

INCLUDES  
DEPRAVED  
DELIVERED  
BOUND  
DECADENT

# DEVIL'S DUE

COMPLETE SERIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EVA CHARLES

# **THE DEVIL'S DUE**

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THE COMPLETE COLLECTION

EVA CHARLES

QUARRY ROAD PUBLISHING

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 Created with Vellum

He was her dark fairy tale and she was his twisted fantasy and  
together they made magic.

— F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

# CONTENTS

## Depraved

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

## Delivered

Prologue

1. Julian

2. Julian

3. Julian
4. Julian
5. Julian
6. Gabrielle
7. Gabrielle
8. Julian
9. Julian
10. Gabrielle
11. Julian
12. Julian
13. Gabrielle
14. Gabrielle
15. Gabrielle
16. Julian
17. Julian
18. Gabrielle
19. Gabrielle
20. Gabrielle
21. Gabrielle
22. Julian
23. Gabrielle
24. Gabrielle
25. Gabrielle
26. Julian
27. Gabrielle
28. Julian
29. Gabrielle
30. Julian
31. Julian
32. Julian
33. Gabrielle
34. Julian
35. Julian
36. Julian
37. Julian

EPILOGUE: PART 1

EPILOGUE: PART II

Bound

1. Smith
2. Kate
3. Kate
4. Kate
5. Kate
6. Kate



7. Smith
8. Kate
9. Smith
10. Kate
11. Kate
12. Kate
13. Kate
14. Smith
15. Kate
16. Smith
17. Kate
18. Kate
19. Kate
20. Smith
21. Kate
22. Smith
23. Kate
24. Smith
25. Smith
26. Kate
27. Kate
28. Kate
29. Smith
30. Kate
31. Kate
32. Kate
33. Smith
34. Kate
35. Kate
36. Smith
37. Kate
38. Smith
39. Kate
40. Kate
41. Kate
42. Smith
43. Smith
44. Kate
45. Smith
46. Smith
47. Kate
48. Smith
49. Kate
50. Kate
51. Smith

52. Kate
  53. Kate
  54. 8 months later
- Epilogue

Decadent

1. Delilah
2. Delilah
3. Delilah
4. Delilah
5. Delilah
6. Delilah
7. Gray
8. Gray
9. Delilah
10. Gray
11. Gray
12. Delilah
13. Gray
14. Gray
15. Delilah
16. Delilah
17. Gray
18. Delilah
19. Delilah
20. Gray
21. Delilah
22. Delilah
23. Delilah
24. Delilah
25. Gray
26. Delilah
27. Delilah
28. Gray
29. Delilah
30. Delilah
31. Delilah
32. Delilah
33. Gray
34. Delilah
35. Gray
36. Delilah
37. Delilah
38. Delilah
39. Delilah

40. [Delilah](#)

41. [Gray](#)

42. [Delilah](#)

43. [Delilah](#)

44. [Delilah](#)

45. [Delilah](#)

46. [Gray](#)

47. [Delilah](#)

48. [Gray](#)

[SIX MONTHS LATER](#)

[About the Author](#)

[More Steamy Romantic Suspense by Eva Charles](#)

**DEPRAVED**

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## THE DEVIL'S DUE (BOOK 1)

## PROLOGUE

**M**y name is JD Wilder, and tonight my father will be elected president of the United States. Satan himself will occupy the Oval Office for the next four years. There have been others, all compelling imposters, but Damien Wilder is the real deal.

As for me?

I'm the devil's spawn.

**Gabrielle**

“U ghhhh!” I whack the edge of the frozen laptop. “Why won’t you behave tonight?”

“Can’t beat those things into submission. I’ve tried.”

An ominous chill raises gooseflesh, as I struggle to make sense of the voice. *It can’t be. It just can’t be.*

*Can it?*

Curling my fingers into the leather blotter, I lift only my eyes, peeking carefully over my lashes. A tremor builds as the animal filling my doorway comes into focus. Long and lean, a broad shoulder braced against the wooden frame, his right hand buried deep in the trouser pocket of a trim navy suit.

My heart bangs furiously on my chest wall, as though fighting to escape. Like the rest of me, it wants to run and hide. But this is *my* office. *My* hotel. And I will not be cowed by JD Wilder.

Ever again.

I try to summon some anger so my voice won’t wobble. My lips part to speak, but my mouth is dry, my tongue rough and heavy, and the words don’t come.

“The hotel is stunning,” he drawls, in that seductive baritone he uses to charm and cajole. “The photo layout in *Charleston Monthly* doesn’t do it justice. You’ve done a hell of a job with the restoration.”

His tone rankles me. Arrogant? Condescending? I'm not sure. But the annoyance stiffens my backbone, and allows the words to flow freely.

"How did you get in here?"

He says nothing.

"I'm sure you didn't come by after all these years to admire the hotel. Especially tonight. I'm surprised you're not at Wildwood Plantation, celebrating. Or commiserating."

With two long strides, he eats up the space between us, bringing the dark, musky scent of sin with him. When I dare to blink, my eyes flit to the starched white collar grazing his neck. It makes a sharp contrast to a jaw that hasn't seen a razor in days.

We peer at each other across the desk. It's awkward and uncomfortable. And dammit, my heart hurts. Just a little.

"It's been too long," he murmurs.

I lower my eyes to ease the discomfort, but his hands are there. Large and forbidding, splayed on my desk with both thumbs hooked under the carved lip. Skillful hands that probed and teased, wakening my flesh with a practiced touch. Luring me into dark, dreamy corners where there was only pleasure—until there wasn't.

I look away, my eyes searching desperately for a place to land. Somewhere safe that won't dredge up painful memories. But there's no eluding him. No escaping the flood of emotion that took hold of me when he entered the room.

When I glance up, his jaw is set and his eyes dilated, as though they haven't grown accustomed to the dim light in the room. Or maybe he's remembering the white-hot nights, too.

The heat creeps up my neck, and I push the salacious thoughts away, focusing instead on how out of place his callused fingers look against the polished mahogany. But there is little reprieve for me.

"Gabrielle." My name glides off his tongue, as though he speaks it all too often.

I don't give him the satisfaction of looking up. I will not do it. He had my rapt attention once, and I'll be damned if he gets it again. Without even a cursory glance in his direction, I lift the stack of papers in front of me and bounce the edges off the desktop, again and again, until I'm satisfied each sheet has fallen into line.

"I have a business proposition for you."



*A business proposition?* After all this time? I don't buy it. Not for a single second. "I'm not interested."

"You will be."

"Not a chance."

*How did he get in here?* Georgina locked the door to the suite when she left for the day. I heard the lock catch. I know I did. "I'm still wondering how you obtained access to a private area in my hotel. Breaking and entering might be business as usual for you, but security is no small matter for me."

He steps back and lowers himself into a chair directly in front of the desk. The rich wool fabric stretches taut over his thighs, hugging the thick muscle like a second skin. I feel a small unwelcome pang between my legs. The barest of sensations. But *God help me*, it's there.

For a fleeting moment, I consider calling security. I want him gone, right now, before—

"Hear me out."

"You can't possibly have time for this tonight." I roll back the chair and stand to signal the discussion is over, but he doesn't budge, not even when I start around the desk to see him out. Anyone else would take the hint. But not JD. Yes, he knows I want him to leave. He just doesn't give a damn.

"I need you to go."

He doesn't blink, but his eyes travel over me in an all-too-familiar manner, before settling on mine. His gaze is steely. I suppose it's meant to make me heel. If so, he'll be disappointed. I'm not the love-struck teenager he coaxed into doing *anything* and *everything* he wanted. She's long gone.

"It wasn't a suggestion, Gabrielle. I might have phrased it politely, leaving you to believe there's a choice other than to listen, but it's not at all what I meant. You *will* hear me out. Sit."

*Sit?* The hell I will. "I am not a dog. And I prefer to stand, thank you."

"*Sit* down."

I'm torn. There's a small part of me that's curious, and a larger, saner part that wants to throw him out of my office before he utters another word. But above all else, what I want is to lash out and defy him. I want it with every living, breathing cell in my body.

But I don't kid myself. What I want is of no consequence. I've known JD my entire life, and he's not going anywhere until he has said everything he came to say.

I edge my backside onto the corner of the desk—*surely this qualifies as*

*sitting*—and pull back my shoulders with my head high and proud. Only the fingers twisting in my lap hint at how anxious this man makes me.

“I’m sitting. Get on with it.”

He says nothing.

JD plays a wretched little game when he wants the upper hand—which is pretty much all the time. He doesn’t talk. He just observes and listens with the utmost patience, absorbing every nuance, every stutter, every tic of his victim’s unease. He’s cool and calculating, like a chess master, or a predator preparing to swoop in for the kill. When he decides you’ve suffered enough, he speaks carefully. It’s mesmerizing to watch, unless you’re the one caught in the cross hairs. I witnessed it dozens of times when we were younger, but even so, it’s my undoing now.

He runs a thumb across his full bottom lip, arching a single disapproving brow at me.

*I don’t care.* The extra height gives me confidence and helps me feel in control. But it’s an illusion. And I know it.

“Your father took a loan from me. A loan he’ll never be able to pay back.”

“*What?*”

He might as well have said Martians landed on the Flag Tower at the Citadel, and they’re occupying downtown Charleston as we speak. The idea of my father accepting a loan from him is *that* preposterous. “I-I-I don’t believe you.”

He says nothing.

How could my parents go to *him* without first talking to me? They weren’t privy to any of the ugly details, but they know he hurt me. Yet, they went behind my back, told *him* things they kept from me, and took *his* money without a single word about it?

I struggle for composure, trying to make sense of why my parents would possibly go to him for money. I can’t come up with a single thing.

I glance at him. He’s watching from the catbird seat, waiting patiently for me to make a wrong move, say the wrong thing, so he can pounce. I imagine him backing me into a corner, swatting with his oversized paws like a big tomcat, toying with me until his hunger consumes him. Then devouring me in a single bite.

*Gabrielle, get a grip. Do not let him do this to you.*

I take a few calming breaths.

“My mother’s very sick.” It’s the only reason I can come up with, but it doesn’t make much sense. “If they needed money, they would have come to me.” *Yes, of course they would have come to me before going to JD.* “I can’t imagine why they’d go to you without talking to me first.”

“And what would you be able to offer them?”

*You smug bastard.* “I own the hotel. I—”

“Oh stop. You don’t have a prayer of coming up with the kind of money they need. You took every cent of equity out of this place to renovate and get it open. You’re in debt over your head.”

“You don’t know a damn thing about me or my hotel.”

“I know everything I care to know.”

His voice is low and gruff, the sound achingly familiar. A small tug at the base of my belly fuels the anger and confusion.

“What do you want?”

JD leans back with an elbow draped casually over an arm of the chair. He deliberately brushes a piece of lint from his trousers before answering, as though even the most inconsequential matters are more important than responding to me. “I’ll get to that soon. First, let me fill you in on what’s happening with your mother.”

“What do you mean, *fill me in* on what’s happening with my mother? What’s going on with my mother?” *Lower your voice, Gabrielle. The hotel’s filled with guests.* But right now, all I really care about is my mother.

“She’s in good hands. Your parents left the city last night to get a second opinion about your mother’s illness.”

“They said they were going to the beach for a few days to spend some time alone before she begins treatment.” Anger. Betrayal. Fear. Swirling and twisting until they’re indistinguishable. “She already had a second opinion. Two additional opinions,” I choke out.

A lump gathers in my throat as I remember those appointments. How the doctors explained everything in excruciating detail. Painting a vivid picture of the disease and how it would progress. It was sobering—for me, for my mother—but especially for my father, who would do anything to change the course for her. *Anything.* Including making a deal with the devil, it appears.

“She had an appointment with a world-renowned immunologist today. He’s running some tests and is likely to confirm the diagnosis, but he might have a more promising treatment to offer that’ll give her more good years.”

“Where are they?” And why didn’t they tell me any of this?

“It’s up to them to tell you where they are. They don’t want to give you false hope in case the long-term prognosis doesn’t change. Your mother insists on keeping you in the dark until they have more information.”

I swallow my pride, and like a big, tasteless wad of chewing gum, it catches at the back of my throat going down. My parents are still keeping vital information from me as though I’m a child. It never changes. “They don’t want me to know about any of it. Yet here you are.”

“I have it on good authority the appointment went better than expected.”

“So much for privacy laws.”

The smallest of smiles plays on his lips, but his eyes don’t twinkle. “Your mother will talk to you when she’s ready.”

“She’ll talk to me now.” I reach over and grab my cell phone off the desk and call my parents, but it doesn’t go through. I text them, but the messages aren’t delivered.

“You won’t be able to reach them, Gabrielle.”

“I don’t care how powerful you think you are, even the president himself doesn’t control the damn cellular network.” My voice is full of bravado, but in my heart, I know there’s very little the Wilders don’t control. Especially now, with DW a presidential candidate.

I lean over the desk, pick up the landline, and dial my parents’ number from memory. I still can’t get through. Panic begins to fill my chest, squeezing and tightening until it’s difficult to breathe.

“Don’t underestimate me, or my reach. There’s no end to what I can make happen if it suits me.”

A myriad of emotions roll through me, breaching the dam I painstakingly built in the last fifteen years. Pushing and pushing against the walls until there is nothing standing between visceral emotion and him. “I hate you.”

My voice is raw with the hurt and betrayal he’s dredged up. I don’t want him to see the vulnerability, but I can’t stop myself. “It wasn’t enough to break my heart, to humiliate me and rub my nose in it. *No*. You won’t be satisfied until you’ve taken everything.”

Pain flashes in his eyes like a bolt of lightning slicing through a dark, empty canvas. I see it. It’s there for just a brief second and then it’s gone. But I’m certain it was there.

*He’s a heartless bastard and you are a fool, Gabrielle.*

He crosses one leg over the other, an ankle resting on a knee. “Your parents can’t afford the treatment.” The tip of a long finger traces the inner

seam of his shoe, gliding through the ridge where the soft cordovan leather meets the sole. “It’s considered experimental even though they’ve had some success with it. Insurance won’t cover any of it.”

“When did you get to be such an expert on a rare autoimmune disease? And exactly why did you lend them money?”

“Before I agreed to pay for the cost of your mother’s treatment, along with all their living expenses while they’re away, I did some research. I don’t throw around money idly.”

He’s calm, and I’m feeling just short of hysterical. I want to shake him. “*Why?* Why did you agree to help? What could you possibly want from them?”

He doesn’t speak for at least a full minute, maybe more. It feels like hours slip away while we stare at each other. With each passing second, the silence grows louder until it shrieks like a banshee heralding my demise. This will not end well for me. I can feel it in my marrow, and the wait is excruciating. “What do you want?”

He doesn’t answer right away, but when he does, it sucks all the oxygen from the room.

“You. I want you.”

I wait for the punch line. Maybe a cruel laugh, and him to tell me I’m not fit to carry his trash to the curb. And I wait. Surely, I misunderstood. But one look at his stony face and I know there’s no misunderstanding.

“*Me?*”

His gaze is penetrating. “I say what I mean, and I mean what I say. Always have. Nothing’s changed.”

Maybe he’s not talking about sex. Maybe I’ve let my mind run away. Maybe he wants to use the hotel for some half-cocked scheme. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

“What do you want from me?”

“Whatever itch I need scratched.”

*Whatever itch I need scratched. Sex. He wants me to be his plaything. His whore.*

My knees tremble until they can no longer support my weight. I grip the edge of the desk, and slump into the chair beside him. I’m done. It’s been a long, trying day, and he’s beaten what little fight I had left right out of me. I can’t bear to hear any more from him. From the man who once professed his love for me. From the man who promised to protect me from all the evil in

the world.

The room whirls, and a sour taste tickles my throat. My face is damp and clammy, and I can't decide if I'm going to vomit or faint first. Gripping the sides of my knees, I lower my head between my legs to stop the spinning.

He curses, and I hear the echo of my name and the faint rustle of his trousers, but it all seems so far away. I don't know how long I'm hunched over before he crouches next to me and pulls back my hair with a long, gentle sweep. "Take small sips," he instructs, wrapping my fingers around a paper cup.

I sit up slowly and do as instructed. Small sips until the nausea subsides and the room stills again. JD sits beside me, his chair angled toward me, assessing quietly while I pull myself together.

"Do you need to lie down?"

I shake my head and swallow the last drops of cool water, staring into the empty cup as though I might find some wisdom there.

"You want me? For—sex? You can't. Can't possibly. After all these years, why me?" I'm rambling. Barely managing choppy fragments between the short pants. My mind can't process any of this. Or it won't.

"It means exactly what you think it means."

I look up at him. He's tapping his fingers on the arm of the chair, his gaze devoid of any compassion. I search frantically, but can't find a single shred of decency anywhere in his face.

"But why me, JD?" My voice is louder now. Stronger. My thoughts more coherent. "Of all the women in Charleston. Of all the women who stalk your every move like you're a goddamn rock star. Why does it have to be me?"

He slides his wrist along the chair arm, as though he's polishing a scuff from the exposed wood. "Opportunity. Never been one to pass up a good opportunity, especially when it falls into my lap." His icy eyes meet mine. "Maybe I want something familiar. Or maybe I like the challenge. Take your pick."

He's not joking.

I'm stuck in his trap. Snared without a single hope of freeing myself. My pulse pounds loudly in the silence while I search for an escape. "I'm engaged," I plead. It's a lie, but I'm desperate.

"Pfft. Engaged. Don't go there. Just don't."

I start to argue it's true, but I don't bother. It won't take much for JD to figure out that Dean and I broke up. Gossip travels through Charleston like a

tiny hamlet. In a matter of days, everyone will know.

There's no way my father would have agreed to terms remotely like this. He would never do that to me. But JD is manipulative and cunning, and I wouldn't be shocked if he managed to trick my parents. I grip my seat and push out the words. Mentally preparing myself to be ripped apart. "My father agreed to this?"

*Please say no. Please.* I fill my lungs and hold the breath while waiting for an answer.

He looks aghast. "Don't be ridiculous."

I slowly release the breath, and relax my hold on the chair. "Then why are you here?"

"I'm not interested in his money."

"This has nothing to do with me. It's between you and him."

"Not anymore."

"What if I don't—agree to your terms?"

"I turn off the tap, and your mother doesn't get access to the beneficial treatment."

My hand instinctively flies to my mouth to cover a gasp. Of all the terrible things he's said today, this stuns me most. "Even you wouldn't be that spiteful. Not to my mother. You wouldn't."

"Don't underestimate me." He sits back in the chair, lifts his chin, and stares straight into my eyes. "I would hate to see her suffer. Your parents worked for my family for a long time. As far back as I can remember. They were always good to us, especially after the accident. But business is business."

**Gabrielle**

**B** *usiness is business?* His cruelty re-energizes me.

“Is that what you think? Is that how you think about life? About relationships? It’s all transactional? God help you.”

“I’ve never been a fool who turns to God for help.”

No, JD doesn’t believe in God. Not after his mother died. Praying to God is for the rest of us foolish mortals. I tuck a loose curl behind my ear, plotting a way forward. “How much does he owe you?”

“After all is said and done, I expect it will end up to be somewhere in the vicinity of three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. That’s a conservative estimate. It could be more.”

I gasp at the sheer magnitude of the number.

He’s right. There’s not even the slightest possibility my father will be able to repay him, and I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to either. Certainly not in cash. “This will take some time, JD. I’ll need a week. Maybe a month. Add additional interest to the debt. I don’t care. I’ll come up with the money.”

“And how are you fixin’ to do that?”

He’s smug and comfortable, his long legs stretched out in front of him. I hear it in the informal cadence of his speech, the way his Ivy League education yields to his Southern roots. He asks the question like he already knows the answer. But I suppose only a fool wouldn’t wonder how I expect



to raise all that cash. JD is many things, but he's never been foolish. Calculating and clever, but never foolish. I doubt that's changed. "I'll go to the bank. And my fiancé will help."

When he says nothing, I glance up nervously.

His body is tight and a storm is brewing in his eyes. "Your fiancé is a worthless piece of shit who has about drained his bank account, and given the opportunity, would siphon every dime out of this place, too."

"You don't know a damn thing about my fiancé, or our relationship. So just stop."

"I know he hangs around sleazy bars on the dock, looking for a game to lay a bet on or a whore to stick his tiny dick into."

I swallow the humiliation and lift my chin. "I don't believe you."

"Suit yourself. You always liked fantasies."

JD edges forward in the chair, his arm resting on his thigh, his face closer to mine. "Think about what I'm offering," he murmurs. His fingertip trails a path from the crook of my elbow to my inner wrist, the callused pad rousing the sensitive skin. He hovers brazenly over my racing pulse. "Nervous? Or is it something else?"

I shiver and jerk my arm away, rubbing my hand up and down over the place where his has been, hoping to wipe away the sensation.

JD gets up and smooths his trousers with a ghost of a smile that mocks me.

He knows. He knows that no matter how much I hate him, my body hasn't forgotten. Even after all these years. It both shames and angers me, so I do what any well-raised Southern woman in my situation would do. I take a swing. Not with my fists, but with words, delivered in a syrupy voice dripping with sarcasm.

"You want me to be your whore? That's all you need from me? It really is no bother. Let's start right now." I make a big show of unzipping my boots and flinging them across the office, one at a time. Then I take off my jewelry, piece by piece.

While I'm behaving like a woman possessed, he's standing with his back toward me, scrolling through his phone, completely unmoved. It's not until I slam my ivory bangle onto the desktop that he glances over one shoulder.

"Don't push me unless you want to end up bent over that desk with your skirt around your waist. I don't have the patience for it tonight. And stop acting like a petulant child. From what I remember, you're getting the best of

the deal.”

“Bastard,” I spew, from somewhere deep and ugly.

He swivels to face me. “Unfortunately for you, darlin’, I’m my father’s son. Inherited every one of his despicable genes.”

The hair at the back of my neck prickles. His father is a monster, and we both know it. I understand *exactly* the message JD’s sending.

“Enough about me.” He reaches down and encircles my wrist with one hand, pushing up the bell sleeve of my dress with the other, exposing the fading purple bruises on my upper arm where Dean grabbed me. “This is what I want to know about.”

Long, embarrassing minutes pass while he examines each black and blue mark. The disgust on his face causes me more pain than the bruises.

“What happened?”

“I bumped into an armoire. It’s nothing.”

“Don’t you lie to me. Those are finger marks on your skin.”

I yank my arm in an effort to escape his hold, but he clenches my wrist tighter. Still, he doesn’t dig painfully into the flesh the way Dean had. “It’s none of your business.”

He lets go of my wrist and I sit behind the desk, putting some distance between us.

But JD isn’t finished.

He reaches over and unloops the scarf from around my neck, and before I think to secure it, it’s in his hand. There’s a long, angry hiss while he glares at the bruises on my throat. They’re fading too, more green and yellow than purple, but they’re still large and ghastly. I instinctively reach to cover them, but he swats my hand away.

His fingers skim my throat, lingering over each bruise. I squeeze my eyes tight, but a small tear escapes and slides down my cheek for him to see.

“Do they hurt?”

I shake my head. “Not anymore.”

“I don’t have all night and I’m not leaving before you tell me what happened.”

“You knew exactly where to look for the bruises, so you already know what happened.”

“I want to hear it from your mouth. All of it. The truth.”

“He had too much to drink. It was only one time.”

“*Only one time?* He choked you, Gabrielle. That’s one fucking time too

many.” His voice is a whisper. A menacing whisper he’s fighting to control.

It takes all the strength I have not to cower as the tremor of his barely restrained rage reverberates through the room.

“Did he hit you?”

My hands are trembling, and I clasp them on my lap to steady them. I didn’t do anything wrong, but still, I feel small and ashamed. “You’ve seen the damage. Does it really matter?”

“Did. He. Hit. You?”

“Yes,” I mutter.

JD takes half a step back and brushes a loose curl off my cheek. His touch is careful, gentle and warm, and my eyelids droop with a heavy flutter. “Did he force himself on you?” His voice is softer and kinder now, too, and for a moment I feel like he’s the man I once knew and loved.

I shake my head. “No.”

It’s a lie. Another lie tumbling off the tongue of the woman who always chooses truth over lies. But I don’t dare tell JD the truth about that night.

“I cannot believe that sonofabitch had his drunken hands around your neck tight enough to leave those kinds of marks. He could have killed you.” JD growls like a grizzly caught in a steel-jaw trap and stumbles back, running a hand over his head to the base of his neck. He squeezes the muscle a few times. Then swivels to face me.

“Tell me you love him,” he demands. “Tell me you cling to him and scream his name when he fills your pussy. Go ahead, tell me.” He’s looming over me now, both hands planted on my desk, disgust oozing from every word. “You won’t say it because you can’t bear to hear the filthy lie come out of your own mouth.” He drops the scarf in my lap. “And this is the man you expect to save you? This is the man you want to marry? What the hell is wrong with you, Gabrielle?”

My fingers find the scarf, rubbing the silky fabric between them for comfort.

“That relationship is over,” he fumes.

I’ve had more than enough of the paternalistic attitude. “What do you mean, it’s over? You can’t—”

“I already did.”

His words are final. Spoken as though what I think, what I care about, is of no importance. My anger mounts again. “What did you do, threaten to make him your bitch?”

He glares at me through squinted eyes and dismisses my question as though it's nothing. And in a way, it is nothing. Nothing more than an insolent remark requiring no serious response. I want to jab at him. That's all. I want to hurt him the way he hurt me.

He straightens and buttons his suit jacket. "I have a victory party to get to."

"Your father won?" The surprise in my voice is unmistakable. It was possible, but I never expected he would actually win. Not many people did. *God help us all.*

He nods, but his face gives nothing away.

Unless things have changed markedly, JD has little use for his father. But still, I would have expected him to be more pleased about the outcome of the election. Instead of poisoning just South Carolina, the Wilders can now spread their special brand of misery all over the country.

Before he leaves, I need to put an end to this. And I make my final stand with as much bravado as I can muster. "I will not be your whore."

"I don't expect you to be my whore. You'll get as much pleasure from our arrangement as I will. Maybe more, if you can manage to stop snarling and calling me names long enough to enjoy it."

I don't know what I ever saw in him. He's nothing more than a vile, self-righteous hypocrite dressed in expensive clothing. And I want at him. I want it in the worst way.

"Lay it out, JD. Go ahead. You can stand there all high and mighty, but you're no different than Dean. You might not leave the kind of bruises that are visible to the eye, but don't think for one minute you're *any* better than him."

As soon as the words tumble off my tongue, he's towering over me, one hand gripping the back of my seat. He's trembling. I feel his rage through the bones of the chair. My heart thumps wildly, and I know the instant he spits out the first word, I pushed too far.

"Your mother gets the care she desperately needs to stay alive. Your father's debts are forgiven." He leans over, so close his breath heats my scalp, but it's not a soothing sensation. It's biting and bitter, like his words. "In exchange. You. Are. Mine. To enjoy as I like. Take it or leave it."

I glance up when he quiets. His face is screwed up with a fury I don't recognize. I'm the one trembling now, not in anger, but with fear.

Before I can calm myself, his shadow recedes, and he strides toward the

door. My hands are balled so tight, the white-tipped nails leave bloody crescents on my palms.

He turns in the doorway. “The offer stands until tomorrow evening at eight.”

I don’t respond, and JD doesn’t leave. Instead, he stands there, appraising me, as though he has more to say. I’ve already heard plenty from him, so I open my desk drawer and begin organizing the gel pens and index cards, sorting each by size and color.

“Gabrielle?”

I glance at him, and immediately wish I hadn’t.

“If you breathe a single word about this to anyone, you’ll watch in horror as your mother’s body is ravaged by disease. You have my word.”

For the first time in my life, I’m truly afraid of him. Terrified of the rage I unleashed. I knew better than to push and push, to compare him to a man like Dean, but I did it anyway.

“Antoine will meet you in the hotel lobby tomorrow at eight. We’ll have supper at Sweetgrass and discuss the terms in more detail. I’ll answer any questions you have. If you’re not interested in what I’m offering, just send word with him, and I won’t bother you again. I’m not forcing you to do this. Come willingly, or don’t come at all. It’s entirely up to you.”

He saunters out of the office as though he hasn’t just dropped a bomb on my world. As if I actually have a choice. Without thinking, I pick up a bud vase off my desk and hurl it at him through the doorway. It misses, hitting the corner of Georgina’s desk. The vase shatters dramatically and water splashes onto his elegant suit, but he doesn’t stop. Doesn’t flinch. He just keeps walking.

## Gabrielle

Once I'm certain he's gone, I grab a small trash bag and get down to clean the wet shards from the rug, trying to concentrate on picking up glass without pricking my fingers. It's an impossible task. Each time I think I'm done, another sliver winks at me.

Somehow, I'm always left with a colossal mess to clean up when JD's around. So this should come as no surprise.

I would love to blame it all on him, every bad idea we indulged, every risk we took, all the adult-themed parties for two we threw for ourselves. But I did it all willingly. Sometimes it was me who led him astray. Me who seduced him into the darkness.

I was fifteen and he had just turned seventeen the first time we ventured into the shadows, playing games that neither of us were anywhere near ready to play. He was the teacher, and I the compliant student, eager to show off everything he taught me. Eager to use my hands and mouth in ways that elicited desperate gasps and shudders from the all-powerful JD Wilder. Eager to submit fully, while he stripped me bare and tethered me to a hitching post, stroking my body with colorful ostrich feathers until a damp sheen covered my skin and nothing but muted whimpers and pleas for more escaped my lips.

We were nothing more than a push and pull of hormone-driven bodies,

capped by minds too young to understand the implications of the physical pleasures we explored. At least that's how I remember it—until he had his fill of the common girl with humble roots.

Don't feel sorry for me. I had no business taking up with him in the first place. I fell prey to an age-old cliché. Servant's daughter falls in love with the master's son, something girls like me are repeatedly warned against. But lustful desires and fairy-tale endings obscured all good sense. That, and a beautiful, sweet-talking boy with a mouth like velvet.

I've kept in touch with his brothers off and on, but until today, I hadn't spoken to JD since the night I discovered him balls deep in Jane Montgomery, the lieutenant governor's daughter. They were both naked. Jane on all fours, squealing like a stuck hog, her Junior League pedigree and dignity discarded in a heap with her clothes.

Julian—I called him Julian then—was behind her, gripping her slim hips with two hands, pounding her pussy while the sweat dripped off his body.

I stood there, feet glued to the floor, both hands covering my mouth, until he noticed me. "Get out," he hissed, never breaking his connection with her. Never interrupting the punishing rhythm.

I stumbled out of the stable, but got no more than fifty feet before I keeled over and emptied the contents of my stomach under a mulberry tree on the horse path.

Two weeks later, I was whisked up North to an all-girls boarding school. Ripped away from my family and friends and a life I so loved, all without a good explanation. At least not one that I believed.

My parents and the school principal behaved like co-conspirators, pretending that a hostile environment filled with snooty teenage girls was a fabulous opportunity for someone like me. Never questioning how a scholarship to an elite Connecticut boarding school fell like manna from heaven, midway through the school year, and found its way to *me* in Charleston, South Carolina. They could pretend all they wanted, but I knew exactly who was behind it.

And I never forgave him.

Not when I left Connecticut with a full scholarship to Cornell. Not when I traveled Europe, interning in the finest hotels. Not when I had the opportunity to return to Charleston and buy this hotel for a song from the city. Not even after the renovations were complete, and the doors opened to accolades. I never forgave him.

*And I never will.*

What could he possibly want with me after all this time? *Sex?* No. JD doesn't need me to satisfy some sick fantasy. Women are lined up from here to Greenville to indulge his fantasies.

He wants to ruin my life, crush me completely this time. Yes, I know it's dramatic. But like last time, I can't come up with a more plausible explanation.

I toss the white trash bag into the incinerator. Well, I have news for him. As long as I have a breath in me, that is not happening. I'll go to the bank tomorrow and beg the loan officer to let me establish another line of credit. The hotel is fully booked every night for the next year, and the restaurant is booked six months out. That has to account for something.

Maybe I should call Dean. *No.* I don't have the stomach to crawl back to him. Despite what I told JD, Dean did try to force me into sex that night but he was so stinking drunk, he couldn't get it up. Though, booze or no booze, it wasn't a unique phenomenon. But that night was different. That night he held me by the hair and slapped my face, again and again, when I refused to suck him off. That night he wrapped his hands around my neck and squeezed while I teetered in and out of consciousness, choking for breath. That night I prayed he wouldn't kill me in a drunken rage.

No, I'll never go back. I'll take my chances with whatever JD has planned. He won't beat me, not the way Dean did, but he'll hurt me in other ways. Crueler ways, leaving invisible scars that last a lifetime. But he won't kill me.

*Sweet Jesus.* How did my life get to this? *How?*

There has to be another way. I say it so convincingly, I almost believe it myself.



**Julian**

Most Charlestonians would deliver their acceptance speech from a historic hotel in the storied downtown. Most presidents-elect would be concerned about the optics of holding an election night celebration on a plantation where slaves were once forced to pick rice and beaten on a whim. Not my father. He revels in it, and his fuck-you attitude is exactly why he was elected president today.

After passing through a half-dozen checkpoints, I pull up in front of the main house and toss my keys to the valet. “Don’t bury it. I’m not staying all night.”

The party is out back under a tent. Large screens are set up so revelers can follow the election results. I hear the victory cries over the raucous music. *Idiots*. They’ll get exactly what they deserve.

The Secret Service agents stationed at the front door let me pass with nothing more than a curt nod. I barely have a foot in the foyer when my brother Gray pounces. “The president-elect is in his upstairs study. You’ve been summoned.”

“It’s nice to see you, too.”

“You should have been here hours ago if you wanted pleasantries. That time is long over,” Gray says, dragging me into a hug. When he pulls back, he doesn’t immediately let go of my shoulders. “You look like hell.”

“Nothing a little dirty water can’t cure.”

Gray shakes his head and grins. He resembles my mother, with dark hair, prominent cheekbones, and a small cleft in his chin. That, and he’s always reaching for straws where DW is concerned. Always giving *Dad* the benefit of the doubt.

“Chase and I were starting to worry you weren’t going to show, and we’d be stuck holding the bag.”

“I thought about it.” *At least a dozen times, just today.* “But I didn’t want to leave you to deal with the fallout. Besides, not showing up would put a kink in my plans.” As soon as it’s out of my mouth, I want it back. But it’s too late.

“Your plans?” Gray studies me carefully, his slate-blue eyes piercing. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing for you to worry your pretty little head about, princess.” I have it all under control.

“Be smart, JD.”

“Always.”

“For what it’s worth, the old man never doubted you’d be here. When Shelby fretted about it, he told her he wasn’t worried in the least.”

Gray knows DW’s despicable, but he’s forever searching for evidence to the contrary. Worse, he’s always trying to convince me to cut DW a break. But I never do. He doesn’t deserve any breaks from me.

I blow out a breath and crack my knuckles. This is going to be one long fucking night. It already feels like it’s gone on forever. “I’m going to get a drink, and then I’ll be up.”

“Don’t dawdle. He’s already pissed it’s taken you so long to come kiss the ring.”

“*Kiss the ring.* He can kiss my ass.”

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ON MY WAY TO see the president-elect, I pass his wife Shelby, in the upstairs hall with two women fussing over her like she’s a helpless child.

“JD! You’re here. I was starting to worry. You know how your father gets.”

As she inches closer, I can almost feel the scratch of her bubble lips on

my cheek. Parched and ice cold, injected with toxins to plump them, and brushed in a vile burgundy. The color is garish against her lily-white skin. I duck out of her reach, my precious bourbon sloshing near the rim as I escape her clutches. “It’s almost time to go down to the party. Don’t want to ruin your makeup.”

Her smile fades quickly, much like her good looks did. She was stunning when DW married her. Now she’s just an aging beauty queen, more caricature than human. “Don’t spoil tonight for him,” she pleads. “He worked so hard.”

Shelby is nothing more than a gold digger, and even costly French perfume can’t hide the stench, but she’s more than he deserves.

“I wouldn’t dream of spoiling your evening. Why don’t you finish getting ready, and let me go say hello to the president?”

“He’s not the president just yet,” she calls after me, giggling like a little girl.

*Shelby.* I can only tolerate her in small doses. Very small doses.

Right after they married, I thought about bending her over my father’s desk and fucking her until she screamed *my* name. Spraying *my* seed over her pale skin. Don’t doubt for a second that she would have been a willing partner. But what would it have accomplished? Short-sighted vengeance, that’s all. Nothing more than the momentary satisfaction of defiling something pretty that belonged to him. But the thought of sticking my dick where his has been always made my stomach turn. Never more than now.

I pause at the door of my father’s study to pull myself together.

My mother, bless her soul, rolled over in her grave today. Probably a dozen times. The worst of her unrest was undoubtedly caused by my visit to Gabrielle. But it couldn’t be helped.

Gabrielle doesn’t know it yet, but she needs to be under my protection. DW will use her to keep me in line, especially once I begin to dig deeper for answers. I fell prey to that tactic once, but it won’t happen again.

I contemplate bolting down the stairs and out the door. But I won’t do that to my younger brothers. They’re both already here. The two who can be. Gray, with his tie loose and sleeves rolled to the elbows, and Chase, with a tablet tucked under an arm. Zack can’t be here. My father made sure of that.

Gray and Chase worked on the campaign for the past two years while I stayed in Charleston to take care of Wilder business. Gray has people skills. He was born with the gift of bringing complete strangers together and putting

them at ease.

Chase, the youngest Wilder, lacks Gray's social acumen, but he more than makes up for it with tech know-how. The kid can hack anything, anywhere, get in and out without leaving a fingerprint. He's that good.

And me? I'm a moody bastard who doesn't suffer fools easily. I don't kiss ass any more than I kiss rings. Apparently these are not useful campaign skills, so I was mostly left in peace while my brothers scoured the country doing the devil's bidding.

My father pauses mid-sentence when he catches me in the doorway. We have the same coloring, same eyes, same nose, and the same chestnut hair that curls at the ends, when it's wet or too long. The resemblance is uncanny.

Some days, when I look at myself in the mirror, I see him.

When I was a child, strangers would comment on how much we looked alike. Back then, I would puff out my chest and beam. Now when someone says I'm the spitting image of my father, it takes all I have not to puke.

"So glad you found the time to join us, JD. Come in."

While ring kissing isn't my style, I extend the sonofabitch my hand. "Congratulations. It appears everything went as planned." I glance at my brothers. "Congratulations to you two clowns, too. Nice work." I elbow Chase, and am rewarded with an impish grin.

"Thanks." He's still smiling, and I smile, too. There were months and months, when he was a kid, that Chase didn't smile. Especially after the accident, when my father shipped Zack off to that dreadful place where he withered instead of thrived.

"What's the plan for tonight?" Chase asks my father.

"Collins will concede after the polls close on the West Coast. As soon as he delivers his speech, I'll give mine, with my sons standing behind me, pleased as punch, showing the appropriate deference and support."

That part about deference and support was for my benefit. *Pleased as punch*. Fuck me.

"I think we should all take a minute to appreciate the history made today. When I started, there were nineteen other candidates. The voters picked me, primary after primary, to represent the party. And today, the country chose me to lead them into the future. By the time the votes are all counted, I'll have won both the Electoral College and the popular vote. It's big. *Huge*. Do you appreciate the significance?" He looks from me to my brothers. "Do you?" he roars when we don't answer.

“Yes,” Gray and Chase say in unison.

I nod. *What an asshole.*

“The voters have handed me a mandate to govern as I see fit. Think about what that means for us. For Wilder Holdings. Looser regulations, lower corporate taxes, stronger employer protections. We can sell our drugs all over the world. Hell, we can sell them on the streets of America if we want.”

I can’t take one more second of his self-aggrandizing bullshit. Even if it means my grandfather’s pharmaceutical company will flourish. The money means nothing. My brothers and I inherited more money from my mother’s parents than we can spend in ten lifetimes.

“Maybe we should let you meet with your speechwriter.” I try to sound helpful. Anything to get me out of here. “You probably need to make some last-minute tweaks before you face the country.”

“The world,” he says.

*Christ.* I don’t dare so much as glance at my brothers, who I’m sure are thinking that DW is an insufferable bastard. Even Gray can’t deny it. It would be laughable if he wasn’t just elected president. It would be laughable if he was someone else’s father.

“The speech was final months ago,” DW says proudly. “It’s all up here.” He taps an index finger against his temple.

I imagine a loaded gun against his head in the very place his finger lingers. Maybe after I’m finished. First I want him to suffer through long, excruciating days and longer sleepless nights. I want every creature comfort stripped away. I want him begging for mercy that never comes.

My hand tightens around the crystal tumbler and I throw back the deep tawny liquid, welcoming the burn at the back of my throat. But even before the warmth subsides, I need another.

“We have family business to discuss. So don’t think about going anywhere yet. The bar’s open all night.” DW glances warily at me. “Sit down, JD.”

“I’ve been sitting all day. I’ll stand.” I wait for him to tell me to sit again, but he doesn’t. When it comes right down to it, he’s got no balls and won’t take the risk that I’ll refuse. Not in front of my brothers. He can’t afford a mutiny on his hands. It’s a small victory, but it’s tasty.

“We’ve talked around the edges, but now it’s real. Once I’m sworn in, I can no longer keep the business in my name. My shares will have to go into a blind trust. There’s no choice. I’ll push it off as long as possible, but there’s a

limit to how long I can wait. The three of you will run the day-to-day operations, and make whatever decisions are necessary in the best interest of Wilder Holdings.”

My brothers nod.

“Exactly how will the responsibilities be divided?” I ask.

“Gray will go back to running Wildflower. Full-time after the transition is over. With everything it entails. Being more careful than ever. *No mistakes.*”

Wildflower is Gray’s baby.

It’s an upscale social club. The very proper front for a not very proper, but very private, sex club. A place where the most discriminating South Carolinians go to play. It’s a high-risk, high-reward kind of place. Lots of interesting people and toys to play with. But if you get caught with your pants down, strapped to a spanking bench with a plug in your ass, your constituents won’t like it. Neither will your clients, your boss, or your wife. Especially your wife.

My father is still droning. He likes to hear himself talk. Always has. “Chase, you’ll oversee the technology arm of the company, just like before. But I want you to stay with the transition team, too. After I’m sworn in, I’ll still need you from time to time, but your main focus will be in Charleston, helping your brothers.

“And JD, you’ll continue to oversee all of Wilder Holdings, but your responsibilities will also include Sayle Pharmaceuticals now. That’s significantly more responsibility than you had during the campaign. Are you up for it?”

*Does he expect me to say no?* “Of course.”

I try not to look as smug as I feel—no reason to piss off DW more than necessary tonight.

It must kill him to hand over the reins to me. But my brothers don’t have the experience or interest in managing the company, and according to the terms of my grandfather’s will, Sayle can only be managed by an outsider, if my brothers and I, or our legitimate offspring, are unable or unwilling to serve.

“Secret Service detail? Anybody change their mind?”

“I have plenty of security. I don’t need handouts from the government,” I answer. *And I certainly don’t need strangers peering over my shoulder while I search for evidence to destroy you.*

My brothers each grunt something in agreement. I’m not worried about

their safety. They have excellent security and my father can't afford to kill off any more of his family members. If he could, I'd already be dead.

"I'd turn it down if I had a choice," DW mutters. "I have Olson. He's all I need. Can't stand having all these government hacks watching my every move. I don't trust them." He waves his hand dismissively. "There will be paperwork you'll have to sign, but you're all of age. They can't force you to accept it."

"So you're backing completely away from everything? Even Sayle?" I ask.

"You two," he points to my brothers, "go make sure everything's in place for the speech."

"Don't you have people for that?" Gray asks.

I gnaw on the inside of my cheek not to laugh. *Don't we have people for that* was my father's most uttered phrase during the campaign. Maybe Shelby's too. The old man has no idea Gray's mocking him.

"Go," he says, dismissing them like they're unruly children. "And shut the door behind you."

Just what I need, a little father-son time. Like this night hasn't already sucked enough life from my soul.

"You'll be the face of Wilder Holdings while I'm president. And that includes the pharmaceutical arm. But I expect daily briefings."

"Daily briefings?" *Jesus Christ*. He expects to talk to me every day? That is not happening. "I thought the whole point of putting your shares into a blind trust is so you won't be privy to the day-to-day operations."

"No one's going to listen in on, or question, a friendly conversation between a father and son who miss one another. You will miss me, won't you, JD?" He snickers, and I want to slam my fist into his jaw.

"Don't you think you'll have enough on your plate running the country?"

"My interests and those of the country dovetail nicely. I can multitask. It's how Sayle Pharmaceuticals got to the top. Despite what your grandfather believed, you don't get to be one of the big boys unless you play the game."

"I don't think *my* grandfather or *my* mother saw *their* beloved family business as a game. And I certainly don't."

He pounds a fist on the desk.

I stand perfectly still, ignoring his antics, like an adult watching a toddler throw a tantrum. Apparently, he doesn't appreciate being reminded who lawfully owns the company.

“No one’s indispensable, JD. Least of all you.” He leans back in the chair and clasps his hands over his stomach, like he’s the fucking king issuing a proclamation. “This is my business, including Sayle Pharmaceuticals, until the day they inter my body. Maybe even after.”

He flashes me a blinding toothy smile as fake as his wife’s tits. “Do your job, JD, but stay out of things that don’t concern you or you’ll force my hand. Your job is to babysit the company, not to make policy, or implement changes, or to harass the employees. The babysitter is supposed to keep things running smoothly and follow instructions until Daddy gets back. If he snoops in the bedside table, or in the medicine chest where he doesn’t belong, he’s promptly disposed of.”

“You mean fired.”

“You can take it to mean whatever you like.”

Sayle Pharmaceuticals is my birthright. I would have to die for that to change. DW doesn’t have the balls to do it himself, but he’s not above having me killed. I’m sure he’s thought about it over the years, and I’m even more certain he regrets I wasn’t in the car with the others when it went over the embankment. But this is the closest he’s ever come to saying it.

Power is intoxicating. It makes people careless. The more people feed his ego, the more careless he’ll become. Eventually he’ll make a mistake. And I plan to be standing right there when it happens.

“I think we’ve said everything we need to for tonight. I’ll be downstairs.” I turn to leave, but I don’t escape quickly enough.

“JD, how’s that girl you used to bang in the back of the stable like she was a bitch in heat? Vivien and William’s daughter. Gabrielle, right? I bet she had a sweet little cunt, didn’t she, son?”

I freeze with my hand on the doorknob, rage and terror flooding into every crevice of my body, until I can barely breathe. *Do not let him see it, JD.* My fingers squeeze the cold metal knob until they ache. “She’s fine, I guess. Lally says she’s engaged.”

“That’s too bad. I’ve always wanted to tap that tight ass. Engaged makes it more complicated. Sometimes more complicated than married. But I’m the president now...all things are possible.”

*Focus on the endgame. Don’t let him distract you with shiny objects he knows you can’t resist.*

My only job this evening is not to scowl while my father accepts the presidency. If I can do that, everything else will fall into place. One small



step at a time. *You've waited a long time for this opportunity. Breathe, JD. Breathe.*

I picture him with an orange jumpsuit yanked down around his ankles, beefy inmates waiting in line to spear his virgin ass with long, thick cocks while he cries like a baby. The image settles me.

I turn to him with a practiced smile and ice water barreling through my veins. "I think it's about time to go downstairs and face the world, Mr. President."

**Gabrielle**

“I’m sorry, Ms. Duval. The bank would love to help, and we certainly appreciate how you’ve turned the blight of the neighborhood into a shining jewel, but there’s nothing we can do in this situation. You haven’t built enough equity in the hotel for the bank to extend a line of credit.”

He might be doing his job, but there’s not a less sincere man than Jacob Lott, the vice president of State Street Bank. My friend Georgina calls him *smarmy*, and he is. But there are so many other things about him that are off-putting, too. His bulbous nose is always bright red, like a man who drinks too much, and he always smells like he’s just eaten pickled onions. And while we can’t help our genetics, the man surely earns enough to find himself a decent tailor and a bottle of shoe polish.

“The Gatehouse is fully booked a year out, and the restaurant doesn’t have an available table for months,” I explain, trying to appeal to reason. “We’ve been invited to join the Blackberry Inn and the Hotel Savannah for the Christmas celebration this year.”

“I did hear about that. That was so good of them to invite you.”

“We’ve worked very hard. I like to think we deserve the honor.”

A woman knocks on the glass partition, between the offices.

“Will you excuse me for a moment?” he asks as he scurries out the door.

“Of course.”

*Nice of them to invite you.* What a prick. The Gatehouse is celebrating Christmas with two other small hotels in Charleston. They're exquisite hotels with an upscale clientele. Not so different than us in that regard, but they've been around for decades.

The Blackberry Inn will serve Christmas Eve dinner for guests from all the hotels, the Gatehouse will host Christmas brunch, and Savannah will pull out all the stops for Christmas dinner. It's genius, and there's been so much excitement about the holiday event that all three hotels were fully booked on the day of the announcement, six months ago. For the Gatehouse, it's an opportunity to showcase our best to a group of people who normally stay elsewhere in Charleston. It has the potential to change everything for us.

"Where were we?" Lott asks, on his way back into the room.

*Nowhere good.* "What about the underwriter?" I ask. "You've turned me down without even talking to him."

"Ms. Duval. I haven't turned you down. You haven't even filed an application." He sighs, a long, exasperated breath that distributes the tang of pickled onions into the tiny office. "I'm just trying to save you the trouble. As you know, the loan process is lengthy and very involved. I'm just apprising you of the almost certain outcome before you embark down that road."

"What if the underwriter feels differently?"

"He doesn't."

"You've discussed it with him?"

"I spoke with him after you called. He's sorry to hear about your mother's declining health, but his initial commitment was to the restoration and preservation efforts in Charleston, not to the hotel specifically, or to you."

I nod. "I understand, and I'm very grateful for his generosity."

"There are so many people in need, we can't possibly expect him to solve everyone's financial woes."

*That might be the case, but I'm not taking your word for it.* "No, I don't expect that, but I would appreciate a loan application."

His tongue clicks softly in disapproval.

"My mother always says you never know unless you try," I add, with a smile sweet enough to make rhubarb palatable.

Five minutes later, my loan application and I are on the sidewalk, headed toward the parking lot. There's no way I'm getting the loan. I insisted on the

application in part because Lott was so condescending. But I will submit the paperwork. All I have to lose is time—something I don't seem to have much of these days.

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I PULL into the driveway of Georgina's house. It's a cute bungalow with a newly painted picket fence. Georgina Bressler Scott has been my best friend since before I could walk. And she was with me from the beginning, when the Gatehouse was little more than an empty shell, badly in need of a facelift and some love.

Georgie's waiting at the door when I come up the porch steps. "I want to hear why you were at the bank. I take one day off, and you're already borrowing money?" She pulls me into a hug.

"You look great," I tell her. "Those pregnancy hormones are good for your skin. It's all glowy."

"Don't lie. I look like a whale." She rubs her hand over her expanding belly. "Can you come in for a few minutes? I have cookies."

"What kind?" I ask, following her into the kitchen.

"Lemon sugar."

"I would never say no to a sugar cookie. Especially a lemon one. Did you make these?"

"Yes. Can you believe it?" she says, pouring iced tea into the tall glasses embellished with bees that she usually saves for company. "I think it's a nesting thing. I read somewhere that around the third trimester all of these maternal instincts kick in as you prepare for the baby. Maybe I'll become the next Martha Stewart."

"There's about as much chance of that happening as there is of me becoming the next Julia Child. But about our baby." I hand her a bag from Mimi's, my new favorite store.

"Gabby, you buy this baby more clothes than you buy for yourself. *Oh my God*. Look at this!" She holds up a onesie with newly-hatched chicks on it that will be perfect for spring.

"It's adorable, isn't it? It was on sale, and I couldn't resist. She can wear it Easter morning before she puts on the cute ruffled dress we're going to buy her. The one with the matching shoes and tights."

“She could be a he, you know.”

“I don’t think so, but maybe. That’s the only reason the ruffled dress is still in the store. Before I forget, here’s the paperwork you wanted. It’s not so adorable.”

“Thanks. Wade’s away tonight and it’ll give me something to do before bed.” She takes the color-coded folder and puts it aside. “So tell me about your appointment with the bank that I didn’t know anything about.”

“Like I told you earlier, I was trying to persuade them to loan me some more money, but I wasn’t successful.”

“Why do you need money? Is it for the quarterly insurance bill that’s coming up? Don’t borrow money for that. I have a few dollars put away. I can help.”

I shake my head. “My mother has been offered some experimental treatment that might prolong her life. Or at least make it better.”

“Oh Gabby! I’m so happy to hear it. I’ve been so worried about her since you first told me she was sick. And worried about you, too.”

I nod.

Georgina doesn’t take her eyes off me. “Experimental treatment. It sounds expensive. That’s why you need money?”

I draw a breath before I say the words out loud. Even as they come out of my mouth, I still can’t believe them. “JD helped my parents find the doctor and loaned them the money to make it happen. I was hoping the bank would lend me the money to pay him back. Then I could get him out of our lives. Things were better for me that way.”

The color drains from Georgie’s face, and I haven’t even told her any of the ugly details. It’s startling to watch.

“*JD Wilder?*” she whispers, like she might summon the devil himself if she says his name too loud.

I nod. “I don’t like it either. But it is what it is. My mother needs the treatment, and Jacob Lott said they aren’t giving me any more money. I’m still going to apply for the loan, but it’s not likely to come through. It might be her only real hope.”

“Nothing good happens when he’s anywhere near you. Remember that whole boarding school thing? Instead of breaking up with you like a normal boy, he had his father send you away.”

I cover my face, making small circles over my tired eyes. “I know. Believe me, I haven’t forgotten. It’s all I’ve been thinking about since I found

out my parents took money from him.”

“Isn’t there another way? Being indebted to those Wilders is—it’s not good.”

“No.” I sigh. “It’s not good. But the treatment is very expensive. Believe me, I’m searching for another way to come up with money.”

She looks at me with those round hazel eyes, framed by soft, inky lashes. I see the worry in her face. The pity. She knows about my history with JD. Not all the things we did in the stable, but everything else. I cried on her shoulder the night I found him with Jane, and for months and months after.

“When we were kids, I was always jealous of you,” she says softly.

“Oh, come on. You talk about this like you committed some big sin. Kids are kids. And I’ve told you a hundred times, I don’t remember you being jealous of anyone.”

“I was. I loved you, but in my heart, I always wanted what you had. It didn’t matter how much you shared with me. I coveted every single thing about your life, like an unrepentant sinner. A mama of my very own, and a father who didn’t stumble around drunk while kids taunted him. And JD—I wanted him most of all.”

She gets up and pours us each some more sweet tea, wiping the lip of the pitcher with a pale-yellow dishtowel. “I was closer to his age, and it never seemed fair that he wanted you instead of me. But it didn’t matter how much I flirted, or paraded around in shorts that were practically indecent, or showed off my belly button to him. None of it mattered. He chose you. Every day he chose you.”

*Every day he chose you.*

Until he chose someone else.

A ball forms at the opening of my stomach, and even the tea can’t go down smoothly. “Everyone wanted his attention—boys or girls, it didn’t matter. I never noticed you flirting with him more than anyone else did.” And I would have noticed.

“Because you always saw the good in everyone. Especially in me. Even when I didn’t deserve it.”

“You always deserved it, Georgie. And JD didn’t turn out to be much of a prize. Consider yourself blessed.”

“*Mmhm*. I do.” Her voice trails off, as she smooths the wrinkles from her cotton skirt. Her left hand finds a soothing rhythm, but it does nothing to ease her crinkled brow. “Do you remember when I visited you at that school in

Connecticut?”

“Yes.” I nod. “I counted the minutes until you arrived. I was so lonely and homesick.”

“All those terrible girls who called you Black Brie and Brie Noir, like you were some wretched French cheese gone bad. You put on a good face, but I knew how broken you were inside. How awful it was to be around those girls with too much money, who couldn’t get their noses out of the air. My heart hurt when I said goodbye that Sunday. Leaving you there in that dreadful place, full of mean and spiteful girls who talked with funny accents. I cried all the way home. It was the very last time I was jealous of you.”

I wrap my arms around my middle, cupping my elbows. “I cried after you left, too. Cried for hours until I fell asleep. I was so miserable.” Those first few months at boarding school, when I was the strange new girl, were the worst.

“I never told you this, but that visit changed my life, Gabby. It made me grateful for what I have.” She twists a small section of hair around her finger, and for several seconds her mind is somewhere else. “I never again wanted to be you. I asked God to forgive my envy, and thanked him for his mercy. Thanked him for sending JD to you instead of to me. I’m so sorry.”

“A lot of the girls were awful. But looking back now, after the first semester, it wasn’t all bad. My parents coddled me. I was too soft. At boarding school, I learned to tune out the noise, and to push through adversity. It proved to be an important life lesson. Painful, but important. And just so you know, they’re quite sure that we’re the ones with the funny accents. I can’t believe you remembered they called me Brie Noir.”

“It was terrible. It sounded exotic, until I found out they called you that after they saw the picture of your mother.”

“*Mmhm.*” My mother is biracial. Her skin isn’t particularly dark, but she has tight, tight curls, that she wears natural. The girls didn’t know what to make of it. They only knew she wasn’t white. White women don’t have that kind of hair. And biracial wasn’t part of their elite vocabulary.

Georgie is quiet and calm now. But I feel like there’s more she wants to tell me. I don’t know what dredged all of this up today. We haven’t talked about any of it in more than a decade. Maybe longer.

“Did I ever tell you Brie Noir is a real cheese? I tasted it when I interned at that hotel in Paris. I thought about those nasty girls while I enjoyed a sliver with some pink champagne.”

She doesn't smile. "You have so much, Gabby. You worked so hard. He'll ruin it. If you let him near you again, he'll take everything. He can't help it. It's how he is. How they all are."

She's right. But it won't do any good to tell her that. And it won't do me or my mother any good to wallow in self-pity. "I won't let him. I'm prepared, and my brain isn't filled with fairy-tale endings anymore. I know his game this time."

"Be careful. Be careful of all of them."

Georgie is afraid of something. Her face is still ashen, and she's pushing back her cuticles, like she does when she's anxious. "What aren't you telling me, Georgina Bressler Scott?"

Georgie opens her mouth, then presses her lips together.

I wonder if something happened with JD when we were younger. Maybe they made out behind my back. There was a year or two in there—it doesn't matter. Not anymore. I love her, and nothing she can say will change that.

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I'M GOING to be late meeting JD. I stayed longer at Georgina's than I planned, and now I'm stuck in traffic. I'm sure he'll have plenty to say about it, too.

*What am I going to do about his proposal?*

I tried to reach my parents again last night, and all day today, but I still can't get through to them. I'm not getting an error message, but the calls are going directly to voicemail. Despite his warning, I can't believe JD can block my calls. Can he? *No*. Maybe my mother is tired from the trip and the tests, and she hasn't bothered recharging her phone. My father refuses to deal with the cell phone, so he wouldn't think to recharge it. He probably doesn't even know how.

It's all drivel, but it's distracting me from the bigger questions. The ones I'm about to be faced with. What am I going to do about JD's *business proposal*? That fucker.

Do I become his plaything? He wouldn't really stop my mother's treatment if it can help her, would he?

*Gabrielle, he showed up yesterday after all these years and he wants you to have sex with him to pay off a loan. He's capable of anything.*



I don't know.

When JD's mother and sister were killed, my mother held his brothers while they cried. She bathed and fed his brother Zack, changed his diapers until DW sent him away. My mother nurtured those boys. Doled out real hugs and an endless supply of love when there wasn't anyone else who cared about them. Surely that has to count for something.

I'll go to Sweetgrass, talk to my parents, and feel JD out. Maybe I can change his mind. When we were kids, JD was tough, and he could be really mean, especially to anyone who picked on the younger kids. He was always the leader. Always the boss of everyone and everything, but he had a sense of honor and decency about him. Fairness was important to him, and he was loyal to everyone he cared about. *Loyalty*. That was one of the hundreds of reasons I was so crushed to find him with another girl.

Snippets of my life flash in front of my eyes as I sit in traffic. Running on the lawn at Wildwood as a child, JD tugging playfully on my braids. How he always hid the last cookie for me in a small copper tin behind the flour sacks in the pantry. And those long nights we spent wrapped in a blanket under an enormous sky teeming with stars, or in our little corner of the stable, kissing and petting, until nothing, *nothing*, seemed as important as chasing the ultimate pleasure.

What happened to that boy who gazed at me under the stars, his bright-blue eyes shining with what I foolishly believed was love? "I'll take care of you," he whispered into my damp skin, after we had sex for the first time. "I won't ever let anything bad happen to you. I promise."

What happened to him? Some part of him must still exist under the custom-made suit and expensive haircut. Surely, it must. People don't change that much. He's still beautiful, but his eyes don't sparkle anymore, and his features are cold and hard.

*Maybe they do.*

Or maybe I can find some of that decency. Maybe it's still there, hidden beneath the trappings.

**Julian**

Lally doesn't keep a goddamn thing in this place to make a decent sandwich. I find a wedge of cheddar in the refrigerator door and a stale baguette in the bread box, and toss them on the counter.

The casserole Lally made for dinner tonight is still sitting on the stove. I lift the lid and peek inside before shoving it into the fridge. I don't feel like eating it alone. And I'm tired of looking at it.

*Gabrielle. Damn woman.*

She pissed me off tonight. Threw a wrench into my plan before we even started. I never thought she'd back out upfront, not with her mother's life on the line. She's going to be an even bigger challenge than I anticipated. But somehow, I need to make it work with her. *Somehow.*

There's no way I can go after my father unless she's wrapped up. She needs to be on board before I make any overt moves. Otherwise, it's too risky. I won't take that chance. Not with her.

*Gabrielle, you never make things easy.*

If the stakes weren't so damn high, I'd enjoy her insolence. But the way things stand, it's just another hurdle on the road to hell.

I'm pouring the third drink of the night when my phone buzzes. I turn it over. *Security.* This better not be any more bullshit. The election speeches went on much too long last night, and now with Gabrielle being a huge pain

in the ass—I'm out of patience.

“Yeah?”

“Gabrielle Duval is at the front gate. Says you're expecting her. She's on the list for tonight, but I thought Antoine was bringing her by the house. Did something change?”

I almost laugh out loud at her audacity. “Nothing's changed.” *Oh Gabrielle, you will learn to listen and obey. Even if it kills me.* “Send her away.”

“Will do.”

“Smith?”

“Yeah?”

“She's not to be roughed up or hurt in any way. Not an eyelash harmed. No one lays a finger on her for any reason. *Ever.* Anyone who doesn't understand that will answer to me personally, and it won't be pleasant. Tell your men.”

Smith was a member of the Special Forces before he started overseeing security for me and my brothers. He doesn't normally man the gates, but the election has made his job a whole lot more complicated. And it's going to become more complicated still. Before this is all over, I suspect Gabrielle will have him longing to be back in uniform, patrolling the darkest corners of Jalalabad.

I turn on the kitchen monitor and watch Gabrielle stomping around outside the front gate. She's waving her hands around and yelling at Smith like she's oblivious to the fact he's got nearly a foot on her and at least a hundred pounds of solid muscle.

She's always had fire in her blood. And I've always enjoyed it. My dick's hard just watching her little scene.

Sending her away is a risk, but it's important to show her right from the start I mean business. Otherwise, she'll do whatever she wants, and that is not an option.

Not five minutes pass before Smith calls back. “JD, the woman refuses to leave until she has a word with you. She's wild, and not much we can do without putting a hand on her. If you give the okay, we can fold her into the car and send her on her way. We'll be gentle, though she's a live one, and I'm not sure she won't just ram the gate,” he mutters.

I can still see those bruises the asshole *Dean* put on her. She can cover them all she wants, but they're etched on my brain. “Not a goddamn finger

on her. I don't give a shit how gentle it is. This is the last time I say it. Put her on."

Smith offers Gabrielle the phone.

She yanks it out of his hand and presses it to her ear. "You demanded my presence at eight o'clock. It's eight twenty-five, and I've been out here for at least ten minutes arguing with your goons. I got caught up in a meeting, and then in traffic. I'm fifteen minutes late and you won't see me?"

Tonight can't be on her terms. I can't afford it. *And neither can she.*

"Good evening, Gabrielle. Did you have a pleasant day? I'm sorry things didn't go as you hoped with the bank. That's normally how polite conversations begin. After all these years, I figured you'd need a little training on how to suck my cock, but if I have to teach you the most basic of courtesies, you'll be paying me back for a long time."

Her breathing is ragged. I glance at the monitor. She has one hand on the hood of the car, as if to steady herself. I can practically see the fumes spilling out of her luscious body.

"The instructions were to meet Antoine at eight o'clock in the hotel lobby. You were to either get in the car or send him away. There was no option of driving that piece of junk you call a car to my house."

"But . . ."

"No buts. I'm not interested in excuses."

"Should I cross-stitch that on a sofa cushion?"

"Whatever it takes for you to remember."

She kicks the car tire and hobbles back. *Jesus.* Gabrielle, this could be so much easier on both of us if you would just do what I ask.

"How do you know about the bank?" she demands.

"I already told you. I know everything I care to know."

"There was a time when you were a decent human being."

That was aimed right at my chest. But I deflect it before it finds the target. "I'm in a benevolent mood tonight, so I'll give you another chance. But before you begin to question my parentage in front of the security detail, I would think twice. My mood isn't that good."

Her full, pink lips part, and I swallow hard. *Fuck, she's gorgeous.* Tall and lithe, her dark mane sprinkled with wispy highlights that sparkle under the security lights.

And all that sinful hair curling around her breasts. I don't need to touch it. I know exactly how it feels sliding through my fingers, wound tight around

my hand, or tickling my stomach while her hot, silky mouth torments me.

I massage my cock through the coarse denim, trying to soothe some of the need. Trying to get it to calm the fuck down before it owns me completely.

But she wets her lips and looks directly through the monitor at me with those soulful brown eyes, rich and deep. And I almost call the whole thing off. I almost come clean. I almost beg to lick her pussy so I can taste for myself if it's as sweet as I remember.

But I don't have the luxury of indulging fantasies or placating my base drives. Fortunately, Gabrielle opens her mouth before I do anything foolish, and her words are a harsh reminder of reality.

"What exactly do you want from me? Spell it out so there's no confusion."

There is no surrender in her voice, and the part of me that doesn't require her surrender is proud. Proud of the way she refuses to cower and bend to my whims. This pride will be my undoing if I'm not careful. I will not let that happen.

"What do you want?" she demands again, in a huffy voice that might accompany a churlish foot stomp. She's sexy as hell when she's pissed off.

"I have a list, kitten. And don't worry, you'll learn quickly not to get confused. But that's for another time. First you need to show me you can follow simple instructions. Antoine will be at the hotel tomorrow at eight. Get in the car with him, or don't. But there won't be any more chances."

"So help me God, if you call me kitten again, I'll chop off your balls with a rusty axe while you sleep." She ends the call, tosses the phone to Smith, and stalks off.

Smith knows I'm watching, and that sonofabitch stares directly into the camera, not even bothering to bite back the smirk. If he wasn't my closest friend, I'd fire his ass.

## Gabrielle

I don't bother to shower after work. I'll need to wash away the slime after I meet with JD anyway.

After pulling my hair into a severe ponytail, secured by the fattest, ugliest hair tie in my drawer, I scrub off all my makeup, and throw on a pair of unflattering sweatpants, ballet flats, and a stained T-shirt I wore when gilding hotel furniture in an effort to save money.

Maybe if I make myself unappealing, he'll look elsewhere for a little side piece. Deep down, I know this thinking is childish, because it's not about sex. I don't know what's going on, but it isn't about sex. It just isn't.

I catch my reflection in the mirror. It's not a pretty sight. I can't believe I'm setting foot outside my suite looking like this. *Southern women don't leave home looking like they haven't bothered. It's not about vanity. It's just impolite.* My mother's disapproving voice booms inside my head, as though she's standing beside me. For a half-second I think about changing, but decide against it. He wants me? This is what he gets. And it's too good for him.

I select the longest coat in the closet, one certain to cover my fashion sins, and belt it tightly, so I'm not walking through my beautiful hotel looking like something the cat dragged in from the woods.

When I arrive in the lobby, Antoine is already waiting.

“Ms. Duval,” he says with a polite nod and a wide smile. I want to hug him, and for a minute he looks like he wants to hug me too. But he doesn’t. “The car’s just outside. Follow me,” he says in a much too formal, stilted voice.

Antoine grew up on Wildwood Plantation, just like me. His parents worked for the Wilders, too. He’s five years older, so we were never really friends growing up, but he was always kind to me. When I was six, he rescued me from the loft in the stable where I hid while playing hide-and-seek. I knocked the ladder over by accident when I reached the top and was too frightened to jump down. I was terrified I’d be stuck there all night, but afraid to yell for help because I had wet my pants. After he helped me down, he tied his sweatshirt around my waist so no one would see my soiled clothes. He never said a word about it.

“Here we are, Ms. Duval,” Antoine says, holding the car door for me.

*Ms. Duval.* The formality stings. “Antoine, we’ve known each other forever. Please call me Gabby.”

“Gabby was a skinny little girl in braids. You don’t look much like her.”

“I’m still me.”

“If you say so.”

“How are your parents?”

“Getting old. Happens to all of us if we’re lucky.”

“Please send them my best.”

“I will.”

I feel like there’s so much to say, so many things and people we can talk about, so many questions that I want answers to, but we ride in silence. It’s loud and uncomfortable, at least for me. “Do you like working for him?” I ask, hoping to draw him into conversation.

“Mr. Wilder?”

*Mr. Wilder?* This surprises me, and I speak without thinking. “JD has you call him Mr. Wilder?”

“Do I like working for him? Very much. I’ve always liked him.”

Antoine ignores my last question, and I don’t press. I know enough about how these types of relationships work to know that regardless of what he calls JD in private, he would always refer to him as Mr. Wilder in public. Even in front of me.

“*Hmmm.* He seems different.”

“He’s a man now. More responsibilities. Bigger problems. That’s the only

real difference I see.” He catches my eye in the rearview mirror. “I’m going to put up the partition now. Keep us both out of trouble. Especially me.”

Before Antoine left to join the Marines, we threw a big party for him. Lally, who ran the Wildwood kitchen back then, cooked for days, and my mother baked a dozen peach pies. They were his favorite.

It was the Fourth of July, and the air hung thick and salty, crackling with the promise of fireworks over Charleston. That night, Julian kissed me for the first time. It had been all day in coming.

When no one was looking, he dragged me behind the stable under a starless sky, and pinned me between his solid frame and the vast wooden structure. I was breathless while his mouth worked magic on mine. I had never been kissed before. Not like this.

The heat surged between us, smoky billows wafting and curling, until we were wrapped in a hazy fog. My fourteen-year-old heart pounded, and waves of pleasure rippled through me as he brushed loose tendrils off my face. His strong fingers slid all the way to the silky ends, skimming my newly developed breasts ever so slowly. My nipples furled and tightened for him, greedy for some attention. When his tongue slipped between my wet lips, I swayed into him.

He was hard, *there*. I had watched horses mate, so I wasn’t completely naïve, but I’d never been anywhere near a boy’s cock. I dug my fingers into his shoulders, rocking and grinding against the long, thick bulge, my young body tingling and quaking as it awakened. Time stood still while a flurry of fireworks exploded around us. They were nothing compared to what was happening inside me. It was sublime.

In the last fifteen years, I’ve seen JD on television, in newspapers, and gracing the pages of glossy magazines. And I’ve caught sight of him a handful of times from a distance. But that’s it. When I came back to Charleston, I heard he’d grown harder and meaner with age. Some said his soul was as black as his daddy’s. My parents, Lally, and Antoine don’t seem to share that view, although my parents never say too much about him.

From the outside looking in, the Wilders seem like ordinary rich folks. The kind living all over Charleston. But when you get up close, they’re nothing more than a crime family, and Wilder Holdings, a criminal enterprise. They control all of Charleston, and most of South Carolina. The darkest elements of their *business* lurk in the shadows, but the rest is out in the open. Why not? They have no shame and much of law enforcement is in



their pocket. When that doesn't prove to be enough, they have fixers, corrupt lawyers, and thugs who do the dirty work, and clean up the messes they invariably leave behind.

DW is the devil in disguise. He has no conscience, no remorse, feels no empathy. Never has. People from around here figure he wants to be president as a way to fill the company coffers. Others feel he craves the legitimacy of the office.

Half the city believes he had his first wife killed, the other half is skeptical because the children were in the car when it happened. Apparently murdering your own blood is a bridge too far, even for the likes of him. I've always thought it possible.

It's a quick trip to Sweetgrass, the Sayle family home, where JD's mother grew up. I haven't been here in ages, but from what I remember, it's a magnificent antebellum property with rich history. The family had an army of servants at their beck and call, but slaves never worked there. JD took it as his own when he returned to Charleston after business school.

Antoine lowers the partition as we pull up. The car stops briefly at the gate, and we're waved through.

"How do they know you aren't hiding someone in the trunk?"

He catches my eye in the rearview mirror. "They know." His gaze is deadly serious, and I don't doubt for a second he's telling the truth.

We drive down the quaint lane lined with live oaks rustling in the breeze, the Spanish moss draped over the sprawling branches like a scene from a gothic romance. It's stunning, lulling me into a lush, sleepy fantasy, and I almost forget why I'm here. *Almost.*

But as we approach the main house, even fanciful daydreams can no longer distract me from the purpose of tonight's dinner. I wrap my coat tighter to ward off the sudden chill.

Antoine enters the circular driveway, and I can't help but admire the gracious piazza that extends the full length of the house. Its haint blue ceiling and white wicker swing with striped cushions strewn casually across the back exude effortless charm.

The car stops directly in front of the house. My heart is heavy as I gaze at the clusters of manicured evergreens flanking the entrance. They stand tall and proud in decorative urns, welcoming guests. They're lovely, but not meant for me.

I am not a guest. And I won't pretend to be. I can have transactional

relationships, too. I'm here to do a job, like the housekeeper, or the plumber, or the man who cleans the fallen leaves from the gutters. Only my job is to *scratch any itch JD might have*, isn't that how he put it?

"Where's the kitchen entrance?" I ask when Antoine engages the emergency brake.

"Around to the side." He points toward the far end of the main entrance. I don't remember exactly where it is, and that side of the house is dark. "Would you mind dropping me there?"

"I don't think Mr. Wilder would appreciate guests arriving through the kitchen."

*I'm not a guest.* But I don't want to make trouble for him. "I'll get out here." Before Antoine can come around to open the door for me, I'm out of the car. I'm behaving like a selfish brat. I know it, but I'm jittery and can't seem to control my emotions now that I'm here.

None of this is Antoine's doing, and the greatest respect I can afford him is to allow him to do his job with dignity. I know this. I feel a small pang of regret, but I want JD to have to let me in through the servant's entrance. I want—I *need* to make the point with him.

I start down the walk toward the side of the house.

"Ms. Duval, where are you going? The front door's behind you."

"Don't worry. I'm sorry for all of this. I promise there won't be any trouble for you."

"I'm not worried about trouble for me. You've been away from here for too long." He jumps back into the driver's seat, inching the car forward, lighting my path while keeping me in his line of vision.

I ring the bell at what seems to be the kitchen entrance. After a couple of minutes, the light comes on, and JD opens the heavy wooden door and unlatches the outside screen that I'm sure Lally insists on keeping up, even in November.

He pushes the screen door open and searches over my head, past me. "Did Antoine leave you here?"

"Good evening, JD. It's so nice to see you again. Did you have a pleasant day? That's how polite conversations normally begin. I figured after all this time you'd need some training on how to lick my pussy, but I didn't think I'd have to teach you the most basic of manners. And no, Antoine insisted on leaving me at the front door. But I know my place. The help always enters through the kitchen."

One side of his mouth curls, and the smile, with all its playful light, reaches his eyes. At least I thought it did.

“Cute. I opened the back door for you tonight because it’s dark out, but next time you pull a little stunt like that, I’ll make you walk around the front to come inside. Don’t play games with me, Gabrielle. You’ll never win.”

I slip off my coat, shrugging away his assistance. He takes it from me, and hangs it on a hook in the back hall. I keep the scarf. It adds to my unkempt look and hides the bruises he can’t seem to keep his eyes off of.

“How about a drink?” he asks.

I desperately want a bourbon. Something to numb me before the onslaught of emotional pain that’s sure to come. But I should have my wits about me for this discussion. “I’ll have a glass of wine. Red if you have it.”

He looks so young and relaxed mixing drinks in the kitchen, like this isn’t some sick horror show. Something about him in a pair of faded jeans and a Gamecock T-shirt softens me, too. I’ve always thought the University of South Carolina could have chosen a more dignified mascot, but JD always loved the damn thing.

I’m fascinated as he painstakingly measures the gin and fresh lemon juice, and adds simple syrup to a cocktail shaker. By the time he finishes with a splash of a brand of French cassis—that’s not easy to find—my fascination has given way to a quiet unease.

He hands me the chilled couplet with a brandy-soaked Luxardo cherry suspended from the glass stirrer laid across the rim. It’s the signature cocktail at the Gatehouse, my hotel. And this is exactly how we serve it. I catch myself with my mouth open and press my lips together to hide my surprise.

“We’ll have wine with dinner. You look like you could use something stronger. Rough day?”

Oh, how I want to slap that smug look off his face, but I savor the icy pink liquid instead.

“How is it?” He sips his bourbon, watching me over the rim.

Delicious. Exactly the way I like it. “Not bad,” I tell him.

“Not bad, huh? You’re still a terrible liar.”

“How do you know about the Gatehouse’s signature drink? It’s something we created in-house. And we don’t share the recipe.”

“I make it my business to know everything that happens in these parts.” He nudges a small bowl of spiced nuts toward me and clinks his glass against mine. “To a long, satisfying relationship.”

My stomach roils in protest. First, he gets access to the executive suite of the hotel, and now he knows about the drink. It's as though he has a spy on the inside. Maybe Gray—no, Gray didn't have anything to do with the bar and he certainly doesn't have a set of keys to my office. Although I don't know who else would have shared that information with him. "Did Gray tell you about the drink?" I blurt it gracelessly, not bothering to smooth the sharp edges.

"How does my brother know about your drink?"

"Gray helped me with the restaurant and made some connections for me."

JD licks his bottom lip, and then scrapes his teeth over it.

He doesn't know Gray helped me.

"I thought you knew everything about the hotel?"

He shrugs. "Everything I care to know. Dinner will be ready in about twenty minutes."

I set down my drink, harder than I mean to, and the stirrer with the bloated cherry plops into the glass, splashing a few drops onto my wrist. Before I can reach for a napkin, JD grabs my arm and sucks the sticky liquid from my skin. It's audacious. But no more so than demanding I trade my body for my mother's health. He catches me by surprise, again, and it takes several seconds before I even think to pull away.

"Mmmm. Delicious," he murmurs. "Could whet any man's appetite."

I yank my glistening wrist from his clutches and rub it on my leg. The friction dries the skin but doesn't erase the memory of his mouth.

His lips.

His tongue.

Or the rasp of his teeth over the sensitive flesh. The sensations are all still there, each one bold and haunting.

I need to get out of here. *Now*.

"I'm not hungry. Let's stop dancing around, pretending like this is a pleasant evening between old friends. Let's just get it over with."

JD leans across the center island and fingers my ponytail. "Always so impatient for the climax. Didn't matter if it was a storybook or an evening in the stable. But when you get there, no matter how sweet it is, darlin', the thrill is over. Anticipation is the first leg of every satisfying journey. Learn to enjoy it."

I adjust my scarf to hide my nipples peeking through the threadbare T-shirt. The last thing I need him to know is how his words affect me. "Pearls

of wisdom aside, I'm really not hungry."

"Well, I'm starved. And you don't want to negotiate with me when I'm hungry. You'd do better to ply me full of Lally's cooking and some decent booze first."

The doorbell chimes, and there's barking outside the kitchen. JD opens the door and a yellow Lab wearing a blue and white bandanna leaps over the threshold, his silky tail wagging furiously.

JD gets down and rubs his hands over the golden fur. The dog licks his face in return. It's genuine and sweet, and it reminds me of a young JD. For several seconds, I forget I'm here to negotiate for my mother's life, and I smile, an honest smile, for the first time since I arrived. Maybe for the first time since he walked into my office.

"Thanks," he calls to someone outside. "He smells so good I might even let him into my bed." The door shuts, and I hear the lock click. "Sumter," he says, approaching me, "we have company."

The dog circles me once, then sits at my feet. I let him sniff my fingers before I run my palm along his glossy coat. He's a beauty, strong and lean, and far more civilized than his owner. When I scratch behind his ears, he lifts his snout, his lids fall shut, and he practically purrs. Sumter is a lovable ham, and I can't stop smiling. "You have a dog?"

"Don't act so surprised."

"It's just—"

"That monsters don't have pets? Even Hades kept a dog."

It's not too far off from what I was thinking, but of course I don't say that. "You must work long days. I didn't think you'd have time for a dog."

"I make time for the things that are important."

"*Sumter.*" My heart clenches tightly. "That was the name of Zack's stuffed bunny. The one he dragged everywhere by the ears."

JD chews on the corner of his bottom lip. "Lots of things around here named Sumter."

I stare right at him. Hold those brilliant blue eyes in a tight lock until I can practically see into his soul. The intensity would unnerve most people, but he doesn't look away. And he won't. Not before I do. It'll make him appear too weak. But he shifts his weight from one foot to the other. It's a subtle move, but for JD, it's the equivalent of squirming.

"I'm surprised you remembered."

A whole host of feelings grabs hold of me, and without any warning, the

past, with everything we shared, seems far more important than why I'm here tonight. I reach for him, in spite of myself. In spite of the terrible circumstances he's created for us. My hand and his arm. A magnetic pull, orchestrated from somewhere beyond my control. "Of course I remember. I loved Zack."

For several seconds, he looks young and lost. Not so different than he looked the morning they buried his mother and Sera. It's a side of JD he rarely lets anyone see, and for a few seconds I struggle with the overwhelming emotion.

"Your brothers are always uncomfortable when I ask about Zack. Even Chase doesn't really like to talk about him. Do you still visit him? How is he?"

JD nods. "The same. He'll always be the same, until the day he takes his last breath." He looks down at where my hand rests on his skin. "I'll be right back. Sumter, let's go, buddy."

The whiff of humanity lingers in the kitchen after he leaves, competing with the delicious smells from the oven. And right now, I'm the one who's lost.

*Something is going on here. There's more to this than he's telling me. He hasn't really changed. I see too many glimpses of the past in him. I look out the kitchen window onto the sprawling yard. The moon shines through the trees, creating lacy shadows on the cold ground. Or maybe I just want to see the flashes of good. Maybe I need to believe I wasn't a foolish teenager who fell in love with a boy who only wanted her for dirty sex. Maybe I need to believe that the tiny, tiny place in my heart, wedged into a far distant corner, the one that will always belong to him, isn't simply wasted space.*

*Gabrielle, you're a grown woman. No more excuses. No more fairy tales. You can't rewrite those chapters of your life.*

The timer goes off just as JD returns. The vulnerability is gone, replaced with that cocky swagger he hides behind. He grabs a pair of quilted mitts from a hook above the stove and pulls a casserole from the oven.

"Whoa. This sucker is hot."

Clouds of steam rise from the baking dish, and I hear the cracklings sizzle and pop. I crane my neck to get a better look. It's Lally's special red rice, with sausage, chicken, bits of ham, and shrimp.

"Why don't you have a seat. I usually eat there." He points to a table tucked between a large bay window and a cavernous stone fireplace with a

potbelly stove tucked inside. The warmth from the fireplace soothes my frazzled nerves.

“I think it’s more comfortable in here,” he says, “but we can eat in the dining room, if you prefer.”

*Comfortable.*

Everything this isn’t. Everything it will never be.

“This is fine.” I place my glass on the table and cling to the back of a padded chair. I recognize the handwork on the fabric. Neat, precise stitches in a multitude of colors. My fingers graze the raised pattern. I feel his eyes on me while I examine the cross-stitch.

“They were a housewarming gift from your mother.”

“*Mmhm,*” is all I can muster. *A gift from your mother—the same mother I’m using to blackmail you.*

The scent of humanity has evaporated. All traces gone, as though it never existed. There really are no words to describe how surreal this whole scene feels. How depraved he is. It’s as though I’m wading through a swamp in the black of night, unsure when the monstrous creature will emerge to drag me into the murky water. I only know it will happen.

He sets a plate in front of me. Rice, okra, and a generous wedge of cornbread. Growing up, it was my favorite meal. I requested it for my birthday every year. *Oh, God!* My face burns with shame. “You—you told Lally I’d be here.”

He shakes his head. “No. She’s always nagging me about what to prepare for dinner. I asked her to make it for last night.” He shrugs. “It’s better the second day, anyway.”

Lally cooked at Wildwood for all of us. She’s ten years older than me, and has always been like a big sister or a young aunt who I went to for advice and trusted to keep my secrets. She can’t know anything about my arrangement with JD. *If* there is an arrangement. I would die if she knew.

It’s all delicious, but I can’t swallow more than a couple forkfuls. Even after the drink, my insides are shaking. My grandmother always told me if you don’t lie, you’ll never have to worry about keeping your story straight, and if you don’t do shameful things, you’ll never be ashamed. *Easier said than done.*

I can feel his eyes on me as I push the rice around the plate.

“You should eat. Lally would be so disappointed to know you just picked at her food.”

“What would disappoint Lally is you treating me like a toy. Like I’m less than a person. Like I’m as disposable as a paper napkin. She’d beat your ass with a broom if she knew.”

“That she would.” He breaks off a piece of my untouched cornbread and pops it into his mouth. “Tell me about the Gatehouse.”

If you don’t like the subject, just change it to something you do want to talk about. *Right, JD?* “I thought you knew everything you cared to know.”

“I want to hear it from you. The kinds of things you worry about, and things about the hotel you love. When you own a business, there’s always something to worry about, but the worries should always be outweighed by the things that bring you satisfaction. The stuff that makes you happy.” He shrugs. “Otherwise you should find something else to do.”

“Why do you want to know? So you can have something else to hold over me?”

He pushes his empty plate away. “It doesn’t have to be like this, Gabrielle.”

JD watches while I stare into my dish, seeing nothing. I feel the sear on my skin for long, excruciating minutes, while I try to figure out a way around this lunacy. My mind races in circles, until I’m ready to scream.

“Do you want some coffee?” he asks quietly.

“No. No more. I want to know where my mother is. And Dean. His sister called me late last night. His phone is off, and they haven’t heard from him in over a week. They’re worried something terrible has happened to him. Did it? Is he still alive?”

JD taps a finger on the edge of his plate, hard enough to make the fork rattle. “Your former fiancé has relocated to a warmer climate. Last I heard, he was alive and well. I’ll pass the message along and make sure he gets word to his family.”

My head is pounding. “You bought him off?”

“It sounds so unsavory when you put it like that. But yes, in a manner of speaking, I suppose I did.”

I couldn’t care less where Dean is, as long as he’s alive, but the idea that JD would barge into my life and buy off my fiancé because it suits his plan—and that Dean would take the money and disappear—it’s infuriating. All of it.

I glance at JD. He was livid about my bruises. *Livid*. There’s no way he rewarded Dean with a wad of cash. I don’t believe it. “Where is he?”

“Are you sorry he’s out of your life?”



“Did you kill him?”

JD digs his fingers into the tabletop, and the long, sinewy muscles in his forearms contract. “I am not a killer. At least not yet. But if you keep talking about him, that might change. Because every time I hear his name from the woman with bruises on her throat, bruises he put there, I want to find the sonofabitch and murder him with my bare hands. Not one more word about him,” he snarls.

*This might be over for now, because you’re not going to tell me anything more tonight, but we will revisit this conversation, JD.* “My parents? I want to speak to them.”

“You can call them when we’re finished.”

Fine. I’m anxious to speak to them, but this will give me a chance to iron out the details before I talk to them. It will be good to have some sense of exactly what I’m dealing with here. Is this a one-time thing? Weekly? Nightly? I need to know before I make any decisions. “What exactly does this—arrangement—you’re proposing entail?”

“I won’t delve into every salacious detail, because I know you’re fully aware of what it entails.”

Not an answer. “What do you expect from me?”

“You don’t really want me to spell it out.”

“But I do. Spell it out, JD. Tell me exactly how you plan on degrading me, as though I’m not human. Go ahead,” I challenge. “I’m sure it’ll bring you lots of *pleasure*.”

“Gabrielle, you test my patience too often. One day you’ll get more than you bargained for.”

He’s fiddling with his knife. He can’t meet my eyes. He doesn’t want to say it. Something about it makes him uncomfortable. Somewhere inside he knows it’s wrong. I’m a bit relieved, but I won’t let him off the hook. I want him to squirm with discomfort. I want his stomach to churn until he tastes the bitter bile in his throat. I want whatever spark of conscience is left to keep him awake at night. If he wants to do this to me, he’s going to pay. “Spell. It. Out. Unless you’re too ashamed to say the words out loud.”

His eyes are black when he drags my chair to him, pinning my legs between his until I can’t move. His right thumb finds my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes. “It takes a lot to shame me. But we’re about to find out where you draw the line.”

I jerk my chin from his hold. In return, he squeezes his thighs around

mine, holding them in a vise-like grip, the exquisite pressure forcing a bloom between my legs.

“You’ll get on your knees and put my cock in your sassy mouth any time I tell you to. After I come, you’ll lick every drop off your lips, and you’ll enjoy it. Just like you enjoyed it before. Like you enjoyed every filthy thing I did to you. Are you ashamed yet, Gabrielle?” He lowers his head and the heat from his mouth grazes my temple. “I don’t think you are.”

My heart is racing. I can’t control it.

“Remember all those times I buried my face in your sweet pussy while you writhed under me? How you begged me to sink my cock into you? How you screamed and clawed before you trembled? It’ll be just like that. Only *nothing* is off-limits this time. You were a dirty, greedy girl who begged shamelessly for release. I bet that hasn’t changed.” He runs a finger over my bare arm, and I shiver. “You loved it then, all of it, and you’ll love it even more now.”

I maneuver back and swing my arm to slap his face. But he catches it before I make contact. “I hate you.”

“You don’t hate me. You hate that you want to be under me again. If I stick my fingers in your pussy, it’ll tell the real story.” He lowers his head again and murmurs near my ear. “Want me to do that? Slide a finger or two inside you? It’ll feel so good. Remember how much you liked it? This is just too much for you to process right now. You don’t know how you feel. I can help you figure it out. Let me.”

I’m aroused. Disgracefully aroused by his husky voice, his filthy words, and the memories of him pleasuring me. My core is throbbing. And I don’t need him to check if I’m wet. I’m drenched.

He’s right. I don’t hate him. I’m filled with unresolved anger, resentment, and hurt. And I’m confused. So confused. But if he stroked my breast, or brushed his fingers over the slick flesh between my thighs, I would press my pussy into his hand. No, I don’t hate him. I hate myself for being so weak.

I draw a breath through my nose and let it fill my chest. It does little to calm me. “I want to speak to my mother.”

He takes out his phone and scribbles down a number. “Call her.”

And I do.

“Mama? How are you?” Her voice is strong and familiar, and I want to crawl into her arms like a little girl. I want her to rub my back and tell me this is all a misunderstanding. That she’s not really sick. That my father didn’t

borrow a cent from JD. After indulging my inner child for the briefest of moments, I pull up my big girl panties and ask hard questions, befitting the adult I am, not the little girl I long to be.

“It’s so good to hear your voice. I’ve been trying to reach you.”

“They say the reception isn’t good in the hospital. Before we hang up, I’ll give you the direct line to my room. JD explained to your father that he told you about Houston. I’m sorry we lied to you, but I couldn’t bear to see your face if the news was bad. I just couldn’t put you through it again.”

“JD didn’t tell me much. I don’t care about the lie.” *Not right now.* “Just tell me what’s going on with you.”

“The doctors here are hopeful. Very hopeful. Not like in Charleston. This is promising.” Her voice is thick with emotion. “They have a treatment—gene therapy—it’s experimental, but they’ve used it for several years, and have had great luck with it.”

“Is it safe?”

“Yes. But there can be some side effects. And because not many other places have had experience with it, I’ll need to stay in Houston, near the hospital, so they can keep an eye on me. But I won’t need to be in the hospital the whole time.” Her speech is wobbly. She’s on the verge of tears. “Once they’re satisfied I’m tolerating the treatment, I can go back to Charleston. I could be here six months, but it’s something I think we need to do.”

“Of course you need to do it!” It’s a gut reaction, but even if I thought long and hard about it, even if I considered how I’d be paying for the treatment, I wouldn’t have said anything different. The truth is, I would prostitute myself in the darkest corners of hell if it would save my mother’s life. “Six months will go by so fast, and I’ll visit as often as I can. Do you need anything? Anything I can bring with me when I come to visit?”

“We have everything we need. More than everything. I’ve been here, but your father is staying in a hotel. We’re more than fine, honey. What about you? How’s my baby?”

“Now that I’ve been able to talk to you, I’m fine.”

“Gabrielle, I’m a great candidate for this treatment. But I’m counting on you to be strong. It might not all be smooth sailing, but I feel like—like I have a real chance. Like I might be around long enough to spoil grandbabies.” She’s crying now, and so am I. I can barely understand what she’s saying through the tears. “Your father wants to say hello,” she snivels,

handing off the phone.

“Sweet pea, we miss you.”

“Hello, Daddy.”

“Don’t cry,” he says, choked with emotion. “Your mother—we—we have a real opportunity here. I feel so blessed—I’m nothing without your mother,” he sobs.

Apart from when my grandmother died, I’ve never seen my father shed a single tear, and I can’t stop my own deluge of tears.

I’m so consumed with my parents, I forget JD is in the room, witnessing the intimate moments with them, until he places a tissue box within my reach, smoothing my hair before he walks away.

“The doctor’s just come in to see your mother,” my father says. “Let’s talk later.”

After giving me a few minutes to compose myself, JD sits beside me. He says nothing. But it’s a different kind of silence. A quiet silence. Like he’s not looking for the upper hand. Probably because he knows he already has it.

I need to do this. My mother’s life depends on it. It’s really that simple. Only it’s not.

Yes, I’ve already had sex with him. Filthy sex, even. And it’s not as though I didn’t like it. I loved it.

But I had a choice then. He never forced me into anything I didn’t want to do. It wasn’t a business arrangement. I loved him. And I was sure he loved me.

But this—this lacks human decency in a way that our dirtiest sex never did. And what scares me the most isn’t that I’ll hate every second of his touch, but that I’ll enjoy it. Begin to crave it, like I craved it before. The signs are all pointing to the fact that no matter how much I lash out at him, no matter how much I want to hate him, my body—and my heart—remember. They miss him.

I might let him back in my bed. But I can never let him back into my heart. He can live in that tiny corner, but he’s never taking over the whole thing, again. *Never*. And I might be his whore, but I’m not giving up everything I worked for, everything I’ve become. I won’t.

I sniff a couple of times. It’s loud and unladylike. “You win. I’ll agree to your sick little arrangement.” I reach for a tissue and blow my nose, balling the used paper in my hands. “But you will not mark me. You will not collar me. I will not do anything that involves other people or animals. I need to

work—I have an important Christmas event that I’m planning. It will require a lot of my time. The future of the hotel hinges on it.”

He nods. “What else are you worried about?”

“You need to make it easy for me to travel to see my mother. And I don’t want the staff here to know anything about what we’re doing.” I couldn’t bear if Lally or Antoine, or any of the others, knew I was whoring myself, even for my mother. “Those are my rules.”

“You’re allowed concerns, but you don’t make the rules, Gabrielle. You follow them. When you do, you’ll be rewarded.” He squeezes my hand, his thumb pressing firmly into the sweaty palm. “When you disobey, you’ll be punished. It’s that simple.”

I chew on my bottom lip until it stings. There’s nothing simple about this. Not a single thing.

“Of course you’ll work,” he says, as though I’m crazy to think otherwise. “I work too. The hotel is important to you. Owning a beautiful hotel downtown has been your dream forever. I remember when you outgrew the dollhouse your father built, you used scraps of velvet and brocade to turn it into a glamorous hotel. You and Georgina—and Sera—made a huge mess on the driveway with gold spray paint.”

JD tucks some strands of loose hair behind my ear. It’s almost as though he’s forgotten why we’re here. As though he’s let himself get lost in the past, and for a few seconds he pulls me back with him. His words are like a balm. I feel myself softening, growing malleable.

But just as the confusion begins to abate, he speaks and I’m left brittle, searching for answers again. “I’m not interested in destroying your dreams or hurting you.” He pauses, as if to let the words sink in.

*Not interested in hurting me? Then what the hell does he think he’s doing?*

“I’m not looking for another pet, or to share you with anyone or anything else, and despite what you believe, I’m not like your ex-fiancé. I won’t leave those kinds of marks on your skin. But if you disobey me, if you push me too far, I’ll redden your ass until sitting down is next to impossible, and then I’ll fuck you until you scream.” The words are threatening, but his voice is smooth, like freshly whipped cream that melts into a sweet, milky puddle on a warm tongue. “But that’s more about pleasure than pain,” he murmurs. “There are far better ways to punish you than to beat you.”

I swallow hard. My skin is overheated, my cunt pulsing with need. My

breasts are heavy and swollen, slip-ripe peaches wrapped in intricate lace, the silken threads deliciously coarse against the smooth, taut flesh.

“Do we have a deal?” I don’t answer right away, so he prods. “Do we?”

Yes. No. I don’t know. “For how long?”

“Until I’m done.”

“I need an end date. Something I can focus on when it gets to be too awful.”

“If you don’t fight it, it won’t be awful. Not even close.”

No, it won’t be awful. I want it to be awful, so I can hate him, but I know it won’t be. “I need an end date.”

“Can’t give you one. Unless you want me to lie.”

“When does—*it* begin?” I need something. Even a small crumb will suffice. Anything, to help me have some control over my circumstances.

“It begins when I’m ready.” He pulls my chair closer, until his legs are brushing mine. “Listen carefully. Above all else, I want you to remember what I’m about to tell you. Tattoo it on your skin, or cross-stitch it on a sofa cushion, do whatever you need to do so you won’t forget. You answer to me. *Only* to me. You obey me over everyone else. Regardless of who it is. Regardless of what kind of power they claim to have over you. Do you understand?”

“No! No, I don’t understand, Julian.”

He freezes at his name. *Julian and Elle*. No one but me called him Julian, and no one but Julian called me Elle. That’s who we were. Who we had been so long ago. Before betrayal, manipulation, and lies. Before he threw me out like yesterday’s trash. Before he insisted on absolute control over me. That’s who we were.

“Do you understand what I just told you? No one but me. *Only* me.”

“I don’t see that there’s another choice.”

He nods. An arrogant nod that’s the privilege of men with power.

*Call it an arrangement. Call it whatever you want, but this is rape, Gabrielle. It doesn’t matter how much you miss him, or how your body responds—he’s forcing you into sex. And it doesn’t matter whether you end up loving it. That’s completely irrelevant.*

I lift my chin and go straight for the jugular.

“I wonder if the man who raped my grandmother told her it wouldn’t be awful. If every time he shoved his cock into her, he told himself she loved it. That she should be honored to have it. How do you think she felt when she

carried my mama, knowing it was a rapist's baby? Do you think she thought to herself, *It wasn't that awful?* What do you think, JD?" I shove his arm, but he doesn't flinch.

My skin isn't dark like hers, and my hair doesn't curl like hers did, because my granddaddy, the *rapist*, and my daddy are white.

"I don't work for you, but will you think about me like that while you fuck me? Will you tell yourself that I love it? Tell yourself that no matter how light my skin is, I'm nothing more than the ancestor of slaves, and I should be honored to have your pure white cock inside me? Is that how you'll ease your conscience?"

He's motionless. Cold and stony like the statue of John Calhoun in Marion Square. His face reveals nothing. No sign that I pricked his conscience. But I am not done. "Do you remember how you reacted when I told you my grandmother's story? When I told you she said it wasn't really rape, because she never said no. Do you remember what you said? *'If he was still alive, I'd make him pay for it, Gabrielle. For every time he hurt her, he'd pay twice.'* That was what you said back then. You knew it was wrong when you were sixteen. But for some reason, now it's your God-given right to behave like an animal." I take a minute to catch my breath.

"Antoine will take you home." His voice is controlled, but I hear the rage knocking at the surface. He starts to leave the kitchen, but turns before he reaches the doorway, and comes back. Inches from my face, he pulls out the dreadful tie securing my ponytail, and my hair falls down my back.

"You can pull back your hair and scrub your face clean all you want. Did you think you made yourself unattractive to me? Is that what you think? Because all you did was remind me of the fifteen-year-old who cried out under me as I stole her innocence."

I bite down on my bottom lip, remembering the boy who treated me like a porcelain doll that night. Gentle, loving, and careful. It was his seventeenth birthday, and my virginity, wrapped in white lace panties adorned with a petite satin bow, was my gift to him. "You did not steal it. I gave it to you willingly."

He lifts my face, forcing me to look into his frosty eyes. "Just like you'll give me everything now. Willingly."

I'm not ready to surrender. I still have some fight left. "You might take my body, but you get nothing else. My soul will hover above it and watch while you violate me like the demon you are."

“Not a chance, darlin’. You’ll be fully present for all of it. Mark my words. And Gabrielle, by the time I’m done, I’ll own your body and your soul.”

And just like that, he turns and walks out, leaving me standing in the middle of the kitchen, angry, and—dammit—aroused. My head is spinning with a whirlwind of emotion that only JD can stir up in me. I clutch the counter, gasping for breath until Antoine appears to take me home.



**Gabrielle**

I'm at my desk trying to wade through paperwork while it's quiet, but I might as well have stayed in bed. The memory of last night keeps intruding, making it impossible to get anything done.

I was all over the place last night. One minute, I wanted him, wanted everything about him, and the next, I hated him. Hated the position he's put me in. Truth be told, I've been all over the place since he sauntered into the hotel on election night. Hell, I've been all over the place since I saw him with the other girl in the stable. My mind and body warring. My mind and heart warring. Yes, dammit, my heart. It's the biggest traitor of all.

JD was all over the place, too. One minute, he was sweet and considerate, serving me my favorite meal, and the next, threatening to steal my soul. It's almost as if he's as confused as I am. As if he's conflicted in a way I don't really understand.

*That's ridiculous. He engineered it—all of it. He is neither confused nor conflicted. He's playing a game. Do not forget that.*

My private line rings, pulling me from the agony of the unknown. An outside call before seven thirty in the morning. *It can't be good.* "Hello?"

"Ms. Duval?"

"Yes."

"This is Patrick, JD Wilder's personal assistant. I hope it's not too early

to call.” When I don’t respond, he keeps right on talking. “Mr. Wilder asked me to assist you with visiting your mother.”

“My mother? Has something happened?”

“As far as I know, everything’s fine. I didn’t mean to alarm you. Mr. Wilder thought you’d like to spend some time with your parents this weekend.”

I push out the breath that’s stuck in my chest, but my hands are still shaking. “Yes, of course. I guess I didn’t expect anyone to be calling so early.”

“We get started awfully early around here. Especially Mr. Wilder.” He chuckles, as though it’s some sort of a private joke. “Normally his plane would be at your disposal, but things are a bit more complicated since the election. We’ll get it straightened out, but in the meantime, he didn’t want your visit to wait. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

I wonder if Patrick knows about our *arrangement*? Could JD be so careless he’d tell people? Could he have so little regard for my reputation? I don’t know. I don’t seem to know anything anymore.

“How did you get this number? Only a few people have it, and I’m quite sure I didn’t give it to JD.”

“I’m sorry. Is there a different number I should use to reach you?”

*Nice dodge, Patrick. I hope JD pays you well.* “No. This is fine. But I would like to know how you got the number.”

“Mr. Wilder gave it to me, but I don’t know how he came to have it.”

*His tentacles are wedged into everything Gabrielle Duval. That’s how he came to have it, Patrick.* It’s unnerving, and I’m furious that JD’s defiled the one place I always felt safe. The little sanctuary I built for myself, that until four days ago didn’t have a single memory attached to him. He’s shattered all of it. And I’m still struggling to figure out why.

“I took the liberty of reserving a ticket for you. I’ll email the itinerary, and if it works with your schedule, I’ll purchase the ticket. Antoine will take you to the airport, and a car will be waiting when you arrive in Houston. The driver will take you directly to the hospital. Your parents are staying in a two-bedroom suite at Celene. There’s plenty of room, but I’m happy to book you separate accommodations, if you prefer.”

“My parents are at Celene?” *Jesus.* “No. I’ll stay with them, thank you.”

“The hotel is not as elegant as the Gatehouse, but it’s quite comfortable.”

I did demand that JD make visiting my parents easy. But even so, I want

to tell Patrick that JD can shove the over-the-top luxury hotel and the private plane where the sun doesn't shine. But I don't. I'm relieved and grateful my mother is getting state-of-the-art care, and that my father has everything he needs.

I guess I'm surprised. I assumed he'd want me to spread my legs before letting me see her. *Assumed or hoped, Gabrielle?* I try to bury the thought, but it's alive and screeching, pecking at my conscience mercilessly with a strong, pointed beak.

"Thank you for making the arrangements."

"My pleasure, Ms. Duval. My contact information will be in the email. Let me know if there's anything I can do to assist you with the trip."

I say goodbye, still shaken that JD has somehow wrangled my private number. It's a small thing, but it's emblematic of what's to come. If this were a play, we'd call it foreshadowing. But this isn't make-believe. This is my life. There will be nothing, no part of my existence that won't be open to him. He as much as said so.

But I will fight to keep some modicum of control, some small part of myself that is untouched by him. Sure, I'll probably lose, but I will not go down quietly.

Georgie pokes her head into my office. "Good morning."

"Morning. You're here early."

"I'm having a sonogram this afternoon and I don't know how long it'll take. They're never on time at that office. I thought I'd get here early to get some things done before my appointment."

"Take as much time as you need this afternoon, Georgie. You work hard, and Lord knows I can't pay you what you're worth. But a few hours, here and there, is the one thing I can afford. Is Wade going with you?"

Georgie nods. "I don't know how I'd ever keep him away. Wade's like a little boy let loose in a candy store with a pocketful of change. He can't wait for this baby to be born."

"What about you? You seem a little anxious today. Are you okay?"

"I'm excited. I really am, but some days the nerves get the best of me. The doctors aren't really worried about post-partum preeclampsia. So far, there's not even a hint it might be a problem, but it killed my mother and my aunt. Some days, I just can't get it out of my head."

"Things are different now than they were when you were born. Maternal healthcare is so much better. It's all going to be fine, Georgie. I'll be there

with Wade, and we'll be watching out for you every step of the way. We won't let anything happen to you or the baby."

"I know I'm being silly. It's just this feeling I can't seem to shake."

I get up and go to her, cocooning her in my arms. My mother is so much better at this, but I try to make my friend feel safe. Sometimes I worry about Georgie giving birth, too. But I try not to go there. The thought of anything happening to her is too much to bear. "It's going to be okay, darlin'. You're going to cry at her wedding. And I'll be right beside you, bawling too. I know it's a girl, and we're gonna have so much fun spoiling her rotten."

"Damn hormones." She snuffles. "They're the cause of all that's evil in the world."

I hate to see her like this. Georgie puts on a brave face better than anyone I've ever met. Her mother died two days after giving birth, and she was an only child, raised by a drunk.

She slowly pulls out of my embrace. "I should get to work."

"Sit with me for a minute. I have a favor to ask."

She lowers herself onto the edge of the chair. "You never ask for favors. Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine. I'm sorry to put this on you at the last minute, but any chance you'll be around this weekend?"

Her features relax, and she wiggles back in the seat. "Wade and I don't have any special plans. We're just cleaning out the spare room to get it ready for the baby. Do you need me to work?"

"If you wouldn't mind popping in for an hour or so on Saturday, and then again on Sunday, I'd be grateful. You can take Monday off."

"Happy to. Please tell me you're getting out of town, and maybe having a little fun for a change."

"I'll be in Houston, visiting my parents. I want to talk to the doctors and see for myself what's going on there."

Georgie nods, but the sour look on her face is unmistakable. I wait for her to bring up JD, but she doesn't mention him. "Hardly fun. And here I thought maybe you were sneaking away with a hot guy and putting that miserable bastard Dean behind you."

"I'm done with hot guys. They've been nothing but trouble for me. The next guy I date will be middle-aged and balding, with a slight paunch and a double chin."

Georgie chuckles. "If you don't mind pickled onions, I hear Jacob Lott is

looking for a bride.”

I stick my tongue out at her. “Thanks.”

“Do you want me to purchase the plane ticket or make hotel reservations for you?”

I shake my head. “JD’s assistant made all the travel arrangements for me.”

She nods and gets up, shoulders slumped. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Gabby.”

## Gabrielle

On Saturday morning, I pause in the doorway of my mother's hospital room, and smile wistfully. Mama's asleep, her hair wrapped in a cream satin scarf, and my father's dozing in a recliner near the bed. They both look so peaceful, I almost hate to disturb them.

It's a spacious, private room with a bouquet of fresh flowers on the windowsill. It looks more like a room in an upscale hotel than in a hospital. Bright and fresh, immaculate, without the sterile decor and antiseptic smells I associate with hospitals.

My father opens his eyes and blinks a few times when I walk in. He seems a bit disoriented, and frailer than I remember. My mother's illness has taken a toll. I remember when my grandmother was dying—spending days upon days in a hospital, even when you're not the patient, exacts its own toll.

I go over to him and press a kiss to his cheek. He pulls me against his chest. His heartbeat is steady and strong. And familiar.

"Let's step outside," he whispers, patting my arm. "She needs to sleep so she'll be ready for Monday."

In the hall, my father slings an arm around my shoulder and pulls me into his side. "I'm so glad you're here, sweet pea. Dean with you?"

It was inevitable they would want to know about Dean, but with everything going on in the last few days, I hadn't given much thought to what

I would say when they asked. I shake my head. “I gave him back his ring.”

He pulls away from me. “Did he hurt you?”

I hate lying to my father, but the truth would serve no purpose but to upset him. “The relationship wasn’t right. Not for a marriage. I’m just glad I realized it in time.”

My father studies me for a few seconds before pulling me back under his arm. “You’re young. You’ll find your soul mate.”

“I wish you or Mama had told me you were coming to Houston. I would have made the trip with you.”

He shakes his head. “Your mother and I talked about it at length. As much as we miss you when you’re not around, I can hold down the fort here while your mother’s having treatment. You need to stay in Charleston and take care of the hotel, sweet pea. That’s your future. We’ll be back before you know it.”

“It’s just—”

“Just what?”

“Mama cooks a special diet for you, and makes sure you take your blood pressure medicine, and that your shirts are pressed just the way you like them.”

“I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I’m not helpless. I can take care of your mama too.”

He sounds a bit wounded, and I try to smooth things over. “I know you can. I can’t help but worry. It’s in my genes.”

He chuckles. “Don’t worry about me. Have you eaten?”

I nod.

“Daddy, I know we talked about it on the phone, but can you explain to me again how this all happened? How JD got involved? I’m still a little confused.”

“Me too. It all happened so fast. JD called us after he heard your mama was sick. Said he wanted to help, asked some questions, and told us he’d get back in touch in a day or two. He came by to see us the very next day, and we were on a plane to Houston the day after that. He made everything easy for us.”

I can’t even begin to reconcile the man my father’s talking about with the one who showed up in my office, wanting to use me for sex. This JD, the one helping my mother, this is the one I knew. Except back then, he would have never demanded sex in payment for his kindness.

“Your mother—she’s going to beat this.” He’s crying softly. “I know you don’t have much use for JD, but our faith was faltering, and he brought us hope. A miracle maybe.”

I can’t stand to see him cry. I squeeze his hand. It’s smaller than I remember, and my heart clenches. “It doesn’t matter what I think. I’m so grateful JD got involved.”

And while I’m standing there with my father, I mean every single word. I am grateful he got involved. *Even if the terms are exorbitant.*

I ask a few questions, before it hits me—something he said earlier. My parents didn’t go to him. He went to them. “How did JD find out Mama was sick?”

“Lally told him.”

Lally. Of course. She knew about the bruises, too. Georgina and Lally were the only ones who knew about what happened. I bet she told JD all about Dean. The little traitor. She and I are going to have a little heart-to-heart when I get back to Charleston.

My father hates when I ask about finances. In part, it’s a source of pride with him, but more than that, he isn’t very literate and only knows what my mother tells him. But we need to talk about it. “Is there enough money to pay for the treatment? And for living expenses? I heard you’re staying at a pretty swanky place.”

“I don’t understand too much of it. Your mother—she’s always taken care of the finances.”

I detect a bit of a bruised ego.

“And you’ve always taken good care of Mama and me.”

He kisses the top of my head. “JD didn’t want to add to your mother’s burden, so he made the arrangements for us. And his assistant Patrick took care of a lot of it too. Nice boy, Patrick. The money comes out of some kind of healthcare trust that even your mother doesn’t fully understand, and the hotel bill goes straight to him. We were embarrassed he put us in such a fancy place. Have you seen it?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. But I’m staying there with you tonight.”

“I got to hand it to him. JD calls every day to make sure we don’t need anything. He’s a busy man. But even when he was a kid, he could do a dozen things all at the same time. Always been sharp, that one.”

*A busy man, indeed.* “Is there a plan for paying him back?” I hold my breath, hoping for—I don’t really know what I’m hoping for. Answers. Just



some answers.

My father shrugs and shakes his head. “When he called to tell us he found a specialist, your mother asked how much it was all going to cost. He told her she wasn’t to worry about the money. Said he has more money than he’ll ever need, and no one to leave it to. And he’s never forgotten how good she was to him and his brothers after their mother died. Said they wouldn’t have made it without her. He told your mama he was humbled by the opportunity to pay back a small portion of her kindness and generosity.”

My head is spinning. I don’t understand any of this, and I’m at a loss for words. He goes out of his way to take care of my parents, then he comes to me for payment. Either he is the most conniving person to walk the earth, or it makes no sense.

“Daddy, would it be okay if I speak with the case manager to find out more information about the finances? I don’t want to run out of money at any point during the treatment.”

“I would appreciate that, sweet pea. It would be one less thing to worry about. Your mother signed a bunch of papers. You can talk to anyone you want. The doctors, nurses. Anybody. Then maybe you can explain it to me. I’d like to understand it.”

Mrs. Dupres is the case manager, but she’s off for a few days. I finally hunt down the person covering for her, Ms. Sanders, and she agrees to meet with me in her office. It takes me more than an hour, and a good deal of persistence, to pin down the moving pieces. No wonder my father can’t figure any of it out.

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice. Before I go back to Charleston, I want to know how the hospital bills are being paid. And if there’s an outstanding balance on my mother’s account.”

She nods. “I understand. It’s hard to be so far away when a parent is hospitalized.” Ms. Sanders scrolls through her computer screen. “Okay, let’s see what we have here. It appears your mother’s care is being paid through a healthcare trust.”

My father got that part right. “Is there enough money to cover the entire cost of the treatment?”

“There’s nearly three million dollars in the trust.”

*Oh my God.* “Three million dollars?” I squeak. That can’t possibly be right. JD said the treatment could cost up to five hundred thousand dollars. “There must be some mistake.”

“I don’t think so. The lawyers set it up. It’s pretty routine. But I’m not the case manager assigned to your mother, so let me take another peek to make sure I didn’t make a mistake.” She continues to scroll. “No. There’s no mistake. The money is to be used for healthcare and living expenses. The definition is loose. If something happens to Vivien Duval, William Duval is the beneficiary. If there is money left in the trust once they’re both deceased, Gabrielle Duval is the beneficiary of the trust. It’s an irrevocable trust. A couple of pages, and the language is pretty basic.”

Three million dollars? Maybe she has my mother confused with another patient. “Did Julian Wilder fund the trust?”

“I’m not at liberty to share information about the trustee. I’ve probably already said more than I should. You can call the legal department on Monday for more information. They’ll be able to answer your questions about the trust.”

An irrevocable trust. The hotel had been deeded to the city as part of a revocable trust, which is why they were able to dissolve the trust easily and sell the building without any issues. My lawyer had said if the trust had been irrevocable, it would have been next to impossible. “Just one more question, please. You said it’s an irrevocable trust. Does that mean the trustee can’t change his mind?”

“I’m not a lawyer, but I’m quite sure that’s what it means. The hospital lawyers look closely at these trusts. This is a very costly course of treatment, and it behooves no one to run out of money midway through. That’s just not how we do things here.”

“Why so much money?” It’s a rhetorical question and I don’t expect an answer. Not from her, anyway.

She shrugs. “For this type of treatment, we would normally require that a patient could demonstrate that they had a minimum of fifty thousand dollars at their disposal. He certainly was very generous.”

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MY MOTHER’S awake when I get to her room, and she persuades my father to take a walk so we can have some time alone. I sit by the bed and hold her hand. It’s warm and has plenty of fight in it. When I think about the future the doctors in Charleston described—my father is right, if this treatment

works, it will be nothing short of a miracle. We've been blessed.

"Now that he's gone, I want to know how you really feel."

My mother chuckles. "He's worse than a mother hen sometimes. I'm fine. Just tired. Being in bed makes me feel old and tired. I need to keep moving. What about you? You okay?"

"I'm just fine, now that I'm here with you."

"Your father told me about Dean. Tell me what you didn't tell him."

I want to share everything with her but then I remember I'm an adult, and she's very ill. I'll tell her one day, but not now. It would upset her too much to know Dean had been abusive. "He wasn't the man I wanted to spend my life with. Deep down, I always knew it, but I'd given up on finding the perfect man. I'm not getting any younger, and I really want a family." I smooth the bedsheet. "And I don't want to end up alone. But in the end, all that wasn't enough."

"Oh, Gabrielle." She squeezes my hand. "You're too young to settle. There's plenty of time for babies in your future. I'll be honest. I never thought he was good enough for *my* baby."

"You'd say that about anybody. What's this?" I ask, holding up an opaque glass spray bottle from the bedside stand. "Pretty bottle. Looks almost like sea glass."

"It's a mixture of rosewater and rose oil to mist my hair with before I put on my scarf, so the air conditioning doesn't dry it out."

I take the cap off and spray a little on my wrist. "Smells amazing." I bet it would be great for dry skin too. I rub the oil into my arm and sniff. "Where did you find it?"

"It was in a basket of toiletries they brought especially for me when I was admitted. This is some kind of VIP area of the hospital."

"And they know about black girl hair?"

My mother laughs. "Yes, they know about black girl hair." She shakes her head. "They know about everything here. Nothing is too small to escape their attention. I might never leave this fancy ward."

"You deserve it. All of it." I take a deep breath. "Mama, can we talk about JD?"

She nods. "I was wondering when you'd bring him up. JD. He's a complicated man."

"That's for sure." I catch myself rolling my eyes, something my mother always chides me about.

“Careful,” she teases. “One day they’re going to roll out of your head.”

I smirk. “Hopefully it’ll happen on Halloween. Otherwise, that would be just plain gruesome.” It’s a private little joke we’ve shared forever.

“Honey, it might be time you got over your hurt feelings about JD. Holding a grudge weighs you down.”

“I am grateful to him for all of this.” I wave my hand across the room. “More grateful than I could ever put into words. But it was more than a few hurt feelings, Mama. When he didn’t want me anymore, he had his father send me away. It nearly killed me to be away from you and Daddy.”

“I understand how a sixteen-year-old girl thought about the circumstances like that, but you’re a grown woman now, Gabrielle. A smart woman. Is that what you still think? That he was tired of being your boyfriend so he had you sent to a fancy boarding school?”

It sounds so ridiculous when she says it, but it’s exactly the kind of thing the Wilders did. I was simply another mess to be cleaned up. “Well, since you and Daddy refuse to be honest about it, my imagination is left to run wild. I never bought the story that I won a scholarship. I’m not that special.”

“You are that special.”

I know she’s not going to tell me. Not today. Maybe not ever. For some reason, it’s a subject too hard for my father to talk about. I think she would tell me if it was just up to her. I do. She won’t go against him on this, but I push anyway because I want to know. I want to know that they didn’t scheme with JD to send me away. In my heart, I believe they didn’t, but sometimes—sometimes I’m not as confident about it, and it’s all because the whole damn thing is some big secret.

“Daddy won’t talk about it, but maybe one day you’ll tell me. Over a cup of milk tea and a lemon sugar cookie.”

She closes her eyes for a few seconds, and when they open again, she doesn’t look at me. “It’s painful for your father, in the way few things are. I know JD being back in our lives like this has dug up the past. But please let it go. Please.” She squeezes my hand. “For me.” Her lids droop again, and she looks too tired to hold them open any longer.

“Why don’t you take a little nap, Mama? I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

She nods off, and I sit alone, watching her shallow, even breaths. Except for the color of her skin, she looks so much like her mother.

My maternal grandmother, Meme, was Creole, from Louisiana. She had

high cheekbones and chocolate-brown eyes, like my mother's. And like mine. But neither my mother nor I inherited her beautiful dark skin.

Meme wore ruby-red lipstick whenever she left the house, and kept a special glossy tube in her stocking drawer just for Sundays when we went to church. The color was stunning on her, and the lustrous sheen made her seem glamorous, like a movie star. I always wanted to look like her. To be like her.

When I was a little girl and my parents were out for the evening, she would paint my lips ruby red, and hold up a tissue for me to kiss, to set the color. I would always put the tissue with my lip print under my pillow before I went to sleep. "So you'll dream of your Prince Charming," she'd tell me while tucking me in.

When she was just seventeen, Meme got pregnant by the man she worked for, a sandy-haired man with blue eyes and a wife. She always said he didn't force himself on her, although she felt she had no choice but to go along with what he wanted. She insisted that every bit of shame was worth it, because he gave her a beautiful, healthy daughter. Now that I'm older, I wonder if in her heart she really believed that, or if it was something she said to make herself feel better. To make all of us feel better.

My grandmother made sure her beautiful daughter had choices. And even though she never found her own happily ever after, Meme always believed in a fairy-tale ending for her daughter and granddaughter.

Unlike her mother, my mother did get her happily ever after. She also met a fair-haired man, but my father is loving and loyal, nothing like the man who made Meme pregnant.

I am the watered-down version of those two wonderful, strong women. My skin is more golden, slightly lighter, than my mother's. But every time the sun winks at me, I turn dark brown. My mother has tight curly hair that breaks easily, like my grandmother's. I have a head of dark waves that morphs into a mass of unruly curls in the humidity.

I look white on the outside. And aside from boarding school, I've never shared their struggles of being black and biracial. *Or the joys*. My struggle is different. My struggle is not being like the women I so admire.

I smooth the blanket over my mother.

Unlike my grandmother, I have a choice. The healthcare trust JD set up is irrevocable. Regardless of what he says about turning off the tap, he can't do it. This gives me control over my life. Over my body. It gives me power.

I can play JD's game, if I choose, on my terms. It might be an opportunity

to work through the past. A past that even after all these years I can't seem to let go of. I can also exact some punishment for his betrayal, if I decide I want it. This time JD can be the one left searching for answers.

