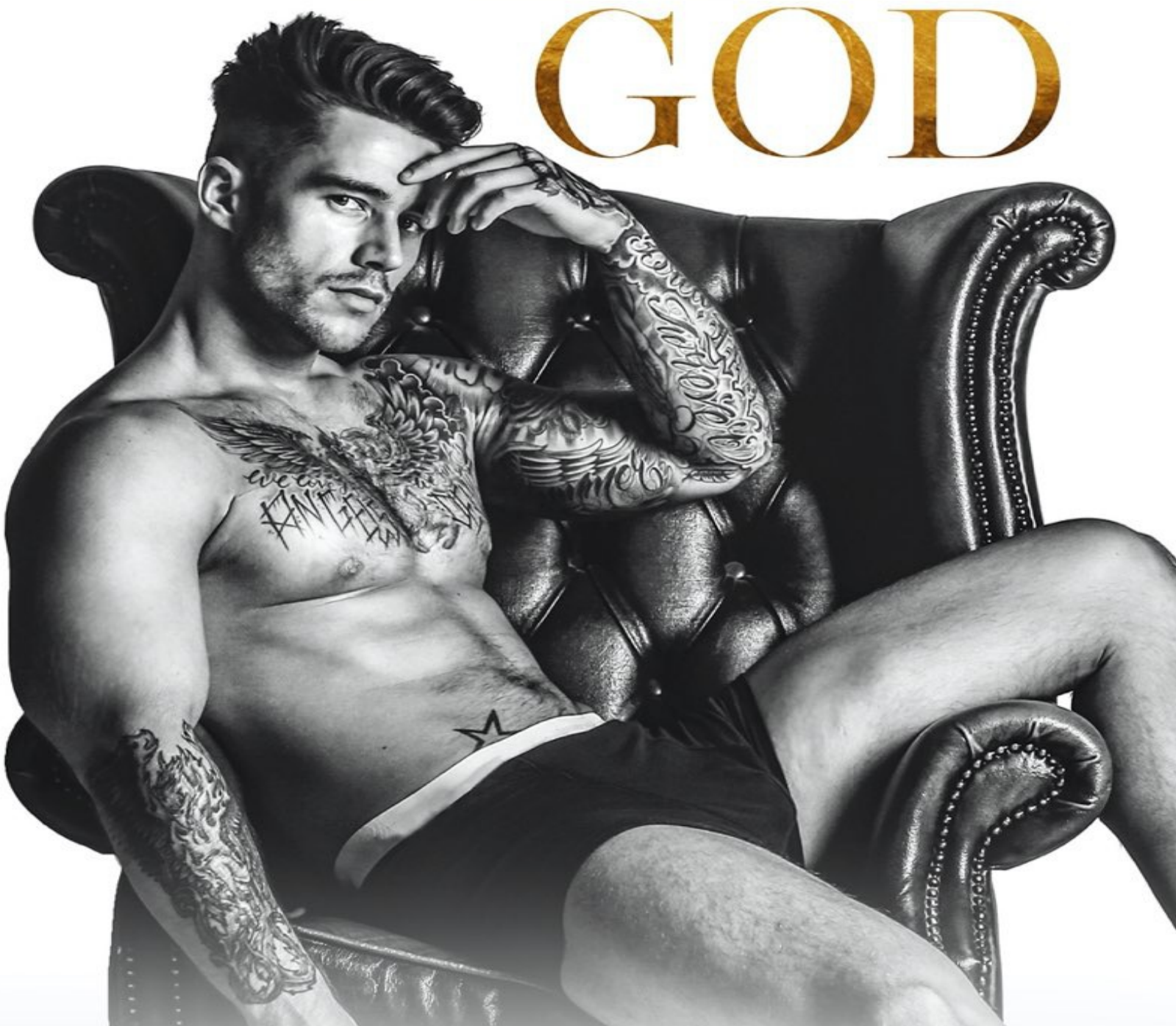


BULLY GOD



MEAGAN BRANDY • SHANTEL TESSIER
TRACY LORRAINE • SAM MARIANO • R HOLMES
KAYLEIGH KING • LUCY SMOKE • C.L. MATTHEWS
SARA CATE • RACHEL LEIGH • VERONICA EDEN
HOLLY RENEE • BECCA STEELE
LINDSEY ILER • LAURA LEE

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AN ANTHOLOGY

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HEIR OF SIN HOLLY RENEE & R.
HOLMES



HEIR OF SIN

HOLLY RENEE &
R. HOLMES

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ONE

I HATED THIS PLACE.

I always had and always would. I despised the smell of smoke so deep-rooted in every fiber of his office, the shroud of darkness which always seemed to cover the space, keeping me on edge.

This was the last place I wanted to be, but he didn't give me any choice.

I jumped as the door opened behind me, and my heart raced in my chest. The rich scent of his cologne hit me before I ever saw him, but I didn't need it to know he was near. I always knew.

"Good morning, Emilia." My dad gripped the back of my chair in his large hand before leaning forward and pressing a kiss against my temple. It was the way he always greeted me, and it was another thing that I hated.

It made me feel sick deep in the pit of my stomach. How could this man be so cruel, then kiss my forehead like he was the most gentle creature?

There wasn't a single gentle thing about him. I knew that far too well, and I had known it since about a year after he had come into our lives.

Roberto Torres wasn't actually my father, but he demanded that I treated him as such. He didn't want to hear the word "step" uttered in his direction, or that cruelty of his would seep through the very fragile front he tried to put on.

"Good morning, dad. Matty said that you wanted to see me." I sat up

taller in my seat as he made his way around his desk and sat down in his pompous, oversized chair. The wood on the arms was hand-carved and the leather supple under your touch, but I had only touched that chair once. I learned that lesson very quickly.

“I did.” He nodded his head as he unbuttoned his suit jacket and got comfortable in his seat. He stared across the desk, and unease flowed through every part of me. “Your mother told me there were some things that you wanted to talk to me about.”

That wasn't true. I had wanted to talk to my mom, I had confided in her, but I should have known better than to trust that she wouldn't immediately turn to him. She had become his pawn, his muse as he called her, but she looked nothing but weak to me.

She had been weak since the moment she learned who he was and didn't walk away. She chose to love him over protecting me, and I would never forgive her for that.

“It's nothing important.” I shook my head and tried to keep my anxiety at bay. Roberto didn't like it when I showed weakness. I was a Torres, and I was meant to act like one.

“It sounded important to me.” His dark eyes studied me, and I held my breath. “She said that you'd like to leave Massachusetts to attend college, but I already told you that I had connections with Harvard.”

“I know that.” I nodded my head and pressed my fingers into the sides of my thighs.

“Are you too good for Harvard, Emilia?” He leaned forward, and I could see the menace in his eyes.

“Of course not.” I shook my head quickly.

“Then tell me, dear. Why are you so eager to leave?” He leaned back in his chair again, and looked so at ease. But looks were deceiving.

The truth almost bubbled out of me, but I would never be so stupid. I could never tell him that I was desperate to leave because I felt frantic to get

away from him.

The urge to run was almost stronger than my fear, and it bubbled to the surface every damn day.

“I just...”

“Don’t lie to me,” he said the words so calmly.

“I..” I hesitated and swallowed hard, but I didn’t dare let my gaze pull away from him. “I just want to make my way in the world. I don’t want to be handed everything simply because you’re my father.”

It was part truth, part lie.

That was the only way to get away with it. He had taught me that too. Any lie you ever told had to be sprinkled with the truth to be believable, so I sprinkled in truths that I knew would affect him.

Roberto respected hard work more than almost anything else in this world, only second to loyalty.

“No one will know that you got into Harvard because of me.”

“I will.” I straightened my shoulders as I continued to stare straight ahead.

Roberto ran his hand over his clean-cut jaw as he watched me. “You know I can’t just let you leave.”

“I’ll come back.” *Lie. Lie. Lie.* “I won’t have any other choice.” There was the truth.

“You know how this works, *ratoncito*.” He ran his gaze down my body, and I stiffened further. I hated the way he looked at me, and I loathed the name he had just called me. *Little mouse*. That was exactly what I was to him. His little rat. “You have to work for the things that you want.”

“What do I need to do?” I asked the question that I always dreaded. Asking him that question gave him the opportunity he was looking for.

He always asked things of me that he never should.

“There’s a man that I need help with.” He leaned forward and pressed his elbows against the table. “You know of Phillip Serrano, correct?”

I blinked at his question. Of course, I knew who Phillip Serrano was. I would be an idiot if I didn't. He had been Roberto's enemy, our family's enemy, for as long as I could remember.

"I can't." I shook my head. "Please don't make me."

"He has a son." He completely ignored what I had just said. "And that boy will be the key to bringing Phillip to his knees."

"And what do you want me to do?" I practically begged, and I hated that he could hear the panic in my voice. But Phillip Serrano wasn't a man you fucked with. I feared him almost as much as I did my own father.

"You do what I just said, Emilia." His sharp tone cut through me. "You bring that boy to his fucking knees so I can cut down his father." His gaze roamed down my body again. "You use what God blessed you with and you get that boy to fall to his knees before you. You don't stop until he fucking begs you for a taste."

My stomach rolled and I pulled my gaze away from him for the first time since I walked into his office. I hated him.

"I don't even know him. I have no idea who he is or what he likes. What if I can't make him fall? What if he doesn't want me?"

"He'll fucking want you."

My gaze snapped back to him, and he was still staring at my body like I wasn't even there.

"And if he doesn't?"

"*Then you make him.*" He finally looked back up at me. "If you want to be an adult and run away to another college then you must prove that you're adult enough to handle this one job. You get it done and I'll pay for you to go wherever the hell it is you want to go."

My heart hammered in my chest and my hands trembled at my sides. "So, what? I just get him to sleep with me. Is that the task?"

"You get him so fucking addicted to you that he can't see straight." He stood and pressed his palms into his desk as he looked down at me. It was his

signature move. Making sure everyone in the room had to raise their head and look up to him when he was saying something important. “You make that boy fall in love, and then we’ll fucking break him.”

TWO

MY HEELS CLICKED against the ground as I made my way into the club. The music was intense, the deep beat echoing inside of me, the lights so dim that I had to blink as my eyes adjusted. This wasn't just any club. It was exclusive, and I hated that I had to give Roberto's last name, the one he had given me, to get inside.

I adjusted my tight red dress at the top of my thighs as I looked around. It was beautiful inside. The place was covered in luxurious fabrics and deep rich colors. Everything about it screamed money, as did the people who were in it.

Every man I passed was dressed in an expensive suit. Some were flashier than others, but none of them caught my eye. I was here looking for one man. A man I had only seen in pictures.

And the pictures were enough to make me nervous about the task I had been dealt. Mateo Serrano wasn't some boy who was going to become a puddle in my hands when he saw me. He was a man, and he was so damn handsome.

I leaned up against the dark bar made of smooth, rich wood, and I ran my nails over the surface. It was flawless under my fingers, not a single imperfection to be found all while my eyes scanned the room for him.

The club wasn't crowded. There were several small groups that were

clustered together around the high-top tables, but none of them were him. I didn't see him anywhere, but I was told that he would be here.

"Can I get you something?" The bartender asked as he wiped his hands on a dark towel. Normally, I would say no. I was here to do a job, but I had a feeling this job was going to take more nerves than I had on my own.

"Tequila on the rocks." I nodded, and he quickly got to work on my drink.

"Are you looking for someone?" He asked, and I wondered if I looked suspicious the way I was searching for him. I had taken extra care to pick out the tightest dress I owned, along with a pair of heels that did great things for my legs. My dark brown hair was curled and falling down to the small of my back, and my lips were the perfect matching shade to my dress.

I had done everything in my power to make sure that no one noticed anything other than the way I looked. That was what Roberto had instructed me to do.

"Not anyone specific." I smiled at the bartender and leaned forward on the bar slightly. His gaze immediately dropped to my breasts, and I watched as his eyes glazed over. "I'm just looking if you know what I mean."

His gaze jumped back up to me, and he quickly set the tequila bottle back down. "Yea." He nodded and handed me my glass that was halfway filled with clear liquor.

I took a small sip and winced at the deep burn the liquor left behind.

"Thank you." I lifted my glass in his direction before stepping away from the bar and back to my mission. He had to be here. If he wasn't, I didn't know what I would do. This was the plan, and I knew better than to veer from any plan Roberto had given me.

Just as I was about to give up, I spotted a thick head of jet black hair. He was sitting on a low half-circle couch with a few other guys, and from where I stood, I could only see his side. He was laughing at something one of the guys said, one of his ankles resting against his knee.

I moved closer to him to get a better look. He ran his fingers through his hair before lifting his other hand and taking a long pull of dark liquor. I caught a glimpse of his piercing blue eyes, and I knew that it was him.

My breath caught in my throat as I took a seat directly adjacent to him. He was beautiful. It wasn't a word I usually used to describe men, but in his case it was true. His skin held a deep tan that did nothing but make his eyes more striking, and his jaw was clean and perfectly chiseled.

His black suit clung to his body and left very little to the imagination of what he was hiding beneath it. Everything he wore was black. His suit, his shirt, the loafers on his feet, and the expensive watch that hung from his wrist.

He looked every bit the definition of power and wealth that I knew his father stood for, but he did it so effortlessly. Roberto held that same aura around him, but every bit of it was forced. He demanded that you saw the power he wielded, and he threw his wealth around like it was expendable.

I took another sip of my drink as I watched him. He laughed so freely with the men sitting around him, and I could only assume they were his friends. There were no women, a fact that I noticed almost immediately, and it was something that took me by surprise.

I had expected him to have women falling all over him when I walked in.

I didn't know if that made my job harder or easier, but I knew that I couldn't see an angle for how I was supposed to get close to him. I couldn't just walk up and expect to talk to him with all of those men.. I mean, I could, but I knew men like Mateo, and they didn't like to be interrupted. Not by things that weren't important.

And right now, I was no one to him.

I lifted my foot and crossed my legs, and he looked over in my direction. It was just a passing glance, but he quickly looked back. His gaze met mine, and I didn't look away. I lifted my glass back to my lips as I held his gaze, and I watched as his gaze fell to my mouth.

Deep breaths, Emilia.

His gaze flicked back up to mine before he leaned forward and set his glass down on the small table in front of him. He looked away from me to answer one of his friends, and I let my gaze fall from him. He looked back in my direction. I could feel it, but I refused to look back at him.

This was a game of cat and mouse, and I would play the part that Roberto gave me. I was the ratoncito, and I was going to let this man think that he was the one who was hunting me.

Because that's what men like him loved.

I was sure that he had plenty of women who chased him, and he would never be interested in that. If I wanted Mateo Serrano to fall into my hands, then I had to make him want to do so. I had to make the allure of hunting me so irresistible that he wouldn't be able to refuse it.

He stood before grabbing his glass off the table and straightening. I glanced back in his direction and let my gaze slide down his torso and over his long powerful legs before looking away again. A tremble ran down my spine as he headed in my direction, and I pressed my thighs together just before he stopped in front of me.

"Hello." His deep voice rumbled even through that one quiet word.

I blinked up at him, and God, he was overwhelming like this. Standing above me until I was forced to lean my head back to take him in. I could smell a hint of his spicy cologne, and it did nothing to help me stay concentrated.

"Hello." I took another sip of my drink, and his eyes tracked my every movement.

"I don't think I know you." His brows formed a deep line between them, and the urge to stand and smooth out that concern with my finger was overwhelming.

"Are you supposed to?" I set my glass down on the table and turned until I was facing him fully. I let my legs widen just the slightest bit, and he was

instantly drawn to the movement.

He slid his hand into his pocket as his gaze trailed over my body. He showed very little emotion in his face. I didn't have a clue what he was thinking, but I knew that I felt like I was burning with one simple look.

"I guess that depends." He cocked his head to the side slightly.

"On what exactly?"

"On what you're doing here." He took a step closer to me, and I was forced to lean back even further to look at him. "If you're just here for a drink, then maybe not. If you're here because you're looking for someone to rip that dress from your fucking body, then yes. If you're here because you're waiting on your man, then definitely."

I looked up at him in confusion even though I could barely breathe through his words. "Why would you need to know who I was if I already have a man?"

"Because," he leaned forward and pressed one of his hands against the arm of my chair. "I want to know what name I should be calling out when he walks in and sees me fucking his girl."

I swallowed hard, but I tried not to let him see how much his words affected me. He was clearly a man who was used to getting whatever he wanted, and even though I desperately wanted to, I refused to fall straight into his trap.

"And what makes you think that I have any interest in fucking you?"

He grinned, the smile on his face equal parts charm and sinister. "Because, love. I just watched the way your pupils dilated and your lips parted. I bet if I pressed my hand between those pretty legs, your pussy would show exactly what you're interested in."

I pressed my thighs together again involuntarily. He was right of course. I had never had a man speak to me so explicitly in a way that did nothing but turn me on.

He stared down at my now closed thighs and a soft chuckle passed

through his lips. “That’s what I thought.”

“Do you talk to all women this way?”

“No.” He pushed off my chair and stood, but he didn’t go far. He pulled the club chair from the other side of the table and moved it until he was sitting directly in front of me. I sat up straighter in my chair as he moved around his and took a seat.

His knees pressed against mine, and a shot of pure want ran through me as he leaned forward and pressed his elbows into his thighs.

“I’m rarely intrigued enough to talk to any woman like this.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Do you?” He cocked his head again and studied me.

“I bet you have tons of women who constantly throw themselves at you.”

“I do.” He nodded and his face held no shame. “But I’m not interested in those tons of women right now.”

“No?” I leaned forward and positioned my body to mirror his. “And why is that? Are you just so interested in one girl in the club who you haven’t already had your cock in?”

He smirked, and it made my stomach flip. “Despite what you think about me. I haven’t fucked anyone in this club. You’ll be the first.”

“You’re not going to…”

“And I came over here because I could see the fire in your eyes from across the room. What do you have to prove, little love?”

My back straightened at his comment. “I don’t have anything to prove.”

“That’s what you want me to think.” He ran his hand slowly over his chin before his thumb trailed over his bottom lip. “That’s what you want everyone to think, but you’re not hiding it very well.”

“I’m not hiding anything,” I practically growled, and he laughed.

“Okay.” He dropped his hand back to his leg and his fingertips traced over the edge of my knee. My leg tensed, and I dropped my gaze to where he was touching me. “I really don’t give a shit if you are or not. Your secrets are

yours to keep.”

I stared at him because I didn’t know what to say. The only secrets I was keeping were the ones that would ruin everything I was working toward.

“But let me tell you a little secret of my own.” He beckoned me forward with the crook of his finger, and I had no choice but to oblige. We were so close now, only a few inches separating us. “I noticed you the moment you walked in that door, and you looked so fucking lost. I think you were looking to be found.”

I searched his eyes before my gaze dropped to his mouth. His lips were a dark shade of pink, and they were so full. I tried not to think about what they would feel like all over my body, but it was impossible.

“And you think you’re the one to find me?” I breathed out the question, and somehow, we had seemed to get even closer to one another.

“I think I’m the one who is going to make you forget about being found at all.” His fingers had crept up my leg, and he was now pressing them into my skin as if he was barely holding onto control.

“And what if I say no?”

His gaze snapped up to meet mine. “Then you see the door. I’m not holding you here.”

Something settled in my chest as I watched him. It wasn’t the answer I expected to pass from his lips. The men I was used to didn’t know how to take no for an answer. They took what they wanted, and they didn’t need anyone’s permission to do so.

“But I’m not a patient man, either.” His thumb swept over my inner thigh, and I felt that one touch straight to my core. “You should tell me now if this isn’t something you’re interested in.”

“Maybe, I’m not sure.” I shrugged, and he ran his tongue over his lips.

“Should I find out?” His hand inched higher just as his knee pushed between mine. “Should we see just how badly you want me right here where anyone could see us?”

I looked behind him to where the club was still thrumming with people, and I hated that the idea of him touching me right here right now excited me so much.

“You do.” He grinned just before his knee jerked hard to the left and forced my thighs open. My right thigh was pushed to the side with his, and my left was held in place by his hand. I had nowhere to go, nowhere to escape, and the most fucked up part of all was that I didn’t want to.

His hand snaked up my thigh, and I gripped the arms of the chair as I tried to prepare myself for his touch. But it was useless. There was nothing that I could do to be prepared for this man.

“Tell me how badly you want it,” he growled just as his hand stopped right before my panties. “Beg me for my fingers inside your pussy.”

I scrunched my nose and tried to close my thighs, but it was no use. He had me pinned open, and I was at his mercy. “That’s not going to happen.”

“Ah, but it is.” He lifted his hand and pressed the tip of his thumb to his tongue. He slowly trailed it down as he stared me in the eye, and I watched as he moved his now moist finger back toward my body. He pressed his thumb back against my inner thigh just at the edge of my panties, and he slowly ran it along the seam.

I opened my thighs more, just a touch, and God, that bastard smiled when he noticed.

“Just give me the word, and it’s yours.”

I should have said no. I should have made him work harder for me. If I wanted him to fall into my trap, I needed him to want me far more than I wanted him, but it felt impossible. Everything I was sent here for had all but disappeared, and all I could think about was him.

And the fact that I was desperate for him to touch me.

“I want it.”

His gaze flicked back up to mine as if he wasn’t expecting my answer, but he didn’t hesitate. His hand pressed against my panties, and I knew that

he could feel how wet I was.

“Good girl.”

I let my eyes fall shut as he pressed his middle finger against my panties and ran it up and down.

“Eyes on me, love.”

I opened them immediately and stared back into his blue ones. They were so intense when he was this close and his hands were on me.

He pushed my panties to the side, and I took a sharp inhale as his skin hit mine. His touch wasn't hesitant or gentle. It was as if that first touch had affected him as much as it had me.

He skimmed his finger against me and groaned when he was met with how wet I was. His finger pressed into my clit, and I tensed as pleasure shot through me.

His finger slipped inside me before pulling back out slowly, and he spread more of my wetness against my clit. I bit down on my lip as he worked my body so effortlessly, and from the way he still held a cool, calm demeanor made me think he wasn't affected at all.

But then his finger slid back inside me, and he pumped it in and out of me as his thumb started working small circles against my clit.

“Mateo,” his name slipped past my lips as I felt my orgasm starting to build quickly inside of me, and he grinned.

“So, she knows who I am?” He slid a second finger inside of me before he curled them, and I almost came out of my seat as pleasure buzzed through every inch of me. “I have to admit. I'm at a bit of a disadvantage here.”

“You want to know my name?” I managed to get the words out but just barely.

“No.” He shook his head. “I want to taste your pussy until I'm fucking positive you know exactly who I am.”

My pussy clamped down around him, and I quickly looked around. There were still people everywhere, but I didn't notice any of them looking in our

direction. But I couldn't concentrate on anything but him for very long.

"Everyone can see us."

"They can." He nodded and worked his hand faster and harder. "Is that what you want? Do you want me to put you up on this table and feast on your pussy where they can all watch?"

The thought turned me on more than I'd like to admit, but I would be dead if anyone in my family ever found out that I let a Serrano touch me this way while everyone was watching. Roberto would have my head.

I was to be his little slut when he needed me to be, but it was for the job and not for my pleasure.

Half the people in this room could have known who I was, and if I wasn't careful, the man with his fingers buried inside of me would know too.

"No." I quickly shook my head.

He leaned in closer until his mouth was right at the edge of mine before he whispered. "Your pussy tells me you're lying. I think you'd love for them to watch me. For them to know that you are mine." He kissed the corner of my mouth. "Every single one of them would be so envious of me. They would all go home tonight and fuck their wives to the image of you beneath me."

"Oh God."

He pressed hard against my clit, and I was so damn close to coming. I was right there, and I just needed him to...

"Get out. Everyone out." His deep voice boomed across the club, and everyone turned in our direction as I tensed. "I said get the *fuck* out!"

No one hesitated after that. Mateo was a God to these people and his word was law.

Everyone scurried out of the club, most of them glancing in our direction as they passed, and I would have had the decency to be embarrassed if it wasn't for the way he continued to work his fingers inside me.

The door to the club closed, and I watched the bartender who had just

served me moments ago grab something from the bar before he disappeared around the side. There was no one left except me and him, and for the first time since I walked in here, a spike of fear hit me.

Mateo Serrano was as dangerous as his father, and I should be careful. Men like him were capable of eating me alive. I knew that before ever walking through these doors, and yet here I was. A lamb for the slaughter.

He pulled his hand from my pussy and pressed them against my hips. He didn't give me a single warning as he lifted me and pressed my ass against the table. My glass crashed to the ground, but I barely heard it. I was too busy focusing on him and the way he stood nestled just between my thighs.

He unbuttoned his jacket before sliding it down his arms and tossing it behind him. His gaze was running over me as he undid the links at his wrists and slowly rolled up his sleeves.

My legs dangled in front of me, my ass just barely on the edge of the table, but he pressed his hips against mine to keep me in place.

"Where were we?" He leaned forward and pressed his hands into the table at my sides. His face so close to mine, I had no choice but to lean back to put any distance between us.

"Does everyone always do exactly what you tell them to?" My breath was so raspy and full of lust.

"They do." He nodded and leaned forward to run his nose along my jaw. "If they know what's good for them."

"Are you good for them?"

He chuckled as his lips pressed against mine again. Not really a kiss. "Love, I'm not good for anyone. Especially not you."

His hands buried in the back of my head, and he tugged on my hair until I was forced to stare straight up at me. "Now fucking kiss me."

He pressed his lips against mine more fully before biting down on my bottom lip, and I whimpered as my pussy begged for his attention again. He took advantage of that moment and slid his tongue inside my mouth.

I didn't stand a chance in holding myself back. He tasted so damn good, with just a hint of whiskey still on his tongue, and I chased the taste of him with my tongue against his. He tightened his grip on my hair as he kissed me, and my hips surged forward against his.

There was a deep rumble in his chest, and I could feel how badly he wanted me pressed against him. He was as turned on as I was, and that was such a heady feeling. I wanted him to be dying for me. I was desperate to hear him beg.

His mouth was harsh against mine, and I knew that I would probably never be kissed like this again in my life. I felt frenzied knowing I wasn't ready for him to stop.

Everything about this was just a game, but I wasn't ready to quit playing.

He pulled away from me before he dropped his hands from my hair, and I fell to my elbows in an attempt to catch myself. His hands moved to my thighs, jerking me forward until my pussy slammed against him.

I moaned and dropped all the way to my back. He lifted my legs until they were laying against his chest, and his fingers dug into my hips, scooping beneath the fabric of my panties as he jerked it down my legs before sliding them completely off and tucking them into his pocket.

“What are you...”

He yanked my legs apart until my knees were each pressing into the table at my sides, and I was so fucking exposed in front of him.

There was no time to overthink it. Dropping to his knees right before his mouth pressed against my pussy with a gentle kiss. I took a deep breath, but it shuttered out of me the moment he dove into me.

He held nothing back as he ate me, and my back bowed off the table as the assault of his mouth pushed me harder and quicker than anyone ever had before.

He ran his tongue from the bottom of my pussy to the top, and I looked up at him just as his eyes met mine. He didn't stop for a second. His gaze

darkened with pure lust and possession before he spit on my pussy and lowered his mouth back against me.

“Oh my God.” I threw my head back as he sucked my clit into his mouth.

“I’m no fucking god, baby.” He wrapped his arms around my legs and tugged me further down the table until my ass was almost completely off. “I’m just the bastard son of one.”

His teeth grazed my clit, and I shot up off the table as my orgasm thrummed right at the edge. He slammed his hand down against my hips and forced them back down to the table. He didn’t let up again as he drove me crazy. He knew exactly what I needed, every touch hitting something inside of me I didn’t know existed, and I tangled my hand in his hair as my other gripped the edge of the table.

“Please.”

He laughed against my pussy. “That’s it, love. Beg me. Plead with me to give you what you want.”

I was too far gone to know that his words should have worried me. I should have gotten up and walked away before I dared to beg him for anything, but he knew exactly where he had me.

“Please, Mateo. Please make me come.”

“That’s it.” He sucked my clit back into his mouth just as his fingers slid inside me, and I fell apart so easily.

I screamed his name as I came against his mouth, and I felt completely raw and spent by the time he moved back over me and jerked me forward. He pressed his mouth to mine, and I tasted myself on his lips.

My pussy clenched hard, and I needed him inside me.

I felt like I was going to die if he didn’t fuck me.

“Mr. Serrano.” Someone cleared their voice, but Mateo was still kissing me and pressed his hard cock against my center.

He continued to do so until they said his name again.

He slowly pulled his mouth from me before pressing his forehead against

mine with a ragged breath. "This better be important."

"It is." The man sounded hesitant, but I just wanted him to leave. "It's your father."

Mateo pulled his fingers from my hair, and he stepped back. He was still staring at me with as much longing as I was sure I was looking up at him with, but when I heard the word father pass through the man's lips something stilled inside of me.

What was I doing?

"I've got to go." He leaned forward and kissed me one last time before he grabbed his jacket and left the club without another word.

THREE

MY HANDS still shook long after I left the club. And for the rest of the night, my thoughts were infiltrated by the man I was destined to ruin. While the plan was for me to bring Mateo to his knees, it seemed that he had an equally maddening effect on me.

And that scared me. Knowing that this man had that power over me, even if it was purely desire, was enough to have my stomach in knots. Not just because of the fucked up situation my stepfather was forcing on me, but because he was nothing like what I expected, and I wanted... more.

After I tossed and turned the entire night, my thighs tightly clamped together as I fought thoughts of Mateo and the way he had touched me, I knew I wasn't going to give up. I didn't have a choice.

I may not have wanted to take part in my stepfather's fucked up empire, but I was still his daughter. And Mateo was the key to my freedom, no matter my conscience.

Which was how I found myself back at that same damn club for the second night in a row. What we started last night was nowhere near finished, and we both knew it. I saw it in his eyes as he left me breathless on the table.

It didn't matter that none of this was real. I had to convince him that it was. I had to make him want me more than he had ever desired anything else in his life.

My freedom depended on it.

Mateo would end up a casualty in the war between our father's, and if I didn't run while I was given the chance, so would I.

Tonight, I wore a dress that I knew would have him falling to his knees. It hugged my curves in all the places his lips would beg to touch, the space between my cleavage dipping low to my belly button exposing far more than I normally would.

I couldn't afford to fail, and after tonight, I wouldn't. I would make sure of that.

The second I step inside of the club, my heart speeds up. I'm immediately on edge from the atmosphere. It feels different than last night when I was here.

Completely different.

The air around me feels heavy, full of something I can't place my finger on.

My eyes scan the crowd as I make my way to the bar. I didn't see Mateo in the space that he occupied last night, but that didn't matter. I was relying on the hope that no matter where he was in this club, he would find me.

I needed to bring the man to his knees. When he saw me wearing the dress combined with the tallest pair of stilettos I owned and my hair falling in waves down my back, I wanted his hands aching to touch me.

I wanted him on his knees, and I would enjoy every moment of him being there.

“And she's back again. Found something you like?”

The bartender's voice paused my scan of the room, and I turned toward him, a smile painted on my red lips. “Something like that.”

He smirked, a boyish grin that most women would immediately fall for. He had dimples to match, and sandy blonde hair falling in his eyes that brought out the bright blue of his irises.

I wasn't just any woman.

And he was not the man I was looking for.

“A beautiful woman like you should be careful in a place like this. Big bad wolves everywhere.”

Despite his soft exterior, warning dripped from his words, and I promptly ignored the dangerous tone. I lived with the most evil man I’d ever known. There was nothing in this place as dangerous as my stepfather.

“Tequila. A double please.” I said sweetly, turning back towards the sea of people dancing to low, sensual music. Once he passed me the small glass of tequila, I tossed it back in one long gulp, enjoying the burn as it slid down my throat.

My nerves had my hands shaking and the tequila would calm the frantic beating in my heart. There wasn’t room for error. This was my only shot at freedom.

It was now or never.

Pulling a fifty from my purse, I slid it across the bar to the bartender who tipped his head at me, giving me another gentle smile before I tightened my clutch in my hand and made my way through the crowd.

I passed by men dressed in suits, all exuding power that radiated in waves, each clutching women in their arms, whispering words of false promises in their ears, but none of them held a candle to Mateo.

Once I reached the middle of the dance floor, I closed my eyes and let the music wash over me, letting my hips sway with the beat. This isn’t just a dance, not by a long shot, it was a show.

A show that was meant for only one man.

The music intensified, the beat vibrating the floor beneath my feet. My hands snaked up my stomach, inch by inch, slowly trailing above my head as I lost myself in the idea of him watching me.

I was so lost in the way my body hummed that time seemed to fly by.

Moments passed and I felt heavy hands slide along my waist as I was pulled back against a hard body that swayed with my own. His hands traveled

from my hips, up my stomach. Together we moved, a leisurely, sensual dance.

“Remove your hands from her before I remove them from your body.” A lethal voice came from behind us, causing a small smirk to tug at the corners of my lips.

The man behind me stilled completely, and then I felt cool air hit my back as he backed away.

“Mr. Serrano, I’m so sorry I didn’t realize... I-”

I turned around slowly, coming face to face with Mateo. He was standing behind me, hands shoved into the pockets of his black slacks with a look on his face that caused a shiver to roll down my spine.

He looked murderous.

The man who I was dancing with scurried off as Mateo stepped closer.

“Playing a dangerous game, Princesa.”

His voice was deep, gravelly, dripping with venom. The same man from last night, but different.

There was nothing playful in his eyes, only dark blue pools that I wanted to lose myself in.

I shrugged, “I don’t belong to anyone. I can dance with whomever I choose.”

He laughed, although it held no trace of humor, before stepping forward, sliding his hand to my throat. He grasped the delicate column in his hand tightly, and I could have sworn his eyes darkened as he watched. He leaned forward until his lips brushed against the shell of my ear. “I’ve killed men for less. Would you like his death on your hands?”

I couldn’t control my body’s reaction to his words. My nipples pebbled and my breath quickened as I tried to hold tightly to the little amount of composure that remained. Mateo Serrano demanded attention.

Swallowing thickly, I pushed the tremor from my voice and lifted my chin. “Maybe I’ve killed men for less too.”

A lie, but he didn't know that.

I was playing every card that I had to entrap him. Freedom was never free, and I was going to have it at any cost.

A sinister smile graced his lips, revealing bright white teeth, but he didn't speak. He simply slid his hands from my throat down to my chest, then to my hips, and suddenly he was spinning me around and gathering my wrists in his hands until they were trapped against his front.

His body sealed against my body, his breath dancing against the shell of my ear. "If you wanted to live dangerously. Princessa. You've found the right man."

Everything about him seemed different tonight, and I couldn't place my finger on it. It was almost enough to pull me away from him, to question his cold, hard demeanor, but before I could he leaned down further and whispered roughly, "Move. And don't make a fucking sound."

His tone was threatening, but the way he held my wrists in his hands showed that he was not going to hurt me. So, I didn't struggle as he led me out of the crowd into the shadows of the club, through black double doors into a pitch black room.

Darkness surrounded us and heightened every one of my senses.

I could feel his chest as it pressed against my back, heaving with ragged breaths against my neck, as his hands let go of my wrists and traveled up my spine to grip the back of my neck.

"Somehow, I knew I'd find you in my club again." He grunted as his hands snaked around my hips to the front of my dress and bunched my skirt up at my hips. The rough pads of his fingers slid below the satin of my underwear until he brushed against my throbbing clit. "Just as I knew I'd find your pussy drenched for me."

Suddenly, he pulled his hands free and spun me around, pushing me to my knees in front of him. I stumbled slightly because I couldn't see a foot in front of me with how dark the room was. It was equally thrilling and

terrifying all in the same.

I felt his thumb slide against my lips roughly before he placed two fingers against them, and I could feel the calloused pads of his fingers as he slid them into my mouth slowly.

“Suck.”

One word, and my pussy contracted. The throb between my legs intensified the deeper his fingers went, and I followed his instruction blindly.

Because obedience with men like him was rewarded, and in order to succeed, I had to do whatever it took. I sucked his fingers in eagerly as he pressed them further into my mouth, down my throat.

“Good girl. Take my fingers just like you’ll take my cock.”

He slid his fingers in and out of my mouth mimicking the way he would if he fucked my mouth, in no hurry.

Still blanketed in darkness, I couldn’t see him, but I could feel how badly he wanted me. In his movements, in the hiss he let out as his fingers hit the back of my throat.

“Tell me, Princesa. Do you want me to fill your tight little cunt with my cock?”

I nodded fervently with his fingers in my throat. A moment later, his fingers slid free, and he yanked me from my knees until I was in his arms.

My legs tightened around his waist as he carried me further into the darkness, stopping only to claim my lips in a kiss so hot, it burned. I felt like I was living in a fever dream, hot and explosive everywhere, ready to go up in flames.

In a breath, he was tossing me onto a soft, plush surface that I deduced as a bed, and then he was gone. I no longer felt his heat.

“You came here for one reason, and I’m not a man who likes to waste time.” His deep voice came from somewhere in front of me, and then I felt the bed dip slightly, signaling he was here once more.

My heart pounded when his hand connected with my foot and gradually

slid up my leg, torturously slow. Goosebumps broke out across my skin in the path he left behind.

Gone were the soft caresses and gentle touches, replaced with a man possessed. His hands commanded my body in ways that I had never felt before this moment. His lips trailed behind his hands, up my calves, to the soft skin of my inner thighs where he kissed and sucked a rough path, upwards toward my pussy. I fought to clench my legs together, but his vice-like grip, that was sure to leave a scatter of marks on my skin, prevented me from moving.

“Still.” He barked gruffly. “Unless you’d rather I stop?”

“Don’t you dare.”

His breath fanned across my skin, causing me to shiver. “Ah, I think you’re mistaken, Princesa. I’m in control here. Not you”

To drive the point home, he slid his fingers across my pussy, gathering the wetness on the tip of his fingers then sliding them inside me painstakingly slow.

My back bowed from the bed as I cried out at the delicious intrusion.

“You came here to get fucked, and it will be on my terms. Not yours.”

Cold and callous, his words washed over me.

Nothing like the man I met last night, the one that held me with an iron grip that somehow felt like he was holding a piece of the most delicate, finest art he’d ever seen.

Things were happening so quickly; I could hardly wrap my head around it. There wasn’t a second to think. Not with his mouth on me. His tongue traveled up my thigh to my pussy, and I was already drenched, desperate for his touch. His mouth replaced his fingers, tonguing me while his thumb rubbed a rough circle over my clit.

The tip of his tongue flicking at my sensitive nub over and over, until my hands fist in the sheets on the brink of the fastest orgasm of my life.

“Joder, sabes a ángel, pero quiero ahogarme en este pecado.”

The words roll off his tongue so quickly, I only catch angel, and something about a sin, but I'm too far gone. Too frenzied with lust to hear what he said.

“Come Princesa, now. Let me taste it on my tongue.”

With that, I submit, falling even further under his spell. My orgasm shooting up my spine, and holding me hostage, unable to do anything as my body trembles with the bolts of pleasure thrumming through me.

My hands were still fisted tightly into the sheets, and the fog of my orgasm still heavy in my head when he rose on his knees between me, then quickly flipped me over onto my stomach in one swift motion.

There wasn't a second to breathe, or to think. Gathering my hair in his rough hands, he yanked me backward. “You should go now, Princesa.” His voice was so rough and filled with truth. “Run while you can.”

I heard the clink of his belt, but he paused, as if he was waiting for me to actually take him up on his offer.

I wouldn't.

Not when everything was at stake. Not when I had him exactly where I wanted him.

“Fine.”

He pushed me down on the bed, my face into the luxurious satin beneath me, and I felt the head of his cock nudge at my opening. I was about to mention a condom, because even though I might be foolish for playing games with a man as dangerous as Mateo, I wasn't a complete fool. I heard the telltale sound of foil crinkling, and once again, he dragged the blunt head of him through my slick folds.

I braced myself against the mattress as he surged forward to the hilt with a roar, followed by a string of curses in broken, ragged spanish.

“You like to play games with dangerous men? You like to come into my club and act as if you own the place, to cause a scene? To get a reaction from me?” His questions are driven home by the force of his brutal thrusts as he

fucked me harder, deeper with each slap of his hips.

Even if I could muster the strength to respond through the haze of pleasure, he didn't pause, only continued his brutal, rough pursuit, fucking me higher and higher on the bed.

The only sound in the room our labored pants, and the sound of our slick skin slapping together.

It's both erotic and sensual, and for a moment I feel wrong for seducing Mateo solely for a war that has nothing to do with either of us. The same sinking feeling in my stomach that I felt when I was tasked this dreadful undertaking.

It was impossible not to succumb to the pleasure he was giving me. I felt his hand snake around my waist to rub against my clit, sending me further and further toward the spiraling edge.

Then, he picked up the pace, fucking me so hard the headboard pounded against the wall with each thrust, and I felt him come on a groan. He slapped my ass so hard I cried out into the sheets while he emptied himself inside of me.

Heartbeats measured the time as I struggled to catch my breath. Sweat slid down the inside of my dress as he curved his tall, powerful body over mine then pulled out of me.

His breath whispered against my ear as he said, "How does it feel to be used, Princesa?"

My heart stopped in my chest as the blood in my veins ran cold.

What?

He laughed humorlessly. "Oh? Nothing to say? Of course, I knew who you were the second you walked in here dressed like you wanted to get fucked. I knew what you came for, and I let you pretend that it was merely a chance encounter."

The lights come on, blinding and bright, as Mateo towers over me. Reaching down he grabs *my* chin roughly in his hands.

“You wanted to bring us down Princesa? How about you send a message to your dearest papa from me, huh? Don't fuck with me. You're lucky you'll arrive back to him in one piece, but thankfully your pussy was somewhat enjoyable and has saved your life.” He ran his fingers through his hair as he stared down at me, and I could feel the urge for him to say more on the tip of his tongue.

“Fix yourself and get the fuck out of my club.”

His words were laced with venom, and for the first time, I saw just how dangerous he was, just how easily he would have crushed me beneath his hands instead of just using me and making me feel like the biggest whore.

“I am not your whore.” I spat, pulling my dress down my hips and snatching my clutch from the red satin bed.

“Ah, but you are. Aren't you?” He reached forward, and I flinched as he caressed my jaw with a tenderness that was at complete odds with everything he was. “Don't show your face in my club again or you won't be afforded the generosity I'm offering tonight.” His thumb trailed over my bottom lip, and I jerked away.

“And you can tell your papa to not be such a fucking coward and have his little whore do his dirty work. I've heard the rumors, but I have to say, Emelia Torres, you far surpassed my expectations.”

“Fuck you!” I stood as he pressed his chest against mine.

“I'll do it again if that's what you want.” Lifting a piece of my hair between his fingers and he let it slide from his touch. “I have no fucking problem fucking the enemy especially when she's so *willing* to beg.”

Before I could utter a single word, he buttoned his jacket and disappeared through the door, the same one he carried me through only minutes before, taking with him the only chance at freedom I would ever have.

To be continued....

Pre-Order your copy of Mateo and Emilia's story here →

<https://geni.us/HeirOfSin>

Heir of Sin is book one in the duet featuring the Torres and Serrano Cartels as war explodes around them.

R. Holmes is from a small town in southern Louisiana where she lives on a farm, with her husband and two little boys. Whenever she's not chasing around the goats and her boys on the farm, she spends her time watching ridiculous amounts of Netflix and is almost always stuck with her nose in a book. She thrives on horror films, sarcasm, and reruns of Harry Potter. A perpetual night owl, you'll find her in her office locked away until the wee hours of the morning. She loves to meet her readers and discuss her latest favorite books and her upcoming projects.

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PRETTY PAWN MEAGAN BRANDY



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CHAPTER 1

DELTA

THE LIGHTS above the stage begin to dim, and only once darkness has fallen over the crowd, does the town's newest paradigm slip between the curtains. Dressed in a deceiving, stark white from head to toe, he steps up to the piano, facing away from the crowd as he lowers onto the gold crested bench.

His posture is impeccable, as my mother will taunt into my ear the moment the show's over and her comparison game begins. His knees are even with his hips, his feet flat on the floor beneath them. His shoulders wide yet relaxed, his neck long and corded, back sharp and straight as an arrow, like the ones I hear he's known to aim at your chest, right before he rips the beating organ from behind it.

This is the first time I've set eyes on the 'transfer' who, as rumor has it, is after my title.

He's tall, tapered, and from what I've learned, treacherous. The white in which he's cloaked himself in is a trick, to divert the gaze of those around from the dark that pours from his fingertips, roaring around us in the form of tritones and grim gusto's.

It's wicked and toe curling.

It's manically mesmerizing.

Coincidentally, I hear that about sums up the man behind the music.

His name is Ander Blackwood and they say he's as filthy as they come. The bastard of a widower with fangs for teeth and claws for fingers. A stubborn, anarchist with a taste for terror.

Oh, what things we have in common, Mr. Blackwood.

"Careful, *sister*," Alto's murmur sweeps over me from behind; right as the room erupts in praise. "I hear he's a psychopath."

The corner of my mouth curls up but I keep my eyes on the stage as Ander pushes to his feet, quickly escaping before the lights find him.

I run my fingers over my necklace, looking up and over my shoulder. "Come on now, dear brother." I play along. "If you want me to back off, you should claim he's a sweetheart who loves his mother."

"His mother is dead."

"Lucky him."

Alto scoffs, sliding with me as I curl around the corner into the empty hallway. He frowns. "And so, the new ward arrives."

"Let us hope he doesn't end up like the last one, hm? Fucked, figuratively and well, you know..."

Alto's hand darts out, gripping onto my throat as I attempt to slip past him, but as quickly as he latches onto me, my sweet Alto finds one around his own.

It's no easy feat, but I manage to hold in my smirk as my gaze darts up to meet the man coming to my rescue.

Hello gorgeous.

Ander's face is stoic, his eyes a deep, dark, vacant brown.

The fist locked around Alto's throat is covered in ink, only bits and pieces of his tan skin peeking through. The images disappear beneath the Armani suit he wears, and the golden tips of his slicked back hair shine against the hundred carat golden column two feet from our right.

Alto's hold tightens and I look to find his glare deepened and pointed at me, so I wrap my palm around Ander's wrist, but he doesn't let up.

Instead, his grip tightens, and he presses his lips against Alto's ear. "Somethin' tells me you like to lead, so lead, fuck boy. I'll follow."

Alto's fingers twitch around me, his eyes darkening, and then he lets go.

I do my best not to cough but take a small sip from my glass to hide the need to.

He jerks free, whipping around to face Ander, who stands just as tall as he is, and just as broad. They're near equals in stature.

Alto says not a word, Anders lifting his chin, a smirk slipping over his lips as he shoulders past.

He saunters his way down the long corridor, up and around the spiral staircase leading to the west wing, his new – *provisional* – home; Alto and I glide toward the center, watching him go.

My laughter is low, Alto jerks my way, his gaze narrowing.

"Why do I get the feeling that went exactly as you wanted?"

"Because it did." My palm lifts, gently cupping his cheek, and he reaches up, covering mine with his own. "When will you stop seeming so surprised?"

He pushes into my space, his mouth opening, but promptly shutting when my mother, his third, and final stepmother, bearing in mind his dad is now dead, appears.

"What's this?" her eyes sharpen.

Reluctantly, Alto releases me and we turn to face Alicia Avara – according to her most recent marriage certificate – the former debutant, now washed-up widow, living off the fortunes of her fallen husbands.

"We were just discussing the performance. Alto found it to be very ... distasteful."

Her gaze moves between the two of us. "Yes, well, let us be grateful he's stylistically different from Delta. Perhaps you two won't have to compete for solos after all."

Such a clueless woman, my mother.

Gliding toward her, I kiss her wretched cheek. "Perhaps, mother."

I attempt to slip past her, but before I can, her grip latches onto the satin of my glove, and she pretends to smooth its length. She eyes Alto, and speaks through a clenched smile, never once breaking character. “Keep your distance, *son*. We wouldn’t want to give anyone the wrong impression.”

Alto smiles as he approaches and takes her hand, gently pressing his lips to her knuckles. With his head tipped, he looks up through his lashes. “Not to worry, Alicia. I’ll make sure my place is understood *perfectly* well.”

I rub my lips together to keep from laughing and face my mother as she lifts her nose high into the air.

Alto releases her, his suit stretching across his chest as he locks his hands behind his back, playing innocent.

My chuckle does slip then, and my mother’s bloodshot eyes snap to mine. I shake my head with a patronizing sigh. “Level your chin mother. Your dinner is showing.”

She promptly reaches up, brushing away the hint of powder that didn’t make its way into her nostril, and back to the ballroom I go.

As required, I make my rounds, pausing for swift conversations at the head tables. Each one the prestigious benefactors are consuming glass after glass of the finest champagne the estate has to offer. All the while, replaying the shitty hand Rocklin dealt me last week that got her out of tonight’s event, leaving me as the solo ‘Greyson’ to grace their presence. The deal is we always come in pairs, and if it’s you’re forte, your attendance is required by default, leaving the rest of us to barter for the second seat. Or rather, for the hope of *evading* the second seat.

Tonight’s fundraiser being the introduction of our program’s newest musical maniac, my fate was sealed. Regardless, had it been a Skeet shooting tournament that called on Rocco, I’d still would have to be here since it’s my lane the man of the hour is here for.

No way she hit blackjack by luck. Sneaky bitch.

Thankfully, the staff begins rolling out the first course of the night, and

I'm able to excuse myself.

As I take my seat at the head of the table, my gaze lifts and directly across from me, sits Ander.

He stares right at me, lifting his drink to his lips as a shadow blankets me from behind, and his eyes rise, slowly lowering with the body that claims the seat beside me.

Alto's knuckle glides along my collarbone, and then a champagne flute is held out in front of me. When I accept, the man across the way lifts a single brow.

I wrap my smirk around my glass.

He better be as vile and cruel as they say, or what a waste he'll be.

If he's not, he'll never survive this place.

They don't call us divine for no reason. Legend has it the women who grace the halls of Greyson Manor were crafted by the Gods but kissed by their enemies.

Cunning, in every sense of the word, and we are.

But never without reason and only ever with purpose.

And mine wears white tonight, hides a flask in his jacket pocket, and likes to hunt for what he hungers.

It just so happens my dearest Alto is his flavor of choice, and *I* ... will be the item in his way.

They call him a walking nightmare.

I think I'll call him mine.

To play with, that is.

Ander

Little mama thinks she's smart, bating a tiger with a taste of testosterone, but all she did was show her hand, and I'll admit it's a tempting one.

Tall and trim, hair like frost and eyes as golden as the column he stood beside. However, greed also shines like gold, and he is full of it.

Every ounce that holds him down ... is made up of her, the real prize if you ask the wallows of this world.

Delta DeLeon.

One of the 'girls' of Greyson and based on the photos lining the halls of the home I was dropped off at this morning, by far the most enticing.

She's elegant, classic in every sense of the word, a pretty little thing, too perfect to be pure.

Then again, nothing in worlds like this one ever are.

Anyone with half a brain knows where there's privilege, there's poison, and this place is no different.

Here, beauty is an illusion meant to pull you in and break you down, so that the poison I spoke of isn't discovered until it's eating you up from the inside out. You're a goner before you've even realized the bitch got in your head, and a girl like this one?

She not only gets in your head but knows how to work her tongue around your favorite one.

Yeah, Delta is far from the innocence she cloaks herself in.

Her make up is so soft, you have to wonder if she's wearing any. Eyes so bright, they blind.

Soft brown hair pressed down to her skull, and wrapped tight behind her head, as if she dances in pointe shoes, but I hear that's the gift another Greyson girl possess.

This one's earned the title of *best musicians of our time*, but that's only because this place eliminates the competition, or so the halls have whispered.

So, who the fuck had my chains cut and how in the hell did I end up here?

Why am I here?

I could destroy her perfection without even trying, but maybe that's the point.

Maybe ... I was brought here to show the queen of the west wing she's not as precious as she thinks. That she's not untouchable to the men beyond the bubble she was brought up in, and that the toy she likes to play with can be stolen in a snap, if I decide I want him.

I'm a fucking nightmare compared to the nobodies who have marched this mansion.

But none of that matters.

The only thing that does, is making sure I don't fall asleep and wake somewhere else. So, that means I've got to find the coffin with my name on it and drive the nails in it myself ... after I find out who I'll have to lock inside it, of course.

I know there is one or else I wouldn't be here. I'm always the fall guy, but this time looks different. This time, the place I'm in is like no other I've seen before.

This isn't ritz and glamour with a scent of blackmail.

This place is an empire hidden behind bull shit, and the only ones allowed inside the kingdom, are the ones who discover it.

Shouldn't be too hard. This place was built a hundred years ago, and just tonight there was no less than a dozen preppy princesses lingering along, just dying to whisper the world into the ear of their Chancellor's – who the fuck ever he is – new ward.

I'll find a truths worth the trouble.

I always do.

CHAPTER 2

ALTO

MY KNUCKLES RUN along Delta's thigh, slipping beneath the pleated skirt, and wrapping around the clasps of her stalking's.

"Are these the ones I picked out?" I whisper in her ear.

Her only answer is to uncross her knees, her body scooting further forward on the seat.

"You wore them for me, didn't you?" My palm presses higher, my fingers curving with the shape of her skin until I've reached her warm, slick center.

Her chest rises, and then, as gracefully as ever, her arm does to.

"Ms. DeLeon," our professor calls on her.

I burry my grin in my free hand.

"Recourse allocation is the best practice," she answers, tilting her hips the slightest bit to allow me inside.

"Wider," I whisper, she sits up straighter, my teeth clenching as I press into her pussy, and her knuckles curl over her closed laptop. "There you—"

"Nah, I don't think so," is spoken loudly into the room, and all heads turn toward the newest member of our program, whose shadowy eyes are locked on Delta.

"Please, share your views with the class," Delta speaks with a smile, her left hand falling to my thigh and squeezing.

His face remains blank, and it doesn't leave hers as he cocks his head to the side, the thick veins of his neck bulging with the small movement.

I glare, my fingers pressing deeper.

Ander slouches further. "Recourse and allocation calls for strategy. It's meant to maximize effectiveness of what you've got at your fingertips."

"It's called careful, full proof planning. Guarantee your success rather than bidding on it like a fool."

His eyes snap to mine, darkening. He licks his lips and my hand twitches, deepening my frown.

"Should we not, sometimes, try something new and see what comes of it?" he lifts a brow. "What's the point of meeting *needs* just because we know exactly how to do it, because we've done it over and over *and over* again. How is a repetitive cycle maximizing the action when something new might just be next level?"

He glides his left palm over his right, slyly caging both his pointer and middle finger with his others before rubbing his palms together.

Delta's pussy squeezes me then, and my lip curls.

Ander smirks and sits back in his chair. "Or maybe I'm wrong." He sits back with a smirk. "Please, teach. Continue, I imagine the climax is coming."

Delta's heady chuckle follows, and my head jerks toward hers, but she's not looking at me.

She's looking at him.

"For that," I breathe, tearing out of her as her eyes snap my way. "You don't get to come."

Her mouth opens, her brows caving, but I'm already standing and on my way out the door.

Blowing a hard breath out my nostrils I shove through the lavatory door and kick over the trash can before I roll my sleeves up, shoving my hands under the sink, but before the water sensors pick up on the movement, my wrist is gripped, and I'm spun around. My back's shoved against the mirror.

My eyes fly up, crashing with Anders.

“What the—” I growl, gripping him by the blazer and shove him back, but he’s got better leverage and holds me still. “Get the fuck off.”

“Dying to, fuck boy.” His leg darts between mine to keep me from moving forward as he wraps his hand around my wrist that’s latched onto him. He yanks it away.

“What the hell are you—”

I’m stunned silent when his eyes flash to mine, his lips closing around my finger.

My body clenches in shock.

His face is completely passive, not a hint of emotion to be found. His tongue brushes my skin and I jolt, tearing myself free and pushing him so hard he nearly trips, his shoe squeaking against the polished floors.

His eyes flash, but as quickly as the rage flickers across him, it’s gone.

Ander chuckles, his smirk slowly growing as he walks backwards, until he’s met by the exit door. “Now I get it.”

I jerk upright, straitening my blazer.

“Get what?” I spit.

“If my sister tasted like that, I’d be fucking her too.”

I walk towards him, getting right into his face.

We’re nearly eye to eye.

“Touch her, and you’ll regret it.”

“Yeah? And what happens if she does the touching?” he tips his head, a flash of amusement in his dark gaze. “Will you *come* ... for me, Alto Avara?”

Anger has my limbs shaking, and his mouth hooks higher.

“Yeah.” He drops his head against the door. “I think you will, and I think you’ll like it.”

“Think again.” I press my chest into his. “I like pussy, and it just so happens the sweetest one here, belongs to me. Remember that ward. I don’t

like to repeat myself.”

“If you wanted to play alpha, all you had to do is say it.”

I slap my palm onto the door beside his head and his teeth sink into his bottom lip. “I don’t *play* anything, especially not with a nobody like you.”

Anders eyes flash, and I know I’ve struck a nerve, so before he can deliver a whatever warning he’s working up in his head, I shove the thing open and slip out.

Fuck him.

Fuck her too, literally, of course. The minute were back at the manor, she’s mine.

My plans to tie her to the bed and deny her of her orgasm the moment she was begging for it, falls through when we walk into the west wing to find Alicia sitting in the sunroom, Delta’s piano adversary in the seat across from her.

“Is she fucking kidding me,” Delta speaks through a forced smile.

With my hand on her lower back, I drop my lips to her ear.

“Shall we call this karma?” I tease, and she slyly digs her nails into my arm.

My cock twitches in my pants and she spins, so she’s only facing me and pops a brow like a brat.

She can never take the loss, and I love that about her.

I love every fucking thing about her.

“See you at dinner.” She backs away.

“I look forward to dessert.”

Delta smiles, a real one, and back to perfection she goes.

Her shoulders square, her spine straightening as she says her hello, and leads the duo to the music room.

I don't make it halfway up the stairs before my name is called behind me, the tone a sharp caveat.

Forcing a grin, I spin, my palm clutching the spiral railing. "Alicia, how was your afternoon?"

The curve of her lips is not for my benefit, but the maid who hustles down the stairwell opposite of us. "Why are the two of you sharing a car again?"

"We leave the same house, head to the same place, and return just the same."

"Do you not have a single talent you should be putting your time into perfecting rather than shadowing my daughter through her every accomplishment?"

"I'm quite fond of being behind her."

Her eyes widen, narrowing just as quickly. "Careful, Alto."

I couldn't stop the smirk if I tried. "Always, Mrs. *Avara*."

The fresh new box of condoms in my bag is proof of such.

I tip my chin, spin and head up to my room.

Setting my things on my desk I slip into my closet, hang up my jacket and tie, and as I step out, with the first three buttons of my top undone, I jerk to a stop.

Ander sits at the edge of the window seat, his eyes pointed at the yard below.

"Why are you here?"

He continues to stare outside. "The door to the left of your bathroom leads down there. Is that you're set up, or part of the property?"

"Everything in the west wing is ours. No one touches it without our permission. Including you."

He nods, his lips twitching. "So, it's hers. Interesting, I didn't peg her for the bow and arrow type."

"That's because you know nothing about her."

“I know you’re not allowed to have her, at least not fully.”

“You think because you picked up on Alicia’s passive aggressive bull shit you know and understand what I can and can’t have?”

“She’s got something you need, that’s why you play nice and fuck behind closed doors.”

“I fucked her in the school pool this morning.” My eyes slide to his. “Shows how much you know.”

“Still, there’s a needle in your neck. I can help you pull it out.”

I shake my head, hitting play and turning my speakers on low.

Ander nods, glancing back at the array of targets below. “I should offer her some pointers.”

“Archery comes as easy as breathing for her, but of course you don’t know that because again, you know nothing about her or the place you’re temporarily calling home. Every corner of this mansion heeds a skill, and every girl who lives within it has each one mastered. If there are pointers to be given, they come from the mouth of a Greyson.”

“So, I should be asking *her* for a private lesson, then?”

I glare, dropping onto the edge of my bed and begin untying my shoes. “Why don’t you tell me what you want, so I can deny you, and send you on your way.”

“So quick to assume a denial?”

“You have nothing I want, so yeah. A denial is what you’d get.”

“Your eyes tell a different story.”

My gaze flicks to his, narrowing before a slow smirk curves my lips. “You think I’m interested *in you*?”

He drops his head back slightly, eyeing me over the bridge of his nose.

“Man, you really are fucked in the head.” A chuckle slips from me, and I push to my feet, caring my shoes to my closet where I neatly set them inside the slots they belong.

Ander doesn’t move so much as an inch.

Shaking my head, I continue unbuttoning my top, untucking it from my slacks. “You just going to sit there and watch me change?”

“You gonna stand there and change right in front of me?”

“You clearly didn’t have a gym class like ours. Showers are required.”

“Can’t wait.”

I scoff, peeling my shirt off and Ander lowers himself back until he’s flush against the pillows there. As I undo my belt and pants, I allow them to hang open as I walk over to my TV stand and pour myself a quick drink. As I bring it to my lips I glance over my shoulder.

Ander’s eyes travel the length of my back, pausing, eyes narrowing on the bite marks framing my shoulder blades. I smirk into my glass and face him.

His eyes snap up to mine.

“She’s a biter.”

“So am I.” Ander grips himself and I jerk my eyes away, visualizing Delta when heat pulls at my groin.

Digging my wallet from my back pocket, I set it beside on the tabletop, and when I look back to Ander, I find a taunting grin hooks his lips.

“What?”

“You’re anxious.”

I slam my glass down and face him. “What could I possibly have to be anxious about?”

“You know I want to see what’s under those slacks, and you’re anxious you won’t be able to hide the fact that you like my eyes on you when you show me.”

“How do you figure you stepping into my room uninvited and my changing out of my school uniform, like I do every day after instructions, translates to my showing you my shit?”

“Why’d you stop changing, Alto?”

I study him a moment. “Are you waiting for me to stand here and tell you

I'm gay? That I like men and you hit the sweet spot? Because if you are, you're going to be here a while. I'm not gay."

"Prove it."

My head tugs back. "Prove it?"

Ander sits forward, propping his elbows on his knees as he rubs his large hands together. "Strip, Alto." His eyes are hard on mine. "Prove you won't swell from nothing but my eyes touching your skin."

The sharp, darkness to his tone has my muscles clenching, and my jaw follows. "That proves nothing."

He lifts a brow. "No?"

I push my pants down my thighs and step out of them, walking over to where he sits, forcing his neck to stretch up with my approach.

"My cock gets hard from the thought of fucking, among other things—"

"What kind of other things?" he cuts me off, but I ignore him.

"It has nothing to do with who's watching and everything to do with who's waiting. So, you want me to strip, ward? Want to see what I'll use to fill my girl when she comes to me tonight?" I nod, step back and push my briefs down. "There you go."

I stand before him, completely fucking naked.

Ander's tongue slips from his mouth, gliding over his bottom lip in slow motion.

A frown pulls over my forehead and he leisurely climbs to his feet, erasing the single step left between us, his attention falling to my package, where it holds. His gaze pops up to mine, desire boiling behind his deep brown eyes.

My cock is hard, standing straight up and when he presses closer, the sensitive tip brushes along the harshness of his jeans, and I clamp my teeth together.

His chin tips the slightest bit, a smirk playing at his coral-colored lips. "I knew it."

“Knew what?”

His eyes fall once more and he slips past me, pausing when his shoulder is even with mine, forcing my head to turn to meet his. “I knew you’d be thick.” He spins behind me, his lips near my ear. “I knew you’d get hard for me.” My hands curl into fists at my sides. “You’re built like a fucking God, Alto, and I’m ready to play servant boy when you are. Just say the word...”

My cock twitches and I squeeze my eyes shut.

“I’ll pull you into my mouth, roll my tongue along your shaft.” His voice drops even lower. “I’ll even lick her off you if you let me—”

I’ve spun, captured his throat in my hands and shoved him to the wall in seconds.

He lifts his hands, a grin on his lips, and then he groans, purposely stretching the cords of his neck against my palm, as if to hint at the strength every part of him holds.

Quickly and without warning, his hips buck into mine, pressing right against my cock and revealing how his is just as fucking hard. My eyes dare to close, but I quickly jump back.

I spin, pouring myself another shot, forcing my breath steady when I’m close to panting, and willing my unsteady grip not to give me away.

“You can go now. Shows over.”

I carry my glass into the bathroom and calmly close the door, but the moment I’m locked inside, I set the glass down, looking to my hands.

They tremble with need, my cock aching to be gripped, squeezed, and released.

Fury builds behind my ribs, but the heat in my abdomen stems from something else completely.

With a low growl, I wrap my palm around my shaft, clenching it furiously, and my groan is chest deep. I tug angrily, working my cock to the vision of Delta spread out before me.

Her pussy dripping onto the satin of her sheets, her whimpers loud and

piercing.

And then a harsh breath blows over my shoulders, and my hips jerk. Words are whispered into my ear, and I moan. My hand moves faster, frantically tugging at my cock until my ass cheeks are clenching, and then a deep, heady groan fills my ears.

“Cum for her...”

Rage boils from the foreign, yet familiar tone, and my cum squirts along my stomach. I gasp, clenching my cock tighter and fall against the wall.

And then I punch a fucking hole through it.

CHAPTER 3

ANDER

THE DINING HALL consists of a giant round table with nothing in the center but the gleam of the chandelier above it. I counted twelve chairs, and only three remain vacant.

The two couples and the solo man seated a space away from Delta's mom introduced themselves as if their names were supposed to mean something to me, so I nodded and said hello. There's no need to tell them my name, because the first question that follows, the woman asks, "So dear we must know, what Academy do you come from?"

"What makes you think he came from an Academy?" the solo man asks.

"People don't wander into this program off the street, Rayo."

A grin pulls at my lips, but I swipe my tongue across them to hide it.

If these fuckers only knew.

"I apologize for the less than youthful evening, Ander, normally the other girls are here to welcome the rare newcomers, but my sisters are away at the moment, so their parents came on their behalf."

My eyes glide toward Delta, who sips a glass of water like a princess. "I wasn't aware you had sisters."

"Semantics."

My nod is slow. "Are you as close with them as you are Alto?"

Her lips twitch, and she gives a mocking little squint. "Much closer."

A scoffed laugh leaves me, and my eyes pop to her left when Alto leans in, whispering something in her ear.

Her hand comes up, her fingertips skating along his sharp jawline as she tips her head a little closer to his.

Heat builds in my gut, and I sink my teeth into my cheek to keep from sneering.

I don't know what pisses me off more, his determination to stake claim, or how she seems completely infatuated.

Is it subconscious, her need to be nearer or is it an act to mollify the man beside her?

I'm not sure why I care, it's not like I like the spoiled brat.

"I only married Alto's father a year ago." The couple face forward when Delta's mom speaks. "They're not *that* accustomed to one another."

"No, not at all." Delta agrees, running her middle finger over the edge of her glass.

Annoyed by her dismissal of him, I look to Alto, but he simply stares at the girl in nothing but admiration. It pisses me off more.

How could he allow her to—

"We only dated for two years, one month, and fifteen days prior to your snorting away your fortune and seeking out another sucker she could smell death on."

I choke on air and Alto drops his grin to his chest.

While the others seated grow wide-eyed, they say not a word, and when I look to Mrs. Avara, her cheeks are red with anger.

"Could you pass the wine, mother?" she says sweetly and suddenly my eyes are called to her.

And now they won't leave.

I didn't expect that from her, not by a long shot. The words she first spoke, yes. Her brushing him off as if he's nothing when he speaks of her like she's the world, completely.

But the golden girl who snaps back with venom when someone dares to belittle her lover, not in a million fucking years.

Spoiled little rich girls don't do that.

They don't bark and they don't dare to step out of line in the presence of others. They do as they're instructed, cry to themselves at night, but leave no proof of their displeasure as their maids wash the pillowcases before it's discovered. This means this place is not what I assumed it to be, and that's a problem.

Alto is right, but so was I.

Alicia has his money.

And *I* ... don't know Delta in the slightest.

Too bad for him, now I want to.

I let my smirk free, and he finds it. Recognizes it.

His chin lowers in warning and mine rises with reason.

Alto said she likes to bite, and it seems that carries out of the bedroom.

But I wonder ...

How much blood is the girl willing to draw to have what she hungers for?

After dinner, Alicia convinces the entire table to return to the first floor's cocktail room, where I spot what's now the fourth piano I've counted in this place. This one's cherry wood, ancient, but in pristine condition and sits on a platform three steps high.

A few members of the staff slip in silently, quietly passing cocktails to the 'parents' of the other Greyson girls, as Delta had introduced them.

While the others waste their breaths with useless conversation none of them give a shit about, I make the move that will draw in the duchess.

I roll my sleeves up to my elbows and take the seat in front of the keys.

Not waiting to steal the attention of the entire room, I hold myself back,

playing a simplified version of Toccata D Minor by Johann S. Bach.

By the time I've eased into the second half, the scent of her perfume reaches me.

Lavender and pink sugar.

Her steps are silent, a part of her classical training, I'm sure, and then her palm is placed along the shiny wood, her eyes on my fingertips as they glide along the keys.

"This is a favorite a mine," she says.

I'm sure she's lying, but she's here, like I knew she would be.

I don't respond, don't look up, but say, "sit," surprised, when she does without a word.

Her shoulders square, her back straitening and then her slender hands hover over the left side, gingerly easing down. Delta plays in tune with me, sharpening the ghostly melody.

The room around us falls silent, and then Alto appears.

He rests his forearm on the opposite side of the instrument, his eyes never once leaving her face.

I would know, because mine remain on him.

I don't need eyes to play, I lived the last four years of my life locked in an abandoned building with stone walls, nothing but a bed, bathroom, and a piano in the center of the space. There was no light outside of the hint that peaked through a gutter window, so when the sun went away, so did sight.

My nights were spent memorizing every note and how to achieve it.

I only left that room twice and I won't be going back.

It's with that thought that I strengthen the melody, driving the symphony.

The piece is perfect.

It's bold and dramatic and forces the mind of a musician to expose itself, revealing the truth. And it does, but it's not the one I expected.

What I imagined was a competitive composer, one who sat with a bitter stiffness but pure confidence, a rich bitch with a talent that was forced upon

her and refuses to lose. That's not what I'm served in the slightest.

Delta doesn't play because she's required. She not only plays like she was born for it, but as if she lives for it, as if the melody is what she's made of. It's a tantalizing response I can't fight.

Musical souls speak to one another, and mines clawing at my rib cage in attempt to touch the temptress beside me.

That's twice now I've misjudged her.

Her hands begin to fly along the keys, so I put a little effort into the performance, challenging her every strike, with two of my own, and it doesn't take long for her head to drop back the slightest bit, her airy laughter floating into the space around us.

It's suffocating.

Mesmerizing.

My gaze is pulled toward her, my muscles clenching as I trace the slender length of her neck, carving a path past her collarbone, down the swell of her breast to the lining of her gown, perfectly tailor to her silken skin.

She's flawless.

It's disturbing.

In my peripheral, Alto's flat palm curls into a fist and my eyes snap back to him.

His are sharp and lasered in on me, so I wink at the guy, and as we hit the climax, both our hands lifting into the air at the same exact second, the others in the room clap, going back to whatever conversation they were having just as fast.

Not Delta.

The girl smiles from me to my hands, and when she takes my left one in hers. She flips it over, gliding the pad of her thumb along my fingertips, and something stirs in my stomach.

It's low and different and has me yanking myself free.

Delta's eyes snap up to mine, small creases framing her features as I dart

to my feet, putting space between us all.

She glances toward Alto and back, both now wearing curious expressions.

“So, you don’t suck.”

A small smirk pulls at her lips and she rises, gliding toward me like a fucking angel in devil heels, but it’s Alto who speaks as he jumps down, offering her a hand.

“Sure she does.” He looks up at me as her long, lean fingers lower into his open palm. “Very well, in fact.”

He leads her away, and the anger from before comes right back, thicker, hotter. It swells within me, but why?

Fuck them.

I’d like to thoroughly do so, but if I can’t get inside their bodies, I’ll get inside their heads.

As the two meet the other guest preparing to say goodnight, Alicia’s eyes glide my way.

She tips her head, glancing from her daughter to me, and when she looks back, it’s with a smile I recognize all too well.

Opportunity sparks in her wired eyes and she swiftly breaks route, curving my way rather than the exit her daughter was eagerly pushing her toward.

“You’re quite the musician.” She sips from her glass.

“I guess that’s why I’m here.”

She shakes her head slowly, peeking behind her. “I don’t think so.”

I lift a brow and she opens her mouth to say more, but the doorman clears his throat.

“Your car has arrived, Mrs. Avara.”

She nods as Delta and Alto look this way.

“Have a goodnight, Ander. I look forward to seeing you again.” The woman winks and walks away.

I stand there, sliding my hands in my pockets and Delta glances my way. Her eyes drop to my hands, slowly lifting once more.

She grins, gently brushing the curl from her face, and my fingers dig into my skin, the sudden urge to do exactly as she does, pissing me off. “Goodnight, Ander.”

“Fuck off.”

She chuckles, loops her arm through Alto’s and off they fucking go.

Back in my room, I kick the door from its hinges, reveling in the crack of the wood as it hits the floor and lower into the center of the bed.

I stare out into the quiet, darkening halls with every light on in the space left around me.

Alicia’s words loop in my head and I wonder if she’s right.

Was I not brought here to tear the girl apart?

If not that, then what?

What purpose could a nobody, as Alto called me, serve a school of scholars like this one?

These fuckers in this program got perfect scores on their SAT’s, graduated from prestigious academies with perfect fucking transcripts, meanwhile I never set foot in a high school, let alone one you had to pay for.

I’m the black fucking sheep, yet again, but I dare someone to come through that door in the dark and try to take me back to my dungeon.

I’ll drive a knife through their throat, carve my name into their skin, and make music in their blood.

Someone brought me here for a reason, but if they won’t show their hand, I’ll take things into my own.

If morning comes without a fight, the day will be mine.

One way or another, I’m sinking my hooks into Greyson Manor.

CHAPTER 4

ANDER

SHE LIES ON HER BACK, her white satin robe open, revealing a deep V of her chest, but the edges tease over her breasts, her pebbled nipples poking against the soft material. Her left leg is lifted and bent at the knee, tilted just enough to hide her pussy from me, so I'm forced to wonder if she's wearing panties beneath it or not.

Her hair is free of its bun, long loose curls falling over the edge of her giant, circular bed.

Beside her, Alto is propped up on his elbow, gliding his knuckles along the length of her neck, and when her tiny hands find his bicep, he lowers, pressing his lips to her throat.

He worships her, and after last night, I don't doubt she does the same.

Whatever they've got, it's real. Raw.

Unbreakable?

Her soft little mewls has my dick twitching in my pants.

I lick my lips, my teeth sinking into my bottom one when her back arches the slightest bit, her mouth opening with her moan.

And then she opens her eyes, spotting mine.

"Good morning, Ander," she rasps, her voice thick from sleep ... or maybe her throat was already coated with his cum this morning.

Alto's head pops up, his eyes sharp. "How did you get up here?"

“Now why would I tell you that?”

With pure grace, Delta rolls onto her stomach, her bare breasts showing themselves for a quick second before they're pressed into the comforter beneath her. They're perfectly round, thick and a darker shade of pink than I'd have imagined. Her hair falls into her face and I clench my jaw.

I want to yank on it, but I'm not sure if it's to hurt her or hear her scream for a very different reason.

“What do you want, Ander?” Alto calls my attention back to him, his fingers coming forward to grip her long locks. He wraps them around his palm, pulling them to her left side, where he lets them fall.

Her fingers come up to her lips, and she drags them slowly down until it pops free, peeking over her shoulder at Alto, who leans forward to meet her mouth a moment.

My dick is hard, aching and I frown. “I need...”

I trail off when he rises off the mattress, the bear skin throw laying over them falling slightly, revealing a hint of his bare hip as he positions his body behind her.

My brows crash, my teeth grinding as his hips roll forward, her body pressing further into the mattress beneath him.

“Need what?” he doesn't bother looking up as he presses his mouth to her shoulder, gliding his tongue across her until his lips meet her ear. He whispers something, and her eyes close, a small gasp leaving her as he thrust forward.

“Let me ride with you to campus.”

“Were you not assigned a driver?”

“I'm more likely to get where I'm going if someone else is in the seat beside me.”

Alto's eyes pop up to mine, narrowing.

“Alto,” Delta moans and my eyes flash, giving me away.

Alto's lips curl into a smirk, the desperation in his woman's tone, the

warning she gives with nothing but his name, demanding he continue to fuck her, while her little glare warns me to stop interfering in her ecstasy.

He rocks his hips slower, tipping his head slightly. “As you can see,” his voice is strained, the veins in his neck thickening.

Her pussy’s gripping him, it must be.

His jaw twitches. “Sorry, but as you can see, I’m spoken for, for *rides* this morning, so if you don’t mind, fuck off, ward.”

Anger boils, heating me from the inside out, but then Delta stretches her spine, pushing back, right into his cock and his features cave from pure fucking pleasure. Every inch of me sparks.

“And if I do mind?”

“Then shut the fuck up.” his lips part and his eyes close, his grip on Delta tightening.

My jaw flexes and I slip further into the room, his gaze narrowing more and more as I press my back into the darkest corner of her room.

The curtains have yet to be drawn back and the only light peeks in from the hall and the crystal mirror that is lit like dim diamonds.

With my head cocked to the side, I unbuckle my belt, and as it does with the open string of an orchestra, the room falls silent.

Their moans, the slight shuffling of the blankets from contact, it all stalls.

They seek me out, but I bend, tearing the plug for the mirror from the wall, and all that’s left is the slight shapes of their bodies.

“Careful, Ander.” Alto warns, but slowly, his woman whimpers, and my palm strokes along my length following the rhythmic way in which he moves above her.

He’s no musician, but his bodies fluent like one. Smooth and in sync.

His pants grow louder, my dick swells wider, and my hips buck in desperation.

But before she can come, he pulls free, flips her and pulls her into his lap.

She sinks down as if she's done it a thousand times, and then her mouth falls to his shoulder.

The deep rumble that falls is pain filled, but echoes with pure extasy, as does the cry that leaves her a moment later.

She's bit him, and the sound draws my cum from my body.

My chin falls to my chest, my groan a heavy, weighted exhale they couldn't possibly miss.

I tuck myself back in my pants and head for the door. "I'll be in the car."

He scoffs behind me, and my smirk slips free.

Yeah, this will be so easy.

With my hands in my pockets, I make my way downstairs. As my feet meet the staircase that leads to the center point of the house, I glance at the other three staircases that meet at the same point.

I've just come from the west wing, the only part of the house I'm allowed to travel, the suited security at the bottom of each railing making sure of it.

Delta DeLeon is the woman of the west, which means the other girls, who have yet to return from wherever it is Delta claims they've gone, have their own designated part of this place.

I look to the man at the edge of the west staircase I've just come down, and point to the giant door dead in the center of them all. "What's in that room?"

The man smirks, shakes his head and looks forward.

And there it is.

It's not a what. It's a whom.

It's the fucking Chancellor. Gotta be.

"How do I get a meeting with the man?"

He scoffs, licks his lips and presses a button on his earpiece.

He nods as if someone can see him, and shit, maybe they can.

I searched for cameras and found nothing, but I imagine that's the point.

"Your car is waiting for you," he says.

“Tell it to fuck off. I’ll be in Alto’s car this morning.”

“Good luck with that.”

I spin, narrowing my eyes on his.

“Mr. Avara is already gone.”

Mother fucker.

I charge down the entrance steps and tear the door open before the man in the suit can do it for me, but then the man at the stairs speaks again.

“Ms. DeLeon, however, has not...”

My head snaps his way, but he stares straight ahead.

He says nothing else, but he doesn’t need to.

I close the door and climb the stairs once more.

Delta

“All I’m saying, is you should befriend Ander, you two, together, could be extraordinary, change the world with your music.” My mother is close to drooling. “Imagine being the bride of—”

“Bride?” I laugh, cutting her off. “Please, mother. One, you know nothing about Ander Blackwood. Two, we might play by the rules of the rich, but don’t forget, that is only for the investor’s sakes. I’m a Greyson.”

I pull open my earring drawer, choosing ruby studs but my hand freezes at my ear when my mother speaks with a tone so sharp, I might have to wound her for it.

“You’re not above an arranged marriage. If the Chancellor wishes to give you away, if it suits the future of this place, it will happen. And I doubt your husband will allow your *stepbrother* to tag along.”

Forcing my breath to steady, I fasten my jewelry in place, and slowly

move closer to where she sits.

Reaching behind her, I pull a cigarette from the glass case, the spark from the lighter making her jump, bringing a grin to my face. “You know how easily fixed that is, don’t you? A single drop of *Devine wine* and poof, the link is long gone.”

I see her hand before it makes contact with my cheek in a hard, swift slap, but I don’t stop it.

I could, but I don’t.

Just as I don’t flinch or move my head in the slightest.

My mother’s face falls and a sinister smirk pulls at my primrose painted lips.

“Don’t test me, mother.” I take steps forward and she cowers away, as she should. “I let you into my home, I allow you to stay in this town, but I’m forced to do none of those things. Don’t forget where you are and who I am. We both know you’ve been blackballed. No one wants to touch the coked-out widow with a track record of terminated husbands, and without one, you can’t challenge the Chancellor, not that your words would make a difference. You have not a hint of hope without me. If I were you, I’d remember that. I don’t imagine you’d do well with a mountain of my man’s money and no one to show it off to.”

“I’ll never give it back to him. Not unless I get what I want. Not until the day I die.”

I blow smoke into her face, and she works hard not to fan it away. “Like I said.” I glide my knuckle along her cheek and she jerks away. “So easily fixed, now, get out of my house, mother dearest.”

With a tight set jaw she whips around and off she goes.

I wait a solid minute before I slip my blazer on and raise my prize possession from its holster, and say, “you can come in now.”

I lift my arms, and as I hoped, there is no hesitation, Ander places himself in my doorway, staring right down the length of my golden arrow.

Shock is the first thing to hit him, but it washes away as fast as it came, and all that's left is that perfected glare of his.

I stretch my hand all the way back until my collar bone is parallel with the arrow. "Eavesdrop on me again and I'll let this loose."

"I don't think you've got it in you."

"That's the biggest mistake you could ever make in Greyson Manor."

He eases a little closer. "What mistake would that be, Ms. DeLeon?"

"Assumptions." I shift the slightest bit and release.

The arrow whips by him before he has a chance to see it coming. His head snaps around to where it's stuck and when he faces forward again, he feels it.

His hand darts up, gliding along his ear and when he pulls his fingertips back, they're blood stained. "You nicked me."

"Only a little." I set the arrow back in its place and walk past him, but pause at the first stair step, glancing back at him. "Coming?"

"What are you, some kind of black night princess?"

An unexpected laugh falls from my lips, and I face forward.

Sure, something like that.

CHAPTER 5

ANDER

THE WHACK ASS way this program is set up leaves a gaping two-hour mid-day break wide open, so I search the place from top to bottom until I find where the happy fucking couple are hiding, which of course is the top floor flat. They sit side by side on a small burgundy sofa that faces a large window, a mini fucking jungle on the other side of the glass.

Alto has a pen and pad in his hands while Delta's nose is stuck in a book, so I sneak up, lean over and read the first line I can find.

“One must rethink how to engage and develop relationships with those who—”

Delta looks up over her shoulder, not so much as a balk when I leap over the back of the small sofa and plant my ass right beside her.

“Ander.” She closes her book with a soft snap, lowering it to her lap. “How's the ear?”

Alto's head snaps this way, and he frowns at the clean slice at the edge of my earlobe.

Ah, so she doesn't report back with every little thing. Interesting...

I reach up, flicking the spot as if to say *just fucking fine*, and she looks to my hands.

“May I?” she says reaching out.

“If I said no?”

“You won’t.” Alto doesn’t bother to look up as he speaks but curves his wrist to shade in whatever the hell it is he’s working on.

What *is* he working on?

“Do you like it?” Delta’s question fans along my neck and I lower my eyes to hers. “It’s a skyscraper. Alto’s designs have been—”

“Baby.”

Her lips seal at his request and I frown at the fact that it was one.

He didn’t bark or pin her with a glare. He gave her the respect of deciding and she willingly, gladly honored his wish as if they’re equals. Are they?

He could demand of anyone and I’m sure they’d give. So could she.

So why choose to settle for less?

Is it less if it’s all you wish for?

“Your hands,” She repeats with an open palm, so I give her what she wants.

Same as after we played together, the pads of her fingers glide over mine, and this time I swallow the urge to pull away, the need of her touch outweighing the confusion it causes. She turns them from side to side.

“They’re so raw, shredded.” She looks to me. “Does it hurt to play?”

I shake my head and she inspects the area closer. “You have no fingerprints.”

“Acid will do that.”

In my peripheral, Alto glances up, but I keep my attention on her.

She speaks a little slower this time. “Yes, it will. Erase the print—”

“Erase the man.”

Something flashes in her eyes, but it’s gone so fast I couldn’t pretend to know what it was.

She grins, then opens the book and picks up where she left off.

As she settles once more, I look up to find Alto’s eyes on me. He holds them there a moment and then he too goes back to his work, so I stay where I’m seated and watch.

When instruction ends for the day, and I'm sliding into the back of my assigned car, I'm surprised to find I'm not alone.

Alicia smiles from her seat, a man I've never seen at her side.

"Ander, this is Damiano Greyson," she introduces him.

Greyson...

This has to be the Chancellor, the man who brought me here.

I settle into my seat more, dropping my palm onto the middle cushion, where I hid a knife I stole from the kitchen. It will have to do until I can figure out where to find a real weapon.

The man nods his head, taps on the window and the car begins to roll. "It's good to meet you, Ander."

"Can't say the same."

"And why is that?"

I eye the man. He can't be much older than my twenty-two, maybe twenty-five, if that. "I was told this was my car and I didn't give you permission to ride in it, yet here you are."

"I could climb out right now." He eyes me. "Or... I could tell you why I'm here."

I don't respond at first, forcing him to wonder what I might do. The man doesn't know me, so he has no idea.

All he can do is what I was so sweetly informed I shouldn't. Assume.

"You've got three left turns, one right and a quarter mile stretch before the car stops."

"You measure time with distance." Curious, he folds his hands before him. "What do you shoot?"

"Anyone I have to."

A chuckle leaves him, and he nods. We both know he means what weapon, but why would I tell him this if he doesn't already know?

He sits back. "I've got a proposition for you, Ander Blackwood, one that will guarantee Greyson Manor as your home."

"There's no such thing as a guarantee."

"I don't say things I don't mean."

"Alicia, I'm gonna need you to get out." My eyes lift to hers.

She blanches, opens her mouth, but Damiano lifts his hand, and she clamps it shut. He taps on the window, tells the man to pull over and pushes the door open.

"Go, someone will come for you."

She doesn't argue but does as she's instructed.

So, he does have power. It has to be him.

The second we're rolling again, his eyes slice to mine. "Say what you want to say."

"You can mean it all you want." I get right to it. "But why should I trust that your word makes a damn difference when I have no idea who paid the price it takes to get me here."

"You're a grown man." He changes the subject. "Why do you work for someone else?"

"I'm a slave, *Mr.* Greyson. I might be a man, but I'm not a free one."

"Call me Dom." He studies me a moment. "Why don't you run?"

"Because I'm a man. Men don't run from their problems; they find a way to resolve them. Every truth, earns a dollar, every dollar, is one less owed. My skills are expensive, but I get the feeling you know this."

Small creases line his forehead, and he leans forward. "What if I told you exactly how to get what you needed if you choose to stay?"

"What's this world got to offer me outside of an education I don't want?"

"The world you see isn't the one I live in."

I knew it, this isn't about a fucking school.

He straightens his watch, looking to me. "Mine's darker, ran by a group so unsuspecting, it's nearly undiscoverable."

“If that’s true...” I lean forward, mimicking his position. “Then what the fuck do you need me for?”

His smirk is deep. “I don’t. Alicia Avara, or should I say DeLeon, *does.*”

My stomach springs and I grind my clamped teeth from right to left as I gauge the guy a long moment.

Keeping my expression as neutral as possible, I slowly sit back.

“I’m listening.”

CHAPTER 6

ALTO

AS MY HEAD breaks the surface of the water, I find Ander standing there, his arms crossed over his chest.

I tear my goggles off, tossing them to the side and pull myself out of the water. “Why are you always popping up?”

“It’s your face, your voice, your body.”

I scoff, wiping my face with a towel and sling it over my shoulders. “Cute, ward.”

Not bothering to entertain him, I head for the locker room, but before I can push through the doors, he stops me in my tracks.

“About that whole ‘ward’ thing. I think I’m about done with that.”

Slowly, I turn to face him. “Oh yeah?”

He nods, taking slow steps toward me. “I’m twenty-two, Alto. Wards are juveniles, like you.”

“I’m eighteen.”

“Yet still under your mothers’ thumb.”

“She’s not my mother.”

“Right, sorry.” He cocks his head. “Stepmother. No incest, right?”

My eyes narrow, my spine tingling.

“What if I said I could give you back what’s been stolen from you.”

“I’d call you a liar.” My words are careful, and he chuckles.

He continues forward, stopping only once we're nose to nose.

Ander licks his lips. "Any chance you'd ever call me yours?"

My pulse jumps.

Seven months of work, and we're only nine days past his arrival.

There's no fucking way we're already here ... yet here he stands.

My chin lifts and I press closer. "Never, ward. Like I said ... you're nothing."

His eyes flash, his lip curling as I whip around, disappearing behind the double doors.

I don't have to stand around to know he won't follow.

He came seeking an answer, and I gave him one.

Delta

A shadow falls against the wall before me, and I close my eyes, my keys striking chords that are not written along the pages before me. It only takes a few moments before heated breaths fan along my neck.

"This isn't one I've heard," Ander whispers.

"That's because it's mine." I slowly lower my hands to my lap, but as I suspected, Ander doesn't want that.

The pads of his fingers glide along my palms, and he folds his over my own, lifting them back up.

"Play it for me, duchess."

"Call me queen and I'll think about it."

His mouth has lowered, so I can feel the curve of his lips along my skin.

"Play it for me, *my* queen."

I turn my head, and his dark eyes lift to mine.

“*Your queen?*” My brow hikes high, but he doesn’t retract his statement. He doesn’t do a damn thing outside of wait for me to oblige.

So, I do.

With my eyes on his, I play him the short piece, and the longer our eyes are locked, the more the truths are revealed in his.

He’s a man without a purpose, searching for one in place he knows nothing about, but is he willing to take should it not be given?

There is no power in probability.

If my intuition is correct, Ander Blackwood has come to realize this.

He slips behind me then, so I straighten my posture, my eyes closing once more.

As I reach the final note, he speaks again.

“For the record.” His teeth graze along my earlobe. “I wanted this to play out real fucking different.”

His footsteps are heavy and angered as he storms from the room, and only when the door is slammed close do my eyes pop open, my slow smirk pointed at the wall before me.

So close.

Ander

Sliding into my car, I slam the door before the driver has a chance to do it for me, glaring at the man and woman across from me.

“Now, or never.”

Alicia’s lips curve into a wide smile and Dom sips his scotch with ease, before handing one he already had poured.

Once I take it, he lifts his glass into the air. “Looks like a celebration is in

order.”

I down mine and set it beside me. “We’ll see.”

CHAPTER 7

ANDER

NO ONE CALLED or came to find me when I didn't show on campus for instruction today, but why would they? I have no one here who cares, but after today, I'll force them to.

Glancing around the room, I lower into the solo item it now holds – a desk as black as a crow, with walls and a chair to match.

“You've been busy.”

I look up to find Dom in the doorway, his suit still on.

“I didn't lift a fucking finger.”

He grins. “Perks come quickly, don't they?”

“Are you here to waste my time or do you have everything ready for me?”

“And so do the balls.” His eyes narrow.

“Balls have always been there, Greyson, but the need to hold my tongue is gone.”

His nod is slow and then he's approaching, lowering the files in front of me. “Signed, filed, and secured.”

My gut swims with anxiousness and I can't help but laugh. I lift my hand and Damiano slaps his into it.

His phone beeps in his pocket and he looks to the screen a moment. “You ready?”

I sit back, my forearms curling over the arms of the chair. “Been ready.”
He comes standing behind the open door to my right, mumbling, “showtime.”

And then there they are, arm in fucking arm.

Stepbrother and stepsister.

Delta jerks to a stop first, her eyes wide as they flick around the room, finally, landing on me.

“Hello, sweetheart.” My smirk is slow. “How was school?”

Alto eases into the room, gazing around at what had just this morning been his bedroom, the bed I caught them fucking in now long gone.

His eyes search mine, narrowing. “What did you do?”

“Come here.”

His jaw clenches, and I cock my head, using his words against him. “I don’t like to repeat myself, fuck boy. I said come. *Here.*”

Delta’s lips press into a hard line, and she slips her fingers beneath her pleated skirt, jerking to a stop when I throw a dagger, nicking her knuckle as she did my ear.

Her eyes flame, hitting mine; Alto flashes, darting forward but I shoot to my feet, and Dom steps out of the shadows.

They both jerk to a stop, their heads snapping toward one another for a shared thought.

My blood runs warm, and I jerk around the desk, but perch on the edge of it. “Lift your skirt.”

Delta lifts her chin, her face stoic as she does what I say without hesitation, her pussy hidden by the thinnest of thongs, a steal arrowhead tucked into a holster attached to the seam of her skirt.

I push off, stepping to her and her eyes flick up, peaking at me through

her long, thick lashes as I guide my fingertips up her thigh, and take the item into my hand. Right as I tug it free, she jolts her hips, and the sharp point slices my skin. Her left brow pops and she faces forward.

Brat.

“Please, Delta, have some class” is spoken from the doorway and I back up, sitting at the edge of the desk once more as Alicia comes in.

Her eyes are clear today, but her grin is as shitty as ever.

She comes to stand beside me and hands me an envelope.

The two watch, their chests rise with inhaled breaths that they don't let out.

I tear open the flap and peek inside, forcing myself not to react at the amount of zeros on the bank statement inside, but fuck me. That's more than I'd have thought.

I step toward Alto and hold it out.

The golden flecks in his eyes seem to disappear as his eyes dig deep in mine, trying to get to the other side, seeking answers I would have given him had he been brave enough to ask.

I tried to give him everything, but he refused me.

Now, he gets only what I'm willing to give.

Slowly, he reaches up, and my brows crease when his fingers land on mine, holding there the shortest of seconds before he takes the envelope from my hands.

His gaze flicks around the room before he looks inside, and when he looks up again, his expression is unchanged. He has zero reaction.

Delta turns to her mom, her hand coming up to her chest in dramatic fashion. “What did you do?” she nearly cries.

My pulse pounds heavily.

Alicia stands tall, a sinister smirk on her lips. “I made a deal with the devil, honey.”

“What did you do?”

“What kind of deal?”

“I gave him everything.”

Delta’s eyes spark, her lip twitching and my brows crash together. “You have no authority...not unless...” she turns to me. “Ander?”

My frown deepens, my gaze zipping from her to Alto.

She tips her chin ever so slightly, and my curt nod follows.

“All I needed was a husband to hand everything to.” Alicia loops her arm through mine. “Now you can touch nothing, and he decides Alto’s fate, which we’ve already worked out of course.”

Delta coughs, choking on nothing but air, her hand shooting down and latching onto Alto’s wrist. “It can be undone.”

“No, it can’t.” She laughs viciously. “It’s all legal. We’ve covered every step. Damiano was the witness to it all.”

“Damiano ... isn’t in control.”

All our heads snap toward the hall, where three women stand, one in the center, the others flanking both her left and right side.

I slowly rise to my feet, my jaw hardening as the blonde leads them in, her black fucking cat suit looking thing- gleaming with her every step, her stilettos echoing along the marble floor and sending my heartbeat slamming in rhythm with them. Slow and fucking steady.

Ready to stop beating.

“Who the fuck are you?” I force past clenched teeth.

The girl smiles, twirling a piece of her long blonde hair.

“Ander Blackwood, meet Rocklin Revenaw, the Chancellor.” Damiano steps beside her, but not too close.

I jerk forward, but before I make it, a cold steel barrel meets the side of my head, the sound of the gun cocking to follow. My eyes shift and the sleek haired brunette winks.

“I heard you were gorgeous, but my, oh *my*—”

“Bronx.”

The girl’s lips close at Delta’s voice, and my eyes snap forward again.

Confusion whirls in my gut when she slips behind the newcomers with ease, a smirk on her lush lips, but she doesn't come to me. She steps before her mother.

"Thank you, mother, for being so predictable." She laughs, shaking her head, and then Alto weaves his way to her side. "You may go."

Alicia begins to pant. "No, I—"

"Sorry, did I say, may?" she tips her head. "I meant you will go. Now. The doorman is waiting with a check in your name, your things are being prepared in your condo as we speak. The jet will take you anywhere you wish, and it will return without you."

"Delta, please—"

"Hm-mm." She cuts her off. "I gave you a chance to decide, and you failed to take it. So, I made it for you. You called 'check'." Her eyes come to mine. "So, I dangled 'mate'."

"What the fuck is going on?"

"Ugh." The girl with the gun, breaks form, and hops up on the desktop, crossing one leg over the other. She scratches at the base of her head with the tip of her Smith and Wesson. "Isn't it obvious? D, I thought you said he was smart?"

Alto chuckles, licking his lips. "He is. Just a little jaded. Fill him in Rocco."

Rocklin steps up. "This, piano boy, is your initiation," the 'chancellor' smiles. "Congratulations, you're in."

"In ... what?" I look to Delta.

"You'll see." She smiles, stepping up to me and pressing her lips at the edge of mine and something inside me settles. Her bright eyes find mine. "I knew you'd get it done."

"You planned this?"

"Why do you seem so surprised? *Who* do you think brought you here?" her fingertips glide down my arm until she's brushing along my own. "This is

my world, Ander, and as of right now, you're officially a part of it."

My heart beats fucking wild as I try to understand, to accept what they're saying.

Alto walks up behind her, draping his arm around her shoulder. "Your debt has been paid to the man who owned you, the money you have now is yours to keep, as is the room you're living in, should you want it." He tips his head back, using my words against me, as I had him. "Yeah, you want it ... just like you want her."

I clear my throat of the sudden knot threatening to clog it. "Wanted you first."

"I told you twice, fuck boy. I'm not gay." He grins and fuck me.. the weight on my shoulder lifts.

"Please, give me five minutes and I'll change that stubborn mind of yours."

Alto chuckles, and we all follow Delta as she faces her mother once more.

"You thought a stepbrother was shameful ..." she smiles. "How do you feel about a *stepdaddy*?"

My nerves jump, my yes snapping to the twosome. They say nothing as they turn, headed for the exit, and my muscles coil, but then they pause at the door, looking to me.

"Well?" Alto pops his brow. "You coming or not..."

My fingertips tingle and I meet them at the door.

CHAPTER 8

ANDER

WE DON'T GET two feet inside her door before she's spun around to face me.

No, not me.

Us.

She faces us.

Alto stands at my side, his chest already heaving as she slowly slides her blazer from her body. She looks to Alto, nodding her chin as he moves over to the vanity, taking the small bench before it and pushing it against the edge of the bed. His eyes snap up to mine.

“Sit,” he demands, peeling his own jacket off and allowing it to fall to the floor.

I do as he says, watching him as he rounds the edge of the room, closes the door and leans his back against it.

Satin like skin brushes along my chin and I look to Delta as she glides before me, swinging a leg over, slowly lowering her ass into my lap.

“Why you doing this?” I rasp and she lifts my hands, dead at my side, placing them over her naked ass beneath her skirt. “I betrayed you.”

She shakes her head. “You did exactly what I wanted. You didn't choose what she offered you without trying to make us choose you first...” her fingernails drive into my hair, scratching down my scalp until she's gripping

me by the back of the neck. “But what you didn’t know, was that we already had. You were such a pretty pawn, we had to have you....”

I dig my fingertips into her ass and she flicks her tongue across her teeth.

“All we had to do was make a splash with your arrival, and let you show the world what you were capable of.”

“My music.”

“Mm,” she moans her agreement. “And just like that, everyone saw you as the man after me, and everyone knows who’s after me, has to go through him. And so the wedge is driven.”

“What if you brought me here and I wasn’t what you thought?”

“Then I would have sent an arrow through your heart and let Alto tear it out.”

My dick twitches and she feels it, her back arching slightly to push into me further.

“Take my clothes off, Ander.”

“No.”

Her eyes narrow and I move mine over her shoulder.

“Come here.”

Alto’s lip twitches and he kicks off the wall, but he doesn’t stop in front of me, he curves around, climbs onto the bed and then his legs are at my side, his shoes planted on the bench seat beside me.

“I thought you understood, ward,” he whispers. “I’m the alpha. Take her top off, or I will take her off.”

“You could try.”

His teeth fall to my neck. “Now,” he hisses.

My dick strains against my pants, so rather than easing it from her body, I tear her tits free.

They bounce before me, and Alto’s left hand comes forward, gripping and tugging on her nipple. He stretches it to its max before letting go, and her whimper has my muscles flexing.

“Pull me out, baby.”

Her lips twist into a smirk as she works her way into my pants and frees me. My hand shoots down to grip myself when she lets go, but Alto’s arm is just as fast, his long, thick fingers wrapping around my wrist and yanking it backward.

“No,” he rasps.

“I need to be squeezed,” I speak through clenched teeth.

“So, tell her to.”

My head falls back, meeting his collarbone and he doesn’t move away. In fact, he shifts the slightest bit to make me more comfortable. My eyes meet hers, and her nipples pucker even more.

“Squeeze me.”

“With?” he prompts and my eyes close.

“You’re pussy, baby. Squeeze me with your pussy.”

She sits up, and not a second later, silk’s sliding over me, and I drive my hips up into her.

I try to tear free, but Alto takes both my hands then, wraps them behind my back and drops his ass behind me, his chest now flush with my back.

I growl, and his chuckles fan along me, my dick flexing inside her.

“He likes that. The heat of your breath.” Delta outs me, and then she starts to ride.

For a moment, the only sound in the room is the grind of our bodies and the low moans coming from Delta, but then Alto’s lips are near, I can sense them, hovering near my ear.

I spin my hips in circles, my groan low and harsh, and then he speaks.

“Fuck her, ward, don’t play with her,” he whispers. “She’s been waiting for this ... for you.”

“Let go.” My fingers twitch, dying to grip her, to flip her. To hold her down so I can dive as deep as her body allows. “My dick is a lot fucking longer than I can give without pinning her.”

“Too bad you’re pinned.”

I growl, and he chuckles against me.

Instantly my balls tighten and Delta moans. My eyes fly open and I lift my knee, nudging her back and sending her flying forward, and she gasps, the new position giving her more.

“Mmm,” her moan breaks off into a croaky cry and I turn my head, catching her nipples between my lips and sucking.

“Bite,” he pants. “Quick.”

I do and Delta’s entire fucking body shakes.

“Fuck, yes, baby.” I drive into her, and she grips my face, dragging my mouth up to meet hers, but before I can press against her pillowy lips, Alto steels her attention, pressing firmly into my back as he pushes up the slightest bit, so his lips can meet hers.

She cries, and then she’s bouncing over men. Then he tears away, his chest rumbling against my back, his muscles flexing when fucking finally, her mouth finds mine.

She hovers there, her eyes locking onto mine as she smashes our chests together. Her tongue comes out, flicking along my lips before diving inside, her mouth molding to mine in desperation.

Her pussy walls clamp over me and I groan, tearing away, my head falling back on the man behind me.

“There it is.” My eyes close, my toes curling in my socks. “Squeeze me.”

Her whimpers, grinding hard, working her clit against my body as my dick works her from the inside. My hands twitch with the need to strangle something, so I adjust, open my fists and close them over Alto’s dick.

He hisses in my ear, and then his clenched teeth are pressing against it. “Let go.”

“Fuck no.” Delta’s legs come up around our bodies, my dick sinking even further. “God ... damn,” I moan, squeezing him harder.

“You’re going to regret that,” he warns.

“Doubt... doubt it. Fuck,” I pant.

“Look at her.”

I do.

He lets go of one of my hands, but I keep his cock in my palms.

I can picture the sight of him, mentally tracing the length of him as I had the day he stripped down. He’s long and thick and so fucking hard.

“I said look at her.”

My eyes fly open, my muscles tightening when his hand comes into view, gently gliding across her skin until he’s trailing the pad of his thumb up her jawline.

She tips her head, her mouth opening, but he evades her, pressing at the underside of her lip, and a small frown finds her forehead. She growls and his airy satisfaction has chills wrapping round my fucking neck.

His lips find my ear again. “You have no idea what our girl can do.”

Our girl...

My fingers twitch.

“Watch...” he says like a secret, and this time, when her head lowers, he slips his thumb between her lips and she starts to shake, her entire body quaking, goosebumps spreading along her skin. She closes her lips around him, sucking, and then her teeth clamp.

He groans behind me and my core begins to jut, but right as I’m about to come, Alto whispers, “I said you’d regret it.”

His other hand lets me go suddenly, and he jerks up, freeing himself and tearing her body off mine in the same second. He tosses her behind him on the mattress and spins.

I’m still panting, just getting to my feet when he’s already got the front of his pants undone, dick out and pushing into her.

Her legs come up wrapping around his waist and rocks into her.

“That’s not ... nice.” She moans. “He earned my cum.”

“He’ll learn to listen.” His face disappears into her neck, and her eyes

meet mine.

My cock twitches and I kick my shoes to the side, tearing my jacket and shirt off, dropping them in the pile with his.

Just as I'm undoing my belt he lifts his head, smirks and slides out of her, and she climbs to the edge of the bed. Alto gets behind her, and then his eyes lift to mine, holding.

I free myself and shuffle forward.

Delta's lips caress the head of my dick and he presses at her entrance.

At the same time, we glide forward, and she moans around me.

We fuck her from both ends and she comes for a second time not a minute later, and I'm getting there.

"I'm going to come." I warn her.

"Pull out of her and she'll sink her teeth in."

"Why the fuck would I do something so stupid." I push in further and she claws at my thighs. "Swallow me, baby."

Alto smirks, leaning over her, his face so close to my dick it swells further.

"I'm coming too, baby." he groans, his features pulling. "Look what you did to us." He kisses her shoulder. "*Feel* what you do to us."

His eyes snap up, dark and desperate and I jolt, my cum spraying her throat and she moans, her body tightening until, all at once, she collapses to the mattress.

Her dark hair fans all around her, her body marked with both our hands and sleek with sweat.

Delta chuckles, tugs us down beside her and closes her eyes.

It's not long before his follow, but I stay awake a little longer, listening to them sleep.

Quietly pushing to my feet I go back to my room, looking around at the large space.

I'd vowed not to go back to being a prisoner, but I didn't expect to come

out of that with anything but my life. This shit don't feel real.

This room can't truly be mine.

Can it?

Lowering onto the edge of the bed, I lean over, staring at the floor.

I've never fucking needed a soul, so why the fuck does the thought of not having them drive me mad? It started with him, grew to her, and ended with one realization.

Neither could be sacrificed.

But will they still want me once they realize they no longer need me?

That I already moved all of the money Alicia gave me into Delta's accounts and that the estate left behind from Alto's father now shows his name on the deed.

I never planned to fuck them over, but I was going to let them feel the sting as if I did for a while.

A little pain goes a long way.

It makes you strong.

It doesn't make you equal ... doesn't make you worth a damn.

Footsteps have my head snapping up to find Delta and Alto stepping inside.

He closes the door and locks it while she walks toward the opposite side of the bed that I'm sitting on and climbs beneath the covers, her body still naked and flushed. Alto climbs in behind her, and they both look to me, ever so slowly, I step out my pants, slipping beneath the covers with them.

Alto reaches behind him and presses a button on the remote, turning off the lights. After a moment my eyes adjust, finding Delta's sleepy smile on me.

Her hand comes up, pushing my hair back and glides along my cheek. "I knew the minute we met you we'd want to keep you," she admits.

I swallow past the lump in my throat, looking to Alto. "We?"

Alto's dazed eyes slides to mine. "You fit, Ander." His eyes close again,

and he wraps his arm around her, hers entwining with mine as she pulls it between us. “Don’t question it, and don’t leave us in bed like that again.”

Heat spreads through my chest, and I nod even though he’s not looking.

“Fine, but I call the first taste of morning pussy.”

He scoffs, and says, “yes dad.”

The three of us laugh, and then we fall asleep.

Quick note from the author:

Gah! Thank you so much for reading Ander, Delta, and Alto’s short story! If you’re a reader of mine, you might recognize the world we’re in!! And if you did, the answer is YES!

Girls of Greyson Prep, book 1 is COMING SOON!

This is a little taste of what their world is like, and I’m dying for it.

The first book in the series is going to be Rocklin’s, and it is MF.

I hope you guys are ready for more of the girls, because this is THEIR WORLD, and god help the men who try and take it from them ...

If you loved this book, you can find a full list of my novels using the link below!

Thank you so much for reading.

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MAKE YOU MINE SHANTEL TESSIER



MAKE YOU MINE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHANTEL TESSIER

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<https://shanteltessier.com/>

You can join her reader group. It's the only place to get exclusive teasers, first to know about current projects and release dates. And also have chances to win some amazing giveaways-

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TRIGGER WARNING

WARNING—*Make You Mine* is a dark bully romance. It may contain triggers for some due to sexual situations, language, and violence. It is NOT a retelling of Hades and Persephone. Please remember that this is a work of FICTION and I do NOT condone any situations or actions that take place between these characters.

A few things to know about **Make You Mine: A Dark Bully Romance**

It is not RH.

It is MF with some MFM scenes.

It is told in multiple POVs.

Hades: God of the underworld

PROLOGUE

ALYSSA

LOCAL GIRL who accused the Westbrook football star of raping and murdering a fellow student is now missing. I read over the headlines while I sit in the Westbrook High cafeteria. Her father has filed a report that the teen never returned home after attending an event. The police have no current leads ...

The poor girl. Henley Greene went up against the Grim Reapers and lost. They did something to her. That's not even a question. Everyone thought she was crazy, but I could see some truth to what she thought she saw.

Henley was once best friends with them, but when she turned Dax Monroe in for raping and killing Brenda Nash out at Death Valley, they all shunned her. She left for a little bit, but some shitty luck of fate brought her back to Westbrook High a few months ago. Now she's probably rotting in a ditch somewhere with their names carved into her skin as a reminder you don't betray them. No, I haven't watched too many crime shows. The Reapers are just that fucked up.

Looking up from my phone, I scan the room. Henley's best friend, Lacey, enters and falls down at the table at the front of the room. It's where the Grim Reapers sit. But she's the first one there. They've taken her in. Honestly, I'm not sure why. Unless they need a new fuck toy now that Henley's missing. Word around school is that they all took their turns with her. She didn't

belong to any one specifically, but no one outside of the Reapers could touch her. They owned her. As much as a man can own a woman, I guess.

It was fucked up really. Everyone stood back and watched them bully her. Who knows what the hell they did to that poor girl that we weren't able to see?

Grayson Law enters the room, and all chatter stops completely at the sight of him. He looks like shit. His once pretty-boy face is covered in bruises and cuts. He fought another Reaper—his best friend—last weekend at the Graveyard. I didn't see it, but I heard he went like forty minutes or something without throwing a single punch. Then Law just stood and went ballistic on his friend, who hasn't been seen or heard from since. I'm guessing he's at home nursing his wounds. Too afraid to be seen after what happened.

Law sits down next to Lacey, and she whispers something to him. He shakes his head at her, and she lowers her eyes to their table.

Some sketchy shit is going on, even for the Reapers. I can't explain it, but I can feel the shift in the school. The city hasn't been the same since Dax Monroe's trial at the end of the school year last year. He was found not guilty for the rape and murder of Brenda Nash. She went to school with us, but I didn't know her personally.

If you ask me, he's guilty. The Reapers own this fucking town. It's pathetic how much they get away with. How many people turn a blind eye because their ancestors are the Founders of Westbrook.

Van Rellik enters the room. Coming to a stop, he notices the silence and glares around the room. "Do we have a fucking problem?" he demands. His voice carries in the large space.

Kids shuffle in their seats, and the chatter starts back up again, everyone trying to avoid eye contact with him. He makes his way over to the table and sits down across from Law and Lacey with his back to me. Placing his elbows on the table, he runs his hands through his dark curls.

It just proves my point that some shit is going down, but I think it's

coming from inside the Reapers. Wherever Henley is, I think she managed to fuck up their little group of untouchables.

Dax Monroe enters with Derek Sanders by his side. This is where things are getting even weirder. Derek Sanders is not a member of the Reapers. So why they have taken him in as one of their own is confusing as fuck.

The two guys make their way to the table and plop down. None of them are eating. Instead, they all have their heads in the center of the table, softly talking with one another. The chatter is too loud for me to hear anything. Plus, I sit too far away from them.

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I look down to see I have a new text. Opening it, I read over it.

Jacob: I've been trying to get ahold of Britney. She's not answering my calls. Will you let her know that I have to leave town this afternoon, but I'll be back tomorrow morning?

Me: Sure.

Jacob: Oh and tell her to call me when she gets the chance.

I stand and pocket my cell, throwing what's left of my lunch in the trashcan and exiting the cafeteria. I make my way to the senior hall and push open the door to Mrs. Shepherd's classroom to find it empty. Not unusual, but I figured I'd give it a try. I didn't need to spend any more time in the cafeteria analyzing the Reapers. The girls at this school already spend their days pining over them. I'm sure as fuck not going to.

I go to leave but see her cell sitting screen down on her desk. Pulling the door closed, I lock it and then walk over and plop down at her desk, picking it up. "Let's have a look." I slide the screen, and it opens. Adults are so stupid. Everyone should lock their phones these days.

Going to her texts, I see that she is choosing to ignore Jacob because she's opened his texts but hasn't responded.

I pull my cell out of my pocket and take a pic of the messages on her cell. "Gotcha." I smile to myself. Exiting out of the message, I catch a text from a

name saved under DV.

I frown. Everyone here knows that DV stands for Death Valley—a once all-boys preparatory academy that caught fire long ago and then was abandoned. Now kids party there. Why the fuck would Britney be going there? And why would she have that saved as a contact? They don't have working phones there. Hell, half the time, the cell phone service is shitty.

Leaning back in the chair, I click on it, and the last thing sent to her from this number was a video. I push play.

“Help me!” a woman screams. “Please—”

“No one is coming, bitch.” The guy laughs at her while she kneels in the middle of the small, darkly lit room. Her wrists are tied behind her back with rope. The white blouse she was wearing is torn, hanging off one shoulder and showing off her black bra strap.

She drops her head, the concrete room filling with her heavy breathing and quiet sobs.

He pushes off the wall and walks over to stand in front of her. Gripping a handful of her hair, he yanks her head up. “Look at me,” the man growls. Then he squats down to her level.

She sniffs, looking up at him through wet lashes. “Please, don't do this.”

“Shh,” he says almost soothingly. Reaching out, he runs the back of his knuckles down the side of her cheek, making her flinch at the touch. “It'll only hurt for a minute.”

“I promise I won't say anything.” She licks her trembling lips.

“I'm not worried about you running that pretty little mouth of yours.” He stands and walks over to a table sitting against one of the concrete walls. Picking up a roll of duct tape, he returns to the woman.

“Wait—”

He yanks on it before he slaps the end over her mouth and quickly wraps it around her entire head four times, silencing her with no chance of getting it off. He straightens to his full height, then tosses the roll to the side and

reaches down to unzip his ripped jeans. “You won’t be needing that mouth tonight because I’m going to fuck that tight ass of yours.”

He grabs the top of her head, gripping her hair and dragging her restrained body across the dingy floor over to a twin-sized mattress that sits over by the wall that he was leaning against. Shoving her face-first, he pushes the black skirt up to her ass to expose a white thong. Then he grips her hips, pulling her up onto her knees. The wet spot on her underwear gives away how much she enjoys putting on a show for him.

His knees spread hers wide open for him. “Look at that.” He chuckles. “Such a good little slut, you are.”

She makes unintelligible noises while she squirms under him.

The man wears a black ski mask over his face to help enhance the game they’re playing, but I know exactly who he is. His voice gives him away. I hear it almost every day.

Reaching into his black boxers, he pulls out his hard dick. His fingers wrap around the impressive size, and I watch him pull her thong to the side before he spits on her ass and slides his thumb into it. “You’re going to remember I was here when you sit down tomorrow,” he tells her. His free hand slaps it hard enough to make the sound bounce off the walls of the small room that I’ve never seen before. But I have an idea of where they are. In the middle of nowhere, where no one would ever think to look for them. It sits on Death Valley property.

“Does he know I fuck your ass?” he asks even though he knows she can’t answer. “I wonder what he’d do to you if he knew what a little whore you are.”

She tries to get up, but his free hand grips the back of her neck, holding it down into the mattress.

“Maybe I’ll send you home with my name written on your ass—”

I stop the video and forward it to myself before I delete the evidence that shows it was sent to my number. Placing the cell on the desk where I found

it, I bite my bottom lip, contemplating my options. I figured something was going on, but I just haven't been able to prove it. This is a fucking gift. The question is, what am I going to do with it?

Westbrook, Texas, has seen its fair share of scandals. They sweep anything illegal or forbidden under the rug, but this? It would rock this city. Tear it upside down. Especially given his reputation. And hers. She's the niece of Westbrook High's principal. That's how she even got this job in the first place. Well, him and Jacob.

My life is pretty boring. I stay the fuck to myself and make sure to never be seen. I like being hidden in the dark. If I told anyone what I just saw, it would most definitely put me in the spotlight. And that's the last place I want to be. But I can't let this go, can I?

No, I can't. Something needs to be done. Who the hell knows how long it's been going on? Or how long it will last? I must capitalize on this while the opportunity exists.

Getting up, I make my way to the door. When I turn the lock, I open it to find her standing there on the other side. She's holding the key to her door in her hand to unlock it.

"Oh, Alyssa." She jumps back in surprise. "What are you ... what are you doing in my classroom?"

"Just thought I'd stop by." I give her a sweet smile, but she frowns, knowing that I never stop by to see her. I have no reason to.

"How did you get in?" She looks from the keys in her hand to the door.

"It was unlocked." I shrug and walk past her farther into the hall.

"Is everything okay?" she asks.

I nod just as the bell rings, and students start to fill the halls. "Everything is fine, Mrs. Shepherd."

Her shoulders fall, and she sighs heavily. "Alyssa, you can call me Britney."

I turn, giving her my back, and throw my hair over my shoulder, laughing

to myself. *Fuck you, bitch!*

CHAPTER 1

ALYSSA

“DANCE WITH THE DEVIL” by Breaking Benjamin blares through the speakers that hang from the corners of the concrete walls decorated with spray paint. The bass makes the dirty floor vibrate under my Balenciaga tennis shoes. I run my fingertips across the glow-in-the-dark white spray paint that reads *fuck my mouth, daddy*.

Death Valley—once known as Spring Valley—is now known for drugs, alcohol, and fucking. What else are bored kids and adults with no lives supposed to do with their time?

Get fucked.

Get drunk.

Get high.

That’s Death Valley’s slogan. It’s literally written all over the walls of the once all-boys preparatory academy. Years ago, a section of it caught on fire, shutting it down, and over time, kids have vandalized it and turned it into party central. The fact that it’s thirty minutes from anywhere makes it convenient. There’s no police for miles. And those who happen to drive by pretend it doesn’t exist because no number of cops could tame this wild jungle.

Doesn’t matter if you’re rich or poor. Young or old. Everyone comes here to get fucked up. You know those old, haunted ghost stories that friends make

up while sitting around a campfire to scare each other? That's what I consider Death Valley to be. Once gorgeous Victorian-like structures have been abandoned for years after the fire broke out that supposedly killed every boy and staff member that lived here. It sits on five hundred acres of now deserted land. The once manicured lawn is destroyed from kids bringing their big trucks out here to party. Doing donuts and stupid shit like that. In other places, the grass has grown so high, I won't even go near it afraid of snakes or whatever else could be hiding in there ready to kill me.

A kid who can't be over thirteen runs his shoulder into me, knocking me into the graffiti wall. "Bitch!" I call out and shove his back. He falls to the floor, laughing. Fuck, I need a drink. I can't be here sober. I'm not supposed to be here at all actually. This isn't really my thing, but I followed someone here tonight because I had to see it for myself.

I walk up to the railing and look down over it to the first floor—the Graveyard, where all the rich and poor kids come to get a little excitement. It once was an atrium that housed the cafeteria for the boys who attended the school, but now it's where they beat the shit out of one another. Kids gather around the makeshift arena with flashlights and glowsticks—whatever they can find to help their roll.

The song ends, and "Cut the Cord" by Shinedown starts playing.

The Grim Reapers are here tonight. Well, all but one. I don't see Ryan Scout anywhere. He must be in the crowd or in the Church with some girl on her knees getting his dick sucked.

Van Rellik, Dax Monroe, Grayson Law, and Ryan Scout have a bloodline that nothing can match. Their ancestors from the eighteen hundreds are the Founders of Westbrook. Derek Sanders is also here with them. He makes me question everything I ever thought I knew about the group of boys. He's an outsider, but they've seemed to have welcomed him with open arms. It makes me wonder what they have on him and why he now hangs with the Reapers. Derek hasn't always been the popular kid, but he was at least approachable.

Now he's climbed the social ladder to a Reaper and is untouchable. I don't go near those types of people.

I've always stayed in the shadows. It's the best place to be. People don't know what they can't see.

I can't seem to figure him out. Derek hasn't always been a Reaper. And honestly, it fucking boggles my mind why they would allow him to become one. Maybe the poor kid is paying off a debt to them or something. Because the Reapers have never let anyone join them before. Why now? Why him?

Matthew, the man who runs the show, enters the empty makeshift ring, holding the microphone up to his mouth. "We've got a delicious treat for you all tonight. A Reaper is making his debut in the center of the ring!"

Derek Sanders removes his hoodie and tosses it to Dax Monroe. Law and Rellik stand next to him. Law has his eyes down on his cell while he types away on it. Rellik shoves his hands in the front pockets of his jeans and leans back against the wall, getting comfortable.

Law pockets his cell and leans in to talk to Rellik, who adjusts his stance. They all stand side by side with their arms crossed over their chests, legs wide. They look like they're a part of some gang watching an initiation. Hell, as little as I know about them, this might be just that. Maybe they require blood in order to join.

Derek lifts his fisted hands up to his face, hopping from foot to foot while his opponent steps into the middle of the ring. The crowd screams at the top of their lungs, making me cover my ears to try to lessen the ringing the best I can. Kids are shoving the front of my body into the railing, and I pray that it doesn't break. This place is old. No one has maintained it for years.

"Give me that," I shout, ripping the joint out of the guy's hand who stands next to me. Bringing it to my lips, I take a long drag, lean my head back, and slowly let it out, needing something in my system. I already regret coming. No one notices me, but just being here and the fact that strangers are touching me makes my skin crawl.

“Can I have that back?” he asks, reaching his hand out.

I ignore him as if I’ve gone deaf and take another hit. He says something under his breath, which I’m unable to hear over the roar of everyone and music before he pushes off the railing and storms into the crowd. Sticking my tongue out, I run it across my upper lip, feeling the tongue piercing hit my teeth. Curling my tongue along the roof of my mouth, I gently close my teeth, capturing the steel bar between them for a second.

Parting my lips, I take another hit. Matthew slams his hand down, and the fight starts. “About time,” I mumble to myself.

Derek tries to look tough by throwing the first punch, but his opponent ducks, and he misses. The crowd boos when the other kid lands a punch to Derek’s side. Every person here is a sheep. They worship the Reapers as if they are their ticket to hell with an opportunity to rule all the sinners.

Gods come in many different forms if you ask me. Some are good, and some are evil, but they all have one thing in common—power. Without a kingdom, they are powerless. This is their domain, and the Reapers rule this underworld.

I’m not an innocent. I got my nose pierced at age thirteen, my tongue pierced a year later, and my first tattoo when I was fifteen. I lost my virginity to an older man at sixteen. The cops have dropped me off at my father’s drunk, and I’ve done my fair share of drugs. I’ve always been a problem child. I like things messy. It’s just more exciting that way. And sex? Fuck, I love dick. A good one that is. I haven’t had a whole lot in my eighteen years, but I did have a couple of bad ones. I’ve found that I like the ones that lay there and let me have control the best. I know what I like, and they rarely get it done, which is fine. I’ll do it myself.

Derek manages to land a punch to the other guy’s face, and the crowd shouts. Everyone jumps up and down, cheering him on. I take another hit when my cell vibrates in my back pocket.

Pulling it out, I see the text.

Want to fuck tonight?

I'm at Death Valley.

I reply and go to put it away when he responds immediately.

So am I.

I don't respond to that one. My ex must be drunk. The last time we had sex, I ended up in handcuffs, and they weren't his. The officer took me home and made my father answer the door while I was still cuffed. Dad was pissed and sent me straight to my room. I immediately crawled out of my window and left town for the weekend. He didn't even notice.

Placing my cell back in my pocket, I watch Derek land another punch. It pushes his opponent back into the crowd, and they shove him forward. Derek hits him again, and the guy falls to the concrete floor, passed out cold.

The crowd screams, and I take another hit, waiting for this shit to kick in. Fuck, it's weak. The other Reapers pull Derek out of the middle of the arena and slap him on the back. Matthew is on the microphone congratulating the newest Reaper while throwing a wad of cash into Derek's bloody hand.

I catch sight of Dax Monroe typing out something on his cell, and then he leans in to tell Law something. Law nods a couple of times. Dax then leans in and speaks to Van Rellik. He too nods to whatever Dax tells him, and they both walk away from their friends. Leaning over the railing, I watch them take the stairs over on the far right that hug the wall. They come to the second floor, and I turn to face the crowd as Dax and Rellik walk past me. I follow, passing by the Chapel where the boys who attended Spring Valley would worship and down the long hallway before we go down the grand staircase in the front of the building, then walk out the double doors. I stay far enough back so they don't notice me.

I'm surprised when I see the lights flash to Law's G-Wagon before Dax gets in the driver's seat, and Rellik jumps in on the passenger side. I take one last drag of the joint before I throw it to the ground and get into my car.

DAX MONROE

I pull down the one-lane gravel road, coming to a stop before the dilapidated two-story Victorian house comes into view. It's been abandoned for years, just like Death Valley. Except this house doesn't see much action. Death Valley is crowded with kids every night, but this sits by itself because no one has a reason to venture over here.

It's dark, deserted, and the best place to do shit that you don't want others to know about. There are always kids over at Death Valley with their phones out recording and taking pictures. That's the last thing I want. Unless I want to record myself.

Turning off Law's SUV, I open the center console and grab two black ski masks. "Put this on." I toss one into Rellik's lap.

He grabs it and slides it over his face. "Does this even matter at this point?" he jokes.

I chuckle. "Not really." Shoving my door open, I round the back as he gets out of the passenger side. He walks to stand beside me at the open back door. We both silently stare down at the woman who's been in Law's SUV for well over an hour now.

Her hands are zip-tied behind her back, and her ankles are also secured. She's got duct tape over her face. Enough covering her mouth that she isn't able to get it off. A blindfold is over her eyes, so she can't see our faces even though we wear masks. The less she can figure out, the better.

"Help me get her inside," I say, grabbing her shoulder to sit her up.

She starts screaming behind her gag, her body thrashing around, making it hard to keep hold of her. Rellik grabs a handful of her hair and yanks her out. The moment he lets go, her legs give out, and she falls to the gravel.

Leaning down, I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder. "Get the door for me."

He runs up the stone steps and pushes the old wooden door open for me to enter with our toy for the night.

Walking down the hallway to the back of the house, I take the stairs to the basement. Rellik reaches up and turns on the single light bulb that hangs from the ceiling.

I toss the woman onto the old mattress that lies on the floor and watch her flop around like a fish out of water while she mumbles unintelligible words.

“Now what?” Rellik asks, watching her with fascination and hunger. I knew he’d want to come with me.

“Now we play with her.”

CHAPTER 2

ALYSSA

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I sit at the breakfast bar eating a donut when my stepmother enters. “Your father and I are leaving next Thursday after school for the weekend.”

I swallow my bite. “So I heard.” He sent me a text last night about the news. I hate that he thinks I care. It means I don’t do a good enough job of reminding him how much I hate her.

Her eyes narrow on me for the briefest second before she masks her hatred for me and gives me that fake smile when my father enters. “My two favorite women.” He goes over to her, giving her a kiss on the lips.

I manage to hold down the vomit that wants to projectile all over her.

He walks over to me and pulls me in for a hug. My arms stay down at my sides. “Will you be okay being home alone?” he asks, the concern evident in his voice when he pulls away.

I snort. “Of course.” I’ve practically raised myself. He just married my stepmother last year. My mother died when I was younger, and he’s been MIA most of my life. His life is devoted to his business. After my mother passed, nannies raised me.

“Well, we will have our cells on at all times,” he adds. “So if you need anything, call either one of us. And we’ll be on the jet rushing back.”

Well, if I’m bleeding out, that won’t be fast enough. “It’ll be fine. I

promise. I'm going to have Jules over for a sleepover, if that's okay?"

He nods once. "Just no parties. I don't want any phone calls from the sheriff for noise complaints and underage drinking."

I hold up my hand. "Swear on the Bible."

My stepmother's face scrunches at my choice of words. She came from a religious family. Too bad none of it wore off on her. She pretends to be this God-fearing woman, but I know the truth about her.

"Have a fun and safe day. I'm off to work." He kisses my forehead, then exits the kitchen.

She looks at me, opening her mouth, but she decides to keep whatever she was about to say to herself. Instead, she pulls her cell out of her pocket and starts typing away on it. I watch the smile tug at the corner of her lips that she refuses to let show.

"May I go to Death Valley next weekend?" I ask.

Her fingers pause on her screen, and she looks up at me through her dark lashes. The confusion is written all over her face because I never ask her permission to do anything. And she knows I never go there. Last night was an exception.

"I didn't want to ask Dad," I continue. "Don't want him to know I'm going there and freak him out after what happened to Brenda Nash last year. I know Dax got off." I wave my hand in the air as if he's not innocent. "We all knew he would."

She clears her throat.

"I mean, it was just too suspicious, ya know?" I add, rambling to make her uncomfortable. "The missing body—"

"He was proven innocent. That girl Henley just wanted attention."

"Right. And now she's *missing*," I say slowly. "That's not suspicious at all. And he has to be innocent because someone with a Founder's last name couldn't possibly be responsible for raping and killing an innocent girl."

Her injected lips thin the best they can, and her hand tightens on her

phone. “That’s in the past,” she says, clearly irritated. “But yes, you may go.” A devious smile spreads across her face before she adds, “It’ll be our little secret.”

She thinks she’ll have ammo to use against me. I bite back a laugh. Not quite.

“Your father will be leaving town later this evening and not returning until Wednesday,” she adds as if I care. “Make sure to stay out of trouble. I’d hate for him to cancel my trip because of you.” She looks up from her cell, her eyes running up and down my disheveled look before tossing her hair over her shoulder and exiting the room.

DAX MONROE

I’m sitting in the living room of Law’s mother’s house when I remove my cell from my pocket. I’ve been staying here for the past few weeks, hiding out from my father. I check the time to see it’s almost midnight, then climb to my feet and slide it back in my pocket.

“Going somewhere?” Rellik asks from his place on the couch next to me.

Law is upstairs doing who knows what to his girlfriend. They were making out on the couch before he threw her over his shoulder and ran her up to his room.

“Yep,” I answer Rellik but look at Derek. “You’re coming with me.”

“Where are we going?” he asks, standing to his feet.

“You get to reap the rewards of being a Grim Reaper,” I say vaguely.

Rellik laughs, knowing exactly what I mean. “Have fun with that.” He winks at Derek.

“We’ll be back,” I tell Rellik. Derek follows me to the front door and out to my car.

He stays silent during our drive. Derek didn’t ask to join us. We just didn’t give him a choice. Too much happened to allow him to walk away. We

brought him in and made him participate so he could never turn his back on us. He's in too deep now, so he may as well get to enjoy the life sentence.

I don't mind having him be part of the group. I actually like the guy.

Pulling up to the mansion, he sits up straighter, but I know he doesn't recognize where we are. If he does, then he has some explaining to do.

I turn off the car and grab the bag out of the back seat. "Come on," I order, getting out. He follows me up the stairs and into the house like we own it. And we do. Tonight, we own everything inside these fucking walls.

"What are we doing?" Derek whispers. "Who lives here?"

I ignore him and make my way to the end of the hall to see the door is shut. I turn to face him. "You're going to go in there and fuck her."

"What?" he shrieks. Then he slaps his hand over his mouth and mumbles, "Who?"

"Doesn't matter who she is." He'll figure it out the moment he sees her.

"Monroe—"

"She likes this shit." I wave a hand at his shocked face. "She likes to pretend she doesn't want it. Good actress. Prefers you to take it."

His brows pull together, and a hand runs through his hair. "You mean you want me to pretend to rape her?"

"If that's what you want to call it." I shrug.

"What else would you call it?" he snaps.

"It's role-playing." I wave off his concern. "Take this." I slide the backpack off my shoulders and hand it to him. "Everything you'll need is in there."

"I don't know..."

I roll my eyes and pull my cell out of my back pocket. I pull up her number that I have saved under *My slut* and show him the text she sent me earlier today. "Read it."

His eyes widen while he skims over it. "Oh." He licks his lips, and I can tell he's into it. Locking it, I place it back into my pocket. "You sure you

don't want to?"

"No. I have to make a phone call. She's all yours tonight." I feel like he deserves a little something for doing so well with the Reapers. Why not give him some pussy? What guy wouldn't want that?

He nods, looking more relaxed about the situation now. "Okay."

DEREK SANDERS

Licking my lips, I turn the knob gently and open the door just as Monroe walks away from me down the hall, placing his cell to his ear. There's a night-light by the side of the bed, giving the room a little bit of light but not much. The woman sleeping in the bed wears nothing but a pair of underwear. The thick white comforter is bunched up at the foot of the bed. She's on her stomach with her arms up by her head. A part of me thinks she fell asleep in that position on purpose. To make things easier on the guy she wanted to fuck her tonight.

Stepping inside, I shut the door behind me and lock us in here alone. Tiptoeing over to the bed, I unzip the bag as slowly as I can so as not to wake her. I have to use the light from my cell phone to see the contents.

Duct tape, zip ties, a blindfold, and a pair of handcuffs.

The text had said: ***Tie me up and share me with your friend. Make me your dirty little whore.***

I've never done anything like this before, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't turned on by it.

Reaching into the bag, I pull out a zip tie. Leaning over, I gently pull her small wrists to lay across her back and zip-tie them together.

She doesn't even move, and when they're secured, I smile to myself. Then I reach back into the bag and grab the blindfold. Slowly, I push it down over her dark hair. She shifts and lets out a sound resembling a moan. I stiffen and let out a long breath when she relaxes back into the mattress. I

grab the duct tape and bite off two pieces. I gently run my fingertips over her right cheek, moving her hair away from her plump lips so the tape won't get stuck to it. Then I gently place both pieces over her lips, each one diagonal to cover them enough. It's not the easiest, considering she's lying on the left side of her face, but I'm making the best of it.

She shifts, her arms pulling on the restraints, and I smile. "Time to wake up and be my little whore." She's coming around, realizing she's tied, gagged, and blinded. "Can't say I'm not going to enjoy this."

Walking back around the bed, I get onto it, and she starts fighting even harder. Mumbled words come from her taped lips, and she's kicking her feet, making the bed shake.

I slap her thigh, the feel of my palm to her skin making her cry out behind the gag.

Gripping her underwear, I yank them down her legs while she kicks them aimlessly. "Fight all you want. We both know you want me to take it." I slap the other thigh, and both spots instantly turn red. I shove her knees far apart with mine and unzip my jeans. Grabbing her hips, I yank her ass up in the air and slap her smooth pussy. She screams. "Look how wet you are." I run two fingers over her soaked lips before sliding one inside her.

I laugh. "Fuck." This bitch is really into this, and so am I. I shove a second one into her, and she doesn't stop fighting me. I know this is what she likes. What she gets off on.

My breathing picks up at the feel of her pussy clamping down on my fingers. I've never done anything like this. I've had sex, but I've never used someone before. And this proves to me that there's a difference.

When I pull out my fingers, her body sags against the bed. Her hands are fisted, and her back arches painfully high, giving me a great view of her wet cunt and puckered ass. I've never fucked a girl in the ass before. Have I thought about it? Fuck, yeah. But when I suggested it, they turned me down.

Shoving my thumb into her pussy, I pull it out and run it up over her ass.

She starts screaming into the gag, her body fighting relentlessly. I force it in, placing my free hand on her back. “Shh.” I try to calm her, slowly working it in and out.

Letting go of her back, I grab my hard cock and rub the tip along her wet cunt. “Such a fucking whore.” I laugh. “I like it.” When I push into her, she makes a strangled cry sound.

My cock stretches her pretty shaved pussy wide open, and since I’m not in the mood to take this slow, I start fucking her. This is an opportunity I’m not going to miss out on.

Removing my thumb from her ass, I slap her soft skin. She still tries to fight me, but her body pushes against me on its own. “That’s it.” I smile, reaching up and grabbing a handful of her hair and wrapping it around my fist. “Push against my cock. Fuck it, baby. Show me how bad you want it.”

I stop moving my hips and just watch her body rock back and forth as she fucks my slick cock. She’s not as rough or fast as I was. She doesn’t have the help of her hands. No leverage.

I lift her head off the bed, pulling it back painfully. Reaching around, I wrap my hand around her throat. I lean over her restless body and growl into her ear. “Fuck my cock, baby. Make it come.”

Her pussy clenches down on me, and I suck in a breath. “Fuck,” I hiss, biting down on her neck. “Just like that.”

Not able to let her have any control any longer, I shove her facedown into the bed and go back to fucking her.

The bed squeaks from my thrusts while her muffled moans fill the bedroom and my body slaps against hers. Within a few minutes, her pussy clamps around me one last time, and she comes all over my cock. I lean my head back and let out a groan while coming not far behind her. My cock pulsing inside her with pleasure.

Pulling out slowly, I sag on my knees while her body convulses.

Getting off the bed, I stand next to it and grab a handful of her hair,

yanking her body to where her head hangs off the side. I rip the tape off, making her cry out. "Open that fucking mouth," I order roughly, still trying to catch my breath.

She parts her lips, and I pull on her more, to where more of her chest hangs off the bed. I slide my dick into her waiting mouth. "Lick my cock clean," I demand.

She still has her blindfold on, so she can't see me. Her tongue comes out, and I see a silver ball piercing before she licks up my shaft, cleaning off our cum. I slide my hands up into her already tangled hair, holding on to it. She lets out a cry, and I shove my cock into her mouth. Her body now lays flat on the bed, and she jerks, trying to get away, but there's nowhere for her to go. "You're not done."

Her tongue circles the tip before I push it in once again. This time, she takes more of me. "Such a good little whore," I praise her.

Her shoulders shake while she gags on my dick. I smile down at her, my hand holding her hair while my cock slowly works in and out of her parted lips.

"Don't forget my balls." I pull out of her mouth, and she sucks in a breath while I grab my cock with my free hand and smash my balls into her face. She licks them before sucking one into her mouth.

"Fuck, yeah." I groan, throwing my head back while she releases it and gives the other one the same attention.

I'm still hard and could go another round. "That's it." I shove my hips forward, my knees hitting the side of the bed. I wish she was on hers instead, but I'm committed at this point.

"Open wide," I demand, pulling back to shove the head of my cock inside her again. "Swallow my dick, baby. Show me how much you love to be used."

She gags as she gets up on her knees, her ass in the air again, and it gives me an idea.

Pulling out of her mouth, she gasps as I squat down and shove two fingers into her mouth, pushing them to the back. She tries to jerk her head away, but I've still got a grip with my free hand in her hair.

Yanking them out, she sags and sniffs right before I replace them with my cock. Then I lean over her body and find her ass with my drool-covered fingers.

She closes her legs and tries to flatten out. "Ass up in the air," I demand, slapping the side of it.

Whimpering, she does as she's told, and I find that tight ass again and start to finger it. "Just like that." I hit the back of her throat, and she mumbles around it. "That pussy want it again? Hmm? Is my cum running out of those pretty little lips, begging to be fucked?"

Unintelligible noises come from her mouth as I work my dick in and out of it. My two fingers not nearly as aggressive on her ass. Monroe told me I could fuck her, not break her. "This time, it's all about me," I tell her, tightening my hold on her hair and picking up my pace to the point the bed rocks back and forth from my force. Drool runs down her chin and onto my balls, but I don't let up. I'm so close. I can feel it ...

Closing my eyes, I clench my teeth, and my balls tighten. I shove my cock down her throat and come again, forcing her to swallow while my fingers are still in her ass.

When I pull out, I gently remove my fingers as well, and she sags onto the bed. Her ragged breathing fills the room. I remove the knife from my pocket and cut the zip tie but leave the blindfold on.

Without another word, I grab the backpack and exit the room. Walking outside, I find Monroe talking on the phone in his car.

"Hey, I gotta go." He hangs up without even bothering to wait for them to say goodbye. "How'd it go?" he asks, looking over at me.

"Fuck." I sigh, then give a nervous laugh, not believing I just did that.

"Right?" He laughs, slapping me on the shoulder. "Get used to it, man."

“How often do you do that?” I wonder.

“Often. She always wants it.” He pulls out of the driveway. “But we usually go to Death Valley. This was our first time here.”

“Why is that?”

“Because her husband was out of town.”

“What?” My head snaps to look over at him, thinking I heard him wrong. “Husband? She’s married?”

He nods, side-eyeing me. “Yeah. But don’t worry. He doesn’t know she fucks me.”

I close my eyes, instantly regretting what I did. I knew it was too good to be true.

“Hey, it’s okay.” He notices and taps my shoulder again. “I promise. No one knows except for the Reapers.”

“Have you all fucked her?” *Shit!* My heart is beating wildly in my chest, and it doesn’t have anything to do with the fact that I just got off.

“Rellik and I have,” he adds. “Law won’t touch her.”

Leaning my head against the headrest, I close my eyes and run my hand down my face. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! “I would have never—”

“It’ll be fine. He’ll never know. I have her on a pretty tight leash. Law set her up recently. If she tries to talk to anyone, we’ll fuck her in a way that she won’t enjoy.”

CHAPTER 3

ALYSSA

MONDAY MORNING, I'm standing in the kitchen like usual when my stepmother enters. "How was your weekend?" she asks as if we weren't both standing here yesterday morning talking.

Like she gives a fuck what I do.

"Mine was wonderful." She goes on as if I asked her. "Your father and I chartered a yacht yesterday before he left town last night. Lake Miles is so gorgeous—"

"When are you going to tell him that you're fucking a teenage boy?" I interrupt her.

Her face pales and body stiffens as eyes the size of quarters stare at mine with disbelief. Swallowing, she licks her lips. "I don't know—"

"You've been fucking Dax Monroe." I take a sip of my coffee, trying to hold in my laughter and not spit it out everywhere.

"I'm ... not. I didn't."

"He came by last night while you were gone," I say. After they got back from their yacht, my father left town, and she was nowhere to be found. She's never here when he's gone. Who knows where the fuck she goes? Or who else she's fucking in this goddamn city.

Britney gets my attention when she sucks in a deep breath, trying to come up with a quick response that would sound halfway true.

“Thought I was you,” I add. When she doesn’t say anything, I place my cup on the counter and pull out my cell. “You had a secret, Britney. Now I have one too.” Unlocking my phone, I go to videos and hold it out in front of her face but keep it paused. “See, while you were getting ready yesterday to go out with my father on the lake, I messaged Dax from your cell to come at midnight. When I knew you’d be gone. I went to your room and set up my cell to record, then pretended to be asleep. He let Derek fuck me thinking it was you. Because you like when he shares you.”

Dick is just that—dick. I’m not a virgin, and I was never one of those women who thinks sex should be cherished, especially because of my stepmother. If spreading my legs and letting a man take advantage of me means I can get her out of my life, then so be it. Who knew he’d actually be good, though? Even I was surprised when I got off. Usually, I prefer to be the one in control, but my body ate up being his whore. I’ll have to remember that for the next guy I take to bed.

I had to request Dax share me with a friend because I knew if Dax fucked me, he’d know it wasn’t her. It was a long shot that just so happened to play out in the best way possible.

Britney goes to grab my cell out of my hand, and I pull it away before she can get it. “What do you want?” she snaps, that surprised look long gone and replaced with pure rage that I caught her.

I smile. I didn’t let that motherfucker fuck me for nothing. “I want you to tell my father exactly what you’ve done. If you don’t, I’m going to expose you and Dax.”

“You don’t have any proof,” she argues.

“Well, the other day, when I was in your classroom, I went through your cell and screenshotted your conversation between you and Dax. Then sent it to myself before I deleted the conversation. So yeah, I have plenty of evidence.”

I’m not going to tell her that I have a video of Dax and Rellik pulling her

restrained body out of Law's G-Wagon at Death Valley from a couple of nights ago. I'll save that for another time.

She reaches for me, but I take a step back. "You little—"

Her cell rings in her hand, and I get a quick look to see it's my father. She silences it, and I smile. "You have until tomorrow," I tell her. "Then I'll show the video that I recorded of Derek and me to Daddy and tell him that your boy toy thought I was you and had his friend rape me."

DAX MONROE

"What are we doing here this early?" Rellik asks us while we walk through the parking lot at Westbrook High.

"Britney messaged me that we needed to meet her before classes start," I answer. Which was odd, to say the least. I may fuck her, but we don't do anything other than that.

Law snorts. "She wants morning sex? Damn, she's getting ballsy wanting it on school property."

We enter the double doors and make our way down the senior wing to her classroom. Pushing the door open, we enter. "Why are we here?" I ask immediately

"Have a seat." She gestures to the front row.

"Seriously? I—"

"Sit down!" she snaps at Law's protest.

We each take a front row seat just as Derek rushes in. "Sorry," he mumbles, falling into the seat next to Law. "What's going on?" he asks, but no one answers because we don't know why the fuck she called us here. "Is this some form of detention?"

Britney walks around her desk, resting her ass up against it. "We've got a problem."

I lean back in the seat, getting comfortable. "Not sure how it's our

problem.”

Rellik laughs, Law is staring down at his cell, and Derek frowns.

“This is serious!” she yells, pointing a finger at Derek. “Were you at my house this weekend?”

He frowns, tilting his head to the side. “No.”

I snort. “Don’t lie, man. She knows you were there.”

He turns to look at me. “Why would I lie and say I went to her house? I don’t even know where she lives.”

I sit up straighter. “Derek, I drove you there. To fuck her.” Jesus, I know she’s not the best fuck, but you don’t forget that. It was just yesterday.

His face falls, and the color drains from his skin. Slowly, he turns to look her over, and then he looks back at me. “I did not fuck her.”

“This is the problem,” she says through gritted teeth. “What the fuck were you thinking, Dax?” she snaps.

“Me? What did I do?” I ask, as confused as Derek is. “You sent me a message. Said ...”

“That wasn’t me.” Her voice rises. “I didn’t send that fucking message.”

“Oh, God.” Derek places his elbows on his desk, his face in his hands. “Oh, God. Oh, God.”

“Shut the fuck up!” I bark at him. “What are you talking about? You texted me to come over after midnight and bring a friend. You were even in your room when we arrived.” I had poked my head into the master suite and saw her lying on the bed. I mean, it was dark, but I could still make out her sleeping form. “Derek fucked you.” I point over at him, and he’s still chanting to himself.

“It wasn’t me.” She shakes her head quickly.

“Then who the fuck was it?” Law asks, also not believing her. The bitch is a good actress. I’ve role-played with her enough to know she can be very convincing.

“It was Alyssa.” She growls the name.

Her stepdaughter? I know of her but don't pay her much attention. She's never been on the Reapers' radar before. Alyssa is just another stuck-up bitch here at Westbrook. That's all the school has to offer us when it comes to pussy.

"Oh, God." Derek starts rocking back and forth in his seat.

"Will you shut the fuck up?" I demand.

He slaps his hands down on this desk. "Easy for you to say. You didn't fuck the wrong woman."

"But ... she wanted it." Why would Alyssa text me from Britney's phone and not just text me directly from her own cell? "She was there. In your room." I recap what she's told us. Maybe I didn't see Britney lying there. It could have been Alyssa. "It doesn't make any sense."

"She knows I'm fucking you. She went through my cell and saw a text, a video ... I don't fucking know. But what I do know is that she set you guys up to where it looks like Derek raped her. If I don't come clean about our affair to Jacob, she's going to tell him what Derek did to her and blame it on you guys. Say that he had mistaken her for me, and she had no chance of stopping him."

Derek jumps to his feet at that and starts pacing the aisle, still mumbling to himself.

"Fuck." Rellik sighs, sinking into his chair.

Law just shakes his head, laughing. "What a smart little bitch."

"What do we do?" Derek's panicking. "I can't go to jail. Rape? I've never touched a woman inappropriately before last night. You told me she wanted me to take it." His large eyes meet mine.

"No one is going to jail," Law states.

"You weren't the one to fuck her," he snaps at Law. "I not only fucked her cunt. I also fucked her mouth. That's twice!" His voice rises. "Oh, dear Lord." He brings his hands to his hair, gripping at the scalp. "I didn't use a condom. She'll have my DNA."

Britney rolls her eyes and mumbles, “Well, that was stupid.”

“You said there’s a video? Of what? She and Derek fucking? Didn’t she get off?” Law shrugs, glancing over at Derek. When we got back to Law’s house, we joked around about it, but none of us ever mentioned who he was supposed to be fucking. “Doesn’t sound like rape to me.”

“A jury will see it that way. Especially with Dax’s past,” she argues.

“What do you want us to do?” Rellik asks. “Sounds like this is a you problem. Not ours.”

“One of your Reapers is in jeopardy.” She points at Derek. “You guys are very much involved.”

Rellik shrugs. “Come clean to your husband, and this’ll all go away.”

She bows her head. “I can’t do that. You have to help me—”

“We don’t have to do shit.” He stands from his chair.

“Wait a minute.” Law raises his hand to Rellik. “She may not mean anything to us, but Derek is a Reaper, and we protect our own.” He looks over at me. “And I won’t let this town know that you’re fucking our teacher.” His eyes go to hers, and they are full of disgust. She’s tried to get Law to fuck her before, and he shut that down real quick.

Even when there was no evidence last year to prove I was innocent in the disappearance of Brenda Nash, the Reapers still stood up for me. Took my side. Never once questioned my testimony. I wish they had. Maybe things would have gone differently. “Law is right.”

“What does that mean?” Rellik demands.

I sit back in my seat. “It means the Reapers have a new toy to play with.”

“No.” Derek shakes his head quickly. “I will not touch her again.”

“Yes, you will,” Law argues. Derek finally stops pacing and glares down at him when he goes on. “If the bitch wants to be used, then you’ll use her,” he adds.

It’s that simple.

“No, no, no.” Derek drops his eyes to look at the floor. “I can’t—”

Law stands from his seat, grabs Derek's shirt, and slams his back into the nearest wall, making Britney gasp. "Quit being a little bitch. This is what we do. We are the motherfucking Reapers. Go home, cry it out, drink a bottle of scotch, do whatever the fuck you have to do to find your balls. And when you do, let us know, and we'll get together and come up with a plan."

"A plan?" Derek rushes out, his voice a little higher than usual. "A plan to do what?" he asks wide-eyed and arms out in surrender.

"Whatever the fuck we want," Law answers simply, pushing off him. "You guys get a new doll. Something to fucking use and humiliate."

"That didn't go as planned last time," Rellik reminds Law.

"This little doll is asking for it. I say we make her regret it," Law argues before grabbing his backpack off the floor and exiting the room. He's clearly done with this shit show.

"Fuck," Rellik hisses, falling back into his seat.

I run a hand through my hair, releasing a heavy sigh. "You said she gave you until tomorrow?" I ask, looking at Britney.

She nods, crossing her arms over her chest. "He can't find out, Dax."

I know. We've still got heat on us after what happened at Death Valley. Everything that went down with Brenda Nash and Henley Greene. The trial—I can't allow Britney to go through that, or me again. Fuck this bitch Alyssa for thinking she can give her an ultimatum. That she believes she even has a chance to go up against the Reapers and beat us.

"We'll take care of it," I assure her.

She swallows and nods once just as the first bell rings.

Derek flinches at the sound, catching him off guard. I slap his shoulder. "Come on."

We exit the room, and I look over the senior hallway filled with students. I spot Law first standing by his locker, wearing a blank look on his face. Whatever he's thinking about the conversation we all just shared is not showing in any way.

My eyes catch sight of a brunette walking down the hallway, her face down and eyes on her cell phone. She's got black tights on with a short, white pleated skirt matched with a black crop top and black leather jacket. Her hair is draped over one shoulder, and a pair of sunglasses rests on top of her head. Her black leather heels clank on the floor, the sound so loud, my heart seems to pump with each step she takes. In a hallway full of noisy students, she's all I hear. They cross over one another like she's walking down a runway during fashion week. Showing off everything she has to offer to a crowd that, if given the chance, would worship her.

I've never noticed Alyssa Shepherd before now. And I wonder just how good of a fuck she was for Derek. He acted like it was the best pussy he'd ever had when he got out to the car and wouldn't shut up about her when we got back to Law's.

Now I want my turn with her.

She looks up from her cell, her bright green eyes landing on mine, and the bitch fucking smiles at me. A gorgeous, *I'm going to eat you alive* smile with a perfect set of white teeth and painted red lips. Her eyes drop to my combat boots and run up over my jeans. Her head tilts a little to the side when she gets to my Graveyard hoodie. Then the tip of her tongue runs across the top of her lip seductively, the silver ball from her tongue piercing peeking out from underneath.

Then like she never saw me, her smile drops off her face, and her eyes return to her phone, breaking the trance I was in. The noise of the loud hall comes crashing back to me. I make my way over to Law and nod my head to our next victim. He looks up at her, his eyes quickly scanning over Alyssa before he snorts. He couldn't care less about her. He's got a girl, but we're about to add a new plaything to the Reapers' long list of fucks. She will be ours. He won't fuck her, but he'll play his part. We work better as a team. Four against one is a losing battle for her.

"That's her," Derek whispers, leaning up against the locker next to us for

support when he spots her. He quickly drops his eyes to the floor. Like if he doesn't look at her, then she can't see him.

“What do you say, Rellik?” I ask, not taking my eyes off her legs while she walks by us, her eyes still on her phone. My mind imagines my hands shoving her skirt up, ripping her tights open, and bending her over Britney's desk while she cries and begs me to stop. She wants to be taken advantage of? I'm more than willing to oblige.

He turns to watch her walk by. Shrugging, Rellik replies, “We do what we have to do.”

To be continued ...

Make sure to add ***Make You Mine*** to your TBR list: <https://bit.ly/3f1exbA>

Want to see where it all started for the Reapers? ***Make You Beg*** is free in
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WARNING—*Make You Beg* is a dark bully romance. It may contain triggers for some due to sexual situations, language, and violence.

A few things to know about ***Make You Beg: A Dark Bully Romance***

It is not RH.

It is MF with some MFM scenes

It is told in multiple POVs

Prologue

HENLEY

“ALL RISE.”

Everyone in the courtroom stands. I let out a shaky breath and run my sweaty

palms down the black pencil skirt and adjust the matching blazer as the judge makes his way to his chair. My heart beats rapidly in my chest with dread and doubt. I've told myself not to worry, but I can't seem to stop. There's this pit in my stomach that I can't ignore. It's had me nauseous for weeks, and I haven't been able to keep anything down. Some would be happy about losing ten pounds, but not me. I didn't have that kind of weight to lose in the first place. Anxiety is a bitch, and I can't seem to beat her no matter what I do or tell myself. She's like this imaginary friend dragging me farther out in the deep depths of an ocean, fully aware I can't swim. I'm trying to keep my head above water, but it's filling my mouth as I try to cry out for help.

Knowing damn well that there's nobody around to hear me.

I jump when my father rubs my back from where he stands on my right. He notices and gives me a reassuring smile. His blue eyes are soft, but I see the worry lines around them. He hasn't said, but I know he's terrified of what's to come. If this doesn't go the way it should ...

Judge Mayes speaks, getting everyone's attention. "Please, be seated." The sound of everyone returning to their seats fills the room. "The court has brought the jury back into the courtroom having received a message that the jury has reached a verdict. Will the foreperson of the jury please stand?" he asks. The man gets to his feet, fixing his already straight tie. "Have you reached a verdict?"

That pit gets bigger, and my breathing more ragged. *This is it.* The jury's answer will define the rest of two lives.

The foreperson nods once. "We have, Your Honor."

"Can you please hand the charge and verdict form over to the bailiff, who will deliver it to the courts so I can ensure that it's in proper form?" Once he has it in his hands, he continues. "The verdict is in proper form. Will the defendant please stand?"

At the front of the room, the boy gets to his feet along with his attorney. Well, he doesn't look like a boy. He's every bit of six foot three. His broad

shoulders and muscular build intimidate men twice his age. He has always had this air about him—like he was unbeatable. He’s a cocky son of a bitch who gets everything handed to him. His daddy buys it for him, or he beats it out of you. Either way, the outcome is always the same—he wants it, he gets it. That’s what makes this situation even worse. This is what fills me with dread.

Even right now, in a room full of people waiting to hear if he’s going to spend the rest of his life in a six-by-eight cell or will be free to walk, he looks unfazed. His head held high; I can’t see his face from where I sit, but I bet he’s having to fight back a smirk. I’m having trouble controlling my breathing, whereas he looks pretty confident for a man facing a life sentence. At the young age of seventeen, he’s being tried as an adult because of me. His three best friends sit in the row behind him with their parents at their sides. Rellik and Law keep giving me threatening looks over their shoulders. Scout hasn’t even glanced my way. He hasn’t always hated me, but he does now. They all do. We were friends, best friends, until I turned on one of them. Now, I’ve been shunned, thrown away for my betrayal. If you can call doing the right thing betrayal.

“Breathe,” my father whispers in my ear. I drop my eyes to the black leather pumps I bought just for today. My entire outfit is new, actually. Hell, even my underwear and bra are. I wanted to be someone else. Someone who my *friends* had never seen. Or touched. It’s stupid now that I think of it.

Something so minor.

Camera crews are present right outside the courtroom. I also saw some perched on the steps of the courthouse when we arrived. Waiting to inform the world of his outcome. It makes me physically ill to think he could walk right out of here.

This case has been a high-profile case since the moment I dialed 911. It’s sick and disturbing how our town has welcomed the media’s attention. They’ve pretty much laid the red carpet out for them. Most here are willing to pay any

price for fame. They want their spot on the map. This is going to give it to them. No matter the outcome.

Lifting my eyes, I see the judge holding the verdict in his hands. He starts reading off the docket number. “The state of Texas against the defendant Dax Monroe, we, the jury, find the defendant ... not guilty.”

No.

Most of the room lets out audible breaths of relief. Rellik, Scout, and Law slap their buddy Monroe on his back.

I’m frozen in place. This... this... no. My eyes fill with tears, and my bottom lip begins to tremble. “I saw him.” I look up at my dad. “I saw his face ...”

My throat closes up on me.

His jaw sharpens, and he looks away from me, unable to keep my gaze. My teary eyes go back to him—the seventeen-year-old boy who should be spending the rest of his life in jail, but instead, he turns around and hugs his dad. Then his stepmother. She’s wiping happy tears from under her eyes. His dad shakes his attorneys’ hands while laughing like this was all a joke. As if they are out on the golf course hitting some balls around and sharing old college stories about the women they once passed around like a pack of cigarettes.

The courtroom grows smaller. The air thicker. Blood rushes in my ears, drowning out their victory. I think I’m going to pass out as I sway in my heels.

“Henley.” My brother grabs my hand, but I yank it away, not wanting the contact. “Henley, breathe,” he whispers.

“I ... I can’t.” I grab at my chest. That water rises higher in the ocean I’m drowning in. It’s up past my mouth, cutting off any opportunity I had to call for help.

He starts talking to our father, but I’m not listening. This was an open-and-shut case. I gave them all the information they needed to put him away. What he did was unforgivable. Friend or not, he should be punished for his crimes.

But then again, I don't know why I'm so surprised. It hasn't even been a month. It moved too quickly. The town wanted the spotlight, but they wanted it over sooner rather than later. They were willing to extort a woman's life in order to gain recognition. It's as if the devil smiled upon the town of Westbrook, Texas, and said you may be seen but for a price—and they were willing to pay whatever it cost them.

Hands grasp my upper arms, and I'm dragged out of the courtroom and into the hallway, away from all the laughter and celebrations.

“Henley, calm the fuck down,” my brother orders, lowering his face to mine. “He did it...” I choke out. I'm going to keep saying that until someone listens to me.

Jeremy's jaw sharpens, and his dark eyes look away from mine. He runs his hand down his tired face, and his eyes land on mine once again. “I believe you.”

I blink, and tears sting my eyes. My throat feels restricted as if someone is choking me. I can't take a breath. I claw at the top of my shirt once again. “Did you hear me, Hen?” he snaps. Grabbing my wrists, he shoves them from my shirt and shakes my shoulders. “I believe you.”

“No one else did ...” The door to the courtroom opens, cutting me off. My body stiffens on its own. Maybe if I stand as still as a statue, they won't see me here. One at a time, my ex-best friends enter the hallway.

Ryan Scout is first. He has his Armani suit jacket unbuttoned and pulled back to allow his hands to rest in the front pockets of his black dress slacks. The soles on his Hermes slap the floor. He doesn't even look my way, and my already tight chest aches even more at his dismissal.

Van Rellik is right behind him. He's dressed almost identical to Scout, except he has a white dress shirt on. He's got his dark curls slicked back. He's laughing with Law.

Grayson Law wears a Tom Ford light gray suit jacket with matching slacks and a white button-down shirt. He has that pretty-boy look with blue eyes and

a sexy smile that just screams fuck-boy. But that couldn't be further from who he is—that saying “looks can be deceiving” has never been truer when referring to Law.

Lastly, Dax Monroe. He looks over his shoulder, and my heart stops when he winks at me before following his friends and their parents down the hallway, then disappearing around the corner. Reporters flock to them like paparazzi to a celebrity caught out dining at an exclusive restaurant, calling his name.

A few choose to stay back and turn to me. Lights flash in my eyes, momentarily blinding me. “Henley? What do you have to say?” one asks, shoving a camera into my face.

Ducking my head, I'm glad I chose to wear my hair down today, so it gives me somewhat of a shield to my tear-streaked face.

“Get back!” my brother shouts, pushing the woman away from us.

“Henley, would you have testified ...?”

Another reporter shouts over the other. “Why did you lie, Henley ...?”

“I said get the fuck away.” My brother grabs my upper arm and yanks me down the hall before shoving me into the women's bathroom. My hands shake, and I try to calm my breathing. “It's going to be okay, Hen. I promise.”

He's wrong. Nothing will be okay ever again. He doesn't know what all I've done. How much those four boys meant to me. I hate that I ever gave Monroe something that I can't get back. Any of them, for that matter. I hate that he's walking free. And I hate that I did everything right, and it still wasn't enough. He deserves to spend the rest of his life behind bars, but it won't be that way.

I saw him. He looked right at me that night. I heard his voice. He spoke to me. He said my name. I felt his hands. It was him. He did it.

The tears run down my face, and I lick my wet lips. I had been drinking. That was what made my testimony laughable. A young underage girl partying where she shouldn't have been didn't hold a fucking candle to the Monroes and their connections. But I had to do what was right. The evidence? The

lack of it is what kept him from a conviction. I taste the bile begin to rise.

“Henley ...”

“Stop,” I choke out and push around him, my Gucci heels clicking on the tile while running into a stall. I drop to my knees and hug the toilet. He comes up behind me and grabs my hair.

“It’s okay.” He runs his free hand over my forehead.

I close my eyes tightly. It’s not. Nothing will ever be the same again. Scout tried to warn me. He told me that this would happen. I didn’t listen.

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DARK KNIGHT TRACY LORRAINE



DARK KNIGHT

A KNIGHT'S RIDGE
EMPIRE NOVELLA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
TRACY LORRAINE

BLURB

Dark Knight
A Knight's Ridge Empire Novella
Tracy Lorraine

For years I've watched her.

Wanted her.

Craved her.

But it's always been from a distance, from the shadows. The darkness.
I've witnessed her grow from a sweet innocent girl, to a sexy, tempting
goddess that I had no right tainting with my presence, let alone my touch.

I've forced myself to do the right thing and keep my distance.

Until that one night.

The night I caved to my need and took exactly what I'd been dreaming of all
these years.

It was a risk—my identity was meant to be a secret.

But she saw me.

Quite possibly the real me that no one else knows exists.

But once again, I did the right thing.

I walked away, trying to forget how explosive we were.

But my best intentions are about to be obliterated when I find her in the one

place she shouldn't be.

And you know what they say about bad behaviour?

It shouldn't go unpunished.

CHAPTER 1

CALLI

I SIT on the floor of my new bedroom with my tablet on my lap and a few products I've designed over the past few weeks surrounding me.

This hobby is new, something that was inspired by the custom lettering I put on our pink ladies jackets back in October for the Halloween party.

Something good needed to come out of that night, I guess.

And with everything that's gone on recently with my new friends, it's helped take my mind off the fact they've both dived headfirst into my world and immediately found themselves more exciting lives.

Things might have changed for me in the past few months, I've done things I never thought I would, experienced things I believed I was destined to miss out on, but still, here I am—alone. I might have moved into Nico's den of sin and turned it into my little piece of craft heaven, but still, I'm alone.

I blow out a breath, wondering what my friends are up to tonight.

Probably at home having romantic evenings with their fellas.

I let out a sigh as my thoughts flicker between two guys.

Neither of which should be taking up space in my head, in spite of everything, both of them seem to have taken up residence up there over the past few months.

I shake my head, trying to force them out. Wanting to rebel and break out

of my sheltered life was meant to be a bit of fun, I wasn't meant to find myself obsessing about two guys I shouldn't want.

As if he knows I'm thinking about him, my cell vibrates on the rug next to me.

Ant: You busy tonight?

I stare at the message, my fingers tapping on the side of my phone as I regret opening it.

He'll have seen I've read it and will be expecting a reply.

It's not that I don't want to talk to him, I do. I always want to. But as the weeks have gone on, the risk of us getting caught only grows. And I'm terrified. Not so much for me... But for him.

If—when—our time is up, he's the one who's going to suffer the pain from spending time with me. More than he already has.

I still vividly remember the day Nico and Seb laid into Ant and Enzo outside the cinema just for hanging out with Stella and me.

If they discovered that even after all these months later that we were still in touch. That we still hang out...

No.

That can't happen.

Ever.

They might think Ant is the enemy because of his Italian blood, but it's not true.

Ant's a good guy.

I know he is.

I feel it when we're together, every time he looks at me. Every time he kisses me...

Calli: Nothing. Home alone :-)

I regret the sad face the second I hit send, but it's too late. It's out there now, and I already know how he's going to reply.

The bouncing dots start almost immediately.

Ant: Come hang with me. I miss you.

Excitement stirs in my belly. I shouldn't go. We're on borrowed time as it is, but I can't deny the thrill that rushes through me every single time I defy orders and go spend time with him at his place.

Butterflies erupt in my belly as I consider sneaking into his room on the other side of town and spending the night secretly in his room.

I glance down at my tablet, the screen now dark and only showing my reflection.

My hair is pulled back, my face clear of today's makeup. I'm wearing leggings and a Christmas jumper that I should have packed away weeks ago, but it's comfy and warm and quite frankly, I don't really care.

Do I really want to get dressed up and go out?

I think about my friends who are all probably enjoying themselves. Then I think about my parents, who more than likely aren't home, which is nothing new, it's more like a regular occurrence. And my brother who's probably out partying somewhere, treating some poor unsuspecting woman to a night of less than mind-blowing sex.

"Ugh." A shudder rips down my spine. "Fuck it."

I could use some fun, some excitement, some attention.

Calli: Give me an hour ;-)

Another thrill shoots through me as I jump up. I'm not sure I'll ever get used to the rush I get from rebelling against all the rules and expectations that have been placed on me.

If only I knew this kind of fun existed before.

Leaving everything where it is, I strip out of my clothes and walk straight into the shower to freshen up.

I scrub every inch of my body, and shave all the parts that need to be. Once I'm out of the shower and dry, I rub my favourite smelling moisturiser into my skin.

Feeling good, I pull out my sexiest underwear—which isn't all that sexy but at least it's lace, not cotton—and I search through my wardrobe for something suitable.

Since Stella and Emmie entered my life, my wardrobe has seen a huge improvement. They've not just had an influence on how I act, but also how I look. Stella was the one who convinced me to shed the blonde hair Mum had demanded I keep. When deep down I craved to try something darker and to cut off the length that Mum always told me was as pretty as a princess.

I didn't want to be a princess. The good girl who did as she was told and lived the dullest life in the world while locked up in her castle.

I wanted to experience life like Nico did. I wanted to paint the town red, be a teenager, or at least have the option to do so.

Happy with my reflection, I smooth my hair down once more and stuff my feet into my Uggs.

Grabbing my bag, I drop my phone into it and head out via my new back door.

Nico moving out and into his flat with the guys was one of the best things

to happen to me. I love having my own space, my own door, my freedom. Even if on most days I don't take advantage of it considering I have nothing to do. Just the knowledge that I have it, that my parents finally trust me, is enough.

The journey to the Italian side of town takes longer than I'm expecting and I get more than one message from Ant on the way asking if I'm still coming.

His impatience to see me makes me smile as I pull up on the street, one over from the converted warehouse he calls home.

Everyone else parks right out the front of the building. But by slipping through the trees at the back, it's allowed me to climb in and out unnoticed over the past few months.

The second I step out of the car, hidden in the shadows beneath the trees, I see him, standing under a streetlamp beside the gap in the trees we sneak through.

"Hey, stranger," he breathes, stepping forward to meet me as I walk away from my car. "I've missed you."

His hand slips around the back of my neck and his lips brush against mine in the sweetest of kisses.

That's just Ant though. Everything he does is sweet, thoughtful.

Nothing like *him*.

Ant would never touch me, kiss me, take me like the way *he* did that night.

Is that the reason why I still crave him?

The darkness he showed me, the pleasure.

He took what he wanted, what he knew I needed—although I'm not sure how he knew—and gave me something I'm never going to be able to forget.

"I'm sorry I've been so busy," he whispers, pulling back, cupping my jaw as he stares down into my eyes.

"It's okay, I get it." And I really do. He works for the Mariano Family,

but he's also doing his first year at university and he's had deadlines and is in the final stretch to exams. I understand why he needs to put that first. Why he has to put his Family first, because if he didn't and anyone found out that it was because of me. Because of a Cirillo...

I shove reality away, trying to focus on him when he slides his hand into mine and twists our fingers together.

"Come on, I've already ordered food."

My stomach growls on cue.

"Sorry I took so long, the traffic was horrendous."

"You're here now," he says, lifting our joined hands to his lips.

Everything inside me relaxes in his presence. It's one of the many reasons why I know my brother and cousin are wrong.

Ant's not playing me. He's not trying to get intel on us, our Family. He's never so much as asked me anything about my life outside of school or normal stuff. He's never given me any reason to believe that he wants anything more than just to spend time with me... well, maybe something. But he's been nothing but a gentleman and following my lead.

I'd told him the first time we hung out after Halloween when he tried to make a move on me that I wanted to take it slow, and he accepted my request without argument even though I knew he wanted to take it further. It showed me that he wanted to put my needs before his own.

I wanted it that way with Ant, to be physical with him like that. But after *him* I just couldn't.

I'd have compared everything Ant did, then I'd get stuck in my own head with the way *he* did it.

I just needed time to push *him* and thoughts of that night from my mind like it seemed *he* did the second he walked out the door.

Discovering who *he* was and watching him forget it ever happened hurt. Seeing him at the hospital later that evening while both Seb and Toby were lying in hospital beds was torture, but it had nothing on the way he looked at

me like it was any other day, nodded in greeting and then walking away as if I hadn't come all over his face only hours before. Hell, he could probably still taste me, yet he dismissed me like I was nothing. Nothing more than a regrettable mistake he'd happily never think of again.

"What's wrong?" Ant asks, sensing my mood shift.

"Nothing," I say, plastering on a smile. "It's just been a long week."

"Well then, you've come to the perfect place for you to relax."

We emerge through the trees at the back of the building and find the window to Ant's ground floor flat open and ready to climb through.

"Didn't you want to hang out with the guys tonight?" I ask as we come to a stop by the window.

"Over spending time with you? Not a chance," he breathes in my ear, stepping right up behind me and pressing the length of his body against mine.

I swoon hard as his hands brush up my sides, finally resting on the curve of my waist to help lift me through the window into his room.

It should be a glaring red flag that I can't just walk in through the front door to be with him. It should be enough to tell me what a stupid idea all of this is. But it doesn't stop me.

Spending time with Ant is just so easy. He makes me smile, laugh. He doesn't take life too seriously despite the ugliness of what we're entangled with because of our surnames, and he makes me feel important, worthy, sexy.

"I love this skirt on you, Cal," he tells me as I climb inside and wait for him to join me.

"Thanks," I say, my cheeks heating at the compliment. I knew he'd like it. It's short and I made the possibly dangerous decision to forgo tights or leggings. It might be a little forward and could possibly be sending him the wrong idea, seeing as I keep telling him that I want to wait. But I was feeling extra rebellious tonight and I crave this feeling of being wanted.

He's the only one that makes my blood boil, and my stomach flutters wildly as he looks at me as if I'm the only girl in the world.

I barely notice the scent of Chinese food that fills the room as he locks the window and turns back toward me, closing the space between us.

"Hey," he says again, a lopsided smile tugging at one side of his lips.

My stomach clenches as he reaches for me once more.

His burning hand wraps around the side of my neck as his head dips.

My eyes flutter closed as his lips brush mine.

"Damn, I've missed you, Sunshine."

"Ant," I moan, my hand wrapping around his side and pulling him closer.

He peppers gentle kisses along my lips as he backs me up against the wall, and rests his arm beside my head.

I gasp when the hardness of his body presses against mine, the evidence of how much he's holding himself back with me more than obvious against my belly.

He makes the most of my parted lips and plunges his tongue inside, a move I eagerly mimic, quickly losing myself in his drugging kisses.

We don't part until we're both breathless and gasping for air.

"I guess we should eat, huh?"

I swallow down my need to tell him that I'm not all that hungry for food, and regretfully release him when he rips himself from my body.

Lifting his hand, he pushes his dark hair back from his brow, his cheeks are flushed and his lips swollen from our kiss.

He looks hot. I mean, he's always hot, he's got that sexy Italian blood running through his veins. Tall, dark, and oh so very handsome.

The rapid movement of his chest drags my gaze from his hooded eyes before they drop lower to the more than obvious bulge in his jeans.

My fingers curl into fists.

It would be so easy right now to step up to him and tell him that I want it

—him. That I'm fed up with waiting and finally give in to replace my memories of that dark room that night, of *his* touch with Ant's.

It's what any sane person would have done weeks ago.

Apparently, though, that's not what I am where these two are concerned.

"Shit," he hisses, reaching down to rearrange himself and turning toward the bags of takeout.

I fight to find something to say, to come up with an excuse for the reason why I continually put a barrier up between us.

I stand awkwardly with my back still against the wall as he pulls the containers out and places them on a tray.

When he finally turns back around, his face is relaxed once more and he's got a soft smile playing on his lips.

"It's okay, Cal," he tells me honestly. "I get it."

I smile back at him, blown away by his understanding, but also wishing he wouldn't be so considerate. A part of me wants him to throw caution to the wind, sweep me up and just take what he wants. Force his way through the wall I keep putting up and rip it to shreds.

"Come eat. You wanna pick a film to watch?"

I look between him, the tray of food then at the massive fifty-inch TV he's got strapped to the wall, and shake my head. "Nah, you can choose."

I climb onto his bed, sitting back against the wall as he lowers the tray and sits on the other side of it, passing me a fork.

Just as he picks up the remote to turn the TV on, there's a huge roar from the other side of the door.

My entire body locks up at the realisation that the enemy—my Family's enemy—is only a room away. Hell, what am I thinking... Ant is the enemy.

But when it's just the two of us, our surnames, our connections, they don't matter.

"It's okay," he says, reaching over and uncurling my fists. "They're all watching some fight. It's probably getting a little heated."

The reason I have to climb into his room via the window is because to get to it from the front door, we'd have to walk through a massive room that the younger members of the Mariano Family have converted to a massive den.

It's dangerous being here, but we figured that it was safer than being out in public where anyone from either Family could see us.

Here, we're locked in his room where no one should bother us.

Well, that's what we hope for.

"You don't want to watch?" I ask, once again feeling like I'm keeping him from his friends by being here.

Lowering the remote, he just stares at me.

"No, Calli. I wouldn't rather be out there with a bunch of sweaty, angry dickheads when I could be in here with you... in this skirt." He bites down on his bottom lip and wiggles his brows.

"You're an idiot."

He shrugs, not having a care in the world as he shamelessly checks out my legs.

"Eat up, Sunshine. I've got plans for you tonight."

A wave of heat races through my body, burning me from the inside out.

"Your parents aren't expecting you home, right?"

I scoff. "You think they've even noticed I'm out?"

He gives me a sad smile, but I know he understands. Having a big brother who's stolen the spotlight almost all his life, he gets what it's like living in the shadows and expecting to behave in a certain way. The only difference is that he's expected to step up now and become a soldier.

I, however, am expected to do what... find a nice Greek guy and pop out some future soldiers.

I blow out a frustrated breath.

"It's a good job I called you over then, we wouldn't want you home alone and lonely." His words drip with lust.

"I was just working," I say, throwing a little cold water on his train of

thought.

“Sure you were.” He wiggles his brows suggestively.

“You’re a nightmare.”

“You love it,” he counters, finally picking the remote back up and hitting play on the number one film that comes up on Netflix. I don’t even get a chance to see what it is other than it looks kinda romance-y, not that I have an issue with that. I just can’t imagine him being into it.

Picking up one of the containers and a fork, Ant spears a piece of shredded chicken and holds it up for me.

“Your favourite,” he murmurs as I part my lips, accepting it from him.

An appreciative moan rumbles in my chest as the flavours explode in my mouth and he watches as my tongue sneaks out to lick up the sauce.

“Do you know how hard it’s been to focus this week knowing I couldn’t see you?”

“Ant,” I sigh, wishing he wouldn’t say such swoony things to me.

I love it really, but it’s just a massive reminder that no matter how we really feel about each other, it can never work. Our parents would never allow it.

He smiles at me, refusing to deal with our reality and instead we just secretly spend time together enjoying ourselves.

The film plays out in the background, neither of us pays it any attention as we eat and talk about anything other than our families.

He tells me about uni and the exams he’s got coming up while I chat reluctantly about school and my classes. I hate talking about school, or even thinking about it really.

It was okay when it was just secondary school, but now we’re in sixth form everyone expects me to know what I’m doing with my life, and the truth is, I have no clue.

I don’t fit in anywhere. I’m mediocre at best in all my subjects. I’m an okay gymnast and cheerleader, but it’s not exactly a career option.

Nothing is.

And I don't want to just be a stay-at-home mum. Yeah, I want kids one day, but it's not the only thing I want.

I want a life of my own, a purpose. A career. I just don't know what that might look like.

"Hey," Ant says, dragging me from my thoughts. "You finished?" he asks, nodding at the mostly empty tray between us.

"Y-yeah," I say, my eyes dropping to the last spring roll.

A wicked smile twitches at his lips as he climbs from the bed and moves the tray to the floor.

Walking over to the light switch, he dims it a little, then turns back to me, pausing to run his eyes up my legs where I've stretched them out in front of me.

His long legs eat up the space between us and he bends down, grabbing something before rejoining me on the bed and straddling my legs.

"Want it?" he asks, lifting the spring roll between us.

He runs it along my bottom lip, his eyes following its journey.

"Y-yeah, I do," I say, wondering if we're still talking about food right now.

"Open wide then," he says, waiting for my lips to part.

The second they do, he pushes it into my mouth and watches, his eyes darkening as I wrap my lips around it and bite.

"Fuck, Sunshine," he grunts. "You've no idea how hot you are, do you?"

I smile as I chew before watching him steal the other end of the spring roll and throw it into his mouth.

"Lie back," he breathes, gently pushing my shoulder until I'm exactly where he wants me, beneath him on his bed.

My heart thunders in my chest as I stare up at him.

"All you gotta do is say the words and I'll stop, you know that, right?" he asks, clearly sensing, like me, that something's shifted with us tonight.

“I trust you,” I breathe.

A smile that makes my stomach flip and my thighs clench appears on his lips before he reaches behind him and pulls his shirt from his body in one smooth move that does little more for the desire that’s already coursing through my veins.

It’s not the first time I’ve seen him shirtless. He’s given me the pleasure of witnessing, even touching his insanely cut torso before, and something tells me I’ve not done a very good job of hiding how much I love it.

Unable to stop myself, I reach out, running my fingertips from his chest all the way down to his waistband.

In a move I’d never even consider if I wasn’t drunk on him already, I tuck my fingers under his waistband and tug him closer, needing more.

“Kiss me,” I demand.

“Like you need to ask, Sunshine.”

His lips descend on mine, his muscular body lowering and pressing my much smaller one into the mattress. My legs automatically wrap around his waist, pinning us together as he kisses me as if I’m the air he needs to survive.

My skin burns with need as his hand slips under my jumper, his fingers splaying across my ribs.

His hips roll, his hard length rubbing against my core, sending pleasure shooting through me.

“Fuck, Calli,” he groans, ripping his lips from mine and kissing across my jaw and down my neck. “You get me so hot.”

Goosebumps erupt across my skin as he sucks on my neck, grazing my sensitive skin with his teeth.

“Ant, God,” I moan, my nails scratching across his back.

He kisses down my chest that’s exposed by the deep V of my jumper before slipping his hand higher and cupping my breast.

My back arches with my need for more.

“Oh God,” I moan when he pinches my nipple through the lace of my bra.

“I love watching you come apart. It’s all I’ve been able to think about this week.”

It’s not the first time things have gotten this far with us but it’s never gone farther than him losing his shirt and dry humping me until I shatter while he’s probably about to come in his pants.

Every time he’s made me come I’ve been flooded with guilt that I’ve not returned the favour, but he’s always assured me that it’s fine and he’s not pushed for more.

Such a freaking sweetheart.

And it should be everything I could want. But there’s always someone else in my head. Someone who wasn’t going to let me off easy, someone who was going to take everything.

Sitting up a little, Ant pushes my jumper up, exposing my stomach and bra.

“Shit, this is sexy,” he murmurs, running his finger around the lace edge.

A quiet needy whimper escapes my lips.

“More?” he asks, a wicked glint in his eyes.

I hesitate for a second and he sees it but thankfully, he doesn’t question me this time, instead, he drags my jumper up and off my body, throwing it to the floor with his. He lowers his head once more and presses his lips to the swell of my breast, tucking his fingers beneath the fabric and exposing me.

His eyes hold mine the whole time, telling me that I can stop whenever I want. But even if I wanted to, I’d be incapable of saying the word as I watch as his full lips wrap around my nipple.

All the air rushes from my lungs as his heat surrounds me.

“Oh shit,” I gasp when he sucks hard.

He teases me until I can barely stand it as my body edges closer to release, his hips still slowly rocking into me.

With my fingers twisted in his hair, holding him against me, he begins kissing lower, over the soft skin of my stomach before dipping his tongue into my belly button.

My stomach clenches hard as I read his intentions in his eyes.

“I want to taste you, Calli. Tell me I can,” he damn near begs.

Mindlessly, I nod and the most breathtaking smile appears on his lips a beat before he drops to his stomach between my legs.

Oh God.

I squeeze my eyes closed when he reaches under my skirt and wraps his fingers around the sides of my knickers.

Sucking in a breath and dragging some confidence with it, I lift my hips right as a loud crash sounds out beyond the door.

Our eyes collide and my heart jumps into my throat.

“It’s okay,” Ant assures me. “They’re probably just wasted and the wrong guy won.”

I nod, trusting him not to do anything that will end up with us being caught, or worse.

“Ignore them.”

I nod again, my teeth sinking into my bottom lip as he presses his hands against the sensitive skin of my inner thighs and spreads me wide for him.

His eyes hold mine for a few seconds as the chaos seems to continue outside the door but I do as he suggested and just focus on him, on us.

Happy that I’m still here with him in the moment, his eyes drop from mine, getting back to where he was before we were distracted.

“Fuck,” he hisses. “You’re perfect.”

He licks his lips as if he’s just been handed a giant bowl of his favourite dessert and surges forward but he never gets a chance to make contact because his bedroom door flies open.

I sit up in a rush, reaching for something to cover up with as Ant barks, “Get the fuck—”

But everything comes crashing down around me when my eyes connect with the person standing in his doorway, his eyes locked on me.

His face is the same hard, cold mask that I'm more than used to but his eyes, they're not just deadly, they're blazing with contempt, with the need to burn this entire place to the ground and raise hell in its place.

“Daemon?”

CHAPTER 2

DAEMON

I'D SPENT all night sitting at home waiting for the signal that I knew was coming.

While Damien, the boss, and Evan, the underboss, had been dealing with the shit with the Reapers and the Wolves that Theo and Emmie found themselves tangled up in, my father had been focusing his efforts on the Italians.

After they confessed to working for Jonas the night of the last Circuit fight that went up in flames—quite literally—they'd gone quiet.

Too fucking quiet.

And there was a very good reason for it we discovered when Dad managed to plant a snake and discover their plans for taking over our businesses that border their side of the city.

They tried with Marco's last year but failed. We'd hoped they might have given up, but it seems that was wishful thinking. They'd just gone back to the drawing board and had come up with a plan that included a lot of intentional blood loss, on both sides.

It's no surprise that the peace that's existed between the two families for years has been shattered, soon after Ricardo took his place as Boss, after his father stood down because of bad health.

He's always been unhinged, power hungry. It was inevitable that he'd

drag us into a war sooner or later.

I glance over at the car parked beside mine and lock eyes with Theo's. Bloodlust for these motherfuckers who are trying to take things that belong to us shines just as bright in his eyes as I know it does in mine.

We're parked on the street over from the Italian's warehouse, the rest of our soldiers are planted at intervals around the building waiting for the second signal from my dad.

This isn't their main headquarters, but from the intel we've managed to get, it's where the majority of them are tonight. Enough to send a message to Ricardo at least.

Pulling out my weapons from my glovebox, I double-check that each of my guns are loaded before tucking two into my waistband and another into my shoulder holster under my jacket. Spare rounds go into my pockets before I strap a knife to my ankle and put another into the holster.

Then I wait.

The second my phone buzzes and Dad's name pops up with the signal, I push my door open and climb out, while Theo, Seb, Nico, Toby, and my twin, Alex do the same.

I nod in their direction but my focus is solely on the building before us.

As far as we're aware, this is going to be an ambush, but while we've had a mole in their ranks, it would be foolish to think this attack might not have got back to them.

We surround the building, hiding in the shadows before we get the final signal.

A smile curls at my lips as we storm inside with our guns raised and discover that the Italian's couldn't be any less unprepared for this attack.

The stupid Italian fucks scramble to defend themselves but they're too slow as the boys and I take them down with little effort.

Alex, Nico, and Seb go for them using their fists while Theo, Toby, and I take anyone down with our guns, the silencers on the end of them mean we

don't get jumped by any of their members who might be hiding out in their rooms.

We don't shoot to kill, we're not here for that. We're here to deliver a message. To point out that we're always one step ahead of them and that if we wanted to cut down their numbers, we could easily do so.

"Go check all the rooms," Dad booms at the six of us when it's clear we've got control of the little party they were having.

Turning away from his other soldiers who are tidying up the mess we've left behind, we split up, three upstairs and three down.

I aim for the first door while Alex and Nico overtake me to hit up the next two.

I push the handle down, but it doesn't budge.

Assuming that it's empty, I almost walk away, but something stops me.

I've no idea what it is, but the niggle of uncertainty in my gut means I ram my shoulder into the light wood, throwing all my weight into it.

The lock pretty much melts under my force and the door swings open revealing a guy's legs hanging off the end of the bed quite clearly in the middle of something important.

A slight smirk curls at my lips knowing that they're not going to want a guest right now and I step into the room as the guy sits up and barks. "Get the fuck—" but the second our eyes lock and he realises who's just walked in, his words immediately cut off.

Smart guy.

But my joy at my gut feeling being right only lasts a split second because I step farther into the room and my eyes land on the woman with that Italian cunt between her legs.

She freezes in shock as our eyes connect and something akin to lightning cracks between us.

"Daemon," she breathes, suddenly jumping into action, scrambling up the bed and trying to cover herself up.

But it's too late, I've already seen it.

I've already seen her with another fucking guy, a fucking Italian, about to...

"You're going to fucking die for this." My voice is cold, colder than even I recognise as the words fall from my lips and I lift my arm, aiming my gun right at his head.

"Daemon, no," Calli cries, scrambling from the bed but she's too slow.

Before her feet even hit the floor, I squeeze the trigger, sending Antonio Santoro flying back into the wall.

"Nooo," she screams but I don't give her a chance to look back because I drop down in front of her and throw her body over my shoulder, marching her out of the room while she screams bloody murder behind me, her tiny fists slamming into my arse.

"It's only my dad who looks up as I pass through all the bloody and broken bodies that he and his guys are rounding up. With Calli upside down behind me, I don't worry that he'll recognise her, and when he doesn't even spare the woman hanging over my shoulder a second glance I keep moving, getting her the hell out of this shitshow.

She doesn't stop screaming and fighting even when I come to a stop beside my car and place her back on her feet.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she screams, her arms flying at me, hitting wherever she can make contact.

Tears cascade down her cheeks, coating them in black makeup as she stands there in just her bra and tiny skirt.

Fuck. She's never looked better.

My cock aches as images from that night flicker through my mind like a fucking movie.

I was so close. So fucking close to having the one thing I've allowed myself to crave all these fucking years.

Calli Cirillo.

My obsession.

My addiction.

My ultimate fucking weakness.

“Stop,” I boom, my hand finding her throat as I force her back against the car.

Her screams stop as her chin drops in shock.

“Stop fucking screaming,” I seethe, getting right in her face. “Unless you want all the others out here seeing you looking like a dirty little whore.”

Her breath catches at my vicious words a second before her palm connects with my cheek.

Pain blooms across my skin, but it does nothing but feed the fucking devil that lives inside me.

Her chest heaves as she glares at me.

“I hate you,” she hisses through the sobs that are still wracking her body. “I fucking hate you and I’ll never forgive you for this. Ever.”

A smile curls at my lips.

Those are the words I always thought I needed to hear. The words that might shatter the hold she’s always had over me, but standing here before her, feeling her pulse thunder beneath my hold, I realise they come nowhere near to severing anything that’s between us.

If anything, it only makes my obsession, my need to prove her wrong, to fucking own her, even more irrational.

I told myself for years that if I keep a distance between us then it would lessen. I’d find someone else to focus my efforts, my dark, twisted desires on.

But it’s never happened.

Since we were six years old. It has always been Calli.

And until that night, my desire for her was always my darkest secret.

One I was willing to take to the grave in order to give her the life she deserves, to allow her to find the kind of man she deserves.

Because that sure as fuck isn't a screwed-up, cold asshole like me.
But something snapped in me that night.
Something that I can't explain even now.
And I still can't decide if it was the best or worst thing to ever happen in my life.

"Get in the fucking car, Callista."

"Fuck you," she spits, slapping me again and making a loud growl rumble deep in my throat.

"You're playing with fire," I warn her, knowing that I'm two seconds from snapping. And that means I'm either about to strangle the fucking life out of her or take what I should have that night right here against my car for her brother and the rest of the guys to witness the second they emerge.

"Then watch me burn, asshole."

Reaching out, I rip open the back door of my car and with my hand still around her throat, I grasp her waist with the other and throw her inside.

"You can't do this," she screams.

"I thought you knew, beautiful," I sneer. "I can do whatever the fuck I want."

"You're a fucking psycho."

"I know. It's fun, isn't it?"

The smile I give her is full of malice, but beneath it, there's nothing but desire.

Slamming the door shut, I engage the locks before she has a chance to escape. Then I quickly unlock just the driver's door before getting into the driver's seat and flooring the accelerator before anyone sees me leaving with her.

I might be willing to show her the level of my obsession with the little girl who helped me all those years ago, but fuck no will I let anyone else see that I care about anything.

CHAPTER 3

CALLI

THE ALMOST SILENT gunshot that pierces the room forces a scream to rip from my throat.

The voice startles me and my eyes fly open.

“What the—”

I try to sit up, but my arms are stuck behind my head.

My head is fuzzy, really fucking fuzzy.