A part of me wants what JD is offering, never stopped wanting it. I know I'm overmatched and can easily have my heart stomped on again if I let him get too close. If I'm not exceedingly careful. But I'm willing to take the risk.

*Okay, JD. None of this makes any sense, but I'll play. If for nothing else than to see what you're up to.*

**Gabrielle**

**M**y mind is still reeling as I make my way to the arrival gate in Charleston to locate my ride. When Patrick emailed, he wasn't sure who would be meeting me, but promised someone would be waiting to drive me home.

I'm confident my mother is in good hands, and God willing, she'll have many more years on this earth. And I have JD to thank for it. Although I'm not any closer to unraveling the mystery. Why is he doing all of this? There's something I'm missing. Something behind all the money he's throwing around. Something behind the control he wants over me. *Something.*

"Good evening, Ms. Duval."

*Antoine.* I'm happy to see him, but a small, pathetic part of me hoped maybe JD would be waiting at the gate. "It's wonderful to see you, but don't you ever get a day off? Even God rested on Sunday."

He takes my bag out of my hand. "I get plenty of time off. Don't you fret about me. But if you don't mind me asking, how's your mama?"

"Of course I don't mind. She begins treatment tomorrow. She's exhausted from all the tests they put her through, but in good spirits."

"I'll keep her in my prayers."

He opens the car door for me and hands me a sealed envelope after I'm settled in the backseat near a navy and white gift bag with gold tissue paper peeking out the top. "Mr. Wilder asked me to give this to you. He said to tell

you he highly recommends you read it before you leave the car.”

“Does he?” I’m too full of pride to have Antoine see me snapping to obey JD’s commands, so I stare out the window until the partition is up, before discreetly opening the envelope. The scrawl on the embossed notecard is familiar. I’d know it even without the initials engraved at the top.

*“Take the bag on the backseat with you when you leave the car. There’s a gift for you inside.”*

I glance at the small striped bag on the seat beside me.

*“We made a deal. I sent you to your parents in good faith, before demanding a single thing of you. I expect you to uphold your end of the bargain.”*

I reread the note several times. It speaks volumes, yet says nothing. It has me agitated. A little aroused. Maybe even a little frightened. The combination acts as a potent cocktail, and it has me squirming and fidgeting, like I’ve just gulped a supersized coffee laced with something sinister.

I glance at the handsome paper sack. *Every pleasurable journey begins with anticipation. Learn to enjoy it.*

The bag is a tease. There might be something wonderful inside. Like hand-dipped chocolates from Renaud’s, or a sugar cookie from the little bakery on King Street. Or maybe something that brings me a different kind of pleasure. Something that fills me, or pleasantly stings my skin. Or there could be nothing at all in the bag. Maybe it’s all a ruse. My fingers skim over the matte stripes, itching to crawl inside.

After a few minutes, my curiosity becomes too much to quiet, and I place the bag on my lap. It’s too heavy to be empty.

Antoine can’t see back here. At least I don’t think he can. *I’ll be careful.* I remove each fluffed sheet of tissue paper with the utmost care. Giving it a small shake to be certain nothing’s lost for Antoine to find later. There’s a mesh pouch with a small tube of lube, and a satin hinged box resting at the bottom of the bag. The kind of box that might hold a piece of jewelry. But I know it doesn’t.

I lift the lid, and inside is a pair of shiny silver balls. Guilt, or maybe shame, pricks my conscience and I look up to make sure the partition is still raised. It is. I run a fingertip over the perfect spheres. They’re smooth and cold. I take one between my fingers. It’s heavy. Heavier than I expected. Heavier than the pair I experimented with in Paris.

There are instructions tucked inside the lid. I smile. Did you think I didn’t



know how to use these, JD? Did you think all my fun stopped the day you sent me away?

There's something else in the lid. Another note. This one written on a neon Post-it. *Slip these in before you leave for work tomorrow. I'll be by to check. Don't disappoint me.*

As I finger the smooth balls, the ache between my legs begins to throb. *I'm not sure I can wait until tomorrow, JD.*

## Julian

I'm in Gabrielle's chair with my feet propped on her desk when she returns to the office. A laptop full of work in need of attention rests on my thighs. But it's nothing more than a prop. I haven't accomplished a damn thing in the hour I've been here.

Those steel balls vibrating in her pussy, and the remote burning a hole in my pocket, have consumed me. I'll either watch the flush spread over her skin while her slick walls clench around the stainless steel, or slap her ass if she defied me. Either way, it's a win.

"Make yourself at home, JD. Please," she calls from the doorway, in that sassy voice that makes my cock weep. The sweater dress wrapped around her lush curves doesn't help either. It accentuates every peak and valley.

Whispers all her secrets.

I bite down hard on my knuckle before I dare speak. "Never been the kind of man who needs an invitation to make himself comfortable."

"What are you doing here, JD?"

Her dress is pink. A soft knit that begs to be petted. Thin and lustrous like fine cashmere, but I know she can't afford that kind of luxury. It doesn't matter what it's made from—I ache to touch it. Ache to buy her closets full of beautiful clothes, and anything else that makes her happy. I catch myself venturing into dangerous territory, fraught with perils, and I get the hell out

while I still can. “Might want to shut the door behind you.”

She bristles at my tone, freezing for a minute as though she’s contemplating a response.

“I don’t care for myself, but I would shut it if I were in your shoes,” I say.

She lifts her chin and her head tilts back, just a bit, but enough for me to see the small ripple in her throat when she swallows. Gabrielle inches the door shut, handling the knob as if it was a piece of delicate china.

“How’s your morning been?” I ask, activating the remote in my pocket.

“You can’t just waltz in here anytime you get the urge to toy with me. Georgina is out today, but normally she would be sitting right outside this door. You promised me I could work.”

“You didn’t follow my instructions, did you?”

“X-ray vision?”

I slide my feet off the desk and push out of the chair. My eyes don’t waver from her face as I stalk over to where she’s standing. Her lips are parted, and I can hear the shallow pants, but she doesn’t move a muscle.

“I don’t need x-ray vision. I know. I know just how you’d look with your pussy clenching around those balls. I know the stain that begins right below your left clavicle and spreads across your chest and neck. I know the labored breathing and the high color in your cheeks right before you come.” My voice is low and rough. And she is mouth-watering. I dig deep for whatever sliver of control is left. Fighting the urge to take her hard against the wall, or drag her to the floor and mount her until she screams. But I don’t do any of that.

Instead, I cup her head in both hands, tracing the outer shell of her ears with my thumbs. She lets my fingers glide through her dark tresses. Allows my knuckles to scrape her cheeks as I wade through the soft waves. She doesn’t protest when my hands rest against her gorgeous tits, until the last silken wisps of hair slip through my fingers.

Her breasts are still pert, but they’re the breasts of a woman now. Heavy and firm. The nipples, hard and greedy, push against the soft knit. I squeeze the tight buds with a quick, firm pinch.

“Ahhh.” The moan comes from deep in her belly, and she arches instinctively. It’s barely a perceptible movement, but I’ve always been attuned to the nuances of her body. There was a time when I knew it better than my own.

I taught her the language of sex: cock, cunt, fuck, cum, and so many other

words. Taught her to ask for what she needed—all without shame. And I'm the bastard who taught her to savor a small bite of pain with her pleasure. It was me. All me.

I should have known better than to drag her down that path. Because once she tasted dirty sex, once it was hardwired into her developing brain, she craved it like an addict craves the next fix. And nothing, *nothing* less, will ever give her the same kind of high.

Did I enjoy it? Every second. But the guilt has dogged me for years.

They should burn me alive for leading her there. Tie me to a stake while the flames of damnation engulf me, until all that remains is a pile of ashes and the teeth I used to mark her flesh. That's what I deserve.

*And now, JD—now you're going to lure her back into the dark. Use her addiction to control her. Jesus.*

I draw in a breath, and release it. "Where are the silver balls?"

"Upstairs."

"Upstairs. Is that what I told you to do with them? To leave them upstairs?"

She shakes her head. "I have a business to run. They're too distracting. I need to work."

"Too distracting. How do you know they're distracting?"

"I've—I've experimented with them before."

"Have you?" I can feel the corner of my mouth curl until the impact of her words hits me. *She played with someone else the way she played with me.* Of course, I knew it was possible, likely even. She was engaged, for chrissake, but hearing it still guts me. "When?"

"Paris."

"With whom?"

"That's none of your business."

I tip her chin and force her to look at me. "With whom?"

She jerks her chin away from my hold. "I used them alone." Her cheeks are flushed, and my cock is throbbing.

"Just in Paris? Was that the only time?"

"And last night," she whispers, lowering her eyes.

*Last night. Fuuuck.* "You had them in last night?"

"Yes." Her voice is soft. Her tone pliant.

"Did they make you feel good?"

"*Mmhm.*"

I twist her hair into a ponytail, winding it loosely around my hand. Enjoying the silky fibers against my skin more than I should.

“Did you touch yourself while they were in your pussy, dirty girl?” I tug gently when she doesn’t answer.

“Yes,” she whimpers.

“Did you come without me?”

She says nothing.

“Did you, Gabrielle?”

She starts to nod, but the movement is halting because I have her hair in a firm grip now.

“No orgasms without me, Gabrielle.” I lower my head, and my voice. My mouth grazes her ear intimately, so close, the heat off her skin warms my lips. “I want you needy and wet when you come to me at the end of the day. You don’t get to take the edge off. You don’t get to make your greedy little cunt happy. Only I get to do that.”

She lifts her chin defiantly. The movement must hurt because I’m still holding a fistful of her hair. But she doesn’t blink. And her voice is strong and clear, like a fucking queen. “You don’t get to tell me what I can do with my body. That was *not* part of the deal.”

I want to smile. Because I love her feistiness, her courage, because she’s telling me to fuck off while I tower over her with a fistful of hair in my hand. But I don’t. I can’t.

“The next time you come without my permission, I will tie you to my bed and spend hours bringing you to the edge without letting you have even the tiniest bit of relief.” I lower my head again to whisper near her ear. “You will be a whimpering, sweaty mess, floating helplessly in subspace. You won’t even know your own name.”

A small moan escapes, and she sways closer to me. Closer to my cock. My control is fraying at the edges. I can feel it unraveling, one strand at a time.

“Do you remember what I said I’d do if you didn’t obey?”

Her fleshy pink tongue darts out and wets her bottom lip. “Spank my ass red, until I can’t sit down, and then fuck me until I scream.” Gabrielle gazes up at me through thick, dark lashes, as the words glide off her tongue. She’s gauging my reaction. The cheeky look on her face is stunning.

She’s not afraid. Her lips are pulled into the smallest of brazen smiles. Her eyes gleaming. She wants me to punish her.

I let go of her hair and force my hands down, curling my fingers into tight fists. I watch as she flicks that sweet tongue over the bow of her lips. I feel the rumble of desire in my chest. And right now, there is nothing, nothing in the entire sordid history of dirty, filthy things, that I don't want to do to her.

If I was a God-fearing man, now's the time I'd get on my knees and pray for forgiveness for every indecent thing I have planned—and for the ones that I haven't planned—the ones that will be driven in the moment by primitive lust. Basic and pure. Hers and mine. But I'm not a good man, and there's only one thing I fear, one thing that haunts my dreams, and it sure as hell isn't God.

I suck in a breath and smooth her hair. “Such a good girl. You remembered what I told you. I need you to remember everything I tell you. I need you to obey me—always. Will you do that?”

She lowers her eyes and nods.

And more than anything, I want it to be the truth. It's the only real hope I have for keeping her safe.

“Maybe I'll go easy on you today. Would you like that?” She bows her head, and pushes it gently into my hand, like a sleek feline currying favor. If I didn't know better, I might believe she's surrendered. I press my lips to her crown, knowing full well that her claws might be in for now, but they're sharp and can strike without warning. “Let's go upstairs and find the pretty silver balls. I want to slide them inside you and watch your pussy quiver. Tell your assistant you'll be out of the office for a couple hours.”

She squints, and her head falls back. The mood shifts dramatically. “A couple hours? I have a staff meeting.”

“You should have thought about that before you disobeyed me.”

She stands inches from me, with those pouty lips I desperately want wrapped around my cock. The claws have emerged. The wheels are spinning, and I'm not sure if she's going to tell me to go to hell, or follow my instructions. Just as my patience grows thin, she picks up the phone.

## Gabrielle

We take the back staircase up to my living area. When we get to the top, JD flicks the overhead lights off, leaving just the low emergency lighting to illuminate the stairs. He pins me to the wall behind the exit door, my hands firmly above my head.

His long fingers slide through mine, and I close my eyes to privately savor the rough hands on my skin. All those years of riding, gripping the reins, grooming the horses, have left their mark on his hands. I can feel the wear. Every callus. Every coarse patch. It's electrifying. I push the hollow of my back into the cool wall to steady myself.

Even with my eyes closed, I know his face is near mine. I can feel the heat of his breath on my cheek. The smell of his boozy cologne mixed with the musky scent of him, the smell of sex. It's intoxicating. And if I could reach, I would run my tongue over his jaw, feel the rasp of the whiskers over the delicate flesh. I'm wet and needy, and aching for the zing of pleasure. Aching for him.

And dammit, it's not just about physical gratification. My heart wants in, too. *No, Gabrielle. No, no, no!*

JD touches my palate with the tip of his tongue, and I moan softly.

Every touch is painfully familiar, as if we did this just yesterday. The heat of his hands, his demanding mouth, and the strangled, carnal sounds that

escape the back of his throat while he kisses me. My heart remembers it, all of it, even better than my body remembers.

“Gabrielle,” he whispers, “look at me.”

I’m afraid to open my eyes. Afraid for him to see how much I want him. Afraid he’ll see the feelings that go well beyond those of wanton lust. Feelings of love that I thought sure I had banished forever. I don’t want him to see any of it. I don’t want to see it myself.

He lets go of my hands, but my arms stay along the wall, as though they’ve been anchored there. He cups my head, his thumbs grazing my cheeks. “Open your eyes.”

I feel his hard cock on my belly, so close to where I need it, but just out of reach. It’s excruciating. And while my eyelashes flutter open, I can think of nothing else.

My eyes begin to focus in the dim light. I see the torment in his face. The unmistakable need, twisted with something else. Something I don’t know.

“Do you want this?” he demands. His voice is thick and rough, and my pussy is throbbing for him.

I open my mouth as his words begin to register. *It’s an out.* He’s giving me an out. *Is he?* Or is he asking because he knows I’m shamelessly aroused and won’t say no? Would he really let me walk away? I don’t want to know the answer. Not now.

I swallow, and nod, brushing against the thick bulge.

The knob in his throat dips and rises. “Say it,” he commands. “I want to hear you say it.”

“Yes.” The word emerges breathy and needy. And as soon as it’s out, his mouth is on mine, searing and rough, demanding, like him. He presses forward until there’s not a scintilla of daylight between us. Not a smidgeon of space between my back and the wall. There’s only his mouth on mine, his body welded to mine.

He’s big and powerful, hard and unyielding. I gasp and shiver against him.

“You’re mine,” he growls, his knee wedging between my legs, pushing them apart inch by inch until a muscular leg is wedged between mine. I’m all sensation, every nerve screeching. The second, the very second his leg grazes my mound, I whimper. He does it again, deliberately brushing against my center, but this time, instead of pulling away, he lets his thigh rest against my pussy, tempting me to grind against the long, hard muscle. When I give in to



the temptation, when I rock against that thick thigh, I feel his lips curl against mine.

I've lost all sight of where I am. Lost sight that one of my employees or a hotel guest could enter the stairway at a moment, or maybe I'm beyond giving a damn.

His eyes are molten when he pulls away. "Not here." He swipes at his swollen lips with the back of his hand. He's panting softly. Fighting for control. I feel it. I might not have a drop of control left in me, but he's struggling, too. It's intoxicating, and woefully arousing, and just when I'm about to sink to my knees, JD squeezes my arms. "Let's go."

He flips on the light switch as we leave the stairwell and drags me to my door.

My hand shakes while he watches me fumble with the key. As soon as we're inside, even before the door latches, his mouth is on mine. He's palming my ass roughly, canting my hips forward, and I squirm against him until I can make out the ridge of his cock through our clothes.

"Get the balls," he murmurs, but I'm not sure I can move, not sure my legs are steady enough to hold me.

When I slowly start to pull away, he yanks me back to him and digs his fingers into my flank, tracing the seam of my mouth with a pointed tongue. I open for him.

"I miss you. Miss you so damn much it hurts. I live with the pain every second of every day. It's crushing."

His voice is raw, the emotion on full display. When I hear it, my heart clenches so tightly, it forces a tear to fall. A lone, fat drop that plops on my cheek and rolls down my face. He leans in and catches it on his tongue. It belongs to him. Like so many of my tears, it's his.

This is the very moment I push away all good sense. Because I know. Because every part of my being knows he's telling me the truth.

*This is how he lures you into trouble, Gabrielle. This is how it always happens.* I swat the nagging voice away. It's barely audible—so easy to dismiss.

He sweeps the hair off my face, and I reach for his hand, placing a small kiss in the palm before pressing it to my cheek. The gesture feels fresh and honest, like they used to be, like they all used to be. His soft, warm eyes tell me he feels it, too.

A quiet intimacy rises between us. Sacred and enveloping, it wafts around

us like frankincense in a holy ritual, purifying and cleansing our souls, preparing us for the next chapter.

“Trust me,” he pleads, not just with his voice, but with his entire being. “Trust me, even though I’ve done shit to earn it.” His finger smooths the furrow between my brows. “I’m trying to keep you safe. It’s all I want. It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

I search his face. It’s guileless. *Now. Ask him, now, Gabrielle. He’s vulnerable. He’ll tell you everything you want to know. All the things that have tormented you for the last fifteen years. Just ask him.*

But I don’t. I want him too damn much. All of him.

*Make him tell you what’s going on.*

But right now I don’t care about anything else but having him. Not revenge. Not about the upper hand. And I sure as hell don’t want closure.

His mouth is on my neck. His hands on my ass, pulling me into him. I’m overcome by the sensations dancing inside, twirling seductively with long, sheer scarves trailing behind, flitting in and out of the shadows, playing an elusive game with each nerve ending, until I can barely stand. Barely breathe.

*I miss you. Miss you so damn much it hurts. I live with the pain every second of every day. It’s crushing.* JD rains kisses on my throat, and my body rejoices, reveling in the warm rainfall after years of drought.

His words echo in my head, again and again, adding to the unsteadiness. I twine my arms around him more tightly to remain upright. When I moan, he sinks his teeth into a tendon right above my collarbone. *That one.* “Ahhh.” I feel the bite between my legs. It’s exquisite.

“Go,” he says, releasing me.

## Gabrielle

Somehow, I make my way to the bathroom and locate the velvet box with the silver balls. I clutch it in my hand and gaze at the woman in the mirror.

Her hair is a colossal mess in that way curly hair can be when it's misbehaving. And a telling feverish glow covers her face and neck all the way down to her décolletage. Aroused. Sexed-up. Wanton. Whore. The adjectives are plentiful.

I touch a fingertip to my swollen lips. The stain I carefully applied this morning has faded to nothing. Much like my resolve and self-control.

*What are you doing, Gabrielle?*

I ignore the question, swatting it away while I spread a creamy balm over my bruised lips, rubbing until the skin is soothed.

But my conscience is relentless, and the questions keep coming.

*Are you really going through with this?* the woman in the mirror asks. I detect a judgmental tone in her voice. I lift my chin. *Yes*, I tell her. *Yes, I am*. When I can no longer bear the sanctimonious looks, I turn away. Away from her sharp eyes, boring through me, before she tells me how foolish I am. Before she warns me that my heart will surely end up in tatters again. I don't want to hear any of it. Not now.

When I enter the bedroom, JD's jacket and tie are hanging over the back of an oversized chair in the corner, where I curl up at night with a book and a

cup of tea. His sleeves are rolled to the elbows, and the top three buttons of his shirt are undone, exposing a swath of sun-kissed skin. I catch a glimpse of the chain around his neck, the one his grandfather's dog tag hangs from. The one that rests near his heart. The one he never takes off. The one that caressed my skin, hundreds of times, while he reared above me. While he loved me, it rested near my heart, too.

Maybe he hasn't changed. Maybe nothing's changed. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

See, I can tell myself any lie I'd like. I can kid myself as much as I want. But he's the *only* man I've ever really wanted. The *only* man I've ever really loved. This truth has never loomed larger than right now. It scares me to death as I find my way to him.

He holds out his hand as I approach, and I carefully lay the box in his palm. He lifts the lid and takes out one of the balls. "So cold," he croons, placing the small sphere near my mouth. "Open up for me, darlin'."

I shiver as the cool steel breaches my lips and slides into my warm mouth. Or maybe I'm shivering at the memory of last night. Last night, when the balls breached other pink lips, and made contact with the hot slick flesh there. I feel the heat rise in my cheeks.

JD takes the other ball between his thumb and finger, and holds it in his mouth. "I can taste you."

I gasp softly. It's not true, of course. I scrubbed the balls clean and rinsed them well before putting them away. But it doesn't stop me from averting my eyes in shame.

He holds the ball in his left cheek and fingers the neckline of my dress, tracing the contours of the deep vee. There's something hypnotic about his actions. About his voice. And when his wrist brushes against my breast, I almost forget to breathe.

"I love this shade of pink on you. It makes your eyes milk chocolate and gives your skin a rosy glow. Your flushed skin makes my cock hard. Always has."

He presses my hand over his erection. I swallow and stare into his blazing blue eyes.

"Take off your dress for me."

I do as he asks. Without hesitation. The belt comes off with ease, but my fingers are clumsy with the hidden hooks and snaps. When the last hook is free, I let the dress slide off my shoulders to the floor. I'm in nothing but a

lace and satin thong and a matching camisole. And my shoes. *My heels.*

JD once fucked me over a bale of hay, in nothing but a pair of black patent leather high heels. I remember how aroused it made him. How insanely wild. How hard he bucked when he came inside me. An uncontrollable shiver skitters through me for him to see. The left corner of his mouth curls.

His gaze travels over me unhurriedly, taking in every inch of skin, leaving a sear as it passes. He lingers longer at my bare pussy, winking brazenly at him, through the pink lace. The tingle of shame begins to crawl up my spine, and I fight the urge to fidget.

The ball is out of his mouth now. His fists are clenched at his side, his thumbs grazing each knuckle, one at a time, over and over, as he admires me. “Gorgeous. Even more gorgeous than I remember. How is that even possible?” JD says the words out loud, but he’s not talking to me. He’s merely voicing his thoughts. It’s as though I’m nothing more than chattel—a sleek sports car, a luxury watch, a prized racehorse purchased for breeding. It’s unsettling, vulgar and arousing at the same time.

He’s a few feet away, but I can feel the tension in his body. I can feel him struggling for control. The power is heady, and my embarrassment begins to melt.

JD steps closer and rubs my camisole between his fingers. My core zings and pulses as the silky fabric yields under his fingers. The ball is heavy in my mouth now. It’s not so big, but breathing is becoming a challenge.

“You look like an angel,” he murmurs, twisting a small section of my hair, “but I’m still going to punish you. Come.”

I follow meekly as he pulls me to a bench at the foot of the bed, where he sits and tugs my arm gently. “Over my lap, darlin’.”

He uses the sweet endearment, as though it’s an invitation he’s extending, but it’s misleading. There’s no room for negotiation in his voice. No opportunity to say, “I’m sorry, but now’s not a good time. I can’t attend your party.”

He will punish me. It will hurt. *Won’t it?* Yes, but mostly it will put me in my place. Humiliate me. That’s what this kind of spanking is meant to do. Isn’t it?

A small part of me contemplates bolting from the room. Getting out while I still can.

*No. I want this. I crave it. A little bite of pain can turn a small tremor into*

*an avalanche of pleasure. I learned this at his hands long ago.*

I take a breath, almost forgetting to control the ball in my mouth. I shudder at the thought of nearly swallowing it.

“Gabrielle.”

He’s impatient. But I’m not exactly sure how to drape my body over his lap. While he slapped my ass before, it wasn’t like this. Not ever like this. I’ve never done anything like it. Not with him. Not with anyone.

Before the awkwardness consumes me, he guides me over his thighs. I’m not entirely graceful, but not as clumsy as I feared.

The left side of my face settles into the tufted upholstery. It’s cool and welcoming against my skin.

His fingers glide over my back in long, fluid motions to calm me. “Relax. Just close your eyes and feel. Let yourself experience the sensations. That’s all you have to do. I’ll take care of the rest. I’ll take care of you.”

*I’ll take care of you. But you didn’t.*

I push the thought away and let my lids fall shut, enjoying his strong fingers on my back, coaxing the knots loose. His hand moves lower, and lower still, nimble fingers pressing into the hollow space, massaging gently. I wriggle with pleasure.

“Stop squirming, Gabrielle.”

“I—I—”

“*Shhh*. No talking. I want you to close your eyes, listen to my voice, and feel. That’s all.”

He wants total control over me. This is where he’ll take it. Everything that came before was foreplay. *Go ahead, JD. Take it. Take whatever you want*—that’s all that’s running through my mind as his fingertips make a slow slide to my pussy, stroking the wet folds.

I moan and squeeze the bench when he slides two thick fingers inside me and slowly strums my clit with his thumb, nudging me toward the edge. “You’re so wet,” he murmurs, adding a third finger. “I’m sliding in and out, darlin’. It’s so easy. Nothing to stop me.”

His fingers feel so good. I inch my legs farther apart to give him better access. To give him more access.

“This is exactly what I want from you.”

There’s a pleased smile in his voice, as my pussy rocks into his hand.

“Wet and eager for me, all the time. Just like this.”

*Yes. Yes, I want this all the time, too.*

My body is humming when I feel the cool, foreign object near my opening.

“Relax. It’s just a little ball. Like last night, only this time for me.” He pushes it inside, and my walls clench, welcoming the intruder with a big, lusty hug. “Good girl.” He strokes me tenderly for long minutes, like a cherished pet.

“I need this one, too,” he murmurs, tapping my cheek. I open my mouth and let the ball fall into his outstretched hand. “This one is much warmer.” He teases my clit with the smooth steel before pushing it inside. “Don’t you think?”

I jump when the balls begin to vibrate.

“*Shhh*. Just a tiny movement so you know they’re there.”

The sensation is heavenly. And so unexpected. This didn’t happen last night.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?”

I nod. Because it does feel good. *So good*. The balls are barely moving, but my hungry cunt laps up every twizzle, and I purr like a well-fed cat as they whirl inside me.

But the languorous feelings are short-lived. They start to shift when JD circles my ass, one cheek at a time. Pulling and separating. It’s embarrassing. And arousing. And I fight to stay still.

“Relax, Gabrielle. Just enjoy my hands on you.”

I try. But it’s something we’ve never done. Something he couldn’t tempt my teenaged self into agreeing to do, and somewhere I haven’t gone with anyone else since.

His fingers are in the small of my back, pausing there briefly, before sliding down the long crevice between the cheeks. It’s humiliating and titillating, and I want *more*. At least I think I do.

He dips his fingers into my pussy and draws the moisture up the slit, to the pleated entrance.

I whimper. *Please, no. Please*. I’m mortified. So exposed. So vulnerable. My face burns.

“Has anyone been here?” he asks, like he might ask if I want milk with my tea. “Have you ever played like this?”

“No,” I squeak.

“Good. All your virgin holes. All mine.”

I bury my face deeper into my folded arms, as he presses a single

fingertip over the most private of places. It doesn't hurt. But it does make me feel squirmy. *And dirty*. His finger is ruthless, pressing firmly, the pressure constant and threatening, but he doesn't push inside.

"Relax, Gabrielle. Tempting as it is, I'm not going there tonight. I just want you to get comfortable with my fingers here." He taps a rough fingertip over the sensitive skin, and my bottom wriggles. "I want you to learn to enjoy me touching you *everywhere*. Every inch of your body is mine to explore. To tease. For my pleasure, and yours."

His voice is melodic. Seductive. The room is hot, *so hot*, and my head is getting woozy. It's getting to be too much.

"We'll go slow," he assures me in *that* voice. That Pied Piper voice, with its irresistible lure. "A little at a time, until you beg for my cock right here." He wiggles his finger. "Until you love me filling all your holes."

I sense myself pulling away from my body. The embarrassment and uncertainty, *and the heat*, nosing out the pleasure. I'm not sure what I want to do, what I want to say, if I want to stop him. But it doesn't matter what I want, because I can't form the words anyway.

I feel the rasp of lace, a tickle on the back of my knees as the thong comes off. I shift my head as JD buries his nose in the pink lace, inhaling deeply before carelessly tossing the thong aside. It's dirty, and the twinges of shame are becoming stronger.

Just when I think I can't bear any more, he changes tactics, sliding off my shoes and releasing my cramped toes. I sigh and wiggle them as they're freed, enjoying the air flowing between my toes.

He massages each foot, lavishing special attention on the overstretched arch, circling the abused ball with a strong thumb until I writhe from the exquisite pleasure. "That's better, isn't it? I don't know how you spend all day in those shoes."

I sense him leaning in and feel the unmistakable scrape of his teeth on my ass. It startles me as it stings the tender skin. I cry out as the sensations race toward my center, burying my face in my arms to muffle the cries.

He presses a soft kiss where his teeth sank into muscle and lets his fingertip graze my pussy. Lightly. Slowly. It's not meant to bring relief, only to torment. A delicious torment that goes on and on. He adjusts the pressure and movement ever so slightly, so the orgasm stays just out of reach.

It's almost too much. I'm slipping again. And then it happens.

*Crack, crack, crack*. The sound blares, heralding the sharp stings that



inevitably follow. It doesn't hurt. Not really. Not at first, but the fire sneaks up slowly. And then the small throb of pain comes.

He murmurs endearments while he rubs the burning skin.

Soothing gently.

Cooing softly.

Praising lavishly.

And then *crack, crack, crack* on the other cheek. This time, he catches the skin right above where the thigh begins.

His fingers are in my pussy again, moving maddeningly slowly, inching me to the edge. I grind against them, hoping to spur them on. JD laughs softly, and shame washes over my hot, sweaty face. But it's not enough to stop me from chasing those long, thick fingers and the promise they hold.

"Keep still, Gabrielle." He flattens his palm on my lower back, to stop my gyrations. "You're so aroused. I can smell it, and my nose is nowhere near your pussy. Not yet."

*Oh God.* I bury my face deeper, shifting slightly, and his cock becomes wedged against my hip. It's hard, so hard, and so tempting. I fidget, rubbing myself all over the thick length.

This time the hand comes down hard. Brutally hard, and he pulls his fingers from my cunt. "Stay still."

I whimper. Not in pain, but in need. I'm close. So close. I rock into his thigh. Rubbing my mound into the muscle. My legs are shaking.

"Don't you dare come, Gabrielle. Not until I tell you."

I hear myself whimpering, and even as I cling to the bench for support, I can't stop the pitiful mewls.

*Crack, crack, crack.* I'm already sore, and these slaps come down like a branding iron. He rubs the abused skin with one hand, and flicks my needy clit, once, *once*, with the other.

"Please," I beg. But I'm not sure what I'm pleading for. Release? His hand hard on my ass? For him to stop? *No.* Not that. Please, not that. "JD, please."

"Soon, darlin'. Soon."

When he lifts me off his lap, I'm a bit unsteady and curl my toes into the plush rug for support. JD stands, too, cradling my face while he kisses me. It starts with a gentle brush of his mouth, but in seconds it's an urgent assault on all my senses. When he pulls away, I'm breathless.

"Take this off," he demands, fingering the cami's satin strap.

And I do, shedding the final garment without delay.

Even before the lingerie hits the floor, my hands are on his belt. But he squeezes them when I attempt to unloop the burnished strap from the gunmetal buckle. “Not yet.”

I’m naked, and he’s fully dressed. The power differential has never been starker between us. *Is this what I’ve agreed to?* There’s no time to protest before his thumbs are on my nipples, skating in small mind-numbing circles around the furred peaks until I don’t care about power discrepancies and agreements. Until I don’t give a damn about anything.

“I want you to get on that bed and show me how you made yourself come last night with the balls inside you.”

A small gasp pushes its way from my chest. I might be beyond aroused. I might not be able to string a coherent sentence together, but there’s still some part of me that’s hesitant to do what he asks. It’s been a long time since I masturbated for him. And then I’d used only my fingers. But I do remember how much he liked it. How hard it made him. How savagely he fucked me after I finished.

And how much I loved it.

“Now, Gabrielle. Don’t make me wait or you’ll spend the rest of the day without coming. Think how uncomfortable that’ll be.”

It occurs to me, as I go to my bedside drawer to fetch the vibrator I pleased myself with last night, that I’m naked. Instinctively, I reach for a blanket to cover up, but I stop. He’s seen me naked before. More times than I can count. Besides, it seems silly, given what I’ve just let him do. Given what I’m about to do.

I glance over my shoulder. His eyes are on me. They’re a startling blue. Virile and threatening. I was kidding myself to believe I had any control over this arrangement. Over him. It was a lie. *All a lie.*

A small panic hovers, but I look away before it squelches my desire.

JD pulls a Queen Anne chair near the bed. I watch him in my peripheral vision, the way a small animal tracks a predator. He settles in with an elbow resting on the wooden arm. The feminine chair with its sweeping lines and graceful curves makes him seem even larger than he is, stronger, and more sharply chiseled.

His jaw is tight. And his fingers dig into his thigh impatiently. I see the feral need in his eyes, the naked passion. It triggers a surge of power that rattles my spine and emboldens me with some unabashed courage that had

started to slip away.

I lift my chin and stack two pillows near the foot of the bed, just like last night. The balls stir inside me, a gentle tremble against my swollen walls, ensuring my arousal never wanes. I lay the rabbit vibrator carefully on its side, atop the pillows. It's not my favorite toy, but it's perfect for this kind of play. When I'm satisfied it's positioned just right, I climb astride, using the wooden footboard to steady myself. After a small adjustment so the bunny, with its fluttering ears, hits my clit at the exact right angle, I flip the remote on low.

The whir fills the quiet room, competing only with the ragged breathing and the small gasps. Are they coming from me? From him? Does it matter?

JD's a few feet away, testosterone seeping through his pores, wafting into my nostrils. Musky. Sinful. Scathing. It's all I can smell.

I pull my head back and stare straight into his eyes. They're dark and hooded. *Oh, JD, you want this. You want it more than your next breath. You need it.* You can't resist the lure of filthy sex any more than I can. But this time it will be your downfall, not mine. This time it's your heart that will be left in a million pieces when I walk away.

He's clenching the arms of the chair, his knuckles ghost white. And I wonder if the delicate frame can survive his punishing grip.

With every forced breath he takes, I feel a tug of power in my chest.

"Do you like this?" I murmur, pulling on my nipples before letting my hands slide to my belly. He grunts, fingering his belt. I rock my hips side to side, while he frees his cock.

It's fat and hungry, the skin shiny and taut. So taut, the dark-purple veins are visible. I shiver, remembering how his cock stretches and fills me. How he works me with it until my legs quiver like jelly.

I want that again. *I want it now.*

I slow my movements to better inspect him. To see if his cock is everything I remember. It seems bigger now, thicker and angrier. But it's still magnificent, with its proud, dusky crown.

My pussy flutters with delight when he takes it in hand, rubbing the leaking cum onto the shaft. It's lewd—so lewd—in the very best way.

He tosses his head back. His scruffy jaw is slack. I sink lower onto the vibrator, grinding with abandon. The tightening is starting. The tug in my belly is urgent. I arch my back, shoving my heavy breasts forward. *Yes. It's beginning.*

This will all be over soon. For both of us.

JD's hand moves over the swollen shaft, with short, hard pulls, while his glassy eyes flicker over my burning flesh. It's mesmerizing.

My release beckons now, every muscle fully engaged. I begin to buck, and grip the wooden footboard to stay upright.

"Wait for me," he warns, jerking harder. The muscle in his forearm pops with every vicious stroke. He doesn't miss a single beat when he reaches over and scoops my discarded camisole from the floor. Gathering it in his fist, he fucks himself mercilessly with the soft fabric that covered my breasts only minutes before.

My mouth is wide open as I fight for air. But I can't take my eyes off him. Not even to breathe.

"Now, Gabrielle. Come for me. Take it. Take it, now."

Yes. Yes. I flip the remote up a few notches and roll my hips, sliding my slick pussy along the phallus, while the powerful pulses zing the swollen flesh. I bear down, squirming over the bunny, babbling nonsense. My womb clenches into a tight, almost painful ball, as I dive off the edge with jerky movements and strangled moans, collapsing onto the antique footboard in a shaky heap.

Somehow, I manage to push through the tremors, and force my head to the side and my eyes open to watch him. My efforts are richly rewarded with the last glorious pull. The one that comes as his hips jerk forward, and his mouth falls open in a long, anguished roar, as the milky seed gushes over his fist and onto the delicate pink fabric.

My eyelids are heavy. I try, but I can't stay awake any longer.

I don't know how much time passes, but when I open my eyes, JD's standing over me. "Let's take out those balls, darlin'. Push down. Just like that." His finger curls inside me, helping the balls out.

He disappears into the bathroom, and I hear the faucet running. When he comes back, he brings water and ibuprofen, which I swallow without protest. He picks up some hand cream from the bedside table, and inspects the tube before spreading it over my backside. I'm too tired to be embarrassed as he soothes the bare skin.

"This isn't the best stuff," he says. "But it has aloe and it will make you feel better."

When he's finished, he settles me under the covers. The sheets feel like silk on my cheek, and I curl deeper into the mattress. JD sits on the bed

beside me and brushes an errant strand of hair from my face. He pets and smooths, and I nuzzle into his hand and moan, without ever opening my eyes. God, I missed this.

“Sleep. I’m setting your alarm so you can get back to work in time for your afternoon meetings. I’ll have lunch delivered to your desk. Sleep as long as you can.”

I’m warm and content, safe in my bed. His voice lulling me toward sleep, quiet and gentle—until it isn’t.

“You need to obey me, Gabrielle. If you don’t, it won’t end in a satisfying orgasm next time.” He presses his lips to my temple, and the bed shifts as he rises.

The last thing I hear is the door click behind him.

## Julian

After a mind-blowing morning with Gabrielle, I'm spending the rest of the day getting better acquainted with Sayle Pharmaceuticals. The company was started by my mother's father. When she died, her children were all underage, so Sayle became a subsidiary of Wilder Holdings. But my father can't change the name, or oust my brothers and me from the company. It galls him to have the Sayle name attached to the shining star of Wilder Holdings, reminding everyone he came from nothing, all his wealth inherited from his wife.

Over the years, DW has managed to keep many of the inner workings of the company a secret from everyone, including the board. But now he doesn't have any choice but to open the doors to me.

DW's not the only one unhappy that the curtain's being pulled back at Sayle. There's Leonard Simms, who I'm about to grab by the neck and throw against the wall. Simms is upper-level management. The senior VP of assholes, and my father's eyes and ears at the company. He's spent the last twenty minutes trying to get me to cancel a company-wide meeting I scheduled without his prior knowledge.

"JD, you're a busy man," Simms explains, like I don't already fucking know it. "You really shouldn't have a big meeting like this. It makes people nervous. Like they're about to be laid off. The transition meetings we'll be

having with employees are enough.”

“Sounds like you’re the one who’s nervous, Simms.”

He ignores me. Mistake number one.

“We can still cancel,” he says, as we approach the cafeteria where the meeting will take place.

He’s still talking. Mistake number two.

“You can go back to your office,” he tells me, “and I’ll go in, and send everyone back to their workstations.”

Okay, I’m done. I swivel around and trap Simms between my body and the wall. I’m a good foot and a half away from him, but trust me, he’s caught like a weasel in a spring-loaded trap. “We are not doing any transitions. *I’m* doing the transition meetings, and I don’t need an assistant beside me, nodding for emphasis. You’re free to do some real work during that time.”

“But your father—”

“I am not finished.” I lean forward and give him a few long seconds to think about how close I’m standing before I continue. “I prefer all employees hear what I have to say at the same time, so there’s no confusion. You do what you want, but if I were you, I’d pay close attention in there.”

After a few more seconds pass, I turn and walk away. “And Simms—” He jumps back, like I’m going to hurt him. I’ve gutted live bass that aren’t as squeamish as this prick. “I’m the person signing your paycheck now, not my father. If you prefer to work for him, the door’s behind you. But if you stay, I don’t want to hear his fucking name from your lips again.”

I think he just pissed himself.

“Of-of-of course. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You haven’t seen upset,” I mutter, as I enter the large dining hall, with hundreds of employees already squeezed inside. Some sit, while others stand elbow to elbow with their coworkers.

As I look around the room, I can’t help but think of my mother and my grandfather, and everything Sayle meant to them. Their images flash in front of me, clear as day, looking as though they’re counting on me to do something big.

*I won’t let you down*, I silently promise, as though they can hear me.

I stride to the front of the room and grab a portable microphone from a young woman—Deidre. Then corral a chair to stand on, so I can see all the faces. And so they can all see me. “Good afternoon,” I call to the masses, my voice booming over the hushed whispers.

“Good afternoon,” a few dozen call back.

“My mother was Julia Davis Sayle,” I tell the crowd, “and her father, my grandfather, was Julian Davis Sayle. And in case you haven’t guessed, I’m Julian Davis Wilder, but most everyone calls me JD.”

As I face the room, the responsibilities I’ve assumed take on a sharper focus. This isn’t just my family’s business. It’s the livelihood of many.

“My grandfather built this company from a dream. He worked hard and believed his employees, like all of you, were the very soul of Sayle Pharmaceuticals.”

I pause for a moment. Talking about my grandfather this way, here, inside this building, in the midst of everything he cultivated, makes me more emotional than I expected.

“Julian Sayle ran his company on three guiding principles: keep your hand out of other people’s pockets, don’t manufacture any product you wouldn’t want your own family to use, and treat everyone fairly. While I’m in charge, those will be my guiding principles, too.”

There are lots of nods and murmurs, many coming from the front, where the old-timers who knew my grandfather are gathered. I’m sure they loathed working for DW, who has no character or integrity.

“My door is always open,” I continue. “But don’t look for me up in the penthouse offices with the rest of the suits.” That earns me more than a few chuckles. “Beginning next week, I’ll be occupying my grandfather’s old office just down the hall. You pass it every morning on your way into the building, and every evening on your way out. If there’s a problem you can’t work out with your supervisor, come see me.”

Now for the part where I remind them that the kid’s in charge, and he’s not a pushover. Those with allegiance to my father should take note.

“I have only one rule, only one thing I will not tolerate, and that’s insubordination of any kind. You share Sayle secrets, you steal funds or ideas—you go behind my back, for *any* reason—there will be no second chances. I’ll show you the door myself, and after I personally escort you out, I will ruin your life.”

I scan the room. It’s deathly quiet. Some are nodding, some are staring at their colleagues, and others are examining their hands or the linoleum floor.

“Any questions?”

No one says a word.

“Okay then. Let’s all get back to work.” I hop off the chair, hand the



microphone back to Deidre, and walk out of the room while a sea of eyeballs bore into my back.

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AFTER GRABBING A COFFEE, I head into my last meeting of the afternoon. It's with an elite group of scientists, PhDs and MD-PhDs. Their lab is called SOLO—Sayle Only Logistical Operations. From what little I've been able to garner, their work involves treatments that don't currently exist in the market. But everything about the lab is highly classified. No one seems to know a damn thing about what goes on there. No one except my father. SOLO is his brainchild.

Don't get me wrong. Secrecy is imperative in this industry. Pharmaceutical companies and the scientists who work for them are notorious for stealing ideas and techniques from each other. Like other companies, Sayle takes espionage seriously.

But still, I'm beginning to think SOLO's work is more covert than anything happening at the fucking CIA.

Scientists and doctors get their little feelings hurt easily, so I try not to let my suspicions spill all over the room.

"Tell me more about what's happening at SOLO." It's an open-ended question. A softball to start, but even that doesn't spur any discussion among the eight-person group. Three women and five men. I glance from one to another. If their sphincters were any tighter, they wouldn't be able to shit. "Anyone have anything to say for themselves?" I prod.

"Our work is classified. We don't discuss it," Rofler, who's in charge of the lab, finally says. "We're forbidden, by contract, to talk about anything we work on. Past or present."

I smile—it's not a happy smile—and make small circles over my temples. "I'm not a spy, Rofler. I own the damn company. And I want to hear what you do. Otherwise, I'm going to think you collect a paycheck for doing nothing."

Patience is not always my strength, and my voice might have been edged with a bit of hostility. Because Rofler's sweating. And everyone else is looking down at their tablets so I don't call on them for answers. It's like middle school again. Only this time I'm the teacher, and not easily dissuaded

by cowardly behavior.

“All right,” I say, startling the sheep. “Why don’t we begin with this: What’s the most important thing you’re working on right now? Gentry, you have the ball.”

Fiona Gentry looks at me like a deer in the headlights. Her eyes dart to Rofler before she speaks. “Antiviral initiatives.”

I glare at her until she looks away.

Rofler pulls out a handkerchief from a pocket and mops his forehead while I wait for Dr. Gentry, or anyone else, to give me some meaningful information. But no one says a fucking word.

“What kind of antivirals?” I ask, looking pointedly at Gentry.

Rofler answers for her, before she can respond. “We work on a lot of antivirals. It’s a guess as to which one is the most important. It’s like asking someone to choose their favorite child.”

Two people in the small group laugh. A few smile. Not me. I’m not amused.

Neither is Rofler. He’s wiping his neck now.

This is going nowhere fast. I stand and push the chair in. “Compile a list of every project SOLO is involved in. Add a coherent sentence or two, describing each one. I want it within the hour. No extensions.”

My hand is on the doorknob when I turn back around. “You were all at the meeting today in the cafeteria?” They nod. “Good.” I make eye contact with each scientist, spending an extra couple seconds on Rofler. “Don’t leave anything off that list.”

**Julian**

The parking attendant nods and opens the gate for me. Gray and I are having supper tonight at Wildflower. Chase can't join us because he's still holed up in Washington with the transition team.

Before the campaign, the three of us had supper together once a week, usually on Monday nights when the club is quiet. After supper, we usually catch the end of a game, or shoot some pool—and the shit—for a couple of hours. It gives me a chance to lay eyes on them and preserves some semblance of family, small and pathetic as we've become.

My mother raised us to be there for each other. Good times and bad, show up and cheer. She always did—we were the center of her world. She also expected me to keep tabs on my younger siblings, to make sure they stayed out of trouble. I still look out for my brothers, and I show up for supper every week for her. It's the best way I know to honor her memory.

That's a lie.

I show up for myself, too, because I love my brothers. Because they're all I have left in this world that really matter. Sure, there are people in my life who are like family. People I'd do almost anything for. But my brothers—for them, I would do absolutely anything. *Anything*. They're everything to me. Always have been.

That's a lie, too.

Years ago, Gabrielle was everything. Everything I ever wanted. Everything I needed. She was mine. Plain and simple. But now, despite this bullshit arrangement, despite how many times I tell her she's mine, and how many times I make her say the words to me, she's not mine. And no matter how much I bribe, threaten, and blackmail, she never will be. Not really. Not in the way that counts. Not in the way I want her to be.

But that little fact doesn't stop me from wanting her, from closing my eyes and imagining her hands on me as I stroke my dick at night. It was her face I saw in every woman I've been with for the last fifteen years. And it'll be her face I see in every woman I'll ever be with. Her whimpers of pleasure I'll hear, her soft skin I'll feel under my fingers. Her sweet taste on my tongue. It's always been her, and it always will be.

I tried to forget Gabrielle, for my sake and hers. Tried to drink my way past the memory of her, tried to bang my way through the pain, but it didn't work. Nothing worked—not the booze, not the women. Nothing. I've just resigned myself to it. Made peace with the emptiness.

But it doesn't change a damn thing. Doesn't change how much I want her. Doesn't change the crater-size hole in my chest. And it sure as hell doesn't change the fact that I will protect her with my life if necessary.

One of the bouncers standing guard at the entrance to Wildflower holds the door open. I make a beeline for the bar, hoping to avoid the glad-handers. Since it's just the two of us tonight, I grab a seat at the bar.

The bartender sets a glass in front of me and serves me a generous pour of Pappy's. Like a skilled lover, he always knows exactly what I need. Although it's not like I'm that complicated when it comes to booze. Always want the same thing.

I'm not that complicated when it comes to sex, either. Get in, get off, get out. And by get out, I mean get the fuck out of her place before she can think straight and start pestering me about breakfast, or next time. Breakfast is never included, not even if you pay extra, and next time—there is no next time. I've never had a problem breaking the bad news to a woman, but I find it's less trouble to get out quickly and avoid the conversation altogether.

I savor the bourbon, letting it slide down my throat, enjoying the hint of sweet vanilla before it becomes a spicy heat. The first taste is always the best.

Gray slides onto the stool next to me. "Starting without me?"

"Figured you'd catch up. Busy in here for a Monday night."

Gray points to my drink and nods at the bartender. "It's been busier than

usual since the election. People stopping out front to take photos.” He shakes his head. “Security’s been swamped. It’s too damn much. I’m hoping things settle down soon.”

The bartender brings Gray’s drink and a couple of menus.

“The club puts us all at more risk now than ever before. I think it’s always going to be like that now.” My eyes are glued to the menu while I have this discussion with Gray, yet again. “We might need to reconsider the value of holding onto it.”

“This is my life.” Gray’s voice is brittle, and I feel him tense up next to me.

He loves the club, almost as much as I despise it. If it were up to me, I’d have dumped it fifteen years ago. Burnt the whole place till it was nothing but a pile of ashes. I actually threatened to do it once. DW dared me to try, but I didn’t bite. “You could start over. Buy another place, in another part of town.”

“What is your problem with this place? *What?*” Gray tosses his menu on the bar. “I’m sick of your piss-poor attitude about it. It’s not like you have such high moral standards. You’ll stick your dick into anything breathing who spreads her legs. Hell, I’m not even sure she has to be breathing. Or a she.”

“Not that it’s any of your damn business, but that’s a yes to both, asshole.”

“JD, we don’t sell sex, and I don’t allow any bad shit to go down inside these walls. It’s all aboveboard and consensual. And you damn well know it.”

I shrug. “Aboveboard might be a bit of an overstatement, don’t you think? It’s not about morality. It’s just not my thing.”

“Which is good, because you were banned until you get some basic training. It’s been what thirteen, fourteen years? And you still haven’t done it.”

“Once again, I was twenty, and those women liked it. They were masochists. That’s how they got off.” And I was in a world of hurt, looking for some way to forget Gabrielle, looking for some way to punish my father, punish everyone who had anything to do with the club. I acted out all over the place.

“You were totally out of control. That can’t happen here. Not on my watch.”

“Of course not. Theme rooms filled with industrial-sized equipment that

looks like it came straight from the Inquisition isn't out of control. Don't give me that shit. People wear masks because it's so fucking out of control."

"Maybe you should give it another try before you insist on selling it."

"I don't need carefully planned-out scenes and someone calling me Sir to get off." I drain my glass and motion to the bartender for a refill.

"But you need control. You need to be the one in charge, always."

I rest both elbows on the wooden bar and turn my neck toward Gray.

"How do you know what I need?"

"*Pfft.* Like you're so hard to figure out. You've never done a single thing in your life where you weren't in charge. Where you didn't expect everyone to do it your way."

"I like people to listen, and to do what I tell them. So what? I've got no problem with kink, but contracts and agreements that dictate where you can touch someone and where you can't—takes the mystery out of everything."

"It's a safety feature."

"Sex isn't supposed to be safe. Not all the way. Anyway, I don't need that shit. And I sure as hell am not a sadist."

"There might be a couple of women who disagree with you on that point."

"Bullshit."

"Well, if you always need control, and you're not a dominant, or a sadist, that pretty much leaves just one other possibility."

"What's that?"

"You're an asshole."

I burst out laughing, and then Gray starts to laugh, too, until we're both practically sputtering booze out our noses. "I guess that's about right."

I need to go easier on Gray about this place. I know I should just leave it alone, but I can't stop myself. I might be a fucked-up asshole, but it bothers me that all his relationships with women are scripted. That he hasn't ever let himself just be with a woman. The club encourages that behavior. I want something more for him. Even if I'll never have it for myself again, I remember what it's like to be in the moment. To explore and discover a woman, inhibitions and prohibitions cast aside. To love. I want my brothers to have that.

But my hatred of the club, of the memories that get dredged up every time I set foot downstairs, stem from another reason. A reason so dark, so ugly, that I've pushed it as far back into my subconscious as humanly possible.

Only sharing it with one person. *Ever*. And even then, not all of it.

I turn to Gray. “What’s good tonight, besides the hostess you can’t take your eyes off of? Has she been downstairs yet? Or up to your place?”

“No. And she won’t be going down there, either, or upstairs. Not in the way you’re implying. Even if he wasn’t the president, she works for me.”

I’m just giving Gray shit, and he knows it. But he’s a little too defensive.

The hostess looks like she was tailor-made for Gray. Surprised my brother hired her. I would have thought her wide-eyed innocence would be too much of a temptation for him. There’s nothing he likes better than introducing a newbie to kink, but he cares too much about the club to ever fuck anyone who works here. “I don’t have any quarrel with the way you run this place. You’ve always had more self-discipline than me.”

“Always been better lookin’, too.”

“Pfft.”

The bartender takes our order and pours us each a beer. “Zack’s about the same,” I tell Gray. He never asks about Zack, it’s too hard on him, but I bring him up every time we’re together because Zack’s our brother, and the goddamn accident didn’t change that. And if anything happens to me, I need Gray and Chase to fight for Zack so my father doesn’t get his clutches on him again. He won’t survive next time. “We’re heading into winter, and he’s pretty susceptible to catching something he can’t fight off. You should stop by and see him.”

Gray takes a long swig of beer. “For what? It’s not like it would do him a damn bit of good. He doesn’t even know I’m there.”

The bartender puts a small dish of warm nuts between us, and I scoop up a handful. “I don’t believe that’s true, but even if it is, you should stop by for yourself. Because after your stomach stops roiling, it’ll make you feel better to spend some time with him.”

“Is that why you do it? Does it make you feel better?”

“We’re family.” A fucked-up family who meets once a week for supper in a sex club. Misfit toys, every one of us, lucky we weren’t sent off to some island. But yes, it does make me feel better. It doesn’t assuage any guilt, but it settles me in some way. It just feels right. Always has.

“I can’t do it, JD. Every time I visit, it takes me weeks to recover. You’re a better man than me.” He downs his beer and sets his glass down harder than he needs to.

“No. I’m not. I’m just a different man. Sure as hell not better. So, what’s

the hostess's name?"

"Mae. Didn't you meet her while I was traveling with the campaign?"

"I might have. She's cute. I can see why you like her," I say.

"Cute? *Pfft*. Get in the game, old man. She's hot as hell."

"And an employee."

"Fuck you."

The bartender brings over our burgers, and we order another round. A piece about the transition flashes on the television above the bar. Apparently it's moving forward smoothly. *Sure it is*. The sound's off on the TV, but images of the new administration are plastered on the screen.

"What is it with the cabinet officials who never met a war they didn't want to wage?" I keep an eye on the transition, but Gray works closely on it and knows the ugly details. "Defense, State, and National Security. It's like the holy trinity of old white guys. What's he thinking? He campaigned as a non-interventionist. Those guys are all hawks."

Gray takes a bite of his burger and wipes his mouth. "They're well-respected and battle tested. They can provide valuable insight. But it's mainly a show of power and strength."

*A show of power and strength*. Give me a fucking break. "Like buying a big-ass truck you can barely drive, and outfitting it with giant wheels and an enormous gun rack. God, he must have a tiny dick."

"You're too hard on him, JD. As far as you're concerned, everything he does has some sinister motive. He can be an arrogant jerk, I'll give you that, but a lot of people like him. A majority of the country voted for him."

"So he keeps telling anyone who's still listening. They don't know him the way I do. What's that PT Barnum said? 'No one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people.'"

"Most of his bullshit comes from insecurity. Cut him some slack."

"Cut him some slack? I've already cut him way too much fucking slack."

Gray shakes his head and pushes away the plate.

My mother's death was devastating. Losing a loving parent, our only loving parent, along with Sera and Zack, hit Gray harder than it hit the rest of us. He's never really recovered, and I always feel bad DW is such a sore point between us, but there is no way I'm cutting the asshole an ounce of slack.

"I'm leaving a week from Friday," Gray says. "I'll be gone for maybe ten days. Liam can manage most things that come up better than either of us can,



but he's getting old and forgetful. Will you stop by once or twice while I'm away, just to make sure the place is still standing when I get back?"

"Where you going, princess?"

Gray shoves my arm, nearly toppling my plate off the bar. He's always hated me calling him princess, and I've always loved getting a rise out of him.

"The president-elect is holding a summit," he says, like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"What?" Presidents-elect don't hold summits. Anyone who's paid any attention to the news in the last decade knows this.

"He wants to squeeze in a little R and R, and get some world leaders together. It'll be a working vacation. This way he can hit the ground running when he takes office."

"Is that what he told you, or is that what you think?"

Gray ignores the question. "He's sending me ahead with a few of his closest advisors and some staff to assess the situation before he joins us." Gray shrugs. "It's a show of good faith with these people to send your son. Ideally, it would be you going."

"Fuck that." Gray is letting DW manipulate him. He knows damn well this is a bunch of shit. "Where is this *summit* happening?"

Gray walks around the bar and dumps some ice into an empty glass. "On the Mediterranean."

It's not easy, but I hold my tongue and toss my napkin onto the plate, waiting for him to sit his ass back on the stool next to me. "Tell me you are not going to a fucking summit in the Mediterranean with world leaders before the bastard takes office. Please tell me that."

"Get a grip, JD. I don't need you to protect me from my father."

I need to take a different approach here, but of course I don't see it until I've already opened my big mouth. "Gray, don't let him use you. No matter what he thinks, he's not a fucking king. There are laws and rules that govern the transition of power."

This is just like my father. He probably can't find anyone else dumb enough to go to his little summit, so he's sending Gray. He'll think nothing of selling my brother out if there's any blowback. "If he wants to skirt the law, that's his business. But don't let him pin his bullshit on you. For all I care, he can rot in jail. But don't let him dirty you."

"He just wants to see who he can trust. Who his real friends are. I don't

get why you're so bent out of shape about it."

I can't figure out if Gray is downplaying this for my benefit, or if he doesn't fully understand the implications. Either way, it's an issue. A huge fucking issue. "Who else is going to be there?"

"Not sure. It hasn't been finalized."

I look up at the television and my father is staring down at me. Big grin on his face, like he's mocking me. I want to take my beer and chuck it at the screen. But I don't let him reduce me to a complete heathen. Not tonight. "They still hang people for treason?"

"Pretty sure the Supreme Court ruled that hanging people violates the Constitution."

"I'd find out if I were you. You don't like ropes."

Gray slowly turns his head to look at me. "How the fuck do you know what I like?"

"I read it on your little form when you were away."

The temperature in the room plummets twenty degrees. My little brother is pissed, and there's ice in his voice sharp enough to cut through glass. "You went snooping through private client information in the locked file cabinets?"

"You're not a client. And I needed something to do while I was babysitting this place. If you don't like it, get your ass back here permanently and don't leave me in charge of this shitshow."

"You're an asshole."

"We established that already. You need to be on alert around those jackals. And for God's sake, familiarize yourself with the rules regarding transitions."

"And how should I do that?"

"They didn't teach you how to read big words at Brown? Look it up. Or ask someone. All those ball-lickers hanging around, waiting for someone to notice them? I bet one or two of them have memorized every regulation. This is serious shit. The kind you can't buy yourself out of. Think alphabet soup: FBI, CIA, NSA, to name a few."

"He's the president."

When it comes to DW, talking to Gray is like banging my head against the wall. I crack my knuckles to avoid shaking him. "I repeat. The man is not a fucking king. Come on, Gray. You're a smart guy. You're talking like someone who's hitting the weed too hard. Promise me you'll get a good handle on what you're permitted to do before you let him send you

anywhere.”

“Fine.” He takes a mouthful of ice and begins to chew. “Anything to shut you up,” he mutters.

I watch him out of the corner of my eye while I take a pull of beer, hoping some of what I said got through to him.

“I was having coffee at Misty Moon earlier today, and thought I saw you go into the Gatehouse.”

He’s steered the conversation away from my father, which is uncomfortable for him, to the Gatehouse, which he knows is uncomfortable for me. *Insolent bastard.*

If he’s waiting for a response from me, he better not hold his breath. But I do have a question for him. “How come you never told me you helped Gabrielle Duval get her hotel open?”

“I don’t tell you everything.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Gabby and I have always been friends. That didn’t change when you dumped her.”

That’s what my brothers think. It’s what everyone thinks. I was the bastard who cheated on her. At the time, it was easier for people to believe that I was done with her, though nothing could have been further from the truth.

“She never asked me to keep it from you, but I thought . . . Anyway, I just made a few connections for her. Answered some questions. That’s pretty much it. She didn’t really need much help. Why do you ask?”

I shrug. “I like to know what’s going on.” *But she won’t tell me shit, although it sounds like you know plenty.* “Tough business. You think she can make it work?”

He nods. “It costs a pretty penny to lay your head on a pillow, but she pulls out all the stops. It’s modeled after the small European luxury hotels. If the concept takes off, and it seems to be, she’ll be able to expand when the surrounding buildings come up for sale. That’s her plan, anyway. Seems solid to me.”

“Hope it works out for her.”

“You never answered my question. Was that you I saw going into Gabby’s hotel?”

I motion for another round of beer without saying a word about the Gatehouse. Hell will freeze over before he gets a confession from me.

“Leave her alone, JD. She’s in a good place.”

*Yeah, a real good place. If only you knew the half of it.* “I never read your little fact sheet. Figure every man is entitled to a little privacy. Even pussies like you. Maybe you could repay the favor by staying out of my business.” I lean over the bar, grab the nozzle that dispenses water, and fill my glass.

“Gabby’s not your business anymore.”

Before I can respond, a sly grin spreads over one side of Gray’s face.

“And I know you didn’t read my fact sheet, because if you had, you’d know I love ropes. My hard limit section is blank.”

“You are one sick fucker.”

“I hear it runs in the family.”

**Julian**

I t's after ten thirty, and I've poured down more than my share of booze and filled my belly with hot food. Now there's just one more thing I'd like to fill. Just one more thing that's missing from making this a perfect night. But that's not going to happen—not tonight, anyway. Instead of looking for trouble, I call Chase, again.

“Hey,” he says, sounding a hell of a lot more relaxed than he did when I called him earlier, on my way out of Sayle's. “What's good?”

“We missed you at dinner tonight. You need to get your ass back down here.”

“I'm workin' on it.”

“Work harder. Are you still in meetings, or can you talk now?”

“Talk away. This is a secure line.”

I smile. Sometimes I forget how clever and grown-up he is. And sneaky. “Good. I've got a couple things I need your help with.”

“As long as it doesn't involve hacking Gabby's security system or jamming her phone lines. I'm done with that. You need to leave her alone.”

“Why? You're not trying to weasel in on my girl, are you?”

“I'm not a seven-year-old, and she's not your girl.”

When they were little kids, Chase and Zack were always following Gabrielle around, trying to get her to play. I would always tease them about

trying to steal my girlfriend, and Gabrielle would always pretend she liked them more than me. Life was simpler then. Everybody was happy. “You need to get a sense of humor.”

“What do you want?”

“Do you know anything about some bullshit meeting on the Mediterranean with DW and some foreign leaders? I’m guessing they’re from countries not aligned with ours, otherwise it wouldn’t be such a huge fucking secret.”

“They don’t exactly invite me to high-level foreign policy meetings. But I’ll poke around.”

Poke around. *Jesus*. Before this is over, we’ll all be in prison—my brothers for being careless, and me for strangling my father for compromising them. “Keep your eyes and ears open, but you are *not* to hack into anything that even smells like government business. They put you in jail and throw away the key for shit like that.”

“Whatever.”

“Whatever my ass. Stay the fuck away from that shit, Chase.”

“When did you become so concerned with foreign policy?”

I draw in a breath and blow it out noisily. Sometimes I feel like I share too much with Chase. *Ah, fuck*. He needs to hear about this. “DW invited Gray. He’s the front man. I don’t want him involved in anything illegal. Gray’s too trusting. DW won’t think twice about dumping the whole mess in his lap if it turns sour.”

“I’ll look around. Discreetly, of course.”

“The answer is still *no*. Do not hack into anything that involves the feds. But if your fingers are itchy, there is something you can hack into for me.”

“I’m listening.”

“Know anything about SOLO?”

“The red cups we use for beer pong?”

“Funny. Glad you found your sense of humor.”

“What’s SOLO?”

“That’s what I want to know. It’s an acronym for Sayle Only Logistical Operations.”

“What a stupid name.”

“Tell me about it. I spent all afternoon at Sayle. There’s a small group of scientists working on some type of antiviral agents. They gave me some bullshit story that didn’t make any sense. I can send you the write-up they

gave me, if it'll help.”

“Hate to break it to you, but you’ve always sucked at chemistry. It’s not that hard to confuse you. A lot of the stuff they work on at Sayle is complicated, even for people who know the difference between RNA and DNA.”

“I might not be fucking Einstein, but I understand English pretty well, and can follow a cogent point from A to Z. Something didn’t feel right. And there was this one guy, Rofler, who was sweating like a pig the entire time I was there. The more questions I asked, the more he mopped his forehead.”

“You make a lot of people nervous when you start asking questions. You have that charming way of turning conversations into interrogations.”

Maybe. But that’s not what happened today. Rofler’s bad news. I know it. “This wasn’t like that. See what you can find. But DW is looking over my shoulder when it comes to Sayle. You need to get in and out quickly without anyone knowing you’ve been snooping.”

“Is there any other way?”

“Don’t be a smart-ass.”

“How’s Zack?” Unlike Gray, Chase asks about his twin every time we talk.

“He’s hanging in there. Kid’s tough as nails.”

“Yeah. I’ll go by as soon as I get back in town.”

“Look forward to it. I told him you were away saving the fucking world or some such shit.”

“Hardly.”

“You see much of DW?”

“As little as possible. He has me running programs for him, and spying on other tech people they’ve hired. He doesn’t trust anyone.”

“Make sure you watch yourself.”

“Don’t worry about me. I know the bastard for exactly who he is.”

No, you don’t. You just think you know him. “Still. Be careful.”

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I HANG up with Chase and put down the top on the car. The air is thick and humid for mid-November. I can almost taste the salt. It reminds me of Gabrielle. Of the lone tear that rolled down her cheek and onto my tongue. I

wonder how many tears I've caused her to shed these last fifteen years? Maybe none. Maybe she knew right away she was better off without me.

*Well, like it or not, darlin', I'm back.*

All afternoon, I kept picturing her straddling that damn vibrator, beads of sweat trickling down her throat, into the valley between her breasts. I wanted to catch the salty beads on my tongue, too. Wanted it so bad. And those little whimpers and moans when I slapped her ass. *Fuck me.* I can't believe I kept my own ass in the chair while she got herself off. Not going to lie, I wanted more. I always want more when it comes to her.

But right now, my needs and wants are not important. What's important is that Gabrielle remembers how much she loves dirty sex. How much she needs it. She might believe she beat the addiction. But no one ever beats it. The craving's merely dormant, waiting for a filthy kiss to awaken from the long slumber. It's still there. I made sure of that a long time ago.

I glance at the time on the dashboard—screw it. I need to check in with her to make sure she's okay. *Right.* There's no shortage of bullshit that I'm willing to swallow when it comes to her.

"Call Gabrielle."

*Calling Gabrielle,* the automated voice repeats. If only everyone in my life was that quick to obey, things would be so much easier. The phone rings a few times before she answers.

"Hello." She's out of breath.

"I was afraid I'd wake you up, but you sound like you've been exercising. Or going another round with that vibrator."

She's blushing. I don't even need to see her face to know her cheeks are crimson. "No exercise of *any* kind. I've been looking for my keys for the last two hours. When the phone rang—it's late—I worried something happened with my mother."

"Sorry about that. I didn't mean to alarm you. I'm on my way home and I want to make sure you're okay after today. Things got a bit intense."

She doesn't say anything for several seconds. I can almost hear her wheels turning. "If you don't want to wake me, or startle me, they have this thing called texting. Have you heard about it?"

My mouth curls into a broad smile, and a small laugh escapes. And just like that, my shoulders begin to loosen, the tension rolling off my back. "Now why would I want to text and miss the annoyance in your voice when you realize it's me on the other end of the call? Not to mention that sassy



little smile you have going on. Can't hear that in a text."

"I promise to add LOL at the appropriate times. And I'm not smiling, JD."

"No, not now. But you were."

"I don't have time for this right now. I need to find my keys."

"Don't you keep a spare set?"

"Yes, of course. But that's not the point. It's the master keys for the entire building that are missing."

If I wasn't so busy thinking about my dick, I might have thought better about her missing keys. "Maybe they fell out of your purse. When did you last have them?"

"I didn't put them in my purse. I don't take them out of the building. They're always on a hook behind my office door."

"Do you think someone borrowed them?"

"No one borrowed them. I checked with everyone who works here. I've looked everywhere. I don't know where else to look."

She sounds frazzled. I can almost see her furrowed brow, and her playing with her hair. Tugging and twirling the dark curls behind her ear. It's a sure sign she's stressed. She's been doing it since she was a little girl. "Anything else missing?"

"Not that I've noticed. You think someone broke into my office?"

"It's not that difficult to access the back offices."

"How did you get access? Did you pay off one of my employees?"

"No. If one of your employees agreed to betray you for money, I would have fired them on the spot."

"Silly me. Of course you'd fire one of *my* employees if you didn't approve of their conduct."

"Your security system isn't hard to crack."

"You hacked into my security system? That's how you got in?"

"I'm coming over to help you search for the keys."

"No."

"Gabrielle, you don't get to tell me no. That's not how our arrangement works. I'm going to help you find those keys so you can get some sleep."

"If you come here, we won't look for the keys. At least we won't spend long looking for them. And I need to find them." Her voice trails off to a whisper. "Not tonight, JD. Please."

She sounds bone-tired, and after today, I'm probably at least partly

responsible for the exhaustion. Besides, she's right. If I go over there, the keys will never get found. "Why I really called was to see how you're feeling. Why don't you tell me, and I'll let you get back to your search."

"I'm fine."

"That's not how this works. You'll need to do better than that."

"I know all about aftercare, and checking in. But I don't have time for it right now."

"Like hell you don't. I'm taking the time for it, and so will you."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Let's start with the physical part. How's your gorgeous ass?"

"I'll live."

"How about your puss—"

"*Jesus*. It's all fine. Enough with the questions."

"Now tell me what's going on inside your head."

She sighs loudly, and I imagine her eyes are rolling, too. "I'm wondering why I'm standing here having a ridiculous conversation with you when the master keys are missing. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Don't you dare hang up unless you want to see my face tonight."

It's quiet for a long minute, but she doesn't end the call. "I don't exactly know how I feel," she says in a small voice. "I don't feel the way I'd like to feel. The way I should feel."

"There are no shoulds, Gabrielle. You feel what you feel. It's all good."

I hear her draw a long breath, and release it slowly. "You're a lot to take in, JD. Even more than I remember. Thank you for sending lunch. The restaurant here isn't open at noon, but you probably knew that." She's quiet for a few seconds. "I can't believe you remembered I like tuna sandwiches with potato chips and sweet pickle slices."

There's not a single thing I don't remember about her. Not one damn thing. I've lived off those memories for almost fifteen years. They've kept me warm during the bleakest nights, helped me find release when I needed it. But I don't tell her any of that. "Part of our arrangement is that I take care of you. You give me your trust and your obedience, and I make your life better. Easier."

"You don't need to do that."

"I do need to. And I want to," I add softly.

"So this is a dominant-submissive arrangement without the normal safeguards?"

“There are plenty of safeguards. But no, I don’t think of it like that. Not exactly. Although we can shape it or call it whatever we want. Our arrangement, our rules.”

“You mean our arrangement, your rules.”

I smile. While she isn’t entirely wrong, I’m not Attila the Hun, either. “With the right incentive, I could be persuaded to be flexible about certain things.”

“How magnanimous of you. It still feels like a power play to me.”

“All my relationships are power plays. But they’re not all about sex. Let’s have supper tomorrow night. We’ll iron out whatever wrinkles are left, and I can see for myself if that gorgeous ass really is fine.”

“I have a dinner meeting with a supplier.”

“Is he local?”

“Yes, *she* is.”

“Reschedule with *her*. Make it a breakfast or lunch meeting.”

“You can’t expect me to change my plans on a whim.”

Yeah, Gabrielle, I do, and you will. “It’s exactly what I expect. You’ll leave on Friday to visit your parents for the weekend. I assume you’ll want to go most weekends, at least until we know how your mother reacts to the course of treatment. On Sundays, you’ll need to catch up on the things you left behind, and set yourself up for the week. On Monday nights, I have dinner with my brothers. That leaves Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday for us. Crumbs. And I expect sometimes even that won’t work out, but a dinner meeting with a local supplier is something that can be easily changed.”

“What time?”

“Antoine can pick you up at eight o’clock.”

“I can drive myself. But eight is so late to begin the evening. During the week, I’m downstairs every morning by five thirty at the latest. If you can’t make it earlier, maybe we should plan on Wednesday.”

For a minute I’m torn, but I can’t do it. Not even for her. “I have a standing appointment every evening between seven and eight that can’t be changed.”

“A standing appointment? I thought that’s what I was for?”

“You sound jealous.”

“Don’t kid yourself. But I’m curious, what do you do at seven to eight every night that precludes you from meeting earlier?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Normally I wouldn’t care about what you do, or who you do it with. But —”

“But what, Gabrielle? I’m not fucking anyone else, and I don’t plan on it while we’re together. And I highly recommend you keep your legs closed when I’m not around, too. And don’t tell me for one second you don’t care where I put my dick, because we both know that’s a bunch of bullshit.”

“I have to go.”

“Wait.”

But she doesn’t. *Sonofabitch.*

I pound both hands on the steering wheel. What I do is no one’s business. Not even hers. Aside from Gray and Chase, and a few others who need to know, no one is privy to how I spend that time. And that’s how I want it.

*But you asked her to trust you.*

*You need her to trust you.*

I can’t. I can’t tell her.

*Fuck!* I don’t know how to do this with her. I thought it would be easier. I knew she would balk and complain, and there might be things I’d say and do to her that would disgust me—but I knew I’d find my balls and do them anyway, because it was necessary. But there are so many other things, like this, that I’m not sure about.

Why can’t I tell her? *No reason.* She won’t go to the press. I know she won’t. No matter how she feels about me, she would never do it.

*Trust begets trust, JD.* You want her to trust you? You need to give her more than kink if you want her all in.

*Screw it!* I don’t even bother calling, because she’s not going to answer. Instead, I text: **I’m parked outside the hotel. Answer your phone or I’m coming in.**

A second later, I send another text: **And I will find you.**

It’s a bluff. I’m nowhere near the hotel, but I’m counting on her not wanting to see my face tonight, badly enough to pick up the phone. I’ve been enough of an asshole with her that she won’t doubt I’d show up and harass her.

I give her a few minutes before I call. There’s a better chance she’ll have read the text.

While I wait, I grapple with the prospect of going over to the hotel and hunting her down. I didn’t leave myself any wiggle room, but I really don’t want to have this conversation with her in person. Gabrielle might be my

kryptonite, but Zack makes me human in a way no one else can. I don't know how she'll react when I talk about him, and I don't trust my own reactions. It's bad enough she might hear the weakness in my voice, but I don't want her to see it.

After ten minutes of driving in circles, I call her.

She doesn't answer until the fifth ring. "You weren't enough of a bastard before? What do you want now?"

I take a deep breath and squeeze my fingers around the steering wheel. "I spend that time with Zack."

Her choppy breathing fills the silence until she speaks. "*With Zack?*"

With Zack. It doesn't change a damn thing for him, but I do it anyway. "*Mhm*. I do my best to protect Zack from all the people who are curious about him and want to exploit his condition for a good story. It's been especially bad since my father started his campaign, and now that he's president, there's no sign of it letting up. I would appreciate it if you would keep this to yourself." I sound like a robot. My voice devoid of any real emotion. I feel a bit like one, too.

"Of course. I would never say anything that would compromise him."

I don't doubt for a second that she'll keep her mouth shut. When they were kids, she doted on Chase and Zack like they were little dolls. Even if she wanted to hurt me, she would never hurt him.

"JD. I—I didn't realize—I didn't think he was responsive anymore."

"He's not. Not really. Although it's possible he's minimally responsive some of the time. Difficult to tell at this stage. We're not entirely sure."

Zack suffered a traumatic brain injury during the accident. At the time, he was diagnosed with unresponsive wakefulness syndrome—a permanent vegetative state. It was probably a misdiagnosis, or more likely, a convenient diagnosis. So my father could lock him up and throw away the key. But it's too damn late now to change things.

"*Hm*. What do you do with him every night?" Her voice is shaky and quiet.

"I read to him. Tell him stories. We listen to music." I sigh. I'm not accustomed to answering this question, and it makes me feel vulnerable—like I'm soft—human. What I do with Zack is between us. I've never thought about sharing the specifics with anyone—even my brothers—but somehow, I find the words to tell her. "Brush Sumter. Bedtime stuff." She's sniffing, and it slices into my gut. "Gabrielle—don't. Please don't."

“I’m sorry. It’s only been a week since you barged back into my life, but it’s been a long, trying week. It feels like an eternity. I’m so confused. I don’t know what to think. Between you and what’s happening with my mother—it’s all too much. I’ve been going through the motions, but I’ve been neglecting the hotel. I can’t go on like this. I’m working hard to process it all, but it’s overwhelming.”

“There’s nothing to process. Not with regard to me. When I walked into your office on election night, your first instincts were correct. I’m not here to ruin your life, or to hurt you—but everything else you thought about me is true. Don’t lose sight of it because I read my little brother bedtime stories. It doesn’t change anything.” *Even though I wish it could.* This was the risk. That she would see this for more than it is and start to think I’m some kind of nice guy who she plays sex games with, but that when it comes down to it, I’m a pushover.

“I would love to see Zack. I haven’t seen him since he went away. Will you take me with you one day?”

“One day.”

“Soon.”

“*Gabrielle.* Maybe.”

“He must be in a facility nearby. Where is he?”

“Go find your keys and get some sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“Don’t bother Antoine. I’m perfectly capable of driving myself.”

“I’m aware of how capable you are. But I don’t want you driving home. It’ll be late and I plan on making you very tired.”

### Gabrielle

After work, I shower quickly and change into a skirt with a zipper down the back that runs from waist to hem. JD won't be able to keep his eyes off it all night. And no, I'm not the slightest bit embarrassed about choosing it for that reason.

The room still smells of him. Still smells of sex. And I can't glance at that Queen Anne chair without becoming aroused. Without my core pulsing with need. I can still see him sitting right there, furiously fucking his fist, my pink cami nothing more than a cum rag wrapped around his fat cock to catch every precious drop of seed.

There's not an inch of skin that's not hot and prickly, and I want to dig my fingers into my needy cunt and satisfy the craving, but there's no time. Besides, I promised to save all my pleasure for him. I'm not embarrassed about that, either.

I go downstairs to wait for Antoine. It's been a terrible day. Not to mention costly. Four flat tires, and the hassle of dealing with the tow company, and the police treating me like a flighty woman because I didn't remember leaving the master keys in the car. *I still don't remember leaving them there.*

But maybe I did. I've been so preoccupied with my mother, and with JD, that I've found myself forgetting little things this week. Yesterday, when I

went to the pharmacy, I sat in the parking lot, shaken, because I didn't remember anything about the drive there. I could have killed someone. Maybe I did grab the keys by mistake. But I certainly didn't deflate the tires. When did teenage pranks become so destructive? *Now I sound like my mother.*

I let the front desk know I'm leaving for the evening. Tom is on tonight. He's a godsend, especially with Georgina scheduled to be out on maternity leave. Dean recommended him for the job. It's the best thing he ever did for me. That, and taking JD's money and leaving town. The man might very well be the most self-absorbed human being I have ever met. But thankfully, he got in touch with his family and they've stopped haranguing me as though I had something to do with his disappearance.

I make no excuses for Dean. Not a single one. The way he treated me was deplorable, and although there is nothing I did to cause his behavior, I never loved him. Not really. I pretended, not just with him and everyone else, but I kidded myself, too.

After being around JD for a week, just one week, I know my relationship with Dean was ill-fated from the start. Ill-fated because I wasn't done with JD. Ill-fated because no one will ever come close to making me feel the way JD makes me feel. This will always be my cross to bear.

Does this mean I want a relationship with JD that goes beyond our arrangement? Something more than revenge? Something more than discovering the truth about what happened fifteen years ago? Yes, yes, and yes, I do. All of it. There. I said it.

But I won't do it. Even if JD wants a relationship, which I highly doubt, I won't indulge in anything more than mind-numbing sex with him, and closure. I won't risk my heart again. I can't. I'm not a kid anymore. I can't afford to sink into depression, to mope around crying for months when he decides there's someone prettier, or smarter, or better connected. I have responsibilities now. JD has the power to destroy me again, but only if I let him.

I know now what I've always thought. He's my soul mate. As much as I hate to admit it, it's true.

But I'm willing to live out my life alone, or with someone else. While no relationship will ever compare to the unrestrained passion I have with him, or the depth of connection we share, I can still have a full and loving relationship with someone else. I'll learn to be content without the flames.



They always seem to singe me anyway. But I can't do any of it until I put JD behind me.

Maybe it's not revenge I need, but closure. I want the answers, *all of them*, so the door between us can close firmly and securely. And forever.

Antoine pulls into the front of the hotel at eight fifteen. It's not like him to be late. "A lot of traffic?"

"Not too bad," he says, shutting the door behind me after I'm settled. The partition is already up between the front and back seats when I get in the car. I guess I ask too many questions.

Sweetgrass isn't far, but there's only one way to get there from here, and Antoine doesn't take the turn that leads away from downtown. I refuse to talk to him through the intercom, so I tap on the partition, until he lowers it.

"Did you miss the turn to Sweetgrass?"

He turns around, puzzled. "We're going to Mr. Wilder's place downtown. I'm sorry. I assumed you knew."

"No." I shake my head. "I didn't. JD must have forgotten to tell me. It's fine." Either he forgot to tell me, or didn't bother. I huff to myself. He's not forgetful. But he is rude.

In less than ten minutes, we arrive in front of a renovated building. It's so close to the hotel, I could have easily walked.

Antoine gets out and leads me into the swanky building to an elevator. "This will take you directly into Mr. Wilder's apartment," he assures me, punching in the code.

On the ride up, I remind myself to ask more questions about the details before agreeing to dinner, or to anything else, if I don't want to be surprised.

JD's waiting when the doors open.

"I realized a few minutes ago that you must have thought you were going to Sweetgrass." He kisses me on the cheek.

To a bystander, the kiss might look chaste, but nothing with JD is ever entirely chaste. This is no exception. I feel the brush of his half-hard erection when he leans in to take my coat.

While he mentioned forgetting to tell me where we were having dinner, he doesn't apologize. That's not his style, and tonight it's not my style to let him entirely off the hook. "I was a bit taken aback. If I didn't trust Antoine so much, I would have demanded he take me back to the hotel."

He rubs his fingers over his chest, right below his neck. "That would have been a mistake."

*Maybe.* I'm not going to engage. I don't want to fight. "I didn't realize you keep an apartment downtown. It's a nice place." I glance around the cavernous space. It's an open floor plan with a bank of floor-to-ceiling windows. It is nice. But different from Sweetgrass, with its warm, sprawling rooms decorated in traditional fabrics and furnishings. Sweetgrass feels like home. This feels sterile, and modern, and blindingly white. *Designer white.* All the apartments in the building probably have this same stark-white walls and nondescript look about them.

"How's Zack?" I ask, studying his face for more than he's likely to give me. I haven't been able to stop thinking about Zack since last night.

"He's okay."

"JD—when you told me you see him every day...it's all I could think about last night. Your mother—she would—"

He puts two fingers over my mouth to shush me. "Stop."

But I don't. I can't. This is the boy I knew, and it makes my heart swell to see a glimpse of him in the man he's grown into. I need to see if there's more of him there. I just need to. I take the long, roundabout way, but I press on. "An hour is a long time to sit with someone who can't engage. Especially for you. You've never been very patient. And I haven't seen any evidence that's changed."

He's pensive and seems to slip away briefly. "It's funny, but the time goes quickly when I'm with Zack. It's calming and peaceful. At least it became peaceful after I stopped dwelling on how much I wanted things to be different for him. I just—I live in the moment when I'm with him now. Want a drink?" he asks.

"How about a cocktail? Maybe my signature drink that you stole?"

His mouth twitches and curls at the left corner, the dimple appears, and his eyes twinkle madly. Then he laughs.

*That's him! That's him!* The voice in my head shrieks with delight. I want to launch myself at him. Rub my body against his like a starved animal whose master has just come home after a long trip.

"I don't have any of that cassis here. And I didn't steal it. I only served it to you because I wanted you to feel at home."

"I call bullshit. You wanted me to know you had lots of information about me."

He gazes at me and smirks. "Maybe a little of both."

"Exactly." I look around while he opens a bottle of wine. Stamped

concrete counters and floors, with exposed steel beams everywhere. The kitchen is comprised almost entirely of stone and steel. It's sleek and cold. "I can't believe how different this place seems from Sweetgrass."

He lifts a shoulder. "I don't pay much attention to this place. It's not home. It's just somewhere I come to crash now and then."

"A place you bring women."

He glances at me, but doesn't say a word. He doesn't have to.

"Dinner will be here soon. Maybe we can talk about a few things while we're waiting." He hands me a glass of cabernet. "You might want to give it a few minutes to breathe," he says, grabbing a beer from the refrigerator.

I cup the balloon-shaped bowl in two hands, warming the burgundy liquid gently. "Do you have a contract?" I ask dispassionately, sitting back on the stool like I'm a sophisticated player in the world of raunchy sex.

His face twists in confusion. "A contract? *No.*"

"I thought these sorts of relationships always had contracts?"

Sparks shimmer in his eyes, and his mouth quirks at the corner. "*Ahhh*, a contract." JD scratches the back of his head. "I don't believe relationships between men and women need contracts." He studies me for a minute, tipping his head to the side. "Do you want a contract?"

I have no idea what I want. I'm just probing to get some sense of what he wants from this relationship. I shrug. "What about a safe word?"

"You don't need a safe word. I'll never let things get that far."

"Really? Weren't you in my apartment yesterday? I'm short one camisole."

"It was never out of control. At least I wasn't."

*Right.* I pull my shoulders back and hold my head high. "I had a safe word at sixteen, and I want one now. I insist. And—and I fully expect you to respect it."

"Fine. Choose one. Something easy to remember."

I think for a minute. "Wilderness."

He swallows hard, and empties the wine bottle into a swan-shaped decanter. The glass swan is delicate with a graceful neck and outspread wings, like it's about to take flight. It has more movement than JD does right now. His entire body is rigid, and his face is blank. I'd give anything to know what he's thinking.

Wilderness is the stable where we played. Where we first discovered the wondrous, dark side of sex. Where I caught him playing those same games

with someone else. It's the perfect word to signify he's gone too far, because that's where he went too far. Too far with Jane—too far with me. *Maybe we both went too far*. The symbolism is scathing, and I know by his demeanor, he thinks so, too.

"I don't plan on giving you anything you can't handle. But use it, if you need to." JD comes over and cradles my face, forcing me to meet his eyes. He blinks a couple of times. His long, dark lashes cast spiky shadows on his cheeks. "Of course I'll respect it. You can trust me, Gabrielle. It might not seem like it, but you can."

More than anything, I want to believe it's true. I want to trust him, again. "I do trust you—to some extent. Probably more than I should. But don't expect me to hand over my complete trust. Again. It's just not possible."

"Because you found me fucking that girl? Fifteen years ago? It meant nothing. She didn't make a goddamn ripple."

"No, not *just* because of what happened in the past." Although the image of you with *her* is imprinted on my soul. It still makes my heart ache. It's not a crushing pain anymore, just an open sore that scabs over, but never fully heals.

I jerk my head away from his grip. "There are the lies you've been telling me, the games you're playing, the secrets you keep. And *that* girl? Jane? Don't you dare say it was nothing. It was *everything*. That, and having your father send me away after I discovered you with her—it nearly destroyed me."

His face twists in agony. The pain and sorrow I see there is breathtaking. But I don't allow it to cow me. "I want the truth about what happened then, and about what's *really* going on now. I know all about the irrevocable trust. You have nothing on me."

He doesn't flinch. And he certainly isn't surprised.

Confusion begins to creep up my spine, followed closely by anxiety, with fury taking up the tail. "You know. You know they told me. You knew it all along." I'm shaking inside, but my voice is oddly calm.

He nods. "I promised to make a donation if your mother is treated well. There's a lot of money at stake for them. The hospital lawyer called me first thing Monday morning after your visit. Told me the caseworker had divulged too much information."

I'm vulnerable. Exposed. Embarrassed—I was sure I had the upper hand—that I knew something he didn't. "When you first came to the hotel, you

were prepared to trick me into having sex with you. To rape me.”

“No!”

“Yes,” I whisper. “That’s exactly how civilized societies refer to sex with dubious consent. You were trying to blackmail me into having sex with you.”

He empties his beer with a long, steady pull. I watch his throat ripple. He drops the empty bottle into a bin under the sink. “It’s not that simple. Not anywhere near that simple. But yes, I was prepared to mislead you, or to do anything else I needed to do to keep—” He stops abruptly, without ever finishing the thought. “But you decided to play along, and saved me from my worst instincts. Saved us both.”

*He always wins.* I bury my face in my hands and feel the small fissures lengthening inside me, crisscrossing over one another, until the tiny cracks have spread everywhere. One more assault, no matter how small, and I’ll shatter into millions of jagged pieces.

There’s no anger inside me. I’m sure it’ll come, but right now, I’m just sad and broken. “This entire week I thought—I thought you didn’t know the case manager told me about the trust. I thought I had some power over you. Some control over this situation. Over my circumstances. *My life.*”

His back is against the counter, his hands gripping the etched lip, watching me cautiously.

I sit in silence, my elbows propped on the cold stone, my mouth resting on my clasped knuckles, trying to understand all of it. Trying to come to grips with my sheer stupidity. “I never had any control. I had nothing. I was just a fool playing right into your hands.”

“No.” He wraps his arms around me and pulls me into his chest. “You’ve always had the power. The real power. All of it. *Always, Gabrielle.* That hasn’t changed.”

He squeezes me tighter, until my cheek is nestled against his beating heart. It’s a sound that once soothed me, but not today. Today it’s just noise.

I try to pull away, but he holds me tighter still, with one hand on the side of my head, his fingers massaging my scalp gently. “Trust me. You’ve got to. So much depends on it.” He swallows hard. So hard it seems almost painful. “Then I’ll tell you everything. I promise.”

JD’s voice is heavy with emotion. The words emerge thick and uneasy. A strangled plea. A desperate prayer into the wind.

His heart is pounding, a strong and steady gallop. This is as humble as I’ve ever seen him. As close to begging as JD has ever come with me. I

wrestle with the feelings inside, trying to make sense of something that makes no sense. Sorrow, betrayal, and—yes, love—it’s there too, stirring the pot.

There’s also fear—fear of the unknown. Fear of the fate that awaits me. It’s as though I’m swimming in quicksand on a cold, starless night, the baying wolves circling, with no help in sight.

I pull out of his arms and off the stool, cupping my elbows as I contemplate the weight of his words. *Trust me. How can I possibly trust you, JD? How?*

I begin to pace, while he continues to negotiate. “Gabrielle. Trust me. For a little while, and then you can have anything you want. I’ll never bother you again.”

As I turn over his words, a ray of light peeks through, and my sluggish brain begins to stretch and churn. It starts slow but then whirs faster and faster until the thoughts are pinging off my skull. His pleas are now nothing more than background din. Maybe he took the keys to frighten me into trusting him. Maybe it’s a setup.

“I never found my keys last night. And today, when I left a meeting at City Hall, my tires were flat, all four of them.”

The blood drains from his face.

“Someone removed the pins from inside, so they deflated without making a sound. When I got into the car to wait for the tow truck, the missing keys were on the passenger seat.”

He’s deathly calm. “You’re just telling me this now?” His voice is icy, and it’s shed all pretense of prayer.

I can tell from his reaction that he knows nothing of the missing keys, and I’m relieved. *So relieved.* That would have been the last straw for me.

“Did you call the police?”

“*Mmhm.* They think it’s a teenage prank. They also think I misplaced the keys inside the car.”

He nods. But he doesn’t look convinced.

“Does this have anything to do with the secrets you’re keeping from me?”

“I don’t know. Flat tires? Probably not.” He squeezes the back of his neck. “But I need you under my protection while I figure it out.”

“Under your protection?” Any excuse to control me, right, JD? “You must be kidding.”

He grabs hold of my upper arms to make his point. “Do I look like I’m

fucking kidding?”

I swallow. No. No, he doesn't. He looks furious, and scared. I might have even caught a sliver of terror in his eyes. But JD doesn't get scared, and he's not terrified of anything. That's not how he's built. He grabs danger by the neck and spits in its ugly face, before he slashes its throat. I've watched him do it more times than I can count.

Gooseflesh has taken over every inch of space on my arms, and the hair at the back of my neck is at attention. It's not the flat tires and mysterious keys that have made me afraid. My body is reacting to his fear. *Maybe you need to listen, Gabrielle. Just listen to what he has to say.*

“What exactly does *under your protection* mean? I'm not leaving the hotel if that's where you're headed with this.”

“You can stay for now, unless there are any more bizarre occurrences. But you need security.”

“I have security.”

“Real security. The kind that will actually keep you safe. They'll disappear into the background. You won't even know they're around. I have it. My brothers have it. It's not a big deal.”

It's a big deal to me. I have a hotel to run, and a Christmas brunch to plan. “No.”

He holds up his hand to stop me. “It's nonnegotiable. You're getting it with or without your consent.”

*We'll see about that.* “Yes, of course, because you would never let a small matter like consent get in your way.” He doesn't flinch. He doesn't react in any discernable way. I try a different approach. “The police weren't all that concerned. Let's not get carried away.”

“My father's the president-elect. There are a lot of bad people in the world.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“We're connected.”

“Then maybe we should disconnect.” It's flippant, and I don't mean it. Not one word.

“Too late.”

“I don't get it, JD.”

“If someone wanted to hurt me, or wanted to pressure me in some way, they might hurt you.”

“It's been less than two weeks. Who could know about us? No one.”

“Don’t bet on it.”

“You clearly believe someone letting the air out of my tires was more than a prank.”

“And the keys?” He scratches his temple. “I don’t know. Not yet. But you can be damn sure I’ll find out.”

“If you knew about the potential for trouble—if you knew someone might use me to get to you—why would you drag me into something like this? *Why?*”

He fills his chest with air and blows it out in a resigned *whoosh*. “Had I known, I would have never touched you.” His voice is filled with pain. His face. His eyes. All of it, heavy with remorse and sorrow. “I was young and stupid, and you were beautiful and sweet. I never stood a chance.”

My heart clenches, and I will away the tears stinging the back of my eyes. “It’s someone who knows about the past?”

“I’ve already said more than I should.” His face is lined with worry, his shoulders uncharacteristically slumped. I can almost see the weight on his back.

“The Christmas brunch is the most important thing that’s happened to the hotel since it opened. If I increase security, people will notice. They’ll ask questions and jump to conclusions. I want everyone to be safe, but I can’t have you going off half-cocked.”

“No one will notice the uptick in security. It will mainly be your own personal detail, anyway. The changes at the hotel will be subtle.” His gaze is hard. “I have a responsibility to protect you, but you have a responsibility to protect your guests and employees.”

“Cheap shot, JD.”

“Maybe. But it’s true.”

“Fine. I’ll try the security. See what it’s like. But if it’s too—”

“Good.” He nods. “It’ll be so much easier on everyone if you cooperate.” He hands me a mini iPad. “I need to make a quick call. Why don’t you sift through my Spotify playlists, and see what you like.” Before he leaves, he slides a thumb across my cheek. “It’s going to be fine, Gabrielle. You’ll be safe with Smith’s team looking after you.”

I’m not sure which of us it’s meant to reassure.

“I’ll be right back,” he says, striding out of the kitchen.

“I’m not agreeing to anything,” I call after him, as he disappears into a room at the end of the hall. “It’s a trial run. That’s all.”



When the door clicks shut, I turn away, propping a hip against the cool counter. *This is crazy.* I gather my hair into a ponytail at the base of my neck and grip it in my fist, sliding my closed hand over the length to smooth the waves, pulling gently until the end.

JD's paranoid. Overprotective—call it what you want. Possessive and jealous, too, but that's another matter. To some extent, he's always been that way when it comes to me, but after his mama died, he sometimes took the safety concerns to extraordinary lengths. And now, it seems like he's upped his game.

I've always thought the excessive smothering was related to his mother and Sera's deaths. It's a common reaction to that kind of trauma. Some events leave such a deep impression on us, they stunt our ability to react logically under particular circumstances. Instead, we react from somewhere inside us bubbling with primitive emotion. Like Georgie, who worries she'll die after giving birth just like her mother and aunt died. No amount of logical reasoning can put her mind at ease. It's the same way with JD. The security he's insisting on is just another way to keep me safe from the boogiemens he conjures. And to keep any interested men at bay—but that's just a bonus.

I rustle through my purse until I locate my phone. I check for messages, but there's nothing pressing to distract me from the little voice in my head that's hell-bent on being heard.

*What are you doing, Gabrielle? Why are you still here?*

*You want this. That's why. The lies, the secrets, the manipulation. Tell yourself anything you'd like. Justify it in any way you wish, but you want this—every second of it, in all its fucked-up glory. If it involves him, you want it. No matter how much it hurts, or how many scars it leaves. You love him. Admit it. You've always loved him. And you always will.*

I scroll through the playlists, looking for something that matches my mood, until I land on Gaga. Yep, this is just right.

I love him. *I do.* All his crazy, and all of mine. Somehow it works—except when it doesn't.

It's all true. Nothing could drag me from here. I'll be careful, I assure myself. I'll be smart this time. I'm older, tougher. My eyes are wide open now. It'll be okay. I know it's all a huge lie, but I swallow it. Every single word.

**Gabrielle**

**J**D comes back to the kitchen with two bags of food, plops them on the counter, and reaches for the iPad to change the music. “Jesus, Gabrielle. ‘Bad Romance,’ really?”

“It seemed like a good night for some Gaga. Stop looking at me like that. It was on one of your playlists.”

“Yeah, well, I have no idea how it got there.”

“Maybe you should stop handing off your iPad to random women,” I tell him, putting out dinner. “I noticed that there’s nothing on that iPad but music.”

“You looked?”

“Of course I looked.”

He pins me with a sharp gaze.

“What, you wouldn’t have looked? *Please.*”

JD tops off my wine and gets himself another beer. We sit at the tall center island, elbow to elbow, Petty playing softly in the background. “Let’s start the evening over,” he says. “Put the last thirty minutes aside for an hour or two. Can you do that?”

I nod, and he blows out a long breath. “So what else did you learn on the dark web?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Isn’t that where you read about contracts and power exchanges?”

I smile, a small wistful smile. “I learned about those things a long, long time ago, in a place not so far away.”

I gaze at him. He’s sullen and grim. And I can’t stand it. “What else did I learn on the dark web?” I ask it in a light, playful voice, that sounds only minimally forced, hoping to coax something resembling a smile from him. “Let’s see. Should I call you Sir?”

The corners of his mouth twitch and curl. And the stress slides off his shoulders, at least for a few minutes. He glances sideways at me, and his chest begins to heave with raucous laughter. It’s a glorious sound, and I start to laugh, too.

“Sir,” he says, his chest still heaving. “That’s too damn funny. *No*, don’t call me Sir. I can’t imagine that word ever rolling off your tongue in a way that would arouse anyone.”

“How about Master?” I play along, hoping to keep the sullen look from reappearing.

He shakes his head, grinning. “Just call me Julian.”

The room stills eerily before it quakes. *Just call me Julian*. I cling to my fork. His is suspended midair. My heart beats so hard, I can hear it in my ears. He didn’t mean to say it. The word slipped out when he was—*being Julian*.

“Julian,” I repeat softly. “You want me to call you Julian.”

His hand still holds the fork, frozen, inches above the plate.

“Look at me,” I demand softly.

He turns his head. Everything is happening in slow motion. At least that’s how it’s registering inside my brain. There’s something in his face. Something I can’t read and don’t understand.

“Julian,” I say again. “I’ll call you Julian.”

JD—*Julian* nods once. “Only if you want to. During sex. Like you used to.” His voice is low and rough. His eyes blazing, so hot, I look away before the fire consumes me.

He begins to eat again, and I shove a small piece of meat into my mouth, too. Chewing and chewing, hoping the repetitive motion will calm me. That it will distract from all the craziness of tonight.

My mind begins to churn again. Our arrangement doesn’t need to include sex. I can have control over that part. I speak only when I’ve fully formed the idea, and have organized the feelings into meaningful sentences. It’s

imperative that I make my case strongly without hesitancy.

“I want to change the parameters of our arrangement. We sort of did earlier. But I want it to be clear.”

“I’m listening.”

His voice is firm, and I’m sure he is listening. *But will he hear me? Will he acquiesce?* He won’t have a choice.

“I’ll play along with your little game, since it’s so important to you. I’ll o—”

“Obey? Is that the word you’re looking for?”

I glare at him. “I’ll do as you ask regarding the things that involve my safety, and in exchange, when it’s over, you will tell me everything I want to know. I mean *everything*, JD. *And* your access to my body is no longer part of the agreement.”

“I can live with that. I’ll miss tormenting your gorgeous little body, but I can live without the sex.”

I adjust my bottom on the stool. “I never said there’d be no sex. Only that it wasn’t part of the arrangement.”

He shifts toward me, his breath tickling my ear. “I never intended to give up the sex. I was playing you. Your body is mine. Always has been.”

I pull back and raise a brow at him.

“I’m teasing,” he says. He doesn’t even try to make it sound sincere.

“No, you’re not.”

JD smirks, that knowing, crooked little smirk that makes women’s panties wet. “How’s the steak?” he asks. “Did they cook it enough for you?”

“Perfectly cooked meat is not getting you out of trouble, JD. The steak’s delicious, but the onion rings are addictive.” I snatch one off his plate, and he pinches my side, playfully. “Next time, I’m ordering a double batch all for myself.” *Next time. Will there be a next time? Who knows?* The words reverberate in my head, until his voice stills them.

“Before we got on the subject of contracts and safe words,” he nudges me with his elbow, “I planned on talking to you about birth control. Are you using anything?”

*Ahhh*, we’re back to the nitty-gritty. “I’m on the Pill.”

He nods.

“And Dean and I always used condoms.”

“I guess you really didn’t want to get pregnant.”

*Condoms and the Pill, Gabrielle—you knew he was cheating, even if you*

won't admit it. You're always lying to yourself when it comes to men. And you're doing it again, now. "I want babies," I say defensively. "It just wasn't the right time."

"Or the right man."

He's arrogant and smug. So smug. And the worst part is, he's right.

JD drops the last onion ring on my plate and gets up, sauntering over to a column of drawers at the edge of the room. He pulls out a manila envelope from the top drawer and slides it across the stone countertop to me. The return address is a doctor's office downtown. "I'm clean," he announces, leaning over the counter.

I nod. I suppose this is the place where I lay out my lab results. "I haven't been tested since my last appointment, six months ago. And even then, not for everything. I was in a monogamous relationship. At least I—"

JD touches a finger to my mouth to quiet me. I bite down on the pad. It's unexpected, and his eyes are molten. "I'll take my chances. But you really should take a look at what's in the envelope."

He watches me undo the clasp and pull out the papers. My eyes glaze over the small print. This is important to JD, that much is clear. It's an offering of sorts. A small gift. His way of reassuring me that I can trust him. The funny thing about all of it is that I would have taken his word about being clean. It's not the kind of thing he would ever lie about. I would be surprised if that's changed, although there have been so many lies now, who knows anymore?

In many ways, I still understand him so well. His moody eyes, his quirky habits, every ragged breath. My brain interprets the signals as though no time has passed. But in other ways, we're still addressing birth control and HIV status.

Once the appropriate amount of time passes, I slip the paperwork back inside.

He studies me carefully. "Any questions?"

"I'm not sure."

His brow crinkles. "Ask me."

"I can't believe how much you weigh. Where do you put it all?"

The crease at his forehead eases, and he lunges at me. "I'll show you."

I push him away, both hands on his solid chest. "I've seen it. It's not *that* big."

He tickles me until I'm laughing uncontrollably.

“I missed that laugh.”

“*Hmmm.*” I don’t want to ruminate about the past. Not now. I want more of the light fun. More smiles and tickles. “Now that we got all of the sexy foreplay out of the way, can I have a cookie?”

He shakes his head and grins. “The only reason you’re not getting a spanking right now is because I’ve always loved your sassiness. Still do.” His nose touches mine. “It makes the surrender so much sweeter.”

He pulls something from his back pocket and lets it brush against my arm. It’s soft. I look down. There’s a long, silky tie of some kind in his hand. *A blindfold.*

“Let’s play a little game,” he murmurs, moving behind me and securing the fabric around my eyes. When he’s done, he pulls my hair aside and touches his warm lips to the nape of my neck.

I shiver.

“What kind of game?” My voice is breathy. I’m nervous. And excited. As much as I always loved gazing at JD during sex, as arousing and satisfying as it was to watch him wrestle with control—I always loved being blindfolded, too. It meant sensory play. I hope that’s what it means now, too. My pussy is throbbing just imagining it.

“Can you see?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“We’re going to play a guessing game,” he whispers near my ear.

I shudder. Now that my sight is gone, the tingling of his warm breath on my skin is magnified.

I hear paper crinkling and sense something under my nose. Lime. And maybe coconut. “What is it?”

“That’s what you’re going to tell me. I have a half-dozen cookies and you’re going to use your mouth and nose to guess what kind.”

“What happens if I guess wrong?”

“Nothing.”

*Oh.* I’m a little disappointed, until he nuzzles my throat.

“I’m warming you up for a different kind of guessing game. Tonight is all about pleasure.”

I squeeze my legs together, and a small moan escapes. I can’t see a thing but I know he’s smirking.

JD slides a thin cookie along the seam of my mouth, much like a lover would use his tongue. “Open.”

I part my lips slightly.

“Wider. That’s it. Now take a bite.”

I do everything he asks, and let the small morsel sit on my tongue before I begin to chew.

“What kind of cookie is it?”

“Coconut and lime. It’s a buttery shortbread. I think.”

“Good girl.” He lifts a glass to my mouth. “It’s just water. Take a sip. Easy.”

I swallow the water, and feel another cookie near my lips.

“This one won’t be so easy to guess,” he says.

I chew the cookie carefully, focusing on the taste. It reminds me of caramelized sugar. But I’m not sure. “Can I have one more bite?”

He puts the cookie to my lips again, but this time I feel him near my face—it’s not just his fingers. At least I think it’s not. I lift my hand to check, but he grabs it gently and lowers it, securing both my hands in my lap.

My breathing quickens. The throb between my legs is stronger. I open my mouth and bite down. The crisp cookie crumbles, and pieces fall onto my lap. I feel his breath on my mouth, his lips nearly touching mine. He’s feeding me with his mouth. Letting me nibble the treat from his lips, like a little bird.

We repeat the sensual exercise again and again, until I’ve guessed five different cookies. JD is patient and reassuring. Stroking my skin gently. Letting me feed from him. Rewarding me with unexpected kisses at every opportunity. Every kiss is its own heated event, making me wetter, needier.

“We’re done with this,” he murmurs, sliding his warm hands under my shirt, and unhooking my bra. He palms my breasts, thumbs circling the hard nipples, until he can’t resist giving them a small, sharp pinch.

“Ahhhhh.” The pleasure mounts, and I can’t sit still for a second longer—but I can’t see to move. “I thought there were six cookies?”

He pinches the furred nipples again, twisting until I cry out. Then he laves them with his tongue until I’m gasping for air, begging for more.

“Julian,” I plead.

But he won’t be rushed. And when I squeeze my legs together for a little friction, he pushes them apart with a *tsk tsk*.

“Do you really want the last cookie?” he asks, his hot breath on my neck.

I shake my head.

“I didn’t think so.”

As soon as I answer, he scoops me off the stool in one easy motion.

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere you won’t fall off a stool and end up in the emergency room.”

“But where?”

“No more questions.”

It’s dark, and I’m not accustomed to being carried. *Breathe, Gabrielle. Breathe.* He lays me on what I’m quite sure is a mattress, and I quickly feel it dip beside me. His hands are on me, undressing me with impatient tugs and pulls. His mouth is everywhere.

Smooth lips.

Wet tongue.

Sharp teeth.

I writhe against the bed, the cool air waltzing over my burning skin. It’s been so long since I felt this way—since he made me feel this way. He’s the only one who has ever had this effect on me.

“You’re mine,” he says, grazing the sensitive skin on my inner thigh.

When I’m naked, he takes hold of my wrist. “I’m cuffing you to the bed.”

Before I process any of it, I hear a snap, and my left wrist is encased in something wide and soft, like velvet. Within seconds, my ankles are shackled too, my legs spread wide, completely open to him, the charged air teasing my needy cunt. I pull on the restraints to test them. I’ve been bound before, but it feels new and scary—just a little scary. *You don’t need to be afraid. He won’t hurt you. You like being tied. Remember?*

*I do.*

Erotic images from the stable flood my mind. We didn’t have a bed, but Julian would tie my hands to a post, or sometimes behind my back, while he ate me from behind, or fucked me until my legs shook.

My pulse is racing out of control.

“I didn’t bind you tightly. There’s some slack for you to tug on.”

His fingers skirt between my ribs, down below my navel. The sensations ripple outward, and I arch off the mattress in response.

“We won’t keep the blindfold on too much longer. Too soon for blinding and binding,” he tells me. “Too long since we last played like this. But you’ll need to be bound for what I have planned.”

I whimper in anticipation, and his lips are on mine, quieting me. “*Shhhh.* Just relax until I’m ready for you. It won’t be too long.” And then he’s gone.

*Relax?* He doesn’t want me to relax. He wants me to lay here and wonder



what he's doing. Wonder when he'll touch me. Wonder if he's still in the room. Time moves slowly for those who wait, the adage goes. Yes, it does. And as the time ticks away, I begin to work myself into a nervous frenzy, until an inexplicable terror builds and stakes a hold in my chest. I can't breathe. "JD. JD!" I scream. "Don't leave me here alone."

The mattress shifts and a sure hand strokes me, while the other unties the blindfold. "*Shhh*. Gabrielle. It's okay. I'm right here. I would never leave you alone tied to the bed. Not even for a minute. It's too dangerous, darlin'."

I manage to regain some sense of composure from his soothing. I can feel my breathing steady. I open my eyes and blink. Once. Twice. His shirt is off, and I see the ink on his chest, and more peeking along his left hip. It appears to be a serpent of some kind, that snakes deep into his jeans.

They're new. New since he was nineteen. I want to run my fingers over them, trace the contours, ask him what they each mean. But my hands are bound.

"I'm going over to the dresser. You'll be able to see me the entire time."

I nod. It's such a relief to have the blindfold off—it was too soon to have so much control stripped away.

My eyes track him across the room. He opens the top drawer, and after a few minutes, he comes back with a deep tray, laying it beside me on the bed. I turn my head to peek inside, but I can't make out what's inside.

"Remember how much you liked sensation play?"

"Yes." *Oh God*, yes, I remember. I remember all the little tools—the feathers and puffs. The sharp wheels and the velvet ribbons. Smooth and bristly. Soft and hard. Hot and cold.

"Me too." He smirks. "I'm going to groom you tonight, brush and comb every inch of your skin until it's rosy and glowing. Work out every knot and tangle until you're purring."

I feel the rush of pleasure between my legs, and close my eyes to ride the wave.

"You were straining to see what's on the tray. Open your eyes and I'll show you the brushes. Would you like to see them?"

I open my eyes and nod. Yes, I want to see them—and *feel them, too*. My toes curl, imagining the sweet torment.

He lifts each instrument, each *toy*, one at a time, so I can take a good look, then skims it over my breasts. The powder puff is first. It looks like something a pampered woman might use to spread scented talc over her skin.

It's fluffy, with gauzy layers, like a billowy cloud skimming the sky on a spring day. Julian brushes it over my right breast.

"Mmmm."

"It's made of silk," he says. "Soft, isn't it?"

I nod, but I'm not fooled. It's soft now, but soon, even the softest puff will be too much. He lets the silken fibers float over my pebbled nipple, once, twice, and again. It's more sensitive than the breast itself, and I moan.

"Oh, Gabrielle. Baby. It's going to be harder for me to stay in control than it is for you."

He takes each implement from the tray, alternating rough and smooth—a hairbrush with natural boar bristles, a feather duster without the stick, a comb with spiny teeth, and a synthetic pastry brush with a long, wooden handle. When he slaps my breasts with the floppy silicone bristles, they sing.

"Are you wet, Gabrielle?"

I avert my eyes modestly. "Yes." Yes, I'm wet because each time he touches my skin with the brushes and feathers, I feel the sensation rip through my core, as though all my nerve endings share a direct connection that ends there, between my legs.

"This is the last thing," he says, displaying what looks to be an artist's brush.

It's round and about a half inch thick. I know there's something special about it, because he saved it for last.

He twirls the brush directly over my nipple. It's sinister and delicious, just like I knew it would be, and my cunt is pulsing with need.

"I'm not going to blindfold you, but I want you to close your eyes and feel. Just feel."

And I do.

I shutter my eyes as he begins the sensuous assault. He starts with the comb, raking the thorny tines over my scalp and cheeks, moving methodically down my throat, lingering on each breast, before sliding it over my belly and across my freshly waxed mound. I writhe and pull on the restraints, my mind blank to everything but sensation. He combs lower and lower still, down the sensitive skin between my thighs, to the soles of my feet—no splash of skin is spared. I don't think I can withstand too much more—but it's only the beginning.

"Which brush am I using?" he asks each time he picks up a new one. My eyes are closed, and after only a short while, my skin is screaming, and I

can't distinguish one from the other.

He eventually has mercy, adjusting the cuffs and flipping me onto my stomach, where he starts with a fresh canvas. The brushes, his mouth, my flesh.

"Julian," I plead, rubbing my body against the sheets. They feel cool and coarse, and I moan and shiver as the sensations swirl into my skin, delving deeper and deeper below the surface.

"This will be cold," he warns, as an icy liquid drips onto the small of my back, pooling in the concave. He dips his fingers into the slippery liquid, dragging it through my slit, to the back entrance, pressing his fingertip against the puckered hole. And like before, there's pressure. So much pressure.

"It's just lube," he assures me. "Lots and lots of lube, darlin'." His voice is low and reassuring, as his fingers slip into my pussy.

I moan and squirm at the welcome intrusion, all while another finger, one that seems longer and thicker, works its way into the pleated bud. The sensation is unfamiliar. My body is confused, and I start to flail as soon as he breaches the first ring of muscle.

"Push out. That's it. Let me in." He strums my clit, and I begin to relax, while his finger works its way inside my ass.

At first, it feels bigger, fatter than it is, but after a few torturous minutes, my body begins to acclimate. I forget all about the dirty, uncomfortable things, when it starts to feel good. Soon, it's so good, I don't even notice his hand leave my pussy.

"I'm going to fuck you here. One day soon," he murmurs, twisting his finger out of my puckered hole.

My mind is blank, my body burning, while he adjusts the cuffs again, and turns me on my back. This time he leaves no slack in the binding. My legs are spread wide. I'm completely open to him. At his mercy. And there is nothing to tug on as he pushes my body to the peak. I'll have to absorb all the sensation. All of it. I'm not sure if I can.

His mouth is on my skin, licking and nipping wherever he chooses. However he wants. Feasting on my body like it's a grand buffet, set out for his pleasure. His tongue flicks my clit, once, twice, and the whimpering begins, and then the prattle of nonsense. I'm going to combust.

"I think it's time to paint," he says, in a sensuous voice that casts anxious tremors, even as it seduces.

“I can’t. Julian. It’s too much. I need to—I can’t.”

“Look at me.” His eyes are black. There’s not a sliver of blue left in them. “You can. And if you’re a good girl, I’ll let you come soon. You need that, don’t you, darlin’? I’m going to make it so good for you. And you’re going to come all over my nice clean sheets. Like a dirty slut. Like *my* dirty, filthy slut. Only mine. Only for me.”

“Yes,” I whimper. *Yes, yes, yes.* “Please. I want to be your dirty slut. Only yours.”

I feel the brush slide down my belly and dip between my legs, swirling inside my wet cunt.

He brings the bristles up and paints each nipple, before suckling the hard bead. “Delicious,” he murmurs. “So delicious.”

I tug on the restraints, but there’s nothing to pull on. Nothing to help me as he dips the brush into my greedy pussy again and again, spreading the wet slipperiness everywhere. Nothing to pull on while he laps it up.

My body shakes. My mind numbs. And the bristles are between my legs again. But this time he doesn’t pull them away. This time he sweeps them over my clit. Gentle at first. Slow and precise. But soon the assault is faster and harder. Harder and faster. And so delicious.

The angle of the bristles change. “*Oh God! No!*” He’s not going to let the little pearl hide. I’m trembling, but he doesn’t stop. With a firm hand, he coaxes it from under the hood with the insistent brush.

I scream, thousands of silent screams, while I try to writhe away from the evil bristles, but I’m bound too tight to move.

He tosses the brush aside and clamps his lips over my clit, sucking and licking. Licking and sucking, until I surrender completely.

My head thrashes from side to side when he lets the orgasm come. The tremors, the bucking, and then a free fall through the gossamer shadows. I hear the shattering scream, years of pent-up frustration erupting from a million tiny pinpricks in my flesh.

I taste the tears. But I can’t feel them on my cheeks.

JD uncuffs me. Speaking quietly while he massages my stiff limbs. “You’re so damned beautiful—tied to my bed—coming apart on my tongue. I’ve waited a long time to have you.” He smooths the hair back off my face. “To taste your sweet pussy. It’s so sweet, Gabrielle. So sweet. I’ll never get enough of you.”

He kneels between my legs and lowers his mouth, kissing away the tears.

“You’re going to come again, baby. All over my cock this time.”

I’m not sure I can come, again—ever. But his cock stands erect, needy, and dark. And when it twitches, I feel the twinge between my legs.

His lips find mine in a scrumptious coupling, and I twine my arms tightly around his neck, not wanting it to ever end.

It’s much too soon when he pulls back, to hook my legs over his hips. The short distance between us, almost unbearable.

Then I feel it.

The tremor on my skin.

His hands shaking.

His control gone.

I know what’s coming.

He won’t ease inside me.

It won’t be gentle.

I squeeze my eyes shut, digging my fingers into his back as he fills me with one, long, agonizing thrust. The groan pushes up from my belly, and into my chest, making its way out into the charged air between us. He stills at the sound, still buried deep, and kisses my throat tenderly.

“*Jesus Christ, Gabrielle. You’re so damn tight around my cock.*” He ruts deeper, bringing his warm mouth back to mine. “I’ve missed this so much. For so long. Missed you every day.” His voice is crushed stone, mined from a fiery quarry deep within the earth.

I’m already starting to climb.

He moves in a steady rhythm—long, punishing lunges interspersed with shallow thrusts that let me catch my breath. My body is awake, every inch of flesh, every muscle, every nerve warbling. He peels the hair off my sweaty face and sinks his teeth into my neck.

I gasp for breath. For sanity.

His hips pound me with long, ruthless strokes. Unyielding.

Uncompromising. He wants it. “Now. Give it to me,” he growls.

I scream as he takes it. Fast and rough, with no pretense of kindness, he rips the twisting orgasm from my trembling body, leaving nothing behind.

It’s brutal.

I’m drowning.

Gasping for air.

Filling my lungs with short, uneven pants, simply to breathe.

The waves swell and surge, pulling me under, finally dragging me to

where there is only bliss. Where there is only us.

I feel his muscles tighten in my hands, his frantic pace, his head fall to my breast. There is only the final savage thrust, and the primal roar, when he empties himself into my throbbing cunt.

After a few minutes, he kisses my forehead tenderly, *so tenderly*, and rolls off me. As soon as he's gone, I begin to shiver.

Without a word, he scoops the quilt from the floor and wraps himself around me, the covers pulled up over us. He rains soft kisses on my hair. The kind of gentle drizzle that doesn't disturb the terrain, but makes it lush and fertile. "Every time," he whispers, "every single time with you, it's more than I could ever imagine. *Every time.*"

His arms engulf me in a safe harbor, and I sink into them and surrender to sleep.

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WHEN HE WAKES ME, there's no time for a shower before I have to get back to the hotel. No time to process. No time to sort through shaky thoughts and feelings.

"I'm so late. I don't think there's time to wait for Antoine to get here."

"Your security is waiting right outside. They'll get you back to the hotel in time."

"You already arranged security?" *Of course you did.*

"It took one phone call."

I'm too tired to argue. Too sore. And too content to let this spoil my mood. Besides, I told him I'd try.

JD introduces me to Rafe and Gus.

When I turn to say good night, he tells me, "I'm coming too."

*Great.* I pull him aside, away from where Rafe and Gus can hear. "You can't come to the hotel with me. People will know. My staff will know what we've been doing. People talk. Charleston's a gossip-lover's paradise. You know this."

"You're an adult. You're allowed to have sex. With me, anyway," he adds. "But no one will know what we were doing. Not unless you tell them." He tips his head toward the big, burly security guards. "I'm sure Rafe and Gus know their business, but I want to get a feel for how they are with you. I

won't hang around for long.”

“JD.” But I don't argue because he's shushing me with his mouth, and his tongue, and his teeth. I even lose sight of Rafe and Gus, who have discreetly turned their backs to us.

“JD.” I pull back, panting softly. “I really have to get back.”

He tucks a curl behind my ear and nods. His eyes are warm and focused. His face gorgeous and scruffy. The furrows and lines relaxed. I like him like this. Just like this. And it takes everything I have not to launch myself into his arms and beg him to take me back to bed.

## Julian

I'm on the side lawn at Sweetgrass, stretching before my morning run with Smith. But I can't stop thinking about last night—wondering how many more nights I can squeeze in with Gabrielle before it's over.

It was everything I've ever wanted. Everything I dreamed about in the last fifteen years. *Fifteen fucking years*. But it wasn't just the sex—although, Jesus, that was pretty damn spectacular.

I see Smith winding down the lane. He'll be here in a few minutes. I want to ask him what Rafe and Gus did to piss him off enough to get assigned to Gabrielle's security detail. Poor bastards. She was polite last night, but she bristled whenever she noticed them loitering. And I'm afraid it's only going to get worse for them. But I'll have to talk to him about it later, because we don't discuss business during our morning runs.

Smith's not even breaking a sweat when he reaches me. "You ready?" he asks. It's not a question. It's a challenge.

"I'm ready. Been waitin' for you to drag your sorry ass here."

Smith and I have been good friends since boarding school. We each spent a year there before going on to Harvard, where we were roommates for all four years. We run at five thirty, every weekday morning, and occasionally on the weekend. Rain, sleet, or snow, we never miss our run unless one of us is away.



“I can only do the five-mile route this morning,” I tell him. “I have an early meeting.”

“We’re not even out of the circle yet and you’re already bellyaching. You’re such a pussy.”

“I’m a pussy? You have on those stupid Redskins shorts, and you’re all over my shit?”

“My mother sent them to me. Take it up with her.”

“How is she?” I ask.

“Fine. Busting my father’s balls constantly now that he’s retired. But he deserves it, I’m sure. It’s her birthday in a couple of weeks. I’m going home for the party. Wanna come?”

“Wish I could.” Smith’s family is great, and I’ve spent a lot of time at his house over the years, especially during college, but I haven’t been back in a while. “It’s been crazy since the election. I’m swamped, trying to get a read on Sayle.”

“Too bad. I could use your help. Meredith’s bringing a boyfriend home from school with her.”

“You’re kidding.” Smith has four sisters. All younger than him, but Meredith is the baby. “Who said she could date?”

“According to my father, my mother said it. I guess nineteen-year-old college girls are allowed to have boyfriends in some places. It’s criminal.”

I laugh, but it’s bittersweet. My sister Sera never grew old enough to have boyfriends. I rub the cramp in my side. “Your father must be losing it, thinking about her away at school hanging out with some guy.”

“He says it’s fine. Through gritted teeth.” Smith chuckles. “My mother hasn’t given him a choice.”

Smith’s father is a retired four-star general. He served as the head of the Joint Chiefs during the first term of the current administration. “Sorry I’m going to miss the fun. It’s been a long time since we laid a beatin’ on one of your sister’s boyfriends.”

“If you change your mind, my parents would love to have you—you’re like the son they never had.”

I laugh, because nothing could be further from the truth. They couldn’t be prouder of Smith. Rightfully so. “What did you end up doing last night?”

“You mean who.”

“Let’s hear it,” I say, rounding the bend near the stable where my mother kept her horses when she was a girl.

“You’d like her. She’s your type. I’ll text you her number.”

“You’re done?”

“Oh yeah. As much as I’d like to go a few more rounds with her, she has the potential to be a stage-three clinger.”

“So you want to pass her off on me? Thanks.”

“I’m telling you, you’d like her. No gag reflex. She’s proud of it, too. Likes to show it off.”

“I’m all set.”

“*Really?* Since when do you pass up a chick who thinks her mission in life is to give good head?”

“I have too much going on.”

“Too much going on, my ass. This is about Gabrielle Duval, isn’t it?” He shoves my arm when I don’t answer. “Huh?”

“Don’t be stupid.” It doesn’t come out convincing, but I don’t give a shit. What I do with Gabrielle isn’t up for discussion. Not even with Smith.

“Maybe I should tell her she doesn’t have to cut off your balls, because you’re about to hand them over to her.”

“Fuck you.”

“We can get her a nice little case for them, and I do mean little, so she can keep them in her purse.”

He just played me. He knows I don’t say shit about Gabrielle. So instead of asking me about her directly, he took the sneaky way around. That’s what I would have done, too. *But he’s still an asshole.* “There was no woman without a gag reflex last night, was there?”

“Only in my dreams.”

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As I WEAVE through traffic on my way to my meeting, the phone rings. *My father.* I haven’t had enough coffee yet to deal with the sonofabitch. “Yeah.”

“Good morning, JD. How’s my business doing without me at the helm?”

He wants something. I can already tell from his tone.

“It’s just fine. Better than ever. I was planning on calling you later. What is it you want so early in the morning?”

“Not only am I your father, but I’m your president, and I expect you to speak to me with a little more respect.”

You'll get all the respect you deserve—not a fucking ounce. "It's early. I haven't had enough coffee to be human yet."

"Maybe you should start keeping more reasonable hours and laying off the booze. I've entrusted you with a lot of responsibility."

When it comes to people telling me how to run my life, I don't have a lot of patience. But when it's my father telling me how to be a more productive member of society, I want to murder him. "What was it you said you wanted?" The question comes out as rude as I hoped. He clears his throat, all pissed off. I can practically smell the toxic fumes coming from the other end of the line. Best thing that's happened so far today. I tug on my seat belt a bit and lean back in my seat, waiting to hear the bullshit du jour.

"I have a reporter hounding me," my father says. "Kate McKenna. She wants to do a feature on Zack. A human interest story. She'll need some photos, too."

"What?" I bark, slamming my brakes when the traffic light turns from yellow to red.

"I think it would be a nice thing. Provide some support to families caring for children with brain injuries. She'll be respectful of Zack's privacy. And yours, too."

"There is no fucking way any reporter is coming anywhere near Zack. Not while I'm still breathing."

"He's my son."

A lot of damn good it did him. "You don't have custody. Legal or physical. You don't get to make any decisions."

"Listen—"

"No. I am not having this discussion with you, or with anyone. It's over. And if you don't have anything else to talk about, I've got to go."

"JD, wait. I'm just asking you to consider it. It could be good for everyone."

DW doesn't do a damn thing unless it's good for him. Nothing. "It could be good for you. That's what you mean."

"I would really like it to happen."

"I would really like to have breakfast with my mother on Mother's Day. I would really like to torment Sera's boyfriends. And what I would really, really like, is for you to leave Gabrielle Duval alone. But none of that's going to happen, is it? Not in this lifetime, anyway."

"No one misses your mother and Sera more than me."

He's lucky my fist can't reach his jaw.

"And as for Gabrielle Duval, she's not on my radar. I have a fucking country to run, for Christ's sake."

"So you're not the one who paid someone to steal her keys, or had the air deflated from her tires?"

"I don't play children's games."

*Bullshit.*

"If I had her in my sights, believe me, you'd know about it."

*Stealing keys and letting the air out of tires is bush league, even for him, JD. He prefers messing with brakes and filming underage girls getting off.*

"I asked you nicely, because technically you are Zack's temporary custodian, but I would rethink my position on the feature story if I were you."

"You'll have to kill me first. And there's not a fucking thing that's temporary or technical about the custody decree."

"I would also learn to be more respectful, if I were you. And more afraid."

"Afraid you'll have someone kill me? *Nah*. Only so many of your family members can die before people start snooping around and asking questions. And you never know what a tenacious reporter might uncover if she starts digging. You can't afford that kind of scrutiny."

The call ends without a single civilized word. If that asshole thinks he's coming anywhere near Zack, or Gabrielle for that matter—

*Get a grip, JD.* Sweetgrass is more secure than Fort Knox, and thankfully, Gabrielle's agreed to security.

I let things get out of control with him today. Let him push my buttons like I'm a fucking puppet and he's the puppeteer. I know better than to allow it. It can't happen again. Not if I want to make him pay.

What kind of man commands respect by telling another man, *I'm your father*, or *I'm the president*? If you have to ask for it, you don't deserve it, and you ain't never gettin' it.

I slam my hand on the steering wheel. A fucking human interest story. With pictures. My head is seconds from exploding all over the car. It wouldn't surprise me if he gave the damn woman my address.

I call Smith to give him a heads-up that a reporter might show up with some bullshit story about Zack, and then sit in the parking lot at Sayle Pharmaceuticals, trying to calm the fuck down before I go inside for meetings.

*I need Gabrielle.* She's the equivalent of a shot of bourbon, only tastier, and more settling. But that'll have to wait until tonight.

The conversation with my father has left me unhinged. I don't trust the bastard, and I don't want to be too far from Sweetgrass this evening. Gabrielle's been hounding me to see Zack. Maybe tonight. *Maybe.*

**Julian**

I'm kicking myself for promising Gabrielle we'd see Zack tonight. I've kept him sheltered for so long now that the idea of bringing in a stranger, even though she's not really a stranger, has been gnawing at my gut all day. Sure, I can still say no, and if it were anyone else, I would say no. But it's her, and I don't want to go back on my promise. Besides, if I can get past the pain in my stomach, I know having someone else, *a good person*, visit him, is a positive thing.

Gabrielle's security team brings her to Sweetgrass at six forty-five. I wave them off at the door. "She's fine here with me. I'll call you when she's ready to leave."

I brush my mouth over hers. It's a quick hello, and I want more. So much more. "It's good to see you haven't chased off the security detail, yet. How did it go today?"

"A whole team, just for me," she says, pinning me with her eyes. "Seems excessive."

"They need to rotate to stay fresh. And you'll be happier if you're with the same people day in and day out."

"I'll be happier when security shadowing me is nothing more than a bad dream."

"You'll get used to it."

“When do we need to leave to see Zack? It’s six fifty.”

The gnawing in my stomach becomes heartburn. “We’re good on time.” I take her hand and lead her toward the back of the house.

“JD, isn’t the garage on the other side of the house?”

“Yep.”

“What are you doing? We don’t have time to—”

I squeeze her fingers. “You ask a lot of questions. Now let me ask a couple. Have you showered recently? Put on clean clothes?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not asking for me. I like you dirty. But the weather’s changing, and it might be hard for Zack to recover if he catches a bug. We’re more careful about introducing new people and germs at this time of year.” I should have mentioned it earlier, but I’m not used to bringing anyone to see him who doesn’t know the drill.

She doesn’t say anything, so I keep rambling like an idiot. “You can shower upstairs if you need to, and slip on a paper gown over your clothes.”

“JD?”

I stop in my tracks and gaze at her. She’s smiling at me. A small, soft smile, with a twinge of melancholy. Her eyes are soft like melted chocolate.

“You’re jumpy. If tonight isn’t a good night, we can see Zack another time. I’ll be disappointed, but I’ll understand. Just do what you think is best for him, and don’t worry about me.”

Right then, I knew what was best for my brother. I wasn’t bringing her there to curry favor, or to share an important piece of myself with her, although there was that too, but I want Zack to feel her kindness and sweetness again. If he can find comfort with anyone, it will be with her. He adored her. “Zack will be happy to see you.”

She squeezes my arm. “I showered right before I came over, even washed my hair. And these clothes are clean.”

“Then let’s go.” I open the heavy double doors that lead to the back wing of the house. Only a few people, besides my brothers, are allowed in this part of the house. And now, Gabrielle.

Sumter takes one look at her and blocks the doorway. No one’s getting in here on his watch, especially not the pain-in-the-ass reporter who phoned me three times today. I run a hand over his head and tell him to go lay down.

“Protecting Zack has become his job. He takes it seriously,” I tell her.

When we enter the room, her eyes flit from corner to corner before they

land on Zack. It's a spacious room with lots of windows. I had a large sliding door installed so that it would be easier to take him out for walks. But Zack's weak, so we don't do that very often anymore. The room is more functional than beautiful, but it's so much better than where my father had him holed up.

I introduce Gabrielle to Maureen, Zack's nurse, and wash my hands.

She washes her hands too, and peeks up at me while she dries them. "He lives here," she sputters. "With you."

"Yep."

"JD," she whispers, drawing in a breath, and brushing past me on her way to the special chair where my brother's resting. "Zack," she says softly, taking his hand. "It's Gabby." She lowers herself into a chair beside his, never letting go of his hand.

I grab a toy from the basket near the door and play a little tug-of-war with Sumter. I want to give her a little time with him.

She talks sweetly to Zack, as though he can understand every word she says, just like I knew she would.

Gabrielle was the one who forced me to visit Zack when he came home after the accident.

He seemed to recognize us then, but all he did was grunt and flail. Chase dragged his pillow and blanket in every night and slept on the floor beside his twin. Eventually the nurse insisted my father put a bed in there for him. Gray was afraid of Zack. And the truth is, so was I. Well, maybe not exactly afraid, but sickened, and repelled by the thing that had taken over my brother's body. It embarrasses me now to think about how I felt back then.

Gabrielle was never afraid of him. Never sickened or repelled. She's better than that. She'd go in all the time and hold Zack's hand while he pulled at her hair and drooled. She quietly shamed me into finding my balls. Chase, too. There was no way I was letting a little kid and a girl be braver than me. I learned to go in a little at a time, to visit every day, until my father decided it was too inconvenient to have Zack at home. Until my father decided that Zack would be better off dead.

"You should tell him about the Gatehouse. I bet he'd like to hear about it. Wouldn't you, Zack?"

Her voice is cheery as she talks about the hotel. "I bought the building from the city for a dollar. Can you imagine that? It had good bones, but it needed a lot of sprucing up.



“My mom and dad, and Lally, helped with some of the work. And Gray helped too. He didn’t actually do any work. You know Gray.” She laughs. “But he taught me a lot about restaurants and introduced me to some important people. Gray still knows everyone, and everyone knows him. Do you remember Georgina? She works at the hotel too. It’s really special to be able to work with my best friend.”

*When I close my eyes for a minute, I see a little girl sitting on the piazza steps, chattering incessantly while she blows big soapy bubbles for Zack and Chase to run after. Occasionally one lands on their chubby hands before it pops. They ooh and aah, squealing like she spins gold.*

I listen attentively while she tells Zack about jelly candies, and designer sheets, and dozens of other small details I don’t know anything about. “The biggest surprise was in the basement,” she tells him. “We discovered a half-dozen gates hidden under a pile of rubble. Beautiful iron gates. Philip Simmons’ originals. You know, he’s the man who made those intricate gates all over Charleston. Even if he didn’t make the ones we found in the basement, they’re beautiful reproductions. That’s why I named the hotel the Gatehouse.”

Gabrielle beams while she talks about the hotel. Her voice is light and filled with joy and pride. For a few minutes, I let myself bask in her happiness. I take solace in making her leave Wildwood before my father could get his clutches into her. It was her home, just like it had been my home. It hurt her to be sent away. I hurt her. But he would have destroyed her whole life had she stayed.

I want to ask her some questions about the hotel. I want to know more about the jelly candies, the honor bar, and Frette sheets. But I’m afraid if I speak, I’ll spoil the magic, so I keep my mouth shut and my focus on Sumter as I try to catch the bubbles floating in the room.

The hour passes and the nurse returns.

“It’s time to say good night,” I tell her.

She smiles at me, and it’s not just her mouth and her eyes that engage. It’s her entire body. At least that’s how it seems. Like she used to. Like I’m something more than a huge asshole come to ruin her life.

I smile back at her, holding her gaze for as long as I can. Hoping to capture the moment, the feeling, so when she’s gone, I’ll have something to keep me warm at night.

I would have gazed at her forever, but she turns to Zack.

“Now that I know how close you are, I’m coming back to see you,” she tells him. “Soon.” Gabrielle presses her lips to his forehead. “Good night, Zackie. Love you bunches.”

Something squeezes in my chest, reminding me that somewhere inside, my heart still beats. “Give me a minute.”

She nods, and says goodbye to Maureen.

I help Maureen get Zack back into his bed for the night. Zack has two full-time nurses who rotate schedules, Maureen and Sue. During the day there’s a physical therapist and a male nurse’s aide to help, too. Maureen’s in her late forties. She’s competent as hell and kind. I trust her to be alone with him.

Saying good night to Zack is always bittersweet. He’s frail, and I’m never sure when good night will be goodbye. But the prospect of walking out of his room tonight doesn’t seem as lonely with Gabrielle here.

Before I go, I smooth the little wisps of hair on his head. “It was nice having Gabby visit, wasn’t it? She’s a welcome change from my ugly face, that’s for sure. Tomorrow we’ll finish reading about the dragons on Ponteluna Mountain. I love you.” I squeeze his hand and kiss his head much the same way Gabrielle did. “Good night, Zack. Sweet dreams.”

It’s been years since I overheard the first of many conversations between my father and Olson about the accident. Just bits and pieces, some of it puzzling, and the rest devastating. It was as though he didn’t care they were dead. Or maybe, he even had something to do with the car careening off the road.

I eavesdropped on their conversations as often as I could, but that night was the most gut-wrenching of all. That night, a piece of my soul crumbled. That night, I stopped being a kid.

After I left them, I went straight to Zack’s room and kicked everyone out. I was too afraid to confront my father. Too afraid he’d kill me too. And I was ashamed. Ashamed for being a coward. More ashamed than I had ever been in life. I sat at the foot of Zack’s bed, my knees tucked under my chin, and cried fat, angry tears. Lots of them. I promised DW would pay. That everyone involved would pay.

It was the last time I shed a tear.

It’s taken a lot of years and heartache to get to this point. Lots of dead ends, and loose threads that gave me hope but amounted to nothing more than a collection of disappointments. I pulled dozens of those threads, chased

every clue that seemed even the slightest bit promising, but nothing ever materialized into anything concrete.

But I have access to Sayle now, and deep down, I've always known the answers to the accident are there.

Sayle is the prize. Always has been. But the only way DW could have gotten his grubby hands on it was if something happened to my mother while my siblings and I were minors. Although there's more to it than just that. Has to be. I just don't know what it is yet.

The answers are there. I'm not sure where they're hidden, but they're there. They have to be, because I've looked everywhere else, and I will not accept failure in this regard. I will avenge my mother's death and Sera's. I will exact retribution for Zack and for Chase, who was in that car with them. And for Gray, too.

I might not live to enjoy it, but that sonofabitch will pay.

**Gabrielle**

I wait outside the room for JD, catching the sweet way he says good night to Zack. *JD, you are the most aggravating man on the planet.* You haven't changed. Not one bit. You have a hard, tough shell on the outside for everyone to see, but all the goodness is on the inside. So much goodness. Don't you dare tell me otherwise, because I just saw your heart.

Before JD comes out, he has a brief conversation with Maureen, something about the change of shifts and additional supplies.

I watch him walk toward me. He's moving slower than usual. There's no swagger in his gait. Letting me visit with Zack was a huge step for him. I realized it right before we went into the room.

I'm bursting with emotion, and I have so many questions. But he's raw. I can see it, and I need to be careful with him. I want to be careful.

He beckons with his head for me to follow, and we walk halfway to the kitchen in silence.

"You take such good care of him," I say. "In just the short time we were there, I can tell. I'm not surprised."

"I don't do anything. Just arrange for caretakers."

I place my hand on his arm. "Don't. Please don't."

"You hungry?" he asks, pulling away from my touch.

"Will you tell me how he came to be here? I can't believe your father

allows it.”

“My father didn’t have a choice.”

“How could that be? Zack’s his son.”

JD shrugs. “It’s not that complicated. My father locked him in an inferior facility and didn’t authorize the care that might have helped him. By the time I was old enough and strong enough to take a stand against him, it was already too late for Zack, but I intervened to slow the downhill slide. DW’s a cold-blooded sonofabitch, but my blood runs just as cold. And at the time, I had nothing to lose from suing for custody.” He glances at me, his eyes glazed. “When you’ve got nothing to lose, you can accomplish almost anything.”

I’m having a difficult time following the details. Maybe it’s because JD is half mumbling, and half cryptic. Or maybe because it’s so much to take in. “You were awarded custody?”

“When it became clear I wasn’t backing down, DW signed over custody. He’d been negligent for years. It would have been difficult—maybe impossible—to prove, but he couldn’t take the risk of a big, ugly scandal. My guess is he was already eyeing the presidency then. He hated signing over custody to me, but it was his best choice.”

My heart is heavy, and I’d like to wring DW’s neck myself for what he did to Zack—and to JD. And I’m sure this is only the tip of the iceberg. Lally always said after their mother died, the Wilder boys were left impoverished. I never fully understood what she meant by it until now.

“Does your father come by to see Zack?”

He shakes his head. “He never visited Zack the entire time he was locked away. Not once. He’s not welcome at Sweetgrass. If I see him on the property, I’ll shoot him.”

His voice is mean and dispassionate, and none of it sounds like bluster. Not that JD has ever been much for bluster. My skin is prickly. *He’s not kidding.* “If I didn’t know better—” I hold onto the wall for support. “You sound like you’d actually kill him.”

He doesn’t bother to deny it.

“Let’s see what Lally left to eat,” he says, heading toward the stove.

I don’t say anything. But something gnaws at me. If DW finds an unfortunate ending, *God forgive me*, so be it. But I don’t want blood on JD’s hands—not his father’s, not anyone’s. I can’t let it go. “You wouldn’t really kill your father, right? Aside from turning my ass pink, you don’t get to dole

out punishment. That's what we have laws and courts for. And ultimately, it's God's purview."

"The law and the courts are in his back pocket. Especially now that he's been elected president. I don't think you need me to remind you how I feel about God."

JD pulls a couple of dishes from a warming plate below the oven. "Looks like Lally prepared some pulled pork and macaroni and cheese. The woman's going to give me a heart attack one of these days from all the cholesterol she feeds me." He sniffs the pork and grins at me. "But what a way to go."

He's not going to answer my question. I guess that's its own answer. *We will revisit this before I leave, JD.* Maybe you'll be more forthcoming with your belly full. "Lally's never been big on greens unless they've been rolled around in lard," I tell him. "This note says there's slaw in the fridge."

"You still like your barbeque tangy?" he asks.

"Of course. Who eats that sweet slop?"

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AFTER DINNER, I help JD tidy up the kitchen. "You can have the plane tomorrow night to visit your parents, or Saturday morning, if it's better for you. I don't need it this weekend."

"Thank you. Saturday would be great." He's been true to his word about making the visits easy for me. It wouldn't surprise me if he gave up the plane once or twice when he did want to use it. Nothing about him surprises me anymore. "Then I can be at the hotel tomorrow night. It saves some money, and I don't have to impose too much on Georgina. She never says no, but she's seven months pregnant now."

"I'll have Patrick get in touch with you about the details in the morning. Is Georgina having a boy or a girl? Do they know?"

I wish Georgie could be as comfortable talking about JD as he is talking about her. We've been friends forever, and I hate keeping my life so compartmentalized. "A girl. We have big plans for spoiling her rotten."

"Poor Wade. He'll be outnumbered. It's all downhill from there."

I whack his arm. "What do you know about having daughters?"

"Nothing. Not a damn thing, and I plan on keeping it that way."

*Hmmm.* He always wanted kids. I wonder what changed. Maybe it's just

daughters. “You don’t want a family?”

“When I took over this place, I imagined having a family. Most people see that kind of life for themselves.” He takes some plates from the dish rack and stacks them on a glass shelf inside the cupboard. Then he shuts the door so cautiously the click is unperceivable. “But I don’t see it anymore. I’ll call your security detail so you can get home before it gets too late.” He glances at me. “What’s wrong?”

I realize I’m scowling. “Nothing. I was hoping that maybe—”

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe you’d kiss me.” Maybe you’d take me to your bed, here at Sweetgrass, where you don’t bring other women.

He stares into my face for a long time. Like he’s looking for some excuse not to kiss me. Maybe he’s thinking that this is home, not a place for dirty sex. Whatever’s bothering him, he eventually relents and kisses me. It doesn’t start this way, but it ends with his hands in my hair, his mouth claiming mine, and both of us struggling for breath. “Just a kiss, that’s all you want?” he asks.

“Hmmm. It’s a good place to start. I like it when you cant my hips, so I can feel your cock against my belly when you kiss me.”

“Your plan is to tease me?” he asks with mock horror. “I feed you Lally’s barbeque and you want to rub yourself against my cock and get me all worked up before you leave?”

I laugh. “Yes. No.”

There’s a glimmer of mischief in his eyes. “Which is it?”

Definitely no. “How would you like me to make amends, Julian?” Should I get on my knees? I bet you’d love that.

The knob in his throat bobs. “I have a list. A long list. It’ll take you a lifetime to get through it.”

I rub against him with whatever control I can muster, while I dip my tongue into his mouth. But a little voice keeps intruding. Reminding me we have unfinished business. Reminding me I’m in deeper than I planned. *Your father’s not worth it, JD. Do not trade your life—your soul—for revenge. I can’t lose you again, not so soon.*

“JD?”

“Hmmm?”

“All that talk about your father earlier. It scares me. Really scares me. I need to know you wouldn’t kill him, or kill anyone. That you don’t have that

kind of hate in your heart.”

He says nothing.

I have a lump in my throat, because this is serious. Because I’m about to dredge up something that has always been off-limits between us. Something twisted and painful, that made him recoil the last time I mentioned it. I straighten the waistband of my skirt, lining up the darts and seams. When there’s nothing left to adjust, I speak. “You always believed your father had something to do with the accident. You still think that?”

He wheels away from me and turns his back to put out the light over the sink. “I never said that.”

“You didn’t need to.” My voice is whisper soft, hoping to soothe some of the sorrow I know he’s feeling.

“It’s getting late, Gabrielle. I’m going to have them bring the car around for you.”

You will not dismiss me, JD. Not on this point. “Not yet,” I say firmly.

He turns a piercing eye on me.

*Your mean little looks don’t frighten me.* “Before I go, I want your word that you won’t do something so foolish. So awful. Promise me, or this whole thing between us is off. I will not be a party to any of it.”

He runs a knuckle along his jaw, back and forth, and for a few seconds, I think he contemplates showing me the door. But he doesn’t.

“I have no plans to kill my father, although if he comes anywhere near Zack, I will use his chest for target practice. But I’d prefer to see the bastard suffer.” He inches closer to me, until we’re almost touching. “This is a ridiculous conversation, don’t you think? We could be doing something so much more satisfying with our mouths.”

He lowers his head to kiss me, but before he can, I grab hold of his cock, through his jeans, and squeeze. He’s smirking but his eyes have a dark, sinful glimmer that makes my pussy flutter.

“‘I have no plans’ is not a promise, JD.”

“This is coercion. No court would ever recognize any promise made under these circumstances.”

I squeeze tighter. He pretends to wince. Although he doesn’t fool me—in one move, he could easily overtake me. He’s that much bigger and stronger. But he’s letting me make my point.

“You’re going to have to do better than that, darlin’, if you want to bring me to my knees. But I’ll make you the promise.”



I'm not convinced but I let go, and before I can say another word, he spins me around so he's behind me, holding my wrists securely in his right hand. He skates his left palm down my arm, capturing the elbow, his hard cock pressed into my back.

"Give me your panties," he murmurs above my ear. "We've got people in the house. I need something to shove into your mouth, because I'm about to make you scream."

**Julian**

When I get back from my run, there's a message on my phone from Chase: *Sline Slocation*. Secure line, secure location—he must have found out something about SOLO. Or the summit.

Before showering, I go straight to my office, drop my cell phone on my desk, and enter the safe room that acts as my inner sanctum. Outfitted with foil walls, and no windows, it's not much bigger than a generous walk-in-closet. In fact, that's how my brothers and I referred to it when we were kids—the closet. Still do.

My grandfather used the space to take proprietary calls or hold meetings where he discussed classified information. It seems overly paranoid, unless you're acquainted with the level of spying that goes on in the pharmaceutical industry. Smith modernized the security in the closet when he outfitted the security cottage out back that he uses as an office. There are also secure rooms at Sayle, but I don't have the same kind of confidence in them.

I call my brother from a phone inside the windowless room. "Where are you?" is the first thing Chase asks when he picks up.

"The closet. Must be important for you to be up at six o'clock."

"Been up most of the night. GEM is the antidote to a nerve agent. It's a hybrid—viral and chemical agent. The antidote is a vaccine that can be used after an attack."

“Wait a minute. SOLO is working on a vaccine for a nerve agent?” I repeat, trying to wrap my head around nerve agents and antidotes, which I know little about. “Is this a government contract?”

“No. I looked, but I couldn’t find any contract. This is SOLO’s project.” *Sayle’s project*. And I’m now responsible for anything that happens with the company. “Who has the nerve agent? Do we have it?”

“As far as I can figure out, the US and Russia are the only two countries with the agent—it’s leftover from the Cold War. But who knows? Sayle had some—for testing purposes. It should have all been destroyed, but if that were the case, SOLO couldn’t be working on a vaccine.”

Nerve agents are weapons of war. That’s their only purpose. “If we don’t have a government contract, then why do we want to manufacture it? Who will be our buyer? It’s not like CVS or Walgreens is going to stock it.”

“I haven’t gotten that far yet.”

“Do you think DW would try to sell it to the US government after he becomes president?” I ask. As far as I’m concerned, the answer is yes. But my mind always goes to the darkest places where my father’s concerned. I can’t afford to chase twisted fantasies. This is serious.

“I don’t know. That would be fucked up, but hey, it’s possible. You know he’s going to do whatever he can to fill his pockets while he’s in office.”

“The conflict would be glaring. Congress won’t stand for it.” But he’s doing it for some reason. And Chase is right. It’s about money with him. It’s always about money.

“How close is that vaccine to prime time?”

“I don’t know that either. But it looks to me like they’ve been running trials.”

“Trials? *Jesus Christ*.” Creating an antidote, in and of itself, is not illegal, but testing on humans requires mountains of paperwork, along with rigorous internal and external reviews. “Please tell me they’re not conducting human trials?”

“No evidence of that. But JD, that guy Rofler, he was in touch with DW after you met with SOLO.”

“I’m not surprised.” I ought to rip him a new one and toss him out into the parking lot. But I’m not going to do that. Not yet. I want more information before I kick his ass out of the building.

“One more thing.”

*Fuck*. “There’s more?”

“Yeah. That summit you said Gray’s going to?”

I massage my eyes to ward off the clusterfuck headache that’s creeping up. “Yeah?”

“I didn’t find any sign of it anywhere, on anyone’s schedule. Including DW’s. Nada.”

“That sonofabitch is already up to no good.”

“He’s probably not in it alone,” Chase says. “Don’t underestimate the number of criminals around him. I don’t know if it’s every administration, or just the one DW is putting together. They look like the kind of guys who got their lunch money stolen every day, but these are some bad motherfuckers.”

**Julian**

“Hey. What’s up?” I say to Smith, tucking my phone into the crook of my neck, so I can continue to research nerve agents on the laptop while we talk. It’s all I’ve been doing since my call with Chase this morning.

“Gabrielle Duval ditched her security detail.”

My fingers are still on the keyboard. *Gabrielle Duval ditched her security detail.* It takes me a couple of seconds to process the words. “What do you mean, she ditched her security detail? What the fuck does that mean?” I clear the browser, grab my car keys, and head straight for the parking lot. My first instinct is to find her.

“It means she snuck out the back door of a meeting she was supposed to be in, and we have no idea where she is.”

My heart is pounding, as I stride right past my assistant without stopping to tell her I’m leaving the premises. “How do you know she wasn’t abducted?”

“We saw her on camera. She left City Hall alone—out a back door—and scurried around the corner toward King Street. Never looked back. But that’s all the camera caught.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

“Who do you think she went to meet that she didn’t want security tagging along?” Smith asks.

I don't like the insinuation.

"How the hell do I know?"

"Well, you're pretty chummy with her. I heard she screamed loud enough last week that security entered your apartment because they thought there was a problem. Why am I not surprised she's a screamer?"

"I told Rafe and Gus not to say a fucking thing about that to anyone. I'm going to fire both their asses. And then I'm going to beat the snot out of you."

"This is the problem, JD. The last time I gave you shit about a screamer, you told me you'd give me her number. Said she'd probably scream for me, too. I don't remember you just offering me Gabrielle's number."

"Cut the bullshit and find her."

"We're looking. I'm capable of doing more than one task at a time. But if you just let me handle her security like I handle everyone else's, shit like this wouldn't happen."

"You are handling things. She ditched *your* people," I shout.

"*My* people. But not *my* plan for protecting her. This is all on you, baby."

"I'm getting in my car. I'll see if I can find her."

"You might not want to do that. She left that building of her own accord. She was going somewhere. You might not like what you find. Just sayin'."

I slam the phone against the dashboard twice before I disconnect the call. No, it doesn't make me feel any better.

I call her a few times, but her phone is off. For the next hour, I drive around Charleston. I go to City Hall first, and then to the hotel, scouring the streets for her. My next stop is her parents' house, but someone's staying there while they're away. I doubt she'd go there, but it's worth a try. What if she's in some kind of danger? Someone might have tricked her into leaving the meeting. Or maybe Smith's right—what if I don't like what I find?

I'm still conjuring up all sorts of bad scenarios, one worse than the other, when Smith calls back.

"We found her. She's at Georgina Scott's."

*That was my next stop.* I release a heavy sigh. This has been the longest fucking hour of my life.

"Took an Uber so we couldn't trace her," Smith continues. "JD, whatever the fuck you have going on with her isn't working. You need to let me manage her security—all of it. I can keep you apprised of what's going on, but she isn't safe this way. And neither are my people. I can't do business like this."

The relief washes over me for about ten seconds, and then it's gone. I'm so pissed off right now, I could smash glass with my bare hands. "I'll have a word or two with her. You've met her. She's stubborn. And she doesn't want security."

"We can stage something to convince her she needs it."

"There have already been a couple unstaged incidences that haven't seemed to sway her."

"Like what?"

"Someone took the hotel master keys out of her office. And the next day, all four of her tires were deflated while she was at a meeting. The missing keys were on the passenger seat."

"You didn't think it was important for me to know about this?"

"The police downplayed it." Even as I make the excuse, it sounds ridiculous. Smith won't buy it for a second.

"This is exactly what I mean, JD. You didn't tell me because you knew I'd insist on making a security plan that she wouldn't like. One that included tracking her phone—at the very least."

"We press too hard, too fast, and she's going to push back."

"She's already pushing back," he says. "Any ex-boyfriends who might not like that she's hanging around with you?"

"No."

"You answered that way too quickly."

"There's an ex-fiancé, but he's in prison."

"You sure about that? They move people through the system quickly these days."

"I'm sure."

"The keys and the tires as separate incidents don't bother me so much. But deflating the tires and leaving the missing keys on the seat? Sounds like someone might be gaslighting her. If that's the case, it's a whole other breed of bad. You have any idea who might want to do something like that to her?"

"I don't know," I mutter.

"You sound like you might know. Don't be such an obtuse prick. My people. Her life. Spit it out."

"My father."

"DW?" Smith asks, like he might have misunderstood me.

"Do I have another father?"

"I have no fucking clue what you rich people do. You could have a dozen

fathers. But that one's the president-elect. Of the United States, for fuck's sake. You think he's gaslighting some woman you're chasing. Why?"

"Keep me out of his business."

There's only quiet breathing on the other end of the line. It's like he's weighing what I just told him, and trying to come up with a response. It does sound preposterous, but I know it's true.

"Listen," Smith says, softly. "I know DW's a huge asshole, and having Gabrielle running around without security today got to you. But she's fine, and she wasn't doing anyone, unless she's into pregnant chicks. So, pour yourself a whiskey, or get Zack's nurse to give you some anti-anxiety meds or something, because this stuff about your father is crazy talk. And it's one thing to say shit like that to me. It's another to repeat it in polite company. You do know that, right?"

"I'm well aware." Which is why the fucker is still walking the streets instead of in jail where he belongs.

"Let me up the ante. Help Ms. Duval come to the conclusion that she needs some big scary dudes hanging around to protect her."

"Not yet. Let me try one other thing first."

"You're too involved with her to be in charge of her protection detail."

"No."

"JD—"

"Not yet, Smith."



**Julian**

I haven't spoken with Gabrielle since she eluded security yesterday. I've picked up the phone a dozen times since then, but I've been too pissed off to even speak with her. Don't trust what I might say. Probably better to deal with her in person anyway.

I have some semblance of control tonight. The urge to beat her ass has receded into the background, although it's still lurking.

I thought sex was the way to control her. To make her soft and compliant. I'd done it before, although last time, I had no ulterior motive. But I've gotten so caught up in her, so caught up in how good she feels in my arms, how good she smells, and the amazing way her pussy clenches around my cock, that I slacked off. I let it become the kind of relationship my heart wants, not the kind it needs to be to keep her safe. That ends today.

When I get to my apartment, she's already there, making a mess in the kitchen. Pots and pans everywhere. *God help me.* The woman can't boil water without destroying the kettle.

"You're early. I was hoping to surprise you with supper," she says, with a big, beautiful smile.

"Is that your way of making nice after ditching your security detail and having everyone frantic with worry?"

"I didn't mean to cause any worry. I thought I'd be back before anyone

realized I was gone.”

“Really?”

“I went to visit Georgina. She wasn’t feeling well, so I brought her a quart of soup from Millie’s. She and Wade are having some trouble, and she needed me.”

“None of that explains why you left Rafe and Gus holding their dicks outside City Hall.”

“I didn’t want to bring an army with me to her house.”

“Two men is not an army. This is bullshit, Gabrielle. Your detail is professional.”

“They make Georgina anxious.”

“Well, that’s just too fucking bad.”

“JD—” She places her hand on my cheek, brushing her lips against mine, but I’m not in the mood for sweet kisses.

“Is that chicken?” I ask, pulling away from her.

“Yes. Lemon chicken and rice pilaf.”

“Is that how you’re planning on killing me?”

She swats me on the arm playfully, and my dick jumps. *Find your balls, JD.*

“The only thing I’m hungry for right now is you,” I murmur, yanking her toward me.

She plays along, jutting her hips forward, her belly rubbing against my lengthening cock.

“After supper,” she says, in a seductive little voice, “you can have whatever you want.”

*Whatever I want? Oh, Gabrielle you have no idea.*

“Forget the food,” I urge, digging my fingers into her ass. “I want my dick in your sassy little mouth. Right now.” It’s coarser than I’ve been lately, and her eyes widen.

“Take off your clothes, Gabrielle. All of them.”

She hesitates for a few seconds, and then begins to undress, quietly. My dick’s hard, but I’m not feeling the sexy. When I start to have second thoughts about punishing her, I think about her being abducted, or worse.

“Get on your knees and take out my cock. You were a bad girl yesterday, and I’m still not myself. I need you to help me relax, to make it up to me for all that time I spent worrying about you.”

When she doesn’t immediately obey, I haul her to me and bury my hands

in her hair, claiming her mouth, until she moans.

“Julian,” she whimpers, but I don’t want to hear it.

My hand slides to her pussy, and I finger her hard, until she’s gasping and shaking. But I pull my fingers away before she comes. “On your knees, Gabrielle. I won’t ask again.”

She wets her lips and kneels at my feet, unbuckling my belt, hands trembling.

My cock leaks while her clever fingers work the zipper. I wind her hair around my hand, aroused by every move she makes.

She doesn’t free my cock. Instead, she tugs at my trousers to pull them down.

“No. I said take it out. The only bare-ass person here will be you.”

Gabrielle sits back on her haunches and gazes up at me, her stained lips rubbing against each other. “No.”

I wrap her hair more tightly. “No?”

She shakes her head. “I will not suck you off on my knees while you’re fully dressed and I don’t have on a stitch of clothing. Not when you’re in this kind of mood. It feels—it feels—”

“Like a punishment?”

She blinks. “Degrading.”

“No more degrading than if someone kidnaps you and rapes you, leaving you for dead. Take out my cock.”

She doesn’t budge, but I can’t let this go. Not after yesterday. Let’s do it your way, Gabrielle—the hard way. “Fine. You want me to take my clothes off? I can do that. You want to play like that? Let’s play in the bedroom.”

I drag her down the hall. She’s tense and guarded, and she should be, because what I’m about to do won’t be pleasant.

“Are you going to spank me?”

“Not tonight.” I strip down bare. “Is this what you wanted?” I ask, tossing her on the bed and covering her body with mine before she can answer. I suck a dusky nipple between my teeth and bite down until she cries out, and then I tweak the other roughly.

While she whimpers, I take both her wrists in my hand and cuff her to the bed. There’s no play in the restraints tonight. I do the same with her ankles, spreading her legs wide so I can have unfettered access to her pussy. When she’s secure, I shove a pillow under her hips.

“What are you doing?” she asks breathlessly.

“Giving you exactly what you deserve. Maybe I should keep you here, bound like this all the time. Then I wouldn’t have to worry about you running around the streets of Charleston alone—an easy mark for anyone who wants to hurt you.”

“I don’t believe anyone wants to hurt me. The security is your way of controlling me,” she says softly. “And to ensure there are no other men in my life.”

“I don’t need Rafe and Gus to *handle* any other men in your life. I’m quite capable in that regard. But I’m jealous and possessive. You’re right about that. And don’t test my patience,” I warn, checking one more time that there’s no movement in the restraints.

“Please don’t leave me here like this. *Please.*”

I don’t say anything to reassure her.

“Will you respect the safe word?” she asks, with the twinge of anxiety in her voice.

I want to say no. That I won’t respect it because I want to teach her a lesson. Because I want her to submit fully to me. Because I want her to do every fucking thing I tell her to do. Because I’m sick and tired of her rebelliousness.

I wrestle with all these feelings while she watches me with wide eyes that are growing more and more apprehensive as the seconds tick on.

“JD?”

“Of course I’ll respect your safe word. Always.” I slide my hand between her legs and stroke her hard little clit. “But I’m going to make you very uncomfortable. You’re going to pull on your chains and beg me for mercy. You’ll sweat and whimper. Your pussy will weep all over the sheets. But there will be no mercy for you. Not tonight.”

She shivers, and I feel the gush of arousal on my fingers.

“I think the better question is, will *you* respect the safe word? Will you use it only if it’s absolutely necessary? Or will you safe out the minute things aren’t going your way?” It’s a total dick thing to say. But I don’t give a shit.

She nods, and I lean over to kiss her cheek. “Good girl.”

I cross the room, and when I pull the artist’s brush and a blindfold from the dresser, I hear a gasp from the bed.

**Gabrielle**

**J**D places the brush and blindfold beside my head, so every time I turn my neck, I see them. He lays on his stomach, between my bound legs, and licks my pussy, avoiding the clit like it's iced with deadly poison. He laves and bites, small nips—not hard, but not gentle, either. The moans form deep in my belly and bounce free, one after the other, while his tongue teases.

He's in a mood tonight. I shouldn't have ditched security yesterday. I knew he'd be upset. I knew it violated the terms of our agreement, but—  
“Ahhh.”

He holds my clit between his teeth, then pulls away, scraping the swollen flesh.

My stomach does little flips when he reaches for the blindfold, his eyes smoldering. Is it passion? Anger? I don't know. But they're the last thing I see before the silky fabric blinds me.

Before I adjust to the darkness, the brush is on my mouth, painting my lips.

Then he works the evil bristles inside my mouth. “Suck,” he demands. And I do.

Until he's satisfied.

Until he runs the brush down my chin, between my ribs...down, down, down, until it hovers over my clit. Grazing the swollen bead.

I grab for the sheets. I'll need fistfuls to help withstand the torment he surely has planned for me. My fingertips dance on the soft fabric, but I can't grip even a tiny piece. The binding is too tight.

He lowers the brush.

My muscles tighten. Every one. The bristles prick the sensitive flesh. It feels as though it's made up of millions of pointed fibers. My legs shake uncontrollably, and as I arch my back in a final surrender, he pulls the brush away.

I whimper. "JD. Please." It's such a desperate, pathetic whimper.

"Remember this feeling. Remember it well the next time you're tempted to put yourself in danger."

His voice is tightly controlled, but I hear the anger bubbling beneath the surface. My heart pounds—*boom, boom, boom*—and I instinctively pull on the restraints. But there is no slack.

JD pushes the blindfold up.

It takes me a minute before my eyes adjust. His cock is in his hand. He's stroking and squeezing. His eyes never leave mine.

"Do you want this, Gabrielle? Do you want to milk my cock with your pussy? Do you?"

I don't say anything. I'm afraid of him right now. *Just a little*. I should use my safe word, but I don't.

His pulls are shorter, harder now, his breath coarse and uneven. Without warning, he comes all over my belly and tits. I gasp loudly. JD stares into my eyes as long ropes of cum sail over my skin.

He will mark me like this, twice more, before the night is over.

I lose count of how many orgasms he deprives me of. How many he ruins. He's vicious, without an ounce of compassion, masking my eyes whenever he chooses and forcing me to watch when it suits him. And as he promised, I'm a sweaty, blubbery mess, floating in blissful darkness, among the gauzy shadows, where nothing touches me.

*Wilderness*. It was on the tip of my tongue, during those brutal seconds, before I began to float. But I never said it. And I'm not sure why.

He eventually lets me sleep.

When I wake, the cuffs are off, and I'm piled with soft quilts. He has juice for me, and salty crackers.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, sitting on the bed next to me, in a pair of well-worn jeans.

I test my legs, stretching them along the mattress. My muscles are stiff and sore. “Wrung out. That was brutal.” I begin to wonder why I let him do that to me. But I’m still too foggy to think clearly.

He nods. “Don’t ever ditch your security again. Don’t ever put yourself in danger like that.”

He pulls me to his chest, but my exhausted body finds no comfort there. And a small part of me wonders if I’ll ever find comfort in his arms again.

“How about a shower before you go home?” he asks, smoothing my hair.

Yes, a shower, my muscles beg. I would love nothing more than to huddle under a warm spray. I nod and pull away, slowly lift my torso out of bed.

JD guides me to the bathroom and turns on the water in the shower.

I catch sight of myself in the mirror as the room begins to fog. I’m washed out, like someone coming down from a prolonged drug high. My drug was sex. The mirror is steamy, but I stare at my pale complexion and sunken eyes until the reflection disappears in the haze.

We get in the shower, and JD washes my hair and carefully soaps every inch of my skin with sandalwood soap that smells like him. When I seem unsteady, he props me against his body and secures me with a strong arm. I feel his erection growing while he attends to me, but he doesn’t touch me in a sexual way. The shower is purely utilitarian.

After long minutes under the warm water, I begin to awaken, my body humming with desire. The feeling is no longer urgent, but it’s gnawing for release.

I sway into his thickening cock, but JD shifts away. When I do it again, he slaps my ass. Not hard. But it’s sharp. Like his words.

“Not for you. There’s no relief for you tonight. And when I see you tomorrow, you’re going to look me right in the eye and tell me if you touched yourself when you went home. If you lie, if I even think you’re lying, we’re going to do this all over again.”

I gaze up at him. The light flickers in his steely eyes, not like fireflies on a warm summer evening, but like bullets during target practice. *Why did you allow it to get this far, Gabrielle?* I wanted to placate him. I thought we could work out our feelings with sex. His anger. My regret. It was foolish of me to think sex was the answer.

“Wilderness,” I mouth. “Wilderness.” This time the word is loud and clear, echoing off the cold, white tile.

He freezes, his eyes all over mine. He doesn't understand.

"The safe word isn't just for when you've pushed my physical limits too hard," I say. "It's about pushing my emotional ones, too. You went too far. And I don't feel like you're done."

There's a ripple when he swallows, but otherwise, he doesn't move.

"I didn't use it earlier—I thought about it, but I could see how worried you were when you came in. How much you needed to punish me. I wanted to give that to you. And deprivation is brutal, but it brings its own kind of toe-curling pleasure. Eventually." I stop for a breath. "I didn't safe out while you were edging me, but I probably should have, because you demanded things of my body, in a way that I'm not sure was playful, or even arousing for you. I was confused at the time by all the sensation. But I can see things more clearly now. Everything you did in there, it was angry and threatening—you're still threatening me. None of this feels right to me, JD—it feels almost abusive."

"I'm sorry," he says quietly. "I'm sorry."

I wait for more, for some kind of explanation or meaningful remorse, but there's nothing. "That's it? That's all you have to say for yourself?"

JD turns off the water and grabs two towels from a hook outside the shower. He starts to dry me, but I grab the towel and finish drying myself.

Right now, I don't want him touching me.

"Yesterday," he says in a heavy voice, "all day, even after I knew you were safe, I was apparently the biggest asshole on the planet. At least according to my brothers. Lally threw a spoon at me and kicked me out of my own kitchen. Patrick went home early with a migraine. And Smith offered to go a few rounds with me. I should have taken him up on it." His eyelashes flutter gently. "After I knew you were safe, I was so angry with you. All day, and all night. Furious. I wanted to see you. But I didn't trust myself to respect the boundaries. The safe word. Human decency. I was raging, Gabrielle. I couldn't even talk to you on the phone, I was so pissed."

He tips his head, gazing at me with those blue, blue eyes. "I thought I was in better control today. I should have canceled tonight."

His confession is staggering. I should be afraid of a man capable of that much anger. I should run out the door as far and as fast as I can.

But I don't.

I know the difference between an abusive, out-of-control man with no respect for boundaries, like Dean, and a man who spins out of control, but



who understands his impulses. Who respects boundaries. Should he have engaged in this little game tonight while he was still on edge? No. And while I'm not responsible for his actions, I shouldn't have played, either.

"I think we both learned something today. When I was with Dean and things got out of hand, I couldn't stop it. There were no safe words. We didn't have that kind of relationship. And even if we had, no safe word would have stopped him from hurting me that night. You stopped bullying me when I asked."

JD winces when I use the word bullying, but that's how it felt to me.

"When we play these games, the lines between reality and fantasy blur," I say quietly. "It's what makes them so seductive. We bump against the edges, so there are bound to be blips. You stopped the second I asked you to stop."

"Gabrielle. I'm just agitated today. It wasn't hard to stop. But I was furious yesterday. With you. Out of my fucking mind. It wasn't a game. I don't think there was a single boundary I wouldn't have crossed. You should know that."

I nod. "You understood that about yourself. You had enough control to think about it."

"Don't give me more credit than I deserve. I might have hurt you." The pain in his face is overwhelming.

"I'll take my chances."

He steps toward me. "You're a fool." It's a halfhearted warning, delivered in a strangled voice.

"We'll see."

I step into the mirror and slide a wide-toothed comb through my wavy wet hair, occasionally glancing at his reflection as he watches me. The woman in the mirror isn't a fool. She's strong and smart. She knows what she wants. And the man standing behind her? The one she's loved all her life? She wants him. With all his broken pieces. The nicked and dented fragments, and the twisted shards, beyond repair. Every one of them.

"Is there any chance I can get something to eat before you send me home?" I ask.

"I'll fix something while you get dressed," he says, slinging the towel around his neck.

When I get to the kitchen, JD's barefoot, in worn jeans and a long-sleeved Gamecock T-shirt. His hair is damp. He doesn't look dangerous. He looks young. And delicious.

I climb onto a kitchen stool and JD brings a tray of food over to me—chunks of cheese and smoked ham, and cubes of sweet pineapple.

“What happened to the chicken I made?”

“I tasted it. I think we’ve both been punished enough for today.”

I smile, and then laugh. A silly, out-of-control, exhausted-to-the-bone laugh.

He laughs too.

“Gabrielle?” he says, wearily, even before our laughter fades.

“Hmmm?” I ask, biting into a bit of salty ham.

I’m still savoring the salt on my tongue, when he swivels both stools so we’re facing one another. He drags mine closer to his, until our knees touch. “The security isn’t there to put a crimp in your life. I would never do that to you. They’re there for your protection. That’s all. I don’t want to lose you.”

His voice is grave. The raw intensity in his face winds its way to my heart, and I reach up and brush the hair from his eyes. “I know.”

*I know you believe it’s all about my safety. Even tonight. I know that. I just wish I could ease your worry.*

**Gabrielle**

I'm in an abandoned corner of the hotel kitchen, polishing silver serving pieces I borrowed for the brunch tomorrow, when my phone rings. *JD*.

It's been nearly a month since the night I used my safe word. I haven't had to use it since, although he's still bossy and controlling. That'll never change.

"Hi," I say, happy to talk to him, even though there's so much going on in the hotel. "You're on speakerphone, so behave yourself."

"Lally cut her finger," he says. "It sounds bad. She needs stitches, but won't go to the emergency room."

"Damn pig-headed woman. I'll call her."

"Gabrielle. I'm not in town. I need you to go over there and take her to the emergency room. I know the timing sucks, but there's no one else."

I look around the kitchen. There's so much to do before tomorrow. I gave Georgie a few days off so they could spend the holiday with Wade's sister, and two people I was counting on for help have called in sick. The very last thing I need right now is to go to Sweetgrass. "I'll head over right now."

"Thanks. Call me from the ER when you know something."

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AS RAFF PULLS into the circle at Sweetgrass, I'm surprised to see white lights strung around the porch and trees, and luminaires lining the walkways. None of it was here last week. Lally must insist on decorating for Christmas.

"Just keep it running," I tell Gus when he opens the car door for me. "I'll have her out in five minutes." Even if I have to drag her by her bleached-blonde hair.

I run up the porch steps and ring the bell. JD answers the door. "What are you doing here? I thought you were away? I don't have time for games today."

"Are you finished?"

"No. Is Lally even hurt?"

He shakes his head and motions me inside, but I turn around to go back toward the car.

JD's not having it. He grabs my arm and pulls me inside. "I have guests. Find some manners before I take you to meet them." With a squeeze, he lets go of my arm.

"Guests?" I hiss. "You brought me here under false pretenses to meet your guests?" I stammer. "You know how busy I am today. How short-handed." For the most part, I know what to expect from JD—at least out of bed. Although he still surprises me, and not always in a good way. But this is too much. "It better be the fucking Queen of England you want me to meet."

"Sweet pea, you givin' this man a hard time?"

I glance at JD, and then at the man ambling into the foyer. "Daddy." My voice is muted, almost a whisper.

What's he doing here? I just spoke to my parents yesterday. "Is everything all right? Where's Mama?"

He holds me in his arms and pats my back, reassuring me like he did when I was a child. "Everything's fine. And if you're done dressing down JD, you can go say hello to your mama."

I catch JD's eye, my mouth still hanging open.

He's smirking. "Your mother's in the living room, visiting with Lally," he says. "We waited on you for lunch."

I'm having a hard time processing everything. Surprise parties are like that. It's why I've always hated them.

JD helps me with my coat and nudges me in the direction of the living room. I follow the laughter. My mother's laughter. Lally's laughter. I feel JD's hand on the small of my back, steadying me. He presses his lips to the

top of my head. “Merry Christmas, Elle.”

*Elle.* I stop and gaze up at him.

He opens his mouth as if to speak, but he doesn't, and when he finally does, I'm certain it's not what had been on his lips a moment before. “Your mom's been anxious to see you. Go.”

My mother looks great, dressed in deep-red velour pants and a beautiful white top with a beaded neckline.

“Oh my God!” I run to hug her. “It's wonderful to see you. I was planning on visiting the day after Christmas, but I'm so happy we'll be together on the holiday.”

“Me, too, baby. Me too.”

“When did you plan this?” I ask, pulling back. “The doctors let you come home? How did you get here? And you, Miss Lally, your fingers look just fine. Were you in on this too?”

“So many questions, Gabrielle. My goodness.” Mama laughs.

“And still no answers. I'm sure you had something to do with this, too, JD.” I crane my neck over my shoulder, but he's gone.

“JD thought it would make a nice Christmas surprise for you,” my father says.

“The doctors said it's okay?”

“I've been in the treatment for seven weeks, and they weren't going to do anything over Christmas. I have a three-day reprieve. JD worked out the logistics. Brought his plane and a nurse with him to bring us home.”

“Said he wasn't leaving anything to chance,” my father pipes in. “Said you'd whip his backside if anything went wrong.”

My father seems so happy. And my mother. It must be a relief to be back in Charleston, even for a few days.

“I know Lally's nephew is living at your house until you get back, and the hotel is full, but you can stay in my room. I'll have a cot made up in my office. It'll be perfect.”

“That's not necessary,” Lally says. “I prepared a room upstairs for your parents. There's a nurse on duty here all the time. This is the best place for your mother.”

I turn to my mother. “Are you sure you want to stay here? I have to be at the hotel. I won't be around much.”

“You sleep in your own bed. We're fine here. More than fine. You do what you need to do. I'm hoping Lally will let me help with Christmas Eve

supper.”

“Help with supper? You’re crazy, woman,” Lally says flippantly, dismissing my mother’s offer to help. “You need to rest.”

Mama’s face drops, and Lally doesn’t miss it. “You know how I am about people in my kitchen. Even you, Vivien.” She wraps her arm around Mama’s shoulders. “But I’m sure I can use the help. We’ll be feeding more people than I’m used to.”

I catch Lally’s eye and wink. “Where did JD go?”

“He’s getting lunch.”

This I have to see. “Maybe I should help him. That man shouldn’t be anywhere near a kitchen.”

“Same goes for you, missy,” Lally says, and everyone laughs.

“I’m better in the kitchen than he is.”

“I’ll be right there. Don’t even think of turning the stove on while you’re in my kitchen.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not that bad of a cook.”

“You are that bad. I’ve eaten your food. Almost killed me.”

“I’m just going to help JD carry things in. Surely I can do that without causing an outbreak of food poisoning.”

What I really want is a few minutes alone with JD.

“It took some effort to do this,” I say, when I get to the kitchen.

JD is rummaging through a cupboard and doesn’t respond.

My chest grows heavy in the silence. And my mind wanders aimlessly. Flitting in and out of the dark shadows—I begin to wonder if this is in some way about the secrets. If this is a manipulation of some sort. I walk over to him and place my hand on his back. “Why, JD? Please tell me this isn’t connected in any way to the secrets. Please tell me it’s as my father said, just a Christmas surprise.”

He recoils from my touch.

“Talk to me, JD.”

“It’s not like you’re a normal woman. I couldn’t just send Patrick out to buy you a pair of diamond earrings. You would have been all pissed off.”

*It’s a Christmas present.* I feel the stress slip away. “If Patrick had picked out my Christmas present for you? Yeah, I would have been annoyed.”

“Even if I picked out a pair of diamond earrings myself—it’s just not something you would have loved. It’s not something I would have been comfortable with either,” he mutters. “When you’ve got money, diamond

earrings are the kind of thing you give a woman when you don't know what to give. When you don't want to give too much of yourself. I wanted your Christmas present to be special. I wanted you to know that I put thought and effort into it."

I rake my fingers through his hair, lingering near his temple. God help me, I love this man. "Like the frame you made me in shop class when you were a senior."

He shrugs a shoulder.

"Thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my suspicious heart." I try not to cry, but a tear slips out, and then another.

"I want you to be happy, Gabrielle. And safe. That's all I want."

JD pulls me to him, molding my hips to his, and cups my face while he kisses away the tears. I could stay with him, like this, forever.

I don't hear the approaching footsteps, and I don't think JD does, either.

"Have some respect, JD," Lally admonishes, "before I take a broom to you. Her father's in the house." And then she mumbles something to me about cows and milk that I don't entirely catch, but I get the drift.

She begins pulling food out of the refrigerator and dishes from the cupboards, chastising and poking at us while she works, but she's biting back a smile. I can hear it in her voice, and the twinkling in her eyes is unmistakable when she hands me a platter to take to the living room.

As we sit and have lunch, my mind keeps going back to the hotel. There's so much to do there. I peek at my watch. Twenty minutes, and then I have to leave.

I watch JD with my parents, and with Lally. For the first time, I feel ridiculous for thinking he sent me away when he was tired of being my boyfriend. I'd held onto the childish self-centered idea because it was easy. And because I needed to believe *something*. I needed answers when there were none. My parents never would have allowed such a thing. And Lally. She would have pitched a fit the size of Texas. I'd like to say it doesn't matter anymore, but it's not true. In some ways, it's never mattered more. I still need closure—I need to close the door on the past, not so I can start fresh with someone else, but so we can start again. So we have a real chance to build something.

I glance at the clock on the mantel. "I have to get back to the hotel. I'm so sorry. I didn't plan very well for this."

"Do what you need to do. We're just fine here," my mother assures me.

“What time will you be back for supper?” Lally asks.

“I—uh—”

“Wildflower is closed today and tomorrow,” JD says, looking at me. “Gray sent some staff over to the Gatehouse. A few extra sets of hands so you can have dinner with us tonight. They should be there by now.” He nods reassuringly. “Don’t worry. They’ve all had experience with difficult clientele.”

“It’s Christmas. I don’t know how he managed that,” I blurt out much too abruptly. The words sound frazzled and ungrateful.

“Not everyone likes to spend the holidays with their family,” he explains patiently. “We’ll make it a late supper. And then you can go back to the hotel before Santa comes.”

JD always thinks of everything. He pretends he doesn’t like to get into the weeds, but he cares about the details.

I turn to my parents. “We’re doing a brunch in the morning with Santa, and we have all sorts of fun planned for guests, but I’m off the hook after brunch. We can spend the rest of the day together.”

“After church,” Lally says, “maybe your parents can go to your fancy *brunch*. And I’ll make a late Christmas dinner, here. How about four o’clock? Does that work for everybody?”

“Perfectly,” JD answers for all of us.

“Aren’t you going to your cousin’s?” I ask Lally.

“Good excuse to break that tradition. I can’t stand her husband’s side of the family. Sloppy drunks. Besides, your mom can’t do everything, and who are we putting in charge of the kitchen, you?”

Everyone laughs, including JD.

“Why don’t you come by for brunch, too, Lally? I’m not cooking.” The thought of having everyone at the hotel for brunch, especially this brunch, makes me happy. And I love the idea of feeding Lally. Fussing over her the way she always fusses over us. “It’s Christmas, Lally.”

“I’ll be spending the day with my stove. I don’t want it to be alone on Christmas,” she says, waving me off.

But I’m stubborn. I go over to her and clasp both her hands in mine. “I would love for you to be with us, even for a short while.”

“Maybe for a very short while,” she says, squeezing my fingertips.

I glance at JD. “You don’t mind us taking over your house when you’re not here?”



“Where am I going?”

I realize I’ve been so wrapped up in my own Christmas plans that we never talked about his. “I—I just assumed you’d be going to Wildwood to be with your father and Shelby, and your brothers.”

“Shelby and my father spend the holiday in Palm Beach. Her family joins them. I never go, and it’s hit or miss with my brothers.”

JD is the one speaking, but I can feel all eyes on me.

“Gray and Chase are coming here for Christmas dinner tomorrow—or supper, or whatever it ends up being. If there’s food, they’ll come. They’ll be by tonight, too.”

“That sounds wonderful.” I try to sound sincere, because spending Christmas with my family and JD’s brothers is wonderful. Almost too wonderful.

Will I always feel this hesitancy? The need to protect my heart? Will I always be looking over my shoulder, wondering when my happiness will go up in smoke?

**Gabrielle**

When I arrive at Sweetgrass on Christmas Eve, my parents are resting, and Lally is in the kitchen.

“Do you need some help?”

“It’s all done. Gray sent a couple girls over here, too. They set the tables and will be back later to clean up. I don’t know why he had to do that.”

I smile. Lally doesn’t know how to let anyone take care of her. She and JD have a lot in common in that regard. Come to think of it, they’re both bossy and controlling too. “Gray loves you and wants you to enjoy Christmas, too.” I glance at the time. “Is JD with Zack?”

“Mmhm.”

“I have something for them. I’ll be right back.”

“Take your time.”

I make my way to the back of the house and through the big doors, toward Zack’s room. A nurse I haven’t met is seated in an alcove, eating a sandwich, with her nose in a book. She looks up when I approach, and I smile and nod hello as I pass.

I’ve visited Zack several times now, and Sumter is used to me, so he doesn’t bother to get up, although he does have one eye trained on me. “Hi,” I say when I walk in. “Let me wash my hands and then I have a Christmas present for Zack.”

“Everything ready for tomorrow?” JD asks.

“More than ready. The extra staff is a game changer. Thank you.”

“Thank Gray,” he says.

“I will. But your hand is all over it, too. Here.” I hand JD two packages. “This one is for tonight, and this one is for tomorrow. I thought you would both enjoy these.”

He fiddles clumsily with the paper for a few seconds, before impatiently ripping it off. The smile spreads slow and warm, melting over his face and seeping into his heart.

I know that smile. I haven’t seen it in years, but I recognize it.

“*The Night Before Christmas*,” he says. “Look, Zack.” He lifts the book, so his brother can see.

My heart breaks for him. For them.

“I wasn’t sure if you had a copy for tonight.” My voice is thick with emotion. And I blink back the tears threatening to spill all over the buffed wood floor.

“No. We don’t.”

“Why don’t you read it to Zack and me,” I say, softly. “Do you mind me horning in on your time together?”

JD shakes his head. “We would love you to stay.”

I lean back against the night table and close my eyes, lulled by his smooth baritone, visions of sugarplums dancing in my head.

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AFTER SUPPER, we sing some off-tune Christmas carols, and mostly relax in the living room. JD feeds the fire all night, and it’s toasty and warm in here, and everything I could ever want on Christmas Eve.

Gray is enthralled by something his friend Mae, the hostess at Wildflower, is whispering in his ear. When he walked in with her earlier, he said she didn’t have anywhere to go.

“Yeah, sure,” JD murmured, when Gray turned his back. “Have you ever known him to bring home a stray?”

“*Shhhh*,” I whispered. “She’s nice. I’m happy to see him with someone nice.”

Ten thirty comes quick, and I need to get back. “I’m sad to say it, but it’s

getting late. I need to be at the hotel by the change of shift.”

“I’ll drive you,” JD says, getting up.

Drive me? That’s new. “No security?”

“Going anywhere without security isn’t *ever* an option for you. I thought we were past that.” He pins me with a gaze, shaking his head disapprovingly. “They’ll follow us.”

I kiss everyone good night, and wrap my coat around me, but I don’t leave before inviting everyone to brunch the next day, even Mae, who has Gray wrapped around her finger. I think I have a girl crush on her, too.

JD and I chatter on the way to the Gatehouse. Well, mostly I chatter and JD grunts or nods.

“Would you like to come in for a drink?”

“It’s still early for me. But you have to be up before dawn. You sure you want me to come in?”

“One drink. It’s Christmas Eve.”

I make myself a Gatehouse special, and mix JD a classic whiskey sour with a single giant cube of ice. When I rub some orange peel around the rim of the glass and then lay it on the ice, he whistles softly. “If you can mix a cocktail like that,” he says, “who cares if you can’t cook?”

“You might want to taste it first.”

He sips the drink, savoring slowly. “It tastes as good as it looks. Maybe better.” His eyes are molten and I’m not sure we’re still talking about cocktails.

“Why don’t we go upstairs?” I say. “I have something for you.”

“Do you?” There’s mischief in his eyes.

“It’s a gift.”

“It’s always a gift. The best damn gift. Every time.” He smirks and motions with his hand for me to go first. “I’ll follow you.”

We haven’t had sex here since that first time. I’ve been reluctant to bring him here, to entangle the two parts of my life. I’ve made every effort to keep JD out of hotel business. This is mine. It’s my future, the place I’ll seek refuge if things don’t work between us. I don’t want his face, his smell, his memory, all over the place when it happens.

Besides, JD makes Georgie uncomfortable. Really uncomfortable, which makes me uncomfortable. So far I’ve managed not to have them run into each other, but it hasn’t been easy. I’m never sure when JD’s going to make an appearance. But so far I’ve been lucky. “Stairs or elevator?” I ask.

“Love that back stairwell,” he murmurs in a lecherous voice.

“Me too.” I grin.

When we get to the top, he takes my drink and places it on the step, with his right beside it, and flicks off the overhead lights. He puts his hands on either side of my face, and teases my lips with his tongue until they part for him. “I know you don’t like me up here. That this is some kind of Christmas concession, so I should warn you, if you invite me to your room, I won’t be fucking my fist tonight. But I will be fucking you.”

I stare into his eyes, trying to find the courage to crack open my chest and lay my heart at his feet. “Does it always have to be about dirty sex? Will you ever—” I lower my head.

“Hey.” He tucks a tendril of hair behind my ear. “Ever what?”

I shrug. “Make love to me? Or let me make love to you. It’s Christmas.”

JD slides a thumb under my chin and forces me to look at him. “You like dirty sex. Making love is just an old-fashioned way to pretty up a good fuck. No one uses it anymore. We’re all enlightened now.” He’s smiling, and I force a small smile, but it’s fake and he knows it. “Should I go? Your decision.”

My decision. My choice. “I do have something for you. But now I’m not sure if tonight is the right time to give it to you.” I feel silly. My plan seems so foolish now. I don’t know what I was thinking.

“If we go to your bedroom, we will have sex. I won’t take it from you, but it’ll happen. Don’t kid yourself.” He gives me a minute to kick him out. When I don’t, he picks up our glasses and hands me mine. “Let’s go get that present you keep talking about.”

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EXCEPT FOR ONE smoldering kiss that lasts about ten minutes, we manage to get through the rest of the stairwell and into my suite without too much distraction.

I flip on the gas fireplace, and the room is warm and glowing. We sit on the loveseat in front of the fire and sip our drinks in silence while the shadows dance in the flames.

JD squeezes my hand. “What is it, Gabrielle?”

“I was just thinking about tonight at Sweetgrass. You were quiet. Quieter

than usual. Not your usual bossy self. Like you were soaking it all in.”

“I was.” He rubs his thumb along his bottom lip, still staring into the fire. “I wanted to make sure I remember it. All of it. Christmas hasn’t been special for me in a long, long time.”

“We can do it again next year—if—we’re still—”

“Don’t.” He pulls me into his side and brushes his mouth over my hair. Not really kissing, just feeling the soft strands on his lips. “Where’s my present?” he asks.

I put my hand over my heart and feel the steady beat. *Right here.* Please don’t return it. And don’t betray it, or stomp on it when you don’t want it anymore. I pull a big breath through my nose, fill my lungs, and blow it out quietly.

“When I agreed to—the arrangement,” I start, just above a whisper. “I didn’t agree to save my mother. Well, initially I did. But after I talked to the case manager, I knew I didn’t need to agree to anything that made me uncomfortable.”

He’s stroking my head, and I let my eyelids flutter closed.

“At first, I wanted revenge for the past. I wanted your heart to be broken this time. And I wanted to understand all the secrets and lies. I wanted something that would allow me to close the door firmly behind you, for good.” He stiffens, and I rub my palm up and down his forearm. “That’s what I told myself. But really, what I wanted was you. I knew the night you came back that I never stopped loving you.”

He combs his fingers through my hair. “You sure didn’t act like it.”

I smile. No, I didn’t. I was confused. And angry. *Angry that you waltzed in and in five minutes, the wall I’d carefully constructed around my heart was crumbling.* “The minute I saw you, all I could think about was your warm mouth, your rough hands on my skin. That, and a thousand other feelings swamped me. It had never—not since you—been like that. I wanted it again, JD. Deep down, I wanted it again. Not just the sex part, but all of it. I was so sure I could handle you, handle my feelings.”

“And now?”

“Now I think I’m fucked.”

He throws his head back and laughs. It rings clear with a pure joy that I rarely feel from him. “It’s a small, elite club,” he says. “Welcome.”

*Should I ask him? Do you want to ruin the intimacy, Gabrielle? The joy. I can’t wait anymore for answers. Not to this question.*

“Why did you send me away?”

I feel him take two breaths before he says anything.

“To keep you safe. I would do it again, Gabrielle. I will do it again if it becomes necessary. I can’t promise I won’t. This,” he squeezes me, “what we have right now, is a hundred times, a thousand, more than I ever thought we’d have when I walked into your office election night. I want to enjoy every single second we’re together, because I don’t know how long it’ll last.”

When he says things like this—it feels as though our relationship is out of his control. Like someone else is pulling the strings. Me? Does he think I’ll send him away?

He drains his drink, places the glass on the side table, and pulls me into his lap. He’s a big, sexy man, with strong hands that hold me against him. It’s intimate. So intimate. More intimate than sex.

I rest against him, lifting my head to nuzzle his neck. “When you talk about sending me away again, it scares me. It makes me think that maybe I can’t do this with you.”

“If I send you away this time, I promise it won’t be like last time. I promise I won’t send you off without an explanation. Last time I had to. I kept you safe in the only way the nineteen-year-old me knew how to keep you safe. But I’ve sifted through it thousands of times since, and even as I look back on it right now, I’m not sure there was another way. I was too young. You were too young.”

“Can’t you tell me more?”

“I can’t—not yet. Part of keeping you safe is not telling you too much.”

“Safe from what?” When he doesn’t answer, I crane my neck to look at him. “You don’t trust me?”

“That’s not it.” He pushes my hair back and kisses my forehead.

It’s Christmas and I don’t want a fight. It feels like he wants to tell me—and for the first time, I believe, really believe, that he will tell me why he had me sent away. Someday. *You’ve waited this long for answers. You can wait a little longer.* I can.

I scoot around and straddle him, my knees digging into the sofa, my fingers raking his hair, tracing the contour of his jaw, letting the stubble prick them.

His lips graze my throat. “You want to play?”

I shake my head. “No. No games tonight. No toys, nothing but my hands and mouth, pleasuring you. My body loving yours.”

He pulls the curls off my face. “You want to own me.”

I nod. “You’ll struggle, because you don’t like to give up control. You’re already sweating and we’re just talking about it.” I cup his jaw. “I want you to let me have it. I want your surrender. I don’t want you to take me tonight. Let me take. Let me give myself to you tonight. Everything. It’s my gift to you.”



**Julian**

I nod and swallow hard. Her skin is silky and warm. Her voice is husky, like she's been enjoying cigars and whiskey all her life. "Gabrielle, you've always owned me." The admission doesn't sting as much as I thought it would, so I confess fully. "If it seems like I'm the one in charge, it's because I'm a damned good actor. But I'm not sure I can do what you're asking." I stop to kiss her finger. "I like the control. I don't need toys or props, but I still need the control. That's how I'm built."

She begins unbuttoning my shirt, like she didn't hear a word I said. One button at a time. Caressing the skin that's revealed as each button is freed from its tether. By the time she reaches the last one, my dick is throbbing, and my fingers are twitching on her ass, lightly cupping, itching to crawl all over her.

"Gabrielle." I breathe her name. "I don't know how to give up control. I'm not sure I can. If someone wants it, they have to pry it from my clenched fists."

She grinds her pussy into my cock.

I groan. "You're a tease, woman."

"I learned from the best."

Her words are like a dull ache in my chest, but she's unbuckling my belt, and I can't think about anything else right now.

“It looks like you might need a little more room in here,” she murmurs, pulling my zipper down.

My hands dive into her hair, and I lower my head to reach her mouth. I’m desperate for a taste. But she doesn’t let me feed off her.

“If you try to wrestle control away from me, again, I’ll send you home. Hard and wanting. I hear blue balls are a real thing. A sixteen-year-old boy once told me that.”

I chuckle. Maybe I should go. I can’t give her what she’s looking for tonight. But before I can move her off my lap, she sinks her teeth into my neck like a little vixen, and I know I’m not going anywhere. “You are wicked,” I say, grabbing hold of her hair. “And it’s Christmas.”

There’s a sultry gleam in her eyes. “Unzip my dress.” She climbs off my lap. Her hair is mussed. The waves have become corkscrews. Her lips are glistening with promise.

She sits at the edge of the sofa, facing away from me. I pull her hair over one shoulder and lower the zipper, one tooth at a time. Planting my mouth at the nape of her neck, I let two fingers follow the line of the zipper down her back.

She trembles. “You’re cheating,” she warns.

“You love it.”

My control is completely frayed by the time she stands and lets her dress glide to the floor. There’s not a shred left to surrender.

Within seconds, we’re both naked, and she’s spreading the drops of precum over my cock, running her nails over my inner thighs, and cradling my aching balls.

When she pulls me into her hungry little mouth, I growl. She laughs softly, and the vibrations around my cock are mind-blowing. My balls are tightening against my body. My hands are in her hair. She slides her hand into her panties and rubs her pussy, squirming into her fingers. I’m not sure if it’s for my pleasure or hers.

“Let me taste you,” I murmur, tugging her arm up and sucking her fingers into my mouth. It’s nowhere near enough, but it’ll do for now. “You’re a dirty, filthy girl. And I am one lucky sonofabitch.”

She takes me deeper. The tingle in my spine is beginning. She tips her head back and swallows me. My toes curl into the rug, when I feel her gag reflex kick in. “Gabrielle. *Oh, baby.*”

I squeeze her shoulders, and she swallows my cock again, fucking me

with her mouth, her hands, hard and fast until I twitch and unload in her throat, with long, hot spurts that seem to go on forever.

“Get up here.” I don’t have much strength, but I manage to pull her from her knees and find her mouth. I suck on her tongue. I taste myself there. Salty and musky, mixed with her honey taste. I’m ready to go again. My balls ache, and right now, I can’t ever remember not being hard.

My fingers shove aside her panties and I stroke her pussy, paying special attention to her clit. She sways into me and mewls. And I’m fresh out of control.

I toss her over my shoulder and lay her on the bed. With one move, her panties are off and balled into her mouth. “You’re a noisy little wench, and we don’t want to alarm the guests.” I pull her legs over my shoulders and lick her pussy, sliding my fingers into both her tight little holes, until I hear nothing but muffled cries of pleasure.

I pull the panties from her mouth and kiss her, long and hard. “Bite into my shoulder if you need to scream.” I lower myself onto her, wrap her legs around my waist, and fuck her like Adam fucked Eve. No toys, no props, no little games. Just my throbbing cock sliding in and out of her hot pussy. It’s paradise. That’s all I think about as her walls clench around my shaft. All I think about as she milks me with her tight little cunt. All I think about as she takes everything from me. *It’s paradise.*

I catch my breath and roll over, bringing her with me. “You really don’t give up control easily,” she says into my chest. “Although you did better than I expected.”

“We’ll have to practice more,” I say to her, wrapping her tighter.

I feel her smile, on my skin. “Stay with me,” she whispers. “All night.”

It’s a mistake to wake up next to her in the morning. I know it, but I’m going to do it anyway. “You sure?”

“*Mmhm.*” She snuggles deeper. “Merry Christmas. I hope you liked your present.”

“Best gift anyone’s ever given me. Except for that birthday present when I turned seventeen.” It’s the last thing I utter before falling into a deep, dreamless sleep, wound around her luscious body.

**Julian**

The alarm wakes us at the crack of dawn Christmas morning, and Gabrielle reaches over me to turn it off. “It’s freezing,” she says.

I don’t know if it’s because I’ve been wrapped around her hot little body all night, but I’m damn cold, too. “Get back here, and I’ll warm you up.”

“I have too much to do. But you don’t need to get up. Sleep for a while longer.”

“I don’t want to stay in bed without you. Let’s get in the shower. We’ll kill two birds with one stone.” I drag her into the bathroom and turn on the shower. We huddle in the corner of the stall, waiting for the water to heat up. I pin her ass against the tile wall, running my mouth over her neck and shoulders.

She wriggles out of my grasp. “Later. I need to get downstairs,” she says, backing into the spray.

“Oh my God! The water is ice cold!” she squeals, jumping away from the water. “The furnace must be out. But I don’t understand why the generator didn’t kick in. Hopefully it’s just this furnace.”

I stick my shoulder under the water. “No one’s showering in this.” I turn the faucet off and grab towels. “How many furnaces in this place?” I ask, wrapping a fluffy white towel around her.

“Four units. But I don’t get it. The systems are all new. I replaced every

one of them. The generator's new, too. My guests. *Oh my God!* They're going to have cold showers, too. It's Christmas morning."

"Hey." I cup her face with both hands, forcing her to meet my eyes. "I'm sure it's just the unit that heats this part of the building. We'll get it taken care of before your guests are even out of bed. Are the units in the cellar?"

She nods. "They're still under warranty."

"Get dressed. I'll go down." Because there's nothing I'd like better than to trade shower sex with a hot woman for a trip to the dusty basement. "If the furnaces are new, there will be a sticker from the company that services them on at least one of the units. I'll make the call. You have service contracts?"

"Yes. But it's Christmas. I'm not sure they'll come out."

"They will," I assure her, pulling on my pants. "Don't worry. This is nothing. I promise, it'll be okay. All my problems should be this easy to fix."

She doesn't look like she believes me.

On my way down the stairs, I stick my head onto each floor. It's cold everywhere. I grab a young man with a nametag—Kevin—and instruct him to light the fireplaces on the first floor where the brunch will be served. He tells me most of the guestrooms have gas fireplaces that throw enough heat to warm the room. That's all good, but it doesn't solve the problem of the ice-cold water.

After calling the service company, I look around the basement. My present for Gabrielle is on the concrete floor, the tarp kicked aside, the ribbon torn to shreds. This is not how I left it yesterday afternoon. I lift the gate, dust it off and cover it with the tarp, again.

I poke around a bit more, and while I don't know much about furnaces, it doesn't seem like any of them are working. *Don't jump to conclusions, JD—not yet.* I don't, but I know we have a fucking problem on our hands. My blood pressure soars while I wait for the repairman.

Within thirty minutes, he's here. "The furnaces are all down," the repairman explains. "The rotors have been disabled in all four of them. I have some extras on the van. Not sure if I have four, though."

"Do the first floor first, then let's concentrate on the guestrooms. Maybe we can get some space heaters from somewhere if you don't have enough to get them all running."

"It's Christmas morning," he says, unscrewing a panel. "I don't think anywhere is open."

I already know the answer, but I ask anyway. "What are the chances these

furnaces all had this same problem? Today?”

He shakes his head. “Zero. I serviced these myself for the winter a few months ago. They were fine. These are good units. I’d say somebody is up to no good.”

Gabrielle is on her way down. I hear her talking to someone at the top of the stairs.

“Merry Christmas,” she says to the repairman. “Thank you for coming out.”

“It’s the rotors,” I tell her, like I know what they are.

“In all four systems?” she asks.

I nod.

“JD,” she whispers.

“Why don’t you go back upstairs? Do whatever needs to be done for the brunch. I’ll stay down here.” I squeeze her arm. “Don’t worry. I called Smith, and he’s on his way over. I’m sure some of the other hotels downtown are jealous that you’re doing the Christmas brunch. Someone’s tweaking you.”

“I thought about that, too. The industry is a small, tight community and people talk. I know some of the hoteliers don’t feel we’ve been around long enough to deserve the honor.”

*If only it were that simple.* “We’ll figure it out,” I tell her. “Once the furnaces are up and running, I’m going to sneak home and change, and then I’ll be back.”

She chews on her lip and nods.

I watch her climb the stairs, and wonder if there’s some other problem waiting to rear its ugly head. Because this is no coincidence. And while it’s possible there’s a crazy hotel owner orchestrating this malicious prank, my money is elsewhere.

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I DON’T HAVE one foot in my own damn kitchen before Lally starts busting my balls. “Going to join us at St. Cecilia’s this morning? Is that why you’re up so early?”

“It’s been some time since I darkened the doorway of a church.” My mother’s funeral, to be exact. “Don’t want to shock God on Christmas morning. You never know what might happen if he’s surprised. The earth

might start to wobble.”

“It’s been some time since you spent the night with a lady, too, but I see that didn’t stop you. First time for everything.”

“How do you know who I spend the night with? For all you know, I have a different woman holed up here every night and send her away before you show up in the morning. That’s what a smart man would do, given that you’re such a busybody.”

“I said spent the night with a lady. Those floozies you chase are not ladies. And you best not be bringing them here.”

“Some people might say you’re much too familiar given that you work for me.”

“People say a lot of things. Much of it isn’t true. And when did you start caring what people say? When you find the love of a good woman to keep you on the straight and narrow, I’ll hold my tongue. But not a second before.”

“There’s about as much chance of you holding your tongue as me finding the love of a good woman. I won’t be holding my breath on either account.” I hug her. “Merry Christmas, Lally. I’m happy you’re not at your cousin’s this year.”

“Merry Christmas, JD. Grab yourself some fresh coffee and a little something to go with it. Then you better go change before Gabrielle’s daddy wakes up and sees you skulking around in the clothes you were wearing yesterday.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, taking the stairs two at a time.

I shut the door to my bedroom and call Chase. “Hey, Merry Christmas.”

“JD?”

“Did I wake you?”

“It’s Christmas morning, not even seven o’clock,” he grunts. “It’s not like I wake up at the butt crack of dawn to find out what Santa brought.”

“Sorry. I waited until a semi-decent hour to call. This is important. I need you to do something for me.”

He groans. “Does this have to do with Gabby again?”

“Someone disabled all four furnaces in the hotel during the night. Nobody saw anything.”

“Jesus.”

“I need—”

“I know what you need, but I’m not convinced we’re going to find anything on the film this time either.”

“Try. And if there’s nothing there, see if the film’s been altered.”

“Have you talked to Smith about this?”

“Had to. Smith will want to put the cavalry on this, and Gabrielle’s going to balk. But we need to try to get to the bottom of it.”

“I’m on it. I’ll call you when I know something.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Yeah, well, you can explain it all to Gabby when she wants to kick my ass for hacking into her security system.”

“Pussy.”

“JD?”

“Yeah?”

“Why not go to the police?”

“Not sure they can be of any help in this situation. The culprits might be too big for the local police to reel in.”

“Who do you think is behind this?”

“I don’t know. But I’m hoping you’ll turn up something that will help us figure it out.”

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I’M BACK at the Gatehouse before eight. I see Gabrielle huddled across the dining room with—Georgina. Their backs are to me, but I’m pretty sure that’s Georgie.

Hmmm, she was supposed to be away until after Christmas.

I’ve known Georgie as long as I’ve known Gabrielle. Never cared for her. Always thought she was skittish, like she was hiding something, especially as we got older. She was always a huge flirt, but I never had any interest in what she was offering.

The last time we spoke more than a sentence or two was the afternoon she tried to kiss me when we were teenagers. Gabrielle was in the shower, and Georgie plopped herself on my lap and tried to put her lips on mine. I tossed her on her ass, called her a slut, and left.

I never said a word about it to Gabrielle. It would have hurt her too much.

“Merry Christmas, ladies.”

They’re both startled. Gabrielle practically jumps out of her skin when she hears my voice, and Georgie looks like she’s being force-fed lemon



wedges.

“Hi, JD. Georgie just stopped by to see if I need help. They got back early from Wade’s sister’s place. It’s supposed to snow in Georgia. Wade doesn’t like to drive in the snow.”

Gabrielle can’t stop blabbering. She says about ten more things. Each one more random than the last. And Georgie’s still sucking on lemons.

“Congratulations,” I say to Georgina. It seems like the polite thing to do, and although she’s still not my favorite person, I’ve softened considerably toward her over the years. “I hear you’re expecting a girl.”

“Yes. We just found out—we’re having a daughter. Thank you,” she answers, turning to Gabrielle. “It looks like you have everything under control here. I should get home to check on Wade. He was still sleeping when I left.”

“I’ll walk out with you,” Gabrielle says.

“Anything I can do while you’re gone?” I ask.

Gabrielle shakes her head and smiles. “Believe it or not, we’re done with the setup. Now we just wait for the guests to show up.”

Georgina hasn’t met my eyes once since I walked in. But she doesn’t look as sour now that she’s about to leave.

“Merry Christmas, Georgie. Give my best to Wade, too.”

She nods. “Merry Christmas.”

“I’ll be right back,” Gabrielle mouths to me before they walk away.

I take a quick look around the first floor while she’s gone. It’s plenty warm, and everything seems under control. I’m about to go back down to the basement when Gabrielle sneaks up behind me.

“Thank you for taking care of things this morning. You were a lifesaver.” She slips her arm through mine and pulls me into an empty room off the kitchen. When we get there, she twines her arms around my neck.

“We always made a good team.” I dip my head to kiss her. But she pulls back. “What?”

“Nothing,” she answers, looking like there’s definitely something eating her.

“Nothing, my ass. Is this about Georgie? I thought she was gone until after Christmas?”

“It’s not about Georgie,” she says defensively. “She and Wade had a fight, so they came home late last night. The snow was just an excuse.”

“If it’s not about her, what were you about to say?”

“Sometimes—when you say things like we always made a good team. After you say it—your face twists into something painful. I don’t know. It makes me feel—I don’t know.”

“Sad?”

“Sad is too mild of a descriptor for how much it makes my heart hurt.”

I cinch her waist and pull her closer, until I can reach her mouth. When all the loose ends are tied up. When the evidence against my father is so strong that he can’t wiggle out, it’ll be over. She’ll be safe. And I’ll tell her everything. She’ll hate me, but she’ll be able to get on with her life, and fall in love with a nice guy from a respectable family, and they can raise a bunch of kids together. My gut’s burning just thinking about it. “You got a cup of coffee around here you can spare?”

She nods. “Yes. Anything for you. How about a chocolate croissant to go with that coffee?”

“Anything for me? Is that the same as *anything* I want?”

She nods. “*Anything*. But it’ll have to wait a few hours. I only have about twenty minutes before guests start filtering in.”

“You won’t believe what I can accomplish in twenty minutes,” I say, pinning her into a corner. “But you’re about to find out,” I murmur, sliding a hand under her skirt.

“JD,” she pants, while I stroke her pussy over the silky panties. Her breathless voice makes my cock harder. “I don’t have—I can’t—someone might see.”

“My body blocks you from view. Even if someone walks in, they’ll have no idea what we’re doing.” I lower my head to her ear. “It’s much more likely they’ll hear you. If you don’t want that, you’ll need to be really quiet. Can you do that?”

She whimpers something that sounds like *mm*.

“Now be a good girl and spread your legs for me, so I can give you something I’ve wanted to give you since I opened my eyes this morning.”

“Brunch,” she squeals. “I have the brunch.”

“This will only take a few minutes, darlin’. Trust me. Just think of how nice and relaxed you’re going to be for your brunch. How pretty you’ll look with a little color in your cheeks.”

“Oh, JD.”

“That’s it, baby. Squeeze my fingers with that sweet pussy.”

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I'M STANDING near the entrance to the room, nursing a coffee, waiting for Smith to come up from the basement. And I'm watching Gabrielle, who's floating around the room, chatting easily with guests. Anticipating their needs before they have them. She's a natural. And I was right. Her flushed cheeks are gorgeous.

"Hey," Smith says, approaching me from behind. "Step out for a minute."

"Find anything?"

"No." He shakes his head. "Not a goddamn thing."

I blow out a loud breath. I'm disappointed, but not surprised. "Chase came in a few minutes ago. He said he couldn't find anything either. He doesn't think anyone hacked into the system. Said it looked more like someone turned off the cameras from inside the building. Sounds like it's someone who has inside access."

"Maybe. This whole thing feels like amateur hour," Smith says. I hear the frustration and annoyance in his voice. "Any one of these incidents—the tires, the furnaces—could have been perpetrated by any idiot with internet access. I'm starting to think someone has a score to settle with her."

"What about the security cameras?" I nod at a waiter wheeling a cart of cups and saucers past us. "Whoever turned them off knew where to find the cameras."

"They could have flipped the circuit breaker. The cameras are on their own circuit. Everything's marked. We dusted for prints, but I'm not hopeful." Smith leans against the wall and folds his arms across his chest. "This feels personal and petty."

"It wouldn't have been petty if the brunch had been sabotaged or if guests had woken up to cold showers. It would have ruined Gabrielle's opportunity to showcase this place and take it to another level. And it would have been a long time before she got another opportunity like this."

"That's just what I mean. Who does this kind of shit? Someone who's jealous or has a score to settle. And it takes a special kind of perpetrator."

"What does that mean?"

"Think about it." He glances at his feet, and then at me. "If you were pissed at someone, would you steal their keys and slash their tires? Disable their furnace?"

"Pfft. No." I don't need a second to think about it.

“Of course not. You would either kick his ass, fuck his woman, or do some real damage to his business. It would be big and splashy. Decisive. Not conniving and sneaky. This is bush league.”

“You think it’s kids?”

“*Nah.*” He buries his hands in his pockets. “Maybe a woman. Or a guy who doesn’t think like a guy.”

“A guy who doesn’t think like a guy? What the fuck does that mean? Like he’s gay?”

“No, asshole. Like he lives with his mother, or he hasn’t spent enough time around other guys—bonding and shit. It’s a prototype for this kind of behavior.”

I pause for a minute before raising the possibility. Smith won’t want to hear it, but I can’t let it go. “Don’t discount my father in any of this. He’s got a long reach.”

Smith glares at me. He doesn’t turn his head. Only his eyes move to meet mine. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that.”

“Then you’re an even dumber bastard than I peg you for.” I take a couple of steps forward, until I’m in his face. “I’m telling you, it’s in the realm of real possibilities.”

Smith sidesteps me and brings his hands to his face, scrubbing the weariness away. “Why don’t you go check on Gabrielle. I’ll handle things on this end.” He starts to leave, but turns before he gets five feet away. “JD?”

I’m sure this is more shit about how my father is the president-elect, and how I need to resolve my daddy issues in therapy. “What?” I challenge.

He glances at me for a second and shakes his head. “Nothing.”

**Gabrielle**

“O kay, just one more thingy to glue on,” I say proudly to Georgie while I hunt for a glittery pink heart. We’re sitting at Georgie’s dining room table, making a growth chart for the baby’s room, one of those long sticks that hangs on the wall. The one we’re making has a ballerina at the top, pirouetting on a unicorn.

“It’s gorgeous,” Georgie gushes. “I can’t believe how crafty you are.”

“I hope she loves it,” I muse, adding the final heart.

“She will. She’ll love all the things we made. Especially the part where her mama and her godmother spent hours planning and painting. I want her to grow up to be the kind of girl who appreciates that part of a gift most of all.”

“She will. How could she not with you and Wade as her parents?”

“I’m putting all of it in my pregnancy journal. Every detail, so she can know how excited we were while we waited for her.”

“One day you need to let those journals inspire you to write a book.”

“One day,” she says wistfully. “It’s on my bucket list, but I’m not sure I want that kind of inspiration. I wish you had brought the quarterly reports with you. I don’t sleep well when Wade’s gone. I could have worked on them.”

“I’ll drop them by tomorrow.”

“Maybe I’ll follow you back to the hotel when we’re done here. It won’t

be that late.”

“Georgie, the baby will be here any time now. You are not driving around alone at night to get some stupid reports that aren’t due for another month. What if your water breaks or something?”

“First babies aren’t born that quickly,” she says, peering out the window again. “I keep thinking that car out there is someone lurking.”

“It is.”

“Besides your security. I’ve felt that way all afternoon. I guess it’s Wade being gone. This is his last overnight trip until after the baby’s born.”

“I’m glad. Everything good between you two?”

“Better since I talked to him about it, but I don’t think things will get back to normal until after the baby comes. It’s not that unusual for expectant fathers to have anxiety before the baby’s born. That’s what all the books say.”

“Imagine if they actually had to push it out?” I roll my eyes. “They’d need to be on anti-anxiety meds for the entire pregnancy.”

We laugh, but Georgie’s looking out the window again. “Have you gotten used to them following you around everywhere?”

“Rafe and Gus? Pretty much. They really do melt into the background unless I think about them. Then I get prickly at JD, even though he means well. Have you watched any of the inauguration coverage today?”

“No.”

“I haven’t seen much either. Although I did catch JD scowling on national television. Do you mind if I turn on the news?”

“Go ahead. The remote’s above the TV.”

Georgie gets quiet and tense when the news comes on. The reporters are talking about President Wilder. She still hasn’t warmed up to the idea of JD and me together. And after that day in the hotel when they met by accident, I’m beginning to think she never will.

There’s a split screen on the television. The politicians preening in their fancy clothes on one side, and the warehouse fires burning out of control, a few miles away from here, on the other side. “Wow. I can’t believe they haven’t gotten that fire under control. It’s been burning most of the day.”

“It keeps spreading,” she says. “There have been multiple explosions. Thankfully those buildings weren’t occupied.”

I hear Georgie, but my eyes and my mind are on JD, whose handsome face is on the screen now. It’s a shot from earlier. He’s with Gray and Chase.

They're watching as their father takes the oath of office. Their faces reveal nothing. Not a trace of emotion. Certainly no pride or joy.

"You still love him," Georgie says, when she catches me red-handed, sneaking a peek at him. "I see it every time you bring up his name. Even if you're cursing him while you do it."

"I'll always love him, Georgie. I've told you, it's my cross to bear. Even if we don't end up together, I'll always love him. When he walked into the hotel after all that time, I knew. I knew that night, even through all the rage, even as I chucked a vase at him and got water all over his fancy suit, I knew I would always love him. No matter what he did. No matter how awful it is. I'm such a wuss when it comes to him. It makes me so mad sometimes."

"*Hmmm.* That's a powerful kind of attraction. I'm not sure I feel that way about Wade, and I love him with all my heart and soul. But JD was your first love."

I nod. "That's part of it. Another part is that we had sex kind of young."

"I know, but lots of people have sex kind of young and they don't feel it forever."

"Dirty sex."

Georgina's lips twitch. "Dirty sex?" She giggles. "Is that like kinky sex?"

"Just like that."

"Oh my God." She puts her hand over her mouth to stifle the laugh, but her chest is heaving. "How come you never told me that part?"

"It was embarrassing to think about in the light of day, let alone say the words out loud. And I don't know, I guess it was private. It seemed like it would be more special if we just kept it to ourselves."

"You could make up for it by spilling the beans about what you're doing now. A pregnant beluga who can barely move her body during sex could use hearing how the fit and fabulous are doing the deed."

I swat her away. "It's not about first love, or sex. There's something about JD that—completes my soul. Sounds so stupid, doesn't it?"

She shrugs, but a building on the screen implodes in flames before she can respond. "Sweet Jesus. Look at that." She clutches her belly. "It's awful. I pray to God they're right and no one's stuck inside those buildings. What an awful way to die." She shudders.

"I'm turning it off. It's not good for a pregnant woman, or for me, to watch this kind of thing before bed. It'll bring on nightmares."

## Julian

Today has been the clusterfuck of all clusterfucks. If I had to listen to any more bullshit about the new president and his handsome family, I was going to puke or punch someone, or maybe both. I almost hauled the Speaker of the House off the dais during lunch to tell him to stop lying to the American people about how impressive and wonderful the Wilders are. *Fuck that.* We're just a bunch of dysfunctional assholes posing as a family. We clean up pretty well, but that's just for show.

I settle into the backseat of the limo and call Gabrielle. "Hey, gorgeous."

"Hey yourself," she says. "Are you at one of the inaugural balls?"

"Hell no. I'm in a car on my way to the airport."

"You didn't look very happy today."

"Not a lot to be happy about here. I showed up for Gray and Chase, that's it. This is all bullshit. I want to be home—wrapped around your naked body. Or maybe making you crawl across the floor to me. Or tying you to the bed and licking your pussy until you scream. The possibilities are endless."

"Promises, promises."

"All of which I intend to keep. What did you do tonight while the ass-kissers were out in full force all over our nation's capital?"

"I had dinner with Georgina. Wade's away for a couple nights. We made a list of the last-minute things she needs before the baby and put the finishing



touches on the nursery. Tom covered at the hotel. He's really stepping up into the manager role."

"Sounds so much nicer than how I spent my evening. I'm glad Tom's working out. Don't demote him when Georgina gets back from maternity leave. If you keep him as a manager, it'll free you up for me more often."

"I can't afford another big salary. Not if I want to buy that building behind me when it comes up for sale at the end of the year."

"I can afford it."

"No. And don't bring it up again, or the only person crawling will be you to beg my forgiveness."

"*Pfft*. I'll crawl when pigs fly. Maybe not even then."

"Have you seen what's happening on the Port of Charleston?"

I hear anxiety in her voice.

"I caught bits and pieces, but the national news has been covering the inauguration pretty much nonstop all day."

"It's a multi-alarm fire. They can't seem to get it under control. There's a black cloud of smoke over the city—I can see the flames from my room. It's scary. I turned off the news because it's too awful to watch."

"Gabrielle, we're approaching the tarmac. I need to get off the phone in a minute."

"Safe travels. And say hello to Smith for me."

"I left Smith behind. He didn't want to stay in DC either. But my brothers are still here, and they don't have Secret Service protection, either. I want him to keep an eye on them. Gabrielle?"

"*Hmmm?*"

"The only fire I want you thinking about is the one between your legs."

"It lit as soon as I heard your voice."

She says it so seductively, I want to take out my cock and stroke it.

"Don't you dare touch *my* pussy," I warn her, in a low voice. "Be a good girl and go to sleep. I'll ease that burn for you tomorrow. Sweet dreams, darlin'."

**Gabrielle**

I shoot up out of bed when the smoke alarm blares. Before my eyes have adjusted to the dark, Rafe is in my room.

“There’s a fire downstairs!” he yells over the screeching alarm.

“A fire!?” I scream. For a second, I wonder if it’s a dream. If this is a nightmare about the warehouse fires. But Rafe’s hand is on my arm. It’s not a dream. “Where? Where is the fire?” I shout, trying to be heard over the alarm, as he drags me toward the stairs.

“Back offices. I’ll find out for sure as soon as you’re out of the building.”

“No. No!” I yank my arm away. “We have a security plan in case of fire. I need to make sure everyone’s out first.” I grab a small knapsack from the corner of the room. “Where’s Gus?” I shout, closing the door behind us. I can smell the smoke now that we’re in the hall.

“He went home sick about an hour ago.”

When we get to the third floor, guests in pajamas are on their way down the stairs. Everyone is moving in an orderly fashion. I stand to the side and take out two hand towels, and soak them with water from the knapsack. I hand one to Rafe. “Cover your mouth and nose.” I also hand him a fat piece of white chalk. “Check all the rooms on the second floor, and place a large white mark on the outside of each door after you’ve cleared the room. I’ll check the third floor. Amy at the desk is responsible for the first floor.”

“I’ll do the third,” he says. “You get out of the building.”

“No. We don’t have time to argue.”

“Fine, do the second,” he says, “and then get the hell out of the building.”

“Meet us in the parking lot across the street when you’re done,” I yell, running down the stairs.

The smoke is thicker as I make my way to the first floor. We’ve practiced this drill countless times, and it looks like everything has gone according to plan.

When I step onto the sidewalk, I don’t hear any sirens approaching. I run across the street to Amy, who is gathered with hotel guests, checking names off.

“Everyone’s accounted for,” she says.

I don’t see Rafe, yet.

“Did you check the first floor?” I ask.

“Tom did,” she says. “He told me to come outside and start moving guests away from the building.”

“Where is he?”

“He went around the building to make sure no one’s in the parking lot.”

I finally hear sirens. I scan the area for any sign of Rafe or Tom. When I look down the street, I see it. *Georgina*. That’s Georgie’s car!

“Amy,” I shriek. “Have you seen Georgie?”

“No.”

“That’s her car.”

*The back office. Oh my God.*

I grab the wet towel and run back inside, covering my mouth and nose. The smoke is thick as I feel my way to the back of the hotel. By the time I reach the office, I can’t see more than six inches in front of me. I put my hand on the knob. It’s red-hot. I scream and take in a mouthful of smoke.

“Georgie!” I shout. “Georgie!” She doesn’t answer. I get down to try to find something to smash the door with. I’m crawling, one hand keeping the towel over my mouth. But it’s not working well anymore. I can’t keep the smoke out. My eyes sting. I can’t see anything. I can’t breathe.

**Julian**

The plane stops taxiing, and I look out the window to see Antoine running across the tarmac toward us.

*Zack.* Something happened to Zack.

I call Antoine's cell phone while the flight crew is unlatching the door, but he doesn't pick up.

"Gabby's hotel—the Gatehouse," he yells from the bottom of the steps as soon as the door opens. "It's on fire."

"What do you mean, it's on fire?" I race down the stairs and grab him by the shirt. "What do you mean?"

"They're saying on the radio, the Gatehouse is in flames. I can't get service out here on my phone. That's all I know."

"Let's go!"

---

SMOKE PERMEATES every molecule of air, and even with the windows up, the ghastly odor wheedles its way into the car. It's all I smell as Antoine weaves through downtown toward the Gatehouse.

I have no information about Gabrielle.

The fire marshal isn't taking calls, and neither the police chief nor the mayor has anything useful to offer. Not a fucking thing.

I try her again, but my call goes directly to voicemail. Rafe and Gus don't answer either.

"Antoine, turn up the volume."

The news accounts are sketchy, and the reporters at the scene keep repeating the same bullshit: The fire department has been working overtime today. They're spread so thin that reinforcements from the surrounding areas have been called in to assist. Everyone was evacuated from the hotel immediately after the fire started, but those reports are unconfirmed. *Blah, blah, blah*. Nothing. They've got nothing.

I scroll through my phone, searching for answers. Hoping there's been some mistake. Hoping it's another building with a similar name, or a structure nearby that's engulfed in flames. But the internet is too wrapped up with the inaugural crap to care much about the Charleston fires. What the first lady wore. What a handsome couple the president and his wife make. How the country is embarking on an exciting new path.

*Right*. A new path—straight to hell. And this road is not paved with a single good intention.

*My father*. He's behind this. Somehow, he's behind it. *Not on Inauguration Day, JD*. No, he wouldn't want the focus off him today. And he wouldn't burn an entire section of the city to get back at me—would he? Gabrielle's hotel, yes. He'd have it torched without a second thought. But the warehouses are too important to him.

My brain wars with itself, the logical versus the illogical. But my gut knows it's him.

*Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck*. I pound on the car roof in a desperate attempt to blow off steam, but all it does is punish my hands.

The ride from the airport to downtown normally takes Antoine twenty minutes, but tonight we make it in ten. The longest ten minutes of my life.

We're still several blocks away, but the smoke is getting thicker. I can't tell if it's coming from the Port of Charleston where the warehouse fires are still burning, or the French Quarter, where the Gatehouse is located.

Hundreds of images of Gabrielle tick through my brain. Some old, and others, brand-new. She's smiling. Laughing. Crying. Reaching for me.

I'm shaking inside, ready to jump out of my skin.

As we turn the corner onto Broad Street, a sea of flashing lights

illuminates the crowd gathered in the road ahead, their eyes glued to the orange flames licking the night sky. “Pull over. Right here. You won’t get any closer.”

I don’t wait for him to pull over. Before he brakes, my feet are on the cobblestones, racing toward the flames as fast as I have ever run.

Dozens of onlookers watch the blaze from across the road. A few are barefoot, using scraps of cardboard as makeshift rugs to protect their feet from the cold ground. Others are in flimsy pajamas with their arms wrapped around one another to stay warm. The scene is chaotic as people push their way into the crowd to get a better look. I glance at the burning building, and my heart drops into my stomach. Please no. Please.

Panic fuels me as I scour the growing crowd for Gabrielle. For her security detail. For anyone who can tell me a fucking thing.

I search frantically. Person to person. Every dark-haired woman gives me a fresh sliver of hope. But it’s dashed again and again.

Only a couple minutes have passed, but it feels like an eternity. I can’t find her anywhere.

*Gabrielle, where are you?*

I slide both hands into my hair and pull. *Dammit, where is she?*

*Inside.* She has to be inside. As I make a beeline for the building, I spot Rafe in the parking lot across the street. He’s getting oxygen.

I reach him in seconds and pull the mask away from his face. “Where is she?” I scream.

“Hey!” The paramedic tears the mask from my hand.

“Don’t know,” Rafe chokes out. “Can’t find her.”

A roar erupts from somewhere deep inside my chest. It’s raw and primal, reminiscent of the chilling howl that comes right before an animal surrenders to its predator.

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TURN the page for the conclusion of JD and Gabrielle’s story!

**DELIVERED**

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## THE DEVIL'S DUE (BOOK 2)



## PROLOGUE

Julian

A dark cloud hangs over the Holy City, eclipsing the waning moon. Charleston has been burning all day. It's as if the Underworld is celebrating the ascension of its leader.

Smoke permeates every molecule of air, and even with the windows up, the ghastly odor wheedles its way into the car. It's all I smell as Antoine weaves through downtown toward The Gatehouse, Gabrielle's hotel.

I don't have any information about Gabrielle. Not a fucking thing.

The fire marshal isn't taking my calls, and neither the police chief nor the mayor has anything useful to offer. *Nothing*.

I try her again, but the call goes directly to voicemail. Rafe and Gus aren't answering their phones either. What kind of two-bit security is Smith running for me?

"Antoine, turn up the volume. I can't hear a thing back here." The news accounts are sketchy, and the reporters at the scene keep repeating the same bullshit: The fire department has been working overtime today. They're spread so thin that reinforcements from the surrounding areas have been called in to assist. Everyone was evacuated from the hotel immediately after the fire started, but those reports are unconfirmed. *Blah, blah, blah*. Nothing. They've got nothing.

I scroll through my phone, searching for answers. Hoping there's been some mistake. Hoping it's another building with a similar name, or a structure nearby that's engulfed in flames. But the Internet is too wrapped up

with the inaugural crap to care much about the Charleston fires. What the first lady wore. What a handsome couple the president and his wife make. How the country is embarking on an exciting new path.

*Right.* A new path—straight to hell. And the road's not paved with a single good intention.

*My father.* He's behind this. Somehow, he's behind it.

*Not on Inauguration Day, JD.* No, he wouldn't want the focus off him today. And he wouldn't burn an entire section of the city to get back at me—would he? Gabrielle's hotel, yes. He'd torch it without a second thought. But the warehouses? They're too damn important to the success of our business.

My brain wars with itself, the logical versus the illogical. But my gut knows it's him. Just like it knows that no matter how many investigations they conduct or how diligent the investigators work, they'll never find anything definitive that points directly to him.

*Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck.* I bang on the car roof, but all it does is punish my hands.

I can't allow myself to get bogged down in unfounded suspicions tonight. It zaps too much energy and makes me too angry to function optimally. There will be plenty of time for that later. Right now, I need to focus on finding Gabrielle.

The ride from the airport to downtown normally takes Antoine twenty minutes, but tonight we make it in ten. The longest ten minutes of my life.

We're still a few blocks away, but the smoke is thicker. I can't tell if it's coming from the Port of Charleston where the warehouses are still burning, or the French Quarter, where The Gatehouse is located.

As we round the bend onto Broad Street, a smattering of flashing lights illuminates the crowd gathered in the road, mesmerized by the deep orange flames licking the night sky. "Pull over, right here," I instruct Antoine. "You'll never get the car closer."

Before he fully brakes, I'm on the cobblestone street racing toward the flames.

Dozens of onlookers watch the blaze from across the road, some are barefoot, using scraps of cardboard as makeshift rugs shielding their feet from the cold ground, others huddle in thin pajamas with their arms wrapped around one another for warmth. They likely are hotel guests, but there's not a familiar face among them.

The scene is becoming chaotic as people push their way into the crowd to

get a better look. I glance at the burning building. The fire's wrath is uncontained. My stomach starts to heave. *She could still be inside. No. No! Keep looking, JD. Don't stop looking.*

There is a swarm of police cars, but only one fire truck in front of the building. *Where are all the fucking fire fighters?* Panic propels me forward, as I scour the growing crowd for Gabrielle—for her security detail—for anyone who can tell me a damn thing. Every dark-haired woman gives me a boost of hope. Hope that's dashed again and again, taking a piece of my soul each time I realize it's not Gabrielle.

I can't find her. *I can't fucking find her!*

If she were here, this is where she'd be. Front and center, staring into the flames in disbelief. Watching in horror. I'm sure of it. Dammit, where is she?

I scan the area again quickly, my eyes rest on the spot where she should be standing. I picture her barefoot on the sidewalk, arms wrapped tightly around her body. The image I conjure has an almost translucent quality with a fog of gray smoke surrounding her. She's wearing a white cotton nightgown that's billowing in the breeze, making her seem like an apparition. It's a mirage. It has to be. I don't allow myself to focus on the vision for too long. Don't allow myself to think about premonitions. I force my eyes away, my mind away, and keep searching.

Finally, I spot Rafe in the parking lot across the street. He's sitting on a stretcher receiving oxygen.

When I reach him his skin is gray, his face smudged with soot and sweat. I yank the mask away. "Where is she?" I scream. "Where is she?"

"Hey!" The paramedic tries to grab the mask from my hand. "You need to calm down, buddy."

"Don't fucking tell me to calm down."

"I don't know," Rafe chokes out. "I don't know."

---

## JULIAN

“**W**hat the fuck do you mean you don’t know? It’s your job to know where she is at all times!” I’m so out of control, even I recognize it. But I can’t stop. Something has taken over my body and I don’t have any control over my emotions or my actions. None. All I feel is my pounding heart. All I hear is my pounding heart. It’s enlarged, bigger than me, and has taken over my body.

“This man is injured,” the paramedic shouts. “You need to leave the area, before I get an officer over here.” He wedges himself between me and Rafe, but I’m significantly bigger and operating full-throttle on adrenaline. I shove him aside with little effort.

“Last I saw her—stairwell—third floor,” Rafe gasps, as the mask is repositioned.

“JD! JD!” I turn in the direction of Antoine’s voice. He’s running across the parking lot toward me. “They have Gabby!”

*They have Gabby.*

*They have Gabby.*

*They have Gabby.*

“Over there,” he cries, pointing to a firefighter carrying a woman in the direction of a waiting ambulance. He’s running. She’s not moving. *No! It’s not possible. It’s just not fucking possible.*

I push through the gathering throngs with a single laser focus: reaching Gabrielle. I don’t allow myself to think about anything else as I shove people out of my way. At the edge of the crowd a police officer blocks my path.

“This is the perimeter. I can’t let you get any closer.”

There is no way this fucker is slowing me down. “I’m JD Wilder, and that’s my fiancée on the way to the ambulance.” I point across the courtyard. “Get out of my way.”

He stands a little taller. “Sir, it’s for your protection.”

“You’ll have to shoot to stop me. See how that works out for you. Talk to your boss,” I shout over my shoulder. “I already have.”

The officer doesn’t pursue. He probably figures I’m not worth the hassle, or maybe that the world would be better without one more arrogant sonofabitch.

While it smells a lot like a harmless bonfire on the beach, the yellow-tipped flames are like an angry beast threatening the entire neighborhood. They take over my entire peripheral vision on the right side as I race toward the ambulance. Toward Gabrielle’s limp body.

By the time I reach her, a female paramedic is adjusting an oxygen mask on Gabrielle’s face, while a lanky male takes her vitals. Gabrielle’s covered in soot. Her hair twisted into tight ringlets matted to her face, and though she has some cuts and scrapes, I don’t see any sign of serious injury. But her skin is ashen and other than blinking her terror-filled eyes, she’s still not really moving.

My heart hasn’t stopped hammering. “Gabrielle. Gabrielle,” I manage between pants. “I’m here, darlin’.”

“Do you know her?” the paramedic asks.

I nod. “Her name is Gabrielle Duval.” I’m gulping air. My lungs working overtime to pull it in. *She’s alive. She’s alive.* “She owns the hotel.”

“Are you a relative?”

*No. But there’s no way I’m leaving her.* “I’m JD Wilder.”

“I know who you are, but are you related to Ms. Duval?”

“I’m her fiancé,” I say, hoping it means I won’t need to get into a pissing match in order to stay with Gabrielle.

“Georgie. Georgie’s inside.” I barely recognize Gabrielle’s voice. It’s hoarse and raw as she claws at my jacket with red, blistered fingers.

“What happened to your hand?” I ask gently, as gently as I can manage so I don’t alarm her.

Gabrielle has a blank look on her face while she studies her hand. It’s eerie, as though she doesn’t know what happened.

The paramedic takes hold of her wrist and gingerly turns her hand over so he can examine it. “I bet that’s painful,” he says. “Do you remember how you

hurt your hand?"

"The baby. Gotta find Georgie. Georgie, JD. Find Georgie." She's flailing, trying to get up off the stretcher.

"Don't. You'll fall off this thing, and it's a long way to the ground." I hold her upper arms securely while the paramedic reaches for a safety belt.

"I'm going to hook this over your hips so you don't fall off the bed when we slide you into the ambulance."

"*Shhh*. It's okay." I smooth her hair from behind so I can stay out of the way while they're working on her. "Georgie's at home. You had dinner with her earlier. That's why you're thinking about her."

"No," she whimpers, pushing the mask up. "Her car. Her car." The paramedic readjusts the oxygen.

"Gabrielle, you need the oxygen to breathe," I tell her, more harshly than I mean to. "Keep that mask on."

Her chest heaves softly. The tears trickle down her cheeks, cutting narrow paths through the grime. "You doing okay?" the tall paramedic asks.

"Georgie." Her weak voice is muffled by the mask.

"Georgie doesn't work evenings when you're on," I assure her. "Georgie and the baby are fine. Probably asleep."

"No!" she screams, flipping up the mask. "No!" The sound is high-pitched and anguished. I don't know where she found the voice or the energy to shriek. But it's a mournful wail, the kind that comes from a mother who's lost a child.

There's a loud boom, and the street lights up. I shield Gabrielle with my body, then glance over my shoulder to see the back of the building collapse. Gabrielle's office. She could have been inside. My heart is pounding again.

A fire engine rolls up and a firefighter shouts something to the reinforcements. They pull a long hose around the building. The flames are mostly orange and red now with an occasional yellow swash. The color is significant. I know it is, but I can't remember what it means.

Gabrielle squeezes my arm. "JD," she mouths. "Tell me."

"The firefighters have things under control. Don't worry."

"Let's get her inside," the female paramedic says. "Mr. Wilder, please step back so we can move the stretcher."

"You know this guy?" the tall paramedic asks Gabrielle. "Says his name is JD Wilder." She nods. "Do you want him here with you?" Gabrielle nods again, and the paramedic leans closer, blocking most of her face from me.

“Are you sure?” he asks so softly I have to strain to make out the words. To my relief, her chin bobs up and down.

Inside the ambulance it’s calmer. The paramedics are talking to Gabrielle, asking questions that require a simple nod, or a shake of the head. She’s dazed, but mostly lucid, and while she’s fidgeting with the sheet, she seems less agitated now. The meds they gave her must be working.

A police officer sticks his head inside the ambulance door. “You need to move back. The wind’s picking up. We’re expanding the perimeter.”

“We’re out of here. She needs to get to the hospital.” One of the paramedics hops into the driver’s seat, and the other turns to me. I don’t give him a chance to speak.

“I’m not leaving.”

He sizes me up for a long second. “Let’s go,” he tells the driver, and turns his attention back to Gabrielle, tending to her right hand, while I hold her left.

The siren is loud, and the flashing red light is disconcerting. It reminds me of the flames we’re headed away from. The paramedic doesn’t shut up the entire trip. He chatters on and on, asking Gabrielle questions, teasing, and reassuring her. She slips in and out of consciousness while the ambulance maneuvers down King Street toward the hospital. We’re a half mile away when she starts pulling at the mask, again. “Georgie. JD. Georgie.”

“It’s okay. Georgie is fine. You were with her earlier in the evening. You’re just a little confused.”

“No. No. Not confused.” She shakes her head.

“*Shhh.*” I run my thumb over her cheek, along the hairline. “It’s going to be okay. They got everyone out.” *I’m sure they did.* “You need to keep the oxygen on. We’ll call Georgie from the hospital so you can talk to her. But no more talking now.”

“He’s right, Gabrielle,” the paramedic says. “You need to keep the mask on to help you breathe. It’s better if you don’t talk more than necessary until they assess your lungs and larynx at the emergency room. Then you can chew this guy’s ear off. Deal?”

She nods. It’s a pathetic little nod, that means sure, whatever you say. But she’s not feeling it.

The ambulance pulls into the emergency bay, the double doors open and several people in scrubs are waiting on the landing to usher her inside. There’s a lot happening all at once. It’s controlled chaos and a jarring contrast from the relative calm inside the ambulance. Gabrielle begins to cry.

I bring her hand to my lips. “It’s going to be okay. So many people love you.” *I love you.* But I can’t say it. I haven’t said it once since she’s been back in my life. It’s not that I don’t feel it. I don’t want to feel it, but I do. *Every single fucking day.* But I don’t feel worthy enough to love her. And I won’t be—not until I can protect her. “You’re strong. You’ll get through this.”

It’s a lie. All a lie. We left her dream crumpling under the flames. I’m not sure how she’ll get through it. How any of us will get through it.



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## JULIAN

Nobody at the hospital gives a shit I'm JD Wilder, or Gabrielle's fiancé.

They make me wait outside the trauma room while they work on her.

"Did everyone get out? Georgie?" Gabrielle asks right before they kick me out of the room. There's terror in her eyes. It slices through me, grabbing my soul, and strangling what little humanity is left there.

"Everyone got out," I assure her, even though I have no fucking clue if everyone got out. "Let the doctors and nurses take care of you. Do everything they say, and I'll go find out about Georgie. I'll be right outside if you need anything."

I pace the hall, not venturing far from her doorway until the ward secretary tells me I need to move. "There's been a multi-car accident and the victims are on their way in. We need the hallways clear. She shows me to a small waiting area. "I'll let the nurse know you're here in case they have any questions."

"Do you know anything about Ms. Duval's condition?" I know she doesn't, but I'm desperate for any scrap of information, so I ask anyway.

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry." She starts to leave, but turns before reaching the doorway. "I apologize, Sir, I just realized who—you're the president's son. I can find somewhere more private for you to wait. This is a public area and patients' families will be in and out."

Money and power get you a special place to wait, but they don't change the bottom line. Not in this case. I can't buy Gabrielle peace of mind or health. I can't order it up for her, threatening anyone who doesn't comply. The last thing I need is to be around strangers, but I don't want to be holed up

in some out of the way place and forgotten, either. I want the hospital personnel to know exactly where they can find me if she needs anything. "I'm fine here."

Gabrielle might have believed I was out of her life all those years, but I kept close track of her to make sure she wanted for nothing. Watched her grow into a beautiful, smart woman who came into her own while learning the ins and outs of the luxury hotel business. I cheered every success from the shadows.

She should have never returned to Charleston. It was a huge mistake. I knew it at the time, but there was nothing I could do to stop it. It was too damn late by the time I found out she'd bought the hotel.

When the ward secretary leaves, I call my father's personal cell phone, the one he's not supposed to use anymore, but he doesn't answer. He's probably still at one of the ridiculous balls. And if he's behind this, he won't take my call, anyway. Scratch that. He'll take the call just to hear the fury in my voice. The pain. He'll listen intently for any hint of fear.

This is what my father does. What he does to me.

This has been my life for the past twenty years, since he first suspected I knew something about the accident that killed my mother and Sera, and left Zack brain dead. I first went to him about the conversation I overheard between him and Olson. I didn't accuse, because I didn't suspect him at the time. At least I didn't want to, not until I saw his reaction to my questions. Since then, I've been parsing truth from lies, all of it shrouded by layers and layers of evil.

I try Smith, but the call doesn't go through. I've been to this emergency room many times with my brother Zack, and the reception in this part of the hospital is bad, but I don't want to leave the ward in case there's news on Gabrielle.

"Excuse me, Mr. Wilder?"

I swivel quickly, thinking it's someone with news about her, but then I notice the tall pushcart with the computer screen and I know it's nothing. "I need some information on Gabrielle Duval," the intake specialist says. "I was told you came in with her."

"I did." *Information*, of course. Like how the hospital is going to be paid. The middle-aged woman will ask me a dozen questions, but that's what she really wants to know.

"What's Ms. Duval's address?"

The image of the collapsing hotel, sparks flying into the wind, is all I see when she asks the question. The fire leveling Gabrielle's home. Destroying everything she owns. "77 Sweetgrass Circle. Charleston." That's my address.

"Religion?"

"Huguenot. Catholic."

"Race?"

"Her father is Caucasian. Her mother's biracial."

She glances up at me. "How about Ms. Duval?"

*I don't know.* "Why the hell does it matter? Do you treat people differently based on race?"

"No. Of course not," she stammers. "It's for statistical purposes only. The government requires us to ask everyone who comes in for care how they classify themselves. We certainly don't verify that information or use it for nefarious purposes."

As asinine as some of these questions seem, answering them correctly would matter to Gabrielle. If she were here, she'd endeavor to respond to every ridiculous question carefully and honestly. Especially this one.

I want to get this right—all of it right—for her. It's the one thing I can do. But I'm not entirely sure. And it bothers me that I don't know something so basic, yet so fundamental. *Yes, you do, JD.* She would take great pride in telling this woman to count her as biracial. "Biracial."

"Mixed race," the woman paraphrases banging on the keyboard.