I still, trying to focus, trying to drag up memories of how I went from being on Ant’s bed with his head...

Everything slams into me with the force of an articulated lorry and I kick my legs out as I try once more to get up.

Ant.

Daemon.

The gunshot.

“Noooo,” I scream, my heart racing so hard it makes my head even fuzzier. “Daemon,” I cry.

Silence.

“DAEMON. DAEMON,” I shout his name until my throat is hoarse but nothing happens, no one comes.

Looking up toward the headboard, I find my wrists have been bound with silk scarves, and when I remember that he dragged me from that warehouse

in just my bra and skirt, I look down at what I have on.

“Jesus,” I mutter, taking in the black man’s shirt I’m now wearing.

Did he fucking change me?

“Daemon,” I scream once more, but just like I expect, nothing happens.

He’s either ignoring me, or he’s left me here. Wherever here is.

I look around the room trying to find something that might clue me in as to where I am.

The walls are white and the furniture is a dark walnut colour. It all looks expensive but surely it’s not Daemon’s place.

I’d expect that to be as black as Theo’s, to match his soul.

A sob rips up my throat as I think about Ant.

Is that where Daemon’s gone? To clean up his body.

Rolling onto my front, I bury my face into the pillow and let my tears spill free as I mourn something that never could have been mine anyway.

I never wanted this, yet I knew it was the risk we were both taking.

We were both naïve to think we weren’t going to get caught.

I just never imagined that it would be by him.

Daemon.

My Batman.

My tears only come faster as I think back to that night and the way he’s avoided me and ignored me ever since.

He knew I’d seen him, yet he’s never once tried talking to me about it.

It hurt to know that he regretted it so much when I truly believed every word he’d said to me that night.

I knew going anywhere near Ant after discovering that he was part of the Mariano Family was a bad idea. But he was so sweet, he saw me as just Calli—not the Cirillo princess—and he made me feel like no one else I’d ever met.

He was my secret. Something I chose for myself when every other part of my life is dictated by my parents, by the Family.

But it was selfish of me to drag him into my fucked-up life.

I've no idea how long I lie there sobbing but eventually, I cry myself to sleep.

When I wake up, I know that something is different before I've even opened my eyes.

I feel *him*.

His stare, his presence. His breath wafting softly over my face.

For a few seconds, I allow myself to remember how safe, how wanted he made me feel that night but that contentment is soon washed away when I remember what happened tonight.

Was it even tonight?

How long have I been out of it?

Ant.

My eyes fly open and they collide with his dark pair.

He's lying on the bed beside me, staring at me with his hand tucked under his cheek.

The sight of him looking completely relaxed after everything he's done ignites a fire in my belly.

I tug at my arms, hoping that he's taken pity on me and released me now that he's here, but no such luck.

"What the fuck is your problem?" I seethe when all he does is lie there and stare at me as if he can't really believe that I'm here.

"Shh, it's okay, beautiful," he whispers softly, reaching out and tucking a lock of my hair behind my ear. "It's okay. Everything is okay."

"Are you actually fucking insane?" I snap, my eyes bouncing between his, waiting for some kind of reaction but all he does is smile.

It's not something he does all that often and the sight of his dimples

makes something odd happen inside me.

“Your assurances and your smile aren’t helping the situation,” I hiss, although I regret it the second his lips flatten once more.

“I’m not going to hurt you, beautiful. I’d never hurt you.”

“Untie me then. My arms ache.”

He looks up to where my wrists are bound and then back to my eyes.

“I can’t,” he confesses.

“Why?”

He studies me for so long that I don’t think he’s going to respond. But eventually, he reaches out once more, brushing his fingertips down my cheek and then along the edge of my jaw as if I’m something precious, something that might vanish at any moment.

“Because you’ll leave.”

“Damn fucking right I’ll leave. You abducted me. You shot Ant.” My expression hardens, grief washing through me as red hot tears burn my eyes.

Something flickers in his eyes, something dark that makes my stomach clench with fear.

I know Daemon is dangerous, I’ve known that for years. But I’ve never been scared of him quite like I have been tonight. I always thought his wrath was aimed only toward the enemy—I mean, I guess it was tonight too—but still, I can’t help feeling like I’m suddenly one of them.

“He was touching you. He was…” His jaw clenches so hard, I can’t help thinking it must hurt.

“I wanted him to,” I shout, making him rear back a little when I realise that he’s not going to finish that thought. “I wanted him to be touching me. I wanted to be his. And he wanted me too. He wasn’t hiding from me. He wasn’t walking away.” With every word, my voice gets louder, angrier.

But despite the fire that’s burning in his eyes, he doesn’t bite back and when he speaks again, it’s soft.

“He doesn’t deserve you, beautiful.”

A bitter laugh falls from my lips. “And you do?”

“Never.”

“This is insane. Let me go.”

“No.”

“Daemon, I swear to fucking God if you don’t let me go I’ll...” I don’t have any words to finish that threat so instead, I start thrashing about, kicking my legs and shoving the sheets he’s covered me with from my body in my need to hurt him.

The second my foot makes contact with his shin, pain shoots up from my toes, swiftly halting my movements.

“Callista,” he warns, his hand wrapping around my thigh, drawing me closer to him.

My breath catches as his touch sends a bolt of electricity shooting through my body. It makes me achingly aware of how little I’m wearing. The fact that he’s clearly already seen everything considering I might not have exactly been dressed when he threw me over his shoulder and marched me out of Ant’s room, I still felt significantly more covered than I am now.

“Do not chastise me like a child. Like I’m being an irrational brat, Nikolas.”

His breath catches at my use of his real name. The one given to him at birth that I know he hates, one that everyone seems to have forgotten exists seeing as Daemon, his middle name, suits him so much better.

“Don’t,” he warns, his voice low and deadly.

“Or what? You’ll shoot me too?”

He freezes, his grip on my thigh tightening on me for a beat, letting me know that my words have some kind of impact on him.

“Never,” he breathes, pushing up on his elbow so he can look down at me, but he doesn’t release my leg, his fingertips digging into my soft flesh.

My breath catches when I find the deep scratches on the cheek he was lying on, but I drag my eyes away.

His eyes search my face, it's as if he's committing every inch of me to his memory before they drop lower, taking in his shirt that I'm wrapped in before moving down to my bare legs and the contrast of his darker skin against mine.

"You're the only person on this planet that I'd never harm. You're a fucking angel, Calli."

His eyes find mine again and my breath catches in my throat at the intensity of them.

He really means those words.

So why the hell are we here?

Swallowing down the lump that's crawled up my throat and blinking away the tears that are burning the backs of my eyes, I hold his stare, summoning up all the courage I possess.

"If that's true, then you need to release me."

"So you can go back to him." It's not a question. It's a statement, as if he knows he's already lost.

I mean, I can understand why. Anyone in their right mind would go running back to the nice guy right now, had he not just been shot.

A sob erupts once more as I think about Ant.

It's my fault.

All of this is my fault and he's just paid the ultimate price.

One of my tears slips free and Daemon watches as it tracks down my temple before soaking into my hairline.

"Fuck, you're beautiful."

And you're fucking deranged, I think but I keep the thought to myself. Something tells me that offending him isn't the way to get out of this.

Leaning forward, he presses his lips to my temple, his tongue licking at the remnants of my tear.

"W-what are you doing?" I ask, hating the way my voice sounds from one single kiss from him.

“He doesn’t deserve you, Calli. You’re too beautiful for the likes of him. Too pure.” My breath catches as I remember telling him on Halloween night that I’d never been with anyone before. His response was that he knew.

Had he been keeping tabs on what I was—or wasn’t—doing?

“So you killed him?”

His hand slips higher up my thigh and it makes my entire body burn with need.

Stupid, traitorous body.

Swallowing down my emotions, my desire. I hold his eyes. “I need the bathroom,” I tell him as softly as I can.

His gaze flicks across the room, I assume to the en suite before coming back to me.

“Please. I need to pee and I need to freshen up.” I’ve no idea how long I’ve been asleep for, but the state of my mouth tells me it’s been a while.

He hesitates, and for a few seconds, I actually expect him to refuse my request. But after another look in the direction of the bathroom, he reaches for the silk scarves and begins untying them.

My arms ache worse than I thought as I lower them and begin to twirl my wrists around but my arm is soon captured in his grasp and he takes over my movements, helping me stretch out my muscles before pressing a soft kiss to the inside of my wrist, his eyes locked on mine.

“Daemon,” I breathe as he repeats the action on the other arm.

His tenderness confuses me after his brutality in Ant’s room, with the way he threw me into the back of his car, and tied me up here when I was unconscious.

Tugging my hand free of his hold, I roll off the bed and stand on my feet.

My head spins and my knees almost give out reminding me of something else he’s done.

“You drugged me.”

The last thing I remember was launching myself at him from the back of

the car as he drove away from the Italian's warehouse, then the next thing I knew, I woke up tied to his bed.

He pushes to stand before me, and I flinch and jump back when he reaches out for me.

Pain shoots through his eyes but he covers it up quickly, allowing his hand to drop to his side.

"It was for your own good."

"How? How was drugging me for my own good?"

"I'd have crashed the car if you continued freaking out," he says, calmly.

My eyes narrow on the scratches on his face as hazy memories of clawing at him around the driver's seat comes back to me.

Pride swells in my chest that I managed that, that I actually managed to cause him even a little bit of pain for what he'd just done.

My lips turn down into a grimace as I stare at him, unable to keep up the act any longer.

"I hate you." My arm moves before I even register what I'm doing and pain explodes on my palm as it connects with his cheek again.

His face turns feral, his eyes murderous as his fingers wrap around my wrist, holding my hand where it landed against his face.

All the air rushes from my lungs when I collide with the wall, immediately crushed between it and Daemon's hard body as he stares down at me, his harsh breaths racing over my face.

"Say it again," he dares.

"I. Hate. You."

Before I know what's happening, his lips are on mine, his tongue is in my mouth and his hand is gripping the back of my neck, holding me in place.

For a good ten seconds, I return his kiss with as much fervour. My mind and body going straight back to Halloween when I lost myself in him so completely, but then everything comes crashing back to me and I slam my palms down on his chest.

“No,” I cry. “You don’t get to do this. You don’t get to keep dropping in and out of my life pretending you care for a few minutes. No,” I cry, slipping out from between his body and the wall. “You don’t care about me. If you did, you wouldn’t have ignored what happened between us like it was all a dream for months.”

His chest heaves, his lips are swollen and his fists are curled at his sides.

As always, he’s dressed head to toe in black, only he’s a little more casual with a black t-shirt. Just like on Halloween. Only, he’s missing his cape and mask.

Superhero.

My fucking arse.

A manic laugh falls from my lips.

“If you cared, you’d have found me. You’d have said something. Anything. But no, you’ve happily sat in the same room as me and pretended like nothing happened. That you didn’t kiss me, that you didn’t—”

“Make you come?” he finishes for me.

My cheeks burn red hot as the memories slam into me and my thighs clench to ease the ache with the need to feel it again.

Things have been good with Ant. He’s made me feel good. And I can lie to myself as much as I like, but it was never as good as that night.

I told myself over and over that it was just the mystery. The high of not knowing who I was with in that dark room. The wildness, the rebellion.

But I know none of it was true.

It was him.

My Batman.

“The things you said that night. The way you touched me, I thought...”

“You thought what?” he asks, taking a step toward me. “You thought it was the beginning of something. That I was going to claim you in front of everyone and make you mine?”

I shake my head, wishing that his words weren’t true.

I knew the second he refused to reveal his identity that any hope for any kind of future between us was a fantasy.

“I can’t have you, Calli,” he says, the sadness and defeat in his tone is enough to make a little of my anger toward him ebb away.

“So why am I here? What the hell is all this about if you don’t want me?”

“No,” he barks. “I said I can’t have you, not that I don’t want you.”

I stare at him, trying to process all of this while whatever he drugged me with still fogs the edges of my consciousness.

In the end, I turn my back on all of it, both figuratively and literally and I race toward the bathroom, slamming the door behind me and flicking to lock it before he has a chance to join me.

I manage to keep myself together while I pee, but the second I stand in front of the basin and look in the mirror, seeing the evidence left behind from Ant’s drugging kisses to my neck and the pure fucking exhaustion in my eyes from everything else that’s happened since, I shatter.

Loud, ugly sobs wrack my body, and my legs give out, leaving me in a heap on the floor. Feeling more than alone, as ever.

CHAPTER 4

CALLI

THE NEXT TIME I wake up, I'm once again back in his bed, only this time, I know I'm alone. I don't feel his presence, his stare, his heat.

Cracking my eyes open, the first thing I notice is the bathroom door hanging off its bottom hinges at a funny angle, the second is that I'm no longer tied to the bed.

Pushing my messy bed hair back from my face, I sit up and look around.

I still don't know where I am, but equally, I'm still having a hard job imagining that this is Daemon's home.

It's so... so normal.

I sit there for long seconds just listening, trying to work out where he is.

A part of me wonders if he's left me, but after waking up tied to the bed the last time, I doubt he'd let me go that easily.

Something tells me that I'm going to have to work harder than to just easily walk out the front door to discover the fall out of all this.

How long have I even been here?

Each time I've slept it's been so deep that it could have been days, or could it be the effects of whatever drug he gave me making me lose my grip on reality.

Climbing out of the bed, I'm relieved when my legs are steadier than the last time I stood, and I make my way over to the window.

Pulling aside the black-out curtains, I discover that the sun is high in the sky.

Seeing that we're a long way from the ground only confirms my first assumption that we're in his flat.

"Jesus," I breathe, spinning back around to look for a clock.

There's one on the other side of the bed that shows eleven forty-five.

But what day?

It must still be the weekend. Someone will have noticed if I just didn't turn up at school. Maybe not my parents, but Stella and Emmie would. Possibly even my brother.

A crash from somewhere beyond the bedroom makes my heart jump into my throat.

After another trip to the bathroom where I'm barely able to shut the busted door, I finger brush my teeth with the tube left on the side of the basin and head out in search of the enigma that is Nikolas Daemon Deimos.

My eyes widen with every step I take through what can only be his home.

And it looks exactly like that, a home.

The guys always joke about him living in a dark basement where he worships the devil and other shit along those lines, and I can't deny that I kind of assumed something similar.

But he lives in a flat that any family would probably feel at home in.

There are even fucking decorative cushions on the sofa.

Who the hell is this guy?

Another clatter forces me to look up from the soft furnishings and I find the man in question standing in the middle of his kitchen with a tea towel over his shoulder and a spatula in his hand.

What the actual fuck?

His eyes hold mine for a beat, before they drop down to my body.

Nerves slam into me despite the fact he's already seen me dressed in his

shirt—and only his shirt—but for some reason, it feels like it’s the first time he’s really seeing it.

Nervously, I tug at the open neck that slipped low on my shoulder and fold my arms across my chest.

“Come here, beautiful,” he says softly, his vicious cold tone from before is long gone as he holds his free hand out for me.

I hesitate, not knowing what to do, but also aware that if I do what I’m told then there’s a chance he’s going to drag me under his spell again.

“Come on, you must be hungry.” A genuine smile curls at his lips making his dimples show and my heart tumbles knowing it’s directed at me.

I know it’s the wrong thing to do, but my body doesn’t seem to be in agreement with my head because when I move, it’s to close the distance between us.

“Good girl,” he praises and despite knowing better, I smile at him, stupidly loving those words coming from his lips.

The second I’m in reaching distance, his fingers curl into the front of his shirt that I’m wearing as he hauls me right in front of him.

His head lowers as he stares down at me, his eyes holding mine until I drag my bottom lip between my teeth.

“You should never wear anything but my clothes,” he breathes, making my stomach clench.

Reaching up, he brushes his fingers over my collarbone making a violent shudder rip down my spine. His eyes flash with understanding telling me that he’s more than aware of how his touch affects me before he pushes the neck of his shirt from my shoulder once more.

“Better,” he murmurs, dropping his lips to my shoulder and giving me the sweetest kiss.

He doesn’t pull back straight away, instead, his lips linger on my skin as he breathes me in.

“Daemon,” I moan when he begins kissing along the slope of my

shoulder and up my neck.

“I’ve dreamed of you being here from the day I moved in.”

Then maybe you should have spoken to me, I think, but they’re not the words that fall from my lips.

“Oh God.”

My fingers curl in his t-shirt as his hands find the curve of my waist and my feet leave the floor as he lifts me onto the counter, nudging my knees apart with his hips and stepping between my thighs.

“You shouldn’t be doing this,” I tell him, although, in contrast to my words, my head falls back, giving him better access as he moves to the other side of my neck.

“I do a lot of things I shouldn’t, beautiful. This barely scratches the surface. You’re the one who shouldn’t be allowing me to do it.”

“I’m more than aware,” I breathe when his teeth scrape against my skin.

“I need to kiss him off you, beautiful. The only touch you should remember is mine.”

His words are the reminder I need.

“Stop,” I say, although my voice doesn’t hold the conviction I was hoping it would.

He chuckles, actually fucking chuckles against my neck.

“You don’t mean that, Angel. You know you want it just as much as I do. You know that you were always meant to be here, with me.”

His hands skim up my thighs, sliding under the fabric of his shirt until he’s holding my hips in his firm grip.

“I know you feel it too.”

“It doesn’t matter what I feel,” I hiss, pressing my palms against his chest to get him to back up, which he thankfully does, although only a few inches.

“You didn’t run for the front door, Calli. You could have left my bedroom and tried to bolt. You didn’t. You found me instead.”

My eyes narrow, frustrated to hell that he’s right. I didn’t even consider

turning in the opposite direction and attempting to leave the flat, to run from him.

My first thought was him. What he was doing.

Damn it.

“You know I’m right, beautiful. You want to be here right now just as much as I need you here.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s not news to anyone.” His lips quirk into the beginnings of a smile at that statement but something dark sweeps through his eyes.

He rubs at his stubbled jaw before dropping his eyes down my body to my bare parted legs that encase his hips, his eyes zero in on the juncture of my thighs that’s hidden beneath the fabric as if he can see straight through.

Thankfully, my stomach growls and reminds him that we’re both currently in his kitchen for a reason.

“I need to feed you,” he murmurs, his eyes finding mine once more before he backs up toward the messy island in the middle of his kitchen.

Resting back on my palms, I watch as he works, mesmerised that this dark knight knows his way around a kitchen.

And I discover not long later that not only does he know his way around, but damn, he can cook.

After placing two plates full of poached egg and avocado muffins on the dining table, he comes back for me.

I expect him to help me down, so I squeal in surprise when he sweeps me off the counter and into his arms. He carries me to the dining table where he sits in the chair he pulled out, placing me down onto his lap with his arm locked around my waist.

“We can’t eat like this,” I argue, struggling against him.

His free hand threads into my hair, dragging my head back so I can see him.

“Keep wiggling your bare pussy against me like that and it’s not going to be breakfast that I’m eating,” he groans in my ear, his lips brushing my skin teasingly.

An unintentional wanton moan rips from my lips at the image that pops into my mind from his words.

“You want that, don’t you?”

“Daemon,” I warn, attempting to slip from his grip once more but all I achieve is to grind against his very obvious erection.

His lips brush my ear, his hot breath racing down my neck making me shiver, all of which makes my nipples harden against the fabric of his shirt.

“I could lay you out right here on the table and taste your sweet, sweet pussy again. Remind you who you really belong to. Is that what you want, Angel?”

My lips part to reply as my head and body war with how I should respond but I don’t get a chance because his teeth nip my ear, sending a bolt of pleasure shooting through my body, ending at my clit.

“Oh God,” I moan as his tongue laps at the sting.

“Tell me that you’re mine,” he demands, his hand sliding up my thigh.

My lips stay firmly shut as he grazes higher pushing the fabric of his shirt up.

My thighs shamelessly part when his knuckles graze my mound and he groans as if he’s in physical pain.

“How wet are you, beautiful?”

I don’t respond, I don’t think either of us needs to hear the confirmation out loud of what we already know. He must be able to feel me soaking his trousers as it is.

I suck in a breath, waiting for him to connect with where I so desperately need him, but his touch never comes.

“You need to eat,” he says, turning the tables, his voice all business once more.

Releasing me, he reaches around my body for the cutlery and he cuts me a piece of his delicious-looking breakfast, spears it with a fork and lifts it toward my lips.

“Eat,” he demands.

“I can feed myself, you know,” I snap out at him.

“I’m aware. Humour me.”

“Why should I do anything you say?” I sass.

“Because you know it pleases me. Because you know I’ll give you whatever you want for it.”

“You’ll let me go?” I ask hopefully, although I can’t deny the disappointment that washes through me at the thought of walking out.

There is something very, very wrong with me.

He chuckles again and I curse silently that I can’t see the look on his face as he does so.

“I think that’s the last thing you want to do right now, don’t you?”

“No. I need to go and—”

“Say his name and you won’t be getting anything you want.”

Silence descends as tension crackles between us.

“I’ll never forgive you for what you did,” I tell him, careful not to use Ant’s name. Although I can’t deny that there is a part of me that wants to see what it would make him do. But I decide that I’ve probably seen enough of psycho Daemon to last me a while, especially in the past fuck knows how many hours.

“Yes, you will,” he states confidently.

When he moves the fork closer once more and the muffin brushes my lips, I cave and open my mouth so he can continue to feed me.

Holy fucking shit.

I moan in pleasure as my eyes roll back in my head.

Boy can cook.

“Good?” he asks smugly.

“There’s no need for arrogance,” I mutter, more than used to seeing or hearing that from my brother and his friends, rather than from Daemon.

When he offers me more, I don’t hesitate to take it this time.

Before I know it, my plate is empty and my cheeks burn knowing that I allowed him to feed me all of it like I’m a useless child.

“You must be hungry,” I say, looking at his still full plate.

“Fucking starved,” he grunts, but instead of reaching for his food, he swipes it aside as he lifts me from his lap and places me on the dining table.

“D-Daemon,” I shriek as realisation hits me.

“I told you, if you’re a good girl, I’ll reward you with what you need.”

Grasping the bottom of my shirt, he pulls it apart harshly and the buttons holding the fabric together rip off, ping-ponging around the room.

“Oh my God,” I gasp, more turned on by that one move than I think I’ve ever been in my life.

“I have two regrets from Halloween,” he tells me, his voice deep and harrowing.

My chest heaves as his eyes feast on my body.

“That I never got to see you, really see you. And that I never took your virginity.”

His eyes find mine again and my breath catches at the intensity within them.

He means every word of that statement.

“Every single day since that night I’ve regretted walking away.”

“You didn’t have a choice. They needed you.”

“But I needed *you*.”

CHAPTER 5

DAEMON

I STARE DOWN at her with her pink cheeks, her heaving chest, and hard nipples.

Fuck, she literally takes my breath away, she's so beautiful.

"You could have come to me any time after that night. I'd have understood. But then weeks passed, months, and all I got was a cold shoulder, your basic pleasantries when you had no choice but to be in the same room as me."

"I always want to be near you."

She scoffs, ripping her eyes away from mine. "You could have fooled me. It was as if I dreamed up that night. That it never really happened."

She gasps when I wrap my hands around her knees and spread her legs open.

"I never forgot a second of it," I force out as my mouth waters for a taste of her.

"You've barely looked at me since."

"I'm looking at all of you right now, and I can assure you, there's nothing else in the world I'd rather be staring at. You're fucking perfect, Angel."

Her blush brightens, spreading down her neck and onto her chest.

Slowly, she turns her face back to me, her eyes locking with mine before they drop down my body until she's able to see exactly how she affects me.

“Not a day has passed that I’ve not thought about you or that night, I fucking swear to you.”

Her stare lingers on the tent in my trousers and she swallows thickly before her lips part.

“Prove it,” she whispers shyly.

My breath catches at the challenge in her eyes, my cock jerking with my need to finish what we started all those weeks ago.

“With pleasure.”

Releasing her legs, I lean over her, wrapping my hand around the back of her neck and lifting her from the table, crashing her lips to mine.

A deep, hungry growl rumbles in my chest as she mimics my moves, wrapping her hand around the back of my neck and licking deep into my mouth as if she’s been craving this as badly as I have since that night.

I understand why she thinks that night meant nothing to me. But I had—have—my reasons for doing what I did.

I had no right dragging her off into the shadows like that. I’d managed to watch her from a distance all these years, but something snapped in me that night from the first second I laid eyes on her despite my best intentions wherever she’s concerned.

I was doing what was best for her, and I knew for a fact that it wasn’t me.

I still know that, but seeing her laid out beneath him on Friday night.

Fuck.

Anger surges through me and my need to fucking own her, despite the fact that she’s mine right now, hits me harder than I’ve ever known.

I was only six years old when I saw this beauty in her.

Six years old when I told myself that one day, she’d be mine.

If only I knew what the next few years were going to hold and how quickly I’d learn that I was never going to be good enough for a girl like Callista Cirillo.

Discovering that was something akin to losing a loved one. I had no idea what it was at the time, but I've since discovered the deep ache in my chest every time I thought about not making her mine was grief.

She might have been living and breathing in front of me, but a part of her—us—died the day I realised she needed a better man.

So I took a step back and watched from the shadows.

I watched her grow. Blossom from the sweet girl to an innocent young woman who struggled to come to terms with the world she'd been born into, while I'd jumped into it feet first a long time before.

I'm dragged back to reality, to her, when her teeth sink into my bottom lip so hard the taste of copper fills my mouth.

"Calli," I groan into her kiss, hardly able to believe she's allowing this to happen right now.

I might be crazy, possessive, impulsive, jealous, and a whole heap of other bad things, but I'm not an idiot. I'm more than aware that she should have run the second I gave her the chance earlier.

I even left the front door unlocked for her.

But she didn't take it. She didn't even try to leave.

My chest swells with the knowledge that she chose to be here.

She chose to be in my flat with me, instead of going to discover the fallout from what happened with the Italian's on Friday night.

Hell, she's barely even asked me about any of it.

She saw me at my worst. Yet, she's still here.

Needing more, I rip my lips from hers and kiss across her jaw, nipping at her skin. Doing exactly what I said I needed to do earlier and erasing his touch, his kisses, his marks from her skin by replacing them with my own.

Her back arches on the table as I glide my hand up her side, not stopping until I'm cupping one of her breasts.

"Oh God, yes," she moans, her body arching again when I release her neck and take the other in my palm.

“Fuck, you’re sensitive,” I groan when I pinch both of her nipples and she cries out.

She reaches out, her fingers thread through my hair before tugging me forward toward her body.

“What do you need, beautiful?” I ask, wanting to hear her beg for me.

“Your mouth.” Her eyes find mine and she tugs on my hair once more, the biting pain making my cock weep. “Please, I want your mouth on me, Nikolas.”

“Fuuuck.” All the air comes racing out of my lungs.

I hate that name. It’s connected to so much shit in my life that I’d rather forget. Hearing it usually makes me murderous. But listening to it fall from her lips as a needy plea.

Fuck.

It does something to me I’ve never experienced before.

“You’re a fucking angel.”

Dipping my head, I suck her nipple deep into my mouth making her cry out my name—my real name—once more.

I groan, the vibrations shooting through her, causing her fingers to twist tighter in my hair.

“I need you, beautiful.”

“You don’t deserve me,” she forces out between her heaving breaths as I kiss down her belly, aiming for that sweet spot between her legs.

“You think I don’t know that? But as true as that might be, I’m not sure I can let anyone else have you either.”

“That’s not for you to—shit,” she screams when I latch onto her clit and suck it into my mouth. “Oh my God. Fuck. Nikolas.” Her hips roll, grinding her cunt right against my face.

Best fucking moment of my life.

Last time was epic, but she didn’t know who I was.

This right here... it’s made all the sitting back and watching her over the

years worth it.

Because she's here. Not because she has to be, she could have easily left, but because she chose to stay.

She wants this.

And for some fucked up reason, she wants me too.

I lap at her as if I'd die without it, savouring her taste, memorising her cries of pleasure and pleas for more.

Anything you want, beautiful.

Her climb toward her first release is fucking stunning.

I watch from my position between her thighs, her eyes holding mine as she watches, as her cheeks redden and her breathing becomes so laboured she's no chance of controlling it.

"You taste like heaven, Angel. I could eat you forever."

"Fuck, yeah," she groans, her head falling back and severing our eye contact for the first time since she pushed up on her elbows to watch me, when I begin to tease her entrance.

Her muscles ripple trying to pull me in deeper, but I hold back, wanting her to climb right to the edge.

I want her fucking begging for me.

"Did he eat you this good, Angel?" I ask, pulling my mouth away from her, terrified of the answer but desperate to know.

"No," she cries. "No."

She reaches out, grabbing my hair once more and dragging my face back to her cunt.

"Don't stop."

"Tell me what you want," I demand.

"I want your mouth," she repeats.

"My mouth, where?" I ask only a breath away from her swollen clit.

"O-on me."

"Tell me where or you won't get it."

She sucks in a breath, dragging some confidence right alongside it.

“I want your mouth on my pussy, Nikolas. I want you to make me come all over your face.”

“Hell, yes,” I grunt, giving her exactly what she needs, sucking on her clit once more and plunging two fingers inside her soaked cunt.

“Jesus. So wet for me, beautiful.”

“More,” she cries, pulling my hair so hard I’m sure it’s about to rip clean from my head. It would be more than worth it.

Curling my fingers, I search for that sweet spot that’s going to make her see stars as her legs begin to tremble and her moans get louder.

“Come for me, beautiful. Come all over my face.”

I flick her clit with my tongue once more as I rub her G-spot and she falls, crying out my name over and over.

My chest swells hearing it fall from her lips. My hatred of my real name dissipated with every cry, every plea for more.

I work her until she’s spent, her skin flushed, her chest heaving as she fights to catch her breath on top of my solid walnut table.

I can’t deny that I’ve had fantasies of this. Calli has been the feature of many, many different ones over the years and images of laying her out on any surface of this flat have been right up there since I moved in. I knew in reality that she’d probably never even have a reason to visit.

I never could have ever imagined that I’d get this chance.

Ever.

“Oh God,” she whimpers when I finally release her and stand up.

Her eyes find mine and I discover a depth, a fire in hers that I never knew existed.

Although I’ve lusted after her for as long as I can remember, I’ve always had her up on this pedestal, much like everyone else. She’s this innocent princess that none of us dared go anywhere near.

But right now, all of that is gone because the only thing that’s staring

back at me is desire and need, both laced with hate, fire, and passion.

It. Is. Fucking. Everything.

Before I get a chance to move, she pushes from the table and practically climbs me like a fucking tree. Not that I'm complaining.

Her legs wrap around my waist, her arms wrap around my shoulders, and her fingers in my hair, gripping it hard.

"Calli," I groan, my own arms holding her just as tight as I lift her from the table before her lips find mine and she kisses me, not faltering when she must taste herself on me.

Her kiss is raw, dirty, and messy. Everything I could have asked for.

The heat of her cunt burns me through my trousers and my need to back her against a wall just to fuck her hard and fast to take the edge off burns through me.

But I can't.

She's not the kind of woman I can lose myself in and just send away before she gets any ideas about a second round or a future.

Up until that night in the derelict building, sex has been nothing but an act. A stress reliever. It's never been anything to really enjoy, to lose myself in, to treasure.

But the second I touched her, I knew everything I'd known before had been forever ruined.

I'd never be able to be with a woman again and be satisfied with the nameless fucking in whatever dark corner I could find for a few minutes.

Everything would always be compared to her and that night—and nothing would ever be good enough. And I didn't even get inside her.

Fucking magical voodoo pussy, and I've not even fully experienced it yet.

"Jesus, Cal," I mutter as she drags her teeth across my jaw, her tongue lapping at the rough stubble covering it.

Her lips descend my neck and a violent shudder rips through my body as

I walk us into my bedroom.

“Fuck,” I bark when her teeth sink into my skin. “You just bit me,” I gasp, looking down at her, wondering who the hell I’ve got in my arms.

When she finally releases my skin, she’s got a little bit of my blood on her lips and a feral, dark look in her eyes that I’m more than familiar with.

Who the hell is the girl who’s been hiding under the twinsets and pearls all these years?

“Y-y-y—” I stutter, struggling to find my words and cursing myself for falling back into old habits.

Her warm palm lands on my cheek and she holds my eyes, silently telling me to take a breath.

“You’re fucking perfect.”

With my hands palming her arse, I lift her a little, capturing her lips in a searing kiss before I lay her out on my bed.

Reluctantly, I release her so I can take in the sight of her laid there wearing just my shirt, her skin flushed with my hickeys and bite marks littering her body.

Reaching up, I run my fingers through my hair, barely able to believe I’m standing here with her right now.

She sits up, and immediately reaches for my waistband.

“Whoa, shit,” I hiss when she makes quick work of undoing my belt and ripping open the button, and dragging the zip down.

When her fingers curl around the fabric ready to tug my trousers down my legs, I panic and wrap my hands around hers, stopping her.

Her eyes immediately shoot up to mine, and they narrow in confusion.

“You don’t want—” She cuts herself off, swallowing nervously as shame washes through her.

Cupping her jaw, I rub my thumb over her bottom lip.

“M-more than you could ever imagine. I-I-I’m j-just trying to do the right thing,” I confess, squeezing my eyes closed tight because I’m not sure what

I'd do if she took the out that I'm offering. But it's Calli. I have to give her an out.

"It's a bit fucking late for that, don't you think?"

My eyes pop open at her comment a beat before she drags my trousers and boxers down my legs without any hesitation.

Her breath catches and her teeth bite into her bottom lip as her eyes land on my length.

"Holy fuck," she gasps, studying the metal balls on either side of my dick. "You... your p-pierced."

"What can I say?" I mutter, kicking my trousers off. "I'm a sadist who gets off on the pain."

"Can't say I'm surprised," she whispers, almost sounding amused.

"Now, where were we?" I ask, wrapping my hand around my cock and running the tip over her full lips. "Did you want to wrap your pretty little mouth around my dick, Angel?"

CHAPTER 6

CALLI

HE DOESN'T GIVE me a chance to answer that question, instead, the second my lips part, he thrusts his hips forward forcing himself into my mouth.

His taste explodes on my tongue, replacing my own from his kiss, and I hungrily suck him.

Really, I have no fucking clue what I'm doing. But I figure that I'm a quick learner and that he'll soon put me right if I do it wrong. I mean, how hard can it really be?

He pulls back and I lick up the underside of him before swirling my tongue around the head of his cock, teasing those two little balls on either side of the head.

Risking a look up, my eyes rake up the dark fabric of the shirt he's still wearing until I find his parted lips and then his dark, hungry eyes that bore down into me as if he's imagining all of this. As if I'm not really here worshipping his cock like I've spent my entire life waiting for the chance.

I haven't. But I can't deny that it has been something I've certainly thought about more than once since our rendezvous on Halloween.

He got to taste me that night, and I can't say I haven't been curious about what it would be like to return the favour.

Taking him in my mouth again, I sink down on him until I can't take any

more. He hits the back of my throat and I have to fight the need to gag.

“Fuck, beautiful,” he grunts, his fingers twisting in my hair, holding me in place before dragging me back and setting the rhythm he wants.

I bob up and down on his length, delighting in every grunt and groan of pleasure that falls from his lips as the salty taste of his precum lands on my tongue.

“Angel. Fuck,” he barks right before he rips his cock from my mouth, reaches down, grasps me around the waist and throws me back on his bed. “I’m not coming in your mouth. Not this time, at least.”

“T-this ti—” I don’t get to finish my question because he crawls onto the bed between my legs, spreading them wide and staring down at my pussy before raking his eyes up my bare body and focusing on my lips.

Reaching out, he traces them with his fingertip.

“Perfect,” he breathes before finding my eyes and settling between my legs.

He rubs the head of his cock through my wetness, just like he did that night before he was forced to walk away.

Dropping his forearm beside my head, he leans over me, his nose brushing mine in a tender move that makes my brain misfire.

“Tell me that you’re still a virgin,” he demands, his voice so deep it almost doesn’t sound like him. “Tell me you didn’t give this away to him when it always should have been mine.”

He pushes inside me ever so slightly but it’s enough for my entire body to tense in anticipation for what’s going to come next.

My words catch in my throat as I think of Ant, of how we got here.

This is fucked up.

I shouldn’t be lying here with Daemon staring down at me like I’m exactly where I belong when I’m assuming it was only two days ago I was in almost the same position with Ant.

And now he’s...

I squeeze my eyes closed as a fresh wave of hot tears threaten to erupt as I think about the reality of what happened Friday night.

“Calli?” Daemon warns, his voice edging on that dangerous tone of his that sends a shiver of fear and desire down my spine.

“I-I... It’s yours. He... we never—”

“Fuuuck,” he groans as his hips piston forward, his cock spearing inside me and making my spine straighten as my body fights against the unusual invasion.

“Oh my God,” I cry as pain shoots through my body.

Daemon’s body lowers down on mine, pressing me into the mattress, his hips unmoving as his hand wraps around the back of my neck, tilting my head exactly where he wants it so he can claim my mouth.

He kisses me until the pain has gone and all I feel is the fullness of him inside me and an unignorable need for him to move.

“Nikolas, please,” I moan, needing to see the way his eyes flash with desire every time I use his real name.

I’ve always known that he hates it, it’s why I used it to taunt him. But while I was expecting the anger hearing it caused, I wasn’t expecting the hunger that crossed his features.

“I need—”

“Trust me, Angel. I’ve got you.”

His hips roll and although there’s still a little lingering pain, mostly, it just feels insanely good.

“Oh God,” I gasp.

“That would probably offend him, Angel. I’m nothing but fucking satan.”

His lips dip to my neck and my back arches into him, needing more, needing everything.

“Do you have any idea how many years I’ve dreamed of this, of having you beneath me, of being inside you,” he all but groans against my lips as his hips continue to move, his cock moving inside me in the most mind-blowing

way.

“Liar. You barely noticed I existed,” I tell him on a gasp as he grazes some deep part inside me.

His entire body stills as my words hit him and he pushes up on his palms, staring down at me with a hard expression on his face.

“W-what?” I ask, suddenly nervous that I’m doing this all wrong.

“Calli,” he breathes. “You’re the only girl I’ve ever noticed.”

All the air rushes out of my lungs at the honesty in his tone.

His lips slam down on mine and the memory of his words, his touch, his kiss, the slow roll of his hips utterly consume me.

He keeps up the gentle pace for another few minutes before his inner devil starts to take over and he sits up, ripping us apart, wrapping his hands around my hips and lifting my arse from the bed to give him the perfect angle.

“You good?” he asks, but he must read the answer on my face because he doesn’t give me a chance to respond before he thrusts forward with more power than I’m expecting.

If it weren’t for his grip on me then I’d have shot up the bed.

His lips press into a thin line, the muscles down his neck tense and ripple as he begins fucking me like a man on a mission. He’s still wearing his shirt and I hate that he’s hiding a part of himself from me.

I feel like I’ve seen so much of the real Daemon in the past few hours and yet, he’s leaving that one bit as a mystery.

I don’t like it.

But as he keeps pounding into me, I’ve no chance of doing anything about it.

His fingertips dig harshly into my hips, hard enough that I’ve no doubt he’ll leave bruises behind.

“Fuck, Angel. Fuck,” he grunts, one of his hands releasing me and skating up my body until it finds a home around my neck.

I gasp, not used to the harsh grip as his jaw tics.

“Mine,” he hisses. “You. Are. Fucking. Mine,” he grunts possessively, slamming into me with every word.

“Tell me, Calli. Tell me that you’re mine.”

I’m so lost to him that anything outside of our connection doesn’t exist right now and I find myself crying out, “Yes. Yes, I’m yours,” as his grip on both my throat and hip tightens, his cock swells even bigger inside me.

“Play with your clit,” he demands. “I want to watch you come before I fill your cunt with my seed.”

My lips fall open at his crass words but I’m powerless to do anything but what I’m told and I find my hand grazing my lower stomach before I press two fingers against my clit.

“Oh fuck,” he grunts as I clamp down on him. “Yes. Fuck. Flick that clit, beautiful. Come all over my fucking dick.”

I do as I’m told while he stares at my hand as I work myself.

“That’s it,” he encourages as I begin to reach my peak. “Yes. Mine. Mine. Mine,” he chants, his dark, haunted eyes staring into my very soul. A devilish smile curls at his lips. “And just like that, the angel hands herself over to the devil himself.”

His ominous words are the final straw and I shatter, my body convulsing for long minutes as I ride out the best orgasm I’ve ever experienced as my pussy milks his own release out of him.

“Calli. Angel. Fuck, beautiful. Fuuuck.”

His cock jerks inside me, filling me with his seed like he just promised he’d do.

My chest heaves as I stare at him, watching as he rides out his pleasure. It’s something of pure beauty as his face pulls tight, his eyes close as his lips part. It’s a moment I could be suspended in forever as my body lies limp on the bed, utterly spent from both of the orgasms he’s given me.

But then, he opens his eyes, dark, haunted, dangerous eyes that I chastise

myself daily for not recognising the night of the Halloween party, and everything comes crashing down around me.

He releases my throat and lifts his hand to my cheek, cupping it in his warm palm.

“Mine,” he whispers darkly as my stomach knots anxiously.

I swallow, trying to stuff down these weird feelings, wishing I could go back to any time in the past hour where he’s taken over me so wholly that I’ve forgotten that anything exists outside this flat.

But the reality is that life has continued outside, the fallout of the ambush on the Italian’s warehouse will have been affecting everyone’s lives that I care about. Yet, here I am rolling around in bed with the guy who shot the good guy I was meant to be spending time with and abducted me, drugged me, tied me to his bed and claimed me as his own.

After a few more seconds, he pulls out and drops down beside me, immediately wrapping his arm around my waist and dragging me into his body.

“You’re fucking everything, Calli,” he murmurs in my ear, sounding relaxed and sleepy.

And you are certainly something else, I think to myself.

There are so many sides to him, more than I think he’s even aware of.

The cold, dark Daemon is brutal, terrifying. But the sweeter side of him is... fuck. It’s all a massive head fuck.

He nuzzles my neck, breathing me in, kissing and nipping at my skin.

“What’s wrong?” he asks when I don’t respond or melt into him like I was. “Did I hurt you?”

Yes. But not physically.

“No. I’m fine,” I lie. “I just need to use the bathroom.”

When I roll away from him, I’m surprised to find that he lets me go.

Pulling his shirt around me, I rush toward the bathroom and look over my shoulder right before I lift my hand to awkwardly close the broken door

behind me.

I look back one more time to find that he's lying on his side with his head on the pillow staring at me with a contentment I've never seen on his face before.

It makes my heart tumble.

I did that. I made that cold, emotionless guy look all soft and teddy bear-like.

But at what cost?

With a small smile, I slip into the room and erect a barrier between us as I suck in a giant breath of air.

As I move toward the toilet, the evidence of what I just allowed to happen slips down my thighs and I cringe.

Did I just make the biggest mistake of my life by doing that?

Knowing that he'll undoubtedly come looking for me if I take too long, I don't linger and just clean up, padding over to the basin.

Not finding any soap, I open the mirrored cupboard in front of me in search of some, only there's a different bottle that catches my eye as I do so.

I wash up and then grab the smaller bottle, reading the label of the sleeping pills that has been prescribed to Nikolas Deimos.

I guess it makes sense that anyone with a soul that dark, after all the things he's done, has trouble sleeping at night.

Before I think better of it, I untwist the top and tip four of the small white pills into my hand.

The label says take no more than one but fuck it. The guy fucking drugged me in his car after shooting my boyf— No. Ant was never my boyfriend. But he could have been. If it weren't for our blood, our families. We could have been everything. Had everything.

Another sob threatens to erupt, but I swallow it down. The time for my inevitable breakdown is coming. But first, I need to get the hell out of here and away from that... that monster.

Dropping the pills into the pocket of his shirt, I finger brush my hair and splash some water on my face.

His eyes are barely open when I step back into the bedroom.

“Angel,” he murmurs, holding his arm out for me to rejoin him.

“I’m just going to get a drink. Would you like anything?” I ask hoping like hell his sweet side won’t come out and offer to go and get it for me.

“There’s a bottle of Fanta in the fridge. The glasses are to the right of the sink.”

Perfect.

With a nod, I spin on the balls of my feet and rush out of the room and set about my mission.

Thankfully, seeing as he’s a cook, I locate his rolling pin quickly and I’m able to crush the pills on the counter before dropping them into one of the drinks. I stir it, careful of not making too much noise to alert him to what I’m doing. Once I’m confident that it’s dissolved enough in the bubbles, I pick them both up and head back to his room.

“Here,” I say, crawling onto the bed and passing him the glass of orange soda I’ve laced with his crushed sleeping pills.

My heart thunders in my chest as I wait for him to take his first sip.

He lifts the glass to his mouth and I swear I actually stop breathing.

But right before the glass hits his lips, he pulls it back again.

My entire body trembles with nerves.

If this hasn’t worked, if he suspects anything, I am so fucked.

Totally fucked.

I realise in that moment as he stares into my eyes that letting him take my V-card probably wasn’t the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.

This is.

Because even if it works, when he discovers what I did, he’s going to be gunning for me.

“I don’t deserve you,” he whispers before lifting the glass once more and

downing the lot in one.

If I weren't on the verge of a panic attack then I might even be impressed at his ability to neck a fizzy drink quite so fast.

When he's downed all but the last couple of centimetres, he looks into the glass with his brows pulled tight as I sip at mine.

"That tastes funky. It was a new bottle, right?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say, forcing a smile onto my lips before taking another, bigger sip. "Yeah, I see what you mean," I lie, screwing up my nose and placing my glass on the bedside table.

"Come here, you," he says the second I've released it. Wrapping his arm around my waist he pulls me against his body and spins me around so I've no choice but to look at him.

Reaching out, he tucks a lock of my hair behind my head and stares down at me as if I'm about to vanish into thin air.

To be fair, that's exactly what I'm attempting to do.

"I never did tell you, but I love this hair on you. You're so sexy as a brunette."

"Yeah?" I ask, my heart naïvely fluttering at the compliment.

"Everything about you is sexy, Calli. Spent all my life dreaming about having this. Having you beside me."

"Who knew the devil could be so sweet," I whisper, smiling up at him.

"Even Lucifer has a weakness, Angel."

Leaning forward, he brushes his lips against mine and despite knowing better, I fall under his spell once more.

He drugs me with his lazy kisses and gentle caresses across my body until he rips his lips from mine in favour of a yawn.

"Tired?" I ask.

"Hmm... I've not had sex in... a while. It's taken it out of me."

"How long?" I ask, hoping that his one way trip to unconsciousness will allow me to get some truths out of him.

“Before Halloween,” he confesses, his eyes already closed as his fingers draw patterns on my thigh. “I couldn’t touch anyone else after you. It could only be you, beautiful.”

“Why that night? What changed?”

He thinks for a moment and I begin to think he’s fallen asleep, but then his voice startles me. “Because I’ve noticed since Emmie and Stella, I’ve seen something new in you. I’ve seen a fire. A strength that I didn’t know was there before and I started to believe you could handle me.”

“Handle you?” I ask softly.

“Yeah. I’m not a good person, Angel. I’ve done a lot of bad things. And I’m...” He pauses and I once again think he’s asleep. But when he finally speaks my heart cracks for the little boy still hiding inside the hard outer shell. “I’m fucked up. I’m not good enough for you, for anyone. I’m broken.”

“Daemon,” I sigh, placing my hand on his cheek.

There are so many things I want to tell him but all the words get stuck in my throat.

And when he begins snoring softly, I realise that he wouldn’t have heard them anyway.

I wait for five minutes, although as I lie there watching him sleep, memorising his soft features when he’s relaxed, it feels like hours before I finally slip from his hold. All the while, my heart is in my throat when I watch him mindlessly reach for me in his slumber.

“I’m sorry, Daemon. But I can’t be yours.”

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Tracy Lorraine is a USA Today and Wall Street Journal bestselling new adult and contemporary romance author. Tracy has recently-ish turned thirty and lives in a cute Cotswold village in England with her husband, baby girl and lovable but slightly crazy dog. Having always been a bookaholic with her head stuck in her Kindle Tracy decided to try her hand at a story idea she dreamt up and hasn't looked back since.

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GOLDEN WINGS & PRETTY THINGS
KAYLEIGH KING



UNDERTOW

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SAM MARIANO

CHAPTER 1

GEMMA

EYES STRAIGHT AHEAD. *Just pretend you don't see him.*

It's not unusual for my shoulders and spine to be straight when I'm driving—I've been dancing since I was four-years-old; I know the importance of good posture.

Unfortunately, good posture isn't the reason for my straight spine as I drive down the road I live on. Tension is. I can feel it building in my shoulders, gathered in my upper back as I get closer to my driveway.

A place that once brought me feelings of peace and contentment has been tarnished with inky dread. I used to love coming home from work. Now it's like this every time.

A shame, too; it's such a pretty drive.

The road I live on is lined with similar-looking homes—monuments that the people living inside have done it: they've fulfilled the elusive American dream.

I'll admit the houses in the neighborhood are very nice.

The people? Not so much.

Especially Brent Hartley and his awful wife, Lisa. If their garage door is even open when I'm driving home, I tense up. Right now, Brent is standing at the edge of his driveway in black shorts and a white T-shirt, a navy blue baseball cap covering most of his short dark hair.

I don't turn my head to let on that I even notice him as I pass, but I can feel his gaze shift in my direction.

Ignoring him even harder, I drive past the next house and then turn left into my own driveway.

My house is a little different from the rest. Still a lovely home, one I was so proud to move into with my daughter. I could never afford a home like the rest of the ones on this street. I shouldn't even be able to afford to live near them, but I purchased the empty lot many years ago, when my daughter was just three years old. I bought it when her father and I were still together and I had dreams of us being a typical, happy family. Back before I knew what a disappointment he would turn out to be.

The dream home never happened, not while I was with him. Not soon after, either.

There were times I was tempted to sell this plot of land. I desperately needed the money, and I almost caved when the developers that bought up all the land around it offered me close to double what it was worth.

At first, I couldn't understand why they wanted my little plot of land so badly, but then these big, beautiful homes started going up all around it and I realized the truth: my little plot was a pimple on the face of this lovely, upper class neighborhood. They wanted to pop me so I'd go away and they could build another beautiful, expensive house.

I didn't sell, though.

When they realized I wouldn't sell, they made me a different offer: they would build me a home just like the others on this street—a stripped-down model, of course—and they would sell it to me at cost so I could afford it. It wouldn't have the interior upgrades and higher end finishes, but even a base model of one of these homes was more than I could dream of.

For years I'd owned this lot, and finally I would have a dream home to put on it.

It seemed like a dream come true. I couldn't wait to live in this beautiful,

family-friendly neighborhood. It's a safe place, a cul-de-sac, the absolute ideal. My daughter could make friends with the other kids in the neighborhood, and it would be a great place for us to live.

Boy, was I wrong.

When Brent Hartley and Jayden Todd came walking up my driveway the first time they caught me on my lot, they seemed welcoming, if a little sexist. They wanted to know when my husband would be around since they hadn't seen him yet. When I explained I didn't have a husband, thought bubbles seemed to hang in the air over their heads reading: then how did you buy a house?

All by my little ol' self.

I didn't say that, of course. Didn't want to start off on the wrong foot.

The builders had asked me not to tell any of the neighbors about the deal they gave me on the house. They didn't want anyone getting jealous or feeling ripped off, and of course I wouldn't want them to feel that way, either. If it mattered enough to the builders to have a uniform neighborhood that they were willing to build me such a beautiful home at such a reduced price, I could certainly repay the favor by keeping my mouth shut.

I smiled and explained to my new neighbors that I was a single mother of a teenage daughter and we couldn't wait to move in. It was our first home; we had been renting before. I didn't explain how I was able to afford it, and although I could tell they wanted to, they didn't come out and ask.

They didn't seem thrilled for us, but I shrugged it off and went about my day.

Jayden was the neighbor directly across the street from me, it turned out. He enjoyed eyeing up my lawn as if he didn't appreciate my leisurely lawn-mowing schedule—or maybe it was that I did it myself. Everyone else on our street has services that come to take care of things like that for them, but not me. I have gardening gloves and a little metal trowel for stubborn weeds, and a mower that I drag out when I need to trim the lawn.

Other than his snobbish behavior, Jayden wasn't much of a problem.

The next time I saw Brent, though, he made a point to tell me about a buddy of his who wanted to move into the neighborhood, but unfortunately, all the homes had sold. I nodded sympathetically, a bit impatient for him to leave so I could get back to my herb garden, then he sprung his reason for stopping by and told me if I ever wanted to sell, I should tell him so he could let his buddy know.

I had no idea why he thought I would want to sell. I let him see my confusion and told him no, my daughter and I were perfectly happy where we were and had no plans to move.

"That's too bad," he said.

I thought it was incredibly rude and didn't even know what to say.

Shortly afterward, I found out from one of the less awful neighbors that Brent's wife had been looking into things and she found the public record of my purchase—for substantially less than anyone else on this street had paid for their home. She started telling everyone I must have slept with the builder and the developer and everyone else she could think of to explain away why I got a deal and she didn't. Inexplicably, despite there being no proof and no reason to believe such a thing, everyone seemed to buy it. I could tell by the snide, sideways looks I started getting.

Since then, the Hartleys in particular have been relentless in trying to get me to leave. First it was their friend who wanted to buy in, then Brent's brother and sister-in-law. They don't care who replaces me, they just want me out.

It's bullying, plain and simple. They're the type of people who were obviously popular in high school and didn't get the memo that we've all grown up. Once they decided they wanted me out, that was what was going to happen, and they would terrorize me until they got their way.

They probably figured I would give in easily because I'm soft spoken and mild-mannered, because I garden and bake and I teach dance for a living.

It's nothing new, unfortunately. People have underestimated me my whole life.

But it doesn't matter. I'm not going anywhere, no matter how juvenile they are, no matter how miserable they make me. I scrimped and saved every single penny that I could to buy this home, even at a reduced rate, and I could never afford a nicer, safer place for my daughter and me to live.

Their latest attempts to run me out have been crude and childish. They smashed cheese slices on the side of the house, hurled little green eco-friendly bags of dog poop on my front porch so that I would step in it on my way out of the house. The last time I went outside to mow the lawn, I had to stop first and put on rubber gloves because dozens of open condoms were littering my lawn. They weren't used, thank God, but I couldn't mow the lawn until I'd cleaned them all up.

I have a Ring doorbell for security, but everyone on this street does, so they also know the limited visual range and how best to stay out of the way of the camera.

I'm so fed up with their nonsense, if I *could* catch them on camera, I would press charges. I know they're sitting back laughing while I'm wasting my time cleaning up after them, but I don't find it a bit funny. Not only are they being mean for no real reason, they're eating up time I could be spending with my daughter that I have to spend dealing with their crap instead.

I hit the garage door opener and watch to make sure it starts to rise as I ease down my driveway. Once it's all the way up, I pull in next to my teenage daughter's car and turn off the engine.

I gather my purse and my drinks—coffee *and* a bottle of water, because why choose?—and push my door open to climb out of the car.

“Hey, neighbor.”

Dread slithers through me and coils around my tummy. I hold back a sigh and turn to see Brent Hartley standing in the mouth of my open garage like a

Cerberus guarding the gates of hell.

There's no escape, he seems to say.

But he's wrong. This is my house, not his, and he's not allowed to be here if I say so.

"Hello, Brent," I say guardedly, pivoting in the tight space between the cars so I can close my door.

He invites himself in, crossing the threshold and walking toward me. "Lovely day, isn't it?"

"It sure is. I really can't talk right now, though. I have to get inside. My daughter's waiting for me to start dinner."

"Oh, yeah? What are you ladies having tonight?"

I turn and look pointedly toward the garage door. "I really don't have time to chat."

"Come on, now. There's no reason to be rude." Ignoring my obvious desire for him to leave, he continues to move closer, his gaze locked on me. "Hey, you know that buddy I was telling you about a long time ago that wanted to move into the neighborhood?"

"Yes."

"Well, things with wife number two didn't work out, and she got the house they ended up moving into. That's how it always works, isn't it?" he says with a smirk that feels vaguely icky.

"I suppose so," I murmur, turning to glance longingly at the garage door leading into my home.

"Anyway, he and wife number three are tying the knot in Aruba next month, and when they get back, they're looking to move into a house. He asked if anything was open in the neighborhood."

"I believe the Burnhams a street over were looking to sell," I tell him.

"Already sold."

"How unfortunate. Well, maybe by the time he gets to wife number four, something will be for sale." I flash him a smile. "Now, if you'll excuse

me...”

Rather than leave, he moves forward and plants a hand on the wall to block me from continuing toward the door. “It must be a lot of work keeping up this whole house on your own.” His hard gaze meets mine as he leans closer. “Scary, too. You never know what kind of things can happen to a woman living alone.”

I try to back away, but only bump into the shelving unit along the wall. “I don’t live alone.”

“Right,” he says with a subtle nod. “*Two* women living alone.”

His words and his tone fill me with such unease, I lose my manners completely. “Get out of my garage and off of my property.”

“There’s no reason to be rude,” he says. “Just being neighborly. Since yours is the only house in the neighborhood without a pool, tell your daughter she can put on a little bikini and swing by my place anytime.”

Fury ignites in my veins. “I *said*, get off my property.”

“Now, Gemma,” he says, deliberately condescending, as he grabs my wrist and pushes me back against the shelving unit. “There’s no reason to be hysterical.”

Just then, the door opens and my daughter Parker peeks her head out. “Mom?”

My instinct is to tell her to go back in the house, but when Brent’s lewd stare turns in her direction, I lose my ability to speak. Fear rushes through me, knocking out my muscles and turning my arms and legs to jelly.

Even though I’m certain he’s only doing this in his latest bid to run me out, it doesn’t matter.

You don’t fuck with my daughter.

“Get out,” I growl.

Surprise flits across his features as his gaze shifts back to mine. “Don’t worry, I was just leaving.” He releases my arm and takes a step back, but my legs still feel as sturdy as Jell-O sticks.

“Remember what I said,” he calls as he backs away. “If you change your mind about staying, my buddy will give you a fair price.”

Parker stays in the doorway, watching until he’s gone.

Finally, her gaze shifts to me, protectiveness etching lines of concern across her pretty face. “Are you all right? You look pale.”

“I have had it,” I say, each word measured carefully. “I am done with the bullying from these overgrown children. I am done. I have every right to be here, and they have *no* right to treat me this way.”

“Agreed,” she says. “But without evidence they’re behind all this crap, I don’t know what we can do.”

I nod slowly. “Well, I’m going to find out.” I look over at Parker. “You go to school with a bunch of rich kids. Surely some have parents who are lawyers. Who is the best lawyer you can think of? The meanest, most aggressive, most successful lawyer around. If one of your classmates got into trouble and their rich mommies and daddies could call anyone to defend them, who would they call?”

“That’s easy,” Parker says without hesitation. “Satan’s dad. Hayden Atwater.”

I nod once. “Then I’m going to see Hayden Atwater.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea. There’s no way we can afford him,” Parker tells me, but it’s too late, I’m already heading back to the car. “Wait, you’re going *now*? You can’t go now! Even if we could afford him, you’d need an appointment. You need—Mom, stop. Come inside, let’s think about this first.”

“I’m tired of waiting and thinking. It’s time for doing. It’s time to put a stop to this nonsense once and for all.” I get in the car, pull the door shut, and turn the engine back on. Thankfully, the car is still reasonably cool since I had the air conditioning on the whole way home, but my skin is hot with anger, so I turn it up a couple of notches.

I glance up to see Parker wide-eyed and waving her arms to get my

attention. I check the rearview mirror to make sure Brent didn't come back and I'm about to run him over—*what a pity that would be*—and when I see no one there, I begin to back out.

A text from Parker flashes across my phone screen, but I swipe it away so I can locate the address and phone number of Hayden Atwater's law office. By the time I'm at the end of my road, I have his secretary on the phone checking with him to see if he can take an emergency appointment right away. Much to my relief, the man says he'll see me.

There have been *many* times over the years our children have gone to school together that I've nearly worked myself up to storming into Hayden Atwater's world and demanding he fix the bully problem in my life.

I just always thought the bully in question would be *his* asshole son, not *my* grown-ass neighbor.

CHAPTER 2

HAYDEN

I WAS JUST ABOUT to leave for the day when Sonya told me there was an angry woman on the phone demanding to see me right away.

To be honest, I don't have many angry women demanding anything of me. In order for that to happen, you generally need to have *relationships* with women, and I stick to casual encounters. Unless we work together—in which case there will be no romance—I am a one-episode guest star, and I have no interest in reappearing in anyone's life.

I'm not sure what I visualized when I was preparing to meet the angry woman in question, but it was decidedly not the doe-eyed redhead who jingles as she storms gracefully into my office wearing the garb of a *belly dancer*.

It takes a lot to surprise me, but I'm so stunned at the sight of her, I sit behind my desk with my jaw hanging open.

She stops just inside my office, the sheer gauzy fabric of her purple skirt an endless wave as she moves. It stops and stills when she does. I'm tempted to tell her to keep moving, but while she's standing there, I let my gaze move up over her toned belly to the beaded purple bra encasing her lovely tits.

She looks a bit like a genie.

Are you here to grant me a wish?

The thought crosses my mind as my shock eases, a faint smile slipping

into place.

This is a joke. It has to be.

I've been working too hard lately—long hours with no breaks. Sonya has been telling me I need to blow off some steam, and while I never expected her to call in a dancer—*she has worked for me long enough to know I have a soft spot for dancers*—I am impressed with the one she picked out. She's not at all the generically hot Barbie doll blonde with plump lips and seductive eyes that I might have imagined.

No, she's beautiful, but not in a generic way. There's almost an innocence about this woman, which is a ridiculous thought to have given she's probably close to 30.

Maybe it's because she's standing there looking like *I Dream of Jeannie*.
I hope she calls me master.

I smirk at the thought, folding my hands over my abdomen and leaning back in my leather office chair, waiting for the show to start.

Since the dancer seems to be waiting for me to say something, I play along. "What can I do for you today, Miss...?"

"Cane," she provides, and even her voice is lovely. "Gemma Cane."

Gemma Cane.

Sweet like a stick of peppermint candy.

That has to be made up. Hell of a stage name, though.

Her skirts sway like ocean waves as she moves closer. "I'm having a problem with my neighbor."

"Oh yeah? Is her lamp too close to yours?"

A frown flickers across her face. "What? No, it's not a female neighbor, it's—well, he's married, somehow. I can't imagine the desperation one would have to feel to marry a man like that, but I suppose she's cut from the same cloth. I don't like her, either," she informs me.

I nod patiently, waiting for this bit to end and for her to dance her pretty little ass over here and sit on my lap.

“It’s the husband, he’s... well, forgive my language, but he’s a real bastard.”

I nod, trying to skip ahead to the good part. “Ah, so you need a knight in shining armor to rescue you? I’m afraid you’ve come to the wrong place, sweetheart.” This is taking up too much of my time, so I pat my thigh to let her know I want to move things along. “Then again, who knows? Maybe if you’re really sweet, I can be persuaded.”

Her mouth forms a little O of shock, her big brown eyes impossibly going even wider. “If you’re insinuating what I think you are, that—that is... incredibly inappropriate.”

I’m ready to get even more inappropriate.

I eye her tits, looking for her nipples beneath the heavy beading. “Feigned outrage doesn’t do it for me,” I tell her, my tone a bit bored. “Come over here and try something else.”

I swear to God, she’s near fainting. I wish she’d give up the act; I’m interested in her, but not this reluctance bit. I want to see her move, then have her on my lap so I can tug that beaded bra down and take the peaks of her lovely tits in my mouth. I want to know how she tastes.

“I...” She is at a complete loss. Since my gaze is on her chest, she glances down, and when she does, she appears to be as shocked as I was when she walked in. Clutching her breasts and gasping, she looks up at me like a deer in headlights. “Oh my God, I’m still in my work clothes.”

Her work clothes?

Is this still part of the act?

“Where do you work?” I ask cautiously, hoping it is.

“A dance school, I’m—I’m a dance teacher.” Horrified, her gaze shifts to mine again. “Oh my god, you thought I was a... different kind of dancer.”

I’m beginning to fear this is a real appointment and not some sexy setup from my well-meaning assistant.

“You’re not here to dance for me,” I say slowly.

She shakes her head, no longer looking angry, just deeply embarrassed. Well, that's damned disappointing.

Damned disappointing.

I don't know what I was looking forward to more, seeing her dance for me, or feeling the weight of her body on my lap before she started lavishing attention on my cock.

I've already got a taste for her now, and she's telling me she's not on the menu?

"I'm so sorry for the confusion," she says.

"So am I," I answer dryly.

"My summer session is wrapping up and we're rehearsing every day for their recital this weekend. I usually wear regular active wear and just maybe a hip scarf to teach classes, but with it being rehearsal week..." She gives up covering her breasts and stacks her hands over her tummy. "Well, I guess now I'm the inappropriate one."

Now that she's gentled, I find myself liking her again. I mean, I wanted her tits in my mouth whether I liked her or not, but she has a sweetness that appeals to me beyond that surface level. "You don't have to cover up. I'll stop requesting lap dances now that I know you're an actual client."

Her cheeks flush a bit and she smiles, shyly avoiding my gaze. "Well, potential client. My daughter tells me you might be outside my price range, but I'm willing to splurge if you can make this problem go away. I was hoping for a consultation and an idea of exactly what it would cost to have your help. I don't even know what I need, to be honest. Maybe a 'cease and desist being a giant douchebag' letter? Is that a thing?"

I find the idea of anyone being a douchebag to her annoying. She seems perfectly nice—what's this neighbor's problem? "Tell me a little more about the conflict, and I'll see what I can do to help."

"Well, my neighbor is a terrible human being. He has been harassing me for a while, trying to chase me out of the neighborhood. I haven't done

anything to him, but he found out I paid less for my house than anyone else in the neighborhood paid for theirs because I already owned the land and the developer cut me a deal. I can't prove that he's behind them, but there have been so many juvenile, mean-spirited pranks. Dog poop on the front porch, open condoms all over my lawn. They smashed cheese on the side of my house."

My eyebrows rise. "He smashed *cheese* on the side of your house? Is your neighbor a 12-year-old?"

Impossibly, her already enormous eyes widen. "Right? So immature. And I've been dealing with the immaturity since we moved in, but today he crossed the line. He made comments and lewd insinuations about my daughter, and I will not stand for that."

I scowl, sitting forward and grabbing a pen and paper to take notes. "How old is your daughter?"

"She just turned 18 in June."

My gaze flickers to her, surprised. "You have an 18-year-old?"

A smile flickers across her face. "Dancing keeps me young." She misses a beat, then adds, "And I got pregnant at 17."

The mention of getting pregnant stirs thoughts of how a woman *gets* pregnant, and my thoughts regarding her were already far from pure. "Has your husband tried talking to him?"

"I don't have a husband. It's just me and my daughter."

"No husband, huh?" I murmur, watching her. "Boyfriend?"

"Um, no. There's no man available to speak with him. I actually think that's part of why he keeps picking on me. My neighbor strikes me as quite sexist, and he thinks he can pick on me because..."

"There's no one to stop him. He probably wants to fuck you."

Her eyes widen at the audacity of my suggestion. "He's married."

"And?"

She frowns, but then it eases. "Well, he *is* an asshole, so I suppose that

doesn't necessarily rule out his wanting to... Regardless, I don't care what he wants. *I want the harassment to stop.*"

I've heard all I need to hear. As soon as she told me there was no husband or boyfriend in the way, I made up my mind that *I'm* going to fuck her—and the sooner the better, so it's time to close this deal so we can move on.

"All right, Gemma Cane. I would be happy to help you with your neighbor problem."

She's so pretty when she smiles. Gazing at me like I'm the answer to all her prayers, she says, "You will?"

I nod, already hating my next words since I know they'll wipe that smile off her face. "Absolutely. Before we go any further, though, I should tell you I charge \$1,400 an hour, and we bill in 15 minute chunks. So, as soon as you stormed into my office in your jingly little outfit, you owed me \$350."

As I predicted, her smile falls. "Uh, 14... wow. Per hour. That's, um, that seems like quite a lot of money."

"It is."

"You must be really good."

I smile. "I am."

"I don't... So—so you don't do like a free consultation or anything?"

I lean back in my chair and shake my head. "They say if you're good at something, never do it for free, and we just covered that, didn't we?"

"Yeah, I guess we did." She looks down, tucking a chunk of ginger hair behind her ear. "Unfortunately, it seems my daughter was right. That's definitely outside our budget."

I knew it would be, so I don't feign surprise. I let her be uncomfortable for a few seconds to see what she does.

I've made my interest in her pretty clear. Some part of me wants to see if she'll "joke" about paying another way and see if I bite.

Another part hopes she doesn't.

It's where we're heading, but I don't want it to be her idea.

“I guess there’s no point in discussing this any further, then,” she says, clearly disappointed. “I should probably go figure out billing with your receptionist before the bill gets even bigger. Do you do payments? Or, I have a credit card, I suppose I can just...”

“You still have a few minutes left,” I tell her. “You can at least give me your neighbor’s information so I can start looking into him.”

“Why? I can barely pay for the consultation, I certainly can’t afford to hire you.”

“What if you could?”

“I can’t.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” I say, watching her closely. “We can finish up your consultation—however long it takes—and I’ll scrap the bill altogether if you’ll agree to meet me later for a drink.”

Her wide eyes shoot to my face. “A drink?”

I nod. “Cold things, come in a glass, often with ice cubes.”

She rolls her eyes lightly, but appears a bit nervous. “I know what a drink is, I just don’t think I should have one with you.”

My brow furrows. “Why not?”

Her gaze drops. I can tell she’s thinking about it, but she’s reluctant. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea. And it’s pointless—I can’t hire you.”

“But you can save yourself \$350,” I counter. “Plus, once you’ve consulted with me, should it come to that, he won’t be able to hire me to represent *him*. Conflict of interest; I’m already privy to too many details about your side of the case. Whether you hire me or not, I guarantee you don’t want me on *his* side of the courtroom.”

This should be a no-brainer. I’ve never had to bribe a woman to have a drink with me before, and the deal is even sweeter for her—she can literally save hundreds of dollars just by agreeing to have one drink with me.

Well, I’m sure it won’t be one drink, but who cares? I’m paying.

Just in case by some slim chance that’s why she isn’t jumping at my

offer, I tell her with feigned solemnity, “I’ll even pay for the drinks.”

She smiles, but doesn’t look at me. “It isn’t that. I just... I can’t have a drink with you, I’m sorry.”

“Not even if it saves you \$350?”

She shakes her head, almost regretfully.

I frown, confused.

That’s fucking insane.

“Why?” I demand.

Rather than answer me, she says, “I’ve wasted enough of your time. I think I’ll just look into filing a restraining order instead.”

“Do you not drink? We can do dinner instead.”

“No, thank you.”

I’ve never been turned down so relentlessly before, and I’m not sure what to do with it.

I think about offering more, but I don’t like to make desperate moves. Hell, no woman has ever had me in a position where I’d even *consider* it, but I don’t understand why she’s so adamantly disinterested in going out with me—and I’m *very* adamantly interested in going out with *her*.

She turns to go back out to reception, to ask about a payment plan or scan a fucking credit card she’ll probably spend months paying off rather than spend a single evening in my company.

I should be insulted. I am a little, but more than that, I’m confused.

“Your neighbor. Tell me his name.”

She turns back to look at me over her shoulder. “Why?”

“Just do it.”

She’s startled by the command, but rather than tell me to go to hell, she says, “Brent Hartley. His wife’s name is Lisa.”

“Thank you.”

She nods, trying not to be rude, but also trying to drop my gaze like she’s afraid to look at me for too long.

I guess I have to release her.

I don't want to, but that doesn't make any sense, so I nod back.

Her gaze leaves mine immediately and she flees my office without another word.

My phone vibrates on my desk, but I don't look at it until Gemma is out of sight.

It's a text from my housekeeper telling me the salmon she was about to prepare for dinner is unexpectedly bad, and we'll have to change tonight's menu.

I grab the phone and shoot a quick text back, telling her I won't be home for dinner, after all. She can just make something for Landon.

Then I slide the phone across the desk and turn my attention to my computer.

Clearly, Gemma's going to need a little more convincing.

I should probably let it go, but I've never been known to take no for an answer.

Let's see what I can find out about Brent Hartley before I take Gemma Cane out for that drink.

CHAPTER 3

GEMMA

REHEARSAL IS WRAPPING up for the day, but Nancy is still struggling with her timing. Since it's Friday and we're out of official rehearsal time, I offer to stay a little late and work with her on perfecting her moves.

Ordinarily I'd want to get home to Parker, and I do, but Nancy isn't like my other bellydancing students who are mostly taking the class as a fun workout. She's an older lady who always wanted to learn to belly dance when she was younger, but she was too self-conscious about showing her tummy. After surviving cancer, she realized there are plenty of things to be afraid of, but a bare stomach isn't one of them. She's so proud of herself for finally putting herself out there and having fun without worrying what people think about her. She even has her grown son and his wife and kids coming to watch her, so she wants to be perfect at the recital.

I text Parker that I'll be working late and stay to practice with Nancy until she finally nails the rhythm. When we stop for a water break before she leaves, she gives me a hug and thanks me.

"You're gonna knock 'em dead, girl," I assure her, smiling as I uncap my water bottle to take a drink.

She beams at me as she makes her way over to grab her purse. "Thank you for staying late, honey. You didn't have to do that."

"It was fun," I assure her with a smile. "I'm so glad you took my class

this summer.”

“So am I,” she says, shimmying her hips and making me laugh.

When Nancy leaves, I turn off all the lights and prepare to leave as well. I grab my phone and see I have several missed texts from Parker, so I swipe the screen and open the message chain to see what I’ve missed.

Mostly there are just texts of her asking when I’m coming home, but she must be getting hungry because the messages are getting hilariously weird. She sent me individual pictures of ham and slices of cheese with sad faces drawn on in purple marker in markup mode, then she sent three sobbing emojis with the added caption, “Me because I don’t have jamón y queso in my tummy right now.”

I grin and text back, “I’m sorry! Nancy and I JUST finished. Mommy is on the way to save the day right now!”

She sends back party emojis instantaneously and I smile, slipping the phone in my purse and drawing out my keys.

Movement in the dark auditorium makes my heart drop and wipes the smile right off my face. I clutch my car keys, my heart stuttering, and try to remember what I’m supposed to do if I’m accosted in the dark by a stranger.

There shouldn’t be anyone else here. I stayed late with Nancy, but she left, and everyone else went home when rehearsal ended.

Before I can have a full-blown heart attack, the man moves out of the shadows and I realize it’s not a stranger at all—well, not a *total* stranger.

It’s Hayden Atwater.

He looks *devastatingly* handsome in his expensive three piece suit, stepping out of the shadows like somebody’s nightmare. Truly devastating.

My insides flutter, but I need him to leave, and I guess before that, I need to know what the hell he’s doing here.

“This is a closed rehearsal,” I say with a frown, casting a confused look at the row he just emerged from.

Was he sitting there watching me?

“Rehearsal ended—” he checks his Rolex “—about an hour ago. Do you often stay late to help little old ladies learn how to rock their hips?”

My cheeks flush and I look down at my water bottle to avoid looking at him. “No, not usually. I don’t generally have elderly ladies in my bellydancing class, or any of my classes, really.” Rather than continue to explain myself to him, I ask, “Why are you here?”

“Wanted to see you dance. You ripped me off yesterday.”

A short laugh bursts out of me. “*I* ripped *you* off? You ogled me and did nothing and I had to pay *you* \$350.”

“You didn’t have to,” he reminds me. “I offered to take you out for a drink and wipe the slate clean.”

He moves toward me, and I find myself taking a step back. Rationally, I know he’s no predator—he’s a lawyer, for heaven’s sake.

But he did sneak into my closed rehearsal to watch me dance, and now we’re completely alone, and...

He needs to leave.

Clearing my throat, I attempt a firm tone and tell him, “I believe we concluded our business yesterday, and I really have to be getting home to my daughter, so if you’ll excuse me...”

He doesn’t stop moving toward me, and I don’t stop retreating.

“This is very inappropriate,” I tell him as I’m forced to continue backing up.

His lips tug up in a smirk, amusement sparking in his dark eyes. They’re the color of the ocean at night. “You use that word a lot.”

“Only when I’m around you.”

His gaze rakes over me. “Turquoise today, huh? I like it.”

“Why are you stalking me?” I demand, since he’s still advancing on me.

“Why are you letting me?” he returns, cocking an eyebrow.

I’m right up against the stage now. I can’t retreat any farther. I stop, jutting my chin up and meeting his gaze. “I’m not letting you, I just can’t

seem to stop you.”

He stops too, but he’s right on top of me. Far too close. His nearness makes my heart hammer in my chest.

“I think I’m beginning to understand why your neighbor loves tormenting you,” he states.

Narrowing my eyes, I say, “You would sympathize with the *asshole* in this scenario.”

He smiles at my insult, like he finds me adorable. “I didn’t say I sympathized with him, just that I understood. There’s a difference between empathy and sympathy.”

“I’m aware of that,” I mutter.

“I want to take you for a drink,” he states.

“While I *empathize* with you wanting that,” I tell him, lightly mocking, “I am not going anywhere with you, least of all for a drink.”

“Why are you so determined not to go out with me?”

“Has it occurred to you that maybe I just don’t like you?”

“No,” he says plainly.

I roll my eyes in disgust.

“I know you’re attracted to me. I make you nervous.”

“Do you think every woman you make nervous must be attracted to you? Because I’m afraid I have some bad news…”

“I don’t ordinarily spend time with women I make nervous. I’m making an exception for you.”

“How delightful for me.”

He grins. “Isn’t it? Now, are you going home to change first, or should you just wear your little scarves to the bar? We can make it a tradition.”

I shake my head. Since he isn’t advancing on me anymore, I brush past him and walk quickly toward the exit. “I already told you, the answer is no. It’s still no. It will always be no. I also told you my daughter is waiting on me to start dinner, so why you think there’s even a *chance* I’ll go out with you

right now—”

“Tell her something came up. I’ll order her a pizza,” he offers.

“I am not blowing off my daughter to go out for a drink I don’t want with *you*.”

“Ouch.” He grabs at his heart, if he even has one. “You wound me, Gemma Cane.”

Ignoring him, I shove open the auditorium doors and make my way out without holding the door for him. Maybe that’ll show him I mean business.

He follows me. “I think I should warn you, the last time a woman made me work this hard to go out with her, I married her.”

I spin around, eyes wide. He has me so discombobulated that I momentarily forget what I once knew about him. “You’re *married*? You *are* an asshole.”

He shakes his head, his expression changing. A granite shield slips into place, as if masking old pain he doesn’t want me to see. “Widowed.”

My heart stops. My chest fills up with something tight and painful. “Oh. Oh, my god. I knew that. I’m so sorry.”

The details are murky, but I remember all the bullying from Hayden’s son started when Parker was in middle school, right after his mother died. Sympathy for what that poor little boy must have been going through was the only reason I didn’t charge into a grieving Hayden Atwater’s office back then and demand he stop his son from being an asshole to my daughter.

That sympathy worked against me then—it has been years, and his awful son still torments my daughter—so I don’t make the mistake of letting it happen again.

“Well, I’m very sorry for your loss, but don’t think my sympathy changes my answer.”

“I would never exploit my wife’s death to charm a woman, Miss Cane, even one as lovely as you.” My face heats, but he gracefully leaps to the next topic, somehow in a way that doesn’t feel all that strange. “Don’t get me

wrong, you're still going out with me, just not for that reason. I have the perfect place in mind; I think you'll like it."

"Based on all you know about me?" I mutter.

As if he didn't even hear me, he plods on. "I guess if you're committed to having dinner with your daughter tonight, we can go out afterward. That gives you time to change out of your costume, anyway." His gaze rakes over me before returning to my face. "How does 8:30 sound? I'll pick you up."

I stare up at him, wide-eyed. "You are relentless."

He smiles. "I know. Makes me a damn good attorney."

"I've told you no a thousand times, I shouldn't have to say it again."

"Why don't you try a different answer? One I'll like better."

I sigh, exiting the dance school and heading for my car. "Why don't *you* try asking out a woman who actually wants to go out with you? You're handsome and you charge \$1,400 an hour, so you're clearly not struggling to pay the bills. Surely this town is full of women tripping all over themselves for your attention."

"Eh, too easy. I want you."

I know he only means he wants to have a drink with me, but his wording makes my stomach drop. I've never had a man boldly tell me that he wants me before.

We've made it to my car, but he's still following me. The only thing left to do is get in and drive away, but since the man won't go away, I turn back to face him.

"I don't date," I say, since maybe more of an explanation will make him give up. "This is my daughter's last year before she leaves for college, and I want to focus all of my free time on her right now. I have the rest of my life to waste on relationships that aren't going anywhere. I've chosen to sit it out this year. If you want a rain check, I'll give you one," I offer, knowing he'll never remember he wanted to go out with me in a year's time.

He's scowling, displeased by my explanation. "You can't go out with me

because you're not dating this year?"

"Correct."

"That's absurd. Tell me the real reason."

"That *is* the real reason."

"No." He shakes his head. "You were very adamant about not wanting to go out with *me*, specifically. If your dating fast was the real reason, you would've mentioned it right away."

I stare at him. "Maybe I didn't think I owed you an explanation for why I didn't want to go out with you."

"Well, you were wrong."

My eyes narrow with dislike before I can stop them. Finally, unlocking my car door and opening it, I say, "As lovely as this has been, I'm going home."

He grabs my car door, letting me get in, but not letting me close it. "What makes you think it isn't going anywhere?"

I glance up at him. "What?"

"You said you have the rest of your life to go on dates that aren't going anywhere, that's why you don't think dating is a thing worth doing while your daughter still lives at home."

"I did."

"Why such a dour outlook on dating?" he asks.

"I don't have a dour outlook on dating." I tug at the door, but he doesn't release it, so I shoot him a dirty look. "I have a dour outlook on dating *you*."

His eyebrows rise. "Why?"

There are plenty of reasons I could give. He's pushy and annoying, he doesn't listen to me when I speak, and I've never found frustrating men particularly charming.

But the real answer is profoundly uncomfortable. Even if it's the truth, I don't relish the idea of insulting someone's child.

Wanting to be free of this interaction rather than have to do that, I give

my door another tug. “Let go.”

“Not until you tell me why you don’t like me.”

“It isn’t you I don’t like,” I snap, surprised by my own answer.

I don’t dislike him?

That doesn’t seem right.

Since my answer doesn’t make sense and he’s still frowning, I decide to pound the nail in the coffin of his romantic interest in me. “I don’t like your son.”

He blinks like that’s the absolute last guess he ever would have made. “My son?”

I nod, feeling my face heat. Even though my opinion is completely warranted, I feel like a witch saying it.

But surely now he sees. There’s no point whatsoever in spending time with someone who doesn’t like your child. There’s no future in it.

I had a first date planned with a man once. He came to pick me up, and when Parker ran over to give me a hug and kiss before I left, I caught a look of utter disdain pass across his face. When pressed, he said he wasn’t a big fan of kids.

I didn’t bother going on the date. What would have been the point? Parker wasn’t going anywhere, and if he wasn’t willing to love her like I did, he had no business being in my life.

I don’t see myself *ever* liking Landon Atwater, so his father could be the man of my dreams and it still wouldn’t work.

Understandably confused, he asks, “What does my son have to do with anything?”

“My daughter and your son go to school together.”

“Yes, you mentioned that.”

“My daughter is Parker Johansson,” I tell him, since he probably would have expected my last name to match my daughter’s, and he hadn’t heard any mention of Parker Cane.

Not so much as a hint of recognition registers on his face.

I frown, a little insulted on Parker's behalf.

He's never even mentioned her?

That seems wrong, but Hayden is clearly clueless when it comes to the relationship between our children.

I don't see how. I've heard so much about Landon Atwater over the years, I feel like I know the little jerk even though we've never met.

"Is that name supposed to mean something to me?" he asks.

"Yes," I snap. "Your asshole son has bullied my daughter since *middle school*. I assumed you knew and just didn't care how your son behaved, but now I'm thinking you actually aren't even aware of what goes on with him."

"I'm a very busy man, and Landon has a lot of friends," he says a touch dismissively. "I can't possibly keep up with the goings on regarding his social life."

"Well, they are *not* friends," I tell him. "He's mean to her, and I obviously can't date someone whose son is mean to my daughter."

"Maybe he likes her," Hayden suggests, not remotely alarmed or surprised to hear that his son is a bully.

"Unh-unh, no. We do not entertain the narrative that if a boy is mean to you, that means he likes you."

"Entertain it or don't, but it's probably the truth."

I stare at him, letting him see how unimpressed I am.

"I'll talk to him," he says, since the dismissive route didn't get him far. "I'll tell him to stop picking on her."

"I would appreciate that," I say, slightly mollified. At least he isn't one of those parents who knows what a jerk their kid is, but just doesn't care.

"Now, with that out of the way, how about that drink?"

I sigh, shaking my head at him. "You don't give up, do you?"

"Not when I want something. Sorry," he says, looking not at all sorry.

I definitely *shouldn't* go out with him. There's no question it's a bad idea,

and I really am taking the year off dating so I can focus on Parker.

But I can't remember the last time I went out on a nice date, and I do have a feeling I would have a good time with him. I also have a feeling if I keep telling him no, I'll keep seeing him until he wears me out and gets a yes.

I suppose one little drink couldn't cause any real harm.

"Make it 9:30," I say.

Victory glints in his eyes as he smiles down at me. "Perfect. I'll pick you up."

"Don't you need my address?"

"Already have it."

I roll my eyes playfully. "Stalker."

"Hey, if you can drive me to stalking, you should feel pretty damn proud of yourself. I usually can't be bothered to answer a text."

I'm not sure he should admit that, but in a way it's comforting. It verifies what I already thought—that taking me out for this drink is only appealing to him because I keep turning him down. As soon as he takes me out and realizes I'm a boring mom and he could be out with a gorgeous, college-aged beach bunny instead, he'll lose interest and leave me alone.

I don't know how this keeps happening to me, but at least *this* relentless pursuer is handsome and unmarried.

CHAPTER 4

GEMMA

WHEN I DRIVE HOME TONIGHT, the Hartley garage is open, but I don't see Brent's car.

As soon as I get my car in my garage, I lower the door anyway, just in case.

I'm still uneasy until I get in the house and see Parker sitting at the island, reading a book.

"One minute," she says without looking up. "They just kissed and there was a scene break, but it's only a few paragraphs and I want to finish the chapter. You know I hate stopping before a chapter ends."

I crack a smile, dropping my bag on the counter beside the fridge. "I thought you were over here wasting away."

"I was, but you took so long I decided to start my new book, and now here we are." She ignores me, focusing her attention on her story while I move around the kitchen gathering ingredients and cooking supplies.

Even though I had the whole drive home, I haven't decided whether I'll tell Parker who I'm going out with tonight. There probably isn't a reason to. We're only going for a drink, it's not like we'll ever go out again.

I won't lie to her, but maybe I'll be vague and just tell her I'm having a drink with a friend.

Given how immersed she is in her new story, she probably won't even

ask questions. She'll want to be free to read her book tonight, so she won't be disappointed I'll be out.

This worked out kind of perfectly.

Once Parker finishes her page, she closes the book and comes over to help me make the ham and cheese rolls we picked out for tonight's dinner. I feel guilty for being distracted the whole time, but I can't seem to get my mind off my nighttime plans.

I can't actually remember the last date I went on. Not only because it has been a long time, but because years of aimless dates have run together.

Was it Dev, the cheap guy who invited me out for drinks and then refused to actually order anything but water so I would have to pay for my own? Was it the guy with the greaser hair-do who had no opinions about anything and then told me during dinner that his last girlfriend had been married, but hey, he doesn't judge? Could've been the bankrupt divorced dad whose idea of a date was me coming over to his place to watch a football game on TV and trying to maul me while his two-year-old took a nap. Maybe it was Brad, the doctor I had been excited about because surely a doctor would be an intelligent conversationalist at the very least. But no. He was boring, and a bad kisser.

Actually, I think it might have been him. That date left a sour taste in my mouth—literally—and I felt so dejected when I got home that night, I decided to take a hiatus from dating altogether.

It feels wrong to even include Hayden in the same group as those guys for reasons I can't explain.

It's completely possible he'll turn out to be a total asshole. Even if he isn't, it can't go anywhere, so I shouldn't get my hopes up.

It will be nice to go out, though.

Maybe.

I find myself watching the clock, keeping track of how long I get ready as Parker and I cook and then eat. She tells me about her book and I tell her

about Nancy, but I don't mention Hayden, and it's difficult to feel like I'm not lying to her.

It feels a little like betrayal going out with the father of the enemy, though.

That probably means I shouldn't go, but I suppose it's too late to back out now. I don't even have his cell phone number to text him and tell him I changed my mind.

I don't know what to wear. I stand in my small walk-in closet looking at everything I own, but I don't actually know where we're going. He asked me out for a drink, so probably a bar, but what kind? A quiet wine bar with other adults where we will have a nice, quiet conversation? A lively club packed full of beautiful, writhing bodies and scarcely a soul over 30?

God, I hope it's not a place like that. I didn't like clubs when I was in my early 20s, and I certainly don't want to step foot in one now.

My closet is arranged by color, but I'm grabbing hangers from every section and hauling them to the bed. There's a green dress, a blue dress, and even a white. High neck, strapless, maybe a halter?

Parker walks by on the way to her bedroom, but she stops dead in her tracks, her eyes widening as she looks at the mess on my ordinarily pristine bed.

"What is going on in here?" she asks slowly.

I'm still in a towel. I took a shower and blew out my hair, but I feel woefully unprepared to dress myself.

"I don't know what to wear."

She eyes me uncertainly. "To grab a drink with a friend?"

"Yes. I don't know where we're going, so I'm not sure how I should dress. I don't want to be overdressed. Or underdressed."

A knowing smile plays around her lips and she teases, "Is this a male friend?"

I shoo her away. "Go read your book."

She grins, but doesn't give me a hard time. Eyeing the mess of clothes on my bed, she walks around to the side I'm standing on. She must not see what she's looking for, because she turns and heads for my closet. "What about the red lace one with $\frac{3}{4}$ sleeves?"

That one has a high neck, but it's lacy and classy. I love that dress, but I think I want something more overtly sexy. A lower neckline.

Why?

I shove the thought away and grab a navy blue strapless one. I look at it, but my displeasure shows on my face.

"All right, what about a two-piece ensemble?" Parker suggests, seeing the difference in the dress she picked out and the one I did. "Your short black skirt that makes your legs look like they go on for days. You could pair it with—Oh! I've got it." She snatches a sparkly navy blazer from the black section, then heads back into my bedroom and grabs the skirt and a black silk blouse I tossed on the bed. "This," she says, handing the pieces to me. "This outfit with your strappy, black suede heels."

I drape it across the bed and look at the outfit she picked out for me. It's actually kind of perfect. If I'm overdressed, I can take off the blazer and I won't be anymore.

"What would I do without you?" I ask rhetorically.

"You're welcome," she says, fleeing my room so she can get back to reading. "Have fun on your date," she calls playfully before disappearing down the hall.

"It's not a date," I murmur, but she's already gone, I'm only lying to myself.

When the royal blue Maserati that obviously belongs to Hayden Atwater pulls into my driveway, I rush out the door like a teenager reluctant to let her parents meet a date she knows they'll disapprove of. Parker is upstairs in her room, but I don't want him to come to the door and risk her getting curious.

My heels click against the cement as I hurry around to the passenger side. I flash him a smile as I open the door and slide in. "Hello, again."

"Long time no see," he says lightly, watching me smooth down the back of my skirt and drop into the two-tone leather seat. "You seem like you're in a hurry. You must have missed me."

I shoot him a look and roll my eyes, but I *am* in a hurry and have to resist the urge to follow it up with, "Now go, go, go!"

Hayden doesn't hurry, though. If anything, I think my impatience slows him down. Clearly, he's a man who does things on his own schedule.

His gaze rakes over me appreciatively. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," I say a bit shyly, tucking my hair behind my ear and looking at him in his black T-shirt and charcoal gray dinner jacket. Black slacks stretch across his muscular thighs, and my face warms as my gaze returns to his. "You look very handsome yourself."

As he backs out of the driveway, I glance at the house to make sure it's secure. Grabbing my phone out of my little navy blue purse, I text Parker and tell her I locked up on the way out and I have my keys. "If the doorbell rings, ignore it. Do not unlock or open the door to anyone while I'm out."

Right as I push send, Hayden questions, "Something pressing going on over there?"

I glance over at him. "Sorry, I was just texting Parker to remind her not to answer the door while I'm out. I don't *think* my neighbor is actually dangerous, but since he's escalating his attempts to run me out, I'm just not willing to take any chances."

His brow furrows with concern. "You're that worried about him?"

I shrug, uncomfortable actually saying it out loud. "I feel a little silly

about it, but he was very threatening last time he cornered me in my garage. He grabbed my arm and pushed me back against the shelving unit. I don't know what would have happened if Parker hadn't opened the door, but—" I freeze in horror as he cuts the wheel and turns into the Hartley driveway. "What are you doing?"

"Something impulsive."

"Let's not," I say, my conflict-averse tendencies rearing their heads. "I was very clear that I wanted to send a strongly worded letter, not—" He ignores me, leaving the car running and climbing out of it. "Hayden," I whisper urgently, opening my door and hastily following after him.

I don't know if I'm supposed to follow or stay in the car. I feel so awkward I could die either way.

I arrive on the porch just in time to see Hayden ring the doorbell. It's too late to turn back now, but interactions like these are literally the stuff my nightmares are made of.

Lisa comes to the door. At first she looks pleasantly surprised to see a handsome man on her doorstep, but her expression changes swiftly when she sees me just behind him.

"How can I help you?" she asks uncertainly.

"I'm here to see Brent," Hayden informs her. "Is he home?"

Realizing he must be here on my behalf, her attitude resurfaces. "No, I'm afraid he's out."

"Ah." Hayden nods. "Well, in that case, could you do me a favor? Tell your husband that next time he corners my girlfriend on her property and puts his hands on her, the assault charges she's going to file against him will be the *least* of his problems. And I've installed extra cameras to ensure her safety, so next time, she'll have video evidence."

Lisa's jaw falls open.

Hayden turns around without another word and heads back to his car.

Her gaze hits mine, her eyes wide with rage.

Without a word, I also turn around and scamper after my date.

“Hey,” Lisa calls belligerently, but neither of us even pause.

We get right back in the Maserati, then Hayden backs out of the driveway and it’s over.

Well, for us.

I can’t bite back a little smile. “He’s probably going to have a bad night.”

Hayden looks over at me and smirks. “I hope so.”

“I hope that doesn’t make things worse,” I murmur, since there obviously *are* no cameras and Hayden isn’t actually my boyfriend. The implication that I have a protector now was nice, but since I don’t, it could backfire. He could come at me even harder now.

“It could go either way. If he’s picking on you because he perceives you to be weaker and unable to defend yourself against him, knowing you have someone proactive in your corner should be enough to shake him. The old adage of ‘once you stand up to a bully, the bullying stops’ coming into play. Of course, that wouldn’t work with an asshole like me. I’m the sort to see it through, but I also don’t go after easy targets. Only cowards do that.”

“I’m not weak,” I murmur, looking down at my purse on my lap.

I feel Hayden’s gaze shift to me. “I didn’t mean to imply that you’re weak, Gemma. Only that a certain kind of asshole might think that because you have a gentle nature. Have you ever heard the concept of Maslow’s hammer? That when the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail? Some people don’t know any other way, so they assume theirs—in this case, being an asshole—is the one right way, and everyone else is wrong. They lack the empathy or intelligence to understand things outside of their own experience, so they ridicule it instead. I’m far from gentle, but I know it takes guts and determination to remain that way in the world we live in, so I certainly don’t agree with that small-minded opinion.”

I bite down on my bottom lip, trying to bite back my smile so it doesn’t get too big. “Wow, two minutes into this date and you’ve already defended

my honor twice and quoted psychological philosophy at me. Are you trying to win an award or something?”

“Or something,” he murmurs playfully, his eyes glinting with mischief.

I’m pretty sure his implication is purely playful, but it still makes my face warm.

I don’t have sex on first dates. I’m extremely slow to warm up. Henry Cavill could don Superman’s cape mid-date and save a kitten from a tree, and I still wouldn’t give him more than a hug and a lingering kiss.

Unless someone makes it past casual dating to being my actual boyfriend, there’s little chance I’m sleeping with him.

But if I *did* sleep with men on first—*and only*—dates? I think I’d probably sleep with Hayden Atwater.

CHAPTER 5

GEMMA

THE PLACE he takes me to is a bar I've never been to before—a place called Underworld located right on the beach.

From the looks of it, it's a hotel bar, with a little walkway connecting the hotel lobby and bar area. The bar has its own separate parking lot, though, and is clearly an independent destination.

The salty beach air fills my senses as I step out of the car and walk around to join Hayden. I take his hand, but I'm not sure why. I like affection with boyfriends, of course, but I'm not terribly bold, and I would never just grab the hand of a man I barely know on a first date.

I do, though. He looks down at our joined hands, but doesn't seem to mind.

I shouldn't be holding his hand.

I can't shake the thought as we head toward the entrance to the bar. I keep wanting to react to him like I would an actual date that I'm giving a real chance, but this was never supposed to be that. It doesn't even matter if I like him. I already know this can't go anywhere, so there's no point.

I look up at the glowing blue sign with three scary-looking black dogs peeking over the name 'Underworld'.

"Welcoming," I say wryly.

He glances up. I get the impression he comes here so often, he hasn't

even noticed the sign in a while. “Oh, yeah. The owner’s dramatic.”

“You sound familiar.”

“I hope so. He’s my brother.” He opens the door for me.

I thank him as I step inside. “You have a brother?”

“A couple,” he answers wryly. “I’m one of six kids.”

My eyes widen. “Six kids? Your mom and dad must have really liked each other.”

He laughs, shaking his head. “Actually, no. My father is a decidedly unpleasant man. He was worse when he was younger—his rage could just swallow you up.” He puts a hand on the small of my back and guides me through a small crowd lingering near the entry doors. “They’re divorced now, but I guess when she was younger, my mom must have been really into his toxicity.”

“Happens to the best of us,” I say wryly.

“What about you?” he asks, glancing over at me. “Any siblings?”

I shake my head no. “Only child. My parents also divorced, but my father passed when I was a teenager. Mom remarried, they live in Florida now so we don’t see them much.”

He nods. “So, the toxic asshole in your life...”

“Parker’s father. He was a liar, a cheat, and he was gaslighting me long before I knew what gaslighting was. We were on-again-off-again forever, but it’s hard when you have a kid together and can’t really break away. I finally realized Parker and I could never have anything good as long as I let him stick around, so I cut it off.” He nods like he understands, so I ask carefully, “What about your wife? Was your marriage a good one?”

“A great one. Mostly because of her. We married young, so I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. She didn’t either, but she figured it out.” He smiles faintly.

The noise picks up a little once we’re in the heart of the bar. There’s a black bar with a blue glow at the center of the room, and everything else

unfolds around it. There are seats at the bar, but those are mostly full. There are black tables surrounding the bar, and then beyond that, blue velvet booths for anyone desiring a little more privacy.

Hayden guides me to a U-shaped booth with a killer view of the ocean. I'm distracted watching the waves lap at the shore as I slide in and don't realize until I'm practically on his lap, I've scooted too far.

"Oh! I'm sorry." I start to scoot away, but he stops me with a hand on my inner thigh.

My heart sinks, and tension tugs between my legs.

That opens up new horror. I've never felt aroused by a man so quickly before.

Then again, I've never let a man put his hand on my inner thigh like this...

Not that I'm letting him. I want to move it. I know I *should* move it. But there's something hard in his gaze, something commanding that conveys wordlessly that I shouldn't.

My stomach pitches, but I ignore the warning. It's only his hand, after all. I'm being silly.

I swallow and reach for the little black menu standing up on the table. My eyes scan it as if I'm deciding on a drink, but I can't concentrate long enough to read any of the words. I can't focus on anything but the weight of his big, warm hand on my inner thigh.

Why isn't he moving it?

Does he think I'll scoot away if he does?

My chest feels tight as I look around to see if anyone else notices, but of course no one does. No one cares if his hand is on my thigh; they're busy enjoying their own dates.

When his hand does finally move, it's not away like I expect. He gives my thigh a gentle squeeze. It feels so intimate, so familiar. The sort of thing a lover would do, not a first date.

I shouldn't have gone out with him.

This was a mistake.

“I think you need a drink,” he murmurs, plucking the menu from my nervous fingers and scanning it himself, his hand never leaving my thigh. “Do you have any strong preferences or dislikes when it comes to alcohol?”

I shake my head, unable to find my words.

His eyebrows rise. “Really? No preference whatsoever?”

“I don't enjoy whiskey,” I say, since it's somehow all I can think of.

He eyes me skeptically, but doesn't press. When the server comes over, he orders bourbon for himself and the house sangria for me.

I didn't expect him to order for me, but I didn't hate it.

His daring hand inches higher. I'm not sure if it's inadvertent, or deliberate. By the time the server brings our drinks, my whole body feels warm and I'm completely parched. I'm surprised to see a whole pitcher of sangria when he only ordered it for me.

“Can I get a glass of water as well?” I ask.

She nods and says she'll be right back.

“Thirsty?” Hayden asks, his tone lightly amused.

“I like to have two drinks. It's a weird quirk of mine. I always like to have water as an alternative, even if I probably won't drink it.”

He watches my face as if he finds that tidbit fascinating. “Afraid you won't like what you initially picked out?” He grabs his bourbon and takes a slow sip. “Are you indecisive, Miss Cane?”

I can't even decide whether to say yes or no, so I guess I am. It's less about fear of making a claim one way or the other. I can't stop thinking about his hand between my thighs. It's so... so inappropriate.

His pinkie inches higher and my breath hitches. I grab my glass and gulp down more of it than I should have.

“Tell me about your last date,” he says.

I place the glass down, looking at it instead of him. “It wasn't very good.”

“No?”

I shake my head.

“Why not?”

“We didn’t have any chemistry or anything to talk about. He was a doctor who worked all the time, I was a single mom dance instructor. I tried to talk to him about things, but it didn’t seem like he had any real interest in my opinions or interests. I thought the date was horrible, but when we went to leave, he still tried to make out with me and invite me back to his place. I think he just wanted...”

“To fuck you.”

His crude words make my eyes widen. Averting my gaze away from his, I murmur, “Yes.”

“Is that so awful? Don’t you ever go out just for a brief physical connection?”

I shake my head no. “Not really my thing. Generally speaking, I don’t have sexual feelings toward someone until I’ve established an emotional connection. I can’t want a man I don’t already like.”

Or, I had thought that until tonight.

I’m not sure I like him—*not sure I don’t, either*—but I definitely know he isn’t someone I should be sexually attracted to. I could never act on a sexual attraction to Landon Atwater’s father.

Needing to steer my thoughts away from sexy things and back into more appropriate waters, I clear my throat and ask, “Did you have a chance to speak with Landon about how he’s been treating Parker?”

“Not yet. I will. You’re trying to change the subject.”

My eyes widen. “What? No, I...”

His hand slides an inch higher.

My spine stiffens. I know it has to be deliberate, and he’s making me so flushed. It’s indecent to touch someone this way in public. Finally, I reach down and grab his hand, tugging it away from my panties. “I believe your

hand is lost.”

He smirks. “I believe it knows right where it wants to go.”

“I’m not going to sleep with you.”

“Good news. I don’t fuck with my hand. I can think of some other things I could do with it, though.”

So can I, and my cheeks heat even more. “You’re a very bold man.”

“And you’re a woman who keeps her passion locked up in a prison cell. Perhaps you need a man like me to help you break it out.”

I fight the urge to tug my skirt down so it’s not riding up so high, but I don’t want to draw more attention to the area. “Just because I don’t want you groping me while we’re in a public place does not mean I keep my passions locked up. And I certainly *don’t* need a man like you. I’ve done just fine by myself all these years.”

“I wasn’t suggesting we get married,” he says, his hand still on my thigh, just beneath mine now. He grabs his bourbon and takes a sip. “I would like to peel back those defenses and pound past your barriers, though. I want to see what you look like in a moment of unrestrained passion, to taste your whimpers on my lips. I think you should reconsider your position.”

Mercifully, the server brings over my water. I try to take advantage of her presence at the table to scoot away from him, but when I try, he locks his hand around my thigh again.

“Stop,” he says casually.

Eyes wide, I turn my head to stare at him. “Get your hand off my thigh.”

He glances down at his watch. “Eleven minutes.”

“Excuse me?”

He releases my thigh and looks over at me. “You’ve been uncomfortable from the moment I put my hand on your leg, but it took you eleven minutes to tell me point-blank to move it.”

“It’ll take me two more to call a cab and go wait for it alone if you keep critiquing my behavior.”

Hayden grins. “I like you. I’m not trying to be an asshole, I’m trying to help.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“Actually, you do. Remember when you burst into my office asking for it? You’re uncomfortable making other people uncomfortable, so you’ll sit in your discomfort to spare them, even if you don’t know or particularly like them. Don’t do that. If someone isn’t considerate of your comfort, don’t be considerate of theirs. Next time your neighbor approaches, tell him immediately to go away. Tell him he’s not welcome on your property and if he doesn’t leave, you’ll call the police. If he ignores your direct warning and puts his hands on you, knee him as hard as you can right between the legs. Then follow through—call the police. There’s no guarantee your efforts will be enough to protect you, but I *can* guarantee that inaction will embolden him to take things even farther. This neighbor of yours isn’t a good guy. Everything else aside, a good guy would never make insinuations about your teenage daughter. You need to make your boundaries with him very clear, and the moment he crosses them, you do something about it.”

Just the thought of it makes me nervous. “I’ve never been great at confrontation.”

“We all have different strengths,” he says. “I understand this is harder for you, but that’s why he’s targeting you. He caught onto that, too. He’s not the type to pick on someone his own size, he picks on someone smaller so he knows he’ll win. He’s a wimp. I’ve never met the man and he disgusts me, but some people are like that, and they have to be put in their place.”

“I think part of the problem is I’m pretty tolerant, so maybe my boundaries aren’t where everyone else’s are. My boundary wasn’t crossed when he first started being a jerk, but he just kept coming until he *did* cross my boundary and then it was too late, he was too confident he could walk all over me.”

Hayden nods. “He’s an asshole. We’ll deal with it and get rid of him.

Don't worry too much about it. Just giving you some tips."

I nod, tucking my hair behind my ears, but I'm not sure he's right. Yeah, he addressed the issue tonight with Lisa and I'm sure she will have something to say about it when Brent gets home, but that doesn't mean my problem is solved. Even if Brent is exactly the kind of worm Hayden thinks he is, right now the threat of Hayden is all that protects me.

We're neighbors. Brent will realize pretty quickly that Hayden isn't coming around anymore, and it would only take a sweeping gaze to see that no additional cameras have been installed.

Hayden's bluff may have bought me a reprieve, but where will I be when he disappears from my life again?

Right back where I was when I stormed into his office, but having also provoked Brent by telling his wife.

CHAPTER 6

HAYDEN

THE PITCHER of sangria was definitely the right call.

I knew Gemma needed to loosen up. First dates make a lot of people uncomfortable, and she's probably one of them. Most people worry about putting their best foot forward and impressing whomever they're out with.

Me, I've never worried about it. Like me as I am, or fuck off and I'll find someone who does. But Gemma and I are nothing alike, as far as I can tell. Complete and utter opposites in every imaginable way.

I want to know if that difference extends to the bedroom.

As she has consumed more sangria, she has warmed right up. She sways to the music as if she doesn't have a passing thought to give to what anyone else thinks. She smiles easily and often, so I know she's having a good time. As the pitcher empties, she begins to lean on me more, her lowered inhibitions making room for her desires—and the attraction to me she won't stop fighting.

I place my hand on her thigh again, but this time she doesn't stiffen or tell me to move it. She leans her head on her my shoulder and lets her eyes drift closed. "I'm sleepy."

Absently, I kiss her temple as I slide my hand up her thigh.

She sighs softly.

"Do you want to go?" I ask.

“No,” she murmurs, but she probably thinks I mean end the date.

I don’t.

There’s only one way this date is ending—with me inside her. I’ve already rented us a room, but I didn’t tell her earlier because I knew she would panic.

Right now she’s far from panicked. She’s relaxed and languid. When my hand slips beneath her skirt, she spreads her legs just a bit to make more room for me.

I feel the breath rush out of her as I drag my fingertips across her pussy. I wish she hadn’t worn panties, but I knew she would be. No one has brought Gemma in touch with her naughty side yet. A damned shame, too.

I brush my lips across her temple. “You like that?”

“Mm-hmm,” she murmurs, her eyes still closed.

“If we were alone, I’d push you back in this booth and climb between these lovely legs of yours.” I press a little harder, pushing the tip of my finger into her even through the panties. “I’d spread you open and devour your pussy until you couldn’t control yourself anymore. Bucking, writhing, sinking your fingers into my hair and pulling as I drive you closer and closer to the brink.”

“Oh my,” she whispers.

It’s so fucking cute how surprised she is. It’s like no one has ever uttered a few dirty words in her ear before.

What kind of fucking idiots has she been dating?

It’s the right moment, so I kiss her temple again and tell her, “I got us a room.”

“I can’t stay the night with you,” she says, but this time it sounds more like a regret than something she’s resolved to.

“We don’t have to stay the whole night. We don’t *have* to do anything. I just figured we could go there and have a little more privacy.” I can feel she still isn’t convinced, but she wants to go, so I lean closer and tease, “You

wouldn't leave me without a goodnight kiss, would you?"

She sighs, but this time not with pleasure. "You make it so hard to resist you."

"Do I?" I murmur with feigned innocence.

She opens her eyes and shoots me a look. "You know you do."

I smile. "Why don't you finish what's left in your glass and we'll get out of here?"

With some effort, she lifts herself off me and grabs her sangria. "This is a bad idea," she murmurs as she drains the rest of her glass, then takes a couple sips of her mostly untouched water.

I have to disagree. This is the best idea I've had in a while.

Once our drinks are finished and I've paid the bill, Gemma and I follow the path to the hotel lobby. When we get inside, she gasps and looks around, admiring my brother's lavish hotel. I'm far less impressed and far more interested in showing her the room—and not for the décor.

I reserved a king bed with a view just in case we did end up staying until morning. I seldom bring women home, but Gemma seems like the type of woman who very much expects to spend all night with you after a fuck, and I have no problem spending the night with her.

My only concern is her daughter.

Landon knows not to worry if I don't come home when I go out, but I'm not sure her daughter does. I grabbed Gemma's phone number when I was doing my homework prior to the date, but I didn't think to look up her daughter's, and I don't know Gemma's phone code, so I won't be able to open it once she falls asleep.

If I tell her beforehand to text her daughter, I run the risk of her getting cold feet and leaving. She's all but admitted to being a bit wary of making decisions, so maybe it's best to take it out of her hands and make the call for her.

We'll both have a good time, she just needs to get out of her own way.

The room is dark when I scan the key and open the door. We have an ocean view with a little balcony where we can have breakfast in the morning if she stays. I bet she'll like that.

Gemma's holding my hand again. I can't remember the last time I held hands with a woman, but she has held my hand several times tonight, and I kind of like it. It's a trusting gesture of affection.

The thought whispers across my mind that I might be taking advantage of that trust right now. She made it pretty clear she didn't want to sleep with me tonight, but I think I can change her mind. I don't even think I *need* to change her mind. I know she's attracted to me, even wants me, she just thinks she has her reasons not to do it.

I disagree. I don't care about some tiff between our kids. That's a ridiculous reason not to explore our obvious attraction to one another.

As soon as the door closes behind us, I let her get ahead of me. She dangles her purse and walks a bit unsteadily into the room, admiring the simple décor.

"I would've gone for a bigger room for an extended stay, but I figured we only really needed a bed tonight."

She giggles and turns around to look at me with that lazy smile on her lovely face. "That sounds so naughty."

I come up behind her, encircling her waist and taking her purse so I can set it aside on the wet bar. "Would you like a drink?"

"I think I've had more than enough to drink," she assures me, leaning back into my embrace.

I pull her hair aside so I can bend to kiss her neck. As I do, I peel off her sparkly blazer and toss it aside, too.

"You're undressing me," she murmurs.

"Very astute." I kiss her earlobe and she shivers. Leaning back a bit, I kiss the ball of her shoulder, then work loose the button on the back of her blouse.

“You shouldn’t take off my top.”

“Why not?” I ask easily. “I’ve seen more than this already when you stormed into my office.”

She laughs at herself. “In my stupid belly dancing clothes.”

I smirk. “They weren’t stupid at all.” I tug the blouse down off her arms, then push it down past her slim hips. I kneel to pull them the rest of the way, then unzip her skirt and pull that down, too.

“Wait a minute,” she murmurs, realizing she’s down to her bra and panties.

Rather than wait, I lean in and kiss her hip bone. She sucks in a breath. I kiss my way along her toned lower abdomen and don’t stop when I get to her panties. Her sighs are bigger and heavier as I kiss my way from the top of her pantyline lower until I’m kissing her pussy through the fabric. I kiss the insides of her thighs, then return to her pussy, covering her with my mouth.

“Oh, Hayden,” she murmurs tremulously, her fingers sliding through my hair.

“Get on the bed,” I tell her, freeing my hair from her hands and rising.

She walks backward, but hesitates before getting on the mattress, so I give her a little shove.

She’s too drunk for good reflexes, so she falls back against the soft bed with a little giggle.

I’m wearing too many layers of clothing, so I start stripping them off. Once I’m down to my boxer briefs, I join her on the bed, climbing on top of her and looking down at her.

Her big brown eyes are so open, so fond, I can’t resist kissing her.

I scarcely taste her lips at first, just a quick brush. Her lips are so soft beneath mine, I want more, so I crush her with my weight, catching her moan in my mouth and tangling my fingers in her soft hair. Her instinct is still to shut me out, but I force my way past her lips and she gives immediately, making room for me and kissing me back as her hands come to rest on my

back.

I want her tits free, so while I'm kissing her senseless, I shift her body beneath mine and reach back to unclasp her bra. The material gives and I peel it away, tossing it on the floor behind us.

I don't stop kissing her, so she doesn't have a chance to object. My palm covers the soft globe and she exhales sharply, but I catch it on my lips and make her go right back to kissing me without giving her a chance to breathe.

I love the way she follows my lead even though some part of her knows I'm taking her somewhere she swore she wouldn't go.

That reality seems to pierce the fog of lust and she tries to pull back, but I have her trapped beneath my weight. Between kisses, she murmurs, "Hayden," but I tug her head back by the hair and slant my mouth over hers more aggressively.

She resists a little, but she doesn't fight. Her body wants the same thing I want, it's her mind that isn't entirely on board.

My cock hardens to steel as she moves her little dancer's body beneath me. Her hands come up and push against my chest as mine skims her side before I grab her other tit.

Some part of me recognizes that I'm not giving her a chance to object. I know she's slow to ask, that in all likelihood she'll let me go further than she's comfortable going before she finally tells me she wants me to stop, but fuck, I don't want her to do that.

I push her thighs farther apart and butt my cock against her pussy, wishing I had stripped off her panties before I got on top of her. I wasn't prepared for how quickly lust would drag me under. I can't remember the last time I wanted a woman with this intensity—to be willing to bend her will and shake the world beneath her feet if it means what I want will fall into my hands as a result.

Actually, I can, and the last time I wanted something that much, I couldn't have it.

I would have traded away all the rest of my days for one more night with Sally, but once she was gone, there was no amount of bargaining with the gods that could get me what I wanted. Not ever again.

The memory fuels my need to hold tight to Gemma in this moment. It's been so long since I've wanted something like this, but she's not one more night with my dead wife. I *can* have her—and I will.

I break away from Gemma's lips to kiss her collarbone—short, greedy little kisses. I move lower and kiss her breasts, then lower still. I move down her stomach, leaving kisses along the way. Then, finally, I hook my fingers in the waistband of her black panties and pull them down.

“Wait,” she says, reaching for them to keep her safety barrier in place.

“I want to taste you,” I tell her, pushing her hand away and dragging her panties off.

I toss the panties and bend down, fighting the instinct to latch onto her pussy right away. She's too skittish, I have to ease her in.

I kiss her inner thigh like I did when she was standing, but this time I bite them, too. She gasps and shudders as I'm gentle, then rough, and when I can't take it anymore, I push my tongue into her, groaning at the taste of her arousal on my tongue.

She cries out as my tongue brushes her clit. I could take my time tasting her, but my cock is aching, and I want to get inside her. I don't waste time exploring this time. I zero right in on her clit and fuck that sensitive little nub with my tongue until her thighs are trembling, broken cries emanating from her lovely throat.

Her nails dig into the bedding. She pants and bucks and begs. “Hayden.”

Fuck, that's hot.

I eat her with abandon, her desperate cries sinking hooks into me and making me crave her even more.

When she comes, she cries out and tries to twist away from me, but I don't fucking think so. I let go of her long enough for her to roll over on her

tummy, but only so I can shuck the last of my clothing and roll a condom on my dick.

I come up behind her, forcing her thighs apart and making room for myself between them. She's still tummy down on the bed, but I don't ask her to get up on her knees because there's a chance she'll say no.

I don't typically fuck in this position. It feels predatory, like something I'm doing *to* her before she can stop me instead of something I'm doing *with* her. Without warning, I push my cock into her sensitive pussy and drive deep.

She cries out as I fill her, bracing her hands against the mattress. She's fucking tight even though she just came, and it takes some effort to bury myself all the way to the hilt.

"Hayden."

Fuck, she feels so good.

I'm terrified she's going to stop me. So terrified I cover her mouth as I push into her again. I can't even think straight, she feels so fucking good. I hear little muffled cries against my palm as I fuck her, but I'm too consumed with the heaven of her body to pay them much heed.

I can't kiss her the way I want to since she's face down on the bed, but with my hand over her mouth, it's easy to pull her back like a bow and kiss the side of her face before lowering her and driving into her again.

I'm so lost to the pleasure of possessing her, I can't be entirely sure she's enjoying herself as much as I am until her cries against my palm grow more desperate and broken, and I feel her pussy choking the life out of my cock.

Fuck.

She's coming, and it throws me over the edge. I shove deep and join her, cursing and groaning as I thrust through the intensity of my own orgasm.

The high lasts longer than it usually does, but when it finally stops, I let go of her mouth and collapse against her on the bed. I press my lips to her bare shoulder blade. I want to kiss her everywhere, but I'm too fucking spent

to move.

Gemma lies beneath me quietly, pinned beneath my weight, trapped tummy down on the mattress. Awareness that I'm probably crushing her washes over me, so I move off her body with some effort.

I don't want to let her go, but when I reach out to pull her into my arms, she moves away and sits up.

I'm blissed out and inordinately pleased, but she looks sober as she scoots toward the edge of the bed.

I figure she may want to go to the bathroom to clean up, so I don't think much of it until she starts gathering up her clothes.

What is she doing?

I don't want her to get dressed already. I want to hold her for a while, maybe explore her naked body more thoroughly once I've fully recovered. I've never felt like I needed to take a woman in stages before, but it still feels like I'm barely acquainted with her body, and I want to know every inch.

"Come back to bed," I tell her.

She shakes her head, bending down and stepping into her panties. "It's late. I need to get home."

I don't like that.

Don't like the tone of her voice, either.

Sitting up, I look her over, and the doubt that clouded my thoughts before my cock took over resurfaces. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine," she says quietly, pulling on her skirt and zipping it up.

"Are you sure?"

If she's not, I'll fix it. The problem is, I'm not sure she'll tell me.

"That wasn't supposed to happen," she says, pushing her arms through the holes and clasping her bra behind her back. "I told you I didn't want to..." She trails off, shaking her head as if she doesn't want to think about it anymore, then she grabs her blouse and pulls it over her head. "It doesn't matter."

I frown, watching as she pulls on her blazer and grabs her purse. “Gemma, don’t leave.”

She pulls her hair out of the back of the blazer and turns toward the door.

I get off the bed because I’m not about to let her walk out that door until we’ve resolved this.

“I have to get home. Parker will wonder why—”

I catch her around the waist, turning her around and putting my body in front of her so I can force her backward toward the bed.

She avoids my gaze and retreats on instinct.

I may have been giving her tips on curbing those prey-like instincts with her shitty neighbor, but to be honest, I don’t want her to learn to fight them with me. I *like* her instincts. I enjoy the way she retreats and makes me chase her. I’m not used to it at all, but it’s intriguing.

There’s even part of me that’s drawn to the vulnerable look in her big brown eyes as she looks up at me once I have her cornered, when I’m bending her to my will and she looks like she damn well knows it.

It’s like there’s something in her DNA that stirs the predatory instincts of those around her, while at the same time instilling in them a desire to protect her.

Whatever instinct she triggers, it screams: she’s *mine* to play with, no one else’s.

No one has ever awoken this side of me before. I’m an asshole when I need to be, sure, but I wasn’t bullshitting her when I told her I’ve never been attracted to easy targets. It’s mean to refer to her that way, and I don’t mean any insult at all, there’s just something about her. Maybe it’s her big doe eyes that trigger the primal hunter buried deep inside me.

She softens when confronted with a predator, too. Makes the dance and the act of capturing her even more satisfying.

I think she’s right about her boundaries. From what she told me, she was probably giving her neighbor the energy she’s giving me right now when he

cornered her, and I can definitely see why he liked it. I bet his wife would never let him get away with stalking her and cornering her. Most women wouldn't. But then he stepped over Gemma's generous boundary and mentioned her daughter, so she snapped out of it and told him to fuck off.

Gemma's boundaries not being where everyone else's are makes her very interesting to me. Ordinary people are all more or less the same, there are no surprises. But with Gemma, it's like being handed a map I've never seen before. I want to explore every inch, see where I'm allowed to go and where I'm not.

I'm fairly certain I just made her have sex with me, but when I pull her close and move her arm around my waist to make sure she'll let me hold her, she does. She even holds me back.

If her boundaries are this generous, there's little chance I'll ever step over them. I take what I want, but I'm not a fucking pervert. I would never threaten harm to her or her loved ones.

But I'm damn sure not going to be resisted.

I know she wants the same thing, she's just afraid to take it for herself, so I'll have to step in and see that she gets what she needs.

I lean down to brush my lips against hers. She's so fucking soft, I sink my fingers into her hair and cradle her head as I kiss her.

She tastes fucking incredible.

I need more of her, so much more.

I thought one night might be enough to cure me of my interest in the intriguing little belly dancer, but I was very wrong. I've tasted her *and* fucked her, and I feel like I haven't even had a sample. If anything, my appetite for her now feels more enormous than it was before I had her.

Seeming to catch on that she's not leaving unless I let her, she kisses me back, then, her tone more cajoling and less reserved, she says, "I really have to go home."

She's telling me, but asking at the same time.

She needs me to let her go for the moment, but it doesn't mean she won't come back.

It doesn't feel so final this time.

Of course, she could just be playing nice to get out of my snare with no intent of ever returning, but that's not going to work for me.

Caressing her jaw, I smile faintly and ask, "You know what I thought the first time I saw you?"

"Who is this lunatic and where are her clothes?"

I smirk. "No."

She smiles, seeming more open again. "What did you think?"

"I thought you were there to grant me a wish."

"A wish?" she questions, laughing.

I nod. "But you know what? I'm going to grant yours instead." It's not selfless, really. Now that I've stalked and pounced on her myself, I don't want her sleazy neighbor coming anywhere near my territory. "I'll solve your Hartley problem. You don't have to file a restraining order or worry about a bill. I don't want you to do anything else. I'll handle it."

"Was this my payment?" she asks in a tone intended to be light, but I can tell expresses real concern as she avoids my gaze.

I tip her chin up, not letting her get away with the avoidance. "No," I say clearly. "This was a date, and I want another one soon."

Carefully extracting herself from my embrace, she says, "I already told you this can't go anywhere."

"I don't agree." Her mouth opens, but I hold up a hand to stop her. "I'll handle my son."

She isn't willing to agree, but she doesn't want to argue with me about it either, so plays her avoidance game and tells me she needs to get going.

I'll let her go for the moment, but I make her wait while I get myself ready so I can take her home myself.

When we pull into her driveway, I start to open my car door so I can walk

her inside, but she asks me not to.

I know she doesn't want to make noise and wake her daughter, but I suspect she also doesn't want her daughter to know she was out with me.

I relent, allowing her to escape my company, but not before I tell her, "I'll see you again soon."

She smiles, but doesn't agree. "Thank you for a nice night, Hayden."

Then she closes the car door, walks to her front door, and disappears inside the house without so much as a backward glance.

CHAPTER 7

GEMMA

MY ALARM CLOCK GOES OFF, alerting me that I need to get up and prepare for my day.

Instead, I turn it off and roll over, wrapping my arms around my pillow and hugging it snugly against me. I roll onto it a little more so I'm on my tummy, and memories of last night resurface.

Hayden's rough hands parting my thighs.

His thick cock shoving into me.

When he pushed all the way in, I felt fuller than I ever had before. I didn't get a chance to *see* his cock, but I knew it had to be huge when I felt all of him shoved inside me.

And then the way he grabbed me and covered my mouth with his hand, invading my body whether I wanted him to or not.

His skin smelled so good.

He smelled manly and capable as he drove me closer and closer to a second orgasm.

A second orgasm.

With the men that came before him, I was pretty lucky if I got one.

Our encounter definitely wasn't how I imagined it when he was touching me in the booth at the bar, but it was surprisingly hot. It felt primal, like a claiming. I've never had a man handle me that way, and I felt possessed in a

way I'd never experienced before.

I don't know how I feel about having an experience like that with someone I barely know, though. Someone I have no plans to see again.

I guess now I can officially say I've had a one night stand.

The doorbell rings, finally forcing me out of bed. I grab a robe and slip it on, then I grab my phone off its charger and hurry downstairs.

When I open the door, a man is standing there in denim jeans and a T-shirt, a yellow ball cap on his head.

"How are you doing today?" he asks politely.

"Good." I pull my robe tighter and offer a tiny smile. "Can I help you with something?"

He holds up a clipboard and offers me a pen. "I just need you to open your garage door and sign this work order so we can go ahead and get started."

I frown. "Work order? I'm afraid you're at the wrong house, I don't have any work to be done."

The man frowns and looks down at the clipboard. "Says here Hayden Atwater requested service—is that your husband?"

The surprise melts out of me, and I shake my head. "No, it isn't, but I know who that is. What exactly did he say I was having done?"

"Security camera installation. It's already paid for. Won't take long, we'll be out of your hair in no time."

I shake my head. "Can you excuse me for just one moment? I need to call Mr. Atwater."

The man is confused, but not knowing what else to do, he nods his head and turns back to talk to his crew.

Sighing, I call Hayden's office and tell his secretary I need to speak with him about an urgent matter. A moment later, Hayden picks up the phone.

"What are you doing?" I demand without so much as a hello.

"Good morning to you, too," he answers.

“Good morning,” I mutter, unable to ignore my manners entirely. “Now, would you like to explain to me what you think you’re doing?”

“I think I’m working. Boring stuff, really. Not worth talking about. What about you? How’s your day so far?”

“There are men in my driveway wanting to install security cameras they say *you* ordered.”

“Correct. It occurred to me that with the neighbor issues you’ve been having, cameras would be a good idea for real, so I ordered some to be installed right away.”

“You can’t just order cameras to be installed in my home without my permission, Hayden. This is *my* house, not yours.”

“So I should have the one in your bedroom taken out?”

My jaw falls open. “*What?*”

He laughs. “I’m kidding. When would I have had a camera installed? Besides, only a crazy person would do that and then tell you about it.” I hear a noise, like he’s covering the phone to say hello to someone else—probably the client he’s meeting with. Then he comes back to the phone, “I have to go now, but everything should be taken care of. I’m paying for the cameras and the installation, all you have to do is sign the paper because it is your property.”

“That’s...” I sigh. “Actually, that’s really nice of you, but also very inappropriate.”

“I’m going to make you an ‘inappropriate jar.’ You know how most people have swear jars? Every time you say that word, you have to drop a quarter in. We’ll be paying for vacations in no time. If you need anything else, just text me, all right? Easier to sneak in a response between tasks.”

“I don’t have your cell phone number.”

“I’ll text you.”

Does he have *my* cell phone number?

I hate that he’s rushing me off the phone. I have more questions about this

camera installation business. He really should have asked if it was something I even wanted, but he should have *at least* told me before springing an installation appointment on me.

I go back outside to ask the installation guy how all this works and sign his paper. By the time I get back inside, Parker is downstairs, frowning as she peeks out the window.

“What’s going on out there?”

Crap. I don’t know whether to pile more little white lies on top of the existing ones, or if I should just tell her.

Then again, this whole Hayden thing is only temporary. As soon as he solves my neighbor problem, he’ll be out of our lives for good.

I don’t want to upset her for no reason, and she’ll never know if I don’t tell her. The only *possible* way for her to find out would be if Landon said something to her about it, but in order for that to happen, Hayden would have to mention it to him.

That seems unlikely. From what I’ve seen so far, I don’t think they share as much as Parker and I do.

“I’m having a few cameras installed,” I tell her casually, bending the truth to its breaking point.

Her frown deepens. “Why?”

“Just for extra security. I’m tired of the juvenile pranks eating up so much of my time, and this should put a stop to them. Next time someone does anything to our property, there will be video evidence, so I’ll be able to take immediate action.”

“That’s a good idea,” Parker says with a nod, walking around the island to grab a cereal bowl out of the cupboard. “We should have thought of that sooner.”

I did, I just couldn’t afford good cameras and professional installation, and I didn’t trust myself to install the cheap ones.

While Parker fixes herself a bowl of cereal, I grab some fresh pineapple

out of the refrigerator.

My phone vibrates on the table. I glance over at it, but do a double take when I see a phone number I don't have saved and a text that says, "What color genie outfit are you wearing today?"

I grab the phone quickly, but tell myself not to act suspicious. Parker isn't paying attention, anyway; she's texting on her phone.

I probably shouldn't answer. There's no reason to engage with him beyond what's necessary.

I do, anyway.

"Blue," I answer.

"My favorite color," he replies back. "You should send me a picture."

Obviously, I don't do that, but I do save his contact information in case I need to contact him again about his intrusion in my life, or even my annoying neighbor.

It's recital night—one of them, anyway. Technically, there are recitals tonight and tomorrow, but tonight's show runs longer, and it's the one with all my classes.

Parker comes to help me keep my outfits straight. Mothers help their kids change, but I still need to change my own costumes as quickly as possible so I can get to the students and parents and help resolve any problems they might have.

"Are you sure you don't want to watch from the audience?" I ask Parker as she moves around me, smoothing down the gold sequins and looking over my tap dancing outfit.

“No, I’m fine watching on the sidelines,” she assures me, checking my black tights for runs. “Perfect,” she says, pulling out her cell phone. “Now, let me get a picture before you go dance and mess up all my hard work.”

I grin at her and strike a pose. This outfit is one of my favorites: a top hat, a gold sequined tuxedo top with a bow-tie, and black short shorts with black tights underneath. I have a cane, and so do all of the adorable little kids in my 7-9 tap class.

I gather up my kids once Parker gets her picture, then we all head out on stage and take our places.

The night goes smoothly, all things considered. One of my creative movement kids gets turned around and another picks her nose on stage. The audience laughs, of course, because she’s five.

The night goes by in a blur of counting little heads and quick costume changes. Finally, toward the end of the night, I get to perform with my older kids 12 to 14, and then my belly dancing class is the last of my classes. There’s one teacher after me with a group of high school seniors doing ballet, but I’m completely beat by the time they dance.

The show closes and all the dancers and instructors head backstage. Thankfully, my amazing daughter has already packed up all of my discarded costumes. I don’t bother changing out of the belly dancing one since we’re heading straight home, and now that the show is over I have to visit my students to tell them how great they were.

I get a carnation wrapped in tinfoil from a blond-haired little boy, the only boy in my creative movement class.

“Aww, that’s so sweet of you, Jamie. Thank you,” I say, giving him a hug. “You did such a great job tonight, you were even better than me!”

He’s shy, but he blushes and smiles, then returns to his mom’s side. She thanks me for all my work with him over the summer, and then they leave.

Slowly, every last student trickles out, so I head back to my dressing room where Parker waits with the suitcase full of my costumes.

“Do you know who the best daughter in town is?”

“Just in town?” she jokes. “I did all this without pay.”

“Fine, your greatness extends beyond our locality. You are officially the best daughter in the world. Maybe the *universe*.”

She cracks a smile and wheels the luggage toward the door. “I have your makeup bag. Make sure I didn’t forget anything. I’ll take this stuff out to the car.”

“I owe you an abundance of Twizzlers,” I call as she heads out the door.

“And I’m picking all the movies we watch tonight,” she calls back.

I smile, turning around to double check that I’m not leaving anything behind. Once I’m satisfied that I’m not, I turn off the lights so I can leave.

The lobby is still bustling with dancers talking to their guests, most with an armful of flowers. I’m so distracted watching them as I make my way toward the exit doors, I walk right into someone.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I say, backing up as my gaze snaps to the person I ran into.

My tummy tumbles when I look up into the handsome face of Hayden Atwater. I take in his sultry smile and the glint of mischief in his eyes, the handsome blue suit stretched over his impressive physique. In his arms rests a gorgeous bouquet of blue and purple orchids.

He holds them out to me.

Flowers for me?

“What are you doing here?” I ask cautiously, not reaching for the bouquet.

“You never sent me that picture, so I had to come see your blue costume for myself.” He smirks, nodding at the single white carnation in my hand. “I figured every dancer deserves flowers after their performance, but I see someone beat me to it.”

I nod, bringing the carnation to my nose and inhaling the lovely scent. “Yep. He was rather dashing, too.”

“Clearly a believer in the ‘less is more’ mentality. I especially like the tinfoil vase.”

“He’s very adept at arts and crafts.” I look over the beautiful bouquet he brought me. “Yours are lovely, too. Even without the foil.”

“Well, if they can impress without tinfoil, I must have made the right choice.”

I smile, taking the bouquet in my left arm and lifting them so I can smell them. “I love orchids.” I bring my gaze back to his. “Thank you. That was very thoughtful. Did you just come to do a costume check and deliver flowers, or did you watch the performance?”

He draws a ticket out of his breast pocket. “Paid my \$15 and everything. I very much enjoyed all of your costumes. Who do I have to contact about arranging a private show?”

I shake my head and look down at my flowers, memories of last night creeping up on me. “No private shows for you. You shouldn’t even be here. I don’t know what this has to do with handling my neighbor problem.”

“Well, obviously, if Brent sees you coming home without flowers, he’ll make certain assumptions about the kind of boyfriend I am.”

I smile because he’s so full of shit. “Of course. Wouldn’t want Brent to form a bad opinion of your boyfriend abilities.”

He nods, his gaze moving slowly over my body before returning to my face. More seriously, he says, “You danced your ass off tonight. You must be hungry. Let me take you out to dinner.”

“I am hungry, but I can’t go to dinner with you. My daughter’s waiting in the car.”

“She can’t drive herself home?”

“She’s also hungry,” I state.

“Then bring her, too.”

That surprises me so much, the smile falls off my face. There have been a lot of times dating as a single mom when I *wished* a man would say

something like that.

Some part of me even thinks Parker might like Hayden, but since she doesn't know he's the one I was out with last night, I can't just spring something like that on her. She might not be comfortable saying no, but also not be comfortable hanging out with her mortal enemy's father.

I don't want to put her in an awkward position, and I'm not prepared to clue her in that I've spent time with him outside of his office.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

I shoot him a look. "You know why not."

"I won't invite Landon."

"And how do you think he'll respond if he finds out you took us out to dinner without him? Honestly, Hayden. He makes her life hard enough."

"I told you, I'll talk to him about that. There's no reason to think he would find out about my taking you two out to dinner. It could be beneficial, hearing her side of the story. It will give me a better idea of what I need to bring up when I do talk to him about it."

I shake my head, but I'm more tempted by the idea than he can imagine.

Too tempted.

"We aren't dating," I state, partially to remind him, but mostly to remind myself. It would be easy to get confused with the sex and the flowers, his pushy insistence on taking care of me and my problems when he doesn't have to. "I don't introduce my daughter to men I'm not dating. I hardly introduce her to men I *am* dating. Her stability is the highest priority for me, and I don't see the point in sharing information that might upset her when this isn't going anywhere."

My reasonable statement seems to irritate him. "There you go saying that again."

"It's true. We both know it's true. Now, thank you for the flowers, they're lovely. I'm glad you enjoyed the show, and I appreciate the cameras, but I

really have to go.”

I try to brush past him, but Hayden grabs my arm, halting my departure.

I look up at him, wordlessly requesting release.

He looks back, wordlessly denying it. “Tomorrow, then.”

His hard tone brooks no arguments, but I give him one, anyway.

“No.”

His eyes narrow. “I told you I want to see you again.”

I tug at my arm, but he doesn’t let go. “And I told you I’m not interested in dating.”

“We aren’t dating, we’re just spending time together. Preferably without clothes on, but I’m flexible.”

“Hayden...” I tug my arm again.

His grip tightens. “I’m not releasing you until you agree to see me again.”

“We are in public,” I remind him.

“I don’t care.”

He may not, but I do.

I cast a subtle glance at the people around us, hoping no one notices this brute holding my arm prisoner until I relent and give him his way.

The biggest problem is, there’s a part of me that *wants* to relent.

His hand locked around my arm reminds me of last night, the way his hands felt on my body. I can’t even remember how long it’s been since a man touched me, and never one like this.

Maybe one more “date” wouldn’t be the end of the world.

“If I meet you tomorrow, we need to agree it’s the last time.”

“If you agree to meet me tomorrow, I’ll release your arm and let you leave. That’s all the ground I’m willing to cede at the moment.”

“Why?”

His eyes seem to darken. “Because I’m not finished with you yet.”

The truth is simple, but hard to hear at the same time. I swallow, my stomach knotting up at the ominous way it sounds.

I won't say I'm not finished with *him*, because I would've been done with him already, if I had my way.

I'm not completely averse to the idea of him fucking me again, though. Especially when he holds my arm like this, when he gazes at me with that hungry look in his eyes.

"One more night. That's all I'll agree to."

His grip on my arm loosens and I tug it free.

He didn't grip my arm hard enough to hurt me, but I still rub it, feeling the absence of his touch immediately.

"Tomorrow," he says immovably. "I'm off, and so are you."

I don't know how he knows that. I didn't tell him. "Fine. What time?"

"I'll pick you up at two o'clock."

My eyes widen in surprise. "That's early."

"If you want me to be sick of you by the end of the night, we'll have to start early. It's the only way there's even a chance."

I can't help smiling. "I'm not that interesting, I promise."

"You are to me."

His words are so raw, so honest, they rip the breath from my lungs. I feel unsteady on my feet, having him brazenly say a thing like that to me.

I think it's because I know he's not dropping some bullshit line like most guys would be. He truly means it.

A lump forms in my throat, but I try to swallow it down.

I think I could like him, but he's the last man in the world I'm allowed to like.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then," I say softly.

He nods his head once, his gaze never leaving mine. "I look forward to it."

His sincerity tugs on my heart strings. It's the thing I've desired most, but never been able to find in a man.

It's just my luck that the first time I stumble across a man who might be

everything I've always been looking for, and he might as well be locked up tight in Pandora's box.

CHAPTER 8

HAYDEN

WHEN I PULL into Gemma's driveway this afternoon, the garage door is open and Parker is out of the house as I instructed when I texted her this morning.

I'm not opposed to meeting her daughter, but Gemma clearly is, and the first part of our date has to take place at her house. It's strategic. Where possible, I like to kill as many birds with a single stone as I can, and I need to feed Gemma *and* let her neighbors know I'm around and not one to fuck with, so I swung by my brother's house first.

"Come on, boy." I leave my things in the car and call Hades out of my backseat.

I must fucking like her. Letting this massive dog shed all over my fucking car. It's an atrocity.

Hades leaps out gracefully, standing proud and looking around at his new surroundings.

I hear the inner garage door open and Gemma steps out of the house wearing a white tank top with blue and white striped shorts. They look nautical and hot as hell on her pretty little ass. Just the sight of her smile makes me forget all about any damage the damned dog might have done to my nice leather interior.

Her bright smile drops, her expression growing alarmed as she sees the

beast I brought with me. “Um... what is that?”

I smile faintly. “That’s a dog. His name is Hades.”

“Perfect name. He certainly looks like the devil’s dog.” Her wary gaze returns to me. “Why is your scary dog at my house?”

“Not my dog. Don’t have time for one. I borrowed one of my brother’s dogs. He has three—Zeus, Hades, and Hera. They’re the ones on the sign at his bar. This one looks the scariest, so he’s the one I brought.”

Wide-eyed, she says, “This dog looks like a bear and a monster had a baby and he’s the result.”

That’s a very apt description for Hades. He’s a black pit bull with blue eyes so light, they’re nearly colorless.

“He’s very well-trained,” I assure her since I can see he makes her uncomfortable. “You don’t have to be afraid of him. In fact, it’s better if you’re not. He can smell fear, and it makes him wary.”

Her gaze flits to mine. “Is there a reason you brought your brother’s scary-looking dog to my house?”

“There is.” I glance toward her neighbor’s house, but no one is outside at the moment. “If your neighbors see this big boy hanging out in your yard, do you think they’ll sneak into it to smear cheese on the side of your house?”

She glances at Hades. He looks back at her with an intelligent, intense gaze. “No, I do not,” she says, seeing my point. “Is he friendly?”

I nod. “You can pet him. Let him sniff your hand first.”

She walks over slowly, then smiles and extends her hand toward him. “Hello, Hades. I’m Gemma.”

He sniffs her hand, then licks it to let her know they’re good.

I feel the tension start to melt out of her, and he probably does, too.

“You must be thirsty,” she says, lightly petting his back. “I’ll go get him a bowl of water.”

While she runs back inside to get Hades a drink, I grab the blanket and insulated tote I brought with me. I walk Hades over to the yard and command

him to lie down and stay put. He watches curiously as I unfold the blanket on the lawn, then start to unpack cured meats, fruit, and different cheeses.

Gemma comes back out with a mixing bowl full of water for Hades. She puts it down beside him, then grins over at me. "A picnic? I love picnics."

"I am not surprised to hear this," I say, grabbing the chilled champagne out of the side that's packed with ice.

Gemma grins as she sits down on the side of the blanket nearest Hades. I packed extra cheese since I knew we would have him. I grab a cube and hand it to Gemma. "It's his favorite treat. Let's get you some brownie points."

She puts the cheese cube down by his paw. He eyes it, then leans down and eats it.

"He's a big boy," she says. "He'll probably need more than one cube."

"He'll get more in a bit." I grab a plate for myself and pass one to her. "I wasn't sure what you liked, so I brought a bit of everything."

"I see that." She eyes the spread. "I love all of it. Except the olives. Olives are gross."

"There's a restaurant in Paris that might change your mind," I tell her, scooping up a few olives for myself. "They bring out olives to snack on with your drink before the meal, and I don't know what they do to those olives, but they're incredible."

"You've been to Paris?" she asks, wide-eyed.

I nod, knowing the answer before I ask, but I ask anyway. "Have you?"

She shakes her head, smiling. "No. I might be willing to try olives in Paris, but I don't think I'll ever get the chance to go there."

"Would you like to?"

"Oh, yes. Very much."

"Who knows? One day, you might get your chance," I say, the words out before I can think them through. I shouldn't say things like that and make her think I mean with me.

Don't I, though?

Of course not, that's absurd. I haven't traveled with a woman romantically since Sally died.

Gemma looks at me, then drops her gaze to her plate. "Maybe," she says, but she doesn't sound convinced.

I pop open the champagne, startling Hades. Gemma instinctively reaches over and puts a calming hand on his back. He looks over at her, then rests his head back on his paws and lets her pet him.

Gemma thanks me as I pass her a glass. I take a sip from mine, then ask, "So, you've never been married?"

I already know she hasn't. I did a background check on her. But there are certain things you admit, and certain things you don't. It's better for her to think I've gleaned most of the information I have on her because she's shared it with me, not because I have a tendency to disregard privacy and be rather invasive.

She shakes her head. "Parker's father and I were engaged, but we couldn't afford a wedding. Thankfully," she says, rolling her eyes. "Marrying him would have been a terrible decision, but I was a teenager, and I didn't know anything."

My lips tug up. "Who does when they're a teenager?"

"Right?" She grabs a grape, but before popping it into her mouth, she asks, "When did you and your wife get married?"

"As soon as we graduated college. I actually met her in high school. We started dating senior year, decided to go to the same college so we wouldn't have to be apart. Then she got pregnant with Landon junior year. Panicked a little because he was definitely not planned, but I told her we would figure it out. I ended up proposing, not a terribly romantic proposal, but more to assure her I was committed and I wouldn't leave her high and dry to chase my own dreams. After we graduated college but before I started law school, we got married under a waterfall in Costa Rica. The proposal may not have been romantic, but the wedding was. Landon was there, but it was very

intimate, just the three of us.”

My throat tightens thinking about that day. I find myself staring off into space, lost for a moment in a memory of Sally splashing Landon with water, his dimpled grin as he caught a few droplets in his chubby hand and hurled them back at her. He adored his mother as much as I did. She was the sun in both our lives, and then one day, she was just gone, leaving us both drenched in darkness.

I feel Gemma’s hand on mine and I look over to see her worried eyes peering back at me. “Are you okay?” she asks softly.

I nod, pulling my hand away.

It’s a stupid instinct, one I regret immediately, but talking about the family I once had isn’t something I ever do with women. I wouldn’t even know how.

“Anyway, enough about me.” I take a sip of champagne to get myself back on track. “We were talking about you.”

“What else do you want to know?” she asks.

“Your last serious relationship. Why didn’t it work out?”

She picks up a strawberry, focusing her attention on it instead of me. “Good question. It wasn’t for lack of trying. I made a Herculean effort to hold things together, long past the point where I should have given up.” She meets my gaze. “My last serious relationship was Parker’s father. I’ve had boyfriends since, but none of them were deep, committed long-term relationships.” She wraps her lips around the strawberry and takes a bite.

My cock stirs with interest, but I try to ignore it. “You haven’t had another serious relationship since that one? Really?”

She shakes her head, chewing her strawberry and absently plucking a piece of cheese off her plate. “I haven’t met anyone I wanted to commit to. Once I commit, it takes a lot to sever that connection, so I’m pretty choosy. I’m not one of these people who happily bounces from relationship to relationship. When I pick my person, that’s my person, and I don’t want it to

ever change.”

I can relate to that. I don't date anymore, but when I did commit, it was forever.

“He cheated on me and I *still* tried to make it work, but we couldn't get the trust back. I tried to hold things together without it, but that was impossible. I stuck it out for a while anyway just because he was Parker's father and I wanted to keep my family together. I didn't want to alternate holidays and spend every other weekend without her. That sounded awful to me, and he was really irresponsible, so I wasn't sure how he would be with her. Turned out, I didn't have to worry about it. As soon as I dumped him for good, he moved in with some girl. He took Parker for a few hours one day a week for exactly three weeks, then he lost all interest. He visited her from time to time and took us out to dinner once in a while, but since we broke up, she's never even spent the night with him.”

I frown. “You don't share custody?”

She shakes her head, leaning back and stretching out her legs. “Nope. It's been years since we've seen him. I don't even know where he lives anymore. Don't care, either.”

“Does he at least pay child support?”

She laughs. “No.”

I shake my head, unimpressed. “That's his responsibility. You should make him pay.”

“I know, but it wasn't worth the fight to me. Honestly, I was just happy not to have to share Parker. I can be a better father to her than he can, anyway. Maybe I'd feel differently if she did, but...” She shrugs. “Parker's a smart kid, and she knows her worth. If he's too big of an idiot to want a relationship with her, she doesn't want one with him, either.”

My eyebrows rise and I nod, impressed. “Takes a lot of maturity to be able to feel that way at such a young age.”

She nods proudly. “Like I said, she's super smart. Mature for her age, too.”

Part of it is probably that I was so young when I had her, and her dad wasn't much support to begin with. It's always been just the two of us, so I guess in some ways she has had to be a little more grown-up than most kids her age. Especially the kids in this town."

The way she says it, she doesn't seem to think much of the spoiled, entitled brats who live around here. Can't say I blame her, though. "Yeah, I didn't have money growing up, either. Life is a lot different for my son than it was for me."

The mention of my son dims her happiness. I don't want to remind her of the reason she doesn't think we should be spending time together, so I change the subject to something lighter.

We talk TV and books, then dip into politics. We circle around to movies, then she tells me about the one vacation she and Parker *did* take to Disney World a few years ago. Parker had always wanted to go—to Epcot rather than the Magic Kingdom even as a kid, which emphasizes what Gemma has already told me about her and makes me think I'd like her. I tell her about the time Sally and I took Landon when he was five, and somewhere along the way, I start thinking about what it would be like to go with her.

Visualizing a fucking family vacation? Really?

I can picture other vacations with her too, just the two of us. Those thoughts aren't as crazy, though. I've had beach days with knockouts that inspired the idea to flicker across my mind of maybe taking a trip with them, shucking the stress of work for a few days, seeing that tight little body in a dozen different bikinis, waking up and having my cock sucked in a tropical paradise. Never pulled the trigger, but I thought about it.

I've definitely never had a flicker of interest in bundling our families and going somewhere together, though. That's... not the kind of thing you do with someone unless you're pretty serious about them.

I try to shake it off, not least of all because if our kids really hate each other as much as she thinks they do, that's not something we could ever do.

I can see her point that them not getting along would be an obstacle, but I don't agree it's the absolute end of our chances together. Both of our kids are seniors in high school. They'll be off at college next year starting their own lives, and any contact between them after that would be minimal. Holidays, family events, but they wouldn't have to be around each other on a regular basis.

Christ, listen to me thinking about this like it's what I actually want.

It's not. After I lost Sally, I had no desire to attach to someone I might lose again.

I like Gemma, that's all.

It doesn't mean we have—or need to have—a future together; I'm just enjoying her company right now.

CHAPTER 9

GEMMA

WHEN WE FINISH EATING, Hayden packs everything up while I play with Hades.

I haven't had a dog since I was a child, and never a big, scary-looking one like this, but despite his menacing appearance, Hades is a sweetheart. He lets me rub his chest, then rolls on his back so I can give him a belly rub. He doesn't tolerate that for long before he's sitting up again, looking around the neighborhood like he's the king who reigns over it.

He's super cute, and I keep giving him pets and love until Hayden returns, grabbing my hips and tugging me back against him.

My blood warms as my butt connects with his body.

When I straighten, Hayden slides a hand under my shirt and rests it on my bare stomach. He caresses my skin beneath the tank top, making my heart pound and my body still against his. I look at him over my shoulder, my breath catching as he stares back at me, a smoldering glint in his eyes.

"I like this," he says simply. "Being here with you."

"I like it, too."

It feels like a shameful admission. An aching regret, because the more I enjoy being around him, the more it's going to hurt when this is all over and I can't be anymore.

Maybe we don't have many moments left, but we still have today.

God, I want to kiss him.

I want to turn around, wrap my arms around his neck, and press my lips to his. I want him to dominate my mouth like he did the other night, to drive out all my sensible thoughts until my legs are locked around his waist and he's carrying me in the house to do unspeakably dirty things to me.

Instead, I pull away and straighten my shirt.

He suggests we take Hades for a walk, so we do.

On our way past the Hartley house, no one is around, but on our way back home, Brent is outside with one of his sons. His face registers surprise when he sees us walking by with Hades, but Hayden doesn't even spare him a glance.

I do. I can't help it. I look back at him over my shoulder and barely resist the urge to call out, "Hey, neighbor!"

I'm feeling good when we get back to the house. Sweaty, though. It's a hot summer day, and Hades is panting after our walk, so I decide we should all go inside and drink some cold water.

I rinse out the bowl I gave Hades outside and get him fresh, cold water from the compartment on my refrigerator. As I fill it, I smile and tell Hayden that when I was a little girl, I always thought you really made it when you had a refrigerator with a water dispenser.

"Well, I guess you made it, then."

I'm taken off guard when he peels up the back of my tank top so everything below my bra is bare. He's dressed casually today in a white T-shirt and charcoal shorts with boat shoes, but I hear a rustling of fabric, and when he moves forward and wraps his arms around my waist, I feel his bare skin pressed to mine.

The contact of his hot skin against my back and the strength of his arms around me make my heart race with excitement. My body is already hot, and he's making it worse.

He kisses the ball of my shoulder, then takes Hades' water bowl from my

hand. He has to put a little distance between us to bend and put it down for him.

I take advantage of the distance and turn around to face him, but as soon as Hades trots over to get a drink, Hayden starts moving toward me.

The counter is behind me, so I have no choice but to back toward my living room unless I want to be instantly trapped.

“What are you doing?” I ask, looking up at him. “I was going to get us a drink of water, too.”

“I’m thirsty, but it’s not water I’m craving.”

He keeps coming, grabbing at the hem of my tank top and tugging it up over my head as we move. He tosses the shirt on the couch, then closes in on me.

I’m hot and sticky, and my thoughts are muddled.

I’m overpowered by him, intoxicated by his incredible, masculine scent.

I let him pin me against the back of the couch and trap my hands. I let him kiss me, his hard body pressed against mine.

I want to wrap my arms around his neck, but when I try to pull my hands from beneath his, he locks his hands around my wrists, holding me in place while his mouth ravages mine.

It strikes the same cord as the other night when he held me down on the bed and drove into me. He won’t let me go anywhere. He *makes* me *let* him kiss me.

It’s hot. Really, really hot.

When he finally releases my wrists, his greedy hands slide down my body. He grabs my ass and pulls my pelvis against his, but he inches closer so he’s still forcing me back against the couch.

The way he has me trapped here, I can’t move much. He slides his fingers into the waistband of my shorts and starts to push them down, but I can envision what happens if I let him.

He’s going to fuck me right here, against the back of my couch.

I can't let him do that. I'll never be able to sit on it again without remembering him bending me over it, pounding his cock inside me.

"Hayden, no." I catch his hand and gently tug it away—or try to, but he doesn't relent.

"I want them off," he murmurs, kissing the underside of my jaw, then kissing his way down my neck.

"There's a zipper on the back, but I don't want you to take them off."

That's only half true.

But we can't, not here. Not on the couch I sit on with my daughter.

Like I didn't just ask him not to, he reaches back and grabs the zipper. He seems hell-bent on getting me out of my shorts, whether I'm game or not.

What will he do to me if he succeeds? *Will* he fuck me, or maybe just touch me? Maybe he'll press a finger into me and tease me until I come apart in his arms. Maybe he'll push me to my knees and free his cock, demanding relief after he's given me mine.

A torrent of naughty, sinful possibilities runs through my head.

I'm staring at his muscular chest as he holds me against him and drags down the zipper on the back of my shorts when I hear Hades' toenails on my hardwood floor.

I pull away from Hayden to look behind him.

Hades is standing there, only a few feet from us, with a curious look on his face. His tail is wagging like he's waiting to be invited to the love-fest.

"Aww," I murmur, reaching back and pulling the zipper up on my shorts.

I'm not one to turn down puppy dog eyes, even if the dog in question looks like he eats human souls for breakfast.

"Hades wants some loving, too, don't you, boy?" I shove Hayden away and slip out of his embrace so I can crouch down and give Hades some attention.

Hayden sighs heavily, turning around to watch me give scratches and pets to his brother's dog. "You know, bringing the dog seemed like a good idea at

the time.”

Hades pants happily as I give him really good chest scratches.

Meanwhile, Hayden adjusts his cock and gives the dog a dry look, as if to acknowledge my affection has been stolen away by a worthy rival.

“You’re not so big and bad, are you?” I say sweetly, rubbing the dog’s muscular body. “You’re just a big loverboy, huh?”

“Never let my brother hear you talking to one of his fearsome beasts in that voice,” Hayden says dryly.

Hades’ tail wags and he rests his big head on my shoulder. “He’s not a beast,” I say soothingly, shooting Hayden a look. “He’s a sweetheart.”

“He’s a cockblock,” Hayden states, but at least he’s smiling wryly.

He *is* a bit of a cockblock, but I’m glad for it.

I was caught up in Hayden’s irresistible sexiness, but I hadn’t *wanted* to have sex with him in my living room, and now that moment has passed thanks to good ol’ Hades.

Since we’re both hot and bothered, I tell Hayden I need to take a shower and clean up before we start the second part of our date.

He decides to use our short intermission to take Hades back home.

I’m a little sad to lose our chaperone. Hades would have probably been more effective at keeping my clothes on than I’ll be by myself, but realistically, I knew this night wouldn’t end before Hayden and I had sex one last time.

I think about it as I dry off after my shower, then rub lotion all over my body.

I think about it when I pick out a pair of blue lacy panties to wear under my strapless midnight-blue sheath dress with a keyhole cut out between my breasts.

I love this dress.

The fabric is silky smooth against my skin, and it clings to every curve on my body. It's very sexy, so I grab a thin white cardigan to go over it, then I find a pair of navy blue flats to wear with it. I'm not sure what we're doing for the next part of our date, but just in case a lot of walking is involved, I don't want to be wearing heels.

It's a few minutes before six when Hayden rings my doorbell.

"You changed," I say, leaning against the door frame and looking him over. He's wearing a black button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to show off his sexy arms and a pair of dark blue jeans.

He looks me up and down, a faint smile on his perfect lips. "So did you," he points out. His gaze lingers on my bare legs, and I shift on my feet, anxious to get out of here before he gets me in the house and out of my clothes.

"Are you ready to go?" he asks.

I nod and grab my purse, then I make sure to lock up.

Parker should be home from Hannah's house soon, so I text her in the car to let her know I'm going out, and to text me when she's home and the place is locked up again.

I have to admit, though, I feel safer than I did before Hayden got involved. I know there are cameras and I'll get a notification straight to my phone if anything is amiss. I can check the live view anytime to make sure everything is all right, and now that the neighbors think Hades might be staying with me, I highly doubt any of them will step foot on my property.

He really has made all of my problems go away.

Well, those problems.

He's a whole new problem, and I have a feeling he won't help me fix that

one.

CHAPTER 10

GEMMA

HAYDEN TAKES me to a nice restaurant for dinner, then to his brother's bar for a couple of drinks.

I don't drink as much this time since I'm less nervous. When I feel myself getting tipsy, I switch to water, then when Hayden finishes his drink, he pays the bill, takes my hand, and we walk along the beach.

I love walking the beach at night. It's so peaceful.

I take off my flats and carry them in one hand so I can sink my toes in the sand.

Hayden hangs back and watches me for a little while. We don't talk, but the silence is companionable, not awkward. I love being around someone I can just be with in the quiet without the constant expectation of conversation. Some moments don't require words.

I move closer to the water so I can use my toes to write in the wet sand before the water comes and washes it away.

That's our relationship, really. We're playing in the sand, knowing the waves will wash it all away before anyone can ever see it. It'll be like it was never there to begin with, and only we will know it was.

It's kind of beautiful in a way.

It could be sad, but I'd rather think of it as beautiful.

The waves lap at my ankles. I wish I had a swimsuit on underneath my

dress. It's a balmy night, perfect for playing in the water without worrying my fair complexion will earn me a painful sunburn.

Turning back to Hayden, I look him over. He's standing guard, his hands shoved in his pockets, watching me play in the ankle-deep water.

"Have you ever skinny dipped?" I ask him.

His lips tug up. "Yes. Have you?"

I shake my head no and make another heart in the sand while the waves roll away from the shoreline. "A friend dared me to once, but I was too afraid someone would see me."

"Is that a common occurrence for you?"

I look up at him, a questioning smile on my lips. "Do a lot of people dare me to skinny dip?" I tease. "No, I can't say they do."

He smiles, but shakes his head, still wanting his answer. "Do you skip a lot of experiences because you're afraid of them?"

That wipes the smile off my face. "I'm not timid, I'm just practical. If the payout doesn't justify the risk, I probably won't do it."

"It just doesn't seem like you take many chances."

"I take chances when I think they're worth it. Opening my own dance studio was a big risk," I point out, though I'm not sure he knows I own the studio. He may just think I'm a teacher there, working for someone else. "I had to invest everything I had in that studio and just *hope* it would work out. It could have cost me everything if it hadn't. I wouldn't have been able to pay my bills or take care of Parker. We would've lost the house because I'm the sole earner and I wouldn't have been able to pay the mortgage. It was immensely scary, but I took the leap."

"Why?"

"Because..." I sigh, thinking back to that time. "Because I wanted more. I was unfulfilled in my other jobs. I'd worked several, but I wasn't passionate about any of them, I was just toiling away for a paycheck. I've had to make a lot of sacrifices over the years due to circumstances and bad decisions. I just

decided life is too short to spend all of it doing something you don't love."

Hayden nods. "That's true. Life *is* short."

I nod and look down, etching a swirl in the sand at the water's edge. "That payoff was worth the risk, so I took it. Now I make my living doing what I love, and I get to be my own boss. Parker dances, too, so I even bring her as my assistant when her schedule allows it. I wouldn't be able to spend that extra time with her if I had any of the crappy jobs I worked before."

"It sounds like you construct your whole life around her. You and your daughter must be very close."

"We are." I'm hesitant to ask, but I'm also curious about the relationship he has with his son. "Are you and Landon close?"

He doesn't answer right away. His gaze drifts to the ocean behind me. "We were once," he finally says. "A long time ago."

I step even more carefully here, since I can tell his wife's death is still a source of pain for him. "When your wife was alive?"

He nods. "My whole life with her was only possible because she was who she was. To be honest, I'm not sure I was cut out for family life, but it was easy to fall into it with her. She made it easy. I loved our life together. Then she was gone, and all of a sudden it was up to me. I was lost in my own grief. I couldn't... I couldn't pull anyone else out of theirs."

Even from a distance, I can feel the pain radiating inside him. It bleeds out around him, like a force field that should keep me away, but it pulls me in instead.

I feel no jealousy that he loved his wife so deeply, only sympathy because he lost someone who clearly meant the world to him.

I don't know if it's the right thing to do, but I can't stand here and watch him hurt without at least trying to help. I step out of the water and slowly approach him. My touch is tentative as I reach my arms around him, just in case my comfort isn't welcome and he wants to push me away.

He doesn't. He doesn't return the hug, just stands there as solid as stone,

but he lets me hug him. I press my head against his heart and listen to the strong thud of it beating in his chest.

Maybe I've been too hard on him about his son. Landon *is* a jerk, but they have both been through an unspeakable tragedy. Perhaps talking to him will work. Maybe he could even benefit from having a loving female influence in his life again. It doesn't sound like Hayden has really opened up to anyone since his wife died.

I'm not sure I could be that for him, though. I know I could if not for our conflict of interest, but my heart isn't big enough to wrap around anyone who is cruel to my daughter.

My heart is big enough to wrap around Hayden, though. I can feel it expanding and wrapping around him now, trying to absorb some of his pain so that at least he doesn't have to feel it all alone.

"Your wife sounds like an incredible woman," I say softly against his chest.

"She was." He grabs the back of my sweater and uses it to tug me back. I think he's pulling me away from him because he wants space at first, but then he wraps his hand around my neck, keeping me still so he can lean down to brush his lips against mine. "She would've liked you."

A smile tugs at my lips. That feels like a really solid compliment coming from him. "I bet I would've liked her, too."

My eyes drift shut as he kisses me. It's slow at first, following the pace set by the ocean lapping at the shore. He kisses me, and his lips linger. He kisses me again, and just tastes my lips.

It's the most intimate thing I've ever experienced, and despite—maybe because of—the excruciating slowness, my heart pounds more and more furiously in my chest.

I ache for him. I could no more resist his deepening kiss than I could my next breath. When his other hand slides down and bunches up my dress, I pay no mind to whether or not we're still alone on the beach. His hot palm moves

down my lower back, then pushes into the back of my panties so he can grab my bare ass.

Arousal pools between my thighs. Tightens when he slides his hand lower and grazes my pussy.

And just like that, I'm on my back in the sand, Hayden's body covering mine.

I run my hands over his handsome face so I can memorize the feel of his stubble against my fingers. If we only have tonight, I want to remember every minute.

I push my fingers into his hair as his greedy hands roam my body. My legs are wrapped around him, his hips grinding into my pussy, but it's not enough. I want him inside me.

I start unbuttoning his shirt, and he lifts up long enough to shrug out of it. He throws it on the beach and reaches for the button on his jeans.

I'm startled when I feel a vibration against my inner thigh. Is it coming from his pants pocket?

Did he bring... a toy?

Interesting.

Did it turn on by accident, or does he have a remote?

"Is that... um... Your pocket's vibrating."

He frowns, ripping his phone out of his pocket and casting an impatient glance at the screen. He must not recognize the number, or not think it's terribly important, because he ignores the call and tosses the phone on the sand.

His attention shifts back to me, a wolfish smile on his handsome face. "Now, where were we?"

I grin as he leans in to kiss me, eager to pick up where we left off, but before we can get much further, his phone is ringing again.

"For fuck's sake," he says, rolling off me and grabbing the phone. He swipes the screen and puts the phone to his ear. "This had better be pretty

goddamn important.”

I study his face, but his urgent call reminds me that I haven’t checked my phone since we came down to the beach. Parker was supposed to text me when she got home from Hannah’s house, but last time I checked my phone, I hadn’t heard from her yet.

If there’s still nothing, I need to call her. Maybe she went home, but forgot to text me.

My stomach drops when I pull out my phone and see a ton of missed notifications. There are missed phone calls and voice mails, the top text reading, “Where are you?” and a note underneath that I have 23 more missed text messages.

And they’re all from Parker.

“Oh my god.” My stomach plummets even lower. My fingers tremble as I swipe open the chain and scan the messages. There are so many.

The first message says she just got home from Hannah’s house, and it was an hour ago. Shortly after, a text that says, “Is that you?” I keep scrolling and the next messages are Parker saying she thinks someone is in the garage.

“Oh my god. Hayden,” I sink my hands in the sand, hurrying to stand up. “Something happened, something’s wrong. I have to go home right away. Oh my god,” I say, my heart nearly giving out when I get to the one that reads, “Mom, I think there’s someone in the house.”

“Hayden,” I scream, finally getting his attention.

He’s still on the phone, but he looks at me, wide-eyed.

“We have to go. Something’s wrong, something happened. Parker—I missed a million messages from her. My god, I should have been home.”

Helpless tears spring to my eyes. I haven’t even finished reading the texts. Illogically, I’m too afraid to. Too afraid of what they’ll say. I don’t even know if she’s okay.

“I’m going to *kill* them,” I growl, choking on sobs at the same time. “Please, we have to go now.”

Hayden must see how panicked I am as I push up off the beach and shakily get to my feet. He stands, too, but he's not in enough of a hurry.

My leg muscles have melted again making it hard to move quickly, but I'll crawl to the car if I have to. "Please, hurry, we have to go."

"Gemma." He grabs my arm to steady me, but I try to shrug him off so I can run up the beach toward the car.

"We have to *go*. Parker thinks there's someone in the house. I have to— she called me. I need to call her back. We need to call the police."

He hasn't moved. He's still holding the phone in one hand, my arm in the other. "Gemma, calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down! Let me go. My daughter needs me and I'm not there!"

"Parker is fine," he promises.

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do."

His voice is so calm, while I'm so frantic. It takes a few seconds for that to register, and to notice the grim look on his face.

Any other time, I would care enough to ask, but if Parker might be in danger, or if she was in danger before and I'm too late to help her, then nothing else matters. Nothing else will ever matter.

"Please," I say tearfully. "I have to get to my daughter."

"Parker is okay," he assures me. "I'll take you to her right now."

"Why are you so calm?"

Dread darkens his features. He looks down, swallows, then looks back at me, but something is different. He no longer looks like a man confident anything in the world he wants will be his. He looks like... like he understands what I've known all along.

We are *impossible*.

My stomach rocks, but I don't understand why. My instincts click the pieces together before my tormented mind can. "Who was on the phone?"

“The first call was Landon.”

“And the second?”

“A friend of mine at the station.”

“The station?”

He closes his eyes and nods.

“The... police station?”

He nods again.

“Why?”

Hayden sighs softly, his eyes opening back up. I can see the regret and frustration. “Because Landon was arrested.”

My eyes widen. “For... for what?”

“Breaking and entering.”

CHAPTER 11

HAYDEN

MY RAGE CAN SCARCELY BE CONTAINED as I escort Gemma into the police station.

She has calmed down some since I filled her in on what I knew of the details—no one was hurt, my fucking son just had too much to drink with his asshole friends and thought it would be fun to give Parker Johansson a good scare.

Turns out, the cameras I had installed caught the asshole who has been playing juvenile pranks on Gemma and her daughter.

Also turns out, it wasn't her sleazy neighbor.

It was *my fucking son*.

Even if I would've pieced together that the pranks began the year he got his driver's license, I never would have guessed that.

All along Gemma has been trying to tell me he's the immovable object in the way of us ever being together, and all along I have thought she was overreacting.

I guess not.

Gemma hasn't said much to me since she wrapped her head around the fact that my son broke into her home tonight to go after her daughter. Most of the ride here was silent, and not in the peaceful way it was earlier.

She doesn't know her way around the police station, so she has no choice

but to stick close to me as I lead her to Parker.

She breaks away from me as soon as she spots her.

I've never seen Parker, but I recognize her immediately because she looks so much like her mother. The same big doe-eyes, similar ginger hair, though hers is longer and not as bright as her mom's. She's sitting cross-legged on a chair in a pair of black yoga pants and a baggy gray sweatshirt, her long hair piled in a messy bun on top of her head.

"Honey," Gemma says, rushing to her side and pulling her daughter into her arms.

Parker returns her mom's hug, but her gaze meets mine as I walk past them toward the desk where my son is sitting.

Landon is wearing dark wash jeans and a black hoodie, his dark hair mussed and his face set in a sullen expression. It's clear he's resentful about being here, like it's not his own damned fault he is.

He doesn't look at me as I approach. He looks past me at Parker and her mom embracing.

"Didn't know there were two of them," he says in a glib, sarcastic tone that makes me grind my teeth.

"You think this is funny?" I ask him, stone faced.

He shrugs and crosses his arms over his chest as he gazes up at me. "I got a good laugh out of it."

The police officer who called me as a professional courtesy is sitting at the messy desk, offering me an embarrassed, apologetic smile as my son shows his ass.

I desperately want to wring Landon's neck, but I can't blow up in public, so I shift my attention away from him.

I shake the officer's hand and thank him because we both know my son shouldn't be sitting here sulking in the police station—he should have been processed and had his ass thrown in a cell with all the other criminals.

The officer fills me in on what's happening and tells me—so Landon

hears, since he's undoubtedly been a pain in the ass since he sat down—how lucky we are that this didn't turn out much worse. The homeowner could have had a gun and killed him. They could have had a guard dog and set them loose on the intruder.

I am belatedly thankful that I didn't leave Hades with her like I thought about doing, because he's absolutely right. This could have gone *much* fucking worse.

The police officer goes on to tell me (and, incidentally, Landon) that breaking into someone's house is not a prank, it's a felony, and since he's 18-years-old, there's no choice but to try him as an adult.

I can hear the distant sound of his entire fucking future going down the toilet.

I squeeze the bridge of my nose, knowing beyond a shadow of a fucking doubt that Landon hasn't just ruined my night.

He has completely ruined my chances with Gemma.

Or, maybe more accurately, he has forced *me* to ruin my own chances with Gemma, because as much as I like her, and as much as I know Landon was entirely in the wrong here, I also know there's not a shot in hell I'm going to let this happen.

I can't.

Landon might be an asshole, but he's still my son.

Sally's son.

It dawns on me that he's gotten so far away from me, I don't even recognize him anymore. This angry, sullen kid is not the little boy who joyfully flung water at his mom under a waterfall in Costa Rica. He's not who he was on track to grow up to be when she died, either.

He was left in my care, and I've failed miserably at my most important job.

His mother would never forgive me if she saw the mess I've let our son turn into.

It may be too late to change it now, but regardless, I have to do damage control.

I have enough of the right connections. I can pull the necessary strings to get him out of this.

But I can't do it without fucking Gemma over.

I don't expect it to sting as much as it does.

I don't know how a mere hour ago, I was clutching her tight and running my hands over her incredible body, and now...

Well, she'll probably never even speak to me again.

I pull the officer aside away from Landon so we can discuss in greater detail what needs to happen next.

The biggest problem is the statement Parker gave. He shouldn't show it to me, but he does anyway, and she describes in explicit detail that even though Landon came in through a garage door that wasn't locked, she called out a warning to leave and even told him she would call the police if he didn't. When Landon ignored her and proceeded to bang on her locked bedroom door demanding entrance, she shut herself in her closet "in fear for her life" and called for help. Landon proceeded to try to enter her bedroom, and it wasn't until officers showed up and dragged him out in handcuffs that Landon finally exited the home.

"Christ," I say, handing back the report.

The officer nods his agreement. "It's pretty bad."

I know he thinks my son's an asshole, but he doesn't say so. He probably also knows my son should see some jail time for how he behaved, but he knows this town well enough to know that's not on the table.

"If we can throw this statement out, it'll be much easier to make this all go away. But if the girl is persistent... it's going to be really difficult not to press charges. It can be done, but not as easily, and it won't be pretty."

I nod my understanding. I know exactly how they go about discrediting a woman's statement, and there's no way I can do that to Gemma's daughter.

“I’ll talk to her.”

He goes back to babysit my son, while I ignore the lead balloon of dread in my gut and approach Gemma and Parker. They’re not hugging anymore, but Gemma is sitting on the chair next to her daughter, her pretty legs turned in Parker’s direction, holding onto her hand and nodding at something Parker is saying.

Gemma’s wounded gaze drifts to me when I enter her line of sight.

Noticing she’s lost her mother’s attention, Parker turns to look at me, too.

This is certainly not how I wanted us to meet.

Not that it matters now.

“Are you all right?” I ask Parker.

Gemma wraps her arm around Parker’s shoulders and pulls her daughter close as if to protect her from me.

And given what I’m here for, she’s probably right to.

“She’s understandably shaken up after what she went through tonight,” Gemma states, her tone cool.

I nod, letting my feelings drain out of me. It’s the only way I can proceed with shattering any lingering interest Gemma might have in me. “Landon is very sorry for what he did,” I tell Parker.

Gemma snaps before Parker even has a chance to respond. “If Landon is very sorry, why isn’t *Landon* the one apologizing?”

Parker responds before I can. “Because he’s *not* sorry.” Not broking bullshit, she meets my gaze dead-on. “I don’t know if you think I’m some utter fucking moron or what, but I know your son isn’t sorry. And I know you’re probably saying he is because you want me to rescind my statement and say something like, ‘oh, I was confused and thought he was an intruder but we’re actually friends from school and I just didn’t expect him to stop by,’ so I’ll save you some time. Not a chance in hell. Your son *trapped me* in my bedroom tonight and tried to break down the door. God knows what

would have happened if he would've succeeded.”

I open my mouth to speak, but before I can, Landon calls out from across the room. “Bullshit. If I wanted to break down your fucking door, I would have. I was only trying to scare you.”

Parker lifts her eyebrows and gestures to Landon. “See? He’s not sorry. And I’m not taking back my statement. I have put up with *a lot* from your son over the years. If this is how it finally ends, so be it.”

Wow. Parker is not what I was expecting after having met her mother, but it’s hard to argue any of her points—at least, when she’s the one I’m arguing to. Sure, I could dig around her life and find grounds to discredit her in the court of public opinion if I had to, but I don’t want to. I like Parker, and I like her mother, and none of this is their fault.

My gaze shifts to Gemma, holding onto her daughter like a protective mama bear.

Even though Parker is the one who has been through a trauma tonight, her hand rests over her mother’s kneecap like she’s providing her stability and comfort, too.

And I’ll bet she is.

Gemma is an absolute sweetheart, but her protective—and more assertive—instincts come out when she needs to protect her daughter.

I bet the daughter is just as protective of the mother.

I’m a bastard to use personal information Gemma has given me when we’ve spent time together, but she said herself that Parker is mature for her age, that it has always been just the two of them.

Ordinarily, I’d want to speak with a parent over their child, but I have a feeling Parker can handle herself.

“May I speak with you alone for a moment?”

Parker’s eyebrows rise in surprise.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Gemma says.

Parker’s eyes narrow, but never leave my face. She’s debating, and she

must decide she's not afraid to go toe-to-toe with me, because she moves her hand off her mom's knee, gently moves out of her embrace, and stands. "No, I'll talk to him."

I offer her a mild smile. Not that she seems to need the reassurance, but I don't want her to think of me as the bad guy here.

Ridiculous that I'm still trying to salvage things when I know the chances of Gemma ever looking past this are fucking miniscule.

Since this area is so open that anyone can overhear, I find an empty interrogation room I can use to converse with Parker. Gemma does not like that at all, but Parker assures her mom she's fine and follows me in.

I close the door and gesture for her to take a seat.

She shakes her head knowingly, crossing her arms. "I'm okay to stand."

I nod slowly, trying to get my bearings. I'm at a disadvantage not knowing this girl. I've had minor interactions with females Landon has brought around, but none of them have been as capable as I take Parker to be.

"Your mother tells me that you and my son have had run-ins for quite some time."

"My mother?" she echoes, her eyebrows rising.

I know Gemma hasn't told her she's been spending time with me, so I say, "She came to my office the other day about your neighbor. We ended up discussing your relationship with my son."

Parker nods, her lips pressed together. "Ah. Well, I don't have a relationship with your son any more than the mole and the mallet have a relationship in a game of Whack-A-Mole."

"I understand that you probably hate him and want to see him punished," I begin.

"I don't hate him. I mean, I don't *like* him, but that's not the problem. He hates *me*. That's the problem. I don't have to do anything to provoke his bullshit. In fact, in the past, I have been really nice to him. Now I try to stay

in my lane and mind my own business, but it doesn't get him off my back. He's the one that won't stop harassing *me*. It is not a mutual problem we have. I never did anything to cross Landon, he just zeroed in on me like a psycho because I tried to be nice to him one time, and no amount of demanding *or* begging him to leave me alone since has worked. Your son has issues, and I don't think jail is the place for him to get the help he needs, but you know what? Maybe it is."

I bow my head, reevaluating my approach based on this new information. I expected a scared, belligerent teenage girl hell-bent on justice.

This girl is not angry.

She is calm and reasonable, and again, I cannot help liking her.

Sighing, I meet her gaze. "I'm going to be very honest with you, Parker, because I respect you. I'm going to talk to you like an adult because I think you deserve that and I think you can handle it."

She doesn't say anything, just stands there with her arms crossed and her poker face in place.

"There is not a reality in which my son goes to jail for what he did tonight. That is not to say it wasn't wrong. It was. Unfortunately, the world doesn't work that way. Justice isn't always black and white, and the court systems do not always provide it. I promise you that if you fight this battle, you will lose. It's not your fault, you are simply outmatched. I do not relish that fact. I am not trying to embarrass you or hurt you. I'm just giving you the reality of this situation. You can stand your ground and refuse to budge from the truth, but Landon will not go to jail, and I urge you to remember you still have to endure senior year with him. If my son is as horrible to you as you say he is, can you imagine how much worse it will be if you try to defeat him and *fail*?"

Parker swallows, a glint of vulnerability in her eyes.

I can see that she does.

She doesn't admit it out loud, but I know she's piecing together that if

Landon gets away with his bullshit and emerges unscathed, he will think he is invincible.

And he won't be grateful for his good fortune and stop tempting fate—he will come at her even harder.

“Wouldn't it be so much better if he believed that *you* decided not to pursue this?” I suggest.

Parker's gaze drops. I see her mulling over her limited options. Her gaze shifts back to mine, and she looks much younger, like the vulnerable teenage girl she actually is. It makes me feel like a fucking monster for manipulating her.

“I'm not a combative person,” she tells me, shaking her head. “I don't *like* any of this. But he came to my *home*. I don't care what he said out there, I believe he wanted to hurt me. I think he would have if he could've gotten past my door.”

“I understand,” I say with sympathy I don't have to manufacture. “And you can rest assured I will deal with my son's behavior. I'm not asking you to let him hurt you, or not to stand up for yourself. I will make this right with you and your mother, whatever it takes. I just want to do it outside of the legal system. I was going to offer to pay off your house as a thank you if you'd let this go, but if you really want to steer clear of my son, I'll purchase you guys a different home in a different school district and you can finish your senior year elsewhere. I know your mother doesn't love the neighbors in your current neighborhood, anyway. She might welcome a change of scenery.”

She surprises me by shaking her head. “I'm not going to let him chase me out. I've worked hard for my accomplishments at the school I've spent my entire high school career at. I don't want to go somewhere else.”

“All right,” I say easily. “It was just an idea.”

She eyes me distrustfully. “You'd really pay off my mom's house?”

I nod. “Absolutely.”

“I’d want it in writing,” she warns me.

I can’t help grinning. “All right.”

Her eyes narrow with suspicion. “What?”

I shake my head. “Nothing. I just like you, that’s all.”

My answer surprises her.

“Not in the alarming way my son seems to,” I specify. “I just think if I had a daughter, I’d be happy if she were like you.”

I expect some part of that might make her cheeks redden, but I’m surprised when she flushes and what she seems to focus on is the first part. “Landon does *not* like me.”

That’s not worth arguing about right now, so I nod as if I believe her and extend my hand in her direction. “Do we have a deal, then?”

She stares at my hand for a long moment, then she says, “I want something else.”

I lower my hand. “What’s that?”

“I need—” She stops and clears her throat. “I need a new laptop for school this year. Mom’s been trying to find the extra money to buy me one, but—”

I don’t make her finish. “Done. I’ll give you my email address. Send me the link to whichever one you want and I’ll have it delivered to your house.”

She looks relieved. I see more of her mom in her as she softens and gives me a little smile. “Thank you.”

CHAPTER 12

GEMMA

I WAS twelve-years-old when I broke the nasty habit of nail biting, but waiting outside the room at the police station, I'm tempted to start up again.

After what feels like an eternity, the door finally opens.

Hayden holds the door for Parker, and she brushes past him to return to my side.

I eye her up, searching for any sign of distress. "Are you all right?"

Arms crossed, she nods.

It strikes me as a self-protective gesture, though, so I'm not so sure. I look back at Hayden, my eyes narrowed. "What did you need to discuss with my daughter by herself?"

"It's fine, Mom," she says before he can say anything. "He wasn't mean to me or anything, we just talked. He apologized." She glances over her shoulder at Landon, who is still watching her like a little creep.

I grab her shoulders and pull her in front of me. "We need to go."

Parker nods her head, but says she needs to talk to the police officer about one more thing she forgot on her report before we leave. I offer to go with her, but she doesn't want me to.

I don't like her even approaching the officer since Landon is right there, but the officer seems to understand they need to be separated, so he directs her to follow him into a nearby office.

Now that my daughter is out of the room, my attention returns to Landon.

He must feel my gaze on him, because while he was still looking at the door Parker walked through, now he looks back at me and looks me directly in the eye.

I glare at him so he feels bad, but he doesn't.

He smiles and gives me a little wave.

Ugh, he's such a jerk.

Looking back at Hayden, I cross my arms and say, "Now do you see the problem?"

He nods, and I can see that he does. "I didn't realize how serious it was."

"I tried to tell you."

"I know you did."

Since he's not arguing with me, I don't know what else to say.

I look down, noticing the granules of sand stuck to my feet since I put my shoes back on in such a hurry.

The memory surfaces of my arms wrapped around him, his lips on mine. How much I wanted him...

The waves lapped at the shore too soon. Our picture got erased before we could even finish drawing it.

Without anger and fear, I just feel a little sad.

I really did like him, it just doesn't matter.

It's like I said from the beginning—there's no future for us together. It's just not possible.

"I don't know if I'll need a lawyer to handle this stuff with Landon, but obviously, if I do, it can't be you. Since I'll probably have to hire someone more in my price range, I'll just have them deal with my neighbor stuff if it's a problem going forward. I'm not even sure what my neighbor was responsible for, and what Landon did. Maybe my neighbor is just a creepy sexist and not responsible for any of the other stuff."

“I’ll talk to Landon and find out,” he assures me. “I’ll let you know.”

I nod. “Thanks. Beyond that, I don’t think we should talk anymore.”

He doesn’t look surprised. He nods, but it doesn’t feel like agreement, just acknowledgment of my preferences.

I’m too tired to insist on clarification.

It has been the longest, most terrifying night of my life, and all I want to do is go home and curl up in bed with my daughter where I can rest assured that she is safe and sound and within my reach.

Parker emerges from the office and makes her way to me with her head down, probably to avoid catching Landon’s gaze again. I escort her out of the building as quickly as possible so we can put all this behind us.

When we get outside, I realize I’ll have to drive her car home since I don’t have mine.

Parker seems to realize it, too, when she gets in the passenger seat and frowns at the door leading into the police station.

She looks over at me, her brow furrowed in confusion. “Did you and Landon’s dad get here at the same time?”

I don’t have the energy left to lie to her tonight. It feels pointless to have made it this far without her knowing, and then have to come clean, but I’m on the verge of mental exhaustion, and I just don’t have it in me.

“I was with him when he got the call that Landon had been arrested. I checked my phone and realized I’d missed all those calls... it was because I was with him.”

Understandably, she looks confused. “But... why? Where were you?”

“At the beach,” I say softly, starting up the car and mustering what’s left of my energy to drive us home.

When we pull in the driveway, it feels like the scene of a crime.

I guess because it is.

There’s dust residue on the doorknob from where they collected his fingerprints, and when I walk into the kitchen, I can’t help knowing someone

else was in this room while I was out—someone who meant my daughter harm.

Parker doesn't balk when I tell her I want her to sleep in my room tonight. It's been years since she crawled into my bed to go to sleep, but there's no way I would be able to sleep with her anywhere else.

As tired as I am, I can't seem to fall asleep even with her right next to me. I lie in bed with my eyes burning and my emotional stores entirely depleted. I'm desperate to sleep, but surprised by the overwhelming emptiness I feel.

I know it's just because I'm exhausted. I'll feel better after a good night of sleep.

The dark room lights up, and I glance over at my phone on the bedside table. I look over to make sure Parker is still asleep, and when I see that she is, I grab my phone.

It's a text message from Hayden that says simply, "It was all him and his friends."

"Were they here tonight? Why aren't they in trouble, too?"

"They bailed on him," he texts back. "They were game to spook her, but not to come inside the house. When he went in the house, they drove away so they didn't get in trouble, too."

"Some friends," I text.

"Yeah."

Our conversation is at its natural end, but for some reason, I don't want to put down the phone. I feel comfort just looking at the screen, seeing his words.

The phone dims while I look at it, but then it brightens again and I see three bubbles on his side to indicate he's typing.

"I'm sorry we didn't get to finish our date," he says.

"So am I," I type back, but it makes me feel sad.

"I really want to see you again."

I sniffle and type back, "No. I'm sorry."

“I understand,” he says.

This feels more like a breakup than my last *actual* breakup did. I want to keep talking to him so I don’t feel sad, but I know it’s just delaying the inevitable.

I type out *Goodnight, Hayden* but then I backspace it and send a message that reads, “Goodbye, Hayden.”

I wait for him to answer that one, but he doesn’t.

The screen dims and still I wait.

I don’t want him to say goodbye back, but I do, too, because I need to know he understands I really mean it this time. Before, it may have been hard to resist him. I said no and knew I *needed* to mean it, but this time, it’s different. This time, I *mean it* mean it.

I wait and I wait.

I fall asleep with my phone in my hands.

But he never texts back.

CHAPTER 13

GEMMA

LIFE GETS BACK to normal in the days that follow.

I'm off work for two weeks between summer recitals and the start of my fall classes. I always schedule it that way so Parker and I can spend a lot of time together before she goes back to school, knock out any shopping that needs to be done, cram in a few last late nights of staying up watching movies or bad TV shows we won't have time for once school starts.

Parker notices I'm staying in every night and assures me that I don't have to. "I'm fine," she insists. "I'll keep the door locked. I bought a Taser. I don't want you to be afraid to go out and live your life just because I go to school with a lunatic."

I smile faintly. "I'm not afraid," I tell her, but that's a boldfaced lie.

She doesn't have a child, so she can't understand the helpless terror I felt that night when I saw those missed messages. Before I knew the entirety of what had happened, and the absolute worst case scenarios were playing out in my imagination. When I thought for a horrifying moment that I was being felt up on the beach by a man whose son may have been hurting my daughter, or even worse.

I don't know Landon Atwater. I don't know what he's capable of.

"You just..." Parker starts, but trails off before she can finish.

I glance over at her. "I just what?"

She shrugs, looking at me. “You seemed happy.”

Tears sting behind my eyes all of a sudden, but it must be a period coming on, because there’s no way I’m getting emotional over this. I force a smile and grab a Twizzler. I tell her I *am* happy, and she lets it go, but I can tell it’s still on her mind.

I’m so reluctant to leave her home alone, I put off grocery shopping until Friday. We’re absolutely out of food to make dinner, and Parker wants to spice it up with chicken tikka for dinner tonight, so I definitely have to make a supply run.

I make my rounds as quickly as I can, and when I return home, Parker is at the table playing around on her laptop. She seems extra cheerful and I wonder why, but when I ask, she just smiles, closes the computer, and helps me put the groceries away so we can get started on the prep for tonight’s dinner.

“By the way,” she says as she prepares the marinade for the chicken, “I got an email from the school. You need to go to some emerald parent meeting this weekend.”

“At the school?”

She shakes her head. “Of course not. You know the parents at my school, they’re bougie. It’s on someone’s yacht. I’m sure there will be Dom and salmon puffs or whatever rich people eat.”

I crack a smile. “I don’t want to go to a yacht party without you. Can you come?”

“Nope, parents only. It’s some ‘strategy meeting,’ I guess they’re strategizing how to get the school year off to a great start or something. I don’t know, I’m sure it’ll be lame, but you have to go. It’s mandatory.”

“What does one wear to a mandatory yacht party?” I question.

“Something cute.” She flashes me a smile. “I’d wear a bikini underneath, just in case.”

The sun is mere minutes from setting as I walk along the dock, looking for the yacht Parker told me this meeting was happening on.

“Poseidon,” I murmur, spotting the trident symbol and nodding. “There it is,” I mutter to myself.

I expected there would be people by the boat, but I am running a few minutes late. I had to make sure the house was locked up before I left, and even once I was sure, I went around and checked again.

Parker has bounced back from the night Landon broke in much faster than I have. She acts like I’m overreacting to still be so worried, but I still feel immense anxiety having to leave her alone at the house.

I don’t keep my phone on vibrate when I’m away from her anymore, and I know I can check the cameras Hayden had installed anytime, but the fear is still there.

“Hello?” I call out, searching the boat for people, but I don’t see anybody.

It’s a pretty big boat, though. Maybe everyone else is inside.

I feel strange boarding someone’s boat without their explicit permission, but I check the information Parker gave me again, and this is definitely where I’m supposed to be.

“Hello,” I call out again uncertainly as I enter the cabin.

I’ve never been on one of these luxury yachts before, but I’m shocked when I enter the room and it’s like a lavish living room. There are three couches at the center of the room with windows to view the ocean on either side. The whole room is decked out in black and brown. Definitely big enough for a bougie meeting, but I still don’t see any other parents.

Beyond the living room is a gleaming dining room table with a tin bucket

full of orchids at the center. I feel nosy, but I keep looking around the cabin, up the stairs to the next levels. There are bedrooms with walk-in closets, gorgeous bathrooms with Jacuzzi tubs. There's even an office. It's literally like a house on water, but I can't find any people in it.

I make my way back to the lower level, but as I pass a window, I start to realize the boat has pulled away from the dock.

My stomach drops, even though I guess it's understandable that if the meeting is happening on a boat, we're probably going for a ride.

I'd feel a lot better about knowing I'm out at sea if I could find other people and be sure I'm where I'm supposed to be.

I hurry back down the stairs and head to the back of the boat so I can see how far we've made it. Not that it matters. It's not like I can jump off and swim back.

I mean, I guess I could, but...

This is supposed to be a mandatory meeting.

I'm about two seconds away from texting Parker when I *feel* his presence behind me.

I turn, and my heart leaps with relief and some other, less acceptable thing I decide not to put a name to.

Hayden is standing there in a pair of white shorts and a light blue button down. His handsome face is a sight for sore eyes, and I have to resist the urge to walk up and touch him just to make sure he's really here.

Because he shouldn't be.

Kids at Parker's school are divided up by house. Parker's house is emerald, and she said this meeting was for emerald parents.

Hayden's son is onyx.

"What are you doing here?" I ask him, afraid I already know the answer.

"Finishing our date."

I glance back over my shoulder. Naturally, there's more space between us and the dock than there was before.

I look back at Hayden. “There’s no school meeting, is there?”

He shakes his head.

“You sent my daughter a fraudulent email to lure me here under false pretenses? I’m no expert, but you are—isn’t that a crime?”