She asks a half-dozen more questions. My head's pounding and I'm about to lose what's left of my self-composure. Not one damn question she asks will make anything better for Gabrielle. But I answer them anyway. Even after so many years, I know a surprising amount of personal information about Gabrielle. That's because there was a time when we shared everything.

I'm nursing a sharp pain in my chest, and don't hear the intake specialist at first.

"Sir. I need insurance information."

I pull out my wallet, and without thinking, hand her my insurance card, like I always do for Zack. She takes it. "This has your name on it. Do you share the same policy?"

*Jesus, JD. Get your head on straight.* "No. We don't share a policy. I don't have a card for Ms. Duval."

"Is she insured?"

"Yes." There's no way Gabrielle wouldn't have health insurance. She's

not much into obeying me, but she's a rule follower at heart. *And responsible.* Something like this should have never happened to her. I want to knock over the cart, and kick the computer around the room until it's broken into miniscule pieces unrecognizable to anyone without a magnifying glass.

"Any information you can give me will help us track down the insurer."

I have no information. I pull out my wallet again and shove a credit card at her. "Put all her medical expenses on this. Anything she needs. I'll assume all financial responsibility for her care. Where do I sign?"

"That might not be necessary. She might be insured."

"Just do it." Why can't one fucking person ever do as I ask? Just one.

I scribble my name on the document. When I look up Antoine is in the doorway. His eyes are wet.

I hand the woman back the pen without sparing her a glance. "You have everything you need. We're done for now."

"Actually, I need to make a copy of your credit card."

"Take it."

"I'll return it immediately." I wave her off, still watching Antoine.

"How's Gabby?" he asks while the intake specialist packs up to leave.

"Her right palm and fingers are injured, probably second-degree burns. The paramedics weren't too worried. They're running some tests on her lungs to see if there's damage from the smoke and heat. I think that's the biggest concern right now." Tears stream down his face while I'm talking. "It's all I know."

His reaction makes me uneasy. Antoine is a big guy. He spent more than a decade in the Marine Corps. Served three combat tours in the desert. We've known each other since we were kids, and I've never known him to be much of a crier.

I squeeze his shoulder. "Hey. She's going to be okay. It might be a rough road. But she's tougher than either of us."

"Georgina didn't make it." It comes out as a sob, echoing in the small room.

*What?* The blood rushes into my ears, hammering so loud I can barely hear myself think. "Georgina was inside the hotel?"

Antoine nods. "I think so."

*Jesus Christ.* It takes me a full minute before I begin to grasp the full impact of his words. "The baby?"

He shakes his head. "They're both gone."

Gone? No. *No*. The news comes like a punch to the gut. The one delivered when you're least expecting it. When you think the fight is over, and you've paused to lick your wounds.

"Are you sure?" My first instinct is always to push back. To brawl. Especially in times like these. I shove my hands in my pockets so I don't shake Antoine. "Who told you this?"

"The firefighters pulled someone from the smoldering rubble. The body was badly charred. Couldn't immediately identify the remains. But whoever it is—was—she was pregnant. Very pregnant. They pronounced her dead at the scene. It was gruesome. As bad as anything I saw in combat."

This is too much. Too damn much. Not for me, I can take it. But I can't bear to watch Gabrielle take the second punch. This one will be even worse than the hotel burning to the ground with everything she owns inside. *No comparison*. "So you're not certain it was Georgina?"

"The FBI showed up because of the warehouse fires. They wanted to see if there was any connection between them and the hotel fire. They called in a forensic examiner who specializes in dental identifications. They don't waste time. They'll know soon. They might already know."

"Gabrielle kept asking for Georgina. But it was after ten when the fire started. It had to be, because I was on the phone with her until ten. Georgina isn't on evenings when Gabrielle's at the hotel. She's told me this. More than once." I'm pacing the room, muttering to myself. Trying to wrap my head around *Georgina didn't make it*. Wondering if she might have been saved if I'd just listened to what Gabrielle was trying to tell me.

"Who else would it be?" Antoine asks, pulling me from inside myself.

"Someone from housekeeping," I reply. "A guest." As tragic as any death would be, nothing will hit Gabrielle harder than Georgina dying. And the baby. The baby they were going to spoil rotten. I rest my forehead on the wall.

"In the back office after ten o'clock?" Antoine asks, like I've lost my mind.

*Pregnant woman. In the back office. Who else would it be? No one. No one else. Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck!* I slam the heels of my hands into the pale green wall, over and over, until small fissures appear in the drywall.

This is a huge crater, a bottomless pit of pain for Gabrielle. And we'll never get to the bottom of it. That's how it is with him and that prick Olson who has always been willing to do anything for my father—lie, cheat, steal,

murder—nothing’s out of bounds for him. And they’ll get away with it. He has the money and power to pay off anyone who knows anything. There’s no shortage of scum suckers willing to do his bidding, and it will all be covered up expertly. Just like the accident.

When I was younger, there were times I was sure I was losing my mind. Sometimes I still feel as though I have a tenuous grip on sanity, but it’s only for seconds or minutes at a time now, not for entire stretches of days.

My father is a psychopath. No, I’m not just saying it to blow off steam. He’s a dyed-in-the-wool psychopath. This is how psychopaths behave. They gaslight their targets until it’s impossible to think straight. Until you don’t know left from right, up from down. Crazy from sane. Until you question *everything*, all the time, even your sanity. Especially your sanity. It’s how they operate. My father could teach a master class.

Antoine rests a hand on my back. “Smith called me on my way to the hospital, said you can’t be here without more security. It’s too risky. Not just for you, but for the country.”

To someone wanting to do harm to the country, I would make an attractive hostage, although the joke would be on them, because there’s no way my father would negotiate for my release. Right now, I don’t give a fuck about myself, and it’s hard to feel any concern for a country that elected that monster. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“He said you wouldn’t. Told him I’ll stick to your side until he can get some more guys over here. No one’s getting to you on my watch.”

Antoine wouldn’t hesitate to take a bullet for me. But I don’t expect that from him, or from anyone else, either. And I don’t want it. It’s not why I gave him the job. “I’ll take my own goddamn bullets. You worry about yourself.” Before he can respond, a man in Carolina blue scrubs walks into the room.

“Mr. Wilder?”

“Yes.” I search his face for some small clue about Gabrielle.

“I’m Doctor Adler. Ms. Duval gave us permission to speak with you.”

The first damn thing that’s been easy tonight. “How is she?”

He glances at Antoine. “Maybe we should step outside.”

“We can, but he’ll be coming with us, so why don’t you just cut to the chase?”

His eyes dart from Antoine to me, and he stiffens, crossing his arms over his chest in a guarded posture. “Physically she’ll be fine. Her right hand

sustained second degree burns. It'll be painful for a while. Is she left or right handed?"

I don't even need to think about it. "Right."

"Then she'll need someone to help her change the bandages. She'll also need to be careful about getting it infected."

"What about her lungs?"

"Her lungs appear to have sustained minimal damage." Finally, some good news. A huge weight slides off my back. "She's likely to have some asthma-like symptoms for some time, and there's a chance they could linger indefinitely, but we expect a full recovery."

"Will you prescribe something for the symptoms?"

"Yes. And she should have a nebulizer on hand." He pauses for a second, and glances quickly at Antoine before he continues. "I'm not too concerned about her physically, although we will need to keep her overnight for observation. But she's pretty shaken up. Does she live alone?"

Not anymore. "No. And we have a nurse on duty around the clock at home."

"That's unusual," the doctor says, waiting for me to explain. *Don't hold your breath.*

I look him straight in the eye. "Not to me."

He nods and scribbles something on a piece of paper. "Good. One more thing. She keeps asking about Georgina, Georgie, and a baby. I'm not sure if it's related to the trauma, or if it's someone she knows. She's groggy and in shock. We can't figure out what she's trying to tell us. Do you know anything about them?"

The weight returns to my shoulders with a force that makes my knees buckle for a second. It's even heavier than before. "Georgina is her childhood friend. She works at the hotel. And she's pregnant. Gabrielle is very invested in the baby."

He looks at me as though he's expecting me to say more. I suppose this time, I should. "She might have died in the fire," I mutter.

"*Ughhh,*" the doctor groans, rubbing a palm along his jaw. "That's a gruesome way to die. Death is always difficult on loved ones. But that's a particularly grisly death for family and friends to come to grips with." There's that word again, *gruesome*. It's exactly how Antoine described it. "Ms. Duval is going to need a lot of support."

"We're still waiting on word of a definitive identification. Until we know

for sure, I don't want Gabrielle to hear anything about anyone dying in the fire."

"As tempting as it is, I don't recommend lying to loved ones in this type of situation," the doctor says, like I'm a child and he's fucking God. "If she asks, you might tell her someone died in the fire. That way she can start to become accustomed to the possibility. You don't need to tell her it might be her friend, unless she asks. But it will come as less of a blow later, if you lay the groundwork. Trauma recovery is a long, difficult road with lots of bumps. She needs to know she can trust you to be straight with her."

I nod. Why did this have to happen to her? *Why?* She's never done a damn thing to hurt anyone. Just like my mother and Sera, and Zack. They never did a single thing to cause anyone pain. Why couldn't it be me? Or my father, who doesn't let a day go by without destroying someone.

"You can see her, if you'd like."

I blink. I want to see her, but she's going to ask about Georgina again. I dread the moment. I dread watching her heart break. Maybe it's not Georgina. *Who else would it be, JD?*

"Her best friend likely died in the fire. If not, it will be a hotel employee or a guest. Regardless of who it is, it will be devastating. She's going to ask about it as soon as I step foot into the room. You're sure she's strong enough to hear the truth? Because I've known her for most of my life, and I'm not sure."

"She's still exhibiting acute symptoms of trauma. But the brain has a way of protecting itself. She wouldn't be asking if she couldn't process the information. There might even be a part of her subconscious that already knows her friend is dead. They were both in the building."

I don't like this guy. He's too squishy, even for a doctor. "We don't know if her friend was in the building. It would be highly unusual for her to be there at that hour."

"The way she's been asking about her—" He tips his head. "It wouldn't surprise me if she knows more than we do."

Some things are counterintuitive, especially when it involves the brain. I realize that. I just don't know about telling her tonight. But I don't want to lie if it will make things worse in the long run. I don't know what the right answer is here. This guy is a psychiatrist wannabe, and I don't entirely trust his judgment. "Is there a psychiatrist around I can talk to?"

"There's one on call for emergencies we can't handle. But this isn't an



emergency. And in the ER, especially in trauma, we deal with this kind of thing all the time. I realize it's difficult to be the one to break the news to her."

*Difficult to break the news?* I'd do anything if I believed it was the right thing for her. I want to grab the condescending prick by the throat and give him my rendition of *difficult to break the news to her*. "I've got the balls to tell her. I just want some assurance that it won't make the situation worse for her."

"I've been doing this for more than a dozen years. If she asks, someone needs to tell her. It can be you, or someone else. But she should have her questions answered truthfully. That's my best advice." He's matter-of-fact, like we're talking about which shelf the bandages are kept on. When I take a step closer, he takes two steps back.

"Is there anything else I should know before I see her?"

He shakes his head. "Not really. We gave her meds to help with the agitation. They might make her a bit foggy. Be prepared to repeat the details of whatever you tell her after the meds wear off. But medicated or not, she might not remember anything you tell her, or she might just remember what her psyche allows." He shrugs. "Everyone's different."

I have good instincts and my gut rarely steers me wrong, but I'm not foolish enough to disregard a professional opinion. At least not until I've fully considered it. I turn to Antoine. "What do you think about telling her tonight?"

Antoine shakes his head and shrugs. "I think we should listen to the doctor."

I'm still not convinced.

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GABRIELLE'S EYES are closed when I get to the room. From the doorway, there's a faint smell of smoke that I'm not sure will ever disappear completely from my subconscious. She has oxygen and an IV, and they have her hooked up to all kinds of monitors, but otherwise, she looks like herself. Smaller, more vulnerable, and exhausted, but she looks like Gabrielle. Every fiber of my being, every single one, is grateful for that.

"I'll be right outside the door," Antoine says, as I walk into the room.

I nod at the nurse drying her hands on a paper towel. “She’s a champ,” the nurse says, checking the oxygen, before giving us some privacy.

Gabrielle’s eyelashes flutter as I approach the bed. I lay my hand on her arm. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it’s cool. Surprisingly cool.

“How are you, darlin’?”

She pulls the mask away from her mouth. “Have you heard ‘bout Georgie? Saw her car. She was there. Couldn’t get into the office. The doorknob—it was so hot.” Her voice is still hoarse, and wobbly. I hear the fear in every syllable she pushes out between small gasps of air. I see it in her eyes.

“First, put this back on.” I adjust the mask so it’s covering her mouth and nose, again. “You need the oxygen to help you breathe.”

I pull up a chair beside the bed, and take her hand in mine. It feels tiny, and weaker than it ever has. I feel tiny, too. The last time I felt this way was when I told Chase that Zack had been moved. My father didn’t have the decency to give us any warning. To let us say goodbye to him. It’s not exactly the same, but the sorrow ricocheting off my chest walls is familiar, and I want to run. Maybe even cry. I never give myself the luxury of tears, and even if I wanted to indulge, I’m not sure I know how to cry anymore.

There is one thing I am sure about. I’m not a coward. And I’ll be damned if she hears about Georgina from someone else.

“Georgie?” she pleads in a voice muffled by the mask.

I nod and swallow a lump that’s nearly big enough to obstruct my airway.

She pulls the mask away again. “She here? Did they bring her here? Is the baby okay? Can I see her?”

“Save your voice. And your energy.” I adjust the mask and brush back some hair that’s stuck to her forehead. “I don’t know anything about Georgina, or the baby.” My chest is tight, and I suck in a mouthful of air. It doesn’t help. “But the firefighters found a pregnant woman inside the hotel. They couldn’t save her. We won’t know who the woman is until later today. Maybe tomorrow.” I know it’s wrong. I just know that telling her tonight is wrong. As I form each word, a voice inside my head screams *stop!* But I don’t.

Her eyes ping around the room. They have a panicked look to them, as though she doesn’t understand what I said, but she knows it’s bad.

She yanks off the mask. “In the office.” Her eyes beg me to say no, but it’s not really a question. Maybe the doctor was right. Maybe she already

knows.

“I think so.”

“Georgie and the baby . . . are dead?” Her voice is eerily calm, and she says each word as though she’s testing her memory.

This feels like an out-of-body experience, as though I’m watching the heartbreaking scene unfold from across the room. “We don’t know.”

The words are barely out of my mouth when she begins to shriek. A long, loud, mournful wail. I freeze, while an army of hospital staff rush into the room.

“What happened?” a nurse asks me.

“I told her that her friend died in the fire.” The nurse glares at me like I’m a monster. Maybe I am.

A vein in my neck begins to throb. I’m raging inside. And so sorry. So damn sorry.

“You’ll need to wait outside.” She dismisses me in a brusque tone, pointing toward the door. I take one more look at Gabrielle before I leave. She’s hysterical. It’s my fault. All my fault.

I stand right outside her room and listen to the wails as they become whimpers, and then fade to silence. Each heart-wrenching cry takes a piece of my soul. Antoine stands beside me, all six-feet three of him, listening to Gabrielle’s pain, and swiping away an occasional tear. That’s what the living do in these circumstances. They cry. They feel sorrow and empathy. They feel it deeply and acutely. Their tears bear witness to their pain.

Not me. I’m dead inside. Not just numb. Dead. I can’t remember the last time I felt alive.

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## JULIAN

I'm sitting in a nondescript chair in a drab hospital room, waiting on discharge papers that are taking longer than expected to be finalized. Gabrielle's perched on the edge of the bed, anxious to leave. Occasionally she asks about the fire, but mostly she's lost somewhere deep inside herself.

"Is there anything left? Anything at all?" she asks in a small voice, her fingers fiddling with the cotton tie on the hospital gown. Even as she asks, there's not a shred of hope anywhere in her face.

I spoke with the fire chief this morning. Aside from the contents of the fire-proof safe, and a few odds and ends, there's nothing left. But I don't tell her. "Hard to know. They'll have a better idea in a day or two when it's safe to go through the premises." Comb through the rubble is more like it, but I don't tell her that either.

"Any more news about—have you spoken with Georgie or Wade?" Her voice is still raw, like her throat hurts, but it has a hollow characteristic about it today.

I shake my head.

"Georgie and the baby." She forms each syllable carefully, her bare feet dangling off the bed. She looks like a young girl. No make-up, and a head full of unruly corkscrews she would normally curse if she caught sight of them in the mirror. "They might have died in the fire," she says to no one in particular. "We should find out."

They did die in the fire. There was a high likelihood that the pregnant woman was Georgie, so they knew immediately where to look for dental records. The FBI identified the remains before sunrise. But I don't say that. I

nod and validate her feelings, exactly like the psychiatrist taught me to do at four-thirty this morning. After I flew into a rage, grabbed the ER doctor by the throat, and demanded they page a psychiatrist. “They might have.”

“I think they did.” Gabrielle leans across the bed and begins picking imaginary lint off a pair of leggings Lally brought by the hospital this morning for her to wear home.

“You might be right.”

“They’re together. Georgie would have wanted that. Now she doesn’t have to worry, because she can take care of the baby. Georgie will be a wonderful mother.”

I’m sure I’m supposed to respond in some way, but I have no idea what to say. Gabrielle is scaring the shit out of me. Her affect is off—way off. She seems to be teetering on the thin line between sanity and insanity. I know from talking with the psychiatrist that it’s not exactly what’s happening, but that’s how it makes me feel.

The psychiatrist warned me to expect this kind of behavior from her while she processes everything that’s happened and tries to come to grips with it. He told me she might bob and weave, in ways that would seem irrational, even downright crazy. And that she would likely experience survivor’s guilt. “She might punish herself by pushing people who care about her away, or by denying herself creature comforts. It will be painful for those who love her,” he patiently explained. “But it’s all part of the healing process, and she needs to work through it in order to move forward with her life.

But what if she tips too far, and can’t right herself? What if she decides living in an alternate reality is preferable to the pain of the real world? What if she doesn’t come back to me?

I push those thoughts back, far, far back into my mind, because I can’t bear to think about losing her in that way. Losing her in any way would be unbearable, but nothing would be crueler than her body beside me, in all its wonder and beauty, but her mind somewhere else, somewhere faraway where I can’t reach. Somewhere I will never reach.

Like Zack.

It would be hell on earth.

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## JULIAN

I send Lally to be with Gabrielle's parents in Houston for a couple days, otherwise they'll be on the first flight back to Charleston. Her mother has come so far, the treatment is working so well, I don't want any of it jeopardized. Lally's torn about leaving, but I persuade her to go, to assure them Gabrielle is fine. Some news is better delivered in person. Gabrielle hasn't mentioned her parents even once since the fire. That alone tells me she's not anywhere near herself.

When we get to Sweetgrass, Gabrielle is so out of it she doesn't complain about being carried or ask where I'm taking her. The discharge process and the ride home did her in. I take her directly upstairs to my bedroom. It never occurs to me to put her into one of the guest rooms.

We have an additional nurse in the house for a few days, and she helps me settle Gabrielle into my bed. The second nurse might be overkill, but I don't want to take any chances. I haven't slept all night, and I'm running on fumes. *No chances*. Not with Zack or Gabrielle.

After she's asleep, I take a long hot shower. I'm exhausted, but still too wound up to sleep, so I go downstairs to my study to answer some emails. I must have nodded off at my desk for a minute, because I wake up to my assistant Patrick and Smith arguing outside the door.

Before I can get up, Smith barges in and slaps a set of keys and his security credentials on my desk. "I'm done."

I'm wide awake now. "What the fuck?"

"I can't operate this way, JD." He hammers an index finger into my grandfather's desk. Each strike accentuates a clearly annunciated word. "I

don't operate this way. There's a dead woman, and there could have been dozens more, some of which are my people, and others who I'm entrusted to protect."

He's right, but I don't concede the point. Admitting it would be akin to surrender, and I need him on my team. I also won't beg. For one thing, it's not in my nature to beg, and for another, it would not persuade Smith to stay. He'd see right through the bullshit. "So that's it? Things didn't go well so you pull your tail between your legs and run. I don't blame you for what happened last night."

"Don't blame me? Well that's mighty big of you. Thank you so much." Smith's face is bright red. It matches his bloodshot eyes. He doesn't appear to have slept any more than I did last night. "You know who's fault this is, JD?" he roars. "It's your fucking fault."

That's something we can agree on. I sit back in my chair. "Go on. Say it. Clearly there's a lot you need to get off your chest."

His hands are splayed on the desk, his torso craning forward. "I've been in charge of security for you and your brothers for almost three years. You are unscathed. All of you. Not a hair out of fucking place. But the minute Gabrielle Duval came onto the scene, you decided you were in charge of her safety. You knew how to best protect her. Constantly ordering me around about how she was to be handled, as though I hadn't protected military brass and a whole host of high-level targets. And you know what? Some of it might have been dumb luck, but I never lost anyone on my watch. Not a single fucking person. Not until last night."

He lifts a paperweight off my desk and slams it down with such force the antique lamp rattles. "Not until you, with your Harvard MBA, and your soft hands, decided you know security better than me. And now look—no, it's not your fault because you didn't light the goddamn match. But I should have told you to go fuck yourself the first time you informed me that no one lays a finger on Gabrielle, as though my security force routinely roughs up women."

He pauses, and wipes his mouth with back of his hand.

"Are you done?" I ask in a tone that has just enough calm to push him off the edge. He might as well get it all out so I know what I'm dealing with.

"No! No, I'm not done, you fucking prick!" he barks. "I'm just getting started. That woman has been under your skin for years. I bet every time you fuck your fist, or anything else, you see her face when you get off. It's been like that for as long as I've known you."

“Watch it.” It’s a warning, delivered low and rough.

“That’s just it, JD. I say shit like that to you all the time and you laugh it off. You never laugh off anything when it comes to her. Every single thing is a huge fucking deal when it comes to her. That’s why you can’t be in charge of her protection. Not just because you don’t know the first thing about protecting a target, but because she’s under your skin, and she has been for years. I don’t need a damn Ph.D. to figure it out.”

I’m pissed. Pissed because he’s being an asshole. Pissed because he’s right. “We’re friends,” I argue. “We’ve been friends for a long time. But making security decisions for me doesn’t seem to pose a problem for you.”

“Because I’m trained. I know how to separate the two. And you don’t make my dick hard.”

I stand up and lean across the desk until I’m inches from his face. “Not one more fucking word about my dick and Gabrielle. You might be better trained than me, but you talk about her like that again, and I’ll do plenty of damage before you take me out.”

My blood is boiling. I recognize it and pull back. *Jesus*. I’m losing it. “I trust you with my brothers’ lives, and the lives of everyone who works for me. There’s no one I trust more than you.”

“But you don’t trust me with her life?”

I rub my jaw, and peer at him. “It’s not that simple, Smith.”

“Why? Why isn’t it that simple?” He parks his ass in the chair across from me. “You tell me why, right now, or I’m out of here.”

I study him for a few seconds. He’s bluffing. But I can’t take the chance. I’m in a corner, with choices that suck. I can tell him everything, which drags him into the middle of my shitstorm, or he’ll leave. I can’t afford for him to go. There’s no one better at what he does. And he’s the only real friend I have. *Fuck it*.

I get up and go over to a small cabinet across the room. I pull a bottle of Pappy’s and two glasses from the shelf. Then I motion toward the room that acts as my inner sanctum. A room outfitted with foil insulation, no windows and just one way in and out. It’s not much bigger than a walk-in closet in a debutant’s bedroom. My grandfather used it to take proprietary calls, and hold meetings where classified information would be discussed. The pharmaceutical industry has always been notorious for its spies. Smith upgraded the security features in the little room when he outfitted the cottage out back that he and his team use as an office.



I turn off my cell phone and drop it on the desk. Smith does the same and follows me into the secure space.

I pour us each a couple fingers of bourbon while he watches me. “What’s going on, JD?”

I hand him a glass, but he shakes me off. “I didn’t get any sleep last night and I have a feeling I’m going to want a clear head.”

I put it down in front of him. “You’ll need it before I’m done.”

I slide into a chair across from him, elbows propped on the table, my hands clasped near my lips, racking my brain. How do I begin? Where do I begin?

“What the hell is going on?” he snaps, like he’s tired of waiting, or maybe uneasy about the answers he might get. *He has no idea.*

I blow out a breath, and tell him everything.

Every damn sordid detail.

“When I was fourteen—several months after the accident happened—I overheard my father and Olson talking. They were discussing Zack. How he should have died with my mother and Sera. How him being alive kept the accident fresh in everyone’s mind. I didn’t really understand at the time, but something didn’t feel right. I listened every chance I got, eavesdropped on their conversations. Usually they were nothing, but every once in a while, I’d pick up another small clue. They were always cryptic, but it became apparent to me, even as a kid, that my father and Olson had something to do with the accident.”

“*Jesus, JD.* Did you tell anyone about this?” I feel myself relax at Smith’s reaction. A great sense of relief sweeps over me when he doesn’t accuse me of being crazy. Because let’s face it, this whole thing sounds insane.

“No. Not at the time.” *Who would have believed me?* “Think about it. He was a community leader. Some people loved him, some people hated him, but everyone knew the kind of influence he wielded. I was a young teenager who had lost his mother and sister. A hothead looking for someone to blame. Even when I tried to talk to you about it,” I meet his eyes, “when the furnaces went down at the hotel, you thought I was nuts.”

The Christmas brunch at The Gatehouse when the furnaces were sabotaged seems like it was three decades, rather than three weeks, ago. “And we’re friends. Think about it.”

Smith puts his hands over his face and scrubs two-day’s worth of growth, then slaps the table hard. The sharp sound reverberates in the room. I can

almost feel the sting.

“When I finally went to my father, he was pissed that I overheard part of the conversation. I pretended it had only happened once. He interrogated me for a long time, and I asked some questions of my own. Nothing accusatory, I still hadn’t wrapped my head around all of it. But he got defensive. Threatened to have me committed to a psychiatric hospital if I ever talked to anyone about it. People would think I was crazy, he said. By the time I left his office, I started to believe that maybe I was crazy.” My chest tightens when glimpses of that scared kid emerge. He was all alone with no one to turn to. No one he could trust to help. “I’ll never forget that feeling.”

“Sonofabitch,” Smith mutters under his breath.

“I was more careful after that to not get caught, and so were they.” My stomach burns, and I feel the acid rising. I can’t shake my younger self. Telling Smith brought him out into the open, and now he doesn’t want to go back inside. The room’s beginning to close in on me. The air’s hot and stale. I get up and turn down the thermostat.

“What does this have to do with Gabrielle Duval?” Smith asks. “How does she fit into this?”

“My father sent Zack away.” I stand behind my chair and squeeze the back to steady myself. “We had no idea where he went. Not for years.” The bile is tickling my tonsils. “He wouldn’t tell us. When I got to prep school, Ms. Newman helped me figure it out.”

“The school social worker?”

I nod. “*Mmhm.*”

“That was true? You were boning her?”

I scratch the back of my head. My sexual exploits at prep school have nothing to do with this story. “Not then. Later.” After Gabrielle was out of my life. “It has nothing to do with this.”

“As soon as I knew where Zack was, I went. It was a Saturday night. He wasn’t allowed visitors, but my father hadn’t been clear enough with his directive, and the woman manning the desk at the facility didn’t need much arm twisting to be convinced it would be okay to let me visit my brother.”

My chest is so tight it hurts. Nineteen-year-old JD had more resources than the fourteen-year-old who had originally confronted his father, but I was still alone when it came to this. “I hadn’t seen Zack in five years. I barely recognized him. And there was no sign he recognized me. He was quiet. His limbs were curled. Atrophy. When I talked to the nurse about it, she said

something about how it was a shame he hadn't gotten more physical and occupational therapy after the accident." I remember every word she said that night. Verbatim. It was just a passing remark, but it cut deep. "When I pressed her, she explained that only ongoing therapy can help slow the muscles from shrinking."

I glance at Smith. I pretend the pity in his eyes is for Zack and not for me.

"At first I was numb," I say, unbuttoning my shirt cuff and rolling up the sleeve. Even with the thermostat turned all the way down, it's still so fucking hot in here. "I was shocked that we weren't doing everything possible to make Zack's life better. DW is evil, and by that time, I knew it, but Zack—he was helpless."

I blow out a long breath. "When I got back to my Jeep, I was so furious I couldn't see straight. I pulled out of the parking lot, with my mind somewhere else. I had to swerve to avoid a woman changing a flat tire on the side of the road." The memory of how close my car came to striking her still gives me a jolt, even after all this time.

"I didn't bother to go back to school. I went directly home. Straight to my father's study. I confronted him about Zack. Spit out everything I knew, everything I believed about my mother's accident. He let me finish, then he pulled out the tapes."

"What tapes?" Smith asks carefully.

I can't say it. Not even to Smith. I crack my knuckles, one at a time. "Of me with Gabrielle." I take a minute to gather the fortitude to tell him the rest. "Having sex," I whisper, each word feeling like a colossal betrayal to Gabrielle. Each syllable strangling my gut anew.

Smith swallows every drop of bourbon and pours another before he speaks. "He recorded you having sex with your girlfriend?"

I nod, looking down at my hands. They're shaking. I don't know why, because I'm too numb right now to feel anything.

"He's your father."

"He's a monster, Smith. A fucking psychopath." I throw down the bourbon, and then the rest of the story comes pouring out. Most of it, anyway. "He made me help out at Wildflower all the time. Encouraged me to watch all sorts of things that weren't appropriate for a teenage boy. And then I went home, horny as fuck, and experimented with my beautiful, innocent girlfriend." I press the heels of my hands into my weary eyes. "While my father watched. He taped everything. He told me he'd sit back in his chair

and enjoy a drink and a cigar, or a blow job, while he watched me fuck her. He laughed at me. Mimicked her reactions.” I can still see his face while he taunted me, imitating my sweet girlfriend who never deserved any of it.

Smith pours me another drink. I can’t even look him in the eye. I’m still so horrified by it, like it happened yesterday. I take a swig, and let the bourbon slide down my throat, buying time before I tell him the rest.

“My father told me if I didn’t fall into line, he’d release the recordings. Everyone would see what a whore she was, enjoying all those filthy things I did to her. I lunged at him, grabbed him by the throat, until Olson whacked me with the butt of a gun and threw me on the ground. My father kicked me in the ribs, while Olson held the gun on me. Told me he was going to teach her what it was like to be fucked by a real man. Said he was going to blackmail her with the tapes so she’d have dirty sex with him.”

Somewhere I find the courage to glance at Smith. He’s pale. Looks like he’s going to blow his lunch at any minute. That’s how I feel, too. “That’s the most revolting thing I’ve ever heard. I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around it. Your father is one sick fuck.”

“I can barely wrap my head around it and it’s my life. The life I’ve been living since the first time I overheard him with Olson. I live it every day.”

“Did you ever think about telling someone about any of this?”

“Who?” I shake my head. “There wasn’t a single person I could trust not to betray me back then. At least not anyone who could have done a damn thing to help. My father was already too powerful.”

“Did he ever make good on the threat?” Smith asks, tentatively, his eyes focused on something that is not me.

“No.” I shake my head, thinking back at how awful it was choosing between sending Gabrielle away from her parents and letting him hurt her. Choosing between having her in my life and letting her go so he wouldn’t destroy her. I still don’t know where nineteen-year-old JD found the strength to do any of it. “I had complete access to my trust at that point. It wasn’t easy, but I convinced Gabrielle’s parents to send her to boarding school. She left almost immediately. Didn’t come back to Charleston for more than a few days at a time, here and there, until she bought the hotel.”

“Have you ever found any solid connection between your father and the accident?”

Not a goddamn thing. Aside from being unable to protect Gabrielle, it’s my greatest failure in life. “Nothing that would hold up under any real

scrutiny. The answers are at Sayle. I know they are, and I'm looking, but he's watching me. He's got spies everywhere."

"After hearing this, I don't know how I'm going to sleep tonight. And I've spent months at a time in a fucking warzone."

"Oh, there's more," I say, glancing at him. "There's more."

Smith grunts and buries his face into his arms on the table.

"After he was elected, I persuaded Gabrielle to resume a relationship with me. Don't ask—that story is vile too. But I need her under my protection while I hunt around. He'll destroy her to get to me. Even when she was gone, he'd occasionally say things about her that would make me want to kill him. And I've never been very good at hiding my feelings. He knows she's how to get to me."

Smith pokes his head up from his arms. "And you think he had something to with the fire?"

"I'm positive. He says just enough to fuck with my head. But I'm positive. Every time we poke around at Sayle, something happens. I'll tell you what else. I haven't found out a damn thing about the accident, but there's something bad going on at Sayle."

"Bad, how?"

"I don't know, yet." And I'm so tired right now I don't have the strength or the presence of mind to think about it. "But he's up to something."

"*Jesus Christ*. She does need protection," Smith says. "The whole fucking country needs protection. Hell, the whole world needs it."

Smith runs a thumb across his bottom lip. "What about that ex-fiancé you talked about? The guy you think is in jail. You think he's involved in this somehow? Your father didn't light the fire himself, and Olson was with him during the inauguration. I can vouch for it."

"I don't know if he's connected to my father in any way. It's crossed my mind. But I kept an eye on the scumbag the entire time he was in Gabrielle's life, and I never found any connection. He's an abusive sonofabitch. But he didn't set the fire."

"How do you know?"

"He's in jail, right outside of Reynosa. Got caught with several kilos of smack crossing the border. I pay his rent. It's expensive, but worth every cent. They'll keep him for as long as I continue to pony up. That bastard will never lay a hand on Gabrielle or on any other woman. Not while I'm alive."

Smith's jaw is on the table. "Remind me never to piss you off."

“She had bruises he put on her when he was drunk. He had his hands around her neck.” The numbness inside is dissipating, and my blood pressure is climbing. “As far as I’m concerned, he’s lucky to still be alive.”

“No arguments from me. But let’s go back to your father, the psychopath. The fucking commander-in-chief is a psychopath.” The color is gone from Smith’s face. “The man who commands our armed forces and sends kids into battle.”

“The correct term is anti-social disorder, and he more than meets the clinical criteria. Yes, he’s a psychopath. A dangerous one.”

I’m staring at an old photo of my grandparents hanging on the far wall, but I can feel Smith’s eyes on me. “You should have told me this before,” he says. “You should have made me listen. I’m sorry. I am so fucking sorry.”

Smith feels like he let me down. If the roles were reversed, that’s how I would feel too. There is nothing I can say that will make him feel any better. We’re exactly alike in that way. “I’m sorry to have dropped this in your lap,” I confess, since we’re laying it all out there. “It puts you at substantial risk, and potentially implicates you in things bigger than we can understand right now. I really need you to stay. I don’t need you involved in my hunting expeditions, but I need you to continue to provide security for my brothers—and for Gabrielle. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Like hell.” Smith leans back in the seat. If I look under the table, the front legs of his chair will be inches off the floor. “I spent years in uniform, protecting our constitution, the country, men died beside me. He’s the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and an evil bastard. There’s no fucking way I’m standing on the sidelines.” He throws back the rest of his drink. “But we have to be equal partners in this, JD. No more secrets. And I manage all the security. Even Gabrielle’s.”

I nod. There’s no choice, and I know he’s right anyway.

“Do your brothers know about any of this?”

“Chase snoops around for me, but I’ve kept him pretty much in the dark about almost everything. Gray knows nothing, except that I’m really worried about the way my father uses him.”

“You mean the trip to the Mediterranean where his security wasn’t allowed to go?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “That’s exactly what I mean. I guarantee some shit went down on that trip, and Gray was sent along to take the fall if there is one. He’s not talking, although I’m not sure he knows anything. He trusts my

father too damn much. He knows better, but he can't help himself."

"I'm going to talk to Gray. He might have some information that could be helpful to us."

"Go ahead, but go easy with him. He likes to believe DW isn't as bad as I make him out to be." I trust Gray not to run to my father, because deep down he knows DW is a bad actor. It's just too painful for him to believe.

"What does Gabrielle know?"

"Nothing. She doesn't know a thing I just told you."

"JD. She's a pawn. Her life is in danger. She has a right to know. And she'd probably be more cooperative with security if she understood the risk. You need to tell her—or I will."

*Fucking Smith.* "Not now. And before I forget, put some more security on her family."

"I don't take orders from you regarding security. We're done with that. But the minute I leave here, the Duval's security will be beefed up. That still doesn't change the fact that Gabrielle needs to know what's going on. At least some of it."

*Jesus Christ.* It's like talking to a goddamn wall. "Not now, Smith. She just lost her best friend, along with a lifelong dream that she put her heart and soul into making happen. When, and if, the time is right, I'll be the one to tell her. Not you. Don't fuck with me on this."

He clasps his enormous hands together, and rests them on the table, twiddling his thumbs. "How's she doing?" He's letting it go for now. But he'll be back to nagging me about telling her, that I guarantee.

"She's asleep. The doctor gave her a sedative. My father knew that nothing else, *nothing* would break me like watching her suffer. Not in the same way." I slam my fist on the table and the near-empty bottle of bourbon teeters.

"Listen, I don't doubt a word you told me, but let's not chase red herrings. We don't know for sure your father was involved in setting the fire. That's going to take some more digging. But it sounds like there's plenty other nasty stuff he might be involved with. We need to formulate a cohesive plan to deal with him."

"We will, but not until Gabrielle's through the worst of this." Right now destroying that bastard has to take second place to her needs. She's on tenuous emotional footing and it's likely to get worse before it gets better. That's where my energy needs to be focused. "My biggest concern right now

is getting her through Georgina's funeral."

He sits back in the chair, studying me. "This isn't just some sick obsession with protecting her. You love her."

"Does it matter?"

"Not to me," he quips. He slides the back of his fingers across his jawline, before catching my eye. "I take that back. If you love her, then it matters to me. If she's important to you, she's important to me. It's that simple."

In some ways, I'm closer to Smith than I am to my brothers. After my mother died, and it became clear my father is Satan, I've taken on a different role with my brothers. A more paternal one. With Smith, I can just be. "She's in danger," I tell him. "He won't kill her—then he'd lose his leverage over me—but he won't hesitate to hurt her. And she could get killed by accident. She almost did."

"Do you think that's what happened to your mother?"

"No." I feel the venom coursing through my veins. It's thick and hot. "I think that sonofabitch had her killed. It was planned. I know it."

Smith watches me until it starts to get uncomfortable. He doesn't say anything, but I can see the gears turning. "What are you thinking?" I ask.

"I want every firearm you own. And I want them today, before I leave this room."

Where the hell did that come from? "*What?* I tell you my father is a lunatic who has it out for me and you want my guns? That's not fucking happening."

"Every single one."

"Why?" I bark.

"Because I know you, JD. You foam at the mouth when the Chinese restaurant forgets to send hot chili oil with your takeout. The only time you're this calm in the face of adversity is when you have a battle plan."

"I look calm to you? Because I'm not feeling any fucking calm."

"For you, this is serene. Your behaving like a man who not only has a plan, but has made his peace with God."

"There is no God," I hiss. And if I ever find out differently, I'll kill him myself for all the pain he rained down on the good people I love. "Stay out of this, Smith. Your part is to protect Gabrielle and protect my brothers. That's it. I told you I'd manage the rest."

"You'll never get away with it."

"I don't need to get away with anything." I'm willing to take whatever



punishment comes, even death. It'll be worth it. "I never shirk my responsibilities."

"Your father doesn't have to win."

"He already did. Go to the cemetery where my mother and Sera are buried, where Georgina and her baby will be buried in a week. Go down the hall and take a look at Zack, then go talk to Chase who prefers the company of machines to humans, or to Gray, who can't fuck a woman unless he's negotiated an airtight contract about where he can put his hands. Go upstairs, sit by the bed and listen to Gabrielle whimper in her sleep. After that, come back and tell me he hasn't already won."

"It doesn't have to be that way. It's only like this because you're pigheaded. You spend every waking minute of your life trying to manage everything yourself. Nobody can go it alone. And it's no way to live."

I've lived alone with this for so long, I wouldn't even begin to know how to share the burden. And I don't want to share it, because the end will be grisly and I wouldn't dream of ever saddling anyone with that. "I have responsibilities. I can't pass them off to someone else. But you're right. It's not living. It's hell."

"I want to talk to my father," Smith says. "Some of this might be a matter of national security."

"Do not involve him in this shitshow. It can only come back to bite him."

"This isn't just a personal vendetta, exacting revenge for what happened to your family. This is bigger than that. DW runs the fucking country. Sends kids to war. Controls the damn economy. When Dad was head of the Joint Chiefs, and when he was a general, commanding forces, my father stared down presidents, and enemies as formidable as DW. More formidable. Trust me when I tell you he can take care of himself."

"DW destroys everyone, and everything that gets in his way. Only death will stop him."

"Maybe. But you will not be the one to mete out that punishment. Not if I have a damn thing to say about it." He raps his knuckles on the table. "Don't give up your firearms, but I'm going to shadow you so close, you won't be able to bend over without worrying my dick's going to slide up your ass."

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**JULIAN**

I stand outside my bedroom trying to form the words to say to Gabrielle.

Wondering if she'll be fully lucid today, or in and out. She had another bad night, crying in her sleep. It was awful.

I'm filled with hate. Consumed by guilt. Guilt about Gabrielle. Guilt about Georgina and the baby.

Smith is right, this is my fault. *How could I have underestimated a man who murdered his family? My family. How?*

With all the planning and celebration surrounding the inauguration, I thought we'd have more time before he struck hard. I thought he'd be too preoccupied with the transition of power to keep too close an eye on me. But instead he used the fucking inauguration as an alibi, for himself, and for Olson. I don't care what Smith says about chasing red herrings, my father might not have lit the match, but he's responsible for the fire, and that bastard Olson is in up to his eyeballs too.

I rest my forehead against the door for a few seconds before turning the knob quietly so as not to disturb her. Gabrielle's curled into the side of the bed I normally sleep on. She doesn't look like she's moved since we laid her there.

Something about her in my bed—not the bed at the apartment—*my* bed, hits me hard. I've spent countless nights on that mattress, in the very spot she's in now, thinking about her. Conjuring hundreds of different scenarios that all ended with me falling asleep wrapped around her warm body. I never once imagined anything like this.

The nurse smiles at me. "How is she?" I ask softly.

“She seems to be resting more comfortably in the last hour. Would you like some time alone with her?”

I nod. “A few minutes.”

I inch closer to the bed, watching her chest move up and down. Relief washes over me. What if it had been her trapped in the back office? What if I had to identify her charred, lifeless body?

I knew he would go after her, and this time I shouldn’t have been caught off guard. No excuse. I didn’t do enough to protect her. *Maybe it’s not even possible to protect her from him.* I squeeze my hands into tight fists and release them, stretching my fingers. Maybe Smith can do a better job. Maybe between both of us, she’ll be safe.

Gabrielle begins to stir, and I lower myself onto the edge of the bed beside her. “It’s just me.”

Her eyes snap open and dart around the room. She has no idea where she is. “You’re in my bed at Sweetgrass. You’re safe here.”

She pops up, and examines the bandage on her hand. “My parents!” There’s terror in her voice, but I’m relieved she’s thinking about them, grateful for every normal reaction from her.

“It’s okay. I sent Lally to be with your parents first thing this morning. I thought it would be better for them to hear about the fire, and about you, in person. I’ve spoken to them twice. You can call them whenever you’re ready. I’m sure they would love to hear your voice.”

“*Lally?* Lally is with them?” She tips her head to the side. “In Houston?” she asks in a way that tells me her memory is fuzzy, not just about the fire, but in general.

I nod. “She stopped by the hospital this morning to see you before she left. Do you remember talking to her?”

She hesitates. Her face is sallow, her lips colorless, like she’s been dragged through hell. After several seconds she nods, and the furrow between her brow eases. I relax a bit, when she lies back down, her head resting on the pillow, dark hair fanning the cream linen, like a piece of modern art displayed in a contemporary gallery.

“Lally will be back in a day or two to dote on you. Prepare yourself for non-stop hovering.”

“Georgie.” She wets her lips, before pressing them together. “Georgie was in the office when the fire happened. She died. And the baby. The baby died, too.”

Her affect is still dull, and there isn't a trace of emotion in her voice. It's all been stripped away. Maybe it's the medicine. "Yes." I force the word out.

"But everyone else is okay. That's what they said."

"Everyone else got out safely."

"Why, JD? I did everything by the book." Her voice has a bit more life to it now. "Everything was to code or exceeded it. Even when people told me it was okay to cut corners, I didn't cut a single one."

I take hold of her hand. The anguish in her face carves a wedge from my soul. My father will pay for this. "You listen to me. That fire was not your fault."

"Wade. I need to talk to Wade." She pulls off the quilt and looks down. She's wearing one of my T-shirts and a pair of underwear Lally sent. "These aren't my clothes." She tugs at the T-shirt. "I don't have any clothes."

Her eyes are glassy, as she looks up at me, studying my face for answers. "I don't have anything."

"You have people who love you. That's more important than anything else. You can rebuild when you're ready." There is no end to the stupid shit I allow to come out of my mouth, because I don't have anything better to offer her.

"I don't have Georgie," she says softly. "Not even all the love in the world can rebuild Georgie." She shuts her eyes. I can tell from her erratic breathing, she's not asleep, just retreating.

Gabrielle will have everything she needs to recover. I'll make damn sure of it. And I'll help her rebuild the hotel with my bare hands, if that's what she wants. But I can't give her back her friend. No amount of money or influence can raise people from the dead. Death is the great equalizer.

"No." I reach under the sheet and grasp her hand. "We can't bring Georgie back. But she would want you to be strong. She would expect you to mourn, and then get on with your life. You can honor her by doing that." It's such bullshit, I barely have the stomach to say the words out loud. It was what well-meaning people told me after my mother and Sera died. It didn't make me feel any better, but Gabrielle is different. She believes in God, in goodness, in honoring souls, living and dead, by doing good works in their names.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for honoring the dead too. But not through selfless good works. I believe in honoring them with justice. I believe in settling scores. In retribution. In revenge, served cold and bloody.

But I don't want Gabrielle tinged by my style of vengeance. I want her heart to beat free from hate. "Maybe when you're feeling better, we can come up with something to honor Georgie and the baby," I murmur. "You're good at that."

After her grandmother died, she spent every Saturday night that summer babysitting. She arranged it with YWCA, so single moms without extra income could sign-up for the service. Gabrielle didn't charge them a penny, even though she could have used the extra money. It gave these women who were raising children alone a night to visit with a friend, or to just run errands without dragging the kids along. She did it to honor her grandmother. Gabrielle never talked about it, and she brushed off anyone who tried to make a big deal about it. That was the summer I decided to marry her. The summer I realized I couldn't live without her. *The summer before I learned there would be no happily-ever-after for us.*

I sit, holding her hand, until I'm sure she's asleep before going downstairs to grab another cup of coffee. Patrick's working in the small office my grandmother once used as a sewing room, but the house is eerily quiet without Lally hurrying around the kitchen and bossing anyone within earshot.

As I pull a mug from the cupboard to pour myself a lukewarm cup of coffee, there's a quick rap on the side door, before it creaks open. I glance over my shoulder at my brother Chase coming into the kitchen. "Hey. Want a cup of coffee?" I ask. "It's not hot, but I can nuke it."

He holds up a hand. "I'm good. I should have called before I stopped by. You probably have a lot on your plate."

"You don't need to call unless you're bringing company with you that requires me to be wearing pants. I don't know how many times I need to say it."

"Gray said to tell you he's around if you need anything. He's been trying to reach you."

I nod. I've texted back and forth with Gray, but I've been avoiding his calls. The thought of him defending my father is more than I can take today. I don't want to say anything to him I'll come to regret.

"How's Gabby?"

I put the mug in the microwave and set it to reheat. "I don't know. I'm afraid the road's going to be long and hard for her."

Chase nods. "She'll be okay. We'll make sure of it. How about you? You

look like shit.”

“I’m fine. Or at least I will be when I have some more answers about the fire.”

“I might be able to help with that.” When I glance across the countertop at him, he hooks a thumb in the direction of my study.

The microwave beeps and I grab my coffee and follow him out of the kitchen. Chase and Zack are not identical twins, but before the accident it was hard for most people to tell them apart. Zack was the more outgoing of the two, larger, with more self-confidence. Chase often looked to his lead for almost everything. They were inseparable.

When we get to the study, Chase tosses his phone on my desk, and I do the same before following him into the closet. I’ve spent so much time in here recently, I should have surround sound installed. This tells you how fucked up my life is that I have to spend copious amounts of time in a secure room.

“Hey.” I point at his laptop.

“It’s all good,” he responds. I have no reason to doubt him. He’s forgotten more about tech security than I’ll ever know.

I shut the door and take the chair across from him. “Do you know something?”

“I don’t know anything about The Gatehouse fire, but I think SOLO is connected to the warehouse fires. And I think Rofler is involved somehow too.”

I’m not entirely surprised. That bastard Rofler. He’s nothing but a snitch, runs to my father with everything. I should have beaten the piss out of him a month ago and thrown his ass to the curb. “I’m listening.”

Two days before the fire, a Sayle Pharmaceutical van pulled up to the loading dock outside the SOLO lab. A couple of guys moved some boxes out of the building and into the vehicle before driving away. It happened at least three separate times that day. I haven’t been able to crack the security cameras inside the lab, so I don’t know what was in the boxes. We might never know.” He shrugs his right shoulder. “It wouldn’t surprise me if the cameras were down. They tried to disable the ones outside, but they missed a step. Anyway, I was able to trace the van to the warehouses.”

“I’m not entirely following you, Chase. How did you track them to the warehouses, you were in DC?”

“Remotely,” he responds like I’m an idiot. “There are cameras all over

the city. I tracked their stupid asses the entire way.”

“But we don’t know what they took over.”

“Nope. But something did go from the van onto a small boat.”

“Wait a minute. One step at a time. If they were driving a Sayle van, we can run the license plate.”

“Already did. The plates belong to an abandoned vehicle. And it wasn’t actually a Sayle van.” He pulls an image up on the screen and zooms in. Chevrolet.

“We don’t have any Chevys in our fleet.”

“Nope,” he says, leaning back in the chair.

“Have you been able to ID the guys in the van?”

“Only one is a Sayle employee.”

“Rofler?” Chase nods. “Let me see the bastard.”

He pulls up another set of images. “I’ve never seen these guys before.”

“But you’ve seen this dickwad.” Chase shows me a video feed taken outside the warehouse where Sayle stored packing materials and other supplies before the fire destroyed it. Rofler pulls what appears to be a piece of rolling luggage and a knapsack from the back of the van and climbs into a boat on the dock. Chase fast forwards to the same boat pulling away toward open ocean with Rofler still aboard.

“The fire started about an hour later.”

“How did you get this feed? The fire must have destroyed the camera.”

He rolls his eyes at me. “It did, but the feed isn’t inside the camera. It’s sent remotely to the security offices. And to me,” the cheeky bastard adds.

“Right. And all this had to take place before the inauguration, because Smith was scheduled to take over security for Sayle the very next day.”

Chase nods. “Probably.”

“I need you to share everything you have with Smith. He’s coming by in about forty-five minutes to meet with me. Can you wait?”

“No problem. You’re the guy signing my paychecks.”

“Rofler didn’t pull this off by himself.” I catch myself thinking out loud, which is never good around my brothers. *Jesus*. I rub my eyes. I am so damn tired.

“I’m sure your father and Olson are involved somehow,” my brother says, like he can read my mind.

“Sorry to break the bad news, but the asshole is your father too.” Chase growls, low and mean.

*Fuck.* I'll bet anything he destroyed whatever evidence there was linking him to the accident. Evidence that I've been waiting years to get my hands on. *That fucker.* I slam both fists on the table. "They destroyed all the evidence."

"Nothing in a lab, or in cyberspace, is ever fully destroyed." Chase stows his laptop in a beat-up leather bag. "I didn't see any connection to The Gatehouse fire. And I looked hard."

"Oh, they're responsible for that too. It's all connected. The Gatehouse fire was just a slap in my face on their way out. A parting gift."

"I'll keep looking."

"No. You will not keep looking. They've killed someone now. They won't hesitate to kill you."

"This isn't the first time they've killed. We both know that. The bastards almost killed me once," he says. "I'm not afraid of them."

I'm speechless for a few seconds while I wrap my head around what he just said. He thinks my father is responsible for the accident too. How did I miss this? "Chase—"

"Don't Chase me. I spent over six fucking hours inside that goddamn car while they died around me. I will never be that powerless again. And no, I don't have any hard evidence, but I'm as determined to find it as you are. So don't you dare Chase me." He shoves his chair aside. "I'm going to spend some time with Zack. Let me know as soon as Gabrielle is up for visitors. I'd like to see her."

I guess the youngest Wilder boy is all grown up, and almost as much of an asshole as the oldest one. "I'll let you know when she's ready. I'm sure she'd like to see you too." He nods and opens the door. "And Chase?"

"What?" he snarls.

"Thanks for putting these pieces together. And for coming by. She'd be proud of the man you've become." She is our mother. I don't need to explain that to Chase.

"Don't get all sloppy on me because you haven't slept in days."

I bite the inside of my cheek. "*Pfft.* Don't worry. I didn't say I was proud of you. Or even that I think you're a man."

I catch the smirk as he snatches his phone off my desk. Little pissant. He's right about one thing. Nothing is ever completely destroyed. There is no such thing as the perfect crime.



## GABRIELLE

I'm lying awake trying to patch together the last forty-eight hours. It's like a challenging jigsaw puzzle, the kind with thousands of tiny pieces, nothing more than splashes of color.

My eyes are closed, and I'm pretending to be asleep so I don't have to face anyone or anything until I have a clearer picture of what happened. I can't let them know that huge chunks have disappeared from my memory, and the rest is hazy, as though someone poured a filmy liquid over my head, and it seeped through the membrane and onto my brain.

The pieces are scattered without rhyme or reason, without even a hint of how they fit together. But the picture's somewhat less blurry than it was just a few hours ago, and much to my relief, the corners are beginning to take shape.

I spent the evening of the fire with Georgie. We had dinner and put the finishing touches on the baby's room. *Oh God, the warehouse fires. Georgie couldn't bear to watch.* She must have been terrified when the fire started and she couldn't get out of the office. It must have been so hot. Since she's been pregnant, she hasn't tolerated the heat well. *Stop Gabrielle! You'll never figure out what happened if you keep focusing on Georgie's last minutes on earth. The details will get muddled again.*

JD called to say hello when he was on his way back to Charleston. And then Rafe called to tell me Gus was sick and had to leave. They were short-staffed because most of the security team was in Washington for the inauguration. "Please don't do anything tonight that would make my life more difficult," he said. I promised him I would stay in my bed until

morning.

I remember sliding my e-reader onto the nightstand when I started to nod off. The next thing—Rafe’s in my room, and I’m banging on doors shouting for guests to get out. Then I’m on the sidewalk across the street. Georgie’s car is there. *Why is Georgie’s car here?* She must have come in to pick up the quarterlies. *I told you not to drive alone at night! Georgie! I need to find Georgie!*

I hear the squeak of the door opening, and I’m pulled back from that night. I want to remember more. I want to remember all of it, but remembering is soul-crushing work and I’m in short supply of the courage it demands. The memories are an ache in my chest, unfurling slowly, spiny fingers prodding roughly as they expand, leaving me drained and overwhelmed. Even lifting my head off the pillow seems like a chore that can only be accomplished after an internal pep talk. I’m grateful for a short reprieve. I’ll work at remembering again after I’ve had a chance to rest and fortify myself.

JD’s talking to the nurse. They’re speaking so softly I can’t make out what they’re saying.

After a minute or two, the bed dips beside me. My eyes are closed, but I know it’s JD. I smell the warm creamy scent of the sandalwood soap uses. He puts his hand on my arm but I pretend to be asleep.

“Gabrielle,” he murmurs. “I hate to wake you, darlin’, but the nurse needs to change your bandages.”

I wince at the prospect of the nurse cleaning the open wounds. “I’m awake. What time is it?”

“It’s two o’clock. There’s a clock right here.” He lifts a small vintage clock off the bedside table so I can see it. “You slept a long time. You needed it.”

I did need it, but my sleep didn’t bring me any peace. The nightmares were hauntingly real. In the dreams, I kept trying to get to my office. For some reason, I knew Georgie was there, but the smoke was thick and black and I couldn’t see more than a few inches in front of me. I rooted around for the office door but couldn’t find it. When I eventually did locate it, a dragon stuck its head through the heavy wooden door blowing fire at me so I couldn’t get inside. Georgie kept screaming my name from the other side of the door, and I could hear a baby wailing. It felt real. In many ways, it still does.

“Lally left clothes for you,” JD tells me. “She said they’ll be big, but they’re clean and will work for now. We’ll get you some new clothes. That’s easy. I spoke with a woman from Jordan Jones. She’s going to come by tomorrow with samples. You can pick out whatever you want, and it’ll be delivered within hours.”

“What Lally sent is fine.” More than I deserve. Georgie’s dead. I couldn’t save her. Maybe—maybe I caused the fire. Maybe I was too inexperienced to be in charge of a hotel. Even a tiny hotel. I glance at JD. “Clothes are the least of my worries.”

“How about something to eat?” he asks, wisely putting the topic of personal shoppers and clothes aside.

“I’m not hungry.”

“At least take a drink and let the nurse change the bandages.”

“I’m not helpless. I don’t need someone telling me when to drink, or a nurse to change my bandages. I have a perfectly good hand.” It comes out terser than I mean it. But I just want to crawl inside a hole and be left alone. JD is going to smother me because he doesn’t know how to nurture without smothering. Because his way of taking care of someone means controlling every last detail. “I know you mean well and I’m grateful to have a place to sleep. So grateful, even though it doesn’t seem like it. But I need some space.”

“Gabrielle, we’re not doing this.” *Here we go.* “You were released from the hospital because there’s a nurse on duty here around the clock. Otherwise, you might still be there. You need to let us take care of you while you get your strength back.”

I will *not* let you treat me like an invalid, JD. “I need to go to the bathroom. And if you don’t mind, I’d like some privacy.”

He nods. That *fine, but I don’t like it* nod he uses with me. “It’s right through there. Don’t lock the door in case you need something. You’re still weak.”

I glare at him while swinging my legs off the bed. Sitting up isn’t easy. I’ve been lying down for a long time, and I’m stiff and wobbly.

“Let me help you stand up.”

I don’t as much as glance at him. “No.” The minute I open the door to his help, he’ll never back off. And I need to prove to myself that I can get out of bed. It’s a small matter, but it’s huge to me.

I hear JD’s knuckles crack. “I don’t want you to fall.”

I sit at edge of the bed gathering some strength and look around. “Is this your bedroom?”

“*Mmhm.*”

I peek over my shoulder. The other side of the bed hasn’t been slept in. “Where did you sleep last night?”

“In that chair.” He points to a recliner, not far from the bed. “We brought it up from downstairs.”

“I’ll sleep somewhere else tonight so I don’t disturb you,” I mumble. “It seems—”

“Seems like a lot of trouble to keep dragging the recliner from room to room. It would be easier if you just slept here.” I don’t understand what he means at first, but after catching his steely gaze, I finally get it. He’s sleeping where I sleep.

“You can’t sleep in a chair again. I’ll be fine for the night.”

“You might be ready, but I’m not ready for that. Not yet.”

“I’m a little unsteady,” I confess reluctantly. The truth is I’ll never make it to the bathroom alone. “Maybe I can use your help. Just a little help getting to the door.”

He places his arm around my torso to protect me from falling, but he lets me do most of the maneuvering myself, even though I know it’s killing him. He’d rather scoop me up and carry me.

It’s a long walk to the bathroom. It feels like miles. When my knees start to buckle, I clutch his arm and cling to him with my good hand. I’m not sure I have the strength to make it.

“Just rest for a minute,” he says softly, wrapping his strong arms around me, and pulling me against him for support. I squeeze my eyes tight. But no matter how hard I squeeze, I can’t hold the tears back.

JD doesn’t say a word. He just holds me protectively, lets me find comfort in his arms, and gives me time to wring out some of the sorrow and grief that have saturated every inch of my body. I cry for Georgie, and for Wade, and for the baby who was supposed to wear a pink ruffled dress for Easter, with matching tights and shoes. I cry for the hotel guests who must have been terrified descending the stairs while the dark, thick smoke rose above the ground floor. I cry for all the work my family and friends put into The Gatehouse to make my dream come true. And I cry for myself. Because I’m allowed to. Because my best friend is dead. Because I don’t have anything left, not a single pair of underpants to my name.

I cry until I'm dry as a bone, until there isn't a single tear left to shed.

When I'm done, JD presses his lips to the top of my head and helps me toward the bathroom. I'm so grateful he doesn't say it'll all be okay, or they're in a better place. Maybe it's true, but right now those words would sting.

When we get there, he guides me into the room and sits me on the lid of the toilet seat. "Stay here, Gabrielle. Don't move. I know you want some privacy, but let the nurse help you. The stone floor is hard. You'll hurt yourself if you fall."

I nod, because I don't have the strength to argue. I'm not even sure I have the strength to pee without help. It's a humbling moment for me.

My physical injuries aren't serious, so I can't understand why I'm so exhausted. I slept plenty. Maybe I slept too much. That's what my mother would tell Georgie and me when we'd wake up at noon still groggy after sleeping half the day away. Georgie's baby will never have sleepovers with her best friend, or movie nights with makeovers and pedicures. I bury my face in my hands. I was wrong about the tears. My heart will weep for them forever.

JD comes back with Nurse Maureen, and she immediately sends him away. "Maybe you can get Gabby some juice and toast. Can you scramble an egg?" she asks him.

He hesitates, but she shoos him out of the bathroom and shuts the door before he can protest.

After Maureen wraps my hand in layers of plastic, she sits me on a long marble bench in the cavernous shower and turns on the water. "I'll be right outside the shower if you need me," she says.

I let the warm spray cleanse me. I diligently work the sandalwood soap under the fingernails of my unwrapped hand and behind my ears where soot still hides. And I ugly cry again. Traces of black ash streak the mucus dripping from my nose.

*How awful it must have been for Georgie.* Consumed by deadly smoke, inside and out. The poison filling her nose and lungs until she couldn't breathe. It's the smoke that kills people in a fire. I heard that somewhere.

The steam clears some of the lingering residue from my sinuses, but it will be a long time before I breathe freely again. It has nothing to do with my lungs, and everything to do with the heaviness in my chest.

I already miss her so much it hurts everywhere. I'm like a wooden chair

battered against the shore during a hurricane. Torn apart limb by limb. Grains of sand wearing craggy holes into the splintered surface until it's a fragile piece of driftwood, twisted into a grotesque form. Unrecognizable.

Was I negligent? Did I miss something that caused the fire? Am I responsible for their deaths? *God help me.* I don't know how I'll ever be able to live with myself if that's the case.

I could hide in the steam forever, but Maureen's waiting for me, so I finish washing myself as quickly as I can.

After she helps me dry, Maureen changes the bandages on my hand. She's gentle and kind, apologizing in advance for the throbbing pain that comes when she applies an antibacterial ointment to the festering blisters. I wonder what kind of pain Georgie was in when she was burning to death. I wonder if the baby felt pain. Georgie must have been terrified gasping for air that had all been eaten up by the fire. Her face is in front of me constantly, screwed-up in agony. Screaming for help. Her chilling screams are all I hear inside my head. Day and night, she screams for me. But even in my dreams, I don't save her.

I'm so tired. I need to sleep for a hundred years. But Maureen has other ideas. She sits me in the oversized upholstered chair in JD's room while she strips the bed and puts on fresh sheets.

*Georgie, why did you have to go to the hotel?*

*To help you, Gabby. I was just trying to help you.*

"JD!" I shriek. "JD!" Maureen rushes over to me, alarmed. "I need to talk to him," I gasp. "It's important."

"He'll be up in a few minutes. Can I get you something?"

I don't think I can wait a few minutes. But now I can't remember what I need to ask him. I'm choking. The smoke. It's so hot. A wave of nausea rolls through me, and the light flickers.

"Gabby. Gabby. Gabby," Maureen calls, but I can't fight my way back to her.

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I OPEN MY EYES SLOWLY. The worst of the queasiness is gone, but my skin feels clammy. JD is on his haunches, on one side of the chair, and Maureen is on her knees on the other side, swabbing my face and neck with a cool

washcloth.

“I think I fainted.”

“You blacked out,” JD says, brushing a few errant strands of hair off my face.

“It’s a normal reaction. You’ve been through a lot and you haven’t eaten anything. Just taking a shower can take a lot out of person who is still recovering,” Maureen assures me, “but I’ll be more comfortable after I speak to your doctor. Let’s get you some juice and into bed first.”

The queasiness is back with a vengeance. “Don’t think I can hold anything down.”

“Take a sip of juice,” JD instructs, holding the glass to my mouth. I wet my lips, but it’s all I can manage.

I let JD help me to the bed. Maureen props two pillows behind my back before she leaves us alone.

JD sits on the bed beside me. “Have you talked to Wade or to my parents?” I ask him.

“I haven’t spoken to Wade. I tried to call to see if there was anything he needed, but his phone is off.” He smooths the quilt over my legs. “I did speak to your parents. They’re worried about you, but otherwise, they’re fine. Your mother wants to come back to Charleston, but she’s in a phase of treatment where she needs to be near the hospital. I’m hoping your father and Lally can talk some sense into her.”

I nod. I’m not really feeling up to talking with her, but there is no way my mother is interrupting her treatment to come back to Charleston. “I’ll call her. Can I use your phone?”

“Here,” he says, unlocking the screen. JD stretches out on the quilt next to me while I phone my parents.

“Mama.”

“Gabrielle!” My mother starts to cry, and I begin to sob too. “Baby,” she says, “we’ve been so worried. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just tired. Georgie—” I can’t say it. I can’t form the words.

“Your father and I are coming home.”

“No! Please. Please don’t even think about it. You need to get well. I can’t lose you too. Please. Give me a few days and I’ll come to you. Please.”

“You have to promise me you’ll do everything the doctors say. And you’ll let Lally take care of you. I’m going to send her home today. And you need to call me every day.”

“I promise. But you need to promise me you’ll do everything you need to do to get well, too.” Before she can respond the phone beeps. Another call is coming in. I glance at the screen. *Charleston Fire and Rescue*.

“Mama. Hold on. Let me call you back. JD’s getting an important call.” I don’t wait for her to respond before I click over to the incoming call. “Hello.”

“This is Chief Clark. I’m looking for JD Wilder.”

“Chief Clark. Is this about The Gatehouse? This is Gabrielle Duval. The owner of the hotel.” He hesitates for a few seconds. “I have JD’s phone. Mine was lost in the fire.” I sound ridiculous. Falling all over myself to explain things that don’t need explanation.

“How are you, Ms. Duval?” the Chief asks.

“Fine.” I’m almost afraid to ask, but I need to know. “Do you have any news about how the fire started?”

“We’re still working on that. It’s too early to know for sure.” I feel like he’s not telling me everything. “A fire inspector will be by to ask you some questions as soon as you’re up to it. Can we reach you at this number?”

“Yes. I’m available any time.”

“Good. Is JD around?”

I reluctantly hand the phone to JD, who takes it and starts to walk away. “Don’t go. I want to hear,” I say softly. He glances back at me. “I’ll follow you.”

JD glares at me, but doesn’t leave the room. Although he might as well have, because his responses are terse, one or two words, and a grunt here and there. The conversation lasts just a couple minutes with Chief Clark doing all the talking.

When JD ends the call, he tosses his phone on the bed without saying a word. “What did he say?”

“Nothing.”

“Georgina is my friend. The Gatehouse is my hotel. Don’t you dare keep secrets from me about the fire. Don’t you dare!”

“Not today, Gabrielle. Today you need to gather your strength. There’s a lot for you to do. And I’m not keeping secrets from you about the fire.”

“Like hell you’re not. The Chief didn’t call to shoot the shit. He called for a reason.”

“The local police and fire inspectors want to talk to you. And the FBI,” he adds, his voice quieter, as though he’s hoping I won’t hear him say FBI.

“Why is the FBI involved?”



“They got involved initially because of the warehouse fires. Some of the items stored in the warehouses were transported across state lines.”

“What? I don’t understand. Is The Gatehouse fire connected to the warehouses?”

JD stretches his arms over his head, like he’s trying to work out some stiffness from his shoulders. “They don’t know, but it’s unlikely.” He’s lying.

“Then why are they still involved?”

“My father’s the president, and you and I have a relationship. You need to put Georgina to rest. We’ll talk more about all of it after the funeral.”

*After the funeral.* I swallow the lump in my throat. “We’ll talk now.”

“No. That’s not what you need right now. You worry about getting your strength back and saying goodbye to your friend. Let me and Smith worry about the rest.”

“That’s what you said when the furnaces went down. Don’t worry, Smith and I’ll take care of it.” The minute the words come out of my mouth, I want to shove them back inside. I didn’t mean to say them out loud. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Nothing to be sorry about. It’s true.”

JD’s face is pasty, and for the first time I notice he doesn’t look like he’s slept in days. “We will get the sonofabitch who’s responsible, Gabrielle. I promise.”

Did I hear him correctly? Did he just say, *we’ll get the sonofabitch who’s responsible?* No. I must have misunderstood. No! My pulse is racing. I need to stay calm. If he thinks I’m all worked up, he’s going to downplay it. “You think someone set the fire?” I cough to hide the squeak in my voice.

“Intentionally?”

“Maybe.”

“Who would do something like that?” I try my best to keep the shock out of my voice. And the anger.

“They don’t know. Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves. It could have been an accident. That’s still where all the evidence is pointing,” he says, unbuckling his belt and pulling off his jeans and boxers.

I let out a small relieved sigh. I don’t entirely believe him, but right now, I’m exhausted and willing to take him at his word. JD pulls down the covers on the other side of the bed and readjusts the pillows. *What?* I thought he was getting undressed to shower. “You want sex?” I ask incredulously. “Now?”

“I always want sex.”

“I can barely move.” Or think straight. And Maureen might come back.  
“What are you doing?”

“Getting in my bed. To keep you quiet and still. And to sleep.”

I don’t believe him. He’s going to try to distract me with orgasms. That’s what he always does. I stare at him in disbelief. “You’re naked.”

“It’s how I sleep. I like the feel of the cool sheets on my ass.”

“You have . . . an erection.”

“I always have an erection when you’re around. Ignore it.”

“Ignore it?”

“Yeah. That’s what I do most of the time, otherwise I’d never get a damn thing done. Do you want to call your mother back?”

“I can’t. Not now. But I better text her, otherwise she won’t stop worrying.”

JD hands me his phone and climbs under the covers, kissing my forehead before he lies down. “I’m fading,” he admits. “I need to shut my eyes for a couple hours, and you need to rest too. I’m right here if you need anything. Go to sleep after you text your mom.”

Even though JD has the kind of hard-on that normally makes me drool, nothing about lying in his bed with him right now is sexy. He’s exhausted and worried. His face is drawn, and his eyes are a washed-out blue I’m not sure I’ve ever seen in them before.

Much to my relief, he doesn’t reach for me or wrap himself around my body. I’m relieved because although I long for the comfort he would bring, I don’t deserve it. Not with Georgie and the baby dead. I want to feel as alone as she must have felt while she was dying. I need the kinship with her. I just do.

JD’s head barely hits the pillow before he’s snoring softly. I text with my mother for a few minutes, and eventually I fall asleep too. It’s not a graceful fall, more like a stumble into sleep. When I close my eyes, and consciousness starts to fade, the nightmares begin—I’m not even asleep yet, so they aren’t really nightmares. But they’re frightening just the same. It seems like no time has passed before I’m wide awake, covered in sweat, shivering, and gasping for air.

I want JD to hold me. To thaw my ice-cold skin. To soothe me while the inferno rages in my head. It’s hell, but all I have to do is roll over and take what I want. He could make it marginally better. He’s inches away. But I don’t allow myself the comfort.

Today, I choose hell.

## GABRIELLE

When I wake up, the shutters are closed tight and the room is dark except for a small lamp in the corner. I peek at the clock. It takes me a minute to figure out if it's day or night. *Oh God, another wasted day. So what? It's not like you have anywhere to be.*

I haven't left the bedroom for days, but I'm feeling a bit stronger, and restless. I'm also starving. Maybe I'll go down to the kitchen and make something to eat. But first things first.

I walk myself to the bathroom, brush my teeth and wash my face. All of it without help. It's a small victory. Maureen examines my hand, and pronounces it, "healing nicely." She doesn't balk about me leaving the room, but insists on escorting me to the bottom of the steps. I hear soft music coming from JD's office when I get downstairs. I follow the sound of jazz and find him working at his desk.

"Hi. May I come in?" I ask from the doorway.

"You don't have to ask permission to come in if the door's open. That's the rule around here." He leans back in his chair, with a small, pleased smile. "It's good to see you up and around."

"It's about time." Can't hide forever. For a brief moment, I think about my little suite in the hotel. It's not—*wasn't*—anywhere near as spacious as JD's room, but it was beautiful. And it was mine. I wrap my arms around my torso, cupping my elbows for comfort.

"We need to get you some of your own clothes."

"These clothes are fine. It's not like I have anywhere to go."

His brow furrows, and I see the concern sweep over his face. "How are

you feeling?” he asks.

I walk around the desk and wiggle onto the edge, careful not to disturb the stack of folders. “Not sure. Numb. Heartbroken. Guilty. And I’m beginning to feel angry. So angry.” He takes my good hand and massages my fingers. “My best friend is dead. Think of how many other people could have died. The fire didn’t start by accident, did it? Someone set it. Maybe they didn’t want the competition. Maybe we were getting too successful, too quickly.” I take a long breath. “Or maybe someone wanted to hurt me.”

“I spoke with Chief Clark again this morning,” he says. “It *appears* the fire was an accident, but it’s too early in the investigation to say definitively. They’ll know more after the autopsy. They want to talk to you about why Georgina was there at ten o’clock on a night when she wasn’t working.”

I nod. It’s an automatic response, before it hits me. “Wait. They think Georgina had something to do with the fire?”

“He didn’t say that, but she wasn’t supposed to be there. They can’t reach your manager Tom, either. He left word that he was going to visit his mother for a few days. The number he left with the fire inspector isn’t a working number.”

Why are they talking about my employees? *That’s what they do. They’re looking for someone to blame it on.* I don’t believe anyone who works for me started that fire. It takes a demon to set fire to a hotel filled with sleeping guests. I would have known if that kind of evil worked for me. They are all good people. Especially Georgie.

My skin starts to prickle, and I feel my pulse quicken. “His phone was probably destroyed in the fire. They don’t know anything. They’re just grasping at straws.” I catch JD’s eye. The anger is simmering just below the surface. “There is no way in hell Georgina started that fire.”

He tilts his head to the side. “She was always jealous of you. Jealousy does funny things to a person.”

*You bastard!* “Stop! Stop talking about her that way!” I lunge at him and slam my fists into his chest. I don’t even care that my hand is throbbing. “Georgina would not have set the fire. She would never do something so awful. And she had too much to live for. Don’t you dare talk about her that way.”

He pulls me onto his lap and wraps his arms around me tightly so I can’t flail around. “They need to consider every angle,” he says, running a hand up and down my back like I’m a skittish animal. “That means looking in places

you'd rather they didn't."

I know he's right. They have to investigate all the possibilities. I rest my head on JD's chest, letting his heartbeat soothe me. "I think Georgie went back to the hotel to pick up the quarterly reports. We talked about it before I left her house. I told her they could wait. That she shouldn't drive alone at night." *But she didn't listen.* "And Tom, he's been so helpful," I add. "Why would he do something so terrible?"

"Tell the authorities about your conversation with Georgina. You're right, they don't know much of anything yet, and they're overwhelmed by all the fires. The FBI is all over this. They'll figure it out. We just need to be patient."

"Why is the FBI involved?" I know I've asked before, but I can't recall the answer. There are so many things I still can't remember.

"Your connection to me, and my connection to the president," JD says with the utmost patience. It reminds me of the way my father would speak to my grandmother when her dementia worsened.

I pass my hand over JD's sleeve, smoothing the fabric until the creases begin to ease. *My connection to you. Georgina warned me. She's been your friend forever, Gabrielle. She knows JD. Why didn't you listen to her? Why?* The emotion wells up again. And the guilt. The guilt is suffocating. I slide off JD's lap in one clumsy move and away from his clutches.

"When I let you back into my life, Georgie was upset. Really upset. Said it would end badly. She knew it." I press my hand into my chest to stop my heart from running wild. "She knew how it would end all along. She could feel it. But I didn't listen, because I wanted you too much. And now she's dead."

I slump to my knees, burying my face in my hands. JD gets down on the floor near me, but I push his hands away when he tries to comfort me. "Don't touch me. Just leave me alone."

"I won't touch you, but I am not leaving you alone."

I knew Georgie was terrified of something. Her face went white as a sheet when I told her my parents borrowed money from JD. That he was back in my life. I didn't make her tell me why she was so afraid—I didn't even ask. *Because you didn't want to know.* I was a terrible friend. Selfish. I should have asked her. Now it's too damn late.

"There is more you're not telling me. I can feel it. Tell me everything you know," I shriek. "Tell me!"

He grabs me by the upper arms. “Calm down. Calm down,” he repeats softly.

I can't. And the more he says it, the more out of control I feel inside. I can't breathe and I begin to gulp mouthfuls of air.

“You're hyperventilating. Control your breathing.”

But I can't. My chest is tightening. I'm having a heart attack.

“Maureen!” JD yells. “Maureen!”

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**JULIAN**

Gabrielle is hysterical, shaking, while Maureen tries to convince her to take a half dose of the sleeping medicine the doctor prescribed before she left the hospital.

“I don’t want to go to sleep,” she sobs. “Please. The nightmares. I need a break from the nightmares. *Please.*”

“You don’t have to go to sleep,” Maureen assures her. “It’s only half a tablet. But you’re having a panic attack. It will help with the anxiety. Let’s go upstairs. You can think about it on your way up.” Maureen nods at me, and together we get Gabrielle off the floor. When she’s on her feet, she holds onto Maureen for help. Not to me. She doesn’t even spare me a glance.

I follow them up the stairs. “I’m afraid to go to sleep,” Gabrielle admits. “Last night—” Even with Maureen’s encouragement, she doesn’t finish the thought. When we get to my bedroom, Gabrielle looks at me and then to Maureen. She doesn’t say a word, but we understand her silent plea.

“Why don’t you let me get Gabrielle in bed,” Maureen tells me gently. “I’ll let you know when she’s settled.”

My first inclination is to say, *fuck no*. It’s my bedroom. My house. I am not leaving. But I muster some self-control. “I’ll be downstairs. Gabrielle, please listen to what Maureen’s saying about the medicine.”

She turns her head and looks up at me. There’s no light in her eyes. Not the slightest flicker. She doesn’t say a single word. It’s like she’s broken.

And there isn’t a fucking thing I can do to make it any better.

I slump against the wall outside my bedroom door until I’m sure she’s safely in bed. Maureen is with her, speaking softly, soothing her in the way



you'd soothe a nervous child.

Once it's completely quiet, I take the stairs to the first floor, two at a time, like I'm running from something. But when I get to the bottom, I'm still looking over my shoulder. Whatever I was fleeing from, followed me down.

I grab a beer from the refrigerator and take a long pull. When it doesn't calm me, I slam the bottle on the counter, and shove my fist through an eighty-year-old pane in the kitchen window. It doesn't solve any of my problems, but I welcome the throbbing pain. It gives me an excuse to hide in my study and drown myself in a bottle of booze. Not that I need an excuse.

My damn hand is bleeding everywhere. I run it under the tap and wrap it in a kitchen towel so the blood doesn't get everywhere. When I'm done picking up the worst of the glass, I go to my study to sulk.

This is my fault. The guilt has feasted on my soul for years, most of the time just nibbling at the edges, but it's gorging now.

I've always believed one measure of a man is how well he can protect those closest to him. Those who are vulnerable and can't protect themselves.

I'm an abject failure in that regard. I can't fucking protect anyone. Not when it counts.

I hear Maureen's footsteps on the stairs. Gabrielle must be asleep. With all the nightmares she's been having, I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. The footsteps go toward the kitchen, and after several minutes pass, Maureen is at my door.

"I saw the shattered pane in the kitchen window. I taped a piece of cardboard and some plastic wrap over it, so a squirrel doesn't get in. I think it'll hold for the night." She glances at the blood-soaked dish towel. "Do you want me to take a look at your hand? See if it needs stitches?"

"*Nah*. I rinsed it off." I need to live with a deep gash for a while. It'll help me find my balls. "It's just a flesh wound. It'll be fine."

"Let me make sure there aren't any slivers of glass left inside," she says, coming closer to the desk.

"It's fine," I say, moving my hand onto my lap so she can't see that the blood's oozing through the white towel.

"If your hand gets infected, you'll be no good to anybody for a long time. You can't will away an infection or tough it out. Doesn't work that way."

I take a swig of bourbon and set my arm on the desk, carelessly unwrapping the towel that's wound around the fresh slashes. "Go ahead. You have ten seconds to look all you want."

Maureen moves the desk lamp closer to me and holds my hand under the light. “A few of these cuts are deep. One in particular. And there are still shards of glass in there. I don’t even need a magnifying glass to see them. I’m going up to get some supplies to clean out that hand. Don’t move,” she adds sternly.

“Is Gabrielle asleep?”

“*Mhm*. For now, poor thing,” she says over her shoulder.

“Let’s do this upstairs,” I say, following Maureen out of the room. “I don’t want her up there alone for too long.”

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WHEN I GET to my bedroom, Gabrielle is curled up on her side, sound asleep. I pause for a moment to watch her breathe. I want to smooth the quilt over her huddled body, to let her feel the warm press of my hand, to soothe her in some small way. I want the human contact not just for her, but for myself too. But more than anything, I don’t want to wake her. I want her to have whatever peaceful moments sleep brings tonight.

Maureen comes into the bedroom with a small satchel and beckons me into the master bath where the lighting is better. She doesn’t say a word while pulling a half-dozen slivers of glass from my hand. When she’s done, she inspects it one more time, then swabs it with a tinted liquid, that even with the bourbon, stings like a sonofabitch.

“Have you thought about moving Gabby into one of the guest rooms?” Maureen asks, sanitizing the tweezers with an alcohol wipe before putting them away. “I think she needs some space of her own.”

*No*. I glance at her. I want to know whose idea this is. I like Maureen, but she better not be filling Gabrielle’s head with garbage. “Did she ask for space?”

“She just experienced major trauma, JD. Lost her best friend and everything she owns.” She pulls out a roll of gauze and an ace bandage. “Give me your hand. It might be nice for her to have something of her own—even if it’s not really hers,” she says, taping the gauze.

“Did she say she wants space?”

Maureen nods.

*Fuck that*. “What exactly did she say?”

“She wants to look for a place as soon as she can. Said she needs to get out of here.”

“I’ll think about it.” Maureen packs up the supplies and I walk her to the bedroom door. “I’ll be here with Gabrielle all night.”

“You should get some sleep too,” she says quietly. “Shout if either of you need anything.”

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## JULIAN

I've been downstairs in my office since long before sunrise. I spent another sleepless night, kept awake by my own fucking demons. Gabrielle moaned several times in her sleep, crying out like she was in pain. I gathered her in my arms, and comforted her until she fell back asleep, although I don't think she was ever fully awake.

I need to go to Sayle today to sign off on some papers and take a few meetings. Regardless of what's happening in my personal life, I can't neglect my grandfather's company while I lick my wounds. DW would like nothing better than for me to stumble at the helm so he can install one of my brothers, or someone else in the job.

The only thing that's stopped me from paying my father a visit is that he hasn't been in office long enough for me to understand the protocols. I have no idea if I can get inside the White House with a gun, and the Secret Service will put a bullet in me as soon as they see the gleam of a blade or my hands around his neck. There aren't many viable options available to assassinate a sitting president. I don't care if they kill me, but not until after he's dead. I'll have one whack at him. *One*. It has to count.

"Good morning." I look up and Gabrielle's walking into my office dressed in Lally's clothing. The clothes are so big they're hanging off her slender frame, making her look small and vulnerable. I wonder if wearing them makes her feel as bad as it makes me feel seeing her in them.

"Good morning," I say hesitantly. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. Better today."

*Okay? Like hell you are. You look like a street urchin who hasn't eaten or*

*slept in weeks.* I want to say it, but she doesn't need to hear it. "Lisa Donnelly from Jordan Jones is coming by later this morning with some clothing samples for you to try on."

"I don't need clothes. I called an Uber to take me to my car. I have a few errands to run."

*Here we go.* "Like what?"

"I want to go to the bank and withdraw some cash so I can pick up a few personal things. Although I don't know if they'll let me without identification," she adds, almost as an afterthought. "And I want to go by and see Wade."

I start to take out my wallet to give her some cash, but think better of it. Before I tell her I'll go with her, to smooth the way so she'll have no problem withdrawing money, I remember what Maureen said about her needing space and some things of her own. "I'm sure there's someone at the bank who can vouch for your identity. They make exceptions when it comes to these kinds of situations."

She nods.

"But forget the Uber. Security will drive you wherever you need to go."

"I'll drive myself."

"Do you have car keys?" She blinks rapidly and tucks a fat curl behind her ear. "I keep an extra key in a small magnetic box in the back wheel well."

"You do know that's the first place a car thief looks, right?"

"No one is looking to steal a twelve-year-old Honda."

"What about a driver's license?" She looks up at me, her sunken eyes registering the dilemma. "Your car might have sustained some damage in the fire."

"Only one way to find out."

I really don't want to bring the hammer down hard, but is there a more stubborn woman in Charleston? "Security will take you on your errands."

She shakes her head. "No more security, JD. I'm done."

"Like hell you are." I stand, struggling to stay behind the desk. I am so fucking done with this conversation. And with her need to punish herself for Georgie's death. That's what this is all about. "I can't force you to accept the services of a personal shopper to help replace some of the things you lost, or to take money from me. But security is non-negotiable."

"I had security for weeks. I had it the day my hotel burned to the ground, taking my best friend with it into the ashes. It didn't do a damn bit of good. I

don't want it anymore.”

“You're not thinking straight.”

“Don't you dare go there. I'm thinking plenty straight. If someone wants to hurt me, they'll do it with or without security. They've already proven that.”

“Only one person died in a hotel fire that started at night. You are hurting, but you are alive. That's the most important thing.” At least to me. “It might have been worse.”

“Really? Really, JD? It might have been worse? You are a heartless asshole.”

I have a response on the tip of my tongue that I'm prepared to deliver while I drag her upstairs and lock her in my bedroom. But I'm no longer in charge of her security. That was the agreement. I pick up the phone and call Smith. “Gabrielle is in my study refusing security. I'm not allowing her to leave this house until you talk some sense into her.”

Before Smith has a chance to respond, Gabrielle speaks. “I won't be your prisoner, but I won't waste what little energy I have fighting you. Tell your friend Smith the bank opens at nine o'clock and I plan to be there when the doors open. If he wants to talk to me, he best make it snappy.” She stalks out of the room and stomps up the stairs like she weighs five hundred pounds.

“Did you hear that?” I ask Smith.

“Loud and clear.”

“You wanted to handle her security? Handle it.” I end the call, and chuck my phone across the room, narrowly missing my assistant, Patrick, in the doorway.

“You need to get going if you're going to make your first meeting at Sayle,” he says, without blinking an eye.

I'm hesitant to leave until Smith gets here and I know whether Gabrielle's going to cooperate or if I'm going to have to chain her to the bedpost. I will do it, if necessary. The woman is irrational. She's like a rebellious teenager bucking the rules like it's her job. *Fuck*. I squeeze the back of my neck until it loosens a bit. Maybe she does need space. I'm not prepared to give it to her yet, but it doesn't seem like I have a goddamn choice.

I go to the bay window and gaze out over the yard. No good answers there. *Fine, Gabrielle. You want space, you can have it, but it'll be on my terms.* “Do me a favor,” I say to Patrick. “When Lally gets back this afternoon, ask her to fix up one of the guestrooms for Gabrielle.”

“Any one in particular?”

“One that she’ll be happy in.” I shrug. “A suite, maybe. On the other side of the house from me, where she’ll have some privacy.”

“It’ll be quiet here with you at the office. I can get started on it this morning. Unless you prefer me to wait for Lally.”

“Knock yourself out if you have the time,” I say, grabbing my briefcase and walking into the hall. “She likes lots of light,” I call over my shoulder.





## GABRIELLE

The bedroom door's open, but Smith knocks anyway. "May I come in?"

I nod and put aside the to-do list I'm forcing myself to create. It's daunting. I peek at him out of the corner of my eye. "I have a lot to do today. An Uber's on its way. I only have a few minutes to chat."

"I'm sorry about your friend," he says gently. "It's not easy to lose someone you care about."

Smith is tall with wide shoulders and muscle everywhere. His body is such a contrast to his kind words and gentle voice. I expected bossy and bossier from him today. That's what I prepared for. I feel the waterworks coming on, and bite down on my bottom lip to squelch the rising emotion.

"Gabby? Is it okay if I call you Gabby?"

"Yes. Of course. Pretty much everyone calls me that." Except JD.

"Sit with me for a minute," he says, motioning toward the sitting area in JD's bedroom. I open my mouth to protest, but he doesn't let me. "Just for a few minutes. I won't make you late for your appointment."

I eye the jungle print on the back of the club chair. Might as well get this over with. "Okay." I drag myself across the room and take a seat in front of the slate fireplace. Once I'm seated, he sits beside me. "What can I do for you?" I ask. It sounds formal, too formal, but my brain is still addled and it's the only polite way I can think of saying *what do you want?*

"You can start by telling me how you're doing."

*Hmmm.* His manner is unnerving. Smith's approach is completely different from JD's, although he's unnerving too. They each mean business when they speak, but Smith demands it more subtly.

“Fine, thank you.” It occurs to me that I haven’t seen Gus or Rafe since the night of the fire. I’ve asked JD about them, but as usual, he was obtuse. “How’s Gus? What happened to him? His sudden illness is connected to the fire, isn’t it? And Rafe? How’s Rafe?”

“Lally’s right about you. You ask a lot of questions. Don’t even stop to take a breath waiting for the answers.” He watches me twist my fingers for a few seconds before he responds. “Gus is fine. He was probably poisoned, although by the time he got to the hospital, there wasn’t anything to detect. We think it had something to do with a piece of banana cream pie.”

Banana cream pie. *Banana cream pie*. “That was the dessert at the hotel restaurant the night of the fire—did anyone else get sick from the pie?”

“No. Not as far as we know. Could be an allergy. But it’s more likely someone laced it with something. Not enough to kill him, but enough to send him crawling home. He was lucky, had the wherewithal to pull over before he lost consciousness.”

I’m not sure I can bear to hear any more, but I press on because I *need* to know. I was responsible for everyone’s safety that night. Every person in the hotel was my responsibility. *Where did it all go wrong?* “Who do you think would do something like that?”

“We’re still short on answers. But we’ll get them.”

“Who gave him the pie?”

“Girl at the front desk. Amy.”

“Amy?” I cup my elbows. Amy is a twenty-three-year-old graduate student that I hired right out of college to work nights. She’s a local girl who had glowing recommendations from people I personally know. And I haven’t seen anything different from her. This just keeps getting crazier and crazier. “How about Rafe?”

“He’s fine. Feels guilty as hell, but I don’t see anything he did wrong.”

“No. He didn’t do anything wrong. He helped guests evacuate. Pulled the alarm when it didn’t go off automatically and woke me. I can’t imagine the magnitude of the loss if he hadn’t been there. I’ll tell him myself.”

“He said the same thing about you. That, and you’re hard-headed and brave as hell. Takes a lot to impress Rafe.”

“I followed protocol. Nothing brave about that.”

“You’ll have to take it up with him. He’s downstairs wondering why you don’t want your security detail anymore.”

“He’s wondering?” I raise an eyebrow at Smith. “You mean JD’s

insisting, and he sent you up here to twist my arm.”

Smith stares straight into my eyes and holds my gaze steady. “Since I left the military, I’m my own man. Don’t do any arm twisting I don’t agree with. You need security. JD’s right about that. But we’re going to do things a little differently.” He stretches his long legs out in front of him and digs his upper back into the chair. “We’re going to do them my way. Which means first, and foremost, you will be kept in the loop so that you understand everything that’s happening and why we’re asking you to cooperate. I will endeavor to be as honest with you as I can be.”

I’m tired. I just want to be left alone. And . . . there’s a small piece of me that doesn’t care if someone hurts me. A small piece of me that doesn’t care if I wake up tomorrow. *Will I kill myself? No.* But there are moments when the weight of living is too heavy. I understand why people throw in the towel and refuse to get out of bed. I’m not there—most of the time—but I understand now. “What more could anyone possibly take from me?”

“Plenty.” It’s a single word, but it lands with a heavy thud, leaving me not afraid, but feeling guilty. It’s not just about me. I have my parents to consider. What if someone tries to hurt them?

“Do you think whoever set the fire would try to hurt my parents?”

He pauses for a few seconds. “I’m not sure. But a pregnant woman died in the fire. We don’t know the circumstances around that—how the fire started or who started it. Your parents have plenty of security. Men I can personally vouch for. I increased their security after the fire.”

That means they’ve had security all along. I let it go. On one hand, it’s a relief to know someone is watching out for their safety. But even top-notch security can’t protect against someone determined to do evil. I’m not that naïve.

“My parents are my biggest concern. As long as they’re safe—”

Smith pulls his outstretched legs back and sits up straight. “I will not provide a detail if you don’t agree to one, but you will have security. If I don’t handle your security, JD will hire a team to tail you.” His words are sobering, and I don’t doubt for a second, he’s telling the truth. “Can’t say that I blame him,” he adds. “If I were in his shoes, I’d do the same.”

I shake my head. JD is too much for me to deal with right now. I don’t have the strength it takes to constantly battle with him, and I refuse to let him control every aspect of my life. I won’t do it. “It’s always like this with JD, there’s never any choice. It’s his way or his way—nothing else matters. He

just wants me—what did he say? Under his protection.”

“He’s stubborn as a goddamn mule. You’ll get no argument from me on that. But about this, he’s right.”

I get up and go over to the window. The sky is a bleak shade of gray with a smattering of dreary white clouds. I can see the ocean in the distance, but it doesn’t cheer me. “I’m not staying here.”

“Where you going?”

I shrug, because I have nowhere to go. I could go to my parents in Houston for a few days, but not until I’m stronger. They’ll worry if they see me like this. Besides, I have things that need my attention here, and I have—the funeral.

“There are a handful of carriage houses at the edge of the property,” Smith says matter-of-factly. “JD’s grandfather built them so his wife’s sisters wouldn’t have to stay in the main house when they came for extended visits. Smart man.” I peer over my shoulder at Smith and roll my eyes. He chuckles.

“I live in one,” he says, “and we use another as the security office. The others are empty. I’m sure JD would be happy to have one of the houses fixed up for you to live in.”

I turn my back to the window. “Happy?” The only thing that would make JD happy is if I was glued to his hip.

His eyes glimmer with mischief as a slow grin spreads across his face. “Happy is probably an exaggeration. But I’m sure he could be persuaded.”

Maybe it’s not a bad idea. “I would pay him rent.” *With what money, Gabrielle?*

“That’s between you and him.” Smith comes over to the window. “This is how things are going to work.”

Just when I was starting to warm to him, he turns into a controlling jerk. I glare at Smith and he stops talking immediately. “You’re bossy, just like JD. What is it with you two?”

“He learned everything he knows about bossy from me.”

“He was born bossy.”

“I elevated his game.”

I smile. I actually smile. It’s small and wobbly, like my mouth’s out of practice. My heart’s not fully in it, either, but it’s making a sincere effort to feel something other than sorrow and despair.

“And you say it like it’s a bad thing. It’s an honor to be like JD. He’s a pain in the ass, but he’s a good soldier.”

Good soldiers obey orders. JD obeys no one. “*Pfft*. How long have you worked for him?”

“Just shy of three years. Right before his father started campaigning. But I’ve known him since prep school. It was love at first sight.”

The more Smith talks, the more I like him. I doubt he takes any shit from JD. “You’re kidding.”

“Yeah. I’m kidding. But not about knowing him since prep school.” Smith glances at his phone. “Should I have them send the Uber away?”

I take a long breath and hold it in my chest for a few seconds before releasing it. I study Smith’s face. It’s not screwed up with anxiety or anger, like JD’s would be. It’s open and relaxed. He’s actually letting *me* make the decision about *my* security. I meet his eyes and nod solemnly.

He types something into the phone and slips it back into his pocket. “If I’m running security, we play by my rules. But I only have one.”

“I’m listening.”

“You do everything your detail advises. *Everything*. You got a question about it, you ask. You got a problem with them, you talk to me. You don’t sneak out any back doors or elude them in any way. That type of behavior puts you at risk, and it puts them at risk. They will protect you with their lives if necessary. They’re to be afforded respect and allowed to do their jobs honorably.”

*If I agree, I will follow protocol this time. I won’t make Gus or Rafe’s lives more difficult than necessary.* “I think that’s more than one rule.”

“You do everything they say. It all boils down to that.”

I nod. *Let’s see if you’ll be honest with me like you promised.* “I think JD’s keeping things from me. I think he knows more than he’s telling. Do you believe the fire was set?”

“Maybe.” He swallows and gazes out the window. “I don’t believe in coincidences, but you can run into trouble chasing red herrings. I’ve told JD that too.”

“JD believes someone set it.”

He nods. “He’s been worried about your safety for—a while. I didn’t listen to his concerns. Chalked up most of it to him being a jealous bastard. But his concerns appear to be valid.”

“He has this idea that there’s a threat to my safety that’s somehow connected to the past. When we were kids. What do you know about that?”

Smith shifts his weight, placing a hand on the side wall above both of our

heads. “I said I’d be as honest as I can, but there are some things that are between you and him. And I’ll respect that too. He has plenty to say to you. *Plenty*. Some of it will be difficult to say, and it’ll be difficult to hear. Give him a chance.”

“Fifteen years,” I say softly. “He’s had fifteen years.”

Smith touches my forearm. “He needs you. There are exactly two people in his life who are willing to tell him to go fuck himself. Even Lally and his brothers stop short of saying it like they mean it. Me and you, baby—that’s it. I meant it when I said it was an honor to be like JD. He’s a hothead—which I’m not, by the way—but he’s loyal to everyone he cares about. The kind of loyal you don’t find in many men.”

I look away. The intensity in Smith’s eyes is too much.

“Are we good?” he asks.

I hesitate. My life will never be the same again and there’s nothing I can do about it.

“If you want JD to find someone else to tail you,” he says, matter-of-factly, “just say the word.”

“We’re good.”

“Your security detail is downstairs ready to take you wherever you like. Let me know if you have any issues.”

He starts to leave.

“Smith.”

He stops and turns to face me.

“I’m not sure what you know about my relationship with JD. But it’s not what you think.” I don’t know what JD has told him about our relationship, now or in the past, and I don’t know why I care. But I do.

“No opinions. No judgments. I’m in charge of security, not the town gossip. Your relationship with JD is of little consequence to me as long as you don’t try to harm one another.”

I fold my arms across my chest and rub my unbandaged hand over my arm.

“I don’t *think* anything about your relationship with him. But I *know* plenty about it.”

I frown at him.

“I knew who you were the first time I laid eyes on you at the front gate. I didn’t even need you to tell me your name. I would have known you anywhere.”

I tilt my head to the side, trying to figure out how that could be.

“When we were in school, JD had hundreds of images of you on his laptop. He’d scroll through them when he thought nobody was looking, like a sad little puppy. He had it bad for you. Still does.”

I open my mouth to speak, but press my lips together before the words come out. They were going to be flippant and dismissive, and all wrong. But I don’t know how to respond. So I don’t say anything. I just tuck Smith’s revelation away to dissect later. When it’s quiet, and I need to distract my mind from fires and funerals.

“If it gets to be too difficult to stay here,” Smith says, “if you really need to get out before the carriage house is fixed up, you’re welcome to stay at my place. It has three bedrooms, and I’m rarely there. Just say the word.”





## JULIAN

I've been home since four-thirty, trying to work, but mostly distracted by every little noise this sprawling old house makes. I think every squeak, every footstep, is Gabrielle coming in.

When I can't stand it a second longer, I call Smith again. "She's been gone all day," I bark into the phone. "It's almost six-thirty, where the fuck is she?"

"Nothing's changed since the last time you called. She's out and she's safe."

"Where? Where is she?"

"I'm getting tired of repeating myself. It's none of your damn business where she is and who she's with. She's not a detainee. I promised her I wouldn't report her every move back to you." He's told me this a dozen times today, and I don't like hearing it any better now than I did the first time he said it.

"I was going to tell you this in person so I could enjoy your reaction, but you need to fix up one of the carriage houses out back for her," he says, out of the fucking blue. "She needs some space to breathe. You're a pain in the ass."

*Asshole.* "We fixed up a guest room for her. A whole suite. She'll have all the breathing room she needs."

"Not going to be enough," he says. "Just sayin'."

"It'll have to be."

"You should know that I offered to let her move into my place until you fix up that cottage."

“*What?*” He’s fucking lucky he’s not standing here or I’d have my hands around his goddamn neck. “Tell me you did not just say that you invited Gabrielle to move in with you?” I can almost see the sonofabitch smirking through the phone.

“She wants out, JD, and she’s leaving whether you like it or not. The security at Sweetgrass is tight. If I were you, I’d tell her that she can stay in the cottage, but then I’d drag my feet fixing it up. If she stays at my place, she won’t be all alone. She’s been through hell, and you know as well as I do it’s just the beginning.”

I hear the front door shut. “We are not finished with this conversation.” I press end, toss the phone on my desk, and go in search of her.

She’s looks worn out and pale, the dark circles under her eyes blacker than I’ve ever seen them. And she’s not wearing a damn coat.

“Hey. You were gone a long time. Let me take those bags from you.”

“I’ve got them,” she says, clinging to the plastic handles like there’s gold bullion inside the flimsy little bags.

“What did you do today?” I ask carefully. I’m not accustomed to walking on eggshells, and I already hear the small cracks as the first words come out of my mouth.

“The bank, the social security office. I went to see Wade. Bought a few things I need. I also talked with the police and the fire inspector.”

“Without a lawyer?” *Jesus*. I curl my hands at my side so I don’t grab her to shake some sense into her.

“I have nothing to hide.”

“No, you don’t, but it’s better not to be alone with the cops during an interview. I would’ve gone with you.”

She lifts her chin. “I know it’s hard to believe, but somehow I managed my affairs up until now without your personal assistance.”

But you’ve never talked to the fucking police about a hotel fire that killed a pregnant woman. She looks like she’s about to drop, so I ignore the sarcasm, and try to calm myself with the information the psychiatrist gave me about survivor’s guilt and pushing people away. “How about something to eat?”

“I ate with Wade.”

“How’s he doing?”

“About how you’d expect a man who just lost his wife, his baby, and the life they had planned together.”

I know a little about losing someone you love, and the life you had planned. “Does he need anything?”

“*Money?*” Her tone is mocking, but I don’t bite.

“Anything.”

She doesn’t answer, but she keeps glancing at the stairs like she’s about to make a run for it. “What’s in the bags?”

“Some clothes I picked up. A black dress for the funeral, and a few other things.”

“Those bags look like they came from Jay’s Variety, not from a department store.”

“I’m tired. I spent the day doing one depressing thing after another. So stop with the raised eyebrow. Where I shop is of no concern to you.”

My patience has worn thin. *You will not push me away. I don’t give a shit how normal it is.* I snatch a bag out of her hand and look inside. “These things are from a thrift store. Used clothing. Why would you do something like that? I had that woman from Jordan Jones call you. She would have brought over anything you needed. But she said you thanked her and told her it wasn’t necessary.” Gabrielle’s eyeing the stairs again, but I don’t stop. “Buying used crap that some stranger sweated all over, or maybe pissed in, is that to punish me? Is that your way of pushing me aside? If it is, it’s not going to work.” The eggshells I’ve been carefully treading on are now a fine powder.

“Not everything is about you. Until I have some identification, I have limited access to my very limited bank account. And my job prospects are pretty slim right now. I like nice things, but I’ve always lived within my means, just like my parents taught me. I don’t plan on changing now.”

“If you’re too damn stubborn to accept clothing from me as an outright gift, then you can borrow the money and pay me back when you’re on your feet again. Lisa Donnelly would be happy—” She puts up her hand to shush me.

“What is it you have in mind?” she drawls, stepping closer. “For Lisa to bring me over a closetful of sexy clothing, that you’ve pre-approved, all of it fit for a whore? So I can become the ultimate kept woman?”

My blood is at a full boil, but I’m trying to keep a lid on it. “My intention was to let you choose whatever you wanted. The kind of clothing you like to wear. The things that make you feel good. I don’t give a shit what you wear. Never have.” *I prefer you naked.* I’m smart enough not to say that part.

“I need some time alone, away from you, away from here. I need to begin to rebuild my life. I need to do it without you hovering and questioning every decision I make. I need space to think. And I can’t do it around you. I just can’t.” She shrugs. It’s a small torturous move, as though she doesn’t have the strength to lift her shoulders. “Smith said there are a few carriage houses on the property that are unoccupied. He thought one could be made habitable pretty quickly.”

I’d like to wring Smith’s fucking tree-trunk neck. “I realize you need space. We fixed up a guest room for you upstairs. It’s a suite—actually, you’ll have an entire wing of the house to yourself.”

She ignores my olive branch. Pretends I’m not standing here with my dick in my hand like a fucking pussy. “Would you consider letting me live in one of the houses out back?” she asks. “I’ll pay you rent as soon as I have access to my account. Is that okay?”

*No*, and *no*. “What’s wrong with this place? You haven’t even seen what we set up for you.”

She takes a deep breath. “I appreciate everything you’ve done. But my best friend just died, with her baby. She burned to death in a fire. In my hotel. Can you imagine what that must have been like for her? What her last minutes were like? How terrified she must have been when she couldn’t breathe?”

Her eyes are wet and she’s chewing the skin off her top lip. I’m pissed as hell, but I still want to wrap her in my arms and hold her until her heart begins to heal.

“I lost them,” she says. Her voice is trembling. “I lost a dream I spent years working toward, and the police questioned me this afternoon as though I might have had a hand in burning the place to the ground. And to top it all off, I’m not entirely sure that you and your secrets aren’t somehow tied up in all of it. And do you know why I don’t know?” She pounds an index finger into my chest, over and over. “Because you won’t tell me a damn thing. You don’t trust or respect me enough to share things with me. Things that impact *me* and the people I love.” She lets her hand fall to her side. “You can help me or not. But either way, I’m leaving.”

She’s exhausted and grieving. The funeral has to be weighing heavily on her. Waiting to bury someone you love is hell. I remember it vividly. You’re stuck in limbo until after the final goodbye. I need to buy some time. “Let’s talk about this after the funeral. Stay here until then. It’s just a few more days.

We'll go to the funeral and the next day we can discuss it."

Gabrielle sits on the bottom step with the thrift store bags at her feet and gazes through the balusters, into the living room, as though there's something fascinating happening in there. "You need to stay away from the funeral," she says, flatly.

"Did Wade ask you to tell me that?" My voice is edgier than I intend it to be. "He wasn't man enough to pick up the phone and tell me himself?"

She turns her head to look at me. "I'm sorry." She's full of shit. She's not a damn bit sorry.

"You are not going to that funeral alone."

"I won't be alone." She swallows twice before she speaks another word. "Georgie was petrified of you. When she first heard you were back in my life, all the blood drained from her face. I'll never forget it. She said you'd bring nothing but trouble for me. I thought she'd come around, but she never did. Georgie was afraid, really afraid of you, of your whole family." She winds her hair around her hand and drags it over a shoulder. "Out of respect for her, I'm asking you not to go to the funeral. *Me*, not Wade. And please pass the message along to your brothers in case they have any intention of showing up to pay their respects."

I am a whirlwind of emotion. Some of it's sadness, but mostly it's rage about how little control I have over any of this. Yeah, I could force her into doing things my way. It would take some doing, but nobody's better than me at playing those games. But I don't have the fucking stomach to bully a beaten woman into submission. Not today. I swallow the bitterness and try not to let her see the fury just shy of erupting all over the room. All over her. "What should I tell them?"

"Anything you want."

"I'm not the enemy here," I tell her pointedly.

"No? Then who is? Tell me, JD, who is?"

I don't answer, because she's right. This is my fault, and I can't share any of it with her, regardless of what Smith thinks. Not without putting her in more danger.

She stands and reaches for the cheap bags. I watch her climb the stairs, her shoulders slumped, like an old arthritic woman. I can't stand it.

"Gabrielle?" She stops with her hand on the rail but doesn't turn around. "I'll talk to my brothers, and I'll make a call in the morning to get a carriage house fixed up for you."

She doesn't say anything, but starts up the stairs slowly, each step posing a unique challenge. When she's disappears, I go to the kitchen and splash some cold water on my face. It's almost ten after seven. I'm late for Zack.



## JULIAN

When the doorbell chimes for the second time, it occurs to me that Lally's at the hospital with her aunt, and Patrick is picking up paperwork for me from Sayle. I have to get off my ass and answer my own damn door.

I don't bother to look out the window, or check the peephole, it's the FBI. Security called from the gate a few minutes ago to let me know they were paying a visit.

When I open the front door, the agents immediately introduce themselves and flash their badges. Agent Gleason is stocky with a smugness about him, and Agent Alves is tall and completely bald. I introduce myself too, but it's hardly necessary. They both know exactly who I am.

"I'm sorry you made the trip out here, but Ms. Duval still isn't up to rigorous questioning. If you leave a card, I'll have her contact you when she's feeling better."

"Actually, Mr. Wilder, we're here to see you."

*Really?* I figured they would eventually want to talk to me, but I expected them to start with Gabrielle. "Then come in." I lead them into my study, and motion to the chairs in front of the desk. "Have a seat." I sit behind my desk. "What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"We're here about the Charleston fires," Agent Alves responds. "The Gatehouse fire is our primary concern today."

"Do you think the warehouse and the hotel fires are connected?" I glance from one agent to the other.

"We haven't ruled out anything," Agent Gleason says. "Do you mind if we record this interview?" *Record the interview?* He pulls a small device



from his pocket before I agree to anything.

“Record away. Although I highly doubt I have any information worth memorializing.” And if I did, I wouldn’t be sharing it with either of you.

“Your father is the president,” Alves explains. “Protects all of us.”

“I get it.” They both nod, and Gleason fiddles with the recorder. “Does my father know you’re here?”

“I’m sure the Justice Department was given a heads-up, but I don’t believe President Wilder has been briefed at this stage, although I can’t make any promises. Briefing the president is well above my pay grade.”

“At this stage? It sounds like I might be on your list of suspects. Do I need a lawyer?” I’m not calling a damn lawyer, I’m just gauging their reactions.

“We’re just here to ask you a few questions,” Alves says. He doesn’t seem to be as big of a dick as Gleason. “But you’re welcome to have a lawyer with you at any time during the interview.”

“I’m quite certain I don’t need a lawyer by my side to answer your questions, gentlemen. Let’s get started so we can all go about our business.”

“What’s your relationship to Gabrielle Duval?”

“We’re friends. We grew up together at Wilder Plantation. Her mother was our housekeeper and her father was a carpenter, essentially the resident jack of all trades. He fixed pretty much everything that needed to be fixed on the property. Why are you interested in my relationship with Ms. Duval? For that matter, why is the FBI involved at all? I thought fires were a local matter?”

“Her hotel was destroyed in the fire, and there was a death. She’s connected to you, and you’re connected to the president.”

“Is the fire suspicious?” The fire inspector already told me they suspected arson, but I want to see their reactions. Besides, I don’t want to let on about how much I know.

“We treat everything as suspicious,” Gleason responds. “We’ll answer all your questions at the end, Mr. Wilder, but we need to get a few things out of the way first. Have you ever made any financial contributions to Ms. Duval?”

“Plain English,” I say to Gleason. “If you want me to answer your questions, you’ll have to be more specific.” He’s on a fishing expedition, casting a wide net that I have no intention getting trapped in. I might not be a lawyer, but I’m not a fucking moron.

“Have you ever given her any money?”

“I’m sure I have.”

“Would you care to elaborate?”

“No. Not really.”

The agents are visibly uncomfortable. Even Gleason. My father’s the president and they have to be exceedingly careful around me. I intend on using the leverage to my full advantage.

“Did you pay her tuition to Pratt Simmons School?”

That information is not readily available. Someone did some serious digging. “I did.”

“It sounds like she might have been more than *just* a friend,” Gleason says. Alves is busy taking copious notes. Since the interview is being recorded, he must be describing my demeanor and body language while they ask questions.

“When my mother died, Gabrielle’s parents, especially her mother, stepped in and took care of us. My brothers were young, and my father was never a warm and fuzzy kind of guy. Vivian Duval doled out all the motherly love we were missing. Paying for boarding school was a way to repay her kindness.”

“And Ms. Duval’s tuition at Cornell?”

“She earned a scholarship, and I supplemented it so her family wouldn’t have any financial burden.”

“It sounds as though you’ve been very generous with her.” I don’t like Gleason’s tone or what he’s implying, and I’m two seconds away from throwing the fucker off my property.

“Spit it out. Say what’s on your mind. But I highly recommend you tread carefully when it comes to my friendship with Ms. Duval.” I glare at Gleason.

“Have you ever had an intimate relationship with her?” Alves asks as politely as you can ask a guy if he’s been boning some chick.

“When we were teenagers, she was my girlfriend. We broke up while I was away at prep school. And until recently, we haven’t had much contact. We reconnected sometime around the election, and we’ve been dating.”

“You paid her tuition even though you had broken up.” I never said I paid her tuition *after* we had broken up. I was purposely vague about the timeline. They’ve sifted through her life pretty thoroughly. Gabrielle will need a lawyer when she meets with them. It doesn’t matter whether or not she did anything wrong. It’s easy to be misunderstood. “The gift was for her parents.

It might seem overly generous, but my grandparents left us a large inheritance. I didn't miss the money."

"So, you had no contact with Ms. Duval, but you assumed the loan on the hotel? Was that a gift to her parents too?"

*Fucker.* "I'm not sure what you're referring to. I had no idea Ms. Duval was purchasing the hotel or returning to Charleston, for that matter. I might have assumed a loan for her had I known, but I didn't."

"Are you familiar with Godfrey LTD?" Alves asks, watching me closely.

I nod. "Yes, of course. It's a small holding company for some real estate investments that my family is involved with in South Carolina. It's essentially a subsidiary of a subsidiary of Wilder Holdings. It allows us to enter into a contractual agreement for local real estate while maintaining a measure of anonymity."

"Godfrey LTD holds Ms. Duval's hotel loan."

That is a bald-faced lie. *What are they up to?*

I briefly consider terminating the interview until I can have a lawyer present. But I want to know more about where they're headed first. I look from Alves to Gleason and shake my head. "You're mistaken. I'm familiar with all the real estate in that portfolio. Neither The Gatehouse or Ms. Duval are part of Godfrey holdings."

"When we investigate a fire, one of the first things we do is trace the origin of any loans on the property. The hotel was a risky investment and Ms. Duval had incurred substantial debt. She was operating at the margins, with no liquid assets, and little equity in the place. She essentially had no way to repay the loan if the smallest thing went awry. A fire would be a good way to recoup your investment. It's not an uncommon practice."

"Are you suggesting I set fire to Ms. Duval's hotel to recoup some money? I don't know a damn thing about that loan." But I bet my father does. That sonofabitch.

Gleason pulls a document from a folder he's brought with him, and hands it to me. On the signature line, it's signed Julian D. Wilder. The signature is similar to mine, but with one caveat. I haven't signed my name like that in twenty years. "That's not my signature."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. I always sign my name using my full middle name." *My grandfather's name.* "I have for years."

"Twenty-one years to be exact," Gleason says. "A State Street bank

account was the last official document we could find with this signature on it.”

They got a warrant to go through my bank records. Unless the bank gave them up without a fight, and without letting me know. *Unlikely*. “That’s about right.”

“Any idea about who might have forged your name to grant Ms. Duval the loan?”

I examine the loan paperwork again. Only one person comes to mind. That fucker forged my name on a loan to get her back to Charleston, after I worked so hard to get her away from here. He knew he was running for president, and that I’d be the one taking over Sayle. He knew I’d examine every piece of paperwork, look in every dark corner to find evidence that he killed my mother and Sera. He wanted Gabrielle here, dangling in front of me, so he could keep me in line. *Jesus Christ*. I take a couple of minutes with the document, buying myself some time to calm down. I’ve got to keep my cool in front of these guys.

“I’ve never seen this document, and I’ve looked through every piece of paper and every digital file having anything to do with Wilder Holdings. Except for the Sayle files. I’m still working on those. Have you checked with the bank?”

Alves nods. “The loan officer said the bank does a lot of business with your family. They don’t remember this specific transaction.”

“What about the notary who witnessed the signature?”

“There’s no record of that notary in South Carolina.”

*Of course not*. “My father ran all of Wilder Holdings before the campaign, including Godfrey. You might want to talk to him about the forged loan document.”

Alves side-eyes Gleason, who looks at me like I’m an asshole. There’s no way they can ask the president about his real estate portfolio. Too bad, I’d love to see it.

“When do you think Ms. Duval will be up to answering questions?”

“Ms. Duval would be up to answering questions right now.” I look up to find Gabrielle standing in the doorway, eyes blazing. *Great. How much did she overhear?* “Although, Ms. Duval would also like some answers.” She’s glares at me when she says it. That’s my answer. She overheard too damn much.

I try to keep an even tone for the agents, while trying to dissuade her from

agreeing to an interview. These guys have done a lot of preliminary investigation and are cagey as hell. “Gabrielle, this isn’t a good time. You’re not up to an in-depth interview, yet.”

“I’m perfectly capable of answering the agents’ questions.”

I get up and go over to her. “Let’s have a word in private. Gentlemen, could you excuse us for a minute?” I take her elbow to lead her out into the hall.

“Get your hand off me. *Now*,” she hisses. “I’m not going anywhere. You hold the loan on The Gatehouse?” Her voice is trembling with rage. I doubt she’s thinking straight.

I stand between her and the agents, with my back to them. “You need a lawyer before you meet with these guys. It’s different than meeting with the Charleston police and fire marshal. They’ll chew you up and spit you out.”

“I don’t have a thing to hide. My friend is dead. My hotel is a pile of ashes. I want to help them find who did this. And I don’t give a damn about anything else. Get out of my way before I ask them to intervene.”

“At least go get something to cover yourself.” I rest my hand on her upper arm, and lean in. “That T-shirt is so thin I can practically see the color of your nipples through it.”

She shoves my hand off her. “Get away from me.”

“You’re making a huge mistake.”

“No. The mistake happened a long time ago.”

The door of my study clicks shuts as I step into the living room, where I wait while Gabrielle spends an hour, *a fucking hour*, locked inside with the feds.

The first call I make is to my lawyer who is of absolutely no help. “It’s foolish,” he says, “but she has every right to consent to an interview. Nothing you can do about it.” It takes everything I have not to fire his ass on the spot.

Next, I call Chase to see if he can find out anything useful about The Gatehouse loan. Then I snarl at Patrick when he arrives with the paperwork for me to sign, and kick an antique chair until it teeters on its last leg. It’s an eventful hour.

The more I dig, the more questions there are, and the fewer answers I have. The loan had not been specially arranged with the city. The fucking loan had been arranged by my father, and he forged my signature in front of a notary. More likely he had some ass-licker forge it. My father never gets his hands dirty. He’s always at least one step removed from the crime.

As soon as I hear the door to my study open, I step into the hall, just in time to see Gabrielle saying goodbye to Alves and Gleason. I watch as the lock on the front door catches. Now I have to deal with her. And from the look on her face, I'm sure she won't waste a single second before busting my balls.

"All the things I thought I accomplished on my own. You were behind everything. Pratt Simmons, I already suspected. But Cornell? My internships? The Gatehouse? You were behind all of it. I didn't accomplish a damn thing on my own. It was all a lie."

"No! I paid for boarding school. But you earned those internships and the scholarships. All of it. I just made sure you had spending money so you could enjoy yourself a bit, instead of spending every minute working just to survive."

"The Gatehouse? Did you arrange to have it sold to me for a dollar, and underwrite the loan?"

"No." I shake my head. "I would have done everything in my power to stop you from coming back to Charleston. I had nothing to do with that."

She lunges at me, slamming her fists against my chest, blow after blow, and I let her do it. I welcome the chance for her to hurt me. To let her feel like she has some power. I catch her when she collapses, before she hits the floor. When she doesn't let me hold her, I yank her by the arm into my study and kick the door shut behind us.

She's shaking when I sit her on the worn leather sofa. As much as I want to sit beside her, I pull up a chair across from her so we can face one another while we talk. But I don't say a word until she speaks. "I want answers. I want every question I have answered, and you're going to do it, or I'm going to the press and telling them every single thing. The whole story as I know it. Every damn word."

I'm going to tell her everything. *Now*. Not because she might go to the press, but because watching her like this is like being eaten from the inside out. Like something's chomping on my organs, gnawing on my nerves, devouring the remnants of my soul. I can't take it anymore. I can't watch her like this. Not for another second. But I'm going to stick the knife in her back one more time before I come clean. I have to.

"Go ahead. People will think you're crazy," I spit out. "No one will believe you. It sounds so far-fetched, something only an insane person would make up."

She slides down into the sofa cushion, curling into a little ball. She's trembling. I kneel beside her, folding my body over hers. "I'll tell you," I whisper. "I'll tell you everything. But not here. Don't say a word, just play along. Follow my lead."

She turns her head and stares into my face, like she has no fucking idea if I'm for real. If I can be trusted. Or if she even heard me correctly. The tears are staining her cheeks. I use the back of my hand to wipe them away, then put my fingers to her lips to shush her.

"Gabrielle, get upstairs and go to sleep or take a shower." I wink at her and nod, never letting go of her hands. "It's been a long day and you need to rest. I don't want to talk about this anymore tonight. Just go."

I motion for her to wait and turn the music on in my study. I know she doesn't have a cell phone on her, because there would be nowhere to put it. I take her hand and lead her into the secure room and close the door.

"It's safe in here. We can talk freely without the risk of being overheard."

"What is going on? Tell me. Why can't we talk out there?" she pleads.

"I will. I'll tell you everything. But sit down." She stares at me, and for a minute I think she might bolt, but she slides into a chair and I sit beside her, pulling our chairs so our knees are almost touching. "Smith sweeps the premises regularly for any type of surveillance devices, but surveillance doesn't always require a planted device. I don't want anyone to overhear me telling you—*everything*." I take a deep breath. "It'll put you in too much danger."

"You need to start talking," she says softly. "Because I'm beginning to feel like you might be the one who's crazy."

"Do you know what Wildflower is?" I ask her.

"A social club." She shrugs. "I've heard rumors that wife swapping goes on there."