He smiles faintly. “I didn’t send her a fraudulent email. Parker knows where you are. She knows you’re with me. She helped me set it up.”

That throws me for a loop. “What—Why would she do that?”

Feigning—but is he, really?—smugness, he says, “I guess you were miserable without me.”

I roll my eyes. “Ugh, I was *not*.”

He moves closer, reaching out and grabbing my waist so he can pull me in. “No?” he murmurs, dipping his head and kissing me. “I was pretty miserable without you.”

I can’t resist kissing him back, but I pull away before he can pull me under and obliterate my senses completely. “I told you I didn’t want to see you again.”

“You did, but it was a lie. Anyway, you owed me the rest of that date, and I’m not a man who lets his debts go uncollected.”

I pull away from his embrace with some effort. “Hayden, I’m serious. We talked about this. You saw what Landon did...”

“My son is not dangerous,” he says seriously. “I know he did an idiotic thing and scared you half to death. I understand that, and I’m very sorry. The truth is...” His jaw locks, and he looks out at the water. Whatever he was going to say, he doesn’t finish. He looks back at me and says, “He knows that he can’t pull a stunt like that again. I’ve already told him he’s out if he does.”

“Out?”

“Of the house. Of his trust fund. Everything he holds dear is gone if he comes after Parker again.”

“Oh,” I murmur, surprised to hear that.

“He’s grounded and not allowed to hang out with his bonehead friends

for a while. I have his car keys, and he's effectively under house arrest for the remainder of summer, so I promise you don't have to worry about Parker."

Easier said than done.

"Parker is worried about *you*," he says.

"Because I'm wasting away with want for you?" I ask sarcastically.

He cracks a smile. "No. Because you've put your life on hold for her, and she doesn't want you to wake up one day when she's off at college and realize you're all alone and you don't want to be. Now, I'm not saying I'm your destiny. I don't want to argue with you about the kids or the impossibility of our future together, I just want to enjoy the rest of the date you promised me. That's all."

I'm not sure I believe him, but I'm not sure I have much of a choice, either.

I bite down on my bottom lip, glancing back at the dock one last time.

"For the record, this feels a lot like kidnapping," I tell him.

He takes my hand and hauls me up the stairs. "That's a good note. Do you *not* like dates which include kidnapping?"

"They're not my favorite," I inform him.

"I'll keep that in mind for future reference." He looks back at me over his shoulder. "See? We're getting to know each other better already."

I shake my head at him, but fail to completely bite back a smile.

If asked, I would have definitely said no to this "makeup date," but I can't deny I feel a little happier now that I'm here.

When we get to the top deck, he hauls me past the hot tub and around the dinner table. I notice this particular table is set for two, but he hauls me past it to what I can only possibly describe as a bed. I guess it's a lounge area, but there are pillows everywhere, a soft-looking blanket draped across the bottom. It may as well be a bed, just one out in the open beneath a bed of stars.

Well, it will be set beneath a bed of stars soon.

The sun hasn't set yet, and I realize that's why he brought me up here. There are two yellow and orange drinks waiting for us when we settle in, and a cold bottle of water for me.

"My two drinks," I say, smiling.

"When it comes to beverages, you like to keep your options open. I remembered."

I can't help grinning as I drop to my butt on the comfy lounge area. "You did." I grab the one nearest my water and take a sip. "Mm, that's delicious."

"I'm glad you're finding the sustenance at this meeting satisfactory."

I scoff. "Meeting."

"It is. A *strategy* meeting," he stresses.

"Mm-hmm. And what, pray tell, are we strategizing?"

Hayden reaches forward and grabs his drink, then leans back against the pillows with it and takes his time looking me over. "Currently, I'm strategizing how best to remove your panties. Conventionally, with my hands? Maybe I should tear them off with my teeth instead."

"That is *not* the strategy meeting I signed up for."

I lean over and put my drink up on a ledge so I don't melt all the slushy ice with my body heat. As I do, Hayden grabs me and tugs me over closer to him.

I don't balk when he pulls me so I'm lying half on top of him.

It feels really nice, actually.

I settle my arm around his waist and my head on his bicep.

"I love watching the sunset," I tell him quietly.

He sighs with contentment, so I guess he does, too.

CHAPTER 14

GEMMA

AFTER WE WATCH THE SUNSET, I hear movement on the deck behind us, but Hayden isn't alarmed and tells me it's just the chef setting up dinner.

Since I know we'll be eating soon, I finish my fruity cocktail. To be honest, I'm sad when it's gone and I wish I had more. It was so good.

Maybe a little too good. I trip over my own feet standing up.

"Some dancer I am," I joke, a little embarrassed by my own lack of grace.

Hayden grabs my hips to stabilize me and teases me, calling me a lightweight.

"You probably drugged me or something," I mutter, only half joking. "Can't ship captains marry people? If I wake up married tomorrow, I'm gonna be so mad at you."

Hayden snort-laughes and follows me to the table. "You shouldn't give me any ideas."

"I'm so serious about this," I say, pointing at him as I drop gracelessly into the booth side of the table, then scoot down to where the food is. "I am not getting married without Parker."

"You're thinking an awful lot about marriage for someone who refuses to date me," he says reasonably, but entirely unconcerned by the tipsy woman talking about tricky weddings on his ridiculous super yacht.

"I need to eat something," I tell him. "I didn't eat much today, and either

you drugged me, or that was a very strong drink.”

“Well,” he says casually as he unrolls his silverware. “I’ve already been accused of kidnapping and fraud today, I suppose we may as well add drugging you to my rap sheet.”

I shake my head in mock disappointment. “Some lawyer you are.”

Once I have some food in my belly, I don’t feel as tipsy as I did before, but I still feel happy. I hate to admit it—actually *loathe* to admit it—but I think it’s just because I’m spending time with Hayden when I thought I never would again.

The chef clears our empty plates away and Hayden thanks her. When she’s finished cleaning up, she goes below deck to give us some privacy.

“So,” I say, gazing at him across the table. “You’ve been emailing my daughter?”

He nods unapologetically, like that’s a perfectly natural thing to do. “Since the night we met. She’s a smart kid. I like her.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty fond of her myself.”

He cracks a smile. “I noticed. She’s pretty fond of you, too.”

“What... um, what do you talk about?”

“Lots of things. Mostly we started out talking about you. She wanted to know what had been going on between us, why we were at the beach that night. What we were *doing* at the beach.”

“You better not have told her that.”

He smirks. “I kept it PG, but I think she’s smart enough to read between the lines. She was surprised, said you don’t usually get serious with guys very fast, but she could tell you really liked whoever you were sneaking out with.”

I cover my face with my hands. “God. That makes *me* sound like the teenager.”

“When I told her you didn’t think we could really give dating a chance because she and Landon didn’t like each other, I think she felt bad.”

My amusement fades and I uncover my face. “You shouldn’t have told

her that.”

“Why? It’s the truth.”

“I know, but it’s not her problem. I don’t want her to feel bad about it.”

“After that we started talking about other things. I think she wanted to get to know me a little bit, see if she approved.”

“Did she?” I ask lightly.

His eyes glint with amusement. “She helped me kidnap you, so she must have.”

“What a traitor.” I shake my head playfully, but realize I haven’t checked my phone in a while. I haven’t heard it go off, but I want to make sure I didn’t miss anything.

I did. Just one text message from Parker.

“Having fun?” she asked.

I smile faintly and type back, “Yes. Thank you.”

Since I didn’t know I was getting kidnapped tonight, my phone doesn’t have a full charge. I didn’t realize how low my battery was, but looking at it now, I see the bar is in the red.

I don’t want to risk my battery dying and Parker not being able to reach me, so I ask Hayden if he has a charger on the boat that I would be able to use.

He tells me he does and leads me down into the cabin I’m guessing would be his. It’s the master suite, if a boat has such a thing—and this one does. There’s a king size bed, but the bedroom is so big that there’s also a little sitting area with a couch and a couple of end tables on the other side. There’s a master bathroom with a shower and tub, and his and hers sinks on opposite sides of the room. The biggest walk-in closet is off this bedroom, and so is the office.

“I can’t believe you have a study on your boat,” I say, leaning forward to peek inside.

“It’s pretty much a whole house,” he verifies. “We lived on it for a year

while our house was being built.” He reaches for me, taking my hips and pulling me around to face him.

On instinct, I wrap my arms around his neck and gaze up at him. “You *lived* here?”

“For a time. I used to love the ocean. Felt more at home out here than I did on land.”

“What happened?” I ask, though I think I have an idea. Maybe it’s better if he tells me himself.

Hayden sighs, his arms settling around my waist. His gaze shifts away from my face, but his grip seems to tighten. “Six years ago I was at work on a Saturday. I wasn’t supposed to be. It was my day off, and I guarded those pretty fiercely back then. I wanted to spend all the time at home that I possibly could. Like you, I wanted to soak up all the moments.”

I smile faintly when his gaze flickers back to mine, but it flickers away just as fast.

“But on this particular Saturday, I decided to go in. Wanted to impress the partners with my dedication to the case. We’d been planning to take the boat out that day. I told Sally we’d do it Sunday instead, but Landon was determined to go out on that boat, he didn’t want to wait. Sally decided there was no reason they couldn’t go out without me. We loved to boat, so we could go out again Sunday if we felt like it. It wasn’t even unusual for them to take the boat without me, they did it all the time. So, they did it that day. And like a hundred other times before, they jumped off the boat and swam around in the ocean. They were both strong swimmers, so they liked to splash around and have fun.”

He pauses, his gaze drifting to the window. I know the ocean is out there, but right now it’s dark, an abyss.

“Landon was 12. He was the only eyewitness, so it’s impossible to fill in the gaps, but he said that they were just swimming and playing in the water when suddenly he realized the only sounds he heard were his own. He turned

around, thought she must have been waiting underwater to pop up and startle him, but he didn't see her anywhere. He swam around in circles, looking for her head in the water, looking for the shape of her body underneath. He looked up on the deck thinking maybe she'd climbed back on the boat, but she wasn't there. She wasn't anywhere. He dove back in the water and he dove and he dove and he dove. He screamed for her, and finally one of the crew came to see what was going on." He shakes his head, and looks straight at me. "The ocean betrayed me that day. It swallowed her up."

I caress his hard jaw, trying not to envision Landon as a desperate little boy searching for his mother when she was already gone.

"There's no closure with a death like that," he finally says. "The ocean is vast and full of predators. They never found her body. For days, weeks, months I didn't want to believe it. Maybe she was out there somewhere, maybe somehow I'd get her back. But I knew it wasn't true. I could feel it in my bones. I still brought the boat out time and time again trying to find her, but once I accepted that she was truly gone and I wasn't going to find her, I brought the boat in and never took it out again."

"I'm so sorry," I whisper.

He meets my gaze. "For years I've been haunted by the same dream. We're out on the boat, and she's alive and there with me, but something feels off. It feels like a mean trick, but I can't completely understand why until it happens. One minute she's there on the deck with me and we're just enjoying one last day together, and the next she's jumping in the ocean. That's when it hits me. That's when I know that if she goes in the water, she'll never come back up, but it's too late. I call out to her, and I lunge trying to catch her to pull her back up, but she disappears beneath the water, and I can jump in, I can dive and dive like Landon did that day, but I can never get her back."

There's something that sounds almost like fear in his voice. It's powerful and deeply rooted, and I wish I could scoop it out of him and throw *it* in the ocean.

His arms tighten around my waist and he pulls me more snugly against him. “The other night I had the dream again. I was out on the boat, which I haven’t been in years. But this time, it wasn’t Sally on the deck with me. It was you.”

My heart sinks. “Me?”

He nods. “We were enjoying a day together, and it didn’t feel off at all. I didn’t even realize right away it was the same dream, because this time, everything felt right. You were wearing sunglasses and a white cover up over your bathing suit. But then you stood up and took it all off. You asked me if I’d ever been skinny dipping, and then you jumped in the water. And as soon as you hit the water, that panic came back. I remembered what was going to happen. I dove in after you, but I’ve had the dream so many times, I knew how it would end. The same way it always ends, with me desperately reaching for someone I can never hold again.”

The way he says that cuts deep, and since I *can* hold him right now, I do.

I close my eyes and rest my head against his chest. My arms reach around his muscular back and I hold him tight.

Then he speaks again. “But I was wrong. This time was different. I plunged my arms into the water, and I ripped you from the ocean’s deadly clutches. You were wet and you were scared, but you were there and you were mine. I held you in my arms, and you held me right back, and... it was like the nightmare was finally letting me go. It was like I finally had a second chance.” He leans in so his forehead is resting against mine. “You were my second chance, Gemma.”

My eyes fill with tears because I want to be so bad.

But it was just a dream.

I can’t say that to him, though. Not right now. Not after what he just shared.

When his lips find mine, I kiss him back with the same hunger.

When he lifts me and carries me back toward the bed, I’m as eager as he

is to get there.

His hands are greedy and rough as they squeeze and caress my skin, running his hand over everything he can touch like he's taking stock of a prized possession. He puts me down right in front of the bed, catching the hem of my dress on the way down so he can grab my ass.

He lets go and searches for a zipper on the back of my dress. When he finds it, he drags it down and pulls the material forward.

He sits me on the edge of the bed and rips his shirt off without bothering to unbutton it. I'm wide-eyed as he pushes the material off his muscular arms and throws it on the floor, then even more turned on when he looms over me, his sun-kissed, muscled chest and abdomen on full display.

I lick my lips and look up at him.

He reaches out and grazes my bottom lip with the blunt end of his thumb, then gets back to undressing me.

He drags down my dress, his mouth grazing every newly exposed inch of my body with a searing heat.

My god, I've never been touched like this before—even by him.

He's not kissing me, he's consuming me. I'll be ashes by the time he's done with me, but I'm too caught up to reach for a bucket of water to save myself.

He hoists me and yanks the dress away from my body, then throws me back toward the middle of the bed. I'm startled, but it quickly melts away when he comes down on top of me.

His weight feels strangely reassuring pressing down on me. I rest my hands on his broad shoulders and kiss him back when he kisses me.

His mouth leaves a trail of wet kisses down my neck, my breasts, my stomach, and doesn't stop until he reaches the top of my panties. His greedy fingers hook into the front of the flimsy material, then he's dragging it down, following the path with his mouth and kissing his way down my thighs.

"I love the taste of you," he says hotly, pulling my panties off and

tossing them on the floor.

“Hayden—” My voice breaks over his name.

Before I can say a thing else, his mouth latches onto my pussy and I cry out, sinking my fingers into his hair.

He growls around my clit as he tongues it, and the vibrations shoot through me like a bolt of lightning.

I can't believe a man can make me feel this way. No man ever has before him. They've never even come close.

His fingers spread me open, then he angles his tongue against my clit. My hips arch off the bed as he begins to fuck me with his tongue, hitting that sensitive spot again and again at just the right speed. He's as relentless at this as he is everything else, so it's maybe a minute later when I feel the desperate elation of an orgasm that's about to hit.

“Hayden,” I cry, throwing my head back against the bedding. “Oh, God.”

And then I'm coming on his face, crying out in ecstasy and twisting helplessly as pleasure courses through my body.

I lie boneless against the mattress as he rises up and looks down at me. He looks gorgeous looming over me, like a god surveying his kingdom.

He shoves off his shorts and his underwear, and palms his cock as he gets ready for me.

I know he's going to fuck me now, but I'm too blissed out to even move.

He climbs over me and grabs my hands, pressing them into the bed above my head. I sigh at the feel of his muscular length against me. At the insistent hardness of his cock resting against my thigh.

"Kiss me," he commands.

I can barely move, but I find the strength to lift up and press my lips to his. His lips taste like paradise, and his tight grip on my hands makes me feel like his prisoner.

The combination is intoxicating.

He shoves into me without warning, making me gasp and jerk my hands,

trying to break free. He doesn't release me. He grips my wrists with one hand to keep them over my head and lets his other hand slide down my arm, down my naked body until his palm is covering my breast, kneading the soft flesh and tweaking my nipple as his cock moves deeper until he's filling me all the way.

It's the best feeling in the world to be so full of him. I can feel him stretching me in all the right ways, feel the slow build of tension deep inside as he finds a rhythm and starts to move faster and faster.

My tits jiggle as he drives into me, and the sight makes him growl and bend to kiss them while he's fucking me. His mouth on my flesh intensifies my building pleasure, and I know he's going to make me come again.

If he keeps giving me these double orgasms, he might make some headway on this dating business. I didn't even know that was a real thing that happened, but I am a big fan.

I arch up off the bed so I can get closer to his lips, needing to taste him as he pounds into me. When our lips connect, it's like a match lighting a fuse. I explode like a rocket, crying out as he wraps his arms around me and holds me tightly against his body. I grab his shoulders and melt against him, moaning and whimpering as his cock pounding into me extends the spark of my orgasm.

"Christ," he groans, squeezing me close and burying his face in my neck as he drives deep into my convulsing pussy and comes inside me.

We both collapse against the bed, sticky, sweaty, and completely sated.

His big hand comes up to brush my hair out of my face, and he can't seem to resist absently kissing my lips while he's there.

I'm feeling too many amazing things to process, so I wrap my arms around him and get as close to him as I can.

"I love your cock," I murmur.

A startled laugh slips out of him. "Yeah?"

"Mm-hmm. I'll marry it. You, I'm not sure about, but—"

He cuts me off, tickling me mercilessly rather than let me finish that sentence.

“Okay, okay,” I cry, pushing his hands off me and laughing. “I give up.”

He smiles, kissing me, then yanking me against his side.

We may both be hot and sweaty, but I’m happy to be here. I rest my head on his chest and enjoy the feeling of being held in his arms. It reminds me of the dream he had, the one where I replaced his wife, but he got to *keep me*.

I wish you could.

The impossible dream whispers across my mind, threatening to dampen the mood, but I don’t let it.

I close my eyes and shove it away.

I soak up the moment, because I know it can’t last.

CHAPTER 15

HAYDEN

I CAN'T REMEMBER the last time I watched a sunrise.

Holding Gemma in my arms, witnessing her simple pleasure as she sighs and leans back against me, watching the light in the sky shift as the sun comes up...

I shouldn't like it so much, but I do.

If I could start every goddamn day this way, I think I would.

I don't have a damn thing to complain about today.

When I woke up in the middle of the night, Gemma was wrapped in my arms. We showered together in my bathroom and she was feeling generous, so she sank to her knees, took my cock in her lovely little mouth, and showed me a slice of heaven I hadn't experienced with her yet.

I pushed her up against the shower wall, slid my hand between her thighs, and fingered her until she came too, then we stood under the hot spray with our arms around each other for a long time.

Now, we're out here watching the sun rise with chilled champagne and a bowl of fresh strawberries.

Gemma leans back against my chest and opens her mouth.

I grab a fresh strawberry from the bowl and hold it to her lips.

I watch as her teeth sink into it and her lips wrap around it.

My cock stirs as she licks the juices off her lips and welcomes my hungry

kiss when I can't take it anymore and need to feel her underneath me.

I hold her in my arms, and she wraps her legs around my hips. I fuck her again as the sun moves higher and higher in the sky.

Afterward, we lie sated in each other's arms.

Like I said, a perfect fucking morning.

I kiss her tit as she lies there gazing up at nothing, not to start anything again, just because she's close, and I can't *not* kiss her when I have a chance.

I shouldn't even be able to want her again, but it's like that first night.

Every taste makes me hungrier for her.

I've experienced lust plenty of times, enough to know that's not what this is. It's something different. Something deeper.

Something that's going to make the next year of my life nearly unbearable if she's going to continue to insist on not dating me.

And she will. Gemma might be soft and malleable in some ways, but she's also the sneakiest kind of stubborn. She's got it in her head that she needs to spend this year with Parker, and I've got it in *my* head that she needs to spend the year with me.

There's only one way to get both of us what we want, and I'm going to have to lawyer my ass off to make it happen.

"I've been thinking about Parker and Landon, our situation with them."

Gemma looks up at me.

"I think the best thing to do is deal with it head-on. Yeah, we can spend this year keeping them apart, but that's not a solid permanent solution."

"It isn't?"

I shake my head. "See, I'm gonna marry you, and I know you'll want Parker back here every chance you get once she goes off to college. It's unlikely that I'll be able to keep Landon away for all of those same occurrences. Not impossible, and if it comes to that, then it comes to that, but obviously, that is not how I *want* the future to unfold."

"You're saying a lot of things."

I pretend not to know which part she objects to. “What? You don’t want Parker to come home all the time?”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m not marrying you.”

“Yes, you are. We just discussed it last night, remember.”

“You’re confused. I said I’d marry your cock, not *you*.”

“I’m afraid we’re a package deal.”

She wrinkles her nose up as if disappointed. “Aw, really?”

I crack a smile and look out at the water. “Anyway, once we’re married, Landon and Parker will have to see each other from time to time. It’s all but inevitable. Parker also seems willing to make peace with Landon for the sake of our relationship as long as he’s willing to do the same.”

“You’ve spoken with her about this?”

“I have. I wanted to feel her out, see if he’d eaten away at all of her goodwill, or if there was a chance we could broker peace between them.” I glance down at her, noting her lack of enthusiasm for my plan. “I understand that she’s your daughter and you’re protective of her. I’ll be protective of her, too, I promise. But Landon is my son. Flawed though he may be, I still love him. I won’t allow his bad behavior to endanger your daughter, but if we can all come to an understanding, I think that would be a lot better.”

Gemma sighs. “Don’t you think it’s a little late for that? I mean, with the cops, and the arrest...”

I’m not eager to share this tidbit. “About that...”

Her gaze shifts to mine warily. “What?”

“Parker took back her statement.”

Gemma’s brown eyes widen, fury sparking in them as she clutches the blanket against her bare chest and sits up. “What?”

“Landon has to be dealt with, we can all agree on that. But this... this is a family matter, and I’d rather handle it personally than in the legal system. What he did was a felony, Gemma. I can’t let my son start his life out as a felon.”

She sucks in a breath, scooting away from me. “If he didn’t want to start his life out as a felon, maybe he shouldn’t have *committed a felony* against my daughter.”

I knew she would be mad when I told her, but I’m glad it’s out there now. “I’m not letting him get away with it. I’m just asking you to be open to the idea of forgiving him and moving past this if Parker can. I know he scared you, I know you’re still dealing with anxiety over all of it, I even know he’s a jerk.” I move up behind her, rubbing her tense shoulders as she looks out at the water to avoid looking at me. “But the kid’s been through a lot, and I’m not making excuses for him, but if I’m being honest, I haven’t been the greatest father since Sally died. I want to make some changes in that area of my life. I want to get back to having an actual family, and I really want you and Parker to be part of it.”

She looks back at me over her shoulder, her brow creased with confusion. “When you say family...”

I lock an arm around her neck and yank her back against my chest. “I can’t believe this is the second time in my life I’m doing this without a ring, but I guess when it comes to forever, I’m incredibly impulsive. I want to marry you. For real.”

“That’s insane. You’re insane.”

“Maybe,” I murmur, still holding her against me. “I don’t mean tomorrow or anything. We can have as long of an engagement as you want. A year, two years, five years. I don’t care about the paperwork. I just want you close. I’d like for you and Parker to move in with us.”

“What?” she says in a tone of disbelief, trying to pull out of my embrace, but that only makes me hold her more tightly. “Hayden...”

“I know it’s fast, but I know what I want in the long run, and I don’t want to be without you in the meantime. Life is short, and I don’t want to spend another day without you in mine. I know it won’t be smooth sailing, that there are big obstacles in our way, but I promise I’ll level all of them one way

or another if you'll just be mine."

Since I won't let her go, she tips her head back to look up at me, her big brown eyes swimming with emotion. "Are you serious?"

"Completely."

She lets out a noise caught between a laugh and exasperation. "I won't even agree to *date you* and you think we should get married?"

My lips tug up. "I think that's the answer. You said yourself, once you commit to someone, it takes a lot for you to come untethered. Commit to me. Then you'll try harder to get past this Landon stuff and make it work."

She sighs. "I don't know, Hayden. I mean... I obviously enjoy being with you, but... I just don't think Parker would be comfortable."

"All of this is pending Parker's approval."

She looks up at me uncertainly.

"Honest to God. If Parker doesn't want to do it, we don't have to. If you guys move in and we try to make it work with Landon but we can't, I'll move him out, get him his own place for senior year to keep him away from her."

Her wide eyes meet mine. "You would move your own son out of your house?"

"If it's a matter of Parker's safety, of course. I love my son, so I'll do my best to resolve this in a different way, but if he's determined to be a dick, I'm not going to indulge his bad attitude at the expense of Parker's safety or comfort. If it doesn't work, he can go. You have my word."

She stares at me for a moment, then she whispers, "This is crazy," but I can hear excitement bubbling up in her voice, see it building up in the smile she's trying to bite back.

I lock my other arm around her, too, and bury my face in her neck. "Good crazy, though. We all win this way. You can spend all the time you want with Parker, and all the time you want with me. Hell, if you want to, you and Parker can plan a wedding. I'll marry you tomorrow if you want to. The engagement timeline is up to you, but not because I need any time to consider

it. My mind's made up. I've seen what's out there, and I choose you.”

CHAPTER 16

GEMMA

I KNOW HE'S CRAZY.

Right?

Yes, definitely crazy.

But...

No, he's entirely crazy, I just like what he's selling, so I want to entertain it.

At least I'm honest enough with myself to admit it, I guess.

There's no way we're ready to get married, but he's kind of right. Being engaged isn't an irrevocable step. People get engaged all the time. Hell, *I've* been engaged once and it didn't end in marriage.

And the guy sucked, unlike this one.

If it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out, but... what if it does?

Besides, it's like he said, none of this happens without Parker's blessing.

Parker's sensible so she'll probably think it's completely crazy. There's every chance she'll overrule it so I don't have to.

"I haven't lived with a man in a long time," I murmur in the car on the way home. We're in my car this time, but I'm so distracted by Hayden's crazy plan that I forget to tense up when we drive past the Hartley's.

Not that I have to anymore, I guess.

If all goes according to Hayden's plan, I won't even *be* their neighbor

anymore.

“I don’t want to sell my house yet,” I say suddenly, looking over at him as I slow down in front of my driveway. “What if it doesn’t work out and I want to move back in?”

“That’s fine,” he says. “But if it doesn’t work out and you’ve already sold your house, I’ll just buy you a new one. It’s not a big deal.”

I stare at him as he says that like he’s buying me a new dress instead of a *home*, but I also know that—knowing Hayden—failure isn’t really an option. It’s what he’s telling me to ease my mind and ease me into it, but if he’s convinced this is going to work, he’ll make it happen, whether the world wants him to or not.

I let him come in the house with me and take note when Parker pops her head up from the book she’s reading and flashes us both smiles. “Hey, lovebirds. Did you have a nice time?”

She seems comfortable with him, and that speaks volumes. I didn’t even introduce them, Hayden went out of the way to establish a relationship with her himself.

He has a pushy, single-minded way of doing things sometimes, but it’s hard to deny it works.

“We did.” I glance back at Hayden. I already told him in the car that I wanted to have this conversation with Parker myself. I don’t want her to feel pressured, and she’ll feel the least pressure if it’s just the two of us. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Her brow furrows at my tentative tone. She nods, sliding the bookmark in her book, and follows me up the stairs.

We go to my room and I close the door for privacy. I take a seat on the edge of the mattress and try to think how best to attack this.

If I’m being honest, I’ve never even considered having to tell Parker a thing like this. When things didn’t work out with her dad, I sort of closed my mind to having serious relationships with anyone else, and no one came along

to *change* my mind.

Until Hayden.

“Is everything okay?” Parker asks, sitting down beside me.

I look over and offer her a reassuring smile. “Yeah. Everything’s good. I just... I have some surprising news and I’m not sure how to tell you.”

“Just spill,” she says, watching me carefully. “You’re not pregnant, are you?”

“What?” My eyes widen. “No. God, no.”

“Phew. Then go on, tell me. Are you dating Hayden?” she teases, bumping her shoulder into mine. “It’s fine if you are, Mom. I know you like him, and he clearly likes you. I want you to be happy, and if he makes you happy, then who cares who his son is?”

“Yeah?”

She nods confidently. “For sure.”

“Okay.” I fidget with the hem of yesterday’s dress. “I guess that makes this a little easier to get out. It’s still crazy, though, so prepare yourself.”

She smiles. “I’m ready.”

“Hayden asked me to marry him.”

Her smile falls. “What?”

My smile turns apologetic and a little unsure. “Surprise?”

“I... wasn’t ready.” Her eyes are wide and she shakes her head. “I don’t understand. What’s the rush?”

“We won’t get married right away,” I assure her. “He proposed, but it was impulsive. He didn’t even have a ring. I guess that’s how he proposed to his first wife, too. Once Hayden makes his mind up to do something, he just does it, to hell with proper form.”

“Okay... So, you’re engaged but not getting married.”

“Well, I mean, he wants to get married eventually, he’s just not in any rush to the altar. But he is hoping we’ll move in with him. With them,” I correct, my heart flipping over in its cavity.

“Them,” she echoes woodenly.

“But we don’t have to,” I tell her quickly. “We don’t have to do any of this. Nothing has to change. We can do senior year right here, just like we planned. If you’re not comfortable with it, I’ll wait. I told him in the beginning he’d have to take a rain check and if he wants to go out with me, he’ll have to wait until next year. We can still do that if you’re not comfortable with this.”

“I’m not going to tell you not to get engaged, Mom. I just...” She looks down at her lap. “I mean, you know how it is with Landon. How could we possibly live in the same house?”

“Well, I haven’t seen it yet, but I have it on good authority it’s a pretty big house.”

The corner of her mouth tugs up at my attempt at levity, but my stomach knots up because she isn’t comfortable.

“We—we don’t have to do it if you don’t want to. We *won’t*. I don’t want to if you don’t want to. But if it changes anything, Hayden swears that if Landon acts up and won’t get along with you, if he makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe living there, he’ll make him move out.”

Her eyes widen to approximately the size of saucers. “He’ll kick Landon out of his own house?”

I nod. “Obviously, he doesn’t want to, but if Landon can’t behave himself, yes. Yes, he will.” I watch her face as she grapples with that new piece of information. “Really, it gives you power over him instead of the other way around.”

“He won’t like that,” she mutters.

“I don’t know if he knows the precise terms. We can talk to Hayden more about it for clarification, but... that’s the reality. Hayden wants us to resolve this and move on if we can, but your comfort is our utmost priority.”

I sit there with her and go over all the facts until she’s made a decision we both feel comfortable with. I know it’s probably unconventional going to my

teenage daughter for approval on my engagement instead of the other way around, but I don't care how other people do things.

Hayden isn't in the living room or the kitchen.

I start to panic that maybe he came to his senses and left, but we find him sitting on the front porch, watching the Hartley house.

Parker and I join him. Brent is piling luggage into the backseat of his car, and Lisa's standing in the driveway yelling something about custody.

"What's going on over there?" Parker asks tentatively.

"I forgot to call off my dog," Hayden says simply. He shrugs, apparently not too concerned about it. "Oh well. He might not have littered your lawn with condoms, but he still behaved inappropriately toward you in the garage."

It's my turn to smirk. "Now who has to put a quarter in the inappropriate jar?"

Hayden rolls his eyes good-naturedly, but he's more focused on finding out how our talk went than pocket change. "Any news?"

I nod solemnly, then walk over and sit down on his lap.

He lifts my legs and drapes them over his, then links his arms together around my waist. "Good news?"

I sigh heavily. Keeping my face as serious as I can, I tell him, "It looks like you're stuck with me."

A grin splits his handsome face and he looks to Parker for verification. "Yeah?"

Parker smiles. "I guess you're engaged. And we won't talk about how crazy that is, so... congratulations. I guess you get me for a daughter, after all."

I glance back at Parker, my gaze questioning.

She rolls her eyes good-naturedly. "Just something he said to me when we talked at the police station."

"Well, I am a man who goes after what he wants," Hayden says deviously, leaning in to kiss me.

“You sure are,” I say, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him back. I’m cognizant of my teenage daughter awkwardly standing by, so I try not to linger too long, but I can feel Hayden’s happiness, and I’m already bursting with my own.

It’s crazy how this *feels* right.

“Why don’t I take you ladies out to dinner tonight to celebrate?”

I’m about to say that sounds great, but much to my surprise, Parker chimes in with, “Shouldn’t we include Landon in the big... official family celebration?”

“If he wants to come, of course,” Hayden says. “I think I’ll probably go home and share the good news with him myself, and then I’ll pick you girls up after.”

“Or we could meet you there,” I suggest. “We haven’t *seen* your house. I don’t even know your address and we’re supposed to be moving in.”

“That’s true,” he acknowledges. “Yeah, that’s fine. You can meet me there, and after dinner I’ll take you in and show you around.”

For my engagement dinner, I pick a cream-colored dress out of my closet. The knee-length gown with spaghetti straps is modest and simple, perfect for a family dinner.

Family dinner.

With Landon Atwater.

It’ll take some getting used to, that’s for sure.

I assume Hayden wanted to tell him alone because Landon won’t consider our engagement such great news.

I try not to let it bother me, though. If I'm going to be his stepmother, I will have to try to bond with him, but the only way that's going to happen is if he starts being nicer to my daughter.

I know it will probably take some time, and I try to tamp down my protective instincts and be patient.

I meet Parker in the hall. Her long hair is down and she's wearing an airy red summer dress with a pair of red strappy sandals to match.

"Ooh, you look pretty," I tell her.

"Stop," she says lightly, looking me over. "You look gorgeous. Hayden is a lucky man."

We head downstairs to my car and I put in the address to Hayden's house. "I think what's crazier than being engaged right now is that I agreed to move into a house I've never seen," I tell her as we drive down to the edge of the road.

I don't even notice this time when we drive by the Hartley house.

Not that Brent is in it. He and Lisa had a big, loud argument in the driveway earlier. Something about how he could have fun with his hooker, so presumably she caught him cheating.

Hayden didn't offer any details, but he seemed at least a little bit responsible.

I'd feel worse about it, but Brent is gross. Whatever he may have done to instigate things, it's not Hayden's fault if Brent can't keep his dick in his pants.

We have to drive all the way to the beach to get to Hayden's house. I don't know the neighborhood at all, but I go where my phone tells me.

Even though I knew Hayden had money—*and a lot of it*—when the GPS tells me I've arrived at my destination, I can't quite believe it.

The sprawling hillside mansion in front of me is somehow not what I expected.

"Whoa," Parker says, echoing my thoughts as I roll tentatively into the

driveway. “This is where we’re going to live?”

It’s white and black, three levels that I can see. The bottom level has windows of onyx glass like I might picture in the lair of a super villain. The main level has a balcony that wraps around the sides and the back of the house. The top level sits proudly against the backdrop of a darkening sky, and while the purples and swirls of pink are beautiful, somehow the sight strikes an ominous chord.

It doesn’t look homey, that’s for sure.

Then again, home isn’t a building with four walls and a ceiling. A house is what your family makes it, no matter how cold and imposing the structure.

“I like it,” I say decisively, so my mind will fall in line.

This is our opinion. We like it.

Parker nods, but she doesn’t say anything for a minute. “Should we go in?” she finally asks.

“I don’t think so. Let’s wait and see if he comes out.”

We only have to wait a moment more before Hayden walks out the front door, looking incredible in a black suit with gleaming loafers. Parker and I get out of our car and I push the lock button on my key fob, then we climb into Hayden’s Maserati.

He starts up the car without mentioning Landon, so I assume that means he’s not coming.

Parker doesn’t assume; she asks.

“Is Landon coming with us?”

“Uh, no,” Hayden says. “I think he needs a little more time.”

She sighs and looks at the house. “He should come. If we’re going to do this, we should do it right.”

“Well, I would have liked that as well, but it was his choice, and he’d rather stay home.”

“Do you want me to try?” she asks.

I open my mouth to say no, but Hayden shrugs. “If you want to. He’s in

the living room.”

“Why don’t I go with you?” I say, putting my hand on the lever.

“No,” Parker says before I can open the door. “I’ll just be a minute.”

Tension gathers in my shoulders as I watch Parker walk up the staircase to the front door. Hayden reaches over and rubs them a bit, like he can tell the tension is gathering there.

“I don’t like her being in there alone with him,” I state.

“We’ve gotta let them work it out on their own. They’re going to live together, Gemma. They’re going to be in the same vicinity from time to time.”

Not alone, not like this.

It’s too soon, it stirs too many memories of that night, her frantic calls for help.

“Maybe this is a bad idea,” I say quietly. “Not the engagement, but the moving in. I’m down to be engaged, but... maybe since we’re taking the engagement slow anyway, we should pump the brakes a little. My house isn’t the mansion yours is, obviously, but it’s perfectly fine. You could stay there with us as often as you like if your goal is spending time together.”

I’m crawling out of my skin waiting for her to walk back out that front door.

“It will be fine,” Hayden says with a calm I don’t understand.

“She said she’d only be a minute. This feels like longer. I think I should go in there.”

He squeezes my shoulder, partially to knead out tension, partially to keep me from getting out of the car. “Don’t. Just let her handle it.”

“He broke into our house to get to her, Hayden.”

“He was drunk. He wasn’t in his right mind. I assure you, he’s completely sober right now.”

I shrug his hand off. “I’m going in there.”

I get the car door open, but as soon as I do, Parker comes back out.

Relief envelops me as I sink back in the seat. Her long hair blows in the wind as she makes her way down the steps.

I notice the troublesome kid from the police station isn't following her, though.

The back door opens and Parker slides in.

I wait for her to close her door, then I look back. "No luck?"

She shakes her head. "No, not this time."

"Well, we'll have fun just the three of us," Hayden says, checking the rearview, and then backing out of his driveway.

Turning back around, I ask, "Was he at least nice?"

"He was Landon," she says, which translates to no. "But give it time, I'm sure he'll come around."

"Yeah." Hayden says it like he agrees, but just yesterday he was telling me he wasn't trying to convince me he was my destiny, and today he proposed marriage.

Sometimes you have to consider the source when a lawyer's talking.

Hayden glances over at me as he puts the car in drive and starts to pull away from his house. "What are you smirking about?"

"Nothing. Just dogging your profession in my mind."

His eyebrows rise at the cheerful way I say it, then he laughs and grabs my hand, bringing it to his lips so he can kiss it.

His eyes shift back to the road, but it's somehow sweeter when he says casually, "I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you."

I want to be as sure as he is that we will.

I'm not, but I *hope* we will.

Maybe I'm only less sure because Landon *is* his son, and Hayden might not like the reality as much as his promise. If Landon won't stop being a jerk and nothing we do seems to help, will he really kick his own son out?

It's hard to believe.

I know that even if Parker were a jerk to someone who moved in, there's

no way I'd ever tell her to leave.

Hopefully, it doesn't come to that.

It doesn't seem like we're off to a good start, but I suppose if Parker can be optimistic, then I can, too.

**See more of Hayden and Gemma in Parker and Landon's book,
*Contempt!***

Thank you for reading!

Feel free to find Sam on her Facebook author page or in her reader group (Sam Mariano's General Reader Group), on Instagram (@sammarianobooks), or TikTok (@sammarianobooks)! You can sign up for her totally-not-spammy newsletter [HERE](#)

GOLDEN WINGS & PRETTY THINGS



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KAYLEIGH KING

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COPY EDITING BY: Amanda at DRAFT HOUSE EDITORIAL SERVICES

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The following story is a preview of my upcoming novella *Golden Wings & Pretty Things*. It is an age gap/boyfriend's father romance that includes themes of coercion, cheating (not on each other but with each other), and adult language/situations. Astor and Indie's story will act as a prequel for my upcoming series *Fractured Rhymes* and the full version will be released in May 2022.

Thanks for reading,

KK

CHAPTER 1

INDIE

JULY

“*Watch out!*” is the only warning I get before ice cold water splashes across my skin, stunning me out of the relaxed state I’d found myself in. The group erupts into laughter and cheers as I fly up into a sitting position on the large inflatable dock just in time to watch Callan’s head resurface.

His perfectly straight teeth flash when he finds me gaping at him in shock. “Did I get you?”

This causes even more laughter from our friends, who either lie on the dock with me or float on smaller colorful rafts all around us. Callan is the only one fully submerged in the frigid water. It may be July, but Lake Washington never gets much above sixty-five degrees.

I look down at my now waterlogged yellow bikini and back at my boyfriend. “Maybe just a little bit.” It takes effort to keep my face pulled in a scowl, a smile and laugh fighting to the surface.

Callan sees right through it though. “Only a little bit?” His muscular arms, tan from spending our summer on the lake, glide with ease through the water. He stops just feet in front of me, his dark blue eyes searching me over. “Show me where I missed. I’m going to need to get there too,” he taunts, his lips pulling into a smug smirk.

It’s refreshing to see Callan like this. He’s been so serious lately. I’ve

tried asking him about it, but he's been cagey and vague with his answers. The desire to push him on it is strong, but when people pry me for information, it makes me want to punch them in the nose. So, I've tried my best to be patient.

He'll tell me when he's ready. Or at least I hope he will.

It's always been a toss-up with Callan. Since the beginning, it's felt like he's been holding back.

His hand wraps around my ankle, and with a harsh pull, he yanks me dangerously close to the edge. My nails dig into the surface to try and prevent him from pulling me further. I have a feeling it's in vain though. My legs now dangle in the chilly water, making goosebumps dance across my skin.

"How about a quick dip, Indie?" Callan takes my other ankle in his grasp too. "Just so we can get all the places I missed."

"Don't you dare," I warn, my smile still threatening to escape no matter how much I don't want to get back in the lake. It took thirty minutes of laying in the sun to finally warm myself up after my brisk swim out here. Shore isn't far, forty feet at most, but it feels a lot farther when your muscles seize up from the icy water.

"Wouldn't dream of it. I promise." Callan lifts my foot out of the lake, bringing it to his mouth. He presses a kiss to the arch, his eyes locked with mine while he does.

It's a sweet moment he completely ruins by breaking his promise.

There's barely enough time for me to release a startled yelp before I'm fully submerged. The abrupt change in temperature is a shock to the system. My body stiffens and my chest aches.

It's only a few seconds I'm under, but it feels like minutes.

Not once do Callan's hands leave my body as he pulls me up and I surface, making a screeching sound. "*Holy shit!*" I shriek once I've sucked in a breath.

My boyfriend's laugh fills my ears while I shove the hair that's stuck to

my forehead back. “Look how fast you get wet for me,” he muses.

His hands flex on my hips and a shiver of anticipation shoots through me. It’s been too long since we’ve slept together, and I miss being touched. In addition to his new evasive demeanor, he’s been coming over less and less. When he does, he doesn’t spend the night.

Since summer break started, he hasn’t invited me over to his place on campus either. Before, there were times I spent two weeks there, not once returning to my own apartment. When we first got together almost six months ago, it was all heat. Didn’t matter where we were, Callan’s hands were on me, but now, I feel like I have to *work* to get him to show interest in me. And I’m starting to grow tired.

The red flags are basically glowing neon signs at this point.

I’m wary, but still pleased by his change in attitude now. I don’t even care that our friends are five feet away from us, possibly eavesdropping.

“*Mmmhmm*,” I agree, looping my arms around his neck, bringing our faces closer. “You got me wet, now what are you going to do about it?”

Callan’s eyes flick to my lips, but where I should see desire reflected in them, all I find is contemplation.

Fuck this.

No longer waiting for him to make a move, I close the distance myself and test the waters.

I remember the first time Callan Banes kissed me. He literally swept me off my feet because he stole my ability to stand with a simple kiss. It was the epitome of making a girl weak in the knees. At the time, I thought that kiss was going to be my last first kiss.

Our kiss now confirms that I may have been wrong that night. Ever since then, I’ve been chasing that feeling like an addict chasing their first high. And now I’m starting to wonder if it’s even worth it.

People sometimes describe kisses like a dance. There’s passion and an elegant rhythm. The choreography should be exciting to perform. It feels

taxing and boring now. Almost like it's a chore.

"Callan!" Hansen hollers from the dock I'd been yanked from, making Callan pull away. "Get your ass up here. I need a partner. Zadie and Lark think they have a chance against me in beer pong."

"Oh! I don't *think* anything," Zadie shouts back at Hansen from the hot pink raft she sits on. "I *know*. I saw how you threw the ball last week at practice. We have this in the bag." Her hand points at the floating beer pong table, the various bracelets she wears chime every time she moves. "I'll bet you two hundred dollars right now that us *girls* can kick your ass six ways from Sunday."

Zadie Hill looks like a sweet little pixie, but she can verbally destroy the strongest of men. It's one of my favorite things to witness.

"Hey!" Hansen shouts at her. "Don't be a bitch."

"I'm not a bitch, I'm a fucking lady," Zadie hurls the ball in her lap at him. He catches it with ease, causing a scowl to form. "Stop talking and let's play."

Callan laughs, his handsome face pulling into a huge smile. "You're on, Hill." His quick kiss on my cheek feels like a dismissal as he pushes away from me without a second thought.

I stay there treading water, watching him swim away, not really sure what I'm waiting for him to do. Come back? Ask me to join? Just...*something*.

It's Lark, the stunning, soft spoken, blonde with the kind smile that yells over to me. Not my boyfriend. "Indie! Come on!" She motions me with her hand. "We can take turns."

I think over her offer for all of two seconds before I shake my head at her. "No, it's okay," I lie. "You guys go ahead. I need to go inside and see if my mom called me back."

Not a complete lie. I have an event this weekend and need to make sure that everything is still okay on her end. When I told Mom my wish to participate in this competition, she dragged her feet on giving me her

blessing. I'm counting down the days till I no longer need her permission.

For three years, I've squirreled away every loose piece of change and dollar bill I don't need to live so I can finally buy Jupiter from her. It's ridiculous that I would have to do such a thing when my dad gave me his beloved stallion as a gift when I was thirteen. The horse is rightfully mine, but when Dad died, my mom put her name on Jupiter's paperwork.

As long as she's the rightful owner of him, I need her permission for every event we participate in. It's just another way for her to keep me under her controlling thumb. Her new boyfriend isn't helping matters either.

Turning from my friends, I begin to swim back to the shore. I get no more than ten feet away when my name is called again.

This time it's Callan.

Treading water again, I look at the man I'm growing tired of wasting time on.

"I think my dad is working with that damn eagle again today," he warns from his place on the floating dock. His hand shields his eyes from the high afternoon sun as he squints at me. "It's never done anything, but I don't trust it. Just be careful."

"Oh," I nod once. "Okay."

With that, Callan turns his back on me. Confirming what I already know in my heart and making the disappointment I feel grow.

I don't chase after boys, but our story is the oldest one in the book. A popular upper classman takes interest in the wide-eyed freshman. She's shy but loves that he takes her everywhere, showing her off. He introduces her to everyone like he's truly proud to have her at his side. She believes his whispered sweet nothings and false promises. She becomes swept up in him and thrives off the heat between them.

But what happens when it turns stone cold, and the sweet nothings become lies?

You discover it was all smoke and mirrors, and you're left clinging to

something that never existed in the first place.

Astor

Jealousy.

It's a peculiar emotion to experience when you're a man who's never wanted for anything. Yet I find that unbecoming shade of green working its way through my system more frequently as of late. It appears during the smallest moments, like now, watching the eagle soar up ahead.

I envy the bird of prey's freedom and ability to fly away from it all. His liberty is fleeting, but every second is priceless to him. I crave those own seconds for myself.

With a low whistle, I call the bird back to me. It's taken years and endless patience to get to this point, but he doesn't hesitate even a moment before swooping back toward the ground. The piece of rabbit leg I have in the leather pouch at my side keeps him coming back.

It's his reward.

Protected by a thick leather glove, he lands gracefully on my arm. He makes a low squawking sound, his yellow ever-observant eyes looking for the treat he knows he's owed.

"Good boy," I praise, stroking a hand down his brown feathers before reattaching the leash to the leather straps around his ankles. It took us a long time to get here, but the contact no longer makes him uneasy. It wasn't an easy road, and I will forever carry scars on my hands and forearms as reminders of our progress.

The outcome has been more than worth it.

Taking his reward from me, he holds the piece of meat in his talons and eats happily as I carry him to the enclosure on the left side of the property. It's built in a dome shape, tight knit black netting covering the whole structure. It's large enough the bird will never feel cooped up, and in the middle is a raised wooden building—almost like a small tree house—where he can escape the Washington rains.

Releasing the tied leash from his foot, I free him, lingering only a moment to watch him fly to a perch. His head nods once, as if he's bidding me farewell as I close the keypad protected door behind me and head back toward my house.

The sound of boisterous laughter and yelling comes from the lake below, reminding me that I'll have another day of college kids in and out of my house. Early in the summer, I made the mistake of allowing Callan to have a few friends over. He has a house on campus he rents with a friend, but they wanted to swim in the lake my house sits on.

Had I known it was going to turn into a weekly event throughout the entire break, I would have rethought my original answer.

Especially had I known he would always bring *her* here.

I've never been one to deny myself what I want, but she is the exception. I've been forced to restrain my cravings for months—something that doesn't come naturally but it is required of me.

It would have been better had she never been put in my sights, but now that I know she exists, I can't seem to escape her.

Now is no different.

I enter through the tall glass backdoors of my home to find the main source of my growing jealousy standing in my kitchen.

The small triangles of her bikini cover little, revealing her sun-kissed skin. She doesn't hear me enter and her attention remains locked on the phone in her hand.

Even though I know I shouldn't, I take this moment to observe the girl

who's unintentionally captured my attention.

She stands on a dish towel in an attempt to not get water on my hardwood floors, but it's not working. Small puddles are forming at her feet. A steady drip comes from her dark hair that doesn't quite reach her shoulders. I watch as a drop falls down her chest. My eyes follow the bead as it travels down her body, stopping only when it disappears into the waistband of her bright yellow bottoms.

The unwelcome desire I feel for the girl rears its ugly head. My teeth clench in anger knowing that, without even trying, she's crawled under my skin. I'm even more infuriated by the fact I've allowed someone so unattainable to do so.

It's one thing to be jealous of another man, it's another thing entirely to be jealous of your own son.

And when I look at Indie Riverton, I'm uncontrollably envious that my son found her first and I'm angry he doesn't fully appreciate the prize he's obtained.

A siren whose song I must ignore.

She's a pretty thing that I'm aching to play with.

A toy that isn't mine to break.

Burying the ill-advised stirrings she causes, I focus on the resentment knowing I can't have her, and I clear my throat harshly.

Her amber eyes drift from the screen and noticeably widen when she finds me standing here. "Mr. Banes," she gasps. "I didn't see you there."

I shift forward a foot, hands behind my back. "You're dripping water on my floors."

She blinks slowly at me as if she's not understanding my remark. Finally, it clicks, and she quickly says, "*Crap*. I'm so sorry. I needed to check my phone, and I forgot to bring my towel up with me." Keeping her feet planted on the small towel, she reaches for the other dish towel that's folded neatly on the marble countertops. "I'll clean it up," she promises.

Before I can say another word, she squats down and wipes at the puddles on the hardwood. With each one she cleans, another appears from the water still escaping her drenched hair.

Shaking my head, I spin on my heels and head toward the laundry room where I know the housekeeper left a pile of fresh towels.

I return to find her on her hands and knees, a sight that makes my hands flex. Stepping closer, I dangle the towel off my fingertip in front of her face.

Indie's chin lifts, our eyes locking. The prettiest blush I've ever seen spreads across her face as her thin fingers wrap around the offering. "Thank you," she whispers with a sheepish smile.

I don't offer any reply or extend my hand to help her stand. I merely watch the way she nibbles on her bottom lip. It's a nervous tick I've seen her do many times. She does it when she's waiting for Callan to look at her or even acknowledge her. Her big doe-like eyes stare at him, silently pleading for him to remember that she's there, but he never does.

I've never been one to interfere with my son's personal life, and in truth, he's never responded well to hand holding. He needs to make these mistakes so he can learn from them. He'll realize too late that he's fucked up. Though, I'm not convinced his retreat from her hasn't been methodically planned.

"Why are you in here?" I ask. "Shouldn't you be down there with the rest of them?" *With my son.*

Returning to her feet, Indie uses the towel to ring out the moisture from her hair. "I needed a break from the sun." She tells a lie better than most, but the falsehood is written in her amber eyes when she speaks. "And I've been waiting for my mom to get back to me all day about a show jumping event I have this Sunday. She's out of town with her boyfriend, so getting a hold of her has been tricky."

Another thing I've noticed is she also rambles when she's nervous. It shouldn't please me as much as it does that I've caused such a reaction from her. It's not the reaction I desire, but then again, I shouldn't be craving a

single thing from her.

“You turned down the spot on our equestrian team along with the scholarship that came with it, did you not?” It was an abuse of my power to look into her school records, but along with my jealousy, my curiosity was also piqued. “Why would you opt for a merit-based scholarship that covers less when you could have received a full ride?”

My question takes Indie by surprise. Her mouth opens and closes a couple of times before she finally finds her words. “I always forget you’re the university president and know all this stuff about everyone.”

“Not everyone.”

Her mouth tilts in a playful smile. “So, I’m pretty special then, huh?”

“No.” My correction comes with a terse edge, instantly killing her smile. “When my son is dating a fellow student, I tend to take interest. I’m not fond of having strangers in my home to begin with, and Callan’s judgment when it comes to the girls he brings home have been less than ideal.”

After his senior year of high school, it went downhill fast and that is partially why I’m shocked he picked someone like Indie.

At the mention of dating Callan, Indie’s face falls further, and her hands tighten around the white towel she’s still holding. “*Right*, obviously.” She nods. “That makes sense.”

“Does mentioning my son’s past conquests upset you?”

“Upset me? Not at all.” Indie makes a scoffing noise before she can help it. It appears it comes as a surprise to even her by the way she covers her mouth. “I... I just mean, I know everyone has a past, and Callan is no different,” she attempts to recover, but the damage has been done.

Silence falls between us when I don’t offer a reply. Instead, I try to uncover the secrets she keeps guarded behind her pretty face.

She breaks it by answering my earlier question. “I’m good at what I do because of the horse I ride. We’re a team, and if I can’t compete with him, there’s no point in me competing at all. My mom wouldn’t allow me to bring

him here to Seattle, and without her blessing, my hands were tied. I took the next best option the school offered me, which was the merit scholarship.”

“I suppose that makes sense. It takes a long time to establish a bond with an animal, and once they’re formed, they’re not easily replaced.”

Indie glances toward the back yard where I’d just been with the eagle. “I can’t begin to imagine the kind of time it took you to bond with him. The patience alone to train an animal like him must have been intense. *How* exactly does one train a golden eagle?”

With her standing this close, I can’t help my eyes from wandering across her tanned skin or my lungs from inhaling her. The sunscreen she wears smells of coconut and there’s a light trail of freckles on her nose from spending her summer days lounging in my backyard.

“Training something is easy once you know what motivates them, Indie,” I begin, my tone sounding darker than I intend it to, but her nearness is destroying my resolve.

Indie picks up on it and her teeth stop their nibbling on her bottom lip. Her eyes lock with mine and her breath shudders as the air suddenly shifts between us. She’s looked at me before, but it’s as if this is the first time she’s truly allowing herself to *see* me.

“For the eagle, it’s the promise of food. As long as I continue to reward him, he’ll come when I call. Humans are just as easy. They want money, power, or sex. Once you know which they desire, you can have them eating out of your hand just like the eagle does mine.”

She stares up at me with her lips parted and chest rising faster than before. My own heart thuds against my chest and my mind fills with the filthy things I would do to her if she was my plaything.

Indie swallows hard, her throat bobbing. “Which one do you crave?” she boldly asks.

My hand reaches out and I push the wet strand of hair that sticks to her blushing cheek behind her ear. “I don’t crave just one, I want all of it,” I

pause, my hand lingering longer on her skin than it should. “And I’ll accept nothing less.”

I’m already playing with fire and toeing the line that’s been drawn in the sand.

To hell with it.

There are a million reasons to keep my distance, the biggest ones being Indie is Callan’s girlfriend and a student at my university, but that doesn’t stop me. *Can’t* stop me.

Shifting forward another step, I bow my head. I’m not sure if she’s even aware that she reacts and moves closer. Her chin tilts up toward me, further bridging the space between us. She’s shorter than me by many inches, but we’re close enough that I can feel her shaky breath across my chin.

“You would be just as easy,” I tell her darkly, eyes cutting to her pink lips. “Once I figured out which reward you craved, I could make you just as obedient. Just like him, you’ll come when I call.” Even to me, I’m not sure if this is a threat or a promise. Maybe it’s a mixture of both. “Just something to keep in mind.” Searching for the resolve I originally entered the room with, I harden myself once more. “Please do bring a towel with you next time, Indie. I would hate to see you ruin my floors.”

It’s best for the both of us that I turn and leave before she can respond.

CHAPTER 2

INDIE

September

I would consider myself a fairly resourceful person.

All my life, I've found a way to achieve my goals and figure out my problems. Sometimes with as little as a piece of bubble gum and spare change at my disposal, I've found a way to *MacGyver* the shit out of life. Each hurdle that's come my way, I've leaped over with grace and my dignity intact.

It took nineteen years, but I think I've finally met my match.

Never in my life have I ever felt more helpless than I do right now. Each direction I look, I can't find an escape route. The doors are all slamming closed on me and I'm hanging on by a single thread.

And she's standing there with a pair of scissors, waiting for the right time to snip it.

I should have seen the betrayal coming, but I foolishly believed that deep down she still cared. She didn't hold back the punches when she proved to me just how wrong I was. Each blow left a bruise that I still wear now. I'm not sure they'll ever fade.

She took the one thing that meant the world to me and now everything else is falling apart in its wake.

It would be easy to blame it all on her, but I'm at fault too. First, for

trusting she wouldn't do something so cruel, but for being reckless with my actions in the aftermath. I didn't think through my plan. I allowed the anger and desperation to dictate my moves and now I'm paying the price.

I can only see one way out of this, and there's no chance in hell I'll make it out with my pride intact.

Not when I have to look *him* in the eyes and beg for help.

It's been two months since I even laid eyes on Astor Banes, but that doesn't mean when I close my eyes at night that I don't see him or hear his voice. That singular and brief interaction we had has permanently embedded itself in my brain. I catch myself getting lost in the memory more often than I'd care to admit.

Astor and Callan have many similarities appearance wise with chiseled facial structures and similar builds, but nothing Callan has ever done or said to me has affected me the way his father's words have.

Callan has moments of intensity, but they pale in comparison to the energy that comes off Astor. I felt like I was choking on it that day this summer to the point I couldn't breathe. There are many ways someone can die, but I'm certain at that moment, I wouldn't have minded going out that way.

Prior to that encounter, I was aware of Astor, but never looked at him long enough to get caught in his storm.

Callan has invited me to a handful of family dinners, and Astor was pleasant then. Cordial even. During that time, I was blinded by the whirlwind that was Callan. My rose-colored glasses were firmly in place, and I wasn't seeing past him. Now that the glasses have been lifted and I've finally seen Astor, it's impossible to forget his existence.

He made sure I'd never forget.

"Just something to think about," he'd said, knowing full well what seed he was planting in my head.

The seed has grown into a vine that's been steadily ensnaring me since

July. I went out of my way to avoid him, hoping that once he was out of my line of sight, the hold he suddenly had on me would evaporate. I thought it was a fluke, that he'd caught me when I was vulnerable. I was feeling an array of things that day as I was coming to terms with the stagnant state of my relationship with Callan and dealing with my mother.

My walls were down, and I think Astor saw that.

I started to decline Callan's offers to spend time at his father's lake house. It only took two weeks of saying no for him to stop asking all together. At that point, I didn't care because while my boyfriend was floating on an innertube getting drunk in the summer sun, I was busy dodging the shards of my life as they exploded around me. Even if I wanted to go back there and risk coming face to face with the man who's started to haunt my dreams, I didn't have the energy to put on a façade.

And now, after a month of mistakes and fighting battles alone, I'm officially out of options and depleted of all my energy.

I could blame the fact I'm running late to this meeting on being too tired and not wanting to get out of bed today, but it would be a lie. The real reason is it took me two hours of pep talks and psyching myself up to convince myself to go to his office.

By the time I finally did, I only had fifteen minutes to get ready.

It takes effort to not growl in frustration at the hoard of people that slowly exit the elevator. They take their time, like they have nothing else better to do. Meanwhile, I have a meeting with a man who very well might be my last hope of keeping the remainder of my life on course.

If Astor doesn't agree to help me, I'm fucked.

Royally and truly *fucked*.

The last person to exit is a middle-aged woman whose attire screams *administrative assistant*. She smiles at me as she passes. I usually smile back at everyone, but not today.

Today is not a day for smiles. I feel like I'm on my way to plead with the

devil.

I step inside the elevator before anyone else has a chance to join me, my finger holding down the close-door button. Once they're shut, I force a steadying breath into my lungs before selecting the top floor. The ride up is painfully slow, and by the time the doors open, I've carved tiny crescent moons into my palms from digging my nails into them.

This level is quiet—eerily quiet. The phones are silent and there isn't a peep coming from any of the various offices on the floor. Walking down the brightly lit hallway, I start to panic thinking I've selected the wrong floor when a pretty woman with auburn hair stands from the reception desk.

"Miss Riverton?" Her smile is kind, instantly putting me at ease. "Mr. Banes has been expecting you. If you'd please follow me, I can show you to his office."

I feel him before I hear his voice.

"That won't be necessary, Cheska," Astor instructs from somewhere behind me, making chills run down my spine. "I can show her myself."

My muscles feel like blocks of ice, and I'm frozen in place. I don't need to turn around to confirm his slate gray eyes are raking over me. With each pass of them, I can feel them leave trails of fire over my skin.

"Do you need anything else before I leave for lunch?" the receptionist asks, a sultry edge to her voice. I can't say I blame the girl.

"No," Astor tells her, but I know he's still looking at me. "Indie, come with me."

His threat from months ago plays on repeat when I finally turn to face him.

You'll come when I call.

The day in July, he wore dark blue slacks and a white shirt. The first couple buttons had been undone and the sleeves rolled, giving him a relaxed appearance. Today, he's dressed like he's prepared to command a boardroom. Hell, as the president of Olympic Sound University, he might be doing just

that after our meeting.

The silver tie he wears complements the silver strands that are forming at his temples and scruff, and the gray color of his suit jacket brings out the slate gray color of his eyes. Both remind me of the color of the sky before a storm rolls in. In all honesty, there's less chaos in a thunderstorm than there is in his eyes. I'd rather face the dangers of lightning than face him.

Not because I'm afraid of him.

No, I'm afraid of what I might do because of him.

Our brief encounter left me feeling unsteady and out of control. He did it so easily, it shouldn't have been possible.

"This way," he instructs, turning away and heading down the hallway. He doesn't turn to make sure I follow. Astor simply knows I will.

It dawns on me as I look around the quiet space that he scheduled this meeting when no is here. And I'm wondering why he'd do such a thing when we enter the spacious office. The whole back wall is made of glass windows, giving an unencumbered view of Puget Sound, one I might find beautiful if I weren't filled to the brim with nervous energy.

Astor takes his seat behind the desk and motions to one of the leather chairs in front of it. My eyes skim over the name plate that sits on the shiny surface.

Astor Z. Banes.

What does the Z stand for?

"Take a seat, Indie."

Astor

I knew the phone call was coming, it just took longer than I expected.

For over a month she's struggled to find a way to fix the mess that has been created and for a month I've waited for her to walk into my office. It would be her last resort, but I knew she would come to me. There was no way she was getting out of this without a helping hand and the public defender that's been assigned her case is worthless. I've met cats that could contribute more than he has. The only decent thing he's done is keep her out of jail.

The last few times I laid eyes on Indie she wore nothing more than a swimsuit. Now she dons a green and black plaid skirt that could be considered too short to some, and a black long-sleeved shirt that's cropped, revealing her toned stomach.

For some reason, I find her attire now more distracting than I did the bikinis. Perhaps it's because I know what's hiding underneath the clothes, or it's more likely because she's wearing black knee-high stockings with her black leather boots. Images of her in nothing but those fill my head.

Indie sits timidly in the chair across from me, her crossed legs bouncing like she's unable to sit still. The fact that I can make her squirm with hardly any effort pleases me. Fighting a smirk, I cock my head at her.

"What is it that you want from me, Indie?" I know the answer, but I want to hear her say it. I want to watch her pink lips as they form the word, *please*. "You were vague on the phone about what this meeting is pertaining to. It's not about my son, is it?" Asking her this is cruel, but I want to gauge her reaction. Callan hasn't spoken much about her as of late, and I want to know just how fragile the single thread between them is. *How hard will it be for me to break it?*

Her answer won't sway or alter my plans. There's no stopping me at this point, but I would still like to have the information before moving forward.

She shifts in her seat again and her fingers reach up to fiddle with gold necklaces around her throat. "No, Callan doesn't know about this." She

pauses, a sad sounding laugh fills the space as Indie shakes her head. “I’m not really sure where we stand and if I did, I still wouldn’t want to bother him with it. I’m not sure if he’d care if I did tell him.” Amber eyes full of uncertainty collide with mine. “No offense, Mr. Banes, but I have more pressing matters going on than to chase after your son right now.”

Even without her saying the words, she tells me exactly what I want to hear.

“Fair enough,” I concede, sitting forward in my chair so I can rest my elbows on the black desk. “So, what exactly are you doing sitting in my office right now?”

Indie takes in a lung full of air and slowly releases it before speaking again. “I’m about to lose my scholarship. I’ve done everything in my power to ensure it’s not taken away from me, but like everything else lately, nothing I do is working. The scholarship committee won’t even entertain the idea of discussing it further because of what happened.”

“And what happened?”

I know the story, but I want to hear it from her.

The uncertainty leaves her eyes and it’s replaced with bitter betrayal. “My mother went behind my back and eloped with her boyfriend while they were on vacation. While the ink was still wet on the marriage license, she transferred ownership of our property in Snohomish to Ivan.” She’s trying her best to keep herself composed, but with each passing second her mask is breaking. “He decided that owning and taking care of such a large piece of land was too much work. He plans on selling everything that sits on it before finally selling the land to a housing developer.” Indie’s hands ball in her lap, opening and closing. “He also plans on selling Jupiter.”

I nod along, allowing her to tell her tale.

“I begged Ivan to let me buy Jupiter from him, but he refused, and my mother wasn’t any help. She sat back and let Ivan take him from me.”

“While it’s a disappointment you won’t have the horse in your possession

any longer, surely an animal of his skill and caliber will be sold to someone who wants to continue to show him. Correct?”

“No,” Indie’s head shakes. “They’re not doing this to make a profit, they’re doing it out of spite.”

My head tilts at this remark. “And why would they do that?”

Like she’s unable to continue the story from where she sits, she jumps to her feet. She paces behind the chair and her gaze looks anywhere but at me. “A few years ago, there was an...*incident* between Ivan and me. I found a camera in my bedroom that I’d never seen before. I tried to tell my mom about it, to warn her that he wasn’t a good man, but she said it was my fault.” There’s an audible break in her voice when she says the last word. Thoughts of what it’d be like to meet this *Ivan* in person crosses my mind as she continues. “Ivan hated me after that. He’s been in my mom’s ear ever since, turning her against me. And she’s let him.” She glances at me for only a minute, like she’s making sure I’m still listening. “Ivan won’t sell Jupiter for money. He’ll sell him to the closet kill buyer he can find just as a last fuck you to me.”

She comes to a stop behind the chair she’d abandoned, her hands gripping the back so tight, her knuckles turn white.

“It’s a troublesome story, Indie, but I’m not seeing how any of this affects your scholarship here,” I tell her, continuing my ruse that I have no idea what she’s done or what she’s about to ask of me.

Like I said, I’ve waited patiently for a month for this meeting. I’ve been devising and perfecting my plan for her since I learned of the mess she’d entangled herself in.

“I knew who he’d sell Jupiter to and that’s why I snuck onto the property while they were asleep. My trainer, Tessa, was a longtime friend of my father’s before he passed, and I knew she’d help me. Her friend owns a sanctuary in Idaho, and I thought if I got Jupiter there, he’d be safe.” I can practically see the defeat in her bones as her hands drop from the leather

chair. “I was so close to the border when the cops Ivan sent found me. They took Jupiter while I was handcuffed on the side of the road and Ivan had me charged with theft of property...”

“And theft is a misdemeanor in the state of Washington,” I fill in for her. She doesn’t understand it now, but she’s lucky she got caught before crossing the state line. Her charges would have been worse had her plan succeeded. “And a misdemeanor on your record disqualifies you for your merit scholarship.”

“Yes.” Her admission is barely a whisper and is full of defeat.

“And you came here today to ask if I would be willing to pull some strings so you can continue your education here?”

Olympic Sound University is a prestigious private college and the doors that will open for the students once they have their diploma from here are unparalleled. To lose her chance at that on top of everything else that’s been taken away from her is unfathomable to Indie. I can practically smell the desperation coming off her.

“Yes.”

Some things in life take work and effort, others just fall into your lap like the fates destined it. This is one of those times. I couldn’t have planned this better. All the pieces aligned without me so much as having to lift a finger. I promised myself for months, out of respect for Callan, I wouldn’t touch Indie Riverton and I would keep my distance from her.

That plan exploded into dust in July when she looked at me with those eyes filled with excitement and fear. A deadly combination but one that sets my blood on fire. The second I left her alone in my kitchen, I decided to break my promise and stop denying myself what I want.

All I had to do was wait for my opportunity and I vowed when it came, I wouldn’t hesitate to take it.

She came to me for help but has no idea what it’s going to cost her.

Laying my palms flat on the cool surface of my desk, I stand to my feet.

Indie's watchful gaze tracks each move I make, like a deer being tracked by a predator. *Pretty girl, I'm going to eat you whole.*

Moving in an unhurried manner, I undo the button of my suit jacket before perching myself on the edge of the desk.

"This is quite the predicament, Miss Riverton." I make a tsking sound. "You made a mess of things, effectively destroying the steadfast path you'd found yourself on." I'm stoking her flames because I want to see how easy it will be for me to put them out again. "It sounds to me that not only have you wasted this university's time, but also its valuable resources. There are thousands of applicants a year for that particular scholarship. They hope and pray to be accepted, but you threw it all away, for what? An easily replaceable *horse*?"

Just like I wanted, fire ignites in her amber orbs and her face contorts in anger. "Don't speak on things that you don't understand," she spits. "You have no idea how important that *horse* is to me. *No idea.* I fucked up, I know I did, but I would do it again if there was a sliver of a chance I could save him from being *slaughtered.*" She rounds the chair she'd been using as a shield between us, her fury driving her closer. "As we speak, he could be standing on a scale being weighed so they can determine how much he's worth. They don't give a fuck what his bloodlines are, or how many ribbons he's won. Or even what he means to me. His only value will be in how much meat he can provide and that thought alone is enough for me to throw up on your fucking carpet."

Sitting like a cold piece of stone, completely unbothered by her outburst, I calmly command, "Sit down."

The anger melts from Indie's face, confusion replacing it. She looks between the chair she'd abandoned and me. "*What?*"

"Sit the fuck down, Indie." This time there's a deadly edge to my tone, leaving no room for her to question me.

She stares at me a moment longer before the fight leaves her body once

again. Satisfaction fills my chest when she complies with my order without further debate.

So willing to comply, Indie. What else can I make you do?

“Good.” My approval has Indie’s eyes flaring and ever so slightly shifting in her seat. “You came here for my help, but you haven’t said the actual words. So, tell me again, Indie, what do you want from me?”

Her pink tongue swipes out, wetting her bottom lip. Finding the remainder of her plummeting resolve, she tilts her chin and sits up straighter. “Will you please help me, Mr. Banes?”

And there it is. The word I’ve been waiting to hear.

Please.

CHAPTER 3

ASTOR

“YOU REALLY SHOULD HAVE COME to me sooner, Indie. It would have saved yourself a lot of time and energy if you had.” I return to the other side of my desk and sit back in the leather chair. Opening the top drawer, I grasp the blue folder that I’d left there nearly two-months prior. Much like me, it waited patiently for this day to arrive. “While you continued with your futile attempts to salvage things, I’d already gone ahead and done so for you.”

Indie’s lips part in surprise. “I—I don’t understand,” she stammers.

I place the folder on the shiny surface of my desk. Her eyes flick to it only momentarily before returning to mine. “I knew you’d eventually come to me for assistance, so I took the initiative to pull strings and arrange some options for you in an effort to be well prepared for today.” My words come across much more selfless than they are. My motives are and will always be inherently selfish. “It will be up to you which of these two paths you choose, but either way, you will be walking away with a diploma from an esteemed university.”

“How could you have known I would come to you? We hardly know each other.” Her head shakes.

“Tell me, who else in your life would have been willing or able to help you in anyway?” I question. “Your mother has all but washed her hands of you now that her new husband is in the picture. Your friends could offer you

nothing more than a shoulder to cry on. And my son? You elected to not inform him of your troubles. So, I'll ask again, who else was going to help you?"

She sits there, staring at her hands and accepting her fate. "You said I had two options. What are they?"

Opening the blue folder, I push it closer to her so she may read the letter of acceptance from the college in Alabama. "I have a long-time business associate that happens to be the dean of Auburn University. He was more than happy to look past your now blemished record and offer you a place at his school. Housing and a meal plan will also be included as part of your attendance. I have also gone ahead and secured a loan for your tuition. If you should want it, all you would need to do is fill out the remaining paperwork. This would give you the opportunity to start fresh, away from your mother and her new husband."

It's a favorable offer, one that offers her everything she could want. *Almost everything*, that is.

"*Auburn?* Are you kidding me? This offer feels too good to be true. So, what's the catch?"

"Smart girl." My head nods once in approval. Turning over her acceptance letter from the southern university, I reveal the brochure hidden beneath. "They acknowledge talent when they see it and they're not about to let this opportunity pass them by. One of their riders had to leave unexpectedly and there is now a spot on their team available for you."

She stares at the blue and orange pamphlet like it's personally offended her. A reaction I had fully expected. "I already told you that I don't have any interest in being part of an equestrian team. Especially without—"

"Jupiter." I finish for her. She thinks I could have already forgotten the thoroughbred's name. The irony of the name alone will keep it committed to my memory for years to come. "I know what you said, but you're not really in a position to be *picky*, now are you? This offer is one that is not easily

beaten. It is also not one you will get again if you were to change your mind in a month's time." Passing the brochure closer to her, I take the picture of the bay-colored horse tucked below it out. "They call him Connecticut. From what I've been told, he's an excellent jumper. He just requires a rider. His owners are alumni of the university and would be proud to have their horse participating on their equestrian team."

Reluctantly, she reaches out with uneasy hands and takes the offered picture. The longer she stares at the gelding in the picture, the more the despair grows in her amber eyes. Her soft lips open and close like she's trying to find the ability to agree to the offer, but in the end her unwavering loyalty wins. Just as I had hoped and planned. Her eyes squeeze closed as she turns the picture over.

Using one finger, she pushes it back to me. "What's option number two?"

There isn't a folder for this one. No, it's best this one isn't written down on paper. "Option two is you stay here, and you're allowed to continue your education here at my university. The same amount that was covered by your scholarship will continue to be covered. Unfortunately, room and board will not be included in this option but seeing as you already have an apartment off campus, nothing will change in that manner. Your classes will resume as normal come Monday morning."

Looking completely dumbfounded, Indie tilts her head at me. "Why didn't you start with that one?"

Leaning back in my chair, I rest my elbows on the armrests and clasp my hands together. "Because the price for option two is much greater than breaking a vow you've made to yourself."

Her faithfulness to her equine companion is endearing, but I'm about to learn just how resilient it is. If it's as strong as my desire for her, there's a slim chance she will break it.

"To stay at Olympic Sound, what will it cost me?" Indie shifts in her seat, crossing her leg over the other before asking the real question at hand. She's

a smart one, I'll give her that. "What do *you* want in return?"

Oh, pretty girl, you have no idea.

That's a deadly question with an answer I'm not sure she's ready to hear in its entirety. So, I tell her the truth. "You."

I watch as she stiffens in her seat and the sweetest airy gasp escapes her lips. "I don't know what that means."

Her hands move to the hem of her short skirt. Her fingers grip the fabric like it's the one lifeline she has left keeping her tethered to her chair. Indie looks like a cornered rabbit, as if any sudden movement will make her flee. I put my theory to the test by standing from my chair once again. Her eyes flick toward the closed door, but like the good girl she is, she remains in her seat.

My palms press flat against my desk as I lean forward, eating up more of the space between us. "It's simple really. For the remainder of the school year, you would be mine. Mine to call upon, mine to have when I please, mine to touch in any way I see fit."

The spark of intrigue that has lingered in Indie's gaze since she walked in my office morphs into dismay. "You want me to, what? Be your *whore*?"

"If you'd prefer to use such degrading terms, we can." *A pretty thing. A pretty whore.*

Her fingers look like they might tear the fabric of her skirt at this point. Her hands have started to shake, but still she remains put. When the door is only mere feet away from her. No one is stopping her from fleeing.

"How can you say that to me when you know I'm Callan's girlfriend?" Indie says this like it's supposed to bring reason to the argument. Little does she know, reason went out the window that day in my kitchen—when I decided I'd no longer deprive myself of what I want.

In steady, unhurried steps, I round my desk and stand in front of her. Indie reclines in her chair, desperately trying to create space between us when I bow so our faces are eye level. She flinches as I trail my fingers along her

jaw before clasping her chin in my grasp. I'm forced to hide a smirk when her pupils dilate, and a shaky breath skips across her lips.

"How did that lie taste on your tongue, Indie?" I ask. "Bitter, I'm sure."

She wants to argue with me, I know it, but instead she sits like a piece of stone, allowing the flames to dance just beneath the surface. I know they're there. The flames lick out, teasing me. I want to stoke them.

"So, what's your plan, Mr. Banes?" Her voice is strong, even. "If I said yes to this, you'd turn me over and fuck me right here on this desk? Whether I wanted to or not?"

My smirk finally breaks free. "No, I won't. You have two options in front of you and you must decide which path you'd like to take. If you elect to go to Alabama, I will gladly book you a first-class ticket there and we can end this right here. And separately we can both reminisce over what could have been." No doubt she'll haunt my dreams just as I do hers. "But if you decide to stay and be mine, you must come to me first. If this is the path you decide to take, I will not initiate our arrangement. It ultimately has to be your choice and yours alone."

She tilts her chin higher in my grip. "Why me?"

"You once asked me what I crave. I told you I wanted it all and that included you. Do you remember what else I said that day?"

Her voice is just barely a whisper when she answers, "That you'd accept nothing less."

"*Precisely.* I saw you and decided I wanted to claim you as my own. All I've done now is discovered a way to do so." I don't bother telling her I deprived myself of my craving for months or that I thought of what her pretty face would look like as she looked up at me from her knees. Those are my secrets and mine alone.

She silently ponders this, eyes examining my face like she will find the answers hidden there. I had planned for an array of questions, but she has only one.

“Do I have to decide today?”

“No.” I finally release her face from my grasp. “You have until Sunday night. Four days and not a second longer.” My fingers pull the card from my suit pocket. It has my personal cell phone number on the back. “If I don’t hear from you, I will assume you’ve found a third path.”

She takes the card from me, and I step back, returning to her the space I had been holding hostage. Indie holds the card to her chest as she stands from the chair on shaky legs. Amber eyes look me over once more before she turns from me. It’s only when her thin fingers touch the door handle that I speak again.

“I do hope to hear from you, Indie.”

CHAPTER 4

INDIE

SOMETHING WEIRD HAPPENS when someone puts a timer on your life. Seconds you would never think about wasting suddenly feel precious and horribly fleeting.

Three days ago, I left Astor Banes office in a completely bewildered and, frankly, aroused state. The latter, of course, caused an extreme sense of guilt to also bubble to the surface. The idea of being Astor's *whore* shouldn't excite me. The very notion should *infuriate* me and scare me. The rational thing for me to do after leaving our meeting—if you can call it that—was to have run to the closest administrator and filed a complaint against him. Even if I had been inclined to do so, I doubt it would have done anything. Astor Banes is a God among men.

For each second that has passed, thoughts of Astor and his offer have occupied my mind. Not once, not even in my fitful sleep, have I found any reprieve from him. Like my own personal ghost, he haunts me. I can't honestly say I'm mad at him for that. I'm more upset with *myself* that I've even allowed this to be a decision worth agonizing over.

I know which one I should choose. Just like he said, Alabama would offer me a chance at a fresh start, away from the evil doings of my mother and Ivan. I should be asking for the first flight out of Washington. There's nothing tethering me to my home state any longer. My relationship with

Callan is nonexistent. At this point, we're both just waiting for the other to call time of death. My mom stopped being my mother when Dad died three years ago and now that she has Ivan, the situation has become even worse. And on top of it all, Jupiter is gone.

Tessa, my trainer, has been calling everyone she knows to try and find where Ivan sold him. Every slaughter and auction house has been called, but of course they're not willing to give over that kind of information. It's been almost five weeks exactly since Ivan took him and sold him to God knows where. It's starting to feel hopeless at this point. For all I know, he could already be dead.

Not only do I feel like I've let down Jupiter, but I also feel like I've let down my dad. My passion and love for the equestrian world comes from him. His family bred and raced horses in Kentucky for generations. My dad may have ventured away from his family business, but he always had his stables full. His last gift to me before he got too sick was the black thoroughbred. It would crush him today to know the horse he spent years training was gone.

He thought their souls were one in the same and because of that he called Jupiter his heart horse. When cancer became too much and Dad's body could no longer bear to ride, he gave me Jupiter. He knew the horse would be miserable and bored if he were to spend the rest of his long life in a pasture. And when Dad saw how well Jupiter and I worked together, he knew we'd form an unbreakable bond.

My dad's heart may have stopped, but he left a piece of it in his heart horse. That's why the idea of going to Alabama and riding another makes me queasy. To me, it feels like the ultimate betrayal. To *both* of them.

"I have all my connections looking for him, Indie." Tessa's reassuring tone does little to settle the nerves in my body. "There's a shipment of horses being sent across the northern border next month. Protestors and attempts from different animal-rights organizations—including my own—have set back the original shipment date, but it's looking like they got the go ahead for

next month. If we raise enough funds from our donors, Amelia and I are headed there in two weeks to offer to buy the lot. If it works out, there're a few rescues that have offered to help take them in and rehome them once they're rehabilitated. If Jupiter is there, we will find him."

"Okay." I release a long breath, trying to quell the unease that's been a permanent resident in my chest for three days. "Just keep me updated, Tessa."

"We'll get him back. Just hang in there, honey."

"I'm trying." I wish I had a fraction of her optimism right now. "Tell Amy I said hello and thank you." I'm not sure how many lives Tessa and her wife, Amelia, have saved, but I know hundreds of horses would be dead without their endless efforts.

"I will."

The call ends just as Lark's blonde head pops out of the back door I'd escaped from just minutes prior. "There you are. Zadie couldn't find you and we thought you left without saying anything."

Even with her blood alcohol level high and shirt damp from the beer Hansen had spilled on her, Lark has a way of looking effortlessly perfect. She doesn't even try, and the worst part is she's completely oblivious to it. I would hate her if I didn't know she's truly a wonderful person on top of it all.

She's one of the good ones and that's rare here. With a university as prestigious as Olympic Sound comes a lot of money, and with a lot of money comes a lot of corrupt and shady people. There's a select few—particularly a pair of brothers—that I know are in my best interest to avoid. It's best I don't entangle myself in their dark worlds.

"I had to take a call." I wave the phone in my hand at her as I walk up the few steps of the stone patio.

"You and Callan both keep sneaking off with these mystery calls," Lark comments, holding the door open for me. "I feel like I'm always searching for one or the both of you."

The smell of weed and spilled beer suffocate me when I reenter the party. Should I be attending a party when I have less than sixteen hours on my deadline? No, but pacing the walls of my small apartment for a third night in a row felt unbearable. I thought getting out might help me finally make up my mind.

Astor or Alabama?

Or there's always option three where I hold out for a magical third choice to fall on my lap. The option of dropping out of college for now and just working did cross my mind. I could save up enough money to pay for college on my own, but that would take years and completely throw me off track from my plans and goals. I want to be a nurse practitioner, and to do so I will need to get into a master's program. A diploma from Olympic Sound was supposed to be my magic ticket for that. I worked my ass off in high school to make the grades to be accepted here because I knew I'd need a scholarship to afford this school. Even if my mom was, and she's definitely *not*, willing to assist in paying for my education, my dad's illness plundered my family's savings.

I think that's one of the reasons she latched so hard onto Ivan. He has money and isn't afraid to flaunt it. She saw financial security in him.

A red solo cup full of clear liquid is waved in front of me, breaking my train of thought. I take the offered cup from Zadie, who had magically appeared, and look at it with uncertainty.

Reading my unspoken concerns, Zadie reassures me, "Don't worry. I poured it myself." Her bright green eyes are surrounded by her smudged makeup and her red lipstick has long worn off from the various drinks she's had. "Drink up and come dance with me!"

This is why I came here, right? To loosen up and clear my head.

Before I can convince myself to get a cab and go home to stew over my decision more, I toss the liquid back. The vodka burns as it goes down my throat, but I look forward to its impending relaxing affect.

Three drinks later and an hour of dancing, I'm sweaty and just buzzed enough that the dread in my bones has been silenced. Looking at myself in the dirty mirror of the downstairs bathroom, I adjust my short hair. I tie the top half into a messy knot and leave the rest down. All my life I had waist length hair, but when I got to college, I felt like I needed a change. It's progressively gotten shorter, but my current long bob is my favorite look.

"I have to pee!" someone slurs from outside the bathroom before they begin banging on the closed door, alerting me that my time in here is up.

I barely get the door open before a girl dressed in hardly any clothes pushes past me. She doesn't even attempt to close the door before she sits on the toilet and begins to relieve herself.

Shaking my head, I walk down the hallway and search for my friends.

I heard someone yell Callan's name about twenty minutes ago, so I know he's still here somewhere. He hadn't bothered to text me back when I told him I'd be coming to Hansen's party tonight. Lark is right about his constant phone calls. I used to wish he'd tell me what he's working on, but now I don't really care. It's not like I've been forthcoming with my own dealings. Why should I expect him to do the same?

When I showed up at the party, I found him already here, drinking on the back deck with Hansen and their buddies. He gave me a halfhearted side hug that I'd returned with the same enthusiasm, and a kiss on the head. His attention was quickly stolen away by a crude joke from one of the football players. I'd slunk away without a look back.

Looking for familiar faces, I walk into a dark smokey room, and I lock eyes with a pair that are so cold that I feel chills go down my spine. Remember how I said there were people I tried my best to avoid? These cold orbs belong to the youngest brother. He is the embodiment of "if looks could kill," but still I'd rather run into him than his older brother.

My feet skid to a stop and I'm just about to turn away when my eyes zero in on what's actually happening in this dark room.

His tattooed arms rest on the armrest of the chair and his black painted fingernails are digging into the leather. The girl on her knees with her mouth around his dick tries to come up for air, but he doesn't allow it. His lips part in a sneer as his hand leaves the leather armrest to thread through the mussed strands of her hair. He holds her in place and her struggling sounds of desperation fill my ears. She gags as he comes down her throat, and the whole time, I can feel his icy gaze on me.

Where disgust should form in my belly, heat does instead. My lower stomach muscles clench and a tingle runs down my spine. I should be appalled by what I just witnessed, just as I should be appalled by Astor's offer, and yet, the emotion eludes me. It's buried by a hunger and craving I didn't even know I had.

With one last fleeting look at the man hidden in the shadows, I turn away with a fire burning in my belly and an ache between my thighs that *shouldn't* be there.

I search the face of each person I pass trying to find the one who could possibly help ease the growing sensation. I'm at the level of drunkenness where bad ideas are starting to sound like good ones. While the logical side of me knows that Callan doesn't want me any longer and my own emotional ties to him are waning by the second, the physical—*needy*—side of my brain knows that once upon a time, he knew how to please me in ways no one ever has before. Though, the bar was low to start with, but I digress.

But right now, my body wants to relive some of those heated nights.

Hansen stumbles out of a dark doorway up ahead and I push through the small group of students blocking my path to him.

“Hansen!” I shout, getting the tall football player's attention. His head turns around, searching the chaos for the source of the shouting. It's when I pull on the arm of his shirt that he finally sees me. “Hey, have you seen

Callan?”

With a huge, *drunken*, smile, Hansen’s muscular arm wraps around my shoulder and he pulls me to his side. “Callan is my boy. My boy, man! You know I love him like a brother, but Indie, baby, he doesn’t deserve you.” His speech might be slurred but his message is clear. “You’re too good for him.”

I can’t stop myself from laughing at this. “Thank you, Hansen.” I pat his chest endearingly. “But I don’t know if that’s true. Actually, I *know* that’s not true.”

If it were true, I wouldn’t be thinking about his *dad*, and I sure as *shit* wouldn’t be thinking about the things he could do to my body. I wouldn’t lie there at night, envisioning what it’d be like to go to him and allow him to have me in any way he sees fit.

If I were *good*, I would feel shame for wanting to agree to Astor’s agreement.

“Nah, don’t say that shit,” Hansen disagrees. “You’re a good one, Indie.”

Hansen’s words fill my ears, but I’m no longer listening to him. Not really.

For an hour, I didn’t think about Astor, but now that I’ve allowed a single thought of him to reenter my brain, he’s consuming me once more. Like a vortex, I’m sucked into my illicit daydreams of Astor Banes and his dark promises.

You would be mine. Mine to call upon, mine to have when I please, mine to touch in any way I see fit.

Hansen cuts through my thoughts, pulling me back. “But to answer your earlier question, Callan dipped out of here about ten minutes ago. I think he was driving Zadie home. That girl thinks she can hold her liquor, but she can’t for shit.” Someone calls his name across the room, and he pulls away from me. “I’m serious, baby, go find yourself someone better.” His grin is huge and encouraging when he looks over his shoulder at me. With a wink, he departs into the crowd.

I stand there, thinking over my next moves. My hand taps a steady rhythm on my bare thigh as I try to talk myself out of what I want to do. *You could learn to enjoy Alabama, Indie. Just take the fresh start and leave everything behind. Leave him and his devious ways behind.*

The thing is, I don't think I'll have to learn how to enjoy Astor. I haven't even tasted him, but somehow, I already know he'll be my favorite flavor.

Before I can convince myself to fly far away from here, I'm pulling the phone out of my small purse and typing in the phone number I'd committed to memory three days ago.

My heart thuds violently against my ribs as the phone rings, and I honestly couldn't tell you if my hands were shaking from nerves or excitement.

He answers on the third ring and the sound of him saying my name makes my breath still in my throat.

"Indie."

"Are you home?" I ask once breath fills my lungs once more.

There's a long, heavy pause before he speaks again. "No. I stopped by my office after a dinner meeting." Only someone like Astor Banes would still be working at this hour. On a *weekend*.

"Will you be there much longer?"

"An hour or so. Why do you ask?"

I'm already walking toward the front door of the house when I tell him, "I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

CHAPTER 5

ASTOR

HER FINGERS TURN the lock on the handle as she rests her back on the door she'd just entered through.

True to her word, it took fifteen minutes for Indie to come to me and I watched each one of those minutes go by on the clock on the wall like a student eagerly waiting for the school day to be done. The knowledge that with each tick of the clock's hand she was drawing closer to being with me—to being mine—made my blood warm and my cock strain against the zipper of my slacks. Never have I waited this long for something, but those months of restraint and patience are about to pay off.

There was a sliver of doubt lingering in my brain while I waited for her to arrive that she wasn't coming here to agree to my offer but instead the Alabama one. But with one look at her flushed cheeks and trembling hands from the adrenaline coursing through her bloodstream, I knew my predictions were right. She was always going to come to me and *choose* me.

The black T-shirt style dress she wears is tight, accentuating each one of the curves that hide beneath the fabric. The clunky black ankle boots give her another couple inches of height, something I will appreciate when I have her bent over my desk.

I sit back in my seat and clasp my hands. "Tell me."

Indie wets her bottom lip as she searches for her words. "I want to stay

here,” she finally manages to say.

“No.” My head shakes slowly, making her face fall. “Tell me what I *actually* want to hear.”

Not understanding my request, she stares at me with confusion in her pretty features. It would seem I need to better explain myself.

Pushing back in the leather chair, I stand to my full height. As I round the large desk, I begin to undo the sterling silver cuff links in the sleeves of my white button down. I’d abandoned the sports coat in my car when I arrived back at the office after dinner. It hadn’t been my original plan to come back here, but with Indie’s time allotment running out, I feared I’d go home and stare at the clock. My patience was disappearing faster than her time.

As it was, there were a handful of occasions in the past three days that I drove past her apartment. I had to stop myself from going to her door and demanding her decision right then and there. Just like my other business dealings, I had to respect the deal we had made.

Walking toward her, I drop the cuff links in the pocket of my slacks and begin to slowly roll up the sleeves on my shirt. She stays resting against the door like it’s her safety blanket, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

“If you are staying here, you know and fully *understand* what the price is, yes?” I grace her with a quick glance while continuing with my sleeves. “You understand what you’ll be if you stay here?”

I come to a stop just inches in front of her, claiming her space as my own. In this position, Indie is forced to tip her head back so she can continue to look at me. Would her eyes still stare at me with such hope and desire if I were to force her onto her knees right here?

“Yes,” she breathes. “I understand.”

Her nerves and stiff posture soften when I caress her face with my fingers. Her eyes flutter closed with contentment, thick lashes brushing against her cheekbones, but the sweet moment is ripped away when I harshly thread my fingers through the short strands of her hair. Amber eyes clash

with mine once more and a startled gasp escapes her lips as I force her head back even farther.

Dipping my head, I bite out between clenched teeth, “Then say it.”

I expect to find a flicker of apprehension reflected on her face, but to my utter delight, there isn’t a single trace.

She’s ready.

“I want to be yours.”

Her declaration has chills of pleasure snaking down my spine and limbs before convening at my cock. It presses against my zipper, aching for her. I should take her right here up against this door, but for just a little while longer, I will have to gather my remaining control.

“Prove it. Show me that you want me.”

I pull harder on the strands of her hair, and she hisses out a breath. “How?”

“Touch yourself,” I demand, releasing her and stepping away from her. “Touch your cunt and show me how wet you can get without me laying a single finger on you.”

Her teeth sink into her bottom lip while a beautiful blush rises on her cheekbones. “I don’t...”

“Don’t *what*? Want to?” I offer as a possible answer as I slowly stalk backward to my desk. If she’s already refusing me this early on, I may have a lot more work cut out for me than I originally thought. “Or perhaps, it’s that you don’t know how?” Perching on the edge of my desk, I wait for an answer.

Like she’s trying to hide her growing, and obvious, blush, she stares at the carpet when she speaks. “I know how—*of course*, I know how. It’s just *private*. I just don’t do it in front of... *people*.”

My eyes narrow in suspicion. “You’ve never fingered yourself while your lover watched?” More importantly, none of her past lovers have bothered to ask her to? What an oversight on their part.

A small head shake is the only reply I get.

“Look at me.” My order has her head snapping up like someone has struck her. “Let’s get something straight, Indie. For the duration of our arrangement, your private moments are no longer your own. They now belong to me, just as you do. Your body, your orgasms, and your fucking *tears* are mine. As are the remainder of your firsts. I’m going to take each one of them and claim them as my own. You say you’ve never finger fucked yourself in front of a lover? Come here and let me be the first to witness such a sight.”

Her face is full of apprehension, but I can see the spark in her eyes. Indie can deny it, but my order thrills her. “Okay,” she agrees after a steadying breath.

“Good girl.” I praise. “Stand in front of me.”

Her footsteps are slow and measured as she walks toward me. Just like she did when she was before me last, her fingers fiddle with the thin gold chain around her throat. Once she’s a foot in front of me, my hand lifts and she comes to a stop.

My eyes start at her boots and trail up her bare legs. “Are you wearing panties?”

“Yes.”

“Take them off.”

Indie hesitates only a second before her fingers trail up her thighs. My teeth grind as her hips subtly sway while she pulls the scrap of black lace from her body. The fabric falls to her ankles and one leg at a time, she steps out of them. Boldly, she locks eyes with me and bends at the waist to scoop them up.

Standing back to her full height, she dangles the thong from her fingertip. A move that reminds me of when I gave her the towel in July.

“Give them to me.”

I take the offered trophy from her finger and immediately bring them to

my face. Her eyes widen as I take a greedy inhale of the fabric. “You’re going to smell even better when you’re completely dripping with need for me.” There’s already a dampness in the fabric, but I want to see just how wet she already is. My head nods at the chair a foot in front of me. It’s the very one she’d sat in just days ago. “Sit down.”

Gingerly, she sits down with her hands in her lap and her legs closed tight together. The dress she wears hikes up another inch, but not enough for me to see what I crave. She’s so close, I could reach out and touch her myself, but I want to see her do it first. I want to see just how much power I have over my good girl.

“Are you going to deprive me of what I want, Indie?” My voice comes out with a harsh bite. A clear warning to her.

She swallows hard. “No, I’m not.”

Inch by inch, her legs slowly open for me until I’m rewarded with the sweet sight of her pretty pussy, but at this angle it’s still not enough for me. It’s obscured and I want to see it all.

Reaching down, my hands wrap around her calves. Indie’s gasp echoes through the room when I plant her booted feet on either side of me on the desk—effectively caging myself between her legs. This position change forces her to slide lower on the leather chair and spread her legs wider. Like a beast, a hum of satisfaction comes from my throat when it gives me the exact view I want.

Every piece of her is on display for me.

“Show me how you come on your own fingers.”

Indie

Never in my life have I felt more self-conscious and turned on than I do with my feet on the desk, spread eagle with Astor between my legs. There's no hiding from him, no angles that I can turn to spare myself from some of the embarrassment I'm experiencing. I'm completely bared to him.

It's an odd thing to be riding the line between excitement and fear, but if I'm going to be Astor's, it's a place I'm going to have to get comfortable being. Somehow the fear makes it all even more intense.

Astor's gray eyes stare at my pussy like he's seeing his long-awaited prize. And it only furthers the heat forming in my core and makes my need for him grow.

This isn't the first time I've used my fingers to get off, and it's not the first time I'll do it thinking about Astor Banes either. But it's the first time I've ever touched myself while someone watched. I don't know why it never occurred to me that doing something like this in front of a partner could be exhilarating, but the second he told me that's what he wanted, anticipation shot through me.

Starting from the gold charm around my neck, I drag my fingers downward. While I'm thrilled to get the chance to ease the ache between my legs, I'm more intrigued by the way Astor's eyes narrow and his nostril flare when my fingertips trace along the seam of my pussy. Somehow, pleasing him feels more important than pleasing myself.

Air rushes through my parted lips when I make a slow, teasing circle around my clit. I'm not sure if I'm taunting myself or Astor, but I do it again, slower this time. The only tell it affects Astor is the way his hands tighten around the edge of the desk and his knuckles turn white.

Repeating myself, I add pressure this time and my hips flex instinctually upward. When I masturbate at home, under the protection of my sheets, it takes a lot of patience for my body to become receptive to my own fingers. I can get there, but it usually takes me more time than I'm willing to give. My pink vibrator gets the job done a lot faster.

But under Astor's watchful gaze, my body is responding faster than it ever has. It makes me wonder what it is about him that is so different from the others. At one point, I thought there was unmeasurable chemistry between Callan and I but knowing how Astor can make me feel with just a single look, I know the heat I thought I once had would be tepid in comparison.

My fingers travel lower and tease my opening. I know what I'll find when I sink them inside. Astor said he wanted to make me wet without touching me but when I pressed against that door with his hand threaded in my hair, my body was already reacting to him.

"That's it," Astor encourages as I push one digit inside. "Get yourself so wet that you're dripping for me when I finally touch you. I want you ready to take my cock."

"I'm ready," I moan, adding another finger. It quickly becomes coated just like the other one. "I want you now."

"Begging for me already?" His taunt only adds to the pulsing in my pussy and making my nipples tighten. "Give me what I want first, then I'll do the same for you. Keep going, pretty girl."

Pretty girl.

The name sends me reeling. My fingers move faster, thrusting as deep as I can manage myself. I know that if he were the one touching me, he would be able to reach all those sensitive places hidden inside of me. My eyes glance at his large hands still wrapped around the desk like he's holding himself back. Fuck, I bet he could reach places I didn't even know existed.

And that's why when I drag my fingers out of my drenched pussy and begin to circle my clit with them once more, I imagine it's him sending shocks of pleasure through me. That it's his callused hands making my core muscles quiver.

A sharp jolt of ecstasy has my legs closing and my feet lifting off the desk as they pull back toward me. Astor's hands lock around my ankles and force my legs back open. He places my feet back on the desk and instead of letting

me go again, they remain in place, keeping in the position he wants.

The idea of being restrained has always intrigued me, but I've never felt ballsy enough to admit that to any of my past boyfriends. I get the feeling that it won't have to be a discussion I have with Astor. It will simply happen.

My pace quickens and my movements become erratic, gone are the slow teasing circles from before. The orgasm I've been chasing is so close, I can feel the hum building under my skin.

All I need is one little push, and I'll be sent over the edge.

And Astor knows this. "I want to know if the sounds you make are as sweet as the rest of you." His words wash over me like a liquid fire. "Come for me."

My orgasm bursts through me, and I lose all control of my body. I can't breathe as I wither in the chair, riding wave after wave of pleasure while my fingers continue to strum my clit. My legs try to close involuntarily again, but Astor's vise-like grip keeps me in place and forces me open so he can watch as my pussy pulses with each chaotic wave.

His hands fall away once I regain control of my body. My vision clears and I find his gray eyes licking over me like a starved man who's just been served dinner.

"Beautiful," Astor praises darkly. "Just like I pictured it—better even."

The fact that he's pictured such a thing sends another flood of heat through my veins. Were we imagining such a moment at the same time? While I lay in bed thinking of what it'd be like to cross the line with him, was he imagining me spread out before him?

He leans forward and looms over me. I've been close enough this whole time that he could've touch me if he so wished, but that's not what he wanted. That moment has passed, and I know from the hungry look in his eyes that he's grown tired of being just an observer.

Starting at my ankles, Astor's fingertips trail up the inside of my legs. Goosebumps follow in their wake and shivers shoot across my skin. I expect

him to reach for my pussy, to touch me like I hope, but he doesn't. He clamps his fingers around my hand that still rests on my lower stomach.

"Tell me, Indie, while you touched yourself, who consumed your thoughts? Who did you think about while you came? Callan, perhaps?" His question has my head snapping up and eyes flaring. The smirk on his face lets me know that my reaction pleases him. "Or did you think of me? Did you imagine it was my hands worshiping your cunt?"

I swallow hard, finding the ability to speak again. To speak the complete and utter truth. "I thought of you. I have since July."

I'm forced to drop my feet back to the floor when Astor's hand tightens around my wrist, and he pulls me back into a sitting position. He examines my glistening fingers and brings them to his mouth. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't pull my hand away from him. His grip is unwavering—borderline painful.

My mouth waters watching as he sucks my fingers clean. His eyes lock with mine and the dark look that's reflected in them makes me choke on my breath. With each pass of his tongue on my fingertips, the flame he ignited in my core grows hotter.

Removing my fingers from his mouth, Astor's features twist with arrogance. "I can taste your honesty." With a harsh yank, he forces me back to my feet. I sway for a second, uneasy on my feet. "And it's fucking delicious."

Everything happens so fast. One second, I'm standing in front of him and the next I'm bent over the desk that he'd just seconds ago been sitting on. Standing behind me, Astor's hand trails between my thighs before delving into my wet center. His hiss of approval fills me with a sense of pride.

"My pretty girl does just what she's asked," he praises, the tip of two of his fingers running along my opening. "You're dripping for me, Indie."

"Yes."

The sound of a zipper has my head turning and cheek pressing into the

cool surface of the desk. Anticipation pools in my stomach like lava and my knees already feel weak at the thought of what's to come.

“I've waited too long for this,” is the only warning I get before the thick head of his cock is shoved into me.

CHAPTER 6

ASTOR

I THOUGHT I WAS PREPARED, that I'd envisioned this in my head enough times that I knew what it'd be like to finally have her, but I was wrong. Nothing could have prepared me for how it feels to be fully seated inside her pulsing pussy. I'm not sure if it's the triumph I feel knowing that my waiting is over and she is finally mine, or if it's simply just *her*. That she is this sweet and tight, it wouldn't have mattered if I had to wait or work for her, Indie still would have felt like a dose of pure ecstasy straight to my veins.

It's something I will never know for sure, and in this moment, I can't find a single fuck to give. Not when her pussy is clamping down on me like it is, and her beautiful noises are filling my ears.

The guilt for taking her right from under my son's nose has always been scarce, but it's completely nonexistent now. Now that I know what it's like to have her as my own, the emotion eludes me entirely. Something that feels as good as Indie shouldn't cause guilt.

I pull almost completely out of her before plunging back into her slick heat. I pull a ragged moan from her. The sound vibrates off the floor to ceiling glass windows. It's too late for people to be at the office, but the chances of the cleaning crew lingering about is high.

While I'm the president of this university and carry an elite social

standing because of my last name, I'm not untouchable to scrutinization. If word were to get out that I was fucking one of my students, the shitstorm that would follow would be disastrous and detrimental to my name. There's a lot of things that I've buried over the years, but a sex scandal is one I'd like to avoid.

Like Indie, I hadn't even bothered to remove my own clothing. My pants are pushed down just enough to free my erection. My hand releases her hip to pull the thong I'd confiscated from her out of my pants pocket.

My other hand threads through her hair and I yank her head back toward me, forcing her back to arch at an aggressive angle. Wide eyes collide with mine as I stuff the lace into her mouth.

"Don't spit these out," I order. "Be a good girl and keep quiet. We can't have anyone hearing you."

Her protest is cut off when I thrust into her again in a long deep stroke. Her groans come out strangled and muffled, just the way I need them to be.

"I'm going to take you so fast and hard you will still feel me inside of you for days. Every time you move, you're going to be reminded of what I did to you. That I've stolen you and claimed you as my own." There are some lines that aren't meant to be crossed, stealing another man's woman is one of them. I saw that line and set it on fire. Rejoicing as it burned.

Releasing her hip from my punishing grasp, I lift one of her legs off the ground and up onto the desk. Her nails dig into the surface, and I wonder if I will find scratch marks in the wood finish tomorrow. For some reason, the thought of her leaving her mark on my property thrills me. It's evidence that she was there.

I thrash into her, not letting up or slowing down. This isn't for her. It's for me. She's already come once tonight, and if she comes again now, it'll be an added bonus for her, but it's not my priority. Not when I'm trying to leave my mark on both her skin and soul.

I may not be the first man to fuck her, but I am going make it so that all

her past lovers become dull memories, and her future lovers become inadequate. Each man she fucks after me will pale in comparison to me and what I've done to her body. Never will she forget me, and that's another way I will leave my mark on her.

When our arrangement has long passed, she will still think of me. I will own her memories.

I'll push her to her limit, taking everything she's willing to give, and stealing what she's not. Her pussy walls clamp around me with each violent thrust and her hips move, matching my rhythm. She doesn't beg me to stop around her gag or push me away. She eagerly takes and thanks me with her chorus of moans.

My eyes watch as my cock disappears in and out of her soaked pussy. It's a sight that will be seared into my brain for all my years to come. One I will savor on my deathbed.

The tight ring of muscle catches my attention and wicked ideas fill my mind. "Has any man ever had you here?" I question darkly as my thumb presses against her asshole on my next thrust. Instantly, her body stiffens and her head snaps in my direction. The look of pure fear in her eyes gives me my answer. "I look forward to being your first." I continue to add pressure with my thumb, but don't push inside. Yet. "We'll work on getting your ass ready to take my thick cock soon, Indie."

There might be apprehension in her eyes, but the heavy moan that comes from her gagged mouth and the tightening of her pussy around my dick lets me know the idea excites her.

I'm getting close and my fingers dig into her hips, no doubt leaving marks in her sun-tanned skin. My teeth grind as I try to keep my release at bay so I can stay in her warm cunt as long as possible, but I can't hold it off any longer. Based on the flutter building in her walls and the cries she's making, Indie is just as close.

Pulling out of her, I flip her violently onto her back. I'm too far gone that

I can't tell if the cry she makes is from pain or pleasure. Fisting my cock, I stroke it twice more before I come all over her bare pussy. Indie groans, throwing her head back and I bite out a harsh curse at the sight.

Using one hand to keep her legs spread wide for me, I spread my cum through her soaked and swollen pussy. She jolts when I brush over her clit. She's still close, her orgasm just a hair's breadth away.

"I could get you off with one touch right now, couldn't I?" I pant, still out of breath. "Should I reward you for being so good?"

Big amber eyes silently plead with me as her head nods desperately.

I could deprive her, but instead I decide to please her. "Okay, pretty girl. Fall apart for me."

And she does.

CHAPTER 7

ASTOR

SHE'S TRYING to get her ass spanked until it blisters, I swear.

One week into our arrangement and she's already ignoring my messages. That was part of our deal, that she would come when I called, but for five hours now, she's failed to respond or show up at my door like the good little girl I know she can be.

Instead of paying attention to the board meeting like I should have been, I stared at my dark phone screen, and silently became more enraged. Exiting the meeting as abruptly as I did had many confused looks being shot in my direction, but I couldn't stand to sit there when Indie is already defying me. We agreed she would be at my beck and call for eight months. Not eight days.

My hand grips the leather steering wheel tighter as I accelerate around a minivan driving too slow for my liking. The engine of my Porsche Cayenne is the only sound to occupy the short drive to her apartment. I'm too angry to listen to the radio.

My tires squeal when I turn down the one-way street she lives on. From the research I'd done on her, I know exactly which windows belong to her studio apartment. While I approved of her being smart and keeping her white curtains pulled tight, I frequently found myself disappointed I couldn't get a glimpse of her.

But it's not the windows that draw my attention this time, it's the yellow moving truck parked in front of the building and a forlorn looking Indie standing on the sidewalk, watching as pieces of furniture are hauled into the vehicle.

A mover wearing a T-shirt the same color as the moving truck walks past her with a woven basket of various things. Indie shouts something at him and jumps in front of him to stop him from walking off. The man's face pulls with irritation and yells back at her. She tries to reach for the basket, but he snatches it away from her.

When she tries again and this time he pushes her back, my foot slams on the brakes. I'm throwing the car into park and abandoning my vehicle in the middle of the street before Indie even has a chance to react to being pushed.

Stalking up behind the pair, I call her name, "Indie!" It comes out in a harsh snap, my annoyance with her blatantly ignoring me still evident in my tone. Heads snap in my direction and wary eyes scan me. Indie glances over her shoulder briefly in a distracted manner, but instantly does a double take when she finds me walking in her direction.

Her lips mouth "*fuck*" before turning back around to face the man with the basket.

That's right, pretty girl, you're in trouble.

Hands clasped behind my back, I come to a stop next to her and look between the dueling pair. "What's going on here?"

"Nothing," the mover snaps. "She's just getting in the way of the job we were *hired* to do."

"You have no right to take this," Indie's hands grab for the basket full of what looks to be various personal items like picture frames, a jewelry box, and pieces of random clothing. "Everything in front of the fireplace is mine to keep. That was the deal she made. This basket was part of that pile."

"I took this out of the bedroom," he argues, not backing down. "It goes with the rest."

“Why are you lying?” Indie’s hands thread through her messy hair. It looks like she may have fallen asleep with wet hair. Scanning the rest of her, I find she’s still wearing her pajamas and slippers. The thin cotton shorts do very little to conceal her ass. She’s dressed like she’s been resting all day but the dark circles under her eyes make me think she hasn’t slept at all.

Not liking that I haven’t been given an answer yet, I hold her chin in my fingers and force her head to turn in my direction. The mover takes the opportunity to slink away.

Indie stares up at me, the same defeat that shone in her eyes when she first came to me for help resides there again. “What are you doing here?” she asks instead of answering my silent question.

My grip tightens on her face. “Really? That’s all you have to say to me?” The realization she’s made a mistake is immediate. Her mouth opens to speak again, but I cut her off. “You ignore my messages all day—a strike against our agreement—and then force me to come and *search* you out? I don’t come to you, Indie. You come to me.” I glance at the jackass in the ugly yellow shirt loading the basket into the truck. “And when I do find you, another man is putting his hands on you? Have I not made it abundantly clear that I’m the only one who gets to touch you?”

“Are you kidding me? It’s not like I asked him to touch me.”

“It happened nonetheless,” I snap. “I don’t repeat myself, Indie, but this one time I will. What is happening here?”

Her eyes squeeze closed like she’s fighting tears. “Another gift from my mother and Ivan.” She tries to turn her head away from me and I reluctantly allow it. “I keep thinking she couldn’t stoop any lower, but she keeps proving me wrong. I never thought she’d make me homeless.”

“I thought you paid for your housing yourself?”

“I did—I *do*! The private lessons I teach for young riders a couple times a week pay for the apartment, but it’s *Mom*’s name on the lease. I couldn’t qualify for the apartment on my own because I didn’t have any credit to my

name. Mom never allowed me to get a credit card or even pay for my own phone bill. It wasn't until I turned eighteen that I got those things, but by then, she'd already put her name on the dotted line. It never occurred to me when I accepted her offer to sign for the apartment that she'd use it against me. I thought she was doing it to be helpful and kind like she used to be before Dad died. Which I now know was foolish of me."

My eyes narrow. "You really believed the woman who allowed you to be charged with *theft* would allow you to stay in an apartment with her name on it? Surely, you can't be that naïve."

"I'm sorry for holding out hope that she would still be my *mother* and *care* about me. It's a mistake I won't make again."

"Good."

It would be hypocritical of me to criticize Indie's mother seeing as I'm by no means the picture of a perfect parent. Far from it, but the more that comes to light about her and the new husband, the more I believe the world would be a better place without them in it. Indie's life, without a doubt, will be exponentially improved without them being permanent fixtures.

"Did she pay the fine to break the lease?"

Indie nods. "Yeah. Showed up at my door at six this morning and told me I had an hour before the movers showed up. Told me I could keep as much as I could pack in that time, the rest was to be taken for donation or the landfill."

Two movers carrying a cheap looking loveseat walk past us to the truck. Indie watches helplessly as her belongings are taken one by one from her. "Where do you plan on staying in the meantime?" There's a long waitlist for a place in the dorms on campus and unless her credit score has improved in the short time she's had building it, I doubt she could qualify for another apartment so quickly.

With an exhausted sigh, Indie rubs her face. She looks like she needs a shower and a good night's sleep. "Lark offered me her couch for the time being. It's a small studio apartment, but it's better than paying for a hotel

room every night. We'll make it work."

This new living arrangement won't work for me at all. "How are we supposed to keep our dealings a secret when you're living with a fellow student? Your constant sneaking off will become noticeable, and one accidental slip of the tongue to her could ruin it all." Another pair of men carrying out an entertainment center forces us to step off to the side of the walkway. "Your body is supposed to be at my constant disposal. You should be rested and ready for me at any given time. That won't happen if you're sleeping on some college student's fucking couch."

"I don't have any other options right now. Until my credit score is higher, and I've saved up enough money from my lessons for first and last month's rent, I can't get my own place. I apologize if that puts a *kink* in your plans for me, Mr. Banes," she snarls my name like a curse.

I step into her and sneer close to her face. "Watch your fucking tone and remember who the fuck you're talking to, Indie."

The fight instantly melts from her body and her eyes fall to the slippers on her feet. "Yes, sir."

Finding her response more than satisfactory, I retreat a step and watch the commotion around me. Solutions and options circulate in my brain, but there's only one that's truly acceptable to me. "Go collect whatever remains of your belongings," I order.

"What?" She frowns. "Why?"

"You're coming home with me."

"Why would you want that? That's not part of our deal."

It never occurred to me to have her live with me for the duration of our arrangement, but now I am wondering why I hadn't thought of it before. It's brilliant really. "But you're wrong. This plays perfectly into our deal. What better way to have quick access to you and your sweet body than to have you sleeping right down the hall from me? This way I don't have to wait for you to come to me. I can simply start every morning with you as breakfast and

fall asleep with the smell of your pussy on my skin.”

My words cause a flush to form on her cheeks. “This doesn’t feel like a good idea. What about Callan? What we’re doing—what we’ve done already—is *wrong*. We’re not officially broken up and that’s bad enough, but now you want me to move into his *home*?”

If she knew the full truth when it comes to her situation with Callan, she wouldn’t be experiencing any doubt or shame over the game we’re currently playing together. That’s a clarity that I can’t offer her; it’s something my son must set right himself.

“When was the last time you had a real conversation with Callan? Not one over text, but face to face? Let me rephrase that, when was the last time you actually laid eyes on Callan?”

Her teeth bite into her bottom lip. “It’s been a week or so,” Indie’s admission is low, just barely a whisper.

“And yet you are standing here trying to tell me that you’re still together.” My head shakes at her.

“It’s the *principle* of it. There needs to be a clear end to our relationship, not this weird uncommunicative drift-apart thing we’re doing. We need to say the words face to face, not over text. I’ve tried, but he keeps ignoring my messages about meeting somewhere,” she sighs in frustration. “And when it finally happens, it’s going to be even weirder to be living in my *ex-boyfriend’s* home.”

“It’s *my* home,” I correct. “And I’ll deal with my son. Now, go get your things, Indie.”

CHAPTER 8

INDIE

FOR MONTHS, I avoided Astor and his lake house, and now here I am, hanging my clothes up in the guestroom walk-in closet. The guest room that is right down the hall from Astor's bedroom.

If someone had told me back in July that not only would I be living with Astor Banes, but also fucking him like he's the only thing that can provide me with oxygen, I would have laughed my ass off. Even now, it feels surreal. I keep waiting for someone to pinch me and wake me up from the fever dream my life has become.

With my clothes neatly packed away, I begin pushing the handful of boxes and baskets I'd had time to pack across the room. There isn't any reason to unpack those as well. It's my plan to be out of Astor's home as soon as possible. I need my own space I can escape to after he's finished afflicting my body with his devious ways. A place where I can collect my thoughts away from his intense gaze.

He was right that night in his office. I was going to feel him for days after he'd ruthlessly taken me on his desk. Two days later, when he summoned me back, my pussy was still sore. To my utter surprise, the zing of pain when he fucked me again ended up increasing my pleasure.

I'd expected to discover new things about myself during my time with Astor, but I wasn't prepared for them to be revealed so fast. Things I never

knew I wanted are being taught to me daily.

And each day I wake up eager to learn what's next.

Pushing the last cardboard box into the closet, I turn to grab the container I had filled with the ribbons Jupiter and I won together. They'd been the second thing I'd packed, right after the basket with my pictures. My already broken heart cracked more when the mover refused to give the basket back to me.

I should have been better prepared for my mom and Ivan's next moves. Astor is right, taking the apartment from me was an obvious choice for them. I don't know why I continue to naïvely believe that my mom will one day return to the woman who raised me. There's no way that she's always been this cruel and bitter. I remember walking the pasture with her and picking wildflowers in the summer, and I remember decorating cookies in the kitchen. My dad had taken a picture of us with blue frosting coating our teeth. The very picture was one of the ones in the basket from earlier.

Where is that mom? Where is the woman who read me bedtime stories?

I think she died when my dad did because I don't recognize the vile woman she's become in the past three years.

Blowing the hair that's fallen from my short ponytail out of my eyes, I reach down for the basket of ribbons but stop short when I spot something sitting just inside the door of the room. I'm not sure when it was placed there, but it makes an embarrassingly large smile grow on my lips.

The basket with my pictures and grandma's old jewelry box is *here*.

How? I watched him load it into the moving truck.

Surely Astor wouldn't have retrieved it for me. That would be wildly out of character for him and borderline unbelievable. *Right?*

Walking to the open doorway, I look down the hallway for signs of him, but it's quiet with zero sign of movement. Or Astor.

He'd disappeared after helping me carry the boxes inside, saying he'd give me time to settle in. As if I could ever really settle in here. I feel

ridiculously out of place. Everything is neat and pristine, not a single sign of clutter anywhere. I'm almost afraid to touch anything.

Stashing the magically appearing basket in the closet with the rest of my belongings, I disappear into the attached bathroom that's made completely of white marble and gold fixtures. I'll search for Astor after I've had a chance to wash this horrible day off me.

I shield my eyes from the late afternoon sun, watching as the golden eagle cuts through the sky with an elegance that's hard to put into words. The animal is magnificent on its own but watching how it works with Astor is a sight to behold. They make it look effortless where I know it's anything but. It's evident in the way they respond to each other that years of patience and trust went into this relationship.

Astor releases a long, low whistle and the bird of prey swoops back down to where Astor waits. The animal is an alarming size, but Astor doesn't bat an eye when it lands on his gloved arm. The wingspan has to be over six feet long and I can see the wicked sharp talons from where I stand on the deck above them.

He hasn't noticed me observing them, but I prefer it that way. I want to watch him like this for as long as I can.

There's always a swirling storm circulating around Astor. His energy is turbulent and untamed, but I've never seen him calmer than he is now, working with his eagle. It's the same kind of peace I found while working with Jupiter.

He pulls out a hunk of raw meat from the leather pouch on his hip and walks across the yard toward the enclosure located on the other side of the property. Say what you want about Astor Banes, but he truly cares about that animal. The expensive state-of-the-art aviary he had custom built proves

that.

I'm sitting in one of the patio chairs checking my phone for any updates from Tessa when Astor returns to the house ten minutes later. He doesn't say anything, just leans against the deck railing and stares at me. His gray eyes lick over my skin, causing liquid heat to spread through my body.

"Your whistle command reminds me of something my dad used to do," I start, needing to break the silence. "He trained all his horses to respond to a certain whistle. It always reminded me of a bird's call. He'd stand at the pasture gate and do it. No matter how far they were, the horses always heard him and came running. When he became too sick to ride and gave me Jupiter, I would use the same whistle every time I entered the barn. Jupiter would always whinny back from his stall. It's like it became our way of greeting each other. It became a habit I guess because I still do it every time I enter the barn I teach my lessons at. I know Jupiter is gone, but a small part of me still expects him to answer."

Astor doesn't offer any kind of response to my story other than a small nod of his head. It's the only proof I have that he'd even heard me speak.

Putting my phone down on the small side table, I sit up straighter in my seat and clear my throat. "Does he have a name?" My head nods in the direction of the eagle's enclosure.

"He does."

My lips twitch at his very on-brand answer. "Are you going to tell me what it is?"

The fabric of his black button down pulls tight around his shoulders when he crosses his arms in front of him. He might be twenty or more years older than them, but Astor is in better shape than most of the college students I know. I haven't had the pleasure of seeing him without a shirt, but I would bet money that there's a nice set of abs hiding under there.

"What will you give me in return?"

He wants me to walk into the trap he's just cleverly laid, but

unfortunately for him, I'm a quick learner.

Uncrossing my legs, I stand up from the wooden chair. "That's a trick question, Mr. Banes. You and I both know that I don't have to *give* you anything because it's already yours to take. That was the deal, was it not?" A smirk spreads across my lips.

The approval in his eyes makes the muscles in my lower stomach tighten. "Good answer."

"I thought so." I stop in front of him, just far enough that he can't reach me.

Astor's eyes lock on where my fingers play with the short hem of the flowy sundress I'd thrown on after my shower. He doesn't look up when he answers. "His name is Periphas. In the legends, Periphas was a mortal king whose adoration began to rival Zeus's. Out of anger and jealousy, Zeus had the king turned into a giant golden eagle. Periphas then became the mighty God's personal messenger and companion."

"I didn't know you were into Greek mythology."

"I'm not," he corrects instantly. "My mother was. She lived in Greece in her youth and would tell my brothers and me the myths as bedtime stories. The one of Zeus and his eagle always stuck with me and when I got my license to own a golden eagle myself, the name seemed fitting."

Astor sharing personal details of his life feels like something that doesn't come naturally to him, but I appreciate him telling me the story nonetheless. Makes me understand him just a small amount more.

He holds his hand out to me. "Come here." It's not a request, it's an order. Releasing the hem of my dress, I place my hand in his much larger one. He pulls me forward by it before placing it on the railing of the deck. "Put your other hand up there too and don't fucking move them."

The shift in his tone and demeanor is abrupt, but my body is happy to go along with it.

Stepping behind me he begins to trail his fingers down either side of my

body. He starts at my bare shoulders and slowly travels down to the hem of my dress I'd been fiddling with just moments before.

"I want you to wear this dress tomorrow at dinner," he rasps close to my ear as his hands push the fabric up. He hums in approval when he finds I'm wearing nothing under my dress.

Confused by what dinner he's talking about, I try to turn around to face him. The second my fingers lift off the railing, his palm comes down on my ass in a harsh smack. "What did I tell you?"

Startled and confused by my body's reaction to his strike, it takes me a second to fully comprehend his question. Swallowing, I say, "Don't move my hands."

"*Precisely*," he murmurs. "Bend forward and spread your legs, pretty girl. I want to see my cunt."

His.

Every piece of me is *his*.

I do what he says, exposing myself to him. "What dinner are you talking about?" I whisper, hands flexing on the railing.

My breath evacuates my lungs in a *whoosh* when his hand delves between my thighs and thick fingers skim my pussy.

"Callan has asked that we have a family dinner tomorrow. His mother is in town." His tone doesn't match the message he's delivering. It's too gruff—thick sounding. Astor's voice like this is quickly becoming my favorite thing. It has a weird way of calming me but making me nervous at the same time. "You will be joining us."

It will be hard enough to look Callan in the eyes knowing I'm fucking his *father*, but now I'm supposed to sit across from him at a table and enjoy a meal...while his *mother* is there.

*A nightmare...*I've found myself in a complete and utter nightmare, and I only have myself to blame. I *chose* this.

The only thing stopping me from freaking the fuck out over these

impromptu dinner plans are Astor's fingers. My hips roll, greedily begging for more as he massages my clit.

"Does that feel good?" he growls into my ear.

My head nods in jerky movements.

"Words, Indie." I suck in a deep breath as Astor pinches my clit between his fingers. A clear warning. "I want to hear your words."

"Yes, it feels good."

He rewards me by restarting the slow circles, this time increasing the pressure. As I proved to him, I can come by my own fingers, but I think I much prefer his.

"Do you want me to get you off like this? Right here on my deck where anyone on the lake could see us?" His words send shocks right to my core, making my pussy throb even more.

"Yes, please."

I'm not sure what I expect him to do, but to pull away completely, leaving me on the brink of an orgasm isn't it. My mewl of frustration and disappointment is involuntary and immediate.

"I want you to answer my fucking calls. Regardless of whatever predicament you've found yourself in. That was the vow you made to me when you agreed to be mine. You ignored my messages today and for that you're going to be punished." The sound of his zipper lowering has my head turning back toward him. "You think I'd forgotten how our day started?"

My mouth waters at the sight of his pants lowering and his thick cock being freed.

"Get on your knees for me, pretty girl," he commands sinisterly. "You're going to choke on my cock and fucking thank me when you're done."

CHAPTER 9

INDIE

CALLAN WALKS out of Astor's office, a perplexed look on his face as he stalks toward me. My stomach drops and my heart rate rapidly picks up when his hand wraps around my arm. Without a word, he drags me away from the spot in the hallway I'd been loitering in while he talked with his dad.

When Callan showed up to the house twenty minutes ago, he'd been shocked to find me sitting at the kitchen island, drinking the iced green tea the chef had made for me. With one look at him, I knew Astor hadn't bothered to inform him of my new living situation yet. Why Astor would wait until *tonight* at this family dinner to inform him, I don't know. I want to call him out on it, but my jaw still hurts from the last punishment I received. I'm not complaining though, I found I enjoyed the way he commanded my head and ability to breathe last night on the deck. There was something absolutely exhilarating about it.

I didn't get a chance to so much as say hello to Callan before Astor appeared in the doorway as if out of thin air. I'm tempted to tie a bell on the man, I swear.

"My office. Now." Astor had commanded his son, disappearing down the hall again a second later. Callan stared at me for a moment as if he was trying to find the answers written across my forehead before following after his dad.

My plan wasn't to hide out in the hallway outside Astor's home office, but when I heard the staff greet Callan's mother, June, I darted out of the kitchen before I was forced to face her alone.

Callan's legs are much longer than mine and I struggle to keep up with his fast pace. He finally stops once we reach the sitting room at the front of the house. Everything in this room is white and pristine. A red wine lover's worst nightmare. I feel like I'm staining something just by standing in here.

"Why didn't you tell me about what your mother did?" Callan questions in a low whisper.

The scowl on his face reminds me so much of the expression his father constantly makes. They look similar with their lean muscles and tall frames, but I get the feeling Callan takes more after his mother. His eyes are deep blue where Astor's are gray, and Callan's brown hair is shades lighter than Astor's ever was. I'm quite fond of the silver strands starting to grow on Astor's temples now.

"You should have called me, Indie," he continues, not giving me a chance to speak. "I could have helped you find another place to live instead of *here*. Or at the very least, I could have helped you pack. Dad says she only gave you an hour to collect as much as you could."

I was curious to know just how much Astor had told Callan, but the fact that Callan is only talking about my abrupt eviction, I think it's safe to assume that his dad didn't give him the full background of my shitshow life. And he *definitely* didn't inform him about our little arrangement.

With a yank, I free my arm from Callan's grip. "I did call you, Callan," I snap at him between clenched teeth. "But just like the rest of my recent messages to you lately, my call yesterday went unanswered."

I didn't know what to do after my mother showed up at my door yesterday. The panic and fear of what was going to happen next had me reaching out for something familiar. It's for the best Callan didn't answer. An hour after my missed call to him, I realized I didn't truly want him there. I

just didn't want to be alone in that moment.

The frustration melts from Callan's face and guilt appears in its place. "I'm sorry." He steps back, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. "I was out of town for a couple of days, and I've been...busy."

"*Out of town?* Where did you—" I start to ask but decide halfway through that I don't actually care. What's going on in Callan's life no longer concerns me. Just like what's happening in mine doesn't concern him. "I get you've been busy, but I'm just making a point." I shift my weight to one foot and cross my arms in front of me. "I've been trying to call you for almost two weeks so we could talk."

He nods. "I know. It actually works out really well that you're here tonight because the same thing I need to talk to my parents about, I was going to tell you later." He squeezes my shoulder, and a soft smile lifts his lips. "But let's talk just the two of us after dinner."

"Okay," I agree, wanting to get this over with as soon as possible.

"Come on, I'll introduce you to my mother."

His mother and my lover's *ex-wife*.

Oh, *joy*.

Maybe I can get out of this dinner early by stabbing myself with one of the many salad forks I saw on the elaborately set table earlier.

You know when you meet someone new and within two minutes of your introduction, you know that if they were ever on fire, instead of saving them, you'd roast a marshmallow in the flames?

That's how I feel about the *ex-wife*.

From the very start of our evening, she's looked at me as if I were the gum beneath her shoe. Her judgmental eyes raked over me, picking out all the things she didn't like. I could practically *hear* her thoughts as she created

false little notions about me in her head. If it weren't for the excessive amount of Botox and filler in her face, I'm sure I would be able to see them written in her expressions too. The permanent scowl on her face is the only one I've received. Because of this, I don't know if Callan has her smile, but I was right in thinking he got his eye color from her.

"Tell me again what you're studying, Andie?" She squints at me from across the large table while dabbing the corners of her mouth with her cloth napkin.

"*Indie*," Astor corrects, not bothering to look at her as he does.

For the most part, Astor hasn't given her the time of day. While she seemed thrilled to see him, he barely acknowledged her. The few times his gaze has flicked in her direction, it's as if he's looking through her. Like he's blocking her very existence out. It's a skill I'm thinking took years of practice to master.

"Oh, my apologies, dear," the false sincerity all but drips off her over-filled lips. "Maybe if my son had bothered to discuss you and your relationship during our phone calls, I'd be better prepared and remember your name."

The fact that he'd never bothered to tell his own mother about me after all this time proves that we were never meant to be more than fleeting figures in each other's lives. If I ever really mattered to him, my name would have come up in conversation before tonight.

Sitting directly next to her, Callan sighs, head shaking. "Mom, come on, please. I asked for *one* dinner together. Just one where someone didn't act like an ass."

"Are you calling me an *ass*, Callan Banes?"

If it bitches like a duck...

Callan rubs his temple like he's already getting a headache. Seems neither one of us won the mother lottery.

"No, that's not what I'm saying..." he trails off, giving up the fight.

Deciding to take pity on him, I clear my throat, regaining the woman's attention. "I want to be a nurse practitioner, so I'm working on my bachelors in nurse science. When I'm done with that, I'll need to get my masters."

Underneath the table, Astor's fingertips begin to trace circles on my bare thigh. I want to look at him but drawing attention to ourselves is the last thing we need to do at this already hostile table. Even when his movements start to travel upward, I force myself to remain still.

"That sounds like a lot of schooling," June comments, feigning interest.

My thighs involuntarily squeeze tighter when Astor's fingers attempt to pry them apart. The tightening of his grip on my skin is my silent warning. *Do not deprive me.*

"I'm only nineteen," I explain, my voice sounding surprisingly even despite my growing flustered state. Ever so slowly, I part my legs for Astor as I add, "I'm not too worried about it."

"Are you taking any summer classes like Callan? Those extra credits really helped expedite his time at university. Which I think is for the best, personally. It's time he joined the real world." June's hand rubs Callan's shoulder, a gesture neither one of them look entirely comfortable with.

From the corner of my eyes, I can see Astor's lips pull in the slightest smirk when he finds I'm not wearing underwear again. He told me to wear the same thing as yesterday for tonight's dinner. I just assumed he meant the *exact* same, so I forwent panties again.

Callan clears his throat and shifts in his seat. "That's actually what I wanted to talk to you guys about tonight."

Pulling on my leg again, I'm forced to subtly shift in my chair so I can widen to Astor's desired position. Nothing about Astor's tone or posture gives away what's taking place under the table. He's as cool and composed as always. Meanwhile, I think my pounding heart might break a rib.

"You wanted to have this dinner together so we could talk about your summer courses?" Astor questions.

“No,” Callan corrects. “I actually wanted to let you all know that I’ve already completed all the credits I need to graduate. I’ve been busy working and talked to my advisors, and they all agree that I can graduate a semester early. I’ll officially be done in December.”

June’s proud cheering and congratulatory words muffle out the sharp gasp that escapes my lips as Astor’s fingers graze my exposed pussy. He’s teasing—*no, preparing* me for what he has intended. The fact he requested I wear this damn dress shows that this is something he *planned* for. This isn’t a spur of the moment kind of thing. Real thought went into this.

“That’s excellent news, Callan,” he praises his son with a nod of his head while languidly tracing up and down my seam. “I know this is a goal you’ve had since high school. I’m proud of you for accomplishing it.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Callan looks at me next and my distracted brain quickly remembers I need to say something.

“I’m really happy for you, Callan.” I truly mean it when I say it. My romantic feelings for him may have diminished, but I still want nothing but happiness and success for him. “You’re going to do amazing things...” My words trail off when Astor teases my opening. “I just know it,” I add tightly.

There’s no way for me to know if the smile I give him looks as forced as it feels.

Astor pushes a finger inside me, and my chin falls to my chest in an attempt to conceal the shocked parting of my lips.

This isn’t happening. He’s not actually doing this while his son and ex sit across the table. The logical side of my brain tries to reason, but the increasing rhythm of his finger sliding in and out of me proves otherwise.

With a deep breath, I try to settle myself before lifting my head again.

“What are your plans for after you graduate?” June asks over her glass of expensive red wine. She’d requested Callan fetch one of the bottles from Astor’s cellar before we sat down at the table like she still had a right to Astor’s belongings.

Callan looks at me like he's about to deliver life altering news. It's not his intense expression that has my heartrate picking up. It's his father's palm grinding against my sensitive clit.

"I've spent the better part of the past three months getting everything in order, but as soon as I graduate in December, I'll be moving to New York." Finally, after months of secrets and Callan's illusive behavior, the truth is finally out. "I flew out there this week and met with uncle Bran. He's offered me a place in his company." He looks at his dad when he delivers the last part. There's a glimmer of fear in his eyes, like he's afraid his dad won't approve of this career choice.

I've never heard Callan speak of Bran before, so I have no idea what this job could entail, but by the way June's concrete face falls, I don't think it's good.

"*Bran* as in *Branson*?" She says his name quietly as if she could accidentally summon the man here if spoken too loudly. "That doesn't seem wise. Astor, you'd allow this?"

The heel of Astor's palm grinds harder against me and at the same time he opens his mouth to speak, he slips another finger inside of me. It takes everything I have in me to not jolt at the intrusion. "Who am I to tell him no? Callan is a grown man. He must set his own path and he must learn to stand by the decisions he makes."

Starting at the top of my head, sparks of pleasure begin to shoot through my body. My skin is too warm and the muscles in my core are starting to quiver. With shaky fingers, I lay my hand over Astor's, silently begging him to stop so I don't come right here at this table.

My plea goes unanswered and has the opposite effect I'd hoped for. His tempo and pressure increase, the only thing holding back my orgasm is my sheer will.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"I think this could be a really good opportunity for me and there's so

much I can learn from Bran—”

Knotting my hands in the fabric of my dress, I fly up from the table and away from Astor’s relentless hand. Completely flustered, I breathlessly apologize to Callan for so rudely cutting him off. “I’m sorry, I—I will just be a moment.”

With the briefest glance at Astor’s smug face, I scurry out of the room before anyone has a chance to say anything else.

CHAPTER 10

ASTOR

“I’M GOING to go select another bottle of wine from the cellar,” I explain, removing my napkin from my lap and pushing away from the table.

Indie, along with her greedy cunt, are hiding somewhere from me. I want to be angry at her for leaving before I could make her come, but the fact I get to now go hunt her down like she’s my prey excites me.

June taps her nearly empty glass. “Be a gem and grab another bottle of cabernet while you’re down there, Astor.”

The only reason I still tolerate June’s presence is for Callan. No matter how strong my ill will is toward her, she will always be Callan’s mother. And because of that, she will forever be a permanent burden in my life. That was her grand plan twenty-three years ago when she fell pregnant with our son. It was the oldest play in the books, and I still somehow fell victim to it.

I will never regret my son’s existence, but I will regret how it came about for the remainder of my days.

Though, my biggest regret will always be allowing my father to persuade me into marrying the woman. The Banes have an image to uphold and a baby out of wedlock was not something he would stand for. It wasn’t until he was forcibly removed from power and cold and dead, did I divorce June. Our marriage came to an end just after three years, and not once during those three years did my dislike for her wane. Over two decades later, I enjoy her

company even less.

I could acknowledge the fact she'd spoken to me, but I find it much more satisfactory to just ignore her completely. The fact my disregard for her presence irks her to no end only makes it that much sweeter.

Indie was desperate to get away from me. The sanctuary of her new bedroom would have been too far for her frazzled brain to consider running to. She would be looking for a much closer and accessible hideaway.

The soles of my dress shoes click against the hardwood floors as I stalk through the grand entryway and down the hallway that my office resides in. While I highly doubt she would be foolish enough to enter my office without permission, I still peek through the open door to be sure. I'm fairly good at anticipating her moves, but she's had a few moments where she's surprised me. Like yesterday on the deck where she enthusiastically choked on my cock. My punishment ended up bringing her more pleasure than I had intended.

Walking past the closed door of one of the bathrooms, I come to a stop when I hear water running. My smirk is instant and anticipation shoots through me like a gun.

Found you, pretty girl.

My knuckles rap against the door.

The faucet turns off and there's a short pause before the voice comes through the wood door. "Just a minute."

We don't have a minute. If Callan or June decided to leave the formal dining room, questions I don't feel like answering would be asked.

I don't say anything, instead I knock once more.

She sighs in frustration before her footsteps move across the room. The sound of the lock turning has my blood rushing to my dick. *Finally.* The door isn't open more than an inch before I'm shoving my way into the bathroom.

Indie's eyes widen and lips part, her shriek is just barely silenced in time when my hand clamps down across her mouth. I shut the door again and lock

us inside.

“Nowhere to run this time, Indie,” I growl close to her face as I push her until her back hits the marble vanity. “You’re trapped in here with me and you’re going to stay here until I’ve had my fucking fill.”

She tries to speak behind my hand.

“Shh,” I coo, brushing the strands of her hair off her face. “We don’t want anyone overhearing us, now do we? You cleverly chose to not wear panties, so I don’t have anything to gag you with this time. If you’re too loud, I’m going to be very disappointed in you.”

Her breath comes faster, her breasts heaving out the top of her white sundress. She’s nervous about being locked in here with me, but her dilating pupils and the way she arches into me gives away her readiness.

My free hand dips between her thighs. “I’m going to finish what I started,” I tell her. “But this time, you’re going to come on my cock.”

Indie’s eyes close involuntarily when I slip a finger back into her slick heat. She’s wetter than she was when she left the table. My cock presses against the zipper of my slacks, eager to sink into her warmth.

“My pretty girl is ready for me, isn’t she?”

She whimpers against my hand and her hips roll, grinding against my palm. Her movements are frantic—desperate even. My teasing from earlier has her eager for me.

Pulling my soaked finger from her core causes disappointment to flash across her face. It disperses when I use both hands to lift her onto the bathroom countertop.

Standing between her spread thighs, I order her, “Take my cock out.”

Pushing my black cashmere sweater up, Indie’s deft fingers tackle the button and zipper of my charcoal slacks. The entire time, I watch how she bites her bottom lip. I’ve never been fond of the act of kissing. Somehow the act felt more intimate than fucking, but there’s a pull in my chest urging me to kiss Indie now. My teeth grind and I suppress the unwanted desire.

She shoves my pants down on my hips, allowing my cock to spring free. Her lips twitch as she looks up at me. “Seems I’m not the only one going commando tonight, Mr. Banes.”

“I told you I like easy access.” I smirk. “Spit on me. Get my cock ready for your pussy.”

Her thin fingers wrap around my thick shaft, and I watch, completely enthralled, as the saliva drips from her lips onto the tip of my dick. My hips jerk forward at her first languid stroke. Tip to base, she spreads the wetness over me.

I drop my forehead against hers. This close, it’s like we’re sharing oxygen. My other hand wraps around her wrist, halting her movements. “Wrap your legs around my waist.”

Pulling her ass to the very edge of the counter, she does what I ask. The heels of her feet dig into my lower back, and she pulls me in closer to her center. Her head falls back against the mirror behind her as I glide my dick through her soaked lips. The head grazes over her sensitive clit, making her whole body jolt.

Her eyes plead with me when I position myself at her entrance.

“*Please.*” It’s just barely an audible whisper, but still hearing that singular word come from her lips is one of my favorite sounds.

I’m just about to grant her wish when the knock comes at the door. “Indie?”

At the sound of Callan’s voice, Indie flies forward and tries to jump from the vanity. My hands lock around her thighs in a punishing grasp, forcing her to stay in place. Pure fear shines in her amber orbs.

My only answer is a slow shake of my head, a devious grin growing on my lips. I couldn’t have planned this better if I tried. Dropping my head close to hers, I speak lowly into her ear. “Answer him, Indie.”

Body still rigid, I push her back until she rests against the mirror once more. Her eyes flick between where my cock slides through her pussy again

and the door her boyfriend stands behind.

When she doesn't answer, my fingers flex on her skin in warning.

Finally, she finds her words. "I—I'm here." Her response comes out cracked, as if her throat is clogged with emotion.

I know the truth, but Callan doesn't. "Are you okay? You sound upset," he asks, sounding worried. It's a little too late for him to be concerning himself with Indie's emotions.

Indie looks at me for help and I simply mouth a single word.

Lie.

"Yes, I'm okay." Her breath shudders when I position myself at her opening again. The subtle shake of her head is her silent plea, and a wicked smile is my reply. "I just needed a minute to—" She loses the ability to breathe and speak as the head of my cock pushes into her. "—to collect myself," she manages to finish.

Her back arches as I push inch by inch into her and her fingernails dig into the top of my hands that still hold her thighs open.

"Are you sure?" Callan presses.

Again, I whisper in her ear, but this time I slice all the way into her as I speak. "*Lie better.*"

She licks her bottom lip before responding. "There's just so many things going on right now, Callan. Between my mom and you, I just need a second to process."

I'm proud of her ability to keep her voice even. There's only the slightest quiver in her speech, but I think it's only noticeable to me because I'm causing it. My thrusts are slow and measured to keep the sound at a minimum, but they're deep, brushing against her womb.

The open mouth kisses I trail across her jaw are her reward for her job well done, but Callan is relentless. "I'm sorry I told you tonight instead of earlier. I wanted to make sure everything was set in stone before I told you. Open the door and we can talk about this."

“No!” Indie instantly snaps, head whipping in the direction of the locked door. “I mean...I’ll be out soon. Please just give me a minute and I’ll find you so we can finally talk about things.”

There’s a long pause before Callan answers, “Okay. I’ll be on the deck waiting for you.”

Indie doesn’t fully relax until there’s the audible sound of footfalls leaving. Once they become distant, her body sags in relief. “Holy fuck,” she breathes.

“Such a good girl,” I growl in approval, my hips driving into her faster. The restraint I’ve been relying on all night vanishing each time her core muscles clench around me. “My good girl.”

“Yes,” she agrees with a long moan. “Your good girl.”

Indie can deny that she didn’t enjoy our secret games tonight, but the way her body has been responding to me would give away her falsehoods. She likes the threat of being caught, it exhilarates her and turns her on just as it does me. The blood in my veins is basically made of fire at his point.

Indie’s breath begins to come in short pants. I would have normally told her to keep her hands on the marble counter, but I find I’m enjoying how they restlessly travel over my arms and chest. When I press my thumb to her clit, her nails prick the back of my neck, making a low groan form in my throat.

Tingles begin to form at the base of my spine and my balls tighten. My teeth sink in my lip and my rhythm becomes erratic as I chase my release.

It’s Indie that comes apart first. My hand slaps across her mouth, muffling her cries of ecstasy just before white-hot pleasure blazes through me like fireworks going off.

Thrusting deep, I spill inside of her with a harsh curse.

I stay buried in her as we both fight to regain our breaths. My head drops to Indie’s shoulder and her skin feels sticky against mine.

I get lost in the soft circles she trails through the cropped strands on my scalp. Prickles dance across my skin. It’s a soothing gesture that feels

borderline too intimate for our kind of relationship. I allow it for a minute before standing straight.

The flush across Indie's cheeks is a stunning red and the sheen of sweat across her forehead was well earned. Her lips part in a silent gasp as my still semi-hard dick slips out of her sensitive center.

My eyes fixate on the way my cum trickles out of her, finding pleasure that I've found another way to mark her as mine.

Indie's eyes widen as my thumb collects what's fallen out and pushes it back inside of her.

“What are you doing?”

“While you break up with my son, I want my cum dripping out of you.”

TO BE CONTINUED...

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BONUS CHAPTER

ASTOR

It wasn't my plan to stop at the office on my way home from the dinner meeting, but Cheska, my assistant, called and reminded me of an important file I will need for tomorrow's early seminar. If it wasn't being hosted off campus, I wouldn't worry about grabbing it tonight. It's just one more thing delaying me from returning home.

Returning to *her*.

She has a late private lesson tonight with one of her young riders, but no doubt she's already home and waiting for my return. My cock stiffens in my slacks as ideas of what I'm going to do to her tonight consume my thoughts.

The elevator stops on my floor and I step out. The only lights on are the emergency ones that always remain on and there's not a single sound besides my footfalls as I walk down the hallway that leads to my large corner office.

My hand wraps around the keys in my pocket but stop when I find my door already open and light casting into the semi-dark hallway.

Where someone else might be concerned over such a sight, I only feel irritation. It's a fact well known by my colleagues that my office is not a place for them to venture into. Not even Cheska will enter my office without me present and she's been my assistant for the better part of five years. My own son won't do it as it's a lesson that's been ingrained in his brain since childhood.

Whoever has entered my office isn't afraid of my wrath it would seem.

Teeth clenched, I push the door open wider and enter the lit office.

My annoyance only grows when I lock eyes with the person sitting in my chair with their feet on my desk.

"Mr. Blackwell—or is it Wilde now?" I greet tightly. "Are you lost?"

The soft light of the phone he stares at illuminates his bitter grin. "Wilde is fine and nope. You're just the man I wanted to see." His cold blue eyes flick in my direction briefly before the device in his hand recaptures his attention. "A little birdy told me that you'd be stopping by tonight, so I thought I'd wait here for you to show up. Took you long enough. Naturally, I was so bored I had to poke around your files a little bit. Hope you don't mind."

"Naturally," I repeat, completely unamused. "Find anything interesting?"

He laughs darkly, a sound devoid of any true humor. "Nothing I didn't already know, but then again, there's not much I don't know. Is there?" Sighing, he stuffs the phone into the front pocket of his ripped and faded jeans. This kid has more money than most people will see in their lifetime, but he can't be bothered to purchase new jeans or tie the laces of his scuffed leather boots. "Though, I did learn something new last week that captured my interest."

"Is that so?" I lean against the door jam, arms crossing. "Who's the unlucky soul that traded you for this information?"

It's no secret to me what kind of business he runs. I allow him to continue with his underground dealings on my campus with the exception that if I'm ever in need of information, he'll give it to me free of charge. It's a deal that's worked well for me in the past.

His feet finally drop off my desk. He sits forward in my chair, arms resting on his knees, looking completely at ease in a space that isn't his to command.

"You really should vet your staff better, Banes. Could have protected

yourself from something like this happening.” Arrogance all but pours from his lips as he talks. “A redhead with an expensive nose candy habit came to me for a loan when she couldn’t afford to pay her dealer. I offered a couple different payment plans to this—*Chelsea?*—bitch, but when she said she had some information about her boss, I was intrigued. And when she coughed up the information, I was fucking *ecstatic*.”

Cheska...What the fuck does she know?

“What do you think you know, Wilde?”

“I don’t *think* I know anything,” he corrects. “You should know by now that when information is brought to me, I complete my due diligence and fact check the fuck out of it.”

“Spit whatever the hell you have to say out, Rafferty. I have places and people I’d much rather spend my time with.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do.” He’s a cocky son of a bitch, has been since he was in high school. He and Callan attended the same private school for a couple years before Rafferty transferred out right before his senior year. “A sweet little thing by the name of Indie Riverton, if I’m not mistaken.”

The sound of Indie’s name on his lips has my spine snapping straight and anger pooling in my stomach. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

His icy eyes meet mine, and as if we’re having a battle of the wills, neither one of us looks away. Both of us waiting for the other to break.

After a minute, Rafferty’s mouth pulls in a wicked smile, and he sits back in the leather rolling chair. “Here’s the deal, Banes. I know about your dealings with Indie. I know what you did to keep her on this campus after she lost her scholarship and I know exactly what she’s paying you in return. Like I said, you should really vet your staff. Your assistant is hot, but she’s got a mouth on her the size of Texas and likes to listen to your private meetings through your door. Consider yourself lucky that *I’m* the one with this information now. In the wrong hands, it could be really bad for you.”

Still doubtful, I ask, “What kind of proof could you possibly have?”

“Well, there’s the large sum of money you’re paying your own college for her tuition,” he shocks me by saying. “What? You thought by having the payment come from a bogus shell account it couldn’t be tracked back to you.” His head cocks, dark brown hair falling on his forehead. “Does Indie know that you didn’t actually get her scholarship back for her, or is that another one of your dirty little secrets?”

The strings that I could pull were just enough to keep her enrolled in Olympic Sound. There are strict rules regarding our merit scholarships, and once she had that mark on her record, there was no way she could become eligible for it again.

Grinding my teeth, I close the door before stalking across the room. “Cut to the chase, Rafferty. What do you want to make this information disappear?”

I’ll be dealing with Cheska myself. It’s been a long time since I’ve called upon my brother, but this appears to be a job he would enjoy.

“It’s simple really.” The Rafferty that I knew when he was in high school had a darkness around him, but at the time, there was still a glimmer of light in his eyes and smile. He had moments where he was happy. The Rafferty that sits in front of me now has fully succumbed to the pitch-black darkness. He’s consumed by it and I’m not sure he remembers the meaning of the word happy. “In the coming months, a student by the name of Posie Davenport will be requesting to transfer here next year. I need you to ensure she’s accepted and given a tuition rate so low, she can’t refuse the offer.”

Posie Davenport.

I recognize the name immediately, but he knew I would.

My head shakes in disbelief at him. “After all these years, you still can’t move on. You’re still not at peace with what happened, are you?”

Rafferty stands from my desk and takes the time to push in the chair. His face is completely devoid of any emotion as he comes to a stop in front of me. “Whatever peace I had she stole from me five years ago and now I intend

to do the same to her.” His hand claps down on my shoulder. “I’m going to *ruin* her, and unless you want word to get out about your *extracurriculars*, you’re going to help me get her here.”

Rafferty and Posie’s story coming this spring

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kayleigh lives in Denver Colorado, just two hours away from some of the best skiing in the world. A luxury completely lost on her considering she avoids snow at all costs. Well, she avoids *outside* at all costs—she’s what you’d call an ‘indoor cat’. She much prefers to sit inside on her computer all day drinking massive amounts of caffeine. She’d have an IV drip of the stuff connected to her if she could.

When she’s not writing, you can find her binge-watching Netflix like it’s her job. Or at the local Mexican restaurant, because the girl loves tacos and margaritas.

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BURN ME LUCY SMOKE



BURN ME

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LUCY SMOKE

BLURB

Burn Me: An Enemies to Lovers Romance

Aurora Summers is nothing but baggage. Beautiful dangerous little baggage.
The off limits kind.

The plan was simple: Destroy the girl. Ruin her life. Make her and her mother leave. Only ... she's not as easy a target as I thought she'd be. Aurora Summers is nothing if not a fighter.

Maybe I lit the match, but she burned down the kingdom.

We should have known better. Any time you play with fire, someone eventually gets burned.

PROLOGUE

RORI

I loved you as
Icarus loved
The sun—

Too close,
Too much.

— David Jones, *Icarus in Love*

It's *empty*. The hallway. The living room. My fucking bedroom. The whole house is empty. I'm standing in the center of it all, holding what is now apparently a useless set of keys and my cell phone, when the front door bangs open and I hear the telltale sound of my mother's heels clicking across the wood floor. Something insidious awakens in my gut. A curdling sense of dread that only seems to revive when she returns from wherever the hell she's been for the last several months.

"Oh good, you're here," she says as she breezes past me.

Where the fuck could she be going? is my immediate first thought. She looks like she's dressed for a god damn gala—long black tank dress with a slit that goes almost all the way up her thigh. The only thing making it seem

even remotely casual is the big, floppy black hat, the shades, and the gray shawl over her shoulders. A shawl ... in the May heat. But I know it's because she's afraid of getting sunburned; tanning ages a person and even in her early forties she looks closer to a twenty-five-year-old than someone who has an eighteen-year-old daughter.

“Hurry up and double check to make sure the movers didn't leave anything behind,” she calls over her shoulder as she reaches the kitchen, and I find myself drifting after her, needing answers. ‘*What the fuck?*’ seems to be more than a question I keep asking myself; it's my new motto.

“The movers?” I repeat. “Why did we have movers? Where's our stuff? Are we going somewhere?”

My mother pulls down her shades, tossing them to the granite countertop as she reaches into the fridge and pulls out a bottled water. Over her shoulder, I note that a single case of it is all that's left. *Am I in the Twilight Zone or something?* I have to wonder. When I left for the last day of my senior year this morning, everything had seemed normal—and by normal, I mean my mother hadn't been home in weeks and I'd received no phone call or messages saying when she'd be coming back. To us, that was normal.

This is not.

“Yes, we're going somewhere,” my mother says. Ignoring my first two questions, she sets her bottled water on the counter and then thrusts her left hand in my face. It takes me a moment to realize that she's trying to shove the giant diamond sitting on her ring finger towards my eyes as if I could miss the damn thing, especially now that it's front and center to my vision.

“What did you do?” The words come from my throat like glass shards being pulled from a wound. Dizziness assails me. My stomach sinks, and then, as if she doesn't hear the horror in my voice, she says the words I've always come to hate.

“I got married!”

This is not happening. My mother pulls her hand away and I dimly hear

the sound of her heels clicking across the floor as she moves away.

“Now, hurry up and check the house. We’re flying out to California in a few hours.”

“California?” My own voice sounds like it’s coming from miles away, but one thing I do know is that her voice doesn’t get any quieter—it remains the same steady volume, which must mean that I’m following behind her even though I can no longer feel my legs. “Why are you going to California?” I ask.

I know why I would—I’m *supposed* to go to California. In two months to be precise. Because in two months, I’ll be joining my brother at Hazelwood University, one of the premiere colleges in the world, exclusive to the upper echelon. But she was never supposed to go. She was supposed to stay here.

My mother’s face comes into view again and I blink, catching sight of the open front door and realize we’re at the entrance again. She laughs and reaches forward, tucking a flyaway hair behind my ear. It’s one of her rare maternal quirks. “Oh, sweetie,” she says, “because we’re moving there. Damien’s businesses are based there—he’s so amazing, oh! I just can’t wait for you to meet him. And isn’t it great that he’s based in California? You and I will be able to spend more time together even though you’ll be going to college. It’ll be like nothing has changed.”

With that, she pats my cheek, turns around, and disappears out the front door again, like she didn’t just barge back into my life like a whirlwind tornado and wreck all of my carefully laid plans. Plans that I’ve had in place for months—months that she’s been MIA, off doing whatever it is she does when she gets a bug up her ass and wants to go travel and play tourist or meet up with a friend in Tokyo. She’s never given a fuck that she has two kids. The second she deemed us old enough to no longer need nannies, we’ve been on our own, and for the last three years—ever since my brother went off to college, it’s just been me.

But this ... this is a game changer. I know how she is. Every time she

does this—every single fucking time she gets married—she suddenly transforms into this big family minded woman who wants nothing more than to shove her latest conquest down my throat.

After the handsy producer who thought fifteen-year-old stepdaughters were fair game, my brother put his foot down. He beat him to a pulp and has refused to meet another since. This is my turn. This is *not* happening, and if I have to dredge up the past and remind her why, I will.

CHAPTER 1

ISAAC

ALCOHOL SWIMS THROUGH MY VEINS, wreaking havoc wherever it goes. Its destructiveness fogs over my mind. And for the first time in forever, it's enough to numb the pain—though just barely.

“Don't you think you've had enough?” Paris asks. It's not like him to be so fucking prudish at a party. Why he's gotta choose tonight of all nights to be responsible is beyond me.

I don't even bother with a response. Instead, I just let the bottle in my hand go flying in the direction of his head. The responding inhale of breath and the shattering of glass against the backyard patio a split second later is the first part of my reward.

The second part is the dark curse that spits from his lips. “Are you fucking serious?” I hear him say. “I know you're in a shit mood, but you're lucky I don't knock your dumb ass out for that.”

Shit mood is putting it lightly. Rather than getting drunk off my ass and taking my fury out on my best friend, I'd rather find my shitstain of a father and wrap my hands around his neck until he's long gone from this Godforsaken world.

The sound of footsteps on the stone walkway of the garden estate echoes up the hedges into the secret alcove and a looming, dark figure appears. “What is he doing now?” Shepherd's deep baritone reaches my ears, but his

question makes me snort.

My head rolls back on my shoulders, and I realize that I've closed my eyes, so I open them and look up into Paris' angry blue gaze as he bends over the top of my chair, looking ready to follow through on his threat.

"He's being a fucking dick," Paris snaps, answering my question and glaring me down all in the same instance.

Another snort escapes my lips. "What?" I ask, the image of him wavering in my vision. "You want me to say 'I'm sorry?'" I shake my head. Sober me might have. Drunk me, however? Drunk me is a fucking asshole that just wants to lob another fucking bottle at someone's head.

Paris continues to glare down at me. "If you're gonna be like this, why don't you crash here or find your own ride home?" he asks. "Because I'm two seconds from being done with you tonight."

"No, let's just take him home." Shep's words get my ass moving.

Pushing myself up from the lounge chair, I waver on my feet before regaining my balance. "Fuck no," I argue. "I'm gonna go back to the house and get laid."

"Yeah?" Paris looks me over as he crosses his arms over his chest. "You really think that's gonna happen, whiskey dick?"

"Fuck you!" I throw out the curse, but I don't mean it. I know I'm just talking through my ass. He's right—with the amount of alcohol I've consumed, there's no doubt I won't be able to get it up for shit tonight. Fact is, I don't even want to get laid. I just don't want to go home. Not when I know that fucker is there.

Paris sighs and lowers his arms before moving towards me. "Come on, Isaac," he says. "Let's just go back for the night. We'll even crash on your floor if you want."

Shep moves in to my right and grabs an arm, lifting it over his shoulder. He doesn't say anything to Paris' offer, but I know he'll do it. I lower my head and inhale. Fuck, I really don't want to go back. I don't want to do this

shit.

“Isaac?” Paris repeats my name.

“*Shit.*” I hiss the word through gritted teeth. “Fine.” I don’t know if the two of them are relieved or what, but the second they get my drunken approval, Shep and Paris practically whip my ass out of the garden and start making our way up the steps and around the big mansion towards the parking lot.

Before I know it, I’m being pushed into the backseat of Shep’s Hummer. The engine roars to life and the sound of the two front doors snapping shut reaches my ears. I lay down long ways on the backseat, one foot propped at the edge of the seat and the other flat on the floorboards. I throw one arm over my eyes to block out the street lights as they pass over my face with every passing mile.

I’m so quiet, Paris must assume I’ve fallen asleep because after several minutes go by, I hear the creak of leather on his side of the vehicle before he starts talking in a low tone. “He’s real upset about the wedding shit,” he says. “He hasn’t gotten this drunk in a while.”

My teeth grind together at the mention of it. “It doesn’t help that Damien’s back for the time being,” Shep grunts from the driver’s side.

Paris’ seat creaks again. “What do you think he’s going to do?”

“Isaac or Damien?” Shep prompts.

“Fuck, I don’t know,” Paris replies. “Isaac?”

“Don’t know.”

“And Damien?”

“Don’t know,” Shep repeats. A man of few words—he’s my damn favorite right now. I wish Paris would shut the fuck up. I can feel myself sobering up, and it’s not a good feeling. The more time that passes, the clearer my head gets. The more I remember what’s waiting for me through the doors of the Icaro estate.

Paris and Shep grow quiet for the rest of the drive and after a while, I feel

the familiar slow of the car as we come to a stop in front of the gates of my childhood home. Shep's window rolls down and he leans out, inputting the code he's known for years. There's a pause as he waits for the gates to slide open and then we're on the move again.

I don't sit up until the car comes to a complete stop and Shep turns off the engine. "You good?" Paris glances back at me as I turn and look up to the three story mansion I've both revered and hated for fucking years.

Although it's well past midnight, there are lights on. Of course there are. For a man like Damien Icari, business never sleeps and neither does he.

"Yeah," I deadpan. "I'm just peachy." Then before Paris can ask another stupid question, I slide to the edge of the seat and open my door. "Let's go."

The three of us make our way to the front door and head into the house. Already, my father's men are hard at work—it's like that shit never stops in this house.

Two months, I think. Two months and I'll be free—relatively speaking anyway. At the very least, I'll be able to escape to Hazelwood University with Paris and Shep.

"Isaac." I freeze at the bottom of the staircase leading up to my room, and at my side both of my friends do the same. Slowly, I pivot back to face the man that called my name.

My father steps out of his office dressed in a three piece pinstripe suit. It's so cliché it almost makes me laugh. A fucking modern mobster hiding behind his businesses is still just a mobster.

"Come." That's all he has to say and I'm no longer even somewhat intoxicated. It's like he sucks all of it right out of me. I'm stone cold sober.

I inhale sharply and shoot a look at Paris and Shep. "Go on ahead," I tell them. "I'll be up in a minute."

Loyal friends that they are—and knowing friends—they each glance between my father and me, silently asking ... but I just shake my head. No doubt, all he wants to do is remind me to behave myself when his new wife

arrives tomorrow.

I turn down the hallway and follow my father back into his office. The door shuts behind me and I feel like I'm being locked in a prison cell. My father waits until he circles his desk and takes his seat before speaking.

"There has been a change of plans," he states, reaching into the right side drawer of his desk and withdrawing a small metal box. He pops it and withdraws an uncut cigar. My eyebrows lift slightly. Of all things, I didn't expect this.

I rock back on my feet, feeling my mood slowly shift. Slowly improving. "Has she rethought the marriage?" I can't help but ask.

My father's gaze shoots to me, a glare of warning in its depths. "*She. Has. Not.*" The vehemence in his words leads me to believe otherwise, but I keep my mouth shut as he snips the end of his cigar, puts it between his lips, and lights it. Smoke curls up from the flaring red end as he shakes the match and the flame goes out.

"Her daughter, on the other hand, is not as accepting of the union," he continues. "She's apparently refusing to come and Emilia is attempting to persuade her."

Smart girl, I think snidely.

"Then she won't be arriving tomorrow?" I ask.

"No." One word and yet it holds all of the obvious irritation he's barely restraining. "I've spent months seducing Emilia Summers, and she will be my wife," he goes on after a moment. "This is merely a setback. From what I understand, she's not close with her son. He hasn't spoken to her in three years. I hadn't considered that her daughter's opinion would mean that much to her."

"Of course not," I say with a nod. Just as much as my opinion matters to him—which would be not at fucking all.

"There is some good news, however." My father inhales another puff of his cigar and leans back in his chair. "The girl will be attending Hazelwood

next fall.”

The slow snake of dread crawls up my throat. My mind runs a million miles per minute, trying to piece together the meaning behind his words before he says them.

“In two months time,” he continues, “Emilia’s daughter will be a student at Hazelwood. My relationship with her mother is of the utmost importance in the coming year, Isaac. I’ll need someone to watch her.” He lowers his head. “Very carefully.”

My jaw unhinges and drops. “You’re joking.”

Dark brows lower over his eyes and my back straightens automatically. Fear is always something my father has been a master at invoking. Even now, grown as I am, it’s an effort just to keep my gaze level with his. “She’s nobody,” I say quickly, bypassing the earlier comment. “A spoiled socialite probably attending Hazelwood with the thought of finding a husband of the same class. There’s no need to watch her.”

“That is not for you to decide, *Son*.” I swallow reflexively when he ashes his cigar into a crystal tray on the side of his desk. “If I say you are to watch her, then that means you are to do so. You do not question my judgment here.”

My teeth grind down into each other, my jaw locking tight as I withhold the slew of curses that threaten to spill forward. “When?” is all I manage to get out after several seconds of utter silence.

“At the start of the semester,” he answers. “You will move into a location I have provided. You will live with Emilia Summers’ daughter. You will watch her and you will report back to me. With Emilia staying with her over the summer at some resort in Macau, I’ll have to push back the honeymoon, but it won’t matter.”

A thought fills my mind, and though I don’t want to make this meeting any longer than it has to be, I can’t stop the question from coming forward. “You’ve planned the Summers’ Industry takeover,” I begin. “Why do you

think it's necessary for me to watch the daughter? What could she possibly do to stop it now?"

My father watches me with a careful gaze. Thankfully, though, it's not angry. He ashes his cigar once more and then sets it within the tray before leaning forward and steepling his hands together to rest his chin upon them.

"I do not like wild cards, Isaac," he states. "Emilia was predictable until now. She's left her daughter alone for months at a time with little more than maids and cooks to look after her. It could be cold feet. It could also be her daughter's influence. I want to know. A businessman must plan for every contingency, my son. Remember that, and make sure you keep an eye on her."

"Yes, Sir." Saying the words is the start of my dismissal. I turn and head back into the hallway. Once I'm out of his presence, my body takes on a mind of its own. My hands clench into fists and my upper lip curls back from my teeth. All of the expression I couldn't reveal in his presence comes to the forefront.

Businessman? Fucking right. Damien Icari is no businessman. On paper he may be a genius—an inventor, the CEO of one of the fastest growing conglomerates in the world. Few know of its illusion, and I am one of them.

Emilia Summers is a fucking idiot for not seeing what a conniving bastard my father is. No woman in her right mind would marry Damien Icari if they knew what he really is—what our family really is.

Insidious.

Deviant.

Criminal.

And she just walked right into his trap.

CHAPTER 2

RORI

2 MONTHS LATER...

I hate going to places like *Cornelia's* where the dress code is *rich-casual*. They make my skin feel itchy. Anything less than designer will have the maître d turning up his nose and telling you that there's a lovely fast food restaurant just down the road a few miles that would be more appropriate. But here I am, stuffed like a Thanksgiving turkey into a Tory Burch dress borrowed from my mother's extensive closet when I'd rather be in a pair of ripped jeans and converse moving into Hazelwood's dorms with my best friend.

Why? Because I've put it off as long as I could and now that school is starting next week, I've run out of excuses to avoid meeting her new husband.

"Oh, there he is!" My mother squeals and abandons me before said maître d as she runs through the restaurant like an unrestrained child. I'd use the opportunity to escape if I thought I could get away with it. Instead, I just check my phone for the hundredth time in the last ten minutes. Still no response. He must be driving. Hopefully, that means he's almost here.

Regretfully, I force myself to trail after my mother to where two men stand, side by side. She fawns over the taller, older one of the two, going onto her already heeled toes to kiss him. I can feel the bile threatening to shoot up

my throat. Her lack of attention, however, gives me a moment to analyze them myself.

Damien Icari is a man of massive size—a wide frame covered in a pin striped suit with a silver tie at his throat and the shadow of a beard covering the lower half of his face. He pours all of his attention into my mother, his lips stretching into what looks like an ill used smile. Anyone looking on would probably sigh with jealousy at how much attention he pays her, but even from my distance, it feels disingenuous. I shift my attention from him to the man at his side.

The second I do, however, something hits me in the chest. Nothing physical, but something far more powerful. He's just as tall as Damien, though not as broad, with cool toned icy eyes. I'm struck by a feeling of uncertainty, of being watched—like prey looking at a predator, a mouse before a blue-eyed snake. I don't like it.

“You must be the famous Aurora I've heard so much about.” Damien's deep baritone makes me jump ever so slightly, and he moves forward, offering his hand, distracting me.

I stare down at it for a moment before reluctantly taking it. “I prefer Rori.”

The corners of his eyes crinkle as his smile widens. “It's nice to finally be introduced, Aurora.” I scowl as he ignores my words and says my full name. “This is my son, Isaac.” He drops my hand and gestures to the man that gave me that uncertain feeling.

My attention returns to the snake. Unlike his father, Isaac Icari has the look of a sun kissed God rather than something from the underworld. Where his father's hair is ink black and slicked straight back, Isaac's is golden with several different shades of blonde and brown. It curls over his forehead in an almost casual shaggy sort of way. If my brother let his hair grow out at the sides, I have no doubt it'd look similar. Still ... despite the warmth of his features, his eyes are a frost covered wasteland. More so than I've ever seen

before.

It makes me curious and curiosity is dangerous, especially in situations like this.

Isaac leans down and holds out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.” *Lie*. He smiles, but it’s sharp at its edges.

I don’t take his hand, instead leaving it hanging in the air. *Fuck this shit. I want out. I do not want to be here.*

As if sensing my internal dialogue, my mother shoots me a warning glare. I release a pent up sigh and reluctantly hold my hand out. He takes it, but instead of shaking it and letting it go like I expect, he holds it just long enough to be uncomfortable and my eyes jerk up to meet his.

“I look forward to our time together,” he says coolly, holding my attention captive.

My lips part in surprise. There’s no mistaking his words. The way he says them almost makes it sound like he’s threatening me, letting me know not to get too comfortable.

“Likewise,” I reply, adding an edge to my own tone. A warning. I don’t know what he expects from me, but if he thinks I’m like my mother—he’s in for a rude awakening and I intend to make sure he knows that.

The second he releases me, I drop my hand and rub it against the fabric of my dress as if to wipe off the residual essence of him. I don’t like the way he continues to watch me—like a lion watching prey.

Where the fuck is Marcus?

Thankfully, that thought seems to make him appear out of thin air, because no sooner have I asked myself that question than my phone buzzes against my hip inside of the dangling black Hermés purse I’m carrying. A true smile crosses my lips.

“Shall we sit?” my mother asks, moving for the table.

“We’re waiting for one more person,” I announce with a smile, reaching into my bag and pulling out my phone just to be sure, but I don’t even have

an opportunity to check the message because he's already here.

And it's so fucking worth it to see my mother's face blanch a split second before she whips around and hisses my way. "Aurora Dawn Summers," she growls, "you invited *him*?"

With a tight smile, I tilt my head to the side and slide my phone back into my purse with a shrug. "He is your son, Mom," I state. "Don't you want him to meet your new *husband*?" Without waiting for an answer, I turn to the man in question. "I hope you don't mind, but my brother will be joining us." I make it clear from my tone that I truly could not give a shit less if he minds. It's too late now anyway.

Damien's face morphs into a careful mask of affability, the kind I've seen dozens of times before. Every man she marries has one—the face they all wear when they're being polite, but inside they probably want to do something that would ruin their sparkling reputation.

That's right, I think. Keep that mask on, buddy. We'll see just how long you can last.

"I thought we talked about this," my mother says in a horrified whisper, panicking. "I wanted to wait until after—Marcus! Sweetheart!" She cuts herself off mid-tirade and plasters on a bright smile, moving quicker than her words as she abandons her new man in favor of greeting my brother.

Marcus frowns at her approach but doesn't immediately throw our mother off of himself, instead returning her hug with a small pat. "Mom," he says cordially.

"It's so good to see you," she gushes before shooting me another scathing glare. "I wish I would've known you were coming."

Marcus looks my way with amusement, and I shrug noncommittally. He shakes his head, one corner of his mouth twitching as he pushes her back. "Wouldn't miss it," he says. "Have you already ordered?"

"No, of course not." I bite my lip to keep from laughing as my mother, in a rare moment of awkwardness, takes a step back, away from my brother, and

glances from the table to Marcus.

Damien takes this as his opportunity and slides a hand around my mother's waist as he reaches out, holding a hand for Marcus to take. "It's wonderful to meet Emilia's son," he begins. "I'm Damien."

"Yes," Marcus returns the handshake with a hard look. "So, I've heard." That's it. No other comment. No other polite greeting. This is going to be the longest lunch in history, but thank fuck I've got him here.

I snort a little bit to myself as I leave the group to take my seat. If I try to off myself with the restaurant's butter knife, there will be at least one person at the meeting who might try to stop me. Funny. It doesn't make me want to do it any less though.

Thirty minutes into the lunch and I'm ready to blow my brains out all over the eggshell tablecloth and fine china. I'm intricately aware of the underlying tension around the table, slowly but surely rising toward the surface.

"So, Marcus, what's your major?" Damien is doing his damndest to appear as wholesome as my mother apparently thinks he is. I'm thankful, too, that I asked Marcus to come because now he's putting the brunt of his questions on the luncheon's unexpected guest.

"International business," Marcus replies as he reaches forward and takes a sip from his glass.

"How amusing, my son is in the same department," Damien replies.

Isaac says nothing. Neither do Marcus or I, for that matter.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if you two became friends," Mom says, her voice tight with hope. "After all, we're a family now."

Family? Yeah, right. Fat chance of that happening. Does she really think that another attempt at shoving strangers together and getting them to play nice will make this family of hers come to life? I drop my fork onto my plate and sit back, waiting for this horrible luncheon to end.

"Of course we are, darling," Damien replies, though I notice with each

passing minute, his expression becomes tighter and tighter. Almost like he expected a different outcome and is now pissed that things aren't playing out the way he predicted. A slow smile curves my lips.

Good. I hope he realizes just how futile this whole thing is. It'll end that much quicker once he does.

Silence descends upon the table—the only sound coming from the still clinking forks between the men and my mother's glass as she finishes off what has to be her third glass of Chardonnay in the last thirty minutes. It has come to the point where she is beyond wino and lush and has ushered her way straight into manic alcoholism.

Damien sets his fork and knife down on either side of his plate, drawing my attention as he sits up straight and turns his gaze to me. Oh no. Something sinister crawls up my throat. His responding smile is almost ... knowing.

“Actually, the reason I wanted your mother to ask you here today,” he begins, reaching over to take her hand, “is that I wanted to give you a gift.”

Alarms sound in my mind. Warning signals. Bright, flashing neon lights. All of it urging me to get up and find a fucking exit. My back stiffens and I cut a look to Marcus out of the corner of my eyes. He's watching Damien like a careful tiger, curious, but cautious.

“I'm sure she'll love it,” my mother gushes, but I highly doubt it.

“What is it?” I ask.

Damien reaches into an inner pocket of his suit coat and pulls out an envelope. *Money*. I almost lose control of myself and roll my eyes. I feel my brother soften at my side. I don't want Damien Icari's money as I'm sure it's nothing but a way to try and ingratiate himself to me, but when he holds it out, I take it nonetheless. Maybe I can pass it off to his son or just leave it on the table for the waitress.

Doesn't matter if it's a hundred or a couple of thousand in this envelope. Anything he gives me probably has strings attached and I don't do strings. *Ever*.

“Open it,” he insists when I go to place it under my napkin.

I blink when something jingles inside of it and confusion takes over. I feel every eye at the table on me as I slip my thumbnail into one sealed edge and rip it open. The slight weight inside slides down into my palm the second I turn the envelope and a pair of what looks like house keys as well as an elevator keycard slide into my palm.

I stare down at the offering, thoroughly perplexed. “Uhhhh ... thanks?”

“Isn’t it wonderful!” my mother exclaims. “Now you can be near us.”

“Near ... you?” I repeat.

“It’s the key to your own penthouse suite at Hotel Theós, one of my businesses. Well, virtually your own place,” Damien says. “Your mother and I will be on the top floor after we get back from the honeymoon, but Isaac is rarely home and—”

I hold my hand up, interrupting him. “Wait,” I snap. “What the hell are you talking about?” A dark look falls over his face, but I ignore it in favor of turning to my mother. I couldn’t care less if he doesn’t like being cut off.

“It’s a key,” my mother says stupidly as if I can’t fucking see what’s right in front of me.

“Yes, I see that,” I say through gritted teeth. “But what the hell makes you think I want to move in with you? Or with...” I turn towards Damien’s son and find him staring back at me in that unnerving way of his. A shiver chases down my spine at the frosty look he gives me as if he’s daring me to continue. Does he think I won’t? I clench my fingers around the key and card for a moment—letting the metal and plastic bite into my skin before I force my palm open and drop it back onto the table. It clatters loudly. “No.”

“Aurora.” My mother’s tone is horrified. “Take the key and say thank you. You’re embarrassing me.”

I don’t fucking care. “I have a dorm room at Hazelwood,” I snap back.

“Not anymore,” Damien says coolly.

My head turns towards him, slowly and in jerky movements. “*Excuse.*

Me?”

“I’ve taken the liberty of canceling your dorm accommodations,” he replies, picking up his knife and fork once more before slicing into his steak. “Don’t worry, though, you’ll be provided for—”

“No.”

At first, I think I’m the one who said it, but then when Damien freezes and he looks up—he doesn’t look at me and I realize it wasn’t. Marcus levels a glare across the table, reaching out as he lets his fingers grip the edge. Something crosses between them for a moment. A battle of wills? I’m not sure. Whatever the case, though, when it ends, it’s clear who’s the winner.

Marcus stands and reaches for me. “We’re leaving, Rori. Mother?” Mom jumps and looks up at him with wide eyes. I look away as I stand. I don’t want to see it again—see her reach for her husband—a virtual stranger—rather than get up and follow her own flesh and blood. I’ve watched it happen far too often.

Somehow, though, instead of finding a place in the far off distance of the restaurant, my gaze finds Isaac’s. There’s neither triumph nor pity in his expression. If anything, I see an absence of both as well as an absence of any visceral emotion that might make more sense to a guy whose father is paying more attention to his wife’s children than his own.

He tips his head down, staring at me through his blonde curls and suddenly I’m struck with an image of him covered in blood. It’s leaking down the side of his face, over his porcelain skin, sliding into the whites of his eyes. Somehow, I can’t imagine him closing them though. He strikes me as the type to lock onto a target the second he’s got it in his sights. And right now, that target is me.

I don’t hear anything else my brother says. I’m so focused on Isaac I can’t even realize I’m being dragged away until I nearly stumble and go down in a heap, only saved from face planting on the marbled floor of Cornelia’s by my brother’s hand on my arm.

“Keep walking, Rori,” he says. “Don’t look back.”

I suck in a breath. Those were the same words he told me the last time she got married. That night we ended up in the hospital with more faceless nurses I can only vaguely recall and Aunt Carmen. I pull my arm from his grasp and move forward, my legs eating up the distance between me and the exit.

I’m not the same as I was three years ago. I’m stronger now. Independent. Maybe I called my brother here for backup, for emotional support, but I don’t need him to hold me up or drag me out. Not when I can walk away on my own two feet. Hopefully for the last time as our mother chooses someone—anyone—other than us—other than me.

CHAPTER 3

ISAAC

“WHAT DO you know about Marcus Summers?” My question is aimed at Paris since he’s the one who knows everything about every-fucking-one at Hazelwood.

Surprisingly, however, it’s not Paris who answers, but Shepherd. “I know he’s not to be fucked with,” he says.

My brows shoot up. “What makes you say that?”

Shep rolls his shoulders back, leans down over the pool table in the game room, and lines up his shot. He waits until he’s hit the cue ball and sunk another three balls, barely scraping by the fourth and ending his turn before he responds. Paris shoots us a look but steps up to take his place while Shep and I both move back to talk.

“Marcus Summers is a man with dangerous friends,” is all he says.

Irritation slithers through me and I grip my pool stick tightly, thumping the bottom against the floor once before shooting a look his way. “Care to elaborate?” I prompt.

Shep’s lips press together and he eyes the table as Paris leans over and lines up his stick. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he was ignoring me. But I do know better, and I know that he has to focus on something mundane when he’s thinking. The longer the silence stretches, though, the tighter my muscles grow. Winding and winding until one mere flick might shatter the

tension until finally...

“Marcus Summers isn’t from the California coast,” Shep states.

I frown, waiting, but when he doesn’t immediately follow that up with anything else, I blow out a frustrated breath. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Paris finishes up his shot and turns towards us. “It means he likely went to school on the East Coast,” he answers for him. “And who do we know that runs the East Coast?” He arches a single brow and I could punch myself for being so stupid. Of course.

“Eastpoint.” The mere word has both Shep and Paris tensing, but Paris nods nonetheless.

“He might’ve chosen to come to Hazelwood, but he’s got strong ties to Eastpoint,” Shep states. “Whatever you have going on with him, you need to be careful.”

A groan rumbles up my chest and I bend until my forehead nearly presses into the chalky top of my pool stick. After a beat, I stand up and move into place, shooting and scratching in under a minute like an idiot. My head’s so full of fucking shit, I can’t even concentrate on a simple game of pool.

Neither Paris nor Shep say a word as I toss my stick into the holder to the side and take a step back, crossing my arms over my chest as my mind whirls with thoughts. “Why’d you want to know anyway?” Paris asks.

If it were anyone else, I’d ignore the question, but these two are as deep into my father’s world as I am—we’re one and the same. Their own fathers are just as monstrous in their own right as mine is. It’s how we became friends—birds of the bloody feathers flock together and all that shit.

“It’s not me that has anything going on with Summers,” I say. “It’s my father.”

Paris’ jaw drops. Shep freezes where he’s bent over the pool table and slowly, inexplicably minutely, he stands without making a shot before turning to meet my gaze. Their reactions do not offer confidence, and I know

without having to go into detail they understand the situation.

“The new wife?” Paris asks, proving me right.

I nod.

“Fuck.” The curse is hissed out between Shep’s lips, surprising me.

“My intel says he hasn’t spoken to his mother in three years,” I say. “But he showed up to the meeting we had the other day. His sister called him.”

“Are they close?” Paris demands.

I shrug. “Close enough for him to come to her rescue.”

“And the plan to have her move in?” he continues.

I shake my head. “Not happening.” And I know it burns my father’s fucking ass that someone else is going over him. He is not a man that likes to be out of control. I should be thankful for Marcus’ intervention, but after seeing the girl that is Aurora Summers, I can’t help but feel like he’s going to be more of a thorn in my side than anything else.

Aurora Summers is nothing like I originally expected. There’s a thread of steel beneath the beautiful exterior and also something else. Something intricately ... damaged. It makes me want to find the wound she’s trying so clearly to hide and dig my fingers into its bloody surface and see what kind of demons she’s hiding beneath her skin.

“What’s the plan now then?” Paris asks.

If only I had an answer to that. I roll my head back on my shoulders, closing my eyes as I try to work through my options. I could just do as my father says and keep an eye on the girl—she’s attending Hazelwood, so that shouldn’t be too difficult. It wouldn’t be hard to plant someone close to her and regardless of what else I do, I plan to have someone watching her at all times. But if I just follow my father’s orders then that would mean giving up my own agenda and I have no intention of letting him dictate my life for much longer.

Opening my eyes, I blow out a breath and move across the room until I hit the wet bar at the edge. I yank down a glass and uncap the decanter sitting

there, pouring a healthy dose of whiskey into the cup before I grip the counter in two fists.

“I want the fucker out of the way,” I say. It’s my main motive for this whole fucking thing. I want my father to fucking pay for what he’s done. For the last several years. For my own mother. And for forcing me, his fucking heir, to run after him like a dog to its master.

The question is, though, am I acting too fast? Is it too soon?

Almost as soon as I ask that, I know the answer—no, it’s not too soon. In fact, I’m running behind. I need him out of the way before he makes things solid with Emilia Summers’ connections.

There’s always the chance that the marriage could fall apart before he gets what he wants, but then there’s always the chance that it won’t, and I can’t take chances.

“This marriage can’t fucking last,” I snap, making my split second decision. Grabbing the glass, I turn and face my friends, my brothers and comrades. “Even if it means earning the wrath of Marcus Summers, before the semester is over, I want Emilia Summers out of the picture—and if I have to drive her daughter to the brink to get it done, I will.”

No matter that she’s got eyes like fresh turned graves and hair like burning sunshine. I tip the glass back and swallow it all in one gulp. Expensive whiskey burns down the throat just like cheap whiskey and leaves me feeling just as determined.

Paris and Shep exchange a silent look before they meet my gaze. “God help you, man,” Paris says.

“But we’re here,” Shep finishes. “Whatever you need. You’ve got it.”

For the first time since this conversation started, the tension finally drains away from me. I knew they were solid. I knew they would have my back, but having it said so openly is a relief that they can’t even begin to understand.

“Just one question, though,” Paris says.

“What?” I set my glass back on the bar.

He pushes a hand up his forehead and into the red-brown curls that hang into his face. “How are you going to break her?”

I let my eyes level on his before moving to Shep’s and back. The words, when they leave my throat, feel like a vow and a curse all at once.

“I’ll do whatever I have to,” I tell them. “I’m going to make Aurora Summers wish she’d never come here.”

And perhaps when she’s as far gone as a human can be, maybe then ... I’ll let her see the truth of it all. I’m not a good man. I may only be breaking her to save her, but at the end of the day, I know I’ll enjoy it.

CHAPTER 4

RORI

I DROP into my seat at one of the tables in front of *BeanBerry*, the campus coffee shop, across from my best friend, Selene, and her cousin, Helen—my new roommates. It’s already been a hell of a week and it’s only Tuesday.

“He really tried to force you to live with his son?” Selene asks not for the first time today. It’s like she can’t believe it. I get it—it’s a crazy situation.

“Yup.” I pop the end of the word as I swirl my straw around the opening of my Frappuccino. *Dick*, I think snidely.

“Damn.” Selene shakes her head. “Good thing Marcus showed up.” I frown at that, but she’s not wrong. It was a good idea to call Marcus, but that, too, has come with consequences. As if reminding me of those exact consequences, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and read the text sent.

I’m stopping by your dorm later. Be there.

I grimace, but don’t send a reply. I already know I will be. And whatever Marcus has to say can be dealt with later. Right now, I just want to sit back and enjoy my victory over Damien and Isaac Icari as well as my very first taste of freedom.

I mean, yeah, even though my mom is more than a little flighty and I never knew when she’d come barging back into my life, I’d still technically lived with her. This is different. This is me on my own.

“Marcus is in overprotective brother mode,” I confess.

Selene tips her head to the side and holds the top of her latte cup with two fingers. “What is he doing?” she inquires.

I blow out a breath. “It’s not what he’s doing,” I confess. “It’s what he *will* do that worries me.”

“What will he do?” she presses.

My eyes slide to Hel, but her face is completely focused on her phone, her fingers flying over the screen at lightning speed. I slowly let my eyes rove over her face, dark skin, even darker hair, and big eyes. She’s completely absorbed in whatever she’s doing. They’re complete opposites—from how they look to how they act. I shake my head in amusement before I return my attention back to Selene.

“Marcus has been on Hazelwood’s campus for three years already,” I point out. “He’s got this place locked down. When we were in high school together—just that one year was unbearable. No one would fucking touch me much less go out with me.”

“Are you looking to date?” she asks.

I shrug. “I’m looking to expand my horizons. The last time I had sex was ... ugh, too fucking long ago.” I roll my eyes and put the straw to my lips, sucking back a mouthful of chocolatey goodness. I don’t even taste the coffee. Just the way I like it.

“And you think you’re gonna be blue balled while your brother’s around,” Selene sums up.

“Pretty much,” I say mournfully, setting down my nearly empty cup. “Thankfully, though, he said he’s got a friend and his girlfriend coming into town soon so he’ll probably skip the first week of classes to spend time with them. They don’t get to see each other much.”

“Do they go to another school?” she asks.

“Yeah.” I flick the tip of my straw with my finger distractedly. “And Mom is going on her long-awaited honeymoon with the current step-dick.”

“Then you should take this opportunity!” Selene jumps forward, startling me. Her hands slap against the table and even Hel jerks her head up from her phone, frowning at the two of us.

“Opportunity?” I repeat.

Selene’s white-blond hair flies around her face as she bobs her head excitedly. “Yes!” she squeals. “There’s a party at the end of next week at one of the frat houses off campus. It’s a Gods and Goddesses party.”

“A Gods and Goddesses party?” I feel like a parrot just repeating every major line she says, but the words coming out of her mouth are confusing. “What the hell is that?”

Selene’s pale blue eyes focus on me with intensity and I know that no matter what my feelings towards this Gods and Goddesses party are—we’re going. She’s got that determined look. I glance at Hel, who seems to recognize it too. She sighs and shakes her head my way as if to say ‘it’s too late now. We’re goners.’

“It’s a party the students put on a couple of times a year,” Selene begins. “Once at the beginning of the year and another at the end. It’s like a welcome back and goodbye thing. Everyone dresses up as a God or Goddess and goes in a mask.”

“A mask?” I scrunch up my face. “What’s with that? Halloween isn’t even for another few months.”

Selene rolls her eyes. “It’s part of the dramatics,” she says. “It’s just to blow off steam. You don’t actually have to wear a mask if you don’t want to, but most people do.”

“Rich kids are obsessed with masks,” Hel points out.

I turn my attention her way. “What do you mean?”

She sets her phone face down on the table and finally picks up her cup. “The amount of masquerades and masked events they have are overwhelming. Selene says it’s because of the dramatics, but not everyone is like that.”

Hel would know—she’s far more down to Earth and less familiar with the expense of the elite. She’s actually only related to Selene by marriage and though they get along and are friends, Hel’s mom was actually a flight attendant before she married Selene’s uncle. Having money is not something she’s used to—even years later.

My lips twitch. “Alright, tell us then,” I offer when it’s clear she’s got something to say. “Why do you think rich people are obsessed with masks?”

Hel lifts her head and over the rim of her coffee cup, her dark eyes meet mine with a laser focus. “People who want to wear masks probably actually want to take them off.” I frown at that, confused, but before I can ask what she means, she keeps talking. “Rich kids are constantly wearing masks. Not physical ones, but ones that hide who they really are.” My lips part, but she doesn’t stop there. “Rich kids are under constant watch—”

Selene scoffs. “The paparazzi aren’t—”

“I’m not talking about something as arbitrary as the paparazzi,” Hel says, cutting her off without hesitation. “I’m talking about everyone else.”

I stiffen, already suspecting where she’s going with this. I don’t want to hear it though. “Got it,” I say, before she can continue. I turn my attention back and focus it squarely on Selene again. Subject change needed immediately.

“How do you know so much about this party anyway?”

Selene bites her lip and shifts until she’s sitting back in her chair once more. “I just met someone who told me a little about it.”

“And would this someone be a guy?” I prompt, forcing myself to smile tauntingly. I can feel Hel’s gaze on the side of my face, but I don’t say a word, and thankfully, she doesn’t force her way back in. It’s one thing I sometimes hate and sometimes love about her—she picks up on shit fast.

Cue another eye roll from Selene, and a frustrated grunt as she crosses her arms over her chest. “So, are we going or not?” she asks, ignoring my question.

“Do we have a choice?” I ask.

She grins. “Not at all.”

“I do,” Hel announces, sipping her coffee.

Selene smirks her way. “No, you don’t. You’re going even if that means I have to stuff you in a dress myself and drag you down the street.”

Hel’s quiet, “Damn it,” has both Selene and I laughing our asses off.

Yeah, being at Hazelwood with these two is definitely better than being stuffed into a cold penthouse with Isaac Icari.

A sinister feeling creeps up my spine and even if I wanted to, I can’t stop myself from looking back. I jerk as a pair of familiar blue eyes meet mine. *Fuck, I think. It’s him.*

A coldness washes over me. I don’t know why I’m so surprised. I knew he would be at Hazelwood, but I just never really expected to run into him—and certainly not this soon. He’s sitting across the open greenery against a tall fountain with two guys, one of which has a girl under his arm. Unlike them, he’s completely focused—his gaze zeroed in and almost ... haunting. I want to turn away, to show him that I’m not aware of him, but it’s too late now and I find that I can’t.

So, what do I do? I stare back like a fucking crazy person. I match his intensity with as much of my own as I can muster and glare his way. I don’t know what this is—intimidation tactics or something else—and I don’t care. I don’t fucking bow and showing vulnerability is not something I’ve been taught. Not after years of my mother’s manipulations.

His lips twitch in amusement and he leans over, his mouth opening as he says something. Though I can’t hear it, I know it’s about me because in the next second, the two guys he’s with turn back and their eyes lock on me as well.

Fuck.

Thankfully, I’m saved by the sound of Hel’s chair scraping back against the stones beneath our feet. The sharp noise jerks me out of whatever trance

Isaac Icari put me in and I pivot back to see her and Selene gathering their shit.

Selene gives me an odd look. “We’re heading back to start picking out our costumes for the party,” she says. “You coming?”

“Yeah,” I say, quickly grabbing my now empty cup and moving with them to throw it away in the nearby trash.

Almost as if I have to know if he’s still watching me, I casually look back over my shoulder once more as we pass the front of the coffee shop and head back towards the dorms. I pause slightly, though, when I see he’s gone and so are the other two.

Something tells me that this won’t be the last time I see him, and for some reason that makes a feeling of dread bloom in my stomach.

“Damn it,” I mutter as I force my legs to hurry to catch up to Hel and Selene who are making their way down the campus steps.

Whatever Isaac Icari thinks he’s doing looking at me like that—if it’s a challenge or something else—I can’t let it get to me. I’m not a toy for him to play with and I’m certainly not as easy as my mother was.

CHAPTER 5

RORI

HEL, Selene, and I are walking up the front steps of Rozenfeld Dorm when my phone buzzes against my side. I pause as they reach the doors but before I can answer it, a familiar voice calls out.

“Rori!” The phone stops buzzing and I turn as Marcus jogs up to me.

“Hey—oomph!” I gasp when he enfolds me into a massive hug and my eyes widen in confusion. We’ve always been close, but he doesn’t do public displays of affection. When he leans down and his jovial voice dips into one of seriousness—I understand what he’s doing.

“We need to talk,” he whispers. “Alone.”

I force a smile onto my face and hug him back quickly. When he releases me, I turn back to Selene and Hel. “Hey, I’ll catch up with you guys later. I’m going to go hang with my brother real quick.”

Selene smiles and waves me off, but Hel seems to catch on, watching me with a curiosity that I know—thankfully—she won’t push on me later. She was right about rich kids and their masks.

Once they’re gone, I turn back to Marcus and frown. “Come on,” he says, grabbing my hand and pulling me after him.

“What’s with the spy treatment?” I ask, not really expecting an answer. And just as predicted, he doesn’t say a word. He keeps utterly silent until we reach the parking lot behind the dorm and I spot his truck a few spaces down

in the front row. He releases my arm and pops open the passenger side door for me.

“Let’s go, kid.”

I roll my eyes. “Not sure if you’ve realized it yet or not,” I say snidely, “but I’m not a kid anymore.”

He leans down as I settle into the seat and drops an arm over the top of the doorway. “You’ll always be a kid to me, brat. Buckle up.”

Douche. But I do as he says after he shuts the door, and watch him as he circles around the front of the vehicle. As soon as he’s in the truck and the engine has started, I attack. “Okay, can you tell me what’s up now?” I demand.

“Needed to get you alone to talk about what happened at the luncheon,” he states.

My lips twist and I frown at him. “Uh, yeah, dumbo, I was fucking there. I know what happened.” Marcus shoots me a look but doesn’t respond immediately. I blow out a breath. “Okay fine, enlighten me.”

“We’re meeting some friends of mine,” he says instead, confusing me.

“I thought you wanted me alone to talk about this?” I remind him.

“I do, but Dean’s got more information than I do on this Damien guy, so I want to talk to him too.”

I lean back into my seat and cross my arms over my chest. “And you think he won’t mind you bringing your *kid*-sister along for the ride?” I can’t help the bitterness in my tone when I say the word ‘kid.’ That’s all I’ve ever been to him. A child he needs to look after and protect. My nails bite into my forearms as the reminder that I’m the reason he and Mom don’t speak anymore hits me hard in the guilt department.

Marcus’ gaze burns into the side of my face but I keep my eyes glued to the windshield. After a beat of silence, he sighs. “I’m thinking about transferring soon,” he admits.

Shock races through my system and I whirl around to gape at him.

“Transferring?” I repeat. “You only have one year left! What’s the point!”

He focuses his attention on the road ahead of him. “There are friends who need me on the East Coast.”

“You’re talking about them, aren’t you?” I demand. “Is that who we’re meeting?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he says, “but it’s because of that—and the possibility that I might be leaving soon—that I think it’s better if you come with me to this meeting. You need to know just as much about Damien Icaris as I do, if not more. It would benefit you to be more cautious about people.”

“I need to be more cautious?” I practically spit out. The urge to slap the fuck out of him—despite the fact that he’s driving and speeding a good twenty miles over the limit right now—is intensifying. He thinks I need to be more cautious about people? Is that why he acted so sketchy in front of Selene and Hel. “Is there something you want to say about my friends?” I demand. “You don’t trust them?”

He doesn’t look at me when he answers. “No.”

It’s as simple as that. Marcus is quick to judge and even quicker to write people off. It’s a surprise he has any friends at all. I sit back against my seat with a grunt.

“This is fucking ridiculous,” I growl. “You’ve been at Hazelwood for three years. You haven’t come home to New York in damn near all that time, but the second I show up—the second I try to get even a little bit of my own freedom, here you are, trying to—”

“I’m trying to look after you, Rori,” he cuts me off. “I know it’s inconvenient. Shit. I fucking know, okay? I don’t want to take away your freedom. If anyone’s earned it, you have.”

I think over his words for a moment before replying. “I’m not going to lie,” I tell him honestly. “You transferring isn’t such a bad thing—I wasn’t looking forward to my big brother hanging over me at Hazelwood, but…” A sorrowful yearning aches in my chest. I’ve missed him.

Sure, I fucking complain and shit—we fight sometimes—but Marcus has always had my back. Without questions and without fail.

“It feels like you’re running from me,” I mutter quietly.

The big truck comes to a stop at a stoplight and he turns, facing me. Heat arches up my cheeks and I keep my eyes trained in front of me. Afraid to turn and look at the expression he’s making.

“Rori.” His hand reaches out, touching mine. “Look at me.”

“I don’t want to.”

His chuckle is more breath than anything else. “Yes you do, brat. Come on, look at me.” I suck in a breath and turn to glare at him, blinking in surprise when he lifts a palm to touch my cheek.

“I love you, brat,” he says. “And I will always be there when you need me. I promise that everything I do is to take care of you. I will make sure you’re safe before I go to Eastpoint. That’s why I’m having this meeting with Dean.”

“What is it about Damien that makes you so worried?” I ask. “You know they’re probably going to get a divorce in the next few months. Her husbands never last long. He’s not...” I drift off, not even wanting to say that monster’s fucking name, but Marcus already knows. I don’t have to say his name to elicit a reaction. His eyes harden and he drops his hand from my face to grip the steering wheel.

“It’s just a feeling,” he replies vaguely.

I narrow my eyes on him but don’t press. I doubt it’s ever *just a feeling* with him, but I let it go. Marcus has his own secrets, and ... I have mine.

The truck moves forward again when the light turns green and for the next several minutes, the two of us sit in virtual silence until I start to notice the direction we’re going. The tall skyscrapers and posh restaurants start to become less frequent and further apart until there are none left at all. The roads become gradually less smooth and I tense when I spot a few haggard faced people milling about the streets with shopping carts full of stuff.

“Marcus?” I call his name and when he doesn’t respond, I look at him.
“Where are we going?”

Almost as soon as the question is out of my mouth, the truck turns into a one story brick building with no sign and blacked out windows and doors. The nicest thing in the parking lot is my brother’s truck and what’s obviously a rented SUV which he parks right next to. *What the hell is going on?*

“Come on,” he says.

Reluctantly, I unbuckle my seatbelt, pop open my door, and follow him into the building.

The second we step inside, a strong wave of cigarette smoke hits me in the face along with the sour acrid smell of cleaning supplies. I’m surprised. I would’ve never expected a seedy place like this to even have cleaning supplies. The cigarette smell is the worst though. I haven’t smoked in months and it makes me crave one.

There aren’t very many people in the building. A lone, skinny bartender talking to a guy in a pair of overalls at the bar’s countertop and a younger couple in the back, standing around a pool table. As we approach, the girl lifts her head, and immediately, I feel assessed. Almost like she’s checking me over as a threat, her cool gray-blue eyes rove over my face and then down the rest of me before they come back up and she smirks. I don’t know what it is about that smirk, but it irritates the fuck out of me.

The guy with her stands and turns when he notices the direction of her gaze. “Marcus,” he calls and I watch in a strange fascination as my brother goes towards him without caution and embraces him in a manly hug. *What the actual fuck? Who is this guy?*

“Dean, man, it’s good to see you,” Marcus says. “How’re you doing?”

I blink at the name and then it clicks. Dean—as in Dean Carter of Carter Industries. Shit. My attention returns to the girl as she steps up next to them.

“If he’d just take it easy, he’d be better, but he’s a dick that has to keep going,” she says.

Marcus releases Dean and steps back before smirking at her. “You’re Avalon, I take it,” he states, holding out his hand.

“I am.” She takes his hand. “I’ve seen you before, but we haven’t had the chance to meet.”

“I was a little busy, Baby,” Dean says, sliding an arm around her waist when she and my brother part. I feel like a voyeur, watching the two of them. Almost like I’ve suddenly fallen into the background. It’s not a place I’m used to—not with someone like my mother—but I find that I don’t mind it.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Avalon rolls her eyes before turning to me. “And you are?”

“Rori,” I say. She doesn’t bother to offer her hand to me and I don’t either. Avalon’s smirk widens.

“Interesting.” That’s all she says and as much as I want to, I don’t have an opportunity to ask her what she means before my brother jumps straight into business.

“So, what do you know about Damien Icari?” he demands.

Dean blows out a breath and leans back against the pool table, both his and his girl’s sticks and their game forgotten as he pulls her in front of him and wraps his arms around her middle. Something wicked and jealous curls into my throat as he nuzzles against her neck, but I shove that feeling down. Shit like that is for other people.

“I know he’s not a good guy,” Dean states.

My body stiffens. “How is he not a good guy?” I demand, blurting out the question with little regard to the fact that I know Marcus only brought me here to listen in.

Marcus cuts me a look, but Dean thankfully answers anyway. “Damien Icari might seem like an average businessman and millionaire to the world, but most people who do even the slightest bit of digging can find out the truth. He’s as dirty as they come.”

“Ties to the mafia?” Marcus asks.

Dean nods and my stomach drops out from beneath me. *What the hell has my mother gotten herself into? No. What the hell could a man who's involved with criminals want with my mother?*

“More than just ties,” Dean says with a shake of his head. His hands twine together with Avalon’s and I watch as she adjusts herself against him, trying not to lean too much on one side. A curious part of me wonders why, but I don’t ask and instead, focus on the discussion at hand. “He’s practically a member himself.”

“Why would he marry my mother?” Marcus demands.

Avalon looks past Marcus and stares at me. Her gaze is impenetrable and kind of unnerving. It makes me want to look away, but my pride won’t let me. Instead, I lift my chin and glare back at her which only makes her look harder as her lips curve up even more.

“Think about it, man,” Dean continues. “Why else? Your mother has connections to a lot of businesses. Even if she’s not directly involved, the Summers name carries weight and it’s got money backing it. That and your Aunt Carmen—is a force to be reckoned with. She’s the business brains of your family. Either he’s married her for a chance to get to Carmen, who otherwise wouldn’t have given a man like him the time of day, or...”

Dean drifts off and I jerk my gaze away from his girlfriend’s. “Or what?” I ask, calling his attention, and my brother’s, back to me.

Dean arches a brow at me once. “Or he’s planning on using your mother as a stepping stone to launder his own dirty money.”

A sick feeling cuts through my gut. That seedy fucking bastard. He wouldn’t dare—but no, he would. Of course he would. My mother can never find a fucking man worth a damn. Marcus’ father split, mine wasn’t rich enough for her family or her, and then the other one ... I don’t even want to think about her last utter failure. Why couldn’t she just be happy without some sick, twisted, son of a bitch coming in to absolutely wreck our lives?

I bite down into my lower lip so hard, I taste blood.

“That’s probably the case,” Marcus says as if Dean’s last words haven’t completely overturned our current situation, but then he’s always been good at hiding his negative emotions. Unlike me.

I can’t deal with this though, not without losing my fucking shit. I turn away and start walking. I walk past the bartender and her customer and right out the door into the hot California sun onto the broken, shittily laid pavement of the bar parking lot.

“Fuck.” I curse as I scrub my hands down my face. Maybe that explains why Isaac Icari was staring at me so hard. Does he know? He has to know. That’s his fucking father.

Another thought occurs to me—was that why Damien had pressed so hard to have me move in with his son? A cold feeling rockets through me. My mother is one thing, but me ... what did they expect from me? A hostage? A pawn.

Anger drives up through my body and I feel an itchy sensation in my knuckles; it’s overwhelming.

“Want to hit something?”

I jump at the question, startled because I didn’t expect anyone to follow me out here—least of all Dean’s girlfriend. I turn slowly, incrementally—as if I’m facing off with some dangerous snake. She just stands back, her hands shoved into the pockets of her ripped jeans. She looks like she belongs in a place like this—like she’s comfortable with decay and cheap beer. I like ripped jeans as much as the next chick and as much as I detest the over-pompous places my mother enjoys, I’m used to it. It’s normal to me where *this* is not.

“Hey, I’m talking to you, kid.”

I grit my teeth. “I’m not a fucking kid,” I snap. Jesus, she can’t be more than a year or two older than me, if that. “And I heard you—yes, I want to hit something.”

“Okay,” she says with a smile. “Then why don’t you?”

“What?” I gape at her. “I can’t just—” I gesture awkwardly to the space between her and me and then around to the practically empty parking lot.

“Sure, you can,” she argues with a shrug, “but I wouldn’t recommend hitting rock or brick,” she says, nodding back to the bar’s building. “It might leave your knuckles bruised, or worse, broken.”

I snort. “Speaking from personal experience?” I ask.

She grins. “Yeah.”

I shake my head. “You’re fucking weird, you know that?”

She shrugs, a lazy movement. “S’not the first time I’ve heard that. Probably won’t be the last.”

My eyes move over her, curious. Something tells me a straightforward approach is what works best on this chick, so I suck in a breath and go for it. “Why did you follow me out here?” I ask.

Avalon’s smile curves her lips and she tilts her head down, towards me. “Thought you might be interested in some free advice.”

I sigh, putting one hand behind my neck and leaning it to one side—feeling the need to crack it. “Go ahead,” I offer casually. “What would you do in this fucked up situation?”

Her smile cuts through her face and makes a shiver run through my spine. “I’d give your enemies a taste of their own medicine.” It’s a simple statement, and yet, I know she means something darker.

“What are you saying?” I ask cautiously.

She pulls one hand from her pocket and gestures back. “Your brother and Dean are in there trying to come up with any number of ways to get your mother to divorce this guy,” she says.

I’m not surprised. “So?”

Avalon shakes her head. “From what I know, sounds like Marcus is planning on making a move soon—Dean hasn’t told the others yet, but Marcus probably won’t be around here much longer. Doesn’t make any sense for them to leave this up to him, does it?” No, it doesn’t. She keeps talking

and finally, I feel like she's captured the breadth of my attention. All of it is focused on her and her words. Her ideas. "Dean's still on the learning curve," she admits.

"To what?" I ask, confused.

"To figuring out that women aren't all pretty objects to be kept and protected. He doesn't think that of me anymore, but most girls..." She drifts off, yet I get her meaning and she's right.

I love Marcus, but for most of my life and especially after the catastrophe of my mother's last marriage, he's treated me as little more than a child. Someone to be kept close and protected, just like she said.

"Okay, so what the hell am I supposed to do?" I ask her. "Walk up to Damien and tell him I know the truth?" No, that would not be a good idea. If he really is involved in something like the mafia then that would be a one way ticket to a Godfather-type ending.

Avalon tilts her head and rolls her eyes. "Come on, girl," she says. "You don't strike me as stupid. What is something you can do that your brother can't?"

And just like that—like a lightning bolt to the head—I know. It hits me like a freight train. It's so simple, it's almost laughable. *Isaac*. A plan forms and my eyes drift to the ground as I see it unfold in my mind. Damien must have seen me as an obstacle—or a key—when my mother didn't immediately return at the start of the summer. That was why he'd tried to force me to move in with his son. As leverage? Maybe. And now that leverage—me—is free, but he's still having Isaac keep an eye on me.

What for?

I shake my head. Whatever the reason is doesn't matter. What does matter, however, is that this opens a door. There's a simple solution to this whole issue. All I need to do is make Damien Icari give up on my mother, and what better way to do that than go after his son the way, I have no doubt, he's planning on coming after me.

“So?” Avalon’s voice makes me jump. Fuck, how the hell does she do that? Make you forget she’s there and then surprise you when you least expect it. It’s like she somehow manages to mask her own presence, but the second you recall it—it’s overwhelming. “Figure it out?” she asks.

I meet her gaze. “Yeah,” I say. “I think I’ve got it.”

Her cool toned eyes slide over mine and she smiles before holding her hand out to me. “Phone,” she commands in a tone that brooks no argument. I snort, but reach into my pocket and pull it free, handing it to her anyway. She types something into the screen before handing it back. “You’ve got my number,” she says. “Call if you want more advice or ... whatever.”

I almost laugh as I tuck my phone back into my pocket.

“Now,” she steps back towards the door, “let’s go grab a beer and wait for the guys to make their own plans.”

“I’m not twenty-one,” I point out.

Avalon throws her head back, her long black hair flying around her face as she roars with hilarity. I blink at the motion and when she’s done, she bends over, wiping beneath her dry eyes as if I really almost made her cry tears of laughter. “Shit, neither am I,” she says. “Why do you think I brought Dean? He’s gonna buy us a beer. Let’s go.”

I let her reach out this time and take my wrist in her grasp. Although small and feminine as it is, it feels like steel, strength, and something else that I hope like fuck I’ve got in me too.

I like this girl, I realize. A hell of a lot.

CHAPTER 6

RORI

RUMORS. The bane of a woman's existence. No one can really stop a rumor once it's out there. Plus, I have neither the will nor the desire to change people's minds. That doesn't mean I don't find it fucking annoying though.

I heard she used to sleep around at her high school.

Marcus' sister? Are we even sure they're related? They look nothing alike. What if she's adopted.

They have different fathers, of course there's no resemblance. No one as amazing as Marcus could possibly be related to someone as boring as her.

I heard she seduced her mom's last husband.

That last one makes me flinch, though only on the inside. I've perfected the poker face when listening to shit like that. Growing up in the elite circles, I had to. What irritates me even more, though, is that some of these rumors aren't even that far from the truth. I can't tell if that's because someone knows something they shouldn't or if they're just throwing darts into the dark, hoping they'll hit a target.

“What the fuck is your problem?” I blink as Selene strides up to where I'm sitting, waiting for class to start, and slams her bag down on top of the desk, turning and glaring at the two girls behind me whispering to each other.

Well ... fake-whispering. I know from the tone they're using that they're not actually trying to mask their gossiping. It's almost like they want me to

hear what they're saying.

"What?" one of the girls pipes back as Selene continues to glare at them.

"You don't know shit about shit," she snaps. "So keep your big, flapping lips shut and mind your own fucking business."

"Who the hell do you think you—" I turn, locking my hand around the back of my chair and pivot until I'm facing them. The girl talking is a tall brunette with freckles across her massive nose. She blinks at me as I stare her down.

"Go on," I say, "finish what you were saying. I'm listening."

Red stains her cheeks and she swivels away, gathering up her things as she and her friend hurriedly begin to move seats. "Bitch," I hear the other girl mutter as they hastily move across the room to a new pair of seats.

I arch a brow. Oh, sure, I'm the bitch because I called them out for gossiping about me right behind my back. I sigh and turn back to Selene, only to realize the target of her irritation has shifted to me.

"If you've been listening to those two talk shit since you've been here, you should've said something sooner," she snaps.

"I don't care what they have to say," I reply with an offhand wave, hoping she'll drop it. "I don't know them and they don't know me."

She doesn't drop it. "That doesn't matter, Rori," she huffs as she tosses her bag into the seat next to me. "Rumors aren't good."

"They're just words," I remind her.

"And words can precede you," she says. "They can ruin a reputation."

She takes her seat and I sigh. "I'm not like you, Selene," I say. "I don't need to worry about my image to be able to make it work. You're in the limelight half of the time when you're not at school. I'm just the daughter of a socialite. Nothing special. Not all rich people are famous."

"Yeah, you're right," she says, blowing out a breath. "I just hate hearing people talk shit in general. I think I get enough of that from the magazines and 'razzi. I'm actually surprised they feel confident enough to say anything,

though, what with Marcus going to this school too. He's pretty respected here."

I wince and face forward, biting down on my lower lip. The one time I'm hoping she doesn't notice, however, is of course, the one time she does.

"What's with the face?" Selene demands.

"What face? There's no face," I lie.

"There is so totally a face," she snaps. "What aren't you telling me?"

I grimace. "It's nothing major," I start. "It's just that ... *Marcus is transferring to Eastpoint University.*" I lower my voice on that last bit, hoping to just gloss over it.

Not sure what I expected, to be honest. Maybe an 'oh, really? That sucks. Sorry, Rori' or maybe a 'that's not a big deal, Rori. Don't worry about it.' What do I get though? I get the dramatics.

"WHAT?" Selene's voice takes on another several octaves. "When were you going to tell me?"

"Well, I was hoping you'd say it wasn't a big deal—"

"Not a big deal?" Selene gapes at me in horror. "Marcus is supposed to be *here*. You moved all the way to California instead of going to Eastpoint yourself because he was here!"

"I came here because of you too," I say in a quiet tone.

She shoots me a bland look. "That's sweet of you to say, Rori, but we both know you really came here because you missed him. He's your brother. You guys have been close since you were kids."

"Not recently," I mutter dourly. Before she can respond to that, though, I shake my head and sigh. "Don't make a big thing about it. I'm trying not to."

"I just don't understand why he would do something like this to you," she growls. "Doesn't he know how excited you were to finally be able to see him regularly and now he's just, what? Moving? No warning or anything?"

"Marcus does what Marcus wants," I say. "Can we just drop the subject? Please?"

Selene goes quiet for a moment. It's only when I feel the burn of her gaze on the side of my face that I turn to look at her. "And the rumors?" she finally asks. "Any clue where those are coming from?"

I shrug.

"It just seems a bit odd for you to show up at Hazelwood and then a week later to be the talk of the town," she says. "You haven't made any enemies since you've been here, have you?"

I frown. She does have a point. The rumors *don't* make any sense. I haven't been here long enough or done anything extravagant enough to elicit this kind of response in people. That is unless someone is starting them on purpose.

As soon as that thought crosses my mind, the door to the classroom opens and the face I've been trying to avoid as much as possible for the last week enters. It's like lightning strikes my brain. He tips his head up, an arrogant smirk on his lips as he turns his head—looking away from the girl he's walking with—and his gaze meets mine. And I know.

That. Motherfucker.

As if he senses my thoughts, his smirk grows. Isaac brushes off the girl talking to him and heads down the first row of desks. He takes a seat directly behind me and I stiffen when I feel his hot breath brush against the back of my neck. I should've worn my hair down.

"Hello, Aurora."

The penalty for punching a classmate probably isn't as severe here as it would be at other universities—but only because most of the students here have been far wealthier as infants than any of the faculty or staff at Hazelwood ever have been or ever will be in their entire lives. That doesn't make my desire to wipe that cunning smirk I know he's still wearing off of his face.

Even if I manage to hold my physical temper back, I can't help the words that come out of my mouth. "Fuck off, Isaac."

His chuckle is dark and something about it makes shivers skirt down my spine. “What’s wrong, sis?” he asks. “I’m just checking in and seeing if you’ve been enjoying your time at Hazelwood. Have you spoken to your mother lately?”

“Rori?” I can feel Selene’s confusion as she glances from me to the man behind us. I ignore her in favor of focusing the whole of my attention on *him*.

His words solidify what I’m already suspicious of. Isaac Icari is the source of these outrageous rumors. My only question is ... *why?*

Slowly, I turn in my seat, until I’m facing him. Eyes like icicles meet my own. It’s not fucking fair. His beauty is almost blinding and yet underneath it all, I know there lies a man of sinister intention.

“What do you want, Isaac?” I demand.

"What makes you think I want something, Sunshine?"

I blanch at the nickname, but force myself to slap on a sickly sweet smile. “The fact that you’re here talking to me,” I reply with exaggerated amiability. I want to be clear to him I don’t trust him or his father. “But if I’m wrong, then I suppose the only way to ensure that I don’t mistake your kindness for something else is to never talk to me again.”

He laughs even as he slaps a hand to his chest and sits back as if he’s been mortally wounded. “You hurt me, Sunshine,” he says. “I was hoping we could be closer.”

“I’d rather have sex with a diseased, boil-infected frog,” I reply with that same smile. "Make no mistake, Isaac Icari, I want nothing to do with you or your father.”

He arches a brow, and I can tell by the way his laughter drifts off and he sits forward, keeping his eyes locked with mine, that my actions have done the exact opposite of what I’d wished for. I’ve interested him. He’s not even sparing Selene a glance—which is a shock enough. I’m not ugly, but Selene is a budding actress who’s also landed more than one modeling contract. She’s gorgeous. And he’s acting like the only two people who exist in this

room are him and me. That, too, is a red flag. In fact, everything about him is one giant red flag.

“What makes you think I care if you trust me, Aurora?” Isaac asks. I hate the way he says my name too. He doesn’t shorten it like I prefer, but says the whole thing as if every syllable is important and nothing can be overlooked. Even if that’s what I want—to be overlooked, to be ignored by him, and to be invisible to his eyes—Isaac Icari is clearly a man who sets his mind to things quickly and once they’re in his sights, permanently.

“I can’t possibly say what,” I reply, “but I think we both know that the marriage between our parents won’t last. My mother is on her fourth marriage in this decade alone. I can’t imagine your father is a man who cares for his wife being so free with her feelings.”

He tsks. “So cruel,” he comments. “And to your own mother no less.” Something tells me, though, that he cares even less for his father. I may dislike my mother in some—okay, *many*—instances, but I still love her. I’m just honest about who she is as a person, and Emilia Summers is rarely a person that I actually like.

Something tells me, though, as I stare back into Isaac’s cold gaze that it’s not dislike for his father I’m seeing, but actual hatred. Pure and true.

The only thing that disrupts the moment is the classroom door opening and our Psychology professor’s booming voice as he enters, already halfway into a sentence and chattering on about today’s lesson. Ten minutes late no less.

I turn away from Isaac and spend the rest of the class with the knowledge that his focus is squarely on me. If there was any doubt before that he was the person behind these crazy rumors, the fact that he approached me today burns them away.

Fine, I think. If he wants to play games, I can play along. After all, I’m not one to back down from a challenge. Never have been and never will be—as Isaac Icari will soon learn.

CHAPTER 7

RORI

I STARE into the mirror of Hel's bathroom and finish brushing on another swipe of gold highlight along my cheekbone. I don't usually go for an excessive amount of makeup, but every once in a while, I like it. Because sometimes, makeup isn't just a way to make a girl feel pretty. Sometimes, it makes a girl feel powerful. Tonight, it makes me feel like the Goddess I'm pretending to be. Beautiful. Ethereal. *Dangerous*.

I smile at my reflection. I look like a completely different person. Gold glitter covers the upper half of my face from just above my eyebrows to halfway down my cheeks. My lips are plumped and painted in a shimmery light pink.

The nearly white-blond wig that is braided into a crown at the top of my head is frighteningly realistic with a few wispy curls falling against my neck, and with the white floor length Grecian dress, I look like I really have transformed into a Goddess of the Night ... or rather Dawn.

A high pitched whistle reaches my ears and I turn, meeting Selene's gaze as she looks me up and down. "Damn girl, you look good!" she says. I laugh at the baby pink dress she's wearing. Even though it's Grecian style like mine, it's obviously been adjusted to look more modern. Instead of being floor length, it's cut to just at her thighs with thick, gold ropes hanging around her waist to emphasize her hourglass shape.

Next to her, Hel looks ready to be going anywhere but to a college party. In lieu of a dress, she's wearing cut black pleather pants that mold to her shape and a matching lace bralette.

"Who's your goddess?" I ask.

Hel holds up her mask, showing a half mask made to look like a skeleton's face. "It comes with a crown," she says, lifting the crown in question in her other hand. My eyes widen. An array of sharp pointed sticks poke out of a ring of dead roses.

"Underworld or something?" I ask.

"*Yup.*" She pops the last syllable. "If anyone asks, I'll tell them to guess, but I was thinking Hel."

"I'm Aphrodite!" Selene pops in.

"Oh, we can tell," I say as I slide past her.

"What?" She puts her hands on her hips and glares playfully at me. "How?"

"You're practically exuding sexuality," I reply. "Are you planning on killing all of the guys tonight or fucking them?"

She thinks about it for a moment. "I don't know yet," she finally admits. "I'll decide when I get there."

I shake my head. Lord help whoever tames her.

"Wait, who are you supposed to be?" Hel asks as I pick up my mask from the common room coffee table and slide it into place. I'm glad I went with soft white mesh instead of something hard and plastic. The fabric molds to my upper face. The glitter looks like it's leaking down—like I'm crying liquid gold.

"Eos," I say.

Selene frowns. "Who's that?"

"Aurora," Hel replies.

I smile. She gets it. "What?" Selene scrunches her face up as she looks between us. "Am I missing something?"

"Yeah," I say, "but you usually are."

Her lips press together and she offers me a bland glare. "Just for that," she says. "You have to dance with me tonight."

I laugh, shaking my head. "Come on," I say. "We're gonna be late."

"Fashionably!" Selene calls after us as Hel and I move towards the door and out into the hallway.

Together, the three of us head out. Half an hour later, the town car Selene called pulls up in front of a luxurious mansion with large roman pillars spanning the front of the building. Lights twinkle and glitter from all directions. The difference between this place and the bar Marcus had taken me to is like night and day. And yet, I feel as though I'm stuck somewhere in the middle of the two.

Born into wealth and luxury, bored with the fallacy of it all. Craving reality, and yet, also frightened of the darkness it holds. Dusk and Dawn. That is who I am—tonight it's just a little more obvious than usual.

Just before we enter the house, Hel latches onto my arm. "Are you still planning on getting back at that guy tonight?" she asks.

Her words bring me back to reality and remind me why I came tonight. I'd double checked with Selene and asked her to ask around, and sure enough, Isaac Icari was invited. He should be here. "Yes," I answer her without hesitation. I'm not backing down.

Her hand tightens on my arm. "Just ... be careful," she warns. "I've heard some pretty shady stuff about him on campus this past week."

I tilt my head in her direction. "Shady in what way?" I ask.

Hel looks up at me with wide, dark eyes and slowly loosens her hold until her hand is barely pressed against my arm. "I heard that the Icari head is involved with organized crime," she says on a low breath, barely loud enough for me to hear over the chatter of people and music inside the house.

There's concern in her gaze. I reach over and clasp her fingers with mine. "Even if that's true, nothing will happen to me here," I assure her. "Don't

worry.”

“Yeah,” she says without much confidence in her voice, “the second I stop worrying about you is the second I start acting like Selene.”

Almost as if to prove the ridiculousness of that statement, Selene squeals as she pushes through a crowd of people and dives, head first into the dance floor. Thankfully, she’s left me alone, having forgotten her threat before we left. I smile regardless, though, watching as she makes quick friends and an attractive man with a bare chest and animal mask starts grinding against her back. I wait for a moment to see if she needs help, but she turns and grins at him, putting her own hand against his six pack as she grinds right back.

“The second you turn into a Selene clone,” I reply to Hel, “is when the world ends.”

She harrumphs in reply, but I know she agrees. They love each other, but they’ve always been and always will be two completely different people.

“I’m gonna go grab a drink,” she says. “You want anything?”

I shake my head. “You gonna be okay on your own for a while?” I ask instead. “I’m probably going to head off.” *In search of my target*, but I don’t voice that last bit aloud. Not that I need to.

She narrows her eyes on me. “I’ve got my phone on vibrate in my bra,” she tells me. “Call or text if you need me. I’ll feel it.”

I tilt my head down in acknowledgment before watching her disappear into the crowd, her dark slender figure only overshadowed by the black ring of sticks and roses crown on her head as she takes off.

And just like that, as soon as she’s gone, the crowd around me converges. Like sharks smelling blood in the water, the moment I’m caught alone without a buffer, I feel a hand slide around my waist and I’m jerked roughly against a hard chest.

Irritation flares to life as hot, unwelcome breath hits my ear. “Hey there,” a deep masculine voice says. “Anyone ever told you that you look like a fallen angel?”

I don't even bother with a response. Instead, I reach around, latching onto two of his fingers and turning the opposite way out of his grasp until he's gasping in pain and half bent over when I tuck his thumb against his back.

"Anyone ever tell you that you need to keep your hands to yourself?" I ask sweetly before shoving him forward into a group of guys watching with amusement. One of them blocks the douche from falling immediately, but surprisingly when I expect him to hold the guy up, he merely looks down and drops his ass just as quickly, quirking his lips before stepping to the side.

Then, as if there's not a two-hundred-something pound dude cursing up a storm as he crawls up from the floor, the guy standing across from me puts his hands in his pockets and looks at me. Like everyone else here, he's dressed for the theme. His wide shoulders are covered in a billowy white pirate shirt and his pants are a worn brown suede. He looks like a farmer or country boy with the halo of light brown, almost blonde curls on his head, but the eyes staring back at me through the plain black mask are anything but innocent. They're downright sinful.

"Did you have to hurt him like that?" he asks and I stiffen because the second he opens his mouth, I recognize his voice and I can't believe my fucking luck. "He was just shooting his shot."

"Yeah? Well, I was shooting him down," I reply casually, crossing my arms over my chest. On the outside, I'm cool as a cucumber, but on the inside, I'm a riot of nerves. There's no way Isaac recognizes me—not with the wig and makeup... right?

Isaac looks back at the guy brushing himself off and glaring in my direction. "Yes, you were," he says absently, putting a hand out and stopping the douche when he moves towards me with a snarl. "Whoa there, my man. I think she's a bit too feisty for you, don't you agree?"

"You fucking bitch—"

Isaac's hand turns into a fist as he clenches his fingers into the guy's dress shirt, nearly ripping a few buttons off in the process. I press my lips

together, but it's only to keep them from dropping open completely when Isaac turns and gets into the guy's face—that smile still in place though it does grow a bit tighter.

“I suggest you *walk away*.” Isaac's growl isn't a request; it's a command. One that makes the man pause and take notice. Despite the fact that he's obviously bigger and heavier than Isaac in the muscle department, there's something very acute about Isaac's smile. Something predatory. After another moment, the dude nods and Isaac releases him. I watch with curiosity as the guy turns and disappears into the crowd without another glance back.

What is it about Isaac Icari that even when his identity is supposedly hidden, he commands respect and authority?

I don't know, and to be honest, I'm not sure I want to find out, but it's too little and too fucking late now. The two of us are bound through this thorny maze until we reach the center. I think back, remembering all of the little digs and rumors that have been floating around this past week. All because of him.

“Now that he's gone...” Isaac nods and the posse around him disperses without another word, leaving the two of us in the front hall of one of Hazelwood University's notorious frat houses with only the sound of music drifting in and gold glitter fluttering around my eyes every time I blink. I stiffen as he moves towards me, reaching down and grasping my hand. He lifts it and bends. My chest tightens and all of the oxygen in my body freezes as the feel of his lips brushes against my knuckles. They're softer than I thought they'd be. He's such a hard man to read. I thought he'd be hard all over, but his lips are like silk against my skin. And it isn't until his head tips up, those blue eyes looking up at me with curiosity and interest that I finally force myself to start breathing again. “Can I ask who you're supposed to be, Goddess?”

Do I answer or will it be too obvious? He didn't react to the sound of my voice. Maybe I really am unrecognizable in this getup. “What kind of Goddess would I be if I just gave everything away?” I ask instead.

Those full lips of his quirk up even more and he straightens, getting taller and taller until I'm forced to tip my head back to meet his gaze now that we're little more than a foot away. "A mystery then," he replies. "I like it."

"And you?" I ask. "You don't look like a God."

Now that comment has him chuckling as he releases my hand from his grasp and takes a step back. "Maybe I am and maybe I'm not," he replies. "Maybe I'm a human in God-like clothes."

"Aren't we all." I don't mean to say the words, but as soon as they're out, I know I can't take them back. It was my own thought and not something said to draw him in. He doesn't seem offended though. In fact, he tilts his head and I feel that gaze of his sharpen.

"If you won't tell me your name, then what am I supposed to call you?"

"I think Goddess is good enough, don't you?"

He laughs. "Fair enough," he replies with a shake of his head. Isaac holds out his hand. "Then, Miss Mystery Goddess, would you care to join me?"

Placing my hand against his feels wrong. It feels like going against nature or stepping straight into the path of a tornado. Yet, I do. I do it because I'm tired of feeling like a child in need of protection. I'm tired of waiting on the sidelines while the actions of everyone but myself—my mother, my brother, a step father I never wanted—holds control over my life.

Not anymore.

Hel's warning rings in the back of my head. The Icaris' and organized crime. Dean's caution to my brother. All of them are rolling around in my mind, telling me to turn back. Only one is screaming 'Hell yes, bitch,' and that's the one I listen to.

It's dangerous, I know. There's no maybe about it. But I think I'm starting to like the danger.

CHAPTER 8

ISAAC

SNEAKY. *Sneaky. Sneaky.* It's impossible to keep my amusement from shining through. Does she really think that she's hidden under half a pound of makeup and a wig? It's a beautiful look for her, I'll grant her that much, but eyes are like windows to the soul and I knew exactly who she was the second she looked up at me.

She can wear all the gold she wants, exude her confidence behind that pretty little mask, but nothing can hide those eyes of hers. Eyes like dark honey. Rich. Cunning. Tempting.

What is she planning? I think. She has to know who I am. Or maybe she doesn't. I can't quite say what would be more intriguing.

I have to hand it to the girl, though; tonight, she has me spellbound. I'm still debating on whether or not I should let her take the lead. I want to see where she'll steer us. I want to see what her angle is. Because there's no doubt in my mind that she has one. I hope like fuck she's planning something naughty—even if that means she doesn't know who she's doing it with.

I'm hungry, I think. Not for food. Not for drink. But for her.

After the fiasco with Javi—one of the fresh blockheads for Hazelwood's defensive line—I lead Aurora out of the main portion of the party and towards the back veranda. "Drink?" I ask as we stop by the bar on the way out where a stone faced man in a tux and a black mask stands, waiting for

orders.

“Tequila Sunrise,” she says.

The man doesn’t even bother asking for identification—no one cares when money buys silence as easily as liquor. Minutes later, with her glass in hand and a beer in mine, I head towards the staircase leading into the backyard and she follows.

It’s quieter on the back lawn, further from the party than anyone else likely would’ve been comfortable with. Not her, though. I bet she’s thinking that she’s gotten a golden opportunity. Me and her. Alone. I find a stone table beneath an open umbrella at the entrance to a large hedge maze, and take a seat.

I sit back and tip my beer up, swallowing down a mouthful. *Let the games begin*, I think. It’s time to see what she’s made of.

“What should I call you?” she finally asks, choosing her words carefully.

I lean my head to one side, watching her through the holes in my mask. “Icarus,” I decide. “You can call me Icarus.” Seems fitting considering it’s only a few letters away from my real name.

“Icarus isn’t a God,” she points out.

“True,” I agree readily. “But what makes a God *a God*?” I ask. “Power?”

She tips her own glass up against her lips and when she lowers it, that little pink tongue of hers flicks out and licks off a drop of orange juice from the rim. The fabric across my lap tightens.

“You could say it’s power,” she says. “But if that were the case, then you would be a God, wouldn’t you?”

“The God of Hazelwood University?” I ask. “Hmmm. I can’t say I don’t like the sound of that.”

She laughs and it’s like ringing bells in my ears. “You’re a man, of course you don’t.”

“What makes a Goddess *a Goddess*,” I challenge instead, switching gears as I lean forward and set my half finished beer on the table. I steeple my

fingers together and regard her with seriousness.

She doesn't react. In fact, she acts as though she can't even sense my hard gaze at all as she lifts her drink and downs another mouthful before pushing it onto the table as well.

"It's not power," she confesses, looking up at me through thick dark lashes. Despite the blonde of her wig and the lightness of what I know to be her natural hair color, her lashes are ink black like the night sky.

"Then what is it?" I press, curious.

"It's a willingness to do whatever it takes to succeed," she says. I wait, something telling me that those words aren't all she has to say. And after a moment, I'm rewarded for my patience. Aurora blows out a breath, turning her head away. Small droplets of sweat collect on the back of her neck and her collarbone. My gaze zeroes in on one as it slips over the dip of structure and down into the cleavage of her dress.

Stepsister, I remind myself. *Tool*. *Baggage*. *Enemy*. That's all she is. All she's supposed to be.

My cock, on the other hand, doesn't seem to give a fuck. Needy bastard. Maybe I should've let one of the other girls hanging around Paris and I earlier suck me off before this. Too late now.

"A Goddess doesn't need power," she continues. "She already appears weak in the face of a God. No, what she really needs is durability. Perhaps even adaptability—a way to ensure that no matter what happens to her, she can keep going. Keep breathing. Keep living. As if nothing can touch her. Nothing can hurt her."

Silence stretches between us and she doesn't speak again for several moments. Neither does she reach for her drink. "You speak as though you have experience with that," I comment. "On the need for durability."

Her lips pinch together and the skin around the corners of her mouth whitens even beneath the makeup. Then with careful movements, she looks my way—lifting her gaze to meet mine with a challenge.

“Do you always ask your dates such philosophical shit?” she asks, shaking her head with a quiet, almost mocking laugh to herself. “In the end, none of it is real. The only real thing we can count on is what we can see and feel.”

The fact that her words are almost an exact replica of something I might have said stuns me into silence. Loathe as I am to admit it, I think Aurora Summers and I have a little more in common than wayward parents. Unfortunately, relating to her won't save her. In the end, I'll still use her.

As if she senses the dark direction of my thoughts, she leans forward, pushing her drink away. “What do you really want, Icarus?” She licks her lips. “Tell me and perhaps I can make it come true.”

Several emotions hit me at once—many of them contradicting. Thrill. Disappointment. Arousal. Regret.

Thrill because I know where this is going now. Disappointment because I almost expected more from her. Arousal because my dick doesn't know what to do with itself when an interesting woman sets herself in our path. And regret because I know I'll do it anyway.

I stand up and hold out a hand. “Why don't you come with me, then?” I offer. “And figure out for yourself exactly what I want.”

The feel of her fingers grasping for mine is like a ringing bell of warning in my head. I ignore it, though, because when Aurora Summers—pretend Goddess—lifts her honeyed gaze and her eyes meet mine, nothing could stop me from doing what I'm about to. I want to know what it feels like to walk on the darkest of lines and I want to see her there with me.

CHAPTER 9

RORI

MY HEART POUNDS against my ribcage, fast and fluttering—like a caged bird. Pretty and trapped. I relate so fucking hard. I feel like my insides are squeezing me tight, cutting off my blood flow, cutting off my airflow. The world is narrowing down to one pinpoint I can see—Isaac Icari.

Now is the time. The last moment I can turn back and pretend I never intended to get mixed up with him. Despite knowing that, my feet continue forward and my mouth keeps silent. The truth is, even if I were to turn back now, the reality that both he and I are in won't disappear. The rumors will continue. Our parents will remain as they are.

So, I let myself be pulled past the point of no return. I go willingly into that dark night and even if a light somehow manages to reach me once again, I don't think I'll regret these actions. Marcus warned me before he left the first time that people like us will always attract hidden agendas. I didn't know what he meant then. I do now.

The thought that I have nothing to prove is the biggest lie people like me tell ourselves.

I have so much to prove. To myself. To my brother. To my mother. And to Isaac.

I know exactly how they see me—weak, easily manipulated, powerless. It's my job to prove them all wrong and show them exactly how done I am

with being treated like a pawn in their games.

Each second that ticks by makes me want to hurry my movements. Like the clock is ticking down the time I have left. If I don't do this—if I don't end this sham of a fucking marriage between Icari and my mother before Marcus leaves—then...

Isaac's hand tightens against mine, pulling me from my internal thoughts. His hand is warm, but not grossly so. There's no sweat—just heat ... and confidence. I look up at him, staring at the back of his head, analyzing his outline.

Has he ever felt out of control before? I wonder. What will he do when he realizes who I am? What will I do in response?

The two of us slip deeper and deeper into the maze behind the frat house mansion, the lights and the music fading as darkness surrounds us. Silence echoes up into the midnight sky. Stars twinkle down overhead. The soft scents of wet soil and freshly cut grass invade my senses. My skin tingles—invisible needles prickling me—as if waking up from a long sleep.

“So, Goddess...” Isaac stops as he comes out in the center of the maze to a stone gazebo and turns to meet my gaze. “What'll you do now?” he asks.

I tilt my head to the side and pull my hand away, wiping it casually against the side of my dress. *It's a good thing I'm wearing a mask*, I think. He can't see my face and hopefully that means he can't discern the riot my emotions are causing.

Right here. Right now. I'm just a girl he's interested in. Not his fake stepsister. Not his enemy. Just an illusion.

I smile. “Why don't we have a seat?” I ask, gesturing to the gazebo.

“Why don't you tell me why you're out here with me?” he counters, stepping closer.

Fine. If he wants to play it that way ... my hands hit his shoulders and I shove, pushing him back until his spine is against one of the hedges. Behind the mask, his eyes widen in surprise and then narrow as I lean up on my toes

and bring my face right before his, sliding closer and closer until my lips are a hair's breadth from his.

“Is this what you wanted then?” I ask, smiling when he stiffens—not just his shoulders, but something down below as well. What do you know ... messing with Isaac Icari is enough to make a girl feel powerful. I should be careful not to get addicted to the feeling.

“Done with your games now, huh?” he replies coolly.

“What makes you think I was playing a game?”

Hands latch onto my arms and he spins both of us in such a quick motion that my lips part on a gasp and before I know it, my back is pressed into the hedge and I'm lifted off my feet. Left with little recourse, I wrap my arms around his shoulders and my legs around his hips, tightening my limbs until I'm not at risk of falling. *Is this what he does to keep girls off balance?* I hate to admit it, but it's working.

His chuckle vibrates against my whole frame. “You and I both know that we've been playing a game since the moment you looked at me,” he says.

Shock hits my system when I feel his lips move against the side of my throat unrestrained. He shows no hesitation, no nervousness as he follows the path of my pulse until he reaches the underside of my jaw and opens his mouth to press a hot kiss to the skin there before pulling away. My thighs tremble and my insides tighten.

I need to get to my phone inside my bra before he realizes it's there. Releasing his shoulders, I push his upper body back and debate for a brief moment on how to pull this off.

“What's wrong?” he asks.

“Nothing,” I say quickly. “It's just ... I think my dress is a little too tight.” When in doubt, go naked. It's not like I've never been naked in front of a guy before ... just not with the intention to seduce and destroy. Mata Hari, I am not, but I pray it works.

His lips twitch. “Does a Goddess reveal her secrets that easily then?” he

asks.

I lift my head and regard him curiously. On the outside, it's a simple, teasing question, but I know there's a reason for it. It almost sounds like he's ... disappointed. Almost as if he'd expected something different from me. What else could he have thought, though? I'm not a mind reader and even if I was, something tells me Isaac Icaro wouldn't be so easy to understand.

"I didn't say I was taking it off," I say quietly. "It's tight. I just need to adjust it. Unless ... you were expecting something else?"

His head jerks back. "You..." He stops, lips parted and for a long moment just stares back at me. The two of us are locked in what can only be considered a battle of wills. Who will crack first?

Moments later, I have my answer. Isaac's strong arms release me and he slowly lets me slide down his front, so that I feel every hard inch of him. He takes two careful steps away and then turns his back to me. "Hurry up." The words are said through gritted teeth, a testament to the desires he's shoving down—all because I told him I wanted to fix my dress.

With a sharp inhale, I reach into my inner cup and pull out my cell phone. Turning quickly, I shove it into the hedge, adjusting the height as much as I can so it can span the two of us. A small kernel of regret pierces me, but as quickly as it came it fades away again. Even if this isn't what I want to do, it's what I *have* to do.

No sooner have I shoved the phone into place, flicked the camera light off, and hit start on the record button than Isaac turns towards me. I jump as he reaches up and rips his mask off, tossing it away before he moves for me.

I'm back in his arms in a split second, being lifted against a strong chest with an arm beneath my ass keeping me pressed as close to him as physically possible. "You didn't take off your dress," he murmurs as his lips return to their previous position against my neck.

"I told you I was just fixing it." I sigh as his tongue traces a path down to my collarbone.

“No makeup down here,” he says.

“What?” I blink, confused by the comment.

He lifts his head once more. “I thought you would’ve dusted makeup all over,” he says. “I half expected my mouth to come away tasting like plastic and glitter, but I guess all this silken skin is purely you, isn’t it?”

I don’t know what to say to that, but it’s okay because it doesn’t seem like he’s expecting a response. Isaac’s head dips down and he reaches around, fingers finding the zipper at the back of my gown. “You should’ve taken this off instead of fixing it,” he says as my dress loosens and the fabric at the front begins to drift down. It was a good call to remove the phone.

I bite my bottom lip as his mouth dances between my breasts, igniting a fire inside of me that I haven’t felt in a long ass time. “I think you would’ve been disappointed.” My breath comes out on a rush and my words are almost swallowed by the wind. They give him pause and Isaac lifts his head once more, those dangerous blue eyes of his piercing into me in ways that go beyond the surface.

“What is that supposed to mean?” he demands, his voice rough with desire as well as something else I can’t name. Frustration maybe? Just how far am I willing to let him go tonight? This is just supposed to be enough to get dirt on him, not for me to lose myself. Yet, with every second spent in his presence, I can feel my resolve fluctuating. Not with my ability to see this through—I know I can and I will—but I almost want to be doing this for another reason and not because we see each other as enemies.

When I answer, the truth pours out. “When you thought I was going to take off my dress before,” I tell him. “You seemed disappointed.”

“Is that so?” He neither confirms nor denies my statement, and for several long moments the two of us stare back at one another with a heaviness that wasn’t there previously.

I’m the one to break this silence. “What do you want Icarus?” I ask.

He blinks, pulling his head back until a ray of moonlight slaps him right

in the face he's revealed without his mask. High cheekbones. Thick dark brows. Full masculine lips. He looks like the God he's pretending not to be.

"Why are you calling me that?" he demands. "You know who I am now."

I tilt my head to the side since I know he can't see the arch of my brow behind my mask. "That's the name you gave me," I say. "I don't want to destroy the fantasy."

His surprised expression morphs into one of amusement. "Are you saying you won't reveal yours to me tonight?" he asks.

"My identity?" No. No way in fucking hell. No one can know what I'm about to do, especially not him, not until I'm ready to use this trump card I'm creating. "No."

"No name and no secrets," he whispers, bowing his head towards me. "You're really making me work for no reward."

My fingers arch up over his shoulders and my dress loosens even more with the movement. Fabric falls away and the tops of my breasts are revealed. His eyes go immediately there.

"That's not true," I say as his gaze eats me up. "I intend to reward the man who's stolen into my garden tonight."

The quiet laugh that erupts from his throat is enough to shake me to my core. It's dark and sinister, like something forbidden is being whispered into my ear. "If that's how you want to play things tonight, Goddess, then so be it," he replies. "I'll play the part of your mortal lover if you open those divine legs of yours and let me inside."

I don't have a chance to say another word—be it an acquiesce or denial—before his head descends and his mouth takes mine. A heat like I've never known consumes me. Fire burns away my thoughts as his tongue intrudes. Dirty. Filthy. Vile. Addictive.

Isaac Icaris kisses like a villain. Like he's a mortal trying to seduce the goddess he's found. He plays into my fantasies like no other man could until I'm left breathless and on the verge of a new emotion I never thought I'd feel

again. Not after...

I pull away from the kiss, shaking my head and disrupting the direction of my thoughts. No. I don't want to think about that right now. It has no place here. Even if I don't like Isaac, I like this. I like what his body does to mine. Just for right now, I'll let myself forget that I'm supposed to hate him. Just for tonight, I'll play the part he wants from me.

CHAPTER 10

ISAAC

A BEAUTIFUL LITTLE LIAR, that's what she is. An illusion.

I still haven't quite figured out what it is that she wants from me tonight, why she's here, or why she's decided to do this with me. My dick doesn't seem to care. It pulses against the inside of my pants as her dress sags down the front of her body, revealing inch by inch the creamy expanse of skin that she was hiding underneath.

My mouth waters and I dip my head once more, tasting her. When I first put my lips to her flesh, I'd expected the disgusting feel of dusty makeup. Instead, all I got was clean, perfect skin. She smells like the sun, warm and delicious. I can't help but take a bite—setting my teeth to the column of her throat and sinking deep until I can feel her whole body stiffen against me and a small moan escapes her throat.

My cock jumps. It's hard enough to keep it at bay, but when her nails sink into my shoulders, scoring me even through my shirt, it's impossible. I want to feel her all over me. I pull back abruptly, not giving her a second to ask what I'm doing before my hands find the hem of my shirt. I yank it up and off, dropping it into the dirt before I'm back with her, pulling her until I can feel her fully against me.

Aurora Summers is hiding something. She's hiding the reason she's sought me out, and I know there's no mistaking it. She *did* seek me out. Why

would a girl who never parties, rarely drinks, and doesn't have an ounce of dumb rich girl personality in her be here tonight? I half expected her to jump back and reveal her own identity when I pulled off my mask, but she didn't. That tells me she already knew. Her lack of surprise and even more, her unwillingness to walk away should be a big warning and it is.

But the temptation of her is too much for me to listen. Whatever she thinks she can gain from me now, it can't possibly be more than she's willing to give.

When I kiss her, she rises to the challenge—meeting me stroke for stroke. She's not shy at all. Her own tongue twines with mine once again. By the time I pull myself away, we're both panting and breathless.

Her soft limbs slide against me, clinging. I like that. I like feeling like she needs me to keep her afloat, and at the same time, there's a little sense in the back of my mind that warns me if I loosen my grip, she'll float away—leaving me forever. I don't want to keep her for that long—I can't—but I do want her for tonight so I tighten my grip and turn the two of us.

She seems to realize that I'm carrying her away from our original position and stiffens. "Wait, stop!" Aurora rips herself from my arms, nearly sending both of us flying towards the ground when I adjust my grip to keep her from falling.

"What's wrong?" I demand, lifting my head and looking around, seeking out a reason for her sudden outcry. I see no one, though, and so my eyes return to her form as she stands before me, adjusting her clothes as a blush stains across her cheeks beneath the gold glitter of her makeup. She looks back the way we came and seems to argue about something with herself. "Do you want to stop?" I ask. *Please say no. Fuck, Gods above, please tell me you haven't realized what a colossal mistake this is going to be.*

A moment of silence passes between us and then she straightens her shoulders and turns back to me. I watch as she reaches up and grips one side of her dress and pulls it down. She does the same to the other and suddenly

her breasts are bared to my view. My breath stops in my chest.

At first glance, Aurora Summers is an average girl that looks no different from the rest. She's neither overly beautiful nor is she ugly. She's normal. Easily overlooked. At least, that was what I'd thought.

Now, I realize that my original assumption could not be further from the truth. She's a true Goddess with full round breasts tipped with pink. Freckles stain across her skin going even further down and I can't help but want to trace each and every one of them with my tongue.

"I want more," she whispers, her voice carrying across the quiet space between us.

My tongue feels like it has swelled up by at least ten times; it chokes me, clogging my throat so no words escape. It's only when she pulls her arms free of the straps of her dress and then goes to her knees in front of me that my voice seems to come back to me.

"Shit..." I hiss out a breath as her little hands go to the front of my pants and she quickly undoes them. *What the fuck is this girl doing to me? Is it her goal to see me lose my absolute shit?* That thought doesn't seem to be far from the truth because she doesn't hesitate to open my pants and pull my cock free. It rises to her attention, slapping against the underside of my belly button before swaying away from me and right towards her.

Calm the fuck down, I urge myself. She wants something from you. Don't think this is anything more. I close my eyes and suck in a breath and then another and another until I feel like I'm further from her and more back in the right headspace. I reopen my eyes and look down at the image she presents.

Curious fingers find my length and explore it, her nails scraping slightly against my sensitized skin as she rakes them down the notches on either side of my hips. Little pops of electricity race through my system.

She's a liar, I remind myself. *She's doing this for a reason, and it's not for her own pleasure.*

That last internal thought hits me squarely in the gut in a way nothing else

could. That's right. Aurora Summers hates me. I'm on the verge of making her life miserable. She knows that. Whatever she's doing here is to get back at me. Or perhaps it's to get back at Mommy Dearest. Whatever the case, though, it's a fact that she doesn't fucking want me. I'm just a means to an end.

A scowl overtakes my face, one I can't hide. Irritation slithers through my skin. I reach forward and palm the back of her head. If she wants to play games with the big boys, I think to myself, then she's going to have to learn to follow her little schemes through because I have no intention of letting her get away tonight without getting a little something of my own.

Big brown eyes look up at me through a white mesh mask. "Open your mouth," I order, my voice hard.

Her lashes flutter behind the mask, and it takes a second—the longest one in history—for her to do as I command. But when she does, she leans forward and the head of my cock disappears between her lips.

My fingers slide through her wig, an expensive one at that because it feels like real hair. If I close my eyes, I can imagine that it's actually hers. Instead of a flat, ugly white color—I imagine the soft silken tresses of brown and gold and even a little hint of red under my fingers as she takes me deeper into her mouth.

She's not a first timer, that much is clear. She sucks me all the way until I hit the back of her throat. A grin flutters across my lips when she moves to pull back, but I hold her in place. I open my eyes and look down with a smile.

"No, no, Goddess," I say. "If you're going to start something, you should finish it. Take me all the way. I want it in your throat."

Her lips tighten around my shaft. I don't give her time to think. I push, and then groan when she chokes on my cock, the muscles of her throat and mouth convulsing as I push past her barrier. I can hear her breathing heavily through her nose, but she does it. My cock sinks past her mouth that last few inches and fuck if it isn't heavenly feeling her whole body trembling as she

tries to suck me.

“Come on, Goddess,” I whisper. “You can do better than that, can’t you?” It’s a taunt, one that pisses her off. I can tell by the way her nails sink even deeper into the skin on either side of my hips. The sharp pinpricks of pain turn me on like nothing else. That little attitude she shows is nothing compared to what I wish she’d do.

It’s no fun hunting prey that doesn’t fight back.

Aurora’s tongue curls against the underside of my cock as I slowly pull back and drags down the veins there, tracing them and making me see fucking stars. Fuck, but she’s good. My other hand moves down until both are against the back of her head. She’s going to make me lose control. I’ve never fucking lost control before, but with her, I can feel my tightly held reins loosen.

I hold hard to the back of her skull and then shove my cock undeterred back into her throat. She makes a small choking sound but takes it even better the second time. Soon enough I’m able to saw back and forth between her full, pink lips without a care. Her throat is tight and every time my head enters, she swallows, squeezing me impossibly tight.

“There you go, Sunshine,” I breathe. “Fuck, that feels so good.”

I can’t think. My mind fractures and I tighten all over, holding her down against my groin as I come straight down her throat. “Swallow,” I hiss through clenched teeth. “Swallow my fucking cum, Aurora.” I look down at her, locking our gazes together, and grin. “If you’re already going this far to blow your stepbrother, you should be good enough to take it all, shouldn’t you, sweetheart?”

I can sense her shock, but it’s too late. My cum is already filling up her mouth, sliding over her tongue to the back of her throat. As soon as I’m done, I pull out and take a step back, doing up the front of my pants and leaving her sitting there on her knees in the dirt with her pretty breasts hanging free.

Aurora coughs, bending over and spitting out the last of my cum. “What

the fuck!” she screams.

I laugh, striding across the space to where I dropped my shirt. Picking it up, I dust off the debris and slide it back into place. When I’ve turned back, she’s already got her dress adjusted.

“What’s wrong, Sunshine?” I ask. “Mad because you got caught?”

Her chest rises and falls in rapid movements with her harsh breath. “You fucking asshole,” she snarls.

I arch a brow before bending to pick up my mask as well, though it’s useless at this point. As is hers, but I notice she doesn’t take it off. “I don’t know what you were trying to pull here,” I admit a tad belatedly, “but I think if you want to piss off your mother, finding out you blew her husband’s son will do, right?” I lift my gaze back to hers. “I’ll even post a review if you like.”

“You knew the whole time,” she says, but it’s not a question.

Still, I answer like it is. “You’re not as good at hiding your identity as you think you are.”

Her eyes narrow behind her mask. “Then why did you pretend not to know?”

“Why did you?” I shoot back. She has no answer to that. Instead, she just stands there, continuing to glare at me even as her hands clench into fists at her sides. I blow out a breath. “Whatever you did this for,” I finally say, “I thought I’d play along to find out, but if you aren’t even sure, then ... I guess I’ll just say thanks for the nice blow job and be on my way.”

Again, she says nothing. So, I turn and walk away, the heat of her gaze following me the entire way.

CHAPTER 11

RORI

THE SQUEAK of the black marker against the dry erase board at the front of the classroom is a sharp stab to my ears. I can feel the eyes on me. It's been three days since that stupid party, and the rumors have doubled in size, and now people aren't even pretending to whisper about me. They're talking openly and rather loudly.

The little ace that I created to take advantage of Isaac sits dormant, and partially useless, on my computer in the bag at my feet. The second half of the video, the part when he came down my fucking throat right before calling out my name, needs to be deleted. Whether he realized I was recording or if he truly thinks I seduced him to get back at my mother, he sure knows how to ruin a good fucking plan.

Or maybe it'd been a bad one. Hell, I don't know anymore. All I know is that Isaac Icari needs to back off before I really lose my fucking mind.

Class ends and I grab the first thing in front of me—my notebook—quickly shoving it into my bag before ripping the strap up and over my shoulder. I'm halfway down the front of the aisle when an unfamiliar girl steps in front of me, blocking my path.

I pause and take in a deep breath, praying that I can maintain my cool. If only Selene hadn't skipped class today, I wouldn't have to worry about beating the ever living shit out of somebody.

“Is it true?” The girl in front of me is either too stupid to realize that I’m not in the mood to deal with her or she’s got just enough bitchy confidence to believe no one can ever actually touch her. Whatever the case, she cocks out her hip and tilts her head at me expectantly.

“Is *what* true?” I reply through gritted teeth.

“That you fucked Isaac Icari,” she snaps.

Shock rockets through me and I whip my head around to stare down the man responsible for this fucking mess. Isaac stares back at me. This chick has some serious balls asking me that with him in the room. I pivot to face her once more with a scowl.

“Why the fuck aren’t you asking him?” I demand.

She rolls her eyes. “I’m asking *you*,” is all she says. Then after a brief moment where I do nothing but grind my teeth together, ruining several thousands of dollars of dental work from years past, she huffs out a breath. “Well?” she says. “Did you or didn’t you?”

“Why do you want to know?” I ask. An idea pops into my head and before I know it, a smile stretches across my lips. “Actually, you know what, the reason doesn’t matter. You asked me if I fucked Isaac Icari?”

I can feel every eye and ear in the room on me. Even knowing it’ll make them late for their next classes, some of the students have stopped packing their things and are leaning in to listen to what I’ll say next.

Oh you stupid, fucking arrogant asshole, I think with pleasure. Rumors are so easy to manipulate, and so easy to lose control of.

“That’s what I asked, isn’t it?” The girl doesn’t seem to realize that she’s just given me the opportunity of a lifetime.

“Yeah, I did,” I say a little louder than her original voice and her jaw drops in shock, as if she’s surprised that I admitted it. I turn to the side, pushing her out of my way before stopping and looking back. “If you’re thinking of fucking him, I wouldn’t recommend it. He has a tiny dick and I didn’t even come. It was a huge waste of five minutes if you ask me.”

With that final statement, I lift my gaze, meet Isaac's furious glare with a smirk, and head for the exit.

He wants to play with rumors and my reputation? Well, fine. Two can play at that game. Rumors, after all, once spoken, can't be stopped. You know what they can be, though? Rumors can be taken and turned on their heads.

He wants to tell people we fucked? Fine. I won't deny it. Instead, I'll fuck him harder than he ever thought he could fuck me.

I stomp down the hallway and head out into the last of the summer air. I make it three steps down the sidewalk before I'm abruptly jerked to a halt by a hand on my arm. Dark, wicked blue eyes glare down at me through the longest lashes I've ever seen on a man, and it takes everything in me not to punch him in his stupid face.

"What the fuck was that?" Isaac demands.

I blink innocently. "What was what?" I ask, lightening my voice to a sickly sweet almost childish tone.

He growls. "That," he snaps, pointing back the way we both came. I note he's without his own bag. He must've rushed after me the second I left the room.

"That," I state, "was me proving to you that I am not to be fucked with, Isaac."

He stares down at me, nostrils flaring. This time, the roles are reversed. Instead of leaving me stuck and unable to say anything, I'm the one with the power. He never even considered that putting him in those rumors about me could bite back. I pull my arm free from his grip.

"When you're ready to call it quits, just let me know," I say. "I'll deliver the divorce papers to my mother personally."

Once again, I make it no more than a few steps away before he stops me—this time, with nothing more than his words. "He won't divorce her," Isaac says.

I consider his expression for a moment. His eyes are unwavering, and though both his jaw and fists are clenched in anger, he doesn't move a single step from where he stands. And he doesn't look away from me.

"They won't last regardless," I tell him. "They never do."

"I hope you're right," he says. I should be surprised, but I'm not. All along I got the sense that the two of us have the same goal.

I turn to face him fully. "If that's true," I say, "then why all of the bullshit?" I gesture absently around me, but he has to know what I mean. It's fucking obvious.

"Because hopes don't make reality," he says. "He won't divorce her." There's no hesitation in his words. It's as if they are absolute in his mind. That ticks me off like nothing else.

I cross my arms over my chest as I stare him down. "What makes you think he's any different from her other husbands?" I demand.

"Whatever Damien Icari wants, he gets, Aurora," Isaac says. Something in his tone makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. The bomb he drops a second later explains why. "And right now, his sights are set on Summers' Industries."

My lips part in shock. *Summers' Industries*. Not Emilia Summers, herself. He's practically announcing the truth behind their marriage. "Why are you telling me this?"

Isaac takes in a breath, and it seems to break the spell that has left him motionless in front of me. He straightens and takes a step back.

"Be careful, Sunshine," he says. "Playing with fire will only burn you in the end."

"You started this war, Isaac," I tell him. "I'm only finishing it."

The corner of his mouth tips up. "We'll see."

Isaac doesn't let me respond. He simply turns and strides away, ruining what would've otherwise been a damn good exit on my part. Prick. I grind my teeth the entire way to my next class. By the end of the day, my jaw and

my head are both throbbing.

When I walk through the door to my dorm apartment and spot Selene on the couch with her phone in hand, I frown. “I thought you weren’t feeling well,” I say as I drop my bag next to the dining room table and take a seat.

“Oh, no, I’m fine,” she says, her eyes locked on the screen in front of her. “I had a modeling thing in town.”

“Okay...” I pull out my laptop and open it up, pulling up the video I’d taken over the weekend. The front door opens and Hel stomps in, muttering under her breath. “You good?” I ask as she passes me and enters her room.

She doesn’t immediately respond and even Selene lifts her head glancing first to the door to Hel’s bedroom before meeting my gaze. A moment later, Hel comes back out and slams her laptop on the table across from me.

My eyebrows skyrocket. “Try not to break the table,” I say, voice full of sardonic amusement.

She doesn’t even look my way as she starts typing furiously and then she flips her computer screen around and presses play. The second the audio hits my ears, I’m up and out of my seat. I grab the top of the screen and stare in horror at the grainy visual of me in high school.

A disgusting sickness curdles deep as, on screen, the younger version of myself stands in the middle of a crowd with an almost absent look of utter humiliation.

“It’s all over the internet,” Hel says, her voice low and angry. “Some girls in class were talking about it today.”

It’s hard to tear my gaze away, but when I do, they meet hers with somber seriousness. “When?” I demand.

“Last period,” she says. “It hasn’t been up for long.”

My eyes return to the screen. “Can it be taken down?” Something nasty festers in my throat, threatening to rip open a hole.

Selene drops her phone to the couch and stands up, hurrying over. She shoves her face in front of the screen and stops. I know when she recognizes

the scene being displayed before us because her face goes white and she clasps her hand over her mouth.

“Oh my God...” She looks from the screen to me.

I lick my suddenly dry lips, but no words come out. Selene turns to Hel.

“Where did this come from?” she asks.

Hel sits back with her arms crossed over her chest and a dark look on her face. “Stupid question. You know exactly who it came from.”

She’s not wrong. I’d heard nothing about this before the last class I’d had with him. That can only mean he already had this information—this ... evidence. This is his payback for what I said.

For the first time in a long time, tears prick at the backs of my eyes, threatening to overwhelm me. *Playing with fire will only burn you in the end.* Isaac’s earlier warning skids into my mind, almost like an extra dose of punishment to remind me.

I don’t want to watch what I already know will happen in the center of that crowd, but for some reason, I can’t seem to pull my gaze away. It’s like when you’re driving down the road and you pass the remains of a gruesome accident. My mind fights it, but my body wants to see. All of it. All over again.

The video, obviously taken on someone’s cell phone—an onlooker, someone who can’t possibly know what I was thinking at the time—shakes as a bucket of honey and syrup is thrown over the front of my high school prep uniform. It soaks into the front of my white, button down shirt until the bra underneath is visible. The video me crosses her arms over her chest, eyes wide and horrified.

“I didn’t know there was a recording,” I say absently. My own voice sounds like it’s coming from somewhere far away.

Selene bites her lip. “I did,” she confesses.

Both Hel and I turn to look at her.

“*You* did?” Hel repeats in shock.

She nods with a wince before jumping to explain as she whirls to face me. “I thought your brother had taken care of it, though,” she admits with shame. “He was—”

“*Marcus knew?*” That sick feeling blossoms and takes over, invading every fiber of my being.

No no no no no. I didn’t want him to know. I never wanted him to know—or to find out. My horrible high school shame. He knew about everything else, this—the results of pissing off one of the most powerful families in New York—was something I wanted to bury as deep as possible.

Selene looks to the ground. “He still had friends there, Rori.” Her voice is quiet but resolute.

She’s right. I remember, now. There had been a few guys from the football team—players who’d remembered him before he’d moved to California and gone to Hazelwood. They’d been kind enough to cover me with a jacket and break up the crowd. But it’d been too late for their rescue. The damage had already been done.

“The question is how the fuck did they get something like this?” Hel demands.

“It’s a small world,” I say. *Especially in the upper echelon.* “I’m sure Isaac has a lot of connections.”

“Are you mad at me?” Selene asks.

I blow out a breath and scrub a hand down my face. “No,” I say. “I’m not mad at you.” I don’t have the energy to be mad at her, and honestly, if I think about it, when had she had an opportunity to tell me? She’d been gone on jobs practically all the time—most her of schooling had been done on the road. She was likely hoping that I would forget that horrible year before I took up kickboxing and learned how to fight back. I, myself, thought I’d left it behind.

“What are you going to do now?” she presses.

What am I going to do? I suck in a breath and my eyes turn to my own

computer screen. "I'm going to give him a taste of his own medicine," I say.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Selene bites down on her lower lip, glancing back and forth between me and Hel.

The wisest thing I could've done would have been to ignore Isaac Icari the second I landed on Hazelwood's campus. There's no use in turning back now.

Bile sits in my stomach, acidic and putrid. I look back to Hel's screen as movement pops up in the corner of the video. A familiar face appears.

Megan Wood.

I stare at the girl, watching her laugh as she rips a bag of bird feathers open and starts tossing them in my face. A few of her friends help. Some even going so far as to waltz right up to me and slap them on themselves. Brave little cunts. Old anger flares to life and my hands clench into fists at my sides.

It'd been Megan's father—another notch in my mother's husband belt—that had started it all. It made sense that she would take her anger out on me. And because of this, I'd learned my fucking lesson.

Until now. Until Isaac Icari. This video is a warning. Play the game, he's saying, and you'll get burned.

The girl in the video—the three years ago version of me—wouldn't have even thought of fighting back. She would've buried her head in the sand and hoped her tormentor would lose interest. Now, though, I don't feel as ashamed as she did. I have nothing to be ashamed about. Their anger towards me—*Megan's* anger towards me—was unwarranted.

It's not your fault, Rori. None of this is your fault. Marcus' words from back then remind me of that.

I'm not who I was in New York. I'm who I am *now*. Here. And who I am now is not a fucking pawn.

CHAPTER 12

ISAAC

EVEN AS I stride into the off campus coffee shop with a baseball cap pulled down low over my forehead, peeking beneath the brim and scanning the wide open area, my thoughts aren't filled with my reason for being here. Instead, a specific bratty blonde is all I can fucking think about.

Everything about her attracts me. From the way she'd sucked me like she wanted to siphon my soul out through my dick as well as the way she'd lifted her gaze and glared me down in the middle of campus, showing no fear despite knowing who I am. It's dangerous, this hold she's forming over me.

I stride through the crowd waiting in line for their coffee and head to the end, scanning the mobile orders piled up on the little black stand marked for such customers. I find mine and snatch it up just before a man with his face buried in his phone reaches for it.

"Hey!" He grunts as I half shove him out of my way and head towards the back of the shop. His irritation disperses just as quickly, though, as the girl at his side gestures to his coffee. By the time he realizes, I've already found my spot, deposited the bag in my hand on top of the table, and taken a seat.

I've got my computer out and my headphones in—sans music—within seconds. I'm not here to play the college student. I'm here for more important matters beyond literary assessment papers and pretending to learn shit I don't give two fucks about. Everything about me today is a facade. From the cap,

to the nondescript clothing, and even to the cheap laptop I grabbed from a low budget pawn shop on the way over.

I'm doing everything in my power to appear to be the middle class student trying to cram as much information in his head as possible amidst the overcrowded and noisy coffee shop. My eyes are glazing over twenty minutes later as I click away from a search engine for the fifteenth time when a familiar weight takes a seat behind me.

Back to back, I can smell the faint scent of menthol cigarettes on him, and it makes me crave one. "Hello, Isaac."

"Malik." I don't look back. Instead, I keep my head trained forward and my eyes level with the computer screen, though I'm not reading anything on the article I've got up in front of me. We rarely speak and even more rarely meet in person, but it's clear that though my father's been away on that bullshit honeymoon of his with Emilia Summers, he's still been hard at work. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here like this at all.

"We received your last message," Agent Malik Brown's voice is sharp and concise. I know without looking back that he, too, is dressed for the part. A business suit, pressed to perfection and the cheapest coffee that I know he's only pretending to drink as he checks his watch as if waiting for someone. That someone is already here. "Has your father made inquiries into your actions?"

I snort. I can't help it. If the FBI thinks that I can't fool my own father, they wouldn't have tracked me down and offered me this deal. "Of course not," I reply. "If he was onto me then I wouldn't be here at all." My mere presence is enough of a statement. I'm in the clear ... for now. "Now, get to the reason why you wanted to meet me."

A beat of silence, and then, "We need you to start gathering more concrete evidence."

I grit my teeth. "What more do you fucking want?" I snap, lowering my tone as a couple breezes past. Thankfully, the girl is laughing loud enough at

whatever the douche hanging onto her arm says that my voice is swallowed up by the noise. “I’ve given you account numbers, locations, and even a list of names. If you can’t do anything with the shit I’ve given you, then what use are you?”

“You’ve been instrumental, Isaac,” Malik states. “But you know as well as we do that Damien Icari is quite good at hiding his tracks. All of those accounts came back completely above board. The locations were empty. Only the associates were of any real use, but we don’t want to risk you if necessary. We can’t make a move on them immediately. You’re our only contact on the inside and your safety is paramount.”

What he’s saying makes sense, but it’s fucking frustrating. What else can I do?

“We need more,” Malik continues. “If you want to help us as you say you do, then we need something that is completely undeniable.”

Yeah, I know what they need. Hard evidence. Something that paying off judges or threatening jurors won’t be able to get him out of. They need a smoking gun. They need to catch my father red fucking handed. I scrub my fingers down my face before reaching back and adjusting my baseball cap.

“He’s set to return next week,” I say.

“Yes, we heard about his new wife,” Malik replies. “Do you think she would be of any use?”

Though he can’t see it, my lips twist into an annoyed frown. “Emilia Summers is nothing more than an empty-headed socialite,” I reply. “She won’t be of any use to you.”

“And her daughter?”

I stiffen at the mention of Aurora. “No.” The word comes out gruff and violent. Just the mere reminder of how close that girl is to the seedy underbelly of my world makes me want to break something—preferably someone else’s bones. “She won’t be involved with this.”

There’s no room for argument. Just the thought of Aurora Summers

facing off against a man such as my father after betraying him and informing on him to the FBI sends shivers down my spine. It makes my already cold blood turn to ice in my veins.

I know what I'm risking. My life and future. But for her, it would be so much worse. I may not like the girl, but I won't let the stain of my father's hands touch her. Ever.

"You seem pretty confident that she won't be of help." Malik's tone suggests he seems to think that I'm wrong.

"She doesn't even know what he does," I say.

"Which would possibly make her even more useful than you, Isaac," he states. "He won't ever suspect her. The sexism of the world can sometimes cloud peoples' minds and make them underestimate the potential of a person based on their gender." I close my eyes. No doubt he's speaking from experience, but no. I don't care if Aurora would be the perfect weapon against my father. My goal is to make her go away, not keep her.

The video I released to the school social media pages should do the trick. If she's not ready for a transfer after that, I don't know what could possibly break her. Even if she doesn't get Emilia Summers to divorce my father, then at least she'll be out of the way—perhaps to Eastpoint with her brother. She'd at least be safe there.

That thought hits me hard. *When the hell did I start thinking in terms of her safety?* The whole point of my tormenting her is to get her to convince her mother to leave my father. But as I sit back against the worn cushion of my seat, I realize, I don't necessarily care about that anymore.

To my father, Aurora Summers is a pawn to control his wife, but if she disappears then she won't be on his radar anymore. As far as I can tell, there's no love lost between her mother and her. If Emilia Summers remains behind with my father, she'll end up dead or worse—so much fucking worse—and if Aurora is with her, she'll receive the same. Liabilities. Loose ends.

When did I start thinking in terms of protecting Aurora Summers instead

of hating her?

“Isaac?” Malik’s voice is hard, irritated, as if he’s been calling me for some time now.

I shake my head, and with it dispel my wayward thoughts. “She’s not to be informed,” I state. “End of story. You bring her into this and I’m out.”

Malik is quiet for a moment and then he hums low in his throat. “Fine,” he says. “I’ll keep that in mind. As for your father...”

“I’ll figure something out,” I tell him. “He has a few meetings when he returns; I’ll keep my ear to the ground.”

“It’d be best if we can catch him in the act, Isaac,” Malik says. The pressure against my back loosens as he stands. “Remember that.”

I don’t look back as his dress shoes squeak against the tile floor. Once he’s gone the noise of the coffee shop intrudes once more and I lean back, shutting my eyes against the pounding in my head. My phone buzzes in my pocket and I groan, reaching inside and pulling it free. Shep’s name flashes across the screen and I flick the green button, putting the receiver to my ear.

“What?”

“Have you seen the school socials yet?” is the first thing out of his mouth. The tightness in his tone makes me sit up and open my eyes.

“No. What’s wrong? Did she reply to the video?”

He laughs, but it’s far from amused. “Fuck yeah, she did,” he says, “but not in the way you’re thinking.”

“What do you mean?” Even though I ask the question, my fingers are already flying over the keyboard and I’m pulling up Hazelwood University’s student run social media pages.

“I think it’s safe to say that she’s not backing down from your threats, man,” Shep says and there’s a note of respect in it.

A frown overtakes my face as I search the pages for the video Shep had scoured the internet for, but Aurora Summers’ high school humiliation is nowhere to be seen. In its place is a new video.

My eyes bulge as I gape at the screen—at a very familiar setting. I almost laugh out loud. So, that’s what she’d been doing. I sit back and stare at my own image reflected back at me—only this time I look far more douchey. Dressed in that stupid costume for the Gods and Goddesses party, I watch myself undress and maul a girl on screen. She’s smart; I have to give her that. She kept her back to the camera. Her identity is hidden. Some may suspect, but no one can say for sure. The wig looks like real hair and it’s not her color. The sound is absent so no one could possibly call her out for that. My face, though, is front and center.

My cock swells in my pants and I shift, adjusting myself as I watch my own face flinch with pleasure, my features growing tight. I know the exact moment that I came, my head rolls back on my shoulders and my lips move on screen.

“This is a problem,” Shep says, distracting me.

I roll my eyes. “Why is that?” I ask. “This might be a problem if I was a chick, but you and I both know that sex tapes are different for men.”

“Isaac.” Shep’s tone grows tight, all hints of amusement or respect or anything other than flat out concern disappearing. “Your father will find out about this.”

And just like that, the day is ruined. Because, fuck me, he’s right. “Take it down,” I snap. “Get it down now.”

“Already working on it,” he says.

My phone buzzes against my ear, signaling another incoming call. I pull it away and see my father’s name flash across my screen. *Fuck.*

“You know once it’s gone viral like this, that’s only going to make things worse,” Shep continues.

“I have to go,” I interrupt.

“What about your father, Isaac? He—”

Already knows, my mind supplies. I don’t answer Shep. I don’t even let him finish. I just hang up and answer my father’s call, sitting back and

waiting for the verbal beating to begin.

Fuck my life, and fuck bratty little fighters like Aurora Summers.

CHAPTER 13

RORI

“WELL, YOUR LITTLE PLAN WORKED.” Hel’s statement makes me smile, but her lack of enthusiasm is a bit of a damper on my improved mood.

“It’s what he deserves,” Selene says with a sniff as the three of us make our way across campus to the final class of the week. It’s been several days since the whole incident went down and I haven’t seen Isaac in any of our shared classes since.

“I don’t know, something feels off,” Hel says.

I glance her way, but she keeps her gaze trained ahead of her. “What feels off to you?” I ask.

“The fact that he hasn’t been in class the last week,” she says, cutting a look to me.

“He’s just embarrassed,” Selene says with a shrug.

But no, Hel’s right. It *is* weird that he hasn’t been in class. Isaac doesn’t strike me as the type of man to give a fuck about gossip, and I know as well as anyone else that this kind of shit is different for men and women. He wouldn’t have had the same hard time as I would have if people knew the girl in that video was me. I bite down on my lower lip, thinking.

“He hasn’t bothered me all week,” I admit absently. I’d just assumed that my little ace had done its job. I thought I’d shown him that fucking with me wouldn’t be as easy as he so obviously assumed, but what if it’s something

else?

Almost as soon as that idea crosses my mind my phone rings. I jump and reach into my bag, pulling it free and glancing at the screen. I pause and wave at the two of them. “You guys go on without me,” I say. “I gotta take this.”

Hel finally looks at me. “You sure?” she asks. Leave it to her to pick up on my practically nonexistent nerves. Or maybe I’m not as good at hiding my anxieties as I think. Maybe just being around Selene and her obliviousness has tricked me into thinking I’m way sneakier than I actually am.

I force a smile nonetheless. “Yeah, it’s fine,” I say. “Go on. I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

Selene is the first to respond. She latches onto Hel’s arm and waves goodbye before dragging her away, and I’ve never felt more relieved for her blind ignorant interference than I am right now. Once they’re well out of earshot, I answer the call.

“Hello.”

“Darling!” my mother’s bright cheery voice shrieks into my ear like a siren. “I’m just calling to tell you that we’re back in town. What are you doing right now? I’m near your campus. We should grab lunch together and catch up. I can’t wait to tell you all about—”

I’m almost stunned stupid by the volume of her voice and the fast pace of her words. Even if I wanted to, I know I can’t get a word in edgewise. But it’s always like this. She disappears for days, weeks, sometimes months at a time and when she pops back in, she pretends that we’re closer than ever before. Normally, I wouldn’t even bother. I’d answer her call—because I know if I don’t she’ll end up showing up whether I want her to or not—and then I’d politely decline.

The only reason I don’t now is because she’s got something I want. Information. “Actually, I just out of class,” I admit. “I was going to grab lunch anyway so if you’re near, we can meet up.”

There’s a brief pause on the other end of the line as if she’s surprised by

my sudden agreement, but when she speaks, there's nothing but excitement in her tone. "That's wonderful," she gushes. "Where are you? I'll pick you up."

"I'm on campus," I tell her and then give her a more exact location.

"I'll be there in ten minutes," she says and before I can tell her to take her time, she ends the call.

It doesn't take her ten minutes to get to me. In fact, it barely takes her five. The reason for that is obvious as a small, red sports car comes careening around the corner at breakneck speed, slamming to a halt a few inches from the curb I'm currently standing on.

"Hey darling!" she cries from the driver's seat. She pulls down the massive shades covering her eyes and smiles up at me. "Hop in."

Even here, on a campus full of rich people, seeing someone dressed to kill and driving like a professional racecar driver is out of the norm. People are staring, but I ignore their curious looks, round the front of the car, and get in. Seconds later, I barely have my seatbelt buckled into place when she slams her foot on the gas and the car rips itself away from the curb, sliding right back onto the road and into traffic. I close my eyes, praying for either safety or a quick death—honestly, whichever hurts less.

Immediately my mother begins chattering away. Her words come at such a breakneck speed, that I can't even hear or decipher them until the wind roaring in my ears dies down and we're pulling into a high class restaurant off a strip.

"—beautiful sights, and Damien was so attentive the entire time. I really think you'll like him if you spend a little time with him. He's just so—oh, here you go." She pauses just long enough to hand her keys to a valet, and with shaky legs, I exit the vehicle and trail behind her into the building.

"Mom," I finally manage to get the word out as we're seated at a bistro table along the patio with breezy bohemian curtains fluttering in the wind around us.

She picks up her menu and directs her gaze to it. "Yes? What is it?"

“I actually wanted to talk to you about something,” I start.

“Is this about Marcus?” she asks.

I frown. “Marcus?” I repeat, confused. Why would she think this is about Marcus? We haven’t talked about Marcus in years—at least not past when I’d invited him to meet her new husband without telling her. “What about Marcus?”

“He’s transferring to Eastpoint University, isn’t he?” she replies, looking up.

“Oh, yes. I ... you heard.”

“Yes, he told me,” she says.

Shock rockets through me. *He told her?* “When did you start talking again?” I ask.

She blows out a breath. “After you invited him to that luncheon,” she says and as she does, her eyes flick up to me. Her brows draw down low. “I was quite upset about that, but honestly, I think it was for the best. You were right. He would have needed to meet him sooner or later, and he seems to like him.”

“He—*what?*” I gape at her. “Marcus *likes* Damien?”

“Well, he didn’t say he likes Damien per se,” she says with a wince. “But he hasn’t mentioned anything since the luncheon so I’m taking it as he doesn’t disapprove.” The waiter stops by and drops off a basket of fancy breads and takes our drink order, disrupting the moment. When they’re gone, however, I focus my gaze on my mother.

Delusional. That’s what she is. Just because Marcus hasn’t said he hates Damien doesn’t mean he likes him. In fact, if I had to hazard a guess, I’d say Marcus doesn’t like him. At all. But whether or not my brother likes her new husband is not why I’m here today.

The waiter comes back and takes our order and in true high society fashion disappears into the background as if they never existed, leaving me alone with my mother. I reach for my drink and take a sip—wincing when the

bubbly champagne mixture of the mimosa hits my nose. Fuck. They didn't even bother to check my age. I sigh and finish my sip before setting it to the side.

"So, it sounds like your honeymoon went well," I say.

"Oh, darling," my mother gushes. "It was wonderful. Truly the best honeymoon I've ever had."

"I assume Damien is back in town as well and back to work?"

She nods absently, taking a sip of her drink. "He's such a workaholic," she confesses. "He spent as much time with me as he could, but every spare second we got he was on his phone, and last week he got a call about something or other—changed our whole flight plan and we ended up back here faster than you would've thought."

My gaze sharpens on her. "What did he get a call about?" I ask, letting the words roll off my tongue in a light, almost disinterested tone.

"Oh, I don't ask questions about his work, dear," she says with a scoff. "You should know better than that. It's best just to let men do their man-thing and we women do our women things." It takes every fiber of my being to resist the urge to roll my eyes at that. "I do hope you and Isaac have been getting along, though." Her comment has me stiffening, but I feign a smile.

"Oh, I hardly see him on campus," I lie.

"Is that so?" she frowns. "I could've sworn he mentioned that you two had attended a party together while we were gone. Isn't he in a few of your classes?"

I choke on another sip of orange juice and champagne. "He mentioned that?"

She nods. "He said as much when I ran into him at the house earlier this week."

I slam my glass down and look at her. "You've seen him?" I demand.

She blinks at me. "Good lord, Aurora, you act like it's a crime for me to run into my stepson." I wince at the reminder of what he is—not just to her,

but to me as well—but keep my gaze on hers.

“It’s just...” What do I say? “I haven’t seen him in class in a few days, so...”

“Oh, yes, he did mention that he’d been out of class because of what happened.”

“What happened?”

She nods and sighs. “He looked quite the worse for wear,” she says. “Boys and their arguments, I suppose. He said something about a workout that got out of hand, but there were bruises on his face. I suspect he must’ve had a falling out with one of his friends.” She pauses and puts a finger to her chin thoughtfully. “Or perhaps it really was a workout,” she surmises. “I forgot but he’s on the football team, isn’t he? That would explain the bruising on his face.” She drops her finger and shakes her head. “Marcus was so careful when he played. Perhaps I’m just not used to other young men.”

A fight? Bruises? I’m getting more information than I ever expected. It was definitely a good thing to agree to meet with her.

“Anyway,” she says suddenly, switching subjects as she leans forward and clasps her hand over mine on top of the table. “I was so excited that you agreed to have lunch. I actually wanted to ask you over to the house.”

“The house?” I stare back at her, confused. “What house?”

“Our house, silly,” she giggles, slapping the top of my hand before pulling away. “Damien’s and mine.”

“So, it’s really official then.” It’s not a question, but a statement. I shouldn’t be so surprised. In the past, every husband she’d been with had ended up moving in with her. Not the opposite. It’s a little unsettling, but there’s no reason why. It makes perfect sense for her to live with her husband. They’re married after all. I’d known it was coming since I came home at the end of senior year to find all of our stuff packed and gone. Still, that doesn’t make me hate it any less.

I pull my hands off the table as the waiter reappears and begins setting

out our food. I stare down at the Eggs Benedict that I'd ordered and suddenly want nothing more than to shove it off the table and watch the expensive porcelain plate shatter into a million pieces.

My emotions feel like they're pulled on a tight string and I'm balancing, walking the tight rope as my mother digs into her salad and pretends like all is right with the world. I want to press into her, ask more, but I think this is all I'm getting from her. At least I got some information on Isaac. I know the real reason why he's skipping classes—likely to keep the rumor mill from going wild.

The video was one thing. The video he probably doesn't give a single shit about. The bruises on the other hand ... my mother can pretend it's just boys being boys, but I know the truth. Isaac isn't the type to let himself be hurt. Therefore, whoever left those marks on him is someone he can't stop.

Damien Icari.

My hands freeze above my plate at that thought, but it makes sense. His father. It has to be. Who else would Isaac be unable to stop? Who else would have that kind of power over him?

My eyes flick up to my mother as she chatters on, her words drifting in one ear and out the other about her honeymoon. Something I couldn't care less about.

"I'll come," I say, startling her.

Her big eyes rise to meet mine. "What?"

"To the house," I say, clarifying. "I'll come visit the house. I want to meet with Damien again," I tell her. "I think we got off on the wrong foot last time. Maybe I should apologize for asking Marcus to come to the luncheon without warning you."

The sound of metal scraping porcelain as her fork clatters to the plate in front of her shocks my ears as she gapes at me. "W-what?"

It's not that shocking, is it? I wonder. I blink and look down. "It's not a big deal," I say. "I just ... want to be nicer to him," I lie. "He's your husband,

after all.”

A sniffle makes me jerk my head up as I watch my mother clasp her hand over her mouth, her eyes filling with tears and a familiar haziness that I haven't seen from her in a long time. “Oh my goodness,” she croaks. “Rori, darling...” She reaches for me and surprise holds me prisoner as her hands grasp my wrist. “I would love nothing more than for you and Damien to be closer,” she confesses. “I know, with our past, we haven't been the best of friends, but this is really important to me. He's not like Eric, sweetheart. I promise.”

My whole body goes cold and I pull away from her grasp sharply. “It's fine,” I cut in, staring down at my plate even though my appetite fled the second she mentioned that man's name.

As if sensing my internal agony, she releases me without hesitation. “Of course,” she says quietly. “Yes, I would love for you to come to the house. Perhaps for dinner next week? I don't want to disrupt your classes.”

I suck in a breath and then another and another, trying to fight off the feeling of my vision tunneling—the world around me growing dimmer and dimmer. *Don't fucking do this, Rori, I order myself. Don't fucking lose it now. It's just a name.*

But it's not. It's not just his name. It's the reminder. I take slow, calming breaths until my vision returns to normal and I feel the urge to puke disperse.

Maybe Eric Wood had expected me to keep quiet about what he did to me, but I'm not the silent type. I'd told on him—to both my mother and my brother. Marcus had beat him to within an inch of his life and when he'd threatened to have him arrested, my mother had stepped in. She'd divorced him without a second thought and quietly informed him that if he so much as tried to come after her son, she'd take him to court for all that he'd done.

She'd been there when we'd needed her, but it hadn't been enough. She'd brought him into our lives and I don't think she even realizes that afterwards, all she'd done was run away.

I eat my Eggs Benedict without tasting a damn thing and I stop when the plate is half empty; I can't stomach another bite. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what she does now; no one can erase the past. All we can do moving forward is try to keep those mistakes from happening again—starting with Damien and Isaac Icari.

CHAPTER 14

RORI

WHEN ISAAC SHOWS BACK UP to school, he's all smiles and no one even questions it. The gossip about the videos has all but completely evaporated. *Is that power?* I wonder.

It's almost sickening, or it would be if I didn't know certain truths. Something tells me he's hiding more than he seems to be. Not just his hatred of me, but his hatred of his father. I've rolled the thought over and over in my mind along with something else.

I'm becoming obsessed with him. Watching him in every class. At first, I tell myself it's just because I'm waiting for payback. I'm waiting for his revenge, but nothing ever comes. In fact, if anything, he starts avoiding me like the plague. Every day, without fail—the second the professor ends class, he's gone.

I should be grateful. I got what I wanted. He's left me alone. He's pretending like we have nothing more to do with each other. What more do I want?

The answer is glaring me straight in the face, but I can't accept it.

So, when Selene comes back to the dorm on Friday after classes and asks if I want to head out to a club with her, I throw off my textbooks and study materials and leap at the opportunity. I haven't been out since we got here, and with Marcus gone, it's not like I'll have to worry about people reporting

back to him. I miss him, for sure, but perhaps him going to Eastpoint is what's best. We've lived separate lives ever since the incident. Maybe this is just how we're supposed to be from now on.

I finish swiping on one final layer of mascara and tighten the ponytail at the top of my head before turning and adjusting the tie keeping my halter top up to cover my front. If California is anything like New York then the nightclubs will have a dress code. No shredded anything. No cheap shit. Only the best for the best. My borrowed dress makes me look like someone else, but I don't mind. Tonight, that's exactly what I'm going for—someone else. Someone who doesn't need to think about the possibility of her mother being used by a monster. Someone who doesn't obsess over an enemy who's made her life miserable. Someone who doesn't care.

"I'm so glad you're coming," Selene says as we head to the curb outside of the dorm to the waiting car. The driver steps out and comes around, opening the back door and she slides in first with me closely following. The door closes behind me. "I mean, if you were worried about me going alone, it would've been fine. I'm actually meeting a few people from the agency, but we haven't been out together in forever."

"Yeah, you're right," I agree absently. I rest my head against the glass as she starts chattering on about the jobs she's been on this week. It's a good thing Hazelwood is so used to people like her—students who are also minor celebrities. Special circumstances might not otherwise be allowed considering how many classes she's missed thus far. Then again, anyone who would think she's stupid would be wrong because despite all of that, I know she's managed to keep up with the curriculum. "Where are we going tonight?" I ask.

"Oh, it's a new club that just opened up," Selene replies. "It's called *The Maze*—very vogue don't you think?"

"I guess." I don't care if it's popular. It doesn't matter. As long as the place has alcohol and music; that's all I need tonight. A way to relax.

Minutes later, the car slows down and I glance out the window, my eyes widening as the vehicle comes to a full stop in front of a massive tower. “Let’s go!” Selene squeals in excitement and this time the driver opens her door first. As soon as he does, she’s out of the car and heading towards the entrance, bypassing the long line of people waiting.

I don’t look back as I follow after her. She flashes her ID at the two security guards at the door. “I’m here for the VIP party,” she says before turning and locking arms with me. “She’s my guest.”

“Of course, Miss Reynolds.” One of the security guards steps forwards and undoes one side of a velvet rope, gesturing for both of us to step inside. “Enjoy yourself.”

She giggles, waving goodbye as we make our way inside. Stepping into *The Maze* is like walking into a whole new world. If the outside California air is warm, then the interior of club is a tropical zone. Already I can feel sweat collecting on the back of my neck as I crane my head back to take everything in.

“Wow,” is all I can say. “They really went all out.”

Selene laughs. “I know, right?” Her hand tightens on my arm and I nearly stumble over my own feet as she drags me forward, pulling me in the direction of the long bar at the back of the bottom floor.

The entire building encompasses the club and each floor circling up from the bottom one has a gaping opening in the middle for those on the upper levels to be able to look down over the edge. The dance floor takes up the majority of the ground floor with people in expensive designer clothes grinding and moving in time with the beat within a circle of tall Grecian pillars that act as foundational support for the whole building.

Selene leans in close as we hit the end of the bar and stop. “Isn’t it cool?” she gushes.

“Yeah,” I agree. “Very cool.”

She squeals again and then leans over the counter as a bartender steps up

to us. “We’ll have two screwdrivers,” she says.

“And shots,” I say. I look at her. “Do you want a shot?”

Selene’s face freezes for a moment and then she smiles. “Uh ... sure.”

“We’ll have three shots of tequila,” I tell the bartender.

“Um ... I know I should’ve asked this before,” Selene says after the bartender leaves to make our drinks. “But is there another reason why you decided to come out with me tonight? You don’t usually do shots.”

“I’m fine,” I lie. “I just need to de-stress.”

“Are you sure that’s—” The bartender returns, dropping three shot glasses full of tequila in front of me along with two screwdrivers.

I don’t hesitate. I lift the first shot of tequila, down it, and then the second. I know, with Selene, that we’ll be sipping on those screwdrivers for the next hour. I can’t wait that long to let loose some of this tension already built up inside of me. When I turn back to my friend and push her shot over to her side before reaching into my bra and removing my credit card to hand to the bartender, Selene is staring at me in shock.

“Hey, Rori,” she says, putting her manicured hand on my arm, “if something’s bothering you, you know you can always talk to me.”

I blow out a breath. “Do you want your shot or not?” I ask.

The bartender comes back. “You want to start a tab?” he asks. I give him a nod of confirmation.

“Come on,” I say as soon as he’s done and we’re ready to go. I grab my screwdriver. “You said you were meeting some people here, right?”

“Wait, Rori!” Selene grabs my arm, stopping my escape. “I’m serious. Is something going on? You’re being really weird.”

I look away and blow out a breath. “I’m just...” I grit my teeth before looking back at her. “I’m irritated by Isaac,” I admit. “I’m stressed about Marcus leaving for Eastpoint and I’m...” I groan. “It’s just all complicated. I promise, it’s nothing more than that. I just want to fucking relax tonight, Sel. Can we do that? Please?”

She sighs and squeezes my arm. “Of course we can, I only wanted to make sure you’re not getting ready to go down a dark hole. You know? I mean ... you know the kind of shit I’ve seen my coworkers get into. I know you’re stressed, but I wanted to make sure it wasn’t anything that I didn’t need to be seriously concerned with.”

Oh, she should be concerned. She should be hella concerned, because she’s right to worry. I’m not thinking straight tonight. I haven’t been thinking straight since my mother walked in and wrecked my life all over again. Not since Isaac showed up and made it his personal mission to disrupt everything that was left over after her announcement. Just for a little while, I want to pretend like none of that exists. And that desire is something that could get me in some serious trouble. But that’s something I’ll worry about later.

“Tonight’s not about worrying,” I say, and I know I’m not just talking to her—I’m talking to myself as well. “Tonight’s just for fun.”

She grins and reaches for her shot of tequila, putting the glass to her lips and throwing her head back in true party girl fashion. Once that’s gone, she grabs her drink and the two of us head up to one of the higher levels with only one thing on the mind—more booze and some relaxation.

CHAPTER 15

RORI

UNWANTED HANDS FIND their way onto my waist for what has to be the tenth time in the last hour. Fueled by alcohol and irritation, I whirl around on the new offender and glare up into a pair of dull green eyes. The guy is obviously already intoxicated. I shove his hands off even as I scowl at him.

“Hands off,” I snap. “I’m dancing with my friend. Not you.”

I turn to face Selene once more, who hasn’t even noticed my absence. Maybe I shouldn’t have given her that earlier shot, because she’s easily the worst lightweight ever. She’s swaying in time with the beat, her eyes closed as she leans into one of the other models from her agency, mouthing the words to whatever pop song is playing over the speakers. I barely make it another step towards her when the offending guy grabs my hips once more and directs me back to him.

“Come on, don’t be like that,” he whispers into my ear. I flinch away as his hot breath hits my neck. “I can show you a good time.”

“The only good time I’m looking for,” I say through clenched teeth as I grip his hands against my body and quickly push him back, “is one where you’re not around. *Back. Off.*”

“I just want to—”

“I believe she told you to get fucking lost.”

I stiffen at the familiar voice that interrupts.

Are you fucking kidding me? I wish a hole would open up in the center of the dance floor and swallow me whole. He can't be here. There's no fucking way the universe could be that cruel, but as I lift my gaze and meet a pair of crystal-clear ocean eyes over the guy's shoulder, I know it can. And it is.

Isaac places a hand on the stranger's shoulder and jerks him away from me. The dude stumbles back and barely manages to catch himself before falling. He does, however, manage to slam into a couple of girls dancing on their own and when they gasp, catching his attention—he grins and redirects the full force of his drunken gaze on them, leaving me alone with both my tormentor and unexpected savior.

Isaac looks back at me, and fuck, but he looks good enough to eat. His golden blond hair is pushed back. The lights from the club as they flow across the room in a circular motion rise and fall over the plains of his face that only make the sharp angled lines of his features even more prominent; he looks like he could be sculpted from pure stone.

I blow out a breath. “What are you doing here?” I demand, crossing my arms over my chest. It's a defensive move. I can't help it. I feel like I have to constantly keep my guard up when it comes to him. Isaac Icaro gives me no ounce of peace. He's nothing but danger and darkness. Maybe that's why I can't help but be attracted to him. There's something wrong with me.

“It's opening night,” he says, stepping closer. So close, I can smell a hint of mint and whisky on him. It's alluring.

“Don't—” But it's too late, Isaac's hand slides around my middle. He pulls me into him and suddenly, we're dancing. Not the cheap grinding that some of the other couples are doing, but a soft sway back and forth that is far more intense.

Each brush of his body against mine sends my mind careening into a full blown panic. Heat shoots through me, lighting my flesh on fire until it's all I feel. I growl out a curse.

“I don't want to dance with you,” I say through gritted teeth.

His fingers merely tighten against me as he yanks me harder into his chest at that statement. “Too fucking bad, Sunshine,” he says, bending low until his lips are right next to my ear.

I should feel just as repulsed by him as I was by the other guy, but my traitorous body hasn’t gotten the fucking memo. She’s completely obsessed. Enough that I can feel the dampening of my panties. Jerking my head up, I glare into the twin pools of dark blue that are his eyes. He doesn’t need to know what he does to me.

“You’re not the type to do something for nothing,” I say cautiously. “What do you want for the save?”

Isaac releases a breath and spins me in a circle. We’re getting farther and farther from Selene and her friend, but I don’t say anything. If Isaac wanted to hurt me, he would have done so already. And if I can keep her away from him for the time being, I’m willing to do it. I don’t trust him and I don’t want my friends near him. Not Selene. Not Hel.

“Just dance, Rori,” Isaac says. Shock hits me. Rori. Not Aurora. Not Sunshine. It’s the first time he’s ever actually said my nickname. That, more than anything else, tells me that this meeting is different from our previous ones.

Hesitantly, I let my fingers drift up to his shoulders. They’re wide—not as wide as my brother’s—but strong in their own way. Definitely the frame of an athlete. I swallow reflexively as on the next spin, one of his legs slides through both of mine and I’m nearly knocked off my feet. He keeps me steady, though, sliding a palm to the small of my back and gently urging me closer.

“This…” I don’t know what to say, but this feels almost wrong. It’s strange to be in Isaac’s arms and for the first time since we’ve met not be at each other’s throats.

“Just let it be,” he says. “It’s just a dance.”

But it’s not. Maybe he wants to believe it is, but I know the truth and I

don't have the luxury of lying to myself. Still, I let my words drift off and close my eyes as the music starts to flow through me once more.

Isaac holds me against him, but his grip doesn't hurt. It's almost like liquid, our movements fluid as we move together. My mind fogs over and I feel the earlier alcohol that I imbibed finally hit me. It's almost like my body waited until it felt comfortable enough to relax. Around Selene, I still felt like I needed to be on alert. To look after her. To watch her and make sure she was safe. But now ... now he's here.

I open my eyes and when I look up, I realize Isaac's attention is centered fully on me. The shock of his blue eyes and the sharp intensity in them blurs out the rest of the world. *Why do I do this to myself?* I wonder. *Why does he do this to me?*

We could be anywhere else in the world—in the middle of a burning building—and I wouldn't even notice. He's that fucking hard to pull away from. He's entrancing. Mesmerizing. *Is he doing this to me on purpose or is this just how he is?*

"Why are you dancing with me?" Despite the unspoken oath to stop asking him questions, this one comes out all on its own, without my consent.

His lips part and his grip on my side tightens until I wince at the pain it causes. Immediately, his hold loosens and his fingers brush over the spot he hurt—almost as if in apology.

"I want to call a truce," he says, his words both confusing and soft. They're barely audible over the noise of the room—the people talking and laughing, the music playing.

The song ends and the bubble pops. All of the outside world intrudes once more. "Why?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Can't you take the olive branch without asking so many questions?" he asks, his lips curling in amusement.

I shake my head. No, I can't. That's not the way I work. It never has been.

Isaac stares back at me and then, slowly, his hand arches up and his fingers brush against my cheek. “Every second you’re around me,” he says. “You’re in danger. I don’t want to see you in danger anymore.”

My body feels buzzed and numb all at the same time. “Is this about your father?”

His eyes flash and he looks up. My attention follows his until I see what he’s looking at. His friends stare down at us, their arms folded over the railing at the topmost floor. The auburn haired pretty boy—Paris, if I remember correctly—smirks at us. The other one, however, looks like someone’s shoved a rather hard stick up his ass. He barely pays me a glance and instead chooses to direct the full brunt of his glare at Isaac.

There’s some unspoken communication going on between the three of them—a conversation I am not privy to. It lasts for several more seconds and then Isaac sighs and looks back at me. “Come on,” he says, pulling me away and off the dance floor. “Let me take you back to your dorm.”

“Wait, what?” I struggle against his grip, but Isaac doesn’t even blink. He merely drops down, wraps an arm around my legs and lifts me against his chest like a prince in a fairytale. I scowl. He’s no prince and this is no fairytale. “Stop!” I command him, smacking his chest. “I can’t leave. I came with my friend. I need to make sure—”

“I’ll make sure she gets home safely,” he says. “One of the guys will keep an eye on her and she’ll be back in her bed before dawn.”

“Are you fucking serious?” I frown up at him. “How the hell can you expect me to trust you?” I demand. “We’re not friends.”

He pauses just off the dance floor and looks down at me. “Do you want us to be?” he asks.

I gape at him. “What? Friends?” I shake my head. “No, I think we’re beyond that.”

My words seem to amuse him because when I expect a scowl in response, he merely chuckles and nods. “You’re right about that, at least. What will it

take to get you to leave with me right now?" he asks. He's tipping my whole fucking night on end. One moment he's reminding me that we've hated each other for weeks and the next he's being courteous.

I narrow my gaze on him. "I want to talk to her," I say.

He looks at me and then sighs. His arms loosen and slowly—inexplicably slowly—he drops me down and lets my feet touch the floor once more. "Fine," he says, "but I'm going with you. Make it short."

I look up at him and when he looks back, he arches a brow, and I know—beyond a shadow of a doubt—that this is as much as I'll get from him tonight. I sigh and turn towards the dance floor, scanning the room for a familiar head of white-blond hair. When I catch sight of Selene, I start towards her, shadowed by what feels like my own personal bodyguard.

Isaac's presence at my back is a constant. It sends tendrils of something electric skittering up and down my spine. An awareness inside of me wakes up and takes notice. I don't know how he does it, but there's no denying that he has a way of occupying a space.

When I approach Selene and she spots me, she blinks and does a double take—pulling away from her friend. "Hey..." Try as I might, it's hard to ignore Isaac. Even she can't do so. Her gaze slides first to him before she looks at me and raises a single brow. "I'm going to head back to the dorm," I tell her. "Are you going to be okay?"

She frowns. "With him?" Surprisingly, her voice is steady and though she's still swaying back and forth slightly—her body moving almost involuntarily in time with the next song that comes on—I'm thankful that she's not as drunk as I originally thought.

"Yeah," I say. "We're going to talk."

Selene focuses her gaze on Isaac and then, without hesitation, she reaches up and clasps me by my shoulders, moving me to the side. "If anything happens to her," she starts, glaring up at Isaac as she snaps her hands to her hips. "I'll track you down and gut you. You got me?"

Isaac cracks a smile. “Understood,” he says.

Selene squints up at him and I bite my lip to keep from laughing. I don’t know what she sees in his face, or if maybe she realizes that there’s nothing she can do except let me make my own decisions, but she finally sighs and looks back at me. “Text me when you get home,” she demands.

“I will,” I promise, taking her hands and squeezing them tight.

Isaac reaches into his pocket and pulls free a card. “Whenever you’re ready to go back,” he says, holding out the card for her to take, “one of my guys will be more than happy to give you a ride.”

“I already have a ride,” she says, lifting her chin, but I notice she takes the card anyway.

“Just in case,” Isaac says with a grin.

His hand finds my hip and curves around it. “See you later,” I call back as he motions me forward and the two of us exit the dance floor for the second time tonight.

“Be safe!” Selene calls after me.

With Isaac’s hand on my side and the hot club air making my hair stick to my nape, I don’t know if safe is anything I can be around him. A part of me argues that I shouldn’t be doing this. I shouldn’t leave with him. I know what it means. Even if we’re drawing a line in the sand, giving in to a truce, there’s more happening tonight than either one of us wants to say aloud.

Safe? With a man like Isaac Icari? It’s almost an oxymoron. But as I step outside of *The Maze* and feel the California air on my skin for the first time in hours, I have to think that maybe the two of us have been building to this since the day we sat across the table next to our parents. Maybe there was no other way around this. Maybe we were always going to end up here—no matter what either of us has done to the other.

I swallow reflexively as he hands something to the valet and then pulls me closer to his side. I shiver, catching his attention. Isaac looks down. “Are you cold?”

No. If anything, I'm hot. Hotter than I've ever been in my life. I shake my head, unable to voice the words inside. His gaze remains locked on mine despite the lack of verbal response until the valet returns, pulling up in front of us in a black Escalade.

Isaac reaches for the passenger door and holds it open for me. I take his hand and step inside, letting him help me into the expensive car. Once the door is shut at my back, I watch him slip money into the valet's hands and then circle the front of the vehicle.

This is it, I think. Tonight is either the end of our feud and the beginning of something new or it's a turning point. I'm not sure which I'm hoping for.

CHAPTER 16

RORI

ISAAC IS QUIET. It's the kind of quiet that preludes some serious shit about to go down. My hands clench and unclench in my lap as he drives. The city passes by us in flashes of lights. It's a classic California Friday night. Tourists are out and about as are the residents. A glance at the dashboard tells me it's barely past midnight, but the city is still going hard—most already past the point of no return.

I glance at the man at my side as he silently stares through the windshield, almost as if he wants to ignore my presence. I wish I'd drunk more. I have a sinking feeling that I'm going to need a little more liquid courage before I can deal with him tonight. But it's too late now. I've agreed to this and I need to see it through. Besides, the truth is that we've been circling each other for far too long.

Several minutes pass and the surroundings become somewhat unfamiliar as we pass by the university and keep going. I sit up straighter and flip around to face Isaac.

“What are you doing?” I demand. “Where are you taking me?”

“I'll take you home,” he promises. “But after we have a talk.”

I cut a look his way, irritation flourishing in my veins. “I want to know where we're going, Isaac.”

He glances my way once and then returns his attention to the front of the

car. That's it. I'm not getting an answer. Irritation turns to anger in a heartbeat. "What the fuck is your problem?" I snap.

"Have patience," he replies.

"No." I'm so fucking sick of him dictating my actions. It's been a nonstop fight since the second I stepped foot in Hazelwood. "Pull the car over."

"I'm not pulling the car over, Aurora." His tone is hard. "Just sit there like a good girl until we get there and then you can pitch your fit."

Maybe some girls would have just sat back and done as they were told, but not me. I pride myself on not letting my emotions get the best of me, but when I'm done, I'm *fucking done*. I hit him. Ball my fist up and slam it into his arm hard enough that it jerks his whole body. The Escalade skids sideways—in hindsight, maybe it was a bad idea to hit the driver, but he's so fucking frustrating, I honestly don't see how I had any other choice.

"Fuck!" Isaac corrects the front of the car and then flashes a look at me. "Sit the fuck down, Aurora. What the fuck is wrong with you? Do you want me to kill us both?"

"No," I snap. "I just want to kill you. Pull this fucking car over *now*."

Something dangerous flashes in his eyes and suddenly my seatbelt jerks against my front and I'm slammed back into my seat as the SUV comes to an abrupt halt. Isaac directs the vehicle into an empty parking lot and throws the shift gear into park. I don't waste a second reaching for my belt to unlatch it. My hand finds the handle of the door and I throw it open, bolting as soon as we've stopped moving.

"Aurora!" Isaac's irritated roar reaches my ears.

I ignore it.

Fuck him. Fuck his father. Fuck all of this. Maybe I should've gone with Marcus to Eastpoint. Maybe then I wouldn't be in this situation. So many maybes. So many what ifs, yet at the end of the day this is what I'm left with. A confusing amount of attraction to a man I should fucking hate. A lost sense of what to do. And an undetermined amount of danger circling me at every

waking moment.

Hard footsteps sound behind me. I keep walking. A hand grabs my arm a moment later. I close my eyes and let myself be yanked around—I expected it anyway. I use the momentum of the movement to propel my fist. If he’s going to jerk me around, then the very least Isaac’s going to do is take the damage that comes with it.

My fist flies towards his face and I register the shock on his expression a split second before my knuckles connect with his cheekbone. The skin over the bone breaks. Isaac curses, but instead of thrusting me away as I expect, his hands latch onto my arms and he shakes me.

“Stop it!” he growls. “Fuck! *Stop.*”

“No!” I scream, dropping my arm as my whole body trembles with the force of his shaking. “*You stop!* Fuck. I’m so goddamn tired of this shit. You think you can just come into my life and boss me around? I’m not your fucking toy, Isaac. I don’t know what kind of girls you’ve fucked with before—which ones had the audacity to get in your way and turn your ire on them, but I am not like anyone you’ve met before. You mess with me and you won’t just have a fight on your hands, you’ll have a war.”

Isaac glares down at me. I just don’t give a shit anymore. I glare right fucking back at him, daring him. “You drive me fucking insane.” He spits out his words like they’re poison. Maybe they are and I just don’t know it yet because knowing that I drive him crazy in the same way he does to me does something to me. It makes me feel good.

“Welcome to the club.” I snort. “You think dealing with you is any different?” My feet move back, but he follows, keeping his hands latched onto my arms. “Let go,” I demand.

He doesn’t let go, though. Of course not. That would be too easy—giving me what I want. Instead, Isaac moves ever closer until the scent of him—all sharp spices and warmth—fills my nostrils. My thighs tighten.

“Let go, Isaac,” I repeat. “Or you’ll regret it.”

“Don’t bother, Sunshine,” he says. “I already know what you’re planning.”

“Oh, really?” Even as the words are coming out of my mouth, I jerk my leg up and aim my knee directly between both of his. In a move faster than lightning, his hands tighten against my arms and he yanks me off balance. The two of us go tumbling down in a heap on the pavement and at the last second, he turns, hitting the ground first. My face slams into his chest.

A low, rumbling growl emits from the body beneath me. Self preservation has me scrambling backwards, but his hold is still there and it’s strong. Isaac flips both of us once more until this time, I’m the one with my back to the ground and he’s hovering over me, blond curls falling into his shadowed face as he looms over me.

Sweat beads pop up along my spine. My whole body goes cold. My throat closes. “No...” What I mean to be a scream comes out as little more than a breathless whisper.

“You are the worst pain in my ass I’ve ever fucking had to experience,” Isaac starts talking. I hear him—the insulting words—but they’re far away. The rest of me may be here, but my mind has been catapulted backwards.

Phantom hands slide their way up my inner thighs. I’m going to puke. *No, I order myself. Don’t puke. Not here. Don’t let him see. He can’t know.*

“Get off me.” Fine trembles start up my limbs, and soon, they’ve overtaken my entire body. Try as I might, I can’t stop them. “Please ... *Isaac.*” I say his name more to myself than to him. It’s a reminder of who this is in front of me and who it’s not. It’s not him. It’s not Eric. “Stop. Get ... get off of me.”

“—rorra.” My vision swims in front of me, growing hazy as the panic takes hold—squeezing long tentacle-like tendrils around my neck until my airflow is cut off and I’m gasping for breath.

The shadow above me disappears and a moment later, I can feel my body being positioned, pulled up, and settled back against a hard, warm lap. A

firm, wide palm touches the back of my head, cupping it. Isaac says something else, but I don't hear it anymore. The hands touching me no longer feel as restraining and disgusting, but instead soft and gentle.

That can't be Isaac, though. He doesn't have a gentle bone in his body. It's that thought, too, that finally pulls me out of the past and out of the bone-numbing panic attack. My vision returns in small increments. I can hear my breaths coming in fast, jerky sounds—but I'm breathing and that's what matters.

I don't know how long we sit like that in the middle of an empty parking lot with rough pavement under our asses and a warm breeze fluttering against our faces, but when I finally feel like I can move again and the world isn't trying to close in on me, I look up into a pair of eyes so blue they could rival the fucking midnight sky.

“Are you okay?”

Am I okay? I repeat Isaac's question in my mind again and again until I feel like it's branded on my soul. *No, I'm not okay.* I push back against his chest and this time, he lets me. He releases me as easily as if he was always intending to in the first place and I climb up from the safety of his arms to stand on my own.

“I'm going home,” I tell him.

Isaac gets up, though a bit more slowly than I did. I wait for a response, but all I receive in return is a hard, impenetrable look. “Did you hear me?” I demand. He continues to stare at me, and I feel electrified by his gaze. He looks like a blue-eyed tiger hunting its prey.

I take a step back. He takes one forward. “Isaac.”

“You're not going anywhere, Aurora,” he says. I blink, but don't respond. He continues. “You can go home after we've had our talk,” he repeats. “Now, unless you want to tell me what that was all about”—I stiffen as he gestures to the ground we'd just been sitting on before letting his gaze come back to me—“then what you're going to do is get your ass back in the fucking car

before I strap you down, spank your ass, and throw you in myself.”

This is just too much. “Why?” The question slips out before I can think better of it. And instead of sounding angry or frustrated, both of which I’m feeling, it sounds ... tired. More tired than I care to admit I actually am—especially to someone like him. Someone that I should have my guard up with.

He arches a brow. “Why would I spank you?” he clarifies. “Or why am I forcing you to talk with me?”

“Why are you even bothering?” I ask with a depreciating laugh. My hands come up and I scrub them down my face, not even caring if it’s ruining my makeup. It’s waterproof anyway. It should be able to withstand the strength of the rest of my emotions too. “Why even bother to explain anything now? What are you hoping to gain?”

Isaac tilts his head to the side and considers me. “What makes you think I’m trying to gain anything from you, Aurora?”

“Don’t bullshit me, Isaac,” I say. “You’ve been trying to torment me into doing what you want since you met me.” I blow out a breath. “I’m tired,” I admit. “I’m fucking sick and tired of it. What do you really want?”

“I want you to get in the car,” he states. “I want to take you somewhere safe and I want to sit down and have a civil conversation for once.”

When a laugh comes out of my throat, it echoes up into the sky and it doesn’t sound anything like amusement. “Civil?” I repeat the word. I’m shocked he even knows what that means. “We passed civil a long time ago, Isaac. What we are is nothing but two warring sides. You made us this way.”

“You didn’t seem too keen to stop the fight,” he points out.

“You’re right,” I admit. Why? Probably because he gave me a reason to prove to myself that I wasn’t the scared little girl in need of protection anymore. But I don’t want to fight if there’s no real reason to. “We both want the same thing,” I tell him. “We want our parents’ marriage to end. So, why are we even bothering to do this?” It’s fucking stupid.

“I have my reasons.” His words are vague and they make me want to punch him again. My hands clench into fists at my sides.

“You want to talk?” I ask. “Then tell me. Give me your fucking reasons because I don’t get it.”

“Not here,” he says. Isaac steps forward and this time, I stand my ground. He comes at me, step by step, inch by inch until he’s standing in front of me and only then does he stop. “Get in the car, Aurora,” he says and when I open my mouth to deny him once more, his head dips, and my eyes widen as his forehead touches mine in the lightest brush. “*Please.*”

There’s a whole host of emotions in that final word. A plea. A wish. My lips part and hang open, but when he says it in that tone ... I find it hard to deny him.

My eyes slide shut. My insides riot, but even so, I turn and walk away from him. He doesn’t come after me because he knows where I’m going. I head to the car, where the passenger side door is still hanging open, waiting for me. I grip the handle and climb back inside, shutting it firmly behind me, and it’s only when Isaac rounds the front of the Escalade and gets into the driver’s side that I speak.

“Tell me where we’re going, Isaac.” It’s not a request.

Isaac’s hands grip the steering wheel and he turns the ignition. “Away, Aurora,” he answers. “Far, far away.”

CHAPTER 17

RORI

FAR AWAY ISN'T ACTUALLY that far. At least, physically, it isn't. But as we pull up in front of a hotel several minutes later, I know Isaac and I are both lost in a haze of our own thoughts. Maybe he meant that the two of us would eventually escape this cycle we were born into—fighting for dominance when all we are meant to be are pawns in someone else's game.

“Come on.” I don't fight him this time as he parks at the entrance and gets out, tossing the keys to a valet. We enter the building and I trail behind him, passing the front desk without stopping. We enter a private elevator and remain silent all the way up to the top floor. The penthouse suite, of course. I would expect nothing less from the Icari heir.

“What is this place?” I ask as we step out onto marble tiled floor and the elevator doors close behind us. My voice echoes around the vast space. It's all whites and blacks. Monochrome and lifeless.

“It's the place you were meant to move into,” Isaac says. “With me.” Right. I'd almost forgotten Damien's 'offer.'

So this place was meant to be my cage, then, I think. I take a look around, moving farther into the living room. The only sign of life aside from the two of us is the various plants around the room. The contrast of so much empty space next to vibrancy almost makes my eyes hurt.

“Okay,” I say, my voice echoing in the quiet open space. “Well, you've

got me here, now, Isaac.” I turn towards him, my back to the wall of windows that lead out onto the rooftop patio. “Say what you want to say.”

He looks back at me for a brief moment and when he doesn’t immediately respond, I scoff. “What? Is the place bugged?” It wouldn’t surprise me. Damien Icari strikes me as the kind of control freak who wants to know everything about everyone at every second of every day—including his own son.

He shakes his head. “No, I wouldn’t move into a place if I thought it was bugged. I have a team sweep it regularly.” His words confirm my suspicions. My eyes narrow on him. I’m starting to develop a larger picture of what’s going on.

Damien and Isaac, despite being father and son, are at war. A far more brutal and bloody war than the one between him and me. Where, then, does my mother fit into their schemes? Where do I?

I exhale and look back to the room, scanning it until I find what I need. The second I spot the alcohol cart, I make a beeline for it. I pop the cap on the decanter sitting there and pour myself a hefty dose of whatever’s inside. It doesn’t matter what it is—all alcohol numbs the senses eventually.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Isaac doesn’t move fast enough to stop me. By the time he’s halfway across the room, I’ve got the glass half full and placed at my lips. I swallow back a mouthful, wincing at the burn in my throat, and then down the rest. When his hands land on my shoulders, and his fingers pluck the glass from mine—it’s too late.

“What the fuck am *I* doing?” I repeat with a laugh. “What the fuck are you doing? Dancing around the subject?” I let him take the glass and place it back on the cart before I jab him in the chest. “You brought me here, Isaac. Time to spill the fucking beans. If there’s a point to the cloak and dagger shit, I’m ready to listen.”

His eyes turn cold as he looks down at me. “No, I don’t think you are. You’re just angry. You want to get drunk—”

“You’re damn right I want to get drunk,” I snap. “And you want to know the reason?” I grab him by the front of his shirt, sinking my nails into the fabric as I drag him with me. I stomp towards the space we just left—right in front of the elevators where there’s a big massive mirror hanging there for all who come through those doors to see. “Take a good long fucking look,” I say, shoving him towards it.

Isaac’s head lifts and his dark eyes glare at me through the reflection. Slowly—so fucking slowly—he turns back to me. The intensity of his gaze sends shivers down my spine, but I don’t back down. There’s no point. I’ve already shown vulnerability to him and I hate that. I don’t want to do it again.

So, what do I do? I do what I’ve always done. I push.

“The subterfuge doesn’t suit you,” I tell him. “The lying, the sneaking around, the social torment.” I lower my eyelids and stare back at him through slitted eyes. “What’s wrong? Are you that scared of a little girl?”

That does it. His hands clench into fists at his sides. “I’m trying to fucking protect you!” he finally yells. I keep my eyes on his as he advances on me in quick stomping steps. “You fight me and you fucking fight me, but Aurora you are in far more danger than you realize.”

He’s not done. Something seems to have snapped within him, and I feel like I’m finally seeing his insides for the first time. They’re just as shredded as mine. His eyes are wild, his nostrils flare, and his chest pumps up and down with effort.

“You want to know why I brought you here?” He doesn’t stop until he’s a shadow looming over me, his hand slapping the wall next to my head. “To warn you? Fuck yes. I brought you here to warn you. You should be fucking terrified. Of me and of my father. You’re right to be wary of both of us, but between him and I—I am your only salvation. So do both of us a favor and keep your fucking mouth shut and your head down. Stop fighting me. If you want to do something to help, convince your mother to divorce him. As soon as possible. The sooner the two of you are as far from Hazelwood and

Damien Icari, the better.”

“Why?” The tops of his cheeks are stained red, not with embarrassment but fury and something else, but it can’t be fear ... can it?

Lightning strikes in his blue eyes, clear as day and dark as night. “Why?” he repeats quietly, sounding stunned. “Fucking, why? Because he will fucking *kill you*, Aurora. That’s why.” There’s a flash of that enigmatic emotion within him at the roar that erupts from his throat.

Small trembles start up and move throughout my whole body, taking over. “Why the fuck do you care whether or not he kills me?” That’s the question that I can’t help but ask.

Why is he dancing around it? Why won’t he admit it? Can I even trust his warning? Why is he even bothering to tell me all of this? What’s the point? There are all these questions and no answers. I’m alone here in the dark, confused—not just by his words but the reason for them. *Why should I trust him? Why does he even care if I live or die by his father’s hands?*

A part of me senses the reason, but I need it in plain words. I need to know if it’s the truth or if I’m just fucking crazy because being around him makes me feel like I am; like every second spent in his grasp is another second I’m slipping free of my carefully maintained facade that everything is alright.

“Why do you care, Isaac?” I repeat the question, looking up into his gaze. Daring him to continue. Daring him to open his perfectly sculpted lips and tell me another lie. Is this really about his father or is he afraid of me? “I’m not important,” I continue, stabbing at his ego. Pricking his pride. He’s close enough to the edge that I know if I keep it up, something will break, and maybe, I’ll finally see a little bit of the real Isaac Icari spill out. “I’m nothing but a pawn, right? I’m just your stepsister.” The last word is a fucking taunt, a barb I know he won’t be able to resist biting back against. “Not your friend and certainly not your lover.”

He pulls back and this time instead of the flat of his palm, his fist hits the

wall, making the paintings and mirror nailed into it shake and tremble with the force behind his anger.

“Shut. Up.” His words are dark and violent. Shaking with an inner fury that I knew he had but I haven’t seen in quite this way before.

My head tilts back, my chin up, my eyes on his, and I do something I never thought possible. “Make. Me.”

Silence and seconds stretch between us. I don’t know who moves first, but I’m afraid it’s me. It *is* me. I can’t help it. All I know is that we have been building towards this moment. I’ve been climbing the mountain that is Isaac Icaro for what feels like all of eternity and I’m tired. Tired of fighting against our very natures.

I push up and slam my mouth against his. There’s a stunned moment where he doesn’t move and I open my eyes to find him staring back at me. I don’t move back. I don’t apologize. If he denies me now, if he rejects this, then I’ll know the truth. I was crazy.

But he doesn’t do any of that. In fact, the slow curve of his mouth reveals that I haven’t, in fact, lost all sense of reason. Not at all. His anger turns into pleasantly surprised amusement. He smirks against my lips and then his fist reaches down, cupping the back of my neck, and his eyes slide shut.

Tongue against tongue, he delves inside of me and sucks out the very last breath of resistance lingering between us. And fuck him. He’s a good fucking kisser. I may have started this. I may have been the first to give in, but if Isaac is anything, he’s a control freak. To him, he has to be the one to finish it.

He pushes me back into the wall until my skull is flush with the plaster and then, he consumes me. A leg slides between both of mine, his knee pressing up against my crotch, and a whimper escapes me as the rough feel of fabric presses right against my clit. Now I know what that smirk was about. It was almost like he was saying, *Oh, Sunshine, you’re going to regret choosing this path.*

But I don't.

"You should've run when I told you to. But that's okay, I'll make sure you're safe. It'll be painful. It won't end here. Just remember—as you suffer in the fire you lit—you wanted this."

"I know." It's the only thing I can say. I can't deny his words because he's right. I *do* want this. Even if he burns me alive, I won't regret this. Because this is the most alive I've felt since that night three years ago when a man who should've never touched me thought he could take without consequences.

No. I shut that thought down without remorse. I don't want the past to intrude on this. This isn't for him. This is for me. This is *all* for me.

My hands shove up into his sandy blond hair, the mixture of brown and gold tangling in my fingers as I kiss him back. He wants to eat me alive? Swallow me whole? Own me? Fine. He can, but he'll have to fight for it first.

CHAPTER 18

ISAAC

AURORA KISSES like the world is ending. She opens her mouth and lets me sink deep like this will be the last time anyone shows her any sort of affection. She's all hard lines and jagged edges—a princess trapped in an incredibly high tower, surrounded by walls of thorns and even a fiery dragon or two. When she finally decides to break free and step outside, she bursts to life.

Feminine hands shove up into my hair as she yanks me closer, demanding more. I reach down, cupping under her thighs and lifting her against me. And just as I expect, she doesn't hesitate. Her legs open willingly and she wraps them around me. Once she's decided she's going to do something, she doesn't second guess it—she just goes for it.

Her chest pushes against mine. I can feel the rapid beat of her heart. Her scent is in my nose. Her hair in my face. Her hands on my skin. I want more. I want it all.

With her back to the wall, I yank my mouth from hers and reach down. Her dress has hitched up her hips. I grab the hem of it and pull it even higher—up and up until it catches at her waist, only then do I stop and reach around, finding the zipper and tugging it down. The damn thing snaps under my fast movements. I don't fucking care. I'll buy her a new one, and then probably rip that off her as well.

Something tells me that once we cross this bridge, there will be no turning back. Hell, we're already past the point of no return. Every slide of her skin against mine feels like flames licking against me. She burns me, from the inside out, and I love every second of it. Even if I end up as nothing but ash, I'll perish in her sunlight.

I push her legs down and the second the shimmery fabric of her dress falls to the floor at my feet, my eyes take her in wearing nothing more than a pair of peach colored underwear and so much perfect skin, I decide she shouldn't ever wear clothes again. My hands find her pink rose tipped breasts.

"Beautiful." I don't realize I've uttered the thought aloud until she chuckles, her fingers trailing along my arms.

"You only say that because you want to fuck them," she says and suddenly I have the image of her laid flat out on her back, holding her tits together as I slide my cock between them and straight up towards her open, waiting mouth.

Fuck. I groan and lower my head, pressing my forehead against her shoulder. She's gonna make me come in my pants like a fucking virgin or something. The first time had been nothing like this. At the party, we'd both been trying to act as someone else, hiding our true intentions. There's none of that now. This time, she's not doing this for some fucking revenge video.

I drop her legs away from me and stand back. When Aurora lifts her gaze and meets mine, she doesn't flinch away. She doesn't try to cover herself or act shy or reserved. She stares back at me with expectation, and fuck if that's not the hottest thing in the whole goddamn world. Confidence. The knowledge of her own worth and beauty. It's a heady mixture that turns me on and makes my cock throb inside my pants.

"Turn around," I say. "All the way. I want to see you."

She arches a brow, but we've come too far now. There's no backing out. Slowly, in small incremental movements, she pivots until she's facing the

wall. I close my eyes briefly. I didn't get to see her like this the last time, so I couldn't have known it then, but seeing what I see now ... *how the fuck have I managed to stay away from her as long as I have?*

Her ass is a work of art. It's practically begging me to get on my knees and worship it. My hands fly down to the hem of my shirt and rip it up and off, discarding it along with her dress. The belt comes flying off next, landing on the floor with a hard thump. My shoes follow. When she's finally completed the turn, I've got everything but my pants off. I advance on her and as I do, she opens her arms, reaching for me.

Her legs are back around my waist, ankles locked at the small of my back as her breasts press against my pecs. "There's no going back," I whisper against her lips as I carry her through the penthouse.

She arches up against me, pressing herself as deep into me as she can. "Good," she replies. "Because I never look back."

I don't think that's completely true. Not from what I saw earlier—in the parking lot—but perhaps she means that if she can help it, she doesn't look back. Maybe she doesn't want to look back but some things force her to. Whatever the case, it doesn't matter right now. All that matters is that she and I, in this moment, are as connected as we've ever been and there's no prying us apart once I get inside of her the way I plan to.

Our lips meet once more, mouths clashing in a dance as old as humanity itself. She tastes amazing, like liquor and sunshine. It's heady and addictive, just like the woman in my arms. She's closer than she's ever been, even at that stupid party. She might have had my dick down her throat, but she was never quite this near. I can see each and every individual freckle across her high cheekbones and the bridge of her nose. They litter her skin. Down her face. Over her shoulders. There are even a few on her upper chest, though less there than other areas. The result is the same—she's been marked by the sun.

I want to leave my own mark.

I pull away from her mouth as we enter the bedroom and then press her back into the massive king mattress across from the wall of windows that overlooks the California coast and city beneath it. My body finds its place on top of her and I come down hard, letting her feel every inch of my arousal against the small of her belly. My lips touch her throat and I grin when she arches up, unaware of my intention.

A cry of surprise echoes from her throat as I sink my teeth into the soft, delicate flesh between her neck and shoulder, biting down hard until I'm sure there's a perfect indentation marking her skin—one that won't be going away anytime soon.

"Fuck!" she cries out, slamming the flat of her palm against my chest as she pushes me back slightly and reaches up to feel the wound. "That hurt."

"Good," I say, still grinning. Her hand turns to claws as her nails sink into my chest and she glares up at me. I arch a brow. "What's wrong?" I ask. "Want a little payback?"

Before I realize what's happening, she hooks her leg over my hip and shoves up on one side, pushing me over. We flip and she ends up straddling me from above, her nails still digging their way into my flesh.

"Yes," she answers with an easy, almost evil smile. She leans down and my eyes find the place that I marked. It's blossoming into a pretty red color and I know before the end of the night, it won't be the only wound either of us will be sporting.

I spread my hands out even as my dick jumps between us, ready and willing to do whatever she wants so long as it means it can sink itself inside the place between her legs. "Then do your worst, Sunshine," I say, offering myself up to her.

"Oh, I will, Isaac," she replies, that smile growing wider as she leans over me, putting her lips to my right pec, right over my heart. "It seems all you do is bring out the worst in me."

And as her own blunt, little teeth sink into my skin, all I can think is,

thank fuck for that.

CHAPTER 19

RORI

ISAAC IS like liquid heat beneath my fingertips. Everywhere I touch is warm. He's all wiry muscle bunched beneath tight, hard skin. He acts so differently than he did before, it's almost like I'm doing this with a completely different person. It isn't until we're already on the bed and practically naked in each other's arms, do I realize that it's not so much that he's a different person, but that he's finally let down those guarded walls of his.

It shouldn't touch me the way it does—knowing he's opened himself to me—but it does. I kiss him again, letting our tongues battle with one another. It's a fight, and it's not. We both want this.

My hands find his half open pants and I push my fingers inside, setting them flat against the ridges of his cut abdomen and sliding them beneath the fabric of his underwear and pants until my fingers meet the iron hard cock beneath. It was dark the last time I touched it. I'd almost forgotten how big he is. Even as I circle my fingers around the hard length of him, I can't believe I somehow fit him all the way in my mouth.

How the fuck didn't I choke?

As if he can hear my thoughts, Isaac chuckles and a moment later speaks. "Is that all you're going to do, Sunshine?" he challenges as I lift up and look down at him. "Give me a handjob? I thought we were past cheap teenage

party favors. Getting cold feet?”

With him? Always. He frightens me far more than I’m willing to admit—especially out loud. But with this? Ha. We’re already too far gone.

“You’re the one who left your pants on,” I tell him. “Maybe you’re scared I might defile you.”

He laughs and I blink at the sound. It’s shockingly beautiful, loud and full of such real, genuine amusement it makes me realize he’s never actually laughed like that in front of me before. His hands reach up and lock on my arms and once more, we’re spinning until my spine hits the mattress. He disappears long enough to shuck his pants onto the floor and toss a condom onto the bed at my side. The next thing I know, thick fingers find the outside of my panties and he pulls those off as well. Instead of just chucking them to the floor with the rest, he lifts them like the filthy degenerate he is and presses the crotch to his face, inhaling as he fists his cock over me.

When he catches me watching him, he smiles and then tosses them over his shoulder before releasing his cock and using his hands to spread my thighs wide open. “You smell like pure heaven, Sunshine,” he informs me.

“Asshole,” I mutter as my face heats up.

His low chuckle rockets through me as he bends and shoves his shoulders beneath my knees, hooking them over his back. I know exactly where this is going and my whole body flares to life, tightening all over as it anticipates his next move.

Warm breath filters over the outside of my pussy and a second later, Isaac’s fingers find my core, spreading me open. “So fucking wet,” he whispers against my flesh, and just the brush of his words across my clit make my back bow. “So fucking ready for me.”

I tremble as his head descends. My body locks up at the first touch of his tongue against my pussy. He proves just how dangerous he actually is as he spears into me, sucking me dry, lapping me up like I’m the last drop of water in the world and he’s dying of thirst.

My teeth sink into my lower lip, biting down hard enough that blood floods my mouth. I can't help it. It's so fucking good. My hips start to rock against his face, seeking out the pleasure he gives me. With shaking hands, I reach down and thread my fingers into the blond locks at the top of his head. He doesn't seem to notice. He's far too focused on sucking down every fresh gush of wetness. His mouth opens and his tongue slides through my folds and above it all, his fingers press down on either side of my clit, both holding me open and reminding me that he can end it all in a heartbeat.

"Fuck!" I gasp for breath that never seems to come. All of the oxygen in my lungs has evaporated, leaving nothing behind, and I'm left to shake and tremble beneath his ministrations and hope like hell that he ends my life with pleasure before the suffocation does it for him.

A moan erupts from me as he hits a spot inside that sends my mind reeling. My thighs lock around his head and a fresh wave of heady pleasure hits me. I can't take it for much longer.

"Isaac," I rasp. "Isaac ... please..."

He devours me. His fingers pinching down harder on my clit and sending me into an explosive white light that tears through my mind. A scream is ripped from my throat as my hand clenches against his head and an orgasm overtakes me. There's no controlling it.

I lose track of everything from his mouth on my pussy to the air against my flesh. My eyes slide shut and it isn't until I feel him pull away that I notice the waning of my orgasm. Isaac slips up my body, gripping my hips and yanking me down until my lower half is in his lap.

My eyes open to mere slits. Fine trembles still shiver along my skin and spine as he looks down at me, lips coated in wetness. He takes his cock in hand, slips the condom on, and directs it towards my still throbbing pussy, pushing just the head inside.

"There you go, Sunshine," he says, his voice hoarse. "Open for me."

There has never been a command that I've wanted to follow as much as

that one. My legs spread and I even reach down with shaking fingers, cupping them beneath my thighs as I hold myself open for him. His lips pull into an off kilter smirk.

“Good girl,” he praises me as he sinks inside. I gasp, arching into the movement as he stretches my hole. “Fuck, you’re tight.” *Of course I am*, I think with a wince. I haven’t done this in a long time. I’d been willing to do so much to get back at him, but it isn’t like I’ve slept with many guys. This is different. *He* is different.

Isaac’s face scrunches up and he releases the base of his cock to punch the mattress next to my head as he bends over my body, slowly but surely sawing his way into my cunt. One hand comes up to cup my face. My thighs are trembling with effort.

“There we go,” he whispers, holding himself above me. “Just like that. Oh, fuck ... Rori.”

The stretching burn of his dick makes me bow up towards him once more. I can’t hold myself up any longer. I release my thighs and instead reach for him, wrapping my arms around his strong shoulders.

“Please,” I beg. “Isaac ... fuck me.”

A growl erupts from him—something animalistic and dark. I didn’t realize what those words would do to him or to me. I didn’t realize how much he was actually holding back, but as the last sound of my voice fades into the room, Isaac’s hands cup my hips and he pulls back, nearly ripping his cock from within me before slamming completely forward—filling me.

Light flashes behind my eyes at the sheer force of it. He doesn’t stop there, though. Isaac rails me, fucking into me with harsh movements. His cock cuts me deep, slicing through my pussy and into places I’ve never felt before. He keeps me exactly where I am with intention, keeping me from slipping away as his dick thrusts back and forth. The muscles in his back bunch beneath my hard grip as I hold on for dear life and he drives me back up the same mountain I’d just come down from.

It isn't long before I'm gasping through the flutterings of a second orgasm. "Isaac," I cry out. "I'm gonna ... oh fuck ... I'm gonna. Please don't stop. Don't stop. Don't stop. Don't stop." I can't seem to help it. I mutter the words on repeat like a broken record, terrified that any second now he'll start to slow and I'll lose this momentum. Whatever is on the crest of this orgasm, though, I know is going to destroy me and I'm ready and willing to go. I want it. Whatever it is, as long as it lets me feel this way for just a little bit longer, I'll take it.

"Shhhhh." Isaac cups the back of my head, never slowing his movements, keeping up the pace with each passing stroke. "I've got you," he promises. "Almost..." He cuts himself off and I can practically hear the grinding of his teeth. Finally, the crest crashes over me and I tighten, my pussy clamping down on him as my orgasm reaches me.

I know my nails are sinking into the skin of his back. I can feel wetness—blood—but I can't release him. My body won't let me. I've never had an orgasm feel so painful and yet so fucking good. I'm left gasping for breath once more and it isn't until I finally retain control of my limbs and manage to loosen my hold that Isaac finally releases me.

He practically shoves me back into the mattress and my eyes widen as he pulls out of me completely, ripping the condom off as he palms his cock and strokes it above me. A moment later, cum shoots out and hits my belly. It arches up and lands on my breasts as well as he coats me in his release.

Only then does he seem to regain his senses, panting and flushed, Isaac looks down at me and smiles—a true, pure smile. Even coated in sweat with loose, exhausted limbs, I feel the flutterings of more arousal slip through me.

Fuck no. How? After two back to back orgasms? How can he do that?

Isaac leans down, brushing my damp hair back as he presses a close-mouthed kiss to my stunned lips. When he pulls back, his eyes open and lock with mine. "There's no going back now, Sunshine," he tells me.

My lips part but no words come out.

“Say it,” he orders. “Tell me that there’s no going back.”

“Th-there’s no going back,” I answer.

He nods. “Who do you belong to?” he demands.

That one is easy, as easy as breathing—though I don’t know how. “You.”

His blue eyes burst to life. “Fuck yes, you do,” he whispers. “You’re mine, Sunshine.”

And just like that, I know there really is no going back. We are past the point of no return. This one decision has locked us together. Suddenly, a true fear springs to life in my mind. We may have solved our differences. We may have admitted our feelings for each other, but there’s so much more at stake now. So much more we have to worry about. I reach up and my fingers brush his.

“What now?” I ask.

There’s no running from my meaning. No hiding it. His jaw clenches and unclenches. His lashes flutter and I can practically see the thoughts spinning through his mind. “We’ll figure it out,” he promises me. “Whatever happens, though, I swear you’ll be safe.”

“It’s not just me I’m worried about,” I tell him. “What about my friends? My mother? What exactly is it that your father is after? Will he use them?”

His grimaces, and I have my answer. “If he thinks they’ll work, yes,” Isaac answers regardless.

“I won’t have my friends involved,” I tell him. “I can’t let that happen.” It’s too late for my mother, but for them, I can still do something.

“Do you trust me?” Isaac asks.

I blink. “What?”

“Do you trust me?” he repeats.

I stare up at him, my eyes glancing across his face, trying still to seek out a motive for this question, but all I see is a cool determination. I want to say yes, but one night does not a relationship make. And even the purest of relationships have fallen before. I bite down hard on my lower lip, forgetting

that I've already cut it. More blood fills my mouth.

Isaac reaches up and presses down on it. "Don't," he whispers. "Don't think about it. Just let me handle it. I won't hurt you anymore, I promise."

I shake my head. "I'm sorry," I reply. "I can't."

He frowns down at me before releasing me and sinking back on his heels. "You can't what?"

I swallow and lean up, keeping our gazes connected. "It's not that I can't trust you," I tell him. "But it's too soon. It's too early. Whatever you have going on, whatever you think you can do against your father ... the only way we can move forward now is if you involve me."

"No." His tone is hard, his face angry, but I push forward.

"It's the only way," I inform him.

"No, it's not," he argues. "You don't want to get involved with him. It's too dangerous."

I sigh. "I'm already involved."

He stiffens, but he knows it's true. Blue eyes look down and then back to me. He considers me for a moment. "You don't have to be," he says, shocking me.

"What?" I gape at him. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You can escape his path," Isaac tells me. I can see the thoughts working through his mind in the expressions that play out over his features—worry, consideration, realization, acceptance. I don't know what he's thinking, but I have the sneaking suspicion that I won't like it. "Follow your brother," he tells me. "Go to Eastpoint."

My hand snaps out before I even realize what I'm doing and I cup it around his throat, holding him as I shove my face close. My words, when they come, are low and angry. "Fuck. That," I spit back at him. "You are not sending me away like someone in need of protection."

"You are in need of protection," he replies coolly. He doesn't even flinch or make any sort of reaction to my hand as it clamps down harder.

“I’m. Not. Leaving.” I say the words with precision.

He shakes his head. “You’re not putting yourself in danger either.”

We’re at a stalemate, him and I. Neither one of us is willing to budge. A rock and a hard place. I’m not even sure which of us is which. “Be careful, Isaac,” I warn him. “Be very fucking careful. Just because we fucked doesn’t mean you get to tell me what to do.”

He chuckles, his full, masculine lips spreading into a wicked grin. “You admitted you’re mine, Sunshine,” he says, leaning into my grasp as if it doesn’t bother him at all. “That more than anything fucking means you should do exactly what I tell you to do, but I get it.” I blink, confused. “You’re not used to being out of control. It’ll take time for you to realize that you can hand it all over to me.” His hands clamp down on my hips and he lifts me, depositing me back on his lap—despite all the sticky, sweaty aftermath still all over the both of us. His lips descend and take mine.

It’s powerful, this kiss. It’s commanding. It’s mind-numbing. “Fine,” he whispers when he pulls back. “You win ... for now.”

My hand falls away from his throat and he takes my mouth again, but in the back of my mind—despite the slack he’s given me now—I know it can’t last.

How long will I keep winning? Or is this even a true win?

Whatever the case, something tells me that the next part of our journey is going to be more perilous. If I want to be ready, I need to do more than demand inclusion. I need to be able to protect myself and my friends without Isaac’s help. I won’t stand next to him as a damsel in distress. I will stand as a fucking goddess, and should I fall, Isaac Icari will fall with me.

Did you love the start of Isaac and Rori’s love story? Are you curious about some of their friends? Check out Ava and Dean’s fully completed story right here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucy Smoke, also known as Lucinda Dark for her fantasy works, has a master's degree in English and is a self-proclaimed creative chihuahua. She enjoys feeding her wanderlust, cover addiction, as well as her face, and truly hopes people will stop giving her bath bombs as gifts. Bath's get cold too fast and it's just not as wonderful as the commercials make it out to be when the tub isn't a jacuzzi.

When she's not on a never-ending quest to find the perfect milkshake, she lives and works in the southern United States with her beloved fur-baby, Hiro, and her family and friends.

WHERE MISCHIEF MEETS RAGE C.L.
MATTHEWS



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Editor: Rumi Khan

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QUOTE

I realized I was asexual because when I was young, all my friends started being attracted to people, and I had no idea what they were talking about.

David Jay

DEDICATION

*To my ace gang, I love you all,
you're worthy, you're not odd for being you,
you deserve love, happiness, acceptance, and representation.*

Author's Note

I've wanted to write an asexual character for a long time. Being asexual myself, I wanted to see attributes I shared in books I'd read; thus, I wrote

Patch.

Not everyone will understand this sexuality, especially if you aren't ace. But I will say, being asexual has definitely made me feel unaccepted and different throughout my life.

There have been times where I've questioned if I'm broken, weird, or maybe just confused. Since learning and deep-diving into accepting myself, I found I love this part of me. It's a key part, like a limb, or oxygen would be to others.

And I hope that regardless of if you are ace, or not, you'll enjoy Patch and Lowell's story.

Not all love is the same.

Not all ways of being are the same.

We're different, and that's fucking beautiful.

TWs/CWs

Please only read this if you're eighteen years of age. There are scenes with murder, abuse, bullying, coercion, events where there is not consent, and hazing. This book isn't terribly dark for those well-versed in dark romance, but it has dark content.

There will sexual situations involving: somnophilia, knife play, blood play, sadism, anal play, rimming, honorifics, drool play, exhibitionism, belonephilia, hematolagnia, consent-non-consent, degradation, humiliation and voyeurism.

CHAPTER 1

LOWELL

HAVE you ever wanted to get revenge? Not the *you cheated on me, now I'll fuck your best friend* kind, but the kind where you wanted to cause mischief and destroy every single thing that made them happy?

That was where I was at.

At eighteen, I lost my best friend.

He's not dead, but he's going to wish he was.

That summer, I enrolled early into Dupont, the most prestigious university located right outside of Arcadia Crest and Cedar Heights. Instead of dwelling on how our friendship ended, I worked my ass off to become part of the fraternity we planned to pledge together with.

Tirelessly, I took every step to become the best at everything and when the prior president stepped down, I took over.

The frat looked to me for answers, guidance; they followed my lead and I never let them down.

The new school year started, and today, we were getting new pledges for the next year. It was blood week. We didn't call it rush week, no, we called it blood week. Where you cried, bled, and proved you were worth the label of Zeta Lambda Epsilon.

We were the elite.

The gods of Dupont.

They'd all bow to us eventually, and if not, we'd make an example of their lack of respect. We were feared as much as revered on campus, rising above their idea of fraternities and making our own label as gods.

"Yo, Montlake!" Cruz yelled at me, rushing to my side. He smiled kindly, reminding me that it'd been nearly a year since we called a truce.

Wouldn't exactly call it a truce.

Patch left and Cruz was here.

We weren't best friends, we weren't hooking up, we were just existing without the animosity involved.

Halloween last year, me and my best friend hooked up for the first time. We were both drunk, and a part of me wished I wouldn't have. I'd told myself several times that he'd regret it. Apparently, he did. Then he up and fucking left without a word, leaving me behind.

Now, I was moving forward, existing without him, and one day, I'd pay him back for breaking my heart.

I'd ruin everything that made him happy.

"Hey," I finally responded as Cruz caught up with me. His face was ragged, like he'd just finished a long run, and not the short distance to me either.

Black and longer than when we were in high school, his hair stuck to his face, riddled with sweat and oiliness.

"Blood week starts tonight," he mentioned, as if I hadn't already mentally planned the entire thing in my head. As the president of the Zetas, my job was to lead and guide. Tonight, we'd be kidnapping the pledges from their beds and forcing them to do stupid shit.

It only worsened from there.

"Yep, going to go shower and get ready for it," I grumbled, thinking of how laborious every event was as a pledge, knowing it was worse being the tormentor this time.

"Do you think we'll find some good ones?"

“I fucking hope so, we have fifty people who wanted to rush for some reason,” I complained, thinking of all the files Cruz had to go over. I tasked him with it and even assigned him the job of historian and records.

“I think turning the tables on what we went through will be fun,” Cruz mused, and I turned just in time to see the small sadistic smirk overtake his face.

“That’s because you’re a fucking psycho.”

He shook his head with a laugh. “You act like torturing them won’t be fun for you. You seem to forget I’ve known you for years. The frat doesn’t call you Loki for no reason, Lowell. You’re mischievous, always fucking causing mayhem, playing pranks, and being a total nutcase.”

It was my turn to laugh, thinking of all the pranks and games I pulled on each member, trying to prove my worth as their president. They didn’t need the reassurance, I’d singlehandedly made their school life experiences better by being the best advocate for them.

By the time we got back at the frat, I took a shower and ate some Hot Pockets, wanting nothing more than to sleep for a few days.

Every time a new school year started, I felt so exhausted, out of touch. It didn’t help that this was only my second semester at Dupont and I’d already fell behind. Patch being gone took the vital part of me that cared about grades and succeeding. He brought out the animosity, the need to hurt others, and the inability to connect with anyone on any level.

Pulling up his socials, I searched for any sign of him. For the last ten months, that’s all I did, searched for answers, anything that indicated where he ran off to and why fucking me led to him leaving.

It made no sense.

We were good.

Better than good.

I thought back to that night, imagining his facial expressions, how he was adamant that he wanted me, and why he chose me as his first.

CHAPTER 2

LOWELL

Past

“SLOW DOWN, DUDE,” Patch warned, but he grinned from ear to ear. Stealing the bottle from me, he took another thick swallow.

His throat contracted, the veins in his neck catching my attention all while the thickness of his Adam’s apple moved with the action.

So fucking hot.

My dick throbbed, reminding me I was very much gay and in lust with my best friend. Not noticing, I peered back into Patch’s eyes, and they’re staring at me in a way I didn’t recognize. He watched me watching him with yearning, and for some reason, his glazed-over look reminded me of Cruz when he wanted to come.

While I shouldn’t be thinking of Cruz right now, it was the only comparison I had for someone who was turned on.

He’s turned on.

Patch.

My best fucking friend who wasn’t into guys.

Offering me the bottle, I closed my eyes, repeating Patch’s actions by

taking slow swigs. When the pop of the bottle sounded out from my mouth, our eyes met, and the heat in his expression scared me.

“We should probably chill out,” I stumbled, hearing my own words dancing like the liquid in my stomach.

“What did you and Cruz do?” he asked huskily, ignoring my suggestion.

Is it husky, or was I drunk? Focusing on the deepness of his voice, I thought it might be hoarse. It took him asking me again to realize he asked me a question.

“What?”

He helped me sit up on the bed, taking another drink from the bottle. “What did you guys do?” Recalling why he brought me out here in the first place, I thought of the enemy we shared that I fucked around with.

Patch was jealous.

Stumbling over my thoughts, I struggled to form the words. “Fooled around,” I slurred, knowing the way my words sound like cursive writing to the ear.

“You said that,” he clarified. “But what did you do, *specifically?*”

I didn’t know what to say or how to respond. Struggling to form even words made me nervous, especially when all I could think of was how we messed around, and the entire time, I’d imagined Patch.

When words didn’t form, Patch pushed me down on my back, this time he was the one straddling me. “Is this what he did, Mischief?”

I swallowed dry air, gasping for a semblance of discourse. His fingers gripped the hem of my jeans, trailing across the waistband. Sweat trailed down my forehead, only proving how hot I felt and how much this scared me.

It couldn’t be real.

I’m drunk.

Having the hottest wet dream.

That has to be the reasoning.

“What about this?” he questioned, slipping his entire hand down my

pants. Grazing my cock, my body jolted, flinching from the simple brush of his fingers. Patch didn't stop there, he gripped my entire length soon after. With his other hand, he undid my pants, dragging my length out of the confines of my boxer briefs. His eyes widened while he subconsciously licked his bottom lip.

"Patch," I hissed, feeling like I was about to jizz in his palm just from the touch alone. "You're drunk."

The humor left his expression, but he chuckled anyway. "So are you. Is that why your dick is hard, Mischief? Because you're drunk?" I nodded frantically, knowing it was a lie. This wasn't the first time I'd been hard for him, and I was sure it wouldn't be the last.

"Hmm," he hummed, closing his eyes briefly. "I don't fucking believe you."

Leaning down, he licked my cockhead, and a long abated groan escaped me. *What the fuck is he doing? Shit. He needs to stop.*

"Tell me how he did it, Lowell. Show me how he sucked your cock."

"I-I," my words stuttered as he flicked his tongue along the tip over and over again. "Patch, we can't do this." My thoughts were hard to un-muddle, stuck on the pleasure his mouth brought me.

"Why?"

"You're straight, for one," I gasped, barely getting the words out with how he's blowing air across me. Popping the head of my cock inside of his mouth, a cry of unadulterated lust rushed from me. "Shit, Patch. Please stop."

He laughed lowly, his voice raspier than ever before. "Scared to have your best friend touch you, Lowell? What about make you come?" Sucking my tip again, he bit harshly. Pain sliced through me, but pleasure soon followed. "What about fuck you? Would you let me inside you, Mischief? Coat my hands with your release while I slammed inside your tight hole?"

Shaking my head, I moaned loudly. "Stop talking," I groaned. "You're drunk. You'll regret this tomorrow."

“It's only fair,” he rumbled, crawling up my body. “I want what Cruz had.”

The words made me shiver and flinch simultaneously. “You don't know what you're saying. Emotions are high.”

“I want to fuck you, Lowell.”

Shit.

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

The times I've imagined those exact words weren't lost on me.

Doubt hit me, reminding me how straight my best friend was.

He was drunk now, but what about tomorrow? He'd regret this.

I know it. He'd been straight our entire lives. Why would that change suddenly?

“Let me inside you,” he taunted, pumping me while leaning into my neck. His teeth sunk in, grinding into the tendon. My nipples tightened from the shiver shooting across my body, but I loved it.

He began sucking furiously. He was going to leave marks, hickeys, a stamp of ownership he had no desire for.

“Why now?” I barely mustered, needing some reassurance. Needing to know this wouldn't ruin our friendship.

“Because you were mine first,” he growled greedily, biting my bottom lip. Lost in his aggression, I didn't notice him bringing his other hand to my throat. Patch squeezed my airway, forcing my mouth open.

Blinking twice, I noticed the spit dangling above me, and my cock twitched twice before shooting all over us both. No movement, no thrusting, just the simple fact that he's about to spit in my mouth.

He lied to me.

He saw the porn I watched that one night. How else would he know my kink?

It was a dude spitting in another dude's mouth. I jerked to that video for

months. If Patch noticed me blowing my load, he didn't mention it.

He grinded down onto me and released the spit. "I knew you were a fucking freak, Mischief. Always watching gay porn. Wanting to be degraded like a slut."

"H-how'd you know?" I mumbled, shame carving through me. He closed my mouth, forcing me to swallow his saliva, and I did, savoring it.

His jean-clad cock rubbed against my already hardening one, making a mess of both of us. "Looked at your search history when you'd pretended to go pee at night. Don't be shy, admit it, you were jerking off to it."

Swallowing air, I gulped at the realization. "You knew I was gay?"

A nod was my only response. "Then why—"

Forcefully, he squeezed my throat. "You fucked our enemy, and now I'm going to fuck you."

With amusement in his features, he jumped off me, touching the splodge on his jeans. "Get undressed, Lowell."

"We can't do this."

"Either get undressed or I'll undress you," he challenged.

"No."

Then he cut my jeans off and fucked me, taking my virginity and his own away with a lot of thrusting and hardly any prep other than using his mouth.

When I woke up naked and alone the next day, he was gone.

CHAPTER 3

PATCH

ASEXUALITY.

I learned a lot of new words in the eight months my dad forced me away, but that one defined an intrinsic part of me. Must've been a shock to him, sending me to Los Angeles where it sprouted my realization of my sexuality instead of stomping it away. He wanted me married, impregnating a woman of *his* choosing, and taking on the family business.

He truly fucked up by sending me to that conversion camp. There, I met people who had the same realities as me. Parents sent the bad kids there, the gay ones, the ones with drug problems, etcetera. I was all of them, wrapped in a fucked-up ribbon.

I learned a lot about myself there. *I'm gay and asexual*. Sounded like a sinner problem to those at the camp, but for me, it gave clarity.

It made me realize the labels others put on me and made me struggle with all throughout high school weren't accurate.

My dick wasn't broken.

It was just what made me, *me*.

My idea of sexuality was corrupted by social media and the people around me. Society deemed heterosexuals normal and homosexuals abnormal.

What was *normal* anyway?

Most people stumbled when I told them about my sexuality now. They confused asexuality with not being able to have boners or unable to fuck someone. Which wasn't always the case. While we *could* experience arousal, we didn't generally experience the sexual attraction most people did.

Lowell made me hard, but until I was drunk that night, I didn't once experience that. Not even watching tons of hours of porn. Nothing interested me, but Lowell did that night.

Until my senior year, I didn't feel the need to have sex or lose my virginity. Lowell changed that for me.

Something potent expanded between us, ruffling my feathers, confusing my dick, and heart, all in one.

And as I knelt on a cemented floor, covered in darkness, it brought me back to camp and whom I missed the entire time forced there.

Lowell.

My eyes scanned the line of masked figures and it caught on familiar navy eyes.

"Lowell?" I questioned, looking upward. Above me stood a person who had a similar build as my ex-best friend, it had me wanting to rub my eyes and see if I hallucinated.

"Shut the fuck up, Pledge," Lowell chastised, his voice raspy and emotionless. He barked at me as if I were a mere stranger, someone he didn't know. But that voice—he could hate me but that voice would always be the same.

It'd been nearly a year since we saw each other last. We drunkenly hooked up on Halloween and then my dad basically kidnapped me. It fucking hurt, waking up with a hangover, in another city, beaten until the thought of Patch didn't get me hard.

Anger rose in me as I kneeled. The Zetas were known for their brutality and hazing. It was bullshit how they acted like gods, wanting to be worshipped. But now, knowing he led them, it made it somehow worse. They

all peered at him for guidance. He must be the president of the frat.

What I didn't expect when rushing was him being a part of it. How was it even possible for him to be here before me?

He stood above me in a mask. Much like on Halloween, I could tell it was him by being a part of his life for so fucking long. Didn't help he finally got the tattoo of a serpent on his forearm, exactly as I drew it for him in high school.

His dad—much like mine—didn't want us inked up, said it gave a bad name to our business. He apparently listened as well as I did. I got back two months ago, convinced my dad I was straight and not into Lowell, and then started inking up my body. Among other plans for getting back to Lowell, force him to tell me why he ignored me the entire time I was gone.

Did he miss me too?

I eyed him once more before looking at my own arm. There were more scars than not, being forced into a place that stripped you of everything did that to a person. Broken glass was my instrument of choice. I'd hide them in the top part of the toilet, my only escapism while being abused.

There were scars that were skin-deep, then the ones that only those who were closest to people truly knew. No one was close enough to truly know the deep-seeded scars that place left me with.

Escape was inevitable, too bad it took me pretending to be straight and promising my dad I'd marry to get out. They all believed me, though. I just needed to get Lowell back and then I could fucking pretend until we ran.

The other pledges turned to Lowell for leadership while he continued to glare at me, not sparing a single glance elsewhere. Hatred stewed there, snaking around me, draining my life slowly like a serpent with its mouse.

Did he look for me at all?

"Up," he demanded. The one closest to him shook his head. Lowell growled under his breath; the heat of his scowl made the guy move from foot to foot.

Did he even care? I begged him to help me.

“He’s a legacy,” the dude mentioned, directing at me. Only reminding me how fucked up this entire situation was. Lowell and I were supposed to rush at Dupont together.

Live together.

Get high together.

Everything.

Already, he became a member of the frat we agreed upon, not a pledge like me. It felt like being stomped on with a boot, rubbed in fucking cow shit as I attempted to move.

“Don’t fucking care,” Lowell growled, punctuating each word. “He wouldn’t make it past blood weekend. He’s too weak.” My throat felt blocked, clogged like a dust trap in a dryer. He said it with venom, the way he spewed the words sounded so angry and he had no fucking right.

It was me who should be angry, not him. He never reached out to me. When I finally got released from the camp, he was the first person I called. No answer.

“Can’t do, Loki. We have rules.” *Loki?* What the hell did he call him that for?

Lowell didn’t appreciate the dude’s response and pushed past the whole row of Zetas. “Then you deal with him *without* me.”

“What the fuck was that about?” Landon—a new friend of mine—asked, bumping my shoulder. I shook my head, not wanting to rehash losing the only person I cared about. Our past didn’t matter. He would never be a part of my future at this rate.

“Mouth shut, you fuck,” the guy who stopped Lowell yelled at Landon.

Suddenly, a sound came out. The tune to The White Stripes’ “Seven Nation Army.” It pounded and they all backed up in succession.

All of them turned around, bending to grab something, and my nerves felt fucking frazzled. Being woken up at three in the morning, taken from your

dorm, stripped to nothing in the freezing cold sucked.

Now, we were in a basement of some sort, on our knees, shivering. Shame should coat me, but the lacrosse team at Cedar Heights did the same, it was the same rodeo in a different season.

When the row of members straightened again, it took all of five seconds for them to walk back, their hands hidden behind their backs.

One by one, they went down the row of us, asking history questions. For every pledge who answered wrong, they slammed a water balloon at their chests and then poured a liquid on their heads, over their mouths, and the way each pledge gagged and yelled, it had to be booze. The smacking sound of them choking, along with the splash, made my body shudder.

The thought of being that fucking cold didn't sound nice. Luckily, Landon prepared me for this shit. When the dude got to me, I felt his smirk before seeing it.

"Who was the class clown of 1988?" he questioned, and then he started counting. "Five." He moved to one foot. "Four." Bounced to the other. "Three." I tried thinking of that year. Then I remembered it was my father and Lowell's dad's graduation year.

"Huey Thurston!" I yelled right as he said, "One." My body shuddered, waiting for the gasoline-flavored liquid to hit me. It didn't.

No one had a fucking list of these names, but I remembered Dad and Meyer—Lowell's dad—talking about how Huey always did stupid shit and got in trouble constantly.

"Lucky guess," he commented, his tone bored. "Unfortunate for me."

After he moved over, Landon got the alcohol waterboarding and I still fucking got hit with the freezing splashes, making me shiver and shudder the entire time. They must've frozen that shit with how cold it felt.

This was bullshit.

CHAPTER 4

LOWELL

HAVE you ever been punched in the gut? That sensation, of pain, the ache that came after the initial hit, that was what it felt like seeing Patch again for the first time since last Halloween.

He looked good in his godly glory. His black hair seemed inkier somehow, all disheveled and messed up. The frat woke up our pledges at three in the morning, wrestling them from their comforts and then undressed them to be humiliated.

That was the rules.

Undress, lose dignity, then earn your spot.

The fact that Cruz didn't warn me about Patch told me everything I needed to know—he wanted me to hurt.

That was the thing about enemies who were sometimes forced together, they wanted you to suffer while also being a part of your world.

Cruz and I called an unspoken truce over Patch, but somewhere, he decided to be a fuck about it.

“You prick!” I yelled at Cruz as he drank a beer by the fire. We lived at the Zeta house—had to since Patch disappeared and never fucking told me to where.

Didn't help that my hatred for his betrayal brought me here sooner, pledging, getting a good seat at the table, and being the president this year.

Fuck.

Cruz either wanted my spot or was angry because I told him to fuck off the last time he tried hooking up with me.

Bruised egos sucked, especially when it came to guys who didn't know what denial was.

“What's got your panties in a twist, Montlake?” he taunted, swirling the liquid around like it amused him.

I stomped the distance to him, stealing the bottle and tossing it against the mantle. “You are the most selfish fucking bastard I've ever met.”

He leered, his teeth showing, along with the piercing in his upper lip. “Aside from you, yeah?”

“Fuck you,” I hissed, trying to control my rage. Anger wasn't something I felt often, not until Halloween last year.

“You couldn't handle me,” he mused, and it took every ounce of control not to walk over to him and punch him in his stupid face.

“When did you see his application?” I deflected, needing answers before I lost my shit entirely.

“Weeks ago.” His voice seemed too light, glee tracing every word. “It's ironic, knowing that your best friend abandoned you and I got to see him first.”

“I hate you,” I let out, allowing the hatred to seep from me. I thought we had comradery, a peace from the stupidity. It seemed that time had passed.

“Yeah, well, now that he's back, truce is off.”

“You have nothing to hold over me,” I argued, balling my fists. Turning, I went to the hutch, grabbing the first tumbler I saw along with the expensive scotch. “There's nothing you could possibly do to me that would make me hate you more.”

“Patch is an easy target, being that I'm the records keeper and final say in selection.”

I shook my head. “And?” Taking a huge swig of the liquid, my insides

flared. I'd been cleaning my system of all intoxicants for months, wanting to be at my best for lacrosse season. "He's nothing."

A chuckle hit my ears and I turned to see an amused Cruz standing with his arms folded across his chest. "Oh, yeah. Not bothered about him at all?"

"Get out of my face before I give you a rearranged one."

He shrugged, the last thing I saw was the joy he got from this entire situation.

By the time I made it back to the group, the hazing portion was over. Booze—moonshine, to be specific—scented the air in a putrid way. It smelled like paint thinner, a total cross from something appealing like rum, which had a sweet hint to it.

"Took you long enough," Lockwood complained, his face wet and red. He tended to get too involved with the hazing, leaning toward them while pouring the shine over their faces, it always splashed on him and he got pretty tanked by the end.

"Did you want me to fuck everything up by being myself?" I questioned, raising an eyebrow at him. He nodded with understanding.

"You want that bank from the Creekman estate, huh?"

Yeah, that's why I barely stopped from fucking punching Patch. I nodded in agreement, unwilling to give any inkling to what I truly felt.

"Can't afford our bangers without money," Tane mentioned, inviting himself into our conversation. His black hair tousled in a fucked-up way, reminding me of Patch when we used to practice on the field.

Glancing at the pledges left, I glared at Patch's bent form, his body heaved, along with everyone else's. He kneeled next to Landon Towle—the pledge Cruz was most excited for. The position Patch was in brought me so much fucking glee. He deserved to be on his knees, beneath me.

Never to be a part of my life again.

As if he could hear my thoughts, Patch's black orbs connected with mine.
Navy and black.

Desolate and rage.

"What's your deal with him?" Tane asked, leaning in toward me, blocking my view of Patch. I wanted shove him off, drink in the sight of my ex-best friend, tattoo him into my mind forever.

"What does it matter? By the end of blood week, he'll want off the fucking bus."

"True," Tane said with a chuckle. "Let the least bitchiest of men win!"

When he walked off, Patch kept his eyes on me. The determination ruminating in his gaze made me uneasy. Once he got it into his mind to do something, he did it, even if it killed us all in the end.

There was something that changed in our time apart. Not just in terms of appearance, though he did get massive. He always complained that my thighs were tree trunks and his were twigs, but now, his were at least the same size if not bigger than mine.

I avoided looking at his dick momentarily before my gaze dragged down him, even flaccid, he was still massive. It took everything in me to shove the memory of us from Halloween away. Fuck him.

His chest rose and fell in even succession, the only thing that let me know he was pissed was the way his face seemed sharper, the tick in his jaw apparent and not subtle at all.

He'd learn soon, like him, I wasn't the same Lowell he knew.

I was a god, and he'd fall at my fucking feet before I ever gave him the time of day again.

CHAPTER 5

PATCH

HE LOOKED at me like I meant nothing. After the stare down, he clapped, forcing us all to leave and jog across campus naked. It was demeaning and ridiculous, but I did it.

Unluckily for Landon and me, we were further away than the rest. We were in the more expensive housing, which put us at the edge of campus.

It was fall, but in California, it felt like summer. The breeze was a little bitter at night since we were near the higher elevation, but not as bad as the snowy places. The stickiness on my body from the nasty-ass moonshine felt like a fucking itch you couldn't quite scratch as the wind hit me.

After we made it to our place, we passed out.

Saturday. Blood week kicked off for real today. We didn't know our tasks until we were assigned them at the party. The only thing I worried about was the sexual rituals I heard my dad and my brother River talk about. That was how Dad got forced to marry Mom. Dad fucked her for his initiation and she got pregnant with River.

They always had a fucking list of women to bag. Key word, *women*.

As someone not only lacking in the desire-having area, attraction wasn't there, either. If I had to fuck someone to pledge, I might as well bow out

now.

It didn't sit right.

Seeing Lowell stand above me, degrading me with his disgusted expression, I wanted to win, even if that meant I had to fuck some rando.

The thought of touching anyone the way I touched Lowell last Halloween had me nearly heaving the liquid contents of my stomach. Fuck that.

"Think we'll make it out alive?" Landon asked that night as we prepped for the party. Landon Towle was my only friend since coming back. He was Asian—Korean, to be exact—and his parents had this entire plan for his life and the more he rebelled, the more they accepted he wasn't like everyone else.

He wanted to pledge for this frat and do what his dad expected of him, which he did, but he also knew his future was in tattooing. Running a hand through his long black hair, he collected it all to put it into a bun. The underneath was buzzed short, the undercut had lines etched into it of some design and showcased the brass knuckles tattoo at the base of his skull.

"I think as long as we don't wimp out on any tasks, we'll be fine," I answered, brushing my hair with mousse, wanting it to look wet while still making it messy. Having curly hair meant it got a bit too fucking dry if I didn't put something in it and gel was off the table.

Landon, after tying his bun, turned to me. His dark eyes met mine and he narrowed them. "What was up with that Zeta being a fuck to you?"

I sucked in a deep breath, swallowing all the memories that popped up of us, thinking of how my dad somehow found out and fucking sent me off to be *fixed*.

"No clue," I lied, shrugging. He raised an eyebrow, not believing me for a second, but I didn't offer any more information.

Lowell and my shit was *our* shit. No one else got to know.

"O-kay," he exaggerated, putting his hands in the air. He blew out a breath and rolled his eyes. "We're friends, Patch. You come in here with this

dark and broody aura, asking to room with me since you were late with your application, and you haven't told me anything about you."

I scrunched my face. "Nothing to talk about."

"Yet, I learned you're a fucking legacy by some random frat guy?" He gave an exasperated raise of his eyebrows. "It's cool wanting secrets, but eventually you have to let someone in."

The only person I *let* in fucked me over. Not repeating that anytime soon.

"It's nothing," I pushed. "Just a fucked-up past. It's not important anymore." He stared at me, his eyes narrowing as he looked me up and down.

"Yeah, okay."

He left me alone in the kitchen and I leaned against the counter with anger coursing through me. Why did everyone feel the need to know my life?

My phone buzzed and the text had me audibly groaning.

Party at the Zeta house. 7pm sharp. Don't be late or you'll get the kissing booth at the fair.

I shuddered thinking of the fair we had to do by the end of blood week. They did it every year to raise money for booze. They had enough donations to never need it for activities and whatnot, but they always wanted to keep their drugs and booze stacked.

"Did you get that text?" Landon asked, peeking his head into the kitchen as I drank my fifth bottle of water for the day. If they were going to get me wasted, I needed to prep my body for the overhaul of fluids.

"Yep, ready?"

It was an hour to seven, but if we wanted to not get alcohol poisoning, we needed to grab food. They almost always had food at these events, but I wasn't risking not having time before shit went down.

Between forced beer pong, Never Have I Ever, and Truth or Dare games, I knew I'd need something.

"Zucchi's?" he asked and I nodded. We headed out, getting pizza on the

way there.

“I’m one hundred percent sure I’ll be barfing all this cheese up later,” he grumbled, patting his toned stomach a half hour later. I felt the same but not. I knew how to stop eating before the sickness came.

Learning how to curb the appetite when you were starved became natural.

CHAPTER 6

LOWELL

IT WAS BLOODBATH DAY, the time where we partied and tested the limits of all our pledges. Rudy texted everyone, asking them to show up thirty minutes early. Mori—Cruz’s stepbrother—messed me, letting me know he’d be showing up.

He wasn’t the president anymore, since he didn’t have the time and gave the torch to me instead of Cruz. I was sure he liked ruffling Cruz’s feathers whenever around and that was why he was attending.

Frat members who weren’t freshmen didn’t have to join in the activities. Mori was a junior and fucked in the head most days.

“Your little boyfriend showing up tonight?” Cruz asked me, his sneer making his face morph into the one from high school. The fact that it only took Patch showing back up for him to come out of his fucking closet unnerved me. He stood feet away, his gaze locked onto the beer bottle I strangled.

“God, it must be exhausting being in Patch’s shadow,” I taunted, watching him for any answers. Taking a big gulp, I waited for him to blow up. He flinched, his fists clenching while his teeth did too.

“He’s nothing.”

“That’s why you’re always a cunt when he’s involved. Grow up.”

He spit on the ground, his face darkening with contempt. “You seem to

know it all now, but when he's begging me for my cock, that'll change."

I didn't feed into him, knowing he'd see it as a challenge—much like Patch would—and I couldn't risk seeing them together.

I might hate Patch, but seeing him with Cruz would absolutely destroy me.

He stormed off as Mori came in. While Cruz tried ignoring him, I saw the shame that flickered in his expression as they passed and it made me wonder what that meant.

"Heard little Creekman is coming," Mori mentioned, knowing about our past. Moriarty Dresden and I knew each other. Hell, when I fake dated his stepsister, he and I talked a lot. We were *friends*.

"Yeah, tried messing with his first taste last night and he still stayed."

Mori smirked, his face lighting with amusement. "You and I both know he's hardheaded as shit."

"Yeah, takes one to know one," I complained. "I'm going to destroy his life."

A chuckle escaped him and he actually rubbed a hand through his hair. "Yeah, you may think he hardened you by hurting your feelings but we both know you are too soft, Loki."

"Fuck off," I admonished, standing and getting ready to figure out what the fuck I'd have the pledges do tonight. We had a bonfire planned out back. Our frat was on a private lake—so were all the Greek row houses—which meant we'd be forcing them to go swimming naked at some point.

"Make 'em cry, Pres," he joked, but unlike with Cruz, he wasn't a dick about it. He acted like a big brother to me, supporting all my endeavors.

"You never told me why you picked me as president over Cruz," I randomly let out, not knowing why I took this exact moment to do it. Mori stepped closer to me, slinging an arm over my shoulder. Leaning in, his breath brushed my ear.

Cruz took that moment to stalk back in. "He doesn't deserve it, Loki. You

and I both know that, and the fact that it bothers him so much makes it that much sweeter.”

He smacked my ass before heading toward Cruz once more. If I thought he looked mad before Mori came inside, his expression turned lethal. His eyes were near slits, his face red and full of loathing. Heading to where he sat, he picked up his cell phone before letting out a grumpy response.

“What was that?”

His eyes connected with mine, the glint of damage—a promise to make me bleed—reflected there. “Stay the fuck away from Art.”

“Jealous?” I mocked, not thinking anything of it. When his face paled, I had my answer. This little fuck had feelings for his stepbrother.

Smirking, I reached for my beer. “Interesting.”

Not giving me the time to say anything, he turned away, grunting something under his breath before slamming the door.

Cruz acted like he’d use Patch to get to me, but he didn’t realize I now had as much ammo. I’d fuck with him right back.

CHAPTER 7

PATCH

“TONIGHT, is the true test. Bloodbath, that’s what we call this event,” Patty—Patrick—one of the junior members of Zeta, explained, his face filled with triumph. “We always start a round of Paranoia.”

The whole pledge class groaned in unison while I stayed stock-still. If I remembered correctly, Paranoia was a game where the people next to each other asked a question and the other had to answer it out loud. It made everyone uncomfortable because there were no limits on what was asked and the person answering couldn’t tell the question asked.

If someone in the group wanted to know the question, they had to take a shot, which would prove how paranoid they were.

Basically, if you talked shit and someone wanted to know, it’d out that person.

“Shit,” Lowell said loudly as another member whispered in his ear about what the game entailed.

They led us out back, standing by the campfire. There were thirty or so pledges left, fifty last night before our little naked stunt. Apparently, people didn’t want to relive that kind of shame.

It could’ve been so much worse, though.

I sat next to Landon, and Prince sat on my right. They were both far more nervous than me. Which meant they had shit to hide.

Guess we all did in the end.

“We’ll start with…” Tane mused, tapping the cup in his hand. He stared directly at me and my stomach dropped. Instead of me, he pointed at Landon. “You, Towle.”

Landon audibly swallowed next to me, sitting up straighter. “Left, or right?” he asked, the light way he requested it let me know he was nervous as fuck.

“To legacy boy, Patch.”

Landon turned to me, leaning into my ear, and I made sure to watch Lowell for any tells. My best friend had to be in there somewhere.

“I don’t know what to ask you…” he trailed off, his voice low. “Do you want it to be something deep or something light?”

“No chit-chatting,” Tane reprimanded. “No pussy-ing out either. It needs to be something dark or embarrassing. Something you don’t want others to know.”

“Why do you shudder in your sleep?” Landon finally whispered. Chills broke out over my flesh. It physically made me uncomfortable holding back the reaction.

Fuck.

Fucking fuck.

“Did you really have to ask that?” I bit out in a whisper. He shrugged and I swallowed.

“They’d wake me up in the middle of the night,” I robotically stated.

It wasn’t a full answer, but it was enough of a response to answer the question. That was all I could offer. Anything else would make me puke.

Lowell’s face at my answer seemed to scrunch in confusion. It didn’t surprise me that he grabbed the bottle of clear liquid from Tane and poured himself a shot.

“Guess President Tight-Ass wants to know the question,” Tane taunted, smirking at the both of us. I took a deep breath while Landon swallowed

again.

“I asked him why he shudders in his sleep,” Landon explained right before the crowd let out a synchronized *oooh*.

“How do you know he shudders in his sleep?” Tane teased. The question had Lowell uncomfortable, but since Landon answered, Lowell hadn’t been able to stop looking at me. He didn’t say anything and when it was my turn to ask Prince, my skin felt hot and itchy.

After a round of Paranoia, we began Truth or Dare, but instead the Truth or Drink version. Of course, I wanted to get fucking wasted. Lowell hadn’t stopped glaring at me and Landon seemed uncomfortable after everything.

“Patch first,” Lowell instructed, coming toward me with the clear liquid. “Truth or drink, you fuck.”

The harsh way he said that surprised me. Yeah, Lowell had his moments where he was angry, but his anger made zero sense to me. He was the one who never called or texted back. Hell, I was so desperate, I sent letters. He had no fucking right.

I raised an eyebrow, waiting for his ask. “Is it true you fucked people in the past year?”

“That’s an odd fucking question,” some tall guy in the back stated. He stood near Cruz but with the dark, he was too shadowed. It was when he moved closer, I noticed it was Moriarty.

“Well,” Lowell implored, his face full of the demons we shared.

I grabbed the bottle from his hand, not wanting to admit anything. He didn’t get to know about my life, just as much as I didn’t get to know his.

He ground his teeth, his jaw popping with each movement. I gave back the bottle and dared to ask. “Truth or drink, Mischief?” He closed his eyes, swallowing and softening his features for a slight second.

“Go ahead,” he muttered, his eyes still closed.

“Is it true you’re a virgin,” I asked, knowing the answer. Drunk sex still equaled sex. The whole crowd hooted and hollered, but Lowell didn’t flinch.

“Nope, lost it Halloween night,” he answered, finally peering at me with the navy blue storms he had for eyes. “Unfortunate, it wasn’t worthwhile.”

My stomach dropped, thinking of that night. It was the first time I ever felt arousal, and it was for *him* and only him. He made me learn things about myself and the last ten months solidified it.

He walked off all while Cruz glared at us both. What the fuck was he doing here and why did he still have a hard-on for us?

“What was that about?” Landon leaned in and for once, I wanted to let it all out. Tell someone the nightmares I experienced all because I realized I had feelings for my best friend.

Let out the fact that my dad thought it was smarter having people force you to do things until you felt straight.

“Pissing contest,” I lied, yawning. I wanted to leave this fucking place and not deal with blood week. This party was not only a drag, it was two more nights of this hell and my liver already hated me.

CHAPTER 8

LOWELL

I DIDN'T KNOW what Patch was playing at with that virgin joke, did he want to embarrass me? It would work if I actually gave a fuck. The frat knew I was gay, half of them were too. Would be kind of stupid to mock someone when their asses were dicked on the regular.

The Truth or Drink game let us know one of our pledges was a murderer by proxy—which we already knew—money bought almost everything, after all. One of the pledges had fucked another's girlfriend, and one did drug smuggling for the Monarchs of Dupont.

"Everyone's drunk, I'll lead them to the basement," Mori explained, his face locked onto Cruz as he said it. They eyed each other, a challenge and bet mixed into one. His interruption to my intrusive thoughts was a welcome one.

"I'll make sure none are comfortable," Tane added, but I stopped him.

"I'll do it."

"Sure thing," he said with a shrug, practically swaying on his way to his room. "There's a toy upstairs begging for my dick anyway."

I shook my head at his use of calling whoever was tied to his bed a *toy*, and headed toward the basement. A hand on my chest halted my journey. "Tonight wasn't too bad," Mori commented. "Keep it in your pants. Can't have others thinking fucking *brothers* will get them anything."

He emphasized the brother part, and somehow, I knew he meant Cruz and

it only made the questions in me rise.

By the time I made it downstairs, whispers echoed. Nothing clear, but it was apparent that they all were chatting. Not surprising. When I rushed with Cruz and the others, we only had each other to get through the three darkest days of blood week.

Tonight, was the sweet part. They weren't prepared for the rest.

I wasn't either.

On the ground were cots, lined pretty close so they'd all fit. The lights were off, except the two nightstand ones that barely illuminated the faces nearest them.

It smelled of jock sweat and booze, and while it sounded disgusting—and was—it also brought comfort.

As soon as I hit the last step, causing a creak, it silenced. They all quit talking and that was somehow worse, knowing their fear existed that largely. To be a Zeta, all morals went out the window. They'd be fucked if they were this big of pussies.

“Lights out,” I ordered, my voice not one for brooking any arguments. Their movements sounded in my ears, cots squeaking, loud “*fucks*” from probably hitting one another too.

None of that mattered, my only interest was in the person who destroyed my life. I wanted to return the favor but needed to know what the fuck that Landon kid meant by his question.

I'd known Patch my entire life, he never had nightmares. Fuck, I hated how much he slept like the dead. I used to stay up all night stressing about things I couldn't help or avoid and he snored within minutes.

The fact that he now had nightmares drove me nuts.

Why?

And why the fuck did he drink when I asked him if he'd slept with other people. I hadn't, and a part of me, the sad and hopeless part, wanted to know if he avoided it too.

After his confession that night, it felt like he only had those feelings for me. *If that were true, why'd he leave your ass?* The negative Nancy on my shoulder always told me how much him leaving was my fault. Maybe the voice was right.

He fucked me and left.

What else could it mean otherwise?

“Patch Creekman,” I sounded out, my tone official and distant when it felt anything but.

He sat up, far in the right corner next to Landon and that Prince guy. His eyes were glazed and I couldn't tell if it was the amount of booze given or if he smoked a joint at some point.

“Yeah?” he answered snidely, his irritation obvious.

“Zetas need a moment,” I responded, seemingly bored. I looked at my fingernails, picking imaginary shit off them.

He rose and the others stared at him, the fear alive and present in their expressions. They needed more backbone. Being here wasn't supposed to be easy, and when it got to the blood rites, the fucking in public, and initiation sex, they weren't prepared.

The archaic rituals here went too far back to quell, and it was a living entity at this point. We were gods for a reason. We got away with murder and so much more.

They'd see.

His eyes never left mine as he found his way to me. The smell of him would never get old. Tea, bergamot, and something so masculine it made my legs weak and dick twitch.

“What?” he asked, the bitterness felt too gravelly. I hated that he had a single effect on me, let alone any after he left.

“What are you doing here?” I bit out, leading him to one of the old guest rooms. Now, they were just fuck pads for when people wanted a one-night stand outside of their bedrooms.

He peered around as if he could tell. Maybe he could. They used to reek of sex, but Miss Molly cleaned them recently. We hired her after her husband bit the bullet. She needed the work.

“What do you mean what am I doing here? This was the fucking plan.”

“Plan?” I hissed, my skin prickling with anger. “There’s no fucking plan.” He rolled his eyes at me and fuck, they did a number on me. Dark as ever and almost void of anything, they stared at me. His hair was longer, curlier, a mess perfectly shaped to his head. His lip was pierced now, his nose too, I didn’t even want to get started on his tattoos. He changed so much in the last year.

Without me.

Fuck, hatred promised to suffocate me before leaking from my pores and going after Patch next.

He stalked toward me, forcing me back step by step. The scent of him invaded my space, sinking into me like he did on Halloween. He consumed me, even now. The power he wielded and abused wasn’t okay. If he touched me, even one touch, I’d bend, fall apart and ask him why he abandoned me.

Even now, he intimidated me and it didn’t make sense. “Yeah, Mischief,” he growled, his face too fucking close. “Go to Dupont. *Together.*”

The battle of wanting to punch him and not wanting to hurt his face warred constantly, so I sidestepped him. “Yeah, fuck your plans,” I barked, leaving him and my past behind.

CHAPTER 9

PATCH

WHAT THE FUCK did that one-on-one accomplish? It was apparent he hated me, for whatever reason, then he stalked off and I went back to the guys.

I didn't sleep.

By three, they were back and blaring fucking foghorns, waking everyone up in loud yells.

"This is the real test, bitches," Tane announced, rocking a sweat suit of some sort. He held the horn and blared it when the rest of the guys weren't getting up quickly enough.

"Every year, we hold this event. This year, we're supposed to attack the Lettermans," Mori explained, a sickening smile enveloping his face. "We are stealing and fucking their bitches tonight, and for the less studiously inclined," he mentioned, staring directly at me, "you'll be jerking off on their faces."

"This is fucking gross," Landon hissed from beside me. He wasn't as loud as earlier tonight, so no one paid him any mind.

He wasn't wrong.