"It's a sex club. A lot of things go on there." Her eyes get a little wider, and I can't even begin to imagine the disgust on her face when she hears the rest. And the pain. There's going to be so much pain. I blow out at breath. "Sometime—right around the time I turned seventeen—I started going to the club after practice. Almost every day."

"I remember you working there after school," she says, twisting a section of hair around her fingers.

"My father insisted I go there to keep out of trouble. But there was nothing but trouble to be had there. At least for me."

“What do you mean, trouble?” she asks carefully.

“I wasn’t doing much work while I was at the club.” *I don’t even know how to say it. Just spit it out, JD. It’s not getting any prettier marinating.* I force myself to look into her eyes. “I mostly stood around and watched while people fucked each other. Not the kind of sex teenagers know about, but kinky sex. It opened a whole new world of amazing for me.” She’s watching me intently. “I saw men do some filthy things to women, who loved it all. They would scream their pleasure, and it would echo in my cock. By the time I went home, I was so horny I could barely wait to find you. Sometimes I would need to come so bad, I’d get in the shower and get myself off before I even went to meet you.” I put my hand on hers and rub her palm with my thumb. Gabrielle’s still, like she’s waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“At night, in the stable, I would teach you things I learned. I would get so worked up thinking about what I saw at the club, I’d do things to you that no fifteen-year-old girl should ever have done to her. That no fifteen-year-old girl should even know about.” She lowers her eyes. “Gabrielle,” I murmur. “Say something. Anything.”

She lifts her head. “I was just an outlet? A way to get off—to experiment?”

“No. That’s not at all what I’m saying.”

“Then what?” Her face is screwed up with sadness and hurt, begging me to tell her something that isn’t awful. But I only have awful to tell.

“I wouldn’t have known about the kink. We would have had sex like normal teenagers. Like normal fifteen and seventeen-year-olds. Instead I dragged you into the filth. You were an innocent.”

Her eyes meet mine. “I never saw it that way—filth. I never saw it like that. I loved you and I believed you loved me too. I knew we—we did things that not all teenagers did. But I never saw it as bad.” She looks at her hands. “Not until I saw you with Jane.”

“I loved you. It wasn’t just something you believed, like a fairy tale. It was real. That’s why what came later was so devastating.” I bring her hands to my lips and try to find some courage in the clean scent of her skin.

“I don’t understand what you’re trying to tell me. But you’re scaring me.”

“It was my father’s idea to let me hang out there and watch. Said it would make me a man. But that’s not what it was about.”

I brush the hair off her face. I’m killing time because—because I know how much this is going to hurt her. I draw a breath and let it find its way out.



“He made sure I was all wound up, like some kind of goddamn wind-up toy made for his entertainment, and then he let me loose. On you.”

“I still don’t understand. Why would he do that?”

Because he’s a monster. “My mother had a video feed set up in the stable so she could keep an eye on the horses when they were ready to foal. It was disabled when the stable was cleaned out after she died. But my father reactivated the feed, and he watched us while—while—” I can’t form the words.

“While we had sex,” she whispers, in disbelief. “While we had sex.”

I nod, squeezing her fingers between mine.

“Oh. My. God. *Oh my God.*”

I slide my hand over her face and close my eyes to stop the throbbing in my head. We sit quietly. All I hear are her labored breaths and the blood pounding in my ears.

“Oh my God,” she says again, gasping. “I’m having trouble breathing.”

“Slow down your breathing. Look at me. Mimic my breathing. Do exactly as I do.” She does, and after several minutes I start to feel her relax a little.

“And that’s why you were with Jane?” Her voice is trembling. “You fucked everyone and everything you could get your hands on? We were all just outlets for you—for your father to watch. I was just like the rest. I was a pawn in some sick game?”

“No! You were never an outlet for me. *Never.* My father started toying with me after he knew how much I cared about you. That I loved you. I didn’t know about any of it until much later. Until it was too late.”

“Who would do something like that? Maybe he was just lying when he said he taped us.” I can’t describe how bad I want to say, *maybe*. But I was done with the lies.

“There are things I suspected about him, and he knew I was always snooping around looking for answers.”

“The accident?” she asks softly.

I nod. “Then I visited Zack in that hellhole where DW had left him. It took me years to find him. DW left him there to rot. I went straight from Zack to my father’s study, and I let him have it. Threatened to expose him. He pulled a bunch of CDs from his drawer, stuck one into the television and turned on the monitor. It was us on the screen—we were—playing.” The word comes out so softly, I’m not sure she hears it until she covers her mouth

with both hands to hold in a string of whimpers.

“He had dozens of recordings. *Dozens and dozens*. He watched us so often he was able to tell me the things—you liked.” I pull her hands away from her face and lace her fingers through mine. And squeeze. “He said that one day while I was away at school, he was going to take you into the stable and show you how hard a real man could make you come.”

“JD,” she sobs. I hear her, but the sounds are muffled, as though she’s crying in another room. I press on. I have to, because I don’t know that I’ll ever have the stomach for this conversation again.

“I lunged at him and slammed my fist into his jaw. I had him by the neck until Olson intervened. My father threatened to ruin you unless I kept out of his business. Unless I stopped digging into the past.” Her sobbing is louder, and I look around the room for something that will suffice as a tissue. There’s nothing.

I take the corner of my shirt and wipe her face. “Please don’t cry. I’m so sorry about everything. It’s not enough—nowhere near enough, but it’s all I have for you right now.” I sigh loudly. “But he will pay. I promise you, he will pay for all of it.”

I pull Gabrielle into my lap, and she immediately starts to squirm off, but I don’t let her. “Let me hold you. Please let me hold you while we figure this out.” To my amazement she does. She settles into me, never fully relaxing, but she stays put. At least for the time being.

“I want to know about Jane,” she says between hiccups. “I want to know if there were others.”

*Suck it up, JD. She has a right to know about all of them.* “It wasn’t just Jane.” Her body stiffens, but I’ve gotten this far so I keep going. “I must have fucked a dozen girls for the camera. I wanted him to see that you were nothing to me, just one more in a long line. When really, you were everything.”

“You had sex with girls on camera. Did you trick them into doing it?” The disgust in her voice is palpable.

I shake my head. “No. Every single girl knew about the camera, and knew someone might see the tape. I chose girls I knew wouldn’t care.”

“Because they wanted your attention. Because they would have agreed to anything if it meant there was even the slightest possibility they might become JD Wilder’s girlfriend.”

I don’t say anything. I don’t need to. We both know that’s how it’s

always been. The girls, and later the women, who didn't give a shit about me. They didn't even know me. They just cared about what I represented. What I could give them.

Over the years, I sometimes let myself believe that Gabrielle and I had something so special that she would eventually forgive me. But today, hearing the words out loud—no one would ever forgive this. There's not a fucking thing in the world special enough to overcome something so appalling.

I hear a small broken cry from near my chest. I don't know if it comes from Gabrielle or from somewhere deep inside of me.

"So you had me sent away."

She says it so simply, as though it was easy. As though it didn't rip my soul to shreds. "Had to. There was no way I was going to give him the opportunity to lay a finger on you. I couldn't do that to you." *Or maybe you couldn't do that to yourself, JD. Maybe you were protecting yourself. Your fragile teenage ego.* I shove the thought away. "I went to your father and told him—"

She sits up abruptly and pulls away from me. "You told my father what we were doing? That DW taped us kinking it up?"

"No." I run my palm up and down her back. "I told him I was afraid for you. That my father wanted to control me and that he knew how much I cared about you. That he threatened to hurt you, and that I was terrified he'd make good on those threats. I offered him money to help them get started somewhere else, in another part of the country far away from Charleston. But they had your grandmother to think about too. She was too old and her dementia too advanced. They didn't think she'd survive the move. And at first, they didn't fully grasp the danger you were in because I spared them the ugliest details. While they were still figuring things out, it occurred to me that I could pay for boarding school up north. I had complete access to my trust fund at that point. But the prospect of sending you away was gut-wrenching—for all of us.

"Your mother cried, but nothing compared to your father. He was so ashamed that he couldn't protect you. And he didn't know the worst of it. My only request to them was that you were never to step foot on the property again." She gasps. It's a twisted painful sound. I feel it in my chest.

"I didn't spend much time at Wildwood after that, either. I wouldn't have spent any time there at all, but for my brothers." There's no way I could turn

my back on them. They had no one else.

“The Cornell scholarship was all you. I threw in some extra money so you wouldn’t need to get a job. So you could devote all your energy to studying and learning about the hotel business. And fun. I wanted you to have fun, without worrying about money. It was the one thing I could do for you. The internships, the rest was all you. I didn’t have a damn thing to do with your success.”

“The hotel,” she says. “The low interest loan. It’s connected to what happened before. Your father greased the wheels for me so that I would come back and he could use me to hurt you.”

“It feels that way to me.”

“You wanted to protect me. That’s why you came back on election night.”

I nod. “During the campaign, I had access to Wilder Holdings and was able to dig around for information about the accident. After the election, I would have access to everything at Sayle too. The missing pieces are hidden there, somewhere. I know they are. I need to avenge their deaths—he needs to pay for what he did to Zack. I promised them I would make him pay. I promised myself. And I thought I could protect you while I searched. If I kept you close. But I was wrong.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me this?” Betrayal is all over her face. It’s the flicker of pain in her eyes, the severe line of her pursed lips, the crinkle of her brow—nothing I say or do now can make up for the duplicity. But I did what I had to do. I’ll live with the consequences. I’ve already lived with them for almost half my life.

“I thought about it. Thought about it all the way to the hotel that night. But I wasn’t sure you’d believe me. And I worried you’d be in even greater danger if you knew everything. I still believe that. Telling you might give you the answers you want, but it makes you a bigger target. We’ll need to be more careful now than ever.”

“How do my parents, my mother’s illness, fit into this?”

“Their misfortune fell into my lap. It gave me some leverage over you. I had already decided the best way to control you was through sex.” Her body is rigid now. “I’d done it before, and I could do it again. Only this time, I would be doing it with purpose. My manipulation, not my father’s.”

“Is that what you think? That you controlled me with sex when we were teenagers?”

“I dragged you into something that we were both way too young to be doing. Something that would leave a mark, and impact how you experienced sex for the rest of your life. You were addicted to me. To what we did. It was like a spell.”

She pulls back and glares at me. “*God*. Your ego is so enormous,” she snarls. “I’m surprised you can walk through a normal-sized doorway. You did not control me. You did not take me anywhere I didn’t want to go. Not back then. And not now.”

“Don’t be naïve.”

“Don’t treat me like a child. I was always curious about sex. My fantasies were dark before I snuck away to meet you in the stable. Before I was even ten, I’d think about the horses mating when I touched myself at night. I sometimes thought about what it would be like to have a horse rear up over me,” she whispers softly. “I might have gone into the dark with you, but only because I already loved it there. And don’t you dare make it seem like something ugly and evil. I’m not ashamed of anything we did, not then and not now. I enjoyed it. I still do. And I will not allow you to shame me for it.”

My mind is racing to keep up with her. This isn’t what I expected from her. She’ll feel differently when she has some time to process everything. “I don’t mean to shame you. I’m the one who should be ashamed. Not you.”

“You’re still doing it. It’s like you didn’t hear a damn thing I said. If you want to be ashamed of something, be ashamed of how you lied and manipulated. Were you ever going to tell me any of this? What would you have done if I told you to go to hell that night in the hotel?”

“If I had my way, you would have never heard about any of this. Losing you was a price I was willing to pay to keep you safe and in the dark. To protect you from that monster. I’m still willing to pay any price for your safety.”

“Any price.” She repeats my words carefully.

“I’d like to think I’m man enough to do whatever is necessary to protect you.”

“To lie to me, manipulate me, to rape me, anything necessary to protect me as though the end justifies the means.”

She looks at me, searching my face, waiting for me to say something to put her mind at ease. Something that assures her there is a bottom line—a line even I wouldn’t cross. *There isn’t*. I don’t respond.

“I realize I begged you for answers. But I need a break—some time to

wrap my head around everything you just told me. Please leave me alone while I do that.”

I nod, and she gets up and rushes to the door without another word. “Gabrielle.” She doesn’t turn to look at me. “There hasn’t been a day since my father showed me those tapes that I haven’t been sorry I dragged you into the mess of my life. Not a single day.”

She swivels to face me. “As sick as it is that your father watched us having sex, as much as I want to vomit thinking about it, I don’t give a damn about those recordings. It’s all the rest, JD. All the rest that makes my heart ache and makes me so mad I want to take my fists to you. You think about me, even as an adult, like I’m just something you can manipulate and lie to on a whim. Like I’m not a woman who deserves your respect or who can be trusted to manage life’s problems—to handle a difficult truth. That’s where the real pain comes from.”

“Those tapes would have destroyed you.”

“When I was seventeen, that might have been true. But not now. I’m an adult. Stronger than either you or my mother and father give me credit for. I can survive pornographic tapes. Although it doesn’t seem like you, or my parents, believe that.” She pauses for a breath. “Smith offered to let me stay at his place. I’m leaving tonight.”

“You’re going to move in with a man you barely know?”

“Really, JD? After all this, that’s what you have to say for yourself? I might not know Smith very well, but he respects me enough to be honest with me. That’s more than I’d get if I stayed here.”



## GABRIELLE

I go upstairs to the guestroom that Patrick and Lally made up. They went to a lot of trouble for me. More than they should have. A part of me wishes Lally were here to talk to, although I'm not sure what I'd say to her. I can't stay here, that is something I'm sure about.

I spend much too much time deciding whether to call Smith or text him, to take him up on the offer to stay at his house. I decide to text.

**Me:** Is there still a room for me at your place?

**Smith:** Absofuckinglutely

I release the breath I've been holding and smile at the text with a huge sense of relief. He's going to make this easy for me.

**Smith:** When you coming?

**Me:** Tonight. If it's ok.

**Smith:** More than ok. I'm not home until late. I'll tell Rafe and Gus.

**Smith:** Give me 10 minutes. Then call them. They'll help you move.

*Help me move? Everything I own can fit into a couple grocery bags with room to spare.*

**Me:** Thank you. So much, thank you.

**Smith:** Make yourself at home. Don't wait up.

I neatly pack three pairs of underwear and a bra into one bag, and toss in a few toiletries from the bathroom. It feels like stealing, but I know JD won't care what I take.

I ask Gus and Rafe to come over at seven-fifteen. JD will be with Zack, and I won't risk running into him when I leave. Sure, it's cowardly, but I don't want to see him for at least a few days. There's too much to process,



too much to think about, and his face, his scent, his voice, everything about him—is too much for me to handle right now. I need to come to terms with everything he told me, and with the fire, and Georgie’s death, and I need to figure out what I’m going to do with my life now. I need to do it free from his influence. It has to be that way because I can’t think straight when he’s around.

The phone Smith let me borrow pings and I pick it up. *Speak of the devil.*

**JD:** I’m leaving in 5 minutes. Be gone all afternoon. You should eat something.

He’s leaving the house, *his* house, so that I’m not a prisoner in my room. So that I’ll go to the kitchen and eat. *Oh, JD.* You are so complicated, and yet so predictable. Your concern for me, your *love*, often emerges in twisted misshapen forms, shrouded by darkness, but there is always light at the center. It’s what has always drawn me to you. *Like a moth to a flame.* And that is precisely why I need to make my decisions away from you.

I stare at the phone. I should answer his text. I owe him the kindness. *No,* I don’t owe it to him, I *want* to show him the kindness. He’s hurting too.

**Me:** I will. Don’t worry.

It’s only a few words, but it’s me squeezing his fingers in the only way I can right now.

**JD:** Will you still be here when I get back?

This was the risk of answering his text—there’d be more.

**Me:** No. Give me a few days to think.

It hurts me to send JD that text. It hurts me because I know it will hurt him.

I call Rafe and ask him to take me to Smith’s in half an hour. I don’t want to wait until this evening—because I might change my mind.

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GUS AND RAPE walk me inside Smith’s house. It’s immaculate and cheery, with exposed wooden beams that make it feel decidedly masculine. Rafe carries my bags, while Gus plays tour guide, explaining the alarm system in excruciating detail, and showing me to my new bedroom and bath. When there’s nothing left to tell me, they stand around looking at their feet until I tell them it’s okay to leave.

“We’ll ring the bell periodically to check on you. But we’re always lurking, if you need anything,” Gus says. “You’re safe here.”

“We’re ordering pizza and sandwiches from Drisco’s for dinner later. You want something?”

I shake my head. “No, thanks. I ate a little while ago.”

“Not even some of that chicken and rice soup he makes? The lemon one?”

I don’t want soup, but they’re trying so hard. “Actually, soup sounds great. Thanks.”

“I’m going to set the alarm,” Gus says. “Lock the door behind us.”

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GUS AND RAFF bring the food by at about seven, and they make themselves at home in the kitchen. They set up dinner at the table. Sharing a meal feels odd, yet right. The fire did something to our relationship. It feels deeper now, more familiar. Or maybe they just feel such pity for me that it bleeds everywhere.

I glance at the clock, it’s seven-thirty. *JD’s with Zack.*

After they leave, I brush my teeth and crawl into bed. I don’t have anything to read, so I just lie here and take stock of my life. I made two decisions today. One, to move out of the main house at Sweetgrass to give myself time and space to heal away from JD. The second was to visit my parents tomorrow. Patrick arranged it, like he has in the past.

I want to see them, and I want them to see me—to know that I’m fine. *Fine.* It’s comical. I couldn’t be any further from fine. But I will get there. I will. Part of getting fine is to talk to my parents. JD told me his side of the story. I want to hear their side. Then I’ll come back for—Georgie’s funeral.

I fight back the tears, until I can’t. Until I decide it doesn’t matter if I cry because no one’s listening. I do need to stop blubbing at the drop of a hat, but not tonight. Tonight, I let myself cry. Tonight, I cry for JD, for the young teenager who discovered his father is evil. I cry for the nineteen-year-old boy who struggled to protect his girlfriend from a monster. I cry for the man who carries guilt and responsibility heavier than any human being should have to bear. I cry for Julian and Elle. And for JD and Gabrielle. I cry until I’m asleep.

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DURING EVERY MINUTE of the plane ride to visit my parents, I think about JD. What it must have been like for him to be in his father's office watching the tapes, DW threatening to rape me. Believing his father killed his mother and Sera. Destroyed Zack's life. All of it, always in the back of his mind, torturing him.

I hate DW. Hate him more than anything I can describe with words. I hate him more than anything I have ever hated in my life. I didn't even know my heart was capable of so much hate. And it's not the recordings. Sure, that's part of it. I would be humiliated if they were ever made public, but I've been through so much now that a little embarrassment is nothing. *Perspective.* That's what it's called.

More than anything, I hate him for what he took from me. From me and JD. He stole years from us, splashed oily grime on every memory, twisted our teenage love into something grotesque and vulgar. I can't do anything about the years he took. Those are gone. But I will take back my memories. And JD's. I'll care for them and love them until they're pristine again. I don't know how I'll do it, but I will.

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EVEN WITH ALL THE worrying about me, my mother looks great. It's been almost three months since she started treatment. She's almost at the halfway mark, and it's working. *It's working.*

I don't bring up JD until after lunch. Until after my mother and I have cried rivers about Georgie and the baby, and about the hotel. My parents don't raise the possibility of arson, and I don't burden them with it. When we're all settled into the spacious living room at their hotel, I begin, without pretense or niceties. I don't ease us in gently. I jump right into the deep end and drag them in with me.

"JD told me about why I had to go away to boarding school."

My mother grimaces and grips the arm of the sofa, but it's my father whose features contort. "I don't want to talk about it," he says getting up, and turning on the television.

"Well I do." I take the remote from his hand and turn off the TV. "I think

we need to. It's long past time."

"She knows, William," my mother says gently. "It's time to talk about it. Time to put everything out in the open. It's long overdue." She turns to me. "What did JD tell you?"

"He said I was in danger. That his father threatened to hurt me. And JD was afraid he would do just that."

"Afraid?" my father chokes out. "The boy was petrified when he came to see me. At first, I thought he wasn't making any sense."

"He said you were upset."

"We were in the barn when he told me. I don't know why, but I asked him if he'd ever touched you. He said he'd done some things he wasn't proud of. I grabbed a strap off the wall, it was the first thing my eye went to, and I took it to him." My father is breathing so hard, he's gasping for air. "He stood there and let me beat him. Didn't say a word. Not a whimper. He just took it." His eyes are somewhere faraway. "I didn't stop until he fell over," he says quietly. "That's when I realized what a terrible thing I'd done."

This is not what I expected, and the tuna sandwich I ate for lunch is tickling my throat. *Dammit, JD! Why didn't you tell me this part?*

"You were at the Bressler's when I brought him home so your mother could tend to him. His eye was swollen shut by the time we got to our house, and he had open gashes where the edge of the strap caught him. I tried to apologize, over and over. It was a bad thing I did. But he wouldn't let me. Kept saying he deserved it."

*Jesus, no.* I fold my arms and bring a tight fist to my mouth, gnawing on the knuckle.

"Your father did a number on him," Mama explains. "And he already had that broken rib his father gave him, too. He was a mess. I was sure your father was going to be arrested. But JD, he just wanted to talk." My mother meets my eyes. "He was beside himself about you. We couldn't move your grandmother. She had suffered so much in her life, I wanted her last days to be peaceful. But you were everything to us."

"Our whole life," my father adds in a heavy voice. "Then JD came up with the idea of that school up North."

"We hated for you to go," my mother says. "We hated how unhappy you were. But something told me JD was right." She gazes at me. "I never saw anything with my own eyes, but no girl was ever too young for DW. Even before his wife died, he chased women. I worried about Georgina around

him. She was an easy mark for a man like him, and Philip Bressler wasn't paying close enough attention. He was too drunk all the time."

I think about what DW said he was going to do to me and shudder. But that was about hurting JD, not about me. *Still*. "Do you think DW ever touched Georgie?"

"I never saw anything," my mother says quietly, her eyes faraway as though she's trying to recall something, "but girls like that are vulnerable to those kinds of men."

I relax. "What I don't understand is why no one told me about DW's threats. No matter how many times I asked, no one would tell me the truth about any of it."

"JD begged us to keep it a secret," my father says. I want to shake him.

"He was nineteen. You listened to a nineteen-year-old kid?"

"He stopped being a kid when his mother died. Everybody knew that. And I was happy to keep the secret," my father whispers. "I'm your daddy. The man you looked up to. The man who is supposed to protect you and your mama. That's my only job in life. The only one that matters. But I'm not a fool, I couldn't protect you from the likes of DW."

I turn to my mother. "Mama?"

"You were too young, Gabrielle. It would have been impossible for you to understand the kind of power someone like DW Wilder has, especially against people like your father and me. And I was afraid. Afraid my daughter's fate would be the same as my mother's. That he would rape you, take you whenever he felt like it." A tear slides down her cheek. I open my hand and offer her one of the tissues wadded in my palm.

"Can you imagine if we had gone to the police about something like that?" she asks, wiping her nose. "No one would have believed us. He had everyone in his pocket. He would have ruined all of us, and still taken what he wanted from you. That's how he is."

*Yes. That is how he is.*

"We did what we believed was the best thing for everyone at the time. And we told ourselves that you were going to have a better future. A better life than anything we could give you. And that you would never end up working in someone else's house, without skills, at their mercy."

My relationship with my parents is—a mess. To some extent. They protect me at every turn, shield me from everything that might cause me pain. Always have. JD does, too.

But maybe it's not them, maybe it's me. Maybe I act like a fragile flower that bends in a light breeze, leaving all my petals scattered on the ground to wither. Is that who I am? *Is it?*

I don't know. But the events of the past week, and the ones still looming in the background, they'll test me and eventually tell the real story. I lift my chin.

Before the year is over, we'll all know how strong my backbone is.

"I love you both," I tell my parents. "But things need to change between us. I need you to understand that I'm a grown woman. I need you to be honest, even when it's going to hurt me. Even when you know it will break my heart. Especially then. Because that means the situation is serious. I can take it."

"Of course you can," Mama says. "Our first instinct is always to protect you. Not because you can't take it, but because we don't want you to have to take it. I protect your father when I can, and he protects me. It's not about weakness. It's about love."

"I know." And in my heart, I do know it *is* all about love. I know I should feel blessed that I have people who love me selflessly and protect me at every turn. Unlike Georgie. There was no one to protect her.

She had Wade when she was all grown up, and before that she had me and my parents, and even Lally, but it's not the same as having loving parents who care about you. It must have been so hard for her. That's probably why she took up with that graduate student from USC when we were teenagers. He gave her trinkets, bracelets and charms that she would hide from her father. She swooned when she talked about him. I never met him. They had to keep their relationship a secret because of the age difference. He could go to jail if anybody found out, Georgie said. She couldn't even tell me his name, only that he was a great kisser and had sexy blue eyes that made her heart beat faster whenever he looked at her. That perverted bastard definitely didn't protect her, that's for damn sure.

Maybe now she has someone of her own to keep her safe. Maybe God can finally find the mercy to protect her. *God*. My faith has always been strong, but it's started to falter. In the last week, I've begun having long moments of doubt that turned into hours, and then days. I understand now how easy it was for JD to turn his back on God.



## GABRIELLE

The morning of Georgina's funeral is a lot like any other late January morning. The sun shines brightly in a clear blue sky, taking a bit of the nip out of the air. Not a drop of humidity in sight. The kind of day Georgie loved.

I would have preferred a deluge. Torrential rains with waves so high they threatened to breach the seawall. Wind so powerful it rattled the shutters on the expensive homes along Water Street. I wanted the universe to mourn with me today.

Antoine pulls up in Smith's driveway and comes around to help me into the car. He's driving Lally and me to church. I haven't seen him since the day I was discharged from the hospital. "How are you, Ms. Duval?" There's pity in his eyes that I can't bear to look at, and a formality that I can't stand to hear.

"I'm putting the sadness aside for today, while we celebrate Georgie's life."

"She's with the angels," he murmurs in that deep voice of his. "But she'll be missed here on earth."

"You need a winter coat, missy," Lally cackles the second I get into the car, before she even says good morning. She's become almost as suffocating as JD.

"I'm not buying a heavy coat. Winter lasts for a short minute around here." I tighten my wrap around my shoulders. "This wool shawl will take me through the season."

"It doesn't become you to play the martyr."



“It doesn’t become you to be quite so bossy on the way to Georgina’s funeral.” Especially when I need a million hugs, not a scolding.

She doesn’t take the hint. “Wearing second-hand clothes. No makeup, no jewelry. Did you even comb your hair?”

“Yes, I combed it, but all the products that make my hair behave went up in smoke with my jewelry, and the rest of my life,” I huff, looking out the window. “And there’s no shame in wearing clothes someone else has worn.”

“No shame at all. But you’re feeling sorry for yourself. There’s plenty of shame in that. At least there ought to be. Your mama worked all day in someone else’s house, and at night, her tired hands cut and stitched fabric making you beautiful clothes so you’d never have to wear hand-me-downs. You’re being selfish and making a spectacle of yourself.”

I turn to glare at her. “A spectacle of myself? This dress is perfectly respectable and clean.”

“And three sizes too big. I could wear that ratty thing. That dress is nothing but a symbol of your guilt. And by wearing it, you’re just calling attention to yourself.”

The woman can be so annoying. And I don’t need her shit this morning. But she’s right about the guilt. I’m submerged in it up to my eyebrows. “I do feel guilty.” I lay my hands flat on my lap, stretching my fingers with small wiggles. “I was selfish and now my friend is dead.”

“Did you set that fire? Did you do something that would have caused her to die?” I don’t respond. “Answer me, girl. Did you?”

“No,” I whisper to my hands. “But you don’t understand.”

“I understand plenty. You’re wallowing in a tub of self-pity that’s so deep you’re about ready to drown. I’ll allow it for another week, but then you’re done. You will clean up your poor-little-me act.”

“I can always count on you for support.”

She reaches across the seat and grabs me by the shoulders, pulling me into her big bosom. “I love you, child. You did nothing wrong. Not a thing. We don’t know what happened.” She pats my back. “But we will. We will. Let’s go say goodbye to that poor girl. We’ll worry about the rest tomorrow.”

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LALLY SITS in the church on one side of me and Antoine on the other. Smith

is seated in the back pew with Rafe, Gus, and Mae or Delilah, or whatever her real name is. I wonder why she's here? She was the hostess at Wildflower. Gray had it bad for her, even brought her to Sweetgrass on Christmas. He was furious when it came out that she worked for Smith who planted her, undercover, at the club, to keep an eye on the place. And although he'll never admit it, he was hurt that she lied to him for all that time.

My employees—former employees—are all here too. Everyone except Tom, who nobody seems to be able to reach. They're without jobs too, and not all of them have friends with carriage houses they can stay in rent free. Until the circumstances surrounding the fire are better understood, their job prospects are slim, like mine. And I don't have a cent to my name to help them stay on their feet until they can work again.

"Damn shame," Lally says softly while we wait for the service to begin. "If that girl had any luck at all, it was bad luck. Her mama died days after she was born, her daddy meant well, but he was a drunk. She was always playing catch up, never as pretty or as smart as her friends. Once she found Wade, I hoped her luck had changed. But the Lord had other plans."

I fight to stay present, but it's a futile effort.

Don't ask me about the service. After the pallbearers wheel the casket in, I remember little. I don't take my eyes off the polished wooden box for a second. But my mind is somewhere else. Somewhere where little girls with wiggly front teeth braid each other's hair and play Chinese jump rope with elastic we stole from my mother. Somewhere where teenage girls use hairbrushes for microphones and dance in their underwear on the bed. Somewhere where a maid of honor and a bride share a shot of Blanton's before they walk up the aisle. Somewhere where two women carry on like lunatics, shrieking with delight, because they're going to have a baby to spoil. Somewhere where a little girl, with big hazel eyes, toddles across the floor in a pink ruffled dress dragging an Easter basket behind her.

That's what I remember about the service.

I celebrated Georgie's life privately, oblivious to the sermon, the readings, and the mourners weeping around me. I pulled out as many memories as I could find and put them on a reel, to play inside my heart for a lifetime.

The cemetery is peaceful. Everyone speaks in hushed tones. Wade is surrounded by his family, and Georgie will soon be surrounded by hers.

Her resting place is high up on the hill, where she can gaze down on her

parents, buried below. She would like this spot.

After the crowd thins, I linger near the grave. I'm not ready to say goodbye.

As I stand near the freshly dug earth, looking for excuses to stay behind, I notice a woven basket filled with pure white lilies. It's enormous, and white lilies were Georgie's favorite flower, so I assume they're from Wade. But I'm wrong. The President and the First Lady sent the grand bouquet. My stomach coils tighter than a rattler preparing to strike. How did they know she loved white lilies? Maybe it was luck. Or maybe when you have that kind of power, you can find out any little thing. I study the lilies carefully, they're not as lovely as I first thought. A few of the flowers are blemished, unsightly dark spots bleeding into the concave center. They no longer seem pure to me, and I fight the urge to kick the bouquet away from her.

"Gabby," Lally says, putting her hand on my back. "We need to go. I told Wade I'd help with the food."

"Give me one more minute," I say without looking at her.

"I'll be in the car. Don't be long."

"I'm so sorry, Georgie. Please forgive me, even though I don't deserve it. I already miss you so much. Save me a place near you on the other side. I love you." I lay my hand on the casket. "Godspeed."



THE RIDE back to Wade's is quiet. Even Lally doesn't say too much.

When we arrive, I help Lally and a couple other women set out food. When I begin to fret about whether Georgie would want us to use paper plates or the company dishes, Lally shoos me out of the kitchen.

People are chatting in small groups all over the house. They're not loud or disrespectful, but Georgie would hate them scuffing up her gleaming hardwood floors, and setting down glassware directly on the furniture to leave a ring. I roam from room to room, from group to group, slipping cocktail napkins under glasses filled with sweet tea and lemonade.

I'm polite to everyone, but I'm not interested in their idle chit-chat, and I'm not hungry. I'm restless. Before I know it, I've wandered into the baby's room. It looks exactly how we left it the night they died. The little ballerina smiles down at me from her unicorn at the top of the growth stick. I touch a

tiny pink rhinestone on the mesh tutu. Georgie and I attached each one securely so the baby wouldn't get hurt. We finished the night of the fire. The night they died. Our little girl is never going to need that growth stick.

"You okay?" Wade asks from the doorway.

"I'm sorry." I'm startled by the voice and a little embarrassed for being here without asking him first. "I shouldn't be wandering around your house. I couldn't help myself."

"I can barely stand to look at this room, but I'm drawn here too."

"I'll help you pack everything up when you're ready," I tell him.

"I'm thinking about selling this place," he says. "I feel like Georgina is everywhere. I don't know if I'll ever stop seeing her. I keep thinking about the terrible way she died."

I press my lips together. "Me too," I confess. "You should talk to someone, a counselor. Georgie wouldn't want you to suffer because of her. She would hate that."

"I just need to get out of here."

"Where will you go?"

"North Carolina. My people are there." Wade slams his fist on the changing table and grabs a neatly folded receiving blanket from nearby. He flings it across the room. It disturbs the blinds before falling silently onto the braided rug.

I touch Wade's arm, before wrapping him in a hug. I don't say anything, because words do not comfort the grieving. No matter what anyone says, there are no suitable words for those who mourn. Human contact, a warm touch, is the only thing that reaches a grieving heart.

"I have something for you," he says, pulling away from my embrace. "Georgie's journals."

"Are you sure?" They were her most prized possession. I'm surprised he wants me to have them. "Why don't you give it some time before you give away her things? You don't know what you might want to keep."

"I'm sure. She always said if anything happened to her, to give you the journals." He opens the closet door and pulls out a cardboard banker's box from the top shelf. It has pastel flowers printed all over the outside. "There are two of these boxes filled with notebooks. I'll carry them out to the car when you're ready to leave."

On one hand, I feel awful about taking them; on the other, I want them more than I've ever wanted anything. She lives on those pages.

Georgie kept a journal since she was nine years old. She'd start a fresh book on New Year's Day each year. She journaled every day without fail. When we were older, she would joke that they were cheaper than a therapist and guaranteed not to spill any secrets. When the fog starts to clear, Wade's going to regret giving them up. "If you change your mind," I say, "tomorrow, or ten years from now, I'll be happy to give them back. Don't be afraid to ask."

"I don't want them," he snaps.

There's something about the way he says it that makes me chilly. The way his face twists ugly and mean.

Grief isn't neat and tidy. It doesn't always follow predictable patterns. Mourning is highly personal. I tell myself those things as Wade tosses the story of Georgie's life in the trunk of the car without a second look. As though he can't wait to get rid of it.



## GABRIELLE

The doorbell rings, and I stand on tiptoe to look through the peephole. I'm still shell-shocked from the funeral, and I don't want to deal with JD yet. I need more time to sort through my feelings before I'm ready to take him on again. Although if it's JD, he'll just let himself in if I don't answer the door. I'm sure he has a key.

It's not him.

I unlatch the door to open it for Mae, or Delilah, or whatever her name is, standing on the stoop with two bags and a white pastry box.

"Hi," I say. "Smith's not here."

"I brought dinner. Enough for both of us. Tacos."

"Tacos?"

She nods. "Deconstructed tacos."

"I never heard of a deconstructed taco."

"They put all the fixings in separate little containers. That way the tacos don't get soggy while we're making margaritas."

I don't realize I'm standing in the doorway like a woman raised without manners, until she reminds me. "I don't mean to be pushy, but can I come in?"

"Oh. Yes, of course. I'm sorry." I don't want her to come inside. Smith's gone for the night, and I'm looking forward to laying around in my pajamas, wallowing in a vat of self-pity. But I don't know how to politely ask her to leave, so I step aside and hold the door open. "You have your hands full. Let me take something."

"Take the cupcakes." She hands me the white box with a pink and white

grosgrain ribbon tied in a dainty bow. “I planned on bringing cookies for dessert. Smith told me you mainline them like they’ll be disappearing from the planet soon, but then I spied the cupcakes in the case at Sucre. I saw them from the window. You know when you walk by a pet store and the cute puppies, the small fur balls with the big brown eyes beg to come home with you? It was just like that. *‘Bring me home with you, Lila. Bring me home.’* And then of course a half dozen of her friends wanted to come too.”

*Oh, Lord.* She doesn’t stop talking for a single second while I follow her into the kitchen. I don’t think she cares whether or not I’m listening. I remember on Christmas Eve, she was animated and funny. Doesn’t take herself too seriously. But boy can she talk.

“Lila. Is that another alias?” I ask, as we place the parcels on the counter. It’s unkind, but my heart still stings for Gray.

She blinks a couple time and starts to unpack the containers from the Tease Me With Tacos bag. “No.”

“I’m sorry I shouldn’t have said that about the alias. It came out—”

“Bitchy?”

I nod. “I didn’t mean it that way. I really didn’t.” And I didn’t. But I’m feeling a bit abrasive, and the last thing I want to do is spend my evening entertaining a guest.

“You’re entitled. It’s always hard when people find out your true identity. No one likes to feel as though they were lied to by someone they welcomed into their home. But Delilah Mae is my honest to God name. The one my parents gave me at birth. Lila is what my family and friends call me. And since Smith says you’re good people, I’d like to be friends. So, call me Lila.”

I’m not looking for a friend, but I do like her, and she went to a lot of trouble to be nice to me. “My friends call me Gabby.” It’s a small gesture, but I hope it makes amends.

“Smith said he keeps his good stuff in the cupboard above the microwave.”

“Good stuff?”

“Tequila. For the margaritas.”

I nod.

“You probably drink wine?” she asks, scouring the cupboard for just the right booze.

“No,” I say much too defensively, as though she accused me of being a pearl clutching, bible thumping teetotaler. “I do like wine, but I drink gin,



unless it's been a really bad day, then bourbon's my lover." She smiles. "But I never met a margarita I didn't want to be friends with."

"Salt or no salt?" she asks, with a raised brow.

"Salt, but only on the first drink. And only on half the rim. Otherwise, I wake up puffier than the Pillsbury doughboy."

"Me, too. Happened the minute I turned twenty-five."

"Twenty-eight."

"Swelling is an evil thing that happens to females, like periods," she says matter-of-factly. "Men don't swell." I don't think she's correct about men swelling, but it's not important. "Put the oven on low so the tortillas and the meat stay warm."

Despite what Lally thinks, I can turn on an oven without destroying the entire kitchen.

"I'll make the margaritas," Lila calls over her shoulder. "You take care of the tacos. Your hand okay to do that?"

"My hand's fine," I say. It still hurts like an SOB when it gets anywhere near warm water, but it works just fine.

In a few short minutes, we make a huge mess in the kitchen. Lila squeezes enough limes to make a full pitcher of margaritas, and I empty all the containers into small glass bowls that I find in one of the cupboards. The juiced limes and empty containers are scattered on the counter. The kitchen smells of citrus and cumin, and my stomach rumbles like I haven't eaten anything all day. Because I haven't.

"What are you doing?" Lila asks, frowning at my little bowls all neatly lined up in a single row on the center island.

"Since you're company, I thought it would be nice to use real dishes."

"Please tell me you don't do this," she waves her hand over the bowls, "when you're alone. The whole point of take-out is to make it easy. No dishes. No clean-up."

"I would have eaten dinner straight from the containers. With my fingers. While standing over the counter, if I'd been alone."

"Thank God," she murmurs under her breath.

We fill the paper plates that came inside the bag. I returned the ceramic plates to the cupboard when Lila wasn't looking.

It's hard not to bond over tacos. You eat them with your hands, and they're messy and delicious. We both love our tacos heaped with toppings.

"You don't eat pickled onions?" she asks, her eyes flitting over my plate.

“I like them, but they make my breath stink.”

“Eat them. It’s not like I’m going to kiss you later, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I feel small bubbles of laughter free floating in my chest. Dozens of them. Maybe hundreds. And I’m grinning—a genuine grin, not like the ones I give Lally or Smith so they’ll leave me alone, but the real thing.

We finish our tacos, and Lila plops my third margarita in front of me. “So if you’re not here to kiss me, why are you here?” I ask, taking a sip.

“Vagina.”

I giggle and spit out a little bit of margarita. It dribbles down my chin before I can reach for a napkin. “Excuse me?”

“Smith thought you could use someone to talk to—a girl someone. I’m the only one with a vag that he trusted to come over.”

“The designated vag.” I laugh some more. She’s laughing too, but I’m clearly more tipsy than she is, and I think she might be laughing at me. But I’m feeling good, and I don’t care.

“Have you seen Gray in the last few days?” I ask, wiping my mouth.

“So that’s how it’s going to be. I bring tacos and cupcakes and you put me on the hot seat.”

“No hot seat. I heard what happened when Gray found out your name isn’t Mae. I’m sorry. You seemed to like each other at Christmas.”

“Gray fired me. Which is a little strange, because I actually work for Smith. But I’m not allowed back inside the club. He left a box with my things and my last paycheck at the valet station. I couldn’t even get past the bouncers out front. So no, I haven’t talked to him recently.”

“What are you doing for work now?”

“Still working for Smith.”

“You’re not here to spy on me, are you?”

She puts her hand over mine. “No. Smith sent me, but I’m here strictly as a friend. Although I’m starting to wonder if maybe he thought we both needed a girl to talk to. Smith is sneaky like that.”

“You like Gray?” I ask.

She shrugs. “I started to feel things that weren’t professional. Smith had taken me off of Gray’s security detail right after Christmas—I asked him to make the change. It was beginning to feel uncomfortable. I didn’t think I could protect him in the right way.” She shrugs. “These things happen occasionally. The important thing is to stay on top of your feelings so that

you don't make bad decisions."

"Gray likes you a lot."

"Some part of him certainly did."

"What does that mean?"

"He's a guy."

"All the parts of him liked you. He wouldn't have brought you to Sweetgrass unless he felt you were special."

"What kind of cupcake do you want?" she asks, getting up from the table. "Chocolate peanut butter, coconut, or vanilla?"

I guess we're done with that conversation. "Chocolate peanut butter." Lila looks at me out of the corner of her eye. "I see you, Miss Lila. You thought I was going to say vanilla." She grins and brings us each back a chocolate peanut butter cupcake on a napkin. The woman doesn't believe in plates and forks. I'm beginning to have my doubts about whether she's a real southerner.

"You ate all those vanilla frosted cookies at Christmas," she says.

"Liar."

"You're sophisticated."

"Is it the sweatpants that gave you that idea or the threadbare T-shirt?"

"It was your hotel. At the brunch. You floated around the room with a big smile, putting people at ease. I don't think your feet touched the ground the entire time. Like a goddamn sugarplum fairy." She rolls her eyes. "It was such a fancy place, all shiny and glittery, decorated for Christmas. But not stuffy. Just warm and cozy." I swallow back the emotion. "I'm sorry," she says softly.

"It's okay. I'm glad you liked it. I loved it too. It's inevitable that people will bring it up."

"I'm not sorry I brought it up. I'm sorry it happened."

"Me too."

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

I nod, but I feel myself stiffen. When someone wants to know if they can ask you a personal question before they ask you the personal question, you know it's going to be big and nosey. I brace myself for the worst.

"You grew up here. You're nice. You have a sense of humor. You like tacos and tequila. Why does Smith think you don't have any girlfriends?"

I relax, it's nosey, but not too big to handle. "I don't," I say softly, shrugging a shoulder. "I left here when I was seventeen, before I graduated

from high school. I had loads of friends until I started spending all my time with JD, and what was left with Georgina. I was gone from Charleston for twelve years, a little more. When I got back, everyone had moved on with their lives, and I had a hotel to renovate.”

“That makes sense. So you and JD were high-school sweethearts. I noticed he’s the only one who *always* calls you Gabrielle. Why is that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes you do. You just don’t want to tell me.”

“He thinks it fits me better.”

“Because it’s beautiful and exotic, not just cute like Gabby.” I give her a small wistful smile. She’s right, but it seems obnoxious to say it out loud. “Did you two have a fight? Is that why you’re staying with Smith, instead of at that gorgeous mansion? I bet there’s a big ass tub in the master bath with jets.”

I chuckle. “I need some time to figure out my life. It’s hard to think straight when JD’s around. He likes to control everything. We’ve known each other for a long time—I can’t hide anything from him.”

“He looks to be a handful, like a feral tiger. Is he squishy in the center?” she asks, rotating the cupcake slowly, licking the frosting off in an orderly way as she spins. “The cake to icing ratio is off,” she explains, when she catches me watching her. “I need to get it right before I can take a bite. I bet you can make JD purr like a pussy cat. *Or growl.*” There’s a glimmer in her eyes. “He’s probably a growler, right?”

“Maybe you should ask him.” My delivery is pitch perfect, and the prospect of her asking JD if he’s a growler is so funny, we both laugh.

After we share another cupcake, Lila gets up and starts throwing the squeezed limes in the trash. “It’s getting late. I’ll help you clean up all your company dishes before I go.”

For the first time, I realize I haven’t lifted a finger all evening to help. She’s a guest, but she’s been the one up and down, filling my glass and plate.

“You don’t need to do any more. It’s time for me to get my butt off this chair and do a little work.” I shoo her away from the sink. “Smith’s not coming back tonight. I’ll do the rest in the morning.”

She slides her purse over a shoulder and we walk to the door.

“Thank you for bringing dinner and for spending the evening with me. You ruined my pity party. I didn’t spend a single second feeling sorry for myself.” I wrap my arms around her and she hugs back.

“I came because I know what it’s like to bury a friend. And to have your whole life stolen from you by an asshole. You have to fight hard, but it gets better, Gabby. It really does.”

My head rests on her shoulder, and I feel a fat salty tear run down my cheek and onto the edge of my mouth. “Come visit me, again. Please. You don’t need to bring tacos and cupcakes. Just yourself.”

“Turn that alarm on,” she says, before she goes. “I’ll let security know I’m leaving on my way to the car.”

After she goes, I empty the pitcher into my glass and take it into the bedroom with me. I probably shouldn’t drink anymore, but why not? It’s not as though I have anywhere to be tomorrow.

It’s quiet with her gone. And lonely. Lonelier than before she came. I glance at the cell phone Smith insists I keep with me at all times, and think about calling JD. *No*. Don’t do that, Gabrielle. Let him be. You need time to heal. If you let him back in before you’re ready, he’ll take over.

I gulp down the entire margarita and set the glass on the nightstand, still eyeing my phone.



## JULIAN

I'm at my desk, trying to make sense of some data Chase sent me, when the phone rings. It's an unknown number. *If this is my fucking father*—I rub my eyes and answer the phone. “Yeah?”

“It's me,” says a soft voice on the other end of the line. “Gabrielle.”

“Hey. Did you get a new phone?”

“S'afternoon. Smith made me. He's as bossy as you.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“Howdya know? You spying on me?”

“Not spying. You're slurring your words a little and you have the hiccups. Why don't you get a drink?”

“I have margarita right here with me.”

“How about you leave the margarita for tomorrow, and have a big glass of water and some ibuprofen?”

“How 'bout you come make me?”

“Gabrielle. What did you do tonight?”

“Lila came over. Because she has a vagina.”

“What?”

“Smith told her to come over because she has a vagina.” She enunciates each word carefully before breaking into a fit of giggles. “She's gonna ask you if you growl.”

“If I growl?”

“During sex.”

“Jesus. Did you talk to her about our sex life?”

“No. I told her she could ask you herself if you growled.” She's giggling

again. It's nice to hear the happiness in her voice even if it was put there by tequila. "You growl like a tiger when you come."

"Where are you?" I ask.

"In bed."

"What are you wearing?"

"You wanna play?"

"I always want to play. But right now, I want security to check on you, and I'd prefer if they didn't see your gorgeous ass."

"I'm wearing da clothes I was born in," she announces proudly.

"Gabrielle, put on some pajamas or something. You are not allowed to sleep naked at Smith's house."

"S'lonely here. Les have a sleepover."

"Not tonight." But I won't be so chivalrous if you ask again. "You need to get some water and go to sleep. How many margaritas did you have?"

"I dunno. JD?" she asks softly.

"What is it, darlin'?"

"I'm wet. Jus' how you like me. You could bring your bag of tricks, or bag of toys, like Santa, and I'll be a good girl, or maybe I'll be s'naughty you'll havta punish me." When I don't respond, she continues breathlessly. "I s'need to be punished."

And I would love to be the one to do it. "Good night."

"No! Maybe I play with myself. S'your cock out?" she asks in a little girl voice.

"Not yet."

"I need you to fuck me."

"I'm not a doctor. I don't make house calls. If you want to be taken care of, you'll need to move back to the main house, back into my bed. Then I'll make sure you always have everything you need."

"Dat's mean."

"You're drunk."

"Do ya know what I told Georgie dat night she died?" Her voice is whisper soft.

"No. But I'd like to know. Why don't you tell me?"

"I told her dat I loved JD. Dat it doesn't matter s'what he does. I always loved him and I always will. S'my cross to bear." She hiccups. "*Shhh*. Don't tell JD. It's a secret."

I take a sip of bourbon and ask a question I'm probably going to regret



asking. But I do it anyway, because I need to know. “Why don’t you want JD to know you love him?”

“He’s jus’ use it ‘gainst me.” Her voice fades, like she moved away from the phone.

“Gabrielle?” There’s only soft snoring. She thinks I’d use her love as a weapon against her. It shreds what’s left of my heart. *She’s not entirely wrong.* I’m a soulless bastard. I wouldn’t mean to hurt her, but I would use anything necessary. No question about it.

I want to go over and check on her, but I don’t. The last thing she needs right now is me. She made that abundantly clear when she left, and continues to make it clear when she’s sober. I call security instead.

“Make sure someone stays in the house with her,” I instruct Rafe. I know Gabrielle well enough to be pretty sure the chances are slim to none that she’s sleeping naked. “She’s drunk. Totally shitfaced. Turn her on her side and put a couple pillows under her head too. And do it without even taking a small peek,” I warn, just in case I’m wrong about the pajamas.

I try to go back to work, but my concentration is shot. After pouring myself another drink, I lean back in my chair and close my eyes. I hear her voice, *I’m so wet. Just how you like me.* I take out my cock and stroke it. I hear her voice again. *Is your cock out?* It is now, darlin’.

I imagine slinging her long leg up over my shoulder and diving into that sweet wet cunt until I can’t breathe. I slip a finger inside her, then two, and three. Sucking on her hard, little clit. My hand tightens around my shaft, the dark head slipping through my fist.

I hear her little gasps, imagine her breathy cries. I hold her down so she needs to take it all. Everything I give her. My balls are tightening, and the tingle of release is tickling the base of my spine. *Oh fuck.* I jerk faster, and before I can even think about what a mess I’m about to make, my body shudders and spasms.

The phone rings before my dick’s tucked away.

“Wilder,” I pant into the phone.

“JD. Chief Parker here. Too late to call?”

“Sleep’s overrated.”



## JULIAN

After I hang up with the police chief, my first call is to Smith. “Wade Scott is going to be arrested for his wife’s murder,” I blurt out as soon as he answers the phone. “The police might have already picked him up.”

“What? How do you know?”

“Just got off the phone with the police chief. They have Wade on video leaving the conference he was supposed to be attending. They were able to piece feeds together from various places along the route. He was hanging around outside their house earlier in the day. And he followed her to the hotel that night.”

“No shit. My guys were at the Scott’s early in the evening when Gabby was there. They never mentioned it.”

“Parker didn’t specify a time. Just said earlier in the day. Wade didn’t cover his tracks very well for someone who supposedly premeditated a murder.”

“Premeditated? *Jesus Christ*. They have a motive?”

“Said he followed her because he thought she was having an affair with Tom, the hotel manager. Apparently, Wade’s not sure the baby was his kid. He told the cops Georgina had a long history of slutty behavior that he just learned about.”

“He told the cops his dead wife was a slut? Fucking idiot. Did he admit to setting the fire?”

“No. He said Tom let him in the back door—the one employees use, and he went directly to the office to confront his wife. They fought, he pushed her, and she fell. He said she was on the ground when he left, but she was

alive.”

“How does he know?”

“I asked the same thing. She was crying.”

“Scumbag.”

“Then he went back to the conference hotel where he was staying. Denies setting the fire. What do you think?”

“I think he needs to have his fingernails removed, one at a time. But he sounds like a moron. Not like someone who could poison Gus with a substance that’s impossible to detect, disable smoke alarms, and set a fire in a way that would cause maximum damage. Pushing around a pregnant woman, even killing her, I can buy that. But I’d be surprised if he could pull off the rest. And where the fuck is Tom? Think Wade killed him too?”

“They’re still looking for Tom. I don’t buy most of it either. Wade is dumb as a box of rocks. Always has been.”

“Think his wife was stepping out on him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you ever hear she got around? Because that could open up a whole new can of worms.”

“When we were kids, she was always ready to spread her legs. At least that’s the impression I got. But I never heard anything about her. And I would have heard something. Teenage boys can’t keep their mouths shut after they get some. I wouldn’t start pursuing disgruntled lovers. The smart money is still on our original suspect.”

“Maybe. We need to let everyone believe Wade did it. In some ways that’s good for us.”

“Even Gabrielle?” I told myself I was done with the lies.

“For now.”

I nod. He’s right, but I don’t like it. “Where are we on the other stuff?”

“Making progress. Not liking anything I’ve found so far. It’s getting to be time to move the investigation up the ladder.”

“Your call. You know how I feel about involving other people.”

“Duly noted. Are you going to tell Gabrielle that Wade’s been arrested, or should I?”

“Not tonight. She’s shitfaced. Margaritas and tacos with Delilah.”

“Good. She needed to get good and drunk with a buddy tonight.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.”

“Stop sulking, JD. She needs people in her life beside you.”

People who she trusts. He didn't say it, but that's what he meant.  
"Whatever. You tell her about Wade when she wakes up. I'm sure she'll be in a pleasant mood."

"Why me?"

"Because she's going to ask a ton of questions. And I don't want to lie to her."



## GABRIELLE

Smith's never home, and there's not enough to keep me busy during the day. I went from never having enough time to having nothing more than time. I need a job. But I'm not sure what I'll do, or if I'll even stay in Charleston. I should probably leave and start fresh somewhere else. If I stay, I'll always be the woman who lost her pregnant best friend when the hotel she owned burned to the ground. But I'm not ready to leave yet. This is still my home, and I need the familiarity it offers.

When JD's at work, I often go over to the main house. Lally's smothering, but I'm stronger now, and not afraid to push back when it gets to be too much. It's a small price to pay for company. I always make sure to go back to Smith's before JD gets home. Usually Lally sends me with dinner.

Being at the main house also gives me a chance to spend time with Zack. I don't read to him, I leave that for JD. It's their special thing. But I tell him stories and sing to him. Sometimes I just sit quietly and hold his hand. Like right now.

The physical therapist sticks his head in the door. "Zack ready for me?"

"He is," I say. "I think I've about bored him enough for one day." I kiss Zack's head, and touch my fingertips to his cheek. "See you tomorrow, Zackie."

I smile at the therapist and slip out the door to go to the kitchen where Lally's cooking. I have no idea who eats all the food she prepares. But I suspect she pawns it off on Patrick and Antoine, and the various security guards who all look like they can do serious damage to a rack of ribs or a Sunday roast.

“What are you making? I can smell it all over the house.”

“Brisket.”

“And macaroni and cheese?” She nods. “You spoil him.”

“That man needs someone to spoil him,” she says. “You ready for some lunch?”

*Lunch?* After last night, I’m not quite ready to put anything in my stomach yet. I’m surprised I don’t feel worse than I do. “It’s not even eleven o’clock.”

“How about I make you a cup of tea? You look a little green around the gills.”

Lally never misses anything. “Tea sounds good. I can make it.”

“Not on my stove, you don’t, missy. Sit.”

Her and that damn stove. She treats it like a child. I slide onto a stool at the center island. “I still can’t believe Wade killed Georgie and set the fire to cover it up.”

“It’s a travesty. I was watching all morning, just turned the television off right before you came in, because I couldn’t listen anymore. They’re saying some awful things about him.”

“I know this sounds terrible, but a small piece of me is relieved. I kept feeling that I did something that killed her. That there was faulty wiring, or that—that I had gotten caught up in some bad element swirling around the Wilders.”

“You’re always letting your imagination run away with you.” She places a small porcelain teapot on the counter in front of me and swats my hand away when I reach for the handle. “Leave it to steep for a few minutes.”

“Yes, ma’am.

“Don’t yes ma’am me in that fresh tone,” she says, snatching the thermal mitts from a hook above the stove and pulling the brisket out of the oven. She begins to shred the warm meat between two forks. “Imagine being murdered by the man who claims he loves you. A man who kills his own child.”

*Imagine.*

Lally’s attacking the brisket like it’s Wade Scott himself. “There’s a special place in hell for that kind of evil.”

“He never seemed that way to me,” I muse. “He was very observant.”

“Religious you mean? Those are the worst ones.”

“He denies killing her or setting the fire. Says they fought and he pushed her, but that’s it.”



“Criminals are stupid. I heard he can’t keep his big mouth shut. Drip. Drip, drip. I hope they fry him.”

“I thought about visiting him in jail.”

She looks up and glowers at me, both hands propped on her ample hips. “What is wrong with you?”

“There are so many unanswered questions. Questions only Wade has the answers to.”

“You always need answers. Some people are just bad, and that’s all there is to it. If you need something to keep you busy, I got a bathroom floor that needs scrubbing.”

“Got anything sweet to go with this tea?”

“Look behind the flour sacks in the kitchen. Isn’t that where there’s always a cookie for you?”

I thought it was our little secret. An innocent game JD and I played. His quiet way of saying, *I’m thinking about you*. “You knew?”

“Close your mouth before something flies in. Of course, I knew. Do you think anything went on around that kitchen that I didn’t know about? If you want something sweet, go look.” She tips her head toward the pantry.

“Did you leave me a cookie behind the flour sacks?” I ask, going into the pantry.

“Not me.”

I peek behind a ten-pound sack of flour, and there’s a small copper-colored tin with snowflakes waiting for me to find it. I freeze. It’s our tin. JD would always hide the last cookie for me. I stick my hand behind the flour and pull out the tin, tracing a raised snowflake with my finger before lifting the lid. *There’s a cookie inside*. A crisp lemon cookie with coarse lavender sugar sprinkled on top. “How long has this cookie been here?”

“Best I can tell, he puts in a fresh one every day since you got home from the hospital. I sometimes find the old cookie in the trash. Boy has always been a glutton for punishment.”

“It’s the same tin.”

“Yep.”

“Did you bring it with you from Wildwood?”

“Not me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me he left cookies for me to find?”

“Some things we have to discover for ourselves. When we’re ready.” She slides the brisket back into the oven. “It’s better that way.”



## GABRIELLE

I take a platter of brisket and macaroni and cheese back to the cottage with me. Smith's car is in the driveway when I get there. *That's a surprise.* I'm not sure whether I should knock or use my key. What if he has a woman with him? But as I get closer, I notice the inside door is open.

"Hey," he says with a smile when I walk in. His eyes immediately drop to the tinfoil. "Did Lally send you home with that?"

"She did. And there's plenty. You hungry?"

"Starved."

"It's still warm," I grin. "Grab some plates and I'll get silverware."

"Oh God," Smith moans when I lift the foil off the dish. "I keep asking that woman to marry me, but she wants no part of it."

"You have no idea what you'd be getting yourself into with her. You'd meet your bossy match, that's for sure." I dish out supper, while Smith drools over my shoulder.

"That's why I'm single." He takes the plates from me and puts them on the table. "You doing okay with the news I gave you this morning? About Wade."

"I'm still in shock. I've been watching the coverage off and on all day. I still find it hard to believe he'd do something so heinous."

"I'll be in Virginia tomorrow," he says, changing the subject. "Spending the night with my folks. You need anything before I go?"

I shake my head. "I'll be here when you get back. I'm afraid there doesn't seem to be much progress on the carriage house JD promised to fix up. I bet you didn't expect me to be here so long when you offered to let me stay

here.”

“No expectations. I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t want you here.” Smith’s mouth twitches at the corners. “I never asked you, how did JD take it when you told him you’d be staying with me?”

“Let’s just say the vein in his neck was pulsing so hard, I thought it would jump into my lap, but he managed to hold his tongue.”

Smith tosses his head back and laughs. “God, I wish I’d seen that. I almost feel sorry for him.” He glances at me. “Not really.”

“You’re terrible. But thank you for letting me stay with you. I can’t say it enough. Is me being here complicating things with security? You know, with your people.”

“Nope. Not unless you’re planning on sneaking into my bed some night.” I feel the color drain from my cheeks.

“I’m kidding, Gabby. But think how much that vein in JD’s neck would pop if you did?”

“Forget the vein. His entire head would pop off.”

Smith lets out a big gutsy laugh. “He’s a possessive bastard and so many other things, but I would trust JD with my life. I don’t have brothers, not biological ones, anyway. He’s the closest thing I have to a blood brother. Did he tell you we were going to join the army together after we graduated from college?”

“JD, in the army? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“It’s true. We had it all planned out. He wanted to be special forces, too.”

“What happened? They tell him he couldn’t enlist as a general?”

Smith grins. “Not entirely sure. My father talked him out of it.”

“Why?”

“Don’t know for sure. My dad just said not all men have the honor of serving in uniform, some are needed more elsewhere. Then he told me to mind my own damn business.”

“Maybe he recognized that JD didn’t have the temperament for it.”

Smith shrugs. “In a lot of ways JD has the perfect temperament for special forces. He’s arrogant, thinks he knows it all and is God’s gift to mankind. Plus, he’s a huge asshole. That’s pretty much all you need.” He winks at me. “JD had the intangibles. And nothing a commander likes more than to kick a little punk’s ass until they learn to obey orders. I think JD said something that made my father believe his family needed him more than his country did.” Smith gets up. “Want a beer?”

I shake my head. “No thanks. I drank enough last night to last me a lifetime.”

I think about what would have become of Zack, or even of Gray and Chase, if JD had enlisted. It would have been terrible for them. But it might have been good for JD. It might have taught him how to trust and depend on others to carry some of life’s weight. *Will you ever learn to do that, JD? Will you ever trust someone other than yourself?*



## GABRIELLE

I spent most of the afternoon with the insurance adjuster. It was torture.

Then I went by the cemetery to see if the graveside had been left neat after the interment. It's a good thing I went. The flowers from the funeral were strewn around in a haphazard way with no rhyme or reason. I spent an hour rearranging the bouquets and sprays by color and size. There weren't that many flowers, but it took me a long time to be satisfied. I made Rafe and Gus sit in the car so I could be alone with Georgie.

The kettle starts to whistle seconds before the doorbell rings, like it's trying to warn me. I look into the peephole. It's JD.

Maybe if I'm quiet he'll go away. I slump, with my back against the door until the bell rings again. *He knows you're here, and he's not going away.* I turn the alarm off and let him in. "Hey," I say, trying not to sound too bitchy. Or ungrateful. He has a tall plastic container in his hand that looks like soup.

"I'm not really up for company, it's been a long day and I'm tired."

"I'm just here to deliver some soup. Lally said to tell you she put elbow macaroni in it and cut the carrots into tiny cubes."

I smile. The week's not up so I guess she's still allowing the poor-little-me act she threatened to put an end to. "You didn't come around today; she thought maybe you hadn't eaten."

JD makes no effort to hand me the container, and when I start to eye it, he holds it out of my reach.

"Got a glass of water?" he asks.

"No water in the main house?" The words are a bit snarky, but I smile to cut the sting.

“It’s a long trip from the main house. At least a half mile here and a half mile back. You don’t want me to get dehydrated, do you? I’d be ugly all shriveled up.”

I roll my eyes and step aside. “Come in.”

JD saunters inside and sits down on the sofa, making himself at home. “The water’s in the kitchen,” I tell him.

He leans back and stretches his legs, sprawling his arms out across the back of the sofa. “Why don’t you fetch me a glass, darlin’?”

“I’m not much of a fetcher, darlin’.”

His eyes glimmer, and there’s a small tug on the left side of his mouth.

“If you don’t need the water bad enough to get yourself a glass, maybe you don’t need to worry about getting dehydrated on your way home.”

“Smith’s away for the night and you just buried your friend.” He pauses for a few long seconds. “I spoke with Chief Parker, they have the autopsy results. Some of it will be made public in the morning. I wanted you to hear it from me before that happened.”

He pats the seat next to him on the sofa, and I sit my bottom at the edge of the cushion and face him. “Tell me. Just say it. Whatever it is.”

“Georgie was murdered,” he says softly. “Her skull had an indentation in it made from a blunt object. She could have fallen or something could have fallen on her, but the coroner believes because of the location of the trauma, it’s unlikely. They’re not making these details public yet. So keep them to yourself.”

Wade killed Georgie? I don’t believe it. I wrap my arms around my torso. This doesn’t make any sense, except— “Wade said he pushed her and she fell.”

“*Mhmm*. Most of his story doesn’t match up well with the facts. Sometimes that’s the way it is. But he could be lying.”

“Does this mean Georgie was unconscious during the fire? That she didn’t know what was happening?” *Please, please say yes.*

But he doesn’t. Not exactly. “Chances are she was already dead when the fire started, or at the very least, she was out of it. It would explain why she didn’t get out. But they’re not certain. There’s still so much they don’t know. Or at least a lot they’re not telling.”

I hold on tight to the idea that she had already passed when the fire started. It won’t bring her back, and it might not even end up to be the case, but I cling to it. I cling to it with every ounce of strength I have.



“I’m going to stay with you for a little while,” JD murmurs, rubbing his fingers over my leg. “We can watch a movie or a show. Whatever you’d like. I don’t want you here alone all night.”

*Murdered.* By someone she loved. By someone she believed loved her.

I start to cry. I don’t know why I’m crying now, the news wasn’t good, but it brought a measure of relief. I haven’t cried all day. Not even at the cemetery. But grief is like that. It sneaks up and digs its claws in when you least expect it. I don’t bother to fight it. I just let it come crashing down as JD pulls me into his lap and twines his arms around me. When I still, I feel his heartbeat and smell the faint musky scent of cologne and the bourbon on his breath.

He holds me for a long time. His fingers are warm and strong on my skin. I shift my body and feel the beginning of an erection against my hip. Not rock hard. Not impossibly thick and long. Just the beginning. I can’t help myself from wiggling against it.

I moan softly at the feel of his cock on me. I don’t know where the moan came from, but it’s *filled* with need. I hear it. His cock jumps with the contact and I wiggle my ass again.

“I didn’t come here for sex,” he murmurs into my hair. “Not tonight.”

But I want sex. I didn’t know I wanted it, but right now, I want nothing else. “I want it,” I whisper, sliding my hand over his growing erection. “I want to forget about everything for a little while. Murders and fires. I want you to fuck me. I want you to punish me. To degrade and humiliate me. *Please,*” I beg, sliding off his lap to take off my clothes.

I pull the faded T-shirt over my head and toss it on the floor. I’m not wearing a bra, and my nipples peak in the cool air. I shimmy out of my yoga pants and underwear together and kick them aside. I’m completely naked.

“We’re not having sex,” he says decisively. But his eyes say something different. “Put your clothes back on.” His tone leaves no room for negotiation. Classic JD.

He gets up and heads straight for the front door, not bothering to steal even a small glance at my naked body. JD has a hand on the doorknob when I realize I have about two seconds to change his mind. And I know just how to do it.

“If you’re not man enough, I’ll find someone who is.” I pause to let that register with him. “I might not be the most attractive woman in Charleston, but surely I can find a man who will be willing to spend one night fucking me

into oblivion.”

He freezes with his hand on the doorknob. The muscles in his back contract. And for some time, I’m not sure what he’s going to do. But when he turns to face me, his eyes are dark, flaring with heat, and maybe anger. I’m sure now.

“You want me to fuck you?” he says, stalking toward me. “You want me to humiliate you? Punish you, so you can stop feeling guilty you didn’t die, too?”

I nod. So I can feel *anything*. I’m tired of the numbness that grips my soul day and night, muting my ability to feel *real* emotion in its depths. Even when I cry, the tears merely skim the surface, never emanating from deep within.

“Put your clothes back on.”

I hesitate. *Put my clothes back on?*

“Now,” he demands, his eyes piercing. I don’t know exactly what’s going on inside his head, but my first instincts were correct. He doesn’t like the challenge I threw at him.

I grab my panties and he immediately snatches them out of my hand. “Don’t bother with these,” he says, holding them to his nose before flinging them aside.

When I’m dressed, he tosses me over his shoulder like he’s a caveman and I weigh nothing, and pulls out his phone. I hear Smith say, *yeah*.

“Gabrielle is with me. I’ll send her back when I’m done with her.”

There’s a kind of vulgarity about JD’s words and tone that I hope Smith doesn’t pick up on. It’s possessive and controlling. And I know I shouldn’t like it, but I do.

When we get outside, Rafe and Gus come racing over. “She’s not wearing shoes,” JD barks. “I’m carrying her to the truck. If you have a problem, call Smith. Get the fuck out of my way,” he growls, heading toward the passenger side of his truck.

“Gabby, you okay with this?” Rafe asks, following us. There’s concern in his voice, and I wonder for a moment if he’d actually take JD on.

I raise my head and nod. I should be embarrassed, but I shed that pretense some time ago. Rafe and Gus are privy to more about JD and me than I care to think about. “I’m not wearing shoes. It’s fine. Don’t worry.”



## GABRIELLE

We drive to the main house in silence. “I’m going to give you everything you asked for and more,” he says, helping me out of the truck when we arrive. “You better keep your safe word handy.”

JD carries me up the stairs and through his bedroom into the adjacent gym. He sets me on my feet in the gym and cradles my jaw, running his thumb over my bottom lip. “Take off your clothes, darlin’. All of them.”

He watches as I undress. His eyes travel over my skin, appraising every inch, like he owns me. My cunt is throbbing.

“Get on your knees and wait for me.” I lower myself to the floor as gracefully as I know how to do. He winds my hair around his hand. “Think about how much I’m going to make you squirm tonight. How long you’ll beg before I let you come.” He swipes two fingers over my pussy, then pushes them into my mouth. “Suck,” he demands. “Like a dirty little slut.”

When he’s satisfied, he pulls his fingers out of my mouth. “Don’t move,” he cautions, grabbing my discarded shirt from the floor. “We’re going to have to improvise,” he murmurs, “most of what I need is at the apartment.” He ties the shirt sleeves around my eyes until I can’t see anything. “I’ll be right back.”

*Will he?*

My heart is pounding. My pussy dripping with arousal. *I’m going to give you everything you asked for and more.*

The waiting is arduous. I listen for any sound that he’s returning, and I wait. It could have been a minute or an hour that passed before he returns. It feels like it’s been an entire week.

When JD returns, he unties my shirt, giving me back my sight. I blink several times to accustom myself to the light in the room. It's not bright, but because I've been blindfolded, it feels like I'm staring straight into the sun.

He pulls me off the floor and over to a metal frame at the edge of the room. It's at least eight feet high and resembles a squared-off U that's been turned upside down, so that the short end is at the top. There are yards of rubber tubing and exercise bands hanging from the hooks on the sturdy structure, and a barbell seated near the bottom. He ties my hands together with one of the rubber bands and loops it across the top of the frame securing me in place.

"Is this what you want?" he says in a low rough voice, fingering me while I dance on his hand. "You want me to treat you like a dirty little whore? You want me to make you beg for it?"

*Yes, yes, this is what I want. Just like this.* I don't say it because I'm afraid he'll stop. But after he has me at the edge, he stops anyway. I whimper when he pulls his hand away and he slaps my ass. "Not a word. Unless I tell you to speak."

This is going to be a long, excruciating night. I shiver in anticipation.

I watch him go over to a bench and pick through a pile of things he must have brought back from the bedroom with him. He comes back with two leather belts and a sleeping mask—the kind they hand out on overnight flights to block the light. I can't take my eyes off the belts. I don't say a word, but I'm afraid now.

"What's your safe word?" he asks.

"Wilderness," I gasp.

"Good girl." He presses his lips to mine and assaults me with his tongue until I'm panting. Until I know nothing but him. "Don't you ever threaten me with another man again. This pussy belongs to me." He pinches my mound. "I say when it gets fucked. How hard. How long. And by who."

I gobble mouthfuls of air as his fingers slide between my thighs, long and short strokes until they reach my swollen clit. "Don't you dare come," he warns.

*I'll try. I'll try to be a good girl.* I do everything I know to stop from drowning in the waves of pleasure that are beckoning. I think about mountains of lima beans which I detest, train my focus on the weight rack across the room, and I pray. When my belly is clenched into a tight fist, when I think I can't hold out for a second longer, he pulls his hand away.

I cry out in frustration. In agony. The wail erupts from deep inside. And I can't keep it in.

"I told you not to make a sound," he whispers menacingly, folding the belt in half, before he lets it fly across my bare ass. The pain is searing, but I don't whimper. I don't dare.

JD knees my legs apart and attaches my ankles to either side of the metal frame, spreading me wide. The cool air tickles my hot center. I squeeze my lips to keep the gasps inside, while my body arches away from the cloying sensation.

"I'm fucking you *everywhere* before I'm through tonight." He tugs my hair back so I'm forced to look at him. "And when I'm done, *if* you've pleased me, I might let you come." He leans over, his mouth against my temple. "But you are going to suffer until then."

My skin is already burning when he takes the flogger to it. Snapping the silk ribbons over each nipple. My body jerks in response. "Is this too much for you, darlin'? Maybe we need to cover your eyes." He ties the mask at the back of my head. Moving my hair so it doesn't pull in the knot. It's that gentle act that reminds me he's not going to hurt me. At least not beyond what I can handle.

I hear the snap of the flogger before it hits my belly. It's made from a silky fabric and doesn't hurt. The ribbon stings pleasantly, making my flesh sing everywhere it touches. I squeeze my eyes tight, they're the only part of my body I can control right now.

"Your skin is so pink, Gabrielle. So pretty." I hear the loud snap of the flogger again and the silky ribbons are like fingers striking my pussy. I scream. A muffled scream that catches in my throat.

"Not a sound," he commands, letting the devilish flogger lick my pussy over and over. My mind and body are no longer connected. I'm adrift among the gauzy shadows where there is no pain. The flogger kisses my clit once more, and I come spectacularly, twisting my hips from side to side. The orgasm rips through me. It's piercing and so divine.

JD unbelted my ankles first, rubbing each one vigorously between his hands as he frees it. Then he untethers my wrists from the frame and pulls off the mask. I'm sweating and his arms feel hot around me.

"You came without permission. Did I tell you that you could come?" he demands. I can barely keep my eyes open, but I shake my head.

"No, I did not give you permission. Do you know what happens to little

sluts who come without permission? Do you, Gabrielle?”

“No,” I manage.

“You’re about to find out, darlin’.”

He carries me over to a leather massage table across the room and sweeps a pile of folded towels to the floor before draping me over the side. Only my toes are connected to the ground. “Hold on, right here.” He adjusts my hands so they’re gripping the far edge of the table. “Don’t let go, or I’ll use that belt on your ass until you can’t sit for a week.”

I’m floating still, in and out of ethereal shadows, it’s airy and sublime. Nothing can touch me there.

He pushes my legs apart with his. I feel his cock resting on my lower back as he reaches over me for the lube. It’s heavy and thick, and I imagine it leaking glistening pearls of cum onto my skin.

“You don’t deserve my cock, but I want your pussy.” I cling to the edge of the table for support as he slides into me. I clamp down hard around him. “Gabrielle,” he hisses, between clenched teeth. I feel triumphant, but the glorious feeling lasts only seconds, until the cold lube drips between my ass cheeks.

I arch off the table as he works the lube inside me first with one finger and then two. “I’m going to fuck you here,” he murmurs, twisting his fingers in and out, preparing me for his cock. When he tries to add a third finger, my body rebels. It won’t allow him to breach the tight muscle.

I’m too full—his cock—his fingers—it’s too much. But he’s patient, working the reticent muscle skillfully, cajoling my body to accept him. And it does, while I rub my cheek against the smooth leather, turning my head from side to side, elating in the cool surface while his giant cock fills me.

He slowly pulls out of my pussy and I hear him reach for the lube. “We’re going to make my cock nice and slippery for you. It’s going to feel so good.” His fingers leave my body, and suddenly I’m empty and lost. But he knows what I need. He always knows, and slides his cock carefully into my virgin hole. “Relax. You’re doing great. Breathe.”

I do all the things he demands, and it starts to feel good. And when his hand finds my pussy it feels amazing. “You can come whenever you need to,” he whispers into my shoulder. “As often as you need to, darlin’. You feel so good. You’re so hot around me. Yes, baby, come. That’s it.”

I squirm into his hand, rocking into the nimble fingers until waves of pleasure surge through me. Until the only word that tumbles from my mouth

is, “Julian.” Over and over.

His body tightens behind me, and he roars his release. I’m certain I hear it before I fade away.

---

WHEN I WAKE UP, I’m in my bed at Smith’s. There’s a glass of juice on the nightstand and a half-eaten piece of toast. But exactly how I got here is a little fuzzy. I was with JD last night. I look out the window into the pitch black—it’s still night.

I was so tired. Wrung out. There was sex. *So much sex*. It all seems like a dream, but I’m sore. Sore in places that I don’t want to think about right now.

There’s a light under the door. Smith must have come home after all. I get up, grateful that there’s a bathroom in the room so I don’t have to face him yet. *Oh God*. I’m sure he heard all about JD carrying me out of here.

I wash my hands in the bathroom sink, avoiding the mirror entirely, and troop back to the bedroom. JD’s sitting at the foot of the bed. “What are you doing here?” I’m surprised to see him. “It’s late, you should go home.”

“I didn’t want to leave until I was sure you were okay. I was rough with you.”

“*Hmmm*. Yes, I’m painfully aware of how rough you were.”

JD smirks. It’s arrogant, but not mean.

“I remember asking for it that way—well maybe not for *everything*. There are some things I’m quite sure I didn’t ask for.” I slide between the sheets and pull the quilt up to my chin.

“Beg for, you mean. What did you expect after you questioned my manhood and goaded me? Finger sandwiches and sweet tea on the porch? A gentle Southern breeze to make you comfortable? You got exactly what you wanted. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“And they say chivalry is dead.”

He stretches out on the quilt beside me, and rolls onto his side. “You were right. You needed last night. Getting you out of your head was a challenge. Only something you’d never done before was going to do the trick.” He smooths my hair back. “You okay?”

“I’m not complaining.”

“I should hope not.” He smirks at me again, with those blue eyes



shimmering mischievously. He is so full of himself. “That would be disingenuous.”

“You’re a jerk,” I say half-heartedly.

“Part of my effusive charm.” He kisses my forehead, right above the bridge of my nose. “I needed it too,” he admits. “More than I realized. I’m not used to tiptoeing around you like you’re going to break in the wind. It was making me edgy.”

I smile. “You always act like I’m going to break in the wind.”

“Not in bed. And I never tiptoe around you. *Ever.*”

He lays a steady hand on my belly. “You sure you’re okay?” His light-filled eyes flicker over my face. I want to curl up next to him, to wake up beside him. Just for tonight.

“Stay with me tonight,” I plead softly. “For what’s left of it.”

“If you want me to fall asleep next you, you’ll have to move back to my house. I won’t be doing it here.”

“I need more time. I need the space this place offers me to think.”

“Eleven thousand square feet isn’t enough space for you to think in?”

“JD.”

“Gabrielle, I’ll give you everything you need, and most of what you want. But I can’t abide by you leading me around by the dick. That is not going to happen. You want someone to keep your feet warm at night, I’ll clear out a few drawers for you. Say the word. Otherwise, you’ll have to get yourself some thick socks.”

He rolls out of bed and kisses my head tenderly. “Good night, darlin’.”

I hear him activate the alarm, before the front door clicks shut.



## JULIAN

Smith wants to run along the ocean this morning, which means two things. One, I have to put my ass in the car before dawn to get there, and two, he has something to talk about.

“What’s up with the new route this morning?”

“I like to change things up.”

“*Right*. Does this have anything to do with your mini-vacay?”

“Yeah, let’s talk about my *mini-vacay*. We’ll start with you carrying Gabrielle out to your truck, over your fucking shoulder like a Neanderthal. You can’t be doing shit like that. You’re a fool to challenge Rafe and Gus. They’ve been on edge since the fire. You were lucky you didn’t end up with a bullet in you. Don’t put it past them.”

“I didn’t kidnap her. She didn’t have any damn shoes on.”

Smith shakes his head. “Don’t complain to me when a surgeon’s digging a bullet out of your ass.”

There’s no way I’m telling him Gabrielle begged for it, so I change the subject. “How was the visit with your parents?”

“I talked with my father,” Smith says, stretching out his calves against the truck. “About everything.”

“I really wish—”

“Yeah. You made your point before I left. You ready, or you need more time to stretch those glutes you sit on all day?”

I stop stretching and glare at him. “Let’s go. Anything to make you stop talking about my ass.”

He smirks, but his light mood doesn’t last long. “Would you be willing to

have Sayle swept?”

“What exactly does that mean, *have Sayle swept?*”

“Let’s just say you and I aren’t the only ones who are *mighty* worried about what’s going on with SOLO. My father said there’s a lot of concern about North Africa. The president is deviating wildly from what US policy has been in the region for decades with no rhyme or reason. When I told him about SOLO, he thought it might hold some of the missing pieces.”

“What exactly did your father say about how SOLO might fit in with the policy changes in North Africa?”

“He said it’s a matter of national security.”

“What else?”

“You think he gave me details? I still have a security clearance, but not the same level he has. There are people in and around the administration who feel the president is inexperienced in foreign policy, and others who just don’t trust his motives. That seemed obvious from our conversation. The fact that they’re even consulting my father on this matter suggests there’s a problem.”

“Who is ‘they’?”

“Not sure. National Security, Defense, FBI, CIA. Maybe all of them.”

“Which agency wants to sweep Sayle?”

“I’m just a go between. An errand boy. I don’t have any real answers. But I’d guess Defense. Maybe the FBI. I suppose even the CIA could be involved.”

“I thought the CIA didn’t operate on American soil?”

Smith grunts.

I’ve been in charge at Sayle for a very short time. My grandfather didn’t have anything to hide, and I can’t imagine my brothers are involved in anything shady related to the company. I’m certainly not doing any sketchy shit. “Fine. They can come in and look around the SOLO project. But that’s it. A lot of what we do is proprietary and I can’t risk it getting into the wrong hands. It could cost the company millions.”

“We’re talking about national security, JD. That trumps profits. But it’s a voluntary search, so they might be willing to negotiate the terms. Don’t forget, they can always get a warrant and go in without your permission. It’s a pain in the ass, but they do it all the time.”

“I need to talk to a lawyer.”

“No one’s going to tell you not to consult with a lawyer. But make sure

you know who you're talking to. Even a whiff of this gets out and we're screwed. This is a big fucking deal, and he's the president. Don't share any information, even with your lawyer, that's not absolutely necessary."

"I don't trust the firm that represents Sayle. They're competent, but too beholden to my father. I'll contact my personal lawyer. I'm confident his firm can be trusted to keep their mouths shut."

"What should I tell my father?" Smith asks, as we take the bend and the ocean comes into full view, with Fort Sumter in the distance. The first shots of the Civil War were fired there. There's something poetic about it. This might be my first chance for a real shot at bringing my father down. I drag in a breath through my nose and blow it out.

"Tell him it's a go. We just need to hammer out the perimeters of the search."

"Good choice. They'd go in with or without your permission. My father has a good poker face, but he paled when I told him about the antidote to the nerve agent SOLO is working on. I could feel the chill coming off of him from halfway across the room."

"This is going to be war if my father finds out I authorized the search. I want everyone's security beefed up. My brothers', Gabrielle's, Sweetgrass—everything."

"I'm well aware of the implications. Security is already tight, but it will get tighter. Especially yours."

"I'm not worried about myself."

"You should be."

I'm not wasting any breath discussing my safety with Smith. "How are they going to get past security and all the safeguards that are in place around the SOLO project? It's like a concrete wall. Even Chase can't penetrate it. And you know how good he is."

"Don't worry about that part. We're talking about the highest-level intelligence. They'll look around and take everything they need without leaving a trace."

"Are we talking about a raid? Because I can't have them come in and walk out with all our data and computers."

"Doubt it. I don't see a raid at this stage. Too risky. They'll make digital copies of everything they need. There's bound to be some paperwork for you to sign. It might give you a better sense of the scope."

"So what now?"

“Sit tight. I’m sure someone will be in touch.”

“I liked it better when we didn’t talk business on these runs.”

“Me too.”

---

THE PAPERWORK ARRIVED within two hours of my conversation with Smith. It was handed to me by a kid who didn’t look any older than sixteen, carrying a messenger bag and wearing hipster tennis shoes.

After he leaves, I open the cardboard envelope and examine the sparse paperwork giving the Federal Government permission to conduct a search on a company owned, in part, by the president of the United States. Date and time unspecified. *Jesus Christ*. The paperwork grows heavy in my hand as the full impact of the situation dawns on me. This isn’t simply about my family or the company. It’s not about vengeance. This is about country.

I lower myself into my grandfather’s chair and call my lawyer back. “It’s here,” I tell him.

“On my way,” he answers.

There is too much secrecy surrounding SOLO. My father kept too tight of a grip on the project. From the moment I first spoke to Rofler, it was clear SOLO was dirty. Then Chase confirmed my worst fears with the information about the antidote they were developing for the hybrid nerve agent. A nerve agent that’s a weapon of war. No other use for it.

I’m not someone who would normally play nice with the Feds, but I will not allow DW to use my grandfather’s company to commit a crime against humanity. Because that’s where this feels like it’s headed.

I don’t have to think twice about how Julian Davis Sayle would have handled this situation. I press the heel of my hand into my chest and feel the outline of my grandfather’s dog tag. I’ve worn it every day since he gave it to me. *Find something in life to motivate you that’s bigger than yourself*, he told me. He was a member of the 47th Infantry that liberated Dachau. My grandfather believed that medical research should only be conducted to promote the human good. And that’s how he ran his company. His example gives me everything I need to sign the paperwork and send it on its way. Sayle will not contribute to evil. Not on my watch.

A few hours later, a different messenger comes by. He’s no less

convincing than the first. He hands me an iPad and watches as I affix my signature to a digital copy of the paperwork. When he leaves, the original paperwork I was instructed to leave at the corner of the desk, is gone too. I didn't even see him pick it up. Impressive.

A burden lifts from me as I watch him get into a white van and drive away. Maybe my nightmare is finally coming to end.

I turn from the window and gaze at my phone on the desk. It's premature to celebrate, but I call Gabrielle anyway. "Let's go out tonight," I say, even before hello.

"Out?"

"Yeah. Some people call it a date. It's an old-school thing."

"A date?"

I smile at the surprise in her voice. "Yeah. We haven't done much of that, and I thought a night out might be something we both could use."

"Where are you thinking about going? I don't have anything fancy to wear."

"Well that could be easily rectified if you weren't so damned stubborn. But you won't need anything fancy where we're going."

"Should I eat dinner first?"

"Stop trying to wheedle information out of me. You don't need to eat dinner. I'll make sure you get fed."

The truth is I had no idea where we were going. Not yet.





## GABRIELLE

**J**D knocks on Smith's door at precisely eight-fifteen, wearing a leather bomber jacket and a pair of jeans that look like they've spent plenty of time inside a washing machine. Soft and faded, they look perfect with his scruffy jaw. If I nuzzle my nose into his neck, I bet he'll smell like that boozy cologne he loves, the one with the faint undertones of tobacco and vanilla. I love it, too.

"You ready?" he asks, his hand buried in a jacket pocket.

I lower my eyes, letting them skim over my outfit. I don't have any jewelry, and while my clothes fit, they're not really right even for a casual date. But I did buy myself a tube of lip gloss and some mascara, and I'm neat and clean, of course. Maybe I need to reconsider taking him up on his offer to lend me money for clothes.

"I'm ready." I gaze at him. "This is the best I have to wear." I sound apologetic, and I am a little.

"You look beautiful. What you have on is perfect."

"We both know that's not true." I look down at my feet and swallow a big lump of pride. "If you're still willing to let me borrow money to buy a few things—I would pay you back as soon as I can, although it might be a while. But no personal shoppers and I can't accept any gifts."

"Of course not." He smiles. "Nothing would make me happier than to lend you some money. I have no doubt you'll pay me back."

I nod. "Thank you."

"But Gabrielle, you do look beautiful. The color's back in your cheeks. And your eyes have some life in them again."

Most of the time now, I feel like I'm going to make it. It's going to be hard, but I'll survive. "Where are you taking me?"

"167 Raw. We'll sit at the counter and eat some freshly shucked oysters, and then go listen to some music."

"A real date." I grab my shawl from a hook near the door.

JD scowls as he takes the shawl from me and wraps it around my shoulders. "When you go shopping, buy yourself a coat."

"The money has to come with no strings, except that it's paid back in full, with interest. You can't dictate what I buy."

"I never agreed to any interest. And there are no strings other than you need to buy a coat. And don't act all offended. It's not like I told you to buy some sexy lingerie. Although you should feel free to indulge me. It's a coat for Chrissake."

"Today it's a coat. Tomorrow it'll be boots and sweaters. That's how it is with you."

"Probably. But you won't do it anyway. Because that's how it is with you."

I stand on tiptoes and kiss his cheek, inhaling the heady smell that's JD. "I'll buy a coat if it makes you happy."

---

I WAKE up in the bed at JD's apartment, downtown. I'm naked under the quilts and he's nowhere to be seen. The bedroom door is shut tight, and I don't see any light under it. He must be in the living room or in the kitchen. He wouldn't go back to Sweetgrass without me.

We stuffed ourselves with oysters and hard-shell clams and then snuck into Kelly's Lounge after the band started playing. JD called ahead and they saved us a table in back. For a few hours, all I did was enjoy the sexy man who held my hand or swung his arm around my shoulders to pull me close. There is nothing in this world as scrumptious as a relaxed JD. Not even an oyster just plucked from the ocean. I loved everything about the evening. *Everything.*

While we danced, he suggested we spend the night at his apartment downtown. He murmured it in my ear while he squeezed my ass. It wasn't actually a suggestion. More like a demand. But I let it go, because at the time

I thought it was the best idea he'd ever had. And it was.

I reluctantly crawl out of the warm bed to use the bathroom, then slip on his discarded shirt, and go in search of him.

I find him lying on the sofa in a pair of low-riding sweatpants, an arm slung across his forehead. "Hey," he says softly, then holds out a hand. "C'mere."

"I woke up and you were gone," I say, making my way over to him.

"Couldn't sleep and I didn't want to wake you. But looks like I did anyway." He pulls me onto him, our abdomens touching. I wriggle to get comfortable, smiling as he winces at the movement.

"What is it about men? Sex isn't too intimate, but somehow lying beside a woman and falling asleep afterward is too much. They need to run and hide."

The edges of his mouth twitches. "You think I run from intimacy?"

I nod.

"Wrong. You're lying on top of me wearing my shirt and nothing underneath it. Squirming all over my cock. I'd say that's pretty intimate. And I'm not running anywhere."

"That's not what I mean." He kisses me and licks my lips before sliding his tongue into my mouth.

"Mmmm," I moan softly. "You want to go back to bed?"

"What's wrong with right here?" he says, rubbing his hands over my backside. Squeezing the cheeks to pull me closer.

"Here is good."

He gazes at me and says nothing. I'm not sure what he's thinking.

"Tonight was fun," I say quietly. "I forgot what a good dancer you are. All those cotillion classes your mother made you and Chase take to learn to become gentlemen."

"Waste of time and good money." He tenses after he says it.

"What's the matter?"

JD presses a small kiss into the bridge of my nose. "Nothing."

"No more secrets."

His Adam's apple bobs a couple times. I still have no idea what he's thinking. "The accident happened while Chase and I were in that stupid class. We begged her not to make us go. But she insisted. If she had given in to us, Chase and I would have been in the car with them."

I comb my fingers through his hair carefully, grateful, *so grateful*, for his

openness. So grateful he wasn't in the car with the others. I want to say the right thing, but I can't find it. Instead I say something that I know will sound trite to him, but something I firmly believe. "You were spared because God had another plan for you."

"I was spared to avenge their deaths." His voice is cold.

*Oh JD.* "I don't believe that's true. And your mama wouldn't have believed it either. She loved you. She would have wanted you to spend your life seeking something bigger than revenge."

"My mother loved too much. She let it blind her."

"You can never love too much." I trace his lips, and he catches my hand and nips my fingers before kissing away the sting. I press my hips into him, and he smiles because he knows exactly where I'm feeling the sting of his teeth.

"I want you to tell me something," he says quietly, holding my eyes with his. "I want to know why every time I have you on your belly, and hoist up your hips until you're on your hands and knees, you stiffen. And you don't relax, no matter how aroused you are, until we change positions. It happened tonight. But I've noticed it a few times before."

"I never noticed."

"Bullshit."

"Maybe I don't like sex in that position."

"That would be more bullshit. You love it from behind. It's deep and it gives me access to all the parts of your body that make you feel good. If I bend you over the arm of the sofa right now, and slide into you, you'll come right away."

"You're so sure of yourself."

He runs his tongue over his bottom lip, studying me. "Did someone hurt you like that? Was it Dean when he was drunk? I'll kill that bastard."

I don't say anything.

"Tell me."

I look down at his neck, examining a tiny pale freckle near his collar bone. "It was you."

He pulls the hair back off my face with both hands, and holds my head between them so I'm forced to look at him. I see his mind churning while searching my face for answers.

"The night I walked into the stable," I say softly. "On you and Jane. That's the position she was in. Even though I understand now what

happened. It's imprinted on my brain and my body reacts, even though I don't want it to."

His eyes are dark with a flash of anger, or maybe it's sorrow. I can't tell. He kisses the tip of my nose, and gazes at me warily for some time before speaking. "We've got to do something about that. I have no intention of giving up a single thing with you."

"Can't undo it. It's not a demon you can exorcise by will or force."

"I don't accept that."

I don't want to talk about it anymore. I wiggle on his cock, which is rock hard against my mound. "I need you inside me. Please," I beg in a way I know makes him crazy.

His face is serious. His eyes laser focused on mine. JD's not through with the discussion and sultry begging might not be enough tonight. I take his hand and slip it between my legs. He starts to protest, but stops abruptly when his long fingers reach my pussy. I'm wet. Soaked. His breathing quickens. "Let me ride you," I demand, echoing the heated flush spreading over my skin.

"As long and as hard as you'd like, darlin'. But when you're done, it's my turn." I tremble at the gravel in his voice. At his words. They have the ring of a threat. A delicious threat that will make me sweat and quiver under him while he takes until he's satisfied. I pray it's a threat he'll make good on.



## GABRIELLE

“**W**here are we going?” I ask, climbing into the cab of JD’s truck. “What do you need to show me? I hope this isn’t a date because I’m not dressed for it.”

“One day I’m going to put a penny in a jar for every question you ask. It’ll feed the world for centuries. And I never said anything about a date.”

“One day I’m going to put a penny in a jar for every question you don’t answer. That’ll feed plenty of people too. And don’t give me a hard time. You just showed up at my door and expected me to go with you without an explanation. No woman would just go happily, not even that fangirl who has an entire blog dedicated to your *hotness*. Well, maybe her.”

“She’s a moron. Even if she has good taste in men.”

I stare out the passenger-side window, but I don’t laugh. She is a moron, and no threat to me, which is why I love to comb through her blog. “A little notice would be nice next time.”

“Would you relax.”

*Relax.* “This is the way to the stable. I thought it was empty?”

He doesn’t answer.

“You want to show me something in the stable?”

“Sure.”

That means he’s not saying another word. JD parks outside the double doors that the horses come in and out of. But there aren’t horses here now. I don’t think anyone has used this building for decades, not as a stable anyway, but the outside is in great condition and like the rest of the property, the area surrounding it is immaculate. “We could have walked here from the carriage

house, JD.”

“Are you ever going to stop talking?”

I jump out of the truck, not waiting for him to come around to open the door. “I don’t know, are you ever going to answer me?”

“Come on,” he says, grabbing my hand. He takes me to a narrow door on one side of the building and pulls it open, motioning for me to go in first. As soon as I step foot inside, the smell of fresh hay hits me hard. I haven’t been inside a stable for years—fifteen years, to be precise. And the smell of hay is fraught with complicated feelings for me. I sniff the air. There’s no escaping them here. I can’t just look away to dismiss the memories.

“Is that your old truck? The one we—”

“Yep.”

I run my hand over the tailboard. The paint’s dull with age. “Does it still run?”

He nods. “I occasionally take it out for a short drive, but otherwise it’s parked here, out of the elements.”

“Is this what you wanted to show me?”

“Nope.” He points to the far corner of the building, where there seems to be a glow.

I walk around the truck and follow the dim light in the distance. The air crackles with nervous energy. I’m not afraid. Hesitant, but not afraid. And more than a little curious too. JD’s quiet. It’s not as though he’s a big talker, but his quiet is heavy tonight. I stop and glance at him over my shoulder. “Keep going,” he says from a couple feet behind me. “You’re on the right path.” The soft light is stronger as I make my way deeper inside the stable.

The far edge of the structure is lit by lanterns, with glass globes of various shapes and sizes, and small electric votives. Dozens of them. Maybe hundreds. I gaze over the space. It’s breathtaking.

Once they adjust to the light, my eyes go to the bed of hay in the center of the room. It’s at least two feet high, with smaller bales piled here and there around it. A picnic cooler sits on one bale, and something resembling a tackle box, or maybe a tool box, sits on another. But of all the oddities, it’s the enormous freestanding mirrors positioned around the straw bed that capture my attention.

They’re larger than any mirrors I’ve ever seen, and set up in a triad, almost like the ones in a department store, where you can see yourself from all angles. The shimmering candlelight is reflected in the giant glass. It’s



beautiful and strangely erotic.

My mouth is dry, and my heart is beating faster than normal. I glance at JD. “What’s all this?”

“Getting back to basics. You’re getting too spoiled because the only place I ever fuck you is in a nice soft bed.” His voice is low and rough.

“I don’t think a bed’s the only place you fuck me,” I whisper.

Before the words are out of my mouth, his legs are on either side of mine and his hands are in my hair. He claims my mouth with bruising kisses that steal my breath.

One hand slides to my bottom and lifts me toward him. I feel his cock twitch against my belly. “This is one way to get you to stop talking,” he murmurs. “My favorite way.”

When JD pulls away, his eyes are black. He runs his knuckles over a scruffy jaw. “Take off your clothes, darlin’. Everything but your panties. Leave those for me.”

I draw in a breath as I untether each button carefully, letting the black cardigan fall open. My nipples furl instantly in the cool air, pushing through the camisole. My face is heated. But not from embarrassment.

I catch his eyes while slowly unzipping my jeans, and hold them tight as I shimmy out of the pants. He’s an arm’s length away. His body is tense. He’s struggling to keep the distance. I’ll bet his cock is throbbing. His struggle causes the hint of a smile to form on my face while I pull the lavender cami over my head, shaking my hair loose. I hold the lingerie out to him. “Will you be needing this tonight?”

I hear the low growl, primitive and raw. He yanks off his T-shirt and toes off his shoes at the same time. When he’s done, he pulls me down onto the straw pile with him. It’s soft and pliable, because it’s fresh, and the smell is intense. Almost too intense. I bury my face in JD’s neck. It’s clean and soapy. I squeeze my eyes tight and fill my lungs with him.

He rolls over me, pinning me underneath, leaving me sandwiched between coarse denim and prickly hay. Even though his arms support most of his weight, he feels big on top of me and it’s impossible to move more than an inch or two in any direction. My flesh is sizzling. I feel the beginning of a light sheen on my skin.

JD lowers his head and pulls a nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue, until it’s beaded tight. “When I’m done tonight, darlin’, the only memories you’ll have of stables will be of me filling you and pounding your sweet little

cunt until you can't stop coming around my cock.”

He sucks the other nipple into his mouth and doesn't let go until I'm pulling his hair and whimpering incoherently. “I can't understand a word you're sayin'. What do you want?” he murmurs before catching my earlobe between his teeth.

*Everything. I want everything.*

He rocks his hips into me, over and over. The thick bulge teases my mound, sending zings of pleasure through me. There's no mistaking how much I want him right now. My mind is whirling, my cunt pulsing with need.

I groan when he pulls off of me to reach the tackle box. He brings it closer, flipping the latch open. A stack of trays pop up, but from this angle I can't see what they hold.

His hand disappears inside the box. He pulls a couple things out and holds them up for me. At first, they appear to be drop earrings made of pearls that shimmer in the low light of the room. They have the unmistakable luster of expensive pearls and I'm captivated by their beauty.

“Do you know what these are?” he asks in a husky voice that makes my center throb.

Although they look a lot like earrings, they're not. “Nipple clamps.”

He nods. “Have you ever worn anything like this?”

“No,” I say softly. The corner of his mouth curls slightly.

“Let me see your hand.”

I hold it out to him, palm up. JD attaches a clamp to the webbed skin between my thumb and index finger. “Doesn't hurt, does it?”

It's startling, but no pain, just a small sting. I shake my head.

“I'll tighten them so you feel the bite in your pussy. But it won't hurt,” he murmurs into my neck. “Not tonight.”

He lowers his head and draws a plump nipple into his mouth, sucking hard, the rasp of his teeth scraping against the sensitive flesh. When he pulls his mouth away, he works his fingers roughly over the nipple before attaching the clamp. There's a small pinch. “*Ahhh.*” I arch my back.

“Good girl.” He tugs gently on the pearls, before lowering his mouth to the other nipple. Once the second clamp is in place, he pulls me to my knees. “Turn around,” he instructs, positioning himself behind me. “Look how beautiful you are.” I gaze into the mirror. We're both on our knees, his body partially obscured by mine. The ornate jewelry hangs from me, like we're performing an ancient African ritual.

His hand rests on my hip, and the other slides to my belly, circling lower and lower. I feel his cock firmly seated in my lower back. I watch my lips part, and my head fall to his shoulder while his fingers graze my clit. The hay mingles with the musky scent of sex to create a potent cocktail.

“I have more,” he says, pulling a tray from the tool box. It reveals five egg-shaped plugs, each with a large silver ring attached to the base. He chooses the center one. “This is perfect.”

It looks so big. “Maybe the smaller one would be better to start with,” I tell him warily.

“We’re going to start with my fingers, darlin’. But you’ve had something much bigger than this inside your tight little ass,” he holds out the stainless-steel egg, “and you took every fat inch of it.” He takes out a triple strand of pearls, several inches long, and attaches it to the large ring at the base of the plug. He gazes at me. His eyes are ablaze. “It matches the jewelry on your nipples. I want you perfectly adorned tonight.”

I finger the pearls and the ring where they’re attached.

“Something to grab onto when I want to fuck your ass,” he says lewdly. I gasp and press my thighs together. JD smirks. “I can attach anything to that ring. Even a thick bushy horse tail.” He leans closer. His breath is near my ear. “Should I bring one of those next time?”

I whimper, and he tugs my hair back so I’m forced to watch in the mirror.

“Would you like that?” He slides two fingers into my wet pussy. “Oh, Gabrielle, I think you would.” His eyes are dancing in the mirror. Taunting me. But it’s not mean. It’s arousing. So arousing. I arch against him. I’m going to dissolve into a puddle if he doesn’t stop. “Do you remember how we would cage the mare, let her bite down on the bit while the stallion mounted her. Do you remember that?”

“Yes,” I gasp.

“How he’d stick his big dick into her until he was satisfied?” His words are vulgar, but his voice is low and buttery. “Did you touch yourself after you watched them mate? Did you think about what it would be like to have a wild animal mount you until he had his fill?”

Yes. Yes. I don’t say it. I don’t have to, he knows.

His fingers push my panties aside and brush my bare mound. “Get on your hands and knees,” he commands. “I want you on all fours, Gabrielle, while I fuck you. I want you to watch in the mirror. I want you to see how beautiful you are when you come. How your eyes roll back and your skin

flushes. Now, Gabrielle.”

I can barely move. It’s as though my brain is so aroused it’s stopped sending mundane messages to my limbs. It takes a few seconds before I remember how to maneuver my body. When I’m in the position he wants, he uncaps the lube and spreads it over my pleated hole. One thick finger pushes inside, while he teases my clit with his other hand. I want to scream for more. But I don’t, because that will get me less. That’s the kind of night this is going to be.

My hands dig into the hay as he slides a second lubed finger into my ass. When I tense up, he scolds me. When I look away from my reflection in the glass, he chides me and moves his hand from my needy pussy. “Warm this,” he says, placing the jeweled plug near my lips. I open my mouth and take it in. It’s big. Invasive. It will feel even bigger where it’s ultimately going. I shudder when I see my reflection in the mirror. The pretty pearls hanging from my lips and breasts, while JD kneels behind me, preparing me. I feel a surge between my legs, and the arousal sticky on my inner thighs.

He withdraws his fingers and spreads more cold lube between my cheeks. “I need this,” he says, pulling on the plug in my mouth. I pant softly when he pulls it out. “Look in the mirror, Gabrielle. Watch how much you like having your ass filled.” He eases the steel egg into me. “That’s it, darlin’, push out. Just like that.” He inserts it gently, giving me time to adjust.

I glance in the mirror. My face is red and sweaty. JD is gazing back at me. “I’m going to shove my cock into you while that plug is in your ass. And you’re going to come so hard around me.” He pauses, admiring me in the mirror. His breathing is labored too. “But first you’re going to suck my cock, and if you suck it good, I’m going to reward you. Can you suck it good, Gabrielle?”

“Yes,” I say in a voice so sultry, I barely recognize it.

He moves in front of me. I push back to my knees and reach for his zipper. “No,” he says, swatting my hand away. “You didn’t listen. I don’t like to repeat myself, Gabrielle. Keep your hands and knees on the straw. Like your life depends on it. They don’t leave the hay unless I tell you.” He grabs a fistful of my hair. “Do you understand?”

I nod.

“Good girl.”

He lowers his blue jeans, and guiding my head, he feeds me his cock an inch at a time until it hits the back of my throat. I gag. The tears pool. But JD

doesn't stop. He thrusts slow and shallow a few times, between the long, deep plunges. I can't swallow him in this position. But I hum, because I know the vibrations will be his undoing.

"Ah, Gabrielle. Stop. Stop." But I don't. I hum faster and faster.

JD pulls out of my mouth and marks my neck and chest with long ropes of cum. I smile. A tiny, smug smile, because I pushed him where he wasn't ready to go. There's sure to be a price for that.

"You are naughty. *Very* naughty," he drawls. "But your mouth is heaven." With a fistful of hair, he yanks my head back, breaching my lips, and his tongue tangles with mine. His heart hammers. "Don't move off this hay or you will regret it."

JD slides behind me, lowering his body between my legs. I groan loudly when his tongue touches my clit. He places a hand on my back while he licks me from behind, pushing two fingers into my pussy. I begin to buck. The orgasm is building quickly.

I don't want to come yet.

It's forming too fast.

It's going to be too hard.

But I can't stop it. It's barreling through me and I can't stop it. My womb balls tightly. I'm being torn apart. Clawing at the straw bed, digging my fingernails deep into the chaff to survive. I scream. My body twitches until I'm wrung out and empty. Until I want nothing but to lay my head on the downy hay.

"Don't you dare move your hands and knees off the straw," JD warns. He's slowed his movements, but his tongue is swirling and teasing still, and I begin to climb again until he pulls his mouth away, leaving me whimpering.

"Open your eyes," he demands from behind me. He slides his fingers over my swollen pussy and sucks them into his mouth. It's filthy and shameful. And I'm aroused by it all.

Small moans escape my lips and tumble into the room. "Do you need to come again, already? You're a greedy little thing. And noisy. But I'm not going to gag you. Do you know why that is, darlin'?" he murmurs, brushing my ear with his mouth.

"You like to hear me scream."

I'm facing him in the mirror and he tugs my hair back gently. "I like to hear you scream. Yes. I like the way your screams echo in my veins. How they make me rock hard. Every time you scream your walls contract around

my dick, squeezing until I can't think straight. *Every time.*"

"Open your eyes." I do as he asks, but it's hard. I focus on my reflection in the glass. My eyes are slits. "I'm going to fill that pussy now, *my* pussy, and you're going to watch while I do it."

With the plug still seated deep inside me, he shoves his cock into me. It hits the deep center with a single brutal thrust. My groans bounce off the walls. I grab handfuls of straw to steady myself. My thighs are shaking.

"*Shhh.*" He stills and brushes his hands over my flank in long strokes to settle me in the way he'd calm a skittish mare. "Breathe. Deep breaths, darlin'."

He brings a hand under me and strokes my clit. *Yes! Yes, I want more of that.*

"Look at you, in the mirror with your pretty pearls. You're a gift fit for the gods. Lips dark and bruised. Cunt ripe and needy. Is that how you feel, slip ripe, eager to be picked?" I can't form words so I nod. "You ready for me?"

He's still buried to the hilt, but he hasn't moved. His voice is raspy, and I know his control is unraveling. And when it does—when he starts to thrust, long and hard—I don't know how I'll stay upright.

He pulls out and pushes back inside. I whimper. "What do you see, Gabrielle?"

"Me."

"That's right." He's thrusting in and out, the rhythm is punishing. I'm squirming on his cock. "What else?"

"You."

"What's my name?"

"Julian," I gasp.

"What am I doing?"

"Fucking me."

"Yes. I'm fucking you." He twists the plug in my ass. "I own all your holes. How does that feel?"

When I don't answer him, he pulls out the plug and pushes it back inside, twisting it until I'm shaking. "Good. It feels good."

"Just good? That's it, darlin'? Just good?"

"Amazing. It feels amazing."

He leans over me. His hands are all over my skin. And his cock is wedged deep when his teeth find my flesh. Sinking into muscle. Marking me. I watch

in the mirror, but I can't process any of it through my eyes. I'm nothing but sensation.

My belly begins to tighten and my heavy eyelids droop shut. He grips my hips tightly. "Eyes open. Watch yourself come all over my cock like a dirty little slut."

With every thrust, the plug moves. Just as I start to come in a shaking mess, he pulls out the plug. I scream. It's desperate and deafening. I feel him tense. I force my eyes open. His head is tipped back. His thrusts are deep and brutal. A tortured growl erupts, and I watch his face contort as he empties himself inside me with a single, long shudder.

After a few seconds, he meets my gaze in the mirror. His eyes are bright and clear. Sparkling like the sea. He lowers his mouth to my shoulders, sprinkling kisses over them while he pulls out.

My limbs are stiff. I stretch them, testing cautiously like a newborn colt.

JD grabs a sleeping bag from nearby and spreads it on the hay. "I wanted you to experience the hay under you. But this will be more comfortable now."

I curl up beside him. Into his warm hard body. And sleep.

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WHEN I WAKE up JD is asleep. But I barely move a muscle before he's pulling me closer. "Where you going?"

"You're not a very sound sleeper."

"Not much of a sleeper at all."

"I'm not going anywhere. I just wanted to stretch my legs a bit. I'm not as young as I used to be." I snuggle back into him. "JD?"

"Hmmm?"

"You did this," I wave my hand around, "to erase my memory of you and Jane."

"I did it because I'm tired of feeling you tense up every time I have you on all fours. I'm not about to give up having sex like that because your head is filled with nonsense."

"Such a romantic."

He pinches my ass and I squeal. But he doesn't let me get away. He rolls me onto my back and brushes the hair off my face.

“I wanted to free you from that memory. To free us both from it. I couldn’t take you back to the stable at Wildwood, but this place felt like it would work.”

I run my fingertip over his stubble, loving the prickliness. “It’s gorgeous in here with all the soft lights.” I rub a few pieces of hay between my fingers. “It’s so fresh. Like it was just cut this morning.”

“It might have been. I had it delivered late this afternoon. I’m not picky about who I share my bed with, but you don’t like mice. I didn’t want to give them a chance to make themselves at home.”

I kiss his cheek. “Thank you. I don’t know if it will work. If it will—”

“It did today.”

All of a sudden, I feel a little shy. “It certainly did. But even if it doesn’t last forever. Thank you for trying. Thank you for all this.”

“It wasn’t exactly a hardship for me.” His eyes twinkle in the candlelight.

“I noticed.”

He’s hard again. I’m not sure if I can come anymore tonight. But I want him inside me. I want to feel his heart near mine. His warm breath on my skin. “JD?”

“Hmmm?”

“I’m ready to move back to the main house.”

“My cock can be very persuasive.”

I elbow him. “It wasn’t the sex.” I glance around the room. “It was all this. You trying to repair my soul.”

“What do you mean it wasn’t the sex?” He pins my wrists over my head. “Maybe I need to give it another go.”





## GABRIELLE

When I move my things back into JD's house, I notice he's added a couple items to the closet, including a down-filled jacket. The kind you'd need for a ski trip to Maine, but not one that would get much use in Charleston. There's also a barely pink, double-breasted wool coat with velvet buttons. I'm quite sure this same coat was in a magazine I leafed through while waiting in line at the grocery store a few weeks ago. I'm going to kill him.

We decided I would keep the wing of the house Lally and Patrick set up for me. Not to sleep in, but to use as my own private space. I'm here now to rummage through the boxes of Georgie's journals Wade put in my car the day of the funeral. Today is Georgie's birthday, and I've been a little weepy all day. I miss her. Maybe reading through the journals, drinking in her words, will bring her close. Help me reminisce about the good times, the fun we had together.

The journals are ordered by year. I pull out the lilac-colored diary, with a sparkly pony on the cover, and read from the beginning. I eat up every silly nine-year-old girl thought, laughing until I'm crying. I inhale the next one, too, and begin to hungrily devour the third. Georgie's musings, to an imaginary Lolo, are just what I needed today.

*DEAR LOLO,*

*I went to the big white house again today and this time Daddy gave me a pretty bracelet! Just for me! It's made of real gold and its got a big round charm with G on the front and P on the back for princess! Its written in curly*

*cursive and its so beautiful! Daddy said it cost a lot of money but he was happy to pay it because I'm so special. He wanted a hug. I would give him a million hugs! Then he put me on his lap because thats how Daddys take care of their special princesses. Then we had a secret. But I can tell you because you won't tell anyone. He touched my privates. Its called a pussy. Because its going to have a lot of hair on it like a kitty. And when you pet it, it purrs like a pussy cat. That's what Daddy said. Mine never purred before. There must be a special way to touch it. Daddy said he would make it purr for me next time.*

*Love,  
Georgie*

I BRING my hands to my face. *Oh my God!* Her father molested her. I'm not sure whether to read more or to run to the bathroom to throw up. *Oh Georgie!* Why didn't you tell me? I put the journal down, and then I pick it up to read more. How could this have happened under my nose without me knowing a thing about it?

*DEAR LOLO,*

*Today Daddy petted my pussy and it didn't purr but I made little kitten sounds. It felt really good! He put something cold on it like lotion only it didn't have any color. It made it all slippery and then he rubbed it for a long time until my legs were shaking. I was a little scared but he said not to worry that all girls like to be petted. And if your petted real good you shake. He needs to take care of me because my other daddy drinks to much so he can't take care of me in the way daddys take care of there special princesses. That's what he told me. He gave me lots and lots of hugs on his lap and kisses. He said I did real good. He was so proud of me! He gave me cherry cordials dipped in milk chocolate and wrapped in gold foil! He let me eat two!! And I got to take the rest home for after supper!*

*Love,  
Georgie*

MY STOMACH IS ROILING something awful. Maybe it's not her father. Who else would she call Daddy? *Think Gabrielle, think.* They're the streaming thoughts of a little girl, written in a barely- eleven-year old's scratch, and I have to admit, I'm not following them very well. I reread the entry. The big white house—the main house. *DW. DW molested her. Oh Georgie, baby! That's why you were so afraid. I'm so sorry. It's not too late to punish him. I promise you, it's not.*

My eyes bleed, but I keep reading. I read through oral sex and vaginal sex. I read as he penetrates her with objects, and buys her trust with candy and trinkets, and false love, and attention she didn't otherwise get. He groomed her carefully, but it didn't take long, because she was so desperate for affection.

She wrote about *big O, daddy's friend.* That bastard Olson, I assume, who threatened her. Warned her bad things would happen to her if she told anyone. She was eleven the first time DW touched her, and by the time she was twelve he had raped her anally. The abuse went on for years.

*Dear Lolo,*

*Daddy's wife she came into the office today. She was so mad at him. She drove me home and asked if it was okay to stay here alone because my daddy, the other one, was drunk and sleeping. She said maybe it wasn't safe for me. She asked so many things. Did anyone come to the house from social services? Did I ever talk to a social worker? Maybe that would be nice for me she said. She asked if Daddy touched me. (her daddy) I said no. I didn't like to lie because she is real nice but I have to keep the secret or I might die. That's what big O said. He's mean.*

*Love,*

*Georgie*

*DEAR LOLO,*

*Daddy's wife is dead. Big O said she wasn't a good secret keeper. Daddy said God punished her. He said he'll take care of me again soon. After the funeral. Now he has only one little girl princess. I can have all the gifts now. Everything will be for me because I make him so happy even when he's sad.*

“JD! JD!” I scream, racing down the stairs with the journal tucked under my arm. He’s at the bottom of the steps by the time I get there. “He raped her!”

JD put his hands on my arms. “Slow down. Who raped who?”

“Your father. He raped Georgie.” All the blood drains from his face. I see flickers of anger in his eyes, before the storm hits. His throat ripples right before he speaks. “Let’s not have this conversation here,” he whispers, dragging me toward the study. He doesn’t say another word until we’re inside his private room and the door’s closed. I shouldn’t have said anything until we were in here, either. But I didn’t think.

“How do you know this?” he demands, his hands squeezing my shoulders.

“Her journals. It’s all in her journals. Your mother suspected. I think he killed her,” I add softly.

JD draws in a breath, but he doesn’t say anything. His hands are still on me. They’re trembling. I reach up to cover them with mine. “It’s in the journals. All of it.”

He sinks his teeth into his bottom lip and nods. “Is that it?” he asks, taking the journal from under my arm.

I nod. “The page is marked with the ribbon. It’s where I stopped.”

I watch his eyes across over the print. He reads several pages, then glances up at me. “Is this the only one?”

I shake my head. “The rest are upstairs. I’ll get them.”

“You stay right here. I’ll go.”

“There are two boxes,” I tell him. “In the blue room. One is still in the closet. And a few of the journals are on the desk.” He’s out the door before I finish.



## JULIAN

I take the steps two at a time. I'm not thinking about Georgie, not right now. I'm thinking about my mother. And my sister. Sera was just a year younger than Georgie. That sonofabitch spared no one. It's eating up my gut.

I pull out my phone and call Smith. "He killed them. We have the proof."  
"What?" Smith asks. "What kind of proof?"

"Journals. Georgie kept journals. The fucking monster raped her when she was a little girl and my mother died two days after she caught him. It's all there. I need your help."

"Name it."

"I want to pull out every piece of incriminating evidence in those journals and I want to create a timeline."

"I'll be right over."

"We'll be in the closet."

I carry both boxes down. They hold the evidence I've been searching for. I thought I'd feel some sense of euphoria when I had him by the balls, but I'm not feeling it. Maybe after we have everything pieced together.

"Did you find everything?" Gabrielle asks when I get downstairs.

I put the boxes down on the table. "I think so. Smith's on his way over to help me sort through these. You should go up to bed. It's going to be a long night."

"Don't you dare. I am not going anywhere. She was my best friend. And those people in the car that he killed and maimed, they were my friends too. I loved all of them."

I pull her close to me. "I know that. But this is going to be brutal. I don't

want you subjected to any more tonight. Don't fight me on this."

She stares at me, into my soul, for long minutes. At least that's how it feels. "I'm staying," she says calmly. "Because we're partners, or we're nothing. I will not leave your side while you comb through these journals searching for evidence that your father murdered your mother and sister."

I hear the alarm chime when Smith comes in. "Grab some sticky notes and pushpins from the cabinet," I say to Smith. "And colored pens. Three yellow notepads too." Out of the corner of my eye, I see Gabrielle relax.

"C'mere," I murmur to her, pulling her into my side. I press my lips into the top of her head. "You need to be a better listener. But I don't deserve you."

Smith comes back before she can say anything smart. "You sure you want to be here for this, Gabby?" he asks.

"She's stayin'."

He looks at me and nods. "Just checking."

It's dawn before we finish. There are index cards with color-coded push pins along one side of the wall. Red for information regarding the accident. Blue for evidence of the molestation. The blues outnumber the reds thirty-five to one. When we're finished we don't know anything more about the accident than when we started. It's all another fucking dead end. Only to get to this one we had to read pages and pages of a twelve-year-old being sodomized. None of us will ever be the same again.

Smith and I both tried to get Gabrielle to go upstairs to sleep. But she wasn't having any of it. We sent her to the kitchen for food and coffee as often as we could get away with it. I was sick just watching her read the filth. The pure evil that was my father. And more than once, I wondered if she thought I was like him. It must have crossed her mind. Because it sure as hell crossed mine.

Georgie flirted with me as a kid, because after he was done with her, he encouraged her to move on to me. She was confused at first, and hurt, but she wanted nothing more than to please him. *I live to make him happy*, she wrote. When he cut things off with her completely, she first chased me to make him jealous, but later she wrote, *I'm in love with JD*. She obsessed about me for pages and pages and pages. For entire journals, like a fifteen and sixteen-year-old stalker. But what gutted me most, was Gabrielle reading about how jealous Georgie was of her. She wrote some nasty things about Gabrielle. Although even through the ugliness, it was evident Georgina always loved



her friend.

Gabrielle was strong, and I watched her fight back tears while she read. “This doesn’t change anything,” she told Smith and me. “It’s just teenage stuff. I still love her.” There were other times when she whispered, “He treated her like she wasn’t even human. Like she was an object to be used and thrown away when he’d had enough.”

The night was long and grueling, and more of my soul crumbled under the weight of Georgie’s words and Gabrielle’s grief-stricken face. And the worst part of it? The worst part of it was that in the end there wasn’t a fucking shred of evidence that could be used to bring that motherfucker to justice.

“This is revolting,” Smith says, pointing toward the index cards on the wall. “But this isn’t evidence. Not without a corroborating witness.”

“What do you mean?” Gabrielle demands, a hand propped on her hip. “It’s all here. We can corroborate all of it.”

“The journals are the rantings of a teenage girl. One who sounds insane in some places. Without her, we have nothing.”

Gabrielle sags into a chair and pulls her legs up, wrapping her arms around them. She rests her chin on her knees and begins to sob. “He can’t get away with this.”

I pull her chair near me and drag her onto my lap. “He won’t, darlin’. This is just the beginning.”

I am so full of shit.



## GABRIELLE

I'm lying in bed pretending to be asleep while JD gets ready for work.

Normally he's out the door at the crack of dawn, but he seems in no hurry to leave this morning.

*It figures.*

I bought a pregnancy test last night, and using it is all I can think about. Well, not all. I can't stop thinking about what will happen if it's positive, either. *It'll be positive, Gabrielle. You are pregnant.* Yes, I'm pregnant. I just need to see the proof.

Do I want children? Yes, of course. I've always wanted them—a houseful. But the prospect of having a child at this point in my life is daunting. Terrifying, actually. I'm still dealing with the aftermath of the fire, and I will be for some time. And I'm still searching for the way forward. Still trying to figure out what comes next for me. *What comes next for us.* I turn onto my side and pull the covers to my chin. I'm not ready to be a mother.