"If any of you are incapable of your task, walk out the fucking door," Lowell barked, coming from behind Mori, shirtless. His shorts hung low, and for the first time in ten months, my dick gave a pathetic jump at him.

Bodies made no sense.

Chemistry and the brain didn't always work in tandem.

"I'm not raping anyone," Landon spoke out, his face red and nervous.

Cruz laughed then, sidestepping Mori and Patch. "Who said anyone was raping? Your task is to fuck them. Good luck with convincing. You have three hours. We spiked the guys' kegs tonight, so there isn't much they can do to fight you."

I wanted to spit at him, punch him in his stupid face, all while fucking Lowell and proving to Cruz, once and for all, he was a loser.

"Let's get to it!" Lowell hollered, his face stony and unaffected. What I'd do to crack open his mind and find out what the hell changed.

We were close.

Time wasn't that big of a fucking wedge.

We ran to the Lettermans'—well, twenty or so of us did. A lot tucked tail and ran. Not me and Landon, though. He apparently had something to prove too.

When we got there, the door was unlocked and Mori led us inside. In the front room sat about fifteen chicks. They were chatting, laughing, and when they noticed us, they waved and winked.

Was no one loyal these days?

Unable to control it, I rolled my eyes with a disappointed sound leaking from me. Landon bumped my shoulder in warning, but several of the women looked at me with dissatisfaction.

The guys dispersed quickly and I stood, staring at everyone. They were pretty—*sure*—but I knew my limits, and vaginas and anyone other than Lowell were it.

But I knew I had to do something. Noticing three unoccupied girls, I went to them. They were average-looking, no makeup, normal bodies with a little fluff, and eyes that told me they weren't treated great. Something about that

had me sitting with them.

“Patch,” I offered, trying not to sound uncomfortable. The brunette with massive glasses on smiled, her cheeks dimpling in kind.

“Charity.” For the first time talking to a woman, I didn’t feel gross. In high school, it was apparent they wanted sex and to fuck with me. This chick seemed absolutely okay with simply talking to me.

The two others stared before offering their names too. “Amber,” the redhead with chestnut skin mentioned. She wasn’t unkind but wary, with every right. I was a dude, after all.

The last one, smaller and shier, it seemed, offered a strangled grin. “Gary.”

“Gary?” I asked, realizing that it sounded anything but feminine. Her parents must’ve hated her. She nodded, her eyes closing as if she were too embarrassed to talk.

“I don’t want to be here,” I admitted and they laughed.

“Phew,” Charity said, twisting her hair. “Me either.”

“I got paid to be here,” Gary stated, her face reddening.

“I just wanted to get laid and it took the others telling me they were drugged to discover the only way I was getting laid was if I stayed for the hazing.”

Nodding, I felt like I understood them a little bit more. Peering around the room, I noticed a few of the frat guys were already in different arrays of undress.

Some made out with girls while others were already undressing. I didn’t realize this was a planned orgy. Fuck my life. My eyes landed on Lowell as if magnetized to him and he watched me warily.

Was he jealous? Because we played this game once—he lost.

Landon was nowhere in sight and that concerned me. I might not have let him in on my life or anything, but he seemed like a decent human being.

Charity tapped me on the shoulder, grabbing my attention. “Want to

kiss?” The forward way she asked me made me suck in my breath. Kissing, much like fucking, wasn’t comfortable for me. Not unless I was high or drunk. Being neither made me shudder.

Looking back to see Lowell still watching, I decided I had to do something. There were rules tonight and the frat fucks were watching.

Leaning forward, I gripped her jaw. It was too soft, too malleable, not rebellious. It wasn’t like Lowell’s. Not wound tight and aggressive, wanting to fight back constantly.

As soon as I leaned forward, I smelled the soft scent of something sweet mixed with vodka, nearing her lips.

Of their own accord, my eyes shut, not wanting to witness this horrific experience. Before our mouths met, I was jerked back.

“What the hell?” Charity yelled out, concern etched on her face. I was dragged and it didn’t take a genius to know it was Lowell and not some random.

“Can’t handle me kissing someone else, Mischief?”

“Don’t fucking call me that,” he hissed, his grip on my arm abrasive and disarming. He wanted me to hurt and his fingers digging in me only solidified that theory.

CHAPTER 10

LOWELL

HE ALMOST FUCKING KISSED HER. My eyes hazed over as he leaned in, about to meet her lips. He didn't get to fucking kiss someone in front of me.

Rage met the mischief inside me, bowling over, a chaotic blend of wanting to stab him and fuck him as revenge.

I hated him.

I also knew hate came from the broken boy inside me that was left behind. The pain he brought, how he destroyed me without talking to me hurt so badly. For months, I allowed it to fester, eat at me, and strip me of the kindness I always offered others.

When I brought him to a random room in the back, I made sure it was abandoned before forcing Patch inside.

“What the fuck are you doing, Mischief? Are you trying to screw my chances?”

I shook my head, rage boiling over. I stalked him, a mirror to Halloween in the sense that he made me as mad as he did that night.

Reaching for his throat, I grabbed it and he let me. Last time, it was him. The anger was his best friend, and he let me take it out on him now.

“I hate you,” I hissed, my face far too close considering we were enemies. You could hate someone and still want them, right?

My dick throbbed in a way it hadn't since he left me, and it didn't surprise me. He brought me to my knees time and time again, and this time, I wanted him to be in that position.

"You don't hate me," he taunted, licking his bottom lip before meeting me with his endless black eyes.

I rested my head against his, wanting to be stronger. "You have to finish the task," I let out.

He fell to his knees, forcing me to release his throat. His fingers went to my shorts, pulling the drawstrings and reaching for the band.

"No," I hissed, not truly meaning it.

"Have to finish the task, Mischief," he explained, his voice humorless. "Better it be you than a fucking chick."

I sucked in a breath as his fingers skimmed the skin of my pelvis. He swallowed loudly, bringing my attention to his face.

God, he was fucking beautiful. Even as he knelt like the peasant he was.

"Suck my cock then, Patch. Earn your fucking spot."

He eyed me, a glint of determination formed there. Between his eyebrows, a wrinkle sprouted, not in hesitation but anger.

And I needed that. Anger was more potent than sadness, made more sense.

He didn't hesitate before licking my throbbing tip. His tongue flattened against the slit and I groaned as he swirled it around.

It wasn't practiced like I thought it'd be. Which meant this wasn't a reoccurring experience for him.

"Don't be a cocktease, Pledge. Take it."

His eyes seemed heady with lust, something I didn't think he'd experience. Without another jab, he took me in his mouth and my head fell back of its own accord.

The brand of his hands on my thighs unraveled the foundation of me. I'd been in an uncontrollable rage for so long, bliss made me loose.

He bobbed and my balls ached at the realization he was sucking my cock. Patch. The fuck who hurt me.

I gripped his head then, taking my hatred out on his throat. Giving a harsh thrust, his gags filled the air. Not allowing him any time to breathe, I fucked and fucked, only pulling back when the color of his face changed.

Pulling out enough to allow oxygen in, he gasped. Drool leaked out the sides of his mouth and his eyes bulged, but that fucker's determination didn't falter and he sucked me down as soon as he caught his breath.

This time, he bit me, grazing his teeth against the sensitive flesh of my dick. "Fuck," I groaned out. "That's good."

He gripped my ass, pulling his lips and nose to my pelvis, brushing it against him like he inhaled and enjoyed the connection.

His fingers crept to my crease, spreading me. The tingle, warning me of my impending orgasm, filled me as he rubbed against my hole.

"Taking my cock like a champ, Pledge. Wonder if they give awards for the biggest cock suckers, or maybe it's just for whores. Either way, you win."

He growled and bit down. I hissed, gripping his head before skull fucking him more. "Maybe you'll get an award for being used like a cum dumpster. Your mouth is like my own personal trash can. Useless unless for disposing my cum."

He kept pace with my thrusts and used his teeth with each suck. I hated how much the pain felt good.

"I'm going to come and you're going to swallow it. Be my little bitch, Pledge. Take what I give," I groaned, feeling my balls tighten and release.

My seed emptied, and he sucked until every throb finished leaking it. "Good, little Pledge," I cooed condescendingly.

Pulling out my cock, I wiped his drool all over his flushed cheeks, making sure he was covered with his own shame.

"Guess I can cover for you," I mentioned, tucking my cock into my shorts. He stood, not saying anything.

It wasn't until I turned away that I felt his body behind me. Before I could stop him, he pushed my body against the door, holding me there.

“Degrade me all you want, Mischief. I'll fall to my knees for you, drink your cum, and even listen as you groan out your pleasure, but you bet your ass when I want to sink inside you again, I will.”

I growled as his hand sank in my shorts, prodding at my ass. “See, it's even clenching for its owner. You might own me, Lowell Montlake, but I had you first and I'll be coming back for more.”

“Fuck you,” I hissed, feeling my dick give a pathetic twitch. It knew. Even if I disagreed. Patch entered me dry, his finger pressing in purposefully. He pressed down on my prostate, thrusting in and out of me.

“Oh, I will fuck you. If I didn't have to deal with this bullshit, I'd eat your ass and then fuck it after. But you seem to have a hard-on for making my life difficult.”

He kept pressing into me and my cock came back to life, pulsing in a way it hadn't in so long. “Get off me,” I tried again, the threat empty and weak, filled with desire—need for something I couldn't have.

“Soon, Mischief. So fucking soon.”

He took his finger out before moving me off the door. Not giving me another word, he left and I fell to my ass, wondering what the fuck just happened.

How did he keep winning?

CHAPTER 11

PATCH

MY DICK THROBBED.

The pulsing reminded me of the migraine splitting my head in two. It intensified as I took him inside my mouth. Even walking back to the orgy happening in the front room, it felt like my eyes were going to pop out.

Cruz and Mori were absent, but Tane held a bottle of beer, watching the naked bodies rut. Moans filled the air, and I once again searched for Landon, not seeing him.

Turning around, I left the unclothed people and went room to room. Stopping at the third, I spotted Prince. He stood over a sleeping guy, jerking his dick over his mouth.

“Dude, what the fuck?”

Prince peered back at me with a glazed expression. The guy beneath him was Valor Buchanan, one of the most influential members of the Lettermans.

“You wouldn’t understand,” he grunted, pumping faster. “I owe him.”

“This is so fucking wrong,” I growled.

He nodded haphazardly. “He likes it,” he let out, his eyes closing. “We made an agreement.” His hand went faster and he let out the loudest grunt. It felt fucking weird being a part of this moment. “He has somnophilia.”

“Consensually?”

“Yes,” he rasped. “We’ve been fucking for a while now. When I sleep, he

does the same to me, but usually to my ass.”

“This is too much information,” I muttered, rubbing a hand through my crispy hair. Walking away, I went to look for Landon again, needing to make sure he was okay.

What I didn’t expect was to find him on his knees, facing the door, being fucked by Mori. “Good fucking God, Mori. What the hell?” He rutted into my roommate and off to the side, a glaring Cruz watched. “What is it with all of you? How can you fuck random people?”

The thought of random people touching me, let alone fucking me or vice versa, made my skin crawl. I didn’t judge others for their affinity to do the same, but I couldn’t understand it no matter how hard I tried.

That didn’t work for me.

Mori’s glazed eyes met mine. I’d known him our entire teenage lives and not once did I think he was into guys. “Teaching Cruz a lesson, Patchy boy.”

“What about Landon?” My eyes narrowed in on my roommate who had his face away from mine, shame apparent there.

“Oh, he opted for my cock,” Mori mused.

I peered at Cruz, his fists were wrapped around a bottle as he glared daggers at his stepbrother. A lot clicked into place at this. One, Cruz’s hatred for what Lowell and I had made sense. Two, he had the hots for his stepbrother. Three, Landon would pay the price for whatever fucking battle these two had been doing with each other.

Mori’s gaze went back to Cruz and he fucked into Landon. “It’s unfortunate you can’t follow rules, little brother. This could’ve been you.”

I put my hands up, not wanting any part of this mess.

“Landon, I’ll see you when you’re... done,” I finally got out, turning away and returning to the orgy room. Somehow, that was a lot less fucking creepy than the two rooms I was just in.

I didn’t know what I got myself into coming back here, but one thing was for certain, I’d be winning Lowell back and telling him what happened.

Living another ten months without him seemed unbearable.

CHAPTER 12

LOWELL

LAST NIGHT WAS A NIGHTMARE.

I wasn't supposed to let Patch get into my head, and that was exactly what happened. Seeing him with those three chicks brought me flashbacks to Allison's Halloween party and I knew having him on his knees would make him mine once more.

The problem: he was never mine to begin with.

"Last night was fun," Tane mused aloud, guzzling an electrolyte drink he shook up five minutes ago. "That orgy gave me enough shit for a long spank bank tour. Our pledges did well."

I nodded, not caring. After Patch sucked me off, he disappeared and I stewed alone outside, needing to fucking breathe.

Tonight, we'd be taking the last big step.

Every year, the founders had us take someone out. Yeah, *murder*. It wasn't something we fucking broadcasted, but this summer when I pledged, I took my first life.

Well, along with the rest of them.

Marsden Crenshaw—the leading Crow of Dupont's Legacies—picked a person he wanted gone every semester.

It was business.

He owned half this town, he even owned towns outside of Cedar Heights.

Some even said he was involved with the Emeralds of Arcadia Crest.

We were fucked up, but they were another brand. My father prepared me for this moment. Mischief, mayhem, and the power I wielded with my name. Hopefully Patch's dad warned him too.

"Got the name," Mori stated, handing me a folder. Painted purple, his jaw seemed swollen and beat to shit. There was even a cut.

I didn't notice where he went last night but with how Cruz threw things, raging, it had to have fucked with him.

"Nice face," I mocked, only half joking. He narrowed his eyes and wiped his bottom lip purposefully.

"Not as nice as Patch's," he jabbed, letting me know not to touch the subject. Fair enough.

Opening the yellow folder, my shoulders hunched at the name. Adam Creekman. *Patch's dad.*

Shit.

"I can't do this tonight," I explained without explaining anything. Mori looked at the name and balked, his eyes landing on Cruz's. He leaned against the door, his lip cut and swollen. Now, their discolored faces made sense.

"Who is it?"

Mori blinked a few times, glancing at me, then back at Cruz. "It's Adam."

"Patch's dad?" Cruz balked, his face losing all its color.

"What about my dad?" Patch asked, coming up the stairs. It was a shock he was even awake. By the time we got back it was seven, and now it barely reached ten in the morning.

"Nothing," Mori remarked, closing the folder on my lap. Patch eyed it, then me, and I didn't offer him a single expression that would explain anything. Telling him would get us both in trouble and whether we wanted Adam dead or not, his life ended tonight.

"Tonight's going to be fun," Tane muttered, taking a big gulp of his drink.

By the time everyone woke up and got showered, it was after five in the afternoon. I sat down with Mori, Cruz, and Tane, talking about what we had to do and while the three of us personally knew Adam, we couldn't avoid what Marsden demanded.

We had rules.

Blood had to be shed or we'd be replaced. That wasn't an omen, it was a fucking promise.

"So, we're doing this?" Cruz asked, his face solemn. He hated our parents, his included, but not like this. Not enough to kill them. This felt wrong.

Patch's dad had to have fucked up royally to have a hit out on him. Especially by his alma mater.

"No choice," Mori bit out, his face glum. He chugged a tumbler full of bourbon, his face hollowed out, much like mine.

"Putting Patch in this situation is fucked up," Tane sounded out, smoking a blunt. He didn't know Patch or Adam, but he understood the repercussions of taking a life. Taking a deep drag, he blew it out and shook his head. "If he follows through, he deserves a fucking medal."

I nodded, thinking of Adam. He was never really kind to me or Patch. He loved Eden, Patch's little sister, and River, but he treated Patch like he meant nothing. So, there was no love lost between them, but killing your own blood changed you.

"Do you think they realize what we all have to do to be Zetas?"

"No," Cruz mocked. "They'd wimp out before the first day."

"I almost did," Mori mentioned. Drinking more bourbon. He swirled the contents, staring at the glass with a faraway expression. "Killing that chick my freshman year," he said with a cringe, adjusting in his seat. "It felt wrong."

"It is," I answered, thinking of the student we took out this last summer.

He had information on Marsden and was creating a case. We had to kill him.

“It doesn’t feel like that anymore,” Mori let out. “I’ve taken so many at this point, I feel numb.”

“That’s so fucked up,” Cruz muttered, rubbing a hand through his hair. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I’m like Mori, I’m used to it. What’s a little bloodshed?” Tane tacked on.

I shuddered but didn’t comment. Maybe taking lives would become a norm for me too. Having power, money, and all the access to the world as we all did had its perks, but at the cost of others? Seemed fucking selfish.

“Let’s get the others. We’ve got a job to do.”

CHAPTER 13

PATCH

“DO YOU HAVE IT HANDLED?” The sound of an uptight man hit my ears as I walked toward the den. The guys had been in here for hours, deliberating or whatever the fuck it is they did. They didn’t say anything to us, but left us alone.

“Yeah, it’s handled,” Lowell responded, his voice lacking any sense of empathy. It reminded me of a robotic salesman who pitched the same thing repeatedly, trying to sell to just one person.

I knocked on the door, immediately hearing the silence that followed. “Come in.” Lowell stood with Mori, while Tane and Cruz sat on sofas nearby.

It looked suspicious, but who was I to say anything?

“What do you want?” Lowell barked, and behind the venom was the broken kid I left behind. After last night—or rather, this morning—that much was apparent beneath the false bravado he put out.

“They’re getting antsy,” I lied. It wasn’t *them*, it was me. I knew this part of initiation. River and Dad told me about it when I told them Lowell and I would be rushing.

We had to take a life to gain the livelihood of the brotherhood.

While the ritual made me uncomfortable, I wasn’t unused to it. Dad killed loads of people. River too. They both told me stories and growing up with

them must've numbed me to the darkness, because the idea didn't make me bat a fucking eye.

"Well, they can fucking chill. We're getting everything finalized before heading out," Cruz barked, smoking a joint. I missed that shit; it'd been ages since I lit up.

I wanted answers.

Who were we killing and why?

Did it matter in the end, or would I just follow through anyway?

I went back downstairs, only stopping to tell Landon we were waiting for them to finalize shit. I didn't want to deal with their pissing match upstairs, but it was obvious something more than deliberating had happened.

Lowell

We didn't say anything as we dragged the guys out of the basement and brought them across town. Marsden always planned ahead. Adam probably thought he'd be working or doing some shit for the Legacies.

Only outsiders were unaware of the Legacies. They owned the country, and to the world, they were a nightmare parents told their kids to make them behave.

The underground of all shady shit was managed by them. Hell or high water, they made things happen behind closed doors.

Someone cheated them out of money? Gone.

Someone lied to them? Handled.

Someone told secrets of the group? Disappeared.

We knew what we were getting into by rushing at Zetas. It was the legacy of every family and the opportunity for others to win power and fame for their families.

“Where are we going?” Landon whispered loudly to Patch. I couldn’t help but glance back at them, seeing them too fucking huddled. What was with them? Was Landon even a worry?

No. Patch would always be mine.

“No clue, but I’m sure they won’t be telling us.” Patch noticed me then, his eyes glimmering with an emotion I didn’t recognize.

We pulled up to the Howling Halls, a banquet center. We were not prepared for this whatsoever.

“What the hell is this?” Mori barked, the vein on his forehead bulging with the fury he must have simmering inside him.

Shaking my head, I rubbed a palm down my face. *He knows*. Directing a raised eyebrow to Cruz, he nodded. Like me, he must’ve come to the same conclusion.

“He knows,” Tane spat, his voice venomous.

Loud music surrounded us, an event was happening. I didn’t waste any time, texting the number I had for Marsden. As the president of the Zetas, I had no choice.

Why is there a banquet happening tonight where our target is?

Immediately, my phone rang. Everyone’s eyes flew to me, but only one pair stuck to my own—Patch. He narrowed them into slits, like he knew I was hiding something important.

He’d be fucking right.

“Hello,” I answered, schooling the anger. When the guys seemed to pause all talking, I left the truck, closing the door, and waited outside while they stayed.

“There’s been a change of plans.”

“This wasn’t the agreement,” I argued immediately. We always had an easy job. Kill while they weren’t expecting it. We didn’t have rules on the how, but it tended to be messy.

“Yeah, well the fucker is smarter than I gave him credit for.”

“What are we supposed to do?” I grumbled, not wanting to continue this job of assassination longer than necessary.

“You need to go home, get in your best tuxedos and masquerade masks, then come back.”

“You’re fucking joking,” I hissed, gripping my phone so hard I was surprised it didn’t crack. My eyes started to throb, the migraine I was bound to have hitting me fast.

“He needs to die. Tonight. Tomorrow, it’ll be too late. I know it’s unorthodox,” he explained and I interrupted with a grunt.

“It’s suicide, it’s fucking public.”

“You aren’t understanding your place, Montlake. You are my bitch. Get the job done and stop complaining. I’ll cover for whatever mess is made, but try not to make a fucking show of it.”

“There’s still twelve people. Twelve witnesses. Who knows which of them are trustworthy?”

“Cut your losses, you don’t need twelve.”

“Fuck,” I grumbled, thinking of every new member. I had files on them all, dirty secrets, everything they hid. Everyone but Patch and where he disappeared to for ten fucking months.

“I’ll handle it,” I rasped, thinking of the repercussions if I didn’t. I killed for Marsden, he only had to release that information for me to be fully fucked.

“Good. Text me when it’s done. I’ll send a crew, be discreet.”

“Yeah,” I answered right as he hung up. My skin crawled with the realization that tonight was going to be a fucking bloodbath. We truly needed to separate Adam from the others.

Whatever was happening, I didn’t like it.

CHAPTER 14

PATCH

DAD TOLD me stories of initiation. Hell, River made sure to warn me that part of initiation was killing and part was sex.

I'd have to fuck someone and I'd have to kill someone too.

This place, it had to be where we'd be doing the latter, what I didn't understand was why there was an event happening.

"Change of plans," Lowell grouched as soon as he reentered the car. Outside, he was muffled, but his anger was heard slightly.

"And?" Cruz asked, annoyance prevalent.

"Wants us to join the fucking event."

"How the hell are we supposed to do that?" Tane hissed, bumping my shoulder as he readjusted. I twiddled my thumbs, needing something to mentally block out the anxiety eating me alive.

Was I in over my head?

I was an angry fucker, but a murderer?

"We need tuxes and masquerade masks," Lowell explained, his voice hoarse like he needed a fucking shot or ten.

"Masks, this short of notice?"

Mori spoke up then, his face masked entirely. "We're literally two months from Halloween, I'm sure the Spirit store will be open and have them."

“Let’s get going,” Lowell grumbled at Mori to drive. His face exhibited so much by showing nearly nothing. His eyes were dark by the lack of sunlight but the way his jaw ticked told me he hid something beneath his grouchy-ass exterior.

After stopping at two Spirit stores, we finally found enough masks for ten of us. There were twelve pledges left. Only four were legacies like me. Which meant there were two either automatically being dropped or they’d be proving their worth outside this event.

Lowell handed me a black mask with glitter on it. I wanted to laugh and shove it at him, but something in his disdainful expression kept my jab at bay.

I miss how it used to be, when we’d joke, watch movies, and pull pranks on the lacrosse team back at home. Now, he was a fucking shell.

It didn’t help that my dad kidnapped me and made my life absolute hell. Being the middle child sucked, not as much as being gay under the roof of a tyrant, but he treated me terrible before he found out I fucked Lowell.

Which I still didn’t know who told him.

Lowell personally drove me home while the others were separated and driven wherever necessary. The drive was silent, but I noticed his gaze go to mine back and forth quickly, as if he was scared to admit he couldn’t avoid it.

“Get your best tux, Pledge. Tonight is important.”

“Who are we killing?” I asked breathlessly, knowing he’d either tell me everything or tell me to fuck off. His eyes closed and he held the steering wheel a bit tighter.

“You were never one for waiting,” he grumbled, his voice raspy with emotion. “Couldn’t fucking wait to rail me. Couldn’t wait to fucking leave. Couldn’t wait—” he stopped, right before I interrupted him to tell him I didn’t choose to fucking leave.

He waved his hand. “Go fucking change. You have ten minutes.”

By the time I grabbed the suit my dad forced me to wear at meetings for

Montlake Pharmaceuticals, uneasiness filled me.

Outside, Lowell sat and when I got into the car, I could tell he shut down while I was away. His face voided itself of emotion, and the way he leaned into his door like there was a wall between us told me how afraid he was of the ease of which we went back to each other.

Unable to stop myself, I reached over, pushing a stray strand of his long hair away from his face. As if I shocked him, he jumped, glowering at me in return.

“Don’t fucking touch me, Patch.”

Letting out a loud sigh, I buckled my seatbelt and sat back, begging for something to force us together. He needed to let go or fucking talk to me. There was a part of him that must’ve thought I chose to leave.

Was that why he ignored me?

Kept me from his life...

“I didn’t choose to leave,” I finally muttered as we pulled back up to the Zeta house. His gaze met mine, the hazy look on his showed his confusion. He unlatched his seatbelt and turned toward me.

“Yeah, you did. You fucked me and ran.”

“No, I fucking didn’t,” I barked, unbuckling my own to face him. We were so fucking close, our faces near touching. “For the first time in my life, I felt something.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” His eyes went to my lips and then back to mine. “I woke up from the best night of my life naked, in a bed alone.”

I shook my head, thinking of how peaceful he looked after we hooked up, the blissful way he snored while I stared.

My hands rubbed across his back, touching the person I always felt connected to, then I passed out. Just to wake up in the middle of nowhere.

“We hooked up and I woke up in a random building,” I started, my skin prickling with disgust as I shook off the nausea. “It took only thirty minutes for them to whip my back, call me unspeakable names, and then I learned.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Lowell questioned, his eyes roaming over my face.

“My dad found out about us,” I let out, my throat clogging with emotions. The part of me that broke inside that camp decided to come out at the very last second. I felt them trying to claw their way out of my eyes, the tears I held back as they touched my body without my permission.

Lowell’s hand rose up and cupped my jaw. The feeling of choking came to mind as I tried swallowing back the pain. “They sexually abused me until I could convince them I wasn’t gay,” I admitted, feeling my skin crawl with every morbid thing they did. The names they called me, the ways they touched me, and the way they gaslighted me and wanted me to say that dicks weren’t what I wanted.

It was easy at first. My dick didn’t magically get hard. Being asexual was confusing, not knowing what I wanted, let alone what turned me on chemically. It happened randomly, a mental and chemical reaction to my body. It was always fucking Lowell.

By the end, not even the thought of him helped me pretend.

“What the fuck,” Lowell rasped, pressing his forehead to mine. “No words. I have no fucking words.” His voice showed more emotion than mine, his ability to compartmentalize in a way I’d never been able to. “When you didn’t text or call...”

“I did.”

He pulled back, his eyes narrowing. “No, you fucking didn’t. It’s why I’ve spent all these months hating you.”

Running a hand through my hair, I tugged, my fingers getting trapped along with my hatred for the time lost. “No, Mischief. I texted, I called, I even sent fucking letters.”

The tears welled up, anger-filled ones, fueled by every emotion I guarded while away. His eyes met mine and the same angst rested there, begging to be set free.

He reached over the center console and brought his mouth to mine, taking the air from my lungs. Our mouths melded. In confusion, anger, and unrest as he kissed me breathless.

Our tongues fought to conquer, but there wasn't a battle either of us would win. We were equals, even if one of us tended to be more stubborn.

He tasted of scotch and hesitation. Confusion and Lowell. We tasted like mischief and rage, meeting in a chaotic tornado of emotions.

When he moaned, I felt that familiar twitch hit me, something only the real Lowell ever did. I might have a label for my sexuality, something to give me comfort when I felt so fucking messed up, but I definitely didn't understand myself any more than I had previously.

My body and heart warred while my dick only showed up for the parts it liked. My brain had its own say too, and I was so goddamn tired of fighting it for answers and comfort.

Lowell made sense.

He always had.

And that's something I couldn't quite label.

We broke apart, just to see the others surrounding the car, watching like fucking scavengers.

"You're not going to like tonight," Lowell admitted, his face flushed, his puffy lips swollen. I didn't know who we were killing but if it really bothered him enough to tell me it would affect me, it must be someone I knew.

"Who is it?" I asked, needing to prepare myself.

"Adam Creekman," he hollowly said. "Your dad."

Two things hit me at once. Nausea and turmoil.

It wasn't a shock I hated the fucker for what he did to me and did over the years of our lives, but he was also my kin. My blood.

"Shit," I exhaled, feeling all knotted up inside. He pressed his forehead against mine momentarily until he opened his door.

"No matter what, Patch. He's dead after tonight."

With a nod, I left the car, just to be met with too many fucking questions and onlookers. Mostly, Landon stared at me as if I lied throughout our entire friendship. With it being so new, how could he blame me? And after what I caught him doing? Not a fucking shock.

Next to Prince, Valor watched me with curiosity and I didn't even want to begin touching that with a ten-foot pole. They were all a little too wild for my simplistic self.

“So, you two fucking?” Mori joked, his ungodly smirk making my stomach churn. He'd always been the better one between him and Cruz, but he still rubbed me the wrong way at times. No one ever truly knew the cards he held, but his brutality slithered just beneath the surface.

CHAPTER 15

LOWELL

“WHAT WAS THAT?” Cruz asked when I went inside to change. He knew the history of me and Patch, or at least what he was privy to.

Hell, we hooked up once upon a time, which brought Patch into my bed in the first place.

“Nothing,” I barked, not wanting to give him anything.

“Looked like *something*,” he goaded, following me upstairs. I hurried to my room, needing to erase the horrors Patch told me.

They touched him.

They kidnapped him.

They hurt him.

Wrath built inside me, the part of me that never thought I’d kill willingly or get used to it was stoked, rubbed into ire, and now it planned on murdering every fuck that touched Patch without his consent. Every person involved with his kidnapping and torture, they’d die.

By my fucking hand.

“Dude, what has you so worked up?”

“Leave, you stupid fuck,” I barked, feeling unhinged. The more I thought of a helpless Patch being chained up or tied down, touched without wanting it, and hating every fucking second made me sick to my stomach. Every part of me zapped in a frenetic way that unwound the very essence of my soul.

I wanted to punch walls, slit throats, and bathe in the fucking aftermath. Nothing made sense but I needed to make them pay.

And fucking Adam, his death tonight wouldn't be easy. He'd pay, and if Patch didn't pull the trigger himself, I'd slice Adam up myself.

Fuck him.

"We need to cut two guys tonight," I offered, seeing Cruz looming at my door. He seemed uneasy and maybe he should be.

"Why?"

"Marsden wants two gone."

"What about that Landon prick?" I stopped rifling through my closet to stare at him.

"Why? He's been dedicated." Something dark passed over his eyes and I knew then it had something to do with Moriarty. The only time he had that look was when Mori was involved.

"Fucking nothing," he deflected, but I knew, something happened.

"Did they fuck?"

"Did they fuck," he mocked my voice with an eye roll. "Yes, I want him gone."

"Too fucking bad. Pick someone else."

"Fuck off," he hissed before slamming my door. He really needed to get his shit together. He was like a dog with rabies, slowly losing his fucking marbles.

I hurried and dressed, rushing out in the tux I wore for the ceremony in summer. It fit a little snugger. I'd been lifting more for lacrosse season, knowing I'd be run ragged by the coach.

"Ready?" Mori asked, and I scanned the guys, noticing a variation in colors and fits, but we looked good. Enough to confuse people at the party.

"Yeah, let's get this handled."

By the time we were back at the event, it was a little after eight at night. People would either be in the banquet hall eating, or dancing on the ballroom

floor, wanting to convince someone to escape into.

I groaned when the guys complained, taking their sweet-ass time to leave the vehicles. We walked up together, rows of men well-dressed but unwelcome. Marsden said he'd handle everything and hopefully he did.

When we got to the front, the man nodded us in, not even batting an eyelash. We split up, and made our alibi while also trying to stroke gossip. The guys knew what they had to do.

Some would be schmoozing. Some would be scouting. Patch and I would be distracting, forcing Adam's hand.

The idea came to me when I was getting dressed, to dance with Patch in the ballroom, garnering attention, and to make sure they knew it was Patch too.

His dad might have been ignorant, but he'd be dead by the end of tonight.

"Really think we should do this?" Patch whispered, leaning into my ear. After our kiss, my skin had been on fire. It missed his nearness but it also really fucking missed his touch.

"No choice," I let out, knowing the only other option was death.

CHAPTER 16

PATCH

THE BALLROOM EXPANDED to at least half of a lacrosse field, if not more. The chandeliers were massive, hanging lower than necessary. Everyone dressed to impress, their faces covered in an array of styles.

No one ever explained how weird masquerades were. The lack of honesty, hiding what parts of yourself you could beneath a mask.

I hated staring at others and having to question if it was them or not.

“Nervous?” Lowell asked me, his devilish eyes watching mine. Earlier, when we kissed, something in me shifted. It felt right. His mask was silver, it covered his eyes all the way to his nose. Mine was the same but in black with a silver design etched on.

“Are you?” I deflected, thinking of my father’s reaction to our show. It bothered me how much it didn’t bother me that we were supposed to kill him.

“Excited,” he mused. “I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.”

He grabbed my hand, yanking me to the center where no one danced. For this being a ball, no one seemed to have gotten the memo. Onlookers sipped their flutes of champagne, watching us.

We were the show.

My eyes shut of their own accord as I absorbed the way Lowell’s hand grasped mine with confidence. He held me like that was where we were always meant to be.

Maybe we were and it took my mind and body meeting in harmony to fully realize it.

Once we got to the center, Lowell nodded to Mori, and then the music changed. An old waltz type song came on over the loudspeakers, and while I didn't know this particular tune, both Lowell and I were forced to learn all classic ballroom dances when we were kids.

He led, grabbing me as if I were in the following role. It didn't bother me, the way he enveloped my body, enrapturing me.

We went each step, our eyes connected. Somehow, this was more intimate than our first drunken night together. This was a sober choice. We were equals. There was no hatred involved, no anger, no resentment. Just him and me.

His feet moved and mine followed, after several minutes, it became fluid, natural. We switched, him following me as I guided each step. We were breaths apart, our skin barely touching and not touching when twirling.

The delight sparkling in his eyes brought a happiness to me I hadn't felt in years. It was easy, simple, the way we always were when sex wasn't involved.

Companionship, even before we messed around, it was something I always sought, and only ever with Lowell.

It made sense now, why it hurt so much when he told me he hooked up with Cruz in high school. The fact that he chose our enemy over our friendship—it was jealousy because in my mind, Lowell was already mine.

“You're thinking loudly,” he mused, leaning into my ear. Chills spread across my skin at the rasp of his voice.

“Just wondering why it took my brain so long to realize you were mine when my heart decided long before.”

“Hmm,” he hummed, the heat of his breath tickled my throat. “Maybe it's you that's mine.” He nipped at my ear and the familiar heat that was mostly foreign to me sparked. His tongue flicked over the pulse point on my throat.

“Definitely mine,” he rumbled, and my dick offered its conversant throb.

“I’m asexual,” I sounded out, tasting the words on my tongue. They didn’t seem wrong, just new. Something I’d only admitted aloud and to others at the same camp as me.

He nipped at my jaw before meeting my eyes. The blue hues seemed brighter, life finally coming back to them.

“Can you explain it to me?”

A beat passed, a moment where I didn’t breathe at all. He rendered me useless with his single question.

“I don’t feel sexual attraction normally.”

“Like you don’t find me attractive?”

“There’s a difference between how you look and the reactions bodies have as a result. One is chemical, the body’s natural reaction, the other is something else entirely.”

“Explain it to me like I’m stupid,” he muttered, leaning his forehead against mine. This moment between us, in the middle of tons of people, felt right.

“I don’t find people attractive or have sexual desire,” I explained, touching his shoulders with purpose. “With you, I feel arousal, but that’s a separate part of the brain. It didn’t make sense on Halloween. I was so angry and possessive. I wanted to experience what Cruz got to and it blinded me. In my head, you were already mine and it took losing everything to realize it.”

I shook my head and he gripped my jaw with his hand, nodding for me to continue. It bothered me that my only sexual experience was with him and stolen by my father.

“Asexuality is a spectrum. Some people only want companionship and love. Others, like me, can get aroused and enjoy sex. There’s nothing definitive other than it’s how we identify. Whether you have sex or not, it’s also a choice.”

He nodded, understanding on his face. “I only want you to do what you’re

comfortable with,” he responded, then our gazes locked. “If you want to... with me, I’m okay with that. If you don’t, that’s okay too.”

My chest warmed with emotion, and I leaned forward, stealing a kiss. He growled low, an emanating sound that brought both comfort and slight stimulation to my dick. Yeah, something about Lowell did it for me.

Pulling away, his eyes seemed darker, like he wanted to take advantage of me in the middle of a ballroom with at least a hundred onlookers.

His fingers brushed over my lips before trailing to my mask. With the same hand, he slowly removed it.

“Ready?”

I nodded, reaching for his mask too.

Our lips met again, but this time, his tongue licked against the seam of my mouth. We kissed, fuck, the way our tongues tangled and glided as if they had been doing it for years.

He gripped my throat, demanding more, and I couldn’t resist the groan that released from me. Nipping at his hot mouth, I felt my dick fully harden, throbbing and promising to ask for something later.

One second, we’re tongue fucking like our lives depended on it, the next, we’re forced apart by a familiar face.

“Dad,” I uttered, my rage simmering back to life.

CHAPTER 17

LOWELL

HE STARED at Patch with a vehemence I only witnessed on my own father. Disgust settled in his gaze as he held Patch's arm with far too much aggression.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he asked, spittle leaving his mouth. Adam Creekman was known for his ability to save face, make others think the best of him and right now, he didn't offer the cordiality he showed the world.

“Let him go,” I hissed, removing Adam's hand from my bicep. Patch didn't cower, but there was an undercurrent of the boy his father beat out of him.

“You need to get your disgusting hands off of me,” Adam scorned, his eyes near slits with the glower he shoved down my throat.

He held Patch tighter and began retreating.

I let them leave.

Searching for Mori, I noticed his delighted smirk. He gave me the signal to follow and I did. Behind them by a lot, I made sure Adam took Patch somewhere private.

There was quiet reprimanding and a silent Patch but I kept my distance enough to not hear it all or be seen.

This moment—while the others were supposed to pull the trigger, so to

speak—was Patch’s. After he told me what his father put him through, he had all the rights to off his old man.

Marsden came to mind and I texted him.

Why Adam?

His call was immediate. He didn’t text me back, ever. Phone calls were more discreet for him.

“Is it done?”

“Nearly.”

“Adam Creekman is a piece of shit.”

“So is ninety percent of Cedar Heights,” I argued, thinking of all the people I’d witnessed firsthand being shitty. Adam seemed like small fish.

“Well, when you force your own child into a conversion camp, you exceed normal fucked up.”

“You know about Patch’s experience?” I asked, swallowing the lump in my throat. Did everyone but me know?

“I know everything about my son,” he answered, the low hum of pride evident in his tone.

“Son?”

My heart hammered, thinking I had to have heard him incorrectly, there was no—

“Patch is biologically mine,” he angrily muttered. “Adam knew about the affair I had with Fiona. He only kept Patch a secret and claimed him as his own in fear of embarrassment. For years, I kept an eye on Patch, and for some goddamn reason, Adam constantly hurt him. By the time I stepped in, he’d hidden him somewhere, to beat the gay out.”

Anger fueled my footsteps, thinking of how horrible Adam had always been, but hearing about the conversion camp confirmed from someone else just made me realize how fucked up Adam really was.

He sent his kid away to be *fixed*.

“I’ve got to go,” I told him, feeling numb to the world.

“Finish the job,” he demanded.

And for once, I had no doubt what Adam’s end would be.

Rushing toward the two that disappeared, I didn’t see them. I slowly checked room by room until I heard the louder voices of Adam reprimanding Patch.

Opening the door, I made sure to have my knife handy and pulled it from my waistband. Inside, Patch sat in a chair while Adam loomed over him, his eyes bulging.

Patch’s face seemed numb, a blank canvas ready to paint with art. I stalked toward them, Adam noticing me as I came closer.

“Get the fuck out!” His holler resonated in my bones, a reminder that not all men were monsters, but monsters were made when gods made them into monsters.

“I’ll stay,” I sounded out, tasting the rebellion on my tongue. Patch turned to me, a smirk the only emotion offered before he turned back to his tyrant without an ounce.

My hand stayed behind my back for a moment, before I realized it would give away that I had a weapon in the first place.

Adam didn’t need to know.

Patch stood, his posture stiff but sure, something I admired. He leaned onto his father’s desk, his eyes meeting the man who hurt him more than a father should ever be allowed.

“How did you know I hooked up with Lowell?” Patch bravely asked, his eyes narrowing as Adam leaned backward. The taken aback expression making me wonder how fucking badly I wanted to stab the life out of him.

Adam shook his head, his eyes landing on me. “Cruz Dilaurentis.”

Patch’s confused expression matched my own. “Why?”

“He recorded the whole thing,” Adam went on, his back straightening, as if he had won one over on us. “Gave the info to River, let him know my own son was a disgusting guy fucker.”

A growl left me, feral, like a beast readying to attack. I couldn't lock it down if I wanted to, it wanted blood, and Adam was its target.

Patch walked to me, putting his palm on the back of my neck. Immediately, it had a calming effect on me, letting my shoulders unhunch a little.

"How did you keep the contact between us nonexistent?" I barely hissed out, needing to know how he singlehandedly ruined every good part of me.

Smiling, Adam folded his arms across his chest. Smugness was hideous, but on a demented man, it was absolutely unbearable.

"It was easy. Cruz wanted you for himself so when he cozied up to you, being all pal-like, he blocked Patch from your cell. Once a day, he'd go to your house and check the mail, making sure no letters made it to you."

"You sick fuck," I barked, my skin on fire with every ounce of hatred I kept bottled up for Patch. It leaked in little spurts as my feet closed the distance.

"Cruz was a good little bitch for me, doing my bidding, all for a chance to be the president of Zetas. It's unfortunate Moriarty didn't approve of my plan."

"He knew?" I hissed, barely able to breathe back the rage.

"Only that I wanted Cruz as president," he drawled, grinning like he won a goddamn medal. "He's been keeping tabs. That's how I knew tonight was the night Marsden planned to kill me. Cruz let me know."

"That fuck," I grumbled, not noticing this entire time, Patch was eating up the distance between himself and Adam. His expression darkened as he neared him. The sound of metal clinking against itself hit my ears.

Music.

Silence.

Calm before the storm.

He raised his knife and went straight for Adam's jugular. Wasting no time, I rushed, holding Adam's flinging limbs back. Patch took his knife,

driving it into Adam over and over again as blood sprayed us both. His face softened as he watched the blood coat me.

Adam didn't have time to spurt any more hate as the blood left his body in heaps. The rage in each jab Patch offered brought the kind of silence only death allowed and sleep temporarily teased us with.

His face was streaked in crimson and I wasn't sure if I'd ever seen him look more attractive. My dick must think so, too, since it hardened at the simple sight of all the blood.

"Patch," I sounded out, and he dropped the blade, his eyes focusing on mine.

I knew that haze.

Bloodlust.

CHAPTER 18

PATCH

I WAS BLIND.

An emotion that fettered itself around my heart, barbed wire and constricting overtook my eyes. It stole my breath and slammed in my chest. Before my cognitive thought caught up with my conscious one, my blade entered my dad more times than I could remember.

After the third, blood overcompensated for the sweat on my skin, its own dressing all over me. My stomach didn't lurch or clench with regret, though my heart did race.

It beat erratically, jumping around like a loose animal, needing an escape from my body.

"Patch."

Lowell. His voice hit my ears, the only sound that didn't zing and overwhelm all my senses. It was his tranquility, the thing to break me of the fuzziness.

"Patch," he sounded out again, and I noticed the knife wasn't in my palm anymore. It rested on the floor in a pool of more blood.

One would think panic would set in, but it didn't touch me. It left me alone like the asinine voices in my head calling me *wrong, sinner, disgraceful.*

They were silent.

They were gone.

I was free.

My skin prickled with awareness as Lowell gripped my jaw, his eyes dissecting me like a frightened animal.

There wasn't fear.

All that existed was him and I.

My body thought without my mind, pulling his mouth to mine. The blood on my fingers smeared across his cheeks and jaw as I reached for him, needing his skin and mine to mix.

Red coated us both as we continued our battle of need and desperation. Sidestepping my father, we were a mess of mouths and moans.

He pushed me against the bookshelf in the office my father forced me into only fifteen minutes ago. My body vibrated with the movement of the old books.

Lowell's mouth only left mine to lick at my throat, then he bit down. The sting of it felt right, painful in the way I wanted.

He tore at my clothes and a part of me knew how wrong this entire situation was. My blazer was first to go and he didn't even attempt to unbutton my shirt. Instead, he ripped that bitch open, flinging all the little buttons to the ground.

I squirmed when his mouth met my nipples. I never thought I'd appreciate the feel of his mouth on them, let alone the sensation as he nipped over and over.

My cock felt like steel, hard and ready. I didn't know my body or heart's expectations, but right now, my balls required something.

Helping him with my pants, I ended up flinging them off and reaching for his clothes. Much like my shirt, his was removed in the same messy fashion. The white of his shirt was streaked with red and it never looked better.

Once we were naked, he pressed me against the bookshelf once more, his mouth roaming over me in reverence.

I moaned when his hand stroked over me, fisting me with aggression and passion, two things that worked well together.

“Fuck, Patch,” he groaned. I leaned into his throat and bit down, feeling him tense beneath me. My tongue had a mind of its own, tracing the veins in his throat, heading to his Adam’s apple. I bit down, then sucked, and worked his length in my palm.

We switched positions, me pressing him against the bookshelf as we rutted against one another. This moment would be burned in me forever.

Lowell reached for his pants on the floor, pulling out his own knife, and brought it to my chest. Without a thought, he sliced over it a bit, taking my blood and rubbing it on his palm.

His mouth scrunched before he spit onto the blood and started rubbing at his cock.

I swallowed, the thought making me both aroused and unnerved, not knowing which was more prevalent.

He turned me around, forcing my front to the bookshelf. I gripped it as I felt him lower behind me. His kisses down my spine leaving shivers in their wake.

The little nips he offered brought groans from me and when he spread me open, kissing my sensitive skin, I pressed back in reaction. His hands cupped my ass and his tongue made a pathway from my hole to my sac.

Each stroke from his tongue across my balls, taint, and back to my hole had me weak. My legs shook with the need to come and it was such an odd sensation that I didn’t allow myself to think too much of it.

“Mischief,” I hissed, feeling so many sensations. When he didn’t stop, I reached and gripped his hair, forcing him deeper. He bit my ass, slapping me and then penetrating me with his tongue.

My balls tightened with need, and before I could blow, he stopped. He came back up for the cut that still freely bled from me, stealing more redness.

“This isn’t a viable lube,” he groaned, spreading the redness over his

fingers. “But I need to fuck you.”

I closed my eyes, not knowing if I was prepared for the pain. “Do it.”

“With blood?” he mused, the eagerness apparent.

“Yes, fuck me,” I hissed, wanting to know the sensation and whether sex was all it was cracked out to be when I was the one being fucked and not the other way around.

He brought the blade back up and cut me again, getting more blood and using it along with his spit on his palm.

“Still have that spit kink,” I mused, listening for his resounding chuckle.

“Yeah,” he rasped, licking at my cut, redness coating his swollen lips. “Spit all over your asshole and watched it drip for me.”

I groaned at the visual, stimulated from his words alone. He caught as much blood as he could and started working at my tight flesh.

“Relax, Pledge. Can’t be tight or it’ll hurt more.”

I groaned as he probed me, thinking how much he loved it when I fucked him. His finger entered me and my body tensed. The intrusion wasn’t bad and I let loose.

He kissed my shoulder, then down my body again. The sounds of his saliva mixing with the thrusting inside me had me gripping myself with enthusiasm.

“Need more,” I hissed, adapting to two fingers. He started with a third and I felt an influx of liquid at my hole, knowing his dirty mouth was lubricating me.

When he thrust, hitting my prostate, I throbbed *everywhere*. From my balls to my toes, I tingled, the sensations going up and down my body as he entered me.

Pulling his fingers out, he replaced them with his cock. I cried out as he fucked into me, his hips slapping my ass upon entrance.

We stood there as I adjusted and when he started moving inside me, I felt a part of me unite finally.

The part that was not only confused about my sexuality and the way society saw me. None of that mattered. The only thing that did was that Lowell made me feel good and he was who I wanted.

“Harder,” I moaned, feeling the ache inside me, wanting to be pressed.

He pulled out, thrusting back in. “Your ass is nice and tight, Pledge. Love fucking it,” he growled in my ear.

Wrapping a fist around my length, he pumped into me with passion, his thrusts purposeful and aggressive. He held me with one hand, digging into my hips as he hammered home.

I couldn’t help the noises escaping me as he continued his brutal fucking. “I’m going to come inside you, Patch. I’m going to fill you up with my cum and when it starts leaking out, I’m going to lick it clean.”

“Fuck,” I hissed, not knowing that was a kink I’d be into. He pressed into me, using the shelf as leverage.

“Fuck your fist, baby, I need to come.”

I did as he said, thrusting into my fist as he used the shelf to fuck me harder. My skin prickled with desire, hitting my spine, and finally my balls did their familiar throb.

“Coming,” I growled and he hissed, biting my shoulder hard as he fucked me to completion. His hips continued hitting my ass, the tension in my shoulders intensifying by his teeth.

Blood or drool, whichever he offered, leaked from where he bit and he stopped coming. Before I could gain awareness of our surroundings, he pushed me in a half-bent motion before spreading my cheeks.

His finger swiped at the leaking liquid, his mouth replacing it a moment later. The slurping sound behind me had my cock throbbing already.

Tingles overtook me as his tongue swiped over me. “Your ass is so perfect,” he groaned, licking several more times.

He rose, finishing, and then his eyes met mine. “I’ve dreamed of doing that since Halloween,” he rasped, his face red with a mixture of blood,

exertion, and aggression.

“It was amazing,” I let out. “Didn’t think I’d be into it.”

“Who’s the freak now?” he asked, laughing at me.

CHAPTER 19

LOWELL

“REALLY?” Mori asked, walking in on us getting dressed. We were messy as hell. Blood everywhere, most of it being Adam’s.

Looking at Patch, I noticed the two large slices on his neck and chest from me and wondered why the hell I’d lost all sense of thought doing that.

Revenge.

That was the only valid reason.

“Jealous?” Patch rasped, his eyebrow hiked along with a smirk I wanted to kiss and lick. He put his bloody shirt on without the buttons and laughed. Not being able to help myself, I laughed too.

“Not at all, but hey, whatever floats your freak boat.” Mori took one glance at Adam and scrunched his face. “The cleaners are going to love this.”

“We listened to Marsden,” I explained. “Called him right before everything and he pretty much alluded that it could be messy and he wouldn’t give a single fuck.”

“Well, guess Patch earned his little initiation.”

“Yeah, no actual ceremony either,” I growled, placing a possessive hand over his bare chest. Heat emanated there, like he felt the same way I did. “No one’s fucking him but me.”

“You really like breaking all the rules, don’t you, Pres?” Mori laughed, his face full of humor. We all know when Cruz was fucked during his

initiation, Mori left so he didn't have to watch. I was certain jealousy made him want to kill them all.

"The rules are guidelines and I'll kill any fucker who touches what's mine," I declared. Patch's hand rested over mine in silent reassurance.

Mori glanced around once more, his eyes stopping at the blood across Patch's chest. "I believe you, and it's fucking funny."

Pulling my cell from my pants, I texted Marsden. *It's done.*

My phone rang, Patch turned to me with a question. I nodded and answered. "Yeah?"

"Let me talk to him," Marsden let out. My stomach dropped, because I hadn't even had the chance to tell Patch that Marsden was his father.

"I don't think—"

"You're not alive to think, Montlake. Put him on the phone."

Rolling my eyes, I offered it to Patch. "I'm sorry I was sideswiped too."

Patch

I didn't know what Lowell meant by that, but I took the phone from his hands. "Hello?"

"Patch," he let out. The man on the other side of the phone sounded vaguely familiar but I couldn't pinpoint from where. The rasp of his voice reminded me of a very long time ago, when my dad didn't beat me and didn't force me to live the life he expected.

"That's me."

A little chuckle was his only response. "I'm sure you don't remember me, it's been years." The way he said those words sounded both nostalgic and nervous. "We met when you were probably about five. I'd been hanging out

with Fiona—your mom,” he clarified.

“Can we skip to the part where you explain what you’re walking around?”

“Short version is, I’m your dad. Biologically.” He let out a breath as if he’d been holding it the entire nineteen years I’d been alive.

“Shit.” I didn’t know how to respond to that but seeing Lowell’s concerned face, I wanted to rub the frown lines in his forehead away. Settling for next best, I grabbed his hand, lacing our fingers, and the sigh of relief that escaped him brought me a sense of calmness.

“Yeah, that’s why he was the next dead end,” he joked, his voice light. “I’m sorry I couldn’t save you before he sent you to Camp Peccatore.”

My body shuddered at the reminder. “It’s not your fault,” I weakly reasoned, wishing he’d have been here sooner.

“It is,” he contended, his voice hoarse with emotion. “I was scared you wouldn’t accept the fuck I’d been for so many years, I didn’t intervene when I should have.”

“Mom didn’t either,” I tacked on.

“Yeah, and she’ll answer for that too. Just not yet. I need to send a cleanup crew to you, and you and Lowell need to shower and burn your clothes. Lowell knows the protocol.”

Glancing at my best friend, I felt closer to him now more than ever after what we did and the need to just tell him how I felt resonated inside of me, burning like the cigarettes the nuns put to my chest.

“We will have to discuss this further another time then,” I finally said, witnessing how jittery Lowell got as he shuffled from foot to foot.

“I’ll get you a new phone and we’ll meet up for dinner, then we can explain the *real* family business and why you’ll enjoy it much more than being River’s bitch.”

I chuckled, finally glancing at a concerned Mori before offering him a small smile.

“It was nice to finally meet you.”

“You too,” I said, thinking of how much my life changed in the span of three days.

Hanging up, I turned to Lowell and grabbed his face. Our lips met, the freedom of being able to kiss him whenever I wanted vibrated deeply inside me.

“I love you, Mischief,” I breathlessly admitted, pressing our foreheads together.

His eyes were like laser beams to my fucking soul as he stared into my eyes. “I waited so many years for you to say that,” he responded, emotion weaved in the hoarse way he said the words. “I love you too, Rage.”

CHAPTER 20

PATCH

Four Days Later

“WELCOME THE NEW ZETAS,” Lowell broadcasted, his face full of amusement. He announced every name, when he finally got to mine, he glowed. The smirk on his face told me how excited he was for our future at Dupont. Out of the fifty who started, me, Landon, Prince, and five others made it.

When it came to the initiation, two of the ones who would have made it refused to have sex. Not that I blamed them, having sex with someone random would’ve made me leave, but I opted out. Witnessing Prince with Valor and Landon with Cruz this time over Mori was interesting, to say the least.

Watching others have sex did nothing for me. I didn’t find it arousing or attractive, nothing about it was more than clinical. The guys seemed to enjoy each other, though. Apparently, all legacies had the opportunity, and Lowell didn’t tell me at the beginning because he wanted me to squirm.

It’d been four days and all we’d done since then is hang out. Yeah, blood week continued, but I didn’t join in any of it.

Watching from afar, Lowell and I caught up.

I told him about what happened to me and he told me what he thought I'd done.

“What are we going to do about Cruz?” Mori asked, sitting with Lowell and I after the event commenced. We were in the den, telling Mori about what Cruz had done. How, behind their backs, he gave information to Adam.

Marsden—my father—wanted us to kill him. For all of Cruz's downfalls, he wasn't a waste of space. He could be beneficial and helpful to us.

He just got lost for some fucking reason.

“Marsden wants him dead,” Lowell answered, gripping the tumbler in his hand as if it personally offended him.

I rubbed a palm down my face, gripping the bridge of my nose. “He told me to decide. He trusts my judgment.”

Not sure why, though. We only met four days ago.

Mori's gray eyes met mine. They somehow seemed less colored than when we last spoke, and the tiny hint of worry there glimmered for only a moment before he asked, “What'll it be?”

Cruz was an asshole. He had been my entire life, but he didn't deserve to die, even if he was the reason that camp happened.

“With River being a part of this, I think we all have a lot more to worry about.” They nodded at me, their faces as glum as I felt.

“River didn't use to be a cunt,” Mori inserted, his features pensive. Thinking of my brother before college, I'd have to agree. Somewhere along the lines, he hated everyone and no one knew why. It made me wonder, though. What happened to turn him into what he became?

“He was a good guy,” I agreed. Thinking of all the time he helped me practice lacrosse and helped me with math. Something changed. Maybe it set him off into hating me.

Did he know Marsden was my father?

“What was he like when you went to school with him?” Lowell asked, leaning on his intertwined fist. Mori took a swig, letting out a hiss at how much he consumed. A cough left him and his eyes tightened with strain.

“We fucked once,” he let out. My stomach dropped and everything suddenly became very clear.

“You don’t say?”

He glanced at me, a cocky smirk on his face. “It was fun, Cruz walked in on us. Was teaching him a lesson and Riv just ended up being the intended target.”

Shaking my head, I thought of Cruz and Mori, their incessant battle that I didn’t know existed sexually. But that was the thing about my sexuality, I didn’t notice these things unless they were pointed out to me.

“Is there anyone you haven’t fucked?” Lowell grumbled, shaking his head. He, too, probably thought of how Mori not only caused the issues with Cruz but River as well.

That or, like me, he didn’t understand the random sex with random people. It was more than likely the former. After learning about my tastes and shit, Lowell learned he loved sex. There were always jokes that hypersexuals ended up with asexuals because they balanced each other out somehow.

I enjoyed sex, orgasmed too, but I didn’t feel the need for it, nor did it come to me unless Lowell got me hard.

“Well, there’s—”

“It was rhetorical, you fuck. Do you not see how toxic you and Cruz are?”

He bit his lip, rubbing his thumb across it, his eyes glazing over. Was that arousal? Was that what it looked like?

“He’ll get what’s coming to him eventually,” Mori conceded. Lowell shook his head.

“Can’t you just fuck each other, get it out of your systems? This back and

forth is not only dangerous but it's fucking stupid."

A chuckle left Mori and he stood. "Not fucking him is the fun part," he answered, taking the last bit of his drink. "When I fuck him, you'll know. He'll stop being a little bitch."

"You're a mess," I commented, rolling my eyes. "Sex is just body movements."

"Says you," Mori taunted. "To Cruz, it's the one thing he wants and can't have. He covets it like Lowell does your dick."

Lowell's face reddened as if he understood Mori. Still, it didn't make sense. If he cared so little for sex, he should get it over with. Stringing it along seemed pointless.

"Off I go, bitches. Don't have too much fun."

CHAPTER 21

LOWELL

Six Months Later

WE WERE INSEPARABLE, Patch and I. Our sex life was almost a game to him. He liked making me squirm and telling me I wasn't *doing it* for him. It added to the degradation we both enjoyed. He seemed to be better at it than me with his lack of sexual inclination.

Something I learned with him, was to keep trying to get him to want and seek sex, even if for amusement.

We've gotten to the point where me telling him if he made me come in short spurts meant I'd cuddle with him throughout an entire movie.

He loved touch.

I loved him.

We were perfect for each other, but still best friends somehow.

"Mischief?" Patch called out while I laid on the bed. He gave me a raised brow as soon as he entered the bedroom. After a month, he moved out of Landon's and we got a condo like our parents planned.

"What, uhm..." He scratched his chin, looking at my naked form. "Whatcha doing?" I couldn't help the impish grin I offered, reaching down to

stroke my already erect dick.

It didn't take much to get me going, especially when my boyfriend needed true convincing to have sex most days.

His gaze went up and down, along with my strokes, and a smirk tilted at his lips. "It's only been two days," he teased, licking his bottom lip.

Spreading my thighs, I showed him my ass. More importantly, the metal plug inside it.

Immediately, his eyes widened and he strode toward the bed. "Is that for me?" His tone didn't let me know if he was aroused or merely curious, but I didn't want to risk him cock blocking me out of spite.

"It is, along with this," I answered, pulling the knife out from under my pillow. *There*. His eyes darkened in that way only Patch's had. The way the room seemed to get a little hotter and he'd get hard for me.

Patch might be asexual, but his body reacted to mine chemically.

He reached forward, and I forced him to lean over me to get his favorite stiletto blade. His chest—shirtless, since he was lounging—brushed against my bare cock and I froze with the inclination to come.

For some goddamn reason, the fact that he only had sex when it amused him made me sensitive. Not in the sad way, but the kind that caused me to orgasm in no time at all.

Patch liked to taunt me nowadays. He liked licking over my skin and stroking me slow, working me up until my balls ached to the point of pain.

Sometimes, when he felt *really* dickish, he'd walk away and tell me to get myself off. It was part of his game, the thing he enjoyed more than orgasms.

His hand trailed up my thigh before he squeezed it roughly. After taking the knife, the metal *snick* filled my ears and he traced the flat of the blade over my nipples.

"You've convinced me, Mischief. I'd like to fuck you."

"Wow, so cordial, Rage."

Patch chuckled. The blade caught my skin, nicking it. The red bubbled

and he immediately lowered his mouth to lick it off.

The pleasure I received from the small flick of his tongue... I wouldn't trade it for the world.

"You're already leaking," he mused, dragging the tip down my abs, little red marks surfacing from the movement. "Should I be nice?"

He rested the cool metal against my groin. Each breath I took had it digging in me. "Kindness isn't your strong suit," I struggled, keeping my body as steady as possible. It was hard when all I could think about was him fucking me.

"It's not," he confirmed, lowering to my mouth. He traced my bottom lip with his tongue, and when he bit down, I moaned, earning a jab of the knife.

That alone had me hissing in pleasure. Pain was my favorite sexual need. It was something necessary for me to get off, and Patch had no problem evoking it.

Patch grabbed the blade, making sure to drag it across my pelvic bone before setting it beside me.

His mouth hit me harshly, his teeth pulling at my lip and his tongue thrusting inside me. He groaned and I swore if he did it again, I'd blow my load without stimulation.

Just knowing that anything to do with me brought those noises was the best kind of praise a guy could ask for.

Patch's hand slid down my chest, teasing the wet crimson marks he'd left, swirling, before finally reaching my swollen shaft. He stroked it harshly, just once, his fingers gripping it like he did my throat when fucking me from the front.

"Patch," I gritted out, my entire body a maelstrom of energy, desperate for release. He licked inside my mouth once more before he lowered to my cockhead.

Teasingly, he flicked the tip, nipping it soon after. "Fuck."

"I love seeing the way your navy eyes turn black when you want my

cock, Mischief.” He sucked me inside his mouth an inch or so, taunting me but not fully giving in.

My hand went to his hair, knowing rubbing it would convince him to be nice. As soon as my fingers went through his curls, he groaned, vibrating against the sensitive flesh of my cock.

He sucked me down as I continued to rub his head gently. “That’s right,” I goaded. “Suck my cock for some affection.”

The narrowing of his eyes should have been my first warning, but it was the grabbing of his blade that told me I fucked up.

Popping off me, he took the metal tip and scored my hip. Once he was satisfied with the pressure he needed to apply, he dragged it across, drawing letters.

Fuck me.

It should disgust me, him mutilating my skin for our pleasure, but it wasn’t in the least disturbing to me.

This was how he claimed me.

This was how he fucked me.

This was how he loved me.

After seeing his work, dribbling with rouge strikes, I grinned. *M&R.*

Mischief and Rage.

“Spread,” he demanded, and he didn’t have to tell me twice. I widened my legs once more, and he tapped the metal plug. “Stretching yourself for me?”

I nodded, a little too enthusiastically. This piece of metal had been rubbing against my prostate for over thirty minutes. The sweat broke out ages ago and while he momentarily distracted me, him putting pressure on the end had me moaning and arching.

“I’ll still make it hurt,” he promised, pulling it out and slamming it back in. I groaned so loudly, I swore the walls shook and he smiled in kind.

“Please fuck me,” I gasped, my cock practically the only sign of my

heartbeat at this point. It throbbed in tandem, so loud, I could barely hear my own breathing.

“If you insist.” His eyes taunted me as he pulled out the plug fast. It felt empty now, a gaping hole for him to get his fill.

“Look at that hole,” he rasped, fingering my rim. “A big slut-sized hole for my cock.”

I nodded jerkily, knowing I wouldn't last long if he kept teasing my entrance like that. He dipped in with three fingers immediately, a tight fit, but he knew what he was doing.

“Still going to be stretched by my cock, Mischief. I'll make this hole wider.”

I threw my head back, gasping as he pressed on my sensitive spot. After he got his fill of torture, he stripped himself quickly. His hand reached for the lube I'd brought out, lathering his fingers, then his cock.

He lifted my knees, rubbing his cock across me. “I'm going to make you scream, Lowell.” And he did. Slamming into me, I shouted.

“Fuck!”

“It's Rage or Sir, Mischief. Fuck is what I'm about to do to you.”

The bed dipped as he adjusted, giving him more leverage to thrust while pushing my knees to my ears. He leaned in, his breath tickling my cheek.

“You feel fucking good around me,” he grunted, sliding out and in swiftly. Hitting my prostate with his thrusts.

“Please, just fuck me,” I growled, my skin rippling with sweat and desperation. Chills broke out and goosebumps followed soon.

Patch stretched, finding his knife and bringing it to my throat. “Stay still while I fuck you, don't need to slice your jugular entirely.”

I groaned, closing my eyes, knowing the two other times we did this, his hand was steady, but not enough not to leave scars.

There was something intrinsically sexy about being scarred by a blade when passion drove you to destruction.

That was us.

Fucking each other until one day we killed one another from fucking too hard.

He rocked inside me, and I steadied my breath to make sure I didn't move forward too much. Pistoning into me, the blade sliced, and I moaned.

"My slut loves his pain, loves blood dripping from him, loves being fucked to near death," Patch drawled, ramming into me.

His stamina was insane. He could fuck me for hours, making me orgasm repeatedly, stealing my screams and storing them in his cold heart.

My favorite, though, was when he released quickly, wanting to fuck again soon after, as if he had something to prove.

His hips hit my ass as he held the knife over me and fucked me with vigor. "I need you to come around my cock, Mischief. Because I want to drain myself inside you and lick it clean."

"Fuck," I hissed, wishing I could fuck my hand without him slicing my throat. As if he knew, he drug the blade over my jaw, then lips, striking my bottom one. I tasted the copper and could feel the oozing liquid.

He tossed the metal, sucking at my lip and fucking me remorselessly. His body warmed mine and he gripped my cock as if he were punishing me while still sucking the life out of my mouth. "Come for me, Mischief."

And with several hateful strokes of my cock, I did.

He held my throat down, fucking into me with impatience and when he came, growling and saying my name in rapid succession, I never felt more alive.

He crashed on me and slowly pulled out. His eyes met mine, navy and black, Mischief and Rage.

"I love you," he expressed, his chest rising and falling aggressively, his breaths came out in pants as he tried catching them.

"I love you too, forever."

"Forever is a long fucking time, Mischief," he rasped, his throat sounding

dry and overworked. But in those words, I felt the love he constantly offered me in every way he could.

“Not long enough.”

The End

Other works by C.L. Matthews

Here Lives a Corpse (Here Lies #1)

Here Lies a Saint

Here Loves a Sociopath

Inhale, Exhale. (Standalone)

Breathe (Standalone)

Firsts (Cape Hill #1)

Lasts (Cape Hill #2)

Always (Cape Hill #3)

The Dating Games: Author Edition

Welcome to Cape Hill (Cape Hill Vipers #1)

Coming Soon

Here Prays a Sinner (Here Lies #4)

Here Saves a Killer (Here Lies #5)

Music Lights & Never Afters (Standalone)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C.L. Matthews lives in lala-landia with her husband and invisible friends. She wants to riot the lack thereof authentic Mexican food in her state, but she's an introvert at heart. She enjoys tacos, Red Bull, and warm water, because she's crazy. She's an oddball, and realizes it's been mentioned before, *just go with it*. Her joys in life consist of writing unconventional romances, making book covers, causing havoc to her reader's hearts, and genre hopping when she needs a change of scenery. She's a special kind of weird and enjoys every moment of it.

BOY OF FIRE AND ASH SARA CATE



BOY OF
FIRE AND ASH

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SARA CATE

CHAPTER 1

THOMAS

“YOU HAVE to be fucking kidding me.” There is steam billowing from the hood of my car, and lights are blinking at me from the dash as I fly down the freeway at eighty miles an hour.

Quickly, I pull my car off the road, stopping on the shoulder and jumping out before the damn thing explodes. This is what I get for being a stubborn asshole who refuses to buy a new car, even though this seventeen-year-old BMW has seen better days—much, much better days. If I call my best friend, Everly, right now and ask for help, she’s definitely going to rub it in my face. She’s been on me to replace this thing for years, but I’m being stubborn about it.

Fuck.

At least it’s unusually cool out for August. Standing a safe distance away, I pull out my phone and find the roadside assistance number. Fifteen minutes later, the lovely girl on the line informs me that a mechanic in town will be here in less than an hour to tow me to their shop.

Halle-fucking-lujah.

This has really been the year from hell. Whoever said your thirties were supposed to be your best years was either delirious or high off their ass, because it would seem turning thirty-four last November set off a domino effect of bad luck.

In June, we lost our beloved editor-in-chief at the *Florence Journal* after he retired and moved to Florida, and instead of handing the job over to me—as it should have been, considering my twelve years of experience as a lead journalist, they gave it to that toolbag, Patrick from *The Herald*. They *outsourced* our new EIC when I am more than capable of taking on the position myself, and what’s worse is that I’m about ninety percent sure, Patrick is a homophobe. More than once, he’s denied my story requests because the articles would be better suited for—*quote-unquote*, someone with more guts.

So, I quit.

Excited for your first day tomorrow?

Everly texts me while I wait.

I want to vomit every time I think about it.

That’s normal, she replies with a laughing face emoji. Couldn’t be any worse than my first semester.

God, I hope not. When Everly started her teaching job at Florence University, she had one of her biggest enemies as a student, who turned into her biggest tormenter, who then turned into the ‘*love of her life.*’ Now they live together in some twisted domestic bliss, and I’m fairly certain they have some pretty kinky shit going on in the bedroom, so I’d say it turned out all right.

For her, at least. Settling down, with a college student no less, sounds more like a nightmare than all the bullying he did to her in those first few months, but that's just me.

I don't have any mortal enemies from my past, so I think I'm golden.

Just be your charming, brilliant, funny self, and they will love you.

Why the fuck is my best friend so amazing to me? Where did I go right twelve years ago when we met, because I could use a little good luck like that in my life right now.

Thanks, babe. That helps. Love you.

Love you too. Seriously, Thomas. Don't be nervous. You will be great. Just don't fuck your students. I know how young you like them.

Bitch. You have absolutely no room to talk.

While I'm smiling down at my phone, I hear the rumble of a truck approach. Damn, that was fast. I'm leaning against the car, pretty convinced it's not going to blow up since the smoking has stopped, when the driver of the tow truck jumps out, and I'm struck speechless.

I was expecting a typical mechanic—middle-aged and greasy. Not a Greek God in blue coveralls.

He's damn near the tallest man I've ever seen in my life. With broad

shoulders and thick biceps, I can't seem to tear my eyes away as he stalks closer. When I do force my gaze to his face, the first thing I notice are the scars etched into his features. It looks like someone took a box-cutter to what must have been a flawless facade with those high cheekbones, a sharp jawline, a chiseled nose...

"Mr. Litchfield?" he says in a rich, deep voice. Jumping up from my position against the car, I take a couple steps toward him.

"That's me."

"I got a call that you need a tow to the shop. What seems to be the problem?"

"Well, a lot of smoke came out of the hood, which I'm assuming is bad, so I pulled over right away."

"Can I take a look?" he asks as he passes by me, leaving behind a cloud of his masculine scent.

Upon closer inspection, I realize he's young, or at least younger than I thought at first—maybe early twenties? I also notice his lips are full and perfect. There's a slash through the top one, and I instantly find myself wondering what it might feel like against my tongue.

"Sir?"

"Oh, yeah. Go ahead." I hold a hand up, gesturing to the front of my car.

He hesitates, glaring at me with his brows pinched together. "I need you to open the hood for me," he says in a bold command that sends a flash of heat all the way down my spine.

"Umm..." I open the driver's side door and crouch down in search of the lever to unlock the hood. I fumble around for a few seconds but can't seem to find it.

"You don't know where the hood latch is, do you?" I feel his presence behind me, and a wave of frustration rolls through me. I'm having a bad enough day/month, and I don't need to be humiliated by a kid with a tow truck.

“I just forgot where it is,” I mutter. Pulling a handle, I hear a pop and stand up, relief consuming me. As he pins me between his body and my car, he looks down at me with a look of amusement on his face, and I notice that I barely come up to his chin.

“That was your gas tank.”

Dick.

Kneeling down again, I fumble for the handle, my temperature rising and making it difficult to focus. I freeze when I feel his arm brush mine. He’s towering over me from behind, and I breathe in the scent of cologne mixed with oil and gasoline. One of his hands lands on my arm as he crowds me, and though there is grease between his nails and caked into the prints of his fingers, I notice that it’s softer than I expected. It takes him exactly one second to find the lever under the dash, which results in a popping noise from the front of the car.

In my defense, I’m more of a ‘drop it off at the mechanic and let them deal with it’ kind of guy.

“Thanks,” I mumble as he walks away.

He inspects the car’s engine, pulling out and opening up parts I have absolutely no knowledge about, and I can’t seem to shake this sudden unnerved spell he’s put me under. How have I never seen him around town? Surely I’d remember a guy like him. He must be at least six-four, maybe five, and those *scars*. His chin-length black hair hangs in his face as he messes around underneath the hood, and I try my damndest to look interested in what he’s doing, but I can’t imagine it’s very convincing.

“Try to start it for me.” Again with that commanding tone.

I drop into the driver’s seat and turn the ignition. The car sounds like it wants to start, but all it does is pop and rev without moving into a steady rhythm.

“Cut it!” he yells over the noise. Doing as he says, I take the key out and climb back out of the seat, just as he flips his hair out of his face.

Okay, that was hot.

“Looks like your radiator,” he says while inspecting the engine.

“Okay.” As if I have any clue what the fuck that means.

“I can tow it to the shop for you. I don’t think I have the parts, but I could have it done in a couple days.”

“That would be great, thanks.” I keep staring at his face, no matter how hard I try not to. I mean, it’s pretty damn hard not to. Those scars are not like any I’ve seen before, and the reporter in me wants the story—the *whole* story. It literally looks like someone carved into this poor kid’s face. And they’ve faded to a light hue which means they’re old, probably something he got as a little kid.

“You can ride to the shop with me, unless you have someone coming for you...”

“No one is coming for me,” I blurt out so fast I surprise myself. What the fuck was that all about? It’s like I was trying to announce that I’m single, as if he fucking cares. That’s clearly not what he was asking. *He’s not hitting on you, you fucking pervert.*

He slams the hood shut, and I notice the way his gaze lingers on me for just a second, and it’s enough to send chills down my spine.

When he goes back to his truck, he throws it into reverse and lines it up with mine. I watch in some sort of erotic fascination as he hoists the chain out of the truck, setting everything up on my car and effortlessly chaining it to the rear of the truck.

Did he just make loading a tow truck sexy?

If I were in the middle of a dry spell, I’d assume this strange interest was due to needing to get laid, but I got lucky, not once, but twice this weekend. In fact, that’s where I was headed home from, a sleepover at my FWB’s—*friend with benefits*. Nico and I have been carrying on a no-strings-attached hookup for a couple years now. It’s completely casual and not at all *coupley*. He’s pushing his late twenties, and I keep waiting for him to give me the

nudge that he's ready to settle down, but it hasn't really happened yet, and honestly, I don't know how I'll feel when it does. I like Nico, and we have a good time together, but the idea of forever with him doesn't exactly get me *excited*.

"Ready to go," Mr. Tall Tow Truck Man barks, jerking his head toward the cab of the truck and signaling for me to get in. As I step up into the seat, the first thing I notice is just how much it smells like him, a combination of cologne and grease with a hint of mint and air freshener. I don't know why, but it reminds me of my teenage years, and I'm hit with a wave of nostalgia, inciting a wave of memories of making out with various boys in cars that smelled like this. I'm pretty sure I gave my first hand job in a truck like this. Back then, I was so sexually pent-up and frustrated, desperate to get it out, I let any guy who wanted to touch me have his way. They were good fucking times.

The mechanic is staring at me with a quizzical brow, and I glance his way after buckling my seatbelt.

"What is it?" I ask.

"You're the one who looks like you want to say something."

"No, I don't," I argue.

He laughs. "Yes, you do. You're judging my truck. I'm sorry it's not as nice as your early 2000's BMW."

"I was not judging your truck," I snap. "I was just remembering something..."

He laughs again. "You have some fond memories in tow trucks, Mr. Litchfield?"

"That's a forward question."

"Sorry," he mutters as he puts the truck into drive. We turn onto the freeway, merging with traffic, and I notice immediately how eerily quiet it is in the car now. He was being casual with me, which was unexpected, and I reacted too harshly. So now it's awkward, and I regret it. The kid was just

being friendly. It's not his fault I'm off today, in a bad mood and a serious funk.

"Not in *tow trucks* specifically," I add, desperate to break the tension. Then, my blabber mouth just keeps rambling. "But something about this one brought back memories of high school. I must have dated someone with a truck that smelled like this."

The words slip out before I can really think about what I'm saying.

Why did I say that? Why the fuck did I say that?

I wince, knowing that I just made things even more awkward as I'm sure he's putting two and two together now. *Girls* don't normally drive trucks like these.

"Good memories, I assume?" he asks with his eyes on the road.

When I glance over at him, I notice how tightly he's gripping the steering wheel and clenching his jaw, clearly indicating his discomfort. *God, let this ride end quickly.*

"Yeah, sure. They were good memories," I mumble.

He turns to look at me. "What? You don't remember?"

"It was a long time ago," I reply.

There is a subtle smile as he looks at me again. Then his eyes travel from my face and down my body, as if he's sizing me up. I feel the hot sting of his judgment, and I swear I am all too tempted to dive out the window of this moving vehicle and into freeway traffic.

"How long ago?" There's no longer a cruel look on his face; now it almost seems...flirtatious, and I notice that he has warm amber-colored eyes that look like the cat-eye rocks I used to collect as a kid. The irises shine in different shades of brown and red like a burning fire.

"Well, let's see. I was a teenager..." I do the math quickly in my head, "fifteen years ago."

His eyebrows shoot up. "That *was* a long time ago."

"Oh, fuck you very much," I reply, and his laughter fills the truck. My

nerves dissipate as I realize he's being genuine, not a homophobic asshole like I expected, and his teasing me about my age is almost coming across as...sexy, somehow.

"Sorry," he says, still laughing, and I can't help but smile. "It's only been one year for me."

"One year since you were a teenager?" I ask, rolling my eyes. "Enjoy your youth while it lasts. Blink and you'll miss it."

He nods his head, seemingly contemplative. Then there's another few minutes of silence, which he breaks when he asks, "So, you haven't been in a truck since you were a teenager?"

"Um...not really. I'm not much of a truck guy."

"Obviously," he replies.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You didn't even know how to pop the hood of your car. I assume you've never driven a truck."

"I could drive a truck," I toss back.

"I believe you." When he looks at me, his grin is so deep in his cheeks that it creates dimples around the scars. I find myself staring at them, fascinated by how they stretch across his face, and my fingers itch to trace the lines of each one.

I feel strangely comfortable around this guy now. I like his flirty banter, although I know I have no right to because he's not flirting. Even if he was gay—which I guarantee he's not, he's not my type.

I don't really do the slum-down thing. My type is more like Nico, fit, young, and *flexible*. Slightly submissive and easy to manipulate—in bed and in our relationship.

We turn into the parking lot of the mechanic shop and pulls right into the first bay. I'm surprised to see it quiet and empty. He puts the truck into park, and I expect him to jump out, but he pauses in his seat. The moment stretches as he stares out the window. "For what it's worth," he says, finally. "You

don't look thirty-four."

"Thanks," I reply quietly.

His head turns my way, and our eyes lock. I'm lost in those amber brown irises for a moment, waiting for him to say or do something to break the sudden tension. But he doesn't. Instead, we bathe in the uncertainty between us because there's something about it—or *him*, that feels both hot and cold, ice and fire in my veins. But it's the fire and strange anticipation that makes its way down to my groin.

He finally jumps out of the vehicle, and I take my first full breath in minutes.

I sit in the truck for a moment, letting this strange feeling wash over me, willing the sudden arousal in my pants to chill the fuck out.

When I finally hop out, he's already unloading my car off the back of the truck, so I busy myself with walking around and looking at everything. It's not a big shop, and it's isolated on a road just outside of the city center. It's in good condition though, cleaner and newer than I expected.

"You run this place by yourself?" I ask.

He laughs. "No. I'm just the only guy willing to work on Sundays."

"What's wrong? You don't go to church?"

That dimpling grin stretches on his face again, revealing perfectly white teeth. As he looks up at me, he replies with a small shake of his head, "No, I don't."

I watch him maneuver the car until it's parked in the bay and hoisted six-feet in the air, and I realize that I could easily watch this guy at his job all day long. It's like foreplay—this sensual dance of muscles and effort and sweat, those strong yet nimble hands moving with deft skill and experience, imagining them working the same way on my clothes and my body.

He catches me looking a few times, but I play it off as just interest in what he's doing, and he seems mostly unfazed.

"If you'd like to meet me in the office," he says casually, "we can fill out

some paperwork before you leave.”

Is that his not-so-subtle way of trying to get rid of me? Giving him a nod, I head in the direction of the entrance. Going through the black door on the side of the garage, I find a small office, immaculately clean, with a broad wooden desk, a computer, and a couple chairs for customers. But I don't sit down. I'm feeling too restless. I'd rather just settle this now, call my Uber, and put this shit show of a day and very strange encounter behind me.

Just as I pull up the Uber app on my phone, I hear him coming in. With my back to the door, I hear the distinct sound of the door closing and the lock clicking. Everything in me freezes, and my head gets caught in a vicious battle between fear and anticipation. This could either be a very good thing or a very bad thing.

The space is swallowed up in silence as he takes another heavy step closer to where I'm standing. My heart seems to be the only thing in the room moving as I wait for what comes next. I'm either about to be fucked or murdered, and my body is wound so tight in arousal and anticipation it doesn't seem to know the difference.

I don't know why, but I expect him to say something, to flirt with me some more or ask me out, but he doesn't. Instead, he pounces.

His large hand takes me by the throat, pulling me backward until I'm up against the hard wall of his body. Then soft lips are devouring my neck, and what comes out of my mouth barely sounds human.

I'm fifty-percent turned on and fifty-percent glad to be alive.

Okay, maybe ninety-ten.

His groan is loud in my ear, and his kiss is ravenous, warm lips and tongue sucking eagerly on my jaw and then my earlobe. I'm thrust into the sensation of complete euphoria.

One hand is still on my neck, holding me in a punishing grip so I can't move—not that I'd want to, while the other is traveling down my side until he reaches around to the front of my body and cups my quickly growing

erection through my pants. Then, he grinds himself against me, squeezing me tight in his hands. The hard length of his cock is crushed against my lower back.

I'm five-eleven. Almost tall, and definitely not short. In this guy's arms, though, I might as well be four feet tall by the way he's handling me, and I don't hate it. Right now, I don't hate anything because I'm being groped by a perfect stranger, not even old enough to drink alcohol, in the office of a mechanic's shop. On a fucking Sunday.

"Fuck," I groan out when he strokes his hand down my dick with perfect precision. *Please fucking take it out*, I pray. And like a sign from God himself, my handsy mechanic fumbles with the buttons on my jeans. They're unzipped in seconds, and his hungry hand digs into my boxers for my aching cock.

Once he has his giant fingers around me, I thrust forward. He strokes me hard to the rhythm of his grinding against my backside. His lips keep up their assault on my neck, and my hands don't quite know what to do. I reach back with one hand and grab onto his hip, pulling him harder against me, while the other one slides up his arm until I reach his head, skating through his soft hair and tugging his face closer.

"Take your fucking pants off," he bites out in a sexy command.

I tense for only a moment. It's not that I have a problem bottoming—it's just that I'm not usually so eager to do so. But apparently, when this guy says jump, I say fuck me.

Digging my thumbs into my waistband, I shove my pants down fast, taking my boxers with them. He lets go of my cock and fumbles in his back pocket, and I hear the familiar crinkle of a condom wrapper. When I glance back, he has it pinched between his teeth along with a packet of lube.

Our eyes meet for a heated moment, but he quickly averts his gaze, looking down as he opens his coveralls. Desperate for a look at his body, my eyes follow the zipper, but they don't get very far. His hand grasps hard at

my face, turning me forward, so I can't see him.

“Put your hands on the fucking desk.”

Obediently, I slide my palms along the cool surface, my body frozen in anticipation, and my mind lost in a fog of confusion and arousal. It can't seem to keep up with this sudden whirlwind of events, and I don't really care. I don't need my mind to try and rationalize my decisions right now.

Suddenly, his hands are on my ass, spreading my cheeks, and he actually fucking *growls* in approval.

Am I dead? Did I fucking die and this is what my brain has conjured up as heaven? Fucking pinch me.

Something slick and warm slides along the cleft of my ass, and I shudder when the head of his cock prods my entrance. Pressing my hips back, I practically impale myself, and it occurs to me as he breaches the tight ring of muscle that I don't even know his name. But I let him in anyway. My body opens for him like he commanded it to do.

He lets out a hearty groan as he slides in another inch, and I'd be groaning along with him if I could breathe—but the sensation is too intense. It burns, but the pain lies because all I feel is pleasure.

He holds onto my hips as he fucks me deeper another few inches. When he rubs against my prostate, my knees practically turn to jello. With torturous control, he retreats and leisurely slides in again. It's a slow torment—I wish he'd just let himself go.

“Fuck me,” I say through gritted teeth.

His movements pick up speed, causing my hands to keep losing their grip on the desk as he pounds into my body. I've never loved the feeling of being used and so selfishly fucked before, but the idea of being this twenty-year old's fuck toy has some strange appeal to it. With all those fucking scars and those bright eyes and wicked smile, I get off on the idea that my body could bring him pleasure, and I want him to take it.

His hand is back around my throat, and I'm pulled upright until I'm

pressed against his chest. His mouth is next to my ear.

“You feel so good around my cock.”

I groan again, his filthy words sending shockwaves coursing through my body. He reaches around for my dick, moving in rhythm with his thrusts and squeezing the head on every upstroke. The fronts of my thighs are digging into the desk, but I don't fucking care, because he's right; I do feel good around his cock, and his tight grip on my dick is making it hard to think straight.

“I'm gonna come,” I moan.

“Paint my desk with it,” he replies, and with a couple harsh slams of his body in mine, I'm done. The climax nearly knocks me off my feet, stealing the air from my lungs as wave after wave of pleasure courses through my veins. I don't just spill cum all over the surface of his desk—I'm pretty sure I saw some reach the floor on the other side. A moment later, his thrusting slows and I feel him shiver out his orgasm, a loud gasping groan echoing against the four walls. My neck is still locked in the vise grip of his large hand, my pulse pounding against his fingers. I'm almost afraid I won't be able to stand on my own when he lets go.

“Jesus,” I gasp as my body recovers, my heart rate slowing and my lungs finally taking in a full breath of air.

He pulls out and quickly turns around, leaving me exposed. My muscles ache as I lean down to reach my pants around my ankles to pull them up. I hear him remove the condom, tossing it into the trash by the door. When I glance back again to see his face, he's already zipped up his coveralls and is avoiding my gaze.

Neither of us say anything. I mean, this isn't my first stranger quickie, but I have a feeling it might be his.

“So did you need me to fill out some paperwork or...”

“No,” he grits out, “I have your number. I'll call you when your car is ready.”

And just like that, he walks out of the office. I can barely move for a few moments, but when I finally regain the ability to think and breathe and function, I pull out my phone and order the Uber, hoping they'll arrive quickly to avoid any further awkward interaction. Then, I take a minute to clean up my mess before I exit the office.

Just as I cross the garage, my ride pulls up, and I glance toward the mechanic one last time before disappearing into the car. Too bad he doesn't even bother to look up at me as I leave.

While I'm in the car on the way to my house, I pull up my text conversation with Everly.

Well, I had an interesting morning...

CHAPTER 2

PAX

MY PHONE ALARM blares from the floor, and I reach over to grab it and hit snooze. It's too early, too *fucking* early. Why do I sign up for 8:00 a.m. classes? What the fuck is wrong with me?

Oh yeah, because I have to squeeze in school around work. And rugby.

Sitting up on the thin foam mattress, I rub the sleep out of my eyes and try to muster enough energy to get up. There's not enough padding to keep me from feeling the cold concrete of the garage floor, but it's better than trying to get a goodnight's sleep in my car.

Glancing around the dim room, I see the office door and it sparks a memory from yesterday like an assault on my mind. As if I could forget fucking a complete stranger in my boss's office.

Why am I suddenly faced with a sense of nagging guilt? He was clearly into me; he never said no, and it was completely consensual. So we fucked. So what?

Because he's a *guy*.

Not the first guy I've fucked—not even close. Just the first one in broad daylight, at work, and who had seen my face beforehand. Dark encounters are really more my style. There's more anonymity and privacy in the darkness. But I couldn't help myself. That salty, short beard of his along with his tight ass caught me off guard.

I wish I could say I'd never see him again, but I have to fix his car and the parts are coming in tomorrow, so... looks like I will have to face him again. *Fantastic.*

I brush my teeth in the bathroom sink, shove my flimsy mattress in the storage closet, no one opens, and toss a granola bar in my pocket as I run out the door. As I jump into my black and silver 1970 Chevelle SS, I say a little prayer that she starts for me on the first try, and thank fuck, she purrs to life after only a few seconds.

“Good girl, Aphrodite,” I say, patting the steering wheel.

She may not have a working radio or A/C, and the heater may smell like something died in there, but she's mine. I bought her off an old lady whose husband had just died and she cared more about getting rid of it than getting rich off of it, so I put a whole month's salary toward the purchase. And three months' rent—hence the current living situation.

I was prepared to be homeless for Aphrodite. When you live your entire life bouncing around foster homes, living in your car doesn't sound like such a sacrifice. For once in my life, I have something I own, something that's *mine.*

As I pull up to campus, I don't even bother looking at my schedule again. This is my second year at Florence U, and I'm here for two reasons.

One, rugby. When a disfigured orphan finds something he's good at, and it makes people revere him as a god, he doesn't let it go so easily.

Two, the grants from the state don't cover tech schools. And if I ever want to run my own shop someday, I need an education.

My academic advisor filled my schedule with all the shit I need, and I have to keep a passing grade. So far, it hasn't been an issue. I work, I play, I do my school work. That's it.

And occasionally, fuck strangers on a whim, apparently.

I still can't get that guy out of my head.

Thomas Litchfield. I didn't even know I was into older guys until now,

but he was sexy as fuck. The way he groaned when I slid my cock into him, his fingers gripping the desk. The way he nearly shot his load three feet when he came. How good he tasted when I kissed his neck, like sweat and spice.

Fuck, it's only seven-thirty in the morning and I'm about to get out of my car with a chub in my pants. I have a few minutes to spare, so I do my best to *not* think about my cock in his ass and pray my dick deflates.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror.

He wasn't repulsed by me. It's not that he didn't stare—everyone stares, but he didn't stare at me in disgust or confusion like people usually do. He had a keen interest in me, judging by the way his eyes lingered on my lips and eyes, almost like he was attracted to me. Maybe that's why I pounced on him in the office. I don't get that look a lot.

Grotesque repulsion? Absolutely. Fear and paranoia? Definitely. Curiosity? Sure.

But attraction? Nope. Never.

I'm used to it though. The guys on the team crack jokes, and I don't mind. I let it roll off my shoulders, and I laugh along when they call me Leatherface and the ugly fuck. Because we all know what really matters—I'm the best fucking player on the team. So they can have their fun giving me names. I just pound them into the pitch during practice.

Five minutes to eight, my dick has finally gotten the memo that now is not the time to get excited, so I jump out of the car and head into the English building. My first class is in the big lecture hall, and when I get there, it's already crammed with students. There's only a couple spots left, but they both require me to walk past the whole crowd, something that immediately has me clenching up with paranoia.

Pulling my hoodie over my head, I keep my eyes forward as I make my way across.

Then I hear a familiar voice.

“Come get a syllabus before you sit down,” he says, his voice loud

enough not to need the microphone that some teachers use. I freeze in my spot before glancing in his direction, and there he is.

Warm gray-speckled brown beard, tall narrow frame, long fingers, and tight slacks snug around his hips. When our eyes meet, time stops. Everyone in the room ceases to exist.

The man I fucked yesterday is my new English professor.

Of fucking course he is.

Someone behind me grabs my attention by shouting my last name across the room. “Hey, Smith! Get your shit and come sit down.”

I glance back toward the voice and see one of my teammates, Mason Richards, hollering at me. There’s an empty seat next to him, so I toss him a quick wave before jogging down to the front to grab the packet from the professor without looking him in the eye. Then I hightail my ass up to the third row to sink into a seat next to my friend.

“Too early for you or something?” he asks.

“Way too fucking early,” I reply.

I have to keep my head down to keep from glancing back at Thomas. What if he says something or flirts with me? My skin is crawling, and I’m tempted to just bolt now. I can go straight to my advisor’s office and change my schedule. It’s not too late.

“Stay out too late?” Mason asks.

“Nah. Just worked all weekend.”

“That sucks.”

I sneak a glance up at Thomas, and he looks nervous, maybe a bit more now that he knows I’m here. How the fuck did I not notice he was a teacher here? My dumb ass had to go and fuck a professor without even knowing it.

Pulling my hood farther over my head, I sink into my chair while Thomas goes through the syllabus. I feel eyes on me, and I glance to the side to see a girl at the end of the row in front of us staring at me. I press my lips together and nod in her direction. Mason knocks me on the arm and lifts his eyebrows

suggestively.

He thinks she's flirting with me.

He's an idiot because he doesn't realize a few very crucial things.

First of all, she's not flirting. Girls don't flirt with me. They stare because they're curious, and in her mind, I'm sure she's envisioning herself with me and wondering what it might be like.

Secondly, neither Mason nor any of the guys on my team know that I'm gay. It's bad enough being this ugly. I don't need to be given shit for anything else. Not that I think the guys on my team would call me a faggot for liking dick. It's more that I'm afraid they'll just treat me differently. Like they'll actually *stop* calling me ugly and leatherface and worry about hurting my feelings. I'd much rather have guys who can crack jokes with me and treat me like any other player on the team.

I make it through the whole class without incident. Thomas does a decent job of focusing on teaching and I focus on taking notes and being a regular student. After class, Mason lingers a little too long and he gets stuck talking to one of the girls behind him.

I tap him on the shoulder, say a quick goodbye and dart out of the lecture hall. Thomas doesn't stop me. He does watch me go though, and it's so fucking awkward, I hate it.

I only have one more class today. Then I work at the garage for a couple hours before rugby practice at five. My packed schedule leaves me barely enough time for lunch, so I grab something fried and greasy on my way to work. When I get there, I find the parts for Thomas's car locked up in the back.

"Fuck," I curse out loud. I'm not an actual mechanic, so while I can do things like oil changes and tire rotations, full radiator repairs have to be done by a couple of the senior guys. So when I find them working away tirelessly on his car, I know it won't be long before I have to call him to pick it up.

"Hey," I say to Ivan as I cross the bay heading toward the office where I

can sit down and eat my lunch.

“Hey, Pax,” he replies. “I’ll be done with this car today. You wanna call the customer and let him know?”

“Umm...can you call him? I have practice at five.” My cheeks burn and my blood turns to ice as Ivan glares at me like I just kicked his dog.

“Calling the customers is your fucking job, man. Are you saying you can’t do your job now?”

Fuck. “No. I can do it,” I reply, stalking grumpily toward the office. His invoice is waiting for me, and I stare down at his name that I scribbled there yesterday. What a fucking idiot I was to even lay a hand on a customer. I’m lucky I didn’t lose my job. It’s not the first time I’ve been thankful the cameras don’t work in the shop. There’s no going back now.

Picking up the office phone, I quickly dial the number listed on the yellow paper. He answers on the third ring.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Litchfield...” I say, making my voice a touch deeper than it usually is. “This is Pax with Olympus Auto Shop. Your car is ready.”

“Oh, Pax,” he replies as if he’s just realizing who I am. We never did properly exchange names yesterday. “Will you be around this evening? I can come by to get it.”

“I have practice until seven.”

“After seven works.”

I wince.

“Perfect, then I’ll...see you tonight.”

“Thanks, Pax,” he replies, saying my name again.

After hanging up, I rub my temple. It was supposed to be a quick hookup without attachments or feelings or names, but now I’m getting caught up on how good he looked at the front of the class today and how my name sounds rolling off his tongue. When he picks up his car, I’ll keep my cool, act like nothing happened, and make it through the rest of the semester that way too.

How hard could it be?

CHAPTER 3

THOMAS

“YOU DIDN’T.” Everly gasps across the table from me.

I laugh around my bite of fettuccini. “I wish.”

“It’s only the first day! I strictly said no sleeping with the students.”

“Yeah well, when *he* was fucking *me*, he was only my mechanic.”

“Oh, let’s come back to that,” she replies, noting how I mentioned the ‘fucking me’ part of that sentence. I really do tell Everly everything. “But what are you going to do now?”

“Sweetheart, there’s more.”

Her eyes widen, waiting for me to finish my sentence. “When I asked if I could pick up my car tonight, he informed me he has practice on campus until seven.”

She drops her fork and grabs my arm. “He’s on the rugby team.”

“Yep.”

“With Cullen.”

“Yep.”

“Oh that is hella complicated, Thomas,” she replies. “Who is it?”

I can’t help but wince, because there is zero percent chance she doesn’t know exactly who it is. Cullen, Everly’s boyfriend, is now a senior at Florence U, and has been a star on the team for the past four years. He took a one-year hiatus after getting shot a few years back, but he’s been back at it

since the start of his junior year. She is a devoted girlfriend and goes to every game and as many practices as she can.

As for the public status of their student-teacher relationship, the administration was apparently so desperate for journalism professors, they basically told them not to let anyone see them together, and they'd let their relationship slide without Ev losing her job.

"More importantly," I say, "do you know of any openly gay players on the team?"

She wrinkles her nose. "No, but it's not exactly my business. Or anyone's for that matter."

"I'm willing to bet this year's salary that he's in the closet."

"Okay, but seriously. Who is it?"

"Pax?" I mutter quietly, remembering him on the phone, hearing him say his name for the first time. It all feels like such a mistake—the hookup, the being in my class, all of it. He never wanted me to know his name at all, but now I'm talking about his sexuality to a girlfriend of one of his teammates, which feels completely intrusive.

"Pax Smith?!"

"Shhh! Will you keep your voice down?" We're sitting in the campus cafe, and although we're far enough away from anyone hearing us, I still don't need to draw any more attention to Pax or this conversation.

"The tall kid with the..." Her voice trails as she gestures to her face.

"Yes, the six-foot-five Greek God with the facial scars."

She lets her gaze settle on me for a moment. "Really?"

He's not my type *at all*, which is exactly what she's thinking at this very moment. Other than the fact that he's much younger than me, there is nothing about Pax that would have led to me trying to get into his pants before he almost forcibly found his way into mine.

"Don't say it," I snap, before tossing my napkin on my plate and looking at my watch. "We better get going. It's almost seven."

Everly and I walk together across campus and head toward where the rugby players are finishing up practice. I keep my distance, not wanting Pax to see me with Everly or Cullen. It's bad enough I've shown up at his school and in his class; he doesn't need me popping up at his games and hanging out with one of his senior teammates.

It would seem that if avoiding being seen by someone was a skill, I would be terrible at it, because as I cross between the cars in the parking lot and head toward Everly's car, I nearly slam right into all six and half feet of muscled, Adonis-body, Pax Smith.

"Shit," I mutter, clutching my chest. "You scared me."

Before I have a moment to collect myself, I'm being slammed against the backside of a van. But not the good kind of slammed. When I look up at Pax, he's snarling at me.

"What are you doing here?" He growls through clenched teeth. His hair is wet, hanging in his face, and he smells like Irish Spring soap. Even being fucked by him I wasn't close enough to him to really see him like this.

"I'm walking to my friend's car," I reply, pointing toward Everly's SUV. He turns and glances at the car, letting out a heavy exhale as if he's putting it all together now. "Until I get my car back, looks like I have to catch a ride everywhere." I try to sound casual, but it's a weak attempt.

When his gaze lands back on my face, he looks as if he's trying to maintain his composure. His hand is no longer on my chest, but he's still crowding me, only inches away, and I can tell it's an intimidation tactic, as if he needs one.

"Did you know last night that I was a student here? That I would be in your class?"

I flinch. "What? No! How would I know that?"

Voices carry across the lot, and we realize that Cullen and Everly are heading this way.

"Did you?" I ask.

He looks shocked, his teeth clenched and his nostrils flaring. “Of course not.” He glances up, hearing the happy couple only a few cars away. Pax then leans in toward me again, and I breathe in his clean scent, my senses feasting on his nearness, even while he basically threatens my life. “Don’t tell a fucking soul about yesterday, understand? I don’t know you and you don’t know me. You even think about telling anyone and I’ll—”

“Pax, I won’t,” I whisper.

“Oh, there you are,” Everly says, approaching me from behind. Pax leaps away from me, and when Ev’s gaze lands on his face, she does a very poor job of hiding what she knows. “Oh, hi. Hello. Hey, Pax.”

I wince. *Real smooth, Ev.*

Quickly, I try to salvage the situation. “Pax is my mechanic,” I blurt out, and she tries to look surprised, but it’s awful. This whole situation is awful.

Now Pax basically knows that I’ve told Everly about us, which is exactly what he just threatened me *not* to do.

Even though I wasn’t in the closet for very long, I remember the agony of feeling like the most vulnerable, most private part of myself was at risk of becoming everybody else’s business; it was terrifying. People are cruel, and they don’t have compassion when it’s not their own heart they’re ripping to shreds.

Footsteps approach again, and I freeze when I see Cullen’s short black hair come into view. He slaps Everly on the ass. “Let’s go. I’m fucking starving.”

His eyes land on me and Pax, who is suddenly sucked into this whole situation, standing with the three of us and looking like he wants to evaporate into dust.

“Hey, Smith,” Cullen says, greeting his teammate.

Pax replies with a curt nod. I notice the way he keeps his head tilted away from people, sometimes facing down, and when given the chance, he seems to blend into his surroundings rather than try to stand out. It pulls at my heart

a little, to see him try to hide himself. And try as I might not to stare, I sort of love his scars.

“Car, now,” Cullen tells Everly, “I’m starved.” It’s taken some getting used to hearing the way he talks to her, and at first, I’ll admit, I hated it. But I’ve never seen a guy so enamored by a woman fourteen years older than him. Plus, I think in some weird way, she likes his crass attitude and bossy ways.

“We have to drop Thomas off at the shop,” she replies, calling after him. Anxiety settles in my bones when I realize what is about to happen.

“His shop?” Cullen replies, pointing to Pax. “Why doesn’t Pax just take him. He’s got a better car, anyway.”

“You don’t have to drive me,” I say immediately, trying to break the tension before it even builds. *Dammit, Cullen.*

Pax looks tense, his jaw is clenched and he’s fisting his bag in one hand so tightly that his knuckles are white. I want to tell him to relax, that no one will suspect he’s gay just because he gives me a ride to his shop. Then again, maybe he’s tense because he doesn’t want to be alone with me again. Maybe he hated every minute of it, and is actually repulsed by me.

Okay that’s a dramatic assumption.

“It’s fine. Makes more sense anyway,” he says with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“Yeah, it’s fine. Come on.”

I wave goodbye to Everly and she grimaces at me before mouthing, *sorry.*

As I walk behind him to his car, I brace myself for what I’m assuming will be a very awkward car ride.

CHAPTER 4

PAX

“THIS IS YOUR CAR?” Thomas asks as he pauses, standing a few feet away from Aphrodite.

“Mmhm,” I mutter, pulling open the trunk to toss my gym bag in. I don't even bother trying to hide my irritation. First, he shows up in my first class *as my professor*. Then he shows up at my rugby practice with one of my teammate's girlfriends. And it was very fucking clear by the deer-in-headlights look on her face that she knew exactly who I was...in terms of my connection to Thomas at least.

I should have known, really. I knew Ayers was dating a professor. Naturally, she was friends with the one I just fucked. But this isn't going to be some double-date situation. No one on the team even knows I'm gay—except for Cullen now, I'm sure.

So when I slam the trunk closed and it echoes across the dark parking lot, Thomas gets the message.

“Listen, Pax...”

“Just get in,” I mutter.

I do a quick scan of the parking lot to make sure no one else sees me taking a guy for a ride in my car. I know I'm being paranoid. Who would think we're fucking, just by me giving him a ride to the shop? But when you have a secret, something intimate about yourself, it's easy to feel like they

already know. Like every little choice you make is a glowing neon sign that outs you without even realizing it.

Thomas doesn't hide his sexuality. He has a swagger that screams confident, gay man—and not just any gay man, confident *vers*. Which wasn't something I knew for sure yesterday so I had to take a gamble, not really knowing which way that was going to go.

And *fuck me*, he looks good. Especially in the passenger seat of my car. Against the faded dark brown leather, he looks like a fucking meal I want to devour. In fact, he looks too fucking good for me. Too perfect, crisp and clean. He has a wealthy, sexy energy that's designed to make me want him without ever really having him.

But I did have him. He let me fuck him yesterday, and he didn't even know my name.

It's a detail I loved, at first, but now as I realize this perfect man I'm suddenly pining for like a teenage girl with a crush is also a fucking whore, it makes me irrationally territorial. Does he just walk around letting everyone fuck him? Does he like it? Did I mean anything to him?

This is ridiculous. I need to avoid Thomas Litchfield at all costs, but how can I when he's sitting next to me smelling like heaven and looking like sin.

"I want to apologize," he says, as I rev the engine, pulling out of the parking space and moving toward the exit.

"What for?" I reply.

"Well, that's the thing. I don't know. Tell me why you're upset."

"Who said I'm upset?"

"Your behavior. The scowl on your face." He's being playful again, a slight lift to his lips.

"This is just my face." I shoot him a sideways glare, and his smile disappears. I don't know why I did that. Made him feel bad for bringing up my appearance. I'm just angry, but I honestly don't know why.

"I'm serious, Pax. Are you worried people will find out about you?"

“Find out what?”

“You know what.”

“I don’t. Why don’t you spell it out for me, teach.” Why am I being such an asshole? Fuck, even I don’t know.

“Whatever. Look, it was an unlikely coincidence that I ended up being your teacher. I have no intention of telling anyone what happened last night and I don’t plan on letting it happen again. We can just move on.”

He sounds so cold and annoyed. I hate it, but he’s right. We have to move on and forget each other. I can’t be letting my secret out and having him around campus while anything is going on between us.

I could bring up the fact that he already told his friend about us. But I don’t, because I don’t want to fight with him. I don’t want him to talk like that anymore. I miss the playful, flirtatious Thomas I met yesterday. But that chance is gone, so I might as well just stew in my disappointment.

“This is a nice car,” he says after about five minutes of silence.

“Thanks.”

“This is the kind of car you give a name,” he replies with laughter in his tone.

I can’t fight back the smile that’s taking over his face. “Aphrodite.”

“Oh, good one. I like it.”

When I glance his way again, the stoplight in front of us illuminates his face in a bright glow that makes him look sexy as fuck. And with just that thought, my frustration is back. Nameless sex encounters are fine, especially for scratching a certain itch, but I hate the way I want to touch him again, want to dominate his body a second time.

I know it’s fucking stupid, but I place all of the blame on him. It’s his fault for being a whore, for being good looking, for being my teacher, for being in my car, and for being friends with my teammate and his girlfriend. How much I fucking like him is his fault too. My fingers squeeze around the steering wheel as I keep my eyes forward, refusing to expose my desire for

him.

But the longer we sit in silence, the more the tension between us grows. By the time we pull into the lot of the empty garage, it feels like I'm driving a bomb that's about to detonate. I shift the car into park, but neither of us move. I can feel him readying to say something about what happened or how he's my teacher or some shit like that, some lame fucking grown-up shit that will sound more rational than I'm in the mood to hear.

So I don't let him speak. Instead, I reach across the seat and grab him by the back of the neck, jerking him toward me and crashing my lips against his.

There is not one ounce of fight in him. He opens for me like he did last night, but this time, it's his lips that part as we breathe hot air against each other, our tongues colliding in soft friction. A low groan rumbles from my chest, and my dick seems to remember how I made it shut up and wait this morning because it's eager to join the party now. I don't think it's ever hardened so fast in my life.

I don't usually like kissing. As a matter of fact, I can't remember the last time I kissed someone, but it's not for reasons having to do with the act of kissing or how much it turns me on. It's more of a self-preservation thing. If I let people kiss me, then they can feel the scars on my lips and cheeks, and I don't normally let people this close for that very reason.

But Thomas tastes *so...fucking...good*. I can't get enough of his mouth. I pinch his bottom lip between my teeth, making him gasp and moan. My hands find their way to his crotch, and just like yesterday, he's right there with me. Pitching a pretty impressive tent—he's so turned on too.

My nerves are buzzing. I'm still full of the fury I had on the car ride to the shop, but my body and my brain are at odds. I want to squeeze this man so tight out of frustration it hurts. I want him to know how badly I *don't* want him. Or rather how badly I *don't want to* want him. Because I don't.

But here he is, being fucking hot and horny and always ready to go.

So I take him by the back of the neck and squeeze.

“Suck my cock,” I demand.

He hesitates, staring into my eyes as his are darkened with lust. “Pax,” he whispers. Then his eyes scan my face, seeing my scars up close, and I hate it. So I shove his face down to my crotch.

“I said, suck my cock,” I repeat. I hate the way it sounds on my lips, so harsh and cold. This isn’t me. I don’t want to do this to him, but why can’t I seem to stop?

He doesn’t fight me. Instead, he tears down the waistband of my athletic shorts and pulls out my throbbing dick. His warm mouth breezes over my shaft, planting kisses from the tip down to the base, then licking his way back to the top.

My hand is still planted firmly on the back of his neck. “Don’t fucking tease me,” I growl.

His lips part and his tongue touches the head before sliding it in his mouth, gliding across the wet surface until I reach the back of his throat. He doesn’t even gag as he coats my dick in saliva, closing his lips and bobbing up and down.

“Jesus,” I mumble as my hips jerk upward to meet his movements. Using his hand at the base of my cock, where his mouth doesn’t reach, he strokes me, squeezing on the upstroke. I can’t stop watching him. He’s so fucking perfect, and at this moment, he’s all mine.

I rest my head back against the headrest and lose myself in the pleasure while he sucks and licks and squeezes. My eyes close and my grasp loosens, letting him take over. It’s never been like this with anyone. Everything Thomas does is so flawless, and I almost don’t want it to end.

I can already tell I’m going to get addicted to this, to him.

“Make me come with that perfect mouth,” I growl, in a softer tone than before.

He hums around my cock as his lips tighten around me and he sucks even

harder. He milks the cum out of me like a goddamn professional. I tighten my fingers around his neck as I jerk and unload into the back of his throat. The suction of his mouth doesn't stop until I'm wrung dry.

I melt into my seat, staring up at the ceiling as he lifts his face from my crotch, licking up the mess he made on my dick. I think I might die because I can't seem to breathe at all, and my heart feels ready to pound its way out of my rib cage.

When I finally relax a little, I look over at him. He's staring out the window, and I don't know if it's guilt or shame he's feeling, but I hate it either way. I don't want to be done with him yet. I want to yank him onto my lap and pepper his face with kisses, rub my nose in that beard of his, and then jack him until he paints my chest white, but I can't.

There is a wall between us. One we can peek over from time to time, but one I refuse to ever completely climb over. It's not an intentional thing, but this mental block I have will not allow me to be the least bit vulnerable. And telling this man how much I like him and want to see him again is exposing too much; it's too personal. All I have left is cruelty.

So I pull up my shorts, jump out of the car, and walk over to unlock the garage where his car is parked. It's a dick move, acting like I owe him nothing, and he will probably hate me for this, but that's for the best. Because I already hate myself enough for both of us.

CHAPTER 5

THOMAS

HE STARTS MY CAR, and I watch him as he pops the hood to check a couple more things before declaring it's *good to go*. And that's it. He leaves it running, and waits for me to climb in and drive away.

I still have the taste of his cock on my tongue and he wants to act like he didn't just make me suck him off in the front seat of his car. Which seems to be a fucking habit of his.

There's not even a bill to settle, since they have my credit card on file, so there's literally nothing left to say as I climb into the driver's seat.

"See you tomorrow," I mutter as I adjust the seat to fit my height. When I glance up at him, he looks like he wants to say something, but he keeps quiet. Then, he slams my door shut, clearly telling me it's time to leave.

Sitting in the car under the bright lights of the garage bay, I watch him as he busies himself with cleaning up the shop. I'm still strangely hypnotized by him.

Finally, snapping myself out of it, I reverse out of the garage bay and drive into the dark night. It's a long quiet road back to the highway, giving me lots of time to think, so I relive the moment we just had in his car with his tight grip on the back of my neck.

I've had rough sex before. I've been told what to do and how to do it. I like it from time to time, but that's not what this was. Pax was mad at me. He

wanted to hurt me. It turned me on—which is not something I expected.

But something is still bothering me.

He wants to keep me on a string, within his reach, but him out of mine. When he wants me, he takes me and then he immediately dismisses me, and it's not fucking fair. He's young, I get that. He's scared, putting up a wall, using distance as a defense mechanism, but it's not right. I deserve something more personal, or just *something more*.

“Fuck this,” I mutter to myself as I slam on the brakes and spin the car around before reaching the freeway.

I'm not some fuckboy. Sure, I'm all for casual flings here and there, but I deserve a few words after. Not only that, I want more from Pax. In just two days, this kid has flipped everything upside down, and it's not fucking fair. I'm not usually so clingy to a one-night stand, but his utter disregard for what? has triggered something in me, and I have too much to fucking say to walk away like this.

In the car, he wanted to play games with me. Pretend he's so unaffected, like nothing happened between us, and that probably pisses me off the most. He may be young, but he doesn't need to be so fucking immature.

God, what is my deal? I must be crazy, I think as I pull back into the lot of the mechanic shop. His car is still here, but the garage bay door is closed.

I waltz right past his car, and try opening the door to the shop, and I'm shocked to find it swings open easily.

“What are you doing?” a dark voice echoes through the empty garage. He's standing there in just his shorts and a T-shirt.

I march right over to him, ready to unload all of the things I've been piling up in my head on the drive back, but none of them quite make their way out in a coherent order.

“You can't...do this, Pax,” I say with anger.

“Can't do what?” he replies in a clipped tone.

“Treat me like this. Like some fuckboy you can use and toss away. I'm

not *that* guy,” I yell.

“Okay,” he says, and it’s the casual nonchalance in his voice that sends me over the edge. He sounds like a bratty teenager, and it grates on my nerves.

“I’ll admit. I was into it yesterday. I liked the quickie in the office and being what you needed at that moment, but now you’re just...”

“Just what?”

“You don’t want to talk about what happened at school? Fine. You want to be rough and fuck on the downlow? Fine. But you can’t just walk away after and suddenly treat me like you hate me.”

He has such a well-suited plate of armor on, it’s infuriating. It’s clear as fucking day that this is how Pax defends himself from emotions; he acts like it doesn’t matter, and he doesn’t care. And I don’t see any way through that armor, so it’s best to just walk away now before I’m in too deep and there’s no going back.

“You know what...I don’t care. I’ll see you in class, but outside of that, there’s nothing.”

“Fine,” he mutters.

I start to storm off toward my car, but something catches my eye. He’s standing next to a thin foam mattress on the floor, and the thing in his hands is a pillow. He’s wearing socks. But no shoes.

And the fight in me suddenly dissolves like paper in water.

He sees me looking and tries to step in my way to block me from seeing the proof that he’s obviously sleeping in this filthy garage.

“Pax,” I mumble, letting my eyes trail up to his face. His jaw tightens and he looks away. “Are you sleeping here?” I ask gently.

“I’m fine. It’s just something I do from time to time. Have a good night, Mr. Litchfield,” he mutters before turning to toss the pillow on the mattress.

Jesus, is this kid...homeless?

“Stop,” I bark. As he glares up at me, his warm copper eyes soak up the

fluorescent lights. “You can’t sleep here.”

“I told you, I’m fine. Now get the fuck out of here, please,” he barks, and I can see how uncomfortable it is for him to show any kind of weakness.

I can’t believe I’m even considering this—I just met this guy yesterday, but he’s a student, and Everly and Cullen know him, so he’s not a complete stranger. “Come stay at my place tonight.”

“Just fuck off, Thomas.”

Of course he’s going to be a stubborn asshole. A little voice in my head says, *just leave him. He said he’s fine and at least you offered.* But dammit, something about this guy catches me off guard. It’s the scars and the wall he puts up that make me want to get through to him. It’s the vulnerability I know he’s afraid to feel and the fact that he’s never going to make things easy for me, but maybe I’m tired of easy. Maybe I want a challenge and Pax Smith is definitely that.

Whatever the reason is, I’m about to stoke the flames that are already burning.

“If you don’t take me up on my offer, Pax...I might accidentally forget to keep your little secret. I’d hate for the whole team to find out the truth.”

He moves so fast it makes me feel off-kilter. His large hand is around my neck, and my back is slammed hard against the wall. His face is just inches from mine, his sneer so close to my cheek, I can feel the warmth of his breath on my skin.

“I hope you’re not fucking blackmailing me right now, Mr. Litchfield.”

“So what if I am.”

“I said I was fine,” he growls.

“Yeah well, I’m not. I can’t just leave you here.”

At this moment, he’s actually quite intimidating. Towering over me, his body pressed up against mine, I’m dwarfed in comparison, but I’m not afraid of him. I think he wants me to be, and there’s no doubt he could very easily hurt me, but I know he won’t. I know that Pax Smith is far more cornered

than I am. He's been abused or neglected and when threatened, he'd rather scare you away than risk being hurt again.

I want to help him, but the problem is, I don't know how to reach him. Behind this mean facade and scary exterior is a guy I know wants to be soft and maybe even taken care of. He started it with me. He could have literally watched me walk away without touching me yesterday, but he didn't, and I have to believe that me being older than him held some sort of appeal. Deep down, he needs someone like me. I just have to make him see it.

I gently wrap my hands around his wrists and coax him into releasing his grip on me.

"Come on," I say. "Let's make a deal. You call the shots, okay? You want to come to my house and have your way with me, okay. You want to tell me to fuck off and crash on my couch, okay. I'll leave you alone. Want to be a dick to me in front of the whole class and the rugby team, just to be sure no one suspects anything? Fine. I don't care. You call the shots, Pax."

Finally, he lets go of my shirt long enough to let me breathe without the force of his body pinning me to the cinder block wall. But I don't let go of his wrists, at least not right away.

When I do release him, the anger drains from his face and he replaces it with confusion. "Why the fuck are you being so nice to me?"

Nice? This is a step above basic decency, but he must have had to deal with a lot of fucked-up assholes in his life to see this as me being nice. I don't really want to point that out, so instead I just reply, "Beats the fuck out of me."

CHAPTER 6

PAX

I CAN SWALLOW down the embarrassment of being caught sleeping in the garage. I can even handle the shame of taking charity from someone I barely know. What I can't fucking handle is Thomas being so fucking nice when all I've been is a complete asshole to him.

It feels like the more I try to push this guy away, the more he keeps coming back. I've been nothing but an ignorant, self-absorbed asshole since the moment I ambushed him in the office yesterday and fucked him without so much as a greeting.

I follow him to his place, which, of course, is downtown. It's a small condo, but I'm willing to bet he paid a shit ton for it. I feel so exposed when I park my car in his driveway. Aphrodite is not subtle. If people see it parked here, they will know it's me.

The minute we walk inside, I feel completely out of place, and I want to bolt. It looks like one of those fancy magazine homes without a touch of anything personal. I still have grease under my fingernails and this guy has a white fucking sofa. This is a nightmare.

The living room is off to the right with the kitchen at the back. To the left are the stairs leading to the second floor. Thomas walks in ahead of me, switching on lights and dropping his keys in a tiny white porcelain bowl by the front door. Meanwhile, I'm standing awkwardly in the entryway as he

heads toward the kitchen. We still haven't said a word to each other since I had my hand around his throat.

I may have overreacted a little, but I don't like the feeling of being pressured or cornered into anything. And I especially don't like attention, which is exactly what Thomas seems to like to give me.

"Come on in," he calls from the pristine white kitchen. "Hungry? I'm not a good cook, but I can put something in the oven."

"I'm fine," I mumble, still standing by the door.

He watches me from under the bright lights, while I'm over here hunkering down in the shadows. It's silent for a moment and awkward as hell. Dying of heat stroke in the un-air-conditioned garage would have been better than this.

"The guest bedroom is upstairs," he says, moving toward the set of stairs. As he brushes past me, I breathe in the scent of his cologne, and my dick responds. He did say I could have my way with him, and sex would probably eat up some of the tension, but to be honest, I'm fucking beat. I slept like shit last night. Practice was exhausting, and I had a packed schedule today.

So without a word, I follow him up to the second floor. There is a room to the right that I can tell right away by the giant bed and clothes on the dresser that it's his. To the left, there is a bathroom and a spare room. Thank God the bedding is deep blue and not white. I don't think I could take anymore fucking white.

"Towels are in the hall closet. Help yourself to the shower. There are spare toothbrushes under the sink."

I only nod in response. I don't bother mentioning that I take my showers in the locker room after practice because that's fucking embarrassing. And I don't dwell too long on the fact that he has spare toothbrushes, because it means he must have a lot of overnight guests. Instead, I drop my backpack on the floor next to the bed and awkwardly wait for him to leave. After a moment of tense silence, he finally gets the message and tells me good night.

I don't bother to shut the door before I switch off the light and shed my clothes down to my boxers. I then flop down on the bed and melt into the memory foam mattress. The groan of pleasure that escapes my lips is loud. What this room lacks in personal touch, definitely makes up for it in comfort, and I hate to admit it, but this is much fucking nicer than a flimsy six-inch mattress on concrete.

After I hear Thomas shut himself in his room and the lights down the hall turn dark, I try to fall asleep. It takes a bit longer than I expected, especially considering how comfortable I am, but my dick doesn't seem to want to give up on the offer to 'have its way with him.' Luckily, my exhaustion wins and I'm deep in a dreamless sleep before I can act on it.

I wake up sometime before six. The house is quiet and cool, so I have no idea why I'm suddenly wide awake, but no amount of tossing and turning will let me fall back to sleep. I might as well just get up. I can slip out the door and go to campus early, so no one sees me leaving one of my professor's homes.

Before getting dressed, I sneak into the bathroom to pee, and when I come out, I see Thomas's bedroom door wide open. Curiosity gets the better of me and I tiptoe to his room to spy on him. There's a subtle blue glow from the alarm clock on his nightstand, and it illuminates his body on the bed. He's on top of the sheets, sprawled on his back in just his tight black boxer briefs.

Until now I've only been able to admire his body through the clothes he wears and the way his ass fills out a pair of tight slacks, but now I can drink in the ripple of shadows across his abs and his thick thighs in contrast to the white sheets. He's not a big guy, but the lean muscle of his body has my cock growing thick in my boxers.

Without making a sound, I give it a gentle stroke over my underwear. It feels heavenly as I stare at his sleeping form, the soft lull of his breathing the only sound in the house. It's intrusive of me, but I don't care. I need to come,

and I probably *should* go do it in the privacy of the bathroom or the guest bedroom, but I can't peel myself away from him.

Plus, I'm breaking a pretty big rule of mine because I'm still half naked, and if he wakes up, he's going to see me. But then again this guy has me breaking all my rules.

Reaching under the elastic band, I palm the head of my dick, giving it a tight squeeze. It's hard to keep my groan silent, but I do, stroking myself while I watch him sleep. But even as I feel my orgasm building, I stop because I don't want to come in my boxers. Not before I get to touch him.

Silently, I cross the room and stand at the foot of his king-size bed. He's sprawled out on one side as if he's only taking up half of it in order to leave room for someone else. I'm tempted to crawl into the empty space, but I don't want to be next to him. I want to be *on* him. No, I *want* to be *in* him.

I slowly crawl onto the mattress, and he starts to stir, but he doesn't wake up. Straddling his lower legs, I drag my nose along one of his tan thighs while my hand slowly glides along the other, and it's not until I bury my face in the silky elastic of his underwear that I hear him hiss, and I know he's awake.

He's soft behind his boxers, but I feel the bulge of his dick and I wedge my teeth around it, giving him a subtle bite.

"Pax," he whispers in the darkness. His husky tone is laced with fear and arousal. Threading his fingers into my hair, he shifts his hips upward, pressing my face into his groin. With my nose buried in the fabric, I inhale his masculine scent. What is it about this guy that turns me on so damn much? It's like his pheromones are a drug to me.

He hardens quickly between my teeth, so I slide my fingers under the waistband and drag down his boxers to find his shaft. My first time really seeing it this close, I admire his impressive cock, like him slender and long. Naturally, it's perfect. Thick veins run along the underside, and I lap my tongue along each one. He gasps and moans, squirming on the bed as I tease

him. The torture is fun, making him suffer in anticipation.

Then, wrapping my hand around him, I give him a couple hard strokes before taking him in my mouth, letting him glide as far down my throat as I can without gagging.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he groans, his back arching off the bed, and I already want to come just from the sounds he makes as I suck him off. His cock touches the back of my throat, and I bury my nose in the neatly trimmed hair around his shaft. My other hand finds his balls and gives them a gentle tug that stops his breathing altogether. Without letting up, I keep my momentum, dragging him closer and closer to his orgasm, knowing mine won’t be far behind.

I’ve never gotten off from giving someone else a blow job, but my grinding hips against the mattress are leading me to believe this might be a first.

When I do feel his balls tighten under my fingertips, I ease up on his dick; I’m not ready to end this just yet. I want to draw out every second and make it last forever, especially in this twilight darkness before we’ve even spoken to each other today. It’s like a clean slate, and I haven’t had a chance to fuck it up yet. I want to enjoy it while it lasts.

But I can’t help how good he tastes in my mouth, and I suck harder, moving faster and lapping up the drops of pre-cum he leaks onto my tongue.

When his balls tighten again, I know he’s about to blow, but I don’t let him come down my throat, not because I don’t like to swallow but because I want his cum in my hand. Picking up speed and squeezing tighter, I take him to the very edge before pulling my mouth away. His body jerks and he lets out a strangled cry as the warm spurts fill my palm.

Before he can even catch his breath, I move upward onto my knees, pulling out my own cock and using his cum as lube to jack myself.

“Jesus,” he gasps, watching me stroke my own cock. The wet sound of my hand around my shaft is filthy and sexy. He squeezes my hips, and his

gaze doesn't leave my stroking hands. "Fuck, you turn me on so much. I love watching you do that." With his sexy, praising words, it doesn't take long before I'm shooting my load all over him. I can just barely make out the lust in his eyes as he stares at the movement of my hand.

It's dark enough that he can't really see me—or at least I tell myself that. Thomas seems to be pretty accepting of the shit all over my face, but I can't really hide it. I can hide my body, though, which I choose to do. I don't know how he'd react to seeing the rest of it, so as long as we're doing this, we'll stay in the dark.

After my cock is spent and I've wrung myself dry, I rub my jizz-soaked hand over his pecs, mixing our cum together over his chest hair. I feel his heart pounding as he tries to catch his breath.

I'm in a post-orgasm daze myself, so I don't even realize what he's doing until it's too late. He reaches over to the nightstand, and the lamp suddenly flicks on, bathing the room in soft, yellow light.

"Shit," I curse as I slump forward, but it's too late. He's already staring wide-eyed at my body, hovering over his.

"What's wrong?" he asks. "Are you okay?"

I refuse to run away or hide like a scared little kid, so instead, I lean back on my heels and let him see me. His chest is still covered in a sticky mess, but when his eyes cascade over my naked body, I don't think he cares about the cum coating his skin anymore.

"Fuck, Pax," he whispers. I can't look him in the eye, so with my jaw clenched, I keep my gaze focused on the wall. Then I feel his fingers trace the shapes on my chest. They are wide, pink, puckered scars that stretch from my shoulders to my waist in various directions. The beauty of growing to my size is that the scars I got from when I was six have grown with me. And I know how gruesome they look, a constant reminder of the world I was born into.

When I don't respond to his touch or look him in the eye, he seems to understand that I don't want to talk about it. His fingers drop away from my

chest and land on my hips.

“Come shower with me,” he says, slapping my ass playfully with one hand.

I’m about to say no and argue, but I don’t. I’m not sure why, but I actually follow him to his en-suite bathroom and peel off my boxers at the same time he does. It’s bright as fuck in here, but he doesn’t stare at my body anymore. He takes my hand and pulls me under the cascading stream, and together, we wash our bodies without talking.

After our shower, we each get dressed, and while he’s making his morning coffee, I slip out the front door. I don’t ask to stay again, and he doesn’t invite me, at least not yet. But I clearly need to make a plan that doesn’t involve me sleeping on the floor because I could get used to staying at Thomas’s house, and that would be a problem. A big fucking problem.

CHAPTER 7

THOMAS

I DON'T HAVE Pax's phone number. This occurs to me on the drive to campus, about an hour after he disappeared this morning. He took everything with him, but I sort of expected him to stay over again. He can't possibly plan on sleeping on the floor of the mechanic's shop, not when he has a perfectly warm and comfortable place to stay at my house. Something I'm offering out of the goodness of my heart, and not just because waking up with my cock down the throat of a six-foot rugby player is a lovely way to start the day.

And the sight of him stroking jacking off onto my chest will be etched into my mind forever, giving me little sparks of pleasure all day long. He didn't seem to be a fan of the lights though, and I guess after seeing those scars, I can see why. I just wish I could have the Pax I get in the dark in the daylight too. Because when it's just us, and he's not worrying about what I see, it's actually kind of nice. We seem well-matched, like the same fire burns in both of us.

When he walks into class, I don't say anything to him. He ignores me and I ignore him. The class is a simple second-level English course, so there are a lot of students and not much time for class discussion. It makes the perfect environment for Pax to blend into the crowd and for me to pretend I don't know him at all, especially not intimately.

And everything is fine when he takes a seat in the back of the room, until

a busty brunette with shorts cut so high I can see the crease of her ass cheek plops down into the chair next to him. It's not just that she sits next to him, it's the way she smiles at him after she does. And the fact that he smiles back.

Now, I am too old to get caught up in jealousy, and I certainly do not get jealous of girls who flirt with the men I'm interested in, but this one, for some reason, has my attention.

One of Pax's rowdy teammates comes in and drops into the seat on the other side of him. He's loud, striking up a conversation with Pax about practice yesterday and plans for the weekend. Pretty soon, the girl has joined in and the three of them are talking loud enough for the whole room to hear over the general chatter.

Pax is looking at me. His expression is heavy, lips tight and jaw clenched.

And I hate this for him. I hate that he has to pretend he's something he's not. I hate that life has thrown him so much shit that he's built armor around himself so he doesn't have to feel anything anymore. I hate that I want to get inside that armor when I know he'll never let me.

The girl touches his arm, and he sends her a tense smile. Not that I've seen a lot of Pax's smiles or know what the different ones look like. The first day in the car, though, I feel like I got a glimpse of what he's like with his guard down. As he talks to her, looking uncomfortable as he does, it makes me wonder how far he would go to prove his straightness.

When I glance down at my watch, I realize I'm five minutes late starting class, so I quickly get the students' attention and get started with today's lecture. Since this course is mostly geared toward writing, we get started with a short writing assignment students can complete in class. I give them fifteen minutes to answer the writing prompt on the board, which goes fine, except about two minutes into the exercise, the loudmouth next to Pax starts babbling on about some story from the weekend.

He's not really talking *to* Pax. It almost seems like he's talking to the girl on the other side of Pax more, but either way, it's disruptive and the fact that Pax is involved irritates me even more.

"Please keep quiet until the timer goes off," I say, but the rugby player only glares at me and continues whispering, without even doing it quietly. Of course, I can't remember his name—it being only my second day.

Pax is actually focusing on his writing, but after a few moments, he drops his pencil and I can tell he's frustrated with the guy next to him. But instead of telling him to shut up, he starts whispering along with him, and now I'm really irritated, which is unfair, considering the morning I had. All things considered, I should be in a great fucking mood.

So before the time goes off, I snap.

"Mr. Smith," I call. Everyone looks up, even Pax, who is staring at me with wide eyes. "I need you to keep it down or I'll have to ask you to leave."

"Are you fucking serious?" he mutters, and the class collectively gasps.

It feels like he's saying that to me as the guy he's currently fucking and not his professor, and I clam up, glaring back at him.

"Yeah, I am. Right now, it's class time. So act like it."

His eyes widen even more. The room is silent as he shoots daggers at me with the intensity of his stare. I've fucked up, I know it. I let my irritation, albeit irrational, mess with my judgment, but something about him carrying on with these two students bothered me.

Calling him out was wrong. The last thing Pax wants is attention. He's pissed at me, and I can already anticipate how he's going to make me pay for it.

Suddenly, the timer on my computer goes off, breaking the tense silence in the room. As I quickly shut it off, the students put their pencils down and wait for my instruction. Pax is still watching me from the back row, and I feel his eyes on me for the rest of the class.

When it's over, and the students start packing up, I decide I'm going to

apologize to him. I'll ask him to stay behind, and it'll give me a chance to get his phone number anyway. I want to make it clear that he's welcome to stay at my place again, if it means he doesn't have to sleep on the ground. Out of the goodness of my heart.

And in hopes of another good-morning blow job.

But with the way he's glaring at me now, the chances of that are getting slimmer by the second.

"Do you guys have class after this? Want to go grab a coffee?" the brunette asks, as they start to shuffle their way down the aisle.

"Sure," the jock answers. "Pax?"

"I have another class."

I'm busy packing up my stuff and saying goodbye to the other students when I feel his eyes on me, and I wonder if he actually has another class or if he's making up an excuse not to have to talk to her anymore. I want to tell him that avoiding girls is going to give him away before being caught talking to me would.

"Mr. Smith, can I have a word?" I say to him as he passes by. The other students stare for a moment, and Pax just looks annoyed. He nods and waves to the others as they leave.

Then it's just us. We're alone, but the door is still wide open. He stalks toward it without a word, slamming it shut, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"Pax, I want to apologize," I say, but the words barely make it out of my mouth before he's shoving me against the wall. "I shouldn't have called you out like that."

"Let's get one thing clear, Mr. Litchfield," he says, when our bodies are flush, and I'm pinched between him and the wall. His face is just inches from mine. "You don't know me, and I don't know you. Don't talk to me, look at me, or touch me. I don't do relationships, so when we're alone, I own you."

His hand cups my dick forcefully, and I jump, but he doesn't let me

move. The tighter he holds me in place, the harder I get under his hand.

“Oh, you like that, don’t you, Mr. Litchfield?”

I stare into his eyes without flinching. This is really not my MO, the one being pushed around, bullied and talked down to. Not that I’m usually doing this to others, but the guys I normally date don’t have the attitude or fire Pax does.

So why am I putting up with it now? Why do I let him talk to me like this? And why is my dick hardening so fast when I know I’m not going to let him fuck me here in this classroom. Not when he talks to me like this and refuses to open up to me. Whenever things get too personal for Pax, this is what he defaults to—pushing me around and trying to fuck me. All part of his defense, I know.

And I’m a stubborn mother fucker who wants to get inside that armor. But the more I enable this kind of behavior, the more he’s going to do it. It gets me nowhere. So instead of grinding into his hand like I want to, I relax against the wall.

“You’re in charge, Pax,” I say, holding my hands up in surrender. His expression falters for a moment, as I’m sure he wasn’t expecting my concession. We stare at each other for a long moment, waiting for the other person to do something, when he does what I least expect—he kisses me.

It’s soft and warm, his lips aren’t hungrily searching for something or forcing my lips apart with his tongue the way he did in the car yesterday. He’s kissing me like it’s a language only we speak, a silent conversation. The hand on my crotch releases its hold and it drifts upward, snaking its way around my waist and pulling me closer. My hands are on his sides, running my fingers along the hard muscle of his body.

As his tongue slides against mine, he lets out a soft hum, and my fingers dig into his back.

“Come over tonight,” I breathe against his mouth.

“Okay,” he replies quickly before diving back in. The hand he was using

to prop himself up against the wall digs into my hair, curving my body harder against his. I've never dated a man this much taller than me, and I've got to say, I fucking love it. He engulfs me, making me feel like a small plaything in the hands of a giant.

This kiss feels like it will never end, and I never want it to, but the sound of the heavy door being opened is like an alarm going off. Pax and I tear away from each other, our mouths both red and swollen from the kiss. We both position our bodies away from the door, so whoever is about to walk in doesn't spot the massive erections we're both sporting.

I'm prepared to be horrified at being seen alone with a student, but I'm actually massively relieved when Everly peeks her head in.

"Oh, hey," she stammers, quickly averting her eyes and ducking back out. "Sorry."

Pax looks horrified, and I can see the anxiety building behind his eyes. I touch his arm and give him a silent reassurance.

"It's okay," I whisper. Then I call out to Everly. "I'll be out in a minute."

"No rush," she replies. Pax still appears distraught.

"I'll see you later, okay?"

He hesitates as he glances at the door again, and my heart breaks for him. The closet he's put himself in is a prison of his own making, which means that only he can set himself free.

CHAPTER 8

THOMAS

“I’D JUST LIKE to start off this conversation by saying I won’t even bother trying to talk you out of this,” Everly says, as soon as Pax has disappeared and she and I are alone.

“Good,” I reply, zipping my bag and throwing the strap over my shoulder. “Because that would be super hypocritical.”

“I know,” she adds, but I can tell by the tightness of her lips that she has more to say.

“But...?”

“But...”

“Just come out with it already, Everly. But do it while we walk because I need coffee. Or alcohol.” It’s only 10:00 a.m., so I guess I should stick with caffeine.

“I’m just worried about you, that’s all.”

“Worried about what?” I ask, locking the door to the room behind us.

“Promise not to bite my head off for what I’m about to say.”

“Not a chance I’ll be making that promise.”

“Fine. I’ll say it anyway,” she replies, before scanning the hallway to make sure we’re truly alone. “Thomas, you tend to get yourself more emotionally invested in these flings than you think you do.”

“What?” I nearly shout as I glare at her. “I do not.”

“Yes, you do. What about Nico?”

“What *about* Nico?” I snap back. I’ve only just noticed that he hasn’t texted or called since I slept over at his place Saturday night, not that he normally does. In fact, he usually only contacts me on the weekends and not even every weekend. I know I’m a booty call to him, but usually by the middle of the week, I start to get anxious or irritated by his lack of communication.

“He’s been stringing you along for two years, Thomas. And don’t say it doesn’t bother you that he only calls you for sex. I’m the one who has to listen to you complain about it.”

Well, fuck. She’s crazy if she thinks I’m going to fess up to that.

“I promise that is not what is happening with Pax. It was a one...or two-time thing, but I’m not getting emotionally invested in him like that. He’s not even old enough to drink for fuck’s sake.”

“He’s not even out yet,” she replies in a low whisper. “Is that really something you want to be a part of?”

Fuck, no. I went through my own coming out when Pax was probably in diapers. It’s not really something I want to relive, and I’m certainly not interested in going through that with the guy I’m dating either. Everly doesn’t understand this thing with Pax, and honestly, neither do I.

We reach the coffee shop on campus and after we both order our drinks, I find a table for us while we wait. It’s loud in here, bustling with students and music, so it’s semi-private enough to carry on a conversation.

“Listen, I promise I’m not getting emotionally involved with him like that, okay?”

“What do you mean ‘like that?’” she asks.

“I just mean that I feel bad for the kid. I mean, obviously he’s had a rough life,” I say, gesturing to my face, and she nods understandingly. “He’s in the closet, and I mean...he’s fucking homeless, Everly.” I make sure to completely whisper that part, and her eyes go wide as I say it.

“Homeless?” she replies, ducking lower over the table, so no one can hear.

“Don’t you dare repeat that to anyone, especially Cullen. It would only piss Pax off and I can handle it for now, okay?”

She nods in understanding, just as the barista calls our names. I quickly grab them from the counter and when I return to the table, Everly has a concerned expression on her face.

“Promise you won’t say anything,” I repeat.

“I promise, really.”

“Then what are you thinking?” I ask.

She chews her lip as she adds sugar to her coffee. “I’m just thinking...poor kid. Cullen’s only told me a little bit of what he knows, and I mean...he was dealt a really shitty hand.”

I have to bite my lip because as badly as I am dying to know what Cullen knows, there’s a part of me that only wants to hear it from Pax himself, as if he would ever open up to me.

“Do me a favor and don’t tell me,” I say. “Like I said, I can take care of it for now, but if I really think he’s in trouble, I’ll report something, okay?”

“Okay,” she agrees. We sit in silence for a moment, and I can practically see the wheels turning in her head. Everly always has something to say. She’s obsessed with right and wrong and justice whenever possible. But we live in gray areas that she just cannot seem to accept.

“Just say whatever you’re thinking,” I tell her.

“I don’t want to. I’ll jinx it.”

A laugh bubbles up from my chest. “Since when are you superstitious?”

“I’m not. I was just thinking that...maybe this is exactly what you need.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, expecting her to say something like a tragic heartbreak to set me straight (not literally) or a tough rugby player to knock some sense into me. Instead, she drops a bomb of reality I wasn’t prepared to hear.

“Someone who needs you.”

And I don't know why that piece of truth hurts, like pouring salt on a wound I forgot I had, but all I can do is nod and pretend she didn't just say that. Is someone needing me the only way I can get them to stay with me? Or do I genuinely need to feel valued by the men I let into my life? Which of those applies to Pax? Does he really need me or is he just looking for a place to crash? I don't want to be a landing pad for some homeless twenty-year old with nowhere else to go.

But that's exactly what I'm doing, isn't it? Maybe because I'm actually starting to like this one. I like the idea that he needs me, but it scares me because what happens when he doesn't anymore?

CHAPTER 9

PAX

THE IMPACT of my body slamming into the forward holding the ball is so hard it rattles my fucking skull, but he goes down, and the ball flies out of his hands, allowing my teammate to take possession.

“Good energy, Smith!” the coach calls from the sidelines. “Nice play!”

It just so happens that I’m full of enough pent-up energy and irritation today that my body is doing the job without having to think about it too much.

Slam that guy into the ground? No problem.

Knock this team off their feet? Easy.

Why am I so full of anger today? Well, it could have been that little stunt Thomas pulled during class this morning, calling me out when it was clearly Richards who needed the ass-handing. But he called on me, told me to act right, and that pissed me off. I might be his student, but I’m not his bitch and I don't play power-trip games.

Which I think he understood after class when he basically handed control over to me. And everything was good. Thomas has a way of knowing exactly what I need and giving it to me exactly when I need it. He makes everything so easy, and I’m starting to really fucking like him. He’s easy to be around, even the silence is comfortable and he doesn’t push me, even when I can tell he wants to do so.

But then Ms. West had to walk in, and even though it's one more person who knows my secret now, it feels like everyone does.

Thomas in my head, and I know I need to just stop seeing him, stop going to his place and letting myself get away with what feels good and make the smart choice. He's getting too close, and once I let him in, I might as well just let everyone and everything in.

Is he worth it?

Fuck if I know.

After our forward scores and the ref blows the whistle, we head toward the sidelines. Richards slams his heavy hand against my back. "Fuck yeah, Pax. That was a killer hit, man. You probably scared that forward shitless."

Another player, Benson, laughs. "Big ugly monster running toward him like that. I'm surprised he didn't just hand us the ball."

I punch Benson in the shoulder. "Speaking of ugly," I reply. "Tell your mom she left her panties in my car."

"Ohhhh," Richards bellows from next to me, and the team breaks out in laughter.

Benson has an ear-to-ear grin and it's fine. It's fine like this, laughing along with them rather than letting them laugh *at* me. I learned years ago that this is how you avoid the pain. Keep up the joke, let them have their fun, and don't take it personally.

My eyes glance in the direction of the stands, and I spot Thomas immediately. He's sitting next to Everly, and although she's watching with interest, he couldn't look more out of place. His eyes are fixated on his phone, and I know the only reason he's here is for me. At least I think it is.

I haven't spoken to him since after class. He invited me over again, and I'm telling myself I'm going there for sex, not because I literally have nowhere else to go.

As it turns out, beating the shit out of opponents on the field is excellent stress relief because by the end of the game, which we win by a long shot,

I'm in a great fucking mood. I spot Thomas still sitting by Everly when I head toward the locker room. He gives me a very subtle head nod and I return the gesture. Even if people see us talking, I find myself hoping he'll wait around for me while I shower. which is very unlike me.

On the walk toward the locker room, the opposing team passes us on their way to the bus. We don't say anything to them, but you can tell by the sour looks on their faces that they have a lot to say to us. And I almost think we're going to get by unscathed when the guy I hit pretty hard in the first half turns around and calls toward us.

"Hey, number twenty-three, how long you been sucking the ref's dick?"

It's Mason Richards who spins around and grabs the player by the shirt. "What the fuck did you say to him?"

"I figured he must be smoking someone's pole since he never seems to get fouls called on him."

Mason only grips him tighter, and the guy looks ready to blow. His face is beet red, and he has such a deep scowl on his face, I know it means he's ready to throw down right here.

"Richards, stop!" I yell, grabbing my friend by the arm.

"You heard the faggot," the guy spits back in Mason's face, and I know shit is about to get ugly. I don't know why, at that moment, my eyes cast upward toward the stands and my gaze locks with Thomas's.

"Is he as fucking stupid as he is ugly?" the asshole in a vise grip asks, and I don't know why I snap this time. I've put up with all the names, all the insults, and I don't care what this asshole thinks about me, and I never take this shit personally, but this time, it *is* personal. I see Thomas's face in my mind when I start swinging. There must still be a lot of pent-up rage coursing through my veins because *my* fist clobbers his jaw so hard, I feel a crack.

Then everything erupts into chaos. Both teams rally for their respective player and fists start flying. There's not a single person in this tornado of fists and elbows trying to stop it, and I lose sight of anything outside of this

brawl.

I have the idiot who called me the f-word by the collar of his jersey, and I'm pummeling his face, when I feel a hand wrap around my arm, pulling me backward. I don't know how, but I register something familiar about the touch that's trying to hold me back, and while I could easily brush it off and continue breaking this guy's nose even worse, I let the hand stop me.

When I turn around and see Thomas standing next to me, wild fear and shock in his eyes, I immediately let go of the punk who started all this shit. Most of the guys are still amped up and fists are still flying, and Thomas sure as shit should *not* be here, least of all for me.

Suddenly, Benson comes flying backward, crashing into Thomas and landing an elbow right into his nose. I act on instinct, crowding Thomas and wrapping an arm around his waist to pull him out of the squall.

The coaches and security have finally broken up the fight, leaving the field in a strange aftershock of adrenaline and chaos. I pull Thomas away from the crowd and into the locker room. It's empty in here, so I drag him to the sink when I notice his nose is bleeding.

"Fuck. Are you okay?" I ask.

"I'm fine," he mumbles. I grab a handful of paper towels and press them against his nose, tilting his head back to stop the bleeding.

"You took a punch too, you know," he says, nodding up toward my eyebrow. A quick glance in the mirror and I see the blood trickling from a gash above my eye.

"I'm used to taking punches," I say.

My hands are wrapped around his face, holding him closer than a straight man would hold another man. Then it finally registers that anyone could walk in here at any moment, and I truly don't know if I care. Maybe it's the adrenaline or maybe I'm just tired of hiding something I shouldn't be ashamed of.

"What made you snap like that?" he asks.

I take a minute before answering, thinking back to that moment when I lost control and decked the guy in the face. I know I hit him hard, probably harder than I've ever punched anyone, and I know it must have hurt like a bitch, but it couldn't possibly hurt as bad as being called ugly and stupid your entire life. And I can now add faggot to the list.

That one shouldn't hurt, but it does. It hurts because I don't feel shame for being gay. It hurts because out of all the shit I've put up with in my life, I'm looking into the eyes of the first guy who makes me feel good, and I hate the idea that someone could make that a bad thing.

"I don't know," I tell him, but it's true. I don't know why all of a sudden I'm triggered by the shitty things people say to me. I think Thomas has gotten into my head, made me realize I don't deserve it or something. Like maybe if a guy like him likes a guy like me, I'm not such a piece of shit after all.

We hear the guys coming before we see them, so I quickly let go of Thomas's face and back away. The whole team crowds the locker room, followed by Coach Johnson, who looks steaming mad.

"I'll get out of here," Thomas says before tossing the bloody towel in the garbage. He quickly ducks out through the crowd of rowdy, sweating, bleeding rugby players.

I immediately catch the way Richards is watching him. Then his eyes suddenly land on me, and I feel like I have it written on my forehead. *That's the guy I'm fucking.*

The coach gives us a verbal ass whooping about learning to keep our cool and letting shitheads like the guy on that team be shitheads. It's a whole *be the bigger man* speech, and I feel like it's directed at me. I always keep my cool. I am *always* the bigger man, but this time, I fell victim to the anger because it's not fucking fair. It's not fair that he can be a dick, but I have to let it slide. I'm fucking tired of it. Of all of it.

After Coach's done giving us hell, we hit the showers, and by the time I exit the locker room, it's dark outside. Crossing the parking lot, I notice

there's no sight of the familiar BMW I want to see waiting for me. And I hate how disappointed I feel.

In just three days, I've gotten myself stuck on this guy. Now at least one to three people know the secret I wasn't ready to let reveal. So as I climb into my car, I know what I should do. And it's not even close to what I want to do. Or what I actually do.

CHAPTER 10

THOMAS

IT'S PAST TEN, and he's still not here. After the moment in the locker room, I was sure things were good between us. He didn't seem to care so much about hiding our relationship when he was hauling my ass out of that brawl and into the locker room. I figured he would come over after his shower, so I didn't bother waiting for him. I didn't want to make things too obvious.

Now I'm second-guessing myself. Did he think my leaving was my way of saying I didn't want him to come over? Am I thinking about Pax far too much for a guy I just met a couple days ago? Definitely. Does that stop me? Absolutely no.

I should go to bed. Pretend it doesn't bother whether Pax comes over or not or where he chooses to sleep tonight. It's none of my business. He's just a student, a guy I've had a couple sexual encounters with this week.

I make it to my bedroom, where I'm supposed to be getting into pajamas, but I can't move because he's not here, and I truly expected him to be here. There's only one place I know he could be, but if I check and he's not there, then it really is out of my hands, and I'll need to let it go.

So, I get in my car and drive the eight miles off the freeway to the mechanic shop. The garage bay is closed, but I can see a light on through the window panes along the top of the garage. After getting out of my car, I

march up to the door and bang on it.

“Pax! Open up!”

I hear movement on the other side, but he doesn't open it right away.

“Pax!” I yell again and continue to bang, “what the fuck? You can't just ghost me like that!”

“I didn't ghost you,” he replies from the other side. I'm relieved to hear his voice, to know he's actually here and I'm not yelling to no one or even worse, a complete stranger.

“Can you open the door so we can just talk?”

“Go home, Thomas.”

“Why? What happened? Is this about the fight? About what that guy called you? Because he's a fucking idiot, Pax. He doesn't have two brain cells to rub together, so don't let him ruin your night.”

“It's not about him,” he groans.

“Then what is it about?”

It's silent for a moment before the heavy door starts to rise. On the other side, Pax stands there in sweatpants and no shirt, giving me an uninhibited view of his scars again, and I wonder if maybe he's doing it on purpose. It's like he's trying to remind me of who he is and what is wrong with him, and I'm not sure how to make him understand that there is *nothing* wrong with him.

“I don't want a relationship, Thomas,” he says, holding the garage door open above his head. He's nothing but biceps and traps, and my mouth actually waters with the need to touch him.

“That's my line,” I reply, which is almost funny. Because that is normally the game I play, but this time, it doesn't feel the same, and we both know it. When he doesn't react to my almost-joke, I continue, “I get it. Things have moved fast between us. It's been a hell of a week. I'm not trying to rope you into a relationship, but if there's something good between us, why are you running from it?”

He nods toward the inside of the shop, and I walk inside so he can shut us both in, away from the cool fall breeze. It's unusually brisk tonight. There is a makeshift bed on the floor that looks like a thin foam pad covered in blankets. Nearby, a space heater is humming, which explains why it's a bit warmer in here than I expected.

Keeping his back to me, he walks over to the tool bench and busies himself by putting things away.

"I'm not running from it," he replies. "I'm just being cautious."

"This isn't cautious, Pax. It's resistant."

"Why do you even care?" he yells back, starting to get defensive. "You act like this with all the guys you hook up with?"

"No, I don't. Can't I just like you? Is that so hard to believe?"

"Well, we had our little hookup. Now let it go," he says, turning toward me without looking me in the eye.

"I don't get you. Today in the classroom, it was all about how you owned me, and I was okay with that. Then, in the fight, you wanted to protect me. But now...you want to call it quits."

"Yeah, I guess I just changed my mind."

He still won't look me in the eye.

"You know what I think? I think you didn't expect to like me as much as you do, and I think you really wanted to come over tonight, but it scared you because if you came here, you might get used to it, and you might start to like it. And then someday, I might fuck you over like everyone else has and you're afraid of losing something good, so you choose to live alone and be miserable instead."

"You don't know anything about my life," he replies, charging straight for me. I don't cower as he stands toe-to-toe with me. His eyes are dark and fierce, glaring down at me with frustration. His nostrils flared and his jaw clenched.

"So tell me!" I say. "Tell me why you're living on the floor of this garage

and why you're alone and where you got the scars."

"Trust me, you don't want to know," he replies with a sarcastic laugh.

"Yes, I do."

The garage grows quiet for a moment as he stares into my eyes, and I wait for him to tell me to fuck off, which is what I'm sure is going to come out of his mouth next. Instead, he takes three steps toward me, forcing me back until I hit his car.

"Fine. You want to hear the story? Well, here you go. My mother was a drug addict with schizophrenia and one night when I was eight, she got so high, she thought I was trying to kill her, so she attacked me with a knife from the kitchen. I was bleeding so bad when the ambulance finally arrived, they couldn't take my vitals, and they thought I was already dead."

"Jesus," I whisper. My hands drift up to his chest, and I touch the long white scars that stretch across his chest. Something in me cracks and splinters at knowing his story, knowing the reasons behind his scars. I knew whatever it was it had to be bad, but to know it was his own mother...

"And since I didn't have a dad, I bounced around foster homes for the next ten years, where the other kids were afraid to sleep in the same room as me because they thought I was a monster."

"Pax..."

"And to top it off, I realized about five years ago that I like dick instead of pussy, which wasn't such a bad thing to be honest because most girls were disgusted by me as it was."

He's worked up, the words streaming past his lips without caution, and I realize this might be the first time he's ever really spoken about any of this to anyone.

"Pax," I say again. He's towering over me now, so close it feels as if our bodies are fused. My hands move up from his chest to his face, where I cup his jaw and stare into his eyes. But he's not done. His abysmal, beyond sad story doesn't seem to end.

“I’m alone because my mother tried to kill me, and I don’t have family or friends. I only have my car and rugby, and that’s all I need. I don’t need a fucking boyfriend—”

Before he can say another word, I pull his mouth to mine, and he doesn’t pull away. He sinks hungrily into the kiss, piercing my mouth with his tongue. Holding me tight, with his large hands on my back, he lets our kiss drown out the words that still hang in the air.

I want to kiss away every single thing he said. I want to wipe out the memories and the pain. If he needs my body to forget, then I’ll give it to him. I have never in my life wanted to heal someone else so much, but I remember what Everly said today over coffee. I want someone to need me, and I realize how true that is. I want Pax to need me like air. I want to be the oxygen that fills his lungs and the person who provides a roof over his head.

And that is exactly how he’s kissing me now, like he would die without it. I know in some way, this is the most vulnerable thing Pax has ever done, opening up, even the smallest amount, to someone else.

Our kiss grows more heated as my hands explore the planes of his back and chest, hungry for every touch. My lips move from his, down to his neck, nipping and licking every inch. I have never felt so starved for another person in my life. He hums when my mouth reaches his collarbone. His hands dig into my hips, grinding himself against me. When my kiss reaches his chest, I expect him to pull away or stop me, but he doesn’t.

He lets me trace the scars with my mouth, kissing my way along each stretched-out mark. I want to rewrite his story, erasing the trauma and replacing it with this—something good. Something where he can feel accepted, wanted, valued...loved.

Without warning, he hooks his hands around my thighs and lifts me off the ground, setting me on the hood of his car. He’s hard behind his sweatpants, and I reach for him, wrapping my hand around his shaft and stroking him through the fabric. He lets out a groan as his mouth devours my

neck, earlobe, and jawline.

This moment feels like everything. It feels like I've been waiting years for someone else to be as alive and as ravenous as Pax is. Someone I don't have to tone myself down for, but who matches my energy and hunger.

His fingers fumble with the buttons of my jeans, finally getting them open and eagerly reaching in for my rock-hard dick. After one stroke with his dry palm, he lets go and holds out his hand, spitting into the center before grasping my cock with his now saliva-soaked palm. Pleasure jolts up my spine like lightning.

I drag down the elastic of his sweatpants, eager to hold him, ecstatic to see he's as hard and as aroused as I am. Dragging my ass to the edge of the car, he holds me closer, leaning over me until our cocks are aligned, and then with one large hand, he engulfs them both, stroking them as one. His dick is warm and smooth against mine, and it feels incredible. My hips jerk along with his thrusts, and it makes what I want from him that much more potent.

I want to fuck him. I want him panting beneath me, crying out my name as I take him to the edge where pain and pleasure collide.

"Pax," I whisper into his mouth while he jacks us together. I don't know how he will take my request. There's a chance he'll freak out and bolt. Or he could just tell me no, and that would be fine, but I have to say it. Because this moment feels perfect. He *feels* like mine.

"What?" he gasps in return, as he pinches the heads of our cocks together, making my body jolt in response.

"I want to fuck you," I mumble against his lips. He tenses for a moment, but he doesn't stop, and he doesn't pull away. Instead, he kisses me deeper. It feels like a yes, and I'm nervous about it. I can't ask again, so if he doesn't say yes, that's fine. As long as I have him in whatever way I can.

As he pulls away from this breath-stealing, heart-stopping kiss, he lets go of our cocks and holds my face in his hands. "I want you to fuck me."

I swear all the blood in my body courses straight down to my cock, and it

lights up every little nerve ending in my body like I'm on fire.

"But..." he continues without taking his lips from my face, "I've never bottomed before."

Jesus. Fuck. I grab onto his hips and tug him closer. I can't even remember the last time I was with a first-timer, and maybe I should feel something more about it, but all I have is this overwhelming need to claim him, to truly make him *mine*.

He quickly tugs my shirt over my head and lifts me again, carrying me over to the mattress on the floor. Not exactly the sex destination of my dreams, but right now, I only care about him and being inside him as soon as humanly possible.

Our clothes come off in a rush, thrown haphazardly across the room until we are both naked, and I don't even care that it's still chilly as fuck in here. He's currently hovering over me, my own personal blanket of muscle and flesh, so I'm keeping plenty warm. I love that we're taking our time with each other. The last time we fucked, it was fast, and although it was hot as hell, I want to draw this out and explore every inch of him. He seems to have the same idea as he sucks on the skin of my neck, leaving what I'm sure will be a mortifying hickey on my neck, but oh-fucking-well.

I'm holding his cock in my hand, stroking him and reaching for his balls with the other. The groan that he releases as I squeeze his sac echoes through the empty garage. Pax likes a little bit of bite to his pleasure, just enough pain to bring him to the edge.

"Get on your back," I say, my voice like gravel.

In the next heartbeat, he rolls us together until he's beneath me, and I move quickly down to his cock, swallowing the length in one quick motion.

He groans again, deep and raspy, as he digs his fingers in my hair, lifting his hips to meet the back of my throat. I gag, coughing as I come up for air.

"Oh my god, do that again," he moans. So I let him deepthroat me again, cutting off the air to my lungs as he punches the back of my mouth. His cock

is coated with saliva as I stroke him with my lips and tongue. I feel the head swell after picking up speed, so I slow down. I'm not ready for him to come just yet. Without taking my mouth off of his shaft, I squeeze his balls with my fingers again, feeling his legs tremor around me as I do.

Then I massage the velvety soft skin behind his balls, and his muscles jerk, but I know he likes it because he forgets to breathe for a minute. Pulling away from his cock, I dip two of my fingers in my mouth, coating them with spit as he watches me, eyes hooded with lust and anticipation. His lips are parted and he's staring at me like he's about to combust.

This time when I stroke his cock with my mouth, I rub my wet fingers around his tight hole. His legs fall open, and his breath comes out in a mumbled curse.

“Fuck.”

And when I breach the ring of tight muscle, his head falls back and he makes a drawn-out noise that sounds like he's dying and loving it at the same time. Keeping my mouth on his cock, I work him open, first with one finger and then with two.

His body begins to rock with my movements, wanting more and needing me deeper. How he hasn't blown his load down my throat yet, I have no idea. Oh, to be twenty again.

“We're gonna need lube, baby,” I whisper, kissing the inside of his thigh.

“Glove compartment,” he barks out in a breathless gasp.

Leaving him on the floor, I jump up to retrieve it from his parked car. I've done it in some pretty unique places, but on the floor of a mechanic shop, surrounded by the scent of grease and smoke, this is definitely a first. As promised, there is a small bottle of lube and a pack of condoms in his glove box. Bringing both back, I find him lying on the mattress, sprawled out and stroking himself while he waits.

God, he's so fucking beautiful.

His shoulder-length dark hair is fanned out behind him, and when I stare

at him in the bright fluorescent lights, I almost can't believe how unbelievably attracted to him I am. With those sharp cheekbones and broad, muscled shoulders. It's not that I don't see the scars—I won't pretend they're not there, but his scars make him fucking beautiful. Where they came from is ugly, and the fact that he endured that pain is disgusting, but him...this masterpiece of perseverance and survival is fucking breathtaking.

“What?” he asks, waiting for me to come to him.

“Nothing—I just like looking at you.”

“Well, stop looking and start fucking,” he says with a sinfully sexy smile on his face.

“Yes, sir,” I reply, dropping to my knees between his open legs. I'll let him think he's in charge now, but he's about to be all mine.

CHAPTER 11

PAX

I'M NOT NERVOUS. I'm just...impatient, and Thomas seems to think I need all the gentle prepping and warming up that I certainly didn't give him when we fucked before. Kneeling between my legs, he covers his fingers with the lube from my car, working me open again, and it's fucking heaven. The burn, the pressure, the new sensation. I need *more*.

"Just fuck me already," I grunt out, reaching for him.

But this fucker likes to drive me crazy. I can tell because instead of doing what I just said, he smiles wickedly and curls his fingers. My hips jack off the floor, and I have to squeeze the blankets between my fists as pleasure hits me so hard, I lose all ability to breathe.

"I swear to God, Thomas, if you don't fuck me soon..."

He has the audacity to laugh, a deep, sexy chuckle before finally pulling his fingers out of my ass and reaching for the lube again. As I watch him wrap up his dick and cover it with lube, I catch myself admiring how sexy this man is. I'm secretly jealous of the confidence he constantly exudes. He's smart, good-looking, and funny, and all without fucking trying. I should hate him, but for some goddamn reason, he wants *me* and that's something too irresistible to avoid.

He lines himself up, pressing in the blunt head of his cock, and I take a deep breath. Before he pushes inside me, he leans his body over mine, and he

lays a soft kiss against my collarbone just as he works his way in. The air is punched out of my lungs, and my fingers dig into the skin of his hips. The pressure is exquisite.

His lips find mine, and his tongue pierces my mouth as his dick thrusts in even deeper, until I can feel his balls slap my ass. And he keeps kissing me, even as he slips to the end, only to thrust all the way back in seconds later.

“You good?” he whispers.

I nod without hesitation, looking into his eyes. He plants his hands on either side of my head, and my fingers cascade down his rib cage like keys of a piano. Having him so deep inside me makes me feel even closer to him, like we are truly connected.

I could never let anyone else in like this, but I’m not so afraid with Thomas. I trust him.

“Fuck me,” I groan, arching my back and tilting my hips to find that magic spot that just made my body light up like a Christmas tree.

He leans down and kisses me deeply again before lifting up until he’s upright on his knees, staring down at me and the place where he’s balls deep inside my body. He’s watching himself fuck me, and as he starts to pick up speed, slamming in harder and harder, the pressure builds.

“You’re mine,” he growls as he fucks me. Fingers bite into the flesh of my thighs as he thrusts. I can’t stop staring at him, fucking me like he owns me, dominating my body and making me feel pleasure I’ve never known before.

When I reach for my cock, knowing that I’m fucking close to blowing, he quickly swats my hand away with a hard slap. Pounding even harder, he takes my dick in his hand, squeezing it so tight, I lose control.

“Say it, Pax. Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” I groan.

“Get on your knees. I want you from behind,” he commands, and goosebumps erupt all over my body. When he pulls out, the pressure is gone,

and I immediately want it back. Flipping over to my knees, I wait for him.

His hand glides along my spine, pressing my shoulders down, and I lower to my elbows, just as he presses his cock back inside me.

“You’re so big, Pax. And you’re all mine.” He slams in again, harsh and unforgiving. He’s teasing me. With every thrust, my body is assaulted with need and overwhelming sensation, my cock bobbing with the momentum. But I don’t touch it yet, because when I do, it’ll be over.

“Please fuck me. I’m not going to last long,” I groan.

He lets out a heavy breath behind me, his hands tight on my hips as he picks up speed. “God, you take my cock so well. I want to come, Pax.”

Our groans and cries fill the room, mingled with the filthy sounds of our bodies slapping together, and it’s fucking amazing. It’s not even over and I already want to do it again. My hips rock backward to meet his thrusts.

“You first,” he says in a deep breathless tone as he reaches around to grab my aching cock. The first squeeze is like torture; it’s so fucking good, but I need to come.

He slows his thrusts as he jacks me, fast and hard. I can’t stop the current as it hits me, making me cry out in a low moan that nearly shakes the walls of the garage. Warm jets of cum land on the mattress and I swear I see stars with the intensity of my orgasm.

His teeth dig into my shoulder as I shudder. “Fuck, I love watching that.”

Letting go of my cock, he grabs my hips and thrusts hard a few more times before riding out his own climax. I can feel his cock shake out his release inside me, and I never want him to pull out.

We both collapse, and I turn onto my back so he can lie in my arms, neither of us seeming to care that there’s a mess beneath us. He kisses my neck between each gasp for breath.

“Oh my god,” I say with a deep sigh.

“Oh my god is right,” he replies, and we both laugh. It sounds like we just finished a ten-mile run with the way we’re panting.

I'm disappointed when he leaves my arms, jumping up to discard the condom in the bathroom trash. I hear the water running as he cleans himself up, and now that I can finally take normal breaths, there's a strange burning smell that I didn't notice earlier. Glancing around the room, nothing looks out of the ordinary, so I assume it's coming from outside.

A moment later, he brings a paper towel to the mattress, cleaning up the mess we made and dropping a kiss to my collarbone when he's done. After tossing the dirty paper in the trash can, he drops onto the mattress next to me. He slips easily into place against my chest, his head lying comfortably on my shoulder. I'm letting myself get relax when I'm with him, and it's hard to believe that something that started just a few days ago has suddenly ripped my reality into shreds, in the best possible way.

"I'm sorry for not coming over," I mumble against his temple.

"I get it. You don't have to apologize." He sounds tired, like he's only a few minutes away from sleep. I should switch the lights off, but I hate the thought of him sleeping on the floor all night. "Promise you'll just sleep at my place until you get on your feet, okay?"

"Okay," I reply, kissing him again.

His fingers trace the shapes on my chest, and it feels nice. I couldn't tell you the last time someone even touched my chest, so the fact that I can let him do it and actually enjoy it is pretty remarkable.

I start to drift off at some point but then I'm jolted awake by the sound of breaking glass. Thomas and I startle at the same time, first staring at each other and then looking around the room for the source of the sound. Something hits the garage door with a loud smack. In the distance, there is laughter and the rumble of a car engine.

"What the fuck," I bark as I jump up, grabbing my sweat pants off the floor of the garage. I throw them on in a rush and bolt for the side door that leads to the street. I hear Thomas shouting, "Where is my shirt?" as I reach the door. I register that something is very off about the smell in the air and

the hint of smoke, but I'm too distracted by the assholes standing in the middle of the dark street with large rocks in their hands.

Instantly, I recognize the guys from the game today, and rage boils to the surface so fast, I nearly black out. I hear Thomas running out behind me, and I turn to find him standing in nothing but his jeans.

“Oh, shit!” the guys yell. “He really is a fag.”

I take off in a sprint toward them, not even caring that I'm not wearing shoes and the asphalt is biting at my feet. They're too far ahead of me to catch them as they dive into the back of their truck and it speeds away.

“Smoke, Pax!” Thomas yells from behind me. “Pax, something's burning in the garage!”

At first I think he must be confused or mistaking the smell of a distant bonfire I noticed before, but as I turn around and see the smoke billowing out of the broken window, my heart plummets to the concrete.

“What the fuck!” I shout as I run back toward the building. I grab the bottom of the garage door and pull it up, and I'm hit with a blast of smoke and heat. All I see is Aphrodite being swallowed up in a gray cloud and the flicker of a flame along the back wall.

“Help me!” I scream as I run toward my car, but a hand hooks around my arm, stopping me.

“You can't go in there!” he shouts.

“I have to get my car out!”

“No, Pax. We have to call 9-1-1. Forget the car.”

“You don't understand!” I shout back, my body coursing with adrenaline and fear and so much anger. “That car is all I have.”

I yank my arm free of his grasp and run into the smoke-filled garage. I trip over our makeshift bed on the floor. How long would we have slept through this? How much danger were we in?

As I reach the door of the car, swinging it open, I spot the space heater in the corner of the garage. It's my space heater. I'm the one who brought it, but

it's Thomas's shirt draped over the top, almost all of it unrecognizable by the way it's scorched. Something in me spoils at the sight.

Suddenly he's there, on the other side of the car, opening the door and getting in position to push it out of the garage, but I can see the annoyed scowl on his face.

"Put it in neutral, and let's push. Make it fast!"

Together, we roll Aphrodite out of the garage, and as soon as we get her a safe distance away, I throw it into park and run back toward the garage to grab the fire extinguisher near the door.

Thomas watches from behind me as I douse the flames. It goes out quickly, leaving the whole building a smokey mess. And as I stare at what's left, I know I'm fucked. The mattress is still on the floor, Thomas and I are stuck out here half-naked, and I'm 100% sure that I'm most definitely going to lose my job.

"Fuck!" I yell, scraping my fingers through my hair. It all happened so fast, the guys throwing rocks through the window, the fire starting. And right now there is so much rage and frustration coursing through me that I know I'm about to blow.

"Relax. At least we got out safely."

"Relax? Everything is ruined! I'm going to lose my job. I almost lost my car, and all because I had to be so stupid!"

He reaches for me, and all I see is his bare chest, evidence of what we've done. Evidence the cops and firefighters and my boss are going to see when they get here.

"Pax," he says, but I quickly jolt away from him.

"No. A week ago, everything was fine. And then you got in my head and I had to let my guard down. Now everyone is about to know. And who knows how much trouble I'm going to get in for this."

"So this is my fault?" he asks, looking shocked.

"You just had to intervene. You thought you were saving me, but you

were just making everything worse!”

“How exactly did *I* make things worse?” he shouts back.

“It was your shirt on the space heater! It was because of *you* I got in that fight today and *you* who all the guys on the team saw me touching. And now all of those guys saw it too,” I say, gesturing toward the road where the assholes drove off.

For the record, I know I'm being insanely irrational. I know Thomas can't actually be to blame for any of this, but this week has turned into a wildfire, and he was the one who lit the match.

“You realize none of that is actually my fault, right?” he asks in a cool tone.

“You don't understand, Thomas! This is why I don't even try. This is why I don't get along with people because they turn into assholes like those guys, and no matter how hard I try, the minute I let my guard down and think for one second that everything will be okay, it turns to shit! I wish you had never walked into my life in the first place.”

He grinds his teeth together and glares at me. The hurt on his face destroys me because just twenty minutes ago, I held him in my arms and everything felt *so good*. And I'm ruining it. No, I'm sabotaging it. I'm making sure that there is no trace of hope left.

“You know...it's not actually gone to shit just because one bad thing happens, Pax. And is everyone finding out who you really are so bad? Is it so bad if they know that the person you're with is me?”

“It was never going to work,” I reply darkly.

“I guess not.” The surrender in his voice hurts like hell.

It's silent as he stares at me, anger and confusion on his face.

“Just go home, Thomas.”

“Why? Because things were good?” I wish he was as used to disappointment as I am because I can hear the emotion in his voice.

“I'm not going to be your fuck boy to boost your fragile ego,” I yell, and I

regret every single word. It's almost impossible to force the words out, but it's better this way. The sooner he leaves, the sooner he gets over me and realizes this was nothing more than a short fling. I don't want to admit feelings were involved or that I spilled every dark secret to him. I'd rather just pretend none of it happened at all.

I'm such a coward, I can't even look at him as he gives one last pissed off glare and spins to walk away. I ignore the sound of his car driving away as I call 9-1-1. And as I sit on the curb, waiting for the truck and my boss to show up, I try to pretend none of this happened. What I wouldn't give to go back to the lonely, pissed-off life I lived just four days ago, but I know there's no chance of that happening now.

CHAPTER 12

THOMAS

TWO WEEKS later

“I brought you something,” a cheerful voice sings from the doorway of my classroom after it’s emptied. I’m lingering to grade papers and sulk.

“What is it?” I ask, sounding entirely too depressed. “And I swear if you say Pumpkin Spice Latte...so help me...”

“Full fat, extra-whip Pumpkin Spice Lattes with a caramel drizzle.”

Everly dances her way down the aisle with two large coffees in her hands, and I can’t help but at least crack a small smile as she sets one on the table in front of me.

“These are disgusting,” I say, cracking the lid and taking a whiff. And I’m not just saying that because I’ve become a serious buzzkill these past two weeks. She knows I hate PSLs but will indulge in at least one a week from September to December. I call it corporate brainwashing. She calls it a sugar and caffeine addiction. Either way, they’re terrible.

“Thank you,” I say, licking up the cinnamon-dusted whip cream.

“You’re welcome.” She pulls up a chair and sits on the opposite side of my desk. “So... big plans this weekend?”

“Not even a little bit,” I reply. “You?”

“The guys have an away game Saturday. I think we’ll be ordering pizza and hanging out at home tonight. You should come over.”

Tilting my head at her, I send her an unimpressed glare. She’s been trying to get me to come over *casually* every damn night since the incident with Pax. Why? Because Pax has been taking up residence in their guest bedroom since the fire, and apparently hasn’t been in too good of a mood either. She tells me how he sulks and how Cullen is tired of the way he’s been playing in their games, like a giant, stoned elephant—his words, not mine. I can’t seem to get her to understand that that’s just who Pax is. He is more comfortable in misery because it’s what he’s used to. I tried to pull him out of it once, and he didn’t appreciate it.

“Call me when they leave,” I say, and I can feel her disappointment permeating the air like bad perfume.

“You know...you did try to warn me,” I say, glancing up at her over my coffee. “You told me not to get emotionally invested.”

“I know, but...”

“And it didn’t work out. On the bright side, at least this one didn’t drag me down a long two-year fuck-buddy relationship. But it’s going to take me some time to get over it, okay?”

She nods, biting her lip. There’s more she wants to say; I can tell. Ever the commentator, my friend, Everly. There is not a matter, public or private, that she can keep her opinions away from. It’s a good thing she’s my best friend or I swear, I’d get really sick of the way she thinks she knows best all the time.

“I wish you didn’t have to get over it though.”

“Yeah, me too,” I mumble so quietly she probably didn’t even hear it. “But as it turns out, dating a twenty-year-old student can’t work out for all of us.”

“Pax has put you through a lot less than Cullen put me through.”

“And you chose to stick it out. I, on the other hand, am not going to test

fate again. Pax doesn't want to be vulnerable and open up to people, and I don't really want to reach back into that lion's den just to get hurt. We're both just trying to protect ourselves, so I guess we have a lot in common after all."

"I'm sorry," she whispers, reaching across the table to touch my hand. "You know I love you."

I send her a smile, forcing a look on my face that doesn't scream desperation and hopelessness, but I can't seem to shake this feeling. What I felt with Pax was something I hadn't felt with a guy before, and maybe it all happened too fast, and maybe I should take Everly's advice and start dating people my own age, but the idea of dating at all is out of the question. I need to get over this heartbreak first.

My week with Pax was a whirlwind, and it ended as fast as it started, making it hurt that much more.

CHAPTER 13

PAX

BY SOME MIRACLE, I got to keep my job. My boss showed up that night so relieved that I wasn't dead that he didn't fire me or throw much of a fit about the fire. He pretty much let me in on the fact that he knew I was secretly sleeping in the garage, but since I never left a mess or made it too obvious, he didn't bother saying anything. I knew the space heater was a stupid thing to use in the shop in the first place.

After the fire, I got a call from Cullen, who not-so-nicely threatened that if I didn't take his girlfriend up on the offer of staying at their house, he would report it to the coach. It's not like I'd be punished for being without a home, but it would get messy. And even though I don't know much about Ayers, I know him enough to know he's been through shit too and probably hates pity as much as I do. If not more.

And it hasn't been bad. I'm never home anyway. I work late, study at the library until they close, and by the time I sneak into the house, it's dark and their bedroom is quiet. Thank God.

I haven't spoken to Thomas either. I sneak into his class, do my work, and sneak out. I'm too mortified by what I did to him that night to even look him in the eye. I can't take it back and I can't make it right, but I hope he at least knows I hate myself for it now. That was the cruellest I've ever been in my life. Not only did I blame him for the fire and for me *being gay*, but I

literally blamed him for making me happy for a split second in time.

What the actual fuck?

And I knew my mistake almost immediately. I was just angry that night, letting my mouth run when I should have just kept it shut, let the whole thing pass, and worked through it all the next day. Because when I woke up the next morning, I regretted every last stupid thing I said.

Richards is talking to Hailey when I walk into English class. There's an empty spot next to him, so I quickly take the seat, but he doesn't greet me right away. He's been acting weird ever since the fight when he saw me with Thomas in the locker room.

Not bad, just weird.

He doesn't rip on me anymore. No more calling me ugly or cracking jokes about my face. None of the guys do, and it's driving me nuts. It's like they're walking on eggshells around me, and I just want everything to go back to normal. Be the same assholes they were before.

When Thomas walks into class, I notice he's looking a little more disheveled than normal. His pants have wrinkles at the bottom, and his shirt is unbuttoned at the top. There are bags under his eyes, like he's not sleeping, and instead of greeting the class with that charismatic smile, he just walks in and finds me with his eyes. After giving me a quick, tense glance, he looks away and doesn't find me again for the rest of the class.

The sooner this semester is over, the better.

This time after Thomas stares at me, I glance sideways, noticing Mason staring at me too.

Great. Just great.

As if I didn't already want to be invisible.

The rest of the day drifts by in a mindless blur, and at practice, I almost lose my mind when no one says shit to me after I blow the worst scrimmage in the history of rugby. In the locker room, I toss my bag harshly against the floor after my shower, turning around to find Mason standing by the door,

staring at me.

“What?” I snap.

“Nothin.” He shrugs as he moves to the sink and starts washing his hands. “You okay, man?” he asks without looking at me.

“I’m fine.”

But he doesn’t leave. He just stands there and continues to watch me, leaning against the bathroom counter.

“What the fuck, Richards? You got a problem?” I hate that my initial reaction is snapping at him, but he’s freaking me out. My cheeks burn as I’m flushed with paranoia. I can just tell he’s about to say something.

“So, Hailey and I started seeing each other,” he replies, and I furrow my brow in confusion.

“Okay...”

“I think she liked you at first, but I didn’t think you’d be mad about it.”

“I’m not mad. It’s fine, man.” I toss the wet paper towel in the trash and pray this conversation is over. But he steps in front of me when I try to leave.

“I figured you were seeing Litchfield anyway.”

The heat in my cheeks is rapidly replaced by ice in my veins as I stare unflinchingly at him. The words ‘what the fuck’ are on the tip of my tongue, but they don’t come out. I just want to see what would happen if I didn’t freak out and get all defensive like I usually do.

“You were, right?” he asks again, and I read every inch of his facial expression for disdain or disgust, but there is none.

“It was nothing,” I mutter, the lie tasting vile on my tongue.

“I’m sorry for what those assholes said on that day of the fight. Stupid fucking hicks.”

“It’s fine,” I grunt.

“No, it’s not.”

He’s right. It’s not fine, but my brain is caught in a whirlwind after being ambushed by this conversation and coming out without even meaning to.

And how much he doesn't seem to care.

"The team's got your back, you ugly fuck," he says, clapping a hand on my shoulder.

And I laugh because thank fuck he can at least act like nothing's changed, and I'm not a fragile baby just because I also happen to be ugly and gay.

"Thanks, Richards," I say, shrugging away from his hold.

"So what happened with Litchfield? He's out of your league or something? He's too pretty for you."

"Fuck you, Mason." I laugh, knocking him into the wall. "I am *never* talking to you about anything ever."

"Come on!" he whines, following behind me out to the nearly empty parking lot. "You hooked up with a hot teacher. I need details. I don't care that he's a guy."

"Never happening," I call back to him, holding up a middle finger as I walk toward Aphrodite.

When I notice the lonely BMW sitting on the other side of the lot, I pause. I remember the first time I saw that car, him sitting in the driver's seat, and I know Mason's right. Thomas is out of my league, but if I was the kind of guy who could grow balls and apologize for being an idiot, I would absolutely ask for another chance. Too bad I'm not though.

CHAPTER 14

THOMAS

“YOU’VE GOTTA BE FUCKING KIDDING me.”

I turn the key in the ignition again, but it does nothing. The dash is on, the gas tank is full, but there is absolutely nothing happening when I turn the key again. I swear this week couldn’t get any worse.

Parked in the school parking lot, it’s starting to get dark. I could call Everly, have her come pick me up and just leave my car here. In fact, I probably should just leave it here, light it on fire, let a family of rabid raccoons move into it. This stupid piece of junk has only brought me bad luck.

Well, technically it brought me Pax, which I thought was a good thing, but after that disaster at the shop, I’m counting it as bad luck now because I have literally never been so miserable after a relationship. Even though Nico hasn’t called me once, I don’t seem to care. But seeing Pax every day...sucks.

I decide to leave the car problems for tomorrow and pull up the Uber app on my phone. I have big plans of going home, alone, getting drunk and trying to forget everything that happened. My finger hovers over the Schedule Pickup button.

What if I just called him? What if I used the car as an excuse to see him again, outside of the classroom? If I were to call roadside assistance, that’s who they would send out, right? So I’m just cutting out the middleman.

Without thinking about it anymore, I pull up his number and hit dial.

It rings twice before his deep voice breaks the silence. “Hello?”

“My car won’t start,” I say, starting with the concrete details, so I don’t get stuck stammering on.

“Oh, really?” he replies.

“I don’t know if you’re even working tonight, but I figured I’d call you first. See if you can tow it again.”

“Hmm...” He hums across the line. “I’m not working tonight, but I can come look at it. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks,” I reply, trying to ignore the subtle rush of excitement I feel at knowing he’s coming here now. “I’m in the school parking lot,” I add, just before the line goes dead.

Fifteen minutes later, the familiar black and silver muscle car loudly announces his approach, and I look up to see him pulling into the spot next to mine.

The first thing I notice is that he looks good. I mean, he always looks good, but Pax is usually hiding in long sleeves and oversized sweatshirts. He cut his hair, which is now no longer hanging in his face. It’s cropped short, faded at the sides and long on top. It shows off more of his scars this way, which I find odd for him since he’s always so insistent on hiding them.

He has on a tight short-sleeve black polo shirt and jeans. My eyes are caught staring at him for a moment, wondering if he got all dressed-up just to see me. And I don’t know how I feel about that. Well, I know I feel good about it, but I know that I shouldn’t. I wish I didn’t care. I wish Pax didn’t have this effect on me and I wasn’t so hung up on this one guy—but I am.

“Hey,” he mumbles after getting out and staring at me with those broad arms crossed over his chest. I’m immediately taken back to that night on the floor of the garage, how hot he was beneath me, and a spark of heat travels down my spine.

Nope. I need to stop thinking about that.

“It won’t start,” I reply.

He doesn’t respond, but I can tell by the furrow in his brow that he wants to say something.

“How are you?” he asks.

Taking a deep breath, I mentally prepare myself for a conversation that could either be great or terrible and what’s even worse is that I don’t know which way I want this to go.

So, I just shrug in response.

“Yeah, me too.”

We’re standing together in silence before I finally move away from the open door of my car. Gesturing toward the driver’s seat, I say, “Want to pop the hood? You already know I don’t know how.”

He laughs, a deep, sexy chuckle that just makes everything worse. Why did I call him? This was stupid. I’m going to end up heartbroken again.

“I’m sorry for being an asshole,” he says, without moving toward my car.

“It’s fine, Pax. Water under the bridge.”

He steps forward so there’s only a couple feet between us now. My heart rate starts to pick up speed.

“No, it’s not fine. I like you a lot, and I do this stupid thing where I sabotage anything good in my life, and I never fucking apologize, but you already know what a stubborn idiot I am. I think...that’s why we worked so well.”

He takes another step closer, and I can smell his cologne. It’s intoxicating.

“Pax,” I say, putting up a hand, but he closes the distance with another step, so my hand lands against his chest, and I don’t move it away.

“I came out to my team,” he says in the next breath, and my eyes snap up to his face.

“You did?”

“I don’t know what I was so worried about. Most of them knew, and they all have my back. Literally nothing bad happened after I opened up, so I don’t know why I was so worried.”

“I’m happy for you,” I say softly. My hand is still resting against his hard chest—I feel his rapid heartbeat beneath my fingers. He puts his hand over mine and takes another step closer, so we’re standing toe-to-toe.

His face is just inches from mine.

“See? You don’t need me after all,” I whisper, keeping my gaze away from his. I know once we look into each other’s eyes, it’s over for me, and I’m not quite ready to let my guard down.

“I don’t. But I still want you.”

There’s no keeping my eyes away at this point. I stare up at him, and I realize how far he’s come since the first time. At that point, he was so defensive that he acted so damn aggressive; I could have never gotten anything like this out of him.

Now, as we stare into each other’s eyes, I know he’s leaving it up to me to make the move this time, so I grab him by the back of the neck and drag his lips toward mine. As we crash into one another, he wraps his arms around me, hugging me so tight I can barely breathe. A gravelly moan hums through his chest, and my dick responds. He’s already hard, his thick erection pressed against my belly.

The kiss is hungry and erratic, his teeth biting my bottom lip as I lick my way into his mouth. This is reckless of me, I know it, but I am addicted to him. His passion and intensity is like nothing I’ve had before, and I just want more. Is there a chance he’ll shut down on me again, push me away and break my heart...maybe. Will it be worth it? Fuck yes.

The parking lot is dark now, and there’s not a soul around as he backs me up against my car and grinds his hips against me in a slow but strong rhythm that makes my knees weak.

“I need you naked. Right. Now,” he groans against my lips.

“The feeling is mutual,” I reply, reaching behind me for the handle to the back seat.

“There’s no way we’re both fitting in there,” he says, trailing his lips down the side of my neck.

“You got a better idea?”

Pulling away, he looks around as if he’s actually searching for a place suitable for two men to discreetly fuck. Naturally, there’s nothing. And the idea of driving all the way back to my house sounds like torture. I want him now, in the midst of all of this heat and excitement.

“Back seat it is,” he replies in a stifled groan. His hands are still tightly wound around my waist, and as one lowers to my thigh, lifting my leg so he can grind against me even deeper, I let out a moan, considering letting him fuck me right here. It would be worth a night in jail, easily.

When I finally yank open the door to the backseat, he climbs in first, shuffling with his zipper and pulling out his hard cock before I even climb in behind him. Then, he tears off his black shirt and throws it up front.

“Get on my lap,” he commands, yanking my body until I’m straddling him. He comes in for a hungry kiss again.

I wrap my hands around his cock and stroke him, loving the strangled sounds he makes as I do. It makes his kiss even harsher, like he’s starving for my mouth. While I work him with my hand, he undoes my pants and shimmies them down enough to pull out my cock.

It’s pretty clear we won’t be having sex in here. I’m already hitting the top of the car as it is and there’s not a single position we could manipulate our bodies into in this cramped space, but with my body pressed hard against his and our shafts aligned so he can fit both in his giant hand, stroking them together, I’m not complaining.

The windows are already fogged up. I’m pressed tightly around him, and he starts to pick up speed with his hand, stroking us both together. The heat of his cock against mine is so fucking delicious, I couldn’t keep my hips still

if I tried. My body thrusts in the same cadence as his, our lips locked and our chests heaving in unison.

“I’m going to come,” I groan.

“Me too,” he replies in more of a grunt than words.

Our breathing changes as the heads of our cocks swell together. He unloads first, and I watch his face as his orgasm unravels him. His lips fall open, and his eyes squeeze shut. His inhaled breaths become choppy and stifled as the cum shoots across his chest, landing across his scarred pecs and collarbone.

“Fuck,” I gasp, because watching him come was enough to send me over the edge, and I lose myself in the current as well. I love seeing my cum land in puddles of his.

My body is spent, exhausted and satisfied as I slump against him, not even caring about the mess between us. My head rests against his shoulder and his hands move in slow strokes across my back.

The car grows quiet as our breathing regulates, and I feel all of the thoughts I was pushing aside during our kiss float to the surface.

“You’re going to break my heart, aren’t you?” I mumble against his bare shoulder.

“I don’t want to,” he replies, pressing his lips to my head.

Pulling my head off of him, I grab a stack of napkins in the center console and get to work cleaning up the mess we made. I take slow, easy strokes across his body. I love looking at him, seeing the strength in each of his scars.

He grabs my chin and forces me to look at him. “Thomas, I was serious when I said I really like you. I like the way I feel *about myself* when I’m around you. I mean...look at me,” he says, gesturing to his bare chest. “Guys are not busting down my door and they never will.”

My brow furrows as I stare at him. And I understand what he’s afraid of. Being vulnerable, giving someone else the opportunity to hurt you, is fucking scary as it is. So I can only imagine how being hurt so badly, by the one person who is supposed to comfort and nurture you, set Pax up for a life of

fear and loneliness.

“I don’t understand why you think these make you look ugly.” I run my fingers over them again. “Pax, where you got them is ugly, but the fact that you’re still here and you have these scars means you’re fucking strong. You’re a fighter, and that’s not ugly. I think it’s hot as hell.”

Bending down, I press my lips to his collarbone, where an especially gruesome scar distorts the shape of the sharp bone underneath. His arms wind around my back and he squeezes me closer.

We sit there like that for a while before finally climbing out of the car. The fresh air feels like heaven to my lungs after sitting in that stifling space for so long, but once we get out, I remember my stupid fucking car won’t start.

“I guess I should be thanking this stupid thing,” I say, pointing to the hood. “But I still hate it. How much is this repair going to cost me?”

“Oh yeah,” Pax replies, rubbing the back of his neck. Then he drops down to the ground, crawling under my car. I see a small flashlight beam as he tinkers around with something.

“What are you doing?” I call.

“Reconnecting your starter.”

It only takes him a moment. I watch in confusion as he scoots out, jumping up to wipe the dirt off his pants. “Go ahead, try it.”

Getting in the driver’s seat, I put the key in the ignition and turn. Just like that, the car starts right up. “Well, that was an easy fix. How the hell did my starter get disconnected?”

Leaning over me with his arm braced against the top of my car, he grimaces. “I disconnected it.”

My face falls. “You what?”

“Listen, I’m sorry. I’m just not good at this dating stuff and I didn’t know how else to get you to talk to me.”

“You pick up the phone, Pax.” I’m literally in shock, but with the way

he's towering over me with those intense eyes and full lips and that mischievous smile, I couldn't even try to be mad. "I expect a real apology when we get to my place. Get in your car. Let's go."

Before jogging over to his own car to follow me back to my house, he leans down and plants a strong kiss against my lips. "Yes, Mr. Litchfield."

I swear this guy is going to break my heart, and I'm going to love every second.

The End

Read Cullen & Everly's story in *Burn for Me*. About the Author Sara Cate is a USA Today best-selling author of taboo and age gap romance, best known for her stories with heart-wrenching love and toe-curling heat. Living in Arizona with her husband and kids, Sara spends most of her time reading, writing, or baking.

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DARK DESIRES RACHEL LEIGH



DARK DESIRES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
RACHEL LEIGH

CHAPTER 1

LUNA

In the beginning there was chaos,
A black hole of nothingness.
From it emerged night and darkness.
Night and darkness make love.
Love creates something beautiful.
They were named Erebus and Nyx.
God of Darkness,
Goddess of Night.
Two souls.
One spellbinding love.

AUGUST 20, 1999

“They’re down for the count,” Kol says, referring to his dad and my mom. He fluffs out the blanket, resting it on the manicured lawn of our back yard.

I grab one end, stretching it and smoothing out the wrinkles in the middle.
“It is two o’clock in the morning. Most of the world is sleeping.”

Kol sits down on the blanket, legs bent, arms draped over his knees. “Their loss. The world sleeps, and we get the beauty of darkness all to ourselves.”

Kol has always loved the dark, the night, the moon, the stars, all of it. “Darkness is our friend,” he’d always say. Most nights he doesn’t even sleep; yet, he still wakes up and goes to school each morning and thrives in his classes.

“Ya know, you might actually need to start sleeping once we leave for the Academy. I hear the teachers are hardasses.”

Kol sweeps his hand through the air. “Nah. I’m not worried about them. After all, I am one of The Lawless.” He grins, and it’s a look that repeatedly sends my heart into a frenzy of warm flutters. “Might do you some good to start getting to bed on time, though.”

“Then who’ll keep you company at all hours of the night?” I smirk, biting the corner of my lip.

Kol returns my smile. “True.” His back hits the blanket, and he stares up at the empty sky. “Isn’t it crazy to think that everyone sleeps under the same stars?”

I drop back beside him, arms resting at my sides. “I guess so. I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Same moon, same sky. We share it all.” We turn our heads at the same time, facing each other. “Guess the stars decided to give us some privacy tonight, though.”

I gulp. “And why would they do that?”

Kol’s hand crawls across the blanket, pinky finger brushing against mine before wrapping around it. My body erupts in goosebumps, chasing the heat coursing through me. “So we can do this.”

My entire body freezes.

I know how I feel about Kol. Crushed on him for years. One night I went to bed and didn’t sleep the entire night when I realized that I was falling in

love with my stepbrother.

Is it possible he feels the same way? I do catch him stealing glances. Brushing his body against mine when we pass through rooms in the house.

Kol rolls onto his side, looking right at me while I stare at the sky, without even blinking.

“Hey,” he whispers, “why are you acting so weird?”

Maybe because you’re holding my hand?

I don’t say it, though.

Instead, I roll over, too.

Our fingers intertwine, locking together. My heart beating rapidly into the ground.

“I’m not acting weird.”

Kol snorts. “Yeah. You are.”

His free hand rests on my waist, giving it a subtle squeeze. “It’s just us out here, Luna. We don’t have to pretend.”

Pretend? Isn’t that what this is? Pretending like this is even remotely possible? There’s no way in hell Kol and I can be together.

“Kol,” I mumble as he slides closer. I’m not sure if I’m saying his name to stop him, or bring him closer, but he ignores the calling. His chest presses to mine. Completely engulfed in his hold, I watch his nostrils flare before our mouths collide.

I never knew how badly I wanted it until this very moment. This moment of conviction. I’m not even sure our parents could turn off the electricity rippling through our kiss.

Kol presses into me, laying me on my back as half of his body cloaks mine. His warm fingers graze my cheek, sending a rush of heat through my belly. He tastes like a candy-coated dream. One I want to devour and memorize, never forgetting this moment and the way it feels in his arms.

Our tongues dance like a skillfully choreographed performance. Our lips melt together as the entire world fades to black and it’s just us in this

moment.

I never want this to end. I want to live at this point in time under the sky for an eternity with Kol.

But as with all good things, it does end.

Only to start again, and again, until a star wakes to watch.

Before long, the sun rises over the mountains, and we're just two lost souls lying hand in hand, making a promise to hold on as long as the darkness will hide us.

CHAPTER 2

LUNA

OCTOBER 29, 2001

Sprinkles of snowflakes fall, peppering my nose from the weeping willows hanging overhead as I make my way down the beaten path. Dodging branches and skipping over rocks, I shiver with my hands clasped around my phone in the front pocket of my hoodie.

Almost there.

The snapping of a stick behind me has my eyes shooting over my shoulder. My heart pounds in my chest, but I draw in a breath of relief when a squirrel scurries across the trail.

My pace quickens, hoping I can get there before anyone sees me.

I'm not sure why my nerves are on high alert. I've done this a half-dozen times. Snuck off to meet Beck, never once getting caught.

As I turn left down the trail, I see Beck. He's sitting under the tree, wrapped in a blanket. His arms stretch out, inviting me into the warmth, and I crack a smile. As quickly as my smile comes, it drops when I see a pair of black boots step out from behind a Blue Spruce. My gaze skates up his black jeans, to his black sweatshirt, and lands on his coal black eyes.

Unease consumes me. We're caught—by none other than my

stepbrother.

At least, that's the way it appears. Maybe we're not.

Kol takes one look at Beck then his eyes find mine. He glowers at me like a wolf, sniffing out my fear as his heavy steps bring him to me.

My eyes shoot to Beck, who's rolling up the blanket in his arms nervously.

"Kol," I say his name casually, as if this encounter in the middle of the woods is no big deal, "what are you doing here?"

"Luna, Luna, Luna," he singsongs, that menacing smirk on his face never fading. "I think the better question is, what are you two doing here?"

I gulp. "I was out for a walk clearing my head. Who is that?" I nod toward Beck, pretending he's just a stranger in the woods.

Kol looks all too amused, eyes swaying back and forth from me to Beck. "Don't play the player, baby. You know damn well who that is." His voice rises. "Osmond, get your ass over here."

Beck hugs the blanket tightly to his chest, his apprehension apparent.

He called Beck by his last name. Have these two met before?

I look at Beck, shaking my head ponderously.

Without heeding my warning, Beck walks toward us at an amble pace.

"What's up, Nikolai," Beck says with a boost of confidence behind his tone.

Kol stuffs his hands in his front pockets, still wearing that same Cheshire grin, like he's just stumbled upon hidden treasure. "So, you're the son of a bitch whose fucking my stepsister?"

I gasp. "Kol!"

Beck's cheeks flush with heat while my heart jackhammers in my chest.

"Well," Kol presses, "are you?"

"I..umm," Beck begins.

"Wait," Kol holds up a hand, halting him, "before you give me the wrong answer and face the consequence of a blatant lie, you should probably know

that I will find out if you're lying." Kol slithers up to me, causing me to overheat. His chest presses firmly to mine, an arm hooked around my waist. "You see, I'm the last person to touch this pussy and I know exactly how I left it." He speaks to Beck but keeps his eyes deadbolted to mine.

My hand flies to his mouth, trying to muffle his words. Doing anything I can do to shut him up. "What are you doing?" I whisper-yell. "Quit this! Now!"

"Shall I inspect you before he lies, Luna?" The way he enunciates my name sends a cool breeze down my spine, chasing the fireballs swirling in my stomach.

"Stop." I drop my hand from his mouth, turning my head away from him in disgust while pushing my palms to his shoulder to break his lecherous hold on me.

I look at Beck, who's standing there with his own gobsmacked look. The way he's staring straight through me like I'm transient is a knife to the gut. "Beck, don't believe him. He's lying."

"Ahh," Kol chimes in, "so you two have met?"

Beck takes a step back, his gaze still set on me. "I've gotta get to Bible study. See you guys around." He turns on his heels and leaves.

"Beck, wait." I go to chase after him, but I'm stopped by Kol's strong hand on my forearm.

He looks down on me, baring his teeth. "Don't you fucking dare."

"Let me go." I try to jerk away to no avail. His hold only tightens as he pulls me alongside him down the trail I just walked up. "What are you doing?"

In one swift motion, I'm shoved up against the base of a tree. Kol locks his hands on either side of me, caging me in. "I'm disappointed in you, Luna. I thought we had a deal."

My arms cross over my chest, undauntedly. "Oh yeah? What deal was that? The one where you promised me that one day we'd get our happily ever

after? Or the one where you lied through your pearly white teeth?”

Kol laughs, as if this is some sort of sick joke. “How about the one where you told me you’d wait for me? That you had no interest in anyone else?”

I shove him back. Little good it does, though, because he eats the lost space right back up. “Pretty sure those promises broke the very second you pushed me away.”

“You’re failing to remember that you’re the one who is fucking someone else right now.”

“And you’re failing to remember that you are the one who ended things between us. So yeah, the girl you gaslighted last year died the second her heart shattered into shards of glass at your feet.”

Kol tsks. “But a Bible hugger? Really, Luna? That’s what you traded me in for?”

“I didn’t trade you for anyone because I never had you to begin with.” This time, I shove him harder, causing him to stumble back a few steps. I duck around him as he tries to grab me again, but this time, he doesn’t succeed. I holler as I walk away, “you were my first. But I was a fool to think you’d be my last.”

No matter how hard I try to temper the cries from my heart, he always finds a way to remind me that it longs for him.

I’m halfway back to the girls’ dorms when the other members of The Lawless step out, sinking my heart deep into the pit of my stomach.

Fuck! I really am caught.

Kol snatches me by the arm again, taking me by complete surprise. I try to pull away, but this time, he sees red. His anger is apparent in his thunderous steps I try to keep up with. “A deal is a deal, Luna. I’m sorry, but as the leader of The Lawless, it’s my duty to bring you forth for acts of treason.”

“Treason?” I choke out a dry laugh. “This is high school, Kol, not a country of its own.”

The others follow behind us in complete silence. Even if I tried to get Kol to keep this hush-hush, Sebastian would never allow it. He hates me as much as I hate him.

“You know the rules. Blue Bloods are forbidden to have sexual relationships with outsiders.”

I try to jerk away as we approach the faculty residence. “And what if I didn’t?” It’s a lie, but no one needs to know that.

Kol stops walking, looks me up and down like he is seriously considering inspecting my vagina to see if there’s been any recent penetration. “Then I guess that’s a case you’ll have to bring forth to the Chairman. We’ll see who he believes.” He winks. He actually fucking winks.

“Your father!” I spit out in a huff. “Are you serious?”

“Yes. Yes, I am.”

“I hate you! I hate you so much!”

Sebastian, Cain, and Aspen hang back on the trail, and I’m grateful for that because the last thing I need is for them to see me at my weakest with Kol. I pride myself in being strong and impenetrable.

“Keep telling yourself that, baby.” Kol jerks my arm again, leading me up the cement slab of stairs. “We both know you’re only whoring around to try and piss me off.”

I laugh in a condescending tone. “It might do you some good to deflate that ego of yours. If you must know, Beck satisfies me so much more than that pencil dick in your pants ever has.”

Another lie. Truth is, Kol is spectacular in bed. So much so that after our first time, we did it like rabbits for a week straight. The difference between us, rabbits are loyal, whereas Kol is subversive.

Speaking of subversive, I’d love nothing more than to submerge his big head in a pool of—

“Ah,” I gasp, my lungs deflating in one exhale, when Kol’s hands clench my waist, shoving me against the large wooden door.

Hoisting me up by my midriff, he makes me three inches taller than him.

“Put me down.” My lower half squirms, trying to break free from his clutches.

“Tell me you hate me again, Luna.”

Baring my teeth, I repeat the words, “I hate you.”

Kol laughs as if it’s comical. I hate that sound, mostly because I love it so much. I just hate the things about him that make my heart flutter.

His laugh, his stupid asymmetrical dimple on his left cheek. The way the blue veins push out the array of black ink on his arms when he strains his muscles, such as now, as he holds me up.

Right now, though, he makes me nauseous.

A cold breeze sweeps up my skirt and it’s a reminder that I don’t have any panties on. It was supposed to be a nice surprise for Beck, but there’s a very good chance my dear old stepbrother is going to be the one surprised.

“Kol,” I emphasize, “Put me down right now or I will scream.”

“Why are you fucking around with that boy, Luna? You know it’s against the rules. Are you trying to get yourself kicked out of here?”

My head tilts and I steal his smirk. “Well, the only way that would happen is if you all open those big mouths of yours.”

His fingers dig deeper into my waist, snowflakes falling on his black hair. “So you admit it? You’re screwing him?”

When my only response is the same smug look he throws at me, he releases me, letting my feet catch my fall.

His head shakes as he stares down at the foot of space he’s left between us. “If he so much as touched a hair on your head, he’s a dead man. I’m not playing, Luna.”

“Why do you even care? You got everything you wanted. A seat on the throne of The Lawless, along with superiority and followers.” I shove my palms into his chest, moving him out of my way. “And me, out of your life.”

As I walk away, Kol shouts, “Because you’re mine. Always have been.

Always will be.”

I pivot around, walking backward while grinning back at him. “Not anymore, brother.” I kiss my middle finger then hold it up for him before turning and leaving him behind.

If only I could really forget everything about him. The way he looks at me, makes me feel like I hung the stars. Ever since the first time he kissed me, he’s been in the forefront of my mind.

CHAPTER 3

LUNA

PRESENT DAY

One month.

Four weeks.

Thirty days.

That's how long they say it takes a broken heart to heal.

That's seven-hundred and twenty hours and too many seconds for my mushy brain to calculate.

Well, they lied.

It's been six weeks, and I still can't get over Beck's death. I don't think I'll ever fully heal. Not because my heart yearns for him, but because I'm the reason an innocent guy died.

At least, that's the way I see it. He didn't die at my hands, but he might as well have.

We were unlawful in the eyes of The Society and caught by The Lawless.

Because of the many unanswered questions, I'm paranoid and restless. How can I let this go?

I need to stop thinking like this. If anyone is to blame, it's my heartless

stepbrother and his idiot friends. They stole our secret and shared it with the world. Made a mockery of me. Stood tall in front of the entire student body—including my stepdad, the Presided of The Blue Bloods—and deemed me a deserter.

The Lawless practically begged for punishment, but when I faced the board, I was exonerated because Beck was not there to attest to our wrongdoing. He wasn't there because he was already dead.

I know Kol was jealous of my relationship with Beck. He and I had something, but it was nothing more than a stupid crush. Ok, that's a lie. It was so much more than that.

We didn't always fight like this. Kol and I started at Boulder Cove Academy together our junior year. Before we went, he was my everything. I truly thought I was in love with him—as wrong as it was. Our secret was ours, and we intended to keep it that way. We gravitated toward each other like a moth to a flame. His dark eyes spoke to me while mine invited him in. I bared my soul while he bore witness to the pain that surrounded me in this ungodly world. We held hands in the dark and separated when the sun rose.

But that was then.

Kol ended things between us shortly after we arrived at Boulder Cove Academy. He said we were better off living our lives separately while we were away at school. We made a promise of a future once we graduated from the Academy. I didn't fight him on it. I could have dropped to my knees and begged him to hold on, but he needed the freedom to spread his wings without me holding him back.

It wasn't long until he started treating me like I was just another girl at the bottom of the hierarchy ladder.

Now, we live in the darkness alone. Him on his side. Me in my corner.

That's when I met Beck. It started off as a friendship that blossomed into more. Some might say I wear my heart on my sleeve. I fall too hard, too fast. I dive in head first, never coming up for air, seeking out the forbidden for the

thrill. Some of it might be true—first my stepbrother, then an outsider.

Beck was just a temporary bandage on my broken heart. I cared about him, but it was nothing like the way I felt for Kol.

Now I have to go back to where it all began.

As much as I don't want to return to school, I have to. Just four more months and I'll never have to step foot in that academy again. Until then, I plan to uncover what happened to Beck, while carrying out the orders of The Society.

Boulder Cove Academy has been my fate since I was born. It's an academy for junior and senior students. Not all have to attend, but it provides you with extra privileges and more training in the rituals and rules of The Society. My mom and dad met at BCA—both Blue Bloods. It's also where I was conceived, months before my biological father passed away.

When I was only nine years old, my mom married Abbott Sunder, Kol's dad. Abbott's great-great (I'm not sure how many greats, but a lot of them) grandfather started The Blue Blood Society when he built Boulder Cove Academy, like a hundred years ago or some shit like that. The Lawless title is given to male descendants of the founding members. Right now, it's Kol, Aspen, Cain, and Sebastian. They are untouchable by students and even staff. What happens at BCA, stays at BCA. Outside law enforcement is never to be notified of campus activity.

That is, until I notified them.

Beck went missing on Halloween night, two days after we were caught together. Kol claims he slipped and fell off the ledge of Eldridge Mountain into the river, but his body was never recovered, and he was declared dead by the local police.

Kol didn't even have to give a statement. He was completely left out of the case, and I'm almost certain the police never actually searched for Beck. That's the thing about this place and being a Blue Blood, you're untouchable and have the ability to turn all heads in the direction you want them to look.

One rule that stands firm for every Blue Blood: outside relationships are forbidden.

Beck and I broke that cardinal rule.

Beck wasn't a student at Boulder Cove. In fact, he was four years older than me, living in the mountains about a quarter-mile from my dorm.

We thought we were being safe. Turns out, our secret was never ours.

“Luna,” Mom calls from down the hall. Her footsteps come closer, so I quickly stuff the rest of my clothes in my bag. I was supposed to be ready an hour ago and still haven't finished packing. My bedroom door opens, without so much as a knock. “Time is of the essence.” She taps her wristwatch, scowling so intently that there's a crease cutting through the thick foundation on her forehead.

A quick zip of my retro luggage bag and I fling it off the bed by the handle. “Ready.” I smile widely.

“Dear,” Mom crosses the room, still wearing the same scowl, “you cannot return to the Academy looking like that. What is that, a nightgown?”

I look down at my black fish-net stockings and black, long sleeve, lace dress. “No,” I drawl, “this is called a dress.” Parents these days. They have absolutely no sense of style.

Gretta shakes her head in complete disapproval, while running her fingers through my sleek, tar-black hair. “Sit down, Luna.” She grabs my arm, pulling me down beside her on the edge of my bed. “It's important for you to know, this place will eat you alive if you allow it. You must walk back in there and own it. Look those girls in the eye when you speak. Make the boys want your goods, without giving them a peek.”

“Oh my God.” I blow out a breath with heat infused cheeks. “Stop it!”

“I'm serious. You've seen what it's like and you still have months to go. I

just want you to be in the right headspace when you return.”

“Then why make me go back? Why not just help me like I asked. Let’s work with the cops to solve Beck’s murder.”

Gretta closes her eyes gently, turning her head as if I just insulted The Society with the mere mention of cops.

“It was an accident. Not a murder. You must let this go, Luna. If you don’t, it will hurt, not only you, but the family.”

I don’t get it. I know the reason behind The Society. I know it’s a secret, and I intend to keep it because I also know the consequences of revealing it.

“Why are they allowed to treat others so horribly?”

Gretta places her hand on my cheek, turning me to face her. It’s a strange feeling, her touch against my skin. This woman has never shown an ounce of affection. I don’t even remember what a hug feels like from her. “Discipline, my child. When you leave that Academy, you will feel like a new person who is ready to take on the world.” There’s a glint of adoration in her eyes that has me feeling all these warm and fuzzy feelings. But they flee as quickly as they came. “You know, it actually might benefit you to get in your stepbrother’s good graces. He has quite the pull in that school.”

That’s where I laugh. “Not a chance. He killed Beck. I know he did, Mom. I’d quit school before I ever stood beside that asshole.”

Gretta gives me stern eyes and pursed lips. “Language, Luna.”

My eyes roll and I pull away from her hold to stand up. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Just remember what I said. Own the place.” Standing up, she grabs the handle of my luggage. “Leave the rest of your bags outside your bedroom door. I’ll send the driver up for them. Call when you arrive.”

“Wait,” I call out, as she rolls my bag across the hardwood floor, “aren’t you coming?”

With a glance over her shoulder, she doesn’t even need to answer. It’s apparent in the expression on her face. “No, darling. Abbott and I have dinner plans with the Saints.”

Dinner with Sebastian's parents—of course. It's always a Blue Blood they have plans with. Never the neighbor, or a teacher from the public school. There is no fraternization with any locals unless they are part of The Society. It's like we live in this world outside of the real one.

I just want to be free to love who I want to love and live how I see fit. Instead, I'm stuck. Forever.

CHAPTER 4

LUNA

PRESENT DAY

As I sit in the back seat, while the driver brings the car to a slow stop, I stare up at the imposing building before me. It's just as I remember it. Substantial, with timeless beauty and an ethereal vibe. The girls' dorms are not quite as spectacular as the guys', but nothing compares to the luxurious accommodations The Lawless get.

Regardless of where we're at on BCA property, all the buildings are practically the same on the outside.

I swear the sun can be blazing down, kissing your skin from miles away, but the closer you get to this place, the more distant the warm glow becomes. Hidden among the tallest of trees, all of Boulder Cove Academy is veiled in a haze of darkness.

"We've arrived, Ms. Luna," Archie, our driver, says as if I was unaware.

I swallow hard, hoping I have the strength needed to face what's waiting for me outside this car door.

"Ms. Luna?" Archie says from the open door beside me, snapping me out of my trance. I didn't even know he was there. "Is there a problem?"

My head shakes. "No problem."

Of course there isn't. I've attended BCA for a year and a half. This is home. This is *my* school. It sure doesn't feel like it, though.

I slide across the seat, palms sweating, heart racing. I go to step out, but my knees are knocking so hard that I can barely muster the strength to stand up straight. When I do, everything slowly fades to black.

“Do you know if she ate?”

That voice. I'd know it anywhere.

“I...I'm not quite sure to be honest, Mr. Sunder.”

Is that...Archie, the driver?

My eyes flutter open, as something cold hits my forehead. Instinctively, I reach up and grab it, not knowing what it is.

I hold it up, inspecting it while my eyes regain focus.

Once I realize it's a cold pack, I drop it beside me, and it falls off the bed onto the floor.

“You can go now, Archie. I'll take it from here,” Kol tells the driver.

“No,” I choke out.

All three eyes shoot to me. Or is it four. Yes, it's definitely four. Archie's soft blue ones and Kol's deadly, black ones.

“No?” Archie questions my blurted-out plea.

I try to speak, but the words get caught in my throat. “Don't—”

“Go. Now,” Kol demands of him, while silencing me.

No. Don't leave me alone with this killer.

I try to sit up, but I'm too weak as I'm pushed back down by Kol. “You need to rest, Luna. You hit your head on the car door pretty hard.”

I did?

“What? How?”

Kol takes a seat on the edge of the bed beside me, and I inch away from

him. “Fuck if I know. I was passing by the girls’ dorms and heard Archie yelling for help. I followed the voice and found him holding up your lifeless body.”

Kol raises his hand, holding a bloody washcloth, and I squeal, shoving it away. “What the hell is that?”

“You cut your head and I’d rather you not bleed all over my clean bedding.”

“Your bed?” I look around and realize that I am, in fact, in Kol’s bed. It feels like an eternity since I’ve been in this room.

So much has changed in the past month. I feel like I don’t even know Kol anymore. Some days, I feel like I don’t even know myself.

My hand pats at my forehead, and I cringe at the sting of pain. When I look at my hand, I notice my fingers are painted in my own blood.

“Damnit. Now I’m gonna have a scar.”

Kol chuckles. “Leave it to you to worry about a scar when you could potentially have brain damage.”

My eyes shoot wide open. “Brain damage?”

“Calm down. I was kidding.” He leans forward, examining my wound. “It’s a small cut. Probably doesn’t even need stitches.”

Pressing my hands into the mattress on either side of me, I push myself into a sitting position. “Probably?” I huff. “That’s reassuring.”

All this small talk is making me uneasy. This isn’t us. Not anymore.

“Why am I here, Kol?”

“Did you not hear anything I just said to you? You blacked out and—”

“I heard all that. I mean...why am I *here*, Kol?”

He pins me with a stare, trying to read me. “Should I have just let Archie carry you to the infirmary?”

“That would have been much more practical. After all, you did try and get me chastised in front of the student body only a month ago. Lest we not forget, you also killed Beck.”

Bile rises in my throat as the memories hit me all at once. I should have known I'd have to face them by returning to this place.

"I didn't kill anyone. Get that shit out of your head and quit letting nonsense spill from your mouth." Kol gets to his feet and turns away from me to fidget with something on top of his dresser. "Aside from that, rules are rules, Luna girl. This time around, maybe you'll follow them."

"As if you give a flying fuck about rules."

"As the leader of The Lawless, I have duties to uphold. You can't expect special treatment just because your mom is fucking my dad."

"Fucking your dad?" I laugh, though it's not funny at all. "They've been married for nine years. I'd say it goes a bit beyond *fucking*."

"Regardless, it was out of my hands. Once the guys caught wind of what you and that guy were doing, I was given no choice."

I take a deep breath of the cologne infused air and mumble, "So much for family loyalty."

Kol shrugs his shoulders in my periphery. "Sorry, baby. Tough times call for tough choices. You knew what you were doing when you started that relationship. You knew what it would do to me."

"Ah, there it is. What it would do to you. I should've known this was a personal attack."

Hugging my arms to my chest, I look away, watching the soft breeze blow the black satin curtains. I don't even know how to respond to that. Maybe I did know it would hurt Kol. Maybe that's why I started seeing Beck in the first place. I guess I just wanted him to feel a tinge of the pain that he brought upon me when he ended things between us and made me feel inadequate in his life of superiority.

Beck was only supposed to be a fun distraction, but with everything I do, I dove in head first. In third grade, Nolan Fisher passed me a note that said I was cute, and the next day, my dolls were the guests to our make-believe wedding.

Then there's Kol. I'm not really sure when that crush began, but it hit me like a tidal wave. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. I was always trying to find ways to be near him. Then one night, I realized he felt the same way about me.

Addressing his comment, I look back at him, where he is, once again, standing beside the bed. "And actually, I didn't know what it would do to you, and I still don't. Because you're the one who swept me under the bed like some annoying dust bunny after keeping me your dirty secret for almost a year." Rage boils inside me. How dare he act like what we had was so casual? Something so miniscule that it could just disappear in the blink of an eye. "It's because of this hellhole. Isn't it?"

"Hey," he snaps, "don't call it that. This place is a kingdom. A sanctuary that sets you up for a future without fear."

Of course all he'd gather from my remarks is the one about the Academy being a hellhole. "Wow! They've really brainwashed you, haven't they?"

"How would it look, Luna?" He presses his hands to the mattress, leaning close. "Huh? How would it look to The Elders, to our parents, to the student body and to all of The Blue Bloods, if they knew I had a relationship with my stepsister?"

I don't humor him with a response, so he continues, "It's an abomination—forbidden and downright wrong. I didn't do it for me. I ended things for you, too."

"Gee. Thanks. How considerate of you to think about my feelings."

Kol drops his whole weight onto the bed, shifting on his side with his elbow propping him up. "One day you will thank me."

"You think I should thank you?" I snap, sitting up and crossing my legs beside his. "You shoved me aside and I found someone who cared about me and even that didn't appease you. You think I'll stay single forever just because I'm what...yours? How long did you expect me to wait for you?"

"You told me you'd wait forever, if that's what it took."

“And you expected me to? Goes to show what a selfish asshole you really are.”

“Come on, Luna. We had a deal that we’d revisit things after graduation. I really didn’t have to see you doing shit with another guy. Let alone one who’s too old for you.”

“If you didn’t snoop and watch my every move, you wouldn’t have seen *shit!*”

This is just like us, to argue and bicker over the most asinine things. He infuriates me to no end, and it seems like nothing I say even touches him—which only exasperates me further.

He shrugs. “What can I say? You suck at keeping secrets. In fact, Sebastian is convinced you shared more with Beck than just the warmth of your pussy.”

“I never told Beck any of the secrets of The Blue Bloods, and if you really believe that, you don’t know me at all.”

My heart burns. It feels like a fire has been lit inside of me and I’m trying really hard to bite my tongue, but if I don’t leave this room right now, I won’t be able to.

I don’t want Kol knowing I came back here with a plan to find out what really happened to Beck. If he knows, he’ll stop at nothing to keep the truth hidden.

I know he had something to do with it; there is no way in hell he didn’t.

Swinging my legs over the bed, I stand up. There’s a pounding in my head and each step feels like a bass drum beating on my skull, but I can’t stay in this room with him a second longer.

“Luna, wait,” Kol says with a softness to his tone.

Ignoring him completely, I do not wait. I leave the room and walk down the long stretch of hall, passing by the rooms of the other Lawless members.

My pace quickens when I hear the door open to Sebastian’s room. A quarrel with all the members is the last thing I need right now. No matter

what I do or say, they will always take Kol's side, and he will always take theirs. They're like this sick band of brothers.

"Luna," Sebastian calls out, "good to see you back here." There's a sarcastic bite to his words that makes bile churn in my stomach.

Sebastian is the worst. He's violent, volatile, and downright evil.

He knows about me and Beck—they all do. The entire school does, thanks to Kol. He can pretend this is about loyalty and his duties as a member of The Lawless, but we both know it's more about his obsessive need to control my life.

That all ends now. I'm going to find out what happened to Beck and I'll contact someone on the police force, who is not in cahoots with The Elders or anyone else in this stupid society.

CHAPTER 5

LUNA

PRESENT DAY

It's a ten-minute walk from The Lawless house to the girls' dorms, but it's treacherous in the dark, not to mention, the snow. There's only a light blanket covering the path, but beneath it are bristling rocks that make it slippery. It's also uphill, which goes to show why The Lawless boys are so fit. I'm sure they all take this short hike at least a couple times a day to go and harass the girls and get their daily blow jobs from whatever willing participants they can find—which is inevitably all of them. Kol, Sebastian, Cain, and Aspen are all gods to the girls here.

I'm a little on edge, thinking Kol is going to pop out of nowhere. He's always out lurking at night, and before things ended between us, it was our thing. We loved to meet up and watch the stars while we talked about the most random things. Those nights were my entry into his heart. We shared so many secrets, hopes, and dreams.

None of it matters anymore, though, and I'm not sure it ever will again.

As I approach the girls' dorms, the motion light comes on. Then another and another. I smile, knowing full well that I'm surrounded by cameras. Cameras that do not come in handy when you're screaming to the cops that

someone was murdered. Giving them my middle finger, I hope it's Headmaster Collins watching. She's the Superior at the girls' dorms and a real thorn in my side.

Kol might say that his loyalty lies with The Society and The Lawless, but being his stepsister does have perks that he won't acknowledge. For example, I should have been kicked out of this place at least three times, but his position as the leader of The Lawless saved me. It wasn't until I started seeing Beck that he totally turned against me, which is exactly why I don't buy the bullshit story that it was an accident.

I know Kol still cares, and as much as I want to hate him, I can't.

When I reach the stairs, I begin my ascent. My room, with my best friend in this place, Kenna, is on the third floor. Our first year here, we weren't close at all; in fact, we were enemies. She had this little fling going with Cain and all they did was fight, make up, fuck, and repeat. I'm not the type to hold back on my feelings, so when I caught them screwing in my bed, I lost my shit. At the end of last year, when they broke up for good, I was her shoulder to cry on. The start of this year, they got back together and made it official, and while they are annoying as hell as a couple, I try to respect her decision to be with him.

I'm thankful to see my bags sitting outside the door, and I wish I could thank Archie for his help, but he's long gone by now. I won't be seeing him again until he picks Kol and me up for Christmas break in three weeks.

I reach into the side pocket of my duffel bag and pull out my room key and my cell phone. Before I unlock the door, I flip open my phone to check the time. Seven-o'clock—Kenna should be at dance practice.

Gathering up my belongings, I unlock the door and go inside, expecting Kenna to still be at the studio. To my surprise, she's sprawled out on the living room floor doing stretches.

"Luna," she howls, pushing herself up and running into my arms, "God, I've missed you." She takes a step back, observing me. "How are you? Do

you need anything?"

And here we go with the pitying glances. "I'm doing good. Actually, I'm great. Happy to be back."

"You sure, babe? Cain said you were still on this trip about Kol and them having something to do with...ya know? You don't still believe that, do you?"

With a shake of my head, my lips press together in a thin line. "No. I don't." Lie.

"Good." She grabs my bag off my arm and drops it to the floor, before taking me by the hand and leading me to the couch. "Sit down. There's something I need to tell you."

"Oh great," I sigh heavily, "let's hear it." I drop my head back on the couch in our small sitting area and stare blankly at the ceiling.

"Don't get mad, but The Lawless met last week, and they're not ending the games. They say that one accident of an outsider shouldn't decide the fate of the entire student body."

"What?" I gasp, head shooting up, my eyes wearing my shock. I should've known they wouldn't have ended something that easily, but I was hopeful there was a chance. "You saw what happened last time. Why would they do this?"

Kenna shrugs a shoulder casually. "I know it's harsh, but as they say, the games must go on."

I jump up, heart fleeting. "The games must go on? Fuck that. Beck died during those stupid games. Either The Lawless pushed him over that ledge or someone else did to climb the ladder. Morris," I snap my fingers, "he was a Rook and then suddenly shot up to Ace status. That's probably it. It was probably him." My feet take me across the room and back, repeating the process. They must've given Morris the task, and when he carried it out, he rose up.

The Ladder Games aren't your average games of fun and laughter.

They're dangerous—deadly even. I'm pretty sure Beck was a victim of the games, and if it's true, it means Kol put out the order to have him killed—or he did it himself.

All because these guys want to move up in rank.

That's right! Rank!

On top of rituals, rules, and meetings, there's also hierarchy games. It's not enough that students are forced to go to this stupid academy and conform to the laws set in place all because it's in our blood...blah, fucking, blah, we also have to fight for our right to fit in.

“Luna!” Kenna says, though I completely ignore her. “Luna!” She grabs my shoulders, stopping me from pacing the room for the tenth time. “Get a hold of yourself. You just said you didn't believe they had anything to do with it.”

My hands fly up, pushing hers away. “Well...I lied.”

Kenna pulls me toward the couch, and my feet move with no effort on my part. “Sit down.”

Dropping back, I fall onto the plush couch that practically swallows my body whole. It's the most comfortable thing my ass has ever graced. Sometimes I sleep on it because the cushions hug my body and make the nights feel less lonely.

Kenna takes a seat beside me, curling her tanned legs into a pretzel. “Tell me it isn't true, babe. You weren't really screwing that guy, were you?”

“Kol? God, no!” The words just fly out of my mouth, and when her expression becomes one of shock, I realize she wasn't talking about Kol.

My face drops in my hands, cheeks practically on fire.

“Umm, no. Actually, I was talking about Beckett Osmond, but maybe we should address why you thought I was talking about your brother.” She pulls my hands away from my face, and I fight to avoid eye contact.

Chewing nervously on my nail, I reach my hand behind the couch cushion, where the remote always gets stuffed and grab it. “How was I

supposed to know who you were talking about?”

Kenna snatches the remote from my hand and tosses it on the floor. “Why can’t you look at me, Luna?”

With a shit-eating grin, I look her dead in the eye. “I am looking at you.”

She squints, reading me like a book, one where the best friend is keeping a huge secret that was just revealed. “You fucked Kol.”

I wheeze. “I did not!”

The corner of her lip tugs up. “Yes, you did, and now you’re lying to me.” She reaches behind her, grabs a pillow and hits me square in the face with it. I use it as a shield to hide my blush-colored cheeks. “Oh my god, Luna. You totally screwed your brother.”

“He’s not my brother,” I mutter into the musky fabric.

“Ok. Your stepbrother, but close enough. How did I not know this?”

I slowly peel the pillow away from my face, peeking over the fringe on the top. “Because...it was a secret.”

Kenna claps her hand over her mouth, stares at me for a second, then stands up and paces the same path I did minutes ago. “Ok. Let me get this straight. You were screwing both the Osmond boy and Kol?”

“No!” I huff. “Well, not at the same time. Not exactly. There was this one night...”

Oh my god, Luna. Stop talking!

“Go on,” she presses, stopping directly in front of me and leaving me no choice but to continue.

“Yes, Kol and I had this stupid thing that started before we came to BCA. I thought I was in love with him, but last year, he ended whatever we had and told me it was best to go our separate ways. We hadn’t even slept together at that point. It wasn’t until after the buildup of sexual tension that we finally did last year, after things had already ended between us.” It was a moment of weakness. Then another. And another.

“I hate you,” Kenna finally blurts out. “I can’t believe you never told me

about him. Then there's this mysterious guy everyone says you were sneaking around with. What's up with that?"

I lower the pillow again, taking a more serious note. "In my defense, I couldn't tell anyone about Beck and me. You know how they are around here. Look what the guys did when they found out. They put us on blast and the day after Beck denied Kol's claims in front of the other Lawless members, he went missing. Do you see why I'm suspicious? There has to be some sort of connection."

Kenna scrunches her nose, and it's a look I'm familiar with: it's a look of doubt. "Eh, I still think you're being paranoid. Come on. Those guys can be cruel to others, but they aren't killers."

Gnawing at the inside of my cheek, I shake my head. "You don't know how jealous Kol gets. Maybe we don't know any of them as well as we think we do."

CHAPTER 6

LUNA

OCTOBER 31, 2001

Damnit! If I'm late for this test, there is no way in hell Mr. Rubin will let me take it. I'm already barely passing the class and missing this test is sure to give me a nice shiny F on my end of the semester report card.

I pick up my pace, buttoning my white shirt as I walk out the main door of the dorms. It's just my luck that it's raining. I'm only on the third button, tits popping out of my bra, when I collide with something, or rather someone. I look up and growl. "Damnit, Kol. Move. I'm gonna be late."

"Most of us get dressed before we leave our rooms. Not that I'm complaining." I push past him, but he walks in step with me as I hurry down the cement stairs.

"Fuck!" I spin back around and walk back to the door. "I forgot my damn backpack." Kol turns with me and I give him a sideways glance. "Why are you still here?"

He's dressed to perfection. At least, to me he is. Wearing the school uniform with a loose tie and untucked white shirt. The cuffs are rolled up his forearms, exposing some of his tattoos.

"I came to see you. But I seem to have lost my train of thought when I

was greeted with your hard nipples pressed against that cute satin bra of yours.” Snarling, I go to pull open the door to go inside, but Kol grabs it first. “Allow me.”

I pause, giving him a look before I remember I’m in a hurry. My feet move quickly as I jog up the stairs to the third floor.

Once I reach the top, I realize it’s no use. There is no way I’m making it on time. The shuttles have already picked everyone up for the day, and it’s a ten-minute walk. I open my door and look at the clock on the wall—class starts in two minutes.

“What did you come to see me for?” I finally say, knowing I have nothing but time now. Second period doesn’t begin for fifty minutes.

It’s not like Kol to pay me little visits like this, unless it’s something important.

Shutting the door behind him, he enters the space of my dorm room. It’s a small two-bedroom, open apartment with a kitchenette and a living room that’s not much bigger. Some of the girls have less. It all depends on how much our parents donate to the Academy each semester.

Kol stuffs his hands in the pocket of his black dress pants, the tips of his black hair glistening from the rain. “We need to discuss your punishment.”

“Get the hell out of here,” I spit in an angry tone. When he’s still standing there, I shout louder, “I’m serious. Go.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Here’s the thing, Luna. The guys will not let this go. They are planning a meeting that involves you and Beck both.”

“They’re bringing in Beck? Are you fucking kidding me? Leave him out of this. He’s just an innocent outsider with no affiliation to The Society.”

“You know how Sebastian is.”

“Yeah.” I huff, spinning around. I can’t even look at Kol. He’s become a stranger that I’ve known half of my life. “And you encourage his asshole ways.”

“If there was any other way—”

I put my hands on my hips, glowering. “But there’s not, right? You have to stand by your allegiance and to hell with what happens to me.”

“It’s a simple expulsion. You go back home and finish out your senior year at public school and complete whatever task is laid before you after graduation. It’s not like you’re abolished from The Blue Bloods.”

My heart twinges. I don’t even care about the task I’ll be forced to carry out—although I’ve heard dismemberment of unlawful members is common—it’s the fact that Kol wants me gone from BCA that pains me the most. “Why are you doing this to me? You really want me kicked out that bad?”

“It’s not about what I want. You broke the rules.”

“Cut the bullshit, Kol. We both know this isn’t about rules. This is about you being angry with me for seeing someone else.”

His hands run through his damp hair as he looks down at his feet. When his eyes rise to mine, he bites his bottom lip. “How could you do it?”

I swallow hard, pushing down the pain. “Why do you care?”

It’s more than obvious his feelings for me are still there. As much as I want to deny I feel anything but hatred toward him, it would be a lie to him and to myself.

Kol takes slow strides toward me. I backstep when his chest bumps mine, but he fills the lost space. “Why do I care? How can I not?” His eyes drift to my mouth and I wet my lips while my heart pounds against my rib cage.

“But you said—”

I’m silenced by his seductive mouth. In one swift motion, Kol tears my top open, popping the buttons that roll across the floor.

“Society aside, this isn’t about them, or him. This is about us. You and I are the same, Luna,” he breathes into our kiss. “We thrive when the sun disappears and live for the darkness.” He pulls my bottom lip between his teeth, letting it go like a rubber-band. “You were born into this world destined to be mine. Not his.”

Part of me believes what he’s saying. Everything about us is right, aside

from the fact that our parents are married and we'd be an abomination to our family and The Blue Blood Society.

What we're doing is wrong on so many levels, yet it feels so right.

I can't deny Kol. I never could, and I fear I never will. Against all odds, my heart still calls to him.

"You need to stop this." I pull back, my hands pressed to Kol's drawn shoulders.

He looks at me with confusion. "I don't think I can, Luna."

God, he's right. I'm not sure I can either.

Against all my better judgment, I throw myself into him, devouring his mouth. Taking his tongue hostage. Fingers digging into his disheveled hair. I succumb to my darkest desires.

Kol hoists me up, his hands snug under my ass as my legs wrap around his waist. His mouth trails kisses down my collarbone to my exposed cleavage. Pushing my bra down, his teeth graze the bud of my nipple, and I whimper.

The burning hunger inside of me only grows to the point of starvation.

Kol carries me across the small room and kicks open my bedroom door then slams it shut. It's dark as night with my blackout curtains, hiding any glimmer of light from outside.

"Do you want me, Luna?"

I blow out a heady breath. "More than anything."

The sound of his zipper coming down ignites something inside me. Tingles course through my parted thighs, my pussy throbbing with a dire need to be touched.

Kol's mouth finds mine. It's like he's memorized my body and the way it molds perfectly with his. Long fingers sweep up my thigh, beneath my spread legs. My skirt bunches at my stomach and Kol pushes my panties to the side.

One finger slides in, then another. Curling and going knuckle-deep. "God, I've missed this. I've missed you."

My heart skips a beat at his words. I want to tell him I've missed him, too. So damn much. But saying it out loud is too painful.

Instead, I moan through the pleasure he's bringing me. Raising and lowering my hips to his rhythm, my orgasm pools inside me. "Oh, God," I cry out, not even attempting to silence my screams. They ride up my vocal cords, spilling out and filling the small space of the room.

My ass falls back to the bed and Kol pulls his fingers out, jerks my panties off, and immediately fills me up with his girthy cock. It's been months since he's been inside me, and I've forgotten how far he stretches me.

"Mine, Luna. All mine." His lips meet mine in an abrasive, but passionate kiss. All my emotions hit me at once—sadness, contentment, elation, and fear. I'm happy, yet sad. Willing, yet resistant. My heart fills to the brim as a stray tear slides down my cheek.

Kol plunges inside me relentlessly. So deep I can feel the head of his cock pushing up my belly button. One hand squeezes my breast while the other cups my cheek in his hand. He thrusts once more, grunting through his orgasm that spills inside me.

His body drops onto mine and we lie there, steadying our heart rates and catching our breaths. Kol nuzzles his face into the crease of my neck, and he's abnormally still and quiet.

"Hey," I finally say, "what's wrong?"

He pushes himself up and I already miss his warm body against mine. "I gotta get to class."

"Kol?" I holler. "What the hell is your problem?"

Crazy how my heart can feel so full one second and completely empty the next. This is what he does, though. I should've known better. "Fine! Go!" I jump off the bed, adjusting my skirt while proof of our orgasms runs down my leg.

A lump lodges in my throat, and I fight the urge to cry. It's like deja vu

from when things ended between us the first time. It was the most pain I'd ever felt in my life and this is the second. Sad thing is, when it comes to Kol, it happens far more often than I care to admit.

Kol's zipper slides up as fast it came down fifteen minutes ago. He opens the door, letting in a sliver of light, looks over his shoulder and his eyes meet mine. "Be at the meeting house at seven p.m. tonight to plead your case beside Beck."

"Are you serious?" I shout, though my words are strangled by the sound of the door slamming shut.

My foot taps anxiously on the snow-covered path. "Come on, Beck. Answer the damn phone."

I need to talk to him before the meeting tonight. The guys are going to force him to be there to speak out against me and my life at BCA will be over.

They'll do whatever they want to get the truth out of him and my fear is how far they'll go for it. He needs to be warned, but how can I do that if he won't answer my call?

I was able to go to the computer lab and get on the internet to check his Myspace. Little good it did since there was nothing on it. Not even a profile picture. It's like he made the page and forgot all about it.

There's only one thing left to do and I know he won't be happy about it, but I have to go to Beck's cabin and talk to him in person.

Beck and I agreed that me ever going to his house was a bad idea. He lives there with his brother, who is a bit of an asshole when it comes to the students of BCA. According to Beck, his brother thinks we're loud, obnoxious, and privileged—he isn't wrong.

I flip my phone shut and stuff it in the pocket of my blazer, then turn

around and head up the far side of the mountain.

The amount of snow we got overnight is unbelievable. Thankfully I wore my boots, but even so, my feet sink in the snow up to my calves. I'm kicking my own ass for wearing my skirt with only knee-high socks that barely cover half of my leg.

A gust of wind has me tugging my blazer shut and hugging my chest. The snow falling picks up and brings small chunks of ice with it that pelt me in the face. My hair blows behind me as I squint, trying to see my way up the mountain.

Relief washes over me when I finally see the orange glow of an outdoor lantern. It gives me the strength to keep going as I hike the last few yards, finally reaching the top.

The small, one-story cabin sits on top of the hill. It's unkept, and the wood has turned gray with blotches of black riding up the logs. There's a pile of chopped wood sitting off to the side and the smoke coming from the chimney leads me to believe he's here—or at least, someone is.

There are no fresh footprints in the snow. No tire tracks from a car coming or going. Beck has to be here.

My palms sweat beneath my crocheted mittens as I approach the porch. A small overhang stops the snow from falling on me.

Pulling off a mitten, I clutch it in my other hand and knock my knuckles softly against the wooden door.

When no one comes, I'm almost certain I wasn't heard. I barely heard the sound myself, so I knock again, louder this time.

A loud bang has me stepping back, my heart in my throat.

Suddenly, the door flies open, and I'm faced with a bearded guy who looks like a mountain man. He's tall, much taller than Beck. A few years older as well. He's wearing a red and black plaid flannel and a pair of khaki-colored overalls.

“What the hell do you want?” The guy huffs, poking his head out the door

and looking left then right. “Who’s with you?” His tone is laced with anger, and it’s quite frightening.

“No one. It’s just me. I came looking for Beck.”

“Luna?” he says my name in question, and I nod. “You’ve got some nerve coming here. We don’t like trespassers, especially Blue Blood trash.”

I’m half-tempted to turn around and leave—run rather, but I need to warn Beck that The Lawless are coming for him to make a confession against me.

“I don’t mean to trespass. It’s just really important that I see him. Is he home?”

Emmett, I think is his name, runs his hands through his beard. His eyes zero in on me with a scathing glare that sends chills down my spine.

“No. Beck’s not here. In fact, he’s missing, and if I had to guess, it’s all your fucking fault.”

My brows pinch together quizzically. “Missing? But where would he possibly go?”

“Hell if I know. Maybe you should ask those misfit friends of yours. He never came home last night, and if I find out any of you damn Blue Bloods hurt him, you will pay. Come hell or high water, you’ll all pay.” His hand shoves at my chest, and he pushes me from the doorway. I stumble, falling backward down the two steps, landing on my ass in the snow.

My body jolts when the door slams shut, and I begin hearing the sound of breaking glass and objects flying inside the cabin.

I sit there cold in the snow as a tear slides down my cheek.

Beck and I are officially screwed.

CHAPTER 7

LUNA

PRESENT DAY

Screw this! If I want answers, it's apparent I have to get them myself. Kol sure as hell isn't going to tell me what I need to know. Somehow, I have to get in touch with Emmett. Beck's older brother is the one who told me when he went missing. It wasn't until the next day that Kol confirmed he was the last one to see Beck alive before he fell to his death.

What started as a simple altercation between Beck and Kol ended with Beck's death. Kol claims he slipped and fell off that mountain. Everyone keeps telling me that his body will turn up eventually, but how long can I wait? Am I to assume he could still be alive because his body has not been found?

Should I just give up? Even if Beck was found alive, would I want a life with him? I don't think I would.

It's the unknown and the guilt that is driving me to madness.

Something inside of me is telling me to go back up that mountain.

Emmett moved shortly after Beck was declared dead, but maybe he left behind a key piece of information to where he went.

Once I've got my snow boots laced up, I prep for any weather possible. It's snowing lightly right now, but that's not saying it won't pick up as I make my way there.

I pull on my black down coat, zip it, and flip my fur hood over my head.

I'm only wearing a pair of boot-cut jeans, but I doubt I'll enter blizzard-like conditions.

"Hey, where are you going?" Kenna asks, popping out of her bedroom as I close the door to mine.

"I have to go check on something. Can I get your notes from Algebra?"

Kenna gives me a probing look. "And does this little excursion involve climbing Eldridge Mountain in search of a dead ex?"

My eyes widen before Kenna begins laughing.

"I was kidding. Sorry. Bad joke."

I grab my gloves off the standing heater in front of the window and roll my eyes. "It was a bad joke. Beck's death isn't funny, Kenna. It's tragic and sad."

I'm so tired of everyone acting like this guy's life was meaningless. Even if I didn't know him for long, he was still a person with a family and a long life ahead of him. There are people out there still mourning his death and hoping for closure that they may never get. If only we could all be so heartless and just sweep his death under the table like he never existed. Well, I can't, and I won't. Someone killed Beck and whoever did needs to face the consequences. As Kol always says, wrongdoings deserve a punishment. Truth is, even if The Lawless did make him disappear, I don't think they will ever face any consequences for their actions.

"I've got you covered in Algebra. What do I say if Kol asks where you are?"

I slide on my white cotton glove, stretching my fingers and snapping the elastic on my wrist. "Tell him I said to mind his own fucking business."

Smirking, I leave our dorm room and jog down the stairs to flee this place before my dear stepbrother has a chance to see and stop me. I'm sure he's here somewhere. He's always here. I'm starting to wonder if it's because he's a manwhore and always in other girls' panties, or if he's just watching my

every move.

At the bottom of the steps, I look both ways to make sure no one sees me before heading around the backside of the girls' dormitory. There's a beaten trail that leads to the low point of the mountain where Beck lived with his brother. Up the mountain, about a quarter mile to the peak, is where Kol claims Beck slipped and fell off and into the river.

With my hands stuffed in the pockets of my coat, I begin my ascent.

The weather is actually pretty nice. It's cold, but not frigid by any means. The snow is light and the ground isn't even fully covered.

My instincts are on high alert as I listen to all the sounds around me—crunching leaves, chirping birds. There is no indication that I'm being followed, so I walk at a leisurely pace, conserving my energy.

Ten minutes later, I'm at the mountain pass and walking up the narrow, dirt road. The road goes almost all the way up, stopping with a turnaround about a quarter-mile from the top. There are only a couple homes on Eldridge Mountain, and this mountain is considerably small compared to others in the area.

When I make it to Beck's old house, I take in the desolate yard. It doesn't look as if it's seen life in months. There's an eerie feeling that brushes through me, sending chills down my spine.

Swallowing hard, I keep going until I'm on the small porch. My hand rests on the door handle, and I take in a deep breath before turning it. To my surprise, it's not locked.

I'm desperate for answers and closure. Part of me needs to know that Kol didn't do this. That I'm not in love with someone capable of murder, for no other reason than sheer jealousy.

What kind of life would that be after we graduated? We plan to be together one day, but how could I have a future with him if he goes to these extremes?

Nudging the door, it doesn't budge, so I throw my body into it and it flies

open, practically dropping me inside.

I shiver at the cabin's frigid temperature. How is it possible that it's colder in here than it is outside? Maybe it's just my high level of anxiety.

With the door still open, I walk farther in. It's completely dark, with just the light from the open door casting inside.

There's a small, worn couch to the right. In front of it is a fireplace with a mound of ash and cobwebs climbing the grate.

A round wooden table sits on the other side with only two chairs. It's a very quaint living space, but it's furnished, which means the owners planned to come back at some point.

I go into the kitchen and open the refrigerator, just to see if it holds any food that could give me an indication as to how long this place has been unoccupied.

The hinges creak as it opens, and I immediately gag at the rancid smell then slam it closed.

Well, it's definitely been a while.

As I reach for a door, that I assume to be a bathroom or bedroom, the floorboards creak beneath my feet. I look down and notice I'm standing in a perfect square that doesn't mesh with the other flooring around me.

Call it clairvoyance, but there's a heightened need to see why it's so warped. I crouch down and run my fingers along the grooves of the wood, seeing if I'm able to pry the board up.

It doesn't budge, so my eyes dart around the room, looking for something useful in prying one of the loose boards. I spot a screwdriver sitting on the mantle of the fireplace and stand up to get it.

It's covered in dust, leaving a residue on my black gloves.

Digging the pointed end into the floor, I bend it, trying to uproot the embedded board.

In one swift motion, the board lifts, bringing up four others, and sending me back on my ass. Dropping the screwdriver to the side, I reopen the door

on the floor.

Then I see it.

A ladder leading into a blackhole of nothingness.

I open the door completely. My pulse races at the thought of going down there with no flashlight. All I have is the small light from the screen of my flip phone, and it's not enough.

What if someone closes the door and traps me down here? What if I'm stuck forever?

Oh my god, what if Beck is down here—dead?

I have to find a flashlight.

Searching high and low, opening cupboards, drawers, and a closet full of canned goods, I come up empty-handed.

I flip a few light switches, but there's no electricity running to the cabin.

Damnit.

I have to do this.

I repeat Kol's famous words under my breath: "Darkness is our friend. Darkness is our friend."

Going in feet first, I step on the first beam of the ladder, then the next, and the next.

"Darkness is our friend."

It's true. Anything hidden in the dark is still there in the light. It's just easier to see it. Some things we can see in the dark that hide in the day, such as the stars.

Before I know it, I'm at the bottom, and my heart settles back inside my chest. With both hands held up, I take baby steps forward and hit a wall. My hand slaps around when I notice a ledge with some objects on it. A few fall to the ground, something breaks and another object rolls.

I find something that feels like a flashlight and pick it up, pushing up the button, and voila—there is a streak of light.

A smile grows on my face momentarily until I take in the sight before

me.

Stealing my breath, I gasp, slapping a hand over my mouth.

This morning's breakfast churns in my stomach, sending a stream of bile into my throat.

I'm going to be sick.

Somehow I manage to pull myself together, and with wobbly knees, I walk over to the wall, holding a mural of me. Pictures. So many pictures. At the Academy, at home, me and Kol, me and Kenna. There is even one of me sitting in class, gnawing on the end of a pen.

I let the light shine around the rest of the room and see that it's not just me. There are notes everywhere. In spray-painted graffiti are the words "Blue Bloods" with an X through it, covering an entire wall.

I step closer, glancing over the notes, clippings from The Blue Blood's monthly newsletters. I see cassettes and VCR tapes.

Whoever did this is totally obsessed with our society. Some of this stuff goes all the way back to Abbott Sunder and the beginning of The Blue Bloods—the start of Boulder Cove Academy.

I stop, shining the light on one picture in particular. It's my mom and a guy holding hands. She has a noticeable baby bump and a smile on her face. It was a time when she was happy—when she was with my dad.

I pull the picture down, fold it in half and stick it in my pocket.

I'm sickened. Absolutely disgusted that someone would go through all the trouble to keep tabs on the students and members of The Society.

But this is Beck's old home. It has to be his brother.

"Don't you know trespassers go to jail and snoops get themselves killed."

I squeal, my soul leaving my body when the words hit my ears.

I shine the light on the perpetrator, or at least try to with his bright light in my face. My heart is hammering in my chest as I swipe the light through the open space in front of me. "Don't come near me. I've got...a weapon." I've

got nothing, but I slap my hand around on the counter behind me and find a letter opener and hold it up in defense.

“Drop your weapon, Luna,” Kol says, stepping into the light.

I let out a breath of relief, dropping the light to my side. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He comes closer with a slow swagger. “I see you figured out my secret.”

My eyebrows rise. “Your secret?” I say with a shake to my voice as I clench the letter opener in my hand.

Kol’s eyes dart to my hand, along with his beam of light. “You’re scared of me, aren’t you?” There’s a glint of humor to his tone that has me tensing up.

“No,” I spit out, “why would I be scared of you?”

“Then drop that letter opener. It’s dull anyway. Wouldn’t even pierce the skin.”

“Yeah, well, I could definitely ram into your gut if I needed to. Now tell me what you meant about *your secret*?”

Completely ignoring me, Kol walks over to the display of sticky notes and articles on the wall. His fingers graze beneath a few as he talks. “He had you fooled, Luna. *They* had us all fooled.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Who had me fooled?”

Kol spins around, letting the flashlight shine onto the floor. “Beck. His entire family.”

I shake my head, forcing a laugh. “That’s ridiculous. Beck was a Christian with a kind heart.”

“That’s what he wanted you to believe. A few weeks before the accident, I followed you two. Saw you cuddled up together beneath that tree you always met at. After you kissed his stupid ass goodbye, I followed him here and watched through the window as he opened up that door in the floor. The next day, when no one was home, I came back and found all this.”

“You were spying on us!”

“Really?” He blows out a breath. “Of everything I just said, that’s all you gathered? Yes, I spied on you and it’s a good thing I did because Beck and a long line of his family members are anti-Blue Bloods. I’m talking, death to all, burn the Academy down with everyone inside, type of anti-Blue Bloods. They fucking hate us. Beckett isn’t even his real name. It’s Jeremy Beckett.”

“No,” I shake my head in disbelief, “you’re lying.”

Kol stomps his foot. “Seriously, Luna. Look around,” his hand waves through the air, casting light on all the pictures and notes, “the evidence is all right here.”

He’s right. It looks really bad for them. But part of me refuses to believe that the sweet guy I knew could have played me like this. “How do I know you didn’t do this to cover your ass for killing him?”

“For the last time, I did not kill Beck. I swear to you on everything. Yes, he is gone. But I did not kill him and you have to believe that and just leave well enough alone.”

I want to believe him. I really do, but without more information, how can I?

“Fine. Then I want you to tell me everything that happened that night. What did you and him discuss and how did he fall?”

There’s a beat of silence before Kol finally says, “Fine. Pull up a seat, this might take a while.”

I look around the place with disgust. “Not down here.” With my hand in my pocket, smoothing my fingers over the photo I took, I go back up the ladder and Kol follows.

We close the door and sit down at the dirty table, me folding my hands in my lap, not wanting to touch anything. The last thing I need is my fingerprints all over this place. I eyeball the screwdriver on the floor and make a mental note to wipe it clean, along with anything else I touched.

“When I found out what the Beckett family had been up to, I did some digging. It seems that the vendetta began like sixty years ago when my great-

grandfather had an affair with Betty Osmond, who is Beck's great-grandmother. Shortly after their affair was found out, she was murdered."

"Murdered? By who?" Against my better judgment, I find myself leaning across the table with my arms folded in front of me to listen to this potentially bullshit story.

"My great-grandfather. He was ordered to end her life if he wanted to stay a Blue Blood. Things were intense back then. I mean, they still are, but punishments have changed." "God, I sure hope so. I committed the same crime."

"Which is why he had to go. I didn't just do it for The Blue Bloods, I did it for you. If he were to stand at that meeting and confess your wrongdoing, you would be the one facing the consequences. I couldn't allow that to happen."

I shouldn't have this warm and fuzzy feeling inside me, but I do. "How did you do it? Did you push him?"

"Damnit," Kol slaps the table, startling me, "I told you I didn't kill him. He's gone and that's all you need to know. The story I told everyone isn't true, and I'm the only one who knows what really happened, and I intend to keep it that way. For you—for us."

I'm not sure what that means, but I have to let it be enough. Kol says he didn't kill Beck, or Jeremy, and I believe him. Maybe it really was an accident after all. All this time I pegged him as a murderer and thought his loyalties lay with The Lawless, but it was me he was protecting.

I'm not sure if I'm more hurt or angry for what Beck did to me. I think disgusted is more fitting. He had me believing he was a good-hearted man who was lonely and enjoyed my company. I had sex with him. I had sex with a guy whose name I didn't even know!

"We have to get out of here. I feel sick." I get up and grab the screwdriver off the floor to wipe my prints from it.

"Don't bother. No one is coming up here."

I drop the screwdriver back down with a thud against the floor. “How can you be so certain?”

“I bought the place. Now anyone who comes on this property is trespassing and will pay the ultimate price.”

I’m speechless. He went through so much just to protect me and my secret. My heart squeezes.

“No one else knows about this place, Luna. We have to keep it that way. If anyone ever finds out, Beck’s family will continue to dig for our secrets. We can’t allow them to win.”

I nod, knowing full well how serious this is. The secrets of The Society are ours and ours alone. For generations, they’ve been kept, and we can’t be the ones that let them spill. This is for our future, for the future of our kids.

“Come on,” Kol stands, offering me his hand, “Let’s go home.”

CHAPTER 8

KOL

PRESENT DAY

“Damn, Dude. How much farther?” Cain trails six feet behind me, curled over and gasping for breath like an eighty-year-old chain smoker, as we make the climb up Eldridge Mountain.

“Almost there.” I dig my pole into the rocky terrain, alleviating some of the weight on my back.

“You should let me borrow that,” Cain says in regards to my trekking pole.

“And you should have brought your own. Or met me at the gym for leg day the last three Sunday nights.”

He growls and mumbles some profanity as the distance between us widens.

“What’s that?” I mock him. “I can’t hear you way back there.” A smile grows on my face. I know he’s pissed that I’m dragging his ass up here, but he’s the only one who’s a night owl like I am. We drink in the darkness and feast on the glow of the moon.

I make it to the top and gaze up and howl like a wolf, telling him I made it.

Three minutes later, he's made it to my side. That is until he drops down on the ground.

"Fuck!" he bellows, situating his ass off the large pointy rock he landed on.

I take a seat beside him and pull out the flask from my pocket, taking a nice long swig and relishing in the burn that slides down my throat.

I pass it to Cain, and he takes a drink then hands it back. "I still can't believe no one has found that asshole's body."

The last time I was at the top of this point, I was meeting Beck. I'm not sure why I wanted to come back. Maybe just to revisit and keep my story fresh in my mind. Or maybe just to get away from everyone and everything at the Academy.

"I still can't believe my ass got off scot-free."

"I can. Accident or not. It's a perk of being a Blue Blood. My dad once told me about a member who broke the mayor's jaw and the mayor is the one who resigned and stepped down from his position. There are benefits, even if we have to endure a bunch of bullshit to reap them."

"Ain't that the truth." I hold up the flask in cheers, though he has nothing in his hand. I take another drink then screw on the top and stick it back in my pocket.

"So, now that Luna's boyfriend is out of the picture, are you two back on?"

"He wasn't her fucking boyfriend. He was just filling a gap while we were on a break."

"Yeah," Cain laughs, "the gap in her pussy you left when you stopped putting your dick inside her."

I gnash my teeth together, trying to hold my composure. The guys know about my past with Luna. How could they not? They're family. More family than the one I've got. We share everything. Sometimes Cain and Aspen even share Kenna, but we keep each other's secrets.

Keeping secrets from Luna has been unbearable at times. For weeks, I told myself I didn't care. Let her grieve. Let her cry. Let her miss him. He's gone and that's all that matters. I didn't kill the S.O.B., but I had it in me to do just that.

"Ya know," Cain says, getting to his feet, "Beck and his family are master manipulators. He could've faked his death and be out there watching us at this very moment."

"Nah. He's gone and never coming back."

After Luna contacted law enforcement and claimed Beck was killed, I went straight to The Elders. I told them the guy slipped and fell off the mountain and that he wasn't who he said he was. They handled everything and told the police that Luna was emotionally unstable.

Secrets are secrets for a reason. Because when they are exposed, they can always come back and hurt you.

It doesn't matter if it's a day, a year, or eighteen years later.

Once they're open, they never seal back up.

CHAPTER 9

LUNA

PRESENT DAY

After Kol found me at Beck's cabin, my eyes opened back up to the side of him I'd been missing. That night, he showed up at my dorm, and I didn't hesitate to let him in. Things are still unsettled between us, but Kol's made it clear he doesn't want to be with anyone else and I feel the same way.

He's been here almost every night since the cabin.

I'm not sure that things ever really ended between us. I'm not sure they ever could.

"We really should get to class." My voice comes out as a whisper against Kol's ear. The words leave my mouth, but I'm convinced I want to stay in this bed forever.

Kol rolls on top of me. His warm, naked body pressed to mine. "We're skipping today. I've already made sure you're marked present in all your classes." He kisses my lips ever so gently. "Oh, and that test you missed a couple days ago, you're retaking it Friday morning."

My mouth curls up against his. "How did I get so lucky to have one of the illicit Lawless members on my side?" It's half-sarcasm, half-honesty.

Kol smirks against my lips. "Guess your mom just married into the right family."

Swatting him playfully, it escalates into a full-blown tickle match.

Ever since Kol and I reconnected, I've been pinching myself on the hour, just to make sure this is all real.

I pushed him away to give us space, but he pulled me back in, and now I never want to let go.

This connection we have is nothing new. It's been there all along, and my heart never stopped aching for him.

When I met Beck, I was smitten—but now I know why. He wanted me to be. It was all an act. A lonely Christian who was looking for friendship with hopes it would become more. All because he was trying to get inside information on The Lawless and their place in The Society.

I've gone from hurt, to angry, to downright furious with that son of a bitch. I don't wish death upon anyone, but if he were alive, I just might strangle him myself.

Once our hands have tired from all the tickling and our voices are depleted from the laughter, Kol drops the weight of his body onto mine.

I wrap my arms around him, living for this moment. "I'm sorry," I say the words I've needed to say for so long. "I'm sorry I made such a mess of things."

Kol strains his neck to look at me, his hands pressed on either side of my body. "Baby, you have nothing to apologize for. Everything worked out the way it was meant to. We're together now. That's all that matters."

My lips press together in a thin line as thoughts race through my head. "What about everyone else? What will we tell them?"

Kol kisses my lips, speaking through pecks. "Right now." Kiss. "Nothing." Kiss. "After we graduate..." kiss, "we are free to be together out in the open." Kiss.

It's four and a half months. I think I can handle late-night meetups when the sun has set and the stars are the only ones bearing witness to our forbidden love. I can handle kisses in the corners when no one is watching. Glances from across the room where, in our minds, were both thinking about

how we can't wait to be together again. Yeah, I think I can handle that.

Just as the guilt of missing class returns, Kol sweeps his hand up my thigh, shutting down all thoughts of leaving this room—ever.

My knees bend, legs spread as he puts enough space between us to sweep his fingers between my folds.

Heat pools in my stomach. An undeniable urge to feel him inside me. I feel like a sex-crazed fiend. Kol being the drug I cannot get enough of.

My nipples pucker against his chest, begging for attention, and as if he read my mind, his mouth finds them. Sucking one in, grazing his teeth over the sensitive skin before moving to the other.

Letting my head fall back, my body gives in to its desires with an upward thrust of my hips. "Patience, baby," Kol mutters against the skin of my chest as he kisses his way to my mouth.

My pussy throbs with need. Shivers riding down my skin.

Kol begins rubbing feverish circles at my clit that have me arching my back. I reach down between us and grab his girthy, erect cock. Closing my hand around it, I stroke the shallow end, using my thumb to sweep the bead of precum on its head.

Two fingers slide deep inside me, curling and prodding at my back wall. Kol lets out a heady breath as I pick up my pace, stroking his full-length faster, squeezing tighter.

My free hand clamps down on his shoulder, pinching tightly as I chase my orgasm.

Kol is a master at his technique. Perfect with his fingers. Working them in just the right way, sending me soaring.

My arousal pools around his fingers, and he slides them out. Grinning at me, his tongue darts out, licking up my juices before he climbs up my body and his mouth crushes mine, allowing me to taste myself on him.

In one fluid motion, Kol shoves his cock inside me. There is nothing gentle about the way he maneuvers his body. Thrusting so deep and filling

me up completely.

A heady breath escapes him, the vein in his neck protrudes as his pulse races against mine.

“Fuck, Luna. It feels so good inside you.”

You feel so good inside me. God, I’ve missed this, missed him.

Our bodies connect on an entirely different level. It’s always been satisfying and passionate, but it feels like the best damn makeup sex I’ve ever had. Not just physically, but emotionally. My heart swells as his cock does the same, and he spills his orgasm inside me.

A few more thrusts and Kol drops his lower half down. “I love you, Luna girl.”

I take his face in my hands, kiss his lips and say, “I love you, too.”

CHAPTER 10

LUNA

CHRISTMAS EVE “I’m not feeling so good.” My hand claps over my mouth as I swallow down the liquid pooling in my mouth. “I’m gonna be sick.” Without another word, I haul ass to the bathroom, the scent of the turkey following behind me and not allowing this nausea to let up.

As soon as I curl over the toilet, everything comes out. And I mean everything. I puke until my stomach is completely emptied.

“Luna.” Mom knocks repeatedly on the door. “I sure hope you’re not destroying that bathroom. We have the mayor and his family coming over for dinner tonight.”

“I’m not destroying the damn bathroom, Mom!” Ugh, she’s insufferable. Why not just say the Saint family? We all know Sebastian’s dad is the mayor.

Wiping the back of my hand across my mouth, I cough and spit then flush the toilet and drop down with my back pressed to the wall.

Mom keeps knocking, and I’m two seconds away from shoving her head in the toilet. “What’s going on in there?”

“Yes! I’m fine. I think I just ate something that didn’t agree with me.”

She finally stops knocking, which causes the rage building inside me to dwindle. I’m not sure why I feel so agitated today. I suppose she has the ability to bring out the worst in me.

“What’s wrong with her?” I hear Abbott ask as he passes Mom in the hall.

“She’s not feeling well,” Mom replies, still standing outside the door.

Abbott’s voice trails down the hallway, but I hear him loud and clear. “... hope she’s not pregnant.”

It’s meant as a joke. Not a funny one, though. But regardless, it has my wheels turning.

I’ve been nauseous a lot lately. In fact, I can’t even remember the last time I had a period. Definitely didn’t this month. Don’t think I did last month.

Fuck. I can’t remember. My cycles have always been out of whack because I’m always forgetting to take my birth control. Once I missed four days in a row, so I took them all at once. Apparently, that’s not how you do it.

Kol and I are going strong, behind closed doors. Our relationship is solid, and after graduation, we’re planning to tell everyone we’re together, but we’re only eighteen years old. A baby is not part of our future, at least, not for a very long time.

No. I’m not pregnant. That’s—

The nausea returns, and this time, I don’t make it to the toilet. Instead, I grab the trash can and let it out.

A minute later, I clean myself up and flag Helena, the housekeeper, down in the hall.

“Everything ok, Sweetie?”

“Yeah. Well, sort of. Can you do me a favor and get rid of that trash can? I have to run an errand before dinner.”

“Of course, Ms. Luna. When you get back you should rest.”

Nodding in agreement, I know that rest is not in my future. I have to take a pregnancy test and it has to happen now.

I step into my snow boots and pull my coat out of the closet in the

mudroom. My hand teeters on the handle for a second before it pushes open from the other side.

“Hey, babe. Where are you running off to?”

“Kol? Hi. I umm...need to run an errand.”

His hand sweeps around my waist, and he pulls me out the door. “My truck’s warm. I’ll drive you.”

Swallowing down the acid rising in my throat, I follow his lead. “Ok.”

Kol snaps his seatbelt in place and starts the ignition. “Where are we headed?”

I don’t speak as he sits there staring at me, waiting for an answer. The silence between us is deafening as I try to figure out how to tell him what I’m doing.

“Hey, What’s wrong?” His hand rests on my thigh, giving it a subtle squeeze as he backs out of the garage.

With one leg tucked under the other, I turn to face him. “Kol, there’s something I need to tell you.”

His eyebrows hit his forehead as he glances from me to the driveway. “Sounds serious.”

“I think I might be pregnant.” The words spill from my mouth all at once, and I wish I would have eased into it, but what’s the point? He needs to know.

“You what?!” His hand pulls back, gripping the steering wheel so intently that his knuckles protrude.

As soon as we hit the main road, my stomach unsettles again, but I continue to swallow the saliva accumulating in my mouth.

“I can’t remember when I had my last period and I’ve been extra emotional lately. Not to mention, throwing up at the most random times of the day.”

I don’t tell him that my boobs have also felt sore and full. All he needs to know is that there’s a possibility and we need to find out.

“Alright,” he nods repeatedly, “let’s not overthink this. Just take a test and

we can put this crazy assumption to rest.”

“Yeah. I mean, I’m probably not. I just need to know for my own sanity.”

We continue the ride in silence, both lost in our thoughts. Every once in a while, I steal a glance at Kol and he does the same.

My hands haven’t quit shaking since I got in this truck. I’m terrified. What if I really am pregnant? What does that mean for our future—for our families, The Blue Bloods? Kol is my stepbrother. Our parents have been married for almost ten years. It would be such an unconventional lifestyle for an innocent child. He or she would be ridiculed for having the same grandparents on both its mother and father’s side.

Then there’s the other possibility. My period hasn’t come for months. Meaning it would have been somewhere between October and November when the baby was conceived. Kol and I slept together the day after Beck went missing. But I also slept with Beck before that. Damn it. I feel like such a whore, but what if...?

No. I won’t go there. Although, I know damn well Kol has to be wondering the same thing. He hasn’t mentioned it. Maybe he doesn’t want to. Maybe he doesn’t care.

The truck comes to a stop in front of a 24-hour Pharmacy, and I freeze. “I don’t think I can do it.”

Kol reaches for his handle, eyes still set on me. “I’ll go.” I smile in response and he leans over the center console and presses a chaste kiss to my forehead. “It’s gonna be ok.”

For the first moment, since I even thought I might be pregnant, I actually believe that it is going to be ok. No matter what happens, we’re in this together.

Kol has had my heart since I was thirteen years old. Sometimes I’m absolutely certain that our parents were brought together just so we could meet.

Kol paces the room for the umpteenth time since I walked out of the bathroom with my test in hand. It's lying on my dresser, taunting us both while I sit on the edge of my bed watching the timer on the watch in my hand.

He stops in front of where I sit, peering down on me with so much fear in his eyes. "How much longer?"

"A minute."

One more minute until our lives potentially change forever.

"Hey," I say, patting the bed beside me and grabbing his attention as he stares into space. "Sit down for a sec."

Doing as I asked, he sits on the mattress beside me, legs bobbing up and down.

"What happens if...if I am pregnant?" I can't even look at him. It hurts too bad knowing that his life could be ruined because of my carelessness. I should've been more consistent with my pills. I should have made him wear a condom.

"Luna," he places a hand on my cheek, turning my head toward him, "if you *are* pregnant, then we're going to raise our baby in a home full of love. I'll step down from The Lawless. Hell, I'll leave BCA if I have to. You and our baby will come first. And if you're not, you still come first. Now that I've got you back, I'm never letting go again."

Like sitting in front of a blazing fire on a cold night, my entire body engulfs in warmth. Leaning forward, I press my lips to his as a tear slides down my cheek. The salty taste seeps into my mouth and I pull back before wiping his lips with my thumb. "I love you, Kol. I always have and I always will. Even if the world is against us. I'll never stop fighting for us."

My watch begins beeping as the timer goes off and we both snap our attention to the test on the dresser.

“Ready?” I ask him, and he nods.

My steps aren't rushed as I cross the room. My eyes pinch shut as I pick up the test then turn around. As soon as I open them, I see it. Two pink lines.

I raise my brows and force a smile on my face. “Well, it looks like we're having a baby.”

Meeting me beside the dresser, Kol wraps his arms around me and presses his lips to my hair. “We're going to be ok, baby. I promise you.”

Kol once let me go and I allowed him to leave so he could spread his wings—now, I've clipped them.

It's a strange feeling being so content in his arms and elated that we're bringing a baby into this world but also feeling like all our dreams have shattered at our feet.

His hold on me tightens, reassuring me with his touch. In his arms I feel safe, fearless, and ready for whatever the future brings.

Once upon a time, there was a blackhole of nothingness. From it emerged a shining light bringing forth new life.

EPILOGUE

LUNA

THREE MONTHS Later

My legs don't stop bouncing as we wait in the lobby of the doctor's office. It's my first ultrasound, and I'm a mixture of nervousness and excitement.

Kol squeezes my hand. "Calm down, babe. This is a good day."

He's right. We get to find out if we're having a baby girl or a baby boy. Looking over at him, I smile. "It is a good day."

Kol has been my rock since the day I found out I was pregnant. He's so attentive to my needs. Puts up with my mood swings, and most importantly, brings me snacks at all hours of the night.

Our parents—not so much.

Abbott and Kol got into a huge fight that left our family in a blood-feud for an entire month. We all tiptoed around one another and stayed on our own ends of the house. Fortunately, it's a big house.

Kol moved to the room beside mine, so he could be there when I needed him.

Mom's been sleeping in the guestroom because she and Abbott are at an impasse. She's stuck between trying to be supportive of me and agreeing with her husband that we should keep the pregnancy a secret then put the baby up for adoption. That's *not* an option. Kol and I have decided we are keeping the

baby. It was a decision made the same day we found out.

We have heeded Abbott's advice and kept the pregnancy a secret, though. Kol and I are both finishing out our senior year here in Evergreen—I'm homeschooling and Kol's attending classes. Our relationship is still not widespread news. It's best this way, at least, for now.

As my bump grows so does the reality that, eventually, the world will know about us and our baby.

The door to the waiting room opens and Kol and I both straighten our backs when the technician walks out.

"Luna," she says.

I look at Kol before we both stand and walk back hand in hand.

The room we enter is dark with a monitor and the ultrasound device alongside the bed. "Go ahead and put this on and I'll be back shortly." The nurse hands me a gown before leaving the room.

Once I'm changed, I lie down on the bed. Kol joins my side and takes my hand in his. "Can't wait to see our boy." He grins widely.

I chuckle. "Me either. In the future when we have one. This one's a girl."

The nurse comes back in, squirts some jelly on my stomach and begins.

"Baby is measuring perfectly at twenty weeks. Everything looks great."

I look at Kol and flash him a smile at her reassurance that the baby is healthy.

She maneuvers the wand around my stomach, stopping at one spot in particular. "Are you wanting to know the gender today?" she asks, eyes darting from me to Kol.

"Yes!" I beam with eagerness, clutching Kol's hand.

"Congratulations to you both. You're having a baby girl."

I wrinkle my nose at Kol with a widespread smile and, to my surprise, he smiles back. I know he wanted a boy, but I can see in his eyes that he's excited for a baby girl. Lord have mercy on this one, she doesn't stand a chance when she's a teenager.

The technician finishes up, prints some pictures then leaves us alone while I change back into my clothes.

Kol holds his head high, exposing the dimple in his cheek. “A girl, huh?” He pulls my body flush with his. “Not sure how I feel about that.”

My neck cranes, looking at him. “Thrilled, perhaps?”

“That’s one word to describe what I’m feeling.” Warm lips press to mine before he backsteps and his expression drops. “A baby girl Blue Blood with a future at BCA. We need to make her tough from the start. I mean it, Luna. This girl will not take shit from any man.”

I laugh. “You mean, men like you?”

“Especially men like me.”

“Scarlett will be lucky to find someone who loves her the way you love me.”

Kol gives me a sideways glance. “Scarlett, huh?”

“Mmmhmm. I picked it out a couple weeks ago. What do you think?”

“Scarlett Sunder. I like it. *Our* baby girl.”

Mom crosses my room and takes my hand in hers. “Sit down, dear.”

Unsure of what’s going on, I do as I’m told. The softness in her tone is one I’m not used to. It’s alarming and a bit unsettling.

I watch her skeptically. “What’s going on?”

“I know things have been intense lately. Just know that Abbott and I both have you and Kol’s best interest at heart.” She places a hand on my stomach that sends a ray of warmth through my body. “Same goes for her.”

Abbott and Mom were in the middle of a fight when Kol and I returned from the ultrasound. In a split-second decision, he screamed at them and told them we were having a girl and if the fighting didn’t stop, we were moving out and leaving The Society.

It was partially a lie just to end the war, but if it came down to it, we would leave. Our baby and our relationship are far more important than a life with immunity and protection from The Blue Bloods.

“Thank you,” I finally say. “That means a lot”

“Abbott and I are getting a divorce.”

Her words take me by surprise. Pulling my hand back, I get to my feet. “You’re what?”

Standing, she takes both of my hands in hers. “It’s not because we want to. The Blue Bloods will never allow stepsiblings to raise a child in The Society. Once the divorce is final, you and Kol will be free to love each other without judgment. We’re doing this for your future—for Scarlett’s future.”

“No!” I huff, wrinkles creasing my forehead. “You love Abbott and he loves you.”

Mom places a hand on my cheek, her eyes boring lovingly into mine. “But I love you most.”

For the first time ever, I believe her. I can see the love in her eyes, feel it in her touch. My mom might have a hard exterior, but inside, her heart beats with purpose. Right now, I feel like that purpose is me.

Just like mine does for my future Blue Blood.

My sweet Scarlett.

What happens when the daughter of Kol and Luna grows up and enrolls in
Boulder Cove Academy?

Darkness emerges, secrets come to light, and the past is never as far as we
think.

Has the former leader raised his daughter to carry her own, or will she need
help from The Lawless—three boys who take their roles dead seriously?

Find out in Scarlett’s series coming in 2022.

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ABOUT RACHEL LEIGH

Rachel Leigh is a USA Today bestselling author of new adult and contemporary romance with a twist. You can expect bad boys, strong heroines, and an HEA. She lives in leggings, overuses emojis, and survives on books and coffee. Writing is her passion. Her goal is to take readers on an adventure with her words, while showing them that even on the darkest days, love conquers all.

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HALF WICKED VERONICA EDEN



HALF WICKED

VERONICA EDEN

BLURB

Kieran Ryder tricks everyone into believing he's a god.
People worship the ground he walks on. Swoon for those perfect dimples he
serves up with each mischief-filled grin.

But I'm not fooled by his clever charm.
The golden god has a wicked secret hidden behind those devastating smiles.
He wants everyone to think he holds all the cards. That fortune is always on
his side.

The fates have other plans.
Escape from Arcadia Hill is all I've ever wished for.
One moment is all it takes to make leaving impossible.
The wrong place. The wrong time. The wrong everything makes me go from
no one to someone my bully wants to destroy, torment, *control*.
Kieran may be worshipped as a god, but he's not the only powerful player in
this deceitful town.

Now I'm not only his toy—I'm his target for retribution.
Kieran rules over Arcadia Prep and ruling me is his new favorite game.

PROLOGUE

ARIANA

THE TAUNTING LAUGHTER is nothing new. It's been the constant soundtrack of my life since the first day I stepped foot in Arcadia Prep. A mark that I'm not one of them, that I would never be worthy. The difference now is that I'm no longer an invisible outsider—I've been noticed.

Senior year has become hell. Ducking my head, I walk the gauntlet of the packed hall of the prestigious school to my locker, ignoring the group waiting there. All of the notorious Bastards at once is bound to be bad news.

Last week the only thing about me that mattered to anyone at Arcadia Prep was that I was beneath them. I don't come from wealth or good breeding. My scholarship was earned on academic merit rather than written in the stars. I was no one.

But now *he* knows I exist, and he hates me.

All because I saw something I shouldn't have. I wish I'd never been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but I can't take it back. My only option is to do what he wants: take his secret to my grave.

"I'm talking to you, peasant." Kieran's cocky voice behind me raises my hair, making my heart rate spike. "I don't see any other peasants around here—just your sad, pitiful existence. You should pay attention when one of the gods is talking."

The *gods*. He's so full of himself just because his dad is the most

powerful man in town. If this was a kingdom, Basil Kingston would definitely be our ruler. But their bank accounts, no-limit black cards, and names don't make any of Basil's illegitimate demon spawn gods—just rich assholes with an easy ride through life.

Ignore him, I remind myself. It's the only way to get through the callous attention he's bombarded me with since I went from no one to someone he needs to destroy, torment, *control*.

It wasn't always this bad, not until I made myself his target. Now he's everywhere I turn, his wrath inescapable. He'll never let me go.

Something hits the back of my head as another round of mean giggles sound in the hallway. The balled-up piece of paper thrown at me falls to the polished hardwood floor. Someone else tugs on my uniform, yanking on the plaid skirt. I press my lips together so tightly the muscles strain around my mouth.

Keep quiet.

After a week of hell under Kieran Ryder's cruel reign, I can't wait to escape once we graduate, now more than ever. Not just Arcadia Prep or from Kieran and all his friends—the Bastards, as his six half-siblings call themselves—but getting out of Arcadia Hill for good.

Senior year won't end for months.

I'm putting this place far behind me. I want as many miles as possible between me and the poisonous bubble of the Hill. Growing up surrounded by the wealthy elite judging each other behind fake smiles was the worst. I hate it here. Hate every single one of *them*.

Sometimes I really regret agreeing with Dad to go to the illustrious private school instead of the smaller public high school to have better prospects for college. It would have kept me off the Bastards' radar. It sounded good back then, and I couldn't face my friends, still too raw from losing Mom to cancer.

If I never came here, maybe I wouldn't have ever mattered to Kieran.

“Don’t be like that, Ari,” Kieran croons in a smooth, smoky tone. The one that guarantees the girls all swoon for him. “Ignoring me only makes me want to make you obey. Make you get down on your knees and worship.”

My stomach clenches at the hard edge to his voice. I don’t know whether I hate it more when he calls me peasant or shortens my name. He’s the only one that calls me Ari, creating another weird connection between us I never asked for.

Obey. I read the message behind his brutal act loud and clear. Unable to pretend I’m unaffected anymore, I flash him a glare.

My arms tighten around my books, bringing them closer to my chest. My secret sketchbook is on top tucked against me. It was stupid to bring it here. But it was the first time I’d gotten the urge since I lost Mom and I missed drawing with her. If any of them find it, it’s one more way Kieran can toy with me.

He loves hunting every weakness to use against me.

Propping beside my locker to block my way, he leans close enough for his warm breath to fan over my cheeks as he towers over me, playing with a lock of my thick wavy brown hair that slipped free from the velvet ribbon securing my ponytail. I jerk my head, shooting him another glare that earns me his signature cavalier grin.

“We only have so much time left. Need to get these memories in while we can. It’s our senior year. High school, you know.” He waves a hand, the corner of his full lips curling sardonically. “Time of our lives.”

I roll my eyes, sick of remaining quiet in the hope they’ll get bored and move on. If I’ve learned anything in the last week, it’s that there’s no hope for mercy. “Time can go faster. The sooner I don’t have to look at you every day, the better.”

“Don’t be in such a rush.”

His gaze flares with a hint of sinful flirtatiousness, the type that beckons me to dance on the dark side with a bad boy with a golden veneer.

Don't be fooled by the golden tousled hair, blue eyes and dimples when he flashes that boyish smile; he's no cinnamon roll—Kieran Ryder is all cinnamon roll.

“I might be known for being the fastest runner in the Hill, but—” He winds my hair around his finger again, grazing his nose over my cheek, murmuring to me in a sultry rasp. “—I like taking my time. Nice...and... slow.”

The minute the husky words leave him, heat floods my veins. It only lasts a second before someone douses me with water, soaking me to the bone. Shock rushes through me and I gasp from the icy chill.

“What the—?”

My shriek is cut off by roaring laughter. Kieran thumps a fist against the row of lockers, joining his sisters and brothers in their jeering laughs at my expense. The deep sound rolls out of him as Sayer, the youngest brother and life of every party, crashes against him, leaning heavily off him for support while they both lose it at my expense. Sayer's eyes are glassy—probably wasted at school as usual, living life a little too hard.

“She looks like a drowned rat.” Ophelia snickers, flipping her luscious blonde hair over her shoulder as she smirks at a boy from the football team passing by who gives her an appreciative once over.

He moves on as soon as he catches Cassian's protective glare above his beautiful sister's head. The guy is built like a brick wall, bulging arms crossed over his chest. The enforcer of the Bastards is the one who scares me the most, even more than Kieran's wrath.

The triplets are busy giggling while taking photos of me. I'm sure I'll end up highlighted on one of their gossip accounts within the hour. Great. Everyone follows Isadora, Isolde, and Imogen because they seem to know everything about everyone. Their musings can make or break your fate in the Hill, inspiring social adoration or turning you into a pariah.

Once the shock wears off, humiliation and pain prick at my senses. I hold

my books away from my wet body, but it's no use. They got me good and the stack is just as drenched. My eyes widen as the thought registers.

Oh no. Please, no.

As surreptitiously as I can, I check the sketchbook. It's old, one Mom and I made together. Anguish rips through me when I trace the sewn paper spine and find it soggy to the touch. My throat constricts, a shuddering exhale hissing past my lips as I fight the tears welling in my eyes.

Kieran finally recovers enough to slouch against the lockers like he's some roguish heartthrob from one of my books. He drags fingers through his hair, studying my attempt to cover up, showing off his bicep flexing through his button down shirt. Amusement bleeds away to reveal the anger burning in his gaze, the same fiery rage as that night in the alley last week.

"Thanks for the preview." He eyes my bra, visible through my wet white blouse. "I think I'll pass after all. It's fine if I don't finish my last year with a perfect record of giving every girl a ride. As great as your tits are, I don't think I could stand to look at you if I stooped so low."

Frustration crashes over me, my lip curling. The hot tears stinging my eyes threaten to spill over, but I won't give him the satisfaction. I hate him so fucking much.

I can't wait to get far, far away from here and never have to see him again.

"This is too far, even for you."

It's only because he's watching me so intently he picks up on the slight crack in my voice. But I'm done letting him see the painful effect his torment has on me. I'm not his to control.

Kieran thinks he owns me because of the secret? Screw him. No one owns me.

CHAPTER 1

ARIANA

ONE WEEK AGO

A running stream of frantic reminders plays on repeat in my head while I try to retain everything Delphine told me. It's my first night waitressing at The Gilded Arrow, the most upscale restaurant in Arcadia Hill, and I'm thrown to the sharks. My employee mentor—not trainer, because that's the kind of fancy this place is—left me on my own when she was reassigned to a different section.

Always be discreet. Melt into the shadows, you shouldn't be seen. Appearances are everything, your hair should always be styled and makeup is encouraged, but not too much. Don't stare at the celebrity guests or ask them for anything.

The back of my skull throbs under the half a can of hairspray holding my curls in place. But I need this job, so I power through it. This is my one shot to save up enough to get the hell out of Arcadia Hill after graduation. My boss Karly let me know I won't be given a second chance if I fuck anything up because they usually only hire staff with experience. She only took me on because I assured her I have zero social life and pick up things fast.

I wasn't always such a study-focused nerd. I love reading, taking pride in

being able to absorb new knowledge I may never need for the simple sake of learning. Books have been my only escape. By throwing myself into my studies so hard, I don't have to face what I can't handle—Mom's death, my broken love of art, still a raw and aching exposed nerve, and my friends who never knew what to say.

It's been four years. People say time makes it easier, but they're full of shit. This gaping hole in my chest stings like a bitch with the same intensity since Mom died.

Eventually, my old friends stopped trying. Whether that's on me for ignoring them or them for giving up, I don't know. The only thing I do know is my determined focus on my plan to leave. I'm putting this town behind me as soon as I graduate.

No more lonely nights while Dad travels for work—his own form of grieving the amazing woman who made our lives shine. No more feeling muddled and stagnant from self-isolation. No more waiting on my dreams.

I'll spread my wings, like Mom wanted for me.

My fingers brush my collar bone, where I want to get my wings tattooed. They were our thing, the beautiful symbols of flight and freedom the only salvation that grounded me from spiraling after her death. I want to get them permanently inked on my skin to honor Mom and remind myself to fly high, like she always said.

A lump forms in my throat every time I think about her, but maybe I'm finally ready. It's been so long. Thinking about our wings makes me want to dig out my sketchbooks. When I get home from my first shift, I'll pull them from under my mattress where I hid them years ago, too stricken by grief to stand looking at them, let alone using them.

I flex my fingers, imagining my rusty drawing muscles shaking off their stone casing. A faint smile flits across my face as I refill water goblets around one of my tables.

“Something the matter?” A nasally drawl snaps me out of my thoughts.

The smile drops off my face and my eyes bug out as I stare at a prominent local author. Right. Don't get noticed. Crap.

Clearing my throat, I offer a demure nod. "No. Please enjoy your dinner."

I avoid Delphine's shrewd eye, throwing myself back into work twice as hard to prove it wasn't a mistake to hire someone with no experience. This job is too important for me to fail the first night.

It's not that I have to work for our survival. Dad's salary keeps us afloat and he works hard. I want to so he doesn't have to worry when I go to college next year.

Everything is fine until Kieran Ryder saunters in with a woman more than twice his age on his arm. I squint from across the room. Isn't that Judge Peterson's wife?

The mantra of rules and reminders flies out of my head. I stop and stare as Kieran escorts the woman through the restaurant. I've seen him in a blazer and tie before, but that's the school uniform. His suit tonight is tailored to perfectly highlight every masculine line of his god-like body.

Kieran pulls out the woman's chair, leaning close to murmur something that makes her giggle and reach up to trace his jaw. My stomach clenches at the public display. Surely he's not like—*with* her? He might be eighteen, but he's still in high school.

There's also the fact she's married. I don't need to see the giant ten carat gleaming rock on her finger from here to know it. The local paper did a feature on the Petersons this week in connection to his current trial, and the photo of her smiling dazzlingly next to the judge in their mansion is fresh in my mind.

Except it doesn't seem to matter, because her thumb brushes right over his lip and his gaze warms, his mouth curving seductively. I gawk because *holy shit*. They're just out here in the open amongst countless other guests who can see them.

"Ariana," one of the other waitresses hisses.

I jolt and snap my jaw shut. Right. Don't stare at the celebrity guests. That applies to the son of the most powerful and affluent man in Arcadia Hill.

Thankfully he's not seated in my section. Dealing with Kieran's whip-like tongue at school is bad enough, since I'm unworthy of breathing the same air as people like him because I need financial aid. Thank god I've never garnered his attention, invisible to him because I'm lumped with the other students the Bastards deem peasants.

I can't help the way my attention drifts to his table, though. They don't bother hiding anything. Kieran sits next to her, his arm draped over the back of her seat. She leans into him while they share the menu. Shifting closer, he caresses her arm, whispering in her ear with another one of his signature flirtatious smirks. Whatever he says makes her grin like a simpering twit.

It's not so much a shock that he's acting like that. This is who he is—charismatic and cocky enough to have anything he wants, even prominent older married women in town. At school he's had a different girl hanging off of him every week since freshman year. The shock is that it seems like he doesn't care who sees them.

What if her husband shows up? Curiosity over the possibility doesn't leave my mind as I surreptitiously watch Kieran wine and dine her.

A strangled gasp catches in my throat when he kisses her shoulder and she eyes him like a slab of meat, practically salivating over him more than her entree. I dart my gaze around to check that no one else is watching and find the other guests absorbed in their own conversations, not caring about what's going on outside of their own bubbles.

Is this how it always is at The Gilded Arrow? Maybe it's why the rules are about discretion and forgetting anything I see here. I'll just have to keep my head down and decompress when I'm off work. The money is too good to pass up.

An hour later, Delphine snags my sleeve, gesturing to the back. "Hey, I need you to empty the cans in the dumpster out back. Usually the bussers

handle it, but everyone's slammed right now and you're new, so you're basically our bitch."

"Okay." I huff out a soft laugh. "Got it."

"Thanks." Her shoulders fall in relief, then she winks. "Your hustle is paying off tonight. Other than earlier, Karly has been paying attention. Keep it up and you'll do fine here."

I hurry to collect the trash in the back of the restaurant. This is going to work. As the most popular and refined place in town, the tips are excellent, far and above what I'd earn anywhere else. My first shift isn't over and I've already pocketed almost five hundred bucks so far. At this rate, I'll be set when I graduate to go to a college far away from here without ever having to look back. I can already feel my metaphorical wings unfurling, ready to take flight.

A shiver racks my body when I step into the cool night, my breath fogging the air in front of me. I cart the hefty trash bags across the wide alley to the dumpsters. A single street lamp illuminates the back door, leaving most of the alley in shadows, including the dumpster. With a sigh, I take care of the trash, struggling to swing the bags up on the first try. I'm not that short, yet I'm not tall, either. Everything about me is average at best.

Brushing my hands, I turn on my heel, ready to go earn more tips. I stop in my tracks, gazing at the back door.

Kieran stands beneath the glow of the Victorian-style street lamp, mouth set in a stony line. I take it from his flat expression that his date with the married woman inside isn't going well. He's so different from earlier, his clever smirk and charming demeanor nowhere in sight. With jerky, agitated movements, he removes his jacket and rolls up his shirtsleeves.

Heat swirls in my gut at the prominent veins I can spot from across the alley as he finishes. Kieran in his school uniform is tantalizing. In his suit tonight, debonair. And like this, without a jacket with his sleeves rolled up? Hot as hell. What is it about rolled up sleeves that turns girls brains to liquid?

I shake myself out of checking him out. What am I doing? This guy's an asshole. An attractive one, that I've maybe harbored a stupid crush on, but that changes nothing.

Guests shouldn't be back here. It's staff only. Except, he's Kieran fucking Ryder. There's no way he'll listen to the rules if I tell him to go back inside.

It all leaves my head when a man melts out of the shadows and approaches him. At first, I have trouble making out who it is. Then he speaks and chills race over my skin.

What is Basil Kingston doing meeting his bastard son in the back of a restaurant like this? No good comes from secret meetings. I've read enough books to know that.

Neither of them have spotted me. Delphine's rules to never be seen ring in my head. I need this job.

They're blocking the way back inside, so my only choice is to hide and wait for them to move. Grimacing, I crouch in the dark next to the dumpster, trying not to make a sound.

"Did you enjoy your meal tonight?" Basil asks.

"The soup was late and the company was shit," Kieran answers. "The lovely judge's wife hasn't stopped feeling me up all night."

Basil's laugh is hearty, matching his large, imposing frame. "I thought you enjoyed it when they fawned all over you. It's part of the territory. You should embrace it more, it'll make your work enjoyable. You can just as easily utilize a bed. Get right to it rather than wining and dining them first, and far more pleasurable."

I cover my mouth, shocked gaze snapping up. Is he—? There's no way. It can't be.

Yet nothing else makes sense to explain what I saw in the restaurant. Kieran and Evelyn Peterson were all over each other and no one batted an eyelash. Do they all know? Is it some sort of private club they all have? My stomach churns at the thought.

Call me crazy, but I think Kieran is some kind of escort and his dad is the one making him do it.

As I lean forward, straining my ears to hear, I completely forget the grave consequences I'd face if they knew I was listening. A bang sounds on the other side of the dumpster, startling me. I cover my mouth, crouching lower into the shadows when they pause their conversation to look over. A fat raccoon waddles away from the dumpster, crossing the alley to head down the steps to the cellar. Once they spot it, they continue, lowering their voices.

Shit, that was close. What am I doing? My job is too important. Rather than risk getting caught, I stay hidden, missing more of Basil's stern, demanding side of the conversation. The longer it goes, the more my mind races to come up with an explanation for what I've seen and heard. No matter which way I work through it, escort is the only thing that fits.

Once it seems like they're wrapping up, I peek around the edge of the dumpster.

Kieran grins like this is a game. "Same time next week? Great, I've got an assignment to write after I drop the judge's wife back home. Don't worry, I'll tuck her in for you, too."

Gross.

Basil sighs. "Some days, you are so much like me, it's uncanny. Others, I wish you weren't."

"Like you care," Kieran mutters. His father doesn't seem to hear it, but because he's facing me, the acerbic words drift over to me.

Basil finally disappears into the shadows. A car door slams, then headlights blind me as his sleek black town car pulls out of the alley. I watch the tail lights until the car rounds the corner, wondering how long it was there before I came out to handle the trash.

Did Basil wait the whole time while his son was whoring himself out in the restaurant? Yikes. My brows pinch.

Kieran looks in the direction his father went with the corners of his mouth

downturned. It's almost strange to see him frown. I'm so used to his constant smirking. Exhaling harshly, he rolls his shoulders and cracks his neck from side to side. He steps out from beneath the street lamp, pacing the shadowy edges between light and dark.

When he takes out his phone, I come out of my crouch. Now's my chance to sneak back in while he's distracted. I keep one cautious eye on him, creeping across the alley, aiming to keep my steps light. I'm almost to the back door of The Gilded Arrow, believing I'm about to succeed in sneaking away without being caught.

That goes up in smoke when I trip over the squat concrete barrier in the empty parking space behind the restaurant on my way to the door. My arms pinwheel to regain my balance and a tiny yelp escapes me, giving me away if the loud scuff of my shoe whacking into the barrier didn't. To make matters worse, I lose my battle against gravity and tip over, landing on the ground with a grunt of pain, stiff styled curls covering my face.

Crap. The uniform comes out of our pay. I hope I didn't mess it up on my first night.

Kieran whips around, pocketing his phone once he spots me. His gaze cuts up the alley, then sweeps around as if he's looking for anyone else who could have listened in on his conversation with his dad.

It's just little old me who's privy to his secret.

Gulping, I climb to my feet, holding my hands up. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out before he traps me beneath the full weight of his arrogant glare.

"What's your name?" Kieran demands, stalking toward me.

I stumble backward, but he snags my arm, wrenching me close enough to get a strong hit of his spicy cologne. My heart hammers in my chest so hard it feels like it's trying to climb up my throat.

His blue eyes harden as they move from assessing me to the spot I hid. He works out the situation quickly. "What are you doing out here? How

much did you fucking hear?”

Oh god. Not only did I fail the never be seen rule, but I did it in the worst possible way.

Before tonight I was a speck of dust at the edge of Kieran Ryder’s radar, but now? Now he’s looking right at me. I’ll never be invisible to him again.

CHAPTER 2

KIERAN

THE ALLEY DOESN'T DISPEL the cloying stink of Evelyn Peterson's heavy perfume. It clings to me, just as the phantom feeling of her touch does.

A sigh gusts out of me, recalling Evelyn telling me I'm growing up to be just like my father. Then she'd trailed off, her voice husky as she went on to say she was looking forward to finding out if I was like him in more ways while sliding her hand up my thigh beneath the fine linen tablecloth. She believed my silver-tongued charm a bit too well. The skill of talking my way in and out of anything is one of my best talents, and the reason Dad found a use for me.

I shrug out of my coat and roll my sleeves up, smoothing away the feeling of her manicured nails dragging on my arm as she whispered her secrets to me. It's always like this. Especially with women.

They're helpless against my weaponized charm and master manipulation. I'm well-versed in when to throw in a sultry smile, when to trace a wrist to encourage connection while I pose a question they're so quick to answer, and how to read people to seek out all the ways I can use them.

This isn't what I dream of doing with my life.

The small wings I got tattooed to my ankles were nothing more than an act of rebellion. I won't escape Arcadia Hill. Not while my father enjoys using me as a tool for information. As long as I carry messages for him, I'm

chained here.

I'm his favorite, the only one he allows close. He uses my siblings for distractions occasionally, but I'm the one privy to every cog in my father's empire.

I toss my jacket over the railing for steps that lead down to a cellar. He's late.

Everything in Arcadia Hill always runs on Basil Kingston's time.

Finally, he emerges from the darkness at the end of the alley. The only things we share in common are our blond hair and blue eyes. I'm leaner than his broad frame, and slightly taller.

"Good evening, son," Dad greets. "How did your track meet go? That was this month, correct?"

My smirk is sardonic, a line of tension in my shoulders coiling tighter. "Come on. That's not why you're really here."

With a flourish of my wrist, I gesture to the quiet alley behind The Gilded Arrow. Dad chuckles, the booming baritone echoing off the brick. He's perfected the art of creating a jovial personality, but I see past his performances, understanding the true power-hungry nature hidden beneath his winning smiles.

He's the king at the top of the Hill because he uses me and his other minions to keep his hands clean of the dirty work. Nothing connects him to the secrets and information I pass on. It keeps him ahead of the game amongst the wealthiest players in town, and against his business rivals in the south and from the coast always poised to overtake him.

"You're right." Dad glances at the door. "Did you enjoy your meal tonight?"

"The soup was late and the company was shit," I mutter. "The lovely judge's wife hasn't stopped feeling me up all night."

I'm sure she's on a mission to cop a feel of my dick for comparison against my father's. Bile rises in the back of my throat.

Dad chuckles. “I thought you enjoyed it when they fawned all over you. It’s part of the territory. You should embrace it more, it’ll make your work enjoyable. You can just as easily utilize a bed. Get right to it rather than wining and dining them first, and far more pleasurable.”

My lip curls. I duck my head to hide it from him. A noise across the alley makes us both tense until an animal scurries out of the darkness.

“It’s just a raccoon,” I say. “No one’s out here.”

“There’d better not be. You picked this location, not me.” His mouth forms a thin line. “I’d hate to make life difficult for your mother if you screwed up.”

“I never screw up.” Clenching my teeth, I keep my voice low. “I have my methods and you have yours. Mine gets you what you want without fail.”

“So far.”

The implication that it better stay that way hangs between us. I tilt my head in mock concession. It will because I’ve perfected this, too. In the last two years he’s had me doing this, I’ve always delivered what he demands.

“Well, what do you have for me, then?” His gaze slides to the end of the alley where he parked. “I have other matters that need my attention.”

The lecherous way he says *matters* makes me grit my teeth. He probably has a chick or three in the back of his car and I’m keeping him waiting. The man is insatiable.

Every time I’m with a girl, some part of me stops to compare myself. I’m not like him. I slam down on the thought, not willing to psychoanalyze my motives to get my dick wet because my Dad didn’t love me enough by doing the same fucking shit.

My legs twinge with the need to run, though I know there’s no escape, no matter how hard and fast I sprint. I’ll go for a jog before I meet up with the others tonight to burn all this energy off and clear my head. Once this whole smoke and mirrors charade is done.

“She confirmed that the trial is going the way you want,” I say dully.

“The jurors will reach the right verdict. Your profit margin is safe.”

“Excellent. Anything else?”

My jaw clenches. “She also implied she hoped to meet up with you.”

If I wasn’t available, that is. I get the sense she entertains fantasies of both of us at once. *Never fucking happening, lady.*

Dad smirks, a lascivious look flashing in his cunning eyes. His affairs are the worst kept secret in the Hill. It’s how he ended up with me and my six half-siblings, and we’re just from the times he didn’t bother to wrap his dick or pay for his numerous mistresses to take care of things. I’m pretty sure it would kill him to keep it in his pants when he’s faced with temptation. He gives in every time.

The fact Evelyn thinks I’ll walk that same path, become the same revered titan as him, pisses me off. I don’t want to walk in my father’s shadow. I want to become a god in my own right, not because his blood is in my veins.

His expression turns smug. “Take her for a spin. She’s quite an enthusiastic lover, my boy.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Your loss.” His gaze shifts past me to the door of the restaurant. “Perhaps I can squeeze in a late nightcap.” He gestures toward his car. “After...”

“Spare me the details. I have a young, impressionable mind.” I rub at my temple as he laughs.

“Very well. I’ll leave you to conclude tonight’s business.” He pins me with a parting stare. “Don’t forget, my boy. No one can know what you’re doing. If Loren got wind, he’d leave his southern underworld. Damn bastard’s looking for any excuse to challenge me.”

“I’ve got it, old man.” I grin, the corners of my mouth sharp. “Same time next week? Great, I’ve got an assignment to write after I drop the judge’s wife back home. Don’t worry, I’ll tuck her in for you, too.”

She may think I’ll fuck her, but I don’t have to touch a woman to have

her quivering for me. It'll be my parting gift to Evelyn. Something to make her believe something happened between us that didn't, just like tonight's charade to cover up the secrets she let slip for me.

Dad sighs. "Some days, you are so much like me, it's uncanny. Others, I wish you weren't."

I inhale harshly through my nose. "Like you care."

I hate it when he gets it in his head that he's a good father because he spends time with his bastard spawn. It never lasts long. I learned that before middle school when he first showed an interest in me.

With a final assessing look, he disappears into the shadows. I don't relax until his car pulls out. I frown at the mouth of the alley. A harsh exhale gusts past my lips and I roll the stiff kinks out of my shoulders, pacing the hazy line between the street lamp's pool of light and the shadows my father lives in.

It doesn't help with the scuzzy feeling I never seem capable of scrubbing from my skin after I'm done playing information broker. I hate this aspect of my life. It's not always bad, but nights like this are the worst, when I'm forced to use my charms to trick people into giving me what I need.

Working my jaw, I check my phone, bypassing the photo of my wall of maps on my screen. There won't be any flying away for me. It's a pipe dream. The Hill has its chain around my throat, ensuring my proverbial wings are clipped.

I couldn't leave my siblings behind, anyway.

The last three messages Sayer sent are increasingly riddled with typos. He's drunk already and it's only nine. Sighing, I type a message to Cassian to check on him. While I'm here, the rest of my siblings are hosting tonight's party. No rest for the wicked.

Our bank accounts might be flush, but it's not enough for us. The only wisdom we've picked up from dear old Dad is to carve our own thrones.

An unexpected noise behind me makes me whirl around. A waitress I

don't recognize from the staff roster is sprawled on the concrete. No one was supposed to be out here. Narrowing my eyes angrily, I pocket my phone and sweep the area to search for anyone else. She's alone.

Has she been out here the entire time? Shit. Dad won't like that. He's very careful to keep himself separated from the machinations behind the scenes that keep him on top. If she heard about the trial, she could sell her story and ruin him. She could go right to his business rivals, the ones hungry for his position in Arcadia Hill.

I can't let that happen, or Dad will make life hell for my mother and siblings.

He can't find out or he'll blame me for not checking things were secure since I picked this spot. I'll handle this on my own. It's time for damage control.

She climbs to her feet, lifting her hands. I pin her with my glare, stalking in her direction.

"What's your name?" As soon as I know it, I'll know who to tell Karly to fucking fire.

She shuffles backward, eyes widening when I grab her arm, dragging her into the light. She's younger than I thought—my age.

There's something familiar about her pretty face framed by thick, wavy dark brown hair and those whiskey-colored eyes that tugs at the edges of my awareness, just out of reach. Have I fucked this girl?

No, I'd remember what those plush lips looked like parted in a scream of ecstasy while I pounded into her. She's hot in a buttoned-up way, like a sexy librarian. Her alluring lips distract me. Under different circumstances, I'd absolutely fuck her.

She must go to Arcadia Prep, but who the hell needs to hold a job? I scan the alley once again, lingering on the dumpster. She has to be a scholarship student. It's the only thing that makes sense.

"What are you doing out here?" My grip digs into her arm. "How much

did you fucking hear?”

Outsider, my mind supplies. If I’m right about her being a scholarship student, then she could be a worse problem than dealing with someone from money. I know how to manage those vipers. Someone unknown like her is a wildcard.

She tugs against my hold. “Oh no, you won’t be going anywhere, little bug.” My tone is light, dancing with false sympathy for my trapped prey. “Not until I say so.”

“Let me go,” she says.

“No.” I grit my teeth at her request. She has no leverage here other than what she witnessed. And when I’m done, she won’t have that either. I’ll make her believe she saw nothing. “Answer the question, or I’ll march you straight to Karly’s office.”

A spark of satisfaction fills me at the way her beautiful features pale with terror. Ah, a weakness. Good. I can work with that.

“I could have you fired for even looking at me right now if that’s how you want to play this,” I threaten.

She releases the most delicious little squeak that draws a smirk from me. This might be fun.

CHAPTER 3

ARIANA

THE FEAR that Kieran will demand Karly fire me on my first night after I worked hard to prove myself shoots through me. It's irrational, because he's the one who shouldn't have been in the alley. But I know it won't matter. His name and money trumps my position.

"Look, I never meant to overhear—"

"You shouldn't have listened in at all," Kieran says aggressively. "That was a private conversation. Spying on the guests is severely frowned upon. It's the only reason I come to this restaurant."

"I didn't!" I insist. "I didn't hear anything. I was taking out the trash and when I turned around, you were blocking the door. I swear I didn't eavesdrop."

The lie twists my stomach in knots. It's not like I was trying to listen. I was doing my best to follow the rules.

"Please, I really need this job. I promise, I don't care about whatever you were talking to your Dad about."

A yelp catches in my throat when he jerks my arm.

"I thought you didn't hear anything?" He yanks my uniform collar, handsome features arranged in distaste. "You're not cut out to work here if you fold that easily. Tell me your name."

I've seen him destroy others at school for less with notorious glee. I'm

afraid of what will happen if he has to ask for it again, even though it's the last bit of protection I have. I recognize him because I'd know him anywhere—anyone who goes to Arcadia Prep would. But to him I was no one until two minutes ago.

Steeling myself, I keep my voice even. "Ariana Kosta."

His clever eyes sharpen with recognition, like he's solved a puzzle that was bothering him. Up close, they're striking. I finally understand better why girls fall all over him with eyes like that. His chiseled jaw works as he considers me.

"You go to Arcadia Prep."

"Yes." I'm proud of myself for not stammering. "I swear I'm no one important. Tonight's my first night."

"That's right." Kieran brings his face close to mine, invading my space with a snarl. "You're nothing but a little bug to me."

I shrink away, uncomfortable being the center of his undivided attention. Other girls vie for this, but I don't see the appeal other than his looks.

"I won't say anything," I promise.

Who would believe me if I started spreading it around that Kieran's some kind of escort? That's not me, anyway. I don't spread rumors or talk about people behind their back.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll forget anything you saw or heard tonight. Take it to your grave and never tell anyone." The demanding tone sends ice through my veins. Gritting his teeth, he digs his fingers into my arm with bruising force. "Got that, peasant? None of this exists, or I'll make sure you don't exist."

When I nod, he finally releases me with a shove, keeping me pinned by his calculating gaze that makes it clear I shouldn't move. I don't know how I'm supposed to unsee any of this, but I'm sure as hell not going to tell anyone.

"Give me your phone." I gape at his outstretched hand. He pushes out an

impatient sound, brows flattening as he pats me down roughly. “Now.”

“But—”

“Give it to me. I have no problem taking it from you if you don’t,” he says caustically. A brutal smile curves his mouth as his dangerous leer slides down my body. “I’ll strip you to find it, then take whatever else I want from you.”

Gulping, I fish the cheap older model from my pocket, unlock it, and hand it over. He flashes me an unimpressed look, then judges the shit out of my phone while he invades my privacy, thumbing through my emails, messages, photos, and social media apps with jerky movements. I cross my arms, frowning.

“Do you have a problem?”

He pauses in going through my photos and messages, shooting me an irritated look. “Your phone is a piece of shit.”

“Thanks. There’s nothing on it. I didn’t record you.” I snatch it back and squeak when he strides into my space, forcing me to shuffle backwards if I don’t want him to collide with me.

He grasps my jaw in a controlling grip. “Drop that attitude. I could end you for your disrespect alone. I don’t think I want to see your face around this place ever again.”

“I don’t want to get fired.” My throat convulses. “I’ll do whatever you want.”

Kieran’s angry features twist like he’s scented blood in the water. “Repeat after me.” He pauses when I lick my lips, predatory gaze tracking the movement. “Say ‘I saw nothing. I heard nothing.’ Do it now.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, I—” My words cut off with a gasp when his hand moves to wrap around my throat. I stare at him. He lifts a brow, waiting. After a beat, his grip tightens, threatening to cut off my air. “I—I saw nothing. I heard nothing.”

“Very good.” The praise drips with arrogance. His fingers loosen, but he

doesn't let go, holding my neck. It seems to fascinate him, his hypnotic blue eyes dragging down. "Don't disappoint me, Ari. Run along."

Finally, he drops his hand. Not waiting to see if he snatches me again, I back away, rushing for the door without correcting him for shortening my name. My hand flies to my throat, rubbing his touch away.

I have no idea what to make of this bizarre night. Kieran is an escort of some kind, but I don't understand why. And now I'm one of the only other people to know a secret I never wanted.

The hope that Kieran would forget about what happened in the alley behind The Gilded Arrow evaporates at school on Monday.

I keep my head down, same as always. I haven't made friends here. At first it was because Mom's death left me reeling and I closed off from everyone. Now that it's senior year, what's the point? I'm only in the halls of Arcadia Prep to graduate with honors to open up my prospects for college. Dad works hard, but we're far from rolling in it. Mom's medical bills leave us barely keeping our heads above water.

There's an odd vibe in the regal halls of the old building today. I don't pick up on it until I cross a courtyard that's usually buzzing with activity on the lush green lawn and students hanging out of the wide stone arches. Today it's weirdly quiet. I peek around, finding people sneaking glances at me and whispering behind their hands.

Okay...

Ignoring them, I hurry on my way. Sometimes if I'm early enough, I can squeeze in time in the library before first period. I love hiding away amongst the historic tomes. The only good thing about this stuck up school is the library. It's my haven here.

I understand why the vibe is weird when I reach my locker, stopping

several feet away. Kieran is there, leaning against the row with a wicked smirk. My days of invisibility amongst the affluent students are over.

Why is he seeking me out? I thought he didn't want me in his line of sight, and I planned to stick to that until graduation.

No one else is at the other lockers when this hallway is usually bustling by now. There are people, but they hang along the opposite wall and alcoves further down the hall.

"Come on, Ari," Kieran calls in a bored tone. There he goes, shortening my name again. The hardness of his eyes belies his fake boredom. "We don't have all day."

Shoulders tensing, I grip the strap of my worn, secondhand leather messenger bag Mom gifted me with and join him at my locker.

"Good morning," I mumble while I put in the combo to open it.

"Is it?" he taunts.

His gaze bores into me and he clamps a hand down on my shoulder. I don't know what he wants from me—I haven't said anything. I'm trying not to think about him and the judge's wife at all. He's already threatened to have me fired, and I'm sure my boss will believe whatever silver-tongued complaint he gives her.

As my thoughts churn, I don't notice his hand slipping into my bag while he squeezes my shoulder to distract me until he pulls it free, my phone clutched in his grip.

"Hey—"

I cut off at the commanding flick of his eyes. He's not as angry as the other night, but I don't trust him not to wait for the right moment to destroy me, audience or not. My lips purse when he unlocks my phone with my passcode without asking. He must have seen me put it in last night. The stares of everyone around us watching with veiled interest make me twitchy.

"Um, what are you doing?"

"Keeping an eye on you," he mutters while he looks through my phone.

“There’s always that conversation I could have with Karly at the restaurant if you’d rather fight me. My father owns the restaurant.”

“That’s unnecessary.” I can’t lose that job. Glancing around, I lower my voice, practically breathing my words to him. “I already told you I wouldn’t say anything.”

Every time his eyes meet mine, I’m locked in place, trapped under his lethal gazes. The corner of his mouth curls up viciously and he plants a hand against the wall of lockers, leaning into me. To those taking in this show, it looks like he’s flirting with me, pulling the same god-like act he does with all the girls in school.

Close enough to kiss, his body is hard and warm, his rich aftershave invading my senses. It’s undeniable that he’s handsome. Bright blue eyes, dimples when he smiles, perfect blond hair. The crush I used to have on him was stupid. He would never notice someone like me—bookish and plain.

Except he has and his attention is the last thing I want.

When he speaks, it’s with a dangerous lilt that makes my heart beat faster in inexplicable excitement and fear.

“You think I’m stupid enough to believe you at your word, little bug? I wouldn’t dream of doing that.” He taps my phone against my chest. “You’re going to do as I say, and I’ll do whatever I deem necessary to make sure you behave like a good little peasant.” Bringing his lips to my ear, he growls, “If you defy me, I’ll enjoy ripping you apart piece by pretty little piece.”

“Fine. But you don’t have to be a creep about it.” I swallow as his eyes narrow. He tears his gaze away, watching my throat with the same odd fascination as last night. My skin tingles with the memory of his fingers wrapped around my neck. “There’s nothing on my phone.”

“There is now.” Smirking, he shows me the message thread with a new contact labeled *Ari’s Golden God* with an eggplant emoji. I pull a face and he laughs darkly, returning my phone and plucking at my uniform. “You should never ignore me, or I’ll make you regret it.”

My stomach tightens, warmth spreading across my skin at the order. His direct focus is too much. He overwhelms me after I've spent so long isolating myself at this school. He seems aware of it, studying me closely.

Turning my burning face into my locker to hide my blush, I grab my books. He chuckles ruthlessly again, the honeyed sound raising the hair on my nape as he leans in, caging me between his arms when he braces them on either side of me. His breath fans over my skin, and I regret tying my hair in a ponytail with one of my velvet ribbons today. A tug on my hair makes me angle my head sharply, finding his sinister grin in my face.

“Say you understand like a good girl, Ari,” he demands in a smoky tone that stirs heat in my core. “I’m waiting.”

“Really?” I hiss, shifting my gaze behind him where people have their phones out. “First of all, my name is Ariana. Second, can’t you see how much attention we’re drawing? I need to go.”

Ducking beneath his arm, I shut my locker and almost jog down the hall. Running away isn’t my finest moment, but I need to get away from him before my heart beats out of my chest. I round the corner and lean against the stone wall with a huff, shutting my eyes.

The rich masculine cologne he wears still filters into my nose like I can’t shake him. It’s a delicious blend of earthy spice and crisp freshness. Why does that asshole have to smell so good?

“Ari.”

My eyes snap open. Kieran is in front of me, a muscle in his jaw flexing now that we’re not putting on a show, a hint of the monster behind the boyish smile creeping out.

“Don’t walk away until I dismiss you again.” His cold tone makes me shudder and his mouth curves into a cruel, cutting sneer. “Understand this now, little bug. You don’t hold the cards, I do. You don’t have power. Obey my wishes and you’ll get to keep your job. Don’t?”

He trails off, touching my chin. When I jerk away, he grabs my jaw and

pins me to the wall with his body. I can feel every hard line of him and it makes me dizzy.

“Be a good girl, Ari,” he threatens in an arrogant croon. “Or I will do very bad things to you without mercy. Understand?”

When I nod stiffly, he hums in consideration, dropping his gaze to my mouth, lingering there. A moment later he tenses, frowning in annoyance as he releases me. He smooths the lapels of his school blazer and gives me a haughty once over like I’ve pissed him off in another way before striding away, leaving me breathing heavily to ride out the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Once I have myself under control, I peel away from the wall. There are only ten minutes to spare before first period. The library will have to wait, no matter how much it’s calling me to hide away.

The rest of the day is full of Kieran’s threatening gaze seeking me out anytime our paths cross, leaving the back of my neck tingling with the sensation of being watched. He texts me during the classes we don’t share when I’m out of his sight. There’s no hope of escaping him.

CHAPTER 4

ARIANA

AFTER ALMOST A WEEK of Kieran watching me—not just at school but when he shows up at work requesting my section, being demanding when I’m forced to serve him—Friday is a relief when I escape to the library. He’s been so in my face, I can’t forget his secret, even if I wanted to.

Ignoring one of the numerous daily texts he sends—this one reading *send me a photo of where you are right now, and don’t you dare try to fake it. I have my ways of knowing if you’re lying and I’m smarter than you*—I push through the ornate paned french doors to my personal haven at Arcadia Prep. The glorious scent of old books, leather, and wood twine around me like a hug. I sigh with a wide smile, the constant knot of tension in my shoulders relaxing once I cross the threshold.

I nod to the librarian as I pass her desk and slip through the stacks, skimming my fingertips over the leather-bound spines. Pausing in the middle of one row, I hold up my phone for Kieran’s photo demand, giving the crappy camera on my old phone a flat expression with my middle finger raised.

He responds immediately.

Ari’s Golden God [eggplant emoji]: That’s a very naughty gesture for such a good girl. Shall I come to the library and spank you? [smirk emoji]

Ugh. Asshole. I need to change his contact name. Or delete it and block

his number.

I stuff the phone into my bag, cheeks flaming. His suggestive offer paints an unwanted, forbidden picture in my head. One where I'm bent over the antique leather couch in the loft at the top of the wrought iron spiral staircase, plaid uniform skirt flipped up, exposed ass pink and stinging while Kieran stands behind me, shirtsleeves rolled up. In my mind he croons to me in that wicked, panty-dropping tone, saying that I've been a good girl for him while he caresses my aching backside with his clever fingers.

Desire pulses deep in my core.

God, what is wrong with me? Am I seriously fantasizing about that jerk?

Get a goddamn grip, Ariana.

While I'm lamenting something that's clearly snapped in my brain, I collide with somebody and we both go down.

"Oh—shoot! Sorry!" She recovers first, bouncing to her feet, helping me up and brushing me down. "Man, I keep getting lost around here. I'm sorry I bumped into you."

"I think it was my fault, actually. I was..." I clamp my mouth shut, not about to tell this beautiful redhead why I was spacing out. "I wasn't paying attention."

Beaming, she snaps her fingers. "No worries. Hey, I think you're in my Ancient Civilizations class. Third period, right?"

"Oh, I—"

Shit, I have no idea what her name is. This is what I get for isolating myself so much.

"I'm Lyssa. I just started here last week. Ugh, mid-semester starts, am I right?" Lyssa shakes her head with a wry expression. She taps the headband holding her gorgeous hair back from her face. "And this campus is like one giant maze. It's so different from the city I grew up in."

"Yeah, Arcadia Hill is..." I wave a hand to encompass the focus on wealth, prestige, and status around here. "A different world."

“Damn right.” Lyssa picks up my bag for me. “There are study tables in here, right?”

“Yes, back this way.”

She follows my lead. “Ah, I see. I got turned around in the dead poet’s section. I knew I should’ve made a left at Poe instead of a right.”

Despite my usual standoffishness from meeting new people, a laugh escapes me. When we reach the tables, I don’t immediately rush away to be by myself, choosing to sit with Lyssa instead.

“You said we share a class?” I roll my lips between my teeth as I pull out my homework. “Sorry, I tend to keep my head down and didn’t notice any new students joined the class.”

It makes sense that I missed her transferring in. There’s been a lot on my mind—namely a controlling, handsome-and-he-knows-it certain Bastard.

“Don’t sweat it.” She flicks her wrist, the gold bangles she wears clinking. “I think you sit on the opposite side of the room.”

“So you’re new?” I study her from the corner of my eye. “Are you here on scholarship, too?”

It’s a shock I missed it before. Lyssa is as far from Arcadia Hill demon spawn as possible. She smiles easily, setting people around her at ease, unlike anyone I know in the Hill. She seems comfortable and confident about her curves, not about to pick up an eating disorder to maintain an ideal image like other girls. There’s something light and carefree about her that I envy.

“No, although we never could have afforded this place on our own. Me and my brother—well, he’s my half brother my mom had shortly before she met my dad—have only ever gone to public school. His bio dad has money, though, and since he went here, Osborn was accepted as a legacy or whatever. They chucked my admission in as a bonus.” Lyssa laughs. “That sounds so ridiculous. If my friends back in the city heard, they’d bust their asses laughing about it.”

“Yeah, it’s like this place is stuck in time.” Sighing, I prop my chin in my

hand. “I dream of getting out of here after graduation and seeing what the rest of the world is like.”

“Do it, girl. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Well, welcome to the Hill.” It takes effort to make my smile genuine. “It’s, uh... Yeah. It’s a place. Mostly it sucks here. My condolences.”

Lyssa huffs in amusement. “Way to sell it.”

I hitch a shoulder. “Can’t help it. It’s the result of a lifetime of life as one of the have-nots amongst those that have it all.”

She eyes my color-coded notes and the stack of books by my elbow for the classes I’ve packed my senior schedule with and smirks. “Something tells me you’re primed to stick it to them.”

“I’m just focused on milking a fancy Arcadia Prep education for all its worth so I can get out of here.”

Lyssa hums in support, checking her phone. “The period’s about to end. Could you show me how to get to my next class?”

“Of course.”

We pack up and I check her schedule, explaining how to navigate to the two towers and what statues to watch out for to avoid going to the wrong one like I learned in my freshman year here. On our way out of the library, we’re discussing our Ancient Civilization teacher’s droning lecture tone when she throws me for a loop.

“Who’s the guy that sits next to you in class? The one with the blond hair and fuck me smile?” Lyssa gives me a cheeky grin. “Is he your boyfriend?”

“Kieran Ryder?” I sputter. An odd, pleasant sensation moves through my stomach at the thought, picturing Kieran as my boyfriend. “No. God no. He’s no one. Well, no—that’s wrong. He’s definitely someone with powerful sway around here. He knows and runs everything, so don’t get in his way. But I don’t really know him.”

My stomach squirms with the memory of the forbidden spanking fantasy that plagued my mind before I met Lyssa. There’s something seriously wrong

with me.

“Really?” Oblivious to my mental dilemma, she purses her lips in consideration. “He stares at you every class like he’s obsessed with you. I figured he was the possessive type of boyfriend. Like, grr, no one looks at my woman but me.”

“You have a very active imagination,” I say dryly, my face hot as my library fantasy returns.

She laughs, the sound just as pretty and friendly as she is. I always thought everyone at this school sucked by the time I came out of the fog of grief a year into my time here, so I never bothered to open myself to them. Lyssa’s not like them. As a new student, she’s as much an outsider as I am.

I still can’t believe I opened up to her so quickly. Making a friend is almost strange after so many years of keeping to myself. It’s nice, though. A step in the right direction away from isolation trapping me in a sense of flightlessness. Mom would never want me to feel stuck in this awful stillness.

My fingers twitch with the need to create and my mind buzzes with inspiration. It comes on so suddenly, it almost knocks me off balance. I’ve been blocked for so long, cutting myself off from art completely. I first felt the inklings like I wanted to start up again after so long last week, but then I got tangled up with Kieran and hadn’t thought about it again. Art is funny that way, creativity locked away until the smallest change can untangle it. I almost wrap my arms around Lyssa to thank her.

As soon as I focus on the images in my head I want to put to paper, it’s like an overflowing well that’s been dormant for too long. Something shifts in my chest, the cracks running through my heart a little less damaged than they were moments ago. Relieved tears prick my eyes.

“Are you okay?” Lyssa asks.

I nod with a tiny laugh. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“Do we need to hug it out?”

Another smile breaks free. I haven’t smiled this much in months—years

maybe. I've lost track. "I'm good."

I'm not broken. I can still create. And for as long as I can do that, Mom is still with me.

CHAPTER 5

KIERAN

ARIANA KOSTA IS A BORING, shy, studious girl who by all accounts shouldn't be a problem. Yet I can't let my guard down or get her off my mind. She says she won't say anything, but I doubt it.

Everyone has their price. I want her to understand it's me she needs to fear and answer to above all else for eavesdropping on the meeting with my father. If he ever finds out she was in the alley, she's done for. No one survives his wrath. His constant worry about the threat of his business rivals dethroning him runs deep. It's why I need to handle her, not only to keep him happy, but to make sure the blame doesn't fall on me because his wrath would turn on me.

I don't trust that this bookish nerd shit isn't a ploy to cover Ariana's tracks. She wouldn't be the first to try to fool me. Too bad for her I'm very good at working out how to read people, and using that knowledge to my advantage to keep them under my rule.

I'll control Ari.

The thought sends a rush of pleasure through me. There's something about her that calls to a deep part of me whenever I think about making her obey my will.

Those ribbons in her hair drive me up the fucking wall with the need to tug. Never has a girl gotten so deep under my skin. Especially not one like

her.

Even after watching her for most of the week, studying her to learn what I can about her, it's impossible to put my finger on what it is about her that fascinates me. She's so different from the people who throw themselves at my feet to worship me. Namely in that she doesn't seem interested in worshipping the gods of Arcadia Hill at all. She keeps to herself, staying out of the social hierarchy of the school. Yet the way she reacts when I'm pushing her, intimidating her... I squash the heat that arrows through me.

I text one of the triplets to check on her progress to find anything on Ariana.

Kieran: Anything useful yet?

Isadora: Still working. Patience is a virtue.

Kieran: I'm far from virtuous. I need something to use for leverage.

Isadora: Not sure there is anything. This girl is squeaky clean.

An irritated noise leaves me. There has to be something. No one is truly goody-goody.

Cassian stalks the halls of Arcadia Prep at my side, my brother's angry, guarded expression always seeking out those to discipline with his fury. He leaves me to my musings, glancing at me periodically as we saunter from the courtyard we spent our break period in.

When Cassian freezes, I shoot him a curious look, then spot what has him alert. Ariana. And some redhead who's new to the school. My siblings and our friends dropped her off our radar once we learned she wasn't from an important family.

"Kieran Ryder?" Ariana squeaks like a rat about to spill her guts. "He's definitely someone with powerful sway around here. He knows and runs everything."

I miss what she says next, too absorbed in the rage crashing over my head. I knew it. I fucking knew I was right. An anger like I've never known sears the blood in my veins. I don't know whether I'm more pissed off that I

was correct about her lying, or that I fell for it despite keeping my guard up. This little viper pretending to be a good girl slithered right past my defenses with her innocence and those fucking velvet ribbons.

My hand closes around nothing and I imagine the soft fabric in my palm. I'm going to rip it from her hair and string her up by it before I'm through with her.

While I'm plotting Ariana Kosta's glorious downfall, Cassian's intense focus is locked on the new girl as she laughs with Ariana ahead of us in the hall. I elbow him and he snaps his gaze to me, caught out.

"Get the others," I order. "There's a peasant in need of punishment."

Cassian grunts, a gleam filling his cold eyes. They're blue, like our father's, but in him they're a dark, murky storm, matching his coal-colored hair. The only time he comes alive is when he gets to flex our power at this school.

A twisted grin breaks free and I clap him on his muscular shoulder.

Ariana should've listened when I warned her not to cross me. Now she'll have to fucking pay. I'll make her understand her place. She'll beg me for mercy that isn't coming. All she's in for is the wrath of the gods of Arcadia Prep.



Everything is ready by Monday. I don't bother texting her with my usual check-ins. I want her on edge for trying to trick me. Hunger for her pain stirs in my gut as we wait for her by her locker. Much like the first time I sought her out last week, I've ensured we have a full audience.

My sisters document the whole thing with three matching smirks for their part in this—destruction by social media. By the end of the day, Ariana will have gone from an Arcadia Prep nobody to the lowest bottom feeder. Her new friend won't want to associate with her. She'll be all alone with only me

to haunt her nightmares.

A week ago, this girl didn't matter to me. Not until she stole a secret that wasn't hers to have.

“Don't be like that, Ari,” I croon when she hides her face in her locker without acknowledging me. “Ignoring me only makes me want to make you obey. Make you get down on your knees and worship.”

Obey. Worship. My jaw clenches as I picture her on her knees for me, falling under my control. Heat rockets through me, pooling in my groin. I grit my teeth against the burst of arousal.

It was one dream. One time in the shower she filled my head as I stroked my cock while picturing her plush lips wrapped around me. I shove those thoughts from my mind. The fantasies I've entertained about her will never become reality.

I run my mouth with anything that pops into my head to get under her skin while I regain control. She's taken me by surprise for the last time.

I give in to the urge to run her emerald green ribbon through my fingers. It's as silky soft as it appears, looking fantastic against her whiskey-colored eyes and that only pisses me off more.

“I like taking my time.” My words drip with sinful innuendo as I paint a picture of something that's never happening between us. My dick needs to get that memo. “Nice...and...slow.”

She turns red right down the column of her neck beneath her blouse. The blush probably spreads across her fantastic tits, too. I bite the inside of my jaw to rein myself in. This isn't like me. I'm not someone who loses my shit over a girl. My mind remains sharp, even when I have someone choking to swallow me down.

The moment breaks when Cassian douses her with water from the large cooler he brought from the football team's locker room. Her drenched uniform sticks to every curve of her body. Her bra is visible through her blouse, offering me a nice view of the tits she's hiding from the others in the

hall with her books. A bolt of satisfaction hits me at the thought that this is just for me.

As my laughter dies off, I drink in Ariana's stunned expression while she drips all over the polished hardwood floor.

Should've thought twice about crossing me, little bug.

Gasping quietly, she moves her books away from her body. They're as sopping wet as she is since Cassian used the big cooler the team has during games and she's a tiny little thing. An uneven breath gusts past her lips as she checks her things, ignoring the raucous laughter in the hall.

She looks at me like I'm a monster. Like she doesn't understand what she did wrong. I work my jaw, pinning her with my angry stare.

"This is too far, even for you." Tears shine in her brown eyes.

I narrow mine at the anguished crack in her voice. This is exactly why she should've obeyed me. I'll do this and worse to her until she gets it into her pretty little head.

There's an impressive burst of fire glinting beneath her fear, luring me deeper into this strange fascination I can't seem to shake. I should want to crush her to dust, but as Ariana storms off, all I can focus on is that hint of fire she doesn't let out. My gaze bores into her back the entire way down the hall.

I shake my head, turning to remove her from my sight.

"That was sick, brother." Sayer's words drag slightly. He throws an arm around Isadora's shoulder and watches the replay, snickering. "Her face is like—" He claps a hand to his face, doing an impression of Ari's shock. "—oh no, why me?"

"Pathetic." Ophelia examines her nails. "I'm bored already. Let's go."

Imogen returns the blazer I handed her earlier and Isolde is busy typing up captions in a note app on her phone, strolling beside me. Cassian falls into step on my other side and nods questioningly at Sayer.

I shrug. Who knows why he's drinking at school again. Lately he's been

able to keep it to partying only.

As we round the corner, I sneak a glance in the direction Ariana went, disliking the lack of satisfaction this brought me. I'm still left wanting to chase after her for more. Every time I torment her, I'm pulled in more by her plush mouth that I can't get out of my head, even when she triggers my anger. She's taking too much of my attention, consuming my thoughts when I don't have time.

CHAPTER 6

ARIANA

ANOTHER SNIFFLE ESCAPES ME, my nose red and swollen from crying all day. I left school early when Lyssa tracked me down after I didn't come to two classes in a row. She found me in the girl's bathroom at the base of the tower, hyperventilating so hard my throat is raw and scratchy.

She took one look at me and spat *what the fuck*, ready to throw down with anyone responsible. I shook my head, knowing it's useless to go against the Bastards.

The humiliation I can handle. It's the risk to Mom's sketchbook that cuts me deep, my nerve endings flayed raw. I hated Kieran before, enduring his crap because he can get me fired, but if this journal is ruined, I'll spill his damn secret to anyone who will listen.

He's got plenty of power in this town, and it's not like he's hiding anything. I don't get why he doesn't want anyone to find out he's working as some kind of escort. If he covered his tracks better, like working outside of town, maybe he wouldn't have to worry about anyone catching him doing it.

A frustrated noise scrapes my tender throat as I carefully use a blow dryer to speed the drying process along. I've taken over the kitchen, spreading the pages on towels across every available surface.

The hand sewn binding was shot, but I'm salvaging what I can of Mom's art. My hair is dry, tied up in a haphazard bun that probably looks a mess

from allowing my wavy hair to air dry. I could care less about myself, or my soggy uniform I tossed into the bathroom sink when I got home before changing into Mom's old oversized painting shirt that I sleep in.

All I'm focused on is taking care of my last connection to Mom before I lost her to cancer.

"Idiot," I hiss.

This is my fault for thinking I could bring it with me to school. After making friends with Lyssa and revitalizing my urge to create art, I was so excited to reconnect with Mom through her sketchbook. The comfort it brings me wasn't worth the risk.

It's not totally lost, though the ink and graphite has bled on some pages. A wobbly smile tries to form. Mom would think it created a new piece of art, transforming it into something more beautiful.

If I'd spilled water on it myself, maybe I could believe that. Carefully, I trace one of my favorite pieces that escaped unharmed, the charcoal wings stark against the fluffy clouds she sketched when I asked her how she makes her wings look so lifelike. We both love drawing them. Some people draw trees, others draw flowers, but for both of us our favorite subject is wings. I take it from the pile to frame separately instead of keeping it in the sketchbook when I rebind it. Once I select one, I can't stop, picking more pieces I need framed around my room rather than hiding her away with my other sketchbooks beneath my mattress.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I whisper.

I've chewed my lip until it's swollen from how mad I am at Kieran. I'm seriously tempted to tell that bastard's secret. Except, if he does this when I haven't done anything, what would he do to me if I actually told?

My stomach clenches and a shudder works through me at the thought. How far would he go to keep the secret I didn't want to know under wraps?

It wouldn't be like the dirty image I conjured in the library on Friday. I claim momentary insanity for ever buying into his attractive looks and ever

crushing on him. Underneath he's nothing but an ugly monster who enjoys tricking people for his own amusement.

Turning off the dryer to take a break, I blow my nose, groaning when I catch sight of myself in the bathroom mirror. My eyes are red-rimmed and puffy. It's a good thing Dad's currently away for one of his work trips. He worries whenever he catches me crying.

The front door opens and I curse under my breath. I thought he wasn't supposed to return until tomorrow. Usually he's away during the weekends, and sometimes those trips extend into the week.

Maybe I can convince him I caught a cold. Sneaking upstairs while he puts away his coat in the hall closet, I carefully pull out one of Mom's knit shawls and wrap myself in it, bringing my nose to the soft wool to see if any of her scent lingers.

"What happened here, pumpkin?" Dad calls downstairs.

"I...spilled water on it. I'm trying to dry it." At least my voice sounds like I swallowed a frog. It'll make it easier to pretend I'm sick.

"You're home from school early," he says when I return to the kitchen and begin gathering the sketches.

"You're home from your trip early," I counter.

He chuckles. "Fair." He stops me on my way to the table, cupping the back of my head and dropping a kiss on my temple. "How was your weekend?"

It's nice to hear him laughing again. He's battled his grief as much as I have after we lost Mom. We both turned inward to process, rather than leaning on each other. He hasn't been as sad lately, like he's coming out of his own fog too.

"Same old." I dig out the newspaper I buried and hand it to him, scrunching my nose when I swear I catch a hint of perfume.

I sniff again, playing it off like my nose is running. I can't smell it. Maybe I'm going crazy. Kieran has certainly been driving me to the brink of

insanity.

Shaking my head, I finish moving the drawings to a safe spot to continue drying. “Since you were gone, I got to read it first.”

“Thanks sweetheart.” Taking a seat at the counter, he flicks on the news for background noise while he skims the paper. “We could order in tonight. How’s that sound?”

“Sure.” It beats the frozen dinner I planned on.

The reporter’s voice on the TV snags my attention at the mention of the trial Judge Peterson has been overseeing. The jury reached a verdict and it’s the opposite of what I expected. My eyes are glued to the screen as the judge’s wife leaves the courthouse with him. Reporters swarm the couple, asking if the judge feels this is the right outcome.

“The jury made its decision after hearing from both sides during the trial,” Judge Peterson says gruffly. Evelyn pats his arm in support, nodding along. “Justice has been served according to the system.”

My stomach twists. That’s such bullshit. The kid on trial is clearly innocent and doesn’t deserve to take the fall for his boss’ financial mismanagement. It was an open and shut case from what I saw. Even this morning’s paper thought so.

The sight of Evelyn’s tiny smirk cuts through my frustration at the world. A chill races over my body. There’s no way...

She was with Kieran, then he was talking to his dad behind the restaurant. Is that why he was there, to make sure his company benefited from the outcome of the trial?

Basil Kingston has stakes in every company in town. He doesn’t only work as the headmaster at the college, he invests in companies and enjoys the benefits once they turn a profit. The people around him get rich and he remains king of the Hill. I never had reason to believe he was corrupt, but with what I know about his son, it makes it more likely.

I think Kieran was used as an escort to cover up passing along some kind

of bribe to sway the case. It's illegal. Does the judge know?

First escorts, now corruption. This is too much. My head throbs and I sit down hard, wrapping Mom's shawl tighter around me.

"Okay, pumpkin?" Dad asks.

"Yeah. Just lightheaded." I clear my throat. "It sucks this guy has to serve time for his boss' screw up."

Dad hums. "That's how the system works."

"It's a crappy system." I tuck my knee to my chest.

Not just a crappy one, but corrupt. And somehow Kieran Ryder is involved.

CHAPTER 7

KIERAN

HUMILIATING ARIANA IS A SHORT-LIVED SATISFACTION, burning out too quickly. I need to keep a closer eye on her and make her understand how serious my threat is to keep her quiet. After we doused her with water, she returned acting like nothing happened, and it only makes me want to mess with her more to get those addictive reactions she buries.

What I need is some dirt on her, but so far any digging I've done has proved fruitless. The triplets have found nothing on her that will cut it. Ariana can't be that much of a goody two-shoes. There must be something that sexy little librarian in the making is hiding. Everyone always has something immoral they're burying beneath lies in the Hill.

Accepting that there's nothing worth using against her, I decide to get creative and orchestrate the secret I'll steal from her. One way or another, I'll control her. A primal, domineering pleasure fills me on my way to the library to wait for my plan to unfold.

When that prissy half-up ponytail tied with a shiny black ribbon comes into view, I give Ariana a mocking grin, leaning against the wrought iron spiral staircase at the back of the room. Her hair spills down her shoulders, calling me to wrap the wavy brown locks around my hand.

"Look at that—you can follow orders. Good girl, Ari." I pat her head, chuckling derisively when she shrugs my hand away with a bitten off sound

and frowns at me.

"What is it?" She waves her phone, showing the text thread between us, the last message an order to find me in the library after last period. "I'm supposed to meet with the counselor."

"Hoping to find a way to earn top grades?" I trace my lip with my tongue. "I'll give you a tip: relax your throat. It makes it easier to suck cock nice and deep."

"Fuck you," she hisses, darting her alarmed gaze around. "Oh my god, you're the worst kind of heathen. It's none of your business why I'm meeting the counselor—but it's definitely not for *that*."

My snicker grows into a deep laugh at how flustered and red she turns. It's a look I'm coming to enjoy on her. "Haven't you learned by now, little bug? Everything you do from now on is my business." My amusement dies off and I grab her by the lapel of her blazer, hauling her closer. I tower over her, my hard voice edged with gravel. "I fucking own you until I decide I'm done with you. I was under the impression you cared about your job, then you go and run your mouth to the first person you see when I warned you to stay silent."

She jerks against my hold. "I didn't!"

My lip curls. "Then why are you going to the counselor? Think tattling will help you escape from me?" I speak against her temple in a rough growl. "I promise you, it will only make it worse. There's no fucking hope for you, little bug."

Ariana shudders, lips parting. "I—I wanted to add an art class to my schedule." She sucks her bottom lip into her mouth, and heat flares low in my gut at the virtuous expression that sends my mind down a dark, seductive path. "And maybe I want to not have so many classes with you."

The hint of defiance snaps me out of the momentary distraction of her plush mouth. Tightening my grip, I push her to the spiral staircase.

"Up. We're going to have a chat and I don't want anyone listening in." I

leer at her. "That seems to be your specialty."

"I didn't mean to," Ariana huffs. "You were the one discussing what you're doing in the alley of my workplace. You can't keep blaming me because I was doing my job while you were sneaking around about your illicit affairs with older married women. I haven't told anyone, yet that doesn't seem to matter to you as long as you get to torture me."

That sassy little mouth is asking to get fucked to keep it quiet and obedient. I grit my teeth against the urge. I don't stoop to fucking the scholarship nobodies.

"Shh. Christ, do I have to gag you?" My chest presses into her back as I hustle her up the winding staircase. "Just move, peasant. My time is a precious commodity and you're wasting it."

This is cutting into my running time, one of the only freedoms I have control over. The constant buzz of energy fizzles beneath my skin, in need of the release I get when I run until the world becomes a blur around me. It doesn't ever stop my problems from creeping up on me. I have a new problem to deal with first—all five foot five inches of her, with whiskey-colored eyes that haunt my thoughts and an insolent streak that brings out my need to bend her to my will.

Mischievous anticipation builds in me as I herd her up the steps, watching the sway of her plaid skirt. My eyes drag down, taking in the knee-high socks she's wearing. I slam down on the filthy thoughts that pop in my head at the sight of them. I'm not going to fuck this girl, even if I find everything about her perfectly tailored to my fantasies.

When we reach the loft, I release her and check over the thick wood railing that keeps this nook secluded from the rest of the library below. A few students mill around, but it won't matter. If they hear, it'll only back up what I'm going to do.

"Why up here?"

There's an odd strain to Ariana's words. She darts a skittish glance at the

antique leather couch that takes up most of the small space and flushes before ripping her attention away to stare at the wall of polished bookshelves surrounding it. I lift a brow, examining the couch. The library isn't somewhere I go often. As far as I know, people come up here to fool around.

Has she...?

My attention cuts to her, roaming over her in careful consideration. No, I decide. My teeth clench. She better not have. This girl has virgin written all over her with a capital V. At least, that's what she wants everyone to believe with these prim little bows in her hair.

Exhaling forcefully, I chide myself to focus on why I brought her up here. Shrugging out of my blazer, my fingers dig into my school tie to loosen it, then fly down the buttons of my shirt. I smirk, catching Ariana drinking in my physique. I'm not overly muscular like my brother Cassian, but I'm in shape from how often I run. Her eyes flare with desire when her not so subtle admiration reaches the dips in my hip muscles. Is my little nuisance hot for me?

She recovers with a jolt, like she realizes she was checking me out. "What are you doing?"

Once again her eyes flick to the couch behind me and her lashes flutter. Backing up slowly, I collapse on the seat, draping my arms along the back. She may not have been up here to mess around before, but perhaps she's fantasized about it. My smirk stretches.

"Get on your knees," I command.

Ariana stops eyeing me sprawled out on the couch, her gaze snapping up to meet mine. "What? No." She falls back a step, bumping into the bookshelves. Books won't save her. Nothing will save her from me. "Absolutely not."

I cock my head. "Don't even dream of testing me. Get on your knees, or I will put you on your knees, Ari. If your own job isn't enough to bring your ass over here, then let's go bigger with what's on the line. Your place at this

school. Scholarship student, right? Your father's job. Your—”

“Shut up!”

Chest heaving, she throws a fearful look at the steps. I shake my head, clicking my tongue. After another moment of wavering, her expression hardens and she marches over to me. Her eyes flash before she sinks down between my spread legs. Amusement filters through me at the disobedience she seems to show only for me, but that's exactly what brought us here.

“Now...” I unbuckle my belt and she panics. She goes to pull back and I snatch her, fisting her hair to hold her in place. The ribbon is smooth between my fingers. “Did I say you could move?”

“Kieran,” she utters in a rush.

Ignoring her, I get set up how I want, leaving my dick tucked away while getting my phone out. Once I frame up the shot, I nudge her head, directing her to lower it over my briefs to hide them.

“Put on a good show.”

Disgust wars with confusion on her features. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” She eyes the phone I have pointed at her, chewing on her enticing lips that make me want the real deal rather than the act I'm demanding. “You don't have to blackmail me. I didn't do—”

“Do it, or I'll come up with something worse.” My tone turns dangerous as I pin her with a glare. “This is my insurance to use if you can't keep your mouth shut again. Or would you rather explain to your dad why he's out of a job?”

She's still fuming and breathing quickly, but doesn't resist when I shove her head in my lap. When I start the recording, she begins bobbing her head awkwardly.

“Come on, Ari.” She tenses at my sardonic croon. “You can do better than that. Give me a pretty moan, like a good little slut.”

Ariana freezes. “Fuck you.” She flashes a hot look at me through her lashes that has the opposite effect on me than she's going for, sending blood

rushing south. “You’re lucky I don’t headbutt you right in the dick.”

I chuckle, massaging her scalp with a rumbling sigh as I trap her between my legs. She goes rigid and another sadistic laugh leaves me. I relax, spreading my legs.

“Make it good, little bug. If I have to use this, the performance has to be believable. I don’t settle for subpar head.” I recline against the couch, watching her with hooded eyes while she fakes sucking my cock for the camera. “You’re on your knees, now worship me.”

At the smooth dominance in my voice, she releases an unsteady breath and hides her face from me. Hesitating, she rests her hands on my thighs and resumes her awkward head bobbing. I can tell from her lack of finesse that, fake or not, she’s never given head. I don’t know why, but the confirmation fills my chest with an odd satisfaction.

“On your knees is a good look for you.”

She huffs indignantly and my lips twitch. I run the ribbon through my fingers, experimenting with tugging on it like I’ve wanted to. It stirs a rising desire in my gut, amplified by having her fitted between my legs.

“Take it all, peasant,” I mutter for the camera, a low groan catching in my throat that isn’t entirely fake when I think of her lips stretched around my cock for real.

After a few minutes, something shifts. Ariana loses some of the stiff uncertainty, her movements becoming more natural when her uptight inhibitions unravel. It’s as if she’s forgotten why I’m filming her to punish her for running her mouth so freely when she needs to fear me.

I grit my teeth, hanging onto my own control as my cock begins to swell.

“Does sucking cock get you hot?” I rasp.

A soft moan escapes her and I immediately want to hear it again, louder. Would it come out garbled if she had her mouth stuffed full of my dick? I picture her tongue flicking the underside while I fuck her face until her lips are swollen.

Ariana startles when I go from chubbing up to fully hard, peeking up at me through her lashes. “You’re—”

A growl from me cuts off her throaty observation. I’m annoyed with myself for being affected by a fantasy of this nobody, tightening my hold in her hair. If this was for real, I’d use the grip to shove her down, make her take me deep enough to choke on me until tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. So deep she’d feel it for days and think of me every time she swallowed.

The phone slips from my hand when I stop recording, falling to the couch face down. I forget all about it, focus honed in on her short breaths, the arousal brimming in her eyes, and the flush I want to chase down her blouse. With that delicate ribbon in her hair and her knee-high socks, she’s the perfect picture of an innocent good girl I want to get dirty and make a mess of. Right now, I believe her act, my mind too clouded by desire flooding my veins.

Fuck, I don’t know what’s come over me, but I need more. I want to feel her. See how far I can push her.

Releasing her hair from my controlling grip, I skim my fingers down her cheek, tracing her lips. Her lashes flutter, captivating me. I continue down, trailing the elegant column of her throat and hold it loosely. It looks so goddamn good every time my hand is wrapped around it.

“Are you wet from the thought of having my cock in your mouth?” I tip her chin up with my thumb. “How wet? If I made you show me, would your pussy glisten?”

Ariana’s lips part and a hoarse groan tears from me. Her eyes darken to a deep amber at my filthy words. The more I talk, the rougher my voice gets.

A grin tugs at my mouth. “I bet you have on prim little white panties under that skirt. Will you be a good girl and lift it up to show me?”

She shoots to her feet, batting my hand away. “You’re vulgar.”

“You have no idea, little bug.”

Grabbing her hand, I haul her down to straddle my lap, her body a perfect fit to mine. I grind my erection against her, eyes hooding at the divine friction.

“What—?” Ariana gasps at the feel of my length, darting a frantic look over my shoulder at the railing secluding us in the loft. No one can see up here, but they could hear it if I made her scream for me. “We can’t—Ah!”

She shudders, swaying into my chest with a smothered sound of pleasure. Tentatively, she moves her hips without me guiding her, seeking the feel of my cock rubbing her clit again.

“Look at you, Ari,” I rasp against her ear while she hides her face and gives in to the haze of arousal we’re lost in. I toy with the hem of her skirt riding up on her thighs, touching the knee-high socks driving me crazy. “Tell me, how did the fantasy play out in your head when you were down on your knees? Was it just like this, in the loft? Was that moan because you were eager to swallow everything I give you like my good little slut?”

The best she manages is a tiny shake of her head, her chest heaving, pushing her tits against me.

“The way you’re dry fucking my lap says otherwise. Does it feel good?”

She refuses to admit anything, but she doesn’t stop, her hot exhalations fanning over my neck and chest. There’s something riveting about her like this, the last of her inhibitions hanging on by a thread while the rest of her has a flair of alluring wildness. It leaves me powerless to look away, hungry for every reaction. I want more of this side of Ariana.

Curiosity if she really is a virgin crosses my mind. My hands go to her hips and guide her to go faster. A weird, possessive urge overtakes me at the thought of being the first to touch her like this. No one else has had her like this, only me.

“Has anyone ever touched your pussy other than yourself, Ari?” I growl, fingers digging into her hips as I grind against her harder. I imagine tearing her underwear aside and driving my cock into her tight, wet cunt, taking her

right here in the library. “Ever been fucked?”

With a strangled noise, she buries her face in my neck. Her body seizes, fingers grasping my open shirt as a tremor racks her body. My dick throbs. I lick my lips slowly, framing her waist with my hands.

“Did you come from rubbing your needy pussy on my cock? From the feel of me between your legs, wishing for more?”

A breath punches out of me as she peels away shyly, gorgeously debauched. I did that to her. Something tugs in my chest.

I’ve been with plenty of girls, but Ariana’s fumbling is somehow hot as fuck. I don’t know if it’s because she’s buttoned-up and inexperienced, or that I haven’t been with anyone lately. She’s got me harder than I’ve been in months, unbelievably close to coming just from dry humping.

Getting a taste of what happens when she comes undone isn’t enough. I want more, my cock straining with the need to be inside her.

The frenzied carnal thoughts pull me up. This was meant to punish her and I let her enjoy herself instead. Let myself fall under a strange spell, ready to forget my plan. My grip becomes punishing on her waist. What the fuck am I doing?

Reality cuts through the lust consuming me. This is all wrong. How did my control slip through my fingers so quickly? Resisting the possessive warmth that rockets through me at the fucked out expression, I lock my jaw, grasping her chin.

“Wishing is all you’ll get, baby,” I croon. “I like the thought of seeing these lips wrapped around my cock, but I draw the line at fucking you, remember? So you’ll have to shove as many fingers as you can into your pussy tonight and use your imagination.”

The languid look on her face melts away, replaced by uncertainty. Leaning in, my grip grows harsher on her jaw and fear fills her pretty eyes.

“I’ll only warn you once more. Keep your mouth shut. Become invisible again, or I will destroy you in all the ways I promised.” I angle my head like

I'm going to kiss those plush lips. My chest constricts at the thought and I crush it. I don't kiss. "I have the power to change your luck around here. For better or for worse."

Pushing her from my lap, she tumbles to the floor as I stand. Ignoring my straining cock and the darkened spot left on my underwear from her, I fix my clothes, grab my phone, then stride from the loft without a backwards glance, shoving every vivid recollection of the sound Ariana made when she came to the dark depths of my mind. I need to run until my muscles are on fire to forget this.

I won't let her get in my head and make me fall for her act again. I'm the god with all the power in Arcadia Prep. She won't have any sway over me.

CHAPTER 8

ARIANA

IT TAKES me several minutes to scramble off the floor of the loft in the library, my body buzzing with a mix of confusion, embarrassment, shame, and hatred for Kieran Ryder. Worst of all, the last vestiges of arousal cling to me, not chased away by Kieran's cruel treatment after he made me feel so good. If anything, his parting words made the blood in my veins burn hotter.

There's something seriously wrong with me. Why did I like it? He did it all to hold that video over my head, but I couldn't stop myself from getting swept away.

I haven't felt much in the last four years since losing Mom, existing in a numb bubble. Even though he's made me his target, he's the only person to make me feel so alive.

Everything with Kieran is like capturing an exploding star—intense, inescapable, fatal.

My tongue still feels thick and tangled in my mouth. Words failed me once those dirty, commanding things spilled from his wicked lips like his favorite weapons. I'm so mad at myself for the heat those sinful murmurs stirred in my core.

As soon as we reached the loft, the fantasy I'd had of him spanking me flooded my mind, making it difficult to resist once things got out of hand. Fear of what else he would come up with if I didn't do what he wanted drove

me to my knees to obey him, but forbidden desire kept me there when it became more than the lie he wanted to spin.

My hands cover my face. I can't believe how turned on I got at the degrading things he said and what we did after. Can't fathom that I came for him—god, right on his lap. A throb pulses deep inside me at the memory.

I've never...not with anyone else.

How can Kieran be the first person I have an orgasm with that I didn't give myself? Humiliation rushes through me at the realization there's another thread connecting us now that he has one of my firsts.

I glare at the couch, questioning everything that just happened.

Frustrated tears prick my eyes, but I refuse to cry because of his horrible torment. Taking a few calming breaths, I turn my back on the couch, tracing my collar bone. I imagine the wings I'll ink in my skin someday unfurling. It helps me steady my racing heartbeat and fills me with determination.

Kieran doesn't get to bully me into submission to his brutal whims. I won't let that asshole control me, and somehow I'll kill this unfair attraction I shouldn't have for a bastard like him.

I'll find a way to fly high to get away from him.

Despite my resolution, it's not as easy as I planned to face Kieran. There's no reprieve at school the next few days, his intense gaze in every shared class carrying an extra weight, reminding me what happened in the loft.

When Kieran sees me in the hall on the way to lunch with Lyssa near the end of the week, he lifts his phone pointedly and a moment later, my phone vibrates with a text from him.

Ari's Golden God [eggplant emoji]: The whole school is going to love the movie we made. I've watched it on repeat. I'd rather keep your talents to myself, but you know what will happen if you're feeling talkative. [GIF of a

bug being squished]

I scoff at his arrogance. Without his threats, I never would've gotten on my knees for him. The thought of him watching it, knowing it was a fake blowjob but what we did after wasn't fake makes my stomach dip.

Lyssa peeks at me curiously. "You cool?"

"I'm fine. Let's grab a table before they're taken."

Part of me would rather hide in the library. It's where I usually go to get away from the poisonous bullshit of the Hill, but Kieran has tainted my favorite haven. The thought of going there makes my thighs clench, tingles spreading across my body. Another part of me wants to show him that I'm not letting him get to me. Raising my chin, I follow Lyssa into the dining hall.

Kieran enters behind us with his brothers, tugging on my chiffon ribbon. I ignore him, picking up my pace to escape.

"You off to hide in your corner, peasant?" Sayer calls. "I hear you work at The Gilded Arrow. Come serve us like you've served my brother."

I tense, worried there's a hidden meaning between the lines, but Sayer has his usual jolly expression in place. He doesn't mean *serve* in a dirty way. Kieran has an odd, intent expression on his face. A muscle in his cheek jumps when Sayer elbows him about my waitressing like it's pathetic to have a job. Maybe it is when you're as rich as he is.

Sayer's smug teasing irks me. I'm unable to ignore it this time after enduring the brunt of their focused attention. His laughter ignites a fire I've never known. I'm so tired of remaining quiet while they tear me apart for fun.

"In your dreams, Sayer." I roll my eyes. "Actually, even then, no fucking way."

The Bastards freeze in surprise. I never talk back to them.

Kieran's eyes flash, roaming over me. A hint of an amused smile tugs at his mouth. It's almost like he's proud of me for locating my dignity, proud I've fought back. But he's the worst of his siblings, commanding them to

target me.

Sayer opens his mouth and I bristle, unwilling to take whatever mean shit they want to dish out. “No,” I snap. “Stop talking to me.”

His bright eyes widen and his mouth hangs open. Kieran shifts, edging in front of his brothers, blocking me from them. Pursing my lips, I stride off before he has the chance to berate me or humiliate me again.

“Right on for putting that jerk in his place,” Lyssa cheers.

“It felt good.”

The press of Kieran’s eyes follows me all the way to the table at the edge of the dining hall, away from the center where Kieran and his siblings hold court every day.

Once we get our food, I try to push Kieran and his depraved games from my mind, distracted from our conversation until she mentions them.

“I’ve heard people saying their underground parties are total bacchanalias.” Lyssa’s attention is on the Bastard’s crowded table. “Is it true?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I murmur. “I’ve never been to one.”

Lyssa studies me, leaning back in her tall cushioned chair. “We should go and see for ourselves. It’ll be fun, we’ll gatecrash. Come on, there’s a party this weekend. It’s the best medicine to get you out of this funk you’ve been in this week.”

“Pass. A Bastards’ party is so not my vibe.” My eyes flick to Kieran, his clever hands almost a blur as he performs complicated card tricks for the people at their packed table. “Especially not while he’s there.”

“Some girl was telling me at the one last month he basically talked three girls off without touching them because someone bet he couldn’t.”

I swallow, not understanding the way my stomach knots. Rumor has it things get beyond wild. It’s never interested me.

Kieran’s table draws my attention once more with a pull I can’t ignore. I frown at the students who hang on his every word.

He checks his phone and his usual cocky expression tightens. I can see it clear across the room, yet no one around him notices the shift in him. Annoyance simmers in my gut. I shouldn't feel bad for him that his father is using him to pass bribes and whoring him out. Not after the cruel treatment he's put me through for finding out his secret by accident.

Kieran's eyes lift and find me. My chest twinges as his gaze holds mine, darkening with something that makes my throat close. In the entire room of people that adore him, I'm the only one who knows what he's hiding behind his devastating smiles.

The moment breaks when he tears his gaze from mine, sauntering from the room followed by the Bastards.

How much does Kieran hide? Do his siblings know? Most of all, the question that hasn't stopped plaguing me since that night in the alley is why he agreed to be an escort in the first place?

I shouldn't care about any of it. Kieran doesn't deserve sympathy. He's been a supreme asshole to me, tormenting me, and—before my mind replays the vivid memories of what happened in the library I shake my head. This is ridiculous.

I never asked to bear the burden of Kieran's secret life, and I hate that I'm curious to know more.

CHAPTER 9

KIERAN

ON FRIDAY, I find myself standing outside Ariana's small house. I'm meant to be across town for the party, but I'm assessing her chirpy doorbell as if it's personally offended me, waiting for her to answer. I don't know what drove me here, only that I'm not going to the party without her sticking by my side like glue.

Giving her no room to breathe without me around is the only way I know to fight against whatever came over me in the library. There's something about Ariana Kosta that I'm drawn to, and if I'm not careful I'll fall for this weird obsession she's sparked. This is the only way I can ensure she doesn't slip past my defenses again like she did in the library.

After I left her, I ran until my legs and lungs burned, but it didn't kill the strange urge pulling me to go find her. I managed to avoid her most of the week. It hasn't kept her out of my head or my dreams, plaguing me with the fantasy of her screaming in pleasure as I take her apart in the loft. I've watched the damn recording on my phone far too many times, wishing it was the real deal. Yesterday in school, I couldn't resist that damn ribbon when it was waving in my face as I entered the dining hall after her.

When I looked up from the text from Dad in the dining hall and caught her looking at me, a strange thrum moved through me. She looked at me like she's the only one who sees me, sees through my smiles to what I keep

buried.

I hate that when I'm around her, the burden of the invisible chain locked around me that clips my wings feels like it loosens. I can forget it when I'm focused on her. It's not clear to me yet if it's because she's the only other person besides my father who knows the truth, or another reason I haven't uncovered. All I know is I need to understand why she gets to me like this, and the only way to do that is to keep her close instead of avoiding her.

The door opens and Ariana pokes her head out, her brows pinching in confusion. "What are you doing here?" She glances past me to my BMW parked in her driveway. "How did you know where I live?"

"I have my ways." Without waiting to be invited in, I push past her. "You're not dressed."

The house is what some might call quaint. Rather than status symbols and heirlooms, the walls are covered in family photos. Assessing it keeps my attention off her bare legs beneath the oversized threadbare t-shirt she's wearing.

Ariana scoffs, looking down. "I'm in my house studying."

"On a Friday?" I lift a brow.

Her cheeks color. "Yes. Most normal people need more than their name and money to get by in life."

I snort. "Only if you play by the rules. How boring."

Not bothering to entertain her prim response, I stride through her home, heading upstairs. "Let's go. We're already late."

"H-hey!" Ariana follows me to her room. "What are you—? Don't go in my closet!"

I flick through her things. The first section is plain, bland, and dull. No color, nothing that feels like those tiny sparks that escape her when I push her too far. Near the back, pieces start catching my eye. I hum in interest at a dress that screams her style, the white lace Peter Pan collar laying over a deep red dress with sheer sleeves seeming right up her alley. The next is a wine-

colored lace blouse that goes with a black velvet skirt with straps.

Neither outfits are revealing, yet the thought of seeing her in them sends a spike of heat through me.

“Those are...” Ariana casts her eyes down. “I don’t wear those.”

“Then why are they here?”

“I don’t know. When I saw them, they made me feel like—” She bites her lip. “It’s stupid. I shouldn’t have bought them.”

I have the urge to pick at the weakness she shows me until she tells me what she wants to hide, but something holds me back. It’s ridiculous that this girl keeps making me veer from how I normally operate. I don’t hesitate, I annihilate. Except when it comes to her. Frowning, I look around her room, searching for an answer that has evaded me to figure out why she gets under my skin.

Her room paints a more vivid picture of her than the girl who has wormed her way into my brain and become the subject of my irritating obsession. Academic awards and framed art cover her walls, though there aren’t many photos of her life during high school as if something made her freeze in time. A pair of wings amongst fluffy clouds catch my eye and make my heart thump. They look so much like the style of wings tattooed on my ankles, drawing me in, my throat going dry. If Ariana likes wings, perhaps she could understand what I deal with when—

I slam down hard on the thought. We’re nothing alike. No one understands my father’s chain keeping me here, not even my siblings. I cast around the room for something to distract me from comparing myself to this nobody.

Bookshelves line every wall, packed with colorful spines. I saunter over and read the titles, the corner of my mouth curling at the amount of romance taking up most of the shelf space. “My, my, Ari. Ravished by the Rogue. The Gentleman Deviant. Captor’s Stolen Kiss.” My fingertips run along the spines as I tease her and she turns an alluring shade of red, averting her gaze.

“Aren’t you well-read. Tell me, are these...educational?” I select one at random and flip until I find a racy scene, scanning the passage. “Mm, *he caressed the side of her mouth stretched around his velvety hardness and plunged deeper with a groan, then reached to stroke his fingers through her swollen folds.* Yet you blushed so pretty in the library imagining sucking my cock for real.”

“Give me that.” Ariana darts over and snatches the book from my hands, clutching it against her chest.

“I was reading that. Maybe I want to borrow it.”

“No,” she mumbles.

I grin. “Want me to read it to you, then? We can act out the sexy parts so you know what to imagine when the maiden is ravished.”

“No!” Flustered, she hides the book at the back of her bookshelf. “They’re not just sex. And would you actually keel over and die if you weren’t a vulgar asshole for five minutes?”

A chuckle huffs out of me and I lean against the shelf with my arms crossed. “Possibly.”

“Why are you here?” She motions to the books and notes strewn across her bed. The corner of an open sketchbook sticks out beneath her schoolwork filled with the doodles I’ve seen her drawing in her notebook during class. Art hangs on her walls, yet she hides her interest in it. “I’m in the middle of studying.”

“Not now you aren’t. You’re coming with me.”

“No I’m not.”

I level her with an amused look. “It’s cute you think you hold any sway over me, little bug. You’re going to get dressed in what I pick out for you, then you’re coming to a party with me.”

“Why would you want me at one of your parties?”

I don’t answer because I don’t know exactly why I drove here instead of going to the party. I won’t give that away. She already has enough leverage, I

don't need to offer any more, keeping the scale tipped in my favor. Instead of deigning to respond, I pick the velvet skirt and burgundy lace blouse.

I shoot her a smirk. "Where's your lingerie drawer?"

"What?" she squeaks. "I don't have one."

"Really?" I drawl, raising a brow. "Naughty little Ari."

Her eyes widen as she realizes what I'm implying. "No, I wear underwear!"

"Care to show me?" My gaze rakes down her body to the hem of her t-shirt skimming her thighs.

She clutches it, tugging down. I stalk across the room, and she shuffles back until she bumps into a dresser. It doesn't stop me from walking into her body. I feel every quick breath she takes, her tits grazing my torso.

"Get dressed," I command.

Ariana licks her lips, making me want to steal a taste for myself. "But—"

"Your other option is I dress you myself and drag you with me. I'd find that just as enjoyable. Either way, you're doing it."

She snatches the skirt and blouse from me, then waits. "Aren't you going to leave so I can change?"

A sultry smile curves my mouth. "No. I'm here to watch you all night long, Ari. Now get dressed before my patience runs out and I decide for you."

Ariana stares me down with all the ferocity of a tiny kitten. When I show no sign of leaving or turning around, she bites her lip and lifts her chin. There she is. Shy Ariana is fun to tease because she's buttoned up and proper, but this fiery and defiant hidden side of her rises to my challenges and throws them back in my face.

Folding my arms, I lean against the dresser as she crosses the room to put space between us. It does nothing to hide the view when she turns around and whips the t-shirt over her head. She only has a pair of white, lace-trimmed panties hugging her ass beneath, much like the ones I've been imagining. A groan works its way up my throat and I swallow it back while she rummages

in a box in the closet, retrieving a bra.

Flashing a look over her shoulder, she unties her hair and it tumbles down her back. Instead of covering up as quickly as possible, she surprises me by dragging it out, putting each part of her outfit on with an air of sensuality that has my cock hard.

When she's done, she peeks at me through her lashes and picks out a blood red velvet ribbon to tie around her hair, leaving it down. She holds still while I peel away from the dresser, circling her before coming to a stop in front of her.

I take her chin between my thumb and finger, angling her face. She holds her breath as if she's anticipating a kiss. Except this isn't one of the books on her shelves where the roguish man falls for the sweet girl. This is reality.

"Time to go." I offer her one of my dirtiest expressions and trace her mouth. "You don't utter a word to anyone who isn't me tonight. These lips only part for me."

CHAPTER 10

ARIANA

“THIS ISN’T what I was expecting,” I say.

The house we’re in—if it can be called a house when it’s this huge—is in the ritzy side of the Hill. My house could fit inside at least three times, and I’ve already gotten lost on the way from the entrance to this billiards room. People fill the home. It seems as though the whole school is here.

Smoothing a hand over my skirt, I keep an eye out for Lyssa’s red hair, hoping she gatecrashed without me. If she’s here, I’ll be able to make it through the night.

Kieran gives me a sidelong glance, passing me the drink he mixed for me before making one for himself that’s straight whiskey. I sniff mine and find it’s fruity, tart, and fizzy. A small sip makes me blink in surprise. It’s good.

“What were you expecting?” The corner of his mouth kicks up. “Orgies? Virgin sacrifices to please the gods? Don’t worry, your virginity is safe with me. It’s just a party, Ari.”

I lick my lips, ignoring the thrill that shoots across my skin. That damn nickname. He’s the only one that uses it and I’m starting to not hate it so much.

Maybe it was a bad idea to let him drag me here, but he’s skilled at getting me to do what he wants. On top of his threat to my job, to Dad’s, the video of me faking giving him head sits in the back of my mind. If I don’t

play along with his orders, he could have his sisters spread it to all their social media accounts. That's not how I want to be seen.

So far it's not so bad, other than feeling self-conscious in the outfit he picked out. I bought it on a whim when I found the blouse in Mom's favorite color. She thought I looked good in wine shades, and the skirt gave me a burst of confidence when I tried it on. I haven't been brave enough to wear them until Kieran made me. I harnessed that bravery to show him I wasn't afraid of his games when he watched me change.

"Well, I've never been to a party," I admit.

The amount of people in the spacious rooms we weave through seems like a lot, every inch of the house bursting with activity and music. I clutch the drink between my hands in front of me to hide the lace blouse. Maybe no one will recognize me. No one expects me to be here with him—I hardly know why he wants me here.

I peek at Kieran while he surveys the room with a bored expression. His tousled blond hair swoops over his brow and he swipes his tongue over his lip, dimples popping out at my confession.

"You've never been to an Arcadia Prep party," he corrects. "I'd remember seeing you."

I shake my head. "No parties, period. I think I was invited to a pool party, but then—" I cut off, swallowing past the lump in my throat. Then Mom got really sick, and I was too scared to leave her side. "Anyway, I thought people say your parties are wild. This seems pretty normal."

He squints. "This isn't actually one of ours. You'd know if it was, trust me. We're at Kirkmore's place." At my blank look, he elaborates. "He's on the football team with Cassian."

"Oh. So other people actually throw parties other than the Bastards?" I roll my lips between my teeth at his barbed leer. "That's just what I heard. That you control the parties."

"You're terrible at this, little bug," he mutters.

“At having a conversation?” I ask dryly.

He’s the one who dragged me here. I’m just making the best of it until it’s over and I can go home.

“At plying me for information.” He taps his temple and leans closer. “You got lucky stealing my secret, but that’s all you get. Stop trying for more.”

“I wasn’t trying to interrogate you.” I sigh. “I already told you.”

“Yes, yes.” He waves me off, steering me away from the drinks area when someone else comes over to help themselves. “You’re a little paragon of virtue and honesty.”

Kieran shoots me a mocking smirk that widens into a devastating grin when I roll my eyes. “So what are we supposed to do?”

“Christ, you’re serious. You’ve got no idea what to do at a party.” I shrug and a laugh huffs out of him. He drapes an arm over my shoulder and motions around the room with his cup. “It’s very simple, Ari. Get drunk, get high, get some. Those are the only three things that matter.”

“I’m not giving you any,” I murmur when his gaze slides down my body in a slow perusal. “And I don’t want to be drunk or high.”

“Then you’re in for a very boring night watching everyone else have fun without you, little bug.” He swallows his drink in one gulp, the bob of his throat capturing my attention.

“There are more ways to have fun than going wild.”

He chuckles. “Like the kind of fun in your books? In front of others? Scandalous, Ari.”

My cheeks prickle, but I refuse to be ashamed of reading what I enjoy. “Or other things. Interesting conversation.”

His eyes glimmer with humor. “This isn’t school. We’re here to let loose.”

Who am I kidding? I hardly socialize. I’d rather be home drawing in my sketchbook, exploring the new styles I’ve been working on. They might make

interesting tattoos one day, though I doubt I'll have the guts to pursue tattoo design. I should stick to academics.

He drags me from room to room, dazzling everyone he speaks to, easily putting them under his spell with his clever words. No one pays much attention to me.

He keeps checking his phone, a small frown tugging at the corners of his expressive mouth each time. Eventually he sighs in frustration and tells me to wait while he goes into a room. The door doesn't shut all the way and I hear some of the call during a lull in the music. I'm not trying to listen, but Kieran's voice is raised.

"No. Lark is nothing. I don't think you need me to work with his wife to get it." He catches my eye through the crack in the door and stalks toward me. "I have to go."

Pulse spiking, I slip away before he can accuse me of anything else. A guy grabs my arm when I rush by.

"Hey, beautiful. Where are you off to in such a hurry? The party's right here."

"I was just going to get a drink," I blurt.

"Great, come on. I'm empty, too." He puts his hand on my back to guide me. "Are you new in town? I'm Jake. This is my place."

"Nice house," I mumble. "I'm not new."

"Yeah?" He eyes me appreciatively. "What's your name?"

"Ariana." The smooth, deep answer sounds behind me. I turn to face Kieran, my breath hitching at the sharp glint in his eyes. "Come with me."

Kieran doesn't wait for me or Jake to respond, grabbing my wrist and leading me away. My heartbeat drums with the worry he's mad that I might have heard his phone call. His grip is a steel band on my wrist as he tugs me down a darkened hallway away from the living room. He pins me against the wall around a corner with a rough noise, his hand locking around my throat like it did that night in the alley. Tingles race across my skin at the feeling.

“What did I tell you?” His eyes narrow dangerously. “You don’t open your mouth.”

I swallow, feeling the restriction of his hold on my neck. “He asked me a question. I was just answering it. I didn’t say anything about—you know. I swear.”

“A question? Bullshit.” The laugh that punches out of him is brittle. “Ari, guys don’t ask girls questions with their hands all over you for friendly conversation. He wanted you.”

My stomach dips at the look he gives me, his gaze roving over me like he hates the idea of anyone else touching me.

“Did you want him, Ari?” he rasps.

I shiver, shaking my head.

“Did you want him to bring you here and do this to you?” Kieran’s hand drags down my throat, moving to massage my waist while his teeth scrape over my jaw. “Did you want his hands on you like this?”

“N-no,” I breathe.

The thought of any other guy doesn’t thrill me the way Kieran does. It’s wrong to want someone who hates me, yet I can’t stop myself.

“He can’t have you.” He pulls back, eyes stormy. “None of them can. They’ll all know you’re mine by the time I’m done with you, and then no one will touch you.”

Something hot and wild burns in Kieran’s eyes. With a growl that makes my core throb, he pushes my hair aside and attacks my neck with his mouth. I sag against the wall, a strangled gasp escaping me at the divine feel of his mouth sucking on my skin. My fingers grip his sweater, holding on as his tongue flicks a sensitive spot before he uses teeth, the sensation sparking another sound of pleasure from me.

“Oh god,” I whisper. “What are you doing?”

“Making sure they know who you belong to.” His lips move against my skin as if he can’t stand to separate long enough to answer. “You’re mine,

little bug. All fucking mine.”

Fire floods my veins and I’m powerless to protest when his hand skims down my side, sneaking beneath my skirt to trace up my leg. We’re only in the hallway. It’s hard to think logically while he kisses my neck and makes me weak in the knees. We should move. Go somewhere private. People could walk down the hall and see.

He traces the edge of my panties, then he stops. I push out a little cry, needing him to touch me, forgetting where we are and how much I hate him.

“Please.” My body trembles with the forbidden plea. “Please don’t stop.”

I feel his grin against my throat. His skilled fingers slip inside my panties and trace my folds until I press against his hand, seeking more. His dark chuckle vibrates against my throat, making me shudder.

“I’m going to ruin you, Ari.”

Heat pulses in my clit at the sinful promise. The first brush of his fingers against it makes my lips part on a gasp. It’s so much better than when I touch myself. Without asking, he knows how to get me trembling for him, dancing toward the brink of oblivion. I grip his sweater harder and move my hips to the rhythm he sets.

I don’t recognize myself right now. Someone unafraid of consequences or rules. Untethered, not caring what someone else would think, only focused on what I need.

Kieran gives my neck one more kiss, then peels back to watch, eyes hooded, holding my gaze as he moves his fingers to tease my entrance. I bite my lip to keep quiet when he presses one inside, gliding sedately, like he’s enjoying drawing this out.

“How many fingers did you use after the library?” He stares at my mouth, finding my clit with his thumb as he plunges his finger deep inside me.

A shattered breath tears past my lips. “I...I didn’t...”

“Fuck, you’re wet. How many, Ari? Don’t lie. I’ll know if you do.”

My face is on fire. “Three.”

“Three?” His dimpled grin grows slowly, making me ache. He adds another finger, spearing me as he finds a spot inside that makes me choke back a strained noise. “Go ahead, baby. Scream for me. Let them all hear what a little slut you are for me. How much your needy cunt begs for me to wreck you.”

As he speaks, he goes faster, hitting the spot repeatedly until I’m teetering on the edge from overwhelming pleasure. I bite my lip raw trying to keep quiet while he taunts me.

“No one will believe your little good girl act once they hear what you sound like when you come,” he mutters.

The protest on the tip of my tongue dies when he buries his face in my throat, kissing it again. Combined with his fingers, the sensations clash together like a firework and I scrabble at his shoulders, clinging to him so I don’t collapse.

“Beg me to let you come,” he demands, the hot rush of air against my skin making me shudder. “Beg me, Ari. Or I’ll stop right now and leave you like this, aching for release.”

Damn it, I hate him.

If he stops, I’ll die. Words spill forth, my inhibitions shattered. “Don’t stop, Kieran. Please don’t.” I swallow, my entire body burning with need. “I want to come. Make me come.”

Kieran growls into my neck, sliding an arm around my waist to tug me closer while he fucks me with his fingers. I wrap a leg around his hip, a desperate noise escaping me. He drives his fingers into me and bites my neck, then I fall apart with a cry I can’t contain as ecstasy crashes over me in waves. My limbs turn to jelly and I find he’s holding me, supporting my weight so I don’t collapse to the floor when I come back to myself.

Breathing harshly, he holds up his fingers, twisting them back and forth in fascination as he studies the evidence of my pleasure. It’s indecent, yet so hot it makes my insides coil. Mischievous gaze flicking to me, he licks them.

“You’ll be on my hand all night,” he murmurs, wiggling them in my face. “And with the sounds you made when you came, everyone will know these fingers have been inside you.”

A chill spreads over my skin that isn’t entirely unpleasant. Part of me likes the thought, while the rational side of me finds his cocky observation offensive.

“You’re disgusting,” I mumble.

Kieran smirks. “You didn’t think that a second ago when you begged me to make you come.”

A flutter moves through my chest, my stomach dipping. “I can’t believe we...right in the hallway.”

He shrugs. “This is hardly the most illicit place I’ve made a mess.” His eyes flash. “And now it’s time to show you off.”

“Wait, what?”

Trapping me beneath his arm, he saunters out into the party with me by his side. Stunned, I barely struggle, too busy battling embarrassed self-consciousness. People are looking. Do they know? Was I loud?

He seeks out the guy he pulled me away from, staring him down. I flush when Jake looks at me, taking in my rumpled outfit and mussed hair. He grins, nodding to Kieran. My stomach clenches.

Kieran’s smug expression makes something inside me snap, unleashing a flood of everything I’ve ever held back. I’m not a goddamn toy for him to play with.

I’m so done. With this, with his wicked games, with *him*.

Yanking away, I storm across the room until I find an abandoned drink on a side table, snatching it.

“Where are you going, little bug?” Kieran follows, his voice carrying a harder edge. “Not trying to sneak away, are you?”

Spinning around, I give him a fiery glare. “Enough. I’m through with bending to your shit, Kieran.”

“Is that so? You think you get to just decide you’re done?”

He cocks his head, amusement written on his handsome features. The playful tilt of his mouth pisses me off more.

“Stop it,” I demand. “I’m past done with your controlling bully crap pulling me in every direction when your whims change.”

There’s a shift in Kieran’s expression, the humor darkening to match the savage way he looked at me in the hallway. An answering frisson of heat builds in me, but I clamp down on it.

The plastic cup crinkles in my hand and I throw the contents of the drink in his face. The beer sloshes and douses Kieran much like the water he had poured on me. He sputters, staring at me intently like he can’t believe I retaliated when I know what’s on the line. The heat in his eyes doesn’t fade, even though I dumped a beer on him.

Satisfaction floods through me at standing up to him like this. Damn the consequences. I’ll find another job and weather it if he releases the fake blowjob video.

My chest heaves by the time I finish. I don’t know what came over me, only that I couldn’t stand to choose inaction any longer. The press of eyes on all sides filters through the scene I’ve made, but I don’t care.

The Bastards toy with everyone in Arcadia Prep and no one stands up to them. It’s time that changed.

“Damn.” Sayer’s amused gaze is locked on me. “I think I just fell in love with her on the spot.”

Kieran growls, grabbing his brother by the scruff of his neck, hauling him away from me. He swipes beer-soaked hair from his eyes, his expression promising violence. “You’d better fall back out of love.”

Sayer frowns, shoving against him. “If I see something I want, I take it, brother. I don’t hold back. We’ll share if you’re not done.”

“Ariana is mine.” Kieran circles behind me and sweeps my hair away from my neck where his teeth and tongue marked me. He raises his voice.

“And I’m not fucking sharing.”

Shock zips through me at Kieran’s open claim and the fierce way he says I’m his despite me standing up to him and giving him a taste of his own medicine. Everyone within earshot gapes. The triplets murmur amongst themselves, their fingers flying over their phones as they stare at their brother.

Cassian whistles and Ophelia drifts closer, assessing my neck.

“Is that a hickey?” She seems impressed and intrigued.

“It’s the mark that she’s mine.” Kieran pulls me back against his chest. “Let that be a warning to any idiot here who thinks about trying anything.”

Ever since the day I started at Arcadia Prep, I’ve never seen the Bastards go against one another. Their bond is impenetrable. This is the first time I’ve seen Kieran stand apart from his siblings.

As far as I know, he doesn’t do this. He has hookups, not girlfriends. He doesn’t get possessive or jealous over one girl. So why is he doing it for me when he hates me? His manipulative games are too much for me to keep up with, sending my mind in circles.

Kieran lowers his head to speak into my ear. “We’re not done yet, Ari. Not until I say so. You’re mine, whether you like it or not.”

CHAPTER 11

ARIANA

THE FOLLOWING night I wake feeling warm, drowsiness making me sluggish as I fight to open my eyes. I'm too warm, much more than I was when I fell asleep after squeezing in some studying when I got home from a dinner shift at the restaurant. A content sigh leaves me as I rub my face against my smooth, firm pillow, enjoying the caressing sensation that has my limbs so relaxed.

Something strong tightens around me and I register the rich, earthy scent of aftershave enveloping me. All at once awareness crashes into me. My eyes fly open and I find I'm laying on a bare chest—a familiar one I've had my face buried in.

Oh god.

Please be a dream.

A horrible, embarrassing dream like the others that won't leave my messed up mind when I close my eyes and find him waiting for me every night, reliving his sinful touch and his filthy mouth.

The hope fizzles out when I angle my head up and come face to face with Kieran in my bed, watching me with his hypnotic blue eyes hooded. This is real. It's not one of the forbidden dreams I've had about him.

Kieran Ryder is in my bed.

You're mine, little bug. All fucking mine.

My eyes bulge and a gasp escapes me as I push myself away, searching the dark bedroom frantically. The mark he left on my neck at the party last night prickles. My heart races, my mind short circuiting.

“Why are you here? How did you get in?” I whisper in a rush. My attention snags on the window left slightly cracked, cool air filtering into the room. “You climbed in through my window?”

Kieran smirks, yanking me back to his side. He continues carding his fingers through my hair—the same feeling I woke to. It feels nice, but I’m conflicted by who the hand is attached to.

I still haven’t figured out what being his means when he doesn’t do girlfriends and there’s nothing loving between us. We’ve been trapped together by accidental circumstance and he won’t let me go. I’ve avoided thinking of it since he dropped me off last night. He didn’t even say anything about me throwing a beer in his face, or why he dragged me out in the first place.

“Yes. Nothing will stop me from getting to you whenever I want,” he says in a weird tone.

It’s not as cruel or arrogant as he usually is. There’s something...different about him tonight. Less cutting.

His fingers brush my neck, stroking the hickey before returning to run through my hair.

“Why?” I murmur.

He doesn’t respond for a long moment. “Because you’re mine.” My stomach dips at the possessiveness the word carries. He stiffens, his grip clenching in my hair. “I own you, remember?”

My chest constricts. That’s what he meant last night?

Another scent catches my attention. Perfume. It’s expensive and elegant. Kieran’s come from somewhere—from *someone*.

I gulp, fighting the tightness making it difficult to breathe. He had to do what I saw him do at the restaurant tonight—maybe more—then came to me.

Why? And why does my heart revolt in pain?

Squashing the unwarranted questions, I push against his chest. He has no shirt on, only sweatpants. I'm only in my mom's old painting t-shirt and my underwear. How did I miss him sneaking in and slipping into my bed while I was asleep?

"You can't be here," I mumble. "My dad's home. He comes to check on me at night."

I attempt to turn over to check if my door is still closed. Kieran stops me, touching my lips. My breath catches at his piercing gaze. Something strained lingers around his handsome eyes. It's like the brief glimpse I saw behind his cracked veneer in the alleyway before he realized I was there.

We remain locked like that for several pounding heartbeats until he breaks the silence.

"It's fine. He's not even here. His car pulled out before I climbed up."

"What?" Where would Dad be going in the middle of the night? He didn't say anything about leaving for work. "What time is it?"

"Late as fuck." He nudges me to turn over like I wanted, then tugs me back against his body. He's spooning me, his arm a firm band around my waist. "Now shut up and go back to sleep."

His words are demanding, yet without bite. He sounds weary, as if he hasn't slept in days.

The bed is so warm with both of us. My heart thumps and my cheeks tingle as I battle the urge to squirm. I resist it, but his hand traces my hips, then explores my stomach beneath the hem of my sleep shirt.

"K-Kieran," I warn, unsure whether I want to stop him or not.

His nose grazes my nape as he lightly skims his fingertips in a maddening circle beneath my belly button. My stomach concaves and I can't help moving a little, picturing how good his fingers felt last night. He chuckles against my ear, the sound a warm, smoky lure that ignites a throb in my core.

"Careful, Ari." Kieran's lips brush the shell of my ear with a wicked

smirk. “You keep rocking your hips against my cock like that and I’m going to think you’re begging me to do something.”

“I’m not,” I hiss.

“I don’t believe that for a second.” He plants his palm against my skin and presses me tight against him so I can feel everywhere our bodies touch. “Feel that? You arched into me. Your body begs for me so pretty.”