I hear the water turn off. JD must be out of the shower.

Maybe I'm mistaken. Who gets pregnant on the pill? Maybe my body is still recovering from the trauma of Georgie's death and the fire. Not to mention those God-awful journals we scoured through three weeks ago. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. And if wishes were horses, beggars would ride. I can't remember the rest of that nursery rhyme.

When was the last time I had a normal period? *Never.* My menstrual cycle has been irregular forever and being on the pill hasn't helped much. I've gone months in the past without a real period.

I'm still counting dates when JD opens the bathroom door quietly so as

not to wake me. He pads through the bedroom with nothing but a white towel hanging around his neck. The man's body is pure sin. I peek through the crook of my arm, covering my face, for a better look at that gorgeous ass. *This is how you got yourself into this predicament in the first place, Gabrielle.* He disappears into the huge walk-in closet to get dressed, and I go back to hand wringing.

Fortunately, my health insurance is paid through the first half of the year. That's one thing I won't have to depend on JD for. I have no money of my own. Nowhere to live. No job prospects. I'm completely beholden to the generosity of a man. It's not how I imagined bringing a child into the world. I have no material possessions, but I have plenty of love to give this baby. If only that were enough to raise a child.

The closet door opens and JD comes over to the bed. He presses his lips to my head. "I'll see you later."

I smile. "Mmmm."

He caresses my hair and I instinctively nuzzle into his hand, enjoying the soothing warmth. "Go back to sleep, darlin'."

I wish I could. But I have something that can't wait.

When I'm satisfied he's gone, I climb out of bed and go directly to the closet, to the bank of drawers on the far wall that now belong to me. I open the middle drawer and pull a small bag from under a pile of sweaters. It doesn't weigh much for something that holds the answer to my future.

I take the bag into the bathroom and lock the door. My insides are shaking. I read the instructions three times. They're idiot proof, but I was too cheap to buy the twin kit with two tests, so I can't afford any mistakes. I follow the instructions precisely, and wait.

I can't keep still. I reach into the cabinet for my toothbrush, trying not to glance at the test stick. JD said he didn't want a family. But he's JD, and in many ways he's very traditional. I know exactly what he'll say when I tell him: *When do you want to get married?* But he won't phrase it as a question, because that would give me the opportunity to say *never*.

The truth is that in my heart I'm ready to marry JD, but my common sense says it's too soon. We're still finding our way. I won't let a baby hurry us down that path. It's not how I want to begin a marriage. But regardless of where our journey ends, this child will connect us forever. On one hand, it's reassuring and makes my heart lighter, on the other, it scares me to death.

I glance at the screen on the test. A big blue plus sign already fills the

window. I snatch the instructions off the counter and read them twice more. I stare at the screen. *I'm pregnant.* It's no surprise.

*What now, Gabrielle?*

I gather the evidence and toss it all back into the store bag. I'll tell JD in my own time, in my own way. I don't want him to know anything until I'm ready to spill the beans.

Georgie's baby would be almost three months old. Our children would have been friends. Maybe best friends, like us. It's been a few weeks since we combed through her journals. Since then there have been moments when I wondered if I knew her at all. And others, when I obsess about what a terrible friend I was not to have picked up on any of the signs of abuse that were surely there. I can see them so clearly when I look back now.

My chest is tight. I go to the bedside table and take out the inhaler I've been using intermittently since the fire. I hold it up to my mouth and freeze. *Will it harm the baby?* When she was pregnant, Georgie wouldn't take an aspirin without checking with the doctor. All that medication they gave me after the fire. I cover my mouth. All that smoke I inhaled. *Oh my God. What have I done?*

It's almost eight o'clock. I grab the phone and call my gynecologist's office, pacing the room until someone answers.

"Angel Oak Gynecology," the receptionist says.

"Good morning. I'm pregnant. I was in a fire. They gave me all kinds of medicines for anxiety and for my lungs. I might have hurt the baby. I need to see Dr. Williams as soon as possible." I blurt out the entire sob story with tears trickling down my face.

"It takes a lot to hurt a baby," she says reassuringly. "Don't worry yet. What's your name, dear?"

"Gabrielle Duval."

"Let's see what we've got here," she says. I hold my breath while she checks for an appointment. "I squirrel away one time slot every day for emergencies. And I'm the one who gets to decide what's an emergency." She chuckles. "Eleven-thirty, right before lunch. Can you make it?"

Thank God. "Yes. I can be there."

"Great. Bring a list of all the medicines you're taking and anything you took after the fire."

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I ASK LALLY to make a rack of ribs for dinner tonight. JD loves them and I might as well put him in a good mood before I break the news.

“You didn’t eat much,” he says, helping me rinse the dishes to put in the dishwasher. “And you’re out of sorts. What’s going on?”

I stare out the window over the sink. It’s a moonless night and the back lights aren’t on. I can’t see a thing. I practiced what I was going to say to JD at least twenty times today. Tweaking each word, turning each phrase, like I was writing a damn novel. But when I start to tell him, I freeze.

“Gabrielle,” he says, putting a hand on my back. “Is it about the fire?”

I shake my head. “No. But there is something I need to talk to you about.”

“I’m listening.” I don’t know how to begin. “There’s no courage out there on the back lawn, darlin’. So why don’t you just say what you have to say?”

I squeeze the edge of the countertop. It’s cold and unforgiving. And for a moment, I’m afraid that’s what I’ll get from JD too. “I went to the doctor this morning.”

“You’re sick?” he whispers. His voice is raw.

I shake my head and turn to meet his eyes. There’s fear in those bright blue eyes that I’ve come to read so well. “I’m pregnant. The baby will be born in October.”

His body relaxes. Visibly relaxes. “Pregnant,” he says carefully, as though he’s testing the word on his tongue. He doesn’t say anything else. And he doesn’t move a muscle.

“Pregnant,” he repeats, pulling me into his arms, cupping the back of my head with one strong hand, with the other settling into my lower back.

“The doctor thinks that either I forgot to take a pill, or that something they prescribed for me in the hospital made it ineffective. It’s also possible that the trauma caused my body to ovulate. They probably warned me before I left the hospital to use back-up birth control, but I don’t remember.” His heart is pounding while I ramble on.

“I know I’m supposed say something sensitive, like, ‘how do you feel about this,’ or ‘what are your plans?’ But I’m not that guy.” He kisses the top of my head with the greatest care. “We’ll get married as soon as the license can be pushed through. Less than a week. We might not be able to get a big thing together in a week, but we can do it again in a month or two. With flowers and a long white dress. Anything you want.”

I start to laugh uncontrollably. JD pulls back and stares at me like I’ve lost my mind. But I can’t stop. His reaction is so predictable. The only

*normal* thing that's happened today. "What's so funny?"

"All day I felt as though everything happening was so foreign and beyond my control. But I knew you'd say you wanted to get married right away. Because you'd want to do the right thing by me and the baby." His head is cocked to the side, and I can tell he's trying to decipher what I just said.

"It's more than just about doing the right thing. If something happens to me, it will be so much less messy if we're married. The terms of my grandfather's will are very specific. My lawful children inherit my share of Sayle. Gray and Chase won't fight you, but if we're not married, my father will drag you through the courts for years and make your life miserable. You'll likely prevail in the end, but it will be hell."

I feel his words in the pit of my soul. I know he means well, and maybe I should be practical, but I've always believed that above all else, marriage is a matter of the heart. "There was a time when we were teenagers that I dreamed of marrying you. Maybe more often than was healthy. But not once in any of those dreams did you tell me we should get married as soon as possible in case something happens to you, so it would be less messy for the baby to inherit your share of Sayle." I pause to take a breath. "Of course, in my fantasies the baby came after the cake was cut."

"Gabrielle." He slides his hands up and down my arms. "I didn't mean for it to sound like that. It's just—"

"Just what?"

"I'm conditioned to go straight to the practical part."

I look up at him. "I don't want to get married."

His hands tense on my skin as soon as I say the words. "You don't want our baby." He doesn't ask. He just jumps right to the worst.

I slide my hands over his and lace our fingers together. "Of course I want our baby." The lines on his face ease and my heart clenches. "But we're not ready to get married. And just a few months ago you told me you didn't want a family."

"I did. But lately I've been letting myself imagine it again." One corner of his mouth turns up. "I don't care what the neighbors do, but I'm old school. I want us to be married before the baby is born. Don't fight me on it, Gabrielle."

"We'll get married when it's right. When our relationship is ready. The baby gets to be a baby. A joy to his or her parents. It doesn't have to carry the burden of a marriage that might not last."

His eyes flicker with some kind of understanding. “I respect everything you’ve said, and I know you don’t want to hear this—but there’s a lot at stake here. My share of Sayle Pharmaceuticals is no small matter.”

He’s not going to let this go easy. “I won’t put money into the mix. This is too important. This is a matter of the heart, JD. Not of the pocketbook.”

He steps back and squeezes the back of his neck. “Money isn’t everything. But it buys financial security. Peace of mind.” He catches my eye and glares.

Glare all you want. I am not intimidated by you.

“Our child will not go hungry or worry about where they’re going to sleep at night, or if they can afford to go to the doctor. And you will not worry about those things either. You will never choose between feeding yourself and feeding our child.”

I will win this battle, but it’s going to be long and ugly. I’m done for now. “Let’s not fight about this tonight. I have something to show you.” I go over to where my purse is hanging in the back hall.

“What else did the doctor say?” he calls after me.

Now that the hard part is out of the way, I’m excited to show him the sonogram images. “He said everything was perfect.”

JD nods. “You have a male doctor?”

I stop short and sneer. “Don’t go there. Not now, not ever.”

“Fine.” He raises his arms in the air. “Just surprises me, that’s all. Your damn car mechanic is a woman. Your dentist is a woman. I just thought that you wouldn’t want some guy with his nose six inches from your pussy.”

“Or his fingers inside it?” I ask sweetly.

“Jesus,” he snarls. I hand him the envelope with the images.

“What’s this?”

“Open it.”

I pull myself up on the counter and watch his face as he tries to decipher what he’s seeing.

“Those are images from the sonogram I had today.”

“The baby,” he murmurs. “I can make out the head but not much else. Wait. I think it’s a boy.”

“It’s too early to tell.”

“I’m not an expert but this looks like a cock to me.” He holds up the image so I can see.

“That’s a leg, genius.”



He grins. “It’s my kid. He could have a cock the size of his leg.”

I roll my eyes and smile. “I heard the heartbeat today. I wish you could have heard it too.”

He gazes at me. There’s a pang of regret in his face that I feel deeply. “I would have gone with you. You just had to ask.”

“I know. And in retrospect, I’m very sorry. But I wanted to know all the details before I broke the news. There will be more chances to come with me.”

“This doctor you’re seeing, is he any good? The best in Charleston?”

I smile. Only the best for his child—and for me too. “He’s delivered dozens of babies. Ours will be in good hands.”

JD’s still holding the images, and every time he sneaks a peek my heart smiles. “How did they take these pictures?”

“An ultrasound machine. A portable thing that sits right in the exam room. There’s a big-ass wand that they slip a condom on and slide into your vagina with some lube. I’m sure you would have been amused.”

“Maybe we can get one of those machines for the house.”

“What? Do you have any idea how expensive those things are?”

“How much could it cost? We could donate it to some clinic after you’re done having babies. Although that could be decades from now.” He’s grinning again, and my heart is about to implode with joy. “Think about it. We could check on the baby any time we wanted. See what it’s doing in there. Make sure everything’s okay.”

“I’d laugh, except I think you might be serious.”

“Think about it.”

“You want an ultrasound machine for the house, like it’s a toaster? Buy one. Go ahead. But you’ll have to use that wand on yourself because it’s not coming anywhere near me. And you are not going to creep on this baby while it’s in my womb.”

“When you put it like that, it sounds so stalkerish.” He slides the images back into the envelope and lays it carefully on the counter. “But I’m going with you next time.”

“We should tell my parents and your brothers about the baby before we tell anyone else. And Lally of course. And Smith.” I take a deep breath.

“What are you going to do about telling your father?” My hands fly to my belly as though they can shield this innocent child from a monster.

“My father will never get anywhere near our child. Ever.” A profound

sense of relief passes through me. “Don’t spend a second worrying about him.” He glances at the hands cupping my abdomen. “Can you feel anything?”

“No, it’s still too early.”

He nudges my knees apart and stands between them. “Did the doctor say anything about sex?”

“Yes. I’m afraid so. No sex until eight weeks after the baby’s born. So sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas, give or take a week here or there.”

“Between Thanksgiving and Christmas.” He nods. “Okay.” But it doesn’t sound okay. He licks his bottom lip, and then scrapes his teeth over it like he does when he’s got something on his mind. I’m enjoying this way too much. I can barely contain my glee. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Yes. I’m kidding.”

JD pulls my hair. “You’re gonna pay for that.”

“The doctor said there’s no reason I can’t continue to enjoy sex. Orgasms strengthen the uterus. But we need to be careful about infection, and I should refrain from anything that’s uncomfortable.”

“We’ll save uncomfortable for after the baby comes. But your uterus is going to be so strong they’re going to write entire medical books about it.” He slides his hand between my legs. “You’re wet, darlin’,” he murmurs. “Let me take care of you.”

“You better get plenty of rest. Dr. Williams said some pregnant women want sex all the time.”

“I can’t believe your doctor is a man and you talk about sex with him.”

“I can’t believe you’re still talking, when I need that mouth busy with other things.”

“We’re going down to city hall tomorrow to apply for a marriage license. That way we’ll have it when you change your mind.” I don’t respond because my legs are over his shoulders and his tongue is swirling around my clit.

Lally would kill us if she knew what we were doing in her kitchen.



## JULIAN

I have a dozen messages from my father that I haven't returned. After the fire, and the night spent with Georgie's journals, it's been nearly impossible for me to utter a single civil word to him.

I'm not afraid to let him have it, but I'm hoping that when the Feds swept Sayle they found something to bring him down. Because nothing in those journals is going to do it. The information about the accident is all there, too. Not the details, of course, but enough for me to put it all together. But it would never stand up in a court of law. Not by itself. And it certainly isn't enough to arrest the president of the United States. That's for damn sure.

What he did to that little girl—Georgie. I keep wondering if there were others. Because for animals like him, there are always others.

I have no idea what the government found inside the SOLO lab. I don't even know whether or not they've swept the place yet. That's how clandestine the investigation is. It's not unheard of for law enforcement agencies to open an investigation against a president, but it's extremely rare.

I don't trust the feds. But I trust Smith's father implicitly. There aren't many people I can say that about. He was the only man who took an interest in anything I had to say after my grandfather passed. I had my mother until she died, but sometimes a boy needs a man to guide him.

When I wanted to enlist in the army, it was Smith's dad who helped me understand that I wasn't answering a call of duty, I was running away from my responsibilities at home. He was right. "You'll get your call to serve one day," he assured me. "Sooner or later, every man does. Be prepared to answer it when it comes. But for now, you have other battles to fight."

I need to try to keep things as normal as possible so that my father doesn't suspect anything. I glance at my phone, suck in some oxygen, and call him.

"JD," he cackles. "Been trying to reach you for more than a week."

"I've been busy. We're in the middle of a budget. The FDA is looking at approving Verex, and we've got a lot of other shit going on around here."

"I need to approve the budget before it goes up for a vote."

"There might not be time to get it to you. It's not as though we can email it to you at the White House. You're not supposed to know anything about the Sayle budget. But I'll see what I can do."

"You could get on your fancy plane and hand deliver it."

*That will not be happening.* "I'm not an errand boy. I'll figure something out."

We talk business for another fifteen minutes, most of it benign. Except for the fact that he shouldn't know a damn about Wilder Holdings, or about the drug we're seeking to have approved by *his* FDA. A drug that will make us millions as soon as it hits the market.

"I'm sure you need to get back to work," I say offhandedly. "I know I do."

"I hear I'm going to be a grandfather."

His words send an electric current up my spine. The kind that sets your hair on end. My heart stops.

We've told our closest family and friends about the baby, and I knew eventually the news would reach him, but I wasn't prepared for this yet. I wanted to keep our secret pure. Untainted by the evil he spreads.

"I'm going to be a father." I don't say 'you're going to be a grandfather,' because as far as I'm concerned, he will never be a grandfather to any child of mine.

"I thought you were smarter than to get yourself roped in by some floozy."

My blood is at a high simmer, and I spit out the words with as much venom as I can muster. "You will respect the mother of my child, and my future wife."

"Or what, JD?"

Or I will tear you apart limb by limb, until you've spent your last breath. The stakes are too high for me to say everything I'm thinking. I'll have to satisfy myself knowing Gabrielle is safe, and that with a little luck and some help from the feds, we'll bring the bastard to his knees.

“I hope it’s a girl,” he says. “I have a special touch when it comes to little girls.” I hear the snicker in his voice. I want to lunge at him and bang his head on a concrete floor until his eyes roll back and blood trickles from the corner of his mouth.

“You will never, *ever*, get near my child.”

“Oh, come on, don’t be like that. What are you going to do, hide the kid away in that Duval woman’s hotel? Oh wait, it burned to the ground, didn’t it? Damn shame.”

“You *sonofabitch*. Mark my words, you will get everything that’s coming to you. And you’ll get it in this world.”

“Big talk from someone who can’t protect shit. How many times have I told you, I’m so much better at this than you. You’re an amateur. Always have been. Always will be. You need to learn to fall into line. Life would be so much less stressful for you.”

“You will not get anywhere near my child. I’ll kill you first.”

“They don’t take threats to the president lightly.”

I end the call and grab my keys. “I’ll be out of the building for a couple hours,” I tell my assistant, on my way past her desk. “Unless it’s an emergency, I don’t want to be bothered.”

I drive around for about half an hour trying to clear my head, but all it does is wind me up some more. That man is the devil. He’ll torment me with my child just like he did with Gabrielle, only this time it’ll be worse. Far worse.

I drive to Sullivan’s Island, and change into running clothes in a convenience store bathroom. The wind whips around me as I run up and down the narrow side streets. All I can think about is killing my father.

He’s destroyed a piece of everyone around him. Everyone who’s still alive. I will not let him do that to my child. Whatever is happening with the feds and SOLO is out of my hands. Totally out of my hands. For all I know they’ll find nothing, and even if they find something, it’ll be years before any of it comes to fruition. He can do plenty of damage in the meantime.

Georgie’s journals might not be enough to convict him in a court of law, but they’re enough to convict him in *my* court. In the place where I’m judge and jury, I sentence him to death.

But how? How do I get close enough to kill him? Poison his food? *Nah*. He’s likely to survive that. They’ll move fast if he gets sick. It has to be quick and lethal. One shot is all I’ll get. But how do I get a gun close enough to

him? The Secret Service no longer checks Chase or Gray going in and out of the White House. But aside from inauguration day, I haven't set foot in the place.

Plastic gun? *Maybe*. 3-D gun that you can print out? *Maybe*. I don't know enough about those sorts of weapons. All the guns I own are substantial and made of steel. Any one of them would do the trick, but not unless I can get it near him.

But I'll never succeed unless I change my attitude. Unless I begin to soften my stance toward him. I'm going to have to make nice with the motherfucker. *Jesus Christ*. I don't think I have it in me.

*But you do JD. You can do anything you set your mind to.*

I run until my side starts to cramp, then head back to a bar on the water and order a whiskey. My plan is nothing more than a rough sketch. But it starts now.

My father's Achilles heel is his need to be surrounded by people who love him. Not real love, I don't think he even knows what that is. He's more than content with the sycophants. The people who lick his asshole and tell him his shit smells good enough to eat, all so they can rub elbows with him.

Can I do that? Do I have it in me to pretend he's the next coming of Christ? I motion for the bartender to hit me again, and while he's pouring, I scroll through my phone until I find my favorite picture of Gabrielle. She's smiling at me. Her skin is flushed. Her eyes twinkling with mischief. It was my seventeenth birthday. She gave me her virginity that night.

I down my drink and pull up an image of Gabrielle pregnant. I focus on the tiny bump and imagine a little girl with her mama's smile. I always imagine the baby's a girl. Because I can't bear to think about a little boy who grows up to be like me. A son who looks to me for guidance. I'm a fuck up, a lost soul, depraved. Call me what you want.

But my father will not destroy another generation.

On the way back to the office, I call him. He's the damn president so I don't expect him to answer his cell phone, but he does.

"JD. Twice in one day. What's on your mind?"

"I'm calling a truce. I want things to be different between us. Better. I'm about to become a father. My life is going to change, and I need my attitude to change too. I want the next generation to be born into a real family that's not always feuding."

He says nothing at first. My father isn't stupid, but he's a classic

narcissist, and his urge to believe I want to be close to him will overcome everything else. “I won’t make you say the words, because I don’t say them either. But is this your way of apologizing?”

Stupid asshole. “Yes. I’m sorry that things got so bad between us.”

“Never too late to change things, son. We’re a lot alike, that’s why we butt heads all the time. But I’m the father. What I say goes. You’ll understand better once the baby is born. It’s how God wanted it.”

*How God wanted it.* “I’m late for a meeting. But I wanted to call while it was weighing on my mind.”

“Let’s talk again tomorrow.”

I hang up the phone and roll down the car window to spit out the bile that collected in my mouth while I groveled to that son of a bitch.

By the time I get back, my assistant’s gone for the day, and I probably should leave too. But I can’t go home yet. I’m not prepared to face Gabrielle.

I toss the keys on my desk. I think about calling Gabrielle to tell her I’ll be late, and to tell her to read to Zack tonight. But she’ll ask questions and I don’t want to lie to her.

I crack open a new bottle of bourbon and pour myself a glass. And then another, and another, until I can’t see straight.





## GABRIELLE

I t's after ten when I see the headlights coming down the lane. JD didn't come home after work and I couldn't reach him. He never misses Zack's bedtime, not without making an arrangement. And he's good about letting me know his schedule. I've been frantic with worry, even after Smith called to say he found JD passed out on his desk at Sayle.

The door between the mudroom and the garage opens and Smith drags JD inside. "Is he okay?" I ask.

"He's stinkin' drunk. But otherwise fine."

"JD. What happened?"

"I love you," he slurs, with a stupid lopsided grin.

"We need to get you to bed."

He cocks his head at Smith, and waggles his eyebrows, still grinning like a fool. "She wants me in bed."

I glance at Smith. "Who is this man and what did you do with JD?"

"Damn idiot," Smith grumbles, practically carrying JD up the stairs. "I'll help you get him into bed. But then he's all yours."

"I'm all yours, darlin'. Come on and give me a big kiss." JD smacks his lips in my direction while Smith hauls him into bed and pulls off his running shoes.

"And he stinks," Smith says. "He needs a shower, but it's not worth the effort. It'll be like being in bed with a wet dog. You might want to find somewhere else to sleep tonight."

I don't think so. Drunk JD is funny and sweet. He keeps looking at me and grinning. Patting the bed next to him and beckoning me over.

“I gotta take a piss,” he announces, trying to climb up out of bed.

“Damn piece of work,” Smith groans, helping JD to the bathroom.

“*Ah, Jesus,*” I hear Smith say. “You owe me big time, asshole.”

They come out and he gets JD back into bed. “There’s a bit of a mess to clean up in there. His aim was poor, but there was no way I was holding his dick for him.”

“I’ll take care of it. Whatever mess it is, it’s better there than in the bed.”

Before we have the covers tucked around him, JD’s snoring. Smith tips him on his side and shoves some pillows behind his back so he can’t roll over. He’s clearly done this before.

“What happened?” I ask Smith when we get to the stairs. “I’ve never seen him like this.”

“I was going to ask you the same thing. I’ve seen JD drunk plenty of times, but never falling-down drunk to where he can’t take off his own pants.”

“Maybe it’s about the baby. I knew he’d do the right thing, but he took the news better than I expected.”

“Nah. He’s a little nervous about being a father, afraid he won’t measure up. Guys talk big, but everybody gets a little scared about the responsibility. JD’s not anywhere near as nervous as most guys are. This isn’t about the baby.”

In my heart I know this, but it’s a reassuring to hear Smith say it. “His brothers?”

“Nah. Only one person that could do this to him. Actually two. But you’re standing right here.”

A sour taste fills my mouth. “His father.” That bastard is never going to leave us alone. I hate what he does to JD. Hate it.

Smith nods. “It must have been bad.” He pauses, and regards me carefully. “You okay?”

“I’m good.”

“Alright. I’m going to head out.” He points toward upstairs. “Don’t worry about him. We’ll figure out what happened tomorrow. He should be okay, but if he needs to get up for any reason in the next hour or two, call security to help. Don’t you try to help him. He’s liable to fall on top of you. You don’t want that.”

Smith leans over and kisses my cheek. “Good night, Gabby.”

“Thanks for bringing him home. And for being such a good friend to both

of us.”

When Smith leaves, I turn off the lights, and check in with Zack’s nurse before I go up to bed.

After I brush my teeth, I curl up behind JD. Smith’s right, he smells like a duffle bag full of dirty gym clothes discovered in the boys’ locker room at the end of the school year. *Ripe*. But I don’t move to the other side of the bed. If he wakes up, I want him to feel my arms around him.

*JD, what hurt you so bad today that you needed to drown yourself in booze?*

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THE NEXT MORNING when I wake up, JD’s already coming out of the shower with a towel slung low on his hips. “Good morning,” I say cheerfully. “How are you feeling?”

“About how you’d expect.”

“Ouch.”

“How stupid was I?”

“Actually, you were kind of adorable. At least I thought so. Smith not so much.”

“*Adorable*. There’s all kinds of stupid written all over that.”

“We were worried about you. Smith and I. We wondered what upset you so much that you felt the need to get falling-down drunk.”

“I ran twice yesterday and misjudged the amount of alcohol the tumblers in my office hold. I rarely use them.”

You will not bullshit me about this. I will not allow it. “That’s right up there with the dog ate my homework.”

“Some dogs are like pigs. They’ll eat anything. I’ve got to get dressed. Big day and I’m running late.”

“JD.” He stops in the closet doorway, one hand on the jamb. “Don’t do this. Don’t shut me out.”

He doesn’t move, and without seeing his face, I can’t even begin to imagine what’s going through his head. “I spoke with my father,” he says calmly, turning his body so his back is against the doorframe. “It’s been more difficult since the fire, and the journals, to keep my mouth shut. We had words. It got ugly fast.” He glances at me. There’s no anger in his expression.

No sadness. No emotion at all. “Nothing more to tell.”

He disappears into the closet, and I declare a small victory in our relationship. Sure, he didn’t go into detail, it’s JD after all. But he opened the door and let me in. I might not have been invited past the foyer this time, but it was a big step for him. A step in the right direction. It’s all I can ask.



## JULIAN

It's been nearly two weeks since I called a truce with my father. We've spoken almost every day. It's nearly killed me, but I haven't deviated from the plan. I keep a picture of Gabrielle handy. She's smiling into the camera, a hand on her belly. The bump is still small, but it's enough to keep me on track.

*My father will not hurt our child, this is my mantra.*

I've stared at the picture so often, it's committed to memory. I can call it up whenever the phone rings and his name pops up on the screen. Like now.

"Mr. President," I say into the phone trying not to gag. I still can't form the word dad. Not sure I'll ever be able to.

"The one and only," he answers. This is the kind of shit that drives me insane. "How are you, son?"

"I'm good. Wilder Holdings turned a nice profit this quarter. Stakeholders will be happy. Sayle crushed it. Did you see the reports?"

"I did. I appreciate you sending them without me having to ask a half-dozen times. We should have called this truce a long time ago."

"I didn't see things quite the way I see them now."

"I'm planning a trip to North Africa in a few weeks. Visit the troops, boost morale, that sort of thing. I'll be making a stop, maybe two, in the Middle East on the way, to reassure our allies that we're with them. I can't get into any of the particulars—don't know all of them myself, but I'd like to invite you to come along on the trip."

"On a diplomatic mission? Not sure I'd be much use to you. I'm not much of a diplomat."

He chuckles. “No, that’s not your strong suit. But don’t sell yourself short. The Amidane King has a son about your age. The Crown Prince. He’s Ivy League-educated, like you. Loves pussy, like you. And he’s heir to a kingdom. They have money to burn. I’d like to see Sayle get a strong foothold there. While I’m president, I have a lot of leverage over the relationship. If we’re ever going to box them into a corner, it’s now while I can sweeten the deal in other ways.”

“You want me to represent Sayle in a negotiation while on a diplomatic trip?”

“Discretely, of course.”

“Of course.” My head is spinning. He’s asking me to get involved in something that is blatantly illegal. Something that he’ll pin on me if it ever sees the light of day. I want to tell him to go fuck himself, but that’s no longer an option for me. “When you have more information, let me know. I’ll need plenty of notice to clear my schedule. My plate’s pretty full.”

“We’re talking about four days, tops.”

He starts to prattle on about some bullshit I have absolutely no interest in. While he’s talking, I remember something my brother Gray mentioned when he got home from an international trip with my father. *It’s a lot harder to protect the president abroad. Especially in a war zone. No matter how much lead time they have, the security is never the same.*

“Alright JD, I’ve got a country to run, and you’ve got money to make. We’ll talk tomorrow or the day after.”

“Okay. If you really think Sayle could benefit from me being on that trip, I’ll figure out how to make it work. A month, you said?”

“That’s about right.”

I end the call, lean back in my chair, and stare at the picture of Gabrielle, pregnant with our child. A child I’ll never meet, maybe never live to see. The thought rips my chest open every time it crosses my mind. That’s the problem with murdering the president, you don’t get to enjoy the spoils. But I’ll rot in prison, or go to my grave, knowing he’ll never hurt either of them again.

I will be taking that trip.

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PLANNING a murder takes less time than you'd think, especially when you're not trying to get away with it. That would be pointless. But planning to die, now that's a shit-ton of work. And heartache. I never realized how much I had to live for until my time on earth came down to a matter of weeks.

I don't know exactly how this will end, but there are two things I'm sure of: I'll need a weapon that won't set off a metal detector or alert the explosive sniffing dogs. The second thing is that as a close family member, I'll have a great deal of unfettered access to the president. I won't be subject to the same scrutiny others would encounter. It won't be easy to kill him, just easier for me than it would be for the average hater.

I glance up at Gabrielle standing in the doorway of my study, her hip propped against the frame. She looks like she's fresh out of the shower. "You coming up to bed soon?" she asks, sauntering across the room and into my lap.

"I need about an hour and a half. Then I'll be up." I nuzzle her neck. "You smell delicious. Why don't you go upstairs and wait for me?"

"What's all this?" she asks, flipping open one of the novels I have on my desk. "Are these books for you and Zack?"

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know, if you'll marry me."

"Don't start that dead-end conversation again. I've already told you, I love you, but I need some more time."

"Every time I get on a plane or some asshole cuts me off in the car, I think about how much easier your life—" I run my hand over her belly, "and this baby's would be, if we were married."

"Stop. I don't want to hear one word about something happening to you. We need a little more time before we make that commitment."

Time, the one thing I can't give her.

She shifts against me and I wince. My stomach's been hurting like a sonofabitch lately. Heartburn day and night. I'm not big on going to the doctor, and who has that kind of time, anyway? It won't matter soon. I wrap my arms more tightly around her and bury my nose in her untamed hair.

"Are these books for you to read to Zack?"

"*Mhmm.*"

Her eyes go to the Dictaphone on my desk. "Are you recording them?"

"Yes. Now go upstairs and let me finish. You're too distracting, squirming all over my lap."

"Am I?" she says innocently, rubbing herself against my cock.

I pinch her ass and she squeals, but she doesn't stop asking questions. "Why are you recording them?"

"I've always recorded books. I go away here and there, and I don't want Zack to miss story time. I've made it a ritual. And it's possible he hears my voice."

"Of course he hears your voice." She rubs the back of her fingers over my jaw. "Are you thinking after the baby's born you won't have as much time for him in the evening? We'll work it out so time is always free for you to be with him."

"I'm not worried about the baby getting between me and Zack. Now get upstairs, take off this nightgown," I tug on the flimsy fabric, "and get into bed and think about how hard I'm going to make you come when I get there."

"You're just trying to get rid of me."

"I am. But I meant every word." I set her on her feet. "Now get."

When she reaches the door, she stops and gazes at me over her shoulder. "Don't keep me waiting too long," she says in a voice that makes my cock weep.

Two more days. I slump back in my chair. Two more days and that bastard will never hurt them again. *Ughhh*. I open the desk drawer and pull out some antacid and shove a double dose into my mouth.

Two more days with her. I'll do anything to protect her—to protect that baby she's carrying. I made that decision a long time ago. But right now, the price seems exorbitant.



## JULIAN

I almost skipped supper with Gray and Chase tonight, but I'm not a coward. *The fucking last supper.* Not going to lie, it was hard and painful and my heart was heavy. Neither of them know that I'm leaving tomorrow on a trip with my father. And they didn't say much about the truce with DW, either. They've had a few weeks to process the improved relationship, and they have, each in their own way.

Gray is just happy we're getting along like one big happy family, and he doesn't ask any questions that might rock the boat. That's how he is. Chase on the other hand, thinks I'm up to something. He doesn't buy the whole *we need to be a cohesive family unit now that a baby's coming* thing. I believe he said, "That's the biggest bunch of bullshit I've ever heard come out of your mouth," while Gray was in the bathroom.

There were dozens of things I wanted to say to each of them, but I couldn't say any of it without giving too much away. When we said goodbye, I clung to them for a little longer than usual, hoping one day they'd forgive me.

I turn off the water and reach for a towel. I'm shivering. I've been cold all day. I brush my teeth without looking in the mirror. I don't know what I'll see there. Perhaps some of the twisted agony I feel inside.

I turn off the bathroom light and crawl into bed to wake the woman I love for the final time. But before I do, I open the shutters and let moonlight fill the room. I don't want our last night together to be in the dark.

I reach for Gabrielle and pull her into me, my arms winding around her body, enjoying her sleepy warmth, before I let my hands roam freely.

“Mmmm,” she whispers, pressing her ass into my cock like a tease. I smile, caressing her breasts in my palms, rolling her nipples between my fingers until her back arches. I bury my face in her hair, letting the soft curls tickle my nose, while I inhale her sweet clean scent.

Sex with her tonight will be different. Every part of me, every molecule, every cell, needs it to be different. “I missed you at supper,” she murmurs. “I hate eating without you.” My heart clenches, and I suck in a breath, and roll her onto her back.

I’m not a tender man, but tonight my lips find hers in a long, gentle caress. When I can bring myself to pull away, I smooth her hair back so I can see her face. Her eyes shimmer, the little flecks of light dancing like stars in the moonlit room.

I don’t demand she undress for me. Tonight, I undress her, carefully cherishing everything about her, like the gift she is.

The languid pace is unfamiliar, not just to me but to her too. I see the concern in her ruffled brow. “Is everything okay?” she asks, cupping my cheek.

I nod. “I want to talk to you a little more about my trip tomorrow. There’s one thing I didn’t tell you—but it’s highly confidential—and you can’t say anything about it.”

Her gaze is steady, as she chews nervously on her bottom lip. “Tell me.”

“We are making a stop in Amidane like I told you, but then we’ll be headed to North Africa to visit the troops on the front line. I’m not supposed to talk about it to anyone—but you’re not just anyone.”

Her eyes are filled with concern. “It’s dangerous?”

“Not really. They don’t take any chances with the president.”

“I don’t care about the president. No chances with you. I need you to come back to me.” She presses my hand into her belly. “We both do. Promise me you won’t take any risks.”

I can’t promise you that, darlin’. Anything but that. I bring her hand to my mouth. Examining each fingertip, as I place a tiny kiss on the smooth pad so that I don’t have to look at her while I lie. “No risks.”

“Promise me.” Her plea fades as I kneel between her legs and brush my fingers against her center to make sure she’s ready. “Julian,” she whispers as I ease my cock inside her. The passage is tight and hot, and the tingle at the base of my spine is already beginning.

I rest my weight on my forearms and lower my mouth to hers until I can’t

breathe. “I love you, Gabrielle. I love you.” I’ve never said it quite like that. Not since we were kids. But as a man, I’ve never felt worthy to love her—until now.

Her eyes are full and the tears begin to escape slowly. I catch each one on my tongue as it slides down her face.

*I love you.*



## JULIAN

We arrive in Amidane mid-morning and go directly to the palace after showering. I was briefed on protocol while we were in the air. Talk about a bunch of bullshit. I believe in respecting the cultural traditions of others, but this is like a damn dog and pony show, and I don't perform tricks on demand for anyone.

My father slept in the bedroom aboard Air Force One, and I rested in my seat not thinking about how I'd be murdering a man sometime in the next forty-eight hours—my father, but thinking about Gabrielle.

My punishment won't be prison or hell, my punishment is here and now, reflecting on the lifetime with her that I'll miss. I won't see my child grow, either. But her mother—she's my soul.

I'm sitting with the Crown Prince in a glass-enclosed conservatory in what is tantamount to a Sultan's palace. My brother Gray would get a kick out of this place. There's a theme room at Wildflower called Sultan's Palace for people who get off on harems and the exotic flavors of the Middle East. Like this palace, the décor is opulent, the mood lavish and excessive. The only difference is at Wildflower you know going in you're going to get fucked.

It's not difficult to imagine how little patience I have for this dipshit. He knows nothing about anything. He's just chatting me up to see if we can be pals. If he decides I'll make a good prom date, he'll put one of his lackeys—one with a brain, I hope—in touch with me. The last thing Sayle needs is to be involved in a deal with these idiots. I don't care how much it's worth. I'm not selling my soul for this. I take a sip of bourbon. But it won't be my



decision to make.

“Good stuff,” he says, nodding at my glass. “I fell in love with it during college.”

Alcohol is prohibited here, but I don’t ask any questions about why it flows freely in the palace. Wouldn’t want to cause a fucking international incident. Besides, I’ve certainly never let a little thing like God come between me and my vices.

My father is right in one regard, the Prince and I do have some things in common: same alma mater, an appreciation for good bourbon, and we both prefer pussy to cock. But that’s where I draw the line. This guy is a first-class douchebag with an entourage of bootlickers anticipating his every mood. I can’t even say for certain that he wipes his own ass.

I gaze out into the courtyard, trying to tune out the noise. Two women and a little boy are sitting quietly on the grass.

“My sister Saher and her son,” the Crown Prince says when he catches me looking. “She lives in the palace. Her husband orchestrated a coup against my father two years ago. He was unsuccessful. His family believes they are the rightful heirs to the kingdom.”

“Where is he?” I expect him to say prison.

“We killed him and now she’s our prisoner. The child is valuable to his father’s family.”

*Okay.* I didn’t really need to hear about all the messy internal politics. But the Prince is a problem. I don’t give a shit how they do things around here, she’s his sister and he doesn’t seem to have any empathy or concern for her or his nephew. But I probably shouldn’t judge anyone’s family dynamics. “Are there children in the palace for the boy to play with?”

“Other children? Yes. Servant’s children, but he’s not permitted to mix with them.”

*Of course not.* The little guy is pretty subdued. I remember Chase and Zack when they were that age—they never sat still. “Must be lonely for him.”

“He’s destined for a sad and lonely life. His father brought shame on his wife and child. Doesn’t matter what the boy says or does, his motives will always be suspect. Eventually he’ll be accused of trying to avenge his father’s death. It won’t end well for him.”

*Jesus.* This guy’s rough. “He’s just a little boy. Was he even born when his father attempted the coup?”

“He was a few weeks old. But the sins of the father are always visited

upon the son. Everyone knows that.”

*The sins of the father are always visited upon the son.* That stuck with me for the rest of the afternoon and into the evening.

The Crown Prince’s sister reminds me of Gabrielle. It’s her dark, warm eyes. *The sins of the father are always visited upon the son.* I can’t get it out of my head.

After I kill my father, I will be apprehended. Dead if I’m lucky. My child will always be the kid whose father murdered his father—the president. History will brand me a psychopath. My child will wear the label like an albatross around her neck. Or his neck, I don’t think gender matters in this case. People will wonder if they’re capable of murder too. They’ll whisper cruelly. They’ll shun Gabrielle and our child. It will be a sad, lonely life for them.

I rub my chest. My heartburn is back with a vengeance and I didn’t bring any of those goddamn chalky tablets.

I didn’t plan for this part. I worked through all the financial pieces, for Gabrielle, the baby, Zack, and even Chase and Gray. I know Gabrielle will grieve, but she’ll get over it. She’s already suffered plenty because of me. And with DW dead, she’ll be safe. And so will the baby. There are other monsters in this world, but none hell-bent on using them to get to me. But still—

*The sins of the father are always visited upon the son.*

All of a sudden, my sacrifice seems more like the action of a coward. That of a man who is too beaten to fight anymore. And in many ways, it is.

*The sins of the father are always visited upon the son.*

I’m many things, but I am not a coward.



## GABRIELLE

The bedroom door opens and a large figure stalks toward me. I'm in that dreamy state between sleep and wakening so my panic is subdued.

"Gabby!" It's Smith's voice. "Gabby wake up! Where's JD?"

I sit up, but I'm disoriented. "What time is it?"

"It's two-thirty. Where is JD?" he asks again.

I'm not supposed to talk about it. It could put them in danger. But this is Smith. But I gave JD my word.

"He's not in Virginia at the Pharmaceutical Executive's retreat like he said. Where is he, Gabby?"

My heart is pounding. Smith's really angry. No, not angry, upset.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"The president's been shot."

"What?!" I shout. "No!"

Smith grabs my upper arms. "Is JD with him?" I nod.

"Tell me everything you know. Everything," he says.

"He's on a diplomatic mission with his father. They stopped in Amidane and then were going on to Northern Africa to visit the troops. I don't know anything else. Is JD safe? Was he hurt in the shooting?"

Smith lets go of my arms, but he doesn't say anything. "Is JD hurt? Did they kill him? Smith," I shriek, climbing out of bed. "I need to talk to JD."

"Is this your phone?" he asks. I nod. "Check to see if there are any messages from him."

I check voicemail, texts, missed calls—there's nothing from him.

"When did you last talk to him?"

“The morning he left. He kissed me goodbye and told me if anything happened to him there was an envelope in the top drawer of his desk with instructions.” I think for a moment. “That was it.”

“I’m going to find that envelope.”

I rush down the stairs behind Smith. He pulls the manila envelope from the drawer and tears it open. His phone rings. “Yeah,” he barks.

I pull out the contents of the envelope while Smith’s on the phone.

There are four white letter-sized envelopes inside. One with my name on it, and one each with Gray, Chase, and Smith scribbled on the front in JD’s handwriting. There are also notarized forms attesting to paternity of the child I’m carrying and instructions on how to proceed with probating his estate. He knew he was going to die. I don’t understand. How did he know? I glance at Smith.

“He wasn’t?” he says into the phone. “Then where the fuck is he?” Smith catches me begging silently for answers. Any crumb will do. “Hold on a second,” he says, lowering the phone.

“JD didn’t go to Africa. At least he wasn’t on the President’s plane when it left Amidane.”

“Are you sure?”

He nods and lifts the phone. “This my father.”

I sink to the floor and hug my knees to my chest and sob my heart out while Smith finishes the call.

After he hangs up, he sits next to me on the rug, pulling me into his chest while I continue to cry. “Where is he?”

“He was on his way to Charleston, on the Crown Prince’s private jet, but my father thinks they’ll probably divert the plane so that JD can accompany the body back. The only thing they can say for certain about JD is that he wasn’t on Air Force One when it took off.”

Accompany the body back? “The president is dead?”

Smith nods. “They worked on him—they have to—but he died the minute the bullet entered his skull.”

I’m not sorry. God forgive me, but there is not one part of me that’s sorry that man is dead.

“I’m going to try to reach JD again.”

“Don’t bother,” I say to Smith, getting up and going back to the desk. I pull out JD’s phone, his driver’s license, and credit cards, and toss them on the blotter.

Smith doesn't miss a beat, but I see the fury in his eyes. "He must have been in some kind of hurry when he left," Smith says.

"Don't give me that bullshit. I want to know why JD thought he was going to die."



## JULIAN

“Mr. Wilder. The King wishes to speak with you.”

*The King? What the fuck?* I open my eyes and blink a few times before meeting the flight attendant’s eyes. The King of Amidane. “The King wants to speak with me?”

She nods. “Yes, sir,” she says, handing me a phone.

“JD Wilder.”

“Yes, Mr. Wilder. One moment please, for the King.”

“JD,” the old man says. “I have bad news.”

I don’t respond, because *spit it out* doesn’t seem like it’ll pass protocol, and I can’t think straight.

“The president—your father—has been shot. I send you not only my deepest condolences but those of the entire Kingdom.”

“He’s been shot?” I rub my eyes. This has to be a fucking dream.

“In North Africa. I will order the plane diverted to a location of your choosing so you can accompany the body of your father home.”

*The body of your father? My father’s body? Wait a minute.* “I don’t understand. Is he dead?”

“I’m sorry to be the one to break the news to you. But you are in Amidane airspace on sovereign land. It is my responsibility. I have spoken with the pilot. He will bring you anywhere of your choosing. Let the flight staff know if there is anything you need.”

I hang up the phone and hand it to the flight attendant. “The King has instructed us to divert the flight to a location of your choosing. Do you wish to speak with the pilot about your plans?”



*My plans?* “No. I don’t wish to speak to the pilot. I’m needed at home. In Charleston. There is no change of plans.”

She nods but doesn’t say anything.

I lay back down, shaken. Not because my father is dead, I wouldn’t shed a goddamn tear over him. But because the timing is staggering. *Who shot him? Did he die right away or did he suffer?* My mind races with dozens of unanswered questions. Why do I care about any of it? He’s dead. *Isn’t that what you wanted, JD?*

News of his death is strangely unsatisfying. I don’t feel triumphant, maybe because I didn’t pull the trigger. I don’t feel a sense of relief either, or even a sense of justice. I don’t feel anything. Nothing at all. I reposition the pillow and pull the blanket over me. Then I curl up on my side and sleep all the way to Charleston. I don’t wake up until the wheels hit the ground.

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APART FROM THE King and the US Ambassador to Amidane, I haven’t spoken to anyone about my father’s death. I sent word through diplomatic channels to my brothers and to Gabrielle. Apparently, ‘can I borrow your cell phone to call my girlfriend?’ isn’t kosher in diplomatic circles. *Fuckers.*

The trip to Sweetgrass is surreal. The landscape is bright and vivid, but I don’t see any one thing in particular. My thoughts are moving at a rapid pace, almost too quickly for my brain to keep up. The ride home happens in what feels like seconds.

The cab pulls up to the front door, and I sit for a long minute, before digging into my wallet for a few bills to pay the driver. “Thanks,” I say mindlessly, climbing out of the backseat.

When I get inside, Smith and Gabrielle are waiting in my study. The manila envelope I left with instructions is on my desk, opened. I draw in a large breath from the doorway. And then a second. I can’t move. I never expected to be back here. I dig my fingers into the doorframe to steady myself.

“JD,” Gabrielle says softly, approaching me in what seems like slow motion. I hold her against my chest and take her in through my senses. My heart is hammering.

Smith watches quietly from across the room. Gabrielle is crying.

“Hey,” I say, smoothing her hair. “It’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“You are one stupid sonofabitch,” Smith says squeezing my shoulder, on his way out the door. “And we will be talking about this in great detail, soon.”

Gabrielle pulls back. “What happened? Why did you think you were going to die? I don’t understand, JD.”

I tip my chin toward the desk. “Didn’t you read the note I left you?”

She shakes her head. “No. We found the larger envelope in the drawer, but Smith’s dad called before I opened it. Then I got sidetracked once I knew you were alive.” I use my thumb to wipe an errant tear from her cheek. “Then later, Smith said we shouldn’t open them. That they were only meant to be read if you were gone.”

“Smith.” A guy’s guy through and through.

“I want to know why you thought you were going to die. I don’t believe it was a just a feeling.”

“Let’s go sit by the window.” I don’t let go of her, not even for the ten seconds it takes to walk to the sofa where I sit and pull her onto my lap. I need her, right here.

When I left Sweetgrass, it was for the last time. When I kissed her goodbye, it was for the last time. When I cupped my hand over her belly, it was the closest I’d ever come to my child. An overwhelming flood of emotion is threatening. I toss my head back and squeeze my eyes tight. It wasn’t supposed to end like this for me. For us.

“I’m waiting, JD.”

I’m not going to lie to her. I’m just not. That shit’s done. “Nope. Not just a feeling. I had a plan to kill him.”

She gasps, and for a second I think that maybe a lie would have been the better way to go. But she doesn’t run out the door or threaten to keep the baby away from me. She doesn’t do any of the terrible things I imagine, so I tell her the rest.

“He threatened to hurt the baby, if it’s a girl, in the same way he hurt Georgie. And I figured he’d do plenty of damage to a boy, too. I’d lost all confidence in my ability to protect any of you. I didn’t see another choice.”

She burrows deeper into my lap. “But you changed your mind?” she asks softly, tracing the contour of my cheek.

“Yep.” I kiss her head. “I didn’t want our child, or you, burdened with the

stigma of what I'd done. I didn't want our child growing up thinking his daddy was a psychopath. A murderer. My father deserved to be killed. But my child doesn't deserve to bear the weight of it. It stops here. Right here," I say, with my hand on her belly. "I decided I would not perpetuate another cycle of evil. I'd find another way to protect my family. That sonofabitch would not destroy another generation from the grave."

"They would have killed you."

"With any luck, that's how it would have turned out. I prefer death over a life without you." I wind my arms around her more tightly, holding her as close as I possibly can. "I'm not a good man, Gabrielle. I don't have those genes. But I'm asking you for a chance anyway."

She wraps both her arms around one of mine and presses her lips to my skin. "When I learned he was dead, I was so glad. If I had heard him threaten the baby, I would have killed him myself. I would have found a way. I hate him. For what he did to your mother, and your siblings, to Georgie, to us. But what I hate most of all is what he did to you. I'm happy he's dead. I hope his soul burns for eternity in the fire of hell."



## JULIAN

I glance up and Smith's father, General Sinclair, is standing a few feet in front of my desk. I didn't hear him enter the study, and of course he didn't knock. Not that he needs to.

I stand and extend my hand. "Sir. It's nice to see you." He still has a don't-fuck-with-me handshake. "How's Mrs. Sinclair?" I ask.

"She's a pain in the ass, but I'm not here to talk about my wife. I heard that you won't be attending the president's funeral. I came to hear it from you myself."

"Would you like to sit down?" I ask.

"No."

I let my fingertips graze the edge of the desk. "You heard correctly. I won't be participating in the grand farewell."

"Like fuck you won't."

This man is the only person who talks to me like this without me at least thinking about pushing back roughly. "I have nothing to offer. And it would be disingenuous of me to pretend I'm grieving, because I'm happy he's dead."

He glares at me with eyes that could slice through a slab of steel. "You will be there while the president lies in repose, and you will go to the funeral and say a few words to the country. A country that has just lost its president. You will hold his widow's elbow as you help her into the cathedral, and at the graveside, and you will offer her a pressed handkerchief should she need it. You will do this because it's what the country expects of you, and it's what they require in order to heal after a tragedy like this. They need to believe that

you are the perfect family, deserving of their affection. It doesn't matter if they loved him or hated him before he stopped breathing. Everyone is elevated in death."

"I don't know what I could possibly say about him that wouldn't turn my stomach."

"Well I certainly wouldn't want you to have a tummy ache. That would be so uncomfortable." He inches closer to me. "Find your goddamn balls. All that fancy education you have. You'll think of some bullshit to say. I told you a long time ago that not every man gets to serve in uniform, but sooner or later we are all called on to serve. This is your moment. You have been called to serve your country and you will stand up and serve honorably. Do you understand me, son?"

I don't like it, but I don't hesitate. Not because I owe it to the country, but because I owe a debt of gratitude to this man who once took the time to guide a desperately lost kid. "Yes, Sir."

He nods and pulls his wallet from his back pocket and slaps a ten-dollar bill on the desk. "Get a haircut before the funeral," then he pulls out another ten and plunks it down on the other, "and take your friend Smith with you. You two look like frat boys who've been on an extended spring break."

He turns to leave but stops to glance at me over his shoulder. "Standing by the graveside is an excellent opportunity to be sure the bastard is lowered into the ground." Before I can say anything, he's gone.



## JULIAN

I dart up the steps to the plane. Just one more small matter left to see to, then we stick my father in the ground and I'm done with that chapter.

The flight crew is at the top of the stairs waiting on me. I'm thirty minutes late. Gabrielle didn't want to let me out of bed this morning. I'd like to say it's because I'm such a great fuck, but the sex was just an excuse for her to keep me there. She suspects I'm up to something.

"Good morning. I hope my tardiness didn't disrupt the flight plan."

"They just shifted us for takeoff by about fifteen minutes. It's all good," the pilot calls from the cockpit.

Not all good. There's a dumb fuck making himself comfortable inside the cabin. In the seat I always sit in. He knows this. "Why are you here?" I ask Smith.

"Thought you might like company."

"Get out."

"Pfft. I'm not going anywhere. Sit down and shut up."

I'm steaming, but I take the seat across from him. I can't afford any more delays, and it's not worth arguing with a jackass.

"So where are we going?" he asks. "And will there be chicks or did you leave your balls with your girlfriend?"

"We haven't started taxiing yet, I can still toss your ass onto the tarmac."

"What the fuck are you up to now, JD?"

"I'm meeting some people near Reynosa."

"Olson?"

*So you do know.* I nod. "Apparently Olson got picked up by the Mexican



authorities approaching the border with enough smack in his vehicle to keep everyone in the entire state of Texas high for the next decade. Did you hear about that?" Smith rolls his eyes. "They're going to give me a crack at him before they put him into the system. I've got a few questions for him."

"You know the people you're dealing with down there are dangerous."

"I'm basically bankrolling them at this point. I'm of little use to them dead. How did you find out?"

"You're never going anywhere again without security. I don't care what kind of story you're peddling about secure locations and billionaire retreats. You go, security goes, so don't send your detail away again."

"Gabrielle told you."

"Yep. Her Mama-radar is on and finely tuned. Neither you nor your kid are ever getting away with anything." I glare at him. "She called me yesterday and said you were up to something."

"She can never know about this."

"That's between you and her. But don't ask me to lie for you. Not to her."

"I don't plan on lying. I'm just going to tell her it's Sayle business. Technically it is."

He glowers at me.

"I don't like it either. But I don't want to implicate her in this in case there's ever any blowback."

"But it's fine to drag me into the swamp with you?"

"Hey. You want to get off the plane, be my guest. I didn't fucking invite you in the first place."

"I'm stayin'. I live for the swamp."

I stare out the window as the plane lifts-off. I'm not entirely sold on the notion that a sniper fighting with the rebels assassinated a sitting US president. It's too convenient, not to mention politically expedient. "Who do you think really killed him?"

Smith digs his teeth into the corner of his bottom lip. "The rebels. The resistance. An ally. An enemy. He was into some bad shit. Probably playing those suckers off each other. The list of haters is long."

"Are we on that list? The Americans?"

Smith catches my eye. "The military? I'd say it's highly unlikely. The CIA? I can imagine that scenario. Unlikely, but possible." He stretches his legs out in front of him and drums his fingers on the armrest. "I think it was probably the rebels, like they're saying. But we would have had to

disseminate misinformation, which is totally in the CIA's wheelhouse, and we would have had to make it easy for the shooter to have the target within his reach. I can come up with dozens of ways we could have done that. Some passive, others active."

It's sobering to think about. But as far as I'm concerned, justice has been served. My father was a traitor of the worst kind.

---

THE PLANE LANDS on a private airstrip in Southern Texas. Smith and I jump into a leased Jeep and head south. When we're ten minutes outside of Reynosa, he wants me to pull over.

"I'm not fucking pulling over."

"You need to put this on," he says, holding up something that resembles a thin ski mask with an embedded microphone.

"What is that?"

"You can't just go in there and show your face. Everybody knows who you are."

"So what? Olson's never going to see the light of day, and the other guys aren't a problem. I already told you that."

"Listen asshole. I promised Gabrielle that I'd bring you back in one piece, but if you don't put this on, I'll break you in two myself."

"What's the microphone about?"

"Disguises your voice."

I thump my hands on the steering wheel, before pulling the damn Jeep over. "Here," Smith says, handing me one of the disguises. "You need to put this on too." He tosses a vest at me.

"This is heavy as shit."

"You have a lot more faith in your friends than I do. It's bulletproof. Did you bring a firearm?"

"Of course. I don't trust them that much." I glance at Smith, who's also wearing a disguise, and start to laugh.

"What's so goddamn funny?"

"My life mostly. Although you look like an idiot."

"Just drive," he says, pointing out the windshield. "I have a few questions for that sonofabitch Olson too."

When we arrive at the meeting place, there are three men and Olson parked near an old shack. “I can’t believe you were going to come here alone. For a smart guy, you’re a moron sometimes.”

I quickly survey the area and decide Smith’s right about that.

I nod at the Mexicans. “We won’t be long.” I grab Olson by the neck and drag him behind the Jeep. He’s cuffed so it’s not hard to hook my leg around his and shove him to the ground. I set my boot on his chest. “I want to know everything about the accident that killed my mother.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the fucker answers. I lean in and put some weight on his chest, grinding my heel into the flab. “It was an accident.” I grind harder, until he cries out like the pussy that he is. “Your father. Not me. He put something in her sandwich. Put her out. She drove off the road. She didn’t feel anything.” Sonofabitch.

“What about my siblings who were with her? Did they feel anything?” I stick my heel into his neck and Smith pulls me back.

“Did you drug Gabby’s security detail too?” Smith asks. “My guy?”

Olson nods.

“With what?”

“Sodium Soltrite. Mixed with dairy. Packs a punch.”

“And is undetectable,” I mutter, slapping my boot back onto his chest.

“What was in the warehouse that needed to be torched?”

“SOLO files. Lab equipment.” He looks up at me. Terror in his eyes.

“You were getting too close.”

“Who set the fires?” Smith demands.

“Tom. Nobody was supposed to die. It was on a timer. He panicked. Didn’t know how to stop it.” He’s sweating like a fucking pig.

“Where’s Tom now?” I ask.

He shrugs, and Smith gets down and grabs him by the throat. “Dead,” Olson whimpers.

I get down on my haunches beside him. “Why did he kill my mother?” When Olson doesn’t answer immediately, I slap his face a few times like he’s a little bitch.

“She—she—Julia was going to blow the whistle on him.”

“For what?” I hiss.

“He was with a girl.”

“Georgina Bressler?” Olson nods. “Were there other girls?” He looks at me and nods. “How many?” He shrugs. “More than ten?” He shrugs, and I

grab him by the throat and squeeze until his face begins to turn a purple hue. “I want to know if my sister Sera was one of those girls.”

He shakes his head. I don’t know whether he’s lying or not, but I desperately want to believe him.

Smith shoves my hands away from his throat. “My turn,” he says, pushing two fingers into Olson’s windpipe until he chokes for air. “What did Rofler put on that boat?”

“Nerve agent and antidote,” he gasps.

“Sonofabitch,” Smith sneers. “Where is he now?” Olson shakes his head. “Where is the nerve agent?”

“Not sure,” Olson mumbles. “No one knows.”

“I want to know why DW had that antidote made.” Smith is an intimidating motherfucker and right now he’s in his element. “Was he selling the nerve agent to the resistance in North Africa?” Olson shakes his head. “Then what?” Smith barks.

“Arming. Arming the rebels.”

“Fuckers.” Smith stands up and kicks him in the ribs. Olson screams. “You were going to let them use it on the battlefield on American soldiers to line your pockets with cash?”

“Antidote,” Olson spits out. “Low casualty rate.”

Smith goes for his gun and I lunge forward to stop him. “Don’t. Death is way too good for the bastard. He needs to suffer a long time before he dies.”

I yank him off the ground and drag him back to his jailors. “He’s all yours. But I want him raped every day.” I elbow Olson in the jaw. “Every fucking day. If you can’t find someone who wants to stick their dick in his ass, use a rusty pipe or an empty cerveza bottle. I don’t give a shit. But if it doesn’t happen, you’re not getting a fucking peso from me.”

“Senor,” the oldest man says, his eyes imploring me to be reasonable.

“He hurt little girls,” Smith says in English, and then in Spanish so that all three of them understand. “Nine and ten years old. Babies. They were raped and he threatened to kill them if they told anyone.”

The men nod. The oldest man meets my eyes and then Smith’s. *Trato Hecho*. Done deal.

*Almost*. I tell myself as we head back toward the Jeep. “We need to get word to your father about the nerve agent.”

“That boat was intercepted by the good guys in international waters. I just wanted to know what was on it. My father is a cagey bastard. He wouldn’t

tell me.”

I SMILE and toss the keys to Smith. “You drive.”

“Back to the airfield?” he asks. “Or do we have time to stop for a cerveza?”

I shake my head. “Haircuts. We gotta get haircuts.”



## JULIAN

One of the first things a president does when he takes office is to plan his funeral. My father had not been president long enough to hammer out many details. His wife Shelby, of course, wanted all the pomp and circumstance she believed was due to her. I, on the other hand, had simpler goals: to stick that sonofabitch into the ground without causing Gabrielle, my brothers, or the country any unnecessary grief. I also wanted to make the general proud.

The Bishop of Washington and I had a brief discussion earlier in the week about how the service would be conducted. Much of it would be based on presidential protocol and church law. He was rather surprised when I told him that I would like an opportunity to speak to the country, but that I would not be eulogizing my father. Apparently, it's a great honor to eulogize a sitting president. *Fuck that.*

After much negotiation, we decided I would say a few healing words and lead the congregation in the Lord's Prayer. Believe me when I say that wasn't my idea. But the alternative was to remember my father with kind and loving remarks. I had nothing on the Bishop that might persuade him to see things my way. *Nothing.* You understand my dilemma.

That's how I ended up where I am now, behind the lectern at the National Cathedral speaking at the funeral of the man who murdered my mother and sister, and left my youngest brother for dead. The man who molested little girls and did his level best to destroy his three oldest sons. The man who videotaped me having sex with my innocent girlfriend and used those tapes to blackmail me. The man who was willing to sacrifice young men and women

serving their country honorably in order to fill his pockets with money he didn't need.

*Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name.*

For the first time in twenty years, since the day I overheard the conversation between my father and Olson, I can breathe again. The weight is gone and I have a chance at a real life.

I gaze over the sea of mourners until I lock eyes with her. I can never undo the evil that he did, but I can put it behind me, and dedicate myself to being worthy of her love.

*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.*

*Amen.*



## EPILOGUE: PART 1

### Gabrielle

The parking lot at Wildflower is deserted when we pull in. The club is closed which is why Gray agreed to let me throw a little surprise party for two today. It took some convincing since he knows JD still hates the club. It's one of the few things in our complicated history that he can't seem to put behind him.

"Are you sure you won't need a ride back to Sweetgrass?" Gus asks.

"I'm sure. JD's on his way and I'll go back with him." *If he's still speaking to me.*

Rafe peers at me in the rearview mirror. "We'll hang around until he gets here. If he doesn't have security with him, we'll be right outside until you're ready to leave. We'll follow you back."

I don't argue. "That's fine. But Smith assured me I could have dinner with my husband tonight without security lurking nearby." Smith snickered when I told him I wanted to surprise JD with dinner at Wildflower. *Dinner?* he teased, not bothering to hide that he knew I was lying.

As I stroll up the flagstone path, I'm a little uneasy. Not because Rafe and Gus are watching me walk into what we all know is a sex club. And not because of JD. The worst thing that can happen in that regard, is he throws me over his shoulder and carries me out of the club, leaving a trail of curse words behind us. It would be just like him to do it, too.

No, I'm uncomfortable because Gray knows what I have up my sleeve. Not the details, of course. But Wildflower is a sex club, so it's not like I can pretend we'll be praying the rosary. *Stop Gabrielle*. I do need to stop the foolishness. Gray knows JD and I have sex. We have a child. We're married. Even the most faithful believe it's acceptable for married people to have sex. It's a God-given duty. Okay, maybe not in a sex club. I have this conversation with myself all the way to the front door where Gray is waiting to let me inside. He must have seen us pull into the parking lot. "Hi," I say a little shy.

"Hi," he responds, with mischief in his eyes that makes my cheeks hot. He places a warm peck on the top of my head. "How's the smartest baby in all of Charleston?"

"Do you believe she'll be six months tomorrow?"

He grins. A sincere, beautiful grin that I don't see often enough from him. "Only because JD couldn't stop talking about it at dinner the other night."

"Yes, JD is fully taken with all her charms. He just can't say no to his little angel. I'm going to have my work cut out for me, otherwise she'll be the most spoiled girl in all of South Carolina."

"Nothing wrong with that," he says. "Do you want to take a look downstairs before JD gets here?"

"Sure." I avert his knowing eyes.

"Then let's go." I follow him to the back of the club and through a door that requires a code. There are two elevators that also require a code to access. "The security is for safety, and also for privacy. Our clientele requires both."

I nod. "*Hmm.*"

"You sure about this?" he asks. "Because you're awfully nervous. You've barely said a word."

"I'm not nervous, just a little embarrassed that you—well, that you know." Gray smirks, and I shove his arm while we step into the elevator. "Don't make this any harder."

"I still don't entirely get why you chose Wildflower to surprise JD. He hates this place, especially the lower floors."

I stand tall and stare at the seam between the elevator doors. "I'm here because someone took something from me—and from JD—a long time ago. I want it back." Gray doesn't say anything, but his posture is rigid, and the air is suddenly chilly.

The elevator stops and the doors open to a long, wide hall with soaring ceilings. Like the rest of the club, it's handsomely decorated in dark woods and rich jewel tones. It looks exactly the part—a private men's club frequented by the wealthy and powerful.

"There are rooms up and down this hall and around the corner on either side," Gray says, pointing down the ornately decorated passage. "The doors are all open. Take your pick."

"Will you be upstairs?"

He shakes his head. "I don't want to think about you and my brother down here, any more than you want me thinking about it. Probably less. Besides, it's better if I leave before JD arrives. He has a key. Stay as long as you like. Remind him to lock up on his way out. And tell him the security cameras have all been turned off. I double checked. He should turn them back on when you leave."

*Cameras.* I hadn't given any thought to cameras. Maybe this was a mistake. "Is there anything else I should know?" It comes out sounding like such a naïve question, but I've never been inside this place. Not downstairs anyway.

He shakes his head. "JD knows the ropes." I see his smug little smile and roll my eyes.

Gray steps inside the elevator, and then quickly steps back out, holding the door open with a broad shoulder. "Did he touch you? My father." There is so much pain in his face that my heart hurts.

I shake my head. "Only with his eyes."

He blows out a large, noisy breath. "I'm so sorry, Gabby. So sorry. I hope you find whatever you're looking for here. For you, and for JD."

"You don't need to apologize for your father. None of it—not a single thing—had anything to do with you." I squeeze his arm and reach up to give him a small kiss. "Thank you for letting me use the club tonight. And since you've done me a big favor, let me do something for you. Call Delilah."

He glares at me. "Why would I want to talk to a liar?"

"Because she made you smile. A lot."

"I'm not like JD. I smile all the time."

"Not the way you smiled when you were around her. Those smiles came straight from your heart. The kind you reserve for your brothers, and for your niece."

"Good luck tonight," he says curtly, stepping into the elevator and letting

the door close between us.

*Oh, Gray. I'm going to force you to talk to her yet.* But I can't think about it now. I have another Wilder man to set right first.

It's so quiet here. My heels clicking against the black and white checked floor are the only sound as I wander down the hall, peeking into one room after another. Each doorway has a beautifully framed sign hung on the wall, just to the right of the door: The Sultan's Palace, The Classroom, The Boardroom, The Stable, The Circus, The Zoo, The Dentist's Office, The Doctor's Office, on and on. A place to indulge almost any fantasy.

I turn left at the end of the hall to find The Attic, The Cellar, and The Dungeon—the darkest room of all. It's like something right out of The Inquisition, with stocks, a wooden cross, and a stainless-steel table that appears tailor-made for torture. The stone walls and floor add to the medieval vibe. It's immaculate, everything polished to a high gloss, but it's menacing just the same.

I move slowly around the space taking it all in, before going to a bank of drawers at the edge of the room, each one with a carefully applied label identifying its contents. I open a few to see exactly what they hold. In the first drawer, there are nipple clamps in assorted shapes and sizes, some with sparkling gems that mask their purpose, others that look like painful pinchers one would do best to avoid. Everything is packaged in plastic and arranged neatly. In another drawer, there are dozens of tubes and jars of lube, something for everyone.

When I've satisfied my curiosity, I go to the back, to an arched doorway leading to what looks like a high-end hotel room, and a connected bathroom outfitted with a spacious shower, fluffy towels, a hairdryer, lotions, toothbrushes, and everything else one might need before returning to the real world. Everything is packaged in sample sizes and it's all of high quality. The cost to join the club must be prohibitive.

I open a tiny jar of cream and work a small dollop into my hands before returning to the play area for another quick look around.

Yes, this is it.

You were a sonofabitch DW, and every day I hope you're getting exactly what you deserve, but regardless, you will not cause your son another moment of regret or any more pain. It ends here, right where it began.

I reach into my bag and take out the note I wrote last night, rereading each word before taping the cream paper to the door.

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## Julian

I use my key to let myself inside Wildflower, and take the elevator downstairs. My eyes are trained in front of me, I don't spare the room even a small glance. I hate this fucking place.

I received a text from Gabrielle. She claimed to be helping Gray with something in one of the rooms downstairs when she twisted her ankle. She's not answering my calls, and neither is Gray. I have the distinct feeling they're playing me. Or at least, that Gabrielle concocted some bullshit story to lure me here.

The elevator doors open, but there's no sign of anyone. I slide my hand into my jacket pocket and palm my gun. "Gabrielle," I call. "Gray." There's no response. I look into each room as I make my way down the hall. No sign of either of them, anywhere. When I reach the end, I consider calling Gabrielle's security who were parked right outside the building when I entered. But then I see it. Something pinned to the door at the end of the hall.

My heart rate has picked up and I'm starting to sweat. I hate this fucking place. Can't say it enough. As I approach the dungeon, it becomes clear that the paper taped to the door is a note—for me.

DEAR JULIAN,

*Tonight, I want to make memories so incendiary they will eviscerate all the ugly memories about this place that torture your soul. Tonight, it's you and me, Julian and Elle, exploring fantasy in the way that we both love to do. Tonight, I'm yours to play with, to do with as you like. Don't you dare hold a single thing back.*

*All my love forever,  
Elle*

AFTER STARING at the note for some time, I rip it off the door and crumble it into a ball and shove it into my pocket. This is her gift to me. An attempt to free my soul. *Oh, Gabrielle.* You have no idea. You don't want this. And even if you do, I'm not sure I can give you what you're asking for. Or even if

I should.

When I push open the door, she's kneeling in the center of the room, head bowed, palms flat on her thighs in a submissive posture that isn't part of any scene we normally explore. She's wearing nothing but flimsy black lace and a mask. My dick is rock hard before the door clicks shut behind me.

I go directly to Gabrielle, my heavy footsteps echoing loudly. When I reach her, I yank off the mask and toss it aside. I want to see her face. Without a single kind word, I curl a finger under her chin, forcing her to meet my eyes. There are no answers there, only the glimmer of arousal. "Are you sure?"

She wets her lips. Her tongue glistens in the dim light. "Yes." She nods. "What's your safeword?"

"Wilderness." My heart clenches when the word tumbles from her lips. But my cock is straining against the zipper, unmoved by sentiment or regret.

I pull Gabrielle to her feet and find her mouth with mine, exploring roughly, delving deeply. My kiss is a message, reminding her how much control I have over her body, letting her know how hard I'm going to use her, and how much she's going to enjoy it.

She gasps for air when I pull my mouth away. "Take off all this pretty lace." I run my fingers along the curve of her breast. "I need you stripped bare so that everything I own is on display for my enjoyment."

She doesn't bat an eyelash as she takes everything off, putting on a little show for me.

I step closer. "One of these days you're going to learn to be careful about what you ask for. One of these days," I murmur, sinking my teeth into a long tendon at the base of her neck.

"Ahhh." She tips her head back and moans softly, at the small bite of pain.

"Don't hold anything back. Not a single thing. That's what you want?" I demand. But before she can answer, I'm already dragging her to the stocks. I lift the wooden arm and push her upper body down gently, until her neck is resting in the padded headpiece, and then I adjust the handpieces so her wrists are bound securely. "Don't move," I warn. "Or I'll bind your ankles." I step back and admire her gorgeous round ass that's fully available to me.

I glance around the room. It's fucking hot in here. I yank my shirt over my head and kick off my shoes formulating a plan.

It's been a long time since I was last inside this room, and although the

equipment has been upgraded, it's essentially the same, except for the smell of the orange oil Gray orders by the case to polish the wood. I unzip my pants to free my cock. It's heavy, jutting straight out. I grip it firmly and yank roughly a few times as I go to the drawers.

I pull a couple of plugs out of one drawer and some lube out of another. I open several more drawers before something catches my eye. A wand. The kind with a power cord attached. The kind that will rip orgasm after orgasm from her sweaty, shaking body until she's wrung dry. I take out the wand and grab a wooden paddle from a hook on the wall.

I leave most of my bounty on a shelf under the stainless table, before going back to my beautiful wife, to dangle the wooden paddle in front of her face. "Kiss it," I command, bringing it to her lips. "It's going to hurt so good, Elle. You're going to want to rub your legs together, but I'm not going to let you do that. Only I get to make that sweet little pussy happy today." She moans and her ass sways. "Don't hold back. That's what you want. That's what you'll get."

"Yes," she whimpers. The word is barely out of her mouth when the paddle connects with her bare ass. "Julian," she gasps. I slide my fingers into her pussy, *my pussy*, stroking the wet flesh.

"You like this, don't you?" She can barely move her head, but she manages some semblance of a nod. "You are a such a filthy little slut." I bring down the paddle again, and again, while my fingers stroke her slick flesh. Each time the wood connects with her skin, I strum her clit hard, just the way she loves. I want her silently begging for the strike of the paddle, craving the pleasure that comes with the pain.

When she's at the edge, I toss the paddle aside and free her. My hands are shaking with need. It's difficult for her to stand upright at first. I steady her, watching carefully. Her eyes are dark and smoldering. Her skin is flushed with arousal. My cock aches.

I guide her roughly to the stainless-steel table and lift her onto it. "You need to lie down."

"*Ahhh!*" she cries when her ass touches the steel. "It's so cold."

"*Shhh*. Not a word from you." I lean closer, so close my lips graze her temple. "Or I'll give you something to complain about. Lie on your back." She grimaces from the cold, but presses her lips together.

I move behind her and pull her arms up overhead, strapping her wrists to the table. She swallows hard while she watches me slide the stirrups out from

beneath the table. I bind each of her feet into a stirrup, and push them apart until she's spread wide for me. "Don't hold back," I mock. "I don't intend to hold a damn thing back." I drop the bottom of the table to allow me to stand between her legs. It's unexpected, and she quakes. But I don't sooth her, instead, I lower my head between her legs and lick her sweet cunt a few times. But it's not enough. She needs more. I know just what she needs.

"Close your eyes," I command. "Don't open them until I tell you." She immediately obeys. I squirt some lube and massage it into her tightest hole, while she shivers from the icy sensation. "Push out, like a good girl." I work one finger inside her ass, until she relaxes enough to take a second, all the while licking her clit, just enough to keep her at the edge. When she begins squirming into my hand, I replace my fingers with a plug. It stretches her wider. I wiggle it inside her, imagining her tight sphincter squeezing my cock. "Open your eyes," I murmur, leaning over her body to place a gentle kiss on her mouth. I smooth her hair back. Her eyes are glazed. A light sheen coats her body. She needs it bad. "You want to come darlin'. You ready?"

She nods and a small whimper escapes her lips.

"Beg for it."

"I need to come. *Please*. Please let me come."

I pull the wand from the shelf under the table and lay it on her belly while I plug it in. "It's attached to a cord," I tell her, as though she can't see for herself. "Toys run by electricity—are not at all like toys run by batteries. And this toy is *really* special." She's trying to squeeze her thighs together, but she can't. Her lids are heavy and they fall shut in defeat.

"Open your eyes," I say, turning on the wand. First I touch the round knob at the end to her lips and tongue, and then to each of her nipples, before the whirl gets louder. I glide it up and down her inner thighs, each sweep getting closer to her pussy. Her head is beginning to thrash from side to side. My cock is throbbing.

Without warning, I hold the wand against her clit for several seconds. The orgasm almost comes, but I pull it away and slap my fingers against her pussy several times. Her eyes are wide. She's stunned. Her legs are shaking. "Just keeping the blood moving. The wand will numb you too quickly. We don't want that, do we?"

"No," she mumbles, mostly to herself. "No, we don't want that."

I bring the tip back between her legs, rolling it slowly over her hard clit. She arches her back. "Julian!" she cries. I hold the wand firmly while she



screams and thrashes. While she fights the restraints and begs for mercy. The orgasm tears through her trembling body, but I don't stop. Instead, I slap her swollen cunt and bring the wand back to her clit, again and again, until she's babbling nonsense. Until she's dropped into subspace. Until I'm satisfied she can take no more.

I yank off my pants, kick them aside, and stand between her legs. My cock is thick and angry, the dark head dripping cum. I'm so aroused I can barely think straight. "Safeword," I pant. "Use your safeword if you need to." I slam into her, spreading the enflamed flesh as I burrow deeply. The fit is tight, and when I'm fully seated, I take a breath and twist the plug in her ass. She moans loudly. Her inner walls grip and pulse around my cock. She's climbing again, but I've been to the edge a few times, and I don't think I can hold back until she gets there.

I reach behind me and unbind her ankles, one at a time, rubbing each before I hook it around my hips. My balls are high and tight. I can't see anything. I have one focus.

"*Julian, Julian.*" I hear her repeat, again and again, with every breath.

My fingers dig into her thighs, holding her captive, while I fuck her hard and deep. *Can't. hold. back.* I grab the wand and bring it between us, letting the powerful vibrations lick her clit, right above where I fill her. She screams loud and long, arching off the table. Her heels digging into my ass. My orgasm comes barreling out. The roar of release bouncing off the stone.

Minutes later, I'm still sucking in air. *Jesus Christ.*

She groans deeply when I withdraw my cock. My legs are jelly.

I unbind her wrists and rub them vigorously, before placing soft kisses on her face. Her lashes tickle my cheeks. "I'm not done yet. But I'm going to give you a little rest before we move onto another piece of furniture."

She moans. *No more.* "I can't."

"You can and you will, darlin'. You just need a few minutes to rest." *And so do I.* Her eyes flutter closed. And I know, right then, I know when I leave here today, the only memories I'll have of this place will be of her. Her beautiful face. Her soft skin. Her sweet, musky scent. The screams of pleasure as her tight wet pussy pulses around my cock. It'll all be her.

I brush a curl off her face. "Why did you choose this room, Elle?"

Her lips move, but it takes a few seconds before the sound comes. It's as though she's having trouble forming the words. "Light shines brightest in the dark."

The words slice through my chest, grab my heart and squeeze, as I climb onto the table and pull her against me. My eyes are wet when I bury my face in her hair. “I love you, Elle. Always have. Always will.”

## EPILOGUE: PART II

### Julian

I still read to Zack every night. But first, I have a standing date with a sweet little angel who loves to fall asleep in her daddy's lap, enjoying a bottle while he reads her a story and passes along sage advice.

When we learned we were having a daughter, we went through dozens of names to come up with just the right one. Gabrielle wanted to name her Julia after my mother, or Sera, or Georgina. All perfectly nice names. But I didn't want our little girl to be burdened with the past. I wanted her to have her own name. Something that hadn't been tainted with sorrow to weigh down her soul.

We both loved the name Grace. It's beautiful and simple. It means "blessing from God." I wasn't sure about that part until I held her for the first time. Any man who cradles his child in his arms can come to believe in a merciful God. Even a sinner like me can be delivered.

"Miss Gracie, before I put you in your crib for the night we need to have the talk, *again*. I saw you today all over that little boy Chi—who calls their son Chi? I'll tell you who, hipsters. People who live in places like Austin and Boston, San Francisco and the like. Those are not our people.

"You can't be crawling all over boys. Boys don't need that kind of encouragement. And they are not your friends. Don't ever buy that crap. They are simple creatures, like dogs, and all you need to remember about them is one thing: If they have a dick, they are a dick. That's it." I brush a dark curl off her forehead, and take the bottle without waking her. "Don't tell

your mama I said that. We have different ideas about raising daughters. And hers are just plain wrong.”

Grace looks more and more like Gabrielle every day. And when she sticks out that bottom lip and shrieks, “*No!*,” I can’t tell them apart. I am so screwed.

“Let’s get you into bed.” I lay Grace on her back and press my lips gently to her head. “I love you, little one. I only want the best for you. I want you to be healthy and happy and well-loved—and safe—the rest is chicken shit.”

I cover my daughter with a light blanket her grandmother crocheted for her and turn on the mobile near the crib. Then take one last peek before I leave. *You’re beautiful with those long dark lashes, just like your mama’s. Damn.* It might be time to start investing in Mexican jails. I hear they’re the future.

Every day I wake up and try to be a better man. I do it for Grace, and for her mama. But if anyone ever tries to harm even a single hair on either of their heads, all bets are off.

*No one will hurt you, angel. Not on my watch.*

**BOUND**

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## THE DEVIL'S DUE (BOOK 3)

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**SMITH**

Gray Wilder's number lights up my dashboard for the fourth time today. I've dated stage-five clingers who were less annoying.

My first inclination is to disconnect Bluetooth, toss my phone out the window, and go grab a beer. But I don't. Gray's more than a client. He's pretty much family, and right now, he's needier than my three-year-old niece on the brink of a spectacular meltdown. "What now?" My irritation emphasizes each word.

"Just checking that you're on your way."

Got to hand it to him, unlike his older brother, he lets my piss-poor attitude roll off his back. JD would have never let it pass.

"Do I blow off assignments? When I say I'm going to be somewhere, have you ever known me not to show up?"

"You weren't exactly thrilled about taking the meeting."

*That's the understatement of the century.*

"Well, I'm here. Parked across the street from Tallulah's, where I can see McKenna when she pulls into the lot."

"Okay. Good."

Gray's anxiety level is off the charts. Kate McKenna has been hanging around, asking too many questions, pestering him non-stop. If she discovers the truth about his club, Wildflower, it will be a disaster of epic proportions. I get it. But I'm not much of a hand-holder. I expect grown men to handle their shit like grown men.

"This is the *fourth* time you've called—not to mention all the texts. Can't you find a distraction? You own a goddamn sex club. You must know

someone who'd be willing to entertain your dick for a few hours so you can leave me the hell alone."

"You're beginning to sound a lot like my brother. That's not a compliment. Maybe it's your dick that needs entertaining."

*Not a terrible idea. But it'll have to wait until I'm finished intimidating a nosy little reporter.*

I bang my forehead against the worn leather steering wheel while he drones on and on. "Just make sure you take care of this bullshit once and for all. I don't want to hear that reporter's name again after today."

I might work for Wilder Holdings, and it's one thing to take direction from the top, but regardless of how old Gray is, he'll always be JD's kid brother, and I'm not taking orders from him. At least not without giving him plenty of shit.

"I was chasing bad guys through the desert and into caves when you were still calling your pathetic hard-on a chubby. But if you think you can do a better job, by all means come on down because there are a million ways I'd rather spend a Sunday."

"Don't underestimate McKenna," Gray snaps. "She's tenacious. Worse than a rabid little dog."

I glance into the rearview mirror as a car with Massachusetts tags turns onto the quiet street. "Well, I'm a Pit Bull. I snack on little dogs and I don't give a flying fuck if they're rabid."

"What's got you so damn surly?"

Before I can answer, the beat-up Volvo pulls into the parking lot with a redhead at the wheel. *Showtime*. "If you've got something that can't wait, text me. Otherwise, let me do the job you pay me to do."

I disconnect the call and watch the woman exit the vehicle, lugging an enormous purse behind her. *Why do women saddle themselves with ridiculous accessories?* The thing probably weighs a ton. I could pack for six months in a bag half that size.

Kate McKenna presses the key fob without bothering to check if the lock engaged, and traipses through the near-deserted parking lot without once checking her surroundings. That kind of blatant disregard for safety usually drives me nuts, but today I plan to use it to my advantage.

From here, she's at least as good-looking as the photos splashed across social media. With all the filters people use, you never know what you're actually going to get when you finally meet them.



McKenna is so preoccupied, she trips over the uneven pavement. *Jesus.* What a disaster. She's damn lucky she didn't hit the ground face-first. Most people look around after they pull a stunt like that to see if anyone witnessed it. *Not her. She's too busy in her own head.* Too busy to notice me stalking her. Either she's reckless or too trusting. Maybe both. The two often go hand in hand. Getting rid of her should be a piece of cake.

Three years ago, I was extricating high-value hostages from the jungle in a corrupt, drug-infested South American country, and flushing terrorists out of caves in the Middle East and Africa. Now, I'm chasing a two-bit reporter out of a sleepy city in the South.

*Fuck me.*

I can't do this shit anymore. My fingers tighten around the wheel. *I just can't.* I need to talk to JD, and it can't wait any longer. He's not going to be happy, but it's the way it has to be—plain and simple. *If it's so simple, why is my damn gut burning like a sonofabitch?*

Red pauses in the middle of the lot to dig through that stupid purse. Her shoulders hunch forward while she rummages. She's not tiny, yet something about her seems small and vulnerable.

Big bad reporter. *Pfft.* She looks like a college kid. Nice ass, though. I'd like to sink my teeth into one of those tight little cheeks.

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**KATE**

The phone rings as I trudge across the parking lot. It sounds shriller than usual, maybe because I'm on edge, or maybe it's an omen. *A bad omen.*

While I root around the bottom of my tote, a sense of dread slithers into my chest, twisting and contorting the muscles as it consumes me. *Please don't be Smith Sinclair canceling the interview. Please.*

It's only a matter of seconds before I locate the phone. But by then my hands are trembling, and I'm struggling to breathe.

When I peek at the screen, the breath caught in my chest escapes in a long dramatic whoosh. It's Colin, my editor at the Washington Sun. The second-to-last person in the entire universe I want to hear from right now, but at least it's not Sinclair. I pull my shoulders back and force myself to exude more confidence than I'm feeling. "Hello."

"Just checking in."

"I'm about to meet Sinclair. Can we talk later?"

"Kate, I know you believe in this story, but you're out of time." *Just checking in. Right.* "If the interview goes nowhere, I need you at your desk by noon tomorrow."

It's a solid fourteen hours from Charleston to DC without stops. I'd have to drive all night to be there by midday. But I don't remind Colin of this, because I have no intention of making the trip tonight, or tomorrow for that matter.

"You can always work the story on the side," he soothes, placating me as if I'm a disappointed child. I can almost feel him pat my head. "I've done all I can for now," he adds for good measure.

It's a lie, and we both know it. He's done all he's willing to do. *Work the story on the side. Right.* When I get back to DC, I'll be so inundated with fluff pieces there won't be a second to pursue any real stories. "Warren King's confirmation hearing is set to begin in less than a week. Supreme Court Justices have jobs for life. Once he's confirmed, it's too late."

"Listen, King wouldn't have been my pick, but the national press was holed up in Charleston for weeks talking to his neighbors, sifting through his trash, following every lead, just like you've been doing. And despite all the diligence, and all the hunches, what did they find? *Nada*," he says when I don't respond.

"He's a member of a secret society. Some of those societies have ties to human trafficking. If it's all on the up-and-up, why all the secrecy?"

We've been having this same conversation for a week now. I'm tired of justifying myself, and the irritation in my voice is palpable, but Colin either doesn't hear it, or he doesn't care.

"St. Anslem's is not a secret," he explains with his patience on edge.

"But everything that happens inside is."

"Rumors. Unsubstantiated rumors."

"From sources with knowledge."

"Kate—" I picture him rolling his eyes and tapping that stupid Superman pen he loves on the edge of a yellow notepad. Patience is not Colin's strong suit, and I've tested it repeatedly with this assignment. "Aside from the local press, there's no one left in Charleston from a reputable media outlet."

"Big stories are unearthed by reporters who work hard and continue to dig long after everyone else has put down the shovel. I've heard you give that spiel dozens of times. Is it just an empty platitude?"

The silence on the other end of the phone is deafening. "It's time for you to come home. I'm sorry."

I stop short at the base of the stairs, squeezing the wrought iron railing. DC is *not* my home. *And it never will be.* It's just a place I landed when home was no longer a viable option. I don't say that to him because it sounds ungrateful. Colin hired me when my prospects were slim, and for that, I will always be indebted to him.

"I'm confident my meeting with Sinclair will yield fruit."

"It better be a truckload of fruit. Ripe fruit. As it is, I owe the Style editor a *huge* favor for borrowing you for three weeks during high season."

"You're fucking the Style editor, Colin."

“That just gives her more opportunities to call in the favor. All hands on deck for the Keaton wedding—I gave her my word.”

I swallow a groan. “Gotta go.”

“Call me after you talk to Sinclair. Good luck.”

“Thanks.” I hang up before he can say anything else. I don’t need any more reminders of how high the stakes are for me. The Washington Sun has an international reputation. After what happened in Boston, I’m lucky to have this job, even if it is at the Style desk.

*Ambassador Keaton’s daughter’s wedding.* The fairy tale Washington so desperately needs to distract itself from President Wilder’s assassination and the ugly politics that followed the requisite mourning period.

*But the grief has just begun for me if I’m stuck covering that fiasco.*

I can see it now. Miles of imported French tulle embroidered with fine gold filigree, bridesmaid dresses in an array of pastels better suited to Easter eggs than to the human form, and a multi-tiered cake artfully draped in fondant, with a crumb so dry, guests won’t be able to choke it down. Like everything else in Washington, the nuptials will be encased in a glossy veneer, all for show. Where I’m from, we call that gloss bullshit.

This is not how my career as a journalist began, nor how I envisioned it unfolding. It’s not that covering the lifestyles of the rich and famous isn’t honest work. Most of the reporters who write for the society pages are talented and hardworking. It’s just that the longer I’m covering socialites, the less likely it is I will ever be given an investigative assignment, and if that doesn’t happen, I’ll never be able to do right by my mother. Although that train veered off the track when I left Boston. *But what choice did I have?*

My stomach roils as I pull open the solid oak door to Tallulah’s. Before stepping across the threshold, I take a deep breath and adjust the heavy tote on my shoulder. *Smith Sinclair, you better come through big for me.*

Inside I blink a few times while my eyes adjust to the low light. The place has a kitschy charm with dark paneled walls and wide-plank floors that give it an outdated vibe. There’s a pleasant citrus scent in the air, but it’s too light to fully mask the booze, sweat, and promise of sex that’s seeped into the wood through the years. Tallulah’s is a working man’s bar where every tongue and groove has a story to tell. It reminds me of a neighborhood place not far from where I grew up, where off-duty cops would hang out after their shifts.

I’m early, but I skim the room for Sinclair. I’ve never laid eyes on him,

but I've seen enough photographs to recognize his face.

There are only a handful of patrons in the place. A middle-aged man with an unkempt beard is working his way through a platter of fried chicken at the bar, and several stools down, three guys are watching a basketball game, hissing at the screen. *All men*. But no Sinclair.

I scan the perimeter of the room, taking note of the exits. It's a well-ingrained habit. Sources often want to meet in sketchy, out-of-the-way locations where they won't be seen snitching to a reporter. I'm always careful, but I always go to the story—*always*—regardless of how dangerous it appears. That's what good investigative journalism requires. *That's what my mother did*.

Tallulah's doesn't exactly feel shady, but it certainly doesn't seem like the kind of place anyone closely associated with the Wilders would frequent.

"Can I help you, miss?" the bartender asks, juicing a lime into a tall Mason jar. He doesn't stop squeezing to make eye contact.

"I'm meeting someone. I don't think he's here yet."

"You're welcome to wait. Sit wherever you'd like." He cocks his chin toward an area of the room with a few booths and a smattering of tables scattered haphazardly. He doesn't ask if I want something to drink while I wait. I haven't been in Charleston long, but it's unusual for a local to act like they can't be bothered. I glance at the half-bushel of limes still to be juiced. Maybe I caught him at a bad time.

"Thanks."

The seating area is situated within earshot of the bar. I eye the booth closest to the back wall where we'll have the most privacy. I want Sinclair to be comfortable talking because I need answers. *Lots of them*.

One of the guys at the end of the bar tips his River Dogs cap as I pass, and his friends greet me with a chorus of pleasantries. The thing about Charleston is that most everyone smiles and says hello. They wield that famous southern charm effortlessly, but despite their impeccable manners, they don't like outsiders. This makes it almost impossible to get any useful information from them. But I understand. I'm from Boston, and we don't like outsiders either. The difference is we don't bother with the pasted-on smiles and polite airs. We're just plain old-fashioned rude.

I approach the booth and set my tote on the bench facing the door, pulling out a small notebook with some questions I prioritized this morning. I don't know how much time Sinclair will give me, and I don't want the interview to

end before I have answers to the most crucial questions.

While I'm digging through my bag, a man slides into the booth across from me—a behemoth with the neck of an offensive lineman and shoulders that span nearly two-thirds of the bench.

Sinclair just stares. His face is stern, and he says nothing, not even hello.

The images on the web don't do him justice. Sure, they capture his strong features and proud, muscular frame. A few even caught a devilish grin. But he's not grinning now. And he's much bigger, and so much more imposing in person. I catch myself gaping, mouth open like I'm on a fly-catching expedition. "Mr. Sinclair?"

"Smith." His gaze drills through me like I'm made of cheap drywall that crumbles easily. Sinclair was a Green Beret, and there is a great deal of speculation that he had been a member of the elite Delta Force, but since the US military won't officially confirm anything about that unit, I can't be certain.

"I'm Kate McKenna." I hold out my hand but he ignores it. It's a slap in the face that stings a bit, but I hold my temper and disregard the brazen slight. I don't have the luxury of slapping back. "I didn't see you come in."

His response is to assess me openly, the way a prizefighter sizes up an inferior opponent. It's unnerving, and instinctively I call up the location of the closest exit. Not that I'm going anywhere—I can't—he'd have to threaten me with a weapon for that to happen, and even then, I might not walk away. I'm not going back to DC empty-handed. Not this time. "Thank—thank you for meeting with me." *Dammit*. I sound as nervous as I feel.

"Don't thank me yet." His voice is deep and rich. There's a seductive quality about it, much like there was when we spoke on the phone last fall, after I had been assigned to do a feature story on Zack Wilder, the former President's youngest son. Even though I had hated the message Sinclair very clearly delivered at the time, something about his voice beckoned. I remember it clearly.

His voice might be intoxicating, but his glare is relentless, tracking my every movement as I tuck a loose curl behind my ear. "I won't take up too much of your time. I have some questions about Wildflower, the social club Gray Wilder runs."

"You want me to answer questions about the Wilders and their business holdings?" His expression is unreadable, but there's a sarcastic edge to his words.

I bob my head a few times, the butterflies swirling erratically in my empty stomach. The request sounds foolish and incredibly naïve coming from his mouth. “Mainly about Wildflower. I know you’re in charge of security for all of Wilder Holdings and for the Wilders personally. I just have a few questions about Wildflower.” *Stop rambling, Kate.*

Sinclair purses his smooth full lips. I catch a small twitch at the corner of his mouth like he’s fighting off an urge to laugh in my face. “What do you want to drink?” he asks, after leaving me hanging for several seconds.

*What do you want to drink?* Yes! He’s planning to stay, at least a little while. “I’ll have a beer. Whatever’s on tap.”

My hands unfurl as the tension begins to dissipate. I’ll have a chance to get some information. How much, though, depends entirely on his cooperation. I’m at his mercy.

He wiggles two fingers at the bartender, who has abandoned his limes and is leaning over the bar eager to take our order. “Got any of those corn nuts today?”

“Made a fresh batch this morning.”

“You’re the man, Beau.”

When Sinclair’s done with the bartender, he shifts back to me. “Beer. And not a light beer where they’ve siphoned off all the flavor. I’m impressed, Mary Katherine McKenna.”

*Mary Katherine McKenna.* It catches me by surprise. Mary Katherine is my baptismal name. It’s on all my official documents, but I never use it. Aside from Nana, and Father Tierney, our parish priest, unless I’m in trouble, everyone calls me Kate. Everyone but Smith Sinclair, it seems.

I regard him carefully for a moment. He’s testing. I need to turn the tables quickly, otherwise he’ll have the upper hand for the entire interview, and I’ll leave here with nothing.

I flash him a cheeky smile, hoping it doesn’t look as fake as it feels. “I do what I can to impress the fairer sex, Mr. Sinclair. Thank you for noticing—” I raise my brow in a perfectly orchestrated attack, and let my smile fade quietly, “unless you’re insinuating that I *should* be drinking light beer.”

I don’t have much of a flair for the dramatic, but that was an Oscar-winning performance. These days most men back far, far away from any comment they make to a woman that might be construed as demeaning. I don’t know what he meant by it, and I don’t really care. I just hope the act was enough to shake him up a bit.

He sits back comfortably, folding his large hands in front of him on the table, thumbs tapping against one another. His eyes wander from mine, raking over my jittery body, taking it all in—until he’s satisfied. “I’d never suggest that to any woman. Even if it crossed my mind. But you should keep on doing whatever you’re doing. It works for you.”

Either Sinclair isn’t most men, or the Academy Awards will have to wait. I’m guessing it’s the former as I swallow to soothe a bone-dry mouth, then order my skin to *stop* tingling. *Damn him.* He’s still winning.

Everything about him is unsettling. He’s too big, too forward, too comfortable in his own skin, and he’s taking up too damn much space in my head. At least it feels that way.

My face is overheated, and I’m not thinking straight. I need to come up with a new plan to win him over because the one I have isn’t working. I should have known better. Yes, I expected him to be a brick wall I’d have to chip away at to get information, but I didn’t expect him to have this kind of presence or to exert this kind of control—he wields control the way Thor wields his hammer: exacting and merciless.

Getting anything useful from Sinclair is going to be a challenge.

While I’m still trying to figure out the best way forward, he slaps one hand against the other, rubbing his palms together. “So, Mary Katherine, what exactly do you need in order to stop harassing the Wilders?”

My stomach coils into a tight ball. *Maybe an impossible challenge.* “Please call me Kate. When you call me Mary Katherine, I begin to worry I’m about to be punished.”

There’s a glimmer in his eyes. “No need to worry in that regard. When I’m ready to punish you, you’ll know.”

I can’t believe he just said that. And I can’t believe my brain is entertaining the countless ways he might punish me. But what really mortifies me is the unmistakable twinge of arousal between my legs. The kind that happens during a long, hot make-out session with someone who knows how to kiss. The kind of kissing that makes it impossible to stop, even when you know you should. I only hope my puckered nipples aren’t visible through my thin shirt.

He starts to say more, but the bartender comes over with our beer and a bowl of corn nuts. “Thanks, Beau,” Sinclair says. “I saw your daddy hauling firewood yesterday. Offered to give him a hand loading the truck, but he shook me off.”



“Don’t get me started on that stubborn old fool.” Beau shakes his head. “The waitress will be here shortly. Holler if you need anything in the meantime.”

“Carrie on tonight?” Sinclair asks, almost too casually. Beau glances over his shoulder with an easy grin that Sinclair returns.

For the record, he’s still winning. He’s now established that this is his place, and these are his people. It’s a game for him. Like he’s trying to psyche me out before the pissing contest starts. *Good luck, buddy.* I have an umbrella in my bag, and I’m not afraid of bodily fluids. I’ve been pissed on before. Shit on too, for that matter.

*Focus, Kate. Focus. You need to regroup. Make a little small talk to warm him up.* “How long have you been in Charleston?” I ask, sipping my beer.

“Three years.” He grabs a fistful of corn nuts and nudges the bowl in my direction. “Why?”

I shrug, pull a single crispy nut from the container and devour it. Even if I wasn’t starving, I can totally see how these salty little nuggets could become addictive. I try not to seem too greedy as I reach into the bowl for more and pop them into my mouth one after another.

Sinclair watches with great amusement as the punishing heat creeps up and sets my mouth on fire. I take a big swig of beer while the bastard sits across the table, smirking, those damn dimples winking at me.

“Go easy with those if you’re not used to spicy food. Or even if you are. The burn sneaks up on you, and it can be brutal. Especially when the nuts are fresh.” *He couldn’t have mentioned this before I shoveled them into my mouth?*

I don’t want to guzzle the beer or give him the satisfaction of watching me squirm. “I love spicy food,” I announce brightly. He lifts his glass, but not before I spy that damn smirk again. I take a few more sips, but put down the beer when I realize it’s not helping.

“Most people I’ve met here are exceedingly polite, but they hold out-of-towners at arm’s length.” I manage to steer the conversation back to Charleston in a steady voice, as though the whole corn nut fiasco had never happened. “How long do you have to live here before the natives stop treating you like an outsider?”

“You thinking about making this home?” he asks, a big paw gripping the glass.

“No.” The word comes out quickly. It’s automatic. I don’t need even a nanosecond to think about it. Boston’s home. At least it used to be. And it will be again. *I hope*. I rub my hands up and down my arms to ward off a chill. “Just trying to figure this place out. It’s somewhat of a mystery. There’s something about the *Holy City* that makes me believe it’s hiding dark secrets—like maybe it’s not so *holy*.”

I glance at him, hoping his expression will give something away. But he doesn’t blink, so I prod some more. “Maybe because it’s such an old city with a complicated history. Not sure. But I can’t shake the feeling that the layers of charm are concealing a black heart.”

“That attitude certainly isn’t going to win you any friends in these parts. People from here take exceptional pride in the city, and they don’t take kindly to strangers pointing out the flaws in their *complicated history*.” He draws out each syllable, mocking me. “There are a lot of transplants in Charleston. Many more than the locals would like. Some of them will live out their entire lives here, and they’ll always be outsiders.”

“So what’s your secret?”

“What makes you think I wasn’t born and bred here?”

“Because you grew up at Fort Bragg.” I did a little research too, and now that I’m beginning to settle in, the details are starting to come back to me.

“When I get to a new place, I adapt to the customs. People are generally proud of where they live, of who they are, and they don’t take well to know-it-alls bringing their own ideas and customs to town—and trying to shove them down everybody’s throat.”

“That must have served you well in the military.”

“Ah. Ms. McKenna did her homework.” He rubs the back of his neck and smiles. It’s not warm or sincere, and it fades before ever reaching his eyes.

“Ms. McKenna always does her homework.” Unlike her mother, she’s not talented or experienced enough to wing it.

“You’re from Boston. I went to college there. They don’t like outsiders, either. So don’t act like you’re experiencing culture shock.” There’s a sharpness to his voice. He expected me to research the Wilders, but it bothers him that I dug into his background too. The tables are finally turning in my favor, so I push a little more.

“You went to college in Cambridge,” I say matter-of-factly. He cocks his head to the right, his lips thin and tight. “Harvard is in Cambridge. That’s not Boston.”

After what seems like an eternity, Sinclair leans across the table, heavily muscled forearms flat on the wooden surface. He's encroaching on my side of the booth, scowling. His beautiful face and sandy hair, gilded with the kind of highlights some women pay a fortune for, aren't doing a single thing to soften his appearance. If it weren't for the gold flecks in his eyes reflecting light, he could be easily mistaken for the kind of monster you wouldn't want to encounter in a dark alley. My heart is pounding again.

“Now that we've established you know my shoe size and how long my dick is, why don't you just tell me what the hell you want.”

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**KATE**

I see. He only likes to play if he's in control.

Although his tone is rough and uncompromising, he doesn't raise his voice. He doesn't have to. Sinclair is attempting to intimidate me with his sheer size and vulgar language. If I allow it, I'm finished.

I sit up taller and force myself to lean toward him, gripping the bench for support. "I want to know about Wildflower." My mouth is pasty and the words get stuck in my throat. They emerge desperate and weak, and just like that, my attempt to project some authority falls flat—in a dazzling fashion. It's all over his face. His jaw is slack, and the glow of victory shines brightly in his eyes. But he doesn't rub my nose in it. *Not yet.*

"It's a social club," he responds coolly, checking his phone.

"A men's club?"

Sinclair slides the phone back into his pocket and takes a drink. "Don't waste my time with questions you already know the answers to. Most of the social clubs and societies in Charleston were founded by men. You already know this."

"The older clubs, but Wildflower hasn't been around that long." He peers at me over his glass, but doesn't respond. I need to know if it's truly a men's club. Historically, it's the all-male clubs that close their eyes to, or even support, human trafficking. "Does the club have female members?"

"Women have all the privileges of belonging that men do."

He's dancing around the question. *But why?* "What kind of privileges?"

Sinclair takes a handful of corn nuts, tossing a few into his mouth, chewing and swallowing like they don't have the devil's spice sprinkled all

over them. “The spa, tennis courts, gym, dining,” he finally answers.

This is like pulling teeth from a lightly sedated bear. I need to move slowly, with razor sharp precision. One wrong move and he’ll bite my head off and run into the woods. “Anything else?” I ask cautiously. I’m careful not to chase him away—or to get bitten.

“I’m sure there are other perks, like the sweet swag bag members get for joining, but I can’t remember every little thing. I’m not much of a detail man.”

“I don’t believe that.” It comes out as an accusation. And in a way it is—I don’t believe him. But calling him a liar won’t help my case, so I smile sweetly to temper the impact of the words.

The waitress comes over, Carrie I assume, and Sinclair chats her up. It’s small talk, with some friendly banter but no real flirting. He doesn’t bother to introduce us. I doubt it’s an oversight. I doubt he does anything that’s not calculated.

“I see you’ve almost finished off those nuts. Still hungry?” she asks, just at the moment I’ve decided to introduce myself.

“I—” I don’t get to finish my introduction or to answer her question about food. Not that it matters. She isn’t talking to me.

“We’ll have two burgers, medium rare. One with a side of fries. The other with onion rings.” *Two burgers?* He has an enormous appetite. *Probably in all things.* I adjust my butt on the seat to quiet a small zing between my legs. *Wait. We’ll have two burgers? He ordered for me without bothering to ask what I wanted? Of all the overbearing, misogynistic—I’m going to stab him before this interview is over. And no one will blame me.*

“Cheese?” the waitress asks Sinclair. He glances across the table as though it just occurred to him I’m still here and might have an opinion about what I eat.

“Pepper Jack on the one with the onion rings,” he instructs the waitress when I don’t immediately chime in. “Something mild on the other.” I’m sure his little smirk is meant for me. “I’ll take a refill, please,” he tips his mug, “and bring Miss McKenna one when you bring the burgers.”

She flashes him a warm, pretty smile. “Anything else?”

“That’s all for now. Thank you, ma’am.”

I need his cooperation, but being a doormat hasn’t worked very well so far, and I’m tired of playing the part. Besides, I have a feeling Smith Sinclair might be the kind of man who appreciates a little push back. Some men are

like that.

“I wasn’t planning on having dinner, but when I do, I normally order for myself. I’ve been choosing my own food for years now. I’m quite good at it.”

Sinclair pushes his shoulder blades into the back of the faded vinyl bench. I have his *complete* attention now. It’s more than I bargained for, and I will myself not to color under the scrutiny. “I always prefer a brat to a princess.” He tips his head, rubbing a single thumb over the stubble along his jaw. “Especially one who turns pink without much effort. If you weren’t so dead set on sticking your nose into Wilder business, we could be friends. *Good friends.*”

The word *good* skitters across my skin, leaving tiny raised bumps in its wake. His eyes have mine in a tight hold. I want to look away, but I don’t. I can’t. Because even though my body is responding like this is the best foreplay it’s experienced in years, I’m here to do a job. I have to take the power back. *Back? Did you ever have it?*

I’m screwed. I need answers from him, but I have no idea how to get them. None.

“The menu’s limited,” he continues, drumming those long, thick fingers on the table, “as in, there isn’t one. They have burgers and fried chicken. Don’t tell me you wanted a salad.” His tone is chock-full of innuendo. *What a jerk.*

“I might have preferred a salad. And I don’t appreciate the little digs about my weight.”

“Nobody orders salad here. If they’re foolish enough to make that mistake, the cook tosses some of the lettuce, tomato, and onion they use for burgers on a plate. You’d stick out like an outsider. I did you a favor. And I already told you that you have a nice body. Maybe not in so many words.” He hasn’t released my eyes, and I’ll be damned if I look away first. “For a reporter, you don’t seem to read between the lines very well. Or be much of a listener.”

I bite back the snarky remark on the tip of my tongue. “I don’t eat cheeseburgers.”

“Religious thing?”

“No.”

“Lactose intolerant?”

I dig my fingers into my thighs so I don’t reach across the table and throat punch him. “No.”

“Then you’re good. Just scrape off the cheese if you don’t like it.”

“And I don’t need another beer.” *Oh, God.* I sound like a whiny teenager, without a shred of dignity.

“The one you’re sipping from like it’s a rare vintage of champagne will be piss-warm before the food gets here, if it isn’t already.”

I’d like to dump my piss-warm beer over his head. *Keaton wedding, Easter egg dresses, dry cake—and most important of all, my mother’s legacy.* These are the reasons Smith Sinclair isn’t mopping beer off his gorgeous face.

I gather my composure and force myself to speak in a pleasant, upbeat tone. “Tell me about your relationship with the Wilders. You went to college with JD, right?”

“That is *never* happening. Next question.”

It’s only a matter of minutes before I begin pulling out my hair in clumps. I’m going to lay it all out for him. It might be perceived as a desperate move, but it’s worked for me at times. And at this stage, I have nothing to lose.

“Look, do us both a favor. I need some answers, and you want to be done with me. Just throw a little something my way and I’ll be out of your hair forever. I don’t care about the Wilders. I’m interested in the broader topic of Charleston’s history with men’s clubs and societies, and Warren King’s relationship to them. My job depends on it.”

While I plead my case, my voice cracks. It’s a small fracture, so tiny, I doubt he notices. But I hear it, loud and clear. I’m ashamed at what a beggar I’ve become, but it doesn’t stop me from continuing to grovel. “Please.”

He assesses me carefully, the same way I’m assessing him. Just when I think he’s about to give me something, the waitress approaches the table with our food. “Eat your burger. We’ll talk after,” he says, when Carrie walks away.

*Arghhh!* I’ve been successful because people open up to me. Even when they know I’m a reporter, they tell me things, confide in me in ways they probably shouldn’t. I’m approachable and compassionate. I listen. Most people are desperate to talk. They just need someone to listen, because nobody really listens. Instead they’re making lists in their heads, thinking about what comes next, how they can bring the conversation back around to them, deciding what they’re going to prepare for dinner, or if it’s a good time to ask if they can bring home a puppy. I don’t do any of that. I know how to be present. How to listen empathetically. It’s my greatest strength, and it’s

always worked for me—until Charleston.

Sinclair grabs a handful of fries from my plate. “Thought we’d share,” he says in response to what I’m sure is a horrified look on my face. “Help yourself to all the onion rings you want. Just leave me a few.”

*He’s taking food off my plate without bothering to ask, like we’re animals in a barnyard. Oh. My. God.*

I grew up with three older brothers, and all my life there have been cops—mostly men who worked for my dad—in and out of our house. Men with the manners of vultures are not a foreign concept to me. Although my standards don’t approach Emily Post’s, I just met this guy who’s foraging from my plate, and his familiarity is obnoxious. I’m starting to wonder if dealing with him is worth *any* story.

*Relax. Just relax. He’s trying to get under your skin so you give up in frustration. This is exactly what he wants.*

“Why did you leave the Boston Sentinel?” he asks, still grazing from my plate.

I shrug, and give him my standard response to the question. “It was time to move on.” I don’t even flinch as the well-rehearsed fib falls off my tongue.

“*Huh.* I read you eavesdropped and stole classified information from your father. That’s how you became an overnight success.”

It’s a punch square to the gut. A clean slash into the armor I’ve carefully constructed, and the gasp of pain escapes before I can stop it.

Sinclair bites into his burger, pretending he’s not gauging my reaction—not witnessing the acute distress or the gore spilling from the gaping wound. The bastard just sits there waiting to see if he landed the knockout blow.

I glare across the table without really seeing him, until I can pull myself together. I want to grab my tote and swing at his head before I run out of Tallulah’s and back to DC, but I will not let this man take everything I’ve worked for. Everything I want for myself—and for my mother. I will not let him win. Not without a fight.

“That is not true.” I answer definitively, in a strong voice, even though my insides are trembling as I cut the burger in two. I lift the top half of the bun to scrape the cheese off, but decide it’s not worth the effort. “I started working at the paper when I was sixteen. I worked hard for any success I had there. None of it happened overnight.”

“But the rest is true?” Smith asks, taking a couple onion rings off his plate, and depositing them on mine.



“None of it’s true.” I don’t owe him a damn thing, certainly not an explanation, but if I share, maybe it will encourage him to speak more candidly too. “I left because my father deserves the police commissioner’s job, and as long as I’m there investigating stories, I’m a convenient weapon for his detractors to use against him. I couldn’t have that.”

Sinclair doesn’t say anything, but I feel his eyes on me while I mindlessly rearrange French fries on my plate. My appetite has disappeared.

“Everything I read sounded like bullshit.” He takes a fry off my plate, drags it through a puddle of ketchup on his, and offers it to me. I shake my head. But he won’t be denied. He touches it to my lips, and when my tongue darts out to catch a gob of ketchup, he slips the fry inside. It’s an intimate gesture, but feels more conciliatory than sexual.

“People who want my father to have the job don’t believe a word of it, and people who want the other guy to have it are sure it’s all true,” I tell him after I finish chewing.

“How about your colleagues at the paper?”

My colleagues were the least of my problems. “Most everyone knew it was a lie. But the few who were sure I was sleeping with my editor to get plum assignments had something new to gossip about.”

“Were you?”

“Was I what?”

“Fucking your editor?”

I look him straight in the eye. “Of course not.”

“How about your father? Did he believe you?”

My stomach ties itself into a painful knot. Sinclair’s probing has disturbed the scab in my heart. It’s still not quite healed. Maybe it will never be. *Mary Katherine, I want to believe you. But how else would you have gotten this information?* How else, indeed? Certainly not by skills or smarts. Or talent. Those possibilities didn’t seem to resonate with him.

“My father believed me.” *Eventually*. At least I think he did.

“That’s not very convincing, Mary Katherine. Are you going to eat the other half of your burger?”

I shake my head, and push the plate toward him. “Help yourself.”

“So you went to Washington to prove everybody wrong, to show them that you really are a talented reporter who didn’t need to steal information from Daddy to publish a great story. But you got stuck on the society pages, and that’s how you ended up chasing the Wilders.”

*Prick.* Just when I feel like he has some measure of empathy, he's a total prick. *Again.* "I don't know how many times I have to say it. The Wilders are an inconsequential piece of what I'm after."

"Sure they are," he says with a smug tone, before finishing what's left of my burger in three bites.

"As I said earlier, Warren King is my focus. Wildflower is a logical place to begin." *And every other alley I've gone down is dark.* I take a sip of beer to fortify myself. "Tell me something about the club. How many members?"

"Not sure."

"Let's make a deal. I'll tell you all about why I left the Sentinel and went to Washington, every ugly detail, if you tell me a few things about Wildflower." I offer it up like it's a treasure, but it's not much of a deal. I've already shared the highlights, and there's no way I would ever tell him how terribly my family treated me, or how heartbroken I was over the whole sordid mess.

"I don't deal, Kate. Dealing is for people who have run out of ways to get what they want. I don't care why you left the Sentinel and went to DC. I was baiting you. And let's be clear, if I did care to know, I could find the answers with or without your cooperation."

My heart hammers against my chest wall, the way it does when you realize you're trapped with nowhere to go. When you've played all your pieces, and there's no way you can win because your opponent is always two steps ahead, shrewder, stronger, and just better at the game. *There will be other opportunities, Kate, with players who weren't trained as special operatives. He's out of your league. He'd be out of anyone's league.*

Just when I've decided to hoist the white flag and surrender to a lifetime of covering weddings and galas, he takes pity. Or maybe he's enjoying the game and he's not ready for it to be over—not ready to stop torturing me quite yet. He reels me back in with a measly crumb, so he can toy with me for a little while longer. And I allow it—that's what desperate people do.

"I don't have the exact membership numbers." He shrugs a shoulder. "There's a substantial buy-in, because there are numerous amenities. But I'm not an expert on the club."

That's a lie. *Another lie.* He knows plenty. He could help me, if he wanted. Somehow, I need to win his trust. Or distract him so he talks unwittingly. *But how?* I need to buy a little time to think. "Where's the ladies' room?" I ask, laying my napkin neatly on the table beside my plate.

“To the right of the entrance where you came in. There’s a narrow hall. Second door on the left.”

I excuse myself, anxious for a few minutes away from him.

The bathroom is tired, but spotless, with a couple stalls I don’t need. I turn on the faucet and examine my face in the mirror while soaping my hands. I’m not beautiful, certainly not in a classic sense, but I have a thick mane of red hair that people of both sexes are drawn to as though it holds some kind of magical power. For most of my life it’s been a blessing and a curse. Mostly a curse.

I bend forward at the waist and flip my hair over my head. Brushing it this way always makes it fall fuller over my shoulders. After applying two coats of fresh lip gloss, I tug on my collar until it’s standing almost straight up, framing my neck attractively. I stare at my prim and proper image in the streaky glass. Maybe loosening another button on my shirt would make me look less uptight, and more approachable. Less like this is an interview, and more like ... *Like what, Kate?*

I’m the only person here. There’s no harm in trying it. If it’s too revealing, I’ll rebutton the damn thing.

With shaky hands, I free the pearl disc from the tiny slit, and examine myself from all sides. There’s no visible cleavage. This is exactly how I would wear the outfit to go out with friends for the evening, or on a date. I might even undo an additional button for a night out.

*What’s the big deal?*

It’s not as though I would ever exchange sex for a story. I wouldn’t do that, not even for the woman who gave up her career, her family, her very life—for me. I will do almost anything to earn my mother the Pulitzer she justly deserves, even if it means stashing my dignity and pride while I deal with Sinclair. I can do that for her. It’s so little compared to what she gave up for me. But sex is where I draw the line.

*Is it, Kate? Are you sure about that?* For a second, I catch a fifteen-year-old in the glass. She was willing to trade sex. I turn away from the glare of the mirror, shoving the thoughts back into the dark corners of my memory. *This is different.*

I won’t have sex with him. But Sinclair can think whatever he wants as long as he gives me useful information.

When I finish justifying my questionable choices, I take a deep breath and head back to the table.

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**KATE**

“O kay,” I say in an optimistic voice as I slide into the booth. “Just tell me one teeny tiny thing about the clientele at Wildflower.”

The lines on Sinclair’s forehead become more prominent as his eyes flit from my freshly polished lips to the deep vee of my neckline. There’s nothing to see, but still, I feel exposed.

I misjudged this—misjudged myself—*misjudged him*. My face is hot, and I’m sure it’s a lovely shade of I-am-a-moron red. It seems ridiculous now, plotting to distract a former special forces operative with some lip gloss and a low neckline, like I’m some glamorous *femme fatale*. The embarrassment is scathing. My mother would have never stooped to such tactics to get a story, and until now, I never have.

It would be painfully obvious if I rebuttoned my shirt here at the table, so instead, I tug at the neckline discreetly, pulling the edges closed.

Sinclair was more responsive when I laid out my dilemma for him. I should try it again. Begging is less shameful than a come-on, even a fake one. “There must be something you can give me,” I plead. “I need this story. I already told you I’d give up something in return. There must be something I have that you want. Anything.”

“*Anything?*” His brown eyes have scores of gold flecks that should make them warm and inviting. But they’re not. They’re cool and calculating.

I hadn’t meant it to sound like an open invitation, but the breathy plea came out all wrong. And God help me, I don’t disabuse him of any assumptions, although I do choose my words cautiously. “I’ll *tell* you anything.”

Sinclair says nothing, and his face gives nothing away. We sit in silence playing a cat and mouse game. If animals played mind games, that is. While I'm still trying to read him, he slides both feet on either side of mine. He doesn't say excuse me, or offer anything resembling an apology, because it's not a mistake, and he's not sorry.

I'm a hair over five-eight, and I wear a size nine shoe, but his feet dwarf mine. The inner sole of each foot presses the outer sole of mine, dragging my legs together slowly, trapping them with my thighs crushed against one another. The sensitive skin chafes as the pressure between my legs mounts.

His jaw is set firmly, with the occasional tick popping under the scruff. Each time it happens, a shiver runs down my spine, making it almost impossible to sit still. I can't escape it. Just like I can't escape the oppressive heat radiating from across the table, creating bright streaks of jagged lightning that electrify my pussy.

"Do you want to see Wildflower?" His voice is thick and rough, like a man who has sex on the brain.

"*Wildflower? See Wildflower?*" *Wildflower.* The intensity of the moment fades. I forget all about the overwhelming sexual tension and throw all good sense out the window. This might be the break I need. There might be some small insight to be gleaned that can help me tie Warren King to Charleston's seamier side. At least something that will allow Colin to let me stay on the story. "You would take me there?" I'm practically salivating.

"Off the record."

Sinclair frees my feet, and I inch my legs apart, releasing the exquisite pressure that bloomed there. There's no time for sexy games right now. "Of course. Whatever you want."

He rakes his teeth over a full bottom lip. It's an excruciating slow movement—raw and primal. I shouldn't have said *whatever you want*—I certainly don't mean it, and I'm through playing. He's too male, and there's been a shift. I can feel it. All of a sudden, teasing feels too risky.

Sinclair motions for the check, then props his elbows on the table, cracking his knuckles. It's the only sound between us. I would give anything to know what he's thinking. *Maybe he's having second thoughts.* We need to get out of here now, before he changes his mind. I don't relax until Carrie approaches with the check. But even then, Sinclair seems broody and far away.

I reach into the tote for my wallet. "Let's split it."

“No.” He drags the shot glass with the check out of my reach.

“You’re a source. I don’t feel comfortable with you buying me dinner.”

He gazes at me, sliding the pad of an index finger over his right temple. “I don’t feel comfortable splitting the check.”

*What?* “You’re kidding.”

“No,” he says, taking a few bills from his wallet. “I’m not. And right now, my comfort is more important than yours. Don’t you agree, Kate?”

There’s nothing unethical about me letting him buy me dinner. It’s just not my practice. “Fine. I’ll make an exception this one time.” Just like that, once again today, I’m trading my principals for the story. I’m not proud of any of it.

He narrows his eyes, capturing mine, and holding them steady. His gaze is piercing. “You’ve put up with my shit for an hour and a half. It hasn’t been easy for you. Once or twice, I thought sure you were going to haul off and punch me in the face.” He pauses for a breath, or maybe for effect. “You must really want this story.”

I shove my wallet back into the tote without responding. He’s not looking for an answer, just gauging my reaction. I feel the weight of his stare while I reposition my bag, which doesn’t need repositioning, on the bench. It seems lighter. I peek in and push a few things aside to have a better look. My heart drops into my stomach. *It’s not here.* My gun is gone. And my phone. *Did I have them in the bathroom?* I try to remember. *Yes.* I definitely did.

“Looking for these?” Sinclair places the small handgun and the phone in the center of the table, between us.

*How the hell did he get them?* He removed the gun from a holster attached to the inside of my bag—without me knowing. I’m seeing black spots in front of me. “How? When—when did you take them?”

“I’m a man of many talents, Miss McKenna.”

*Maybe I didn’t have my bag with me in the ladies’ room.* I’m not sure, anymore. “You rummaged through my purse while I was in the bathroom?”

“Come on. You really think I went through your purse while you were in the bathroom? What fun would that have been? Any two-year-old could have done that.”

I had the tote with me because I brushed my hair and reapplied lip gloss. It was heavy when I lifted it off the vanity in the bathroom. I’m sure of it. The butterflies have returned, but they’re quickly chased away by a raging storm. “When did you take them?” I demand.

“While I was offering you a visit to Wildflower.”

I remember him reaching under the table. I thought maybe he was scratching his leg, or picking up something he dropped. It was just a matter of seconds—*right*? The truth is I didn’t think much of it at the time—all I could think about was getting access to Wildflower.

“It was like taking candy from a baby.”

*Original.* I ignore him and his stupid smirk and reach for my things.

“You will not take possession of your phone or your weapon until I’ve tucked you back into your car after our visit to Wildflower.”

My eyes dart between him and my gun. *Tell him to go to hell. Grab your things and leave.* But I don’t. I’ve come too far to walk away now. “I can’t agree to that.”

He shrugs. “That’s the way it has to be. I hold them, and you get to see Wildflower. If you don’t like it,” he nudges my belongings toward me, “take your gun and your phone, and go home.”

“I thought you didn’t deal?”

“It’s not a deal. It’s an ultimatum.”

I don’t understand why I’m considering his terms. I know it’s a bad idea. Although, if he took my gun from my purse while it was sitting next to me—if he can do that—my gun and phone won’t offer much protection, anyway.

I’m rationalizing, and I know it.

*Keep your eye on the prize, Kate.*

I blow out a breath. He was a highly decorated special forces operative. An officer in the military. His father was the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the last administration. He went to Harvard. He has sisters and a mother. *Ted Bundy didn’t have sisters, right? Or was his sister his mother?* *Stop, Kate. Stop.*

“Okay.” The word is weighted with hesitation. “But I want to text a friend.”

“Which friend?”

“Fiona. She’s a friend from Boston.” Colin knows who I’m with, but Sinclair doesn’t know that. I want him to see me tell Fiona that I’m with him. Besides, if something happens, I’d rather have Fiona on Sinclair’s tail than Colin. If Smith Sinclair thinks I’m a pain in the ass, he needs to meet Fiona in mama-bear mode.

“What are you going to tell her?”

“That I’m on assignment meeting with a man named Smith Sinclair.”

“What if I say no?”

I don't respond because we both know the answer to this. Add it to the list of things I'm not proud of.

He hesitates for a long minute, considering my request, or maybe he just wants to watch me squirm. “Go ahead. Text her. But nothing about Wildflower. That's off the record.”

After I send the text, I place my phone in his outstretched hand. “You're not going to rape and murder me, are you?”

Sinclair freezes, glowering down at me. “No. Just rape you and leave you to live with the consequences.” The ugly words fall like acid on my unprotected skin. “Are you actually stupid enough to trust my answer to that question?”

*No.* But it would give me a moment's comfort. A little reassurance from him might trick my brain into sending an all-clear signal so that my heart stops pounding. A heart attack now would be such poor timing.



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## KATE

I t's a twenty-minute drive to Wildflower. During the car ride I don't mention the Wilders. Instead, I pepper Sinclair with questions about himself and his family, personal questions, most of which he answers with astounding brevity. I also tell him about my family. While I don't *really* believe he's going to hurt me, I still make an effort to humanize myself, and to remind him he's human too.

He's quiet, with his eyes on the road while I brag about my brothers, all proud Marines, Sean still in the Corps, and Liam who died when his unit was ambushed in the desert. I also tell him about my oldest brother, Tommy, a former Marine who is now a Boston cop.

What I don't mention is the complicated relationship I have with my family, how depression sank its poisonous fangs into my soul when Liam died, or that Tommy has never forgiven me for my mother's death. I do talk about Nana, who lived downstairs until she wandered off in the middle of the night and we had to put her in a home. How she was a stubborn, God-fearing Irish woman who went to Mass every morning at St. Claire's. I explain how Nana always found peace inside a Catholic church and comfort in the rituals, just as I do.

I prattle on and on, because no matter how much I kid myself, I'm nervous, and this is what I do when I'm nervous. Some people clam up. I don't shut up. Sometimes it's a chatty inner monologue, other times, like now, it's a severe case of verbal diarrhea. "What about you?" I ask. "Do you believe in God?"

Long seconds pass before he answers. "I'm not a churchgoer. But yes, I

believe in God—although I’ve had moments of serious doubt.”

I’m startled by the frank honesty. It’s not an off-the-cuff answer. It’s thoughtful and feels sincere. I don’t trust people who say they’ve never once questioned their faith. How could you not?

Sinclair rests his elbow on the console between us. “I’m sorry about your brother. The desert has taken too many good people.” His voice is gentle, but heavy, like the desert has stolen much from him too.

Despite the way he’s behaved in the past two hours, there’s plenty to like about him, and I’ve barely scratched the surface. Maybe we could be friends if the circumstances were different—maybe more than friends. I cast aside the foolish thought quickly. “Are you close to your sisters?”

“Very close,” he answers, pulling into a parking lot enclosed by a tall fence, sandwiched between two rows of dense, manicured hedges. It’s not only aesthetically pleasing, it affords absolute privacy to anyone in the lot.

Sinclair nods at the attendant who raises the remote arm so we can continue inside. I feel all the excitement of a child who has just arrived at the amusement park. I’m surprised I’m not bouncing on the seat. Wildflower might not hold all my answers, but it’s a piece of the puzzle. I’m sure of it.

As we drive around to the back of the building, I try to commit even the smallest details to memory. It’s often those seemingly insignificant facts that breathe life into a story and make it believable.

Sinclair stops at a cobblestone ramp, where he lowers the window and enters a code. A steel door opens and we proceed into an underground lot. *This is unusual.* Charleston floods frequently, so there are no underground parking lots, and few basements in this part of the city. *At least that’s what I’ve been told.* It’s too expensive to create the kind of barriers that can keep water out. Although cost is probably never a consideration for the Wilders.

Sinclair parks between a covered motorcycle and an expensive-looking sports car. There’s no sign of water damage on the exterior walls, and the floor is pristine. The garage spans the entire width, but not the length, of the building. *There must be a basement beyond the interior wall.*

“It’s deserted.”

He nods. “Closed on Sundays, except in the winter.” I don’t know what I expected. It’s not as though he was going to whisk me around the club, introducing me to one prominent member after another. Still, I’m a bit disappointed that it’s so desolate.

“It must have cost a pretty penny to install an underground garage,” I

observe out loud, hoping he'll nibble.

"The Wilders have means." So much for my casual observation. He's back to the dismissive tone he used with me at the bar.

Sinclair doesn't say much beyond *watch your step*, as he leads me to a back entrance and into an elevator. Before I step inside and the doors close, I scan the garage one more time, taking note of the exits.

The elevator doors open into a wide hall with plush Persian rugs laid over gleaming wood floors. Elaborate molding and still life paintings grace the walls. Not the kind with gracious bouquets in antique urns, but crude bowls overflowing with fruit and nuts, and trussed game flanked by decanters of fortified wine. My eyes stop on a painting of a helpless lamb, legs bound, so lifelike it causes a twinge of melancholy. But the lamb doesn't appear despondent. There's a serenity about it, as though it's willingly accepted its fate. A sacrifice or a meal? Perhaps both.

As we make our way down the hall, there appear to be four doors, two on the left and two on the right, each lacquered in a navy gloss and outfitted with polished brass trim. Near each door there is a narrow marble table with a gooseneck lamp, where packages can be left or where one might rest a grocery bag while fiddling with a key. It all screams old money, like Ralph Lauren or one of his protégés hand-selected the decor.

I silently follow Sinclair to a door on the right, the one farthest from the elevator. He presses a few buttons on the keypad, and when the lock clicks, he pushes the door open and gestures for me to go inside.

I hesitate briefly before walking past him into the apartment. My arm grazes his abdomen as I pass. It's a solid mass, harder than I expected. The brief contact sends currents scrambling haywire through me.

Sinclair is hot and dangerous with all that muscle, and even with everything going on, it's enticing. I hate to admit it, but it's true.

My pussy is awake and all atwitter, and for long seconds, I contemplate how I might respond if he makes a move. How it might feel to be pinned under that massive body, his cock hard and insistent, his warm mouth feeding on my needy skin. *Kate! You'll say thanks, but no thanks, and hope he respects it.*

The door clicks shut behind me. The echo is deafening. I should be afraid. It's the last thought that registers as I proceed into the sparsely furnished apartment.

It's an open floor plan with soaring ceilings, more modern than the hall. I

scan the rooms slowly, soaking up the details. It looks and smells like the housekeeper just left. There is not a single thing out of place—no socks strewn about, not a glass in the sink, nor are there any personal items anywhere to be seen—not a photograph or anything resembling a memento—not even a decorative sofa cushion that might hint of his style. It's devoid of character, faceless, and I can't imagine having anything in common with the person who lives here. Even my lady parts have stilled.

"Is this your place?"

"It's a place I crash from time to time."

*Crash. I'm sure it's a euphemism for have sex.* If you're not married, and you don't live with your parents, why do you need a place to crash? *Why?* There's something about this city, its people, so many secrets and unspoken truths. Although I have to admit, I'm oddly relieved that he doesn't actually live here. "Do you share the apartment?"

"Like a roommate?"

"Yeah."

"No. Why would I want a roommate?"

*Because this place has no soul, but it looks like it costs a fortune. And you don't actually live here.* "Who else lives in the building?"

"I'm allowing you to infringe on my privacy, but you will not violate anyone else's privacy while you're here."

*Hmmm. We'll see.* "Is the club downstairs?"

"Dining room is on the first floor. The spa and gym are on the second floor. There's office space on the third and storage. Want some water?"

I nod, and he reaches into the refrigerator and lobs me a bottle of artisan water. I glance at the label. Someone else must do the shopping, because I can't picture him putting a case of this into a cart. "What's in the basement?"

I watch for a reaction, but he only shrugs. "Vermin. Although it's exterminated frequently."

I'm anxious to see the club, including the *vermin* in the basement, but he doesn't seem to be in any hurry. I hope he doesn't think bringing me to this sterile apartment is going to satisfy my curiosity. "It's getting late. Are you going to show me around?"

"I haven't decided yet."

My heart skips a full beat. *You fucker.* "I thought that's why we came?" I manage to keep my voice even and calm, without a hint of emotion, but my body is growing heavy with the possibility that this might be another dead

end.

“I thought we came because you had questions.”

“I do have questions.”

He tosses his head back, guzzling every drop of the fancy-pants water without stopping for a breath. I watch, mesmerized by the ripples in his throat. When it’s empty, he crushes the bottle in one hand. The crinkling plastic startles me, even as I watch him do it.

While I’m still regaining my poise, he drops the flattened plastic into a recycling bin under the counter, then strides toward me, inching closer until there’s little daylight between us. I lift my chin cautiously, until our eyes lock.

Without a single word between us, he seizes control. I feel the floor beneath me shift as the universe tilts in his direction. My toes curl into the soft suede foot bed inside my sandals.

It’s warm in the apartment. *Stifling*. A sheen is forming on the back of my neck.

Sinclair takes hold of a small section of my hair, twirling it around a finger. When he releases it, the soft curl bounces off my cheek. “I love redheads,” he murmurs in a low seductive voice. “Is it true their pain threshold is higher?” His nimble fingers find my hair again, combing roughly through the strands. Just before he reaches the ends, he furls his hand and tugs firmly. “Is it, Kate?” My mouth falls open, but I can’t form words. “Do you enjoy having your hair pulled?”

I hate having my hair pulled. At least that’s what I always thought. But the tugging called my body to attention, put every nerve on high alert. And yes, I did enjoy it—all of it. But I especially enjoyed the way my scalp and pussy tingled in sync, as though they were engaging in an erotic dance for my pleasure alone. I’m still enjoying it. Although I have no intention of telling him that. I shake my head in response.

His eyes are dark slits. “Liar,” he murmurs, a breath away from my temple.

The warm sensation caresses my skin. It’s a stark contrast to the cruel word, *liar*. Is that what it would be like with him? Cruelty swathed in a tender caress? Would I enjoy that, too? *Oh, God*.

My throat is parched. My brain thick with fog. I’m aroused. And confused. With every circuit misfiring.

“How badly do you want those answers?” He hooks a thumb under my

chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. “What are willing to do to get them?”

His last question jolts me out of my *he-is-hot-as-sin* and *I want to melt in the fires of hell* trance. “You’re kidding?” I pant softly.

He smirks. It’s a menacing little smirk. “I’m not kidding. If I’m going to answer your questions, you’re going to make it worth my time. Or at least make it interesting. It’s not too much to ask, is it, Kate?” He stands inches from me, his voice sultry and rich when he says my name.

I don’t move. I can’t. My heart is pounding. It’s all I hear. That, and the small voice of reason nearly obscured by his chiseled features and strong hands. *Go, Kate. Now! While you can*, it shouts. But I don’t. My feet are stuck to the floor, and there’s nowhere to go, anyway. I can’t get out of this place without the codes, and he could overtake me easily if I run. My eyes dart around the room looking for an escape. I should at least make some effort to leave.

“Relax. We won’t do anything you don’t want to do.”

His voice has lost the perilous edge, but I’m not convinced he’s any less dangerous. Or maybe I’m not sure that I need much convincing to do whatever it is he has in mind.

He steps away, and pulls out two ladder-back chairs from the table, arranging them about six or seven feet apart, facing each other. “I’m going to give you back your gun. We’re going to leave it right here, within your easy reach.” He places the gun on a table, near me, within arm’s reach. “That should help you relax so we can play a little game. Do you like games?”

I glance at the gun. “What—what kind of game?”

“Ever play strip poker?”

*Why am I still here? Because this is your chance to get the information you need to write a Pulitzer-winning story. She died less fearful than you are right now, Kate. Suck it up.*

I shake my head. “No.”

“You can ask me questions. Whatever you want. And I’ll answer them. For every question I answer, you’ll remove an article of clothing.”

My mouth is dry. I swallow some water while he watches, like I’m an exotic sheep on display at the petting zoo.

“Start with anything you’d like. Lady’s choice.” I take another sip of water and screw back on the cap, tightening until the plastic cuts into my fingers. “When you’re out of clothes, if you still have questions left, we’ll come up with a different game. That’s up to you. We won’t do anything

you're not comfortable with. The gun is your insurance policy. But I promise you won't need it. I won't hurt you—unless that's what you like.”

*I won't hurt you—unless that's what you like.* I bat the thought away quickly.

He wants me to take off my clothes for the story. Those are his terms.

I bite down on my bottom lip so hard it stings. Once I'm undressed, once I agree to go that far, all bets are off. Why should I believe he'll stop, if I ask? There have to be some assurances. I lift my chin. “How do I know you won't force me—you won't hurt me?”

“Because I just gave you my word.”

*His word. Is that enough?* “And you'll take off your clothes when I answer a question?” I'm not sure why I ask this, or even whether I want it to happen. My head is spinning, and I'm stalling trying to figure out a strategy where I can win.

“I don't barter with my clothes,” he answers plainly, in the strong voice of a man who holds all the cards. Every single one. “I only take them off when I'm good and ready.”

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**KATE**

I'm not sure what to do. A part of me wants to demand he take me back to my car, but it's overshadowed by the part that wants to see this through. I might not have another chance. And I'm pretty confident he won't hurt me. I don't know why, exactly, but I am. I can stop at any time. I just need to stay one step ahead of him.

"Have a seat," he instructs. "You'll be more comfortable while we play."

I look at him pointedly. "I haven't decided if I want to play your little game."

"Yes, you have."

"You need humbling."

He smirks. "And you're going to handle that?"

*God, he's obnoxious.*

I've never played strip poker, but I've played poker. A lot of poker. The next best thing to a winning hand is a stone-cold bluff. I smile at him with all the bravado I can muster, which is a considerable task because I still don't have a cogent plan. "I need my notebook." If I'm going to humiliate myself by giving up my clothes, I don't want this to be a waste. Right now, I can only remember bits and pieces of what I prepared.

I retrieve my questions, and sit up tall, clutching the notebook to my chest. *You've got this, Kate.*

"I'm ready." I say it with my head high and an abundance of confidence. But it's a sham. I'm not at all ready. Maybe I'll ask just a few questions, that way I won't have to actually give up any of my clothes. It's not much of an attack plan, but it's all I've got.



He's drumming two fingers on his thigh, right above the knee. Otherwise, he seems relaxed. "I'm waiting."

I draw a breath and say a small prayer. "Wildflower membership is kept under tight wraps. Give me the name of one prominent member."

Sinclair hesitates. Maybe I shouldn't have started with that question, but there's no easing in slowly, if I plan on keeping my clothes. I don't have a single question to waste. "Just so you know, I'm not taking anything off if you tell me Larry Jones, Suzie Smith's grandfather from down the block. I need the name of a prominent Charlestonian who belongs—and it can't be one of the Wilders."

"One, and only one." He digs his teeth into his bottom lip and releases it with a snarl. "Jordan Hayward."

"The Governor?" I choke out. This little tidbit, in and of itself, is worth all the anxiety I had about playing the game.

He smiles. It's not a quick, easy grin, but rather the slow, lazy slide of a satisfied tomcat who's been on the prowl all night. At first, I think he's smiling because I'm wide-eyed at his jaw-dropping response. But that's not the reason.

"Yes," he responds without hesitation this time. "And that's two questions. You owe me two articles of clothing." Sinclair pauses briefly to enjoy my surprise. "Take them off and bring them to me."

I peer at him across the floor, preparing a solid argument, but decide against it. Arguing will make me seem weak and whiny. And there's no way he'll give in. I'll gain nothing. *I need to be more careful before opening my mouth.*

My face and neck are burning, the mottled pink skin winking at him, as I slip off my sandals, and cross the room with all the dignity I can garner. I plop the shoes into his waiting hand with more force than necessary.

He's still delighting in my mistake, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to grab a sandal and whack him over the head with it.

When I get back to my seat, I take a quick peek at my notepad until I find the right question, and then I take a couple of minutes to think it through. He's wily, and will seize upon any advantage. I can't afford another unforced error.

"For someone with so many questions, it's taking you a long time to ask one." I ignore his snarky remark. I'll ask when I'm good and ready.

When I'm fully prepared, I look up and meet his gaze. "For how long has

Wildflower been hosting sex parties?” I frame the question as if I have some basis of knowledge. I don’t. There are hushed whispers of hedonistic sex fueled by drugs and alcohol, but I haven’t been able to get anyone to confirm a thing. It’s important information because Warren King might not be a current member, but he was an early investor in the club.

“Sounds like you’re pretty confident about the parties. Are you sure you want to waste a question on it?”

*Why is he pretending to be helpful after just demanding two pieces of clothing, in what was a total prick move?* He’s not. He’s manipulating. I pause for a few seconds, but I can’t come up with a motive. “I’m sure.”

“Since it opened its doors.” He holds out his hand. I get up and drop my watch into it, while he observes intently, his eyes never straying from me.

I’m beginning to understand why he arranged the chairs some distance apart. It requires me to get up and go over to him, hand him my discarded things, and walk back in disgrace. I feel the blister of the brand on my back each time I retreat, but I’m getting the answers I need, so I force myself to quietly endure the humiliation.

Sinclair deposits my watch on the table beside him, using great care not to scratch the crystal.

I planned to stop the game after a few questions, but he’s talking, so I ask several more, until all I have left to give him is the shirt covering my undergarments, and the undergarments themselves.

My stomach churns with an array of emotion coated in a viscous bile. But I’ve come this far, and he’s given me useful information. It might be enough to convince Colin to let me stay another week or two, maybe longer. I’m so close.

I take a deep breath. “What type of illicit drugs are used during the parties?”

He tips his head, and for a few seconds, I’m sure he’s going to end the game. But he doesn’t. “This is off the record.” It’s not a question, but I nod my acquiescence. He swallows hard. The knot in his throat bobs twice before he speaks. “Drugs are a membership perk. Members pick their poison. To each their own.”

*It’s more than just rumor.*

Sinclair leans back, legs out in front of him, hand outstretched. Waiting.

*This is the moment of truth.*

I search his face for mercy, but he’s aloof and callous. There will be no

leniency.

Slowly and carefully, my clumsy fingers untether each button, painfully aware that I'm wearing a turquoise bra from a big box discount store, one that's old and a little stretched out. My face flushes when I remember the panties I put on after my shower. They were a gift from Fiona when the accusations about me stealing information from the police department first began. They have a smiley emoji on the back, with the words *kiss my ass ... Oh God*.

I'm not a woman who has a chest full of sexy underwear from Agent Provocateur. I have two kinds of underwear: clean and dirty. I have no idea why I care about any of this right now, but it's one of the errant thoughts swimming in my head while I slip the shirt off my shoulders and bring it to Sinclair, imagining his mocking thoughts when he gets a good look at my ridiculous underpants.

I glance at him. His gaze is all-knowing. It's as if he's able to bore into the depths of my soul and read every emotion I'm experiencing, so he can play it expertly.

He winds his long fingers around mine as I lay my shirt in his open palm. He squeezes, making it impossible for me to pull back my hand. My cheeks blaze as his eyes flicker over my bare skin, scorching the flesh everywhere they touch.

He's aroused and making no effort to hide it. I follow the outline of his cock against his leg. It grows longer and thicker from the attention. I avert my eyes, ignoring the ache between my legs, focusing on my racing pulse instead. The beats are coming too fast to count.

"Look at me," he demands, squeezing my fingers more tightly.

Without a second thought, I immediately obey, as though I've been a follower all my life.

There is something ruthless about him as he moves his hand from mine with a slow, deliberate slide. His fingers are nimble and strong, and he wields them masterfully.

When he's finished, I lower my gaze and go back to my seat, painfully aware that nearly every inch of flesh, every imperfection on my body, is on display for him.

*Breathe, Kate. Breathe. Think about why you're doing this.*

I don't remember meeting my mother, of course. But I've spent so much of my life combing through hers, gobbling up every detail from those who

knew her, rereading everything she ever wrote until I know it by heart, and I never tire of admiring the photographs of her. I've been such a conscientious student that it sometimes feels as though I did know her. I see her face in front of me now. Her young, beautiful face—she never had the opportunity to develop the furrows and lines of a long life.

“Kate.” I blink a few times. Sinclair's voice startles me. It's so out of place in my mother's story—at least it was until now.

“Are you done?” he asks.

It doesn't matter that I never planned on it getting this far. I'm like an addict, the more he feeds me, the more I need.

After drawing a breath, I wrap my icy fingers around the seat, and summon some of the grit my Boston neighborhood is famous for. *He's nothing more than a pawn*, I tell myself—a means to an end. Besides, he's a total jerk. *So what if he sees me naked?* It's not like I'm planning on having sex with him. I'll get my story then leave. We'll never see each other again. Two more questions, and I'll be done with him forever.

I repeat this several times while I decide which are the most important of the many questions I have left to ask. I cling to the seat, and choose two that will force the White House to reevaluate King's nomination. “How often do members participate in ritualized sex?”

“All the time.”

The answer comes quickly. *Too quickly*. I feel the flush crawling, spiky limbs spreading like a cancer over my pale skin.

Bra or panties? Which do I give up first? If we were having sex, it would be the bra. Second base before third. Or is it first? I don't know, and it doesn't matter. My feverish brain continues sputtering nonsense—the inner babblings of a fool.

I have misgivings, but I'm not a coward or a cheater. *Just pull the bra off quick, like a bandage. Don't think about it. Then ask the question about sex trafficking, get dressed and get out.* My arms reach behind me, but before my fingers get anywhere near the hooks, Sinclair's voice booms.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he barks, stalking toward me with my clothes in hand. “Put your goddamn clothes back on.”

It takes me several seconds to wrap my head around what's happening, and even then, I'm not exactly sure. He drops my things into my lap, towering above me. I feel the anger vibrating from him. Or maybe it's disgust. I begin to shrink inward, getting smaller and smaller until he finally

steps back.

“Do you think that gun sitting there is going to help you without these?” He takes the bullets out of his pocket and dumps them on the table beside the gun. I see the shells, but they barely register. “And even if the bullets were in it, do you think you would be any match against me? I could wrest that gun from your hand without any effort. But that would have never happened, because I wouldn’t give you the chance to get anywhere near it.”

My stomach seizes as the realization hits. It’s stark and bitter, and the pain is agonizing. I’m going to vomit. I cover my mouth with my wrist and focus on taking even breaths. “Nothing you told me was true, was it?”

“Of course not. My job is to protect the privacy of club members and the owners. Did you think I would trade my loyalty to see your tits?”

I squeeze my eyes shut. I was so desperate for information, I allowed myself to be played. Of course, they were all lies. A part of me knew it was a real risk all along, but I so wanted it to be different, I refused to consider it seriously. The tears are forming. Tears of anger and humiliation. Tears of a woman who is fresh out of time.

“The bathroom is the first door on the left. Get dressed.”

I’m not just shaking inside, my hands are trembling, too. I hug my clothes to my chest, wrapping my arms across my body, gripping the clammy skin tightly to stop the shaking.

“I should call your cop brother and have him come get you and take you home to your father. But I won’t, because they have enough on their plates without worrying about a little girl who is stupid enough to get herself caught in this kind of trap. I could have easily raped and killed you, disposed of your body in such a way that no one would ever discover it.” He pounds his fist on the table, rattling my watch and jewelry. “And you knew that, but you decided chasing the story was more important than living to write it.”

*Call my cop brother.* It’s *déjà vu*. It can’t be happening again. It’s not possible.

I’m embarrassed, but I’m also so angry now, I can hardly see straight. “For your information, I assessed the risk. I knew you wouldn’t hurt me.”

“Bullshit. You were pale and scared. Fidgeting and yapping nonstop in the car on the way over here. You had no way of knowing what I would do.”

I march right up to him. He’s taller than me, but I stand on tiptoe and do my best to get in his face. “I’m an adult. Stop lecturing me like I’m an irresponsible teenager. I have a right to take my clothes off for whomever I

want to take them off for. My brothers and my father don't get to make those decisions for me. I gave you a lot of slack today because I needed the story. But I was just a problem to be disposed of—like stinky trash.”

I'm shaking uncontrollably. Tears that I have no intention of letting fall are threatening, but I will have my say. This bastard is going to hear everything. “Did it ever once occur to you, just once, that I'm a human being? That I'm only trying to do my job? No, of course not, because you're a first-class jerk—no, you're a complete asshole without a drop of honor or decency to your name. I'm sure you and your friends the Wilders will have a good laugh about this.”

Without a single thought, I pull off my panties and fling them in his face. “Here's a little souvenir for you. Something to remind you of how despicably you treated me.”

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**SMITH**

Somehow, I find the decency not to check out her ass while she stomps off. After she slams the bathroom door, I pick up her panties off the floor and stuff them into her bag.

I can be a dick. But I'm normally not a hothead, and I rarely let anyone get that far under my skin. When I act like an asshole, it's usually calculated to make someone nervous, but inside I'm fully in control. Although, lately I've been flying off the handle left and right, and none of it's been an act.

Then today, when that woman showed up—that kid—with her damn smiley face underpants, and behaved in ways that put her safety at risk, I wanted to toss her over my lap and slap some sense into that tight round ass—*while I fingered her. Fuck.*

As I'm putting the chairs back, my phone vibrates with a text, but I don't bother to look. It's probably Gray wondering where the hell I am. Our plan was to meet at JD's place after I took care of Kate McKenna. *I took care of her all right. Used a damn nuclear bomb when a small hand grenade would have done the job.*

If some asshole pulled the shit on one of my sisters that I just pulled on her, I'd fillet them like a tuna and throw their guts overboard for the smaller fish to feed on.

She got the brunt of my pent-up frustration. Sure, she's a pain in the ass, but she didn't deserve to be humiliated to that extreme. *I'm better than that.*

The bathroom door creaks, and Kate comes into the living room, messy red hair spilling over her shoulders. One look at her swollen washed-out eyes and I feel like a total shit.

When she arrived at Tallulah's, her eyes were a vivid green with deep copper specks at the center, alive with expression—they hid nothing. But right now, they're so lifeless, I can't read them. *Anger? Disappointment? Sadness? Disgust?* Part of me wants her to feel all those things, and pull her tail between her legs and scoot back to DC, or Boston, or wherever she came from, and leave the Wilders the hell alone. Leave me the hell alone. Another part ... I don't let myself think about what that part wants, because that part is always looking for trouble, and I refuse to let it rule my life.

"If you give me back my phone and let me out of here, I'll call an Uber back to my car."

There's no fucking way she's calling an Uber. It's dark and the parking lot is empty, and I suspect the one where her car is parked is empty too. She doesn't pay attention to her surroundings even when she's not all shaken up.

"Here's your gun. The bullets are back in the chamber. And the safety's on. Do you know how to use that thing? I mean really know how to use it?"

She glares at me. "I would be happy to show you if you'd like." Her voice is strong and she doesn't sound as beaten as she looks. Frankly, I'm relieved by the sarcasm.

"Listen, I might have gone too far—"

"You think?"

I ignore the snark. "I agreed to the meeting to get rid of you. But it became clear you weren't going anywhere fast. I wanted to see how far you'd go to get the story—how important it was to you, and how big of a pain in the ass you were going to be. Then I started to get pissed off that you were careless about your safety. That you'd risk your life—for bullshit."

There's fire in her eyes—just a small spark, but it's there. "It might seem like—"

"I take it back. It's bullshit to me, but clearly important to you. I'm telling you this, though, nothing is worth the risk of enduring what I could have easily done to you. *Nothing.*"

She stands tall, flipping her hair over a shoulder. "You don't get an opinion about the decisions I make regarding my life. You don't even know me. I'm not an idiot. I checked you out. I knew you were a highly-trained operative. I knew full well you could've overpowered me. But I didn't believe you would."

*You have no idea what I'm capable of, what I've done. If you did, you wouldn't sleep tonight.* "You're not a mind reader. How could you possibly



know what I might do? How?”

“Because I make a living based on intuition and then follow the facts. I’ll admit, I was desperate and might have taken more risk than I would ordinarily. But we both know damn well the risk was tiny.”

I’m still pissed off. But I don’t argue the point, because I would never hurt her. She didn’t read the situation wrong. “I’ll show you around if you still want to see the club.” I won’t allow her to see anything that will peak her interest, but I want to give her something. I just do. “Then you can see for yourself that nothing here is worth taking your clothes off over. When we’re through, I’ll take you back to your car.”

She glares at me. “I’ll decide what’s worth taking my clothes off over.”

*Christ, she’s a pain in the ass.* “Do you want to see the place or not?”

Thin lines appear, etching the smooth skin between her brows. I’m pleased to see she’s being cautious. “Are there any strings attached?”

“One.”

“Forget it.” She dismisses me with a wave of the hand, checks her weapon, and secures it in the holster inside her bag. She handles the gun properly, which also makes me feel a little better. But she still has no clue what an easy mark she is—young and pretty, *real pretty*, and as she hoists that stupid bag onto her shoulder, I’m still not entirely convinced the gun isn’t just for show.

“The next time you’re chasing a story, I want you to remember how easily things could have gone bad today.” Her body tenses. It looks like I’m about to have my balls handed to me, but I don’t give a shit. She’s going to hear me out. “Next time, remember how much I struggled not to pull you onto my lap when you handed me your shirt. You saw the evidence—couldn’t drag your eyes away.” I glance at the smooth, creamy skin along her throat, my eyes lingering where it meets that defiant little chin. “Don’t make it easy for fuckers like me. Remember today. That’s my one string.”

She swallows hard, blinking a dozen times in rapid succession, trying to digest what I just told her. It’s all true, and I don’t give a damn if she knows it. I didn’t touch her, and I won’t. In my line of work, the very last thing I need is a nosy reporter in my bed, but that doesn’t mean I wasn’t tempted. I wait for her to haul off and take a swing at my head, but she doesn’t.

“Are you going to stand there all night and tell me what a fucker you are, as if I didn’t already know, or are you going to show me the spa?”

I crack a smile. God, would I like to toss this woman over my shoulder

and chain her to my bed for a week. “Yeah. I’ll show you the spa. But while we’re speaking freely, that ridiculous purse you carry—it’s bigger than you. It looks like it weighs a ton. Makes it easy for someone to grab you, and less likely you could get away.”

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t just comment on my purse.”

She showed a little spunk at Tallulah’s, but mostly she was reined in tight, and after we left the bar she was too nervous to give me any lip. She doesn’t have much to lose right now, and it appears Kate McKenna is done taking my crap.

I like this side of her. I like it a lot.

“The floor right below is the spa and gym. Let’s start there and make our way down. I have an appointment and I’m already running late, so we might not get to everything, but you’ll have a good feel for the place by the time we’re through.”

There is not one thing I show her that would raise a single suspicion. The kinky shit is on the lower level, and there are a few things in the apartment we just left. But she didn’t see any of it.

“I’m sorry your visit didn’t give you any leads.”

“What about the basement?”

“I already told you that there wasn’t much of a basement.”

“Underground garage that takes up a small portion of the building. It was pristine. It doesn’t make sense that someone would go to all that expense to park a couple dozen vehicles.”

She’s looking for a reaction from me that she’s not going to get. “You’re not dressed for the basement.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means if you’re going to crawl around with the vermin, you need to be appropriately dressed. That skirt and those shoes won’t cut it.”

“I already got plenty dirty today. I’m not afraid of a little more filth.”  
That was a jab squarely at me.

I check my watch, not that I have any intention of taking her to the basement, but I want her to believe I’m considering it. “I don’t have time. And I’m telling you—the answers to the secret societies you’re researching are not at Wildflower.”

“Then where are they?”

“I don’t know.” I really don’t. “Some of what you insinuated, ritualized sex and nefarious secret societies, sound a little far-fetched for buttoned-up

Charleston. But I suspect if there are secrets, it's because someone wants it that way. Poking the bear is rarely a good idea."

Kate glares at me over her shoulder, and my cock comes alive at her fiery green eyes. "Far-fetched?"

She's smart, too young, and hot as hell with that hand on her hip. I want to cancel my meeting and fuck her into next week—fuck all the sass out of her until she can't form a single intelligible word. But I don't take marching orders from my dick. Nothing good ever comes of that. "You should go back to Boston. It's your home. You should have never let the bastards drive you out."

"I can't right now." Maybe not, but she looks like she'd drop everything in a hot minute and head north if she could.

"I meant what I said about trumped-up accusations."

"How do you know they're not true? My behavior upstairs should be enough to convince you that I'd stop at nothing for a story."

"I just know. Gut feeling. Instinct. Call it what you will."

She tilts her head. "Why is it okay for you to trust your instincts about me, but it's not okay for me to trust mine about you?"

Because I'm highly trained commando and have spent years of my life in hellholes. But I don't tell her that. "I appreciate a person with goals and dreams. I hope you reach all of yours. Watch your back, Mary Katherine McKenna. You're a beautiful woman, and the world is filled with monsters, the likes of which you couldn't even begin to fathom."

"You're patronizing me."

"Nope. I'm just saying, don't take your clothes off for men who don't deserve it. Make them earn the privilege. I respect my sisters. They're capable adults, but that's exactly what I tell them all the time."

"Do they listen?"

"No. They do whatever the hell they want. Same as you."

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**KATE**

Sinclair drops me at my car and waits while I start the engine and get situated. I take the phone out of my bag, turn on the ringer, and place it on the console. The light flickers with messages, but with Sinclair still waiting, I don't take the time to check them.

I glance out the window and nod to let him know I'm all set. I don't know why I smile at him. It's just a small polite smile, maybe out of habit, or maybe to say thanks for waiting. Not that he deserves any thanks from me.

Sinclair lifts his chin in acknowledgment, but he doesn't go anywhere. No, he's not the kind of guy that would leave a woman in an empty parking lot after dark. Although his chivalrous behavior now is completely at odds with that little stunt from earlier.

When he pulls out of the lot behind me, I begin to wonder if he's planning on following me to the small motel that's been my home for the last few weeks, but at the top of the street, he turns in the opposite direction.

I'm embarrassed to admit, even to myself, that I'm a little disappointed. It's been that kind of evening, with so many highs and lows I still don't know if I'm coming or going. So many emotions—anger, relief, sadness, surprise, shame, and arousal—one poured on top of another, swirling and overlapping, creating a disturbing canvas, dark and erotic, with nary a glimmer of light to be found.

My phone chimes. I glance at the screen before answering. "Hey. I was about to call you."

"That was a weird message. I started to get worried when you didn't respond to my texts. I want all the details on Smith Sinclair."

Fiona has been my best friend since the day she wet her pants in kindergarten during circle time. Later that morning on the playground, Brett Nash called her Missy Pissy in front of the older kids. Everyone laughed. I was furious and kicked him in the shin so hard he cried like a baby. Everyone laughed then, too. I had to sit in the principal's office until lunchtime, but it was worth it.

"He's just a source for the Warren King story. I'll tell you about him in a minute. First, tell me about the boys." *Maybe by then my thoughts and emotions will stop swirling, and I'll be able to explain Smith Sinclair in a way that makes some sense to both of us.*

"The little monsters are finally asleep. Brett and his dad took them to a Sox game this afternoon, and they spent more time in the bathroom and at the concession stand than in their seats. I told Brett five was too young to sit through a baseball game." Yes, that Brett. He went from a toad to a prince. It took forever, and it wasn't pretty, but that kind of evolution can't be rushed.

"So what happened with Sinclair?"

"Nothing." I'm still not ready to talk about Sinclair, even to Fiona. "I didn't get anything helpful out of him. I have to go back to DC tomorrow."

"You don't have to. You can choose to go back, but you don't have to. You can stay in Charleston or go anywhere you want."

*Anywhere I want.* Does that include—I know the answer, but I ask anyway. "Is it too soon to go back—home?"

"I didn't mean Boston," she says tersely. The finality leaves me smarting. Fiona doesn't want me back in Boston. Every time I visit, she worries I'm not going to leave. Even though she misses me, and I know she does, she believes my family is toxic—believes it with every fiber of her being.

"There's nothing good here for you, Katydid."

There's more for me there than anywhere else in the world. Before they accused me of stealing information from the police department, I was happy in Boston. *Wasn't I?* I clutch the steering wheel tightly. "You're there. And my godsons. And my dad, and now my brother Tommy. I miss you."

With the air between us still heavy with unspoken thoughts and feelings, I pull the car up to the entrance of the dingy motel and turn off the engine. I glance at the rundown building. The dim lighting hides the layers of grime on the siding, but does nothing to improve the depressing façade or to ease my loneliness.

"We're at the Cape from the end of June through the third week in July,

but I'll come to visit as soon as I can string a few days together, after that—wherever you are. Brett's perfectly capable of managing the kids, and my mom and mother-in-law will be happy to help out while he's at work. It'll give the Nanas a perfect opportunity to check for dust bunnies under the beds and try to reverse the effects of my inept mothering before the twins grow up to be miscreants."

I dig a water bottle out of my bag while we joke about the Nanas. It's all in jest, but there's more than a grain of truth behind the humor. Fi is a wonderful mother, but she does things her way, making both her mother and Brett's crazy. I laugh so hard while she mimics her mother that I spray a mouthful of water all over the dashboard. For a few minutes I forget about Pulitzer prizes, the Keaton wedding, and Smith Sinclair. And I forget about how lonely I am, so far from home.

"When I got your text, I googled Sinclair. Impressive. All that muscle and those dimples—my ovaries nearly exploded. Damn he's *hot*."

I shiver, remembering his warm breath on my skin, *Do you like to have your hair pulled, Kate? I shake my head. Liar.*

"I didn't see much of the dimples today. He brought his A game—as in, he was a total asshole."

"What happened?"

*What happened? Where do I begin? It's Fiona, just say it.* I sigh. "He tricked me into taking my clothes off."

"Wait. *What?*"

I'm nearly drowning in shame—no, it's more like embarrassment. Not because I gave him my clothes, although that's a small part, but because I allowed him to make a complete fool of me, with nothing to show for it. Absolutely nothing. I take a breath and blow it out loudly.

"We played this game—for every question he answered, I had to take off a piece of clothing—everything he told me was a lie." The last part of the admission is so soft it's barely audible. I wonder if she's thinking about what happened in the frat house. It's crossed my mind a dozen times since the bathroom at Tallulah's.

"You took off your clothes for a stranger to get information for a story?"

Leave it to Fi to distill my stupidity into one clipped sentence. Plain English, and not the British kind, prettied up with a charming accent. "Yeah."

"You let him play you?"

I chew on my thumb, trying to contain a fresh wave of embarrassment.

“Yeah.”

“*Kate.*” She says my name gently, but I hear the small rebuke, laced with disappointment and pity. The pity is the worst.

Her tone makes me defensive, and for a few brief seconds I stop feeling sorry for myself. “Don’t get all judgy-judgy on me.”

Fiona sighs. “I’m not. Lord knows I’ve taken my clothes off for a stranger or three, with nothing but a chaffed vag to show for it.” Water is running in the background and I hear the clang of metal against metal. I imagine her standing at the sink in her cheerful kitchen, enjoying a glass of wine while she does dinner dishes, and I’m more homesick than ever. “It just doesn’t sound like you,” she adds softly.

It’s not like me, but I’m grateful for the validation, and relieved. I was beginning to have second thoughts about myself. “I needed the information, otherwise I’m back in DC covering silly stories.” I hesitate, taking a second to come to terms with my future. “I don’t think I can face that life again.” She doesn’t say anything. “I know there’s a story here, Fi. An important story. I can’t explain it, but I can feel it. It’s pulling at me.”

“If that pull is guilt about your mother, then maybe you should leave. But if you really believe there’s a story in Charleston worth pursuing, then stay.”

This is complicated and can’t be distilled into black and white choices. There are too many variables. Fiona knows this, but she’s pushing my buttons. Or maybe I’m too wound up to see my circumstances as clearly as she does.

“It’s not that simple. If I stay, I’ll be walking away from a prestigious news outlet and a paycheck. There will be no second chances. Those jobs are impossible to come by.” I sound whiny and helpless, even to my own ears.

“I’m beginning to think you don’t *really* believe what your gut is telling you. Or maybe you don’t want the story bad enough. You’re not normally a coward.” *Unless my family is involved*—she doesn’t say it, but that’s what she’s thinking. Fiona might have spared me on that front, but make no mistake, I’m getting a dose of tough love right now, like only Fi can deliver it. I suppose I need it, but that doesn’t make it any more pleasant.

She’s right. I’m not a coward, but I hate to disappoint—especially my dad. *What will he say if I quit my job on a hunch? Nothing supportive.* “It would be irresponsible to walk away from a good-paying job without any real prospects.”

“Don’t give me that shit. You’re twenty-seven years old. You have no

responsibilities but to yourself. This is the time to take risks.” The water’s off and it’s quiet now. “Whatever you decide, I’m behind you one hundred percent.” I hear Brett’s voice in the background, calling her to come upstairs.

“I should let you go.”

“Follow your heart, Katydid,” she adds softly, before we hang up.

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I SHOULD HAVE STOPPED for a bottle of wine. I desperately need something to take the edge off so I can sleep, but now that I’m in my room, I don’t feel like going back out. Fourteen long hours in the car tomorrow, and every second of it promises to be unpleasant.

After I text Colin to let him know I’ll be back tomorrow evening, I turn off my phone. I don’t want a response, or worse yet, to talk to him if he calls. He won’t gloat. That’s not his style, but I’m not ready for a heavy conversation with him. Nowhere near ready.

I’m still not sure whether I’ll stay in DC, or if it will be a quick trip to pack up my belongings before returning to Charleston. Fi gave me plenty to think about, and I’ll have lots of time to chew on it during the drive. Either way, Colin deserves a face-to-face conversation.

I glance at the clock on the nightstand before pulling out my pajamas from under the pillow. I’m still so keyed up that I’ll be tossing and turning half the night. *Maybe a bath will help me relax.*

After wiping out the tub, I turn on the spigot, making minor adjustments until the water is the perfect temperature. I toss my clothes on an empty chair and twist my hair into a high ponytail, clipping it to the top of my head. It takes forever to dry, so I don’t want it to get wet.

I grab my iPad and scroll through the playlist. I’m in the mood for a little Lady Antebellum tonight. I lay the tablet on the counter and turn off all the bathroom lights except for the small nightlight I purchased at the drugstore when I first arrived.

Mostly pleased with the mood in the room, I lower myself into the bath. The tub isn’t cavernous and there are no pulsing jets, but the warm water does its job nicely, penetrating my tight muscles until they begin to melt. Even without a tub full of bubbles, or a scented bath bomb, this feels heavenly.



“Need You Now” starts to play, and I lean back against the cool porcelain and let my eyelids flutter closed. The music is soothing—until the lyrics begin to seep into my subconscious, and all I can see is Smith Sinclair. The man who was a complete ass to me today. That’s not entirely true—and therein lies the problem.

In between being an insufferable jerk, there were moments that he touched my soul. When he talked about how the desert had stolen so much, my heart clenched, and then there were times, one or two, where I had to stop myself from tearing off his clothes and rubbing my body against his. *You saw the evidence—Oh, yes, I did.* I had to tear my eyes away from his swelling cock.

I spread my legs, letting the warm water lap against my pussy.

There was also that whole overprotective thing he had going on. I don’t know what to make of it. On one hand, I hated the patronizing attitude, on the other, I was tempted by it. I might have grown up surrounded by men, but I’ve never felt very protected.

I push away the sadness threatening to ruin my bath. I’ve learned to protect myself—physically and emotionally—that’s all that’s important. Girls who grow up believing a knight in shining armor will ride in and save them often die in the tower. Life isn’t a fairy tale.

Despite Sinclair’s concern, my gun is not just for show. While my friends were getting pedicures with their mothers, or scouring the mall for sales, I spent weekends at the range with my dad. My emotional armor, however, isn’t always as robust as it needs to be, and there are gashes and pings denting the surface. But it’s resilient. Like me.

Since Smith Sinclair is hellbent on infiltrating my thoughts, I might as well give him a little help. After drying my hands, I reach for my iPad and open my research folder. I pull up an image of him at President Wilder’s funeral. He’s somber, in a dark suit perfectly tailored to his large frame. The jacket cinches at the waist, falling effortlessly over those powerful hips. *Fi is right—he’s hot—everything about him screams sin in these photos. In person, too.*

I dredge up the photos, one after another, lingering, as I soak in the details of each frame. My favorite is one where he’s standing at the helm of a listing sailboat, glancing over his shoulder with a playful grin. It’s as though he’s sharing a joke with someone behind him—maybe JD, or maybe he’s with a group of friends. His dimples are on full display for the camera. My mouth

waters at the contours of his back and shoulders, chiseled out of a deep bronze stone. The photo must have been taken a while ago. His muscular frame hasn't changed, but his hair is longer now.

While I'm admiring Sinclair, secretly wishing I had an opportunity to experience the broad grin and playful side of him, my hand slips between my legs. I ogle him one last time, and set my iPad back on the counter, away from the water.

I tease my clit, massaging in a way that usually gets me off quickly. But I want more than a tepid orgasm with pleasant ripples. I want something that will leave me limp and exhausted. *What I really want is Sinclair.*

I drain most of the water out of the tub and lie back on my elbows, hooking one leg over the edge of the tub, and bracing the other against the tile wall. My legs are spread wide, with my tingling pussy positioned directly under the spigot. I reach between my legs and turn on the water, fiddling until the temperature is perfect. With a few tiny moves, I adjust my bottom so that the water trickles directly over my clit. My head falls back and my eyes shutter when the stream hits the swollen hood, caressing gently but relentlessly. The throbbing builds slowly, deep within my core.

My hands slide to my breasts, circling the heated skin, teasing each puckered nipple, pulling and pinching until the throb between my legs is merciless. But I don't want to come yet. I want to draw out the pleasure for as long as possible. I concentrate on the way my skin feels. I absorb each tiny prickle. I listen intently as my breath comes in short quick pants.

The music plays somewhere in the background. There is not a single thought of hard to dry hair. Smith's enormous hands are on me, warm and strong, demanding all my focus as they explore every inch of flesh. When he reaches my thighs, his fingers glide over the smooth skin in long strokes, nudging my knees further and further apart with each sweep, until I'm fully open to him.

He gazes at me, hungry and demanding, slipping his fingers into my wet pussy. My inner walls caress them, and he growls his approval while lowering his head to taste me. The long, lush strokes of his tongue entwine with the silky water in one exquisite sensation.

My clit is throbbing, and I need more.

I nudge the handle with my big toe, forcing the water pressure higher, and return my leg to the wall, curling my toes into the slick tile.

Oh. My. God. Yes. I squirm against the slippery tub, arching my back as

the pulsing water bounces off my pussy, stinging my sensitive clit. I can't hold off any longer. I grip the edge of the tub, clinging tightly as my hips begin an erratic buck.

*Do you enjoy having your hair pulled?* Smith's breath is hot against my temple. His cock is impossibly thick and impatient as it pushes into me.

My womb clenches into a tight fist, and a tortured groan emerges as the waves crash over me. I writhe and buck against the smooth porcelain, struggling to escape the deliciously cruel stream beating on my tender folds.

I lie spent in the empty tub, the beat of the music competing with my thumping heart. My limbs are so heavy, I can't move. And I can't keep my eyes open. No matter how hard I fight, I begin to drift.

*Follow your heart, Katydid.*

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**SMITH**

I pause outside the door to JD's study to get my head on straight. Gray is already here, and his non-stop speculation about what's holding me up is setting my teeth on edge. I'm sure it's also driving his brother nuts. JD can be a huge pain in the ass too, but in a different way, and we've known each other so long that I'm used to his brand of bullshit.

Both men look up when I walk in and park my ass in a chair in front of the desk. "Hey."

"How did it go?" Gray asks tentatively, as if bracing for bad news.

"She's after Warren King. Just chasing her tail. She didn't get what she wanted from me. I guarantee she'll be gone before midweek." The revelation comes with a small pang of regret. Not that I'm sorry she'll be out of my hair, but that my brief time with her might have been better spent. I would have liked—

"Did she say that?" Gray demands, interrupting thoughts that I shouldn't be thinking. I shake my head. "Then how can you be so sure?"

I stretch out my legs and lean back in the chair, resting my elbows on the thin arms, and look straight ahead as I casually drop the bomb. "I took her to Wildflower."

"What?" Gray barks from the edge of his seat. "You did what?" I knew taking her to the club would freak him out, but I've seen corpses with more color in their cheeks. "Tell me you did not take her downstairs."

"You need to calm the fuck down."

JD hasn't said one damn word since I walked in, but he's peering at me from across the desk, quietly biding time. Sometimes it's hard to believe

these two emerged from the same womb. “And don’t talk to me like I’m an idiot,” I add. “You had every opportunity to take the meeting with her, but you wanted me to do it. So I did—my way.” Granted it might have been better if my way had involved a more light-handed approach, but that’s water under the bridge.

Gray turns to his brother. “Don’t you have a fucking thing to say about this?”

That might as well have been a rhetorical question for all the response it received. But JD’s glare is now on his brother, and I’m relieved to have it off me. He sees too much sometimes, and I don’t need that kind of scrutiny right now.

“We call it a social club,” Gray spits out, as he moves closer to me, “but you do know it’s a goddamn sex club, right?” Sarcastic bastard. A vein throbs in his neck as he looms over me. He better not get one inch closer or I’m going to grab him by the throat and compress that bulging vein with my thumb. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“Listen up, asshole. I am not your Sub. You want answers, put the Dom back in the box, and shut your trap, otherwise you’re getting shit.”

Gray snarls before taking a few steps back. He leans against the window frame, hands clasped behind his head.

“It’s not like McKenna didn’t know exactly where Wildflower was located. Sometimes giving up something small is a better deterrent than anything else. I let her see the restaurant, the spa, and the gym. She walked through the empty ballroom, and got a peek into the office space. All of it off the record, and designed that way to make her feel I was doing her a big favor. I’m not some fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants chump. McKenna got nothing.”

Gray can’t stand still. He’s wearing down the rug on one side of the desk, still agitated, but more measured. “She got something.”

“She got shit.”

“Are you going to keep an eye on her to make sure she stops snooping?”

Sure. I don’t mind candy I can’t eat dangling in front of me. I’m a masochistic sonofabitch like that. “We’ll keep an eye on her, but I’m telling you, she’s at the motel packing. McKenna’s not interested in the club. She wants information on Warren King. His confirmation hearing is in a week and then this will all be over.”

“A week is a long time for a reporter to be hanging around asking

questions.”

I slap the heels of my hands against the wooden arms of the chair. “*Jesus*. You are some kind of thick. I just got through telling you, *twice*, she’s not going to be here a week.”

“King hasn’t been a member of the club for almost twenty years. He got out shortly after investing. I don’t even know how she found out about the connection.”

“Maybe she doesn’t know about the connection.” Even as I say it, I’m not sure. I don’t know what she knows about King’s relationship to Wildflower. We never got that far. I’m just trying to get Gray to chill.

“She wouldn’t be asking questions if she didn’t know something.”

“She didn’t bring it up. And trust me, she’s not shy.” The image of her in the middle of a world-class temper tantrum, whipping off those stupid panties and throwing them at me, pops into my mind and settles there. I already regret not checking out her ass as she marched off.

Gray’s phone beeps, and he curses softly. “I’ve got to go. Are you sure you have this covered?”

“I’m all over it.”

He places both hands flat on his brother’s desk. “Thanks for all your input, JD. Your concern for Wildflower is touching.”

JD sits back in his chair, glowering at his younger brother. “I’m not your Sub either, princess. So watch your tone.”

Gray stalks out, mumbling something that sounds like *fuckers*.

When he’s gone, JD reaches for his phone. “I know you didn’t take her downstairs, but did you take her upstairs?”

*Fucking JD*. There’s not a human being on earth that can read me better. “It’s not what you think.”

“She a real redhead?” He turns his phone so I can see Kate’s face.

Something about seeing him with her picture in his hand makes me want to jump over the desk and choke him. “Fuck you. You have a wife and a kid. Don’t you think it’s time to stop stalking women?”

He holds up both hands in mock surrender. “Just wanted to get a look at her. See if I’d have to give you hazardous duty pay for keeping a close eye on her. But from the look of her, it seems like you might need to pay me.”

I’d like to wipe that stupid smirk off his face. “You’re enjoying this aren’t you?”

His leans back, and chews on the knuckle of his index finger, his fucking

lips twitching. “Immensely.”

“You’re an asshole.” I snatch one of the baby’s stuffed animals from the corner of his desk and whip it at him with everything I’ve got. He catches the baby chick as it bounces off his chest.

“I’m well aware,” he drawls, studying me carefully. “Why did you take her upstairs?”

He expects me to say I wanted to fuck her. But that’s not true. Not really. That came after we were already in the apartment. “I wanted to see how badly she wanted the story.” I shrug, brushing a thread from my pant leg.

“And?”

“She wants it bad.”

JD sits forward, elbows on the desk, the fingers of his left hand pressed against the right. He takes a moment to search my face before he speaks.

“You didn’t.”

“Of course not. I toyed with her, but put an end to it long before it got out of hand.” *But not before I made her take off her clothes and cry.* I keep this information to myself, not that JD’s a choirboy, but it feels wrong to share it.

“Really? Because from the way you’re acting, it seems to me like it might have gotten out of hand. Like it might still be out of hand.”

“I didn’t touch her. She’s young. I was on a fishing expedition. That’s all.”

“Fishing. Of course.” He picks up a stack of papers off the desk and tosses them aside. “How young?”

“Mid-twenties.” Too young for my eclectic tastes.

“That’s not too young to cast a rod into.”

No, but in this case, young has nothing to do with age. “Why are we talking about this?”

“Because she’s a reporter. Maybe you didn’t stick your dick into her, but you wanted it. And you’re still thinking about it.”

“You’re a goddamn mind reader now? Well, tell me what else is on my mind.”

“I have no idea, but I have a feeling you’re about to tell me.”

He just handed me my opening. We need to have this discussion, and now. But the guilt I’m shouldering is heavy. “Mind if I get a drink?”

“Help yourself. Although I’m not sure why you’re asking.”

I pour us each a couple fingers of whiskey and hand him a glass. I’m going to tell him, but I want the vibe in the room to change. I don’t want this

conversation to be flippant or laced with our usual sarcasm.

I sit down and sip my bourbon, appreciating the small burn in the back of my throat after the first drops trickle down.

“Now that you’ve set the mood and calmed your pretty little tits with my good bourbon, I’ll give you the bad news. I’m not fucking you, no matter how much you beg.”

I laugh. It comes all the way from my belly, and the corner of JD’s mouth curls in response. He’s a sonofabitch. *The best kind of sonofabitch.* I’ve never had a better friend.

“I appreciate you hiring me when I wasn’t sure where my life was headed,” I begin from the heart, because I remember how out of sorts—how lost—I felt after the surgery, after I left my unit. JD was there. I didn’t say much, and neither did he. But he listened carefully to the few words I spoke, and to the silence. He called bullshit when necessary. Stood beside me while I healed and then gave me a job to do. A *real* job. Not some bullshit task to keep me busy like the military had planned. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciated it at the time. Still do.”

He rubs his hands over his face. “*Jesus Christ.* You sound like a teenage girl telling some pimply-faced bastard he’s going home with blue balls. Spit it out.”

I hesitate for a few seconds. I’ve thought about this moment often in the last month, considered the words carefully, but still, they don’t come easy. “I’m ready to move on. I need more in my life. With your father gone, there are fewer safety concerns. You no longer need the kind of security I can offer.”

He runs his knuckles across an unshaven jaw. “You’re leaving?”

There’s a catch in his voice that’s rarely there. I suck in a breath and blow it out. “Don’t want to. I’m hoping you let me hang around and grow the business from here. Do some high-level tracking—maybe some search and rescue—pick-up a government contract, here and there.” I shrug. “The details are still up in the air. But there’s a lot I can do remotely—even manage teams from here. Not much different from some of the work I did in the military, but I’ll be my own guy. I have skills I could be using more effectively.”

“Do it.”

*Do it.* Things with JD are rarely simple. I expected some pushback. Some kind of negotiation. “That’s it. Do it?”

“It’s not exactly a secret that protecting me isn’t your life’s dream.



You've been an irascible motherfucker lately."

I crack a smile. In all the times I thought about how unsatisfied I had become with the work, I didn't once consider that anyone else might have noticed. "You're pretty observant for a self-absorbed cocksucker."

"*Cocksucker*. In your dreams." He props an elbow on the arm of the chair. "I want to be an investor."

I should have expected this. "You don't need to do that. I'm not going to start big. I might not have the kind of money you do, but I have a pile of loose change hanging around."

"What you're describing is going to cost a pretty penny. I know what I'm talking about. Equipment, insurance, you name it, it all costs money. More than you think. You need investors."

I know he doesn't mean anything by it, but the offer nicks my pride. "I didn't come to you for money."

"Didn't think you did." He pauses for a few seconds, bouncing a pencil eraser off the desk. "I'd like us to be in business together. I'm happy to be a mostly silent partner." I catch the twinkle in his eyes and quietly shake my head. He might be a man of few words, but nothing about him is silent.

"You're going to do good things," he continues. "I'd like Wilder Holdings to be a part of it. I'd like to be a part of it."

I look up from my empty glass. "Mostly silent?"

He nods, swirling the whiskey around the tumbler in his hand.

"I'd like that, too," I say, after a few seconds pass. And I would. He's smart and has much more experience running a business than I have, and most importantly, I trust him implicitly.

JD gets up and goes over to the bar, bringing back a bottle of Pappy's and two fresh glasses. He pours us each some whiskey. "Special occasions," he says, "call for my man, Pappy." He touches my glass with his, before sitting his ass on the edge of the desk a few feet away from me.

"What's going to happen with the security here?" he asks.

I've thought through every contingency carefully. Now to see if he'll go for it. "I don't want to give that up." He visibly relaxes, but I haven't lobbed the grenade yet. "Thought I'd put Rafe in charge of security here."

He freezes. His expression, like his words, is dead serious. "I don't want him off Gabrielle's security team. Rafe and Gus look out for her and the baby like they're their own."

"Wouldn't want to take them off, either. That's never been the plan."

JD nods, and his frown eases. “Do you plan on using any of your current team in the new venture?”

“Aside from me, Delilah is the most highly trained member of the team. She’s the only one with the kind of skills that can be useful in what I’m thinking about. But there won’t be any changes for a while. It’s going to take some time before we hammer it all out, and it’s up and running in a way that I’m comfortable bidding on contracts.”

“Delilah. I can live with that.” He lifts his glass in my direction. “Cheers.”



## KATE

While it took less than two hours to pack my furnished room in DC, mop the floor, and wipe up the bathroom, it's ten days before I'm back in Charleston, and two weeks before my job begins. So much has happened in the interim.

Warren King's confirmation hearing has been delayed until after Congress returns from their summer recess. I learned this little piece of news while driving through the Blue Ridge Mountains on the way back to DC. It cemented my decision to leave the paper.

Hearings are delayed for a myriad of reasons, big and small. It happens all the time. Maybe they found something concerning in King's background, or it could be a political calculation by the White House, or perhaps some Senator has a burr up his ass. It could be that simple. Nothing in the announcement provided any clue, and I parsed each word carefully.

It's only unusual because it means that when the Supreme Court begins its October term, they'll be down a justice—bad for the country, but the timing works in my favor. By October, the Boston Police Commissioner's job will be long-filled, and I can go home again.

With the hearing delayed, there was no real urgency to get back to Charleston, except for a nagging pull that I still can't quite explain. So I stuck around to cover the Keaton wedding. My colleagues appreciated the help, and it eased my conscience not to leave them short-handed for the event.

The wedding was as godawful as I anticipated. When the mother-of-the-bride *accidentally* spilled an entire glass of red wine in the lap of the father-of-the-bride's mistress, I reminded myself that it was the last society event I

would *ever* have to cover. It made the air kisses and the never-ending parade of lavender tulle more tolerable.

The extra time in DC also gave me an opportunity to find an affordable sublet in Charleston, and a part-time job at the library working with women who are homeless because of domestic violence, sex-trafficking, and poverty. It's not only meaningful work, but it will give me ample time to work on the King story, and it pays enough that I shouldn't need to dig into my savings.

I'm sure Smith Sinclair and his buddies will be thrilled that I'm back in town. I wonder what Sinclair will have up his sleeve for me? Whatever it is, I'll be prepared this time. *Maybe*.

Sinclair has been a regular in my naughty fantasies since our little encounter at Wildflower. I thought about him often while I was in DC—when I got bored with all the Keaton nonsense, and also, alone in my bed in the dark, with the soft hum of the Lelo in the background. The orgasms were epic. But I'm paying the price now. Since being back in Charleston, I'm constantly looking over my shoulder, wondering if he'll appear out of nowhere. I still can't decide if I would enjoy bumping into him casually. I wish I could say *no*, but I'm not sure.

Today is my first official day of work. I'm both nervous and excited as I add the finishing touches to the bulletin board in my office, that also doubles as a classroom, tucked behind the stacks in the library. This is where I'll be helping women put together resumes, fill out applications and forms, and provide advocacy, when necessary, along with holding ESL classes twice a week.

When I turn to grab a stapler from the table, there's a man in the doorway, preparing to knock on the open door. *A priest*. The white collar is a dead giveaway. His quiet presence startles me. It's not that I'm a stranger to priests—my childhood home abuts St. Claire's Church, and I spent a lot of time there soaking up Father Tierney's friendship. It's just—I must have been deep in my own little world because I didn't hear him approach.

"Hel—hello," I stammer. He smiles kindly. Even with a shock of dark hair, he has the look of an Irishman. A handsome, strapping Irishman is how Nana would have described him. I can almost hear the lilt in her voice, *Could have had any woman, but he chose Christ*.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." He steps inside and holds out his hand. "I'm Father Creighton. But most everyone calls me Father Jesse. You must be Kate."

*How does he know my name?* “Kate, yes. I’m Kate.” I take his hand. It’s large and warm, with a firm handshake. “Mary Katherine McKenna. But most everyone calls me Kate.” I sound ridiculous, almost sheepish, as though he overheard me daydreaming about my Lelo and the mind-blowing orgasms.

“Mary Katherine. Lovely name for a lovely woman.” He looks at me with nothing but kindness, but still, I feel a small blush from his careful scrutiny which seems to go on a tad too long.

“When I was in last week, Lucinda at the front desk told me you’d be taking over for Stacey while she’s on maternity leave, and I wanted to drop these off, and to meet you.”

He hands me a stack of cards—they look like business cards with the photo of a stately church printed on the front. “At Saint Mary Magdalene’s, St. Maggie’s—that’s what most everyone calls her—” his bright blue eyes twinkle in a boyish manner, “we welcome everyone, but we have a special mission to serve women who are struggling, spiritually or worldly.”

I glance at the cards. St. Maggie’s is a gothic style structure, while St. Claire’s in Boston is a Romanesque Revival. They’re both grand, and quite beautiful from the outside, boasting tall tapering spires topped with Latin crosses.

“We have clothing and non-perishable food items—and God, of course.” I look up from the cards, to the corner of his mouth curled at the corny joke. I smile, too. Father Tierney is also fond of dad jokes, but he’s significantly older than Father Jesse, so the jokes don’t seem quite so lame coming from him.

“I guess you could say we supplement the work you’re doing here,” he adds. “We also have connections that can assist women with things like an apartment or household items.”

“That sounds fabulous. I’m new in town and have no connections.”

“You have me now, and I have connections with the very best.” It’s an odd thing for a priest to say, and when I don’t respond, he points toward the heavens and grins. I laugh softly when I finally get the joke.

Lame jokes aside, I like him. He’s the most down-to-earth, approachable person I’ve met in Charleston. Maybe he wouldn’t mind giving me some guidance. I’m totally confident about putting together resumes and filling out forms, but I’ve never worked with women at risk—with anyone at risk, and I’ve been a little worried about saying—or doing—something that might be insensitive or retraumatizing.

“I volunteered at a neighborhood soup kitchen in Boston and helped with clothing drives at our church, but I was never the one in charge. I know the women who come here for assistance are quite vulnerable. Is there anything you think I should know that might help me with my work here?”

He thinks for a minute, not breaking eye contact. “It can be trying, on many levels. Just remember that you are doing God’s work, and you’ll be fine. After spending only a few minutes with you—I can see you have a kind way about you and great empathy in your heart. You’re perfect.”

I’m not accustomed to such effusive praise and I’m a bit embarrassed. I glance to the side in an effort to deflect the glare of the spotlight. Father Jesse doesn’t say anything more, but he studies me, again, this time with a faraway look, as though his mind is elsewhere. When the spaciness goes on for too long, it becomes a bit disconcerting, and I begin to wonder if he’s having a seizure. It sounds silly, but a little girl who I babysat one summer suffered from a seizure disorder. She’d just stare into space—she was there, but not really. It felt just like this.

“Is everything okay?” I prod gently, so as not to alarm him.

He shakes his head with small movements, as though he’s gently clearing the cobwebs. “Yes. Yes. I apologize for staring.” He sighs. “It’s that you remind of someone. But I can’t quite put my finger on it. It’s maddening.” His brow is crinkled, and his expression seems—I don’t know—agitated. Not angry—but as though there is upheaval happening inside him.

“Perhaps it’s my hair?” I offer, hoping to lighten the mood. “There are so few redheads that people are always sure they’ve met me before.”

“Yes. But that’s not it.” After another few awkward moments of chit chat, with him trying not to stare, his expression softens, and I see the glimmer of recognition in his eyes. “Your face has the serenity of a young Magdalene.” His tone is hushed, almost reverent. “You resemble the images we have of her. It’s uncanny, really. I don’t know why I didn’t notice it when I first came in.” He wets his lips. “Perhaps I did,” he adds, mostly to himself.

“Oh.” That’s a little strange. But I brush it off. I’ve had enough experience with priests to know they don’t always think on the same level as the rest of us whose lives aren’t steeped in philosophy, theology, and mysticism.

“Of course, we’re not sure how she actually appeared. Instagram wasn’t available back then.” He cocks his head and smiles. “I made you uncomfortable. I’m sorry.”

I shake my head. “You didn’t.” It’s just a small fib. Lying to a priest might be bad, but it would be terribly rude for me to say otherwise.

His eyes stray from my face while he bends to pick up a pushpin from the floor. “Don’t want anyone to step on this.” He places the lime green pin carefully in the center of the table, where it won’t accidentally roll off. “You’re new in town?”

The change of subject isn’t exactly seamless, but I’m glad to be talking about something besides how much I resemble a saint who lived at the time of Christ. “I arrived a few days ago, but I was here for three weeks last month too.”

“If you’re still looking for a church, I hope you’ll give us a chance. We do a Sunday potluck after Mass. I’d love to say it’s well-attended and you’ll meet lots of people your age, but fewer than a dozen parishioners show up regularly, and they are mostly old enough to be your grandparents. But I can promise you’ll be well fed.” He sticks a hand casually into his trouser pocket before continuing. “Sometimes we get one of the women from the classes here, who needs a good meal or a friend.”

I shift my weight from one foot to another, preparing to confess that I haven’t stepped foot inside a church while in Charleston.

“I haven’t found a church,” I say softly, lowering my gaze. *Or even looked for one.*

Father Jesse rests a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me,” he whispers, with a wink so quirky and sweet, it charms me. “We’re on Albert’s Island. The bus runs from downtown a few times a day. You can almost always catch a ride back downtown with a parishioner. Not many people actually live on the island.”

“I have a car.”

His face lights up. “Then I can count on seeing you?” Even if I wanted to, I don’t have the heart to say no.

And why not check out St. Maggie’s? I would love to be part of a spiritual community again. I miss the feeling of belonging to something bigger than me, and Father Jesse has been more welcoming than anyone else I’ve met here. “I’d love to come. Should I bring something to the lunch?”

“Not this time.”

“Mary Katherine.” I look up to find Smith Sinclair striding into the room. Even with all the time I spent looking over my shoulder waiting for him to appear out of nowhere, I’m still surprised to see him standing here. It feels



out of place, somehow, all wrong. Like I'm a five-year-old who just bumped into her kindergarten teacher at Target. He doesn't belong here.

I'm speechless, but I can't stop gawking. He looks delicious, in a faded, cadet blue T-shirt stretched over his chest and shoulders, the soft fabric barely corralling his biceps. *I hope priests are oblivious to the heady scent of pheromones that emanate from the aroused female body.*

"Father." He nods. "I don't think we've met. I'm Smith Sinclair."

"Father Creighton, from St. Maggie's."

"On Albert's Island."

"That's right." The two men size each other up. It must be a genetic thing with men. Even someone as evolved as a priest can't help himself.

Father Jesse turns to me. "I need to get back to the island. Please give out the cards."

"I will."

"I look forward to seeing you on Sunday. Perhaps your friend, Mr. Sinclair, would like to join us for Mass." Father Jesse doesn't glance at Smith, even as he speaks about him.

Sinclair doesn't say a word in response. *Thankfully*, because there is no way I'm taking him to church with me. The last thing I need is Sinclair intruding on what I hope will become my spiritual oasis.

"Thank you for stopping by, Father. I'll see you on Sunday. But if I have any questions, or need a connection, you might hear from me sooner." After sharing the private little joke, I smile at him, and he chuckles softly.

I hold out my hand, and he takes it in both of his in a friendly gesture. "My door is always open for you, Kate." He lets go of me and turns to the man whose muscular ass fills out his worn blue jeans nicely. "Mr. Sinclair, good to meet you." Sinclair gives him a small curt nod of acknowledgment, but doesn't return the pleasantries.

I watch Father Jesse walk out the door and disappear behind the stacks. When I turn back around, Sinclair is sitting in *my* seat at the small table, like he owns the place. It's irritating, and my pheromones dry up.

"Why are you here?" I grab the to-do list he's eyeing and turn it over, quickly scanning the table to make sure there's nothing in his line of vision that he shouldn't see. I'd call him a nosy bastard, but I'd do the same thing in his shoes.

"I need some help polishing my resume," he says with a straight face. I scowl at him. "Be nice, Mary Katherine. I don't think the good Father is even

out of the building yet. What do you think makes a man want to be a Catholic priest? Give up all his worldly possessions, his sexuality, and devote his life to a God that we're not even sure exists?"

"It's considered a great honor."

He raises his brow. "*Really?*"

"*Really.*" I hitch my thumb, signaling for him to get up. "You're in my seat."

"I'm not staying long." He glances pointedly at each available chair around the table. "Explain why it's such an honor to become a priest."

"After I explain, do you promise to leave?"

He smirks. "Very shortly after. Has anyone mentioned that your southern charm is sorely lacking?"

I sigh and sit diagonally across the table from him. "Becoming a priest is a special calling, directly from God, and having a priest in the family is a special blessing from God." I explain like I'm a catechism teacher and he's a bored fifth grader. "There are many Irish families, Catholic families, I suppose, but I can only speak for the Irish, who dream of having a priest in the family." Sinclair picks up the errant pushpin off the table and twirls it between his fingers while he listens. "But only the smartest, most reflective boys are sent to the seminary."

"That's old school stuff. I don't believe there's much honor in joining the priesthood anymore."

"Maybe not everywhere, but where I'm from, there is still much honor in becoming a priest and it's still a great blessing bestowed on families." The sex abuse scandal that I'm sure he's hinting at is a well-deserved black eye on the institution of the church. It involved so many innocent children, far too many, but it did not involve *all* priests. Not by a long shot. It grates on me when I hear people speak in sweeping generalities about the travesty. "Since you're not Catholic, maybe you should keep your uninformed opinion about the priesthood to yourself."

He tosses the pin aside, and gazes at me until my skin begins to tingle. "He likes you."

"Who?"

Sinclair lifts a purple pen out of my pencil holder, clicking it on and off a few times before replacing it. Then he takes out another pen, and another. I try to ignore it, but having him paw at my things is driving me crazy. "The Father," he answers matter-of-factly, while toying with my favorite orange

pen.

“He’s a priest. He likes everyone, even you.”

“Something off about the way he looked at you—for a priest.”

I snatch the pen holder away from him, stashing it well out of his reach.

“What do you want?”

Sinclair peers at me, his eyes narrowing. “I stopped by to say hello. I didn’t expect to see you back in Charleston.”

*Stopped by to say hello, my ass.* “Well, you’ve said hello, and now it’s time for you to go. I have a lot of things to do before my class this evening.”

“I’ll be keeping my eye on you. And you ... will stay away from the Wilders.”

“You know, your southern charm could use a little shine, too.” I flash him a saccharine smile. “I already told you I have no interest in the Wilders.”

“And I already told you I don’t believe you. You took off your clothes to get a story. Any fool could have seen that wasn’t your normal way of operating. That tells me you’re looking for a big story. No bigger story in Charleston than the Wilders. And there’s sure as hell no other story here worth leaving your paper for.”

When he mentions my clothes, I dig my fingernails into my thighs to control my temper. He’s trying to get a rise out of me, but I’ll be damned if I give it to him. I’m so indignant it takes almost a full minute before it registers that he already knows I’ve left the paper.

“Life around here must be pretty dull if you have nothing to do but monitor my every move. Maybe the Wilders are paying you too much. Or maybe it’s time to leave Charleston and find something to do that holds your interest so you don’t need to be skulking around, puffing out your chest and growling at reporters trying to do their jobs.”

His lips are pursed in a tight little line, and he’s all but snarling. I plucked a nerve. For once, just once with him, I feel like I’m the one in control. Even in my fantasies, he’s in charge.

“I can’t imagine a man like you would be satisfied for long doting on the rich and famous. I know just how you feel. That’s exactly why I left the paper.” His eyes are dark slits. He’s pissed. *Good.* Now maybe he’ll leave me alone—not just in the real world, but in my fantasy world, too. *Although, there’s probably no harm in him making an occasional appearance there.*

Sinclair glowers at me, but today, I’m not squirming. The library is a public place with people milling about on every floor. Besides, I don’t want

anything from him. I'm done in that regard.

"Don't fuck with me, Kate. It's not a game you want to play. You won't win, and next time, you might lose more than your clothes."

"I have no interest in playing *any* game with you, Sinclair. But just like I decide when to take off my clothes, I decide what games I'm playing and who I'm playing them with."

He leans across the table and taps the edge of my wrist a couple times. "You keep up that line of thinking. See where it gets you." With one last snarl, he gets up and strides toward the door without even a goodbye. When he gets to the doorway, he turns abruptly. "That priest wants to fuck you."

I slap a hand over my eyes, covering them completely. He sounds like a jealous boyfriend, but that's not what this is about. This is pure, unadulterated manipulation. Psychological warfare.

"I can't say if he'll act on it. But he wants it."

"You're ridiculous."

With just a few strides, he's back, both hands flat on the table, leaning over me. "You believe whatever you want to believe. Faith is a highly personal thing." His eyes are ablaze, and I look away to avoid the singe. "But behind that starched white collar is a man. He's got the same capacity for good and evil as any other man. Same base needs—food, sleep, and sex. I've been all over the world, never seen any difference among men in that regard." He pauses for a few seconds, the silence vibrating in the room. "You'd be surprised what men do in the name of God."

Sinclair is trying to shake me up, to keep me away from the comfort of the church and any friends I might make there. It'll be easier to chase me out of town if I'm alone and isolated.

I look down at my laptop and scroll through some documents, searching for nothing in particular. He doesn't say another word, but I feel his eyes penetrating—his shadow looming large. I don't breathe again until he's gone.



## KATE

As I drive over the causeway to Albert's Island, the overgrown trees in the distance catch my eye—Live Oaks, draped with Spanish moss. They're all over Charleston, and for a girl from New England unaccustomed to them, they're a bit spooky. They remind me of a scene straight out of a horror flick.

The island is surrounded by swampland with vegetation and murky water on all sides. Albert's Island is a small landmass that holds St. Maggie's and a few houses that belong to the church—at least according to Google maps.

I follow a narrow dirt road a short distance, weaving to avoid the brush. It's not even summer yet, and the thorny shrubs have already taken over. I can't imagine this road will be passable in July if the bushes aren't tamed.

When I reach the clearing, St. Maggie's is directly in front of me—a Gothic marvel constructed almost entirely of stone with an ornate cross jutting into the heavens. More than a dozen armed gargoyles with misshapen features are perched along the roof, guarding the castle, perhaps from the devil, or maybe from other fallen angels. Regardless, it's a grand piece of architecture, out here on a lonely island. Striking, yet haunting, even in the bright sunlight.

There are a couple dozen cars in the parking lot—nothing particularly fancy or showy. I walk around to the front entrance and climb the steep granite stairs. At the top, I turn to survey the area. It's so close to the bustling city, yet so desolate.

A gentle breeze carries the familiar scent of brackish water. *The ocean.* It's the one thing about Charleston that always feels welcoming—that, and hopefully St. Maggie's.

When I step inside the vestibule, Father Jesse is there, dressed in traditional green vestments, greeting a couple who appear to be in their late sixties. Father Tierney always stood in the back of St. Claire's before mass began too.

While waiting my turn to say hello, I notice an opulent font, with cherubs carved from honed marble, along the back. The stone has worn smooth over time, giving it an elegant patina. I quietly admire its beauty before dipping my fingers into the holy water, reciting the silent prayer as I make the sign of the cross.

"Kate." Father Jesse approaches me and takes both my hands in his.

"Good morning, Father."

"I'm so glad you came. I wasn't sure you would. But I'm a man of great faith." He squeezes my fingers firmly before letting go. "I hope you're planning on joining us for lunch."

I wasn't sure if I would stay. My plan had been to scope out the situation, and decide after Mass. But I don't have anywhere else to go, and it will be hard to leave without making up a lie. I don't want to lie to a priest while standing in a church—not even a small fib to spare his feelings. If God doesn't punish me for that, surely Karma will. "I would love to stay for lunch and meet some of the parishioners. If it's still okay?"

His features soften. "More than okay." The processional hymn begins, filling the church with joyful sounds. "That's my cue." He winks, that charming quirky wink, and smiles. He has an easy boyish smile that bathes his features in a sweet innocence, and he's not shy about using it. "We'll talk more after Mass." Father Jesse motions for me to go inside and waits until I'm situated before proceeding up the grand aisle.

The liturgy is achingly familiar. When I close my eyes, I could be back in Boston, sitting in a pew at St. Claire's. The ritual of Catholic Mass is predictable, rarely deviating from the traditional, always providing comfort and a sense of grounding.

The church has always been my anchor, even when I strayed from its teachings. I feel protected inside the hallowed walls—physically, emotionally, and spiritually safe. I guess you could say it's coded into my DNA. Or perhaps it's the love and affection that Father Tierney showed me growing up. The times he babysat when no one else wanted the chore, snuck me Kit Kats and Hershey Kisses, or let me choose one item from the collection of donated clothes. I spent a great deal of time with him as a child.

There was much solitude, but also much joy there. And it was safe. A kind of safe that I rarely felt growing up. Something beyond physical safety.

When it's time for communion, I hesitate. At St. Claire's, congregants are welcome to participate in communion, even if they haven't received the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or Confession as it is still sometimes called, as long as they are in a state of grace. Father Tierney interpreted grace broadly, but I'm unsure about the custom here, so I remain in the pew, kneeling while Father Jesse administers Communion. Once or twice, I'm sure he glances at me, although it might just be my conscience needling. It's been a long time since I've confessed my sins to a priest.

After the final blessing, Father Jesse makes his way down the aisle, and waits at the top of the landing outside, chatting amicably and inviting congregants to lunch. From his expression, I imagine that some of the conversations are more serious than others. He touches many of the people he talks with, gently—a hand on a shoulder, or on an arm, perhaps giving support or consoling. He's genuine and kind, and his way makes it feel like this is a place I want to return to.

“So, what did you think?” Father Jesse sneaks up behind me while I'm preoccupied with the intricate scrolls of the iron handrail. “Did the sermon bore you to tears? Is that why we can't entice anyone under forty to leave their warm bed and attend Sunday Mass?”

I smile broadly. There is something about him that catches me by surprise because it feels so ordinary. As though he's just another guy. Maybe it's because he's young. My experience is mainly with older clergy. “I enjoyed the sermon. It was fresh and filled with hope.”

“Really?”

I nod and smile.

“Let me change, and I'll give you a tour of the grounds while we walk over to lunch. You can tell me what you enjoyed about my ramblings.” He grins. “I'll be quick. It'll give you a few minutes to think of something polite to say.” He squeezes my elbow in a friendly gesture, and he's gone.

I stand in the center of the church captivated by the sunlight streaming in through the stained glass, the diffuse light bathing the face of Jesus hanging on the cross. Like everything else, it's a magnificent rendition of the crucifixion. It's difficult to imagine that a church so poorly attended can manage the upkeep of a building this size.

“Let's go out this way,” Father Jesse calls from the front. “It's a short



cut.”

“The church is stunning. I can’t believe the craftsmanship that went into building it.”

“It’s a replica of a European Cathedral, or rather a collection of ideas that a generous benefactor brought back with him from his travels through Europe. He had the church constructed, and left his fortune to St. Maggie’s in the form of an endowment that we still use to sustain the property.”

“Wow. That is generous. Did he have a connection to St. Magdalene?”

He chuckles. “Apparently, he had a fondness for whores—that’s the story, anyway. But I don’t believe it. Magdalene has had a complex history with the church—but during that particular man’s lifetime, she wasn’t believed to be a whore. That came much later.”

I’ve never heard a priest use the word whore so freely. While I’m deciding how I feel about it, we approach a building with a tall tower behind the church. “There are a couple small houses on the property,” Father Jesse tells me, pointing down a small unpaved lane. “The church secretary and her son live in one, and Silas, the groundskeeper, in the other. Be mindful around him.”

“Why is that?” I ask when he doesn’t explain.

“He spent time in prison for rape. It was a long time ago. That’s all I can say. This building holds the rectory,” he continues, “the church office, and the common space. It’s where I live.”

“The turret is spectacular.” So spectacular that I forget all about Silas. “It reminds me of something out of a fairy tale—a tower where princesses would hide away.” As soon as the foolishness is out of my mouth, I feel ridiculous.

He smiles. “Ah. So you’re a fan of fairy tales.”

My face is warm, and I’m happy we’re walking so he doesn’t see the flush across my cheeks. “Not really. But occasionally I do indulge my inner girl.”

“Nothing wrong with that. But I’m afraid there’s never been royalty to speak of on Albert’s Island. It’s unlikely princesses were ever jailed here—sinners perhaps. Although we can’t know for sure who’s been hidden away in the turret as a sacrifice to God. Or during war and rebellion,” he adds quickly.

“It was used as a prison?”

“I was joking.” He shrugs. “But who knows. The tower is the only reinforced area in the rectory. It’s where priests safely counted money from the Sunday collection plate, back when the pews were full. Although I think

the idea of keeping sinners locked there is much more interesting, and princesses more interesting still.”

I smile. “Are there historical records?”

“Fire destroyed much of the early history. There’s little left, but you’re welcome to comb through it if you’re interested. Let’s go inside so that lunch can get started. They refuse to eat until I arrive.”

He opens the door for me and I follow behind to a large hall where some people are seated, and others mill around. There is a buffet table set up against the sidewall, across from a bank of windows, laden with more food than this group could eat in a week. It makes me a little sad, imagining women old enough to be my grandmother waking up at the crack of dawn to prepare food no one will eat.

“Let me introduce you to Virginia, the church secretary. She’s not much older than you, and I think you’ll like her.” Father Jesse beckons Virginia over. “Virginia Bennett, meet Kate McKenna. She’s new to Charleston, and I persuaded her to make the trip over by bribing her with lunch.”

She holds out a small hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Kate.” But I’m not sure it is. Her face is tense and her smile forced. Before I can say anything, Father Jesse is pulled away by a man wearing suspenders, and Virginia and I are left alone. After we chat for a few minutes, I realize she thinks I’m from the women’s shelter.

“I don’t live at the shelter. I work with women from the shelter, at the library.”

“That’s wonderful,” she says, her brow unfurling. “There was a time when I was pregnant with Petey, that I could have used that kind of help. God bless you.”

Working with the homeless women is my opportunity to do some research on Warren King. It’s not as altruistic as she made it out to be, and I’m embarrassed enough to set her straight. “I’m happy to be working with women from the shelter, but I’m actually a journalist, in town to do a little research.”

“That’s interesting. What about, dear?” It’s odd to hear her call me dear. She’s probably only a few years older than I am, although she seems older. “The Charleston societies.” Virginia freezes with a look on her face like she’s sucking on a lemon. Clearly another Charleston native who believes it’s impolite to dig into local business. “Nothing too intrusive,” I assure her.

“Maybe you can help us with our newsletter—you being a journalist and

all. I keep telling Father Jesse we need to spruce it up, maybe put it online if we're ever going to attract young people. But he doesn't have the time."

That was so random. She's nervous—I say random things when I'm nervous too.

A young man wanders over to us, and hands Virginia his tie without saying a word. "This is my son, Petey. Petey this is Miss Kate. She works at the library."

"I love the library," he says in a childlike voice. "We get books there. You have pretty hair." He grabs a fistful of my hair. "It's red like the devil."

"Petey!" Virginia admonishes. He lets go of my hair immediately. "Do not touch anyone's hair. You need to apologize to Miss Kate. Right now. Jesus is watching." There's something harsh about the way she chides him. It's not so much about what she says, but her tone.

"I'm sorry," he says, staring at the floor.

Petey is clearly mentally disabled in some way, and I don't want him to feel the shame of having disappointed his mother, or me, or Jesus for that matter. "It's okay, Petey. People like to touch my hair because of the color. There aren't too many redheads around, so they like to see if my hair feels different than their hair. It doesn't feel different though, does it?"

He shakes his head. "Can I touch it again?"

"Petey! No, you may not touch her hair again."

Virginia speaks in a raised voice that brings Father Jesse over. He peers at her, until she explains. "Petey's taken with Kate's red hair. He touched her." She lowers her head, much the way Petey did.

"I saw that," he responds, before turning to me. "Did you know Mary Magdalene was a redhead? At least that's how she was depicted in drawings."

"I was trying to persuade Kate to help modernize our newsletter," Virginia pipes up. There's something a bit off about her affect, or maybe she just has poor conversational skills. "We need to get with the times, Father, or we'll be the ones left to close the doors."

"The bulletin, Virginia."

"The bulletin," she repeats softly, lowering her eyes, again. "I better go supervise Petey's lunch." She hurries away in the direction of her son without another word.

"How old is Petey?" I ask.

"Sixteen. Almost the same age Virginia was when she gave birth to him."

It hasn't been easy, but she's a wonderful mother, and takes great care of him. He's gotten to be a handful now that he's hit puberty. If you're going to be coming over to help us with the bulletin, you should be aware that he is—that he's unpredictable. Keep your wits about you when he's around." He looks directly at me. "I don't want anything to happen to you." His attention goes back to Petey. "Virginia insists he's harmless, but you have the right to know."

It sounds a bit dire, or maybe I seem fragile. "I have older brothers. I'm used to a bit of rough and tumble. I'm sure I'll be fine, but thank you for letting me know."

"I noticed that you're too polite to tell me that you haven't actually agreed to help with the bulletin."

I don't really need another job to cut into my research time, although a church bulletin shouldn't be that difficult to overhaul. "I have a lot going on, but I would be happy to help, if you don't need it done in a hurry."

"I'm not sure that I need it done at all, but Virginia keeps nagging, and I'm willing to indulge her on this. Perhaps you can take a look at our back issues and give me your opinion. You're young and smart, just the kind of person we're seeking to entice."

"I'm not sure how smart I am, but I'm always happy to offer an opinion."

"Great. Maybe one evening after work you can come by for supper. Mondays are the best night because I have all these leftovers to eat. Trust me, you don't want to eat food I prepare." He quirks his brow. "Are you free tomorrow?"

*Tomorrow?* "I have a meeting at the library tomorrow, but next Monday will work."

"Good. We can confirm at Mass next week." He pauses. "That was presumptuous of me. There's no expectation that you attend Mass here. You might prefer another church. I'm sorry."

"Please don't apologize. I planned on attending next Sunday. I enjoyed the Mass today. It felt right." He stares at me, much the same way that he did in the library when I worried he was having a seizure. "Father?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I have a lot on my mind. We should help ourselves to lunch while the food is still warm."



## KATE

It's Friday evening and I'm relaxing on Miss Macy's porch with my laptop open, plotting the weekend's research while treating myself to a plate of shrimp and grits and a chilled rosé. Miss Macy's is known for smooth creamy grits, inexpensive wine, and free Wi-Fi. It's my kind of place.

Today is my twenty-eighth birthday. Bittersweet as always.

My family never celebrates with me because it reminds them too much of my mother. Except for my brother, Liam. Growing up, he was the only one who wished me a happy birthday, and bought me a present from money he had saved from shoveling snow. When he was older, he would take me out for a banana split at Brigham's, or sneak me an éclair from an elegant bakery downtown. While he was alive, even when he was stationed in the desert, he always remembered my birthday. I don't know if it seemed disloyal to my mom, or to the others, but he wanted it to remain our secret. I never betrayed him, not even to Fiona.

It wasn't as bad as it sounds. We celebrated my birthday every year in class during elementary school. Chocolate cupcakes with buttercream from Rita's Bakery would somehow materialize each year. Back then, I pretended it was my dad who would sneak the goodies in, but I'm an adult now, and I know better. I've nagged Rita for years to tell me who placed the orders, but her lips are sealed. I still don't know.

When we were teenagers, Fiona always made a huge deal of my birthday. We celebrated with friends and vodka pilfered from our parents' stashes. She never forgets me, and today was no different.

The day started with Fiona and the boys FaceTiming me to sing a loud,

off-key rendition of “Happy Birthday.” Their love and joy radiated off the screen as they promised there were more surprises in store. They were bursting with secrets, and Fiona had to finally shoo them away before they blabbed about the surprises.

She had an eight-layer chocolate cake delivered to the library, along with a huge basket of lilacs, and when I arrived home, there was a package waiting for me. I teared up as I carefully undid Fiona’s exquisite wrapping, and lifted the gorgeous shirt from the box—a sexy off-the-shoulder style with a lace-up front and delicate hand embroidery, from a boutique on Newbury Street, near where she works. Fiona has always been better at dressing me than I am at dressing myself.

I wore my new shirt to my birthday dinner. Who cares if I’m eating alone and no one besides the waitstaff at Miss Macy’s will see it? I see it, and it makes me feel pretty and loved. *That’s what’s important.*

Alone, or with friends, I’ve learned to commemorate my birthday in some way each year. To celebrate my life, because it’s worth celebrating. My guidance counselor told me that the year I graduated from high school.

Aside from church, I have no weekend plans, just two full days to devote to research, and trying to put together the pieces I’ve already gathered. I still don’t know why the King hearings were postponed, but I do have more information about him, although no smoking gun.

Lucinda, who volunteers at the library, is chatty, and she doesn’t care that I’m not from Charleston. Apparently when she was younger, she was a *striking redhead too*, and has decided we were meant to be good friends.

She makes it her business to fill in the gaps—to teach me things I don’t understand about the city or its people. Lucinda swears King was a dog back in the day, scouring Charleston after dark for a little tail. Those are her words, not mine.

While she acknowledges they exist and that there are secrets, she doesn’t make much of the exclusive societies. She also doesn’t have much use for the Wilders, except for Gabrielle, JD’s wife. Says she’s the only one who doesn’t have her nose so high in the air that she can’t say hello. Although Lucinda did confess if she were younger, she’d like to wrap her legs around Gray and let him take her for a ride—*on his motorcycle, you naughty girl*, she added when I began giggling.

I sense someone approaching the table, and look up with a smile, assuming it’s the waitress with the cornbread I ordered. My smile fades when

Sinclair pulls out an empty chair and sits down across the small table from me, our knees almost grazing.

I'm speechless. I open and close my mouth a few times to say something, but the synapses don't begin to fire on all cylinders until he speaks. "Nice night to have supper outside. Perfect weather and no bugs. We don't get enough evenings like this."

"This has to stop. You're always creeping around in the shadows. I can't even get a meal in peace. What are you doing here?"

"You're never going to get anyone to tell you a damn thing if you don't develop some manners. *Good* manners. It's like you were raised by Yankees, or some other gnarly creatures."

His tone is chiding, but his eyes have the glimmer of fun. Too bad I'm not in the mood for Sinclair's kind of fun tonight.

"Hello, Mr. Sinclair. It's a lovely evening, isn't it? What are you doing here?"

He shakes his head. "I came for the shrimp and grits, same as you." Sinclair hesitates, looks around, then leans across the table and whispers conspiratorially. "Please tell me you ordered the shrimp and grits."

"It's none of your business. And I don't believe you're here for the food."

"Believe it."

"Smithie," a woman cries, as she steps onto the porch with a starched apron tied around her generous hips. Her chestnut hair, dotted with silver, is coiled into a neat bun. She's beaming as she approaches the table. Sinclair gets up, takes the glass out of her hand, and gives her a bear hug, squeezing until her heels are off the ground. "I'm off at ten," she tells him. "If you get rid of this pretty little thing sittin' here, I'll see what I can do about ditchin' my husband."

Sinclair's immediate response is a loud boisterous laugh that echoes from every corner of the porch. "You, darlin', are more woman than even I can handle."

"You always know how to make an old lady feel good," she says, before pointing at the tumbler Sinclair took from her hand. "Jasper's workin' up some new concoction now that the weather's warming up, said to bring some out for you to try."

Sinclair sits back down, and takes a sip, and then another before he offers an opinion. "Tell him he's got a winner here."

"Praise the Lord! He's been tinkering with that damn drink all week. I'm



sick of hearing about it.” The woman reties her apron. “The usual?” she asks Sinclair.

“Yes, ma’am.” His attention shifts momentarily to me. “Have you ordered?”

I nod. “Right before you sat down.”

“Would you mind holding back Miss Kate’s order some, so we can have our supper together?”

*Really?* Presumptuous bastard. I would kick him under the table, but he’s too close for me to get up the momentum to make it hurt. “And can we get some of that jalapeno cornbread you bake up, please?” he asks. “I dream about that buttery crumb all the time.”

“You watch yourself, Miss,” she warns. “This man is a shameless flirt. No tellin’ where his charm might lead you.”

I stop myself from saying something snarky about him. Instead, I give her a warm smile. “He keeps me on my toes, that’s for sure.” Being pleasant isn’t normally so difficult for me—unless Sinclair is around.

“Is that Missy Macy?” I ask when the woman walks back inside.

He shakes his head. “That’s Miss Jolene, Jasper’s wife. They own the place. He cooks and she bakes. They make everything from scratch. Miss Macy was Jasper’s old hound.”

How does the man know the details of everyone’s life? And why do people adore him? Even Lucinda said she’d let him keep his slippers under her bed.

“Taste this,” he says handing me the old-fashioned glass. I shake my head. “Come on. Jasper will appreciate a woman’s point of view.”

“A woman’s point of view?”

“Yeah. You’re a woman. We established that the first time we met, right?” *God, he’s insufferable.* “Whiskey’s a man’s drink.”

“A man’s drink?” I glare at him across the table.

“Stop acting like I’m some kind of Neanderthal. Men drink all sorts of liquor, as do women. But my experience is men tend to drink whiskey more often, and although I know plenty of women who are whiskey drinkers, they tend to lean more toward clear spirits or wine.” His gaze shifts to my glass of rosé. “I bet that’s your experience, too.”

I don’t answer him, because he’s right, *of course.* And it’s so annoying. I take a taste of the drink and immediately give it back, trying not to make a sour face. “It’s not bad ...”

“But?”

I smile sheepishly. “It’s a little too whiskey-ish for me.” His head falls back and he roars. I laugh, too. The bubbling laughter begins small and quiet, but gets louder as it floats out of my chest and into the open air. We laugh for what feels like a long time. Every time one of us stops, we catch the other’s eye and we start again. My annoyance drifts away with the laughter. And as much as I hate to admit it, at this moment, I’m kind of glad he showed up.

We semi-compose ourselves when the waitress brings over Sinclair’s bourbon and two kinds of cornbread. I avoid the bread with the jalapeños. I’m not falling for that again.

“Miss Macy’s is a well-kept secret among the locals. How did you find it?”

“Lucinda from the library told me about it. She’s a wealth of information on all things Charleston, and she doesn’t mind sharing what she knows with me.”

“Lucinda McCrae?”

I nod.

“She’s a fixture in town. Speaks her mind, even when it would be better for everybody if she kept her mouth shut. You must be pretty special if she’s takin’ a liking to you.”

“You’ve lived here three years. How do you know Lucinda’s life story?”

He shrugs, breaking off a piece of pepper-studded cornbread and placing it on my plate. “When I started working for the Wilders it became my business to know Charleston—every inch of the landscape, every corner of the city, the players and the spectators. Why don’t you put away your computer?”

“I’m sorry?”

“We’re having supper. Put away the computer—it’s the polite thing to do when someone is sitting with you.”

“I didn’t invite you to have dinner with me. You just sat down.”

“You didn’t tell me to leave, either.”

Despite my better judgment, I close the laptop and store it in my bag.

“Taste this,” he says, bringing a bite-size piece of cornbread to my mouth. My lips are sealed tight as I eye it suspiciously. “It’s got just a small kick to it—mostly flavor. Nothing like the corn nuts.”

I gaze at him for a few seconds, but look away before I eat from his fingers. The bread is delicious and being fed like this makes it seem almost

decadent, but when his thumb catches a stray crumb from my lip, and he sucks it into his mouth—it's downright sinful.

I'm a bundle of nerves. That's what he does to me. Tonight it's the kind of nerves that take over when you're with an attractive man and you're not sure what's going to happen next—or even what you want to happen. I take a sip of wine to calm myself, and steer the mood back to a place that's more comfortable for me. “Do you just randomly go around and sit with any unaccompanied diner or only women?”

“It's part of my daily act of kindness.”

The small throbbing between my legs continues, but it isn't enough to throw me completely. “How did you know I was here?”

“I thought I made it pretty clear that I'd be following you.”

My jaw tightens. “You actually follow me from place to place?” The prospect of this total lack of privacy is unnerving. And infuriating.

He shakes his head, and butters a piece of cornbread, taking his sweet time before answering my question. “No. I don't have time for that. I have a newbie who's been tasked with the honor of keeping track of you. But we're not monitoring you that closely. Not yet, anyway.”

I pull out my wallet and place a few bills under the edge of my bread plate to cover the dinner I haven't yet eaten, and gather my things. He places a heavy paw on my wrist. “Where you goin'?”

“I wanted a quiet night to myself. I don't need this.” I pull my hand back, but he doesn't let go.

“Maybe you can ply me with booze and get me to talk.” One side of his mouth curls. “You're not going to get me to spill my guts about the Wilders, but maybe there are other things about Charleston I can help you with.”

“Stop manipulating. It's not going to work this time.”

Sinclair tips his head from side-to-side as though he's weighing something. “You're right. I'm manipulating. That's a fair characterization.”

“Why would you bother?”

“I want to have supper with you.” I'm not sure which of us seems the most surprised by his revelation. The difference is, I don't believe it.

*Right.* “You want to have supper with me. Why?”

He takes a sip of bourbon. “It gives me a chance to see what you're up to ... and ... it allows me ... to have ... supper with you.” The words emerge in fits and spurts, a bit tortured, like a tooth that cracked into a half dozen pieces while the dentist was attempting an extraction.

“Why?” I don’t care if I sound like a parrot who has been taught only one word. I want the answer to that question.

He shrugs, rubbing his thumb in small circles on the inside of my wrist that he’s still clutching.

“Here we are,” the waitress announces brightly. “Careful, the plates are hot.” Sinclair lets go of my wrist and pulls his arm back so she can put down the food.

“Why?” I probe, when she’s gone. “Why do you want to have dinner with me?”

He wets his lips with the bourbon before draining the tumbler. “I like you,” he says simply, his eyes focused on mine. “And it’s your birthday. You shouldn’t spend it alone.”

“What?” How does he know it’s my birthday? *They’ve been monitoring your every move. He already said as much.* The throbbing between my legs has migrated due north, and my head feels like it’s seconds from exploding. I sip some water and swallow deliberately, asking myself over and over why I’m still sitting here.

“And you’re a bit of an enigma,” he mutters. “There are things about you I don’t understand. I like puzzles.” He pauses for a moment. “Why did you agree to that stupid game in the apartment?”

“I wanted the story.”

He pins me with his eyes. “Bullshit.”

“Maybe I was hoping you’d take off your clothes, too.” I smooth the napkin on my lap, avoiding his eyes.

“The bullshit is piling up. How about a little truth before we drown in the stench?”



## KATE

I take a bite of my dinner with Sinclair still studying me like I'm a lab experiment. I don't like being on this side of the probe.

His fixed stare is relentless. It's probably some kind of special operative tactic to get people to talk. It's not going to work. Although I suppose there's no harm in telling him a little something, so I can eat in peace. "I'm chasing the Pulitzer Prize," I throw out casually, before taking another bite of food. "It's awarded to honor exceptional—"

"I know what it is," he responds gruffly.

"This is delicious. You should eat before it gets cold."

"And ..."

*Oh, for the love of God.* "And the King story has a lot of promise." I hear the frustration in my voice and wonder if he hears it too. "It could earn me at least a nomination."

Sinclair still hasn't taken a single bite of food. He's fixated on me, as if waiting for some kind of grand declaration of truth.

"I realize it's something you don't understand. But it's important to me." I peer into his rich brown eyes, until I reach the soulless bottom. It's a place I've never been—not even at the apartment. He's ruthless. At least he can be. For the first time, I see a flash of danger in him.

*But is he a danger to me?*

I put down my fork to pull a thin wrap from my bag and drape it over my exposed shoulders while he watches quietly. "I want the prize." I shrug. "It's the truth."

And it is. I'm chasing a Pulitzer. Not the one that was rightfully my

mother's. Nothing can change that. But I'm chasing it just the same so that I can at least make sure she gets some of the recognition she deserves. I don't tell him that part. It's none of his business.

His eyes still haven't wavered, but I keep shoveling in the savory grits, each mouthful accompanied by a bite of succulent shrimp, ignoring the scrutiny as best I can.

I've wolfed down a healthy portion of my grits and a generous square of cornbread by the time he picks up his fork and points it toward my half-empty plate. "I hope you're planning on saving room for dessert. Miss Jolene's chess pie is legendary."

I raise my brow. "Remind me why I didn't leave earlier?"

"Because I'm an enigma, too. And I don't know whether you like puzzles, but you're curious by nature, and you do like answers."

I'm drawn to him because he's an enigma. *Is it that simple?* I watch him take a forkful of food, scooping up the grits with a bite of shrimp, just like I've been doing. *I don't know.* It's hard to tell what draws me to him because I've muddied the waters. I've enjoyed at least a dozen orgasms with his name on my lips, and still more where he featured prominently. Most of them were mind-blowing orgasms that tore through my body and left me comatose. It makes it hard to hate him.

I should have been more disciplined. *It might not have mattered.* Maybe I was attracted to him even before I had a single one of those orgasms. Maybe it happened when he slid into the booth across from me at Tallulah's, or at the apartment when his rock-hard cock dared me to stroke it. Maybe it happened last year when he told me, in *that* voice, that he'd personally escort me off the property and out of the state if I tried to get anywhere near Zack Wilder. *Or maybe I'm attracted to assholes.* History certainly bears that out.

We finish dinner without attacking one another like rogue chimpanzees in the monkey house, and without any more scathing self-analysis on my part. I tell him about Fiona and the boys FaceTiming with me at the crack of dawn, how they were dying to spill the birthday secrets, and he tells me about his nieces. All five. He jokes that he'd do anything for a nephew, but the glow on his face gives him away. He adores them and couldn't care less that they're girls. I'm sure of it.

*As I watch him with his guard down, I know exactly why I stayed for dinner.*

Shortly after our plates are cleared, Miss Jolene appears with an

enormous slice of chess pie, dusted with powdered sugar. There's a single slim candle atop the pie. The flame flickers gently as she sets the plate in front of me. Jasper's with her and the waitstaff, too. They sing "Happy Birthday" with everyone on the porch joining in.

My brain is slogging, the cogs turning slowly through the muck. The revelers seem far away, as though I'm a bystander at my own party, watching safely from the distance.

I'm overwhelmed. My eyelashes are wet, splashing a drop or two onto my cheeks every time I blink. I glance at Sinclair. He's not singing but has a look of concern. "Make a wish and blow out the candle," he urges as they sing the last note. And I do, to whoops and cheers.

Before the smoke dissipates, everyone disappears, and the porch diners go back to their own conversations. Now it's just us.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"You don't look all that thankful. You look a little pasty. All I said to Jolene was to send over an extra big piece of pie because I was still hungry and it was your birthday. I should have known she'd make a fuss. I take it you don't like a fuss?"

"No, it's not that. It surprised—I didn't expect—"

"I thought the Taurus loved to be the center of attention?"

God, even that smug little smirk is panty melting. "So you're an expert on astrological signs, too. Do you use them to profile?"

"Hell, no." He shakes his head. "I'm a Taurus too."

"Oh." I sit up tall. "When's your birthday?"

"Next month." He swipes one of the fat blackberries garnishing the dessert plate and pops it into his mouth. "Will you take a bite of that pie, already, so I can have some? I'm drooling over here."

We finish the pie and linger over the after-dinner drinks Jasper sent to the table. It's dark now, with a waning moon and a smattering of stars across the sky. The porch is dark too, just the small votives and a few strands of jazzy lights twinkling overhead. Almost every table is empty, but I can't recall a single person getting up to leave.

I sip the strawberry cordial. The burn at the back of my tongue is dulled by the sweet macerated strawberries at the bottom of the glass. I have a suspicion this is potent stuff masquerading as a genteel concoction you might find at a ladies' tea.

All and all, it's been a nice evening. Better than I expected when I



reserved a table for one.

I twist my fingers in the silence and wet my lips carefully, stealing a quick glance at him so as not to get caught. But I'm not quick enough to evade his sharp eyes. "I played the stupid game—took the risk—because I was desperate for information." As I talk, I focus on the beads of sweat forming on the water glass. They grow fatter and fatter, jiggling before sliding down the side and puddling on the placemat.

"The King story is important," I continue, with a heavy heart. "Not just for the country. I am chasing a Pulitzer—not for me, but for my mother." I live with this every day. It's a central part of who I am. But only a handful of people know, and I'm not sure why I'm sharing something so deeply personal with Sinclair, but I don't stop. "Right before she got sick, she spent a year investigating the foster care system in Boston. After she died, the story was written from her notes, but she was never given any credit for her work. Not a mention."

Sinclair rubs the back of his fingers over an unshaven jaw. "What happened with your mother?" he asks cautiously, like he knows the answer might break me.

"You don't know?" I thought he had researched everything about me. That there were few surprises left.

He shakes his head. "Only that she was a reporter who died of a rare cancer not long after you were born." The candlelight has softened his features, casting a gauzy shadow on his cheek.

"A very rare cancer. She didn't get the treatment she needed because she was pregnant—with me." The last part trails off, as though I'm embarrassed to say it out loud. And it crosses my mind, as it always does, that I will be judged unworthy of such a sacrifice. I certainly don't blame anyone for considering the question. It's human nature, and there have been plenty of times when I questioned my own worthiness. My fingers find the napkin in my lap, and I caress it gently, trying to soothe myself with the starched cotton.

"She was a devout Catholic and didn't believe in abortion," I continue. "I'm not entirely sure, but I think Father Tierney, our parish priest, assured her that God would forgive her if she chose abortion. But she had always wanted a daughter."

I rest my elbows on the table, bringing my clasped hands to my mouth. Sinclair is watching me. I feel it, but I can't face him right now. "The

treatment might have saved her life, or at least prolonged it.”

My mouth is dry, and the last couple of words stick to my tacky tongue. I take a small sip of water and compose myself before continuing. “She chose my life over hers.”

For a long minute it feels like everyone, and everything in the restaurant—maybe all over Charleston, has fallen dark and silent. The circumstances surrounding her death are not a secret. I’ve talked about it before, just not in some time. And rarely with someone who didn’t know her, or me, well.

“That’s some gift,” he says with the utmost of care. His voice is a tender embrace, cloaking me in warmth. I don’t hear any judgment. “It must sit heavily on your shoulders.”

I gaze at him, fighting back the tears. The world turns slowly, but forever forward, while I struggle to keep up. It’s almost as though he’s stolen my very breath with his words.

He’s the first person who has ever said anything like that to me. Well-meaning people always say, *she must have really loved you*. And she did. *She must have been an incredible woman*. She was. But no one, no matter how kind, has ever said that her decision, her gift, is a burden. *My burden*. Not even the psychologist who I talked to when my teenage thoughts went to dark scary places suggested it. No one. And I’ve never said it out loud—not even to Fiona, because even to my own ears, it sounds selfish and ungrateful to harbor those feelings. So instead, I keep them buried in a small bleak corner of my heart.

A tear escapes, and I whisk it off my face with a quick swipe of the hand.

“That’s exactly how it feels sometimes.” I try not to let my mind wander too far into the shadows. It’s not safe there. “Only I don’t feel it on my shoulders.” My voice is wobbly. “The weight is here.” My hand finds its way to my chest, rubbing out the ache. “It makes it hard to breathe at times. Although not so much anymore.” I glance at him. “How did you know?”

“I’m a soldier.” He intertwines his fingers and bends them until the knuckles crack. “Was. Always will be, I guess.” There’s muted laughter from inside, a background din reminding me we’re not alone. “On the battlefield,” he continues, “men bravely stand and take a bullet, or throw themselves on a landmine, or in front of a grenade. They give their lives selflessly so others can live.”

Smith regards me with a profound sorrow that I’m certain lives inside his soul, concealed by the clever sarcasm and humor, obscured by the dimpled

smile. “They leave families and friends behind. They go someplace we don’t understand—we don’t even know if it exists. It’s the ultimate sacrifice.” His voice is grave and raw. “That gift comes with tremendous guilt for the recipient, and a weight so heavy not all men are able to shoulder it. I’m sure it’s unbearable at times.” He gives me a small sad smile. “You’ve done good, Kate. She’d be proud of you.”

I bury the sniffing in the back of my hand. “How about you? Do you carry it?”

Smith shakes his head. “Not that burden. But I carry other kinds of guilt. We all do. It’s human nature.” He drains his drink and tosses the napkin on the table. “Come on, let’s get out of here and let them clean up. It’s been a long day for Jolene and Jasper, and first thing tomorrow, they start all over again.”

He pulls out his wallet, and places some cash on the table, folded under a glass. “Don’t even think about it,” he growls before I can offer to split it.

We don’t have the check. I look around for the waitress, but she’s inside. “How do you know that’s enough?”

“Jasper will put it on my tab if I’m short. But it’s enough.” I glance at the bills more carefully this time. It’s enough. *More than enough.*

“Where are you parked?” he asks.

“I walked. I guess your guy wasn’t tailing me that closely.”

Smith shakes his head. “It’s a nice night. I’ll walk you home.”

“You don’t need to walk me home. I can find my way. It’s not that late, and there are still plenty of people on the street.”

“I’m walking you home. It’ll give me a chance to hear your thoughts about King. I want to help you with the story.”

He’s going to help me because I told him about my mother. I stop dead in my tracks. Isn’t that what I want—what I’ve been hoping for since we met? *Yes.* But his words are a slap in the face. *I hate pity.* Hate it more than anything. And even though I need the help, defensiveness takes over, and I clap back. “I don’t need your pity. And you don’t need to help me because you feel sorry for me—because it’s my fault my mother died.”

Sinclair grabs my arm and drags me off the porch, to the side of the building where there is a thick row of flowering bushes. No one from the restaurant can hear us. His face is screwed up in a way I can’t read. “First, your mother died because of cancer.” His tone is cold and uncompromising.

As I stand here captive, the perfume of the night jasmine quickly becomes

too much. I cough to dislodge the tickle in the back of my throat, and wait for what comes next.

“Second, you’re a strong, smart woman. You have a lot going for you. Why the fuck would I pity you?” He squeezes my arm above the elbow as if to make his point. “Helping you ensures that you stay away from the Wilders, and it gets you what you need. The way I see it, it’s a win-win.”

*It’s not about pity.* It’s not even about me. It’s about helping the Wilders. *Of course.* I feel foolish. And maybe a tad disappointed. While I’m brushing off my ego, his eyes shift to where his hand is still clutching my arm. He releases the grip abruptly, as though my flesh is suddenly scalding. “Do you want the help or not?” he asks like he doesn’t give a damn if I say yes or no.

I swallow my pride and grovel. “Yes. I’ll take whatever help you can give me.”

Sinclair doesn’t say anything, but he takes my arm again, this time gripping gently below the elbow. He examines it, running two fingers over the cool skin. It takes me a minute to realize that he thinks he might have marked me.

I don’t see a red spot, but it’s dark, and he has the better angle. “I’m fair. I bruise easily. It’s nothing.”

“When a man puts his hand on you like I just did—without your consent—it’s not nothing.” He releases my arm. “But it doesn’t look like it’s going to bruise.”

Smith motions toward the sidewalk, and we head in the direction of my house.

“Thank you for offering to help,” I say when the silence becomes awkward. “I should have been more gracious. It’s just that I hate pity—from anyone. And thank you for dinner. I don’t think it’s fair that you always pick up the check, but I know you hate to let a woman pay for your food.” I’m on a spectacular ramble.

He snickers, but it’s not mean-spirited. “I was just trying to get a rise out of you that day. I don’t really care who pays for the food as long as I get to eat.”

“I’m not entirely sure I believe you. Sounds like hyperbole to me.”

We stop at the crosswalk a block from Miss Macy’s, waiting for the light to turn green. He takes out his phone. “It is early,” he says. “You up for a nightcap and a game of pool at Tallulah’s?”

I freeze in the middle of the sidewalk. “You know I play pool?”

“Should I?” He slides the phone back into his pocket.

“No! You shouldn’t. But it seems like you know everything else about me,” my hands are gesturing wildly, “and you brought up pool, so—”

“You shoot pool?” The way he asks is so disarming, it lowers my blood pressure instantly.

“I can handle a stick,” I answer haughtily.

His mouth curls. It’s a smug, sexy curl that’s irresistible. “Is that so?”

“It is.”

“Sounds like a challenge, Miss McKenna.”

“Put up or shut up, Sinclair.”



## SMITH

T allulah's is crowded. I shepherd Kate to an empty spot at the bar and wrangle a stool for her, but she doesn't sit.

"This is the waitress station," she explains, like I'm an idiot.

"Yeah?"

"Do you know how obnoxious it is when customers sit in the waitress station? It makes an already difficult job harder." She drags the stool away from the bar, but I grab the wooden leg with my foot and yank it back. I'm rewarded with a sharp look when she realizes that she's not taking that thing anywhere.

"There's one waitress on." I point to the other side of the bar where Carrie is emptying a tray of empty glasses. "She's working from the other station. This one's never used because it's too far from the tables."

She assesses the situation for a few seconds before sliding her gorgeous ass onto the stool.

"Protecting the waitresses. Such a good girl," I murmur. It's meant to tease—a harmless tease, but the joke's on me, because my dick jumps when I say it. "You okay with a beer, or you want to stick with wine?"

"Maybe I want a girlie vodka drink." She's trying hard not to smile, but her face, and those fiery green eyes hide very little.

"That strawberry cordial Jasper makes,"—it's not for everyone's ears, so I lower my head so I don't have to raise my voice to be heard over the music—"that's moonshine, baby." When I stand back, her eyes are like saucers. "It has a way of sneaking up on you long after you expect it. I'd go easy for now. But you're the boss."

“I’ll have whatever’s on tap.”

Beau comes over and sticks out his hand, and I take it. “What’ll it be?” he asks.

“Wet and cold,” I answer. “Something in a bottle.”

“Got just the thing.” He pops the top off a couple pale ales and brings them over. “You want to start a tab?”

I nod, and point to the top of Kate’s head. “And her money’s no good tonight. I don’t care how much she begs. It’s her birthday.”

Kate swats my arm away from her. “My money is just as good as his. Maybe better.”

Beau puts up his hands and walks away, but he doesn’t spare me the shit-eating grin. “Work it out between you,” he tosses over his shoulder. “I don’t get paid to referee.”

“Why did you do that?” she demands while I’m putting my credit card back.

“Do what?”

“Tell him my money is no good. You paid for dinner. I want to buy the drinks.”

“It’s your birthday. Your money’s no good on your birthday. It’s a rule. Everybody knows that.”

“A rule?”

*Jesus she’s mouthy. And begging for a kiss. Something rough and demanding to shut her up. Or maybe that’s what I want.*

“Yeah. A rule.” I brush a hand over her cheek. “Eyelash.” It’s a good excuse for letting my fingers wander over her skin. And she allows it, without complaint.

“I’m a practical man. You just left your paper and moved here. I doubt that job at the library pays much.” I shrug. “I’m doing pretty well. I have enough to share—no strings attached,” I assure her. “When the tables turn, as they always do, you can buy me all the whiskey in the joint. I won’t complain.”

Her wheels are turning. They’re always turning. It must be something to live inside that head. “Thank you,” she says softly. It’s heartfelt and humble, and it makes me wonder why a woman with a father and three older brothers is grateful for crumbs. Like I said, it must be something to live inside her head.

I hand her a beer. “Bottles tonight. Easier to manage while we’re playing.



I'm not letting you back out on the bet."

"Don't you worry. I want that game. But I don't recall making any bets."

I put my beer behind her on the bar. "You think of something while I go tell those guys playing now that we're next. Make it something you're prepared to lose."

There are a lot of lies guys tell themselves, especially when it comes to women. *I don't want her in my bed*, is the bullshit I'm currently peddling. *That* cannot happen. I have a job, and she's a target. And a reporter—not an inconsequential fact. So yeah, I want to taste that pussy, *want it bad*, but I won't be surrendering to my base desires. I have more discipline than that.

As I make my way back to the bar, some asshole is chatting her up. I don't spare him a glance, but place a hand on her thigh, as I reach over her for my beer. When I turn around, the little fucker is still standing there. *I might not be able to have her, buddy, but you sure as hell won't be laying a stubby finger on her.*

I inch closer to him. He's probably six inches shorter, and I must outweigh him by at least seventy pounds. Most guys have a look they use to warn off the enemy without coming to blows. I have several that I've perfected, and I use my best one on this little bitch.

"I-I think my friends are leaving," he stammers, stepping out of my reach. The guy's smarter than he looks.

"Smooth, Sinclair," Kate quips after he slithers away. "He's cute. I kind of liked him."

The not-at-all thinly veiled tweak rolls off my back, although the ride is bumpy. "Tell me more about your mother." I take a pull of beer to take the focus off her, and let the question settle.

Her chest moves up and down more rapidly than normal. "She's been gone for my entire life. I never knew her."

"She was an investigative reporter, like you?"

Kate nods. "I worked for the same paper in Boston where she did. But she was very talented. Naturally talented. I don't have that kind of talent."

"Don't sell yourself short." She looks up at me, through thick dark lashes, and takes a long pull of beer. I can't look away from her mouth, her full lips on the long neck of the bottle. I am *so* screwed. *Fuck.*

I'm saved by a guy in a grey T-shirt waving his hand in the air from the pool corner, signaling the table's free. Not a moment too soon. I can use a distraction.

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DISTRACTION. *Right.* Just what I need, Kate bent over the table, wiggling her hips while taking shot after shot, or batting those long eyelashes at me while I'm trying to focus on taking one. Every time I move so that my eyes aren't in line with her ass, I'm treated to the top of her creamy tits. I almost let her win, just to stop the torture. But I'm not that guy. In the end, I beat her both games. Although she's a pretty damn good player.

"So what did I win?" I ask after we hand off the sticks to the group waiting.

"You don't have to dance with me." Her bottom lip is out in an exaggerated pout.

I throw my head back and roar. "*Sweet Jesus.* My guardian angel must be on tonight." She shoves my arm, and I laugh some more as we go back to the bar.

The place is starting to clear out, and we don't have to shout to be heard. I order more beer, and Beau brings them over with a couple shots and a salt shaker. "Happy birthday," he says, "on the house."

Kate's face lights up slowly. "Thank you." She's so grateful, you'd think he just plunked down shots of Pappy's. When he walks away to serve another customer, she sniffs the drink. "Tequila?"

I nod. "The lime and the saltshaker are giveaways."

She sniffs it again.

"Ever done a shot of tequila?"

She shakes her head.

"Wet the back of your hand, like this, and put a little salt on it. Then lick off the salt and tip your head back. Take it all down at once, like any other shot." I throw back the shot. "And then shove the lime in your mouth, real quick."

She eyes the glass.

"You don't have to do the shot."