Mortification makes my face hot from the way his sinful tone stirs heat in my veins. He’s such an asshole, yet every time his hands are on me something depraved locked away deep within me makes me lose my senses and forget how much I should hate him.

Kieran doesn’t move his hand lower to the ache building between my legs, not like in the library when he blackmailed me, or in the hallway last night at the party. I wait, but he never moves his hand from my stomach, drifting up instead of where I expect. He settles with a rumbling noise.

I grapple with wondering why I’m holding my breath, anticipating that side of him...*wanting* him to push me like he has before. Why do I like what he does to me? Is it him?

Blinking in the dim room, a knot forms in my stomach. I inhale carefully to cover the confusing thoughts running through my head. If he finds out I’m craving his touch, desiring the ruin he rules me with, then he’ll have another weapon to use against me.

Kieran already has the power to destroy me. I can’t offer him the power to wreck my heart, too.

I lay in his embrace, my mind unable to calm down. My bully is in my bed, holding me after a night of being used by someone else. I don’t know why he came to me. He hates me and I hate him, yet he presses his face into the back of my neck and breathes me in like my scent is a salvation.

I want to ask why—why me, why did he come here, why doesn’t he stop—but I’m afraid to break the quiet spell that’s fallen over my room. Is it crazy that laying in my bed with his arms around me is comforting? I have no

way to explain it. He's the last person I should find comfort in, yet somehow a dulled pain in my chest eases that's been present since losing Mom.

Several minutes later, his warm exhalations stir my hair and fan across my skin. "What is it about you Ari?" His voice is a near-silent rasp. "Why do you make me feel like this?"

My heart climbs into my throat. I don't think Kieran means for me to hear. He holds me tighter and sighs as if he has the weight of the world on his shoulders.

I don't understand what this thing is between us, but I get the sense it's shifting, changing irreversibly from what we started as.

CHAPTER 12

ARIANA

I'VE SETTLED into working at The Gilded Arrow in the three weeks since starting. Delphine hasn't sent me back out to the alley, and I've learned the art of being discreet and invisible amongst the restaurant's most prestigious guests. The urge to stare has even faded.

Things feel like they're returning to normal. Well, my new normal. Kieran's siblings backed off at school after the party. He stopped toying with me sadistically, but his attention remains on me, not allowing me to return to invisibility. I don't know if I want to be invisible anymore.

My shift tonight is going smoothly, almost eight hundred bucks in tips burning a hole in my pocket from my tables. These tips are my lifeline. Saving up during senior year will get me enough to break free of Arcadia Hill and keep me afloat at whichever college I go to.

As I collect the check from a candlelit corner table with an older couple celebrating an anniversary of their remarriage after he left his mistress—something they gushed to me about over the third bottle of wine—I consider what major I'll declare. There are so many subjects that interest me, some more practical than others. Then there's a secret interest that I've been entertaining each time I open my sketchbook and create. I'm rusty from years of not practicing, too gutted by losing Mom to handle drawing, but I'm slowly getting my muscle memory back.

Art school is expensive and I have no portfolio to show for it. Do tattoo artists even go to art school first, or straight into an apprenticeship?

I shake my head with a wry smile. It's silly. I should stick to something that will guarantee several career options rather than fill my time with whims just because I enjoy learning and have this idea of myself as a tattoo artist.

Dad would have a heart attack, but Mom would love it. She was our eccentric light, and offbeat ideas delighted her. She always encouraged me to follow my heart.

A pang of sadness echoes in my chest. I miss her so much.

For her, I'll live with spread wings and strive to fly high. No more isolating. No more choosing inaction because it's easier than speaking my mind. My lips twitch with pride, reliving the memory of standing up to Kieran at the party on Friday.

All thoughts of my night ending with another big tip evaporate when Basil Kingston walks in with Kieran in tow. They're led to a prominent table right in my section, filling the last table currently open.

Oh please, no. I search for Delphine, desperate to have someone else deal with this. She's nowhere to be found. Damn it.

Basil sends a glare around the room and I curse under my breath, forcing my feet to move from where I was hovering out of sight at the edge of the room. Kieran is absorbed in his phone, bored expression carefully constructed. I'm starting to recognize when he's putting on an act after being around him so much. He glances up and freezes when I reach the table.

"Good evening, my name is—"

"I don't care about your name, girl," Basil says disdainfully. "I've never had to wait so long for service. Perhaps The Gilded Arrow is on the decline."

"Sorry, sir. I'm new." He lifts a brow in clear disinterest. "What can I get you?"

"I've been coming here long enough, I expect my usual order put in once I arrive and my drink on the table before I sit." Basil scans the table and my

stomach drops. "I see no drink."

Kieran cuts in, watching me intently. "What if you felt like something different? You said that on the way in. She's anticipating what you need." He pauses, tearing his gaze from me. My heart drums. He's helping me so his father doesn't have me fired, like he threatened himself to get me to obey him. "Get us two Balvenie 61s to start. Neat."

I scribble down the order on my pad, not bothering to point out that Kieran is only eighteen. I've seen him served here before and no one bats an eye.

Basil smirks, eyeing his son. "Just like your father."

Kieran hitches his shoulder languidly, a playful smile tilting his full lips. "Ready to tell me why you dragged me out to dinner yet?" He lifts his brows in a mocking show of wholesomeness I might be able to buy if I didn't know the wicked side of him. "It's a school night, you know."

Basil shakes his head, eyeing me. "You're still here? Go."

Jolting, I murmur that I'll get their drinks and dart toward the bar. As I leave, I hear Basil complain that a father should be able to take his son out when he wants. Kieran scoffs in response. His mutter is too quiet for me to make out and I've already learned my lesson about eavesdropping on their conversations.

He still has the video from the library. Just because he climbed into my bed last night doesn't mean I should trust that he won't change his mind and use it against me.

Delphine snags my arm halfway to the bar. "Basil Kingston doesn't usually sit in your section. Sorry. I didn't have time to warn you what to do."

"It's okay." I scrunch my nose. "I think."

"Just keep your head down, move fast, and whatever you do *don't* spill anything. The last server that did not only got fired, but disappeared from town all together."

My face drains of color. "What? Am I in danger?"

“No, no.” Delphine pats my arm. “It’ll be fine. Just watch yourself and follow the rules. You can do it. He tips well.”

If she thinks he tips well, that means it has to be really well compared to the other patrons we serve. I still gape when my tips are a couple hundred dollars and people act like they’re tossing out pocket change when it’s more money than I’m used to seeing.

Adrian eyes me when I reach the bar, then glances past me to Basil and Kieran’s table. He has two drinks poured and ready.

“Good luck,” he says quietly. “The next round will be ready, just swing by before they finish and be prepared to give them their drinks before they’re done.”

I nod, mustering my sense of calm to get through this. Basil never saw me in the alley that night, only Kieran. He won’t recognize me, and for whatever reason Kieran doesn’t seem poised to use this opportunity to torment me. The question he asked himself last night when he thought I was already asleep runs through my head.

Afraid of pissing Basil Kingston off and risking my job, I hurry back to their table to deliver the drinks, tuning out their conversation. Kieran no longer pretends to be bored, peeking at me through his lashes while he types on his phone. My pocket vibrates with a text notification.

Basil gesticulates with his arm. “Put your phone away. I’m growing tired of your troublesome rebelliousness. Your usefulness isn’t what it once was the more you refuse my orders. One call is all it takes. I’m warning you.”

Kieran’s shoulders tense and his mouth flattens, taking his father’s berating in grim silence. I wish I could stop Basil, not liking the pain lingering at the edges of Kieran’s expression, but if I insert myself I don’t think either of them would like it.

Sympathy clogging my throat, I quickly set Basil’s drink down, but in my rush to get them their delayed drinks when they’re already waiting, I don’t account for the tray balance.

With a startled gasp and a quick jerk, I catch the tray from toppling out of my hand. My eyes stretch in horror as Kieran's glass wobbles, then topples, the amber liquid splashing across the tray and directly into Basil's lap. He hollers in surprised outrage, banging a fist on the table.

Oh god.

I'm dead.

The one thing Delphine warned me not to do, and I fucking did it.

Terror grips me, making it impossible to take my eyes off the spill and the stain on Basil's light gray suit. Oh my god. I just spilled a drink in his lap and now I'm staring. My white-knuckled grip clutches the tray as panicked breaths scrape my throat.

"Karly—!" Basil's shout is interrupted.

"Dad," Kieran barks. "You were waving your hand around and startled the poor girl."

A vein bulges in Basil's temple as his dangerous gaze locks on me. "If she can't navigate serving us without spilling, then she's not fit to work here. I want her fired."

A strangled noise escapes me and I take a hesitant step back. "Please, I didn't mean to. I'm sorry. I'll get you a fresh drink right away."

"Don't worry about it." Kieran won't look at me, his focus trained on his father. He stands, stepping in front of me. "It's hardly the worst thing he's had on his suit. He'll just buy a new one. I'll see that the bar sends over the whole bottle to take care of this."

Basil grumbles, but accepts Kieran's quick, confident tone. He waves his son off, pushing away from the table to go to the men's room. I remain rigid for another beat, then burst into motion, scurrying from the table with my heart pounding.

I'm done for. Karly is going to fire me and I'll never find another job that helps me save what I need to. Frantic tears sting my eyes and my throat hurts from panting so harshly.

“Come here.” Kieran is behind me. He takes my arm and pries the drink tray from my stiff hands, setting it aside. His grasp on my elbow is the only thing keeping me upright. “Out here.”

The restaurant is a blur. Kieran takes us through the back door to the alley, and a strained laugh bubbles out of me. We’re back where we started.

CHAPTER 13

KIERAN

THE OUTSIDER I wanted gone in this very alley is now the girl I'm jumping to protect. The irony isn't lost on me as I hustle her out into the night and lean against the rough brick wall. She's no longer someone I need to control to keep quiet, now she's just...*mine*.

Every night I fight the desire to sneak in her room, tempted by the obsession I can't shake. I broke after the party over the weekend, needing to be near her. While leaving, I caught Mom going out late. Worry shot through me that she was with Basil again. They've fallen in and out of affairs over the years, and she wore the perfume he prefers when I hugged her.

Dad's veiled warning echoes in my head. If he comes for Mom, I'll kill him. I'm sick of him holding her over my head to keep me chained to him. He won't fuck with my little bookworm, either.

Ariana paces, her face pale, teeth scraping her lip. She wrings her hands in front of her and pulls on her wavy ponytail tied back with a deep red ribbon.

Dad dragged me to dinner after I kept ignoring him to ensure I'm still firmly under his control. Being his son awards me power and privilege, but not against him. I didn't think Ari would be here, or that she'd be our waitress while I endured Dad's power flexing.

When I saw her standing by our table, a bad feeling came over me. Not

what she overheard, but that Dad would notice her. I don't want her anywhere near him, rejecting the thought of him knowing she exists. Before it was because I needed to handle her myself, control the information she has, but now it's something else. It would be bad enough if he realized she heard us in the alley. Then there's a worse scenario—him taking a liking to her. Anything he sees that he wants, he gets.

I force that thought away. That won't happen.

She's making me dizzy. On her next pass, I snatch her, pulling her against me, sliding my fingers into her hair to soothe the buzzing feeling filling my chest. Her body trembles, and not in the pleasurable way I've come to enjoy. I lock my jaw, cutting a glare at the door.

"I can't believe it," she repeats in a robotic tone. "She said not to spill and I spilled anyway. I'm dead."

"You're not dead," I murmur. "You can't be. I'm not done with you yet, remember?"

She thumps my chest weakly with her fist. "Shut up."

My mouth curves. "See. Tons of fire left in you, little bug."

"They're going to fire me." Her voice strains. "I need this job."

I study her glistening eyes and the way her teeth sink into her lip. Something twists in my chest. I know she's a scholarship student and that she lost her mom. Her dad works, but maybe she helps out and this job is vital to their situation.

A bewildered breath huffs out of me. It's only been a few weeks since I threatened to get her fired, now I'm going to make sure I save it.

"You covered for me." Those beautiful eyes meet mine. "You helped. Why?"

Fuck. I don't know. I just acted after sending her a cocky text about servicing me in other ways between the soup and salad course.

It all happened in slow motion. At first it was fucking hilarious, until I realized what he would do for her ineptitude. A protective urge barreled

through me strong enough to knock the wind out of me.

Nothing mattered except getting my father's attention off Ariana by getting her away from him long enough for him to forget about her existence.

"Because, Ari. You're mine." I buff her arms to fight the night chill. It strikes me how small she is. Yet she fits perfectly against me, both here and in her bed. "Don't worry about it."

She laughs again, the sound all wrong. "Easy for you to say. You don't rely on a paycheck and tips like I have to."

"Take this." I give her the wad of cash in my wallet, chest burning oddly.

"What—no, I can't take your money." She presses it back against my chest.

"Yes you will. If I want you to have it, you'll have it." Folding the bills, I unbutton the shirt she keeps done up to her throat and tuck it in her bra. "Don't argue with me. Consider it a consolation for crossing my father."

She blushes, covering her cleavage with a hand. "But—"

"Look, everything will be fine. I'm going to make sure he doesn't go off on Karly. I promise I'll convince him it was nothing." Hell, all I need to do is steer him in the direction of the closest piece of hot ass and he'll forget all about this mishap. Taking Ariana's chin between my fingers, I make her look at me. "I can talk anyone in and out of anything, and that includes my father when he's distracted."

"Then why work for him?" Something that looks a lot like sympathy fills her eyes. "Why do anything he makes you?"

My grip on her chin tightens. "Don't bring that up now, Ari."

"Sorry." She sucks her lower lip into her mouth and it becomes a struggle not to kiss her. That damn mouth is too tempting, making me want what I haven't had in years. "Why'd you have to come tonight? It was shaping up to be my best night."

The corner of my mouth hitches without humor. "It wasn't my idea. Trust me, I'd rather be elsewhere."

She stiffens. “Oh. Right.”

I graze my knuckles across her cheek and stroke the fading mark on her neck hidden by makeup and a sheer scarf she tucked into her uniform collar. I have half a mind to make it look like new.

“Look at your phone.”

Her forehead creases. “Why?”

“Just do it.”

Sighing, she pulls it from her apron and reads the suggestive message I sent. I smirk as her pretty eyes dilate.

“Kieran,” she hisses.

A chuckle rolls out of me and I grasp her waist, pulling her closer. “Sounds like a better idea, doesn’t it? Way better than enduring dinner with my dad. Let’s get out of here.”

“I can’t just leave work.” She peeks at me through her lashes, her gorgeous eyes darkened with arousal. “Are you going to sneak in my room again?”

I thought I was succumbing to insanity to fall into her bed after climbing through her window, the appeal too strong to resist. I slept better than I have in years with her nestled against me, and strangely she loosens the invisible chain my father has on me.

“I knew you liked that.” My smirk stretches. “Just know when you’re tucked in your bed I can always get to you.”

A shy smile tugs at her lush mouth. I trace it, swiping my thumb along her lower lip. Keeping her gaze on me, she presses a dainty kiss to the pad of my thumb and heart gives an insistent thump in response.

“You sure you don’t want to get out of here?” I rasp.

“I have to finish my shift,” she whispers.

A sigh gusts out of me. “Fine. Always so logical, rule follower.”

She eyes the door with dread. “Please don’t let me be fired.”

“You won’t be. Hang out here for five minutes, then go back in.” I tug on

her velvet ribbon until her hair tumbles free from the ponytail. I pocket the ribbon. “There. He won’t even realize you’re not the same girl. Dig deep for that fire I know you have in you, then say you apologize for the other girl and she’s gone. Make sure you sell it, yeah?”

“He won’t recognize me and find out I’m lying?”

“Not a chance. It’s all about confidence.” I cup her cheek, trapping her in my gaze using the same tactics I do when I want to manipulate someone into believing the tales I spin. “Look him directly in the eye and he’ll never stand a chance.”

Ariana gives me a cute, determined little nod that yanks on my heart with an invisible thread. The crazy urge to kiss her consumes me, calling to me like a siren at sea. I hold back. I might want her, but I still don’t know what this is between us.

Pulling away, I head inside with confident strides. Grabbing the first waitress I see, I point at our table.

“Send the entire bottle of Balvenie 1961 to Basil Kingston.” I gauge his expression from here and grimace, handing over the black card in my wallet. It doesn’t matter how much it costs to ensure Ariana’s off his radar. “Make it two.”

“Right away, sir,” she says.

I smooth the lapels of my dinner jacket, steeling myself to manage the man who has me under his thumb. My hand goes to my pocket and I run my fingers over the soft velvet ribbon from Ariana’s hair. I haven’t been able to get myself out of much when it comes to him, but for her I’m pulling out all the stops. It’ll take offering myself up for something I wanted to avoid, but it’s the distraction I need to pull this off.

Sauntering back to the table, I offer my father a lazy smirk. “The bar’s sending two bottles over.”

“Good,” Dad blusters. “I have half a mind to rain hell on this place, strike it down for the insult of hiring incompetent servers.”

I roll my eyes. “Please, you’re just mad you’ve already fucked half the staff and haven’t gotten your dick wet since the last time you were here. You get cranky when you’re bored.”

Dad’s mouth curves in a lecherous grin. “Ah, well. Maybe you’re right. It’s been a busy week preparing. As I’ve been trying to explain to you—”

“I’ll do it.”

He pulls his attention from the tits on the girl who delivers two bottles of Scotch to study me. “There’s my boy. I knew you’d come around.”

Ariana arrives at the table, hair down, mascara darkening her eyes and the top two buttons of her shirt left undone giving just a hint of her curves. She shoos the other waitress away and pours our drinks, being generous with his. I gulp a mouthful of whiskey, watching carefully without being obvious.

“Apologies for the incident, gentlemen. I assure you, that’s not how The Gilded Arrow conducts itself. The pitiful girl’s been let go.” She winks at my father, then breezes through his usual order, confirming it’s on its way. “Is there anything at all I can get you while you enjoy your drinks?”

I gape. She did exactly what I told her to, but I never expected her to do it that well. She’s like a completely different person, not my meek little bug who blushes at every word out of my mouth. I slip a hand in my pocket, touching the ribbon I took from her.

Dad rumbles out a laugh and pats her ass. “How about you, my dear? You seem to ah...know what you’re doing. There’s time before the steak cooks.”

I grip my glass hard enough I’m surprised it doesn’t shatter. Ariana bats her lashes and manages to escape his fondling inconspicuously.

“Is that the generous tip you’ll leave?” she teases, moving behind his chair.

He laughs again, the vulgar fool playing right into her hand. She meets my eye over his head, mouthing *thank you*. A band constricts around my chest and my punishing grip doesn’t relax on my glass until she flits away, far out of his reach.

This is why I can't let him know she exists. I need him to forget all about her. Time to offer myself up in sacrifice.

"Just tell me who I'm supposed to seduce at the party to get the message you want," I mutter.

CHAPTER 14

KIERAN

THIS COCKTAIL PARTY IS RIDICULOUS. I fought my father on being here, but he was relentless. At least Ophelia and Cassian are here, too. They might not know the full extent of how Dad stays in power by using me to ferry information, but it's easier when he includes them for their own usefulness. Dad didn't get any resistance from them when he demanded their presence to show us all off, proud of his many bastards as a symbol of his strength.

To me it only proves he's an insatiable manwhore when we're lined up, all of us born within months of each other.

Most of the guests congregate in a parlor of the mansion with rich dark wood accents and leather furniture. An ugly modern light fixture hangs overhead, replacing the regal chandelier I remember from the last time I was here. Perhaps a touch of the host's much younger second wife.

Cassian and I lean against a black marble mantel with drinks in hand while we watch our sister captivate every man and more than a few women in the room with her renowned beauty. She laps up the attention, laughing delicately at all the right moments when someone important in the semicircle formed around her gives her a compliment. They flock to her like moths to flame, lured in without hope of escape once she works her magic to gain their attention.

“What does he need us for when he has her to provide a dazzling distraction,” Cassian jokes. “He can have them all signing over their company majorities with one smile from Ophelia.”

The side of my mouth hitches up. “True. She’s a force to be reckoned with.”

As far as they know, we distract while Dad works when in reality, I’m the one retrieving crucial information, relaying it to him.

“Although,” Cassian muses, toasting me. “She’s been eyeing you like a slab of meat all night while Ophelia entices her husband.”

With a smug tilt to the harsh line of his mouth, he indicates my target for the evening, Vivian Lark. I’m waiting for the right moment to use her to weed out the message I need to carry to my father. She’s Stephen Lark’s new wife, probably bored out of her mind at a party like this, not quite fitting in with the younger spawn crowd and snubbed by the older wives for being the mistress upgraded to wife.

Lark recently bought out Titan World Trust, a holdings company Dad has fought to keep contained. His business rivals in the south and by the coast need it as their cornerstone to overtake his wealthy empire. Dad wants me to find out what I can about it using any means necessary. He’s deemed the wife the best in while Lark remains here, distracted by my sister’s charms.

“Sure she doesn’t see your hair and think the dark horse out of our bastard bunch would be more exhilarating?” I taunt. “You’d probably blow her back out.”

“No, she’s definitely heard the rumors about you and wants to see if your mouth is as skilled as all the girls say,” he shoots back.

My tight smirk doesn’t reach my eyes before I down the rest of my drink and leave the glass on the mantel above the fireplace. Vivian flicks another flirtatious look my way and I suppress a sigh. Time to do what I do best—deceive and extract information.

“Why the long face, Kier?” Cassian slaps me hard enough to jostle me

with his unmatched strength. “Enjoy yourself. She’s hot.”

He wouldn’t understand what it’s like. Dad’s never used him like he does me. At most, Cassian’s had to provide some muscle to intimidate people into submitting to Dad’s rule over the Hill, but they don’t get along on the best days. Cassian only agrees because he likes hitting things and letting his rage out to play. He also does it because he cares about protecting us. If he doesn’t fall in line, Dad threatens him with taking it out on Ophelia.

Slipping a hand in my pocket, I twine Ariana’s ribbon around my fingers. I’ve been carrying it with me since I took it off her at the restaurant last weekend. I haven’t given it back. I take it out when I’m laying in bed to stroke the velvet length, bring it with me on runs, and keep it on me wherever I go.

Instead of doing Dad’s bidding, I’d rather sneak into a shadowy corner to text her. The urge to climb through her window tonight has me in a chokehold. I want to bury myself in her sweet scent and soft curves.

“I’m sure this won’t take long,” I mutter. “Poor thing probably hasn’t had an orgasm that didn’t come from something battery powered or a showerhead since she married the wrinkled old ball sac.”

“Money and security are fickle mistresses.”

I send Cassian a sharp, assessing look. Out of all of our siblings, he’s the one who hasn’t had it as easily as the rest of us anytime Dad decides to fuck around with his inheritance. My mother’s wealthy in her own right, but Cassian’s stepfather made poor choices that flushed out his family’s vast estate until little remained. It’s the biggest reason why we came up with the idea to use our parties as cover for what really goes on as insurance so we eventually won’t have to rely on inheritances and trust funds.

The usual disdain fills me as I return Vivian’s flirty glances, playing a game I know all too well. At first this was fun. I like working people over, finding out which buttons to press and which words to whisper that get them to open up and spill all their secrets to me. It got old fast when I realized the

invisible leash chaining me to my father keeps me from flying free the way I crave to do.

When I tip my head toward the hall, quirking a brow before slipping away from the parlor, the echo of heels follows me. A humorless smile crosses my face. I close my eyes for a moment, picturing sneaking off with Ariana and all the delicious things we could get up to.

Hands slide over my shoulder and Vivian's expensive perfume surrounds me. "Where are you going? The party's back there."

"I have a penchant for exploring," I drawl. "And the party's wherever I am. Care to give me a tour?"

She steps around me, taking the hand I offer, not picking up on the stiffness in my limbs. "Honestly, I've been dying to get away."

"Let's make our own party, then." I give her a devious wink. "You seem like you like making mischief."

Vivian simpers, pushing her breasts against my arm, the low-cut cocktail dress leaving little to the imagination. She's not much older than me, maybe five or six years, but she does nothing for me. I'm eager to get this over with, so I slide an arm around her waist and palm her ass.

"Where can we go to get away from them?" I nod toward the parlor without turning around.

"This way." Vivian practically digs her manicured nails into my crisp shirt to lead me exactly where I want her to—her husband's study. She peeks over her shoulder and gives me an eager leer. "This is Stephen's home office."

The corners of my mouth curl and I bring my lips to her ear, tone sinful. "The next time he's in here, he won't realize what you've done right on his desk."

She moans, not hiding her intentions. I barely have to manipulate her at all, letting her work herself into her own fantasy by waiting so long to fan the flames of her flirtations. I allow her to pull me over to the desk and lean

against it when she plasters her body against mine. This is too easy.

“Does he bring his work home?” *Is what I need here?*

“Ugh, yes. He won’t shut up about the takeover.” She giggles. “Has it in his head he’s going to go against your father. Can you imagine, Stephen on top of Arcadia Hill?”

Bingo.

Vivian loosens my tie. “Enough about him.”

She buries her face in my throat before she has the collar open. I do just enough to seem like I’m participating, caressing her back, palming her waist, and squeezing her ass. My hands don’t stop moving, forced to keep touching her.

“You’re so hot.” She pants between the mauling kisses she presses to my neck, nails clicking while she tries to undo them all at once. “Evie wouldn’t shut up about how dirty you talk.”

“I don’t know what you mean, darling.” I tip my head back. Nothing happened with Evelyn Peterson, either, but after I left her, she believed exactly what I needed her to—that I gave her a night she’ll never forget. “I don’t kiss and tell. Just like this will be our little secret, hmm?”

“Yes.” She gasps when she gets my shirt open and molests my pecs. “Shit. Are those real abs? Only my trainer has them. God, I’m going to ride you like a stallion on Stephy’s desk. This is what he gets for ignoring me after putting a ring on it. He hasn’t touched me in so long. He’s obsessed with his new company.” She leans closer with what she must believe is a sexy look and bites her lip. “I do kegel training. I’m going to make you neigh, baby.”

I smother a snort and whip her around, planting her ass on the desk so she believes I’m into this. She writhes for me as I skim my nose up her neck and massage her waist.

“You know what would make this even better? There’s this filthy trick I know with a tapered bottle. If we had one we could—”

“Oh my god, yes! The wine cellar isn’t far from this wing! I’ll go get it.” Vivian hikes her dress up to keep her tits from spilling out and pops off the desk. I brace against it, bowing my head. She kisses my cheek. “Be right back, baby. Don’t go anywhere.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, pet.” I scan the contents of the desk for proof of what she said while she click-clacks away on towering designer heels.

Vivian never noticed that my dick didn’t even twitch for her and her enthusiastic jockey kink. It doesn’t matter. She fell right into the suggestion to get rid of her like it was her own idea and provided my cover if I’m caught by mauling me. I’ll be out of here and back to the party before she returns.

A huff of amusement escapes me. Cassian would’ve been the better fit for Vivian Lark. He’s the one built like a horse with his tall, muscular frame.

I find the paperwork regarding Titan World Trust and gather everything I need before finding my tie on the floor and leaving. Texting Dad to let him know it’s done, I drape my tie around my neck. I’m distracted while searching for a bathroom to remove any evidence of dallying with Vivian Lark in her husband’s study now that I don’t need the cover, curiosity about what Ariana is up to crossing my mind. I snort, picturing the bookshelves in her room. She’s probably curled up with this week’s devilish rogue.

Turning the corner, I rummage for my phone to text her after all, planning to demand she send me the title of the book she’s reading so I can find it and read it to her in my filthiest tone while she sits on my lap in the loft at the Arcadia Prep library. A grin splits my face and heat pulls into my groin as I picture her pretty blush.

“Kieran.” Ariana’s surprised voice makes me whirl around. She eyes me up and down, her face shuttering. “I didn’t realize you’d be here.”

Shit. She’s always in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Glancing around to make sure no one has seen us, I take her by the shoulders and shove her in the nearest room. It turns out to be a closet. I hustle her deeper inside, my mind splitting between her and what I’m here to

do. There isn't much room to move around, keeping us close together.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper.

"Working. The restaurant is doing the food." She gestures to her catering uniform, then hesitates. "You're...working too?"

I sigh harshly. "No. Yes. Goddamn it."

"Looks like it. Your shirt's undone, tie around your neck, and there's lipstick on your collar." Her words are strained and she keeps her eyes down.

"Ariana." She won't look at me. I tilt her chin up. "Ari."

"It's fine. We're not dating."

A growl tears past my lips. "You're mine. This? This is nothing."

I don't know what it is nagging me to explain myself, feeling strangely guilty for being caught looking like I've been balls deep in someone else. She knows my secret. She should know that's not what happens.

Gritting my teeth, I rack my brain for a way to make her understand. My mind is never quiet, always full of quick ideas, yet it blanks.

Peering up at me in the shadowed closet, Ariana bites her lip. "I don't get why you're an escort, but—"

My choked laughter cuts her off as shock crashes over me. Escort. What the hell? More stunned amusement rises up.

I've spent all this time suspicious around her, and she didn't even know the secret she's keeping. She doesn't know anything about what I really do, and doesn't pose the threat I once crucified her as.

Shit. That means everything I've done to her had little ground to stand on. At the cute crease of confusion and empathy on her face, I can't say I regret it. Without catching her in the alley, I wouldn't have her now.

I bury my face in her shoulder to keep quiet so we aren't found. Relief spirals through me and my arms go around her waist. "That's what you thought?"

"Well, you were with an older married woman at dinner." Ariana plucks my shirt collar. "And the rumors about your hookups. I saw the news about

Judge Peterson's case. I thought you slipped her a bribe or something."

Another bout of laughter threatens to give our hiding spot away. I press my face into her throat and breathe her in, my smile genuine.

Ariana's innocent act isn't an act at all. I'm convinced now. Maybe even trust that her honesty is the real deal. Perhaps it's the reason I find her refreshing and addicting to be around after I've only known a complicated web of deceit navigating our cutthroat town. Where anyone else would use the opportunity to ruin me, even if it's not true, she didn't. Some part of me recognized it, drawn to her more and more because the invisible chain around me loosens when she's near.

"I'm not a fucking escort, Ari." Leaning back with a heated look, I brush her arm. "I don't exchange sex for money. I'm just very good at making people think they get what they want from me. I didn't touch anyone tonight."

She gapes at me, blinks, then smacks my chest. "You dick! You put me through so much crap for nothing! Where's your phone—I'm deleting that damn video." I catch her pawing hands with an uncontrollable, stupid grin on my face. "There's no reason for it since I'm not even keeping a secret that exists."

"Not so fast." My heart drums faster thinking about how many times I've watched it. "I like that video."

At my filthy tone, Ariana bites her lip, eyes bouncing between mine.

"If you didn't touch anyone, how did you end up all...ravished?" Her tone is wary as if she's on a precipice, unsure whether she can believe me. After everything I've put her through, I wouldn't trust me, either.

"This isn't ravished, little bug. You haven't seen ravished yet, not from me and not in your precious books." I tug on her ponytail, enjoying her gasp as I bring my lips to her ear. "But I will ravish you. It will be a lesson we both enjoy."

Voices in the hall draw our attention. We still, my body blocking hers

instinctively. Whoever is outside stops right by the door.

The handle turns and I act without thinking.

Cupping Ariana's face, I slam my mouth against hers in a searing kiss I've wanted for weeks. She makes a tiny sound and I swallow it, pulling her closer. The first taste of her lips tears a groan from me as my tongue sweeps into her mouth. It's been two years since I've kissed anyone, and with Ari it's easy, addictive, *right*.

I don't give a shit about anything past that door. The only thing I care about is her—the first girl I've kissed in a long time. The only one I've wanted to kiss.

CHAPTER 15

ARIANA

I MUST BE DREAMING because Kieran kisses me like every minute we've spent not doing this is something he needs to make up for. It leaves me dizzy, clutching at him while he devours me with a ruinous kiss.

Each glide of his lips and tongue sends me higher with a rush like wings spreading wide to carry us. This is what it truly means to fly high. I want it. I need more of this exquisite freedom that comes from kissing him.

Tentatively, I touch my tongue to his, following his lead as arousal spreads through me. His groan is wild and rough. He cups the back of my head, deepening the kiss with skills I don't have, pressing our bodies closer, no space left between us.

I never imagined it could be like this, not from my books or from seeing anyone else doing it.

Kissing Kieran is something I don't ever want to stop. It's provocative, making me feel alive, driving away every worry I had about what I thought he was doing with other women. *Mine* it says with a possessive edge that engulfs me.

"Oh, there you are."

We break apart, reality dragging us back from the clouds we soared in. While my brain takes long seconds to catch up, Kieran is in motion, stepping in front of me.

Stephen Lark leans into the pantry, taking in Kieran's opened shirt. I didn't do that to him, but I could be fired for dallying with Kieran instead of working. My heart sinks. I'm still an outsider in Kieran's world. He belongs here, a guest at the party, while I'm the nobody waitress he stole a kiss from.

My first kiss—yet another first Kieran has taken for himself.

“Must you go around kissing the help when they're meant to be working?” Stephen asks like this is a common occurrence.

Kieran shrugs, slipping back into the cocky persona he uses like armor. He doesn't seem as affected as I am by the world-shattering kiss that was more devastating than any of his dimpled smiles. “They're always so pretty and eager to please.”

Stephen laughs like he understands what Kieran means. My chest tightens and my face is on fire. Is that all I am to Kieran? The urge to scrub at my lips tugs at me. I still can't fathom that I was wrong about him being an escort, but it doesn't give him the right to use me.

“Go back to work,” Stephen commands.

“Yes, sir.” As I step out of the closet, his touch skims up my thigh to squeeze my ass.

I freeze, blinking in disbelief. Did he seriously just—?

A low growl from Kieran sounds behind me and I jump, hurrying away. Before I make it far, he snags my elbow, whirling me around. My back hits the wall between a tall vase and a painting. He steps into me, bracing a hand on the wall. His eyes flash with anger as they roam my face.

“He touched you.” His tone is dangerously icy.

I shrug. “Hazard of the job.”

Kieran frowns, glaring up the hall where Stephen's wheezing laugh echoes. “Fucking bastard.”

I touch his jaw, guiding his face back to me. The wrathful lines of his chiseled features soften and he takes my chin, tipping it up. His attention falls to my mouth.

“Ari,” he rasps.

My breath hitches and my heart constricts. The nickname he gave me in that desperate, gravelly tone ignites heat in my core.

I don’t know which of us move first, only the searing pleasure of our lips colliding in another kiss. He consumes me with it, pulling every tiny noise and gasp from me, swallowing them with each brush of his sinful mouth. He grasps the side of my throat, using his thumb to keep me where he wants while his body crushes me against the wall, letting me feel every firm line, the hard ridge of his erection grinding into my stomach.

I arch into him when his teeth scrape my lip, my body aching with a wild need for more. Every new sensation is a revelation that becomes my new addiction and wrecks me for anyone who isn’t him.

Long before I’m ready, he ends the kiss, grazing his lips across my cheek. “Keep this our secret, too.”

“Why?” I whisper.

“Because I don’t kiss anyone.”

The admission surprises me. Then he claims my mouth once more, like he can’t help himself. I can’t, either. Even a quick one steals my breath, leaving my thoughts muddled.

Drawing away, he drinks me in, a slow grin blooming at my dazed expression. Winking, he slips away to rejoin the party.

Heart pounding, I lean against the wall with my fingers pressed to my tingling mouth. It didn’t feel like I’m nothing to him despite the cool way he reacted when we were caught in the closet.

Kieran’s lips are...soft. It’s all I can think about, not ready to touch the other revelation about his secret. His mouth is one I’ve only known as cruel, spewing venom without remorse. Yet his lips against mine leave me burning for more.

It's late when I get home from catering the Lark's party. Dad pulls into our driveway right before I do, surprisingly. He's kind of ruffled when he climbs out, a strange smile on his face. He comes over to my car and opens the door for me.

When I get out, I prop my hands on my hips and eye him teasingly. "What time do you call this?"

"Hi, pumpkin." Dad huffs out a tired laugh and holds his arm out. I hug him and together we walk into the house. "How did work go? You were on the fancy side of town, right? Bet they had a cool house."

"It was fine." My cheeks warm at the thought of Kieran kissing me. "Why were you working so late? Is everything okay? I thought you weren't supposed to leave for the next trip until tomorrow."

Lately he comes home late and leaves in the middle of the night, returning at odd hours. I don't know if he's taking on more because I can take care of myself, but his travel schedule used to be more routine.

"It's nothing. I'm just trying to get ahead on a project. Hey, what would you say if I made us some late night cocoa with extra marshmallows?" Dad runs a hand over my ponytail, lingering on the bow I tied with one from Mom's collection she left to me. "Used to be your favorite."

"Yeah, when I was eight." Smiling, I shake my head. "I'm eighteen now. Not a kid anymore."

"I know, sweetheart." He sighs and his voice grows tight. "You had to grow up too soon. Your mother would be so proud of the young woman you're growing into."

A pang of sorrow echoes in my chest and I hug him tighter. "I hope so."

"Of course she would. Come on."

He pulls me into the kitchen and I let him make us cocoa, laughing when he makes a show of stacking so many marshmallows in my cup they tip over onto the counter. I cradle the mug, peering over the rim while I wait for them to melt into a gooey mess of sugar.

“You’d tell me if something was wrong, right?”

“Yes.” His smile is languid. “I promise, nothing’s wrong. Quite the opposite.”

I lift a brow. How can it be great if he’s working so late and gone more often than not these days? If we’re not doing good, I make enough in tips to dip into what I’ve been saving to help out. I know we have a lot to pay off that insurance never covered for Mom’s medical bills. Cancer drains you dry until there’s nothing left but withered bones—not only for the beloved person it steals from you, but for your entire life.

Fuck cancer.

My grip tightens on the mug and I put it down harder than I intend. Dad startles, seeming caught out.

“Sorry,” I offer apologetically. “I’m tired from serving every whim of the Hill’s richest snobs. Thanks for the cocoa, Dad.”

He relaxes, coming over to kiss my forehead. “Goodnight, sweetheart.”

“Night.”

Upstairs in my room, I survey the pieces from Mom’s sketchbook I rescued after they were drenched in water. It hurt so much at first, but now I look at them framed on display, more beautiful with their transformation. The water made some of the pieces have an effect that gives them an ethereal quality I’ve ended up liking despite the pain of how they got that way.

I haven’t thought about telling Kieran what he did. If he knew, I think he would’ve used it as another spike to drive into my heart when he was still being a dick all the time. Things aren’t the same between us anymore. Earlier, I wasn’t able to think about the truth he shared, too struck by his kisses. I jumped to the conclusion he was an escort based on what I overheard and it was wrong.

So if he’s not an escort, what is it his father makes him do? Curiosity slithers around the edges of my awareness. He believed I was eavesdropping, tormenting me for what he thought I knew.

Then he gave me a real secret to keep by admitting he doesn't kiss anyone. Maybe I can give him one of mine.

Moving to the bed, I touch the spot where the corner of my hidden sketchbook sticks out. I've almost finished this one in the few weeks since I rediscovered my ability to create art, the muse coming hard and fast to make me need to stop and draw. It's full of my favorite subject: wings.

They send my mind to the kiss.

When Kieran wants something, he doesn't hold back. I turn that over in my head while wondering again if pursuing my art is something I should do for college.

My gaze slides to the framed sketch of perfect wings spread amongst the clouds. Mom would've encouraged me to chase everything I want.

As I get ready for bed, my phone lights up on my nightstand with a message from Kieran. I really need to change his contact name from the cocky one he put.

Ari's Golden God [Eggplant Emoji]: There's a party tomorrow night and you're going. It's one of ours [wink emoji]

My stomach dips. I told Lyssa I've never been to a Bastards party and never wanted to go to one.

Ariana: Says who?

Ari's Golden God [Eggplant Emoji]: You know who. Leave your window unlocked for me tonight. I'll convince you that you're going, which you are.

I bite my lip at his confidence, heat spreading through me. My window hasn't been locked since the first night he snuck in and climbed into my bed while I was asleep.

Ariana: That's presumptuous of you. What if I'm otherwise occupied?

Ari's Golden God [Eggplant Emoji]: Love it when you pull out the big words on me, brainy little bug.

There's a voice message he sends through after. My body buzzes with

anticipation as I press play, his deviant tone filling my room.

“What has you occupied? Are you touching yourself? Show me. Send a picture of you in bed. Whatever you’re doing, I promise I can do it to you ten times better with my fingers, my tongue, and my cock.”

The last word is nearly a growl that pulls a gasp from me. A glutton for punishment, I listen to the message again before it expires, skin buzzing with the heat he stirs in me.

Another voice message comes through, this one more demanding. “Do it, Ari.”

Licking my lips, I grab a book off the permanent stack on my nightstand, then climb under the covers. After a quick glance in the mirror, I release my hair from a mangled bun, allowing it to tumble around my shoulders to frame my face. I lean back against the cushioned headboard I thrifted and reupholstered with Mom’s guidance, smirking as I take a selfie with one of my favorite romance books rather than the racy photo Kieran expects. Once I send it, I get sucked into reading the scene I have open. It takes several minutes for him to respond.

When he does, I jump.

Ari’s Golden God [Eggplant Emoji]: Clever girl. Well played, but your Duke won’t be enough to satisfy you like I can. This, baby.

Another message delivers and I choke back a yelp, dropping my phone to the covers. When I’m brave enough to peek again, my face flushes.

Kieran is in a room with rich wood panels, a world globe in the background behind the bed he leans against. He’s shirtless and hard, the ridge of his erection imprinted on his briefs, his hand tugging the side of them indecently low.

Ari’s Golden God [Eggplant Emoji]: Your turn.

Ariana: I’m not sending you a photo like that.

Ari’s Golden God [Eggplant Emoji]: Guess I’ll need to climb through your window then to admire the real deal. It’s always better than my dreams

anyway.

Ariana: My dad's home. Bad idea. Goodnight.

Ari's Golden God [Eggplant Emoji]: Good idea because I want that mouth again. I've been thinking about it since the library.

I gasp at the admission that even when he was bullying me he wanted to kiss me. He sends another voice message and it takes me a moment to work up the courage to play it. When I do, my chest fills with a warm glow.

"You've gotten under my skin like no one else, Ari." Kieran sounds wrecked. A husky laugh punches out of him. "I want you like I've never wanted anyone. It drives me to the brink of madness."

Because I don't kiss anyone.

Yet Kieran kissed me.

Heart in my throat, I manage to type out a reply. I almost delete it, too scared of what will happen if I put this out in the world. Squeezing my eyes, I send it.

Ariana: I want you, too. I shouldn't, but I can't help it. You're not what I expected. Not the asshole I thought.

My heart pounds when he doesn't respond. Oh god. I shouldn't have confessed that. What if this is something else he holds over my head? I might not know the secret that drove him to bully me, but now I have another. My phone vibrates with his response and another photo, this one as obscene as the first with his hand slipped into the waistband of his briefs.

Ari's Golden God [Eggplant Emoji]: Dream of me.

Too tempted and flustered by the sexy photos he sent, I silence my phone, put it face down on the nightstand, and collapse on the bed. A rush of tingles makes sleep impossible. My nipples tighten with arousal when I think of those photos and what was going through his mind when he took it. Me?

Biting my lip, I slip a hand between my legs and let my imagination run wild with fantasies starring him until I'm shaking and breathless. It takes the edge off, but Kieran's right. It doesn't satisfy the needy ache building in my

core that desires more—his touch, his filthy mouth, *everything*.

The phone remains quiet and I exhale, settling in bed.

Closing my eyes, I picture him here already, his arms around me. He's the last person in the world I should fall for.

But when he sneaks into my room to slip into my bed, I can forget everything else. I swallow, acknowledging the undeniable truth about how he makes me feel. I'm in danger of handing my heart to Kieran, and it'll be tied with a bow from one of my ribbons.

CHAPTER 16

ARIANA

THE DELICATE GOLD wings I painted on my collarbone in the style I want my tattoo done look amazing. They're to honor my Mom's mantra to fly high and tonight I couldn't feel those words more profoundly. I look so different from the shy, closed off girl lost in grief, my chin held high with newfound confidence. I admire them in the mirror, dusting a bronze shimmer over them.

There wasn't any hope of escaping tonight's Bastards party, and it's themed. Golden revelry.

Kieran did come last night, after I fell asleep, waking me up on a moan from what he was doing to me. Not only did he blow my favorite Duke from my book out of the water, he made me want to see where this goes with him.

It might be crazy, but I like the way he pushes me. How it brings out a side of myself I've buried. We began as a nightmare, yet it works between us.

After he made me shatter, he said to dress in something gold and be ready by nine.

When I'm done, I tie a gold feathered shawl I made this morning around my shoulders with a bronze velvet ribbon to make it look like a cape of wings over my simple gold romper, the only thing in my closet I had that met the requirements. It's a ridiculous outfit I bought on a whim while out with Lyssa, but I like the way the material shimmers when I move.

When Kieran arrives, I tease him. “Look at that, you do remember how to use the front door like a normal, well-adjusted person instead of climbing in windows all the time.”

He smirks, taking me in. The amused curve of his mouth softens into a reverent smile as his gaze drags from the Grecian sandals, up my legs to the scandalously short metallic gold romper, lingering on my wing cape and the design on my collar bone.

“Ari,” he says roughly.

My heart thumps at the nickname and I’m equally stunned by him. He’s always handsome—the attractive-and-he-knows-it type—but tonight he steals my breath in a black suit trimmed with gold piping, his tousled blond hair swooping over his forehead to give him an air of mischief when he flashes his eyes up to capture mine, his dimples popping out.

Coming closer, he touches the wings painted on my skin carefully so he doesn’t mess them up, then sinks his fingers in my hair before kissing me until I’m dizzy.

“You’re perfect,” he rasps.

“You look nice, too.”

“You’re going to draw a lot of attention tonight.” He fingers the cape. “They can only look. It’s the most I’ll allow, because you’re mine.”

A thrill shoots through me at his promise. Before, I never would’ve wanted the attention of being his, but I’m not holding back anymore. For Mom. For *me*. I’m spreading my wings to fly, allowing myself to experience everything my life has to offer.

The party is at a small estate, not far from Old King’s College on the outskirts of Arcadia Hill. Kieran told me he and his siblings have complete access to the property on the drive here.

On the outside it looks like any other opulent home in the Hill. Once we enter, the impression shatters and my jaw drops.

It's absolute hedonism. This isn't a high school party, it's an explosion of debauchery and indulgence.

In every room we move through there is a crush of people, alcohol, and skin. So much skin. People went all out with the gold theme, painting their bodies with smears of gold in place of clothes. I thought I was scandalous wearing a short romper, but I'm one of the more modestly dressed people.

Three girls in gold bikinis and sheer sarongs dance on an expensive looking table with Sayer sandwiched between them while he pours vodka from the bottle into his mouth and offers them some, only to spill it so he buries his face in their breasts to lap it up. The dancing goes from dirty to filthy when one of the girls moves in behind him to open his shirt, the other girl pressing her body against the girl in his arms to touch his skin. His booming, lively laugh sounds above the music.

Kieran's lips twitch at his brother's antics, not shocked in the slightest that he's one more kiss away from a public orgy.

Someone bumps into me forcefully. I stumble into Kieran's side. He catches me, swinging a glare around.

A girl in a plunging fringe top, a tiny pair of shorts, and towering glittery gold heels folds her arms, eyeing me with judgmental disdain. She quickly dismisses me and focuses on Kieran, obvious want written all over her face. She didn't run into me by accident I'm guessing.

"K, baby. I thought I was going with you tonight." She pouts. "We talked about it weeks ago."

"Did we?" He hums as if he's thinking, distracted from fully committing to a conversation with her. "Doesn't ring a bell."

She hisses out an angry noise. "Are you serious?"

"Not if I can help it," he answers in a bored tone.

Recognition hits me. She's one of the girls I've seen all over Kieran in the

dining hall. One of his sycophants. Sympathy slides through my stomach at the hint of panic she tries to hide under her shimmery makeup and I understand why she's making a scene. He's her status symbol. Without him, she's nothing—a bad thing to be in the Hill for those that care to play the board and social climb.

When she attempts to push between us, trying to elbow me out of the way, my sympathy for her evaporates and something fierce rises up. I'm not just going to stand here and let her take him.

“Can you take your hands off him?” I don't push her, I simply stand my ground while she tries to reach around me to get to him. “He's not here with you. If he wanted to be, he would've made that clear.”

A low chuckle fans over my ear and his arm slips around my waist. The girl looks between us, horror etched in her features. With all his girls, it's always been them hanging off of him with little reciprocation on his part. His arm around my waist makes a statement.

“Kieran—”

“You heard my girl, Essie.” Pride and the ever-present mischievous humor colors his tone. “Run along now.”

“Your girl?” she chokes. “Isn't she the peasant the triplets put on blast?”

She's not wrong, but since Kieran and his siblings backed off, no one tags me as #soggypeasant anymore on social media.

Kieran growls at the reference to his mean prank. “Did you just talk back to me?”

The press of eyes around us intensifies, everyone hungry for someone's downfall. Essie realizes, too. She straightens, lifting her chin.

“Your loss,” she snaps, then joins Sayer's table dancing groupies rather than hold her ground on her own.

My eye catches Lyssa's across the room. I lift my brows in surprise to see her here, though she did show an interest in crashing a Bastards party. She lifts her drink, toasting me. Cassian stands like a muscular pillar at the edge

of the room several feet away, his guarded gaze tracking her as she dances.

“The real party’s over here,” Kieran says.

His hand is warm against my lower back and he guides me to a door suited for a dungeon entrance. I peek up at him through my lashes.

“Is this about to get weird?”

He smirks. “In what way?”

“Like a sex club in the basement? It’s already indecent up here.”

Bringing his lips to my ears, he flicks his tongue out, sending a shiver down my spine. “You read about that in your books? What an intriguing idea. I’ll have to talk to Cassian about the renovations to accommodate something like that.”

Heat floods my face and I clamp my mouth shut. Kieran chuckles and opens the door, taking us down a set of stairs. What we find at the bottom surprises me, but also doesn’t.

“So the rumors flying around about you are true,” I muse.

He shoots me an amused look. “Welcome to my kingdom.”

The finished basement is all white and cream marble with several packed poker tables, some games already in progress. He leads me to a prominent one at the center of the open floor plan, nodding to several men in dark suits watching over the games as if this a full working casino. It’s not just high school and college aged people playing poker—there are older people, too, each with an intent air about them like they’ve got everything riding on this.

A fresh set of chips and an unopened deck of cards are at the center of the table. Some players seem antsy, one guy in particular watching Kieran like a hawk as we approach.

“About time,” he snipes.

“Gentlemen,” Kieran says in an arrogant drawl. “Welcome to tonight’s game.”

The poker table is full. When the same grouchy player barks about a buy-in, I look for an open chair to watch from afar, only for Kieran to catch my

wrist.

“Ah, you’re new here. She doesn’t need one. This is Ari, my lucky charm.” He tugs me back to the table, taking his seat. He makes me sit in his lap. “She sits right here. Are we playing or not?”

The guy rolls his eyes, muttering beneath his breath. No other players seem surprised. I get the sense he’s in control of all of this somehow.

“Your ten thousand dollar buy-in got you a seat at my table.” Kieran tilts his head playfully. “Let’s see if you can take tonight’s pot.”

Air catches in my throat at the amount of money they paid to play poker with Kieran. My gaze flies around the room, wondering if the other tables have a special buy-in, and why they don’t go to a real casino rather than play in secret at a Bastards party. Kieran and his siblings hold all the power at Arcadia Prep, but do they have even more sway than I realized over the Hill?

As I’m looking around curiously, the poker game begins. I’ve never seen it up close before and the first few plays move surprisingly fast. Kieran doesn’t look at his cards like the others, who peek continuously like they’re double checking they haven’t changed in the last ten seconds. Instead, he lounges in the club chair with a sly tilt to his mouth, rolling a coin across his knuckles. The trick fascinates me. He does it with ease, the well-practiced grace second nature as he plays the game.

It takes me until the second hand to catch on that Kieran is cheating. If I’m right, he’s about to draw the ten of diamonds. He keeps his face carefully blank, but I can tell there’s a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes.

The players all paid a heap of money for their seats at the table and he’s swindling all of them. I shoot him a questioning look.

Smirking, Kieran pinches my side lightly, then his hand drops to my leg. His touch against my bare skin is an electric spark, the tiny circles he draws with his fingertips making me rub my thighs together. Feigning interest in the next play, he raises the bet and tosses chips in the growing pile at the center of the table while his other hand drifts up my leg, inching toward the apex of

my thighs. I inhale sharply, trying to keep quiet.

“Quit flirting with your distraction and focus on the game,” growls the same guy who didn’t want me to sit at the table in the first place.

“She is lovely, isn’t she?” Kieran keeps his eyes on me, sliding higher up the inside of my thigh. I work to keep my face blank to hide what he’s doing. “She’s not distracting me, though. If you can’t focus, perhaps you shouldn’t have coughed up the money to sit at my table.”

“Whatever,” he bites out. “Call.”

A heady ache builds the higher he teases his touch. This is wrong. It’s like the hallway all over again, except this time it’s worse. My heart races.

I should stop him—there are people who can see right there. Yet I can’t. Some part of me enjoys it when he pushes the line and lures me into his depraved games. This one is to see how quiet I can be while the poker game plays out.

Those wicked fingers brush against my pussy through the thin material of my romper and my stomach dips. I bite my lip as he holds them there, applying pressure but not doing anything for a beat. Then he moves and I’m lost to the forbidden heaven the firm, slow circles of his touch brings me.

Following the game is impossible, but he manages both like he’s not bringing me close to the brink in front of a room full of people while joking with the player next to him.

When he pulls away, I almost scream, forgetting where we are. I was right there on the edge, so close to coming. My eyes dart to his and find him studying me from his periphery with one of those devastating smiles that steal my breath, his dimples taunting me.

I win, they say.

Just as I get my breathing under control, willing the heat to dispel from my body, his hand moves and the deviant game begins again.

Over and over. Maddening torment.

He never lets me come, only keeps me dancing on the edge until my

thighs clamp around his hand and my nails dig into his wrist in a silent plea.

“Be a good girl, Ari,” he mutters, the words meant only for me. “You’re swaying the tides of luck in my favor.”

I want to snark that it’s all his doing because he’s cheating, but his damn fingers find my throbbing clit through the romper and pet it so I have to smother the cry threatening to escape me. No matter what I try, he never lets me come. The more I move against his hand, the more he stops touching.

At last, the card game ends with Kieran taking the pot, though it doesn’t help me breathe any easier. We leave the lower level and return to the main party. He takes us to a couch in the middle of the parlor that empties for him and pulls me back into his lap, his hand gripping my thigh just like downstairs.

My fiery gaze snaps to Kieran’s and my core throbs with molten heat. All around us the party continues, yet my awareness only encompasses Kieran, his hand possessively tucked between my thighs, and the way he looks at me like I’m the only person that exists in the room, the full weight of his attention something I no longer want to run from.

Maybe it’s the wings I’ve painted in place of the ink I want permanently on my skin, or maybe it’s the metallic gold romper giving me a hit of bravery. Sitting on his lap like a queen instead of his pawn, I trace his sharp cheekbone before kissing him. It’s not like me to take charge, or put myself in the spotlight, but tonight is different.

Kieran yanked me into his world, an outsider amongst the gods of Arcadia Hill. The only way I’m going to survive is by playing the game to win—by being strong against those that want to knock me down, by being sure about what I want and willing to take it, to fight for it.

If he brought me to this party to claim me as his, I want everyone to know I’m not like the others that hang off him. If Kieran has claimed me, I’m claiming him right back as mine.

A low, pleased rumble sounds in his throat and he squeezes my thigh, his

arm around my waist drawing me closer as he deepens the peck I gave him into a scorching kiss.

When I break away, he's not mad about killing his kissing secret. The smug, shameless grin he gives me says one thing: *mine*. My heart agrees.

CHAPTER 17

KIERAN

UNDENIABLE NEED SEARS through my veins watching Ariana, my golden goddess with delicate wings painted on her skin and feathers draped around her shoulders. I want her. I want her all to myself.

Taking her hand, I lead her through the party. People call out to us and I ignore them. The only thing that matters right now is getting Ariana far enough away to kiss, to ensnare, to fucking *consume*.

She stays close by my side, following me without question. It makes an unfamiliar insistent warmth spread through my chest. I don't slow down until we reach the master suite, my domain at our clubhouse.

"You dragged me to this party just to take me to a bedroom?" she sasses, giving me a spark of that addictive fire she hides behind her books and primness. "At least it has a door this time instead of a hallway, like the last party."

"I got sick of every guy here staring at your legs." Releasing her hand, I reach down, caressing her thigh. My fingertips tease the hem of the romper higher, skating over her ass. "This is too tempting. I can't decide if I want to tear it off you or leave it on to see how much of a mess we can make. It's short enough. I bet I can pull it to the side when I bend you over and slide right into your tight little pussy."

She blushes, batting my hand away. "Who's room is this?"

She drifts off, exploring the room. The master suite is in the west tower of the estate, the circular room furnished with a large bed and a jacuzzi tub with pillars. I like it because of the view that makes it feel like I'm somewhere else instead of Arcadia Hill. A set of stairs following the curve of the wall leads up to a loft with a lounge area, a wet bar, and a poker table I keep there for private games.

"Mine." I prop against a pillar, watching Ariana skirt around the tub in the middle of the room.

She whirls around in surprise. "Yours? This is where you live?"

"Not where I live, this is just the clubhouse." I cock my head, considering her before allowing her to know another truth few know. "It belongs to me and my siblings. The deed is held in trust."

"Is it only used for poker game parties?" She fixates on a small statue near the arched windows, tracing the angel's wings with a faraway expression.

"There are certainly more entertaining uses." I close the distance between us, lifting her chin. "Do you want to find out?"

Ariana bites her lip. "How did you learn to play poker like that?" At my raised brow, she elaborates. "All those tricks you did."

"Luck always bends to my will." I smirk. "I'll teach you to play the fun way."

"What's that?" Those whiskey-colored eyes flare with heat as I trace my thumb across her lip.

I brush my lips over hers and grin when she tugs on the lapels of my jacket as I pull away too quickly for her. "Come on."

We go up to the loft and I guide her to a seat at the poker table. As she takes in the lounge, I find the deck of cards I always leave up here in the antique chest that serves as a table by the couch. Shrugging out of my jacket, I toss it aside and take my seat across from her. Shuffling the deck is second nature, my fingers moving with skilled muscle memory that makes what I do

seem effortless. It captivates her each time I pull off a flashy shuffling trick.

“There’s only one thing to know about poker.” I deal our cards and draw out my answer until she leans forward in anticipation. “Forget about the cards. It’s a mind game. A game of seducing your opponents. Succeed in that and you’ll win every time.”

She huffs, peeking at her cards. “I should’ve known you’d say something cocky like that. I thought it was supposed to be about strategy and chance? How do you know you’ll win if you don’t get the cards you need?”

“Bluffing and getting every other player at the table to believe you’re on top.” I offer her a sly look. “It’s always better on top.”

The flirtatious innuendo makes her breath hitch and the filthy image of her riding me in nothing but that feathered cape flashes across my mind.

After a quick explanation of the most common winning hands, we start. During the first hand I get a sense of her tells. She’s an open book, her expressive face giving away when she gets a card she’s waiting for and when she’s anxiously considering her next play. She concentrates on the cards rather than watching me. Amusement rises in me as I study her. She’ll learn soon enough that it’s better to keep an eye on your opponent.

I purposefully throw away good cards, intending to lure Ariana into my web with a win. She lights up and I know it when she’s got what she needs.

“Let’s see what you’ve got.” She lays down her straight, beating out my two pair. “And with that, darling, you win the first hand.” I shoot her a devious expression and unbutton my shirt with a deft sweep of my fingers. “Time for your reward.”

“Wait, what are you doing?” Ariana’s gorgeous smile falters as I take it off, her attention falling to the flex and ripple of my taut body.

“Stripping.” I lift my brows pointedly. “I lost. Lose a hand, lose an article of clothing. That’s how the game’s played, baby.”

Her eyes widen. “We’re playing strip poker?”

“It’s the best kind. I told you I’m teaching you the fun way.”

Licking her lips, she nods. I chuckle, shuffling the deck for our next round. She peers at me through her lashes and I read her thoughts as clearly as if she spoke them—she wants to see me strip down. Every time we've collided, clothes have mostly remained on or it's been dark in her bedroom.

I deal and our next game begins. Ariana fascinates me. Every time she bites her lips they turn pinker, and her fingers make me want to groan from how she strokes her cards. She's so focused, features set in determination, yet she doesn't see it coming when I draw my next card and take the second one rather than the top. I distract her from what I'm doing by running my fingers through my hair, hiding a grin each time she grows flustered.

My tongue clicks in mock sympathy when we show our cards. "Ah, what a shame. You lost this hand. Take off those pretty wings."

Sucking her bottom lip into her mouth, she hesitates a moment before reaching for the tie holding her cape of feathers in place. They flutter to the floor in a graceful rustle.

She shivers, meeting my eyes. "Next hand?"

Mouth tilted wickedly, I deal again. As our poker lesson continues, the loft grows hot and the air thickens with tension. She doesn't spot my tactics like she did downstairs, her focus split between gazing at my shirtless chest and absorbing how the game is played. I'm only half paying attention to the cards I have, too busy enjoying the play of emotions on her face each time she loses to me. I don't need to—I could play in my sleep.

I'm not exactly playing fair, but I don't give a damn when she stands to remove her laced sandals that have driven me insane all night, then realizes she's down to one last piece of clothing. Eyes gleaming, she perches in her seat and accepts the new cards I flick her way.

"Ready to go again?" I murmur.

This time when she meets my eye, there's a challenge in hers that lights a wildfire in my blood. This side only comes out when I push her until she cracks.

“You’re on.” She lifts her chin. “I’m winning the next one.”

Her confidence turns me the fuck on. I trace my mouth, keeping my twitching lips from breaking into a smile. I know she won’t win.

“Let’s see if the odds are in your favor. If they’re not, well...” Trailing off I sweep my hungry gaze over her. “Whether you win or not, I’m ripping that tiny romper off you.”

A hushed gasp escapes her and she swallows audibly. I keep my gaze trained on her through the round, working on muscle memory until it’s time to show our hands. I know what we both have.

“How?” Ariana’s lips part and her eyelashes flutter, lids lowering. “You’re still cheating. You just want to get me naked.”

With a slow grin, I spread my hands, showing no cards up my nonexistent sleeve. She finally figured it out.

“Am I, Ari? You won’t learn if I let you win every hand. The first one was just to distract you with this.” Shooting her a sultry look, I skim a hand down my chest, chuckling when she tracks it with unrestrained desire gleaming in her eyes. My focus falls to her sexy as fuck golden romper. “You’re right about wanting you naked. Take it off. Show me.”

Her chest heaves and she rakes her teeth over her plump lip, tempting me to end this game now and take what I fucking want. Holding my gaze with her cheeks a pretty rose color, she strips. I drink her in greedily, admiring every inch of skin she bares for me. My prim little bookworm sits before me in only a scrap of lace for panties and no bra, the shimmering gold wings delicately painted on her skin even more beautiful like this. A rough groan lodges in my throat.

“Fucking hell, Ari.” I drop my head back, palming my aching cock. “I don’t know whether I’m glad I’m winning or ready to lose it all for you.”

The delicious noise she attempts to smother goes straight to my dick and I give up the last shred of my control, succumbing to the need to own every goddamn part of her until she breaks. Springing from my seat, I prowl to her,

erasing the distance in two strides until she's in my arms. She gasps as I slant my mouth over hers, the kiss reckless and raw, an explosion of heat that burns us both.

I maneuver us blindly, unwilling to stop kissing her for a second, and we crash onto the couch, Ariana almost toppling over. I catch her, pulling her onto my lap. One of my hands sinks in her hair, fisting to keep her angled where I want her. The other goes to her ass, fingers digging in when she circles her hips, seeking her pleasure.

"I'm going to devour you." The promise is spoken against her swollen lips. "You're all fucking mine. Always will be, my cock the first and only one you'll know."

A fervent moan slips out of Ariana and she clings to me when I move my hand between her legs, slipping inside her panties to stroke her pussy. Her muscles seize at the first touch, then her knees widen and she moves against my hand with abandon, no longer shy about the pleasure I wring from her body.

"That's it," I murmur into another kiss, chasing her tongue to suck on it as I thrust a finger into her pussy. I barely meet any resistance from how wet she is. "Be a good girl and cream all over my hand before I fuck you."

"Oh god," Ariana pushes out.

"Surrender, Ari." My teeth scrape down her neck and I close my lips around her pulse point, sucking hard. "Give me everything."

"Yes," she whispers, wrecked and fucking gorgeous falling apart for me. "I want more."

I trail kisses down her throat, licking the wing body art. Her skin tastes so goddamn divine. When my lips close on her nipple, she cries out, hips jerking and pussy fluttering around my fingers. I curl my fingers, teasing her to draw out her orgasm until she grinds on my hand with a litany of pleas falling from her mouth.

"Please. More, Kieran."

The sound of her begging is sweet perfection. I kiss her again, wrapping my arm around her to lift her. My fingers fumble to get my pants undone—a first for me. I get distracted halfway through stripping down to kiss my way up her thigh when she splays out on the couch, lapping at her pussy with a groan. No girl has ever made me want to live between her damn legs, worshipping her body like this.

I don't stop until she comes on my tongue, her thighs clamped around my ears. Moving up her body, I brace on my forearms, leering at her with my mouth hovering over hers. She wraps her arms around me.

“Taste.” I slam my mouth against hers in a hot as sin kiss.

Reaching between us, I get the rest of my clothes off, a rough sound punching out of me as I grind my cock against her slick folds. I swallow her needy sounds, using my cock to rub her clit, grinning into the kiss when she trembles. Lining up at her entrance, I break the kiss to hold her gaze.

“W-what about a condom?” she pants.

Stopping hasn't crossed my mind. I shake my head. She's right. Normally I don't do this. It's my rule so I don't end up like my dad with a brood of bastards. No kissing, no fucking raw. Yet she makes me decimate every rule.

My hips rock and the tip nudges in, stealing air from both of us. She feels incredible.

“Kieran?” Ariana doesn't push me away, her leg hooking around my hip.

There's no denying we both want this. I move again, sinking in another inch. Her lips part on a gasp of pleasure. Grasping her jaw, I bring my face close to hers.

“I've never fucked anyone without one, Ari. Understand? Never,” I growl. “Not until you.”

With one more thrust, my cock is inside her pussy. Eyes wide, a small cry lodges in her throat. I hush her, fluttering kisses over her face until she relaxes.

I don't move for a minute, both of us feeling the connection of my dick

inside her virgin pussy. No fear shows on her face, only that determined bout of fire and desire I'm addicted to. I love being the first to touch her, knowing no one else will ever see her like this. She clenches around my length, so goddamn tight.

"Feel that? Feel my cock inside you? I'm going to brand you mine and fill you with my come." Possessiveness floods me at every flicker of her features. "Nothing between us."

Arousal blooms in her eyes and she nods. "I want this. Make me yours."

With a growl, I snap my hips, reaching down to hike her leg higher. She arches against me. Her body was made by the fates to fit with mine.

Reaching between us, I circle her clit the way that she likes as I fuck her. The feel of her warm, tight heat choking my cock is heaven, a divine experience I never want to cease.

"God, you feel so fucking good." Eyes hooding, I rake my gaze over the red marks blooming over her skin from my teeth and tongue—marks that she's mine. She bites her lip hard, a shiver racking her body. "You just came on my cock."

With a choked sound, she nods. "If you're marking me yours, I'm marking you mine."

Intense heat spirals through me and I thrust harder, enjoying the way she clings to me. A feral rumble vibrates in my chest at the thought of her marking me hers, too.

"Mark me, Ari." I skate my lips across her jaw, nipping at her skin. "Come on my cock again."

"Don't stop," she pleads. "It feels so good."

"Better than your duke?"

"That's what you're thinking about right now?" A breathless laugh escapes her.

"Tell me." I nibble at the corner of her mouth, slowing to grind my hips. "Tell me how it feels to fuck, little virgin."

She writhes. “Good! It’s better than good!” Her hazy eyes meet mine, lips parted. “Because it’s you.”

A rough, pleased noise barrels out of me as my balls tighten. I grasp her throat. “It’s only ever going to be me, baby.”

When the pleasure is close to cresting, I flip our positions, sitting up so she straddles me. Her eyes widen at how deep my cock hits, her head lolling back. I take advantage, chuckling as I lick a stripe up her neck. Her movements are clumsy at first, but with my hands on her hips I guide her to find the right rhythm in time with my thrusts.

A groan tears from me when my release crashes over me, my cock throbbing inside her as I come. Not done yet, I keep thrusting up, gripping her waist to drive into her.

“Oh shit! F-fuck, that’s—ah!” Ariana tenses, nails scraping my shoulders as she comes.

“Told you being on top was good,” I rasp.

Her laugh breaks off into another moan when I hit the right spot. She collapses against me, both of us panting. My hands skate over her body, dipping down to feel where she’s stretched around me, my come leaking out. I tease her folds, watching pleasure play across her face with a hooded gaze. She nuzzles into my shoulder with a shy sound, wrapping her hand around my wrist to keep my hand where it is.

The odd pull in my chest I experience around her tugs, my heart clenching.

I don’t want to get up. I’d rather stay like this forever, with my come dripping from our connected bodies while I play with her pussy and dream about all the ways I want to have her.

After a few minutes, I realize she fell asleep. Being careful, I lift her, biting back a groan at the sensation of slipping out of her body.

I don’t bother with clothes, carrying her down the wide steps to the bedroom. I lay her on the covers, then run the water in the tub on a towel and

clean up, then do the same for her. I brush hair out of her face and she turns her cheek into my palm. Once again my heart constricts and possessiveness sweeps through me.

The girls I've been with before meant nothing. Hookups, that was all they were to me. But Ariana is dangerous because she makes me want more. She's reached my heart, something I've never given to another girl.

Instead of going back to the party, I get into bed with her, tugging her against my body. She nestles closer with a content sigh, the murmur that slips from her sounding suspiciously like my name. I lock my arms around her and brush a kiss to the top of her head, something in my chest clicking into place.

There's no resisting this anymore. I can't ignore the way my chest fills with fire whenever I'm with her.

Ariana is mine. And I don't have any plans to let her go.

Kieran and Ariana's story continues in the **Half Wicked** duet coming this fall.

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WICKED WATERS BECCA STEELE



WICKED WATERS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BECCA STEELE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Wicked Waters is a high school enemies to lovers story, which ends with a cliffhanger.

The author is British, and this story contains British English spellings and phrases.

LEGEND

Legend tells of three gods. Zeus, king of all the gods, and ruler of the skies, Hades, ruler of the underworld, and Poseidon, ruler of the seas.

The three gods were brothers.

According to legend, the gods grew bored with their immortal lives, and their attention was drawn by the humans who lived in the mortal realm. Each of them took women, and sometimes men, even though it was forbidden. Poseidon, in particular, was known for his promiscuity, and stories about him began to spread far and wide.

When the Titans, parents of the gods, discovered what had been done, they threatened the gods with banishment, and even death. So the gods agreed never to visit the mortal realm again.

Thousands of years passed, and humans no longer believed in the gods, although the legends remained.

The blood of the gods was strong, though. Every so often, a child would be born who would be faster, stronger, more beautiful than those around them. The inherent characteristics of the gods could be seen in these children too, shaping their personalities and lives.

Did the gods exist?

Was it all a myth?

No one knows for sure. But seventeen years and eleven months ago, a

boy was born. A boy with hair as black as midnight, and eyes as blue as the depths of the sea.

The boy was impulsive and quick to anger, and soon became known for his violent outbursts of temper. He was at his happiest around water, and he excelled at swimming, rowing, and surfing.

The boy's parents moved around the world for their jobs, but they wanted their son to grow up in England. A succession of nannies took care of the boy's needs, but none of them could provide what the boy needed the most.

Love.

As the boy grew older and his skill in the water began to surpass those around him, his reputation as a troublemaker also began to grow until it became legendary.

The boy was expelled from a number of schools, and his parents despaired. But thanks to his family name, and a sizeable donation from his rich uncle, he eventually ended up at Hatherley Hall, one of the most prestigious boarding schools in the country. For a while, things were calm.

Then, he grew bored, and the trouble started again. First, arson. It was only a small fire...

It wasn't enough. The beast inside him wasn't satisfied. He needed to do something bigger to get everyone's attention.

Something that would go down in history at the school, that would make him a legend.

So, he planned.

But then, there came a girl. A girl who ruined everything...

PROLOGUE

QUINN

TWO YEARS EARLIER

Staring at myself in the mirror, I rolled the waistband of my skirt higher. It wasn't regulation but screw the rules and regulations. I ripped the hair tie from my hair, shaking it free, then stalked out of the toilets into the school corridor, all the way to the end, past the classroom where I should have been sitting in a biology lesson, and pushed open the heavy doors leading to the grounds of Hatherley Hall.

Freedom. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with fresh air.

“Shouldn't you be in a lesson right now?” The voice came from my left. Fifteen-year-old Roman Cavendish. Tall and lean, with inky black hair and the most gorgeous olive skin, leaning casually against the honey-coloured Cotswold stone wall without a care in the world, he cocked a brow at me. Wow. I hadn't known he could talk. I mean, obviously he could talk, but I'd never heard him speak. Roman Cavendish was a bit of an enigma. I didn't know anything about him, other than the fact he mostly kept to himself, and he'd developed a bit of a reputation as a troublemaker. He'd beaten Charles Pennington black and blue for calling him a dirty little orphan, even though he did have parents somewhere overseas, and people whispered about him

behind his back, wild rumours that I doubted had any truth to them. Kids could be cruel, and in a place like this, a boarding school where we couldn't escape each other, gossip was practically our lifeblood.

“Shouldn't *you* be in a lesson?” I countered, returning his raised brow with my own.

“Yep.” He shrugged, flashing me a small grin, his messy hair falling into his eyes.

“I...um...I had to get away, you know?” I mumbled, caught off-guard by the way the smile had transformed his entire face. “Sometimes I feel...it feels like I can't breathe.”

The smile disappeared from his face as he studied me intently. After a minute where I held my breath, wondering what was going through his mind, he held out his hand. “Come with me.”

Something deep inside me told me I could trust him, and I placed my hand in his. He startled for a moment, staring down at our hands with his brows pulled together, before he shook his head with a small laugh and entwined our fingers. His warm palm was a reassuring touch against my own as he led me around the side of the school and pulled me into the tree line that marked the beginning of the wooded boundary area running all the way down the left side of the school buildings and beyond. He cut through the undergrowth, ducking under the overhanging tree branches, and we eventually broke through the line of trees on the other side. A gasp fell from my lips as a lake appeared in front of us, still and glimmering in the weak sunlight that filtered through the clouds.

“Where is this?” My voice came out as a whisper. There was a large lake on the school grounds, used for various water sports. But this one was different. Smaller, clearer than the murky waters of the other, with a tangle of reeds and more trees at the far side, ducks swimming lazily in the distance, and close to where we were standing, a tiny pebbly beach that sloped down into the water next to a little wooden jetty where a rowboat was tied, bobbing

up and down.

“I don’t know who it belongs to or what it’s used for, but I’ve never seen anyone else here before. I don’t think it’s part of the school.” He hesitated for a moment. “I...I come here when I need to get away. I like to be close to the water.” His soft confession was accompanied by a squeeze of my hand, before he let go. Taking a seat on the soft grass next to the pebbled beach, we sat in silence for a while, the quiet only broken by the sound of the birds in the trees and ducks creating ripples in the still water. I glanced over at the boy by my side. The boy who was labelled as a troublemaker. The boy I’d never spoken to before today. The boy who had always intrigued me. He was so still, reclining back on his elbows with his face tipped to the sky and his eyes closed, long black lashes sweeping down. There was still an undercurrent of tension that seemed to radiate from his body, but this was the most peaceful I’d ever seen him. A soft breeze ruffled my hair, and I let my whole body relax. It felt like we were in a different world out here. Away from the drama of school and the pressures that sometimes felt like they were drowning me—for a moment everything else disappeared and it was just us.

Eventually, though, I knew we’d have to get back before I missed English Lit as well as Biology. My moment of rebellion had passed, and the need to get back to being the good girl, the perfect student, overwhelmed me.

Pulling my hair back into a smooth ponytail, I blew out a shaky breath.

“Thank you for bringing me here.”

Roman’s eyes blinked open, and he turned to face me, his deep blue eyes meeting mine. “Come back whenever.” He gave me another small smile, and my stomach flipped. But I pushed that feeling aside, because nothing good could come of being interested in the bad boy of Hatherley Hall.

Over the next few months, I continued to meet up with Roman, snatching

moments whenever I could sneak away—normally during our lunch break, although I still cut the occasional class if everything got on top of me. My parents would have flipped if they'd known—he was very much the opposite of the kind of boy they'd want me to be friends with, despite his family name. In fact, they didn't want me to be friends with any boy, let alone one who had a reputation as the bad boy of Hatherley Hall.

The problem with that was that Roman was...different. He was easily as rich as the other kids that attended our school, yet he didn't have the same air of entitlement and arrogance that most of the others did. Not only that, but he also didn't expect me to act a certain way—he accepted me just as I was, whatever my mood happened to be, and that was something I hadn't experienced with any of my other friends other than Aria, a girl I'd got to know recently. As we'd spent more time together, he'd begun to open up to me a little, telling me about his life being transferred between schools until he'd arrived here the previous year, how he didn't really know his parents since they lived overseas, and how when he acted out, it was the only time he really felt anything. With every layer that I uncovered, I knew that my feelings for him were starting to grow beyond friendship.

“What's up?” Roman tilted his head as he studied me, his long legs stretched out in front of him, his shoes idly making circles in the dirt. I shifted on the log we were sitting on at the lakeside. How could I tell him? Should I tell him? Screw it. I was going to tell him. It was the last day of term, and my parents were taking me to Greece the following day. This would most likely be my final chance to speak to him face-to-face until the new school year.

“I...I was wondering.” This was too hard to say. What if he rejected me?

No, I had to do it. Swallowing hard, I tried again. “I was wondering what...what it would be like to kiss you.” As I whispered the words, I lowered my eyes, my cheeks hot and flushed. It felt so good to finally say the words, but I couldn't bear it if he didn't feel the same.

He stilled next to me, and my breath caught in my throat. Then he reached over and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, his finger brushing down the side of my face. “Me too,” he breathed, then his lips were on mine, so soft and sure. We explored one another’s mouths with slow kisses that filled my stomach with butterflies.

Eventually, he pulled away, clearing his throat, a slight flush on his high cheekbones. “You should probably know...I’ve been wanting to do that ever since the first time I brought you here.”

“You have?” I stared at him, and he nodded, his lips curving upwards. I returned his smile. “Me too. I wish...I wish we hadn’t waited until the end of term. Now I have to get through a whole summer without you. What if you forget about me, or find another girl?”

Shooting me a grin, he pulled me into a hug, placing a kiss to the top of my head. “Not likely. We can text each other, anyway. Then pick up where we left off next term.”

I wished with all my heart that those words had been true.

CHAPTER 1

ROMAN

TWO YEARS LATER

“Did you hear?” Tristan leaned against the door frame of our shared room, his eyes on his phone.

“What?” I stared at him impatiently as he tapped away on the screen.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. Did you hear that Quinn Farrow is back?” He glanced up at me then, his eyes dancing with amusement. *Fucker*. Running a hand through his thick dark blond hair, he smirked. “Not that you’d be interested in that news.”

“Fuck off.”

Tristan just laughed, shaking his head. While he was my complete opposite on paper—he was the head boy, for a start—somehow, we’d clicked at the beginning of the previous school year when we’d been assigned the same dorm room, and now I counted him as my closest friend, other than my friend Grayson, who I’d known since we were little kids. Grayson attended a different school to Tristan and I though—All Hallows’ Hall in Oxford, so I didn’t get to see him that often.

I joined in with Tristan’s laughter, but it rang hollow.

Quinn.

She'd been the only girl I'd had more than a passing interest in. A friend, maybe even more, except that she'd completely ghosted me after the term ended. All my messages went unanswered, and then she'd never returned to Hatherley Hall. After a while I stopped feeling rejected, and instead, started wondering if something had happened to her. I'd asked my then-new roommate, Tristan, if he'd heard any news about her, and he'd actually taken the time to go and find out some information for me. It turned out she'd been transferred to a Swiss boarding school while her dad had moved to the Geneva offices for whatever his business was. I couldn't help comparing her situation with mine. It would never even occur to my parents to take me overseas with them, even if I was at boarding school and they only had to see me during the school holidays. Sure, my uncle, Arlo Cavendish, and my two older cousins, Caiden, and Weston, were here in the same country as me. But they were down on the coast in Alstone, and I was stuck here in the Cotswolds in this boarding school. I didn't get to see them much.

I shook my head, derailing my train of thought, and turned back to my friend. Ever since Tristan had come through for me, we'd been friends, which had taken us both by surprise. Secretly I thought that Tristan liked living out his rebellious streak through me. He prided himself on his head boy status, but more often than not, he was the one who came up with the pranks I did. Like the arson. That had been fucking close though. These days, I tried to keep my pranks low key so I wouldn't get caught by anyone in authority, since I was sure I'd been banned from 99 percent of the elite schools in the country. But the need inside me to create chaos and get away with it was always there, and it would always eventually grow too strong to ignore. That was when I'd end up risking my future to ease the craving.

When I'd started the fire in Hatherley Hall's outbuildings, it was only supposed to burn the empty building that normally housed the headmaster's Bugatti. How was I supposed to know the man had decided to store a load of fucking petrol cans in there? It wasn't like there was a fuel shortage. It had

resulted in the fire getting a little out of hand, if you could call the explosion and flames spreading to three nearby buildings ‘a little.’ I’d been caught and suspended, and my uncle had had to get involved to smooth things over. Suffice to say, I was a lot more careful now.

“I’m not interested in Quinn.” Flinging myself back on my bed, I stared up at the ceiling.

“Yeah, alright.” Tristan reached out to grab the door handle. “Since I’m the head boy, I have to go and greet her, welcome her back to the school and all that. I’ll just leave you here, yeah?”

I shot up from the bed. “Wait! Give me a second to grab my shoes. Don’t even fucking think about leaving without me.”

He laughed again as he straightened his already pristine school tie, adjusting his head boy pin badge. “Not interested? Keep telling yourself that, Ro.”

“Fuck off.”

Quinn Farrow had been gorgeous before, but now... *Fuck*. She was a goddess. Shining waves of rich brown hair, shot through with reds and golds, and those thickly lashed eyes that seemed to switch between blue and grey and green, depending on the light. Her body was utter fucking perfection, even covered head to toe in the Hatherley Hall uniform—navy blazer with the school crest, a navy V-necked jumper with royal blue piping over a pale blue shirt with the school tie, and a navy chequered skirt and black tights. Her house pin caught the light as she turned towards the tall lead paned window, talking with Mrs. Banting, the school secretary, and a grin tugged at my lips. *Good*. She’d been placed in Epi, with me. The school houses were all named after ancient Greek philosophers—Aristotle, Democritus, Socrates, and Epicurus—otherwise known as Aris, Demo, Soc, and Epi. Quinn being in Epi

with me meant that we'd be spending a lot of time in the same vicinity, with our house activities, meals, and shared common room, and she had to be in some of my classes too. A grin tugged at my lips, but I suppressed it.

At my side, Tristan nudged me, before moving towards where Quinn stood. I shot him a warning look, falling into step beside him. Quinn's head turned at our approach, and then she saw me.

Her eyes widened, and her fists clenched at her side briefly, before she tore her gaze away, a blankness coming over her features. Completely ignoring me, she greeted Tristan with a bright smile that was patently fake. Tristan's curious gaze bounced between us, and I gritted my teeth, unsure of what to do. Why was she blanking me? Eventually, after an awkward silence, I cleared my throat.

"Quinn."

She startled but recovered instantly. "Roman." The way she said my name set my teeth on edge, so coolly polite it was bordering on icy. As soon as she'd completed the obligatory greeting, she turned away from me in a clear dismissal.

What the fuck, Tristan mouthed at me, his brows pulling together, and I shrugged, at a loss. Maybe she was doing this because the school secretary was here.

I needed to get her alone. When Tristan took her arm to give her a "refresher school tour," I leaned into his other side, speaking low in his ear. "Get me five minutes alone with her."

He gave a short nod, before returning his attention to Mrs. Banting. Once he'd waved her away, he led Quinn in the direction of the school hall. When the sound of the school secretary's heels had faded away, he bypassed the hall's entrance doors and turned Quinn in the direction of the doors that led outside, down to the sports facilities and lake. She walked stiffly at his side, either uncomfortable in his presence or mine, and I would bet my entire inheritance that it was me who was affecting her. What the fuck was going on

with her?

The school had had new, upgraded boat sheds put in while she'd been gone, and it was here that Tristan led her. Stopping outside the sheds, he opened the door of the nearest one, then gestured for her to enter. When she stepped inside, he shot me a pointed look, and I took the hint.

The door closed behind us, and we were finally alone. The side of the boat shed that opened onto the lake was currently open, letting in plenty of light, and when Quinn spun to face me, the rays of sun hit backlit her. My breath caught in my throat at how good she looked.

“Quinn,” I said hoarsely. “It’s so good to see you again. Where—”

Her jaw tightened, and she crossed her arms over her chest. “Roman. Look. Whatever you’re thinking...just don’t.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” My words came out more harshly than I’d intended, and she flinched away from me.

“It means.” Gazing down at the floor, she took a deep breath. Then she straightened her shoulders and met my gaze head-on, her eyes completely expressionless. “It means that-that I’m over my little rebellious phase. I’m here to get good grades and surround myself with good people. And that—” Her voice cracked, and she took another deep breath “—that doesn’t include you. You’re bad news Roman, and I want you to stay away from me. Far away from me. In fact, forget I even exist. I don’t want to know you.”

With that, she shoved past me, wrenched open the doors, and was gone, before her words even had a chance to sink in.

I slumped against the wall, rubbing my hand over my face. What the fuck?

“I take it that didn’t go well.” Tristan pulled the door open, eyeing me with what looked suspiciously like concern. And that was not a look I wanted directed at me.

“You think?” A humourless laugh fell from my mouth.

“She ran out of here like the fucking hound of Hades was after her or

something,” he informed me. “Lost your touch?”

“Apparently I’m not good enough for her. She doesn’t want to know me.” The hurt that I’d felt only seconds before was fading away, replaced by a hot rush of anger that burned through my blood.

“Seriously?” Tristan stared at me for a second, his mouth open, then he punched my arm lightly, which I guess was his form of comfort. “She can fuck off. If that’s the way she thinks, you’re better off without her.”

The anger burned brightly, a ball of fire inside my chest.

“She thinks she’s better than me? Wants me to stay away from her? To forget she exists? I’m going to make sure that she regrets ever saying those words.”

Triston studied me warily. “What does that mean?”

“It means...that Quinn Farrow is about to find out just what happens when you make an enemy of me.”

CHAPTER 2

QUINN

TEARS FILLED my eyes as I stumbled blindly away from the boat sheds, barely even seeing Tristan as I passed him. It had taken everything in me to hold my composure while I'd thrown those horrible words at Roman, and seeing the look on his face...

A sob tore from my throat. I'd thought it would be easy enough to follow the rules my parents had set out for me, but I'd just been fooling myself. The second Roman's eyes had met mine, everything I felt for him came rushing back.

But he'd believed me. I'd seen the way he'd shut down and hardened, his hurt and confusion replaced by hatred.

I couldn't help feeling like I'd just made an enemy out of the boy that I'd once been close to falling in love with.

When I arrived at my dorm room, I threw the door open and flung myself onto the nearest bed, letting the tears free.

"Quinn?"

I raised my head at the soft voice that came from my left, swiping at my eyes. Pulling myself into a seated position, I met the concerned gaze of Penelope, current head girl and my friend...well, I guess you could say we'd been best friends, once. Our families were close, and we'd grown up together. It was completely my fault that we'd grown apart during my

rebellious phase, but she was too nice to hold a grudge. I hoped that we could grow close again now I was back.

“Hi, Pen. It’s...it’s so good to see you. I’m sorry, I didn’t see you there.”

She smiled. “Anything I can help with?”

“Just first day nerves.” I shrugged, thankful that my voice came out steady. “I know I’m not exactly new here, but you know...I’ve been away for a while.”

“I get that.” Crossing the room to sit next to me, she sank onto the bed to give me a hug. “I wanted to be here when you arrived, so you’d see a familiar face. I missed you, you know.”

I glanced around the room, taking in the four beds in each corner, each with a desk, wardrobe, and shelves. Taking a deep breath, I gave her a shaky smile. “Me too. I missed...everything. More than I thought I would.” My gaze went to the neatly made bed across from the one I was sitting on. “Who are my dorm mates?”

“Well, they didn’t have much space. Most of the beds were taken.” Her mouth twisted. “You’ve been put in with three of the other girls from Epi. They’re not... none of them are girls that you were friends with before, I’m sorry. The bed under the window is free.”

My first day back, and I was having to share a room with three other girls that I didn’t know? I tried not to let my disappointment show, because I shouldn’t have expected anything, joining mid-year. “Sorry, I didn’t realise.” Now I noticed that my suitcases were placed next to the bed and empty desk that sat underneath the large, leaded window.

“No need to be sorry.” She reclined back on her elbow, flipping her blonde ponytail back over her shoulder as she did so. “I would have roomed with you if I could, but you know the head girl gets a twin room with private bathroom, and since you weren’t here...I had to choose a roommate.”

“You don’t need to explain,” I assured her. “Who are you sharing with?”

She hesitated, before lowering her gaze. “Freya.”

Oh. Freya Thorpe. Blonde, beautiful, Freya. We'd never seen eye to eye, but she was a close friend of Penelope, even though she was in the year below us at school. They were third or fourth cousins, or something like that, and Freya was popular despite her spoiled, arrogant attitude. Thanks to her popularity and relationship with Penelope, she wasn't someone I wanted to get on the wrong side of. There wasn't any particular issue I had with her; it was just that she was one of those people who had to be the best in everything. We'd fallen out when we were younger, after I'd beaten her to the team captain position in netball. Her entitled attitude grated on me, not that it was anything unusual in this school with so many rich kid egos crammed into one space 24/7. But I could deal with it, and who knew, maybe Freya and I could put the past behind us and start over again now that I was back.

Before I could think of anything to say in reply, a bell rang loudly, making us both jump. Penelope sighed, sliding off the bed. "Come on. House assembly. We'd better not be late."

"Yeah. I don't want to draw any more attention to myself." Mainly because Roman would be there. And despite Pen's calming presence, I knew that it was going to take everything in me to stick to the agreement I'd made with my mother to stay away from him.

I quickly flipped on the selfie camera on my phone, making sure that my face showed no traces of my tears, and ran my fingers through my ponytail, smoothing it out. Then Penelope and I made our way down to the hall where the house assemblies took place.

As soon as I stepped inside, my shoes hitting the worn flagstones, it was like no time had passed. The hall was exactly as I remembered—cavernous, vaulted ceilings and pillars, all stone and huge windows, with rows of wooden pews facing a small stage with a lectern and microphone. The whole thing gave off a cathedral type vibe, although to my knowledge, the building had never been used for any kind of religious ceremony. The carved stone

statues that flanked the corners of the room were depictions of the Greek philosophers rather than saints, for a start. Although it did have something in common with the cathedrals I'd visited as a child—the hall was always cold, even in the summer with the sun streaming through the windows.

There were other students filing into the room, so I slipped in between them, losing Penelope in the crowd. As the head girl, she had to sit up at the front, anyway, and I wasn't about to draw any more attention to myself than I absolutely had to. Having said that, I wasn't going to hide in a corner either.

Before I could decide on a seat, a hand curled around my wrist. "Come and sit with me."

I spun around to see Aria grinning at me. Petite, with dark, poker straight hair, huge brown eyes, and a rosebud mouth, I'd heard her described as both "cute" and "fragile". Looks were deceiving though. Aria was fierce. Her small stature belied her sometimes fiery nature, mostly if she was provoked, and she swore like a sailor, as my mother would say. We had totally different friend groups, so we'd never really interacted, but we'd become friends of a sort around the same time I'd started getting to know Roman. We'd met on the night I'd sneaked out of my dorm room to the old bell tower that was off-limits to students, and found her in there smoking a joint, casually draped across the crumbling remains of the window ledge like there wasn't a sheer drop that could kill her if she moved an inch in the wrong direction.

"Aria. Hi." My lips curved into a genuine smile, and I followed her without hesitation.

"We're roommates," she announced as we took seats about halfway down the rows of pews, sliding along the row until we reached the end closest to the window.

"We are?" My smile widened. This was great news.

"Your parents probably won't be happy."

"No..." My voice trailed off, and I grimaced.

Aria studied me; her head cocked. "I'm sensing there's more of a story

here than just their usual disapproval.”

There was. And I needed to tell her. Needed to tell someone, in the hope that it would help sort out this mess of feelings inside me. It wasn't like I hadn't known the terms of my return to Hatherley Hall, but facing Roman earlier...the reality had been far more difficult than I'd anticipated. But I wouldn't say anything yet. Not until we could be alone, with no chance of being overheard.

The tower, I mouthed, and she nodded, before turning to face the front of the room where Professor Donnelly, our head of house, was shuffling papers at the lectern. Most of the teachers preferred to use laptops and projectors, but he was one of those old-school teachers who had a deep distrust of modern technology.

He cleared his throat loudly, the microphone amplifying the sound, sending it bouncing around the hall with the help of the speakers placed on the pillars that ran down the sides of the room. Just that small action had the hall falling into silence, students straightening up and fixing their gazes on him.

A sudden chill went down my spine as Prof. Donnelly began to speak, and it was nothing to do with what was happening at the front of the room.

It was the awareness of the gaze I felt boring into the back of my head. Without even having to turn around, I knew it was him.

Roman.

My heart stuttered, and I squeezed my hands together in my lap, my knuckles turning white with the pressure. After all this time, the way this boy held so much power over me, the way he could affect me like no one else ever could...

I could never allow him to see it. I had to perfect my mask of disinterest, even if it made me feel like a hollow shell of myself.

The consequences weren't worth risking. Not for me, and not for him.

CHAPTER 3

QUINN

THE REST of the day was mostly uneventful, and I managed to avoid Roman. I didn't get to speak to Aria again, as Penelope came to find me after the assembly and we ate lunch together, surrounded by the popular girls in our house. Penelope's roommate, Freya, was in a different house, so my first meeting with her was delayed, and I was grateful for that. Although I'd probably been building everything up too much inside my head, the chance of more than one confrontation on my first day back was enough for me.

When the warning bell rang to inform us that curfew was thirty minutes away, I was already in the dorm room, collapsed on my bed, earphones in and an audiobook playing on my phone. My roommates were nowhere to be seen—my guess was that they were in the common room. Each house had their own common rooms, shared between two school years. Our common room was located on the same floor as my dorm, and Epi students from years twelve and thirteen, the final two school years, shared it. In the daytime it was mostly used as a study area, but in the evenings, it played host to board games, card games, film nights, gossip sessions, students flirting with each other...all the usual stuff, I guess. The staff generally turned a blind eye, as long as everything remained discreet, and no one got too loud. I should have been there, integrating myself with the members of my house and reforging old acquaintances, but the day had been a little draining, and I needed some

peace. To be back here, surrounded by so many people...it had been everything I'd wanted since I'd left here the first time, but it was a big change after almost two years of being homeschooled.

The door suddenly swung open, and I reached for my phone, pausing my audiobook, before tugging my headphones down to rest around my neck. Three girls piled into the room. The first one stopping dead when she saw me, and the other two crashed into her back with muffled cries.

From the back, Aria stepped around the other two girls, throwing them an eye roll, then turning to me. "Meet Quinn. Despite being one of the goddesses, she's actually nice."

"Ugh. Don't start with that whole gods and goddesses thing." I returned her eye roll with one of my own, pulling a face at the same time. It was like no time had passed between us.

She just laughed. "You can't deny it. You were one before, and you'll be one again."

There was a tradition at Hatherley Hall—every May, there was a Greek gods and goddesses themed ball. I loved the ball itself—who wouldn't love a chance to dress up, dance, and have fun with all your friends in a beautifully decorated space? But part of the ball was essentially a popularity contest, where people would vote for their favourite gods and goddesses, and towards the end of the evening, the winners would be announced. I'd always hoped to be voted as one of the goddesses, for the golden crown styled like a laurel wreath to be placed on my head, cementing my place as one of the elite, and the year I left Hatherley Hall, I had been. I'd been the youngest ever goddess, according to the then-head girl, and I'd narrowly beaten Penelope to the spot by a tiny margin of five votes. Of course, Penelope was nothing but happy for me, even though it meant that she missed out on the prize.

This time around, things had changed. While my mother would no doubt love nothing more than for me to be one of the goddesses—especially since she was a Hatherley Hall alumni and had been a goddess two years running

during her time as a student, I didn't want that.

Because there was no doubt in my mind that Roman would be one of the gods.

He'd always affected me, always been beautiful, but now? He took my breath away. That chiselled jaw, those deep blue eyes, like the depths of the ocean, fringed with thick inky lashes, his black hair, artfully dishevelled, falling into his eyes, that body I'd felt pressed against me today—all lean, toned muscle, no doubt from his hours of swimming and rowing and whatever else he did to get such definition, and that sexy, low rasp to his voice that sent shivers through me. Whether he was still a troublemaker or not, there was no denying how utterly gorgeous he was. Not to mention, it seemed like he was friends with Tristan now, who was the head boy, and that more or less guaranteed him a place as one of the gods.

“I have no interest in being one of the goddesses,” I said firmly, and Aria raised a brow.

“You might not get any choice. Everyone's eligible.” She seemed to read something in my face, because she gave a small shake of her head and stepped closer. “Anyway, enough about that. Quinn, meet Samira and Gracelyn, our roommates.”

I recognised both of them, although I'd never spoken to either of them before. Samira was striking, all dark hair and flawless brown skin, and Gracelyn was a pretty redhead with pale skin dotted with freckles.

They both eyed me curiously, and before the silence became awkward, I spoke up. “It's nice to meet you both. Thanks for letting me crash here.”

“It wasn't like we had a choice.” Samira's reply was accompanied with a smirk that changed into a bright, genuine smile, and I relaxed. “Only joking. Welcome back to Hatherley Hall.”

We chatted for a bit, and I relaxed even further. By the time the curfew bell rang, I was curled up on Samira's bed in pyjamas and a hoodie, catching up on everything I'd missed while I'd been gone, while Gracelyn painted her

toenails in rainbow colours and Aria sketched something that she refused to show to any of us. Now the bell had rung, we had around ten minutes before we had to be in bed with the lights out, so we all made our way to our own beds.

Aria leaned into me as she passed. “One hour.”

I gave a small nod, climbing into my bed and discreetly waking up my phone under the covers, turning the screen brightness right down and making sure it was on silent. I passed the hour by playing games on my phone, and once I heard Aria’s bed creak, I made myself wait another few minutes before slipping out of the room into the silent, dark corridor.

The corridors were occasionally patrolled by security, but in a building this large, it was easy to avoid them, especially since their numbers were minimal. They were mostly concerned with covering the grounds, anyway, stopping anyone who might want to sneak out. Inside, they relied more on the cameras dotted around the corridors, but once you knew where they were, it was fairly easy to avoid them. There were no cameras in the old bell tower either, since the whole area was off-limits to students. The entrance was completely blocked off, and most people had forgotten all about it. Except... I’d found the hidden entrance, through a small door under a set of stairs. It looked like a cupboard—in fact, it was a cupboard, but it had another opening on the other side which opened onto the set of stairs which led up to the tower.

I made my way to the cupboard, which Aria had left ajar for me, and once I was inside, flipped on my phone torch so I could see the bit to push on the panelled wood which doubled as an interior opening for the bell tower door. It opened with a soft creak, and then I was out on the other side with the cool night breeze snaking down the stairs and wrapping around me.

Pulling my hoodie sleeves down over my hands and tugging my hood up, I made my way up the stairs to the room right below the ruins of the top where the bell had once stood. Aria was on a blanket on the floor, leaning her

back against the wall with her legs outstretched and a joint already in her hand.

Crossing the room, I took a seat on the blanket next to her. “Where do you manage to get these things?” I indicated towards the joint clasped between her fingers.

“I have my ways.” After inhaling deeply, she held it out to me, but I shook my head.

“No, thanks. I just want to get all this off my chest first, and I need a clear head to make sense of everything.”

“Fair enough.” She leaned her head back against the stone wall, exhaling a stream of smoke that the wind immediately whipped away through the large gap where a window used to be. “Okay. I haven’t had a proper conversation with you for almost two years. So, I think it’s time you caught me up.”

Our eyes met, and there was no judgement in hers.

I opened my mouth and began.

I’d always had an expectation on me to be the perfect daughter. I was an only child, and my parents had provided me with everything I needed. Everything I needed, but not everything I wanted. They didn’t believe in spoiling me, although I was never deprived of anything. Their main goal for me seemed to be for them to have a child they could boast about to their friends and colleagues, a child who excelled at everything. No expense had been spared in my education and extracurricular activities. Ballet, tap, and jazz were three dance disciplines I was expected to perform. I played tennis, rode horses, even learned to windsurf (the only discipline I was allowed to choose myself). I was coached in French and German, and played piano and violin. For any child, it would be a lot, and I was left constantly exhausted, under pressure to do better every time I achieved one of my parents’ goals. When I received the letter of acceptance to Hatherley Hall, my parents threw me a

huge party filled with all kinds of influential adults, and very few people my age. Penelope had been there, though, and we'd managed to escape to my bedroom after the cake cutting ceremony, which included an incredibly long, drawn-out performance from a string quartet. That night, I remember that the thing I felt most was a sense of relief and anticipation, because Hatherley Hall meant getting away from my parents, and whatever the school pressures were, surely the other students would be going through something similar. We were all children of rich and influential people, after all.

Everything had gone well to begin with. I settled into the routine of school, carving out a place for myself. Penelope shared my dorm, and we'd stay up late talking about boys, and our plans for the future, making up wild stories that a secret prince of some obscure European state would fall in love with us and take us back to his homeland to be his princess. Looking back, it was clear that we spent far too much time in our formative years watching *The Princess Diaries*.

As I grew older though, the pressures gradually returned, with the weight of the expectations on me becoming clear again. My parents were friendly with several members of staff, and they used their connections to stay updated on my progress. I'd receive messages and phone calls from my mother that would make it clear that my best wasn't good enough.

One day, I snapped. I'd been on my way to a biology lesson, when everything had hit me all at once, the pressure suffocating me. I'd ducked into the toilets, and then afterwards...that was when I'd met Roman for the first time.

That first taste of rebellion, of the freedom to make my own decisions, was an addiction. I continued to meet up with Roman, I met and became clandestine friends with Aria, and I carried out small acts of rebellion—adapting my uniform, cutting classes, slacking on my homework, dabbling with contraband drugs and alcohol.

It didn't take long before word reached my parents. Their spies must've

been almost everywhere, because they somehow knew everything, except for my secret friendship with Aria, which had somehow remained a secret. It had to have, because there was no way I'd have been allowed to room with her this year otherwise.

My punishment was taking me away from the school I loved. I also had to relinquish my phone, to cut ties with everyone and everything to do with Hatherley Hall, even Penelope. It was harsh, but I'd brought it upon myself.

Since my parents were moving overseas temporarily while my father took a secondment in Geneva, they took me with them. I was assigned tutors who homeschooled me, and while I threw myself back into my schoolwork to prove I wasn't a failure, I grew increasingly withdrawn. The simple truth was that I was lonely. So, so lonely. I missed my friends, my school, the daily routine, the old buildings surrounded by gorgeous English countryside and fresh, clean air. Here, I was alone, other than the tutors, with my father working long hours and my mother out doing whatever she did all day with her friends.

Eventually, things changed. My parents weren't monsters, and finally their concern for me began to outweigh their need for me to succeed.

“What did they do?”

I blinked, my gaze flying to Aria at my side. I'd almost forgotten she was there; I'd been so lost in my memories.

“When we came back to England, they allowed me to come back here. I have conditions though.”

“Of course you do.” She flicked the tiny stub that was left of her joint out of the window, then sighed. “Let me guess. You have to toe the line? Be the perfect student? Interact with the right people?”

“Yeah. I expected that, though. And although they've always put a lot of pressure on me to succeed, I have to look at it from their point of view.

They're paying a lot of money for me to be here, and they don't want me to squander my education."

Her fingers tapped against the stone floor, her mouth thinning. There was silence while she gathered her thoughts, then she spoke gently. "I get that, but, Quinn, it almost sounds like you're a commodity to them. They want you to do well because it makes them look good."

A lump came into my throat that I desperately tried to ignore. "I know," I whispered. "But that's okay."

It's not, she mouthed, shaking her head sadly, and I blinked again, sudden tears obscuring my vision.

"That's not even...there's something else. I'm not allowed to even *speak* to Roman. I can't be friends with him, and I *definitely* can't be anything more. If...if word gets back to my parents...it can't happen. They made it clear that they'd find a way to get him expelled. You know how he was in and out of all those different schools before he came here, and this is really his last chance." A tear crystallised on my lashes, then fell. "He's *happy* here. I could see that the second I saw him with Tristan. I can't do that to him. I can't risk it. This is his life, his future. If anything happened and I had a hand in it, I'd never forgive myself. My parents more or less blame him for my rebellious phase. I mean, it was easy enough for them to jump to conclusions, based on his reputation, but the thing was, it wasn't him. It was all me. *I* made all my own decisions, and *I* was the only one who deserved to face the consequences."

Aria studied me for a moment. "This is fucked up," she muttered. "You still like him, don't you?"

I pulled up my knees, resting my arms on them and dropping my head. "So much. It took me aback...I...I wasn't expecting to still have such strong feelings for him. The things I said to him, I—" My voice cracked. "The way he looked at me, Ari. I feel like the worst kind of monster for making it seem like he was nothing to me."

“Do you think it’s worth telling him?”

“No. I know him, and I know he’d try and find some way around it. He lives for the thrill of danger, doing what he thinks he can get away with, without being caught.”

“Yeah.” She gave me a wry grin. “His arson stunt was talked about for months. But he’s been quiet since then. I heard he was on his last warning.”

“You see?” I raised my head to stare at her. “This is why I can’t say anything. This is his last chance, and we’re in our final year. I’m not going to do anything to jeopardise that for him.”

“I—”

Whatever she was about to reply was lost with the unmistakable sound of footsteps on the stairs.

CHAPTER 4

QUINN

ARIA AND I FROZE, staring at each other, before she tilted her head towards the shadowed part of the room next to the stairs. As quietly as we could, we melted into the shadows, and I was glad that both of us had worn thick socks and no shoes. There was nothing to hide behind in this room, so our only hope of remaining undetected was if whoever was coming up the stairs only took a cursory glance around.

A tousled blond head of hair came into view, silvery in the bright moonlight that bathed the bell tower. My body relaxed incrementally, and Aria made a sound that was something between a huff and a laugh, then stepped out of the shadows. “Head boy,” she drawled, somehow managing to look down her nose disdainfully, despite her small stature.

“I should’ve known *you’d* be here.” Tristan matched her disdain with an imperious look of his own, and I clapped my hand over my mouth to hold in my laughter.

When Aria stalked over to the wall opposite my hiding place and leaned against it, folding her arms across her chest and darting a pointed look at me before staring up at Tristan, I figured out her plan. *Distraction*. Allowing me enough time to get away.

Tristan moved further into the room, so close to me. I held my breath, not daring to move.

“Come closer, head boy. Or are you scared I’ll bite?”

“You fucking wish.” He stepped up to her, and I caught a glimpse of his curled lip and arched brow before he turned to fully face her.

“Mmm, maybe I do.” She gave him a blatant once over, exaggeratedly licking her lips, but even in this dim lighting I could see her eyes sparkling with mischief. After one last sweeping glance, she returned her gaze to his face and bit down on her lip, clearly trying to hide her amusement.

“Sorry, I don’t associate with drug users who—”

Aria’s hand flew up, and from the muffled sound Tristan made, I guessed she’d placed it over his mouth. “I’m going to stop you right there. Someone as...uptight as you could use a little relaxation. Ever smoked a joint? Or are you as perfect as your reputation suggests?”

Fuck, I really needed to get out of here before I laughed out loud.

Tristan gripped her wrist, lifting it away from his face and pressing it into the wall behind Aria. “I know plenty of ways to relax that don’t involve weed. Do you? Have you ever...” He lowered his head to her ear, and I could no longer hear what he was saying, but I watched as Aria’s mouth dropped open and her eyes flashed with something I couldn’t name, before her leg came up and kicked him in the shin.

“Fuck’s sake, what was that for?” he growled out, collapsing against the wall, and rubbing at his leg. Unfortunately, it was at that moment that his head turned, and he saw me. Shock registered in his expression, then his eyes turned hard. “Quinn.”

“Why didn’t you leave? I was creating a distraction,” Aria hissed, and then I had both of them glaring at me.

Tristan shot Aria an annoyed look before returning his attention to me. “What are you two doing here?”

“We could ask you the same question.” Aria stepped forwards, drawing his attention to her again.

He sighed, pinching his brow. “Whatever. Look, it’s late. Why don’t we

just get back to our rooms and forget we ever saw each other here, okay?”

Silence fell, and I tried to signal Aria with my eyes. We’d accomplished what we’d come here to do—to talk, and it wasn’t like Tristan was going to let us stay up here now he’d found us. He’d probably go running to our head of house or something, and I couldn’t risk anything getting back to my parents. I shouldn’t have even come here in the first place, but I’d thought the risk was minimal until Tristan had shown up.

“Fine,” Aria muttered eventually, pushing past Tristan, and stalking over to the stairs. I went to follow her, but I was stopped by a hand on my arm. Tristan leaned down and spoke low in my ear.

“You’d better stay away from Roman. He told me what you said to him, and that shit isn’t okay.”

“I didn’t—it’s not like that.” I shook my head furiously, yanking my arm away from his grip. “Is...is he okay?”

Tristan studied me for a long moment before he turned away. “You need to stay away from him.” Then he was gone, following Aria down the stairs.

I’d really thought that I’d done the right thing by coming back here, by pushing Roman away, but I had a horrible feeling that my problems were only just beginning.



The sky was beginning to lighten when I gave up on sleep. No one else was awake, so I made my way down to the showers at the end of our corridor and spent way too long under the water, turning everything over in my head. When I was back in my dorm room, it was still early so I dressed in running leggings, a sports bra, and threw on a zip-up hoodie. All regulation, of course—the school had uniforms for just about every kind of sport imaginable. I pulled my damp hair into a ponytail, grabbed my phone and headphones, and then made my way down to the ground floor.

There were a few students milling around—other early risers, most dressed in some variation of sports clothes, taking advantage of the time before breakfast for exercise or extra training in their favourite sports discipline. Since I'd only just showered, I wasn't planning on exercising, but the clothes were comfortable and meant I didn't stand out among the other students.

Once I was outside, I hit a random playlist, and lost myself in the music, walking across the soft grass that was damp with the morning dew. Without any conscious thought, my feet carried me towards the line of trees that marked the boundary. When I realised where I was, I came to a stop, staring at the wooded area in front of me. Stopping my music, I tugged my headphones off and shoved them into my hoodie pocket as I lost myself in the wave of memories that crashed over me. Roman, leading me through the trees, my hand clasped in his. The small smiles and sideways glances that he gave me. The way he held back the branches for me so that I had a clear path.

I took a step forward. Then another, and another, until I was moving with purpose through the trees, until I reached the other side. The lake was there, exactly as I'd remembered. That still water, now a soft grey as it reflected the cloudy dawn, the reeds at the far side, the jetty, the ripples—

The ripples. There shouldn't be ripples. Not like that. I watched as they spread, a dark shape beneath them, and before I could make sense of what I was seeing, Roman burst from the water.

Fucking hell.

His eyes were closed, his lashes spiky and wet and his jet-black hair was plastered to his head, rivulets of water running over the ridges of his muscles as he lifted himself effortlessly above the surface, like some kind of water god. As he drew closer to the surface, and more and more of his godlike body was exposed, his eyes opened.

Something dark and hot flared in his gaze as our eyes connected. His mouth curved into a slow, predatory smile, and he stepped upright as he

reached the shallows.

He was completely naked.

Heat raced through my body. My mouth went dry, and my heart sped up so fast that I had to press back against the tree behind me, gulping air into my lungs.

When he stepped onto the shore, the water sluicing off his hard body, I closed my eyes. It was too much. Way, way too much. No one could be confronted with Roman Cavendish like that and not be affected.

The silence surrounded us, only broken by the birds in the trees. Then I felt a whisper of breath across my cheek, and fingers curled around my jaw, holding me in place.

“Did you follow me here?” Roman’s soft rasp hit my ear, and I dared to open my eyes. He’d wrapped a towel around his waist, which should’ve made me less flustered in his presence, but it didn’t. Droplets of water glittered all over his bare torso, and as he stepped right up to me, I felt the unmistakable press of his hardening length against my body.

“I didn’t know you’d be here,” I managed once I remembered how to form words.

He clearly didn’t believe me, even though it was true, but he didn’t comment. Instead, he released his tight grip on my jaw, skimming his hand down my throat, stopping at the zip of my hoodie. “You’re overdressed.” He gripped the zip and lowered it all the way until my hoodie was hanging open, then slid it off my shoulders, leaving me in my running leggings and sports bra. I told myself that my shiver was from the cool morning air hitting my exposed areas, but in reality, I knew it was the feel of his hands sliding over my bare skin. Our interactions in the past had had an innocence about them, but there was nothing innocent about this.

“Better,” he murmured once he’d thrown my hoodie somewhere. I couldn’t bring myself to care where it had fallen. His hands went to my waist, pulling me closer. When his lips trailed along the side of my face, up to my

ear, a soft noise escaped me before I could stop it. I felt his mouth curve against the shell of my ear as he dipped his fingers beneath the waistband of my leggings. “What would you do if I pulled down these leggings? Would you let me fuck you?”

“*Roman.*” I gave into the desire to touch him, winding my arms around his shoulders and gripping the back of his neck, attempting to angle his head so I could kiss him.

He scooped me up, pressing me back against the tree. I wrapped my legs around his waist as he held me effortlessly, palming my ass and brushing his lips over mine with the barest touch, nothing that would satisfy the craving I had for his mouth on mine. When I tried to deepen the kiss, he turned his head, stepping backwards, away from the tree.

“Why won’t you kiss me?” I whispered.

In the back of my mind, I knew the answer to the question, but right now, surrounded by him, just the two of us in the place that had always been ours, it was easy to forget everything else. To forget how I’d hurt him with my words, how I wasn’t supposed to allow myself near him. How I’d told him one thing, but I was now doing the opposite.

I dimly became aware of the sound of wooden boards creaking under his feet, but I barely paid attention. His mouth returned to my ear. “I’m not good enough for you, but I’m good enough to kiss? Good enough for a quick and dirty fuck out here where no one else ever has to find out?” He clamped down on my ear with his teeth. “I don’t fucking think so.”

Then he ripped me away from him, and I found myself falling, a scream tearing from my throat as I hit the water of the lake and went under.

CHAPTER 5

ROMAN

I LEFT Quinn without a backwards look, scooping up her hoodie as I went. Her shouts rang in my ears, but I didn't stop other than to grab my small pile of clothes where I'd left them. Quickly tugging on tracksuit bottoms and my own hoodie, then shoving my feet into my trainers, I jogged back to the school building and made my way to my room.

Tristan looked up from his laptop when I entered, his eyes narrowing. "You look suspiciously happy."

"I don't know what you mean. I'm off to have a shower."

Once I'd washed the lake water off, I headed back into the room to change into my normal uniform. Tristan was sitting on the side of his bed, holding up Quinn's hoodie.

"Care to explain this?"

"Not really, no." Opening the wardrobe, I pulled out my clothes, hiding my smirk.

From behind me, he cleared his throat pointedly. "Okay. Want to tell me how you now have two phones, when you had one this morning? And why you're suddenly in possession of a pair of rose gold headphones?"

"Who doesn't have two phones these days? And I liked the colour, so what?" I shifted so he could see my face, and he rolled his eyes at me.

"Nice try."

Moving to stand in front of the mirror, I began pulling on my clothes, and made sure I kept my voice casual. “I saw Quinn.”

“Uh-huh.” He eyed my reflection in the mirror. “In that case, I don’t even want to know. Plausible deniability, and all that. But you can’t keep her phone.”

“Watch me.”

“Ro. You can’t.”

“You know what your problem is?” Shrugging on my blazer, I turned to face him. “You have too much of a conscience.”

“Maybe if you listened to yours, you wouldn’t get into so much trouble.” He flashed me a grin, and I knew he wasn’t really annoyed at me. Head boy or not, he was my friend, and he was on my side. Except, he continued, “I’m serious. You can’t keep this. I’ll make sure it gets back to her without implicating either of us, okay?”

“You’re such a good boy, Tris. Want some help polishing that halo?” I stepped over to his bed and ruffled his hair, which made him glare at me, shoving my hand away and smoothing his hair back down. With a sigh, I held up my hands. “Fine, get it back to her if it’ll stop you whining about it.” The truth was, I hadn’t even noticed her phone was in the hoodie when I’d first taken it. If you thought about it, I’d actually done her a favour by saving it from being drowned in the lake when I’d thrown her in.

“My influence spreads far and wide. I got Hatherley Hall’s resident bad boy to do my bidding.” Climbing to his feet, he pulled on his own blazer, and then grabbed his bag. “They don’t call me the king of the school for nothing.”

Swiping my own bag from the floor, I followed him out of the room, just as the bell rang for breakfast. “Literally no one calls you the king of the school.”

“They do.”

“They don’t.”

We continued arguing all the way down to the dining hall, where Tristan

strolled to the front of the line with his head boy privileges, and I had to join the back of the queue with the other students. In front of me, two girls were talking in hushed voices. I wasn't paying attention until one of them mentioned Quinn's name.

"...and she only had a sports bra and leggings on. She was completely soaked, and I heard from Harriet that her lips were blue with the cold."

I had a sudden twinge of something that felt a lot like guilt, but I pushed it aside. Quinn deserved it.

"...yes, but did you actually see her? I did. Ugh, I wish I had her body. There's no way I'd look anywhere near that good if I'd fallen in the lake."

"Yeah, she's so pretty. I'd look like a drowned rat if it had been me. How did she even manage to fall in the lake, anyway?"

"I don't know."

The conversation segued into something about hair drying techniques, so I tuned them back out. From the sound of it, Quinn hadn't told anyone about the part I'd played in her dunking. At least she was smart enough to keep it quiet.

For a moment there, when I'd broken the surface of the water and seen her standing frozen, staring at me with that look in her eyes, I'd forgotten the way she'd acted towards me. Forgotten that I needed to punish her. And when I'd had her pressed up against me, all soft and pliant, it had taken every bit of willpower I had not to just rip off those fucking leggings that showed off the curves of her long legs and sink my cock inside her. She would've taken it too. Probably even begged me for it.

Then I'd remembered what she'd said to me. Throwing her in the lake had been an impulse decision, but she made me irrational. Made my head spin, telling me one thing one day, then begging me to kiss her the next. No, Quinn Farrow deserved to be punished. I knew that no one loved me, that despite the way I looked, I'd never have a close connection with someone. I tried not to think about it, managed to ignore it most of the time, but then

Quinn had come along and reminded me of everything I wanted to forget. And she'd made it crystal clear just what I meant to her when she'd told me that I needed to forget she existed.

I wasn't going to let that happen. The lake was just the beginning.

By the time lessons were over for the day, the word had spread around the school, and every time I saw Quinn, she had a murderous look on her face, directed at me. Good.

It wasn't enough though.

I cornered Tristan in the common room after dinner. "Hey, Tris, can I have a word?"

He glanced up from the TV screen, meeting my gaze. "Yeah. What's up?"

"Over here."

When we were in a corner of the room away from the others, I shoved my hands in my pockets, leaning back against the wall. "Did you give Quinn her phone back?"

He shook his head. "Not yet."

"Okay, good." It was time to put the first steps of my plan into place. "You know how Blaine was talking about going down to the beach for the bank holiday weekend? What do you say we take him up on that, and invite a few others?"

"I can already see where this is going." He shook his head with a sigh, but I caught the wry grin that he was trying to hide. "Let me guess. You want me to get Quinn to come. This is a bad idea, you know."

"Yeah, but we're doing it."

When he gave me a nod, I called Blaine over. He was a guy from the year below us that I knew from the diving club, plus he was a friend of Tristan's. I

hadn't seen him much lately because despite the fact I was a fucking strong swimmer and diver, I'd been kicked off both the swim and diving teams the previous year, and I'd been banned from reapplying this year. Banned from applying for anything else, in fact. The rowing club was the only extracurricular activity I was still allowed to be involved in at this school. The only reason I'd been allowed to stay in it was because I was really fucking good, better than anyone else in the school by far, and no one else came close. That, and the competitive nature of Hatherley Hall—the desire to outrank the other schools and come out on top—that was stronger than the desire to punish me for my transgressions.

“Hey, mate.” I grinned at him. “Still planning on that beach trip this weekend?”

His face lit up. “Yeah. You coming?”

“Yep. How do you feel about me bringing a few friends? I can sweeten the deal with some contraband.”

“No need. The beach house is fully stocked. But yeah, the more the merrier. We've got the space.”

Throwing my arm over his shoulder, I lowered my voice conspiratorially. “There's a girl I want to make a move on. I want her to come too, but I don't want her to find out I'm going to be there until it's too late.”

He gave me an evil grin. “Leave it with me. Who is she, and what do you need me to do?”

I glanced over at Tristan, who raised a brow at me. “Well...we have this phone, and we need it to sound like you found it lying outside on the ground...”

When Blaine returned to the common room around fifteen minutes later, he headed straight for me. “Done. Now we have a whole group of girls coming, and I kept your name out of it. I gave the phone to the scary short girl.”

Tristan snorted. “Aria?”

“The one and only.”

I noticed Tristan pretending to study the window intently. “Is she coming?” His voice radiated disinterest, but he was so transparent.

“No. She doesn’t have parental permission for overnight trips yet. Not that it’s stopping Freya—she’s telling her parents she’s going to her aunt’s house or something, I dunno.”

“I see,” Tristan murmured, before changing the subject. “Okay. Who else is coming, and how many cars do we have?”

I left them to make plans and headed out of the common room. Coincidentally, the path to my and Tristan’s room led straight past Quinn’s dorm room. If you took a detour in the opposite direction, that was.

My timing was perfect. Just as I rounded the corner of the corridor, I saw her disappearing into the shower room. Wasting no time, I followed her in.

Her shocked gaze met mine through the mirror, and she spun around, clutching her towel and toiletry bag in front of her like it would protect her from me.

“I heard you went for a swim with your clothes on this morning. Trying to shower again to get the smell of the lake water off?”

Her eyes flashed with anger, and she bared her teeth at me. “Get out.”

There was no one else in the shower room, but I wouldn’t have cared either way. Stalking up to her, I ripped the towel and bag from her grip and let them fall to the floor, then caged her in against the sink unit with my hands planted either side of her body. “No.”

“Get. Out.” The way she pushed at my chest, staring up at me from beneath her lashes with both anger and lust burning in her gaze, combined with her body up against mine, made my dick harden rapidly.

“I don’t think you want me to.” Angling my hips, I let her know just how she was affecting me. When my hard cock pressed against her, a gasp fell from her lips, her eyes darkening, and I took the opportunity to lower my head and kiss her gorgeous mouth. Fuck, she tasted so sweet.

The next minute, there was a stinging pain as she clamped her teeth down on my lower lip, and I tasted blood. This time when she shoved me, I let myself go. Was it wrong that her actions made me smile?

“Biting isn’t very nice, Quinn.” I shook my head at her.

She stood there seething, all the lust gone. “Don’t. Touch. Me. Don’t speak to me. Don’t come near me again.” Her words were spat at me between gritted teeth.

“I’m going.” Making a show of adjusting my dick in my trousers, which made her cheeks flush a deep pink, I backed out of the shower room.

I’d let her think she’d won, for now. I’d step back for the rest of this week, lull her into a false sense of security. But this weekend, the opportunities that I’d have to fuck with her, away from the school...

I couldn’t wait.

CHAPTER 6

QUINN

MY SMILE WIDENED as I breathed in the sea air coming through the open doors that led onto the deck of Blaine's family's beach house. Solar powered fairy lights were wrapped around the wooden railing that ran around the edge of the deck, and steps led down to the beach. I sipped my wine, listening to the sound of the waves lapping at the shore as the last rays of the sun disappeared. It was so good to be here for the bank holiday weekend with my friends, minus Aria, and to see the coast again. I hadn't seen it in over two years. My parents liked to holiday at luxury beach resorts in the Caribbean and the Maldives, but there was something about the British coastline that I loved. The craggy cliffs, windswept beaches, the wildness of the sea in the winter, even the annoying seagulls that stole food from unsuspecting tourists... It felt like home to me. If I could, I'd live on the coast all year round. Maybe I would, one day. I'd already applied to Alstone College, an exclusive university on the coast, fairly close to where we were staying this weekend. Not that I was expecting to see it this weekend, but if all went well, I'd be attending there once I'd left Hatherley Hall. The University of Brighton was my second choice if things didn't pan out, but either way, I'd be close to the sea for the duration of my time at university.

Next to me, Penelope lifted her wineglass. "Cheers to the weekend, for sunny weather and hot boys at the beach."

I laughed, clinking my glass against hers. “Cheers.”

“They’re here! Finally!” Freya’s voice came from behind us, and we both spun around.

My stomach flipped.

A group of guys were strolling into the room, all popular, good-looking guys from our school. Heading them up were Tristan and the boy I’d been managing to avoid for most of the week.

Roman.

Dimly, I registered that I wasn’t even surprised that he’d showed up. Something in me had known that he’d be here.

When he caught my eye, he smirked. Why did he have to look so good when he was acting like a dickhead? I shot him a glare that made his smirk melt into a blinding smile that gave me butterflies. For fuck’s sake, not again! Why did he affect me like this?

I turned away from him, stepping out onto the decking and taking a seat on one of the loungers, watching as Freya came to stand next to Penelope, joining a whispered huddle with their friend Harriet. I would bet anything that the new arrivals were the subject of the conversation.

We were all supposed to be going to Chaceley Rock this evening—a little island a bit further down the coast with a ruined lighthouse. It was basically an excuse to go out on the boats and get as loud as we wanted without any neighbours to complain. I’d been looking forward to it until now. Now, it meant that I’d be stuck on an island with no escape from the one person I was trying to avoid.

Was it too late to fake a sudden illness that would mean I didn’t have to go?

Blaine directed me to the very end of the pier, to the ladder that led to the

water. "Down here."

I paused. There was still time to turn back.

"Come on. This is the last boat. The others are already there." He was starting to get impatient.

The boat in question was bobbing below us, a shadowy figure at the helm, and two other figures sitting inside. I shook my head, looking at the dark water swirling below us, and then began to descend the ladder. The metal rungs were cold under my grip, and I was suddenly aware of how cold I was. A shiver wracked my body, and goosebumps flared down my arms.

A pair of hands were suddenly gripping my waist, and I was being lifted into the air, and placed down on a bench seat. I shrieked involuntarily.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you," the figure spoke. He pulled a phone from his pocket, turning on the flashlight and shining it in my face. I recoiled at the sudden brightness.

The next minute, Tristan's low voice sounded close to my ear. "Quinn. Hi. I feel that I should probably tell you to watch out for Roman."

I swallowed hard. I shouldn't have come.

The boat engine started up, and then it was too late. We were cutting through the dark ocean waves, heading for Chaceley Rock, and Roman Cavendish.

The closer we drew to the tiny island with the ruined lighthouse, the more apprehensive I grew. I had to remind myself that I could hold my own. Roman needed to get the message that we needed to stay away from each other, and if I had to hurt both him and me to get the message across, it was a price I was willing to pay. He wasn't going to be expelled because of anything I did. I'd make sure of it.

The smell of salt filled the air, and the boat kicked up sprays of seawater that misted on my hands and face. I huddled into my thin hoodie, wishing that I'd thought to bring something warmer.

Finally, the boat began to slow, and then the engine cut out. Blaine

jumped out onto a small dock, the wood creaking beneath his trainers. Once the boat was safely tied up, we climbed out of the boat. I stood, blinking, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness. Huge, jagged rocks towered ominously to my left. To my right was the jetty, and up ahead I saw the tall, looming structure of the old lighthouse. So, this was Chaceley Rock.

My feet slipped on the wet, stubby grass as I followed the light of Tristan's torch towards the lighthouse, and I slowed down, not wanting to risk falling on my face in the dark. As we reached the lighthouse, I looked around me. I could just about make out a tiny path, leading to a small, pebbly beach, and more jagged rocks, with waves crashing against them.

Yet again, I stumbled a little, and I reached out to the crumbling stone wall of the lighthouse to support myself. Pushing the door open, Blaine gripped my arm to hold me steady. Dim light spilled from the opening, and he tugged me forwards, before dropping my arm and stepping inside. "Come on."

The interior was full of people, talking, drinking, laughing, kissing, but I didn't see Roman.

As I stood in the doorway, taking everything in, an arm snaked around my waist, and yanked me back outside. A hard body pressed me up against the side of the lighthouse, a hand coming over my mouth and nose so I could barely breathe, let alone scream.

"I've been waiting for you."

At the sound of Roman's voice, I kicked out, but he was too strong. He gave a dark chuckle, adjusting his grip on my face so I could at least breathe through my nose. "So angry, but you still want me."

He was right, but I couldn't admit it to him.

His lips skimmed over my ear. "We need to have a conversation about the way you say one thing and do another. How you think I'm not good enough, but you still want me to fuck you." At my attempt at a violent shake of my head he laughed, tightening his grip on my face. "Don't even deny it. I'm not

fucking stupid, baby. I see the way you look at me.”

“Roman?”

Shit, that was Freya’s voice. Roman growled under his breath, then released me. “Don’t even fucking think about going anywhere.” He stepped back, glaring down at me.

“Ro—Oh. Quinn.” Freya suddenly appeared from around the side of the lighthouse, staring suspiciously between us. “What’s going on here?”

I didn’t trust her, and I didn’t want any word getting back to my parents. “Nothing’s going on. You’re welcome to him.” Turning back to Roman, I hissed, “Don’t try to speak to me again.” Pushing past them both, I stalked back around to the lighthouse door, and entered. Roman and Freya appeared less than a minute later, so I made my way to the far side of the room. I needed a distraction, but Penelope was occupied with her tongue down the throat of a guy from the swim team. Looking around at the others in the lighthouse, I suddenly felt alone. It wasn’t a feeling I liked—I’d spent far too much time alone when I was in Switzerland. Here, the fact that I’d been away for so long made me feel like the new girl all over again. I knew I should make the effort, to talk to people, but instead I decided to get some air.

Outside, I immediately felt calmer.

The calm lasted for less than a minute before a hand came around my waist and gripped my arm tightly.

Not again.

Roman’s low rasp sounded in my ear. “You’re coming with me.”

CHAPTER 7

QUINN

“NO, I’M NOT.” I dug my heels into the ground, throwing my weight back.

“You are. I said we needed to have a conversation, and now we’re going to have it. Back to the boats. We’re leaving.” Roman tightened his grip on my arm, and began dragging me away from the lighthouse, back towards the jetty. I stumbled a little, and he slowed down so I could regain my footing. Even as he did so, he frowned, then as soon as I was steady on my feet, he picked up the pace again.

Was he seriously going to do this? “We can’t just *leave*.”

“We can and we will.”

“People will talk.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” he growled.

“But I can’t—”

“Enough. Boat. Now. We’re going to have a conversation without any fucking interruptions.” We reached the dock, and he wasted no time in manhandling me into one of the boats. I practically fell inside, collapsing down on the seat at the back and putting my head in my hands. I heard him moving around, then the engine was turned on, and we were roaring away from Chaceley Rock.

What was everyone going to think when they found out that Roman and I had both disappeared? I had to hope that they were too drunk to notice. I

hoped that once we were done, he'd be taking us back to the island, otherwise we were going to have a lot of explaining to do, not to mention the risk of my parents finding out.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I hadn't even realised that the engine had cut out, until Roman's shout sounded from the front of the boat. "Fuck!"

"What is it?"

He ignored me, flicking switches, turning the key in the ignition over and over again. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*."

"What's wrong? Why have we stopped?" I carefully made my way over to him, attempting to stay steady as the boat bobbed gently in the ocean.

He finally met my gaze, his eyes dark and angry.

"Know anything about boats? The fucking engine just cut out."

No.

"I don't, sorry."

"Fucking useless," he hissed, which I thought was a bit unfair since it had been his idea to do this in the first place.

"Doesn't look like you know any more than I do," I countered, glaring at him. "Aren't you on the rowing team? You should know more than I do."

"Fuck you, Quinn. Rowboats have oars, not engines. If we can't get this engine going, we're stuck here. Do you want that?"

"No. Is there like a manual or anything?"

"Do I look like I know? It's not my fucking boat." He was getting more and more angry, and it shouldn't have affected me the way it did, but I couldn't tear my gaze away from him. He was so beautiful, even in his anger, cursing the sea like some kind of vengeful god.

When he slammed his hand down on the control panel, I finally looked away, glancing through the windshield. We seemed to be drifting further away from the island. "Uh, Roman? Does this boat have an anchor? I think the tide is carrying us along, look." I pointed towards the now-distant lighthouse, which was now off to the right instead of directly behind us.

His eyes widened as he took in what I was seeing. "Shit. Yeah. Anchor." Both of us turned to scan the boat, and I immediately saw the anchor. I raced for it, grabbing the handle of the winch. "Roman!" I called, and he was suddenly there with me, his hands on mine as we turned the heavy handle together, and the anchor released, the clanking of chains as it descended into the depths the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard. There'd been a moment there when I had a vision of us being carried away on an empty ocean, swallowed up by the night.

"We did it!" I forgot who I was talking to for a moment, turning to Roman with a huge smile.

He stared at me for a moment, his face illuminated by the moonlight, and then he gripped my face in his hands.

Then his lips were on mine.

I froze in shock for all of two seconds, before I kissed him back.

This kiss... It felt like I'd been waiting my whole life for it.

He pulled back slightly, his breath coming in pants as he stared down at me. "This wasn't supposed to happen. Fuck, why do you do this to me?" he groaned, before his lips descended again. I lifted myself up on my toes, winding my arms around his neck and he slid his hands from my face, down around my body until his arms were around me, holding me to him.

This kiss. Everything about Roman was hard, so hard, but his lips were so soft. My tongue slid against his as he pressed into me, grinding his hardness against my body.

"No." With an effort, he pulled away from me, stepping back towards the helm. "We need to get out of here," he said softly to himself. I collapsed back on the padded leather bench seat, attempting to slow my breathing and get my elevated heart rate under control. Everything in me wanted to carry on kissing him, to make the most of being alone with him here on this boat. No one would know. There was nobody to see us, no way for anyone to find out.

He was the biggest temptation I'd ever had, and I knew that if he kissed

me again, out here with no one to see, I wouldn't stop him.

I watched him as he tried again, and failed again, to restart the engine, distracted by the way his arm muscles were flexing. Then a thought came to me. "Isn't there some kind of radio or SOS thing on here? I knew I shouldn't have listened to Blaine's stupid rule about not bringing phones to the island."

"Flares." His voice was suddenly hopeful. "In the—" He cut himself off, slamming his hand on the control panel. "Fuck. We cleared everything out to make room for the drinks."

"You cleared out the lifesaving stuff to make room for alcohol?" My voice was incredulous. "Whose genius idea was that? There's nothing else we can do, then. We'll have to wait for the others to find us when it gets light. Or the coastguard, I guess."

"The engine's overheated. It might work again if we leave it for a bit." His voice sounded uncertain, and I was sure that neither of us believed that was the problem, but I nodded.

"Let's try it again in a bit." Biting down on my lip, I warred with myself, before I let the words come out. "We can have that talk, if you want." Both of our defences were down right now, and maybe this was what we needed. A chance to clear the air.

He stared at me for a long, charged moment.

Then he spoke. His voice was low, his words carried away on the night breeze, but I read the intent in his eyes perfectly. "I don't want to talk."

He crossed the boat to me in three strides, threw himself down on the seat next to me, and tugged me onto his lap.

There was no hesitation from either of us. I poured everything I had into this kiss, grinding down against his hardness, digging my knees into the leather of the seat as his tongue swiped into my mouth. The boat rocked, making me slide on him, and his hands came down to grip my hips, holding me steady.

"I want you," I whispered as he kissed along my jaw, then bent his head

to drag his teeth down my throat.

“Yeah. Here, where there’s no one to see,” he muttered into my neck.

The hurt tore through me, and suddenly, I wanted to explain. Explain what I was able to, to make him understand that it wasn’t what he thought. I gripped a handful of his hair and tugged, making his head come up. His darkened eyes met mine.

“Listen to me.” I took a deep breath. “I want you all the time. Those things I said to you in the boat sheds...none of them were true. I lied to you.”

His brow creased. “Why say them?”

“I-I can’t tell you. But I want you to know, that if there was a way for you and me to be something, or even to just be friends, I would seize it. But we can’t. Please, please don’t ask me why. I can’t tell you.”

“Is this—”

Brushing my lips over his, I cut off his question. “*Please, Ro.*”

He huffed out a sound against my mouth that sounded like a growl, but then he kissed me again. “Okay. No more questions. Not tonight. I’ve got a much better idea for your mouth.” Taking my hand, he slid it onto the impressive bulge in his jeans. “Have you ever given a blowjob on a boat?”

I eyed him from beneath my lashes. Fuck. I was so wet for him. He affected me like no one else ever had. “Not until now.” Licking my lips as I palmed his erection, I was rewarded with a groan. Then I slipped off him to kneel on the floor.

He opened his jeans, revealing his thick, hard length.

“You’re so big,” I whispered, and he smirked down at me. There was something more in his gaze, though. Something that I wanted to take advantage of. He could act like this was nothing, like I was just another mouth, another body to satisfy him, but we both knew the truth.

“You like what you see, huh?” He swallowed hard, trying to sound casual, steadying me with his legs on either side of me as I gripped the bottom of his erection, not wanting him to go too deep while we were on a

rocking boat.

Instead of replying, I leaned forwards to place a kiss to the head of his cock, followed by a long, slow lick. One of his hands came down to grip my hair while I licked around the head again, then down his shaft.

“*Fuck. Your mouth. Stop teasing me and suck me.*” His voice was hoarse, and his legs tensed on either side of me.

Lowering my head further, I took him into my mouth, down until I reached the place where my hand was gripping him. Getting into a rhythm, I sucked him up and down in tandem with the movement of my hand, swirling my tongue, getting him wet and messy until he was panting above me and groaning out my name.

‘*Fuck. Fuck. Quinn. Fuck. Baby. I’m—*’

His hips stuttered and he pulsed in my mouth, his release hitting the back of my throat. I swallowed him down, as much as I could, his cum spilling out of the corner of my mouth as I raised my head.

For a minute he just stared down at me, breathing hard, and then he cupped my jaw, his thumb rubbing across the side of my mouth. “Open.”

I opened, and he slid his thumb inside. As I sucked lightly, he stroked through my hair with his free hand. He didn’t say anything more, but a smile curved over his lips. It lit me up from the inside and brought a lump to my throat, because that was his proper smile. The smile he used to give me.

While he was doing up his jeans, I took a minute to compose myself, swallowing down the emotions I couldn’t allow myself to feel. When I straightened up, he lifted me onto him again, and gently tugged my bottom lip between his teeth.

“I think it’s time I returned the favour.”

Just as he spoke, I felt the first drops of rain. My release was forgotten as we both scrambled to get under the tiny hard top while we were pelted by the rain. It was little more than a sunshade, and barely provided any shelter, especially with the way the wind was picking up and driving the rain

sideways.

I began to shiver. Why had I worn this stupidly thin hoodie?

Roman wrapped me in his arms, but as the rain started coming down harder, I knew that we'd both be cold and soaking before long.

Raising his head, he looked towards the back of the boat. "The island doesn't look too far away," he said slowly. "I think I can make it."

"*What?*" There was no disguising the horror in my voice. "You can't seriously be thinking about swimming it!"

"I'm a strong swimmer. I can make it." He nodded decisively, before releasing me to rip off his T-shirt and tug down his jeans.

"But-but look! Look how far away we are from it. I can barely even see it. What if there's rocks? Or sharks? And it's pitch black and raining! What if you get disoriented? *You could die*, Roman." Panic was clawing at me as all the ways that it could go horribly wrong hit me at once. "Please, please don't do this."

A sob tore from my throat, and I began to shake. Roman glanced towards the island, then back at me, and gave a heavy sigh. He stepped forwards and hugged me to him, rubbing his hands up and down my arms. "I have to. We can't stay out here all night, not like this. You'll get hypothermia, and so will I. There's no shelter on this boat." Tugging me into a corner of the boat, he directed me to sit down on the floor where the seats were providing some protection.

"Put my T-shirt on under your hoodie, and stay as dry as you can," he instructed. "I promise you I can make it, okay?"

Before I could reply, he made a run for the back of the boat, and dived into the deep, dark water.

"*Roman!*" My scream was carried away in the night as I desperately scanned the waves for any sign of him.

All I could see was darkness.

He was gone.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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GOOD GIRLS DON'T LIE LINDSEY ILER



GOOD GIRLS
DON'T LIE

LINDSEY ILER

CHAPTER 1

LILIANA

“YOU KNOW, at some point you will have to leave this dorm room, right?” Jade says sympathetically.

She thought she was going to have a dorm room to herself, and then I showed up, blowing up her plans for senior year. I had been a late add to Silverwood Academy and because of that, we have one of the smallest dorms. We’ve managed to become quick friends, but she makes it easy. Even when I’m reminded daily how different we are.

Since arriving on campus, I’ve only left the safety of these four walls to go to class. All my meals are spent looking out the window from my dorm. I’ve grown comfortable watching others live their lives, rather than living my own. I’m used to the silence and am starting to prefer it, which is enough to tell me I *do* need to get out more. Being comfortable being alone is a trait we all should strive to have, but human interaction is still necessary to survive as a species.

“What do you have in mind?” I sit up, dropping my book to the mattress.

“Something that doesn’t involve fictional men.” She squints her eyes at me and then towards my paperback. “Hate to break it to you, but they aren’t going to fly off the page and sweep you off your feet.”

“A girl can dream.” I stand from the bed and grab a bottle of water from the mini fridge. “Now, where are you taking me?”

“Do you trust me?” Jade asks, a wild grin crosses her face as she watches me fidget.

“Not the slightest.”

“Wise girl, you are.”

An hour later and a long argument over what I’ll be wearing, I step out of my dorm room wearing what me and Jade compromised on for the evening festivities. The cool night air hits my bare legs, forcing a shiver through my body.

I tug at as much fabric the skirt will allow, willing it to grow longer from my efforts.

“Will you knock it off?” Jade swats at my hands to stop me. “You look hot. You’d look hotter if you would have forgone the signature cardigan.”

“What?” I grab the bottom of it, pulling it away from my body to admire the details. “This is cute.”

“You’re right. It is cute.” Jade pulls open a door to one of the dorms, allowing me to enter first. “Especially if you are a grandmother at brunch.”

“Well, that’s just rude.”

“Honesty isn’t and should not be confused with rudeness.” Jade pushes past me and starts walking down the hallway.

I stay firmly planted, turning my eyes from where my sweater is on my body and to Jade. She doesn’t slow down, not giving me much choice. I can stand here, or I can hurry my legs to catch up with her.

“I hate you,” I say when I catch up to her.

“That is something I can live with.”

“What are we doing here anyway?”

“For this.” Jade places her hands on the double doors in front of us and pushes them open. The low roar that could be heard before is louder now.

My eyes take a minute to take it all in, unsure of what I’m looking at. There are crowds everywhere. How are they all fitting in here?

“What is this place?”

“Fight Club,” Jade says staunchly.

“No, seriously.”

“No, seriously, it’s a Fight Club. We call it a different name, but the same premise.”

“Like Brad Pitt, Fight Club?”

“Yes, like there’s only one rule and it’s...”

“Loose lips, sink ships,” a boy says in my ear. He could stick his tongue out and glide it along my lobe by how close he is. “Oh, and we aren’t afraid to let you drown.”

All I catch is the back of his head and the strong ribbons of muscles along his back as he pushes through the crowd. He has shiny, golden hair and once he’s under the lights in the middle of the space, it looks like a halo above his head. My guess is he is the furthest from being an angel by the sinful gleam in his eyes when they’re turned back on me.

Jade grabs my hand and continues to lead me through the tight crowd, forcing me to drop my stare from this interesting stranger. We don’t go to the front though. She steps onto a platform, practically pulling me up behind her. Once I’m up here, it’s easier to see where we are. This is some sort of auditorium. The red curtains are pulled back, and the material frames the space we are taking up.

I don’t know much about Silverwood Academy, but I know it’s built from the wealth of its students. *Deep pockets*. I suppose, I belong to that group as well. The thing about money is you either feel comfortable with it, much like most of my classmates, or you’re like me. Money isn’t the most important thing about me, and it never will be, no matter what my grandfather says.

“What is this place?” I ask Jade, still moving my eyes around the room to get a better look at what’s happening.

“Use to be the old auditorium. No one, not even staff, checks on this building. After being caught a time or two in our old spot, this place was born.”

“In sight, but also out.”

“Exactly.” She taps her finger on the ridge of my nose. “And tonight, you couldn’t have chosen a better night to come out.”

“Let’s not forget, I didn’t choose to come out. You dragged me.” I laugh, turning away from her to watch the makeshift ring. “So, they fight? And then what?”

“Because fit, undeniably attractive men fighting isn’t enough?”

“If that’s your sort of thing.”

“My sort of thing?” Jade scoffs. “Look around”—her hand ghosts in front of the both of us— “it’s all of our things. Even yours, whether you want to admit it or not. These boys brawling is the kind of primal shit that will make your pussy wet.”

“Eww! Don’t be gross.” I elbow her.

“Don’t be a prude.” She returns the silent threat.

For an hour, I watch match after match. Some are quicker than others. The one thing that is true about all of them is I don’t like a single second of the experience. High school boys fighting. How original.

“I’m going to go,” I say to Jade. She’s in the middle of a heated conversation with some boy that she barely hears me or maybe she’s ready to wrap her hands around this guy’s neck that she can’t be bothered with me trying to disappear.

Before I step off the stage, I check my surroundings. This crowd can chew me up and swallow me. When the coast is clear, I jump down and head straight for the door. I’m halfway there when a hand wraps around my wrist, stopping me in my tracks.

I spin, watching the hand tighten to pull me back. “Where you off to?”

My eyes slide up to the wrist to the forearm, until I finally lay eyes on the person the hand belongs to.

“Oh, Mr. I’ll Let You Drown,” I say, wiggling my wrist to have him release me, albeit reluctantly. “And if you must know, I’m leaving.”

“No, I got that, sweetheart. What I’m wondering is why? You’re about to miss the real show.” He glances over his shoulder at the ring. Another large guy stands in the middle with a smaller boy who is intently watching us.

“You’re fighting”—I shift to get a better glance at his opponent— “that guy? He’s huge.”

“Stick around and find out for yourself if I can hold my own.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“T.K., let’s go,” one of the guys in the makeshift ring shouts over the loud whirl of the crowd, waving him on.

“If you’re looking for some grand response, you won’t get one from me. I’m not some white knight, looking to rescue you. I’m the villain.”

“And this is to entice me to stay?”

He boldly leans forward, resting his cheek against mine. I’m far too aware of his lips near my ear. Boys don’t do these things to me. I’m unnoticeable and unwanted. I attempt to step back, but he stops me with his hand on the back of my head, pulling me back into him.

“I know you prefer you the hero, the kind that makes grand gestures like the ones in your silly books, but like I said, you won’t find that with me. Maybe that’s the whole point though.”

That’s all. That is all he says as I watch him turn and head for the place that he so confidently believes he belongs.

How does he know I like to read? Has he seen me before, sneaking pages between classes? I’ve kept my head down, quite literally, so if he’s seen me, I haven’t noticed him.

Which now looking at him, I’m certain I would remember someone like him.

The way he bounces on the balls of his bare feet tells me this isn’t his first time. He’s a fighter by nature. His fists fly in front of him, working out his muscles to prepare for what’s to come. The giant in front of him does the same in some ritual, full of pride and determination. They look like they want

to kill each other.

There's not a single bone in my body that has this kind of fight in it. What makes someone willing to step into a ring to get the crap beaten out of them? What kind of person finds joy in inflicting pain on someone? And why are my thoughts so consumed with these curiosities?

As if he knows, his head turns just enough to let me see the wide grin on his face. Did he wink at me? This guy has too much confidence for someone who is about to go against someone that's a hundred pounds heavier.

A gong rings and the energy in the room shifts to heightened anticipation to blood hungry. The crowd engulfs me as I turn to leave. Not matter how intrigued I am, nothing good can come from me being here.

Working my way through the room, something stops me right at the exit. I'd like to blame it on the round of cheers and the loud gasps, but even I can't lie to myself like that. This mere stranger dug deep enough in the thirty seconds he was in front of me to have me turning around to see what all the commotion is about.

I push through the throngs of people, pushing my way to a spot that is hidden, but still giving me a vantage point to see the fight. Stuck between two large, bodied guys, I peek around them when they sidestep, blocking my view. Instead of grappling with them, I shift to the left, giving me a decent vantage point to see the makeshift ring.

An audible gasp escapes me as I watch the beast he's fighting strike him with a wide hit, connecting easily with his jaw. Sweat flies, but surprising to me, he doesn't fall, managing to keep his footing. He bends at the waist, taking a breather, and when he stands back up, he sends a direct kick to his opponent's stomach. Unlike himself, this guy doesn't keep his feet firmly planted and he falls backwards. He takes the opportunity to attack him, hovering over him to rain down punch after punch until his opponent's body falls lifeless.

The scene is barbaric. Blood drips down each of their faces from wounds

that are sure to take weeks to heal.

Unwilling to watch the ritualistic ending to this brawl, I turn away to push through the crowd I should have never been amongst. My eyes are set on the double doors, determined to escape without being noticed. This shouldn't be hard, as I'm already invisible to them all.

I grab ahold of one of the handles, and attempt to push it down, but something stops me. It's not my intrigue this time. My mind knows exactly where it wants to be, and this place isn't it. What stops me is a physical force. My eyes skim along the door, only to stop on a hand with bruised and bloody knuckles.

"Running away so fast?" He's out of breath, which comes to no surprise considering what he just inflicted on another human being.

I turn to face him and take inventory of the damage done. A gash beneath his eyes pulls all my attention. A smile splits his face as I reach forward, but quickly pull my touch away.

"I told you, I wanted to leave," I say.

"But you didn't. You're here."

"And you were right. You could hold your own. Thanks for this conversation, but I *have* to go."

"Hot date?"

The laugh that slips through my lips is proof that his accusation couldn't be further from the truth. His eyes narrow, realizing my self-deprecation.

"It's not so far out of the realm of possibilities. Pretty girl like you." His finger wraps around the tendrils framing my face.

"Yeah, okay." I turn away, happy to escape him.

He guesses my move before I can fully execute the escape and steps in front of me.

"I'll rip the throat out of whoever made you believe you aren't worthy of a compliment. Don't do that shit, sweetheart. Take my words for what they are."

“Why do you care?” I groan. “Why am I even standing here having this conversation, better yet?”

“Because whether you want to believe it or not, you are curious about me.”

“You have me all wrong. You sure as heck don’t know me.”

“I don’t think I do, and give it time, and you’ll know me.”

“I doubt that will be true.”

“Just for fun, let me take a stab at who you are.” His tongue peeks out of his mouth, and he nibbles on the end of it, proving he’s as cocky as I believe him to be. “By the look of the broach on your sweater, you are rich. It’s vintage, probably a family heirloom,” he says, running his hand over the delicate diamonds. “You’re also stupid for wearing it out in public. My guess mommy and daddy don’t know you have it, which is probably the only thing you’ve done that goes against their will.”

“You don’t know me,” I plead again, uncomfortable by his intuitiveness.

“Not yet at least, but I plan to.”

“Boys like you don’t bother with girls like me.”

“Boys like me destroy the hymens of girls like you.”

“I’m... umm...”

“A virgin.”

Is it written on my forehead or something? It’s not something I’m ashamed of, although the way this boy has said it, sure makes it seem like it should be.

“Don’t worry, your virginity is safe with me.”

“I doubt that.” I attempt to escape again. I’m blocked in. “Are we done here?”

“And here I thought you were a nice girl.”

“I am.”

“Prove it.”

“And how do you suppose I do that?” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Meet me Monday after school. Six-thirty, at the cafeteria.”

“I don’t think so.” I pull away and rush towards the door to get distance between us.

His hand wraps around my wrist, pulling my back flush to his chest. “I’m Townes Kerrington by the way.”

“I don’t remember asking for your name.” Rudeness doesn’t come easy to me. I’ve always been this way. Kindness is all I know, but for some reason, Townes gets the best of me and forces me off my typical path.

This is not good.

Frantic, I practically run out of the room.

“I’ll see you on Monday,” Townes hollers down the hallway.

My legs don’t stop until I’m back at the dorms with his voice still in my head, like a song I can’t stop singing the lyrics to myself. I fall onto the bed, panting and heaving as I attempt to control my breathing. I’m so out of shape, unlike Townes.

I groan, realizing my minds slip up.

“Don’t think about him, Lily. Just don’t think about him. It’s that simple,” I whisper the pep talk to myself as I walk into the bathroom to brush my teeth. Once I’m done, my clothes are peeled off to crawl under the covers.

It doesn’t work. Instead, I toss and turn throughout the night, awakening from thoughts of him. He means nothing to me. I barely know him.

I wake up, sweat across my brow and an ache in a place I shouldn’t.

“What is going on with me?” I clench my legs together.

I jump from the bed and grab the first pile of clothes I can find that look like something a well put together girl would wear. Once I’m dressed, I straighten my hair, and head for the door.

Jade jumps back as I step out of my dorm. “Where are you off to so early?”

“I should be asking you where you’ve been all night.” My attempt to shift the attention to her empty bed. She stares at me, tapping her foot, impatiently

waiting for an answer. “If you must know, I’m going to church,” I explain, continuing down the hallway and pushing the elevator button.

“It’s Saturday,” she yells, exhaustion in her voice.

“I’m not judging you for whatever escapades you got into last night, so don’t judge me.”

“Dirty dreams get you second guessing your vow?” Jade shakes her head, starting to shut the dorm door.

“Not funny!” I yell back at her.

Is she right though? Did one little encounter stir things up inside of me?

My entire walk-through campus to the chapel, I ask myself the same question.

Is this the right decision for me? Chapter Two

Townes

“Where are you running off to so fast?” Holland, my twin sister, yells at me. She’s standing at the top of the gym steps.

“I have somewhere to be,” I answer her, hoping this will be the end of the conversation.

A quick check over my shoulder, proves that this is in fact not the end of the conversation. She jogs down to me, knowing if she’s right in front of me, I won’t be able to lie.

Having a twin has its advantages. When we were younger, there was always someone to play with. I’ve never known what it feels like to be alone, which has its perks. Outside of her, there’s no one else I truly trust and sometimes I wonder if I trust her too blindly. We shared a womb, but we are still two different people.

Where she’s caring and polite, I’m her counterpart. Unemotional and curt. She likes to blame it on the fact that I came second, nearly killing our mother in the process.

You came into this world, kicking and screaming, causing chaos, and that’s how you’ll live your life, is what she likes to remind me every chance

she can get. Even with our differences, we always have each other's backs.

"Don't you have a workout to do?" Damn, she's observant.

After practice for basketball, I had archery practice. There's an agreement with all my coach's that I can participate in both activities, even if that means more work for me. Typically, after both hours, I hit the weight room or take a long run to clear my head. I'm not surprised that she catches me missing my final workout for the day.

"I have homework to do," I lie, testing fate and walking away.

"No, you don't," she yells to me.

My feet slow my pace, but I don't stop fully. I don't need the lecture that's sure to come if I tell her the truth. She's north on the compass, guiding those around her. She believes she knows best for me, and more times than not, she does, but this is one thing I'd prefer to keep to myself for the time being.

"If this has to do with what I overheard last night," she starts to say.

I turn, holding my hands out straight. "Please mind your business, Holland. I love you but mind your business."

"It will only end poorly. You and I both know it. She's not different than the others." She shakes her head, shame radiating from her eyes.

This would usually upset me, but all I can think about is that fucking god-awful cardigan she wore and how I'd give anything to get her blood on it, make it a fraction less perfectly pressed.

"I'll see you later, Sis." I turn back around and blur out the image of her disappointment.

Fall is coming and going quickly, and soon we'll be into winter. This is my favorite time of year. Basketball season. On the court, I feel alive. It's fast paced, as compared to archery, where the sport requires more patience and breath work.

The air bites at my neck. I pull up the hood of my sweatshirt, waving to some teammates as I make the walk through the courtyard outside the

cafeteria.

It's six o'clock and dinner time. At the thought, my stomach growls.

I circle the side of the building and see her sitting on the bench outside. She's early. She's not wearing her school uniform, making me miss that skirt. In their place is a pair of jeans that do nothing for her figure. Her blonde hair falls into her face, shielding her from anyone who walks by.

"Do you own a cardigan in every color?" I call out, willing the buttons on her yellow sweater to magically combust to reveal to me what's underneath.

Liliana's head swivels to me. On her face, a smile is absent. She's not happy to see me, but she's here, so I'm not going to complain. I half expected to be stood up.

"I like the way they make me feel," she answers, standing up. Her hands circle her body, like she's trying to hide a secret.

"How do they make me feel?" I reach up, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. She may not notice, but I do when she leans into my touch.

"In control," she whispers, turning away from me.

"And that's something you seek? Control?" We start walking simultaneously together.

"Is that such a surprise? Aren't we all looking for control, in one way or another?" She enters the cafeteria when I open the door for her.

With her directly in front of me, I lean forward, pressing my lips to her ear, knowing she'll remember the way I did it Friday night. "Not all of us. Some of us are hungry for chaos."

I don't know if it's my words or my proximity to her ass, but her spine straightens tightly.

"Why doesn't that surprise me about you?" She glances over her shoulder, but where I expect to see disdain, there's a flirty smile on her face.

Well, that's new.

"Care to have dinner with me?" I ask, grabbing her hand and guiding her to the line. As we wait, I realize in my hurry to get her into line, I hadn't let

go of her hand. It's small compared to my big.

"I'll have dinner with you, but under one condition," she says, wiggling her hand until I release her. I instantly miss the feel of her hand in mine.

Whatever she's about to ask, I'm sure I will say yes. She looks at me like a puzzle she can solve or a code to be cracked. No one has ever tried but I have a feeling a girl like her, I'd love to watch her tackle the chore. That's what it would be. A chore. I'm not easy and every move I make is strategic, made from survival.

"What's that?" I lean past her and grab a tray to hand to her, which she happily takes.

For several minutes we make our way through the line. With excitement, she loads up her plate without second guessing if the calories are too much or if she'll regret it in the morning. She is fascinating.

Instead of me leading the way, I follow her. She may not know it, but her choosing our seat is a power move. I belong in the middle, at the head table. It's there I've sat all four years at academy. It's my own personal throne.

Liliana chooses a table in the back, stuck within the shadows, where light barely reaches. Hidden. Exile. Where she belongs and I do not.

"You going to tell me that condition or what?" I slide my tray onto the table but continue to loom over her side of the bench where she is now safely tucked away. "Don't keep me waiting."

"I'm not going to be your friend."

"Look around, sweetie. I don't have a shortage of friends and I'm not looking to add anymore."

"Then what do you want from me?"

Good question.

She looks at me through her eyelashes and every thought I had disappears, ceases to exist. Why though? I am never rattled by a female. This is where I thrive. Girls are easy for me. Liliana won't be like the others. How cliché does that sound? Every man has said this at one point in his life, but

the truth is, I don't think any one of us is special enough to deserve those words to be spoken about them.

We're human. We have needs and urges. Fears are stacked up beside us like trophies. Certain things drive us, and others slow us down.

There's nothing special about this girl, even if she thinks prancing around holding tight to her virtue makes her superior.

"What I want isn't important." I tilt my head to the side, waiting for a reaction that never comes. She's stoic, stiff with conviction in who she is. "What you want is."

"I don't want anything, Townes."

"We both know that isn't true." I slip away from her. Witnessing the hiss of an inhale at my absence proves my point. I'm under her skin and she hates it. "Eat up."

"I don't understand you." She picks up her spoon, doing as I say. I watch the metal curve dip into her chocolate pudding and slowly pass through her lips. She closes them around the cool material, licking off all the contents.

Under the table, I adjust the bulge, giving my zipper a run for its money and lean back to continue to watch the show.

"Good girl," I whisper.

Her eyes catch mine, quickly, but just as they arrived, they are gone. What hasn't disappeared is the flush of pink on her cheeks and chest. Someone loves to be praised. *Interesting.*

We eat in silence. She genuinely is eating her dinner, while I'm plotting my way under her skirt. As if she knows, her leg stretches out, bumping against mine. Liliana tries to retreat, but my shoes wrap around her leg, trapping her between my legs.

"Not so fast." I stretch my arms out on the back of the booth. "Has anyone ever touched you?"

"Touched me, how?" Her throat flexes with her deep swallow.

I stand and bend down to grab her hand, pulling her from the booth. We

race through the cafeteria with her protesting behind me to slow down, but I can't, too concerned with getting an answer.

We maneuver our path, aware of the eyes on us. My feet stop at the table that my best friend, Nathan and Hunter are at. With surprised expressions, they gaze up at me and then turn their attention to Liliana.

“What do we have here?” Hunter singsongs like a complete prick.

“I'll write you the check tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Nathan stands like he's ready to object. There's no need to. It's done.

“Giving up, already?” Hunter rolls his and shakes his head.

“Not even close.” I wink and then leave them there.

“What in the world is happening?” Liliana asks behind me.

They take her in. It doesn't take a genius to know what they are doing. *Sizing her up.* Imagining what's under that cardigan, but they'll never know, if I have anything to say about it.

“Ask your new friend,” Hunter says, sitting back down with an audible huff. He's pissed, but he'll have to get over it.

I push through the doors, adjusting Liliana's hand in mine. Once we are far enough away from the lights through the cafeteria window, I spin us around, pinning her against the brick wall.

“What are you doing?” Her eyes are bewildered.

“I'll ask you one more time, Liliana. Has anyone ever touched you?” I pull her hands up above her head, crushing my body against hers.

“I... I don't...” She shakes her head, but she never tries to pull her hands away, happy, for a lack of a better word, to keep them under my control.

“Do you know what I'm asking you?” My lips are practically against hers, but I refuse to steal a kiss. She'll give it to me on her own.

“I think so.” Another swallow. I never thought I'd find something so innocent to be so wretchedly sexy.

“You don't like to talk about sex, that much is clear, so I'll make this

easier for you.” I release one of my hands, clutching both her wrists in my hand.

With a free hand, I graze it softly over her collarbone.

“Here?”

She shakes her head.

Going a little lower, I cast my hand over her stomach. She shakes her head again, understanding the game. My touch glides to her hip. I’m gifted another shake of her head.

Lower, I go.

“Townes,” she whispers my name like a pray. “You can’t.”

“Give me one good reason why I can’t.”

“Did you forget I’m a virgin?” she blurts out. Surprisingly, there’s no shame in the word. It’s a choice. “Even someone like you won’t change that.”

Her eyes track my tongue as it glides over my bottom lip.

“I know. It’s one of my favorite things about you.” My fingers crawl up her legs. She allows me to cup her through her jeans. “What about here?”

Blush creeps onto her perfect cheek bones.

“I want to hear it from the lips I can’t stop imagining being wrapped around my dick.”

Visibly rattled, she shakes her head.

“Say it.”

“Why does it matter to you?”

“Tell me, Liliana.”

“No, Townes, no one has ever touched me there.”

“Good.” I release her, dropping my other hand from her wrists.

Liliana lowers her hands, twisting her wrists back and forth.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” I ask, knowing that I don’t care and yet, still need to know I didn’t.

“I don’t think you left a mark,” she says.

“There’s still time,” I say, turning away to leave her there.

I'm such an asshole. This I'm certain of. Doing what I just did and then walking away is some wickedly cruel shit.

"Townes, don't ever touch me like that again, okay?" The conviction in her voice has me spinning around. She's standing in the middle of the yard, her eyes on me. "I'm not like the other girls around here. I'm not going to sleep with you."

"We'll see." I shrug, leaving her outside.

There's no need to look back. If I do, I'm sure I'd be greeted with the treat of seeing her slacked jawed, wide open, begging for me to stick my dick in her mouth. I'd hit the back of her throat to listen to what would sure become my favorite song, her gagging on my length.

Once I'm through the doors of the cafeteria, a chair is kicked out at Hunter and Nathan's table. I take it, happy to sit down with them, all while my mind is on a pair of doe eyes I've left out in the cold.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" Nathan speaks up first.

"If you two want, you can follow me back to my room, and I'll cut those checks for you."

"Fuck the checks," Hunter shouts, slapping his hand on the table.

"Calm down." I run my hand over my face, not ready to explain myself, but knowing it's inevitable.

"Fuck that. This isn't part of the plan." Hunter fidgets in his seat. My decision has clearly rattled him.

"The plan was busted from the beginning," I attempt to explain. Liliana is right about one thing. She isn't like the other girls.

"It's worked every other time." Nathan leans back in his chair, crossing his large arms over his chest.

"It's tired, a washed-up game."

"Or maybe it's because you know this one can't be tackled. She won't give in as easily as the other mouses we've set in your path."

"I'll give you both your ten-kay, but I'm not done with this girl." I stand,

pushing back the chair with my legs. I lean on the table, eyeing both my best friends. “I’m going to break this one for fun.”

CHAPTER 2

LILIANA

I CAN'T STOP THINKING about him and I hate myself for it.

The way he left me standing there, it hit parts of my heart I hadn't been expecting. Meeting Townes had doom written all over it from the beginning. We aren't cut from the same cloth and that much is certain by the way he looks at me like I'm his next meal, where I look at him as someone to save.

My mom said this has always been my downfall.

Strays. Lost souls. Whatever name you want to give them, I've been pulling them into my vortex my entire life.

Townes is no different.

There's a reason why he is the way he is. He walks around like he can't be touched, and we both know that isn't true. We all have something that can bring us down.

My only worry is that he may be mine. I clear the thought from my head, pulling out my book. It's my free period and instead of tucking into the cafeteria or library, I chose the bleachers. They're grand, made fully of cement, like something you'd see at a major university. Everything here is over the top.

I'm used to rich surroundings, but this place is a different beast.

There are things happening everywhere around me. A group of girls sit further down, their heads tucked close together, whispering and I'm sure

discussing what is happening on campus. On the track, a girl practices hurdle. On her last one, her shoe gets caught and she goes tumbling to the hard ground below her, causing the girls to giggle at her expense.

I lean over the railing and ask her if she's okay.

She glares up at me, an expression laced with disdain and surprise. "Yeah, I'm fine." She stands and dusts the dirt off her legs.

"She's a bitch. Don't mind her," a girl says as she takes the final step onto the landing of the bleachers where I stand.

The girl has blonde hair, and, in the sun, it looks like it could be laced with gold. Reminds me of a certain boy. Her smile is wide, truthful and friendly. Not like the others around here, who can barely muster up enough energy to look in my direction.

"I'm Holland," she says.

I'm shocked when her hand extends out to me. Apprehensively, I take it for what it is. *An olive branch*. I may not understand why this strange girl is chatting me up, but I'm in no position to turn a cheek to a potential friend.

"I'm Liliana."

"Oh, I know." She grins. "Nothing happens on this campus without us all being made aware. Your car pulled up and the stories started flying. It's what us bored, rich kids do best."

"What kind of stories?" I sit down, pulling my bag to my chest as some sort of armor.

Holland sits down beside me, leaning back against the bench behind us. She has the type of confidence I can only wish to possess.

"Are you really saving yourself for marriage?" Even with her behind me, I can feel her amusement against the back of my head. When I'm not quick to respond, she doubles down. "I'm not here to judge. It's just unheard of, especially here. It's like they put something in the water here. Everyone fucking like rabbits."

"Not that it's anyone's business, but yes, so I suppose you can go run off

and tell the rumor mill that it's true."

"I listen. I'm not into spreading other's business." That's refreshing. Most girls our age can't wait to spread other people's business.

"Hate to break it to you, Liliana, but my brother eye fucked you enough that you may want to alert the press that you are no longer an actual virgin." She grips ahold of my leg, using it to help her push to her feet.

"Your brother?" I ask, looking at her for clarification.

"Townes. He's my twin, and like I said, good luck with that. He's not known to stop until he gets what he wants."

I scan the field in front of me. How had I not noticed him before now? There he is, standing at the fifty-yard line. He wears grey sweatpants with the school's crest in black on the upper thigh. It's small, but it draws your attention to his strong legs.

"He doesn't want me," I say, hopefully.

"You sure about that?" As she says it, I watch him pull his shirt up and off his body. He throws it to the ground in front of him, never dropping his eyes from me.

His body is incredible. Lean, but strong. Muscles that look as if they've been cut from stone. His skin isn't tan, but not pale either. The perfect hue to go with his blonde hair.

"He wants the idea of me. I'm not the girl for him." I continue to keep him in my sight as he shifts to the side when someone steps in front of him, blocking his view.

Even if I don't want that bit to be true, I know deep down, it is. I'm the good girl, following the instructions and commands of my parents. *Do good in school. Become a well-rounded young lady. Marry someone respectful. Grow a family and don't step out of line.*

I've always taken their way of life as gospel because it's all I've known. Being at Silverwood, I find myself curious of the other side of life. Like Holland for instance, I'm sure she doesn't answer to anyone, fearless in her

choices. I've never been allotted that privilege.

"Like I said"— she grins down at me and winks— "good luck."

Before I can say anything, break myself away from the trance Townes has me in, Holland is walking down the steps, disappearing below the bleachers.

I pull my book out, forcing myself to look away from him. It's not as easy as it should be. I've never been tempted by anyone or anything, always keeping my urges in check. They're natural, I know this, no thanks to my mother, who told me they are not to be explored until I'm married, but the internet told me something completely different.

Even at thirteen, I understood what I was searching wasn't okay. If they caught me, I'd be in a wrath of trouble. They never did find out.

The internet has an arsenal of information. It had been so overwhelming that after a few searches, I slammed my laptop shut and refused to entertain the idea that even at a young age, I could have urges and physical kind of needs.

Instead of creating an infatuation for someone through junior high when it was all I could seem to think about, I started reading. It was a distraction. All the books were clean, nothing too risqué, although I did dare to slide into the romance section from time to time. I never dared to pick one of them up, simply admiring the covers, wondering what kind of stories were told within the pages.

Over the top of the book, he watches me. I try to be discreet, but there's no use. He must know I'm watching him. Determined to not be distracted and wasting my free period, I skate my eyes across the page, channeling my inner strength to only give my attention to the words.

Completely engrossed in the story of a young girl on a journey to find herself, *ironic, I think*, I don't notice him until he's right in front of me, plucking the paperback from my hands.

"What has you so entertained over here?" The amusement in his tone is infuriating. "Other than me working out."

“I wasn’t watching you,” I argue, a little too eager. By the way his eyebrow perks up, I’d say he knows I’m lying.

“Good girls don’t lie, Liliana.” He grips ahold of my chin tightly, forcing me to look up at him. “Care to try again.”

“I mean... I wasn’t...” I stutter, hating myself for even admitting the truth to him. He’ll only use it to his advantage.

“It’s okay if you were looking at me. You won’t go to hell for something so trivial.” He bends down, placing his mouth against my ear like he did that first night. “Now, the thoughts I have about you, those will land me there. Do you want to know what they are?”

I shake my head, but he doesn’t listen, stepping forward, until he’s straddling my lap.

“Townes,” I whisper his name like a curse and a promise. This is what my mom has warned me about. Boys like him can poison purity with a single glance.

“I imagine you spread out on my bed, bare, and even though you say you don’t want me to, I find you drenched. One slide of my tongue over your untouched pussy and you’d buck like a wild pony. You’ll want to ask me to stop, but when you feel my hands on you”— he skims his hand down my throat, tightening the grip and forcing me to lean back— “you’ll be begging me to bury my cock inside of you.”

“Townes,” I say his name again.

“I’m not a betting man, but if I were, I’d bet your white panties are soaked. Feel free to touch yourself to the image I gifted you.”

“I’m not going to do anything of the sorts.”

“Keep lying and you may find yourself in hell with me. Wouldn’t that be a treat?” He releases his hold on my neck.

“Why are you doing this?” I stand, gathering my things and stuffing my book in my bag. “Showing me attention?”

“Because nothing is more fun than watching an angel fall.” The sadistic

smirk on his face tells me everything I need to know. He means those words.

I stand there, stunned at his promise to bring me down. His hand cups the side of my face and with his thumb skimming across my bottom lip, I stop breathing for a second. I shake my head to remind myself I'm still alive. That's a big mistake on my end. His thumb slips into my mouth just enough to touch my tongue. The salt from his skin ignites my senses.

"You look sexy with your mouth open like that." He drags his finger out, moistening my lips. "I'll see you around."

"Why does that sound like a threat?"

"Take it for whatever you want to, but know, when I say I'll see you around, I mean I'll find you." He turns, leaving me standing in the middle of the bleachers.

The girls nearby glare in my direction. I can't blame them. If they heard what he said, his implication is loud and clear. Our interactions aren't finished here.

Jade skips up the steps, giving a second glance over her shoulder. She must have seen Townes on his way out. She shoots a thumb behind her.

"What the hell was that all about?" she asks. "Townes had the same shit eating grin he had that night you met him."

"Don't get me started."

"Are you headed to church, to pray the sinful thoughts out of your head?"

"I'm not like the rest of you."

"You say it like I'm some sort of whore." Jade flutters her eyelashes, playing the part of the innocent schoolgirl.

"I will not judge you for what you do with the opposite sex, but it's just not something for me."

"Hate to break it to you, but if Townes is looking at you like that, you're in trouble."

"That's what Holland hinted at earlier."

“You spoke with his sister?”

“She approached me.”

“Wow.”

“What’s the big deal?”

“After everything that happened last year with their family, she started to keep to herself, only associating with those approved by Townes. He played the protective brother role pretty well.”

“What happened last year?” I ask, curious to have any bit of information on Townes and the world he lives in.

All the students on this campus have grown up together. They know each other in an intimate level in some way. I’m an outsider here. I have no connection to anyone on this campus, outside of our small interactions. That makes me more curious than anything.

“No one is allowed to talk about it.”

“What do you mean no one is allowed?”

“We all signed an NDA.” Jade shrugs, writing it off as if it’s normal and natural for high schoolers to have to sign a document to keep secrets.

“That’s insane, you know that, right?”

“Rich people are exactly that. *Insane.*” Jade pats my shoulder. “You’ll start to understand soon enough.” She turns away, most likely hurrying to grab a coffee before her next class. “Want to grab dinner tonight at the cafeteria?” She smiles back at me.

“Do I have a choice?” I swoop my bag off the bleacher and fall into pace with her. Jade is making it her own person mission to break me out of my shell. I loathe and appreciate her for it.

“Human interaction is a must for survival.”

Jade isn’t wrong. I doubt my parents’ idea of interaction involved someone like Townes. They’d hate the idea of him even being within the same air space as me.

Why does that thought thrill me?

“I’ll meet you tonight,” I call out to Jade as we hit the fork in the sidewalk. She’s off to English lit, while I’m on my way to history.

I sit through the remainder of my classes, forcing myself to pay attention. I’m distracted. My mind is reeling with theories as to why Townes has taken an interest in me. None of them make a bit of sense to me.

A boy like him could have anyone.

I’m plain. *Basic.*

What could he possibly want with me?

CHAPTER 3

TOWNES

I WATCH HER THROUGH DINNER. She doesn't sit in her usual seat, instead choosing a spot in a more visible place. Maybe my attention has spurred her on to be more outgoing. She doesn't seem like someone who needs the eyes of all the boys on her to feel validated. The exact opposite. She prefers to blend in.

"Well, that won't do, now, will it?" I say to myself.

"Who you talking to, weirdo?" Holland sits down across from me, following my line of sight. "Could you stare any harder?"

"What do you want, Hol? Don't think I didn't see you getting cozy with her."

"Figured I'd see what all the hype is about, seeing's how I heard you cut the checks for the boys without completing the task."

"She's not a task."

"Oh, then what is she, Romeo?"

"I know I say this a lot, but don't you have something better to do with your time?"

"No."

"Well, could you?"

She stands, making a show of pushing her chair back. The screeching of the wood on the floor draws everyone's attention. Liliana's head spins

towards us and I drop my eyes, not wanting to be caught.

“She’s looking over here. How embarrassing for you.” Holland has always been a pain in my ass. Nothing has changed since we were children, vying for the attention of our parents. What a pointless task that ended up being. “I think I’ll go over and say hi.”

“Hol, wait,” I whisper yell at her as she’s already halfway across the cafeteria.

Once she’s in front of Liliana and Jade, I duck my head, pretending to be consumed with something on my phone. It’s pointless. The lack of trust I have in my sister to not utterly embarrass me has me sitting up straighter.

I lean forward, resting my elbow on the tabletop, setting my phone down on the table. I do something stupid, something I know nothing good will come of it. I type Liliana’s name into the search bar of several different social media apps. *Nothing*. It’s like she doesn’t exist.

“My parents won’t let me on them,” a soft, sweet voice says from behind me.

Fuck! I’ve been caught.

“Your sister said you wanted to talk to me?” There’s a lingering question mark on that statement.

I stand and over Liliana’s shoulder Holland walks towards the door. Not before dipping out, she grins over at me, offering me her middle finger.

“Bitch!” I mutter under my breath.

“Excuse me?”

I shift my attention to her, offering her a slight smile. “Not you. *Her*.”

“You two are close,” she says observingly.

“What makes you say that? What have you heard?”

“Just that something happened last year, and you stepped up the protective, big brother role.”

“You curious what it is?”

“I only want to know if you want to tell me. I don’t put much stock into

gossip, Townes.”

I abruptly grab her hand and pull her out of the cafeteria. This is quickly becoming *our* thing. Me pulling her from here to there like my own personal toy. We don't stop, although she does try to protest the entire way, until we are at my dorm. I pull out my key card, sliding it through the reader.

“I can't go in there.” She pulls on my hand, forcing me to let her go. “This is the boys dorm.”

“Liliana, have you done anything you weren't supposed to, ever, a day in your life?” I crowd her space. “Why don't you pull the Holy Bible out of your ass for one night, and break the rules with me?”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“One day, you are going to be married to some strait laced, tie wearing douchebag that will inevitable cheat on you with his young secretary, and while you are going through the daily routine you've convinced yourself you're okay with, you're going to need a memory to get you through.” I tuck her hair behind her ears. “Let me be that memory.”

Liliana's resolve melts right in front of my eyes and it's a sight to be seen. “I'll come up, but only for a little bit.”

I intertwine my fingers with hers and guide her through the doorway. The space is large with a front desk that is currently empty and hallways going both ways that lead to separate rooms. There's commotion throughout the building. This is nothing new. There're always people coming and going, making it impossible to get away with anything.

Some of these fucking assholes would love nothing more than to catch me slipping up. Having Liliana here is a risk, but one I'm worth taking if I can convince her to loosen up the buttons on another one of her pretentious sweaters. What are you hiding, Liliana? It's a secret I'm dying to unearth.

“What if we get caught?” she whispers from behind me, squeezing my hand.

As she asks the question, footsteps quicken around the corner, and I

swing us both around, pinning her in the corner. We are hidden in the darkness of the hallway, unseen, hopefully.

My arm is above her head, bracing myself on the wall behind her. She's perfectly tucked into my body. Her minty breath hits my lips as I gaze down at her. Our breathing syncs with each other, heavy in both of our bodies as we look at each other.

My eyes dip to her perfectly pink lips and as if she knows what I'm thinking, she says, "Please don't kiss me."

"I don't think you mean that," I whisper, cradling the back of her head.

"Townes, please," she begs.

I can't be so sure if it's to not kiss her or to kiss her, so I do what I do best. I crush my mouth against hers, taking what I want. What happens next surprises us both. A small squeal escaping between our lips has me stilling.

With our lips practically still connected, her eyes open to look at me.

"Do you regret it?" she asks.

What kind of question is that? Who is this girl? She's delicate in the worst kind of way. At this point, most girls would be dropping their panties for me, offering themselves on a silver platter. She's asking if I regret a meaningless kiss.

"You've never kissed anyone, have you?" I ask. She shakes her head in answer. I pull away, grab her hand like it's second nature, and drag her up the steps.

I'm on the second floor with a single room. There's no way in hell I was going to be sharing a dorm with another guy. A guy needs his space and right now, I'm particularly happy that I'm connected enough to have it.

I unlock my door and gesture for Liliana to enter. She does with slow steps, taking in the space like a piece of art in a museum.

"Can I be honest with you?" I ask her, shutting the door behind us, pressing on the lock to secure us inside.

"I'd prefer it."

“I can’t stop imagining wrapping my hand around your hair, tugging it hard, and fucking you from behind.”

“Maybe not so much honesty.”

“I’m going to. I’m a boy who gets what he wants, Liliana, but knowing that you’ve never kissed anyone before that poor excuse for one downstairs, so…” my thoughts trail off.

“It was nice.” She touches her lips, clearly reliving it in her head.

“Nice isn’t good enough. Nice is kissing a boy at summer camp and giggling as you run away. A kiss should make you wet between those pretty thighs of yours. A kiss should make you feel out of control.”

“I’ve never felt that way.”

“Would you like to?” I ask. She nods her head in approval. She does that a lot when she’s too afraid to speak her wants out loud. “That’s a good girl.” The blush on her cheeks makes me hard, which I don’t understand. “You like that, don’t you, when I call you that?”

I’m typically repelled by the innocent acts, but hers isn’t one of them. This is who she is. Sweet and untouched.

That won’t be true for long, if I have any say in it.

“I don’t understand it.”

“If I were to guess, it’s because you love the idea of actually being a well put together, rule following girl, but deep down, there’s parts of you, like here”— I graze my finger over her lips— “and here”— I move them lower, touching the buttons of her sweater until they’re down by her waist band— “that are yearning to be a little reckless.”

“Teach me,” she whispers. “Show me.”

Wait! What? Did she just ask me what I think she did?

My face must show my shock. Her angelic eyes glisten with embarrassment. She tries to turn away from me, but I won’t allow it.

“You already did the hard part.” I smile, hoping to put her at ease. “You asked.”

“I doubt that’s the hardest part.”

I grab her hand and put it on the front of my pants. Her stiff hand is quick to loosen up, earning a genuine smile from me. “No, you’re probably right. The hard part will be pushing pass those walls you’ve protected this far. That kind of pain, I’ll prove is delicious.”

Panic echoes through the room. I guide her over to the bed, hating that her hand drops from my cock, but knowing damn well the buildup to being between her legs will be just as enjoyable.

“I’m not going to fuck you tonight. When my cock finally gets to feel your walls clench around me, I don’t want you scared. I want you present, looking me in the eyes.”

Her mouth opens and closes like she doesn’t know what to say. She startles when the back of her legs hit the mattress. The way she clutches the material of her sweater is cute. *Cute?* What the fuck is wrong with me?

“Lay down,” I instruct.

“Townes.”

“You can say my name like a prayer all you want but trust me when I say this”—I lean forward, dropping my hands onto the mattress to cage her in—
“prayer will not save you from me.”

CHAPTER 4

LILIANA

THE AIR in my lungs is brutally stolen from Townes' closeness. I lean back, hoping to force some distance. He matches me, not allowing such a thing.

My eyes shift to my lap. What am I looking for? There're parts of me that don't want him to stop, too curious to find out what his plan is. He doesn't seem to care that I'm a virgin, untouched and unexperienced. In fact, that seems to turn him on more.

Am I capable of such things? Is there anything about me that's desirable? Or am I another boy's conquest? I witnessed girls at my old school fall for far less than what Townes is doing, and, in the end, they ended up being another notch in a bed post.

"What are you thinking about?" Townes asks. His breath hits my cheek when I lift my chin to gaze into his unbelievably gorgeous eyes.

What do I have to lose? I'm innocent. No one could hold it against me.

"Is someone like me capable of..." my words trail off, too afraid to hear them come from my own mouth.

"Don't be shy. It's just us here," he encourages.

"Can someone like me really do anything for someone like you?" The question is more honest than I would prefer to be.

Being around Townes Kerrington is proving to be a problem. I've never been curious, choosing to put my focus on school and refusing to be derailed

by some boy.

“No one’s ever told you, have they?”

“Told me what?”

“There’s something pure about the way you look at me. It’s not something I’ve ever experienced. Your innocence is sexy and if you’re asking if a girl like you could bring me to my knees, then the answer is yes.”

Right before my eyes, Townes kneels in front of me. My legs are spread enough for him to settle into the space. His hands slide from the mattress onto my hips, holding me in place. I couldn’t bolt if I wanted to. My legs are thousands of pounds, grounding me in place.

“What now?” I ask, not truly knowing what I’m asking for.

“I’m going to need you to trust me. Can you do that?” he asks and all I do is nod my head, blindly. “Good girl.”

Why do I like it so much when he says that to me? My center clenches at the thought, forcing me to pay far too close attention to my body and its reaction to him.

“Lay down,” he demands.

I do as he says with no reluctance. By the way he smiles at me, I’d say he’s pleased with my obedience. My hands extend above my head, move to my side, and then finally land on my stomach. I’m too nervous to look at him, unsure of what he plans to do next. Instead, my eyes stay locked on the ceiling. *Townes Kerrington’s ceiling.*

His touch is soft at first as it moves onto my knees and makes its way up my thighs, painfully slow and intentional with the way his hands spread out, taking up as much space on my skin as possible. As if he can’t fathom not touching all of me at once.

“Breath, baby.” His hands move my skirt up just enough. I feel his hands on the waist band of my panties, but they pause, lingering in that spot for several of my shallow breaths. “Can I?” The question sounds foreign and polite coming from his mouth. I suspect he doesn’t usually have to ask for

permission.

For whatever reason, my hips lift, inviting him to continue. The material is guided down my legs. I'm vulnerable, naked under my school uniform.

What am I doing? Who am I right now? This isn't the girl that volunteers over spring break instead of partying. This isn't the girl who looked me in the mirror this morning. That version of me is long gone. I wonder if she'll ever come back.

Panic starts to settle in, and I go to sit up, but his hand presses on my chest. "I said, I need you to trust me."

"I'm not going to lose my virginity to some playboy who thinks he can have whatever and whoever he wants."

"Not planning on taking your virginity, remember?"

"What are you doing then?"

"There's other things I can do to drive this perfect body crazy." He flips my skirt up and when I sit up again to protest, he pushes me back down. "Let me make you come undone."

With authority, Townes scoops one of my legs up, tossing it over his shoulder, exposing my body further.

"Such a pretty cunt." There's admiration within his abrasiveness I don't expect to hear. "I don't care what kind of pep talk you have to give yourself to be on board with what I'm about to do to your body but start it in your head now."

"What are you going—" The question isn't out of my mouth when I feel his finger tracing along my center.

His fingers are soft, creating more of a tickle than anything. He hits a spot that causes my body to buck involuntarily. A low, gruff chuckle comes from him. He does it again, clearly finding my reaction amusing.

"You're responsive," he admires, lifting his head. "Have you ever touched yourself?"

I cover my face, completely mortified by what's happening. I shake my

head in answer.

His fingers slip away, and he reaches for my hand. “Let me show you.”

“Absolutely not.”

He must stand up because his hand wraps around my fingers, guiding them to the place he was touching seconds before.

“Don’t think about it. You already know what you want. It’s natural, so show me how you want to be touched.” I drop my other hand that shields my eyes and find him backing away from me. His back hits the wall across from the bed, but his eyes are only on one part of me. He tips his chin forward, encouraging me to continue. “No one else knows your body better than you do, Liliana.”

This is wrong. I shouldn’t be doing this. Good girls don’t masturbate. Good girls don’t give into their every urge. Good girls do the right thing.

So, why do I want to do all the things *they’ve* deemed bad with Townes? What is it about him that has me throwing all my inhibition to the curb?

I lift my leg up, dropping my knee just enough to give myself room. My finger starts where his last touched, moving in small circles. My head falls back as my momentum builds.

“Look at me, Lil,” Townes requests.

I shift, searching the space for him. My breath hitches when my vision focuses, and I see him. His school uniform pants are low on his hips and his penis is in his hand. It’s hard, long, and veiny. His hand strokes himself, working up and down as he watches me.

“You’re wet.” He grimaces, but not from pain. It’s all pleasure on his face. “Touch lower, coat your finger and then run it over your clit.”

I do as he says, following his instructions to a tee. He’s not wrong. I find myself warm and wet.

“Fuck! You’re so fucking hot like this.”

Does he mean that? I want to believe him and by the way his eyes are widening as he touches himself, watching me, it’s hard not to.

“Are you going to come?” I ask. The word sounds foreign coming from my lips. Vulgar, even. I don’t even know where that came from.

“Yes,” he answers, buckling at his knees. His face contorts with what I can only assume is pleasure. I watch as his hand gets covered with his arousal. He walks over to me, his dick still out, but not as hard as before. “Open up.”

“What? Why?” I ask.

Townes’ finger runs along my bottom lip before plunging into my mouth. It hits my tongue and I’m instantly intruded by a salty taste. My lips close around his finger, and he pulls it out with an audible *pop*.

“Next time you taste my cum, it will be when my cocks hitting the back of your throat.” He pulls his pants up before dropping a knee on the bed. “Let me.” His hand replaces mine. “Lay back, close your eyes, and relax.”

Why do I keep following his instructions? I’m pliable, completely at his will.

“Obedient, just like daddy likes you, right?” This time his finger doesn’t stay on the outside. I feel it spreading me wider and hitting the walls within me. It’s only one, but it’s enough to stretch me. “So tight.”

“A sinful act can’t feel this good, can it?” I say out loud, officially incapable of keeping my words to myself.

“Stick with me, and I’ll show you just how good it can feel.” He pushes deeper “You feel that? To you, when I touch it like this”— his finger grinds against my wall— “it makes you want to go crazy, almost too good to comprehend, but to me it feels rough against my finger. That’s how I know I hit the right spot. I could work this spot until your walls clench around me.”

“You aren’t going to, are you?” I ask as his finger releases from the spot, sliding out of me.

“You’re a quick learner.” He grins at me, and I can’t help but match his enthusiasm. He’s finding nothing but joy tormenting me.

When he shifts, I visibly cringe at myself and my body’s reaction to him.

There's a rustling sound and when he turns back to me, he has a sleek black thing in his hand. It's thick in diameter, but long.

"What is that?" I bite my lip, trying to convince myself that I'm still awake and not dreaming.

"Give me your hand." I offer it to him, and he places the thing in my hand. The outside of it is smooth. He pushes a button, and it starts to vibrate against my skin. I pull back, but he yanks my hand back, continuing with it along each of my fingers before moving it down to my wrist. He slips it down my arm, moving it along my collarbone. His eyes don't leave mine as he explores my body with the wand.

"It's my muscle massager," he finally says as it touches the end to my breast, tickling my nipple and moving to the other. "After a workout, I use it on certain muscles to work out the knots."

"I bet it helps," I say, unsure of what else I'm meant to say right now. All my brain capacity is being used to track the massager moving down my body.

"You're awfully tense." The massager stops at the hem of my skirt that's fallen back into place partially.

"I am?"

"You are. What are we going to do about that?" He falls back to his knees in front of me, placing his hand on each one of my knees. "Open up for me, baby." Once again, I do as he says. "That's my girl."

His head dips low between my legs and something happens I'd never be expecting or ready for. His wet tongue runs along my opening. It's different but a welcomed kind of different. His tongue is joined by the low buzz of the massager. He grazes it against my clit and my body jolts in pleasure.

"You like that?" Townes lifts his head, grinning at me.

He moves the massager down, teasing my entrance. Heat floods my face. It's fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of pleasure, if I'm being truly honest with myself.

"Trust me," he whispers.

At the command, I cover my eyes with my forearm, placing faith in a boy I know nothing about, other than the way he makes me feel, which is alive. Something I hadn't been so sure is possible until this moment, I feel free and out of control.

He pushes the massager deeper in, but still shallow enough that it doesn't hurt. The vibration sends these small bursts of pleasure and I know he won't find much resistance if he dares to push it further.

"Are you okay?" Townes pulls my arm away from my eyes, flooding my vision with the light from his bedside table.

I blink slowly, taking him in. His blonde, shaggy hair falls in his face as he leans over me. He retreats the massager, only to push it further. It goes easily, now coated in my arousal.

"Oh my god!" I whisper.

"Now, imagine what my cock will feel like."

"Am I still..."

"A virgin?" He grins. "Yes."

"What about?" I lift onto my elbows, bringing us closer together as I watch him move the massager in and out of me, delicately dancing it around the spot that makes my toes curl.

I've been taught literally nothing about sex, outside of it's meant only to happen within a marriage. Laying down for your husband is the only sex ed I've gotten.

No one has told me that sex can be beautiful. Looking at Townes, his hooded eyes as he enjoys pleasuring me is a sight to be seen.

"Consider this group masturbation." He grins, lowering his lips over mine.

The kiss is harsh. He devours my mouth, hitting my tongue with his with such force, the breath is stolen from my lungs. While he continues to pleasure me with his massager, he uses his free hand to grab my face, holding me to him.

As he kisses me, he moves the massager faster. A deep pit hits my stomach. Like a pressure cooker, slowly building up steam, I'm overcome by every one of my senses going into overdrive, until I see nothing but stars, and everything goes black.

Townes lips release me and my eyes flutter open.

"What was that?" I ask.

"That is what we normal teenagers call an orgasm." He waves the massager in front of me. "There's plenty more of those waiting for you, if you want them."

"I've never felt more..."

"Uninhibited? Powerful?"

"Out of control and yet, in control."

"That's called taking charge of your own life, Liliana. You should try it sometime." He drops the massager onto the bedside table. "You're so innocent, it's almost shocking."

"I can't tell if that's a compliment or not."

He bends down and grabs my underwear off the floor, handing them to me. Once my grip is tightened around them, he tugs them to his chest, bringing me closer to him. He kisses me, quickly. Too fast.

"I'm not sure yet," he answers.

I'm not sure if I'm looking for him to put me at ease for what happened just now or what I'm searching for, but that isn't it.

I shyly step into my underwear, pulling them up as he buckles his pants into place. He's relaxed, and unphased. It's because he's done this before, far more experienced than I. Where this feels monumental for me, he thinks of this as a normal weeknight.

When our eyes lock in the middle of dressing, he steps towards me, cupping my face in his hands. "Don't think too hard. What just happened, it's natural. Normal. You won't go to hell for playing around."

"You must look at me and only see the church going, *obedient* girl." My

eyes shift down at my bare feet. When did I lose my shoes?

“I don’t care if you go to church. You want to read the bible while I eat you like my favorite ice cream cone, be my guest.” He drops his lips to my forehead, contradicting the vulgar things he says with a dose of sweetness. “You have one thing right. I do see an obedient, good girl. It’s my favorite thing about you, the way you follow my instructions blindly. You hand over your power to me, certain I’ll deliver an experience you won’t be repulsed by when I’m done with your perfect body. I could get use to that.”

His words, the way he speaks about me, so openly to my face, unafraid of my reaction is intoxicating. I could stand in front of him, listening to this version of me he’s conjured up in his head. Most of its true. I’m putty in his hands. Pliable and submissive.

“Probably should go,” I say, turning away to head for the door.

“Never took you for the *love em’ and leave em’* type, Liliana.”

“I don’t know what type I am.”

“I’m banking on that to be true.”

I can feel his eyes on me as I grab the door handle.

“Oh, and Liliana, wear your plaid skirt on Friday,” he adds before I close the door.

CHAPTER 5

TOWNES

INNOCENCE.

What does that mean? To me, it doesn't mean much. I haven't been innocent since birth, choosing a path of destruction mostly for my own entertainment.

To her, the word means everything.

She links her purity with some sort of social standing and high horse bullshit. It pisses me off and maybe that's why I've agreed to the bet with Nathan and Hunter. We've been tackling girls since freshman year. It started out as innocent games, but it turned sinister quickly.

Some would call us *bored, rich kids*. That part is true. Nathan and Hunter are cut from the same cloth as me. Our friendship built on mutual destruction. We have each other's backs, always, without question, but we also aren't afraid to turn the knife in each other's back for our own amusement.

That's why when little miss purity ring stumbled onto campus, practically clutching her beloved family bible to her chest, they saw an opportunity. They didn't think I could do it. What they didn't foresee happening is me finding myself curious about the girl. No one holds my attention for longer than a sloppy blowjob.

I played it off like I wanted to break her for free, choosing to pay them their winnings before I even go to stick my dick in the girl.

But she fucked it all up.

She came easy.

I'm certain she would have let me fuck her. It could have been so simple, splitting her in two for the first time.

Instead, I used my muscle massager. It's not as thick as me, but it gave her a preview of what sex could be like. She needed it, too tightly wound, aching for the relief of an orgasm.

By the way she's looking at me now, I'd say she hasn't stopped thinking about it.

"Doesn't this scream *Cruel Intentions* all too much to you?" Holland plops down next to me in the library.

"Sure, except I don't have a hot stepsister I want to fuck, and I don't plan on dying in the end." I wink at her, earning myself a glare. "Don't you have other friends?" I glance around her to see I've lost Liliana's attention to her book.

"What are you going to do to her?"

"She's not your friend, so don't worry about it."

"She could be." Holland shrugs. "I like her. She's kind to me and she's one of the few people who don't treat me like a fragile glass flower."

"She doesn't know what happened. That's why."

"Better reason as to why I should befriend her."

"Not going to happen."

"And why not?"

I stand, tucking my books into my bag and lean on the table. "Because once I'm done with her, she won't be able to look at you without seeing me. Once I'm done with her, she'll leave this place and me, never to look back."

"You do this, you know? When a girl sparks a bit of your attention, you make sure she bails on you."

"This conversation is boring me." I wrap the strap of my bag around my hand, tossing it over my shoulder. "Mind your business and let me have my

fun.”

“It’s going to get old.”

“What is?”

“Being full of malice.”

“I am who I am. Stop trying to make me a better person. I’m dark where you’re light.”

I walk across the library, dropping my bag on one of the armchairs. Between the stacks, I catch Liliana ducking between aisles in search for another one of her books I’ve seen her with, most likely.

“Are you following me?” her voice says from somewhere. I turn around, hoping to see her there, but she’s not. “Psst, I’m over here.” Through the stacks, Liliana’s face pops up between a line of books. She smiles.

“Care to come over to my side?” I tilt my head.

“I think I’ll stay here for now. Probably safer.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” I shift a cluster of books on the shelf below, exposing her hips to me. I bend down to see what I’m working with and smile to myself. “Plaid skirt.” When I stand, she rolls her eyes.

“My back-up skirts are at the dry cleaners,” she explains.

“Whatever you need to tell yourself to sleep at night, sweetheart.” I reach through the small opening and reach under her skirt. She backs away with a loud yelp. “Not so fast.” I grab ahold of her school issue navy blue cardigan, tugging her chest flat against the bookshelf.

“What are you doing?”

“Call it research.” I release her sweater when I know she won’t bolt. “I’ve been thinking about you. Mostly about the way you opened these for me.” I graze my hand along the inside of her thighs.

I haven’t spoken to Liliana since Monday. It was on purpose, and for my own mental survival. She’s the kind of girl that could burrow into my thoughts. I have a plan and I won’t let her sweet, doe eyes distract me from that.

“Townes, someone may see us,” she whispers.

Is she afraid of what I’ll do next or of just getting caught by one of our classmates?

“Have you been thinking about it?” I dip my hand into her panties, slowly moving lower until my fingers touch her center.

“How could I not?” Her eyes flutter shut. Her hand grabs ahold of the edge of shelf, bracing herself.

“Do you feel shame for what happened?” I run a slow circle around her clit before teasing her entrance.

“No.”

“You’re wet.” I slowly press into her tight pussy, massaging her walls with my finger.

Feeling her against me, in the place that we are, has my cock throbbing. What I could do to this girl’s body. There’d be no remorse for the vile things I could dream up to experience with her.

“Don’t be crude.” She captures her moan by pressing her mouth against her arm. It doesn’t shield her arousal though.

“You’re the one letting me finger you in the library, Liliana.” I continue to work her body, moving my fingers in and out. “Do you want to come?” She nods her head, frantically, hoping I’ll give her what her body needs.

I pull my fingers out to her surprise, stepping back to take her in. Unsatisfied and wanting. Her eyes widen, tracking my fingers as I move them up to my mouth. I suck them into my mouth, tasting her.

“I thought...” her words get lost between us.

I walk to the side Liliana is standing on and wrap my hand around her waist to pull her close. When my mouth is against her ear, her knees go weak, and she becomes soft in my arms.

“You may not be a whore, but you’ll be *my* whore. Only for me,” I whisper, not kissing her temple, but pressing my lips there as I press past her. “And only when I say so.” I reach into my backpack and slap the massager

onto the shelf. “For now, you can go fuck yourself.”

I walk out of the library, a surprising lightness to my step. Tormenting Liliana is starting to be the favorite part of my day. There may not be anything on this planet that could bring me more joy. That realization alone is enough to tell me I should end the charades now before it’s too late.

She’s nobody, means nothing to me. I don’t think I’m done with her just yet though.

Where would the fun in that be?

The library doors behind me rattle. *No, it can’t be.* There’s no way that Liliana is chasing after me. Only an angry person could crash through a door like that. One quick glance proves I’m wrong about this girl after all.

“What the hell is going on?” she yells at me.

“Oh, princess purity has a dirty mouth.” I spin to face her but continue to walk backwards. “Better watch that mouth of yours. Someone may hear you.”

“Will you please stop?”

“Since you said *please.*”

Once she’s right in front of me, I see it in her eyes. She’s hurt. Good. I don’t need her thinking this is more than what it is.

“Are you emotionally stunted or something?” Her head shakes slowly as if she’s trying to figure out the puzzle that is Townes Kerrington.

“Possibly.” I flash her a grin.

“Do you take anything serious, ever?” Liliana smacks my chest, and I trap her hand in mine, pressing it against my chest. Where her anger once was, it’s now replaced with a playful smile. “I kind of hate you right now. Why can’t I be mad at you?”

“Give it time.” I start to walk. She follows beside me, just as I had hoped.

We walk in silence through campus. People watch us, most with questioning glances. There’s no wonder why. We don’t exactly look like we

belong together. I watch her out of the corner of my eye the entire way to the gym. Her eyes take in every little thing most of us would take for granted. She's fine with the silence and that's something I can appreciate.

My phone dings in my pocket. I pull it out, reading the text.

"I'm going to go." Liliana points her thumb over her shoulder before politely stepping away.

"Do you know what class Holland is in right now?"

"She was at the library, remember?"

"No, I know, but she doesn't have free period right now like we do. Hers is in the morning. She would have been late, but she wouldn't miss class."

"Are you okay?" Liliana bends down to look me in the eyes.

My head is tucked low, still looking at my screen.

"I need to find her. Now," I say louder than I intended.

Panic starts to settle in. I haven't felt this way since last year when everything happened.

"Take a deep breath. I can help you find her."

With no questions asked, Liliana leads me through campus. I frantically call Holland's cell phone, but it goes straight to her voicemail.

"Dammit," I yell, squeezing my phone until I feel my case start to bend.

"Wait here," Liliana insists.

I watch her walk inside the building. Five minutes later she comes out.

"She's in geometry," she announces. "Let's go." Her hand extends out to me, and I take it easily. "I don't know what's going on, Townes, but whatever it is, I hope everything is okay."

My ears ring as panic starts to rear its ugly head. My heart beats frantically in my chest, imagining all the worst-case scenarios in my head.

Following behind Liliana, she guides me to the math building. Once we are at the front steps, my eyes search the area. If what I read is true, there's no way she went in there.

"Let's go," Liliana calls out. When did she walk up the steps? She waves

me forward. "We'll find her."

Liliana pulls open the door and I sneak in past her, searching the first floor, peeking into the rooms to only end up empty handed.

"I'll check the bathroom." She pulls open the door and her eyes flick back to me. She pulls the door open further, exposing the inside of the bathroom.

There, on the floor, lays my sister. I rush to her, falling to the floor beside her. I lay flat on my stomach, brushing her sweat soaked hair from her face.

"You're okay, Hol. I promise you're okay," I whisper. "No one is going to hurt you."

"Don't you get it? They already have. You can't break a broken vase twice," my sister whispers through her cries.

I could swoop her up into my arms, carry her back to the dorms, but that's not what she needs. Instead, I continue to lay here with her, allowing her to feel what she needs to feel.

She's the only person in this world that I soften for. When she hurts, I feel the unrelenting pain. When she's happy, I can sense it. She hasn't been more than miserable for a long time. The world doesn't deserve her gentleness. She's good in a world full of hatred.

"Why does it have to hurt so bad? Why me?" Holland asks. Her cries break me open further.

I wish I had an answer for her, but I don't.

"People destroy beautiful things because they can't handle being amongst them. It only brings out their ugliness, Hol," I finally say.

A snuffle brings me back to reality, only bringing more anger. I glance over my shoulder and glare at a crying Liliana.

"Don't cry for her. You don't know us." Everything Liliana represents has my eyes burning with anger. "You can go now."

"Townes..." Liliana's hurt is evident.

"You aren't my girlfriend. You aren't even my friend, Liliana. You are dismissed," I say stonily, turning my full attention back to my sister.

The door opens and shuts behind me. I don't make a point to look back. The clicking of the door latching echoes in my ear.

For an hour, we lay on the floor. No words are spoken. Holland closes her eyes, small cries coming from her chest as she tries to keep it in.

I sit up, pushing my back against the tiled wall and pull my knees tight against my chest. Holland follows me. Her eyes are rimmed with red and her cheeks flush from crying.

"Are you okay?" I ask. It's a stupid question, but I don't know what else to do.

"I don't think I'll ever be okay," she says honestly. I hate this for her. "Why now? Why after all this time is someone bringing it up?"

"The better question is who posted it." I stand, dusting off my school uniform. I reach my hand out and she happily takes it for me to pull her to her feet. "I plan on finding out."

"What good will it do?" She walks to the sink to splash cold water on her face. Her eyes catch mine in the mirror. "Don't get into trouble for me. What happened is no secret. So, what if someone posted about it on their stupid blog. It's nothing they haven't already heard about."

"Will you quit talking about it like it's not a big deal?" I kick the stall door, rattling its hinges. "What they did to you, how they left you, it will never not be a big deal. I couldn't even protect you. I was there, in the house when they did what they did, and I was none the wiser, too busy screwing my next conquest."

"What happened wasn't your fault." She spins around, leaning on the sink. Her arms cross in front of her, a lame excuse for a shield. Nothing will protect her from what they did. She'll carry that shit with her forever.

"I didn't sit back and let it happen. You're right about that, but I should have known better to let you go to that party."

"Because group rape typically happens on this campus? Come on, Townes. You and I both know that isn't true. They targeted me. I was the

naïve girl who thought the upperclassman actually liked me.”

“I would have killed them”—I close my eyes— “had I known that night.” My head shakes, overcome with anger.

“And if you had, I would have lost a lot more that night and in this world, it’s you and me. That’s all we have.” She invades my space, and I don’t hesitate to take her in my arms. “Thank you for coming to find me.”

“Always.” I kiss the top of her head like a parent would a child in pain.

I walk her through campus. Eyes discreetly watch us, and I make a point to look them in the eyes. They all glance away, ashamed for entertaining the latest stunt to take down the Kerrington twins. That’s what happens when you are on top. There is always someone willing to do anything to take your place.

“I’ll bring you dinner,” I say, handing her the remote to her TV.

“I’m okay. I promise.” She gives me a sad smile.

I walk to the door, ready to kill someone once I shut her inside.

“I’ll have tacos, if you’re taking requests,” Holland calls out. “And if you see Liliana, tell her I can’t meet her for dinner. I don’t have her number.”

“You’ve been talking with her?”

“Yeah, sometimes when we run into each other between classes. She’s really sweet.” Holland sinks down into her bed, pulling the blankets tight to her chin, looking smaller than she is. “She doesn’t look at me as if I’m broken like the rest of you.”

“I’ll tell her,” I lie.

I shut my sister in her dorm and slam my back against the wall outside her room. Thirty seconds is all I give myself to have a pity party. What’s done is done. I can’t go back in time and fix it for Holland. There’s no reason to dwell on it. She’s getting the help she needs and continues to thrive, despite the chaos those guys put into her life. The girl is stronger than most, refusing to hide from what happened.

I had tried to convince her to switch schools, to get as far away from here

as possible. That had been for selfish reasons, too afraid what everyone would think. The thought of everyone's eyes being on us drove me nuts.

I'm glad she's stronger than I gave her credit for, and she decided to stay.

She's spent the last year, keeping to herself, much to my doing. I wanted to put a protective bubble around her, to shield her from any judgement. Everyone heeded my warning, staying away.

Everyone but *her*.

Liliana didn't know anything about what happened at that party last year, completely in the dark about our secrets. She befriended my sister.

I don't know why that makes me angry. It's too deep in my psyche, too many buried emotions to understand. I won't even begin to try.

Instead, I'll do what I do best.

You're full of malice. My sister's words play in my head.

Malice helps build walls, and I'm on my last row of bricks before I'm completely hidden from the world and a particular pair of blue eyes.

CHAPTER 6

LILIANA

“ARE we all done hiding out now?” Jade sits down on the bench beside me.

I’ve spent the last week playing a harsh game of avoidance. She found me in the dorm, crying on my bed, after Townes showed his true colors. I told her everything, pushing away my own embarrassment simply because I didn’t want to live it alone. She sat on the end of my bed, listening kindly, like a true friend. She didn’t judge me and allowed me to feel what I needed to feel.

After that day, I stopped talking about it, choosing to move forward. I got lucky with not having one run in with Townes. No one paid me any attention, which makes me believe he hasn’t told anyone.

I’m not the same person though, no matter how much I’m trying to be. Everything about me feels different. A cardigan that I once wore like a badge of honor feels like a strait jacket. It no longer is the symbol for purity and innocence. He tainted parts of me I will never be able to wipe clean.

The only good thing about this campus right now is its immensity. It makes it easy to not run into him, on purpose.

Jade clears her throat, forcing me to look up from my book. I silently ask her what the problem is. She nudges her head to the side and walking up the sidewalk is Holland. Once she’s in front of me, remorse and sadness etched onto her hollow features, parts of me melt for her.

“I’m going to head to the cafeteria. Save you a spot?” Jade asks, hiking her backpack up on her shoulder.

“I don’t think so.”

“If you aren’t going in there because of my brother, I can tell you he won’t be there today,” Holland says, offering a wave and a tight smile for Jade as she walks backwards away from us.

“I’ll be there in a few minutes,” I call out.

Holland sits beside me, her eyes on the cover of my book. “He did what he did to protect me.”

“Did he also send you out to talk to me?” I snip.

“No, actually. He doesn’t know I’m here.”

“What happened to you last year…” I start to say, stopping almost immediately, because there are no words.

“Was horrific. For a lot of us.” She entwines her fingers, releasing them, only to hold them tighter.

“I’m sorry for what they did. I know it’s some secret here on campus.”

“That was Townes’ idea.” She shrugs. “At the time, it felt right. If no one is talking about it, then it should be easy to forget.”

“I don’t think that’s the type of thing you can forget.”

“No, it’s not.”

“I’m going to go.” I stand, shoving my book in my bag.

Holland’s hand comes down over mine. “He’s protective of me. I’ve always come first. If he thinks someone may see some sort of weakness in us, he’ll push them away with little to no regard for them.”

“Clearly.”

“We could’ve been good friends, huh?” Holland smiles, but there’s nothing but sadness along the lines of her face.

“We still can be. Maybe.” I shrug.

“When my brother isn’t making you question your entire existence, right?” She laughs humorlessly, pushing off the bench and walking down the

pathway.

“Your brother...” I call out to Holland.

“He’ll be back tomorrow.” She shakes her head. “He can be a colossal asshole, Liliana, but deep down, buried under all that mess, there’s a kindness no one knows about.”

“I highly doubt that.” I smile, hoping not to show how I’m feeling. Like a heartbroken girl that’s been played, fooled by an attractive face and the idea of who he could be, but not who he is.

Walking to the cafeteria, I berate myself for being so childish. I fell for the temptation of Townes because he happened to show me a little bit of attention. My resolve hadn’t been as strong as I believe it to be and because of my weakness, I’m finding myself feeling more lost than ever.

My family is quite like most families with some apparent differences. They all want the same thing for their children. Safety and purpose. Where my family veers down a different path is they don’t want independence for their children. Obedience doesn’t end when you become an adult. There are expectations and strict guidelines to follow.

My cheeks burn with the thought of my parents finding out about my tryst with a boy like Townes Kerrington. He’s everything they hate about the world. *Reckless and unruly. Defiant and boundless.* All the things they would hate about him are the things that intrigue me most. He had no fear of approaching me, touching me, and I wonder how someone becomes to be like that.

“Distracted much?” Jade giggles, pointing at my tray. “You forgot the sauce on your pasta.”

I glance down at my tray and see what she means. My fettucine is missing the alfredo. I have a random pear and apple, along with a glass jar of iced tea, which I don’t particularly like all that much.

“You can say that.” I sit down, unscrew the lid on the tea. Jade reaches across the table and takes it, exchanging her orange juice with my mistake.

“Thanks.”

“What are you going to do?” she asks, looking at me over the pebble glass of her drink.

“I don’t need a plan. I’m going to go back to being me. Minding my own business and being the quiet girl that no one pays any attention to,” I explain, twirling my fork in the stack of dry noodles.

Jade stands and grabs my plate, disappearing from in front of me. With no energy to track her, I continue to stare forward, wondering if my plan is flawed. Can I go back to being invisible, knowing that I’ll see him around campus?

When she returns, she slides my plate back to me. The noodles are now covered in creamy sauce.

“You need to eat,” Jade says. “You’re going to need your energy.”

“For what?” I take a small bite, closing my eyes briefly as I enjoy the garlic flavors dancing on my tongue.

My eyes flutter open, far too aware of a body surrounding mine. On the table, two large hands flex against the wood top.

“Your back,” I say, turning my head just enough to come face to face with Townes.

“Miss me?” His minty breath hits my lips. It’s the cocky way he grins that upsets me.

Why am I not surprised that Townes Kerrington disappears for a week, only to return, and act as if he’s done no wrong?

“Please leave me alone,” I beg, shifting from his proximity. He makes me nervous, and I don’t like it, as if he could do anything he wants to me, and I’d have no control.

“I got you something.” He holds out the box. If it’s another present like his other one, I don’t want it. “Go ahead. Take it. Open it later. Consider it a peace offering.”

“Why should I?”

“I’ve been feeling a little bored around here.” He pushes my hair over one shoulder. “Unlucky for you, you’re the new shiny toy that’s caught my attention, and I plan on playing with you for a little while longer.” His lips drop to my neck. “Figured since you can’t wear that broach, you needed something else beautiful to call yours.”

I put all my force into pushing my chair back, not caring that it hits him square on the chest. The sound draws too much attention and I freeze.

“Your worst nightmare is happening,” Townes whispers in my ear. “They’re all looking at us. Noticing you.”

“Please, Townes. Let me put this all behind me.”

“I can’t have that happen, Liliana.” He shifts, shielding his mouth from onlookers. His tongue slips along my ear. “You are going to convince yourself that your purity is enough to hold strong against me, but we both know it’s not. You’re weak when it comes to me.”

“Why are you doing this? Why me?” I’ve convinced myself that I’m somehow special, but I know I’m not. Not to him. Overcome by this realization, I feel the tension release from my jaw. “I’m asking the wrong questions. This has nothing to do with me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This, what you are doing”—I hold up the box— “has absolutely nothing to do with me.” I turn into his arms, to come face to face with him. “This is about *you*. No one else, no matter how hard you try to convince yourself otherwise.”

Townes backs away from me, giving me space. He moves towards the door and with his hand on the knob, he glances over his shoulder to wink. “I love to watch angels fall, remember? And something tells me, you’re going to crash and burn right at my feet.”

Every muscle in my body is on fire. Unable to withstand the ache any longer, I plop down into my chair. An entire day could have passed by the time I notice Jade intently watching over me.

“What?” I shake my head, poorly shaking the fog from my brain.

“What was that all about?” Jade brushes her hand through the air. “All that energy between you two.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.” I shove the box in my backpack, refusing to open it here. My curiosity is lit on fire though. He knew it would be.

“All I’m going to say is that it’s no wonder you loosened the reigns on your chastity belt. If that’s the kind of energy Townes is serving up, no one can hold it against you.” Jade wags her eyebrows at me.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” I lie, pushing my tray of food away.

This is the last place I want to be. My skin starts to crawl, knowing others saw mine and Townes’ interaction. What could they possibly believe? If Jade noticed some sort of energy, then there’s no doubt others may, too.

I push out of the chair and bend down to grab my bag from the floor.

“If it’s any consolation, I grew up with Townes and I’ve never seen him like that, with anyone.”

“He isn’t any way with me.”

“Townes is a behind the doors kind of guy. It’s not a secret, but he never publicly shows interest.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because”— Jade shrugs— “My gut is telling me that as capable he is of hurting you, you may be just as capable of hurting him. Call it an intuition. I don’t know.”

“Are you telling me to forgive him?”

“Hell no. Boys like that need to learn sometimes the line to cross is much closer than they believe.”

“And you think I can teach him that?”

“What’s the worst that could happen from trying?” She slides my cold fettucine across the table to sit in front of where she sits. She spins a fork

through the noodles and takes a large bite. “Just think about it.”

What’s the worst that could happen? That’s the question I play in repeat in my head through my last two classes of the day. I barely listen as the teacher’s lecture and explain our upcoming course load.

After the final bell rings for the day, I pull my bag onto my shoulder and still in a fog, walk towards the door.

“Liliana, hold on a second,” Mr. Jackson calls out. Where he typically is laid back, his tone is tense.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, clutching my book to my chest.

“I planned on asking you the same thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve missed a few classes, and you just seem”— he glides his finger down my bare arm— “*distracted.*”

I flinch away and he notices. He should retreat. Any self-respectful adult would. Mr. Jackson doesn’t, choosing to hold his ground, all while leaning a little closer to me. His hand encompasses my elbow, not too tight but enough pressure to remind me of his presence.

“Mr. Jackson,” I say his name like a swear.

“If you need anything, *at all*, please reach out. I know how isolating this campus can be.”

“Please let me go,” I plead, pulling my arm away from him and backing away. I walk backwards, instinctively afraid to keep him in my blind spot.

Outside in the cool air, I try my hardest to regulate my breathing. What was that about? My stomach does somersaults at the way Mr. Jackson put his hand on me. It hadn’t been appropriate, that much I am certain of.

He isn’t the first grown-up to push a boundary. Men, especially those in certain circles, believe stature and wealth gain you access to all that you want. My mom has protected me for the most part. She could never stop the lingering glances as I matured or the way they’d comment on *how pretty of a young woman I’m becoming.* Those words never settled well in my soul.

Maybe that's why I could never imagine, no matter how hard my parents prayed, marrying into the circle. In our community, you don't linger too far out of those who are deemed respectful suiters.

Townes would never fit into their dreams for me.

Townes? The present...

My hands wrap around the smooth, navy blue paper covered box and pull it out. It's like a beacon, gleaming in the night, telling me to stop here. *Open me!* You know you want to know.

I should toss it in the garbage, but Jade's words won't let up on my conscious.

With little resistance, I rip open the package, tossing the paper into the garbage as I walk by. The black velvet box feels heavy in my hand. I pull it open and in front of me lays a gold chain. In its entirety it appears to be leaves all the way around it. It's the most beautiful thing my eyes have seen.

Why would he buy me this? I snap the lid shut and put it back into the safety of my bag. He may have called it a peace offering, but it feels much heavier than that.

I kick at the dirt, mad at myself, for allowing my thoughts to linger back to him. At this point, it's like I have no control over my own head and heart.

He had been right that first day. I'm intrigued and that kind of emotion is hard to deny.

I'm going to try though.

CHAPTER 7

TOWNES

“KERRINGTON,” Coach yells across the court. “You plan on waking the fuck up today or do I need to bench you before tonight’s game?”

I kick through my final sprints a little harder, catching up to the rest of the team.

“You good, man?” Hunter asks. “You’re distracted and on game day, you’re never distracted.”

I walk over to the bench and spray my water bottle into my mouth, wetting my tongue. All the sprints and drills we’ve been running have me exhausted. You’d think coach would know better to have us exerting all our energy, but I don’t get paid the big bucks to bitch and moan. I’m here to do a job and a damn good job will be delivered tonight, no matter how much shit the coach gives me leading up to that first buzzer.

“I’m good.” I toss my water bottle to the ground and grab a ball. Dribbling it between my legs, I get to the free throw line, shoot, and swoosh it into the net. Nathan grabs my rebound and tosses it back. I shift to the side and knock down another shot. I continue this, all the way around the free throw line.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with Miss Liliana Carter, does it?” Nathan questions, pulling my last rebound and serving it up to get an easy lay-up.

“Yeah, we saw you in the cafeteria yesterday, all cozied up to her,” Hunter adds, catching the ball. We are a well-oiled machine out on the court. Our movements are fluid, no one makes a move without the other anticipating what’s to come next.

The problem with that cohesiveness is that it trickles off the court, too. These two won’t let up because they know me. I’ve been avoiding their inquisition and badgering since I told them I’d break her for free. What they don’t know is I haven’t even begun to start. As far as they are concerned, I’m halfway to making the girl get down on her knees and pray to whatever God she has devoted her life to.

What they also don’t know is how I know she tastes so sweet and how easily she crumbles under my touch. Those are secrets I’ll be keeping for myself.

“Hardly,” I scoff, stealing the ball from Hunter. I stand at the foul line, toss the rock up with a spin and bounce it several times before I make the shot.

“So, what’s the plan then?” Nathan snags it midair.

“Let us in on it, at least.” Hunter grins like a cat that found a mouse in his house. He’s ready to bat it around.

“Not going to happen.” I grab a towel off the bench and dry the sweat from my face. With a high toss, I make it into the large laundry bin. I pity the person that must have that job. “I’ll see you guys in a bit. Got to go check on Holland before the game.” I wave at them over my shoulder.

“How is she doing?” Nathan asks, jogging up to walk beside me.

I glance over at him to see him messing with the hem of his shirt, like a nervous girl.

“Why do you ask?”

“Come on, man. Don’t make me say it.” He bats his hand at my stomach. “She’s your sister, but she’s also my friend.”

“Since when?” I still my feet and turn towards him. If he wants to have

this conversation, he's going to look me in the eyes when we do it. "I didn't see you at the hospital with her. Hell, did you even bother to call after it all went down?"

"It wasn't that simple."

"I sat beside her, watching that monitor beep, being the only proof that she wasn't taken from this earth because of those assholes." I shake my head, willing the numbness in my hands to go away by balling up my fist and releasing the tension. "So why now?"

I've always suspected Nathan has held a torch for Holland. Even when we were younger, he'd find a reason to stick his head into her bedroom, playfully teasing her. At first, it seemed like he only saw her as my little sister.

And then last year happened. Nathan is the kind of guy you want on your side in the middle of a fight, but that night, he went unhinged. He nearly beat one of the guys to death. That's when I knew. I've been waiting for him to grow the balls to tell me the truth. Hell, Holland may not want a single thing to do with him, but I think I deserve for him to be able to tell me if he has impure intentions for my sister.

Much like you do for Liliana.

Fuck! Sometimes those thoughts creep in out of nowhere.

"I can't do this shit right now." Nathan storms off in the opposite direction of where I stand. Today isn't the day that he finally owns up to the truth.

I may be partially to blame for that simple fact. My crew has a reputation. We are the love them and leave them type. There's no reason to get locked down. We're young and it's not like the person that's going to fundamentally rock our world is possibly walking amongst us the first four years of our first taste of freedom.

You fuck at academy. You do some seriously sadistic things at academy. What you don't do is fall in love.

I push through the doors and still, watching Holland walking up the steps with Liliana at her side. She hasn't spotted me yet, so I duck back inside. At the front desk, one of the attendants sits combing through a magazine.

"If my sister comes in here asking for me, you didn't see me," I instruct.

"You got it, boss." He waves two fingers in a salute as I hurry around the corner to hide in the locker room.

What the fuck is wrong with me? I sit down on the bench and cradle my head in my hands. After most of the guys clear out, I grab my phone and headphones. I need to get my head right. I swing my body around and lay down on the bench, pulling my gym bag under my head as a makeshift pillow.

Music plays loudly in my ears and is just the distraction I need before a game. I can't allow thoughts of Liliana distract me. She means nothing to me. She's a conquest, a hill to hike, an itch to scratch, and nothing more. What's important is proving why we are the number one seed in our area. My attention needs to be on the game and nothing else.

"Wake up, asshole," someone says over my music. My legs are kicked off the bench next.

I stand just as my entire team fills up the locker room. I must have fallen asleep.

"It's go time, boys," I say, swinging my uniform around over top of my head.

Once we are all dressed, we circle around in front of the locker room doors to do our usual thing. Nathan gives the before game speech, rallying us all together, and preparing us for the war we are about to walk into out on that court.

Shortridge Academy is our biggest rival. It doesn't matter if they are in a rebuilding year, we won't go easy on them. We hate each other. Always have and that shit isn't about to end any time soon. Tonight, we will be out for blood, just as I suspect they will be, too.

Our team is announced, and we jog in a single file around the gym to warm up, stopping under the furthest hoop from the entrance. We go through our routine, jumping up and touching the rim. Call it superstition, but it works. As we are warming up, my eyes scan the crowd.

Holland is standing near the bottom row of the bleachers at the student section. A girl wearing a Shortridge hoodie is chatting her ear off. They both look happy to see each other. Good because Holland needs more friends.

My eyes fall towards Holland's side and standing beside her is Liliana. She shifts back and forth on her feet, visibly uncomfortable. If I had to guess, my sister dragged her here. As if Holland can feel my thoughts, she glances onto the court, waving to me with a smile on her face. She knows exactly what she's doing.

Shortridge's team jogs past where they stand. Liliana's hair falls in her face, shielding her from most of their eyes. They'd never give her a second glance. She makes a big mistake though. Her chin lifts high as Cooper Stevenson waltzes by. His eyes zone in on her, and then shift to my sister.

I start to walk over there when he notices my presence. Typical. Always fucking concerned with me and mine. He meets me halfway at center court.

"Don't even think about it," I warn.

"Oh shit, you've got to be kidding me, Kerrington," Cooper laughs, glancing back over his shoulder to where Liliana sits. "That's her, the little virgin you..."

"Shut the fuck up." I slam both of my hands into his chest. The crowd doesn't miss the animosity, but no one steps in to ensure the conflict is squashed. "And mind your damn business."

"Is this for money or satisfaction?" he asks, fiddling with the drawstring of his shorts.

"Worry about getting your asses handed to you tonight. How about that?" I turn away, joining my team at the bench.

As coach gives his typical pep talk, I spot Cooper bending down to

whisper in Liliana's ear. *Fucking asshole.*

“Take it out on him on the court, kid,” Coach warns, smacking me on the shoulder as our starting lineup steps onto the court.

He's right and that's exactly what I'm going to do.

We hold strong for the first period. With only a few minutes left on the second period, we are up by ten points. I've made simple, stupid mistakes, and can own up to that much, but there's no way in hell I will allow that score of theirs to budge.

“You want to get in my shorts with me, Stevenson. You may as well at this point,” I say to Cooper as I bend low to get into my stance, following all of his moves as he dribbles down the court. “Have you seen the score board?”

“Liliana seems nice. Managed to chat with her for a minute before the game.” He grins, working his fancy footwork. “Not the biggest fan of yours though. Smart girl.”

He slips up in the middle of his shit talking and I steal the ball from him. With an open lane, I'm able to drill it straight to the hoop. The student section goes crazy. I jog backwards along the student section where Liliana is still sitting beside my sister. Around her neck, gold flickers under the lights above us. She's wearing it.

She can try her hardest, but she hasn't looked away from me the entire game. Maybe my little peace offering worked.

We finish the period strong, not allowing Shortridge any sort of advantage going into the second half. As we are walking back to the locker room, I spot Liliana walking back to the stands. Her eyes lock on mine and just as we are about to cross paths, I wrap my hand around her neck to push her backwards. Our bodies spin until her back hits the harsh metal of the bleachers.

Her hand wraps around my wrist, clawing at my grip, but I don't release her. Knowing your strength is key. What I'm doing isn't hurting her. It's

scarring her, just as I intended.

I press my lips against her now disheveled hair, right behind her ear, forcing her to hear me loud and clear. “You speak to Cooper Stevenson again, and I will make your life a living hell.”

“You don’t get to tell me who I can and cannot talk to,” she whimpers when my fingers dig a little deeper into her flesh. Her muscles flex under my palm.

“Don’t you get it?” I lower my hand from her throat and rest it flat against her collarbone, rubbing my pinky along her skin. “That’s exactly what I can do.” My eyes shift to her mouth, far too interested in feeling them against my own.

“Townes...” Why does my name sound so good coming from her mouth?

“Kiss me.” That’s my first mistake, asking this of her.

“Absolutely not.”

“I *need* you to kiss me.” That’s my second mistake. I’m showing my cards, revealing parts of me I don’t want her to see. It’s too late though.

Liliana’s lip’s part, her eyes shifting from my lips to my eyes. There’s a story being told between us that neither of us are willing to read. We stand, frozen, seeing who will turn the page first.

She does.

Her hands weave into my hair, pulling my face closer to hers. I allow her to do the work because I’m an asshole, unwilling to admit the truth. I want all the parts of her.

“Do it,” I whisper.

The kiss is soft at first, her taking full control of the situation. Her tongue begs for entrance at my mouth, and I can’t control the grin on face.

“Good girl.” I spin us again to shield us from the crowd walking by.

I bend down and cup the back of her legs. She happily jumps into my arms, and I press into her center, pushing her back against the wall. It’s warm with her body wrapped around mine, something I could get used to, but never

will allow myself. I haven't earned this affection.

She kisses me like I could change her world for the better and I take whatever I want. I hate myself for stealing this from her. Remorse isn't an emotion I put much stock into, but with her, it's complicated.

Liliana pulls away, breaking our kiss first. Desperate for a little more, I lean forward and kiss her one more time before she can wiggle out of my hands.

"You better go before you get in trouble." She smiles sweetly and I straighten her sweater that our tryst has disheveled. She turns away but spins back with no words coming from her open mouth. "Okay, I'm going to go." She turns away and starts to walk back to the stands.

"The necklace looks good," I holler back to her.

Her steps still and I watch as her hand reaches up to touch the gold leaves. She doesn't turn back around and I'm thankful for that. If she looks back, it means she's done fighting me on this and I don't think I'm fully ready for that.

I give myself a couple minutes to collect my thoughts. When I reach for the locker room door, it busts open with Nathan and Hunter, followed by Coach.

"Where were you?" Coach demands an answer.

"Sorry, Coach. A girl stumbled down the bleachers and I had to help her up," I lie, avoiding Coach's eyeline, while Hunter and Nathan keep me under watchful eyes. They know I'm full of shit.

Hunter's stare shifts and catches a glimpse of Liliana as she turns the corner. I don't say anything, but I make a mistake of rubbing my finger over my bottom lip, remembering her kiss. He shakes his head, clearly annoyed by whatever secret antics I'm pulling.

"Let's go, boys!" Coach pushes past us.

"You know, if you're into her, you can just say so," Hunter says as he walks by me.

“It’s not like that,” I lie again.

We walk out onto the court, ready to start the second half. Hunter won’t stop staring over where Holland and Liliana are sitting.

“If you aren’t interested in her, maybe I’ll try bloodying the sheets up with her,” Hunter says, walking to center court.

I lunge at him, but Nathan catches me before I can get my hands on him. He has me locked up, debilitated.

“Let me go,” I yell, gaining the attention of everyone in the gymnasium.

“Calm the fuck down,” Nathan says, pushing me backward.

Liliana’s face is etched with worry as she watches the altercation.

“What’s the problem, T.K.? Worried someone else may beat you to it?” Hunter goads me, knowing damn well what he’s doing.

“Shut the fuck up!” Nathan points at Hunter, forcing him to step back.

“I don’t know what game he’s trying to play, but he won’t win,” I say to Nathan as he continues to push me away from Hunter.

“Let’s finish this game and then I’ll let you kill him, but if you keep this up, you’ll get kicked off the court.” Nathan is always the voice of reason and I know he’s right.

“Trouble in paradise?” Cooper slips into the conversation, resting his hand on my shoulder.

I smack his hand off me. “Fuck off.”

The buzzer echoes through the gym and the energy of the second half buzzes in the air.

For the rest of the game, I try to forget the way Liliana’s lips felt against mine or how when she laughs at something Holland says her head falls back, exposing her neck. Thinking about her won’t get me anywhere, so I do what I do best. I lock those parts of her away.

It works.

For a little while at least.

That is until I see her sneaking away before I get the chance to talk to her.

She's through the crowd before I can finish celebrating with the team. Her putting distance between us is for the best. Except, I've never been good at denying myself the things that I want.

And dammit, if her giving in to kissing me tonight didn't make me want her that much more.

CHAPTER 8

LILIANA

THE FINAL BUZZER blares through the gymnasium, sending the crowd into a frenzy. Silverwood Academy has beat Shortridge and by the energy in the room, this is a big deal.

At my previous school, I never went to sporting events, too busy with other extracurricular activities and if I'm being honest with myself, I had no one to go with. That's why when Holland came knocking on my door earlier, I couldn't say no. It seems both Kerrington siblings have a way with words. After our last encounter, I could see she meant what she said, believing we could be real friends.

Holland could have easily taken our last interaction as a sign to give me space. Instead, she showed up at my dorm, refusing no for an answer. I had been reluctant, considering seeing Townes would be inevitable, but I'm learning I can't hide from things that challenge me.

Townes and his teammates cheer and bounce up and down in celebration. He looks so carefree, less serious out there on the court. This must be his place, where nothing can infiltrate and take away the joy.

I tell Holland I'm going to head out. She gives me a sympathetic smile but doesn't try to argue with me to stay. I disappear into the crowd as we all work our way out of the gymnasium.

Instead of heading straight for the dorms, I walk through campus,

choosing to take the long way. Sometimes nothing helps clear my head more than breathing in the fresh air.

Since coming to Silverwood Academy, I've learned quite a bit about myself. I'm not the same girl I was that first day my parents dropped me off. In her place, there's a girl that's screaming under water, but no one can hear me. I'm struggling with who I think I am and who I'm being.

I don't know how long I walk for, but by the time I look around, the streetlamps smartly placed all over campus are on. It's dark, so I pull out my phone and see it's almost eleven.

"Crap," I whisper to myself.

I walk through campus, fully prepared to hide away in my dorm room once I get there for the rest of the weekend. There's no way I could face Townes after showing up wearing the necklace. I may as well have worn a sign that said, "I'm yours for the taking".

My pace quickens, far too aware of how alone I am out here.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" someone says.

I glance over my shoulder to see Nathan. My body hits a hard but forgiving wall, knocking me backward. A hand wraps around my elbow, catching my fall. I correct my footing and step away from Hunter.

"Excuse me," I whisper, attempting to walk around Hunter's large body.

Stuck between both, I'm forced to be aware of how little I am in comparison. I continue the short walk to my dorm. They seem happy to escort me in silence.

"I'm not so naïve that I think you actually want to walk me back to my dorm," I say, stopping at the bottom of the steps.

"We were just curious..." Hunter starts to say, biting his bottom lip. His eyes jet over to his buddy and then both look to me.

"About?" I reach into my pocket and wrap my hand around my key card. They are too busy having a silent conversation to notice that I've taken two steps up, getting me closer to the door.

“Why Townes Kerrington is so damn interested in you. Your porcelain with sunshine shining out of your ass. Not his usual type.” Hunter steps onto the bottom step, making my exit plan a little bit more difficult.

“Put your curiosities away. Townes and I, we aren’t anything,” I say, pulling the card out of my pocket and tightening my fingers around it until it bites at my skin.

Hunter and Nathan both look at me. Nathan has remorse in his eyes where Hunter is doing just that, fixing his eyes on his prey. Fear settles into my bones, and I glance over their shoulders, hoping to see someone, anyone to help distract them.

“That doesn’t satisfy us,” Hunter says. The anger in his tone tells me it’s now or never.

My feet shift and I twist away from them as Hunter reaches for my bag strap. His hands wrap around it, and I let it fall from my body. I tap the key card on the reader and the door unlocks. I push it shut behind me, locking myself away from them.

Hunter’s balled up fist rattles the glass door. “This isn’t over.”

He swings it in front of me to taunt me. Nothing in that bag is worth much at this point. Most would be worried about their phone, but the only person I talk to is my parents and Jade. There are no secrets hidden in my personal belongings.

“We’ll see you around, virgin.” Hunter smirks sadistically, while Nathan tries to pull him away.

They can celebrate whatever hill they believed they’ve conquered by frightening me. I don’t turn to head upstairs until I can no longer see them. Once I do, I take the stairs two at a time, ready to hide myself behind my dorm room door. It’s where I feel safest, which is odd, considering I have never had a reason to feel unsafe on campus until today.

With heavy breaths, I pull my key out with my shaky hand. The key bounces around the lock until I concentrate enough to push it in. With a

heavy turn, it clicks.

I toss my keys on the table, realizing how lucky I was that they were already in my pocket or else they'd be across campus already with Nathan and Hunter.

"You should hide the hide-a-key better," a deep voice says from behind me. It's then I notice a dark figure stepping out of the shadows near the bathroom. "I sent Jade away for the night."

"Jesus Christ!" I flatten my hand on my chest, hoping to stop the assault my heart is doing on my body.

"Isn't that a sin, to say his name in vain?"

"You'd know more about sinning than I do, so why don't you tell me?" My voice shakes as I speak. Townes may think it's because of him, but he's the least of my worries right now.

"Why's your hands shaking?" He hurries across the room to me, worry etched into the corner of his eyes.

I glance down and see the tremble. A physical representation of what's going on in my mind. This body hasn't been built for confrontation and cruelty. I retreat, hitting my back on the wall, and slide my way to the floor. My arms wrap around my body, and I close my eyes, trying to regulate my heartbeat.

I don't want him to see me as weak. Even after how he's treated me, dismissed me, pulled me back in, I still worry about how he perceives me. That will need to be unloaded on a therapist for another day.

"I'll ask you one more time, Liliana." His hands grip ahold of my knees. My eyes flutter open to see him watching me. His eyes darken as his stare shifts around my face, finally landing on my lips. "Why are you shaking?"

"Hunter and Nathan..." I stutter out their names, too unsure of what exactly happened outside the dorms moments ago. "Mostly Hunter."

"What did he do?" He stands to pace in front of me. "Dammit, Liliana. Tell me what he did."

“Why do you not sound surprised?” I question. The way Townes face shifts from murderous rage to realization gives him away. “What have I ever done to them?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it?” I say hysterically. “Don’t worry about it? Townes, they just cornered me in front of the dorm, and tried to grab ahold of my arm to do God knows what with me.” I push off the ground, angry by his, once again, dismissal. “I’m going to say I have something to worry about. They have my bag with my phone and everything else in it. Boys with good intentions don’t look at you like he just did me.”

“How did he look at you?” He turns, his eyes burning into me like I’m something to possess and conquer.

“Kind of like you are now.” I swallow, matching his step forward with my own backward.

“And how am I looking at you now, Liliana?” His head tilts just enough, making me feel like his prey.

That’s what I am. I’ve never been more certain about anything. The only difference between him and the other two boys is I don’t think he’d hurt me.

I grab the bottom of my sweater and wrap it around my body. Townes reaches out and yanks the fabric from my grasp.

“No reason to be shy now.” He grins, and my cheeks immediately heat under his watch. A shiver runs through me as his fingers skate over the gold necklace around my neck. “So pretty. Like it was made for you.”

“What happened earlier, at the game, the way you asked me to kiss you? What was that all about?” The sudden need for answers from Townes is apparent in the way he makes me feel around him. I can’t process those feelings if I don’t know where he’s coming from.

“I couldn’t do it myself.”

“Why?”

“I can think of other things we can be doing with our mouths instead of

talking, Liliana, so how about it? Care to kiss me again?"

"I'll kiss you again," I say.

He immediately grabs my shirt and pulls me into his body. "Well, come on then."

"No, no." I shake my head, placing my hand on his chest to steady myself. "This time, I'm going to need you to kiss me."

Townes head tilts from side to side, inspecting my face for the joke. He won't find one. I can only speculate why he needed me to kiss him before, but I'm not going to play into his hand again. This time, he can come to me.

"Kiss me," I say.

"My pleasure." He drops to his knees in front of me.

"What are you doing?" I look down at him.

"You said to kiss you." His hands start making work on my belt, pulling it straight from my body. When his fingers clasp ahold of the top button, he smiles. "I didn't say where I'd kiss you. Now, you need to tell me if you're okay with that or..."

"If I want you to stop." I nod my head, understanding what he's asking me.

"So, what's it going to be, baby? Because I'm more than happy to be on my knees in front of you, but I'm going to need an incentive." He points at me. "Drop the pants, Liliana, and give me something worth praying to because I can't sit down here for much longer with nothing to do."

Why do I bend when he asks me to? I earn myself a pleased grin when my hands work down the line of buttons on my jeans. They hang open and for the first time, there's no embarrassment of being exposed to Townes. It's hard to feel anything other than beautifully wanted when someone like him his gazing up at you expectantly.

He works the denim down my legs until it's pooled at my feet, and I can step out of them. Once they are thrown somewhere in my room, he grabs the sides of my panties and lowers them, painfully slow to the ground.

Like before, he drapes my leg over his shoulder. This time since I'm standing, I get a direct view of him at work. His hand rests against my stomach, pushing me backwards until my back hits the wall. He kisses along my thighs, sending goosebumps all over my skin. His hands delicately skate up the back of my legs.

"Where'd my shy girl go, huh?" he asks.

My head falls back, rolling against the wall. I close my eyes, allowing myself to be someone else, just for while I'm with Townes tonight.

"Tomorrow morning, I'm going to pretend like this didn't happen," I say.

"Baby, I'm going to make you come so hard, you won't be able to forget tonight." His tongue slips against my center, sending a flood of memories from the last time.

My fingers dive into his hair, holding his head in place, abandoning every impulse I have, and given into the torture Townes is doing on my body. My hips sway with the movement of his tongue. We work together, building up momentum in my body.

"Oh my god!" I whimper, feeling my body edging closer to unraveling.

The intoxicating assault continues. His hand reaches between my legs and just as he hits that spot, the one he taught me about, I come undone.

He pulls away after my orgasm rolls through me and I immediately miss the feel of his tongue against me. "Still trust me?"

Too afraid to speak, I nod.

His hand wraps around mine as he guides me over to my bed. I sit on the edge of the mattress and his body covers mine. He kisses me softly, caressing my hair like I'm something to be worshipped and taken care of.

"You're beautiful," he whispers as he pulls back.

"Townes."

"What do you need?" he asks.

"*You.*"

The beautiful blue hue of his eyes melts right in front of me as he watches

me. Is he waiting for me to change my mind, to tell him no?

“Are you sure?” He bends low to kiss along my jawline. His hands finding no real home but feeling along my entire body.

“Yes,” I say confidently, reaching between us to lower his sweatpants. They go easily and he’s sprung free. I feel him against my hand and as if my body knows what to do, I move my hand up and down his shaft, just as I watched him do to himself. “Please.”

“No one has ever sounded so pure, asking me to fuck them.” His mouth devours mine.

Never in my wildest dreams, after first meeting Townes, did I think he would be capable of this moment. He’s gentle and passionate in a way someone like him should never have the capacity to be. By the wide-eyed expression staring back at me, I think he is feeling the same way, surprising himself.

“It’s going to hurt”— he guides himself towards my entrance and I can feel the warmth of him against me— “but it won’t last.”

“Slow, please,” I request, not even sure if I know what I’m asking for.

“Baby, take a deep breath.” He pushes further and I stretch to accommodate him. “Good girl. There you go, baby. Take another one.” He repeats this until he’s completely inside me.

“I feel full.” My head falls to the side, but he forces it back to look at him.

“Don’t be afraid of saying whatever you are thinking.” Townes grins with obvious amusement by what I’ve said. “Also, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

He starts to move, slowly and at a rhythm that has me gripping his face. Overcome by it all, I close my eyes and feel his lips touch against mine.

“I got you,” Townes reassures me, quickening his thrusts, building a tension between my legs.

My eyes flutter open and I see Townes watching himself slide in and out of me. It isn’t out of fascination or curiosity. He watches our bodies in awe. His slow movements are thoughtful, not rushed.

“You feel so good.” He kisses the tip of my nose.

“So do you.” I run my hands up and down his ribs. “I didn’t have any expectation, but this, you”— I take a deep breath— “you’ve exceeded all of it.”

“Fuck!” His forehead falls, resting against mine. “I can’t last much longer.”

“It’s okay. This has been perfect.”

“Don’t say that.” He moans and lowers his head to my shoulder. His body convulses.

I feel a wetness between my legs.

Townes falls to the bed next to me, his breathing heavy and matching my own. My comforter is pulled over me as he stands. He pulls on his sweatpants.

“Where are you going?” I grab ahold of his hand, stopping him.

“Just lay there. I’ll be right back.” He disappears into the bathroom. I hear the cupboards opening and closing, then the faucet turning on.

He comes out with a wet rag in his hand, and he sits on the edge of the bed. The comforter is pulled from me. He spreads my legs and starts to clean me up.

“We’ll have to change your sheets.”

I glance down and see a pink hue. *Blood*. Proof of my virginity. Gone.

“What we did, it isn’t wrong, Liliana. Whatever you’re feeling, know that you are not any less than because of the decision you made. No matter how everyone in your life has made you feel.”

Townes continues to run the warm rag over me. It feels nice, calming, both to my used body but also my soul. This is not what I had expected at all.

“You’re not anything like the person you want everyone to believe you to be.”

“If you don’t think I didn’t imagine rolling you over on your stomach and fucking your perfect ass, then you are mistaken. Your first time, it will never

be like that again for you. I wasn't about to steal that from you, too." He drops the rag into my bedside table.

"Like I said, you're a complete surprise." I stand, wrapping the comforter around my body. "The sheets are in the top drawer."

I watch as Townes moves about my space, removing the blood-stained sheets and replacing them with fresh, clean ones. Once the bed is made, I grab clothes from my drawers, choosing a pair of plaid shorts and an oversize t-shirt with the school crest on it. He watches me dress, happy to take the blanket from me, and sit on the edge of the bed waiting for me.

"Get in," he says, pulling the comforter up for me to crawl in next to him. His arm wraps around me and I lay along his side with my head resting on his chest. "Can I stay?"

CHAPTER 9

TOWNES

CAN I STAY?

I'm such a pussy when it comes to her.

With a happy smile, she sleepily answers, "Of course."

This is my first mistake. Not of the night. No, the first mistake of the night had been demanding she kiss me at the game, followed by taking her virginity. As I watch her breathing level out, it starts to not feel like a mistake though. It starts to feel like the right thing.

In such a short amount of time, this girl has crawled into parts of me I thought I had sealed tight. Then she came along and blown the walls off it all.

I reach over and turn off the light, nothing but the moonlight through the sheer curtains illuminating her face. She's perfect and I've gone and did the unthinkable, but I don't regret it, which makes me a bigger piece of shit.

I run my fingers through her hair, loving the way she cuddles in closer. She looks at me as if I'm more than my reputation. I don't know how to be this version for her though. I've made it clear to her who I am, and she kept coming back. Technically, that means it's not on my shoulders. Her feelings aren't my problem.

At some point, I drift to sleep, dreaming about a girl with soft blonde hair.

The slumber doesn't last long. Some hours later, I suspect, I hear loud pounding on the door. I check the clock and see it's only three in the

morning.

“What is going on?” Liliana sits up, worry and fear on her face from being abruptly woken up.

“I don’t know.”

“Open the fucking door,” a girl’s voice screams through the door, continuing her assault on the wood.

I jump from the bed and unlock the door. As soon as it clicks, the door is swung open, and Jade pushes through, slamming the door behind her.

“Don’t you have a key?” Liliana asks, standing from the bed.

Jade’s eyes shift around the room, her stare catching on the sheets and rag in the trash.

“How could you?” Jade reels back and punches me across the face.

For how little she is, the girl can pack a punch. I stand, massaging the ache from my jaw. Liliana runs to my rescue, glaring at her friend.

“What happened tonight, it was my decision. He didn’t make me feel pressured or anything like that, Jade.” She ushers me over to the mattress, straddling my legs to check out, what I am certain, is a red mark. “For crying out loud, why would you hit him?”

“You have no idea, do you?” Jade continues to glare at me. “Holy shit. I can’t believe I have to be the one to tell you.”

“Tell me what?” Liliana cries out, anger and frustration in her voice.

“He recorded you.” Jade’s hand flies up at me. “This piece of shit has video of him and you.”

“What is she talking about?” Liliana backs away from me, tears instantly fighting their way out.

“Let me explain,” I say, panic settling in. This is it. I should be okay with her realizing I’m exactly who they all think I am. The problem is when she looks at me, I don’t want to be that person.

“It’s pretty simple, Townes. Did you record us?” Her voice is low. I can see her trying to keep it together, but there’s only so much one human can

take, and what is being said is enough to break the strongest person. I would know.

“It’s not that simple,” I try to explain, reaching out for her.

“Answer the fucking question, Townes. Did you record us?” Liliana yells. Her face is red and her chest heaves for a breath. When I don’t answer her, she shakes her head in disbelief. She no longer looks at me as someone she could know. I’m a stranger. “You didn’t!” She covers her mouth.

“I did.”

“Fucking asshole,” Jade says from behind me.

“Jade, can you give us a minute, please?” Liliana’s tone is soft when speaking to her friend.

Jade doesn’t say another word but leaves with a warning that she’ll be right outside the door, standing as protective watch.

“Why?” Liliana sits on the edge of her bed.

“I didn’t think anyone would see it. It was for proof, but that was before this, before everything changed for me...”

She cuts me off. “And that’s supposed to make it better?”

“No, I guess not.”

“What was it for, and don’t lie to me? For your own person collection? Do you have some sort of virgin kink?”

“No, but you were a game, but along the way, the game fell away and it was just *us*.”

“Jesus! It just gets better!” Her hands are thrown up in the air. “It was just *us* for me. You allowed me to let you in with no intentions of doing the same in return.”

“When you came to campus, no one believed I could fuck the Hollier than thou virgin.”

“Well, I guess you proved them wrong, huh?” She releases a humorless laugh. I watch her unravel in front of me and there’s nothing I can do. I’ve done enough. “What did you win? If it was some sort of game, there had to

have been a prize and lord knows, I'm not it for you, so what did you win?"

"Liliana..." I draw out her name, not wanting to pour salt into her already gaping wound.

Her eyes widen as if she's solved a difficult puzzle. "The checks. You told Nathan and Hunter, you'd cut them checks. You paid them out, so sure I'd sleep with you, but you didn't care about getting the money. I guess I was the prize after all." She bends down and grabs the bloody sheets. "Here's your trophy, Townes. I hope you're happy."

"Lil"—

She cuts me off. "No, don't say anything."

There's no redemption in this and no number of words to make this better. Not knowing what else I can do, I walk to the door with my head hung low.

"You are no better than the boys that hurt Holland last year."

"I'm not a rapist, so don't you dare compare me to those pieces of shit." I invade her space, undeserved anger taking over.

"You may not have assaulted me, Townes, but you stole my power. The same power that had me freely giving myself over to you, so yes, you are no better than them."

"Maybe so." I shrug, allowing her to believe so. I'm such a cowardly, piece of shit.

I turn towards the door and pull it open to come face to face with Jade. If she had a weapon, I'm certain she'd use it against me.

"And to think I encouraged her to give you a chance. How wrong I had been about you." She shakes her head. "There's no fixing this. When she wakes up in the morning, she's going to walk onto a campus full of people that have seen her in ways she could have never imagined. You did that. I hope you're happy with yourself."

I push past Jade and hurry down the stairwell, hoping not to get caught. Instead of walking to my dorms, I sit down on the bench outside of Liliana's

building for close to an hour. She's not coming out to tell me she forgives me, but I still sit here, watching her window.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and when I pull it out, Holland's name lights up the screen.

"Hello?" I answer.

"You are a colossal piece of shit."

"How bad is it?" I ask, standing from the bench and making my way towards my dorm.

"Everyone has seen it. It's clearly her, so there's no doing damage control. The seventeen-year-old virgin gets fucked with muscle massager will be trending by morning."

"Where are you at?"

"Heading to you. Up for company?" I hear her voice through the phone but also from somewhere else. I search the area and see her pop out a little way ahead. She hangs up and wraps her arms around my shoulders into a hug when she's in front of me. "You really fucked up this time."

"Don't I always?" I shake my head, standing still as she tightens her hold on me.

"No, this time, I don't think there's no way of talking your way out of it. Your charm won't work here."

"She cursed at me," I explain when she releases me from her sisterly hug.

"Wow! You broke her." She pats my shoulder. "Congratulations."

"I did."

"Looks like you got what you wanted, right? Intrigued enough to fuck her, but not enough to not ruin her life?" Holland twists her arm around mine, guiding me to my dorm.

"Yep, got exactly what I wanted."

"*Malice.*"

"I know."

We stop in front of the dorms, and Holland stares at me. "The only

question is how did the photos get out?”

“I have no clue, but I’m going to go to bed.”

“Probably for the best. You can’t hurt anyone else while you’re asleep.”

She walks down the walkway.

“She said I’m no different than the boys that hurt you last year,” I call out to my sister.

Holland’s face falls with a sadness that could convince me to start a war. “Can’t blame her, brother.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For being a part of the problem.”

“You aren’t part of the problem, Townes. Don’t you see that?” She shakes her head, angry at me or maybe simply at the world. “This earth is full of boys that are so willing to hurt us. We can’t even walk to our car without looking over our shoulder. Those kinds of boys are the problem. The ones in the dark, waiting to lunge. You have the capability to be a part of the solution, to water down the pool of filth walking amongst us, but you make these decisions that make it impossible for girls like Liliana to believe the impossible is possible. That boys won’t hurt her for their own person gain.”

“Like I said, I’m sorry, okay?” My defenses are up, even when I know Holland is right.

“Sorry doesn’t work anymore.” Holland hurries to stand in front of me. “Change or don’t, but if you can’t, just know you’re making the world a little harder for girls like me.”

I go to bed with a heaviness on my chest. In the morning, I wake up alone in bed, with the same heaviness. It hadn’t been a nightmare. There are messages on my phone still coming through. The most recent being from Holland.

Meet me at the cafeteria at 10AM.

I check the clock and it says nine-forty-five.

“Shit!” I say to myself.

I pull on clean clothes and run my hands through my hair before busting through the door. Nathan is coming up the steps as I’m leaving.

“Did you have something to do with this?” I grab ahold of his shirt. “You’re the only one I told.”

“I swear, man, it wasn’t. I told Hunter though, and after the shit that went down yesterday with Liliana, I wouldn’t put it past him. He is bent out of shape over this game,” Nathan says. I release him with a shove.

“I have to go meet Holland. If you see Hunter, don’t tell him I’m looking for him,” I warn.

I check my phone and see it’s ten. A text comes through from Holland and it says *hurry*. No explanation. I break into a dead sprint across campus to get to the cafeteria. She’s standing outside when I turn the corner.

Out of breath, I bend at my waist to rest my hands on my knees. “What’s going on?”

“She’s leaving.”

“What?” I stand straight up, causing myself into a dizzy spell. “What do you mean she’s leaving?”

“Listen to me. This morning I went over there to check on her. Jade met me at the door, saying she doesn’t want to see anyone. Over Jade’s shoulder, I could see boxes. She’s leaving, Townes.”

“Fuck!” I search the space, as if my answer will be somewhere on the lawn. “I have to get to her before she’s gone.”

“Go!” Holland pushes me in the direction of Liliana’s dorm.

As I’m running through campus, I notice everyone’s eyes on me. No one is judging me for what’s on that film. Most will praise me, while Liliana is forced out of school and labeled a *whore*. All because I made one decision.

With no key card, I can’t get in. I bang on the glass door, hoping someone will let me in. A freshman swings the door open with a scowl.

“Yeah, I know I’m a piece of shit. Is she gone already?” I ask.

“I don’t know.” She steps out of the way for me to get into the building.

Taking the stairs three at a time, I make it to her floor. The dorm room door is wide open. Jade is sitting on the edge of her bed, her head in her hands. She looks up at me, and I know. I’m too late.

I walk into the room and see Liliana’s side completely cleared out. All that’s left is the bedframe and mattress. Where photos once sat on the dresser, all that’s left is the dust outline.

“Where did she go?” I beg Jade.

“Her parents picked her up ten minutes ago. They said they had to stop at the Dean’s office for an emergency meeting to clear things up, hopefully not tarnish her reputation forever. Their words, not mine.”

The sun comes out and hits the mattress. A gold speckle hits my eye and I lean forward, grabbing the necklace I gave her. I hold it up for Jade. Her face doesn’t shift or show anything.

“She left this for you.” Jade flips a piece of paper back and forth in her hands. “I planned on ripping it up.”

“Did you read it?”

“No, that would be an evasion of privacy and you’re the only one here that finds joy in doing that.”

“Are you going to give it to me?” I hold my hand out. She doesn’t move. “Listen, Jade, I know I don’t deserve it. Trust me.”

She stands and hands it to me. “Lock the door once you leave.”

The door shuts behind Jade, and I sit for minutes, or maybe hours. I can’t be sure. The paper gets heavier and heavier in my hands. I place the necklace back on the mattress and unfold the note.

You once said to me that good girls don’t lie.

You’re right.

Nothing between us, for me, had been a lie though.

You did enough of that for the both of us.

You changed the way I looked at life, Townes.

*Your fascination with me turned into destruction.
That is one thing I can't forgive you for.
And here's one last truth for you...*
YOU WILL NEVER FIND ME.

*Sincerely,
Your good girl*

Stunned by her words, I reread them until they all start to blur together. I didn't love Liliana, but dammit, if it doesn't feel like I do in this moment. Daylight turns to darkness, and I tuck the note into my pocket, swearing to hold onto it.

Liliana may have been dragged out of here by her parents, into a life that's sure to be filled with meaninglessness. She'll marry the boy of their choosing and live as I suspect she would have until she met me.

There's one fatal flaw in her plan though. One thing I'm certain she hadn't thought about when she disappeared into thin air.

Good girls don't lie, but they also don't stay hidden for long.

Thank you so much for reading! Good Girls Don't Lie is the introduction to new characters that will be getting their very own, full-length novel this year.

I can't wait to give you more of Liliana and Townes.

Where do you think she ran off to?

To stay up to date with all my latest news and teasers, join my reader group!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lindsey Iler is the author of several new adult romances. No trope is off the table with her, but she especially loves writing bully and sports romance. She is married to her high school sweetheart and has four kids.

When she isn't writing and spending time with family, she can usually be found listening to music and true crime podcasts.

RUTHLESS GOD LAURA LEE



RUTHLESS GOD

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LAURA LEE

RUTHLESS GOD
An Inked Men of Crystal Cove Novel

LAURA LEE ©2022

CHAPTER 1

KANE

PRESENT

“HOLY SHIT, man. Is that who I think it is?”

My eyes follow my brother’s pointed index finger until they find the leggy brunette walking toward one of my prized fighters.

What in the actual fuck?

This bitch has some nerve showing her face in here. This warehouse may be a loud, dingy, seemingly abandoned building to some, but to me, it’s a temple. It’s the only place I can go to quiet the beast inside of me. Where my insatiable thirst for battle can be quenched without sacrificing my true livelihood. But one glimpse of that woman, more painfully beautiful than ever, and I’m enraged. The monster inside of me is pounding his chest, rattling the cage, demanding to be set free.

My jaw clenches. “Sure is.”

Hunter whistles. “Damn. Our dear sister-in-law grew up *good*, didn’t she? I’m pretty sure her boobs are even bigger, and considering how impressive her rack was before, that’s saying a lot.”

“Quit fucking looking at her tits,” I growl. “And she’s our *ex*-sister-in-

law. Don't go leaving out that key bit of information."

He shrugs. "Ex or not, Armani Lopez is just as off-limits as she was when her surname was the same as ours, bro. You'd do well to remember that."

Like I'd fucking forget.

"I'm well aware, shithead. I'm also not interested, so it doesn't fucking matter."

"You keep telling yourself that, man." Hunter laughs, slapping me on the back. "But considering you look tempted to throw yourself into the ring with Evans tonight, maybe you should take off. I can handle things here, and we wouldn't want to upset the powers that be when you murder their biggest ticket."

"Fuck that. If anyone's leaving, it's *her*. This is my fucking show."

We both watch as Armani leans into Vaughn Evans, our only undefeated fighter on the cards. Whatever she says to him causes him to laugh, which is a damn near impossible feat. That man is the only person I know who harnesses more fury inside of him than I do. You'd think beating the shit out of any dude stupid enough to go against him would satisfy his bloodthirstiness, but it only seems to fuel his psychotic urges. That asshole is one rageful motherfucker. It's why we get along so well.

"You think they're fucking?"

My eyes narrow as my brother's question sinks in, trying to get a read on their body language. "Who gives a shit either way? Certainly not me."

They'd better not be.

Not if Evans wants to keep breathing. Just because I choose to run the show instead of fighting doesn't mean I don't have the lethal skills required to kick Vaughn's ass if need be.

"Sure, K." Hunter scoffs. "Whatever you say. Although, if they are... it's not like you could blame him, right? That girl is walking sex on a stick and always has been. Every dude in this place has their eyes on her right now."

I glance around and confirm what my brother said is true. Cold-blooded

massacres have never appealed to me before, but the idea is awfully tempting at the moment. If I find out our reigning champ has touched Armani, every one of these fuckers will know real fast what I'm capable of.

I rake a hand through my hair, tugging on some of the longer strands. "Why is she even in Crystal Cove?"

How dare she come here and stir shit up?

If there was any inkling of doubt as to whether or not Armani knew I ran these fights, that would be obliterated the moment her espresso eyes lift to mine. A smile that could only be described as cunning stretches across her face. She briefly whispers something to Vaughn before putting one pointed-toe shoe in front of the other and striding directly toward me.

"Dayum," Hunter mumbles. "It was nice knowing you, dude."

It's loud as fuck in here, but my brother's ominous statement echoes throughout my head. I tell myself to ignore the sultry sway of Armani's leather-clad hips and the way her toned abdomen flexes with each step she takes, but it's impossible. Each of her defined arms is now covered in ink, a new addition since the last time I saw her. It's too dark in here to make out any detail on the colorful sleeves, but I've memorized every line of the delicate symbol decorating her lower ribs, clearly on display since her shirt barely covers her tits. My eyes hone in on it, memories I've tried bleaching from my brain assaulting me in high-def.

My face buried in Armani's ample chest as she rode me like no one before or after has ever been able to do.

Swollen lips parting on a sigh as she was claimed by the ecstasy only I could deliver.

An indefinable connection I would've sworn on my left nut was written in the stars.

The blackening of my heart as I learned who she really was.

My spine straightens as she reaches us. The ever-present aroma of sweat and blood that permeates the air is swallowed by her sweet fragrance. I hold

my breath for as long as I can to avoid breathing her in.

“Boys.” Armani nods first in Hunter’s direction, then mine. “Long time no see.”

“What the fuck are you up to, Armani?”

Her dark eyelashes flutter innocently. “Whatever do you mean, Kane?”

Hunter swings a heavy arm around my neck. “I think what my rude-ass brother meant to say was, ‘Hello, Armani. It’s nice to see you. What brings you back to Crystal Cove?’”

“Not *at all* what I meant to say,” I mutter.

She ignores me. “Why, thank you, Hunter. Evidently, you’re still the only Ambrose brother with some semblance of manners. To answer your question, I live here now.”

Say what now?

I mime unplugging my ears. “I’m sorry; I don’t think I heard you correctly. I could’ve sworn you just said you *lived here* now.”

Armani couldn’t possibly look more unimpressed with my sarcasm. “There’s nothing wrong with your hearing, Kane. That’s exactly what I said.”

“Why?”

The calculating smile is back. “I’ve enrolled in CCU.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Aren’t you a little old for college?”

Her eyes narrow. “Twenty-four isn’t *that* old, jackass. Especially not for a master’s program. You know, as well as I do, I had to pause my undergrad studies for a while. When I told my cousin I was thinking of transferring from UC San Diego, he offered me to stay at his place rent-free. It sounded like a pretty sweet deal, so I jumped on it.”

That explains why she and Evans looked so cozy. They’re living under the same roof. For both of their sakes, they’d better not be fucking under that roof.

“And the fact that Evans and DeLuca also live there had nothing to do with your decision to move in?”

“Oh, you mean Vaughn and Nico?” She licks her red lips, leaving a slight gloss behind. “It certainly doesn’t hurt.”

I don’t realize I’m lunging forward until Hunter bars his arm in front of me to stop my momentum. “Whoa, dude. Check yourself.”

Armani releases a throaty chuckle. I refuse to acknowledge the effect it has on my dick. “I see you’re still a caveman.”

I glare. “Liars tend to bring out the worst in me.”

I see my brother shaking his head out of the corner of my eye, but I don’t dare look away from the siren before me.

Her chest rises and falls as she takes a few deep breaths. “I never lied to you, Kane. I simply... omitted information. And it’s not like there was any malicious intent behind that omission. It just didn’t have any relevance at the time.”

“Fucking me while you were engaged to another man seemed pretty malicious *and* relevant to me.”

“I *wasn’t* engaged,” she hisses. Armani’s fists ball as if she’s resisting the urge to hit me. “We were broken up, and you know it! I had no intention of *ever* going back!”

My eyebrows rise. “Yet you married him anyway.”

Her anger deflates. “There were extenuating circumstances behind that.”

Yeah, I’ll say.

Hunter clears his throat. “I need to get up there and get this fight started. You two kids try not to kill each other while I’m gone, mmkay?”

I flip him off. “Fuck off, Hunt.”

Armani gives him a sad smile. “Sorry, Hunt.”

“Why are you apologizing to him?” I swing my arm in my retreating brother’s direction. “He’s the only sibling in this family you haven’t royally screwed over!”

“Fuck. You.” Her eyes fill with ire. “You have *no* idea what you’re talking about!”

“I don’t?” I challenge. “Well, then, why don’t you explain it to me, Armani? Go ahead and justify why *you sought me out, knowing damn well who I was*. Why you fucked *me* so you could *fuck over Grayson*?”

Her nostrils flare. “Don’t pretend like you didn’t *thoroughly enjoy* every second of it.”

I scan her body disinterestedly. “I’ve had plenty better, sweetheart. *Many times over*. Your pussy isn’t as golden as you seem to think it is.”

I catch her arm mid-swing and pin it behind her back. When she attempts to hit me with the other limb, I also trap that one. Both of her tiny wrists are cuffed in my large palm as she struggles against me. Her full tits are pressed up against my chest as she fights my hold. My cock swells at the contact, and I know the moment she feels it. Armani’s eyes roll back with a gasp, right before she leans *into* me to rub her torso along my shaft.

Fucking hell.

I groan involuntarily before gritting through my teeth, “Knock it off.”

Her bright white teeth gleam in the darkened warehouse as she smiles coolly. “Why’s that, Kane? For someone who’s supposedly *had so much better*, your dick seems to remember how good it was between us.” I tighten my grip when she grinds more purposefully against my erection. “*He* seems to be awfully interested in a repeat.”

Without any conscious thought, my teeth clamp down over the throbbing pulse in her neck. Armani moans as the taste of copper floods my mouth. I suck on the broken skin, indulging my twisted desires for a moment before pulling back slightly, licking her blood from my lips.

So fucking sweet.

So fucking mine.

I smile smugly as I notice the unmistakable arousal in her gaze before leaning into her ear. “I’m a red-blooded man, sweetheart. *Anyone* with a decent set of tits or ass can get me hard, and I’m man enough to admit you have some of the best tits and ass I’ve ever seen. But trust me when I say

there is *nothing* remarkable about you beyond your looks. You're a liar and a whore, and that's all you'll *ever* be to me. That's all you'll ever be to *anyone* holding a modicum of sense."

I catch the tail end of Hunter calling out the final warning to place bets before the match begins. I was so lost in this little power play between Armani and me, the cacophony of sound in this joint completely faded away. Armani's hand flies up to cover her fresh wound the moment I pull away from her completely. She brings her fingers in front of her face to inspect the unmistakable red smear across her skin.

That's right, baby. Take it all in.

I just stamped my mark on her in front of hundreds of people, and there's not a damn thing she can do about it. My cock stirs as rivulets of blood drip down the slope of her neck, pooling in the dip between her collarbones. It takes every ounce of willpower I possess not to lick all traces of it clean with my tongue.

I may not want Armani Lopez for myself, but I'm not going to let any other fucker have her either. If she wants to move to my town, so be it. But I'm sure as shit going to make her regret it.

CHAPTER 2

KANE

PAST

“I’M A VIRGIN, so be gentle with me. Okay?”

My head snaps up to find the source of the raspy feminine voice. Standing inside the doorway to one of the private rooms in my studio is an absolute goddess. That’s the only word I can use to describe her. She’s easily the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen, but in addition to that, she’s got this wild energy about her. Every inch of this woman screams sex and debauchery, and my dick is rapidly trying to punch through my zipper. I’m a twenty-two-year-old dude, so it doesn’t take much to get it up, but Christ, I don’t think I’ve ever been so viscerally attracted to someone.

The brunette beauty chuckles. “Damn. I was pretty proud of myself for that icebreaker, but it seems to have gotten lost in translation. I’m not gonna lie; my ego’s a bit bruised.”

I suppress a groan as her cherry red DSLs form into a pout. When her sculpted eyebrows pinch together, probably wondering if I’m mute, I finally pull my head out of my ass and remember how to speak.

“It was a *great* icebreaker,” I assure her with a devious smirk. “Although,

we're not that kind of shop. The only things we sell here are ink and piercings. That said, I'd be willing to give it up for free if you're actually asking. Just say the word, and my cock is at your command."

That probably wasn't the most professional thing to say, especially for a dude who's trying to make a name for his new business—not to mention the hard *no dating clients* rule I've established—but I couldn't seem to help myself. In my defense, she did begin the conversation talking about popping her cherry. However, I suspect there is *nothing* virginal about this woman. Plus, let's not forget the fact that no one's ever accused me of being a gentleman.

She licks her full lips. "Is that so?"

My eyes slowly peruse her body from the bottom up, leaving no question of how genuine my offer was. She's wearing cheap flip-flops so I can clearly see the sparkly polish showcasing her perfectly manicured toes. Her black joggers are baggy, but they do nothing to disguise the long legs or feminine curves hiding beneath the cotton. Above the waistband is a wide patch of golden skin, sculpted abdominal muscles flexing in time with my gaze.

Round, perky tits stretch the limits of the red crop top she's wearing, making me wonder what shade her nipples are. Based on her complexion, I'd say medium brown if I hazard a guess. And now that I'm thinking about her nipples, I'm wondering how sensitive they are. What sound she'd make if I wrapped my lips around them, sucking them into my mouth. How wet her pussy would get if I bit down, giving her just the right amount of pain to enhance the pleasure. This girl's effortlessly casual clothing shouldn't be so fucking erotic, but my dick hasn't gotten the memo.

When I get back to her model-worthy face, my icy blues latch on to her dark chocolate orbs. "Deadass serious."

Her lips curve. "As... enticing as that may be, I'm here for another purpose." She nods pointedly to the tattoo gun on my left. "You're Kane, right? The lady up front sent me back here. I'm Armani. Also known as your

nine o'clock.”

Well, well, well.

This night just got a lot more interesting. I'll admit; I thought the whole idea was a bit trite when I researched the meaning of this particular tat, but now that I've met the woman behind the request, I can't say I've ever been asked to etch something more appropriate onto someone's skin. Now I see why my little brother was acting like such a smug shit as he was leaving work tonight, telling me to *enjoy* my last appointment.

I pick up the symbol I just finished drawing. “Ah. The Aphrodite fan.”

A grin stretches across Armani's face. “Is that my design?”

“It is. Sorry, I planned to have Hunter email it for your approval before you arrived, but I've been with back-to-back clients all day and didn't get a chance to finish it until a few minutes ago. I can easily make adjustments if you'd like.”

I stand, crossing the small room in a few strides until I'm close enough to get a whiff of her sweet coconut scent. I stifle the urge to lean closer to determine if it's coming from her skin or those long dark locks I'm itching to wrap around my fist. Armani takes the paper from me, thick lashes fluttering against her cheeks as her lids briefly close on a sigh.

“It's perfect. Absolutely perfect. I knew you were the right man for the job.”

“How'd you hear of Immortal Ink, by the way? We haven't been open too long, so I'm curious.”

“Oh...” Armani nibbles on her lower lip. “Um, someone I know was scrolling through your Insta page one day.”

“Yeah?” I smile. “Did I do some work for them? What's their name?”

Her ponytail whips from side to side as she shakes her head. “No. He's really conservative, not exactly a fan of body art. More like pretentious and über judgmental, if I'm being truly honest.”

“I know the type. My older brother has a giant stick permanently wedged

up his ass. The asshat actually told our little brother he was going to regret being my apprentice and that he'd be spending his days with criminals.”

I roll my eyes, thinking about my brother's insinuation that anyone bearing tattoos is a criminal. I would *never* think poorly of someone for choosing *not* to get inked, just like he shouldn't automatically label someone who does. I mean, seriously. Think of how many sickos exist in this world with zero tattoos. Getting inked is about personal expression, not willingness to commit a crime.

Armani nods understandingly.

“This probably goes without saying, but we're not exactly close. Gray—that's his name—is almost eight years older, so we've never been tight. Maybe we would've had a chance now that we're all adults, but he lives in San Diego, rarely makes the drive up here, and calls or texts even less. In the twelve years he's been down there, he's never invited a single member of our family to his place.

“Hunter, the guy who did your consult, is the youngest brother. Hunt was born shortly after my third birthday. That shithead was like a barnacle, always up in my grill from the start. It was annoying sometimes, but we bonded when he started taking an interest in art, which became our thing. Even now, that fucker is like my shadow. We not only work together, he somehow convinced me to let him live with me, too. I can't seem to get rid of him, no matter how hard I try.”

I was expecting to see amusement on Armani's face, but instead, her expression is oddly blank. It's as if she already knew everything there is to know about my sibling dynamics, but that's impossible considering we just met.

She claps her hands together. “So, where do you want me?”

Her rather abrupt change in topic is a little strange, but I shrug it off and slip into business mode.

I nod toward the dentist-style chair I have set in the center of the room.

“Go ahead and take a seat. I need to get this on some transfer paper, and then we’ll be all set. I’ll be just a few minutes.”

“Okay. Sounds good.”

I step into the main room where my imager is located and carefully position the sketch I made beneath the thermal paper. I slide them both into the plastic carrier before feeding it into the machine.

Our resident piercer and sorta receptionist, Mo, props her bony ass against the counter next to me. Not that there’s anything wrong with a skinny ass, mind you. I just prefer to have a little meat to grab on to while I’m fucking. Mo’s gorgeous but nowhere near my type.

She stretches her neck to peep my design as I double-check to ensure the transfer came through properly. “That’s dope. You do that?”

I nod. “Yeah. The client met with Hunter earlier this week and gave him a brief idea of what she was looking for, but for the most part, I had free rein.”

Mo inspects the small yet intricate flower, composed of six vesica piscis and almond-shaped forms, surrounded by a web. “What is it?”

“It’s the symbol for the goddess of sex and beauty.”

She waggles her eyebrows suggestively. “Well, that’s fitting.”

I huff out a laugh, thankful Mo had the sense to lower her voice enough so Armani couldn’t possibly hear. The odds of Mo having any tact are fifty-fifty on a good day.

“You can say that again,” I mumble.

Mo flashes a knowing smile. “Hey, you cool if I take off? My last appointment chickened out and canceled. I already completed the release forms with your goddess, so all you need to do is cash her out at the end.”

I quirk a brow, ignoring the insinuation that the beautiful woman waiting on me is *my* anything. “Dick, nip, or clit?”

Whenever we have last-minute piercing cancelations, it’s always one of those three body parts.

“I’ll take door number three, Bob.” She pouts. “It’s a shame, too, because

she sounded really cute over the phone. It's been a while since I've had my face all up in some hot chick's vag. You know how much I love eating pussy. I mean, if I can't get my kicks at work, what's a girl supposed to do?"

I laugh. "Oh, don't pretend you don't have options. Besides, it doesn't matter how many snatches you have shoved in your face while you're in this building. You can't do anything beyond poking some holes into them and filling said holes with some jewelry. We've talked about this, Mo. *Many* times."

Mo is an equal opportunity dater. She once told me she doesn't care what kind of equipment a prospective lover is packing, as long as they know how to use it. I know she would *never* inappropriately touch a client—male or female—but she sure as shit likes to threaten to use my studio as her own personal fuckpad an awful lot.

"Yeah, yeah." She rolls her big hazel eyes. "You're always ruining my fun with this stupid *rule* about not dating clients." Mo points a stern finger at me. "You know, one of these days, you'll be tempted to break it, and I, for one, can't wait to see you squirm."

Take a good look, Mo. Because I am severely tempted by the busty brunette in the next room.

"Oh, fuck off, Maureen."

She gasps dramatically. "I can't believe you just legal-named me! You know how much I hate my real name."

"Hence, why I did it," I smirk. "Now, get the fuck out of here before I change my mind."

"Ten-four, boss." Her lips curve as she gives me a half-assed salute. "You have a *fantastic* evening. I'll lock the door behind me."

"Don't let it hit your ass on the way out," I grumble, shaking my head. Between Mo and Hunt, I'm surrounded by smartasses all day long, I swear.

I wait to hear the lock turning before grabbing the thermal paper and heading back to Armani. When I find her stretched out on the chair, *nearly*

topless, I'm glued to the polished cement floor.

Armani twists toward me as she realizes I'm in the room, nodding to the folded red shirt beside her. "Hey. I hope you don't mind. I figured this was easier than trying to hold my shirt up the whole time."

Don't look at her tits. Don't look at her tits.

Shit.

Too late.

Damn, they're even better than I imagined. Armani's wearing a bra, but it's one of those subject-to-involuntary-nip-slips-if-you-move-the-wrong-way types.

I clear my throat, making my way over to my workstation, loading up the rolling tray. "Not at all. Just an average day on the job for me."

She laughs. "Right. I suppose you see all sorts of naked body parts on the regular."

It's true; I do. Sometimes a client wants their ink placed on a *very* private place, and nudity is the only way to make that happen. It's something you become desensitized to pretty early on in this profession. Despite Mo's earlier jokes, a naked body isn't sexual when you're on the job. It's a *canvas*. But for some reason, the part of my brain responsible for compartmentalizing is misfiring tonight. No matter how hard I try, it's not working. I look at Armani, and all I see is a woman I desperately want bouncing on my dick.

Christ, couldn't she have requested a wrist piece?

"Still thinking of placing it on your left ribs?"

My eyes instinctively track Armani's finger as she points to a spot slightly below her left breast off to the side. "Yeah. Right there if you think it'll be okay."

I swallow. "Yeah. It's a good spot. I should warn you that the ribs are one of the most painful spots, though. You sure you want that on your first time? I wouldn't want to scare you away from future art."

"I think I can handle it. I like a little pain." Her full lips turn up in the

corner as she winks. “Especially when there’s a reward at the end.”

Great.

Now I’m imagining all the different ways I could leave my mark on her delectable body. With my tattoo gun and... other things. Damn, what I wouldn’t give right now to see my handprint coloring her bare ass.

I blow out a harsh breath, telling my dick to calm the fuck down. “Okay, then. You ready to get started?”

The beautiful temptress’s grin is flat-out lascivious, not helping the boner situation whatsoever. “Absolutely.”

CHAPTER 3

ARMANI

PRESENT

AFTER A QUICK TRIP to the disgusting bathroom to clean up, I head back toward my cousin and his friends in a daze, replaying what just went down in my head. I can't believe that motherfucker *bit* me! Even worse, I can't believe I nearly orgasmed on the spot as he sucked on my neck like a goddamn vampire! I knew Kane had some kinks—which I can certainly appreciate—but the blood play is a new one for me. It really makes me wonder what the hell he's been up to since I last saw him.

I rub the sore spot on my neck before moving my hair back in place to cover the marks that bastard left behind. It's no longer bleeding, but I'm sporting clear teeth imprints and some nasty discoloration. I make a mental note to douse my neck in hydrogen peroxide and antibiotic ointment when I get home. If I wind up scarring from that little stunt of his, Kane Ambrose might just find himself missing a testicle one day soon.

“What's that about?” My cousin, Cruz, jerks his chin toward the asshole of the hour, who happens to be glaring at me over the gathered crowd.

I wave him off, all while keeping my narrowed gaze on the prick who's responsible for the throbbing in my neck. “Nothing. Just airing out some old shit.”

Cruz's two best friends, Nico and Vaughn, also turn their gazes in Kane's direction.

"You need me to take him out?" Vaughn asks.

My lips curl upward as I pat his bare, muscular chest, lingering a little longer than I probably should because I know we're being watched. "Nah, big guy. I can handle him. I want him to suffer, not die."

Nico releases a rumbly chuckle. "Poor bastard."

Vaughn smirks. "I don't mind playing with my prey a little first. No need to get your hands dirty when mine are already stained beyond repair."

Okay, I'm not going to lie. Having three terrifying dudes at my disposal is a heady thing. A *powerful* thing. Especially *these* three dudes. I don't know precisely what Cruz, Vaughn, and Nico have their hands in these days, but I know enough to understand why they inspire fear in this town. Let's just say they're not exactly involved in the most legal business ventures. And sometimes, brutal violence comes with the job description. But what can I say? I've always been drawn to the bad boys. The one time I went against my instincts and dated someone obsessively straightlaced turned out to be one of the biggest mistakes I've ever made.

"We've all got your back, little cousin. You just say the word." Cruz hooks his arm around me and pulls me into a side hug.

"Thanks." I smile, wrapping my arm around his waist. "But in case you forgot, I'm older than you. What's up with the 'little' crap?"

"Because you're tiny. I mean, I guess you're taller than a lot of chicks, but you're not big and scary like we are." Cruz pounds his chest like a Neanderthal to punctuate his statement.

My eyes roll. "Well, at least all you big, scary guys aren't cocky about it or anything."

"It's not cockiness when you have the dick to back it up." Nico winks suggestively.

Cruz shoves his friend. "Dude. That's my cousin. Quit hitting on her."

“Chill, Ramirez. My dick has no interest in your cousin.” Nico holds his palms out. “No offense, Armani.”

“None taken.” I shake my head. “I think.”

Nico laughs. “Don’t get me wrong. Anyone with eyes can see how beautiful you are. But to us” —he flicks his hand between himself and Vaughn— “you’re extended family. Hotness doesn’t factor into the equation.”

He’s got a point. Vaughn and Nico are two of the finest specimens of the male species I’ve ever seen. But I’ve never been attracted to them like that. No matter how ruggedly handsome and impressively built they are, these boys will always be the same boys who played Barbies with me whenever my mom and I visited. Sure, they stubbornly refused to use the Ken dolls like I wanted them to—insisting Ken was a wuss—but they *would* get their G.I. Joe *action figures* out, so Barbie still had a hot date to ride off into the sunset with in her pink Corvette. Personally, I think they did it just to make the little blonde girl they were always with happy, but I benefited from it too, so whatever.

“Hey, what happened to that cute blonde you used to always hang out with? Amy or something like that? Is she away at school? God, you guys were so infatuated with her. I remember thinking one of you would marry her one day.”

All three men stiffen. I’d say it was impossible considering we’re standing in the middle of an underground fighting ring, but the vibe in here just got a helluva lot tenser than it was a minute ago.

I look around in confusion. “What’d I say?”

Cruz clears his throat. “It’s Andi. And we don’t talk about her. *Ever*. Just leave it at that.”

O-kay... that’s not weird or anything.

“Good evening, ladies and gents. Are you ready for tonight’s main event?”

The crowd roars as Hunter hypes them up. Vaughn is the clear favorite, but the guy he's up against is pretty damn formidable with a sizable fan base present.

"In this corner, standing at five-foot-eleven, two-hundred and five pounds, eighteen wins and only one loss under his belt, we have Rick *the Rampage* Simons..."

Vaughn is bouncing on the balls of his feet as Hunter rattles off his stats, undiluted rage oozing from his pores.

"And at six-three, two-hundred and three pounds, thirty wins and *zero* losses, give it up for our undefeated champ, Vaughn *the Assassin* Evans!"

"Don't fuck up the plan," Nico barks as Vaughn steps into the bloodstained ring, looking like he has every intention of living up to his nickname tonight.

When Hunter commands them to fight, Vaughn wastes no time with fancy footwork or sizing up his opponent. As he rains blow after unanswered blow down on that poor Rick guy, I ask myself what in the hell just caused Vaughn to flip the switch over to beast mode? One second we were all having a conversation, and in the next, he's mercilessly beating a man to a bloody pulp. The wicked grin stretched across his face tells me he's enjoying it, too.

"Aw, man," my cousin whines. "We're gonna pay for this later."

Vaughn lands a solid right hook, taking his challenger to the floor with a bone-chilling thud. The audience is rabid, cheering, booing, and shouting colorful requests to paint the floor with Rampage's brains. I'm pretty sure the dude is out cold, but Vaughn continues beating his face in until Kane hauls him away, corralling him into a corner.

Vaughn's sweaty chest heaves as he and Kane exchange heated words while another guy helps the dazed man off the floor. *Rampage* looks more like mincemeat as he hobbles away, only making it a few feet before slumping down on the ground, propping himself up against a wooden crate.

After a couple of minutes, Vaughn finally seems to have calmed down enough to be trusted. Or at least that's what I assume as Kane releases him from his unforgiving grip and takes a step back.

God, why do I find this whole thing so insanely hot?

Clearly, I have issues.

Kane claws a hand through his dark blond hair, pec muscles bunching beneath his wifebeater as he does. He motions his brother closer before leaning into his ear to discuss something, all the while keeping his pale blue eyes trained on me. Next, he does the same to Nico and Cruz, who then take up sentry beside Vaughn. I'm still trying to figure out what's happening as Vaughn is declared the victor by knockout in the first round. That's when all hell breaks loose.

I'm so lost in Kane's stare, I startle when Hunter grabs my arm and gives it a solid tug. "C'mon, we've gotta get out of here. Shit's about to get real."

"Where are we going?" I struggle to keep up in my stilettos with his long strides as we're jostled by the rowdy crowd.

Hunter doesn't bother with a reply, but I'm not stupid enough to fight him on it. This place is a madhouse.

When I get shoved by some guy on the receiving end of a mean uppercut, I yelp.

"Sonuvabitch." My eyes water as the bridge of my nose slams into Hunter's unyielding chest as he tucks me into his body. I know he's shielding me from the ensuing brawl around us, but that hurt like hell.

"Fucking Evans," he grumbles next to my ear. "That asshole just made a lot of people very unhappy. He knew he needed to drag it out until the third round."

Huh? Did Hunter just admit the fight was rigged?

I'm about to ask him to elaborate when a loud bang rings through the air, followed by a series of screams.

"What the hell was that?!" I yell.

“Gun,” Hunter explains. “We’ve gotta go. *Now.*”

Mass hysteria sets in when more shots are fired. People are scattering like cockroaches in every direction, not giving a single fuck who they trample over—*literally*—in their bid to escape the warehouse. Hunter’s large palm pushes on the back of my head, forcing me to bend forward in a crouch, dragging me with him as he speed walks down the narrow hallway.

Holy shit.

If the shooter comes down here, we’re like fish in a goddamn barrel! We weave through the mob as fast as possible until we reach a metal door, and I pray to all the gods it isn’t barricaded shut. The door slams into the brick wall as Hunt flings it open, pulling me into the chilly air.

He points to the left. “My truck’s right over there. Hurry the hell up!”

The locks disengage as we approach Hunter’s vehicle, its stark white color a beacon in the night. I barely have my door closed before he’s shifting into drive and peeling out of the lot. There’s only one way out, so it’s more like a demolition derby as the other drivers attempt to flee, but Hunter’s truck is one of those giant vehicular representations of big dick energy, so we easily bust through the congestion as their cars veer out of our way.

Neither one of us talks until we’ve left the rundown warehouse district behind, merging onto the freeway that runs parallel to the ocean.

“What did you say to Evans right before he stepped into the ring?”

I roll my window down, breathing in the salty air as I process his question. I honestly don’t know how I’m so calm after what just went down. The only plausible explanation is that Hunter has this freaky ability to make people feel at ease. Sure, he was my brother-in-law for a hot minute, but I technically don’t know him all that well. He just has one of those souls that speaks to you. I felt like I had known him my whole life from the moment we met.

“Armani!” Hunter yells, the charming persona he’s known for nowhere to be found at the moment. Though, oddly, despite his increased volume, I’m

still not anxious. Who needs MaryJane when you've got your very own Hunter Ambrose nearby? "What *the fuck* did you say to Evans right before he jumped into the ring? I saw you guys talking, and you said something that visibly upset all three of them."

I stare at Hunter's colorful tats as he white-knuckles the wheel, trying to recall the conversation with my cousin and his friends.

"Um... he was offering to kick Kane's ass for me."

Hunt's eyes slice to mine, not impressed in the least. "What else? Like *immediately* before the fight began?"

"Uh... *right* before, I think I asked about this pretty blonde they were all obsessed with growing up. Her name's Andi."

"Fuck," Hunter mutters. "That'll do it."

"That'll do *what*?" I ask. "What am I missing, Hunter?"

"Andi Carmichael," he begins, "left town after some major shit went down nearly four years ago. Never came back."

"O-kay," I say slowly, still not getting it. "And?"

He blows out a harsh breath. "And the guys haven't been the same since. Look. I don't know how well you know your cousin or his friends these days, but, from what I've learned, those three were walking a fine line before Andi left. When she took off... nothing was stopping them from diving off the deep end. It's like she was the only thing tethering them to humanity and once she was gone, they said *fuck it*. Cruz, Nico, and Vaughn are involved in some really messed up shit, Armani."

"Like underground fighting and gambling rings?" My brows rise. "Don't you think you're a bit of a hypocrite, Hunter? You and Kane have a perfectly legal business—a *successful business*—yet you two choose to dabble in the gray area, too."

"The fights aren't illegal," he insists. "They're just not sanctioned by the UFC."

"Don't think I missed the fact that you left the gambling part out."

“Eh. That part doesn’t make me lose sleep at night.” Hunter shrugs. “Sure, maybe Kane has a hard-on for the violence of it all, but what we do, it’s all very white collar for the most part. My brother would never risk fucking up his hands. You know how he is.”

Rightfully so. Kane Ambrose is genuinely the most talented tattoo artist I’ve ever met. Anyone who’s seen him in action knows that’s where his true passion lies. If he didn’t have full use of his hands, he’d be devastated.

“So, why the fights then? Why not just run the studio?”

Hunter’s shoulders lift. “The fights drum up business for the studio, plus we get a cut of the bets. Our... association with these people is about money. We’re not all that deep in the trenches. Your cousin and his friends... can’t say the same.”

“Look, Hunter. I know Cruz is a little different, but he’s still the same guy where it counts.”

“Maybe with you,” Hunter suggests. “You’re some of the only family he has left. But generally speaking... I adamantly disagree. I know Cruz is your blood, but I don’t know if staying at their house is the safest choice. They’re walking targets.”

“That’s ridiculous.” I wave him off, although, as the words leave my lips, I think about the over-the-top home security system the guys have. And the various weapons they have stashed around the house. The way all three of them are constantly on alert, scanning the area for perceived threats.

He quickly glances my way before turning his attention back to the road. “Did you ever ask why they live together? You know damn well Vaughn and Nico could afford places of their own.”

I shrug. “I just assumed because they’re so close and the house is so big.”

“Look. It’s not up to me to give you all the gory details, and I *can’t* even if I wanted to.” Hunter sighs. “But like the expression says, *there’s safety in numbers* as far as those three are concerned. Think about it, Armani. Do you really want to be in the middle of that? You don’t have the knowledge and

skills they do to protect themselves.”

“That makes no sense,” I argue. “If living at Cruz’s house makes me a target for whatever baddies you think are out there, I don’t think he would’ve extended the offer in the first place.”

“I don’t *think* bad people are out there.” His dark blond hair flops over his forehead as he shakes his head. “I *know*. These people—this town—aren’t as idyllic as they look on the surface. There’s a shit ton of money to be had in Crystal Cove. It’s the ultimate motivator for someone to have... *flexible* morals.”

Fuck.

Have I really been that naïve?

My brows rise. “Are *your* morals flexible, Hunter?”

He flicks the blinker on, merging onto the exit lane before answering. “When they need to be. But not nearly as bendy as your cousin’s.”

Speaking of... I dig my phone out of my pocket, blowing out a sigh of relief when I see a text from Cruz, asking how I am, telling me he and the guys are okay. I shoot him a reply, telling him I’m safe as well. When he asks when I’ll be home, I realize we’re driving in the opposite direction of my temporary residence.

“Where are you taking me?”

Hunter’s phone rings through Bluetooth before he has a chance to reply. When Kane’s name flashes on the display, I release another sigh, thanking the man upstairs.

Hunter presses the button on his steering wheel to answer the call. “You make it out all right?”

“Where are you?” Kane demands.

Hunter rolls his eyes. “We’re about five minutes from the house. Where are *you*?”

“Cleanup crew just got here, so I’m heading out. Armani’s not too much of a raging bitch, is she?”

“*The raging bitch* can hear everything you’re saying, asshat,” I inform him. “And I’ll have you know, Hunter and I are having a lovely time—minus the part where we were dodging bullets. You must forget he’s the brother I actually don’t mind spending time with.”

“Goddammit, Hunt,” Kane grumbles. “You’re supposed to warn me when you have me on speaker.”

“Oops.” Hunter winks at me. “Sorry, bro. I forgot.”

Yeah, right.

I swear, an honest-to-God growl just rumbled through the speaker. “What-the-fuck-ever. I’ll see you in twenty.”

The call disconnects without the courtesy of goodbye, not that I’m surprised.

I smirk. “I see he’s still as cantankerous as ever. If you two didn’t look so much alike, I’d swear you were adopted.”

Hunt chuckles softly. “What are you really doing back in Crystal Cove, Armani?”

“I told you. I’ve enrolled in CCU. They have a great accelerated MBA program.”

“Yeah? Your old school didn’t have the same?”

I shrug. “I like it here. I have family here.”

He eyes me skeptically. “Really? It has nothing to do with Kane, huh?”

It has *everything* to do with Kane.

Instead of confessing my deepest darkest feelings, I go straight into denial.

“Nope.” I make sure to pop the P for emphasis. “Kane can go straight to hell for all I care.”

“He’s already there, sis.” Hunter’s mouth curves into a sad smile. “He’s been for the last three years.”

The *since you left him to marry our brother* was implied in his tone. The thing is... I know exactly how Kane feels because I’ve been there, too. The

question is... can we get over the damage we've caused? Or is this whole thing an exercise in futility?

I guess we'll find out.

CHAPTER 4

ARMANI

PAST

“ALL DONE. You wanna take a look in the mirror before I wrap it up?”

My hulking beast of a tattoo artist straightens his spine. His brothers aren't exactly small, but Kane takes it to a whole 'nother level. He's clearly no stranger to the gym. I'd seen pictures of him before, but they didn't do him justice whatsoever. He's easily the most gorgeous man I've ever met.

And I've never wanted anyone more.

I know this is messed up. *I know it.* The plan was to simply meet the man behind the mystery and walk away with some new art embedded into my skin. But I wasn't expecting him to be like my own personal brand of catnip. I'm not just talking about his body either. Kane Ambrose has the face of an angel. A *dark* angel, but his features are stunning nonetheless. From the dirty blond locks badly in need of a trim to the baby blue irises I could get lost in for hours. The little bump on his otherwise flawless nose, indicating he may have broken it at one time, to his full, ridiculously kissable lips. All of that perfection framed by a strong, square jaw lined with stubble I'd love to feel against my inner thighs.

Kane was right; getting inked on the ribs hurt like a bitch. But the living god before me proved to be a great distraction from the pain. It was hard to ignore the way his sinewy muscles flexed from shoulder to wrist as he meticulously labored over my design. I had to suppress a breathy sigh every time I breathed in his clean, masculine smell, an intoxicating blend of citrus and cedar.

“Armani?”

Shit.

He asked me a question, didn't he?

I nod. “Sure. I'd love to see it.”

I stretch my limbs as I rise from the chair, not missing the way Kane's eyes are glued to my cleavage. In his defense, there is quite a bit of it. I'm a busty Betty, and the balconette bra I'm wearing pushes my boobs up pretty drastically. I smile seductively when his attention drops to my peaked nipples, clearly on display through the thin material. The bra isn't see-through, but it doesn't leave much to the imagination either.

Ironically, it's one of my most conservative lingerie pieces, which is why I chose to wear it today. But as unmistakable heat flares in his gaze, I wonder if Kane's not as immune to nudity on the job as he claims. There's this electric charge in the air, putting every nerve ending in my body on high alert.

Oh, if my ex could see me now.

I've been told that I exude this weird sort of carnal energy on more than one occasion. The first time someone mentioned it, I laughed it off, but when I really started paying attention, I noticed that people *do* react to me a little differently. A former lover once said that every move I made was sinful, dripping in desire. Everything about me made people think about sex—*want sex*—no matter how hard they tried to deny their baser instincts. Now, that was a rapey statement if I'd ever heard one, but I had to admit, the idea did have some merit.

When I'd learned to identify the subtle nuisances of attraction, I decided to have some fun capitalizing on it. What can I say? I love sex. Having it, watching other people do it, talking about it. Hedonism speaks to me on a primal level. Maybe it's because I was raised to be incredibly open-minded about all things in life, I don't know. But once I discovered what the fuss was about, I never looked back.

My prurient nature caused all sorts of problems in my last relationship, though, because my ex couldn't see past his insecurities. He would constantly accuse me of flirting with other men when I did nothing of the sort. A few months into our relationship, I was shocked when he suggested we open our bedroom to a third. To be honest, he was incredibly selfish in—and out of—bed, so I thought adding another person could be fun. At least I'd get some orgasms out of it, right? He completely shut down the idea of involving another man, but lucky for him, I enjoyed being with women as well. Little did I know he had an ulterior motive from the start. One that ultimately backfired on him and forced me to see him for who he really was.

When that toxic relationship ended—far past its expiration date, mind you—I promised myself I would own my sexuality like a boss, and if anyone had an issue with it, too bad. I refuse to allow others to shame me into stifling an essential part of who I am. I'd like to find true love one day as much as the next gal, but I'm perfectly fine enjoying the freedom of singledom for as long as it takes.

Despite my somewhat adventurous sexual preferences, I'd actually prefer monogamy. There are plenty of ways for a couple to indulge their fantasies and not touch other people. Voyeurism and exhibitionism are two of my faves. But if my past relationships are anything to go by, it'll take someone who's incredibly enlightened with high self-esteem to be with me long-term.

With the reminder fresh in my brain, I decide to leave the past where it belongs and take what I want in the present, regardless of who he's related to. Besides, it's not like I'm looking for anything beyond tonight. What harm

could really come from two consenting adults enjoying each other's bodies? Two virtual strangers coming together purely for physical gratification before going their separate ways. Nobody outside of this room would ever have to know.

I step in front of the mirror, feeling Kane's watchful gaze behind me. I trace the outside of the elaborate symbol now adorning my skin, watching as goose bumps scatter across the pinkened flesh beneath the ink.

"It's beautiful," I breathe out. "Your talent is unreal."

"Thank you." Kane's voice rumbles. "You're quite the canvas."

My eyes lift to his reflection as Kane steps closer, not stopping until I can feel his heat at my back. I gasp as he gently rubs ointment over my new tat before placing a transparent dressing on top of it and securing its edges. Kane's movements are practiced, precise, but I have a feeling the way his fingertips linger on my skin afterward is anything but.

I bite my lip as he removes his gloves, tossing them in the nearby trash. "What happens now?"

"That's entirely up to you." Kane's large hands bracket my hips. The bridge of his nose runs along the slope of my neck, causing my nipples to pebble even more. "Tell me I'm not imagining this crazy pull."

"You're not." My spine bows as I rest the back of my head on his shoulder. "Definitely not."

Kane groans, and with fingers splayed across my stomach, he pulls me back into his steely erection. "You're making me want to say *fuck the rules* and just take what I know we both crave. But I can't do it."

"What rules?" I ask. "What can't you do?"

"Fuck clients." Kane palms my breasts from behind, abrading my stiff nipples as he kneads. "I *can't* risk it, Armani, no matter how badly I want you. This company is my livelihood. My brother's livelihood."

"Wait." My hands cover Kane's as he begins to pull away, trapping them in place. I'm not an idiot; I know this man could easily overpower me if he

wanted to. But he doesn't seem to mind having two handfuls of boob at the moment, so I let the words fly off of my tongue as fast as possible before that changes. "I haven't paid yet. Not that I *can't* pay—I totally will if that's what you want—but if no money actually exchanges hands, I wouldn't *technically* be a client, right?"

A devilish grin stretches across his handsome face as my words sink in. "You know, I have been known to gift a *friend* some ink on occasion. You wanna be my friend, Armani? Is that what you're saying?"

I moan as one of Kane's hands slides south, flirting with the waistband of my sweatpants. "Do we get to be naked friends?"

His laughter vibrates against my skin as his lips hover over the sensitive spot right behind my ear. "Naked friends are the best kind of friends, don't you think?"

I nod furiously. "Oh, yeah. Naked friends are awesome."

"I think we've found ourselves a technicality."

"Thank you, baby Jesus," I mutter, causing Kane to laugh again, right before he sucks on the skin beneath my ear so hard, I know it's gonna leave a mark. "Holy shit, that feels good."

He pushes his hand into my pants, going straight for the bullseye. "It's about to feel a helluva lot better."

"God, yes!"

We both watch in the mirror as Kane's hand moves beneath my sweats. He wastes no time yanking my flimsy panties to the side and swiping his fingers through my slippery flesh. We groan simultaneously as he sinks one thick digit inside of me before dragging the pad of his thumb over my clit, slowly rubbing circles around it. There's something oddly erotic about the way my pants conceal all the dirty, dirty things Kane's doing to my body. It's a tease, if you will, robbing us of sight, so we're forced to focus on our other senses.

The contrast of his calloused hands against my soft skin. The dichotomy

of his bulky muscles bunching against my long and lean frame as he picks up speed. The wet sucking sounds our bodies make together when he adds a second finger. Whispered pleas of “right there,” and “faster,” and “harder,” racing from my lips. Masculine groans and moans erupting from deep within Kane’s chest, telling me I’m the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen. What a good girl I am for being so responsive to his touch.

When the hand that was still on my breast moves to my throat, it’s almost too much. *He’s* too much. I’m on sensory overload as he squeezes, choking off my air supply. Spots dance across my vision as oxygen evades me. But when Kane loosens his grip, my head spins from the exhilaration as lightning barrels down my spine into the most powerful orgasm I’ve ever felt. By the time I’m done screaming his name, my voice resembles a croak.

Kane holds me upright as I go limp in his arms, nibbling the skin along my bare shoulders. “That was the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.” He gives me a moment to catch my breath, to steady myself before releasing me.

“Christ,” I pant. “I think it’s safe to say you have the most talented hands in all the land.”

I smile as he barks in laughter, the broad grin stretching across his face out of place on such an imposing man.

“You think so, do you?”

“Mmm. Quite.” I tap my chin in mock contemplation. “But it does make me wonder...”

Kane’s lips curve in the corner. “What’s that?”

I take a few steps forward before turning around to face him instead of our reflections. I kick my shoes off, push my pants down, and reach behind my back to unclasp my bra. Kane stands there silently, periwinkle eyes watching with rapt attention as I conduct my little striptease, waiting for my reply. I push one bra strap down, then the other, before flinging the entire garment off to the side, freeing the girls.

I cup my naked breasts, tracing the areolas with the tips of my nails as I

lay down the proverbial gauntlet. “If your tongue and that anaconda in your pants are equally as talented.”

Kane’s nostrils flare before he peels his shirt off, tossing it over his shoulder as he stalks toward me with a growl. “Only one way to find out.”

CHAPTER 5

KANE

PRESENT

“YO, HUNT!” I yell. “Where’re you at?”

“Up here!” he calls from the general direction of the loft.

Our shared condo isn’t large—only thirteen hundred square feet—so it doesn’t take long for me to run up the stairs and find them.

Armani’s mocha eyes widen as I charge into the room that serves as my home office. I scan her body from head to toe, searching for damage. I’m more relieved than I should be that she doesn’t seem to have a scratch on her. I amend my previous thought when she pulls her long brown hair over her shoulder, trying to hide the bite mark I left behind. A primal sense of male satisfaction courses through me at the visual reminder of breaking her skin with my teeth. Tasting her sweet blood on my tongue.

“Hunter, leave.”

“Uh... I’m cool right here, bro.”

My gaze flicks to his in annoyance. “Armani and I need a little privacy, *so get lost.*”

My brother looks to me, then to Armani, then back to me again. “I’m

pretty sure she doesn't want to be left alone with you, so..."

I lift a brow. "You think I'm gonna hurt her?"

He clears his throat. "Normally, I would say no, but that was before you went all Mike Tyson on her neck. Don't even try to play that off, dude. I saw the whole thing go down."

I smirk. "Yeah? Did you also catch the fact that she *loved* every second of it?"

The supposed victim scoffs and flips me the bird. "You wish, asshole."

I swipe a thumb across my lower lip. "You really wanna take a trip down Memory Lane in front of Hunter, babe? Should I tell him all about how you prefer a little pain with your pleasure? How drenched that bite of mine made you earlier? How your pussy is throbbing right now, begging to be pounded into submission by my cock? The same cock you used to Hoover every chance you got as I pulled your hair?"

Ah, hell. Now I'm imagining how fucking sexy she looks with a mouth full of dick, tears running down her face.

"Hmm. Funny, I hardly remember that time in my life. You must not have been very good."

"Nice try, sweetheart." I give her a wry look. "I'm sure you relied on those memories countless times while you were trying to get off with someone else who couldn't quite make it happen."

Fuck knows I have.

"La-la-la-la-la-la!" My idiot brother plugs his ears like a child. "Don't need to hear kinky shit about my sister."

"I'm not your sister," Armani says.

"She's not our sister," I growl at the same time.

Hunter waves his hand dismissively. "Close enough."

"We both know there is a *big* difference between a man pushing boundaries to enhance a woman's pleasure during sex versus physical abuse," I tell Hunter. "The latter of which I would *never* do, unlike other people we

know.”

Armani folds her arms over her chest, pushing her tits up for my viewing pleasure. “If you have something to say, Kane, just freaking say it. I want to go home.”

I glare. “Excuse-fucking-me for delaying your return to the three psychos.”

She mirrors my frosty expression. “As opposed to the two psychos I’m currently with?”

“Hey!” Hunter protests. “Don’t lump me into the same category as them.” He jerks his thumb in my direction. “I’ll defend myself if need be, but his cray-cray obsession with bloodshed did *not* pass on to me. I’m a lover, not a fighter, thank you very much. Now, take it back before my feelers get hurt.”

A blinding smile stretches across her face, making me irrationally pissed off that my little brother put it there.

“I take it back, Hunter. You’re right; Kane’s the only psycho present.”

I flip them both off when they start laughing.

“Quit screwing around, you two. For fuck’s sake, Armani, tell me what you said to Evans that started a goddamn shootout in my club. You’re lucky they wound up just being warning shots. If I had to deal with dead bodies tonight, I’d be taking it out on your ass.”

Great.

Now I wish I had some dead bodies lying around.

Maybe it’s not too late to make that happen.

“First of all, *you wish*. I’m not letting you anywhere near my ass. Secondly, how do you know *I* said anything?” Her gaze wanders over the half wall as if she’s contemplating whether or not she could safely jump.

Ah, so she’s not as unaffected by the brewing rage inside of me as she’d like me to believe.

Hunter raises his hand like we’re in school or some shit. “Yeah... I’m gonna go ahead and save you the verbal foreplay and answer that myself. I’m

already having enough trouble keeping my dinner down, choking on all this damn tension between you two.”

I fan my arm out, gesturing for him to continue. “Try withholding the smartass commentary, will you? I’m not in the mood, dipshit.”

“She brought up Andi Carmichael.” Hunter shrugs. “Needless to say, Vaughn didn’t appreciate it.”

“The hot blonde you’re always FaceTiming?”

Hunter’s eyes widen as he points to Armani. “You did *not* hear that.” He turns back to me and glares. “Thanks a lot, fuckface.”

“Didn’t hear *what*?”

This newfound sass of hers is puzzling. It makes me want to simultaneously snuff the life out of her and fuck her brains out. I know it’s not unheard of, but those two urges are mutually exclusive for me. Figures the woman before me would be the exception. She emanated strength from day one—it’s part of what drew me to her—but I don’t remember her ever being this feisty. Nor vindictive, which she definitely is now. And because I’m clearly a sick fuck, of course, I think she’s sexier than ever because of it.

Armani smirks as if she’s reading my mind before adding, “That you’re in constant communication with the girl my cousin and his two besties have apparently gone nutso over? *That’s* what I wasn’t supposed to hear?”

Hunt groans, scrubbing a hand down his face. “Look. I ain’t playin’. Those guys would probably kill me if they found out Andi and I still talk. Like, legit murder my ass. You can’t say a word.”

She sighs dramatically. “Fine. I won’t say a word, but only because I like you. Your thickheaded brothers, not so much.”

I wonder if she’d keep flinging insults my way if she knew it’s making me hard. Probably. Why that turns me on, even more, I don’t know. I seem to be a glutton for punishment when it comes to her.

Hunter preens. “Aw, you say the sweetest things, sis.”

“But for the record...” she continues, as I fight the urge to make her

swallow my dick. “I do think you’re exaggerating a bit much about Cruz and the guys. I don’t think they’d *actually* murder someone.”

My brother and I share a knowing look, wordlessly agreeing to keep our mouths shut. We are both *intimately familiar* with the violence a person is capable of when cornered—or hell, sometimes just for the high it brings—but neither one of us is looking to incriminate anybody, especially ourselves. Hunter wasn’t lying when he said he was a lover, not a fighter, but he’s also a survivor. You do what needs to be done, and afterward, you figure out how to cope with the demons living inside of you. For my brother and me, that’s art. I’m one angry motherfucker, but if I didn’t have my studio, I’d be downright psychotic.

Fuck.

Speaking of psychopaths, if Armani asking about Andi indeed was the cause of Vaughn’s meltdown, damage control is going to be more complicated than I thought. That asshole is usually pretty logical, especially when it comes to business matters, but bringing up the girl who dumped his ass and ran off is the exception to that. It’s been a long time since anyone’s been stupid enough to do so. It’s kind of an unspoken rule around here. You don’t mention the Carmichael girl, and you sure as hell don’t talk about any of the shit that went down on Devil’s Night several years back.

Christ, it’s gonna be a long night.

I release a harsh breath. “Regardless of how harmless you think they might be, you need to give Evans some time to cool down. You saw the beat down he gave Rampage, and I know you’re smart enough to pick up on the fact that he was in a blind rage while that was happening. Who knows what the hell you’d be walking into if you went home right now? You can stay here tonight.”

“Yeah, right. Like you’re so much better?” Armani laughs. “You’re one of the most sadistic people I’ve ever met.”

I tell my dick to calm the fuck down when she bites her lip.

“Yet, interestingly enough, you never once complained. The way I remember it, you were gagging for more. *Literally.*”

“*Jesus Christ, just fuck each other and get it over with already.*” Hunter’s face scrunches up with distaste as he heads toward the stairs. “You’re both obviously on a mission to make some terrible decisions, and I’ve officially met my limit trying to talk some sense into either one of you. Armani can clearly handle herself, so I’m going to my room to draw. If anyone needs me, don’t bother. *Thank God* for noise-canceling earbuds.” He shivers dramatically. “Who thought I’d ever have to deal with my brother and sister lusting after each other? Gross.”

I roll my eyes. “She’s not our sister!”

At the same time, Armani says, “I am not related to either of you *in any way!*”

“Semantics.” He waves us off before hurrying down the stairs.

Armani shakes her head. “I see he hasn’t changed one bit.”

If only that were true.

I wait until Hunter’s bedroom door closes before I motion for her to follow me. “C’mon. I’ll show you to my room.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” She releases an annoyingly adorable snort. “I’m not having sex with you, Kane.”

“I wasn’t offering, Armani,” I toss over my shoulder as we reach the main floor. “I’ve got shit to take care of. I’ll be out all night.”

I lead her to my bedroom, tossing some clothes from my dresser onto the mattress. “Here. You can change into these. If you want to shower, there are clean towels in the cabinet under the sink.”

When she doesn’t say anything, I turn around and find her standing in the doorway, looking around curiously. I follow Armani’s gaze, trying to see my bedroom through her eyes. There’s not much to it, to be honest. A king-sized bed and a wooden dresser take up most of the space, but the back wall is what she’s fixated on. It’s coated in a layer of black chalkboard paint, and

whenever I feel inspired, I use special pens to draw on it. Her eyes wander over the various artwork, designs ranging from downright aggressive to classically beautiful, depending on my mood at the time.

She gasps when she gets to one particular image I never thought I'd have to worry about her seeing. "Is that—"

Fuck.

I clearly wasn't thinking when I brought her in here.

"No," I lie, shaking my head profusely.

Armani's eyes lighten to the color of bourbon as she studies the drawing of a woman's eye. Its almond shape is topped by long, thick lashes and a delicate brow. Maybe that in itself wouldn't be so telling, but there's no denying the fact that the iris is actually a symbol, one she is *very* familiar with.

"Yes, it is!" She blows right past me until her finger is tracing the design. "Oh, my God." She whips around, drilling her gaze directly at me. "What does this mean? Have you... do you..."

Goddammit.

I need to get out of here before I do something stupid.

"It doesn't mean *anything*, Armani. It's just a fucking symbol."

"My symbol!" She points to the matching design on her ribs. "My one-of-a-kind tattoo!"

"I like the symbol!" I spit out. "So what? I'm proud of the design that *I* created. Quit trying to romanticize the meaning behind it. It has *nothing* to do with you! *Abso-fucking-lutely* nothing. Quite frankly, if anything, I'm pissed that it's imprinted on your skin because I can't think of anyone more undeserving of it."

Her lips thin, and her eyes narrow. "You're lying."

I don't like the absolute conviction in Armani's tone one fucking bit.

It's time to shut this shit down.

"Believe whatever the fuck you want, Mani." I stride across the room

toward the hallway. “It doesn’t change the facts.”

“Oh yeah?” she challenges. “And what *facts* are those?”

I turn toward her when I reach the doorway. “That you’re nothing to me but a regret from my past. Someone I made the mistake of trusting once upon a time. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a couple of beautiful *friends* waiting on me, and I wouldn’t want them to get started on all the naked fun before I get there.” I give her a sleazy wink for added effect as I make my way through the house. Right as I’m slamming the front door closed, she belts out a string of curses, claiming she hates my guts and would be perfectly fine never seeing my ass again.

Good.

It’s easier that way.

CHAPTER 6

KANE

PAST

“YOU’VE OFFICIALLY BEEN UPGRADED to my bestest friend ever.”

I smile into Armani’s neck, inhaling the sweet coconut aroma. “*Talented hands in all the land and bestest friend ever.* Wow. I’m getting all the accolades tonight.”

She loops an arm behind my neck, pulling me down so she can playfully bite my chin. I cup her tits in response.

“Well deserved accolades, good sir. Well deserved.”

Armani arches her spine, pushing her luscious ass directly into my growing erection. We’re lounging on my client’s chair, both spent and sweaty, her supple body on top of mine. We’ve already fucked three times, but I’m itching to go again. Yet, at the same time, I’m perfectly content just holding this gorgeous girl in my arms, basking in the afterglow. I don’t know when the fuck I became a cuddler, but here we are.

I roll her dark brown nipples between my thumbs and forefingers. “You ever think about getting these pierced? You’re a perfect candidate for it.”

She releases a chuckle that quickly turns into a moan. “I have, actually. I

love the way it looks. Did you pierce your own?”

“Nah.” I shake my head. “Mo did it. I’m sure she’d be happy to do yours, too.”

A little too happy, I’m sure.

Suddenly, I regret suggesting it, although Armani would look fucking amazing with a couple of barbells.

“Hmm...” She looks down at her chest. “I’ll have to talk to her about that.”

This woman’s self-confidence is a huge turn-on. We’re lying here completely naked, under stark fluorescent lighting, yet she makes no move whatsoever to cover her beautiful body. She’s a goddamn wildcat in the sack, too. I’ve never been with someone more enthusiastic or open-minded. None of the awkwardness you usually have with a new partner was present. Armani was game for whatever I wanted to give her, and she’s got the reddened ass to prove it. Shit, when I told her I wanted to fuck that ass, she told me to grab the lube. Sadly, the only suitable lubrication I have in the shop—also known as petroleum jelly—isn’t condom-friendly, so that idea was out. I’ll be damn sure to carry a travel bottle of Astroglide with me at all times going forward, though.

What am I saying?

I’m talking like this will be a regular thing. I know nothing about this woman. Not really.

There’s an easy way to fix that.

“So, do you live close by?”

She frowns. “Aren’t personal questions sort of a one-night stand faux pas?”

My shoulders lift. “They don’t have to be. Hell, I’ve already given up tons of info about my family. Besides, I’m down for extending this beyond tonight if you are.”

Armani sits up, twisting her body until she’s straddling my lap.

“Kane.” She frames my face with her hands. “Tonight’s been *amazing*. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t interested in seeing where this could go.”

“But?”

She sucks the corner of her lower lip into her mouth. “*But...* I live over two hours away. I’m in school. Once the fall term begins, I’ll barely have time to sleep, let alone maintain any kind of social life. I’m just in town for a few weeks to help my family out.”

My fingertips dig into her curvy hips as she sensuously glides her wet pussy along my shaft. I’m not sure if she realizes what she’s doing. The movement is more of an instinct than anything.

“So, you have family here?”

“Yeah. My *tía* Maria and my cousin, Cruz.” Armani cringes slightly. “Well, not my aunt anymore. She recently passed.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. It’s awful because she was so young, but I think she’s in a better place now. Cancer really destroyed her body in the last few months. Never her fiery spirit, though. She kept that until the very end.” Armani’s lips curve into a sad smile. “My mom and I are here to help settle the estate. My cousin just graduated high school, so it’s all a bit overwhelming, I’d imagine. He’s eighteen, so legally an adult, but *Tía* Maria made my mom the executor so he wouldn’t have to worry about all the legal stuff.”

This is a rather odd conversation to be having while in our current position, but for some reason, it seems perfectly reasonable. Even though my dick is definitely responding to the hypnotic pulse of Armani’s hips, I’m not in any hurry to get inside of her. I almost feel... compelled to comfort her in her grief. Hold her if she needs to cry it out or whatever.

A fucking weird feeling, that’s for sure.

The fact that she’s leaving town in a few weeks is... unsettling. I want to know everything there is to know about Armani, and now I feel like there’s this deadline looming over my head. Once she leaves, she becomes nothing

more than a fond memory. But if she's meant to be a part of my past, why does she feel like my future?

Damn, listen to me. When did I become such a philosophical pansy ass?

I clear my throat. "Why don't we just play it by ear then? I'm sure you'll be busy with your cousin's stuff a lot of the time, but whenever you're free, if I'm free, why don't we hang? We can exchange numbers and go from there."

Her espresso eyes bounce between mine as she considers my proposal. "Okay. I'd like that."

My mouth kicks up in the corner. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Armani nods, grabbing one of the foil packets I set on the rolling tray earlier. Ripping it open, she adds, "But I've got something else I'd like to do first."

"What's that?"

I have a solid idea where she's going with this, but I want to hear the words. My head falls as Armani scoots back to give me one long stroke from root to tip before rolling the condom down my length. Once I'm fully sheathed, she positions her body above me.

"I want you to fuck me so hard, I feel the delicious stretch you bring even when you're no longer inside of me. I want your handprints on my ass, fingertip-shaped bruises on my hips and breasts. Lips swollen from too much kissing and a jaw that's sore for days from sucking your cock. You think you can handle that?"

Christ, this woman was made for me.

Straight up fashioned from the gods perfectly tailored to lure me into her web. I can't think of anything I've ever wanted more.

I hook my hands over Armani's shoulders, pushing down at the same time I thrust upward, burying myself to the hilt in one stroke. Her surprised yelp morphs into a moan as her tits bounce enticingly.

"Oh, baby, I can definitely handle that."

CHAPTER 7

ARMANI

PAST

“YOU SURF?” I nod to a group of guys exiting the water from their sunset ride.

“Nah.” Kane shakes his head. “Never had much of a chance growing up. I just moved here from Anaheim a little over a year ago, and I’ve been too busy to learn since.”

“Are you sure you just don’t want to make a fool out of yourself in front of all the locals who’ve been doing this their whole lives?”

He laughs. “That, too. Gotta maintain my street cred, ya know?”

“Of course.” I smile.

“What about you?”

I stare into the ocean wistfully. “I used to love it. I grew up in La Jolla, which has great waves year-round. Haven’t done much of it lately, though.”

“Why not?”

I shrug. “Honestly? It wasn’t worth the arguments or admonishments I’d have to deal with afterward. The thought of surfing became... stifling, I guess.”

“What do you mean?” Kane’s brows draw together in confusion. “Every surfer I’ve met acts like it’s the ultimate freedom.”

“It is.”

Now his eyebrows rise in the opposite direction. “But?”

I take a long sip of my beer, watching as the sun dips below the horizon. “*But...* I was in a relationship for a while. My ex wasn’t a fan of the lifestyle. He thinks surfers are a bunch of lazy bums who do nothing but smoke weed and ride waves all day. He didn’t want me associating with them.”

Kane takes a drag from his bottle, watching me as the liquid goes down his throat. My nipples pebble under my bikini top as Kane peruses my body with unmistakable interest. I don’t know how this man gets me revved up while I’m thinking of such a terrible period in my life, but I can’t help but return the gesture.

“Don’t take this the wrong way... but you don’t strike me as the passive type. I know we’ve only known each other a couple of weeks, but I can’t picture you allowing anyone to make you feel any less than the stunning, sexy creature you are.”

Okay, tread carefully, Armani.

“I don’t know exactly when it happened, but somewhere along the way, I became what he wanted me to be. I didn’t realize how much I sacrificed my essential self until things ended. When I left, I swore I would never do it again. I’m *not* ashamed of who I am, despite how I acted with him. I know parts of my lifestyle may seem too... *free-spirited* to others, but I also know that I’m a good person where it counts. If someone doesn’t like me for me, fuck ‘em. Ya know?”

Kane reaches out, tracing my freshly healed tattoo. “Lemme guess. This was a big step in feeling like yourself again.”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

I gasp when he scoots down in the sand, tracing the symbol with his tongue. “Well, I’m glad I could be a part of that. I happen to like your *free*

spirit quite a bit.”

I hold him to me as he nibbles the skin around my navel. “Kane, you need to stop, or we’re going to give those people over there a show.”

He releases a deep chuckle as he resumes his position sitting beside me. “And what a show it would be.”

I laugh. “Mmm. Indeed. And I am *all* for a little exhibitionism, but there’s a time and a place for it. Doing this right here, right now, is just asking for indecent exposure charges, and I’m not exactly in the mood to get arrested. Now, if we waited until it got a little bit darker... that’s a different story. I’ve always wanted to fuck under a pier. Feel the wooden piling digging into my back as I’m impaled on someone’s big, thick cock.”

Kane bites his lip. “Will any cock do? Or did you have a specific one in mind?”

I reach over and discreetly rub his growing erection through his shorts. “I’m quite fond of this one. You up for the challenge?”

He groans, scooting closer so he can nuzzle my ear. “I’m absolutely up for the challenge, baby.”

His fingers climb my thigh, dipping beneath my bikini bottoms. I gasp when Kane roughly thrusts two fingers into me, pumping them in and out. Lubrication certainly isn’t an issue—it never is around him—but the intrusion is still a bit shocking. I moan like a damn porn star when he presses the pad of his thumb into my clit.

“Shh, Armani. Wouldn’t want to tip those people off to what we’re doing over here.”

“Then quit being so damn good at it!” I whisper-shout.

I feel him smile against my cheek. “Never. Watching how responsive you are to me is the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever experienced. But if you want me to continue, you need to be quiet.”

“I need a distraction. Talk to me.” I dig my fingernails into his forearm but make no move to stop him. “Tell me more about your family and why

you moved from Anaheim to the coast.”

“My folks won the lottery. Not a ton, but enough for my mom to quit her job at Ralph’s and buy a pretty sweet ocean-view pad.” The tip of Kane’s pinky finger presses against my ass, really testing my resolve to be quiet. “I was working at a buddy’s shop at that point, making a name for myself. Hunter was serving as my apprentice, but when it was time to move, staying wasn’t an option for him since he still had a year left in high school.”

Sweat trickles from my hairline as I try my best to act unaffected. Much easier said than done, considering I’m starting to clench around him. “So you moved with them?”

He shakes his head, stilling his fingers. Kane seems to have a thing for edging, which is equally arousing and infuriating. “Not at first, but about a month later, I did.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“Hunter and I had planned to open our own shop as soon as we could get the funding, but startup costs anywhere in Orange County aren’t cheap. My parents offered to loan me enough money to open the studio and put a down payment on a nearby condo. I wasn’t stupid enough to allow my pride to ruin the chance to make mine and Hunter’s dream a reality.”

“Wow... that was really generous of them. They must be good parents.”

Kane starts circling his thumb and slowly moving his fingers again. “They are. I have no idea how my older brother turned out to be such a Grade-A prick.”

“Tell me about him. Why is your relationship so strained?”

I know I’m pushing it here, but my curiosity won’t allow me to pass on the opportunity. Of course, I’ve heard Grayson’s version of why he became estranged from the rest of his family, but I have a feeling he didn’t present all the facts. In the short time I’ve known the middle Ambrose brother, he’s been much more forthcoming with me than his older brother ever was.

“It’s not like there was some big blowout.” Kane shrugs, which causes

him to hook his fingers inside me in the most delightful way. “Even with the big gap in our ages, I vividly recall Gray having a superiority complex. He *hated* the fact that we came from blue-collar stock. It embarrassed him. Our dad’s a mechanic, and when Hunt and I were growing up, we’d hang out with him being little grease monkeys any chance we got. He specializes in restoring classics which is truly an art in its own right. But that didn’t matter to Grayson because he was above manual labor. He’d sneer when he’d see our oil-streaked hands.”

A sneer I am quite familiar with.

“One time, shortly before he went away to college, our mom asked him to load the dishwasher. Gray told her she needed to hire a maid to do it. I will never forget the look on his face when she told him she birthed three boys to do it for her, so why pay someone?” Kane laughs. “When he got a full ride to college, he ran as fast as he could and never looked back. He still calls our folks on holidays and sends them gifts and shit, but Hunter and I are completely off his radar.”

Not exactly accurate.

Kane’s hand ceases all movement again when I’m on the verge of coming, making me whimper. “How much longer do you think they’ll stay? How many times do you think I can get you to the edge before they leave? Because I’m not letting you come until my dick is inside of you, Armani. Until I’m pounding you into one of those pilings so hard, you’ll be afraid the pier will collapse on top of us.”

I glance over to the group of beachgoers, willing them to leave with my eyes. They’ve already put out their fire, but they’re taking their sweet ass time packing up their belongings.

“Please, just one. Just let me come once before they go.” I’m straight-up going Freddy Krueger on Kane’s forearm at this point, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

He bites down on the shell of my ear. “Mmm, as pretty as you are when

you beg, I'm gonna have to insist on waiting."

"Bastard," I grit out through my teeth.

Kane withdraws his fingers entirely, bringing them to his mouth. A throaty groan rumbles from his chest as he tastes me. "Shit, I think your pussy has become my drug of choice. I'm about to say *fuck it* and make you sit on my face, not giving any fucks who's watching."

"Say the word, and I'll sit on your face any time. No force required."

I fall back on my elbows, practically in tears from being strung so tightly, while the sadist next to me is laughing at the pained look on my face. The combination of the edging and the visual he just planted in my head is too much. My entire body feels like a downed wire. Violent. Explosive. Ready to wreak havoc at the simplest touch.

Kane's handsome face hovers above mine. "Don't worry; I'll make it worth the wait." I pull his face down to mine and bite his lip so hard, the taste of copper fills my mouth. This only seems to turn him on more. "What's the matter? Is my little kitten getting frustrated?"

I swear to God, I actually growl when I see his eyes twinkle with amusement. "I should just leave you here and find someone else to get me off."

He grins. "Why bother when you know nobody gets you off like I do?"

I both love and hate how factual his statement is.

"Cocky asshole."

Kane lowers his face again, taking my mouth in a soft kiss. The contrast between the gentle stroke of his tongue and the tension between us is disorienting. I'm not sure how long we kiss before he pulls back and presses his mouth against my ear.

"You ready for those pilings now?"

I turn my head, shocked to find we're all alone on this darkened beach. I never noticed the final group of people leaving. I don't have a chance to respond before Kane wraps my thighs around his waist, lifting into a standing

position. The dark promise in his eyes as we pad across the sand toward the pier should probably terrify me, but it only excites me more. I yelp when Kane slams my bare back into the weathered wood, but the pain is quickly forgotten the moment he slides my bikini bottoms to the side and thrusts his huge cock inside of me.

“Fuck,” he groans. “Nothing feels better than this. Not one.” *Thrust.* “Damn.” *Thrust.* “Thing.”

It feels like he’s splitting me in two, but he’s right. There’s no better feeling on earth than when this man is inside of me. Kane moves with wild abandon, pulling my neck back at an awkward angle as he wraps my hair around his fist. The jagged wood scrapes my back with each thrust. He’s pinned me against the piling so tightly, all I can do is accept his brutality. But I relish every second of it. I scream. Beg for more. Make all sorts of filthy demands and promises.

When I finally come, I swear I actually hear angels sing as stars explode behind my eyelids. When Kane follows soon after, he falls to his knees, playing with my abused pussy like it’s the most fascinating thing he’s ever seen. He smiles as he watches his seed drip down my thighs before scooping the sticky substance up with his finger and putting it back inside of me. I have never witnessed anything more erotic in my life, and I immediately clench my pussy walls to keep it in place. This is the first time we’ve gone without protection, and I should probably be concerned, but I’m not. I realize I trust this man, even though I don’t know him all that well.

He puts my bottoms back in place and says, “Don’t let it out, Armani. I want to know I’m inside of you when you sleep tonight. I want you to wake up so horny from dreaming about me that when you slide your fingers inside of you, you feel the mess we made together.”

My head falls back with a groan. “Jesus, that’s hot.”

He chuckles, placing a quick kiss over my nylon-covered clit. “Only because it’s *our* mess, baby.”

I smile sleepily as he scoops me into his arms bridal style, completely spent. “We make *the best* messes.”

He places a kiss against my temple. “If it’s this good now, just imagine how great it’ll be years from now.”

I close my eyes, resting my head on his shoulder, wishing I could actually have years with this man. Like it or not, I’m on borrowed time. There is no future with Kane because there’s no way for that to happen without telling him about my relationship with his brother. I’ve already crossed too many lines. I just have to make the best of our time before I go back home. Because if Kane finds out what I’ve kept from him, he’ll hate me. And that’s one thought I can’t live with.

CHAPTER 8

ARMANI

PRESENT

BASS VIBRATES my skull the moment I step into the club. I know I'm asking for trouble by coming here, but quite frankly, I'm sick of being in this holding pattern. It's been a week since Kane left me at his house while he supposedly went off to have a threesome. I stayed awake half the night stewing on that, vacillating back and forth between anger and hurt. When I couldn't take it anymore, I ordered an Uber, only to find Hunter sending the guy away when I stepped outside to meet my driver.

When I asked him what the hell he was doing, he told me he was under strict orders to keep me there and threatened to restrain me if necessary. Hunter must've sensed I was about to call his bluff because he quickly switched tactics, begging me not to make the situation more complicated than it needed to be. He assured me it'd be only a few more hours max, so I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. Following Kane's orders rankled in the worst way, but I didn't want Hunter to suffer his brother's wrath for my obstinance.

Shortly after dawn, Hunter got the all-clear and drove me home. I was

exhausted, angry, and my frustration tolerance was nil by the time we pulled into the driveway of Cruz's Spanish-style mansion. I wanted nothing more than to crawl under the covers and crash for hours. Yet, when my cousin met me at the front door, my weariness didn't stop me from going off on him and his friends for being such reckless idiots. At one point, Cruz referred to me as Hurricane Mani because I wouldn't stop pacing the floor, shaking my clenched fists, yelling at them in Spanish. After I finally calmed down, the four of us had a long talk.

It turns out Kane was with *the guys* all night—not banging some randos—trying to fix whatever problem Vaughn created by knocking that dude out in the first round. I don't know why Kane lied to me about where he was going, but I suspect it's the same reason he lied to me about why he has my symbol on his bedroom wall. My cousin and his besties were annoyingly cagey about the staged fight and the resulting fallout, but we openly discussed my personal safety. Evidently, Kane also raised the same topic, and collectively, they decided I'd be safest somewhere else.

“Hey there, roomie.” Hunter sidles up to me, swinging a heavy arm over my shoulders. “Whatcha doin’? I didn't realize you were coming tonight.”

He has to practically yell so I can hear him over the music. The last time I was here, the vast open space was filled with a roped-off ring circled by bloodthirsty spectators. Tonight, it's still packed with hundreds of bodies, but those bodies are grinding up against each other with entirely different desires in mind. The main area was converted into a dance floor save the bar that runs along the back wall. They even brought in several portable platforms featuring scantily-clad girls swinging around poles.

This place reeks like sex, sweat, stale beer, and bad decisions, but it calls to me in the most primal way. I'm itching to get out on that dance floor and rub up against someone. If Kane insists on pushing me away, I insist on showing him what he's missing.

I shove Hunter's arm off. “Just because I'm being forced to live with you

doesn't mean you're my keeper, Hunt."

He rolls his eyes. "Don't act like living with me is such a hardship. As much as you hate to admit it, you know it's better to be safe than sorry by having someone looking out for you. Someone who knows *what* to look out for. Besides... you had the opportunity to go back to San Diego, and you're the one who chose to stay."

"Yay me!" I wave my imaginary pom-poms. "And you know leaving isn't as easy as you're making it sound. School starts next week, Hunter. I can't just withdraw and find another university at the snap of my fingers."

Hunt narrows his eyes. "C'mon, sis. Don't be a jerk about it. You know I'm the best option you have. God knows if you had to shack up with Kane, you two would probably kill each other. I don't need that shit on my conscience."

He laughs at his joke, but I don't find the humor in it. I hate the animosity that exists between Kane and me. I knew convincing him to give me another shot wouldn't be easy, but I wasn't prepared for this newer version of him. He's angry, bitter, and frustratingly inflexible. Kane Ambrose is holding on to his grudge like a lifeline.

But if that were really true, why draw my symbol in a place where he'd be forced to look at it every day? I don't believe his bullshit excuse for one second. I know the Kane I spent the best weeks of my life with—the one who defended my honor even after I cut him so deeply—is in there somewhere. It just may take a Herculean effort to dig him out.

Hunter loops his arm through mine, leading me back toward the exit. "C'mon, Mani. You don't want to hang out with these assholes. Let's go home and order takeout and watch movies or something."

"Do I *look* like I want to curl up on the couch and watch movies?" I push his arm away for the second time, gesturing to the black skintight minidress and sky-high heels I'm wearing.

He rubs the back of his neck. "Nope. Not even a little. And that's what

I'm afraid of. Kane is gonna flip his shit when he sees you, girl. This is his place to blow off steam, and your presence seems to have the opposite effect lately."

Ah.

I see what's happening here. Hunter is stepping into his peacekeeper role, eliminating a problem before it arises. Too bad for him—and his brother—I have no intention of making it easy on them.

"Look, Hunt. Don't worry about me. I'm just here to blow off a little steam, too. I'll stay far away from Kane if that's what you're so worried about."

I surreptitiously glance around, trying to find his elusive brother, but so far, I haven't spotted him. I know he's spotted me, though. I can feel the heat of his gaze, following my every move. I spy a security cam out of the corner of my eye and wonder if Kane's sitting in some backroom, watching me through a monitor right now. If that's the case, I might as well give him something to see, right?

I give Hunter a condescending pat on the chest. "I'm gonna go get a drink, and then I'm gonna dance. Now, if you'll excuse me."

I don't bother waiting for Hunter's response. I fight through the lineup at the bar, squeezing in to get the bartender's attention.

His handsome face splits into a grin when I lean over the polished mahogany, giving him a generous glimpse of my cleavage.

"Hey there. What can I get you?"

I pointedly check him out, slowly cataloging his muscular build and various tattoos before holding up three fingers. "A triple Blanco straight."

He whistles. "Damn, baby. You ain't playin' around tonight, are you?"

He sets a rocks glass on the bar in front of me, pouring a generous amount of tequila into it. "Nope." I down the shots in one go before slamming the glass back down. "How much do I owe you?"

The bartender wipes his hands on a towel. "First one's on me,

sweetheart.”

“Is that something you do for all of your customers?”

“Nope.” He winks. “Only gorgeous brunettes named...”

I smile. “Armani?”

He points a finger at me. “Exactly! That wouldn’t happen to be your name, would it?”

I press a hand to my chest in mock surprise. “As a matter of fact, it is! What a coincidence!”

Several people are grumbling around us, trying to place orders, but Mr. Bartender is in no hurry to walk away. “Well, there you go. There is one condition, though.”

I nod. “Of course. And that would be?”

His beefy forearms flex as he leans closer. “My break is in an hour. If you’re still around, maybe save a dance for me?”

Well, damn, this was much easier than I was expecting. “I think I could do that. What name should I put on my dance card?”

He swipes a hand along his jaw. “Sa—”

“Sam,” a deep voice growls beside me, making me jump a little. “Fuck off. This one’s off-limits.”

Sam’s eyes widen as he holds his palms up in surrender. “Sorry, bro. Didn’t know she was spoken for.” Sam tips his head. “It was nice meeting you, Armani. Have a good night.”

Sam quickly busies himself, serving other patrons, likely sensing the danger brewing from the man beside me. I’m instantly irate.

“You have some nerve! What do you think you’re doing?”

“Cockblocking you.” Kane lifts a brow. “Was I not being obvious enough?”

I fight the urge to jam my spiky shoe into his shin. “And what gives you the right to do that?”

I’m frozen as he leans down, pressing his lips against my ear. “If you

thought you were going to come to *my* club to pick up some random fuckboy, you were sorely mistaken.”

I step closer, slipping my hand beneath Kane’s shirt. If anyone were watching us, they’d probably think we were two lovers locked in an embrace, when in reality, it’s anything but. His giant body tenses as I rake my nails across his lower back, leaving a trail of deep scratches in my wake. I mean, it’s only fair, right? I still have faint bite marks on my neck from this asshole.

Payback’s a bitch, isn’t it?

Our height difference isn’t too significant with my heels, so it takes minimal effort to lean into his ear.

“How exactly do you plan on stopping me, Kane? In case you didn’t get the memo, I can do whatever and *whomever* I want with *my* body. Unless you plan on slapping a chastity belt on me, you have no control over who I fuck.”

Kane’s fingertips dig into my side before he pulls back with a grin. “You wanna bet?”

Before I can ask him to elaborate, Kane jumps on the bar and makes a slicing motion across his neck. The music instantly stops, causing a stunned silence throughout the crowd.

“Listen up!” Kane shouts, cupping his hands around his mouth to amplify the sound. “See this woman?” He points to me. “If I see any dudes flirting with her, dancing with her, hell... even *talking* to her, he’s walking out of here tonight without a dick. You feel me?”

I laugh mockingly but stop as I look around, seeing every guy in the club nodding their heads in agreement before the music starts blasting through the speakers again.

I throw my hands up. “Oh, you’ve got to be shitting me!”

Kane hops down from the bar, landing smoothly on his feet. “Afraid not, Mani. You are officially the most unfuckable pussy in this building now. You should probably save yourself the embarrassment and just head home.”

Motherfucker!

I refuse to give him the satisfaction and instead make my way to the dance floor. I swear I hear him laughing as the crowd parts like the goddamn Red Sea to avoid any accidental contact. I dance from one song to the next, supremely pissed off, but there's no way I'm backing down. I'm aching for human touch when the beat switches to something slower, more sensual. More specifically, the touch of the infuriating man whose eyes haven't left me once. I find myself dancing *for* him, running my hands over my body, pretending they're his.

I startle when a pair of delicate hands grip my waist from behind. I look over my shoulder and smile when I see a familiar face.

"This okay?" Mo, the piercer I met from Kane's shop, asks.

Her hair is longer now. Bright pink. Still as gorgeous as ever in an edgy sort of way.

"Um... it's okay with me. But are you sure you want to sacrifice yourself to the slaughter?"

Mo's husky laugh is nothing short of erotic. "Why would I be sacrificing myself? He was threatening to chop off dicks, and I definitely don't have one of those. Not unless you count the silicone variety."

I join her in laughter. "I suppose he did say that, didn't he?"

She smiles. "I'm Mo."

"I remember." I return her smile. "Armani."

"How could I forget a beautiful name like that?" Kane's jaw clenches when Mo runs her fingers along my left rib cage, right above my Aphrodite tattoo. "What do you say we teach Kane a lesson?"

She presses her soft breasts into my back as she grabs my hips, encouraging me to move with the beat.

"What'd you have in mind?"

I shiver as Mo brushes my long hair away from my neck, pressing her mouth to my ear. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you're into women too, right?"

“I am,” I confirm, swaying my hips to the rhythm.

Mo grabs my hand. “Let’s take this conversation someplace a little quieter, shall we?”

“Lead the way.” I nod.

Mo takes me down the main hallway, stopping at the door about halfway down on the right. Producing a key from her bra, she unlocks the door, which evidently, leads to an office.

I raise a brow. “You work here? Are you still at the studio?”

“I am.” The music is muffled once she closes the door behind us. “But I also help Kane with some odds and ends around here. Hence, the key.”

I look around the small room. Besides the wall of security camera monitors, it’s pretty basic. A metal desk with a couple of chairs, a leather couch, not much else. It smells like him as if he was in here recently.

“Make yourself comfortable.” Mo opens a desk drawer, retrieving a bottle of top-shelf whiskey. “Drink?”

I prop my butt against the edge of the desk. “Sure.”

She extends her arm, offering me the bottle. “Sorry, no glasses.”

I unscrew the top and take a lengthy swig, relishing the burn. “No glasses, no problem.”

Mo takes a few gulps of her own before placing the bottle back in the drawer. “May I be frank?”

“Please do.”

Her long, delicate fingers move down my arms, gently tracing the designs inked into my flesh. “I’ve been wildly attracted to you since the moment you first walked into the studio. And every time after that, even though I knew you were Kane’s girl, it didn’t stop me from fantasizing about you repeatedly. I used to tease Kane all the time that I was going to steal you away from him. That if I ever had the pleasure of showing you the things I can do with my tongue, you’d leave his ass. Did he ever tell you that?”

I shake my head, warmth pooling between my thighs at the visual she just

planted. “He did not.”

“I’m not surprised.” Mo chuckles. “In case you haven’t noticed, he is a bit of a caveman.”

I laugh. “Oh, I’ve noticed. But since we’re being totally frank, I should probably tell you I’m not looking to... be stolen.”

“I figured,” she says matter-of-factly. “I knew if you ever showed up in town again, you’d be here for one reason and one reason only, and that’s to reclaim your man.”

I sigh. “Do you think it’s a lost cause?”

“Not at all.” Mo places her hands on either side of me, caging me in against the desk. She smells sweet, like orange blossoms. “But I do think he needs a little... motivation to get out of his head. And since he took the majority of your prospects away out there...”

I tilt my head to the side. “Are you volunteering to be my prospect *in here?*”

Mo covertly gestures to a camera that’s pointed directly at us. “There’s no sound feed, but I guarantee he’s watching from his phone right now. He would’ve received an alert when the motion sensor was triggered. Here’s the thing, Armani: *I love eating pussy.* It’s genuinely one of my favorite things in the entire world. If you’re willing, I think we should play a little game of chicken with Kane. Let’s see how many orgasms I can give you before his tightly-leashed control snaps, and he busts in here to club you over the head. Figuratively speaking, of course.”

“I like this plan.” My lips curve. “But I do have one question.”

She nods as if she was expecting that. “Shoot.”

“I thought you and Kane were friends. Knowing how much it would piss him off, why would you do this? Wouldn’t that be putting your friendship at risk? Not to mention the fact that you work for him.”

She brushes some sweaty hair away from my face. “*This is me being his friend. And yours, if you’ll have me.* Kane doesn’t have many friends. He’s

too scary to most, so it's not often someone has the balls to stand up to him and tell him when he's being an idiot."

"But you do?" I challenge.

"Metaphorically, yes." She laughs before her expression takes on a more somber tone. "Kane *is* my friend. He's one of my best friends, honestly. So I'm one of the few who know how truly miserable he's been over the last few years. You made him happy, Armani. More so than I would've ever thought possible. I know the baggage between you two is... unconventional at best. I know unpacking that won't be easy. But I also know he doesn't want to be stuck in purgatory for the rest of his life. He just doesn't know how to stop getting in his own damn way. Kane needs a little push in the right direction from someone who cares."

I think about that for a moment. "And you really think this is the solution?"

"I do." Mo nods. "Or at the very least, I think it'll light a fire under his ass. I know what I'm suggesting may seem fucked up to some people—self-serving even—but I can tell you're sex-positive, like me. You can appreciate this for the pleasure of it without forming attachments or being riddled with shame. Tomorrow, neither of us will have any problem forgetting this ever happened. And Kane knows that, which is why I'm confident it won't have any long-lasting effects. But it *will* cause him to take action in the short-term, so while we're waiting for that to happen, let me make you feel good."

Mo's face lowers toward mine. She's seeking permission, giving me plenty of opportunities to stop this from happening. I close the gap between us, pressing my lips against hers. She moans, cupping her hands around my jaw as she licks the seam of my lips. I open willingly, allowing our tongues to mingle. The kiss quickly becomes heated as our hands roam anywhere they can reach. When I trace the soft curve of her breast, she does the same with mine, groaning when her fingers feather over my nipple rings. It's no secret I have them—they're pretty apparent through my dress since I'm braless—but

I know exactly where she's coming from on the tactile experience of feeling them. It's arousing for both giver and receiver, which is precisely why I got pierced.

She pulls back, toying with the thin straps of my dress. "May I?"

In reply, I slide both straps off my shoulders, pulling the fabric until my breasts are bared.

Her finger traces my areolas before tugging slightly on each barbell. "Damn, I really wish I had the pleasure of doing these for you, but I can still appreciate the beauty of them."

I gasp as she bends over, flicking her tongue over each tip. I hop on the desk, parting my legs in invitation. Mo takes a seat on the chair in front of me, eyes zeroing in on the tiny scrap of lace covering my pussy.

I spread my legs wider. "I have another piercing you might be interested in."

"Oh, I'm *definitely* interested." Mo's fingers tickle my exposed thighs, causing a full-body shiver to course through me.

I fall back on my elbows and groan. "It's been so long since I've been with a woman, I almost forgot how good it feels. So soft."

She kisses my inner thighs, alternating sides as she climbs higher. "Mmm. Well, let me refresh your memory."

I may prefer my sex on the rougher side, and I've always naturally gravitated more toward men, but sometimes, I like to engage in something more delicate. Wholly feminine. Women are beautiful creatures. No matter their shape or size, everything about them is inviting. The roundness of their curves. The silkiness of their skin. The scent of their shampoo or perfume. Every girl-on-girl experience I've had has been pure pleasure. Especially when I was with a man and a woman simultaneously because you get the best of both worlds. I was in a few short-term arrangements being a couple's third, and it was some of the best sex of my life.

Nothing compares to being with Kane Ambrose, though.

I shake the thoughts from my head, knowing this is not the time. Even though Mo says she's doing this to help me get Kane back, I refuse to treat her like a sex toy. She deserves my full attention and gratitude—something I always demanded upfront when an established couple invited me into their bedroom.

I squirm in anticipation when her fingers hook under the straps of my thong, slowly pulling it down my legs. Mo cuffs her hands around my ankles, hooking my knees over her delicate shoulders. My recently-bared pussy is mere inches away from her face. I moan when her index finger teases my entrance, gathering some wetness before fingering my VCH piercing.

“So pretty,” she muses, leaning forward, flicking her tongue out.

My back arches as the cool metal of Mo's tongue ring presses against my clit. “Oh, *fuck.*”

I can feel her lips curving against my heated flesh. “I doubt he'll let us get that far, but let's give it a try.”

My laughter is quickly choked off by a porny moan as she licks me like I'm the best damn thing she's ever tasted. She's so enthusiastic, I have no doubts she loves doing this as much as she claims. I play with my breasts as Mo eats my pussy, loving the idea of Kane watching us through the video feed. The only way this could get any better would be if he joined us in person. When I'm on the verge of an epic orgasm, the doorknob turns, hinges squeaking as it swings open.

Just as expected, Kane walks into the room with fire in his eyes. “Get out, Maureen.”

I hold his stare as she continues to lick me, slowing her pace but making no move to leave. “That's awfully rude, Kane. Armani here was just about to come. Are you going to take over for me?”

My dress is bunched around my waist, my legs are spread. Everything I have is on display as Kane's gaze rakes over me. There's no hiding the significant bulge in his pants, proving he likes what he sees. I nibble my lip,

eagerly awaiting his response.

His eyes remain locked on my face as his friend eats me, watching the ecstasy roll through me. Kane presses his palm to his erection with a wince.

“Why don’t you join us?” My breath hitches as Mo picks up the pace again.

His head slices slowly to the left, then the right. “I’m not fucking Mo. No offense, Mo.”

She moans. “Mmm. None taken, dude. I’m not interested in fucking you now or ever, and I’m excellent right where I’m at.”

I lift a brow, gasping as she points her tongue, flicking my piercing. “But you *will* fuck me?”

He raises his brows. “Is that your endgame, Armani? That’s what this little show is all about?”

“Blame me for the show,” Mo murmurs. “I told her you needed a little encouragement pulling your head out of your ass.”

Kane’s blue eyes narrow on his friend. “You need to mind your own business, Maureen.”

I mindlessly play with the barbells in my nipples, not missing how Kane’s gaze follows my every move.

Mo sits up with an annoyed sigh. “Quit legal-naming me, asshole. You’re ruining the mood.”

“Get your face away from my woman’s pussy, and I will.”

Mo winks at me when Kane refers to me as *his* woman. “You good if I leave you with the caveman, honey?”

I give her a single nod. “I’m good. Thank you.”

She stands up, just enough to place a soft kiss against my lips. “Good luck.” Mo whips around and flips Kane off. “Don’t blow it, douchebag, or I’ll be right back here to finish what I started.”

He shakes his head. “Get fucked, Mo.”

Mo blows him a kiss. “Love you too, bro. Have fun, you two!”

Kane locks the door behind her when she leaves the room before stalking toward me. “You tryin’ to get my attention, Armani? What are you going to do now that you have it?”

I try to ignore how his heated stare affects me, but I’m not doing the best job. “I just want to have an honest conversation, Kane. It’s long overdue, don’t you think?”

His thinks about that for a moment. “Maybe. But I don’t think I’ll be in any mood to listen until you’re punished for the little stunt you just pulled.”

I lift my chin. “Oh yeah? And what kind of punishment did you have in mind?”

I start to rise from the desk, but he advances on me faster than I can track, pinning me by the throat. Leaning into my ear, he growls, “I think you know exactly what I want.” His free hand moves to my right breast, squeezing. “And I think your cunt is dripping at the prospect. Shall I check?”

“*My cunt is dripping* because Mo really knows how to eat pussy. Quite frankly, I’m pissed you interrupted us. I didn’t get the chance to get off or return the favor.”

He pinches my nipple until I’m crying out. “She could *never* get you off better than I can. *No one* can. Since when are you into pussy anyway?”

“I think you’re overselling yourself..” He’s *really* not, but I can’t resist the urge to talk back. “And I’ve *always* been into pussy *and* dick. You know that, and you didn’t have a problem with it before.”

“I *didn’t* have a problem with it. I *don’t* have a problem if it’s true. But I figured it was another one of your lies.”

“How many times do I have to say I never lied to you?!” The hand that was loosely cuffed around my throat squeezes for just a moment. “I just didn’t give you all the information. What on earth would I have to gain from pretending I’m bisexual?”

Kane completely ignores me, straightening his spine and undoing his belt. He unfastens his pants next, lowering the zipper. I watch as he rounds the

desk, pulling his beautiful cock out, giving it one long stroke from root to tip. Standing right behind my head now, he pulls my shoulders until they're suspended in the air, and my head is inverted right beneath his erection.

“Let's see how well you apologize, and then I'll decide if you've earned the right to get off.” Kane takes his length in hand, bringing the head to my lips. “Open wide, baby.”

CHAPTER 9

ARMANI

PRESENT

GOD, *he has the prettiest dick I've ever seen.*

I'm literally salivating at the thought of having it in my mouth. But I refuse to give him the satisfaction with his current objective of punishing me.

I purse my lips and turn my head when Kane pushes the head of his cock against my mouth.

He cuffs a hand around my neck again, this time squeezing until I hold still. "Now, now, Armani. Don't make me get rough with you. We both know you want this."

"Go to hell." He's squeezing so hard, my words are barely a whispered rasp.

His other hand fondles my breasts, roughly tugging on my nipple piercings. "I like all the new ink and piercings. More rebellion, I assume? What does your husband think of you like this?"

I glare, but it turns into an involuntary eye roll. I feel like I'm going to pass out at any moment. The lack of oxygen from being choked and the blood rushing to my head from my upside-down position isn't the best combo.

When I struggle to form words, Kane eases up on the pressure. “I don’t give *a shit* what my *ex*-husband, Grayson, thinks. I haven’t talked to him in two and a half years.”

“Right,” he scoffs. “And why should I believe you?”

“Because it’s the truth, you ass!”

Kane’s nostrils flare as he squeezes my neck again. I’m reasonably sure I’ll have a ring of bruises when I leave here tonight. “Watch it.” He releases my neck to wrench my jaw open with both hands. “You bite me, and we’re gonna have a big problem, Armani. You feel me?”

I flash a murderous glare as he feeds his dick into my mouth. I fight a moan when I taste the salty precum on my tongue. Kane smiles knowingly as he pries my mouth open further, going deeper and deeper until he triggers my gag reflex. He doesn’t give me any time to recover; he simply pushes past it until I’ve taken all of him. Tears are pouring down my face as drool leaks out of the corners of my mouth. I ignore it the best I can and focus on breathing through my nose, which is easier said than done since his balls are resting against my nostrils. After a mini eternity, Kane retreats a little, thrusting slowly, almost experimentally.

“Good girl,” he coos. “Damn. I nearly forgot how incredible you are at this.”

His hands abandon my jaw to knead my breasts, twisting and tugging on my nipples. It’s probably no more than thirty seconds before I’m giving up all pretenses of not enjoying this. I hollow my cheeks, increasing the suction as Kane fucks my face, moaning to communicate my enthusiasm since my mouth is rather full at the moment.

“Fuck, Mani, I love your mouth. It’s goddamn heaven. You’re such a good little whore, aren’t you? You can pretend all you want, but we both know you love this. A person doesn’t suck cock like you do unless they’re getting off on it as well.”

I startle when he reaches out, lovingly tracing the symbol he inked into

my skin. Kane bends forward before I have time to psychoanalyze the action, sealing his lips over my pussy lips, sucking them into his mouth. I come instantly. Viciously. He doesn't ease up as the tremors wane. He starts licking and sucking so hard, it's almost painful. I come a second time, with so little build-up, it seems to surprise us both.

His tongue slows its pace as his dick picks up speed. The sounds we're making are straight-up obscene, and we're both moaning and grunting so loudly, I wouldn't be surprised if the people in the club could hear us over the music. But neither one of us seem to care as we race to the finish line. Kane's salty cum shoots down my throat right as I'm reaching my third climax of the evening. I drink every drop before releasing him with a pop, licking my lips.

As Kane hastily fastens his pants, I lie across his desk, trying to catch my breath.

"Jesus Christ, put yourself back together, would you? I've got shit to do, and I don't trust you in here by yourself."

I wince from the harsh tone, craning my head to look at him. When I see absolute disgust on Kane's face rather than the sleepy satisfied grin I was expecting, I'm jolted out of my post-orgasm daze. I jump off the desk, yanking the top half of my dress over my shoulders and pulling the rest below my ass.

I grab some tissues from the box on Kane's desk and start wiping my face. "What the hell is your problem?"

"You!" He points an accusing finger at me. "*You* are my problem. That bullshit with Mo, luring me in here with your live-action lesbian porno."

I park a hand on my hip. "Don't act like you didn't enjoy every goddamn second of that. The watching *and the doing*."

"And you don't go reading into what just happened here! It meant *nothing*. *You* mean nothing to me anymore!"

My jaw clenches as angry tears fill my eyes. "Now who's the liar?"

"I mean it, Armani. You rank slightly above dogshit in my world, and the

only reason you're that high is because you suck cock like a goddamn pro. I mean, it makes sense, all things considered."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know *exactly* what that means!" he yells. "How many times did you have to suck my brother's dick in apology for fucking me? How many times did *he* come down your throat and then shower you with pretty baubles afterward as payment?"

My eyes round. "*How dare you!*"

Kane's mouth curves into a cruel smirk. "I'm just calling it like I see it, sweetheart. Now, get the fuck out of my office. If I see your ass in my club again, I will personally throw you out so fast, your goddamn head will spin."

"Fuck you, Kane." I pull the door open with so much force, it slams into the wall. "Fuck. You."

CHAPTER 10

ARMANI

PAST

“WHY THE LONG FACE, MIJA?”

“I’m just tired, *Mamá*.”

“Nonsense.” She clucks her tongue. “Something has been bothering you ever since we returned from your cousin’s. Does this have to do with the boy you were spending time with up there?”

I groan. “He’s twenty-two, Mom. Hardly a boy.”

She waves me off. “You’re all still babies. You have so much life ahead of you. Do you need a reading? Let me get my cards.”

I hold my hand up. “No, *Mamá*. Tarot cards are not going to fix the problem. I’m just exhausted thinking about everything on my plate. I’m taking sixteen credit hours for the fall term plus my T.A. job. It’s going to be grueling.”

My mother motions for me to follow her to the dining room table, grabbing her stack of cards along the way. “Sit. We will see what the Fates have to say.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. I adore my mother, but the woman puts

entirely too much stock in woo-woo stuff. I've learned over the years it's much easier to let her perform a reading when something's bothering me so she'll stop nagging.

I blow out a breath as she stacks the deck in front of me. "Cut the cards."

I do as she says and wait for her to take the bottom half of the deck and move it to the top. Before turning the first one over, my mom sets out three cards face down in a triangular pattern.

"Ah. The Wheel of Fortune. It means great change is coming."

I don't have the heart to point out that great change has *already* come in recent months.

She flips the second card and frowns.

"What's wrong?"

I recognize this card as The Lovers, but it's upside down which carries a different meaning. I don't remember what that is, though.

"The Lovers reversed signifies imbalance. Disharmony."

O-kay... well, considering I just had a nasty breakup, that would make sense. You know, if I believed in this stuff.

My mother turns the last card over and gasps. "The Empress."

"What does that one stand for?"

Her dark chocolate eyes wander over me for a moment before she replies. "The Empress represents fertility. Motherhood." She waves her hand, gesturing to all three cards. "I don't like this combination for you, *mija*. It's giving me bad juju."

I shake my head. "Mom, don't be ridiculous. A few cards can't read someone's future."

She narrows her eyes. "Is your period late?"

"What?!" I shriek. "What kind of question is that?"

"Answer the question, Armani."

I sigh. "No. I'm not due until tomorrow."

"Are your breasts sore?" she continues. "I already know you're more

tired than usual.”

“Are you seriously suggesting that I might be pregnant just because some fru-fru cards said so?”

She raises a challenging brow. “Is that a yes?”

I think about it for a moment and realize the answer *is* yes. My boobs have been *really* sensitive lately.

Shit. Could I be pregnant?

I think back to the one time Kane and I were together without protection. But that was only a week ago. I couldn’t possibly be pregnant from that, could I?

I stand up so fast, the chair nearly topples over behind me. “I need to run to the drugstore.”

“Armani!” my mom calls. “Let me come with you!”

“Nope!” I grab my purse and wave her off. “I’ve got this. I’ll be back soon.”

I drive to the nearest CVS like a bat out of hell, telling myself not to freak out the entire ride. I select three different early detection tests, pay for them, and duck into the store’s restroom to pee on some sticks. I keep my eyes closed while they process, praying to all the gods for a negative result. When my timer goes off, my gaze immediately falls to the tests.

A pink plus sign, two pink lines, and leaving no room for interpretation, a digital display confirming I’m *pregnant*.

Holy shit.

I’m pregnant. I’m freaking pregnant!

I wrap the tests in paper towels, shove them in the garbage, and wash my hands. I drive back to my mom’s on autopilot, wondering what to do next. It’s not like this is some big scandal. Sure, it’s not ideal, but I’m a grown-ass twenty-one-year-old woman, and I can handle this. And it’s not like Kane is a loser or an asshole. I mean, he probably doesn’t want to be chained down for the rest of his life by some chick he barely knows, but I think he’d be a stand-

up guy about it.

I hope.

But if not... it's not like I'm in a financial bind. Our family isn't wealthy by any means, but I could make it work. I know I'll have their support no matter what. Taking a few cleansing breaths as I step out of my car, I'm not surprised to find my *mamá* waiting on the front porch.

I clear my throat. "The tests were, uh... positive. I'm pregnant."

She places an open hand over her heart before enveloping me in a hug. "Oh, *mija*. I'll make an appointment with the obstetrician right away to confirm. In the meantime, don't worry. This could be a blessing in disguise. Why don't you go rest in your old room for now? I'll call the doctor."

"Thanks, Mom." I climb the stairs, sinking into the pillow-top mattress with a sigh.

I have my own apartment near campus, but I drove back to my childhood home without thought. I think about calling Kane but decide against it until I can get confirmation from the doctor. There's no sense in worrying him over a false positive, right?

Do you really think three different tests would have false positives, Armani?

Ugh. Of course, not. As my eyes drift shut, I think of little brown-haired, blue-eyed babies and tell myself this might not be so bad after all. If this were to happen with anyone else, maybe not, but Kane is special. The connection we share is unique. I know I'll have to fess up about my past with Grayson, but Kane would have to forgive me for my omission if I were carrying his child, right?

"When did you say your last period was?" Katie, the ultrasound tech at my new OB's office, asks with a frown.

“The fifteenth of last month.” I pinch the hem of the hospital gown between my thumb and forefinger.

“Hmm. The baby measures a bit larger than that. Let me check a few more things, and we’ll get Dr. Roberts back in here.”

What does that mean?

I watch as she pushes some buttons and moves the wand around inside of me. When she initially came at me with what essentially looked like a dildo, I was a bit surprised. On TV, ultrasounds are always done on your stomach, but Katie said this early in pregnancy, they’d need to use an internal transducer. I honestly have no idea how she makes sense of anything from the images on that screen, but I guess that’s why she’s getting paid to do this, and I’m not.

“Knock, knock,” my doctor calls as she enters the room. “How’s it going in here?”

“Oh, good,” Katie answers. “I was just coming to get you.”

Katie points out a few things on the screen, whispering in hushed tones, which is really starting to worry me.

“Is everything okay?”

Dr. Roberts turns with a smile. “Everything looks great, Armani. See that right there? The baby has a strong heartbeat.” She points to a few colorful splotches before turning a dial. “Let’s listen.”

My mouth gapes as a rapid *whoosh-whoosh* sound comes through the speakers. “It’s so fast.”

“It’s perfectly normal,” she assures me.

I frown. “Then what’s the problem?”

“It just appears you’re a little bit further along than expected based on your last period. Your labs just came in, and your HCG levels—that’s the main pregnancy hormone—are spot on with the ultrasound measurements. I’m guessing what you thought was your last period was actually a little implantation bleeding, which isn’t uncommon.”

“What exactly are you saying, Doctor? How pregnant am I?”

She smiles. “I’d say about nine weeks, give or take a day or two.”

I do the math in my head. “That’s... that’s impossible.”

Dr. Roberts looks at her chart. “You mentioned you’ve had two sexual partners recently. I’d say conception was likely the last week in June. Does that tell you who the father could be?”

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

Katie thrusts an elongated plastic bag in front of my face. “Here.”

Both women wait while I puke into the vomit bag until I’m all tapped out. The doctor hands me a wet paper towel when I’m done to wipe my mouth before taking the bag from my hands and disposing of it.

“Armani?”

I nod, wiping tears from the corner of my eyes. “Yeah. That tells me exactly who knocked me up.”

What am I going to do?

Dr. Roberts gives me a sad smile. “I’m guessing the father isn’t the man you were hoping it’d be?”

I belt out a caustic laugh. “You can say that again.”

She nods. “We’ll give you a few minutes to get dressed. When you’re ready, come back to my office, and we’ll talk.”

“Thank you.”

I wait until they leave the room before sliding off the table and putting my clothes back on. I don’t know what the hell I’m going to do now, but I know one thing I can’t do is string Kane along anymore. I pull out my phone and open a text window.

Me: I can’t do this with you anymore. I’m sorry.

The text bubbles pop up immediately, but I block Kane’s number before his message comes through. It’s easier this way. It’s not just me anymore. The only thing I know for sure is I’m keeping this baby, and there’s no way he’d want me if I was pregnant with another man’s child. I have to do what’s

best for this baby, whether I like it or not. With a steadying breath, I open a message to the one man I never wanted to speak to again.

Me: I need to see you. I'm pregnant, and the baby is yours.

CHAPTER 11

KANE

PAST

“MOM? Dad? Your favorite son is here!” Hunter calls.

I punch his arm. “Dick.”

He shrugs. “What? It’s true. Nobody tops the baby of the family.”

I roll my eyes as our mother greets us in the foyer and pulls my little brother into a hug. “It’s about time you two showed up. I’ve been dying to share the exciting news!”

I frown. “What news? And whose flashy-ass car is that parked out front?”

“Mine,” a deep voice answers. “And it’s an Aston Martin Victor, thank you very much. Although, I suppose I’ll have to pick up something more family-friendly in the next few months.”

I scowl when I follow my older brother’s voice and find him standing in the doorway wearing a smug smile. I haven’t seen him in almost three years, but he still looks the same. Freshly-cut hair slicked back, a designer suit, polished Italian loafers, and impossibly impeccable posture. Meanwhile, Hunter and I are donning plain black tees, heavily distressed jeans, piercings, dozens of tattoos, and we both could’ve used a haircut weeks ago, but neither

of us really gives a shit.

“Gray,” I grunt. “What’re you doing here?”

Our mom claps her hands together. “Grayson has blessed us with some big surprises this Thanksgiving! He felt they were best delivered in person.” She laughs. “And I’d say he was quite right.”

I scrub a hand down my face, feeling a headache coming on. “What kind of surprises?”

“He got married!” My mom squeals, bouncing on her toes. “And that’s not all!”

I can’t imagine what kind of vapid Barbie it would take to marry this douchebag.

“Mother, please.” Gray holds up a hand. “May I be the one to introduce my wife and share our wonderful news?”

Mom giggles. “Oh, of course, honey.”

“Darling,” Gray calls over his shoulder. “Come here and meet my brothers.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Jesus. This oughta be fun.”

“Oh, shit,” Hunter mumbles as he latches on to my wrist with a death grip.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I grumble. “Let go, asshole.”

“Nuh-uh,” he replies. “This is gonna be a shit show.”

“Boys! Don’t be so rude in front of our lovely guest,” our mom admonishes.

“Hunter, Kane, I’d like you to meet my wife, Armani.”

What the fuck did he say?

My head snaps up to ask Gray to repeat himself, but once I see the curvy brunette standing next to him, it’s not necessary. It takes me a moment to process this high-society version of her. Her dark locks are piled in some elaborate updo, her makeup is flawless, and the fancy dress she’s wearing no doubt costs more than my mortgage payment. I must be in shock because it’s

the only explanation for why I don't notice the most important difference until my brother points it out.

Rubbing a hand over Armani's tiny but pronounced bump, he says, "And this is our son, Grayson Jr. You'll get to meet him come springtime."

I quickly calculate the numbers in my head, flashing an accusing glare at the beautiful liar standing across from me. Her headshake is so minute, I don't think anyone else notices, but the message couldn't be any clearer.

Grayson doesn't know about us.

"Come." My mother motions for us to walk into the attached den, utterly oblivious to the chaos brewing inside of me. "We have about an hour before dinner. You boys can catch up in the den."

"Uh... I think I forgot my phone in the truck," Hunter says nervously. "Kane, come help me find it."

Hunter tightens his grip on my arm, pulling me with him out the front door. "Don't make a scene, dude. You need to promise before I let you go."

"I'm not promising shit, Hunt. What the fuck?!"

He exhales harshly, releasing me anyway. "I know, bro. *I know*. But this is not the time nor the place to get answers."

I throw my hands up. "Why the hell not? It seems like a perfect time to ask that lying bitch what the fuck she thinks she's doing! She's *married* to Grayson, Hunt! And based on the size of her stomach, that baby could just as easily be mine!" I start pacing back and forth. "My life has become a goddamn soap opera!"

Hunter groans. "Dude. I know. This freaking sucks, all right? But maybe it's not as bad as it looks. I didn't get to know Armani nearly as well as you did last summer, but I'm having a hard time believing she would orchestrate something this fucked up. It doesn't make sense."

I scoff. "It makes perfect fucking sense, Hunter. The way she came on so strongly, all the times she was cagey when I talked about visiting her in San Diego, *how she told me it was over in a text message and then blocked me!* I

had no way of communicating with her. She's not on social media. She never gave me her address—though now I can guess why that was. Shit, if they're married, her last name probably isn't even Lopez! Oh, Christ, it's probably the same as ours! This is *beyond* fucked up, Hunter!”

“*I know!*” he repeats.

My head snaps up when I hear the front door open. As Armani steps out, my jaw is clenching so hard, my molars ache.

She hangs her head when she sees what I'm guessing is the unadulterated rage on my face. “It's not what you think, Kane.”

“I'm gonna go look for my phone in the truck.” Hunter jerks a thumb over his shoulder. “I'll be *right there* if anyone needs me.”

I hear the implication in his tone. “Oh, fuck off, Hunt. I'm not going to do anything drastic.”

He unlocks the vehicle, holding his palms out. “Never said you would, bro. Just telling you where I'll be.”

“I only have a couple of minutes,” Armani says softly as she walks toward the side of the garage. “Grayson thinks I'm grabbing some ginger from the car.”

I snort, folding my arms over my chest as I follow her. “And the lies keep piling up.”

“I didn't lie to you, Kane.”

“Are you shitting me?”

“I'm not,” she insists, eyes filling with tears as she leans against the stucco. “I just... left some stuff out.”

“Like the fact that you're *married* to my brother?”

“We weren't married last summer. We weren't even together.”

“Right. Why should I believe you?”

“Because it's the truth, you bastard!” Fire burns in her gaze. *Ah, there's the girl I got to know.* “We got married in early September... shortly after I learned I was pregnant. Grayson didn't like the idea of having a kid out of

wedlock. He didn't think it'd be good for his image."

A muscle in my cheek twitches. "So you got hitched because you were worried about *his image*?"

"No." She shakes her head. "I did it for the baby *and only* for the baby."

"How long were you and Gray together, Mani? How long were you *fucking my brother* before you started *fucking me*?"

"A little over a year." Armani sighs.

"So he's the asshole ex you were talking about? The one you couldn't be yourself around?"

She nods. "Yeah."

"Did you know who I was when you came into my shop?"

"Yes." Her gaze darts to the side. "I did. I'm so sorry, Kane. I don't have many regrets, but not telling you about Grayson is a big one for me."

I pinch her chin between my thumb and forefinger, forcing her to look at me. "Why'd you do it? Was it some sick fascination? A brother kink? Just wanted to take a ride on the wild side before you went back to your stodgy venture capitalist?"

"God, no!" Armani's mocha eyes widen. "I had no intention of hooking up with you, Kane. I swear on this baby's life."

"Then *why*?"

Her delicate shoulder lifts. "I was curious about you. And you really are the most talented artist I've ever seen. I researched a lot of studios before coming to yours. When we met..." Armani's fingers wrap around the hand I have propped under her chin. "C'mon, Kane. You can't pretend it was one-sided. You can't deny how... *right* it felt between us from the start."

No, I can't, and the fact that she walked away from us without a word pisses me off more than anything.

She squeezes my hand. "I know it was only a few weeks, but those were the best weeks of my life. I will never, ever forget how you made me feel. You are, without a doubt, the lov—"

“Is the kid mine?” My eyes fall to her round stomach pointedly, cutting off whatever bullshit proclamation she was about to make. “Is he gonna call me Uncle Daddy?”

“What?! No. You think I’d lie about the paternity of my child? I got pregnant *weeks* before I met you. It was probably the last time Grayson and I were together. Literally the last time. Trust me, it’d be a helluva lot easier if this *was* your kid.”

The conviction in that statement has me wavering. “What does that mean?”

She blows out a breath. “Nothing. Forget I said anything.”

“Does Gray know about us?”

“No.” She squeezes harder. “And you can’t tell him. I don’t know if you know this, but Grayson has some weird obsession with you. He’d never admit it, but he’s insanely jealous of you and your relationship with Hunter. That’s why I was so curious. Why I *had* to meet you in person. If Grayson knew about us, he would *never* forgive me, Kane.”

“I know the feeling,” I mutter. “And I don’t believe the jealousy thing one bit. He has everything he’s ever wanted, and now, he got the girl.”

“I never meant for it to be this way,” she swears. “I never meant to hurt anyone.”

“You claim you married him for the baby’s sake, but I’m sure the fact that Gray’s loaded didn’t hurt. Is that really why you did it? The other brother comes with much better financial security?”

“Quit making this about money! Give me a little more credit than that, for fuck’s sake!”

Trust me, honey, I’d love to, but you’ve already fooled me once. I have no intention of allowing that to happen again.

“Such unladylike language. Does my brother know what a filthy mouth you have?” I lean forward, caging her against the garage wall. “Does he know all the dirty things you like to do with that mouth, Mani? Does he make

you wet with a single look like I do? Does he know how rough you need it? Does he redden your ass and eat your pussy like he's starving for it? Does he pound you into the wall like a soldier returning from war every fucking time because being inside of you feels so goddamn amazing, he loses his mind? Does he make you scream his name so loudly, your voice is hoarse afterward?"

She gasps when I place my hands on her hips, leaning closer until her firm bump is pressed against my abs. "Kane. Please, don't." My hands inch upward toward her noticeably fuller breasts. Armani's spine bows, her nipples practically slicing through her clothing. "Kane. We *can't*."

"I'm *well* aware, sweetheart." My fingers curl into the silky fabric of her dress. "But the thing is... the way you're reacting to me right now? That tells me everything I need to know. Grayson *doesn't* give you what you need. Hell, he's probably as vanilla as they come, and you *hate* that. But you married him anyway. If I were you, I'd invest in an extensive toy collection, Mani, because one thing I'm certain of is that my older brother doesn't give a rat's ass whether or not you get off. But I'm sure you already know that." I laugh. "You wanna know the best part of this whole fucked up telenovela-hot-mess?"

"What?" Jesus, she's practically panting, and I'd bet her panties are soaked through right now.

Shit, what I wouldn't give to stick my hand up her dress and find out.

It's infuriating how attracted I still am to her, even after her betrayal and my brother's baby in her belly.

What the hell does that say about me?

I'm one sick fuck, that's what.

I take a step back so we're no longer touching. "If you would've been honest with me from the start, you wouldn't be sentenced to a life of boring sex with the most uptight sonuvabitch I've ever met. I wouldn't have cared that you were with Grayson before me. It'd be different if it were Hunt, but

Gray's more of a stranger to me than a brother. To me, he would've been just some rando from your past. You would've known that if you had just given me a chance."

"What are you talking about?" Her sculpted brows draw together. "I told you I was pregnant *before* you and I even met. I just didn't know it yet."

My lips curve as I prepare to deliver my final blow. "I'm saying *your pregnancy wouldn't have mattered*. Baby or no baby, *I would've wanted you*. Hell, if you never wanted to tell Gray, I would've raised that kid as my own. But you didn't give *me* enough credit, and now you have to live with that."

"Kane. I—"

"What's going on here?"

Armani gasps, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Grayson! How long have you been standing there?"

His blue eyes—identical to my own—glare at me. "What's going on, Kane?"

"Absolutely nothing, brother." I clap him on the shoulder. "Abso-fucking-lutely nothing."

I walk away, intent on leaving Armani to stew in the misery she created, but my brother's following words as I turn the corner give me pause.

"What the hell, Armani?" he whisper-shouts. "Were you coming on to my brother? Are you really that much of an ungrateful whore? We've talked about this. You're a married woman now. You can't go around flirting with every man who looks at your tits!"

"I *wasn't* flirting with him!" Her volume matches his, but I can hear every word. "We were *talking!*"

"About what?" He scoffs. "Asking his opinion on getting another trashy tattoo?"

"Oh, give it a rest, Grayson! My tattoo is *beautiful!* You're just too stuck up to appreciate it."

"It makes you look cheap! As soon as the baby is born, you're getting it

removed! No wife of mine will look like a common prostitute. Have some class, Armani, and quit acting like such a slut.”

She laughs, but there’s a maniacal edge to it. “That’s rich coming from you, Grayson. I’m not the one who’s a serial cheater.”

What the fuck?

I place my index finger over my lips as Hunter exits the truck and approaches me, signaling for him to be quiet.

“Please. I’ve already explained this. Men were not built to be monogamous. We’re genetically programmed to spread our seed around as much as possible.”

Hunter’s eyes round as he mouths, *bullshit*.

I nod in agreement.

“You just need to accept the fact that I’m going to have mistresses,” the douchenozzle continues. “I don’t understand why you’re always getting so upset over this. You’re the one with the rock on your hand, and you’re carrying my heir. You’ve got me locked in, darling. You get to have the name and prestige that comes along with being Mrs. Grayson Ambrose. Do you know how many women would *kill* to be in your position?”

“I don’t care about any of that, you asshole! *I never did!* You can keep your fucking money! You shouldn’t have married me if you wanted to maintain your harem. I think I made myself *very* clear about that before I got on that plane to Vegas with you.”

“You’re being completely unreasonable,” the fuckwit pouts.

“You’re delusional! I bet if we went inside and asked your mother, she’d agree that it’s *not* unreasonable to expect my husband to be faithful when I tell him I want a monogamous relationship. It’s also *not* unreasonable to demand the respect I deserve as your wife and the mother of your child!”

“Maybe I would respect you a helluva lot more if you weren’t running around like a tramp, presenting your ass for any man or woman who’ll look! I mean, really, Armani. I thought the whole lesbian thing was hot at first, but

you had to go and ruin that with your ridiculous expectations of *fidelity*.” My dumbass brother says the last word like it’s a curse. “There’s *no* difference between fucking another woman *with* you versus doing it myself behind your back. The end result is the same. *I’m still fucking her!*”

“Oh, screw you, Grayson! There’s a *huge* difference! It’s called being honest and open with your partner! Something you have *no* concept of! Quit projecting your guilt onto me. I *don’t* run around presenting my ass to anyone! And for the record, I would’ve *never* said yes to bringing those women into our bedroom if I had known you were *already* sleeping with them on the side! It’s not my fault one ratted you out because I ate her pussy better than you ever could!”

“You fucking bitch!”

The moment I hear the distinct sound of a slap followed by a shocked feminine gasp, I see red. When I round the corner, Armani is holding her cheek, tears streaming down her face.

“You’re dead, motherfucker!”

My fist rewinds and aims straight for Gray’s nose without thought. I smile when the sound of crunching bones and Grayson’s screams ring through the air.

“What the fuck?” He’s holding his hands over his face, unsuccessfully trying to staunch the flow of blood. “You broke my nose, you lowlife criminal!”

“I’m about to break a lot more than that, asshole!”

I’m vaguely aware of Armani’s sobs as Hunter consoles her, but I’m too blinded by rage to stop. I punch and kick and knee Grayson wherever I can manage to inflict the maximum amount of damage. This shithead is tall, and he obviously works out, but he lacks skill. If this were anyone else, I might feel bad about beating the shit out of someone with such a clear disadvantage, but this prick needs to be taught a lesson.

Our parents must’ve heard the ruckus and come out here at some point

because my dad tries hauling me off my brother, but I shake him off. He must see the fury in my eyes because he's smart enough to back off.

"Stop it, Kane!" my mom screams. "What are you doing to your brother!? Look at him! He's barely conscious!"

"Good!" I yell, giving the asshole on the ground a swift kick to the ribs with my steel-toed boots. I'm fairly certain I just heard one break.

"C'mon, man, that's enough." Hunter pulls me into a half Nelson. Fortunately for the prick crying on the ground, our younger brother is strong and skilled enough to accomplish his goal. "He's learned his lesson. That fuckhead isn't going to be walking anytime soon," he growls into my ear. "Look at Armani, man. Look what this is doing to her."

"He hit her!"

"I know, man," Hunt assures me. "But he's still the father of her child. You need to let it go."

My eyes scan the area until they land on the stunning Latina sitting on the ground, holding her stomach as she cries.

Fuck.

I stumble backward, ducking out of my brother's hold. I clasp my hands behind my head and pace in circles, trying to calm down. Right when I think I have enough of a grip on my control to check on her, two squad cars peel into the driveway, officers piling out of the vehicles with their guns drawn.

"Put your hands above your head and get on your knees! *Now!*"

Everyone who's not curled into the fetal position raises their hands, but only Hunter and I drop to our knees. We're not idiots; we're well aware we're the most threatening dudes here.

"Oh, thank God you're here! That's the one! The bigger one! He just attacked that poor man like a maniac!" My head swings to the right to see the next-door neighbor lady running up to one of the officers. "I'm Delores. I'm the one who called you." The cops are pulling both mine and Hunter's hands behind our backs until Delores adds, "Not the one with the lip rings. He just

broke up the fight. He didn't hit anyone."

"Jesus Christ, lady," Hunter mumbles. "Were you spying through the bushes or something?"

"Shut up, idiot. You can't keep an eye on Mani if you're in jail."

Hunter's mouth snaps shut.

An ambulance pulls in next, EMTs immediately heading toward Gray.

"Make sure you check her out." I jerk my chin toward Armani. "He hit her, and she's pregnant."

My mom gasps. "Oh dear lord. What happened out here?"

One of the EMTs veers toward Armani.

"I'm fine." She tries waving the man off.

"Just shut up and let them look you over, Mani," I grouse, wincing when the officer behind me snaps my cuffs too tight.

Her eyes narrow, but her glare softens when the cop hauls me to my feet and starts reading me my rights.

"Wait!" Armani calls, rushing toward the officer. "You can't arrest him. He was just defending me." She points at Grayson. "He slapped me."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but the witness who called it in says he assaulted that man unprovoked."

Armani's glare transfers to the nosy neighbor. "Well, your witness is *wrong*."

"He didn't even fight back!" Delores argues.

"Because he doesn't know how to fight!" Armani's hands ball into fists at her sides.

"That asshole threatened to kill me," Grayson mumbles, coughing up a little blood. "He *belongs* in jail."

"*Shut up, Grayson!* You absolutely will *not* be pressing charges, or you and I are gonna have an even bigger problem to deal with!" Armani looks like she's about to kick him herself, but she thinks better of it since four cops are watching this whole thing go down.

“All right, that’s enough.” The officer pulls on my cuffs. “We’ll settle this at the station. Let’s go.”

“We’ll meet you there with the family attorney,” my dad promises.

My mom wails as I’m stuffed into the back of a squad car, and Grayson is loaded onto a stretcher. As we’re pulling out of the drive, my eyes land on Armani’s. There’s so much sadness and remorse in her gaze, but all I feel in return is numb. Knowing that she’d rather marry that cheating, abusive piece of shit instead of being honest with me, giving me a chance to weigh in on the matter, breaks something fundamental inside of me.

And as I’m booked into the system, finally becoming the criminal my brother’s accused me of all along, I promise myself I will never let a woman get close to me again.

Especially not *that* woman.

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Laura Lee is the *USA Today* bestselling author of steamy and sometimes ridiculously funny romance. When she's not writing, wrangling her kids, or watching HGTV, she's reading anything she can get her hands on. She's particularly fond of spicy romance books that can make her laugh. For more information, [CLICK HERE](#) to check out her website.