"No. I want to," she says, bringing her hand to her mouth. When she licks the skin with her wet pink tongue, I feel it in my groin, but I don't look away. Within seconds she's sucking on the lime, grimacing, and trying not to laugh at the same time. She's adorable. I reach out and sweep her to my chest, placing a kiss at the top of her head. Harmless gesture—normally—something I might do with Gabby, or any female friend. But it's not harmless

with Kate. *And I fucking know this.* But I did it anyway—*without thinking.* *Goddammit.*

I plunk the bottle on the bar harder than necessary. “It’s getting late. We should go.”

“I haven’t finished my beer. And—and—”

“And what?”

She looks up at me through her lashes. “I was hoping, maybe, I could still have that dance.”

“You lost. That ain’t happening.”

“It’s my birthday,” she turns over her phone, “for ten more minutes.”

“I don’t dance.”

“Not even a slow dance?” she asks, after throwing me a *you’re a lying sack of shit* look.

“You mean slow, like at a high school dance, where we shuffle our feet without moving much, but my over-eager cock presses into you at every opportunity—that kind?”

“That very kind. Although the cock thing is an add-on I don’t need.” She tips her head and gives me a small smile. It’s flirty with a hint of impertinence. The kind of smile you like to see from a woman when she gazes up at you from her knees.

“*Please,*” she begs, dragging her fingers through her hair in seductive slow motion.

*Jesus.*

I put out my hand reluctantly, and she takes it, dragging me to the dance floor. “Don’t blame me if your feet are all banged up when the music stops.”

We start with one of my hands on her back, and the other hand holding hers. It’s all civilized and innocent—until she lets go of my hand and wraps both arms around my neck.

*This was a mistake.*

Now I have a free hand with nothing to keep it out of trouble, so I rest it low on her back, pushing the heel into the sexy hollow. She sighs softly, lowering her head to my shoulder. I feel her warm breath on my skin as she melts into me. She’s so relaxed, I’m practically the only thing holding her up. “You’re drunk, Kate.”

“A little,” she murmurs. “It’s my birthday.”

She’s warm and soft, and her hair smells like the sun-drenched Mediterranean. That first breath that fills your lungs when you step off the

transport for a few days of much-needed leave. Where you breathe sandless air, refuel the tank, and tend to your dick. *I need to get my mind out from between her legs.*

“I didn’t follow you to Miss Macy’s,” I confess. “I was having lunch with my guys there on Wednesday when you called to make a reservation.” She lifts her head, searching my face with those innocent eyes. “No one ever calls to reserve a table, and Jasper was all hopped up about it. I knew it was you.”

“How?”

I shrug. “Just knew, but I asked anyway. Sure enough. I wasn’t planning on showing up.” Although it crossed my mind once or twice. “But Josh, the guy who’s been making sure you don’t get into trouble, mentioned it was your birthday when he signed out this afternoon—I decided to join you.”

“Why? I still don’t know why.”

I tighten my hold on her. “Yes, you do.”

She rests her head back on my shoulder. The shirt she’s wearing is so thin, I can feel her skin under my fingers, yielding gently, supple and creamy, a blank canvas waiting to be marked.

When the song ends, I pull away abruptly, because I’m a grown man with little control over his dick right now, and this isn’t a high school dance.

“One more,” she murmurs, clinging to my shoulders.

I place my hands firmly on her upper arms, trying not to let the smooth skin distract me. “Kate. My guys are monitoring you. You’re a target. This,” my finger gestures back and forth across the dance floor, “doesn’t change that.”

“I know,” she says softly, without a twinge of regret in her voice. “One more. Then we can go.”

I don’t say a goddamn thing. Nothing. I just surrender to the moment. Let my hands slide over her round ass, cupping the curves while I soak up her scent. I want to fuck her. Bend her over, and plow into her until she’s babbling. I want to feel her clit swell and harden on my tongue. I want to coat her throat with my cum.

“I love this song,” she says, oblivious to my filthy thoughts—thoughts that don’t involve anything resembling love. “Do you know it?”

*I don’t know. I haven’t been paying attention.* When I listen, I recognize the band. Lady Antebellum. “I’ve heard it.”

“It won a Grammy. I think.” She tucks her cheek into the crook of my neck. Her lips are almost grazing my skin. “Do you want to know a secret?”

I smile and pull her closer. “Sure. Is it a secret about you?” She lifts her head and nods, chewing on her plump lower lip.

“The last time we were here. When I went back to the hotel—I was confused, and agitated, or something. I don’t know—aroused, I guess.” She buries her face in my chest, like a shy little girl.

“Is that the secret?” I stroke the back of her head, my fingertips learning the contours of her scalp. She shakes her head. “Come on, don’t be like that. You promised me a secret. I was expecting something good.”

“I—I.” She’s smiling, but even in the dim light, I can see the top of her cheeks are bright pink. “This song came on while I was in the bathtub—and I touched myself—while I was thinking about you.”

I push back the groan and say the stupidest thing any man who needs to keep his dick in his pants has ever said. “Tell me about how you touched yourself—in the bathtub. I want to know—everything.” I drag my thumb over her cheek. “Was it filled with water?”

“I let most of it out. Then spread my legs and hooked them over the side.” Her face is back in my chest. “I let the water run on my—”

I tug her hair back, just enough so she’s forced to look at me. “On your pussy? You let the water beat on your sweet pussy.” I’m seconds away from tearing off her panties and burying my face in her cunt. But my words are measured, and my tone reserved. More reserved than I would normally use in this kind of conversation with an attractive woman. I don’t care how many times she’s gotten off under a faucet, she’s inexperienced and I don’t want to scare her. But I do want her to keep talking. To tell me more dirty secrets.

“I can’t believe I just told you that.”

I brush her hair back off her face. “I think you wanted me to know.” She shakes her head vigorously, and rests it against me while we continue to dance. “I won’t tell anyone, Kate.” My hand glides up and down her back. “Your secrets are safe with me. All of them.”

I’m convinced she wanted me to know. She’s not so drunk she’d blab something like that. She’s had just enough to give her a boost of courage, to make her all warm and fuzzy—and horny. I’m horny, too. I haven’t had that much to drink, but I don’t need booze to get me there.

While I’m trying to think about something, *anything*, besides about how hard my dick is, she reaches up to kiss me. But my training kicks in. It’s automatic, and happens so fast, it’s jarring. I press a finger to her lips to stop her. “We can’t. We just can’t.”



## KATE

By the time we leave Tallulah's the temperature has dropped, and there's a sobering breeze from the ocean. I can't believe I told Smith about the bathtub. *Is he right? Did I want him to know?* I'll have to unpack that later, or tomorrow when I'm thinking more clearly.

The drive to my place is quiet, but not awkward. I still have a decent buzz, so I'm nowhere near as embarrassed as I should be. Besides, Smith took the whole thing in stride, as though women confess their masturbation rituals to him all the time. *What did you do last night?* Nothing much. Laundry, watched a movie, polished my toenails, and got off in the bathtub fantasizing about your giant cock.

The twitch of shame is beginning as we pull up in front of my apartment, but it doesn't stop me from wondering if he'll kiss me goodnight. *Why, Kate—why do you wonder? He made it pretty clear that there would be no kissing.*

"What exactly do you want my help with?" A small panic ensues while I wrack my brain—I have absolutely no idea what he's talking about. "The story, Kate. What do you need from me?"

*Oh. The story, yes.* "I want to know about the St. Anslem's Society. King is a member. And I still haven't figured out why his hearing was postponed. But you probably won't be able to help with that."

"I'll talk to a few people. See what I can turn up," he says, his hand on the door handle. "Wait. I'll come around."

"You don't need to. I can make it inside. I've sobered up—since the dance floor." I smile through a flutter of embarrassment.

“Will you just wait?” His tone is clipped, but I ignore it, and wait for him to come around to open my door, because I know he expects it, and—because I know it will please him. *Where did that come from?*

We bide our time at the base of the porch steps, neither of us anxious to say goodnight. “Go inside,” he says finally, cocking his head toward the front door. “And lock up behind you.”

I want him to kiss me.

“This is a transitional neighborhood,” he continues, clearly not reading my thoughts. “Not unsafe, but not exactly safe either.”

“I have a gun, remember?”

“Do you actually know how to use it?” He asks it in such a way that maybe I don’t want to kiss him anymore.

“I come from a family of cops and Marines. When other girls were having a girls’ day out with their mothers, I was at the range with my father.”

“My sisters come from a family of soldiers, but there’s only one I’d trust to shoot straight. Make sure you carry that gun when you walk around at night.”

“Anything else, sir?”

His lips part, and the flame in his eyes dances dangerously. Without warning, he grabs my hand and we duck into a narrow alley on the side of my house where my neighbor sometimes parks. Before I can adjust to the dim light, my body is pressed against the building. The stone is rough and uneven on my back, but still warm from the day’s heat.

“You,” he says gruffly. “You’ve been a tease all night. Do you know what happens to cock teases?”

He towers over me, one hand on the brick, the other still on my hip. *I have a pretty good idea, but I want to hear you say it.* I shake my head, clinging to his eyes. “Tell me.”

Smith lowers his mouth, stopping inches from mine, and pounds a fist on the brick wall just above my head.

I hear the rumble of desire, before the eruption, and slide both hands to his chest. The reverberations are powerful, and my fingers tremble where they rest. But I don’t wait passively while fate decides. I dig in and roll the tips over the dense muscles working the tempest loose with the skill of a trained masseuse.

“*Fuck it,*” he growls, and his lips capture mine.

The first swipe is kind—soft, smooth lips that warm gently. But the



tenderness is fleeting, and even though I've surrendered, it's a rough capture. His teeth sink into my bottom lip until I cry out, arching into him.

But there is no reprieve.

A strong hand slides through my hair, fisting the long strands possessively. My head falls back, exposing a large swathe of my neck to the cool air. I shiver when his tongue connects with the flesh, blazing an upward path.

His teeth scraping.

His tongue laving.

His hot breath raising an exquisite prickle on my scalp. The sensations are too much. I want to squirm. I *need* to squirm, but his hold is firm—there's no escape, not even when he bites into the tendon at the base of my throat.

A moan escapes into the thick sultry air. It's loud and frantic, pleading for more.

"Open your eyes," he demands in a raspy voice. "Don't hide from me." My eyelashes are still fluttering when his large calloused hands skirt under my blouse, kneading my breasts, while rolling the sensitive nipples between his fingers. Like his kiss, it begins gently, but as I sway into him, nudging his cock, his touch grows hungrier. Before I know what's happening, my bra is hanging loose and his hot mouth is on my nipple, sucking and coaxing, until it's long and hard.

"Let's go inside," I pant.

"Can't," he murmurs, his lips merely grazing my breast. For a harrowing few seconds, I fear he's going to stop—that I broke the spell, but his mouth finds the other nipple, working it with this tongue until the pleasure is almost unbearable.

"Are you wet, Kate?" He whispers in a voice that ensures if my panties weren't already soaked, they would be now.

Before I can form an answer, my skirt is gathered haphazardly above my thighs, and his fingers are on my panties, impatiently shoving the satin gusset aside. I part my legs to give him better access—to offer him full and complete access to my most intimate parts. It's sheer instinct, but his mouth curls against my neck at the shameless acquiescence. I want him. *And I don't give a damn if he knows.* Right now, the clawing ache is much too great for false modesty.

His face is buried in my neck. His lips cajoling small shivers from overheated skin. I cling to him as his fingers glide over my slick folds.

The groan comes from deep within his chest. Lusty, strangled sounds, scraping his throat as they emerge. The throb between my legs grows louder. “*Kate. You are so wet,*” he murmurs, his nose brushing mine.

I feel the pulse of desire radiating from him. Thick and luscious droplets suspended in the air until I catch them on my tongue.

“Do you know how easy it would be for my cock to slide into your tight little pussy right now? Would you like that? Would you scream for me?”

I gasp softly. I’ve never been with a dirty talker, and I’m not sure how I feel about his filthy words, but there’s no time to process. He slides a thick finger over my slippery clit, and pushes it inside. I gasp, louder this time, and he murmurs something I don’t understand. All I know is the tightening in my belly and the zings of pleasure between my legs.

I clamp down, hugging his finger with my inner walls, but before I’ve had anywhere near enough, he wrenches his hand away.

*No!* I want to scream, *No!* But I don’t normally talk during sex, clean or dirty. At least I never have. And I’ve always been too shy to ask directly for what I need.

While I’m still quietly grieving the loss of his finger, he lowers himself to his haunches, tugging my underpants to my ankles. “I can smell you, Kate.” He runs his nose through my slit, the tip teasing my swollen clit. “You’re musky and sweet. It’s making me so damn hard.”

“What are you doing?” My voice is as wobbly as my knees.

“You’re horny as fuck, and I’m doing my part to conserve water.”

“Bastard,” I mutter, pressing my shoulders into the wall to stay upright, while he lifts my feet one at a time, and takes my panties.

He stands slowly. His fingers grazing the sensitive skin on the inside of my thighs as he rises. My back arcs off the wall as his fingertips sweep upward. The anticipation is a tortured bliss, but when he reaches the apex, he pulls his hands away. *Arghh! I can’t take much more.*

“These are mine,” he mutters, stuffing my underwear into his pocket.

I watch him, letting my breath come under control. “Are you going to look at them when you touch yourself?” I lift my chin and ask brazenly, as though I’m an expert on such things.

He snickers, securing my hands to the wall, just above my head. He pins me in place with his hips, his cock between us, swollen and hard. It’s everything I crave right now.

“I don’t touch myself, princess. I fuck my fist. Hard,” he whispers

coarsely, a breath from my temple. “That’s what I’m going to do tonight after I leave you. Look at me.” I gather the courage and raise my eyes. “And while I do, I’m going to think about your sexy little moans and tortured gasps. I’m going to let your scent fill me while I cum all over the sheets, pretending it’s your ass, your tits, your tight little cunt. And then I’m going to do it again, and again, and again, until I’m too wrung out to think about you anymore.” He caresses my entrance with two calloused fingertips, before sliding them inside me. I gasp into his mouth when he curls both fingers against the sensitive flesh, circling the rough spot in the silky walls.

His tongue is smooth and wet, licking into my mouth and exploring it thoroughly. When he grinds the heel of his palm into my grateful clit, I allow myself to explore his mouth with abandon too.

I don’t think about where I am or what I’m doing. The sensations have staged a coup, and I have surrendered any good sense, and welcomed the captors with open arms. I’m nothing more than an achy ball of need, at their mercy.

“That’s it, darlin’,” he encourages, as I rock into his hand. “Tonight, you can take what you want.” His teeth rouse my skin while his greedy mouth feeds on my throat, taking as it pleases. “Enjoy it, because next time, I’m going to hold you down, and you’ll take what I give you.”

I shudder at the threat, mewling my appreciation for his long fingers twisting inside me, pushing me closer to the edge. “I think you need more, Kate. Just one more.” His tone is sweet—syrupy almost, and I’m a wet needy mess when he slides his hand out. It’s for a brief time, so brief, but I want to snatch it back and hold the palm against my pussy until I come. But before I can make the desperate move, he pushes three fingers inside, filling me completely.

I press my mouth to his shoulder, to quiet myself. My legs quiver and I clench his back, digging my fingernails into the corded muscle. I shutter my eyes and hump him—letting the pleasure cascade over me like a celestial shower against the midnight sky.

Smith tips his head back just before I topple over the edge. “Open those gorgeous green eyes,” he demands, and with great effort, I force the lids open.

He watches me come undone—coal eyes peeking through thick lashes as I writhe and pant. It’s too intimate. I’m too exposed. I squeeze my eyes tight as I buck against him, pulling out the last bits of pleasure like an insatiable

whore.

His lips rest on my forehead as I quiet, but his fingers don't still. They continue to stroke the tender slippery skin until the meekest of pulses plays itself out.

"Don't hide from me, princess." He touches a slick index finger to my lips. "Open," he instructs and pushes into my mouth. "Suck," he demands, and I do, while he slides the thick finger over my tongue, occasionally letting it slip far enough back that I nearly gag.

I taste myself on his skin. It's a heady combination, salty, but sweeter than I expect. Before I can be too appalled, he steals his hand away, sucking the other two fingers he pleased me with into his mouth until they're clean. "Now, I know how you taste," he says, each word rough and desperate.

I feel lost, and he must sense it, because he pulls me into his chest and runs a soothing hand over me like I'm a skittish pet, sprinkling small tender kisses on my hair. I'm not sure how long we stay like that, but it's the regret in his voice that yanks me from the safe haven where I've been resting. "It's late. You should go inside."

The short distance from the alley to my door is long and awkward, the air dense and heavy with thoughts that neither of us dare to vocalize. It's suffocating.

Without a kiss goodnight, or any other recognition of shared intimacy, Smith waits at the bottom of the stoop while I climb the porch stairs and unlock the door. I'm impatient to get inside so I can breathe again, but my clumsy hands don't cooperate and it takes longer than it should to escape.

"Kate." I freeze at the bellow from the sidewalk, my shoulders hunched forward, gripping the house key so tightly, the bitings notch my finger. "For the record, I planned on helping you before your mother's death ever came up."

I grasp the doorknob and glance over my shoulder. His arms crossed over a massive chest, pad the space between us. Despite what happened in the alley, the culmination of an evening filled with flirtatious innuendo, the nod to our undeniable attraction, despite all this, the distance separating us has never been greater than it is right now. It's palpable and scathing, and not entirely unexpected—at least it shouldn't come as a surprise. *That's what happens when girls mistake lust for love, Kate. You know this.* I do.

"Take some Tylenol or Advil before you go to bed," he instructs from the safety of the curb. "And have a big glass of water with it."

“I’m sober.”

“I know. But when you wake up tomorrow and remember that you rode my fingers all the way home, in the alley next to your house, your head is going to pound like a sonofabitch. Better to stay ahead of it. Go inside.”

“You’re an asshole,” I mutter, pushing the door open.

“You’d do well to remember that.”



## SMITH

“What do you know about St. Anslem’s?” I ask, as JD tosses me a water bottle from the fridge at Sweetgrass. We just finished a brutal morning run. Brutal because I was up half the night making good on my promise to Kate. But it didn’t help. I woke still thinking about her soft mouth, and that tight little pussy choking my fingers.

“The society?”

“Yeah.” I’m sweating like a pig and use the bottom of my T-shirt to wipe the moisture off my face.

“It’s as old as dirt. They do some charitable work. A lot of prominent Charlestonians are members. It’s mostly a way to keep families insulated from the riff-raff.” He unscrews the cap and takes a swig of water. “There are all sorts of rules.”

“Like what?”

“Women with big sticks up their asses are only allowed to marry men with equally big sticks up their asses.” He grabs a wad of paper towels to dry the back of his neck and tosses me the roll. “Although many of the men who belong don’t seem to be all that picky about where they shove their sticks. Some of them are members of Wildflower too.”

“Your family never belonged?”

JD shakes his head. “No. My grandfather wasn’t a fan of inbreeding. Probably should have been, then maybe my mother might still be alive.” He stares out the window into the abyss. Even a manicured backyard and an ocean view can’t fill that void. “My father would have done anything to join, but he didn’t have the right pedigree.”

“Warren King’s a member.”

“I’m sure.”

“Do you know what’s holding up his confirmation hearings?”

JD throws me a sharp look. “No,” he says pointedly, while assembling the ingredients for protein shakes.

“Will you do me a favor?”

“I’m listening,” he says, measuring some protein powder and tossing it into the blender with a banana, some water, and ice.

“Can you find out why the hearings were postponed?”

JD throws his head back and groans. “This is about that reporter?”

The whirr of the blender is loud, and I act like I don’t hear the question. “What about that priest at St. Magdalene’s? Do you know anything about him?”

“I don’t know shit about any priests. The closest I’ve gotten to one was when Gracie was baptized, and that was enough to last me a lifetime. Pious bastards. All hypocrites as far as I’m concerned.” He pours a little of the shake into a glass and takes a taste before filling both tall glasses.

“What about the church?”

“It’s not much anymore. It’s the polar opposite of St. Anslem’s. Nobody wants in. They’d be dead and buried if their survival depended on membership. But they had a wealthy benefactor who left enough money to keep the church running in perpetuity.” He hands me a shake. “You looking for God, or is this about the reporter, too?”

“I told her I’d help her figure some things out.” He stares at me from several feet away, expressionless. “The sooner she has the answers she wants, the quicker we’ll get her out of town.”

“You must think I’m a moron.”

“JD—”

“No. Don’t fucking JD me. I don’t care where you stick your dick as long as you keep it away from my wife, and that reporter away from my family.”

“Where are you sticking your dick, Smith, that’s got my husband all hot and bothered on this lovely morning?” Gabby saunters into the kitchen and over to the coffeepot without sparing us a glance.

JD shoots me a warning while her back is turned. A warning I don’t need. There’s no way I’m having this discussion with her. I try to shield Gabby from the seamy side of Charleston almost as much as JD does. And I don’t normally talk to her about women—at least I don’t like to encourage that line



of discussion. She, on the other hand, brings it up at every opportunity. “How’s my favorite Wilder?”

“Don’t try to change the subject.” She curls into her husband’s side, and he wraps a protective arm around her. It’s effortless. At least they make it look that way. “Is there a woman in your life that I should know about?” *God help me.*

“Not a woman. A reporter,” JD responds curtly.

“Tell me about her.” JD stiffens at her words. I see it from here. Gabby brings the mug to her lips without giving anything away, but I’m sure she notices it, too. Damn woman never misses anything.

“Nothing to tell,” I say nonchalantly, trying to cover for JD’s blunder. “She’s digging around for a story on Charleston societies, trying to connect them to Warren King.”

“That doesn’t sound like it has anything to do with us. So what’s the problem?” She tips her face toward JD.

“We don’t like reporters.”

“We don’t?”

JD scowls at me over her head, without uttering a single word. He can be difficult, but he’s smart enough to know when to hold his tongue around his wife. She might not be very big, but she punches well above her weight class.

“That seems very ungracious of us. Maybe we need to rethink our values.” She pokes JD’s thigh. “And by we, I mean you.”

“My values, like my opinion of reporters, don’t need rethinking.”

She twists away from him. “I don’t agree. What if Gracie grows up and wants to be a journalist? Would we not like her?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. No daughter of mine is ever going to be a journalist.”

Now that was just a dumb thing to say. He deserves that ball-shrinking glare she gives him, before shifting her attention to me. “What’s your friend’s name?”

“She’s not my friend.”

“The reporter. What’s her name?”

“Kate.”

“*Kate*. I wonder if it’s short for Katherine or Kathleen.” She’s not wondering a damn thing. She’s baiting and watching. “Beautiful name. Strong and regal. I’d like to meet her some time. You should bring her by Sweetgrass for supper. Soon. Maybe next week,” she says, almost to herself.

“He’s not bringing her over for supper. He just got through saying that nothing is going on between them. And it’s not going to, because pussy makes a man stupid, and Smith is already stupid enough.” JD’s pissed. I almost feel sorry for him, but he’s the one who stiffened up when she started probing. He sold us out, and now he’s paying the price. *Better him than me.*

“You know,” she says, in a voice dripping with sugar, “if that truly is the case, I have an idea that will make you a whole lot smarter. And you’re going to just *love* the new sheets on the spare room bed.” She pats his wrist. “Gracie was calling for her Da when I came downstairs. I’m sure she’s up there waiting to throw her chubby little arms around your neck.”

“This discussion is finished,” he barks, storming out. “I don’t want to hear another goddamn word about any reporter coming to supper.”

“Well,” she says after he’s gone. “I suspect he’d like it to be finished with me, but I’m sure you’ll be getting an earful.”

I clutch the edge of the marble island behind me, plotting my escape.

“You like her.”

“Not particularly.”

“Really? Because I thought I saw a gooey look on your face when you told me her name.”

I scoff, white-knuckling the countertop.

“Don’t worry, your balls won’t shrink into miniature nuggets. The gooeyness lasted just a quick second.” She’s smirking, like a woman holding the goods. She knows I like Kate, something I’m not prepared to admit, even to myself.

“And JD wouldn’t be so annoyed if *Kate* was just the flavor of the day.” She pauses, glancing past me. “I can continue to build an airtight case, but I like that countertop, and you’re squeezing so hard, I’m worried a piece is going to break off in your hand. Marble is a soft stone, you know.”

I loosen my death grip on the stupid counter. “It doesn’t matter what I feel. I’m not taking up with her. JD’s absolutely right about reporters.”

“So it’s okay for him to be happy, but it’s not okay for you? You’re actually going to let him dictate who you date?” She pours herself another cup of coffee. “Want some?” she asks over her shoulder.

“I’m all set. It’s getting late, and I need to grab a shower.”

“I admire your loyalty. How you always stand tall beside him. It’s one of the things I love most about you. But allowing him to run your love life is ridiculous.”

“It’s not about my loyalty to him. That’s just a small piece of the equation. I’m developing the business, and secrecy is going to become even more important than ever. She’s an investigative reporter. She chases stories. In my line of work, there will always be a big story. One that some believe the public has a right to know about. I can only be effective if I work covertly. I can’t save lives if my tactics are broadcast through a megaphone.”

She studies me for what feels like an eternity, her hands wrapped around the coffee mug. “Those are just details,” she says softly. “Don’t let the details get in the way of love.”

“Love? You’re ridiculous. I barely know the woman—we haven’t even —”

“Details, Smith. They’re just details to be worked out. Life’s too short to shut the door on something good before you even enjoy it. Some people believe there are countless human beings in this world to fall in love with. I’m not one of those people. Sure, there are plenty who might do, but I believe the universe assigns us each one soul mate.”

“That might be the way it is for you, but it’s not like that for everyone.” I guzzle my shake. The damn thing sat too long, and it goes down like cardboard.

“I’ll give you that. But how do you know your experience won’t be the same as mine? Maybe there’s only one person out there that’s right for you. What if Kate is that person, and you dismiss her before you’ve had the chance to find out? Are you willing to risk it?”

This is such a load of crap. I can’t believe I’m standing here listening to it. I rinse my glass and set it into the dishwasher. “I need to go. I’ll see you later.”

She grabs my arm as I pass. “Easy is for those whose appetites are satisfied with milquetoast. It’s not for people like us.” She plants a kiss on my cheek, and releases me. “Bring Kate to supper on Friday. Lally will make something special.”

“Never happening,” I toss over my shoulder before the screen door slams behind me.



## KATE

I t's eight-fifteen. Fiona's on her way to work. Now's a good time to call and confess last night's sins. *Oh God.* I pull the covers over my head and groan into the wrinkled linen.

*In the alley.*

I need a thorough postmortem on last night, and the voices inside my head are too complicit to give me an unvarnished opinion. And they're too judgmental—especially this morning. I need to talk to Fiona. I only wish it was over a cup of coffee, instead of across the miles.

“Hey, birthday girl!” Fi says brightly, picking up on the first ring. “Did you have a nice dinner?”

“You made my birthday perfect, like you always do. I don't know what I would do without you, Fifi.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Tell me about your birthday dinner. I'm doing Keto until I can fit into a bathing suit without looking like some seasoned pork stuffed into a casing. I need to live vicariously through you until then. What did you eat?”

“Shrimp and grits, and chess pie for dessert. It had a bajillion carbs and about two bajillion calories. We'll have some when you visit. But I don't advise coming to Charleston on a diet.”

“I'm working on that visit.”

“And you don't look like a sausage. I hate when you say things like that. Plus, diets that restrict healthy foods aren't good for you.”

“Talk to me about it again when you're five-two, and your body has been stretched to capacity carrying twins. What else is going on?”

*What else, indeed.* I rest a hand on my forehead, shading my eyes as though she can see me through the phone. “Remember Smith Sinclair?”

“The guy with the please-fuck-me-now-muscles and ovary-splitting dimples?”

“*Mmhm.* He showed up at the restaurant last night and sat down at my table. He knew it was my birthday.”

“And?”

“Oh God, Fi. I don’t know. He was his usual self, but in between being a complete jerk, he was a nice guy, trying to make my birthday special, too. I think so, anyway.”

“Did you have sex?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because I can hear the *I’m sorry—not sorry* in your voice. Well?”

I take a breath and let it out slowly. “We made out in the alley near my house, and he took off my underpants and fingered me.” No reason to spare her the lewd facts. She might as well have the full technicolor picture if she’s going to help with the autopsy. “I humped his hand like a bitch in heat until I came all over it.”

“Birthday sex with a big fat orgasm. Well, aren’t you all grown up?”

“It wasn’t sex. It was just—”

“Sex. Own it, baby. You have a thing for him.”

*I do. I’m afraid I do.*

I throw the covers off and dangle my feet over the side of the mattress, before asking the question that’s been gnawing at my soul since I crawled into bed last night. “I need to ask you something, and I need you to answer me truthfully, even if you think I’ll end up in a fetal position for the rest of the day.”

“*Mmhm.*”

“Promise me, Fi.”

“I never lie to you, Katydid. Ask.” If only it were so simple.

“Sinclair is hard to read. But he’s not a nice guy—that’s not exactly true. I can’t put my finger on it, but something about him is dangerous. And you’re right. I am attracted to him. So attracted, it’s embarrassing. That whole thing in the alley—I’d do it again right now, in broad daylight with my neighbors watching out the window.”

“It must have been good.” She sighs. “Is he dangerous because you let yourself go around him? Because that can be a good kind of danger.”

Especially for you. You need more of that in your life.”

I drag a ragged breath into my lungs, and home in on my struggle. “Is this like when I was fifteen? Is it the same thing all over again? Because it feels like it.” My voice fades, leaving a long trail of regret and sadness in its wake.

“You know—letting guys take advantage of me.” It pains me to dredge up the ugly events of the past, but I do it bravely, because if I want answers, that’s what’s required. “Pass me around, because I’m so desperate for a little affection? Sinclair is an asshole. He says it himself.”

“I don’t know Sinclair, but I do know what happened with those guys—they were college boys and you were a teenager,” she says pointedly. “They were scum. They deserved to have their asses kicked all over town and I would have done it myself if they ever came near you again. Especially that Ryan.” She spits out the ringleader’s name in a tone one would reserve for Satan. “You’re a woman now. You’re allowed to have sex with whoever you want, as often as you want, wherever you want—no apologies.”

“That’s what I keep telling myself. But it rings hollow, like I’m justifying self-destructive behavior. It’s not about the sex so much, it’s, it’s just that I’ve been so lonely, and feeling sorry for myself, and Sinclair is ... sin on a stick, and he makes me feel pretty, and desirable, and safe. But it’s not real. I just want it to be. This is exactly what happened before. I’m walking into the trap again, only this time, my eyes are wide open.”

“Listen to me,” she says in a voice that dares me to defy her. “What happened with those guys—I meant every word I said about them. But it wasn’t as big of a deal as your family made it out to be, and it sure as hell wasn’t your fault. None of it. Teenage girls are vulnerable. You weren’t special in that way. Dragging you to St. Claire’s in the middle of the night so you could confess to Father Tierney—that was bullshit.”

“Tommy didn’t know what to do.”

“So he treated you like you needed to have an emergency exorcism performed?”

“He meant well.” I don’t know why I defend him. Nothing I say will ever change Fiona’s mind about him. And he doesn’t deserve my empathy. It’s taken me twenty-eight years to come to terms with this, but I’m still not ready to share it outside my head.

“Tommy is an asshole with anger management problems,” she huffs. “I’m not telling you anything you don’t know. He’s a hair shy of exploding all over the place. Don’t get me started on how he’s allowed to carry a gun.”

The rage simmers inside, but never comes to a full boil. No one besides Fi is allowed to talk about my family this way. *No one*. But even coming from her, it stings. I should know better than to discuss them with her—especially Tommy.

“Jesus, Fi. I didn’t know you felt so strongly about what happened that night.” We haven’t talked about it since it happened. I did my punishment and buried the whole sordid mess while it still had a pulse. But when you bury something alive, no matter how deep the grave, it eventually comes back to haunt you.

“I’m an adult now,” she explains, “and I see it differently—more clearly. They shamed you—all of them. What teenage girl wants to have to tell a priest that she let four boys fondle her?” *And that she was seconds from giving them each a blow job, and more, if the police hadn’t come by and broken up the party.* She spares me that part. “I don’t care if Father Tierney was decent about it. Your family made you feel ashamed. Tommy that night, and then your father and Sean.”

“It was so I would learn a lesson. Shame is a powerful teacher.”

“Shame is a bully’s weapon, wielded by the ignorant and the impotent. They missed an opportunity to show you kindness and compassion—and the love that you deserved. I’ll never forgive them for that.”

By them, she doesn’t mean Father Tierney. He showed me plenty of kindness and love growing up. Fiona knows this. She means my family. My father and my brothers. I don’t want to think about it anymore. “Can we leave the Norman Rockwell memories for another time, and get back to Sinclair?”

She sighs, long and deep into the silence, letting her thoughts unfurl and stretch, smoothing the rough edges into palatable words. Fiona is rarely careless with me. I stare at a speck on the ceiling while I wait, following closely as it shimmies into the light fixture.

“This is what I think about Sinclair. Men are men. Even the good ones are assholes. It’s a fundamental part of the Y chromosome.” I picture her gathering her long chestnut hair in one hand and draping it neatly over her shoulder. “It sounds like he showed some restraint last night—unless there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“No.” *I would have happily reciprocated.* “He didn’t expect a thing.”

“Take it slow. Enjoy him, if that’s what you want, just don’t give your heart away unless it’s in a fair trade. I’m pulling into the salon and the valet is heading this way. The Oribe rep is coming this afternoon. I’ll see if I can get



you some samples.”

“I love that shampoo. It smells so good.” I catch myself smiling for the first time since last night. “And I love you Fi, with all my heart.”

“I’ll call you on my way home so I can bitch about how clients need to learn to take their make-up off at night if they want clear, poreless skin. I’m not a damn miracle worker. Answer your phone.”

I toss the phone on the bed beside me, and it rings as soon as it hits the sheets. Fi must have forgotten to tell me something. We do this dance all the time.

“What did you forget?” I ask before she can get a word out.

“Kate. It’s your father.”

My heart begins to pound. He never calls unless he has something to say. Maybe he has news about the promotion. “Hi, Dad. I thought you were Fi calling me back.”

“How’s my little girl?”

“Things are good.” Without thinking, I start to tell him about my birthday dinner, but I stop myself just in time. “How are things with you?”

“Same shit, different day.”

“Anything on the commissioner’s job?”

“Not yet. They’re dragging their feet. I’m beginning to think it’s in the bag for Moniz. We’ll see. Either way, I should hear something soon.”

“Good. You’ve been on pins and needles about this for too long. I’m planning on coming home for Father’s Day. It’s still weeks away, but it’s something for me to look forward to. I haven’t seen you since Christmas, and I wouldn’t mind sleeping in my bed for a night or two.”

“Bed’s gone, Kate.”

*Gone?* I don’t understand. “What happened?”

“We had to move it to make a craft room.”

All sorts of things flitted through my mind when he said my bed was gone. Flood, fire, ant infestation, all of it, but it never occurred to me that he got rid of it.

“Craft room? You’ve started crafting?”

“Not me.” He chuckles like it’s the most preposterous thing he’s ever heard. “Joyce. She’s crafty. Makes beautiful things. She’s really spiffed up the house with her handiwork.”

“Joyce is decorating our house?” Joyce who worked at the local bank while I was in high school. She was the branch manager, I think. The last

time I saw her was on New Year's Eve, with her arm linked through my father's. They were headed to a house party across town. "I didn't realize it had gotten serious."

"With you gone, the house was too empty, and everyone kept telling me it would do me good to settle down again. You know I can't cook, and I hate to clean."

Most people would just hire a housekeeper if that's all they wanted. "Is she living in the house?"

"Yeah. Tommy still stays here every once in a while. And this is Sean's home when he's on leave. It made sense to use your old room. Joyce loved the pretty green color. Said it felt like the most feminine room in the house."

Of course. My room that I spent an entire month redecorating after my father begged me not to move out after college. I painted it floor to ceiling, every windowpane, every inch of molding, even in the closet. Then I installed white wrought iron shelves in just the right spot, so I could see all my treasures from the bed. I used money I'd saved to buy some sheer curtains and a new comforter, that matched the freshly painted walls.

"What did you do with all my stuff?" And Mom's things that I found hidden in the attic when I was fourteen.

"Joyce boxed it up, and Tommy put it in the cellar." *Great.* I'm sure he just dumped it all down there in a heap.

"I hope he put it on something so that it doesn't get wet when the cellar takes water."

"I'll ask him. Listen, I was wondering where you left that recipe book. The one your mother made before she died?"

"You need the recipe book?"

"Joyce is a master crafter, but she's not much of a cook. Thought she might be able to make some decent suppers if she had a straightforward guide."

"I have it with me." *Thank God.*

"Send it, would you, honey?"

"Sure." But not the original. Those are my mother's recipes—in her handwriting. Her family recipes. My family recipes. Joyce isn't getting the original. I'll make a copy at the library on Monday. "Dad, why didn't you tell me?"

"This is still my house, and I can use whatever room I want for whatever I want." He's defensive about giving my room to Joyce. It's strangely

comforting.

“Not about my room.” *Although that would have been nice.* “About Joyce. It sounds like things are serious with her.”

“No man likes to talk to his daughter about the women he keeps company with.” He’s gruff and dismissive, but I don’t stop.

“I know, but—”

“I’ve been alone for a long time, little girl. I’ve sacrificed plenty for something that wasn’t my fault.”

*For something that was my fault.* He doesn’t have to say the words—the implication is crystal clear. It always is.

“I’m glad you have someone.” And I am. “I worry about you being alone. I didn’t mean to suggest otherwise. I’m just homesick and it gets the better of me sometimes.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ve always been one to speak and act before you think. Got that from your mother’s side. That, and your pretty green eyes and burnt-red hair. Joyce is staying at the house—but she’ll never be your mother. Not a day goes by that I don’t miss her.”

My heart splinters, creating millions of tiny new fractures each time he talks about how much he loved my mother, and about the grief he’s carried for all these years. “I know how hard it’s been for you, Dad. I’m so sorry.”

I’m not sure why I apologize. Maybe it’s because I’m sorry he lost the love of his life too soon. Maybe I’m sorry for the choice she made—the one that changed my father’s life, my brothers’ lives, and devastated our family. I’m not sure anymore. I’ve been apologizing for so long, it’s just a habit now.

We say goodbye after I promise to send the recipe book first thing next week.

I lie back down on the air mattress I’ve been sleeping on since I moved into this temporary apartment. *My room is gone.* I suppose that’s what parents do after their children leave home. They turn the space into something practical. It’s a natural progression—nothing personal.

I spend a long time making excuses, and I don’t dwell on the fact that my father never said *you can stay in the den while you’re home, or in the front parlor that we never use. I can’t wait to see you.* He never said anything resembling that. I don’t dwell on it because it hurts my heart.



## KATE

I ring the bell at the rectory entrance and adjust my tote bag on my shoulder while waiting for someone to answer the door. This is such a vast structure in the middle of a tiny island. It must be lonely out here, especially in the winter.

The lock clicks, and the wooden door creaks open. “Kate,” Father Jesse says warmly. “So good to see you.”

“Hello, Father.”

“Come in, please.” He holds the screen door open for me. “Can I take your bag, or would you prefer to keep it?”

“I’ll hold onto it. I have a notebook inside so I can jot down your ideas for the new bulletin.”

“My living quarters are upstairs. I usually spend most of my off-duty time there. But we can have supper down here in the public space, if you prefer. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

I smile. “Upstairs is fine.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” He beckons with his head. “Follow me.”

While Father Jesse leads me to the stairs, I can’t help but mull over the contrast between him and Sinclair. One considers my comfort, and the other wants to make me as uncomfortable as possible, or at least keep me off kilter. And it’s not just this. The differences between them are so stark, it’s as though they come from different species.

“How are things going at the library?” he asks over his shoulder.

“Pretty well. I have a steady stream of clients who come in for help with job applications, or for some general advice about banking and utilities. I

think some of them are just happy to have somewhere to be besides the shelter, and it doesn't hurt that Lucinda keeps a tin stocked with goodies in my office."

"We all deserve a treat now and then," he says as we reach the second-floor landing. There's a substantial door at the top, not a heavy-duty outside door, but more like something that would close off a bedroom from the rest of the house. It's unlocked.

"Here we are," he says, pushing the door open. "I suppose I could make this place a whole lot homier, but it suits my simple needs."

The apartment is cozy and neat as a pin. A simple wooden cross hangs on the wall above a console table in the entranceway, but the walls and surfaces are not otherwise cluttered with religious symbols. Nana had more crosses and virgins on display than Father Jesse.

"Let's go into the kitchen," he says. "I didn't want to put the oven on until I checked to see if you would be comfortable up here. But it shouldn't be too long. Are you hungry?"

"I am, but not so hungry that I can't wait a bit."

The eat-in kitchen is painted a cheery yellow, with a nautical themed valance dressing the window above the sink and matching cushions on the chairs.

"Can I get you a glass of wine?" he asks, turning on the stove.

*Wine?* I must hesitate for a second too long before answering. "Priests have an ancient, celebrated relationship with wine," Father Jesse quips. "We partake regularly, and not simply for ritual. It's allowed," he whispers in my direction, and I laugh.

When I was young, I sometimes had dinner with Father Tierney in the rectory, and during Lent and Christmas there was often a visiting priest in residence who would join us, but there was no wine, or private upstairs apartments, and there was only one kitchen on the first floor that everyone used.

Father Jesse pours us each a glass of ruby-tinted wine, and carefully removes a towel draped over the cheeseboard. My mouth waters at the wedge of cheddar and the delicate crackers sprinkled with poppy seeds accompanying it. A bunch of plump red grapes sits in the center of the small wooden board rounding out the selection.

"I know that I should preheat the oven, but I don't always follow the directions to the letter. Don't tell anyone or they might stop leaving me

food.” He wags his finger, giving me a lopsided grin.

“A rebel,” I tease back.

He chuckles, placing a shallow casserole tented with foil into the oven. “I hope you like chicken pot pie.”

“That wouldn’t be the chicken pot pie that Bertha Clemmons made, would it?”

“The very same. I overheard you telling her how much you loved it. I was hoping you weren’t just being polite.”

“It was delicious. I had a second helping, larger than my first.”

“Good. I put the extra one she brought aside, before Virginia could freeze it. Supper will be ready in about half an hour. Why don’t we sit in the sunroom, have a little snack, and discuss the bulletin? Then, with that out of the way, we can enjoy a pleasant meal.” He hands me a few paper napkins, and we take our wine and cheese into a lovely glass-enclosed solarium overlooking the distant ocean.

“Quite a view, isn’t it?” he asks, placing the tray on a small table between us.

“It is.” The outlying view is spectacular, but the area closer to the back of the rectory is overgrown and a bit eerie. From here, it looks almost as though the turret juts out over the swampland, but it’s unlikely that it was actually constructed so close to the water. I read, somewhere, that storms have caused land erosion on all the sea islands, in some cases, putting structures at risk. That’s probably what happened here. “Is the swamp deep?”

“Yes. But how deep depends on the tide and how much rain we’ve had.”

Father Jesse slices a generous portion of cheese and lays it on a thin cracker before offering it to me. I take a quick bite, catching the crumbs in a napkin, and pull out my notebook.

“I’m at somewhat of a disadvantage because I’m new to the congregation. Tell me what you’re thinking about for the bulletin. What kind of tone would you like it to convey?”

He separates a small cluster of grapes from the larger bunch and places them on a napkin. “I’m not exactly sure,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “Something that offers hope. I want people to know about the kind of help we can offer them, but I don’t like the idea of bragging, or calling too much attention to ourselves. I like that we’re humble—that we perform good deeds quietly without seeking praise.”

“I think it’s a fabulous tone to set. We’ll come up with something that’s

newsy with plenty of practical information, but without any kind of boasting. How does that sound?”

“It sounds like a tall order, even for a smart woman.”

I smile shyly and help myself to a cracker and some cheese. “It’s a fine line. We’ll parse it carefully. It will mean several drafts, and honest, open communication between us. Virginia can help too.”

“You are a ray of sunshine. I spend too much time around naysayers who are experts on why we *can’t* do things. Your can-do attitude is refreshing. St. Maggie’s is lucky to have you. As am I,” he adds softly.

I feel the bloom on my cheeks and shift the subject away from me. “You mentioned a printed version when we last spoke. Do you have a subscriber list? Emailing would be much less expensive. There’s little cost involved unless you’re sending thousands of newsletters—I mean bulletins.”

“Most of our congregants are older. Many of them don’t get their information from the web. And the people we need to reach most, like the women you work with, don’t have access to computers.”

“Maybe we can do both. It would be easy to put the bulletin online. It can go right onto the church website, and we can print some copies to distribute to places like the library, the hospital emergency room, and leave some in the church as well.”

“That’s perfect.”

The timer buzzes. “I think that’s our signal that we’ve done enough work for the evening. Let me feed you.”

Father Jesse moves around the kitchen with a graceful ease, not wasting a single step as he sets the table. “Can I help with something?” I ask.

“Sit,” he says, pointing to a chair facing away from the stove. “You’re my guest this evening. Let me serve you.”

I try to imagine Sinclair preparing a meal—serving me—but despite my best efforts, the image is filmy with fuzzy edges, until my mind wanders to the dim alley. But I don’t allow myself to linger there. Not now.

“I’m not much of a cook,” Father Jesse says, dishing out the pot pie. “Although I can make a few simple things.” He sets a pure white china plate on the placemat in front of me dotted with a few peas and a slice of carrot peeping out from under the well-browned crust. “My mother died when I was a toddler, and my father a few years later. My grandmother was sickly, so I often had to fend for myself at suppertime. But it was mostly cold cuts stuffed between slices of store-bought bread and boxed macaroni and cheese.



You know, the kind with bright orange powder.”

I nod. “I’m sorry. It must have been difficult growing up without either of your parents. Do you have siblings?”

“Only child. It was a bit lonely at times, but good practice for the solitude of the priesthood. Tell me about your family.”

My fork stills midair. “I also lost my mother when I was very young. I never knew her. But I’ve tried to piece together her life, so that I have something to hold onto.”

“God’s plan isn’t always apparent to us, but He always has one. When we’re grieving, our hearts are often too closed off, but if we open them to Him, He will provide us ample comfort in our hour of need.”

“I grew up hearing that she was in a better place. I hold onto that, especially when I’m missing her.”

“One day you’ll be together again, for all of eternity.” He pats my arm gently. His fingers are warm and smooth. “Do you have siblings?”

“Three brothers—two who are living, and one who died while serving in the Marines.”

“Are you close to them?”

“I was very close to Liam, who passed away, but not as close to the other two. They’re somewhat older, and mostly think of me as an annoying little sister.”

“I highly doubt that you’ve ever annoyed anyone.”

I stare down at the plate, spearing a piece of tender chicken with my fork.

“You never told me what brought you to Charleston.”

“I originally came to learn more about Warren King. But my interests have expanded beyond him, and now I’m trying to learn more about Charleston’s societies and men’s clubs. But everyone has been rather close-mouthed.”

“The secrecy is part of the allure—it always has been, and probably always will be. In the church, too. I understand the confirmation hearings for Judge King might not happen until the fall.”

“Do you know him?”

“Only in passing. But I did recently hear he’s fallen ill.”

“Oh? Perhaps that’s why the hearings have been delayed.” He doesn’t respond, and I can’t come up with another question on the spot that doesn’t sound too pushy.

“And what about Smith Sinclair?” he asks. “Couldn’t get him to join us

for Mass?”

“We—we—I don’t know how to describe our relationship,” I answer sheepishly. “We’re friends, I guess. It’s an unlikely friendship. Charleston is not a very welcoming place. Or maybe, not terribly welcoming to journalists.”

“Not just journalists. Priests too, but they eventually open their arms wide. It does take time, and it doesn’t hurt to develop some thick skin while you wait for them to come around. Did you have any pets growing up?”

*Pets?* His transitions are often so clumsy. But now that I’ve had a chance to know him better, they seem less like a lack of conversational skills, and more like another charming quirk.

I shake my head. “No. I always wanted a dog, but my father didn’t need anything else to take care of.”

“You can get one now.”

“I’ve thought about it, but they require a lot of attention and some stability. I don’t think it’s the right time in my life for a dog.”

“A pet turtle then, perhaps. They’re rather independent, although they’re not much fun to play with.” Father Jesse pours us each more wine and offers me a second helping of the chicken pie.

“It’s delicious, but I’ve had enough, thank you.”

After replacing the cork on the bottle, he sits back in his chair, swirling the wine around the balloon glass. “I’d like to ask you something, but please stop me if I’m overstepping.” I nod solemnly, wondering what he has in mind. “I noticed that on both Sundays you attended Mass, you haven’t received communion—although you’ve looked wistfully at the chalice.”

I release a breath that I had apparently been holding. “I wasn’t sure—at St. Claire’s,” I begin inelegantly. “At my parish in Boston, congregants are welcome to receive communion so long as they are in a state of grace. I know that some parishes interpret, well, everything, more liberally than others. I wasn’t sure about St. Maggie’s, and I didn’t want to do anything improper.”

“Ah, I see.” He clasps his hands together, elbows on the table. “Here at St. Maggie’s, we are family. I want you to feel comfortable to ask me anything. But you can also ask Virginia, if you prefer. She’s been with me for so long that she usually knows what I’m thinking, before I’m even thinking it.”

He reaches for some bread and breaks off a crusty end. “I encourage everyone to partake in Reconciliation, because it’s freeing—good for the soul, so to speak. I don’t worry too much about parishioners being in a state

of grace—I leave those decisions to God and their individual consciences. But of course, I offer spiritual guidance when asked. I highly doubt there’s anything you’ve done that would remove you from grace.” He dips the bread into a bit of creamy sauce left on the plate and pops it into his mouth.

Friday night against the brick wall in the alley with Sinclair comes immediately to mind. Premarital sex is definitely a mortal sin, but I keep this to myself.

“I’d be honored to hear your confession—although I prefer to think of it as reconciliation. St. Maggie’s has a lovely reconciliation room downstairs overlooking the garden. We offer the sacrament with or without a privacy screen.”

*Honored?* “Yes. I’d like that.” I say it to please, but I’m not at all sure I would like it.

“I’m glad you’re considering reconciliation because there seems to be something weighing heavily on you. Can I tempt you with dessert?” he asks, clearing my plate.

“Thank you, but it’s getting late, and the road off the island is still new to me. I should probably go before it gets too dark.”

“On the island, we enjoy the solace dark provides, but it takes getting used to. Before you go, I have a gift for you.”

“A gift?” *A gift?*

“It’s actually more of a regift. I hope that doesn’t offend you.”

“No of course not.” I smile. “I’ve regifted once or twice myself.”

He leaves the kitchen and returns with a large rectangular box that appears heavy.

“A well-meaning congregant brought this to me.” He sets what appears to be a box holding a television on the table. “I played with the thing for hours—even read the instructions twice, but I can’t make heads or tails of it.” He shrugs. “It’s a smart TV. Ever hear of it?”

I press my lips together, trying not to laugh. For someone who isn’t even forty, he knows little about technology. “Yes. They connect to Wi-Fi and you can watch shows with subscriptions, like Netflix.”

“I’m afraid this television is smarter than I am.”

I chuckle. “You can use it like a regular TV. It doesn’t have to be connected to the internet.”

“I don’t watch much TV, and the small one I have more than meets my needs. Do you have Wi-Fi at your place?”

“Yes.”

“You would do me a great act of kindness by taking it off my hands.” He glances at me and bursts out laughing. “*Please take this damn thing. Do with it what you will, just get it out of here.* Not much in the way of an offering, is it?”

“I would be happy to take the TV. I don’t have one. I watch movies on my laptop now. This would be a big improvement over that.”

“Good!” he cries, so loud the lusty echo surely resonates beyond the walls. “I can’t tell you how much you’ve pleased me, Kate. Let me carry it out to your car.”



## KATE

“Kate?” a lovely dark-haired woman with warm brown eyes asks tentatively from the doorway of my library office. She’s familiar, but I can’t immediately place her. I glance at the designer purse she’s carrying and the diamond on her finger. She certainly doesn’t appear as though she’s without resources.

“Yes.” I stand and walk around the table as she enters the room. “May I help you?”

“I’m Gabby Duval.” Her entire face lights up when she smiles. “Actually, Gabby Duval Wilder.” That’s how I recognize her—from the media coverage of President Wilder’s funeral, and photographs splashed all over the local news. She’s a bit of a celebrity in town. *But why is she here?* “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to saying that,” she adds.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Wilder.” I extend my hand. “How can I help you?”

“Call me Gabby, please,” she says, her perfectly manicured hand grasping mine firmly.

“Gabby.” She’s quite beautiful up close. Not like a fashion model, but like a woman with good genes who wears sunscreen faithfully and washes her make-up off carefully every night. Fiona would appreciate her flawless skin.

“I’m here for two reasons,” she says. “Let’s do a little business first.”

*Okay.* “Would you like to sit?” I gesture toward the mismatched chairs around the table. They seem childish and unpolished compared to her. If she notices, she doesn’t let on.

“I only have a few minutes, but I would love to sit. I’ve been running around all day, and these shoes are every bit as uncomfortable as they look.” I glance down at her strappy sandals, casual, but modern, like her outfit.

As she sits, it occurs to me that I should offer her something to drink—that it would not only be polite, but expected. Sinclair’s right. My southern charm is lacking. “Would you like some water, or a cookie?” I sound more like an idiot than a gracious host, but she doesn’t seem to notice.

“That depends. Is it a sugar cookie?”

“Snickerdoodle.”

She side-eyes the tin at the end of the table. “I better not. I’ve already had two cookies today. And an orange-glazed scone,” she adds with an impertinent grin. “But thank you.”

We settle in across from one another, and I wait on pins and needles while she pulls a folder from a large leather satchel. I hope she’s not doing her husband’s bidding and here to chase me out of town.

“I recently started an after-school program for girls, Georgie’s Place,” she explains, sliding a bold fuchsia folder toward me. “While all girls are welcome at the center, I’m particularly interested in creating a safe space for vulnerable girls, and an atmosphere that builds them up and helps them imagine a promising future for themselves.”

Her words hit close to home, and for a few seconds, I wonder if she knows about my history. *No, that makes no sense. She couldn’t possibly know anything about me.*

“I’m lining up speakers to come in and talk to the girls formally, and informally, about career choices,” she continues. “To introduce them to an array of possibilities and make their worlds a little bigger. I would love if you would come by the center and talk to them about journalism—about what you do. I’m sure most of those little girls have never met a journalist.”

My fingers unfurl as I relax. “I would be happy to speak to the girls. Maybe I can bring some pens and notepads with me. Depending on how many girls there are,” I add.

“That would be wonderful.” She smiles. “We can help with the supplies.”

“When were you thinking you might like to have me come in?” Between my work at the library, the King investigation, and the church bulletin, I’m not even sure where I’ll find the time. But it sounds like a great program and I want to be a part of it.

“The after-school coordinator will email you with some proposed dates.

Do you have a card?"

"Yes." I take one of the simple business cards the library had made for me off the miniature easel and hand it to her.

"I'm also always trying to find volunteers with an hour or two a week to spare. There's a vetting process, but I hope you'll consider it." She pauses for a breath, studying me while I study her. "I've managed to twist a lot of arms—women of all ages—many the same age as we are, so in addition to doing angel's work, it will be a nice opportunity for you to make friends. I know how hard it can be to break into the Charleston scene when you don't know anyone. I grew up here, but when I came back after being away for several years, it was even hard for me."

I tuck a curl behind my ear. "I would love to help in any way I can. Having a chance to meet other women my age is a bonus."

"You just made my day," she says, tapping her hand on the bright pink folder. "There's information about the center inside, as well as my contact information, and a form for a criminal records check, if you're interested in a regular volunteer stint."

"Thank you. I'll read through it this evening." *Tell her about what you do. There are so many similarities.* "I work with homeless women here," I begin hesitantly. "If you meet anyone through Georgie's Place that could use some supportive services, this is a sampling of what we provide." I hand her a list of what we offer.

She takes it and scans the list quickly. "This is a nice complement to what we do. Together we could be a formidable team." She smiles broadly and slides the paper into her bag. "Now, for the next item of business. You should know upfront that I won't take no for an answer, unless you have an audience with the queen on that very day. Then *maybe*, I'll let you slide."

I shift in my seat. There is absolutely nothing snobby or off-putting about Gabrielle Wilder. She couldn't be nicer, but there is something about the way she speaks that I'm not used to, and it has me mesmerized. It's an unhurried cadence with an enchanting combination of clever prose and a lyrical accent that floats from her perfectly shaped mouth. I might be developing a serious girl-crush.

"It's Smith's birthday next week and we're having a party for him," she says with her hands clasped on the table. "Just a few friends. I want you to join us at Sweetgrass."

*Wait. What?* How does she know Smith and I—are friends? "I don't



know,” I say, averting my eyes.

“Smith speaks fondly of you. He’ll love you to be there.”

It was him. He told her about us. What did he say? Clearly nothing too awful or she wouldn’t be here. “Does he know about the party?”

“No. It’s a surprise. Not a jump out from behind the drapes and yell surprise kind of surprise. Although he might get a kick out of that.” She smiles impishly. “He’s been invited to supper. He just doesn’t know that there will be some extra people joining us, and a big coconut cake piled with boiled icing for dessert. The man will eat anything that doesn’t move, but that’s his favorite.”

“I-I’m not sure he would appreciate me crashing his birthday party.”

“You’ve been officially invited. That’s not crashing.” She stands and gathers her things. “I’ve heard a lot about you from Smith, and from my husband. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that Smith likes you—very much. I’ll see you a week from Friday at seven. It’s casual. Just give the guards at the gate your name. You’ll be on the list of approved visitors. It was nice meeting you, Kate,” she says warmly, before turning toward the door.

“Gabby?” She stops and pivots.

“Smith, your husband, and Gray Wilder ... you should know ... they want me to leave Charleston. I-I don’t think they—especially your husband—would want me at your home.”

She takes several steps toward me and drops her bag on the table with a hand propped on top. “I don’t believe for a minute that Smith wants you to go anywhere. I’m sure he’s given you that impression. I can’t explain the male courting rituals, except to say they don’t advance much past sixth grade,” she says, rolling her eyes. “I invited a *friend* of Gray’s, too. He’ll have plenty on his plate that evening, and it won’t have a thing to do with you. So check him off your list of concerns. As for my husband—don’t spend a single second worrying about him.”

I swallow some of the anxiety that’s been building since she issued the invitation. “Your husband doesn’t seem like the kind of man whose bark is worse than his bite.”

Gabby arches a well-groomed brow, and her eyes grow wide and serious. “Oh, his bite is venomous. If you tangle with him, you better have the correct anecdote handy. But trust me. He will be on his best behavior that evening—although that’s not saying much.” She lifts the satchel off the table and onto her shoulder. “Should I send a car for you? It might make it easier.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Thank you. I can find my way.”

“Good,” she gushes, with a toothy grin that makes her eyes sparkle.

*Oh, Kate, what on earth did you just agree to?*



## SMITH

“What?” I bark into the phone.

“You go first, darlin’,” JD drawls, “because it sounds like someone stepped on your fragile little feelings, or is it that the menstrual cramps are particularly bad this month?”

“I don’t need your shit right now.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing happened. I’ve been on the damn phone all morning negotiating prices and delivery time for the new equipment.” There is almost nothing I hate more than being stuck in my office for hours trying to reason with morons.

“The heat-sensing devices and night-vision goggles are on back order,” I continue, whacking the desk with a yellow pad filled with notes. “Because those stupid fuckers who think they’re going to fight off the United States military from bunkers in the backyard have eaten up all the inventory, not to mention driven the cost sky-high.”

“What now?”

“They add us to the list and we wait. Six months, maybe longer.”

“How much to get to the top of the list?”

“Too much,” I mutter. “The computer equipment is more important.”

“That’s not what I asked.” *Damn JD.* Once he gets something in his head, he can never let it go.

“I thought you were going to be a silent partner? That’s what we agreed on.”

“You know there are jackasses all over the Carolinas that are less

stubborn than you. Use the damn money I transferred into the account.”

“I’m planning on it. But I don’t want to drain the account at this stage in the operation. Things are going to come up that we’ll need that money for, including a hefty insurance bond when the first contract comes through.”

“So? We’ll transfer more.”

“No.”

“Alright. Let’s talk about something else before I’m so pissed off, I have to drive over to your office and slap some sense into your thick skull. I have information on King.”

“I’m listening.”

“There’s a rumor being floated that he’s sick. Smart people don’t believe it. They think that it might be an excuse so that when they pull his nomination, he can still keep his current judgeship.”

It takes a moment for the pieces to fall together. “If that’s true, that means whatever the White House dug up has legs. Otherwise, King’s people wouldn’t be worried that he’d lose his judgeship. Those are lifetime appointments.”

“Yep.”

“What do you think?”

“The information comes from a source that doesn’t trade in gossip. I’m inclined to believe there’s at least some truth behind it.”

“Any sense of what it is?”

“Not really. But King fucked anything with a pussy back in the day. One source tells me he wouldn’t be at all surprised if this involved a woman.”

“Thanks. I appreciate you asking around.”

“I guess this means that reporter is going to be staying in Charleston.”

I don’t like his tone. “You could cut her a break.”

“I could, but I won’t. She’s trouble, Smith. I feel it in my bones.”

We hang up without any more discussion about Kate. When JD’s thinking clearly, his instincts are solid, but he can’t think straight when it involves her. Not after she tried to do a story on Zack last year. JD protects his brothers fiercely, but when it comes to Zack, who is helpless, JD is a bear and wouldn’t hesitate to kill to protect him. No different than he feels about his wife and daughter.

My instincts are more than solid. They’re well-honed and battle-tested. But my dick has gotten in the way and compromised my judgment where Kate’s concerned. It’s inexcusable and demonstrates a total lack of discipline

on my part—at least that’s what General Sinclair would say. And he’d be right.

The bottom line is I don’t entirely trust her either. Can’t afford it. As much as I want to let my guard down around her, I simply can’t. It’s always possible she’s using me to get closer to the Wilders. Everyone wants a piece of them. It started even before their father became a presidential nominee. Three young guys, filthy rich, and powerful. Even with the old man dead, they’re irresistible to the media.

I can’t let my dick take the lead on this. I just can’t. But I can give her the information on King. That, I can do.

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I STROLL past the circulation desk where Lucinda McCrae is checking out a book for a woman with a young child strapped on her back. “Can’t bring drinks into the library,” she chides, like I’m a schoolboy.

“I’m taking it up to Kate McKenna. Going straight to her room. Won’t be anywhere near a book.” I don’t stop and wait for permission.

“Next time,” she calls after me, “I take my coffee with a big dollop of cream and no sugar. I’m sweet enough.”

I pause on the bottom rung, turning my head to look at her. She has a damn sassy twinkle in her eyes that makes me grin. I’m sure every story about the woman is true. “I’ll remember that for next time, Miss McCrae.”

“I’m counting on it, Mr. Sinclair. I hope you have an appointment to see Miss McKenna,” she says, when I’m halfway up the stairs. “She’s a busy young lady who doesn’t have time to entertain everything that blows up from the street.”

I should be annoyed by the crack, but I’m not. For some reason Lucinda McCrae has made it her business to watch out for Kate and that’s fine by me.

When I get to the top, I snake my way through the stacks to Kate’s office, standing in the doorway to watch her for a few seconds before I barge in. Her elbow is propped on the table, and she’s twisting a hunk of hair around her hand, sharp eyes trained on the computer screen.

*Shit.* She’s gorgeous. There’s nothing more I want than those long legs wrapped around my waist, heels digging into my bare ass. *That’s enough. This kind of thinking is not helping your judgment.*

I stow the not-for-prime-time thoughts, and stride into the room, kicking the door shut behind me. “Hey.”

“Hey, yourself.” Not sure the broad smile is for me or for the coffee she’s eyeing longingly, but either way, it’s all good. “I didn’t expect you for another twenty minutes.”

“Light traffic.” I place the cup on the table in front of her.

“Thank you. Must be some news, if you have to shut the door.”

I grunt and plunk my ass in the chair across from her. “There’s a rumor that King’s sick, and that’s why the hearing’s been delayed.”

“I heard that,” she murmurs, prying off the lid, and blowing on the coffee before taking a sip.

“There are people who believe it’s a ruse. That King’s camp leaked the lies, so when the White House pulls the nomination, no one will start digging for the reasons why, and he can keep his federal judgeship.”

“Why doesn’t the White House just pull his name if they’re not planning on proceeding with him?” She fidgets with a pen while her mind churns.

“Why would they want to be complicit in a lie that doesn’t benefit them?”

“I doubt they do. But they won’t pull it before they have another nominee. It will make them seem disorganized and inept.”

“And this White House always does everything it can to avoid that look,” she says. “It plays right into King’s hands.”

I nod. Whatever is happening with King isn’t good for the country, but to be honest, all I can think about right now is how relieved I am that the story isn’t dead, because when it comes down to it, I don’t want her to leave Charleston. *Not yet.* It might not make me very patriotic, but it makes me very human. I’m a civilian, and I get to choose human now, but not without the pinch of conscience.

“Why would he be afraid of losing his current job?” she continues. “That makes no sense.” Her brow furrows tightly. “Unless—”

“They’re pulling the nomination because of some scandal he’s involved with,” I respond before she can finish.

“It would have to be something serious to force him out of his current position. Do you have any ideas?”

“No.”

She disappears somewhere deep inside her head. “Do you know Judge Sorlin?” she asks, tapping a finger mindlessly on the bow of her lip.

*Judge Sorlin?* I wrack my brain, but I can’t come up with anything.

“Never heard of him. Who is he?”

“Lucinda told me that he was King’s mentor back in the day. Carefully groomed King to be what he is today. He’s in a nursing home with dementia. His only daughter lives in Richmond. Maybe I should talk to him.”

“A demented judge doesn’t sound like he’ll be much help to you.”

“I don’t know. My grandmother had dementia. Not every second is confused. She had lucid periods. Depends what stage he’s in.”

I can see where this is going—into a big dead end. Maybe I can grease the wheels, make her life a little easier. *Why? Why do you want to do that?* I ignore common sense. Why not, when it come to her, I’m on a roll in that regard. “How are you going to get in to talk to him?”

“Unless it’s different here, you’d be surprised how easy it is to walk into a nursing home. They’re short-staffed, so nobody bothers you, especially if you look like you could be family, and act like you know where you’re going.”

“That’s reassuring,” I say dryly. “Do you want me to go with you?”

“No. It’s too late to go today. He’s likely to be more confused as the sun sets. I’ll go tomorrow, mid-morning. I think it might be less overwhelming for him if it’s just me.”

I wonder for a minute if there’s another reason she doesn’t want me to go. Maybe she doesn’t trust me anymore than I trust her. Probably smart. Although I’d never betray her—at least I don’t think so.

“Be careful.” I’m not sure why I feel the need to warn her. But something about this whole King mess is beginning to eat at me, and it doesn’t have a thing to do with Wildflower.





## KATE

After I meet with Judge Sorlin, I have back-to-back appointments at the library, and then a literacy class. There's scarcely a minute to visit the restroom.

It's past seven by the time I lock my office door and head downstairs to let them know I'm leaving. Before I make it to the circulation desk, a man wearing a sheriff's uniform approaches me. "Mary Katherine McKenna?" the deputy asks.

"Yes."

He hands me a sealed envelope. "It's self-explanatory. But there's a number inside to call if you have questions. Have a nice evening."

My hands tremble as I tear open the flap and pull out the paperwork. I read each word carefully. It's a temporary restraining order, issued by a judge in Charleston County. It states that I am to have no contact with Judge Sorlin, and that I am ordered to stay away from the nursing home. A hearing on the merits has been scheduled for ten days from today. I read it through twice more before sitting on the bench just inside the main door, where I read it again. It's intimidating with its formal language and judicial seal.

Someone doesn't want me talking to Judge Sorlin. Maybe he does know something. He might, but if today was any indication, it's unlikely he'll ever be able to tell me. Maybe it's just that someone doesn't want to risk that I'll upset him. Maybe it's that simple.

I'm not sure what to do. I no longer have an editor or colleagues. After a couple minutes stewing, I still have nothing.

I could talk to Smith. There's really no one else to turn to for guidance.

Do I really want him to know about this? When I can't think of one good reason why not, I text him.

**Kate:** *Do you have a few minutes?*

**Smith:** *What's going on?*

**Kate:** *I was just served with a judicial order to stay away from Judge Sorlin.*

**Smith:** *I'll meet you at your place in an hour.*

---

BY THE TIME I get home, shower, and tidy up the house a bit, Smith is at my door with a pizza large enough to feed a family of four and a six-pack of a hoppy beer we both like.

"I hope you like cheese on your pizza," he says, with a cocky half-smile, "because I know you don't like it on burgers." I shove his arm playfully and take the box, setting it on the counter while I get out plates.

"As long as it's not covered in anchovies, I'm happy. I don't have beer glasses. How about these?" I hold up one of the tall etched tumblers that was in the cupboard when I moved in.

"Don't bother dirtying glasses on my account. The bottle's fine." He uses the opener from his keyring to pry off the cap from two bottles and stashes the rest in the fridge. "Let me see the restraining order."

I hand Smith the paperwork, watching him closely while he reads. As usual, his face gives little away. "It's signed by a judge," he says, folding the order carefully and stuffing it back into the envelope.

I'm not sure what he means. "It's a court order. I would expect a judge to have signed it."

"In Charleston County, restraining orders are normally issued by magistrates and usually only after two incidences of harassment. Have you visited Sorlin before?" I shake my head. "Contacted him?"

"No. I just showed up."

"Whoever sought the order had access, otherwise it's unlikely they would have ever gotten near a judge. How did you know what room he was in?"

"Lucinda. They're old friends and she brings him lunch a couple times a month. She gave me his room number when she suggested I pay him a visit."

"When was that?"

“More than a week ago.”

“Did she know you went to see him today?”

“No. She was off today and had left yesterday by the time I decided to go.” I’m starting to feel like he’s accusing Lucinda of setting me up. It’s ridiculous. “Lucinda didn’t sic a judge on me.”

He nods, and takes a swig from the bottle. “Probably not. Let’s eat. I need a couple minutes to think.” I would prefer to figure it out first, then eat. But I’m grateful he’s helping, so I keep my mouth shut.

“The pizza smells great.” I flip open the box, and there’s a slice missing. “What happened here?” He side-eyes me, but doesn’t respond. “Does Fazio’s make a special-shaped pie they sell at a discount? Or did a big rat walk away with a slice?”

His lips twitch madly, as he tries to hold back a smile. “Don’t give me that shit. I left plenty. I was starving.”

“Then let’s feed you before you waste away to nothing and I’m somehow blamed for it.” I hand him a plate with a slice of pizza.

“Put another one on there,” he says, “I’m a growing boy.” Gabby was right. The man will probably eat anything that doesn’t move. I wonder what they’ll serve at the party to go along with his favorite coconut cake? *The party*. What if Gabby’s wrong and Smith doesn’t want me there? I told her I would go, but I could email her with an excuse. There’s still time to beg out.

“Where’s the TV?” Smith asks.

“The TV?”

“The basketball playoffs begin tonight,” he explains sheepishly. “I’ll keep it on mute. I just want to keep track of the score.”

“Right.” I’ve never met a single male who only keeps the TV on during a game to keep an eye on the score. They say it, but it always ends up with them yelling things at the TV from the couch. At least that’s the way it always went down at my house growing up. But I don’t mind watching the game. Like most Bostonians, I’m a huge sports fan.

“Come on,” Smith begs shamelessly, flashing a dimpled grin that would melt the polar caps. He knows it, too. “I have a small wager on the game.”

*In the bedroom. Ugh.* “Follow me.”

On our way to find the TV, he peeks inside the oddly furnished living room. There are a couple of end tables and a coffee table in the room, along with a standing lamp, but nowhere to sit.

“Where’s the sofa?”

“I don’t have one. This house belongs to a professor at the University. She put her upholstered furniture in storage before she left town for the summer. The only items she kept in the house can be wiped off easily or cleaned when she returns.”

“You should’ve told her you like to get off in the bathtub, so you won’t make anything dirty.”

I glare at him over my shoulder to hide the embarrassment. I’ll never live it down. That’s what I get for telling him. “Do you want to watch the game, or give me decorating tips?”

“What I want is to see if the Lakers are winning,” he says as we get to the bedroom. “Wait. Is that an air mattress?”

“Yes. Mattresses are upholstered. They definitely can’t be wiped off.”

“You’re fucking kidding me. She took the bed? But she left that ugly-ass rug? That’s made of fabric, too.”

“The rug is mine, thank you very much.” I grab the remote from the bedside table and sit on the floor cross-legged with my food.

“You sleep on that thing? I’m not sure it will hold my weight.”

I do sleep on it, and I do other things on it too—*while I fantasize about you*. But today, I’m not liquored up and horny, so I have the presence of mind not to share any of it with him.

“Weight capacity is not a problem, because you’re not sleeping on it. And you’re not lounging on it with that pizza, either. Sit your butt on my ugly-ass rug or go get yourself a kitchen chair.”

“Pft. Why don’t you buy a mattress, so you’ll have something decent to sleep on?”

“I’m not sure I’ll be in Charleston long enough to justify the purchase.” The words stir uneasy feelings inside me. “What channel is the game on?”

“Let me see the remote. I’ll find it.” He sits on the floor, back against the mattress, legs spanning the length of the rug, and scrolls through the channels so quickly it’s dizzying. “This is a nice TV. Nicer than mine. I’m surprised she didn’t store it with everything else.”

“It’s mine. It was a gift,” I say without thinking.

“A gift?” He peers at me with that probing gaze, still clutching the remote. “From who?”

*From Father Jesse. You know, the priest you think wants to fuck me.* I am not having that discussion again. “From none of your business.”

“Must be from a guy, then,” he mutters. “Boyfriend? Secret admirer?”

Daddy?” he ticks them off one after the other, pausing for a beat between each to see if I respond in some way. “Only a guy would give you a TV.”

“There are differences between the gifts guys give and the ones women give?”

“Yeah. Don’t change the subject. Where did the TV come from?”

Nosy bastard. He’s not going to stop until I tell him. “It’s from Father Jesse at St. Magdalene’s, okay?”

Smith takes a bite of pizza, chewing carefully. “The priest gave you an expensive television? Did I get that right?”

“A parishioner brought to him, and he already had a TV. He didn’t need another one.”

“So he gave it—to you.”

“It’s really not that complicated. I volunteered to help the church create a new bulletin, and I’m sure the TV is a way to compensate me for my trouble. Surprised your boy Josh, who keeps track of me, didn’t report it.”

“Mmhm,” he says. “Not too complicated at all.” He drains the beer bottle and stretches to place it on the wood floor at the edge of the rug. “Josh is a grown man. Served two tours in combat—I doubt he’d appreciate you calling him a boy in that disrespectful tone. But he’s on a more pressing assignment right now. I doubt you’ve seen him recently.”

I hardly saw him before. “So who’s tailing me?”

“Nobody was ever tailing you.”

“Keeping an eye on me, then?”

“That would be me.” He gets up and approaches the doorway.

Disappointment settles into my bones like a late January chill, but it comes disguised as anger. “*What?* You pretend to hang out so you can spy on me?”

“Calm your titties or that pizza will give you terrible heartburn. You want another slice or a beer while I’m up?”

God, I’m an idiot, or delusional. While I realize there is little difference between Sinclair setting up surveillance, and actually doing the surveilling himself, to me, there’s a world of difference. “No. I want answers,” I call after him, but he doesn’t say a word in response until he returns and is sitting comfortably on the rug with a full plate.

“I told you when I agreed to help you get to the bottom of the King story, that it would help me keep tabs on you, too.” He did say that. But I hoped his hanging around was about more—about wanting to be with me.

“I know it’s gotten more complicated between us. And to be honest, most of the time I have no fucking clue what I’m doing. It’s why mixing business and pleasure is never a good thing. I like you,” he says, bringing a slice of pizza to his mouth. “My life would be easier all around if I didn’t, but I do.”

I’m not sure how to respond. *Get the fuck out* is my first inclination, but there’s the matter of the restraining order, still. And then there’s also the small fact that I put on my best panties and bra after my shower. That must mean I like him too, even if my life would be easier all around, if I didn’t. “Can we talk about the restraining order?”

He nods solemnly, and the tenor of the room shifts. It’s still serious, but the baggage has been packed away.

“I want you to think carefully about anyone you might have told about the visit to Sorlin. Even if you just mentioned it in passing.”

“Other than you, Fiona is the only person.”

“Fiona. Your friend from Boston?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see anyone at the nursing home today who might have recognized you?”

That’s such a tough question. How can I possibly be sure? “I didn’t see anyone that I knew while I was there, and I was careful not to wear Judge Sorlin out, or to ask him too many questions that might upset him. He was in a good mood when I left. A dietary aide came into the room when I was there, but she didn’t say a word to me. She just left him a couple graham crackers and some apple juice.”

He looks at me with an alert gaze. “Do you remember her name?”

I shake my head. “She was a petite brunette and wore a light blue scrub top with teddy bears on it.”

“Well someone saw you and reported it. It might have been her,” he mutters mostly to himself. “Did you learn anything while you were there?”

“Not really. His dementia appears to be somewhat advanced. He had a brief moment of clarity when I arrived, but he wasn’t lucid for long enough to tell me much about King beyond someone named Gigi who didn’t want an abortion. I’m not even sure the two are related.”

“What exactly did he say?”

“*Gigi doesn’t want an abortion. Warren’s in a hell of a pickle now. So much promise.* But in the next breath, he was asking if his wife was visiting today. She died ten years ago. Then he started calling me Noreen. That was

his wife's name." Things deteriorated quickly after that, and I didn't want to push him too hard. Nana would always get agitated when visitors asked too many questions. It made the rest of the day rough, and it sometimes required sedating her so she could calm down enough to sleep. I wasn't going to do that to Judge Sorlin.

Smith shakes his head. "I hope someone puts a bullet in my head before I get to that stage."

"That's a terrible thing to say. He's a sweet, sweet man."

"I'm not talking about him. I'm talking about me." Smith gets up and makes himself comfortable in the center of my bed, his hands folded behind his head.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm tired of sitting on the floor," he says rearranging the pillows behind him and making himself right at home. "Why don't you come keep me company."

All that gorgeous muscle in my bed is so tempting, but he is a bad idea on steroids. "Don't get any ideas."

"Too late."

"It's not too late. Get off my bed."

"You think lying on your bed is what gives me ideas?" He snickers. "Or that I wouldn't fuck you on the floor, or against that door, or the dresser or —"

"Okay. You made your point."

"When's the last time you had sex?" he asks, in a voice that's not any different from the one he used to ask me if I wanted another slice of pizza. I turn and glare at his brazenness. "It's a simple question. It shouldn't require a calendar and a calculator—I hope."

"The alley," I huff. "If you want to call it that."

He whips a decorative cushion from the bed at me. "Before that. Was it more than a month ago?"

"Why do you care?"

"I'll take that as a yes. Six months? A year?" he asks, when I don't respond.

*Longer.* "Why is this germane to anything?"

"You know as well as I do that we're going to end up naked. Or at least you are. Maybe not tonight. But it's in the cards."

I do know. Most of the time, I even want it to happen. Although I expect



him to be naked too. I pick at my pizza, pulling off a green pepper that's embedded in the melted cheese. But I'm a little afraid of him. There's something about him—his intensity—his demanding nature—I don't know for sure what it is, but it frightens me at times. Maybe I'm afraid of getting hurt. He's the kind of man that could, *and would*, break my heart. I have no doubt about it.

“Kate?”

I turn to meet his eyes.

“There are things worth sharing with me before it happens,” he says with a gentle warmth, thawing the protective layer around my heart just a drop more. I hope he doesn't notice the thinning shell. “And we've got time right now—it's halftime and I'm not going anywhere until the game's over.” The last part is laced with a bit of sarcasm that lightens the mood and puts us both back on safer footing.

“It's been more than a year,” I mumble. Since before I left Boston.

“You on any kind of birth control?”

“No.” I've only used condoms.

“Are you healthy?”

“Yes. Do you want to know what I ate for breakfast?”

“Not necessary. But you should be happy I'm asking these questions. And you should ask some of your own.”

*I just might do that.* “When's the last time you had sex?” I ask from the rug at the foot of the bed.

“With my hand? That would be last night in the shower. Do you want to know what I was thinking about?”

I feel my neck flush. “With a woman?”

“The alley.”

Now I'm curious. “Before that?”

“A few days before we had supper at Miss Macy's.”

I swallow. “With a girlfriend?” *Please don't say yes.*

He maneuvers on the unstable mattress so that his head is at the foot of the bed, with his face close to mine. “No. If I had a girlfriend, I wouldn't have been in that alley. I'm not a cheater.”

I curl my hands into tight balls, thumbs caressing the ridges and bumps of the outer knuckles. He opened the door, so I might as well ask. “Have you ever shared a woman—with friends?”

“At the same time?”

I nod, holding my breath while I wait for him to answer.

“No.” He leans closer, his lips grazing mine. “Although once or twice women have shared me.” I pull back, recoiling without even the pretense of subtlety.

“Don’t ask a question you don’t want the answer to, princess. You’ll never hear me ask how many men have been in your bed before me.” He tugs on my arm. “Come back here. Finish that line of questioning, or ask whatever else you’re dying to know about me.”

Smith is unlike anyone I’ve ever met. While he can be demanding and judgmental, he has an openness that is both seductive and scary at the same time. I have no doubt he’s experimented with things that would make me uncomfortable. One more than any other. “You’ve never shared a woman—sexually? Not even with JD?”

“That would require our cocks to be in very close proximity to one another. Too close for either of our tastes.” He pulls me up onto the mattress, until we’re lying on our sides facing each other. “Is this something you’re asking for?” He brushes my cheek with his fingertip. “Because you don’t strike me as the type—”

“No.” My voice is wobbly. “It’s not at all what I want.”

We lay there quietly for a minute or two. Me, swatting away the thoughts creeping in to ruin the evening. Him, searching my face for answers. “One day you’ll tell me what this is all about,” he says, smoothing back my hair with his hand. “Doesn’t have to be tonight.”

“No more questions?” I aim for the right amount of sarcasm to hide behind, but the words emerge shaky. I’m not fooling anyone.

“Plenty more. I’m just takin’ a break to taste you.” His lips are smooth and firm when his mouth crushes mine. There’s no gentle exploration tonight. He takes and takes until I’m breathless under him. Until I can’t remember ever being afraid.

My impatient fingers rake into his muscled back, tilling the terrain, until the lush tendrils of desire wind their way through the fertile ground, enveloping us, until there’s no turning back.

It’s then that his phone rings. A shrill alert dragging us from a shared weightless dream.

Smith throws his head back with a primal growl and pulls the damn thing from his pants pocket.

“Yeah?” He rolls off of me, taking all the warmth with him. “You are

fucking kidding me.” He says a few more things, none of which I grasp completely because I’m too busy bemoaning what is clearly not going to be happening tonight. When he ends the call, his lips brush my forehead in a chaste reminder that we’re done here.

“There was an attempted break in at Sayle Pharmaceuticals—it’s a Wilder property. I need to meet the police there. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I say it, and of course he needs to go, but I’m not feeling okay. I miss him already.

“Don’t worry about the restraining order,” he reassures me. “We’ll get you a lawyer to make it go away if we need to.” I nod. “I want a raincheck for tonight,” he says, tying his sneakers.

I respond with a sad excuse for a smile. A pathetic little tug of the lips, but he’s already at the doorway so it doesn’t really matter.

“Kate.”

My gaze flickers to his eyes. “Hmm?”

“The break in is off the record.” His voice is hard and unforgiving.

*The break in is off the record.* It’s a warning shot. Not delivered with the violence of an AR-15, more like birdshot, leaving a smattering of ugly, painful pox that last for weeks.

A moment later the backdoor shuts firmly and he’s gone, leaving me to tend to my wounds.



## SMITH

I spoke with Kate briefly this morning and something seemed off with her. She was cool and detached. Not like herself.

It almost seemed like I did something to piss her off, but I haven't spoken with her since the other night when I brought pizza over to her place, and we almost ended up fucking on that ridiculous air mattress. There were no problems up until the time I left to deal with the disgruntled Sayle employee who thought he could break into his former lab and take his work. At least no problem aside from my hard, aching dick.

You could say I dodged one the other night. One being my own stupidity. I'll be smarter next time. Charleston has plenty of attractive women. I should not have sex with Kate McKenna. It's all true, but the story doesn't end here. It ends in some bed, somewhere, after we've both come a half-dozen times. I can pretend otherwise, but that's the reality. She's too far under my skin, taking up too much space in the spank bank, and I think about her too damn much.

Every guy knows the best way to get a woman out of his mind is to fuck her out. They don't all go away easy. Some linger, and it takes a repeat, or ten, to get rid of them, but it can be done. Kate's going to be a lingerer. I already know it.

That's neither here nor there because right now I'm in front of the library with my hands full of sweet tea, like the pussy I am. My first stop is the circulation desk. "Afternoon, Miss McCrae." I plop down a cup of iced tea in front of her. "I know you don't take your coffee with sugar, but I assume you take your tea sweet."

A bony hand flies to her chest. “Do people drink it another way?”

“Not our people,” I say, halfway up the stairs to find Kate.

“Thank you for the beverage, Mr. Sinclair. Don’t overstay your welcome.”

The woman’s got balls. When I get to Kate’s office, she’s saying goodbye to a client. The door’s closed, so I can’t hear the conversation, but Kate has her hand on the woman’s arm. Whatever she’s saying is kind and encouraging. I can tell from watching them. Aside from whatever beef I’ve had with her, she’s a good person. I knew that from the moment I met her.

The problem is that even good people are sometimes motivated by outside sources. She’s made it no secret, at least to me, how much she wants that Pulitzer for her mother. If I were smart, I’d turn right around, head down the stairs and out the door, and drink the damn tea I’m holding myself. But I’m not smart.

When the woman opens the door to leave, Kate sees me. But instead of saying hello, she turns her back and walks over to the table where she sits down in front of her laptop. I hope she doesn’t expect me to leave that easily. By now she should know how much I love a challenge.

“Hey,” I say, taking a seat without being invited. I put the iced tea in front of her. “It’s hot out. Thought you might appreciate a cold drink.”

“Thank you.” Poor woman. She wants to be pissed at me, but I brought her some tea and now she’s torn. “I’m really busy,” she says. “I don’t have time to chat.” She is the worst liar.

“I’ll only stay a minute. The restraining order has been dismissed.”

“How did that happen?”

“My lawyer took care of it. It was apparently faulty. It needed to be filed by Sorlin’s daughter and it wasn’t.”

“Who filed it?”

“His old firm.” I slide the paperwork across the table. “Take a look at the name of the firm. Look familiar?”

“It’s King’s old firm.”

“Yep. They could refile the request on behalf of his daughter, but the lawyer doesn’t think they will as long as you stay away from Sorlin.”

She nods. “I would be happy to go to court and contest the order. I’ve been doing a little research. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“That’s debatable. They could argue that just showing up and questioning him was wrong. But it doesn’t matter, right or wrong, you were never going

to be successful against them. Don't go back to see Sorlin."

"I'm sorry?" she asks with a pissy tone.

"Don't go back there. He didn't have anything for you, and next time, the order will stick. It'll follow you around forever."

She wants to tell me to go to hell, but she knows I'm right. The last thing an investigative journalist wants dogging her is an order to stay away from an old man with dementia. It will be brought up every time there's an issue. Doesn't matter if it's expired or not.

"I appreciate you handling it. How much do I owe you for the lawyer?"

"Nothing." She glances at me. "Lawyer's on retainer, and this took a couple phone calls. No big deal."

"Thank you."

"If you're interested in returning the favor, why don't you tell me why you're pissed."

"I'm not pissed. I'm busy."

"Bullshit. You were pissed when we spoke this morning. Couldn't wait to get off the phone."

"The other night, you left—"

"I had to leave. That's what my job entails. Trouble doesn't strike between nine and five. Well it does, but it also happens at other times.

Inconvenient times." I reach for her hand, but she pulls it back into her lap.

"Kate, what do you want me to say? If that had been someone calling with an important lead on the King story, you would have been out the door in a flash."

"It's not that you left," she says, staring at her hands. "It's what you said before you left."

*What I said? Jesus.* That could be anything. "I said a lot of shit that night. Help me out here."

"You said, 'the break in is off the record,' as though I would run to a tabloid as soon as the lock clicked behind you. It never crossed my mind." I hear the hurt in her voice.

I do remember saying it, and although I'm sorry it upset her, I would probably say it again. It's just the way it is. We each have a job to do, and there will be times when our jobs will be at odds.

When I'm through defending my behavior to myself, I try to see it from her perspective. It was a dick move.

"I own it," I admit, without making excuses. Sometimes with women, it's

just less trouble to eat the humble pie, especially when you were wrong. “I straight up own it. It’s going to take time to learn a new way of thinking—for both of us.” I get up and go around the table, pulling a chair close to her. “I’m sorry I hurt you. Hurting you was the last thing on my mind that night.” She doesn’t pull her hand away when I reach for it this time.

“You going to be mad all day? Because if not, maybe we can grab a drink after work.” She smiles. It starts small, but soon she’s laughing, and I know I’m not in trouble anymore.

“I’ll probably be done being mad by six o’clock. But then I have my class, and later Lucinda and I are getting a bite to eat.”

I lean in to nuzzle her neck, sliding my hand up her skirt. “How about after dinner? Lucinda’s old. I bet she doesn’t stay out late.”

She pushes me away. “I work here. This is a library. You need to behave.” She doesn’t want me to behave—or at least she’s torn about it.

“I’ll stop for now. Because the next time I have your panties off—let’s just say we would be better off not to be in a library.”





## KATE

Getting through security at the front gate at Sweetgrass is akin to getting on base at Camp Lejeune where my brothers were stationed.

“Ma’am.” A beefy guard nods at me, looking into the backseat of the car. “Any weapons with you?”

*Oh God.* “I have a gun in my purse,” I confess with some apprehension.

“We’ll safeguard it while you’re on the property. You can have it back when you leave.” I reach for my bag. “Please hand me the purse and I’ll remove the weapon.”

“Can you pop your trunk, Ma’am?” the second guard asks in a voice that indicates it’s more of a command than a question.

*Why am I here again?*

Because I accepted Gabby’s invitation, and because Smith didn’t make excuses when I lectured him about how hurt I’d been about the *break in is off the record* remark.

I’m glad we talked it through, because no matter how I tried to justify it, I couldn’t move past the hurt. And I refuse to let any more men into my life who I need to make excuses for. I already have plenty, thank you very much.

I can accept that we need to work on breaking old habits. Although in my mind, I’ve given him a deadline. If he can’t make measurable progress by the end of the summer when my lease is up, there’s no point in—remaining friends. And let’s face it, we’re nothing more than friends with benefits, and that’s all we’ll ever be.

We’re too different—not just where we came from, but where we’re going. Boston is my home and my ultimate destination, bed or no bed, and

Smith doesn't like the cold climate. But for now, we're friends with a strong physical pull that might, or might not, get the chance to burn itself out before the leaves begin to change color. That's good enough for me.

When I'm free to enter Fort Knox, I park the car where the security guard instructed, and climb the front steps of the beautifully restored antebellum mansion. The house is magnificent, with stately columns, and generous pots of bright red geraniums and wave petunias lining the steps. Two iron urns flank the doorway, each holding a boxwood topiary draped in lights that I'm sure twinkle after dark.

With a growing apprehension, I ring the front doorbell. The lock clicks while I'm still admiring the foliage and the glossy black door opens. JD Wilder, himself, stands just inside, staring out like I arrived from a distant planet. After a few long seconds, he glances over my shoulder, perhaps looking for the spaceship. "Hello, I'm Kate—"

"I know who you are," he snarls. "How did you bypass security, Miss McKenna?"

"I left her name at the guard house," says a kind, familiar voice from behind him. "Like I did for each of the guests *I invited*."

Gabby hands off a drooling baby with a fist stuffed in her mouth to her husband, and pulls me inside. "Come in." She wraps me in a warm, friendly hug. "I'm so glad you made it!"

"This is for you and J—your husband," I say, when we separate, handing her a jelly jar of strawberry preserves I picked up at the local farmers' market. "And this is for the baby. It's a book. It was my favorite growing up." Anxiety has taken control of my brain, signaling for more adrenaline like it's planning a party. If I don't control myself, I'll soon be telling them about every book and toy I loved as a child.

JD stands several feet away, fuming. I can practically see the smoke pouring out of his ears. It's not helping my stress. I eye the door. It's still open, and there's nothing more I'd like right now than to run out and back to the safety of my little house without a sofa or a proper bed.

"Gracie and her daddy will love this book. They read together every night." It's difficult to believe this man, who is barely controlling his rage, reads to his daughter at night.

The baby starts to fuss and Gabby turns to her husband. "Why don't you take her upstairs and play with her? I'll join you after I show Kate to the kitchen."

He places a protective hand on Gracie's back, murmuring softly to her, and turns a simmering glare on his wife, before striding toward the stairs without a single word to either of us.

"I'm sorry about that. He beat me to the door." She squeezes my arm. "Don't worry. It's just a hiccup. JD will be fine."

She has a persuasive manner, but I don't believe for one second her husband is going to come around. I'm not even sure she believes it.

"If you need to be with the baby, I don't mind waiting here."

She glances in the direction of the stairs and clasps my hand. "Promise me you won't leave?"

I don't know if it's the nerves, but I start to laugh.

"You were thinking about it, weren't you?"

I nod sheepishly, and she laughs, too. "I won't go anywhere until you come back. I promise."

"I can't have you waiting here. But if you go down this hall to the end," she points toward the back of the house, "you'll run into the kitchen. Everyone there is a whole lot friendlier. And Delilah is making Devil's Margaritas." I must look as apprehensive as I feel. "You know what? They can wait a few minutes upstairs. Let's go to the kitchen and I'll introduce you to everyone."

I touch her arm. She's needed upstairs, not just to pacify the baby, but to pacify her husband. I'm not a child. I can brave the kitchen, especially if there is some booze there to calm me. "It's okay. You go up and smooth things over, and I'll find the kitchen. I can get along with anyone who knows how to make a decent margarita."

She eyes me carefully. "Do not leave, or I will chase you down. I won't be long."

I follow the sound of laughter to the kitchen. Smith's laugh booms over everything else. I stop right before the doorway to quell a small panic. What if he doesn't want me here with his friends? What if he asks me to leave? *Whatever it is, you'll survive it.* I practice a bright, cheery hello, smooth the flirty sundress I put on with him in mind, and step into the kitchen with my chin up.

"Kate," Smith says, freezing in place before my cheerful hello hits the air. "What are you doing here?" I suck in a lung-full of air. "Is something wrong?" he continues, tentatively. There's worry all over his face. I'm sure it never occurs to him that I was invited.

“Mrs. Wilder—Gabby—invited me,” I squeak. “She dropped by the library and asked me to come. Said she wouldn’t take no for an answer.” The more I babble, the deeper his frown becomes, but I’m on such a roll that it will take a force of nature to stop me at this point.

“I’m Lally,” a woman says draping a substantial arm around my shoulders, “and this is my kitchen, child. *Gabby invited me* is more of an explanation than he needs or deserves.” She scowls at Smith. “Is this your house? *No?* Then it’s none of your damn business.” She squeezes my shoulder and releases me. “That’s how we talk to men around here. Don’t raise their expectations by answering stupid questions. Otherwise, before you know it, he’ll be askin’ about everything. *How many pairs of shoes you got in that closet?* And, *How long is your mama plannin’ on stayin’?*” She shakes her head, with a chiding tsk-tsk. “I can see you’re not a southern girl.”

Lally is short and curvy with wide streaks of golden blonde covering what looks to be her natural dark hair. It’s an odd hairstyle, but it works on her. I think she could make anything work.

She fills a glass, and nudges Smith out of the way, stepping between us to offer me an iced tea. “Take a drink. Go on,” she encourages. “It’s hot out, and you look parched.” I can still feel the sear of Smith’s eyes on me. Lally’s not anywhere near tall enough to shield me from his glare, or from the security team that I expect to rush in at any time and drag me away.

I take a sip of the cool drink, and then another. “It’s delicious. Thank you.”

She turns to Smith. “I like this girl. She has good taste—in tea. Apparently not in men.”

“Lally, this is between me and Kate,” he says, still glowering at me.

“Then don’t be bringin’ it into my kitchen. Go tell Gabby I need her here. And don’t be in a hurry to come back, because we’re going to be talkin’ about things that don’t concern you.”

“Like what?” he says with much more impertinence than is wise.

She rests both hands on her ample hips and raises her brow. “Like monthly visitors and sanitary products, and whether slips will ever make a comeback or if they’re truly a thing of the past. Go have a drink with the boys. It’ll settle your nerves.”

“You’re all damn crazy,” he says, waving a hand in the air and stalking out.

“I’m Delilah.” A buttermilk blonde with clear blue eyes, and a more

pronounced southern accent than anyone I've met so far, approaches me. "I'm part of Gabby's let's-see-how-uncomfortable-we-can-make-the-guys plan, too. She means well."

"I'm Kate, but I guess you've figured that out." I take another sip of tea and place the glass on the counter. Coming here was just plain stupid. There's no other way to describe it. "I should probably go. I'm ruining Smith's birthday celebration." It's the last thing I want.

"You have to stay. Even with Lally, who accounts for half a dozen women, we're still outnumbered."

"I hope you're not referring to my waistline, Miss Delilah," Lally calls from near the sink.

"Of course not. I'm talkin' about your feistiness."

"Here," she says handing me a red-tinged margarita. "Taste it and let me know if it's missin' anything."

I look at the drink longingly. A little alcohol could go a long way right now, but I don't think getting drunk is a great idea. I'm clearly not among friends. I take a small drink from the unsalted half of the rim. "It's not missing a thing. What makes it red?"

"Wine. It turns it a pretty color and cuts some of the sweetness so you can drink more of them."

I take another sip. "How long have you and Smith been friendly?" she asks, while I try not to choke on the drink.

"We met when he tried to chase me out of town about a month ago."

Delilah's shoulders shake gently, but her lips are pressed tight, so she doesn't laugh out loud. "That's so romantic," she gushes, playfully. "A story to tell your grandchildren."

"Behave yourself," Lally calls from the stove. Her hearing is clearly as sharp as her wit.

"What fun would that be?" Delilah sips her drink. "*Mmm*. This is good. You know, Kate, I work for Smith, but it's more than that. He's like the big brother I never had." She pauses, dropping an ice cube into her glass. "Don't toy with him carelessly," she warns, "otherwise you'll have to deal with me."

With a ghost of a smile, Delilah raises her glass. "Sláinte," she says, in an Irish toast to my good health.



## SMITH

By the time dinner is served on the piazza, I've had my fill of drinks with the boys. Although since Kate arrived, nothing more than *take it up with your wife*, and *I fully intend on it* has passed between JD and me.

Kate seems more at ease now than she did in the kitchen. Of course, anyone could relax with Delilah at their side fending off trouble. Kate's smiling at Chase, JD's youngest brother, like she's knocked back a couple drinks herself. Chase's interests are limited to hacking, bad music, and the gym. He isn't that amusing, although tonight he's uncharacteristically animated.

The guys who work for me have been paying Kate plenty of attention, too. Even the ones who know she's a target. *Bastards*.

They're all here because Gabby invited them. I didn't know JD's mother. She was murdered long before we met. But everyone agrees she had a heart of gold, and there was no *them* and *us* in her home. Everyone who worked for the Wilders was family. Gabby has taken up her example.

Gray hasn't said a single word to Kate, but he hasn't come to me bellyaching about her, either. That's a surprise. Might be because he's too busy eye-fucking Delilah, or maybe he's enjoying her eye-fucking him. It's quite a group assembled here.

Kate tucks some hair behind an ear. It's shiny and sleek tonight, without a single one of those waves my fingers itch to run through.

I need to talk to her and make things right. I *want* to talk to her. I *want* to make things right. My behavior in the kitchen left a lot to be desired. If she was mad the other day, I'm sure she's livid now, although the booze might



have softened her. She won't make a scene. The worst that happens is she tells me to go fuck myself. I'm a big boy, and she won't be the first woman to say it.

I catch her eye with a discrete wink as I approach the small circle. "Hey."

She flashes me an apprehensive smile before turning her attention back to Chase. After about thirty seconds of listening to him pretend he likes women, I take hold of her elbow and drag her away from his inane flirting. "Come sit with me."

She gazes into my face warily.

"It's my birthday—I want to have you all to myself for a few minutes." That does little to ease her mind. She probably thinks I want to get her alone to dress her down.

"I'm sorry—I spoiled your evening," she says softly.

My stomach twists into a guilty knot. "You did not spoil my evening. Let's sit here." I stop at the wicker swing. It's at the edge of the party, where we can still be a part of it, but far enough away to talk privately.

"I mean it," she says. "I-I don't know what I was thinking coming here. I'm so sorry."

I squeeze her fingers. My parents raised their daughters to be unapologetic. Or at least not to apologize any more than their son. Kate apologizes for everything, like her very existence is a gross offense. Her family didn't do right by her. I don't know the details. Don't need to. There's no other explanation for a woman like her, smart, beautiful, with a good heart, to *always* step up and take responsibility for things that are not her doing.

"I'm happy you came," I tell her. It's the truth. Now that I've gotten past the initial shock, I am happy she's here. "And I'm the one who should be apologizing. My behavior in the kitchen—that was just plain bad." I gaze into her eyes. They're less emerald and more bottle green today, and the deep copper specks in the center are missing. "I was surprised to see you."

"Shocked, you mean."

I chuckle. "Pretty much. I wasn't sure I was ready to introduce you to this motley crew."

"Well, you weren't quite as *surprised* as JD."

"I'm sure." I shake my head. "Gabby probably should have told him beforehand. But she handles him better than anyone."

Kate smooths the wrinkles from her skirt, coaxing the fabric closer to her

knees, so less leg is showing. I resist reaching over and hiking the material back up again.

“JD is a good guy,” I tell her, “but often misguided. He has his own code he lives by. Gabby brings out his better angels. He was a miserable bastard without her.”

“I’m glad I missed that.”

It’s quiet between us. Awkward, to be honest, like we’re teenagers grappling with where to begin. It’s not us—we’ve gotten comfortable with each other—it’s the environment. The people, not the place. I’m not accustomed to feeling this way, and I hate it.

“I brought you a gift,” she says finally, after a few more self-conscious minutes. “Is there a time set aside to open presents later, or is it okay to give it to you now?”

“Hell, no. This isn’t a baby shower.” I tug on her hair. *Mistake. Mistake. Mistake.* My brain blasts the warning, as a shiver runs through Kate. But it’s too late. We both recognize it.

“I want my present now.” It’s an attempt to recover, but it comes out sounding like the gift is her, and I’m demanding she spread her legs so I can lick her cunt.

“I’ll—I’ll get it.”

I watch her walk away, hypnotized by the swell of her hips and their gentle sway. My gaze skims her legs, all the way down to *those* shoes—laced up her ankle, that made me hard the second I laid eyes on them. I intend on being the one who unlaces each one, slipping them off her feet after I fuck her.

I’m still thinking about the shoes when she returns with that big bag she lugs everywhere. “Open this one first.” She hands me a rectangular box, wrapped in matte navy paper with shiny red stripes.

“There’s more than one?”

“I guess it’s time for presents,” Gabby calls from the other side of the porch, before Kate can answer. “JD, get some champagne. I’ll get glasses.”

“She’s going to be the death of me,” I mutter, standing up.

“No, stay right there,” Gabby says, pointing to the swing. “That’s a good spot to do presents. We’ll come to you.”

JD pours everyone champagne or whiskey, depending on their preference. Good whiskey. Not the brand he reserves for when it’s just me and him celebrating, but an excellent choice by anyone’s standards. Good enough to

know I'm not in the doghouse forever.

"Okay. We're ready," Gabby announces, sitting on the arm of her husband's chair.

I open Kate's gift that I've been holding, trying not to trash the paper completely. When I lift the lid from the box, I laugh at the trio of hot sauces before gazing at her. Not a sound is coming from her, but she's laughing too, eyes dancing, beaming like the sun. "Couldn't get Beau to make you a fresh batch of corn nuts?"

She's still glowing, and I'm sure everyone's waiting for me to let them in on the secret, but I'm not doing that. This belongs to us. "Where's my other present?" I ask without a drop of shame.

She pulls a cellophane bag, secured with a wide silver ribbon, from her tote. "It's Irish soda bread. You can eat it as is, or toast it for breakfast. It was my mother's recipe," she adds, with a gentle pride, her eyes shimmering with a tenderness I've never seen. "I think you'll like it."

I clasp her hand in mine, and lean in for a kiss, lingering too long on her lips—in *front of my friends*. I'm sure she's acutely aware of all the eyes, too. When I pull away, a flush stains her cheeks.

"Show's over," I tease, regarding the rapt audience. "You'll need a paying ticket to see the rest." Kate swats my arm, just as I catch Gabby's sweet smile. But I don't see JD anywhere on the porch. I'm sure he's disappeared inside, pissed off and pouting. I swallow a wad of disappointment.

His concerns about Kate are irrational, and I'm starting to lose patience with him. We've been friends for half our lives. There are brothers who don't share the kind of bond we have. Don't get me wrong, we've squabbled plenty, even raised our fists once or twice, but nothing has ever threatened the friendship. Not like this.

I glance at Kate, her graceful fingers folding the discarded paper, the bread she baked sitting in her lap. She swings her head to say something to Delilah, and her hair gets caught in the breeze, filling my nose with her sexy scent. I feel the pull in my groin.

JD's going to have to suck it up if he wants the friendship, because I have no intention of being the bigger man.

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I DON'T KNOW what kind of prodding it took, but JD shows up in time to make a heartfelt birthday toast when the cake is served, and shakes my hand when Kate and I say goodnight at the door. He even wishes her a very pleasant weekend, although that appeared to take more effort.

"I don't suppose you'll be up for a morning run?" he asks drily, glancing sideways at Kate.

"Not sure. But all that cake and booze—I should probably sweat some of it off. Can I text you later?"

"On second thought, why don't we skip tomorrow," he says, gazing at his wife. "It's going to be a *long* night here."

*Oh, for fuck's sake.* He's going to be all over Gabby's case about Kate. But before I can say anything in her defense, she tips her head, and sends him a smoldering look. A look he returns in spades. *Their plans for a long night don't involve Kate.* Whatever it is passes quietly between them.

"Good night, and thank you," I say, again, hustling Kate out the door. I don't let go of her hand when we get outside, or as we make our way to the driveway. We chit chat about where her car's parked, but that's all I remember. My head is somewhere else.

I can't stop thinking about those last thirty seconds with Gabby and JD. I want that—not what they have, that's their thing. I want my own thing. The kind where words aren't needed to convey volumes. Maybe it's the booze, or maybe I'm all hopped up on sugar, but I want it right now. And I want it with Kate. It's all I can think about.

When we get to the car, I pin her between my aching dick and the hood, my legs caging her like a predator. I have no intention of letting her go—not until I've satisfied us both. But that is not happening here. "Spend the weekend with me," I demand, lowering my mouth to hers, roughly licking my way inside.

"The weekend?" she gasps, when we come up for air.

"A night is just enough to get our feet wet. Not enough to do any real exploring. I want more." I sound like the greedy bastard that I am. But what the hell? It's my birthday, and this is the only present I really want.

She runs her fingers over my scruffy jaw, and it takes everything I have not to pop her on the Jeep, shove her panties aside, and take her right here. "It's inevitable, Kate. I already told you. We both know it's a bad idea, but I'm not sure there's anything I've ever wanted more."

"It sounds so romantic. How can I possibly resist?" She's doing that thing

she does—a sassy comment to hide a shaky voice. Like she can fool me.

I take her hand and put a small kiss on each fingertip. “I’m not much for romance. But I promise I’ll make it good for you, princess. So good.”

“I don’t need romance,” she says, pulling me closer to her lips. *But you should have it*, I want to shout. *You should insist on it*. But I don’t say any of it, because I’m a selfish sonofabitch, and all I can think about is her wet pussy sliding onto my fat cock.



## SMITH

I leave Kate's car keys with Josh who's at the guard house. "The car is parked near the garage at the main house. Drive it to Kate McKenna's place at the end of your shift. I'll let you know in a minute where to leave the keys."

Kate watches us out the Jeep window. I don't want to leave her alone for too long creating a laundry list of reasons why she shouldn't spend the weekend with me. I'm not prepared for her to change her mind, so I don't waste any time making the call.

"Good evening, The Blackberry Inn."

"This is Smith Sinclair calling from Sweetgrass." I don't normally use my connections to the Wilders, but this isn't the kind of place you wander in off the street at midnight with a woman and expect a room. "I'd like to book a room for the weekend."

"This weekend?"

"Yes."

"We have a small suite available on the top floor, and a more modest, but well-appointed room a floor below."

"The suite, please. A young woman will be joining me, without luggage. Can you arrange to have some toiletries sent to the room?"

"Of course. I'll have a basket of incidentals sent to the room within the hour. If it's missing anything, just call down to the desk and I'll take care of it."

After ending the call, I turn to Josh. "Leave the keys with the front desk at the Blackberry Inn under my name. And wipe the smirk off your face or

you'll be looking for another job before the sun rises." *Eavesdropping bastard.*

That was the easy part. Now to deal with the woman who is wringing her hands in the passenger seat. I climb into the Jeep, beside a fidgeting Kate. "Josh is going to drive your car home and he'll leave the keys at the front desk."

"What front desk? There's no—"

"At the Blackberry Inn."

"Please explain." There's a twinge of *don't fuck with me* in her voice. That's a whole lot better than anxiety. At least I'm better at dealing with it.

"I made a reservation at the Blackberry Inn."

"For the weekend?"

I nod. "For the weekend." She looks out the window, and the uneasiness is palpable. I snatch her hand off her lap and bring it to my mouth. "It's a nice place. You'll like it."

"I've never stayed there, but I've walked through the lobby. It's beautiful." Her head snaps toward me. "I don't have anything with me. Not a toothbrush or a change of clothes. They'll know we're there for—sex. Like you picked me up at a bar, or I'm a hooker."

"Sex is their business. Everyone has sex in hotels. Do you really think the staff gives a damn about us? Besides, I did pick you up." I squeeze her hand to reassure her I'm teasing. It's ice cold, even on this warm evening. She's nervous. After that comment about the hotel staff, it's clear she hasn't spent a lot of time with men in hotels. But I already knew that—I'm not exactly sure how much time she's spent with men, period.

"They have toothbrushes," I add when it's too quiet again. "And you won't be needing clothes for anything I have planned." I can almost hear her heart hammering. Thankfully the trip downtown is quick.

When we get to the inn, I toss the valet my keys, and pull out a gym bag from the back of the Jeep. There's a change of clothes in the bag, and more importantly, condoms and lube. I check in while Kate uses the ladies' room.

When she comes back into the lobby, she's still wearing that timid smile, but I have a remedy for jitters. As soon as the elevator doors shut, I corner her in the small space and slide my hands into her hair, kissing her breathless, my body teasing hers, or maybe hers teasing mine. There's been nothing but foreplay since I met her. Too damn much foreplay. I'm ten seconds away from taking her against the wall in this tiny box.



The elevator pings, and we make it down the hall and into the room without my hands, once, leaving her body.

The suite is actually one expansive room with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. On one end there's an alcove with some furniture and a fireplace, on the other, a king-size bed with the covers turned down for the night. I toss the room key onto a small table near the bed and put my bag on the floor.

Kate examines the room from the sitting area, holding the back of a small sofa like she needs it for support. She seems lost again, but before I can deal with it, the bell rings. Her eyes dart suspiciously from the door to mine. "It's probably just the things I asked them to bring up," I assure her, opening the door.

"Good evening." The bellman wheels in a cart and takes a basket of toiletries into the bathroom. Then he sets out a bottle of Port and tea service with delicate cookies on a round table near the window. Kate and I don't say a word to each other while he's in the room. I half expect her to run out the door any second.

"Is there anything else you need?" the bellman asks.

"Kate?"

"No, thank you. This is lovely," she says, smiling. It's one of those fake smiles she paints on when she's anxious. I hand him some bills and he leaves quietly.

As soon as the door clicks, I sit on the edge of the bed. The sooner I give her something to do, the sooner she'll relax.

"Take off your clothes, Kate," I tell her, toeing off my shoes. "But leave on those sexy-as-fuck sandals."

She hugs her body tightly. "We've already played that game."

"Last time you played under duress. This time I want you to take them off willingly."

"And this time, you're going to take your clothes off?" she asks so softly, I can barely make out the words.

"Count on it."

She's motionless, feet glued to the floor, with her arms still wound around her body. "I'm waiting," I say, in a gruff impatient voice. It's meant to let her know that she doesn't need to worry about anything, that I'm in charge. But she doesn't understand that signal.

She lifts her chin. Her green eyes flaring in the dim light as she shimmies

out of the little dress that's been swishing around her thighs all night. I dig my fingers into the mattress to keep me back. No smiley face underpants today. She's wearing a thong and a lace bra that are *very* grown-up. My eyes flit between the tiny scraps of purple fabric and her creamy skin. "Kate." I can't force myself to stay seated.

With a few long strides, I'm behind her, my hands on her upper arms. "Let me help you," I murmur above her ear, pushing her hair aside, to unclasp the delicate bra. I slip it off her shoulders and toss it on her dress, adding my shirt to the growing pile.

"Turn around. Let me see you." My voice is rough and low, emerging from the ache in my chest. She's beautiful, and I want her. Truth is, I've wanted her for a long time.

She swivels slowly. Her apprehension fills the space around us, making the air heavy.

I give myself a moment to enjoy her gorgeous tits, the erect pink nipples daring me to touch. The pull in my groin is relentless. My dick is weeping. I need to get better control, otherwise, this isn't going to be what I want for her—for either of us.

I maneuver us toward the window, her ass against my cock, with only my pants between us.

"The view is breathtaking." Her voice is little more than a squeak.

My hand splays flat on her stomach, cradling her against my aching cock. My free arm supports her breasts. "Not as breathtaking as you."

I love that she's tall. That I can lower my mouth and reach her neck easily. I'm buying time. Trying to get my dick to calm the fuck down. I can't ask her to suck me off, to take off the edge. At least I won't—not yet. She seems too inexperienced, and there's something that still bothers me—all that talk about sharing women with friends. Something about it didn't add up, and it's been on my mind ever since.

"Any trauma, Kate?" I ask as gently as I can.

"Trauma?"

"Yes. Has anyone ever hurt you? Forced you to do something—sexually—you didn't want to do?"

She shakes her head. "No."

"Not very convincing, Mary Katherine."

She rocks her hips all over my dick, and I swat the side of her ass. She jumps. "Stay still and let me focus." I draw a breath. "Trauma?"

“No trauma. How many ways would you like me to say it?” *Maybe not, but there’s something. I know it.*

Let’s approach this from a different angle. “Anything off the table?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Is there anything that you absolutely don’t like in bed, or don’t want to do? Some people call those things hard limits.”

“Oral sex.” *You have got to be kidding.*

I let my hand wander over her belly with light strokes. “Giving or receiving?”

She lifts her shoulders with a slow, uncertain motion. “Receiving.”

That’s an easy fix. “Anything else?”

I feel her stiffen. “Anal—anal sex.”

I pause for a few seconds, wondering if she’s had a bad experience, or no experience. Not everyone is into it or has tried it. It’s not that unusual. “What about anal play?” She shakes her head emphatically. “That’s a lot of good stuff you’ve taken off the table. Is there anything else?”

“No.” She says the word so softly I strain to hear it.

“Let me get this straight. You don’t like to have your pussy licked, but you’re okay with being tied to that bed and flogged or caned? And you don’t mind me dripping hot wax on your breasts?”

Her head jerks, and she stares up at me with wide eyes. She’s pale, and even with a throbbing dick, I’m beginning to have misgivings about this. In truth, if I met her at a bar, she’s not someone I would ever take home. Not because she isn’t attractive—she is—in every way that matters to me. But I prefer to play with seasoned women who understand the game. I’m not someone who likes to spend a lot of time convincing a reticent woman she should let me fuck her. But somehow—I got caught up in her, and—

“You—you do that? Beat women and pour hot wax on them?” she gasps.

I cringe as she says *beat women*. “I don’t touch a woman without consent. And we don’t have to do anything like that. Not tonight—not ever, if you don’t want to. But sex is a whole lot more fun for everybody involved if we understand each other’s preferences. You’ve never had this discussion before, have you?”

“No.” Her answer wedges itself under my skin. I knew what she was going to say, but it still pisses me off.

“So you’ve only fucked mind readers?” It’s not really a question, just me being an irascible asshole, and she doesn’t say anything. “If you don’t talk

openly and honestly with a partner, you can end up being handled with all the finesse of someone stuffing a Thanksgiving turkey, or worse. Is that what you want?”

She laughs. It has a nervous, almost delirious edge. “I don’t think I’ll ever look at a turkey the same way again. Thank you very much.”

Oh, no, Kate. You don’t get to blow me off tonight by being a wiseass. That’s not how this is going to work. “I want us to put *everything* on the table—I want you to give it all a try, just a small taste—even the things you think you don’t like, because you might enjoy them with me.”

She draws a long breath but doesn’t release it.

“Breathe, Kate.” I watch her take two shaky breaths, before continuing.

“I’ll stop whenever you want. You just say the word and it’s over.” I kiss the top of her head. “Let’s explore. Let me test your boundaries, just a little.” I pause for a moment to allow what I’m asking to set in. “We’ll go slow. Even if you feel afraid, because of something I say or do, or because of whatever games you play inside your head—you never have to be afraid with me. You have the power to stop it, at any time. That’s the deal I’ll make with you.”

“I thought you didn’t deal? That dealing was only for desperate people.”

I take her hand and place it on my cock. “Feel the throb? That’s what desperate feels like.” I move her hand away because I’ve finally gotten some control, and I don’t want it to evaporate into thin air. Or in this case, thick, chewy air. “It’s a good deal. You should take it.”

“Are you going to make me afraid tonight?” If I read the words, they would seem awful, but that’s not how they sound when she asks the question. She’s not frightened—anxious about the unknown, but not frightened. There’s a difference.

“Not tonight.” I watch her reflection in the window. Her mind is churning. This is new, and she’s nervous, but she’s going to take the deal, because she’s curious, and although she’s not ready to admit it, she wants to explore too. At least some part of her does. “We’ll spend the weekend working up to it, if that’s what you want.”

She places her arms over mine and tips back her head against my shoulder. As much as I’d love to be inside her body, what I’d like most right now is to be inside her restless mind. It doesn’t ever seem to quiet. I can fix that, too.

“Let’s move closer to the window,” I say, nudging her forward. “Put your

hands flat on the glass. That's it. Press your breasts there too. Lightly." She shivers when her nipples make contact with the pane, and my dick throbs hard. "Cold, isn't it?" She nods. "But it feels good, doesn't it? Like the nerve endings all over your gorgeous little body are singing."

She nods, again. "Can anyone see us from outside?"

"Not enough light in here." I feel her relax against me. "But if you take the deal, before we leave here on Sunday, I'm going to fuck you against this window. Lights on, so that everyone can see you from the street. And you're not going to care. You're not even going to care if the pane is strong enough to hold, as I pound you against it. You're not going to think about any of it. All that will be inside that pretty little head is coming around my cock. That's all either of us is going to care about."

The pulse in her neck is thrumming, and I'm teetering at the edge of restraint.

"Okay," she whispers.

"Okay what, princess?"

"I'll take the deal."

Without another word, I lift her off the floor and carry her to the bed. *Trust. That's what the deal is really about. She gave you her trust. Don't abuse it.*

I sit her on the edge of the mattress, where I can have better access to everything, and slide my hand into her thong, tracing the tight little seam with my thumb, while gorging on her soft mouth. She tips her head back and moans, fisting the quilt like it will save her. "Open your legs for me, Kate. Let me make you feel good."

Her legs ease apart, but nowhere near enough to give me what I need. From my haunches, I tear the skimpy little fabric that's keeping me from her cunt. When my mouth is inches away from the sweetness, when her musky scent has taken over my brain, she whispers, "Can we start with something else? How about if I—taste you?"

She asks so timidly, so sweetly, and I want nothing more than to feed her my cock. Let it rest between her plump lips, while her tongue laps at the taut skin. But there's no fucking way I'm doing that. She's uncomfortable with my mouth on her pussy, but she's fine with hers on my cock? I'm sorry, but that is *not* okay.

"No. We made a deal," I say plainly, before my better angels intervene. "But we can stop, if that's what you want. We can get dressed, crawl into bed

and go to sleep, or I can take you home, if you prefer.”

I want her bad, but I’m almost at the point where I don’t care whether we do this or not. I’ve been hard for so long that I need the release, but my hand will do, if necessary. It’s been forever since I’ve been with a woman who is this timid, this uncertain, and I’m not interested in freaking her out any more than she is already. *This is why I don’t play with rookies.* I tilt her chin, and peer into those frightened eyes. “Should we stop?”

She shakes her head vigorously—doesn’t hesitate for an instant.

There’s a tug inside me I don’t understand. Something that goes beyond the physical release I’m chasing. “I need to hear the words, Kate.”

She gazes at me with an innocence—an openness—a trust, that steals my breath. “I don’t want to stop.”

This time I move more slowly, beginning with her mouth, sliding my lips over her throat, murmuring into her skin, before sucking each hard nipple between my teeth until she writhes under me. I graze slowly, taking my time, my fingers following a patient path to her pussy.

When I get there, I spread her wide, my palms holding her open against the mattress. She presses her thighs into my hands, trying to clamp her legs together as I lick her. But she doesn’t protest, and the little sounds emerging from her lips are the gasps and sighs of pleasure. The push and pull makes my cock swell, and the ache to plow into her is clawing. I’m having a lot of trouble fighting it back.

“You taste so sweet, princess, but you need more. I’m going to slide my fingers inside you. Remember how much you liked that in the alley?” She’s so wet my fingers slip in without much resistance.

She’s also squirmy as hell. “If you don’t keep your legs spread, I’m going to tie them open. I need my hands.” I find the pleated rosebud between her cheeks, teasing it with my tongue.

“No!” she gasps. But my tongue is already licking a path to her clit. I draw the sweet nub into my mouth, scraping the swollen flesh with my teeth. Her movements are jerky, and I feel her body tense as her slick walls choke my fingers. “Take it, Kate. Let go.”

I coax her with my tongue, sucking on the hard little bead until she screams my name. Her hand flies to her mouth to muffle the pleasure and I want to push it away. I want to hear every sound she makes, but I’m a man possessed, and all I can do is slide the condom onto my weeping cock.

I let my mouth crash into hers in a brief attack, before I flip her over, and

hoist her hips into the air, gripping them so tight I know there will be bruises. But I don't care. I plunge into her. There's no gentleness. No letting her get used to me. Nothing. I just sink into her hot pussy. It's only when I hear my balls slap against her tender skin, that I force myself to take a breath. "You okay?" I ask, slowing, but never stopping the assault.

"Yes," she groans, reaching behind to grasp my thighs. I lean over her and sink my teeth into the back of her neck. "Touch yourself, Kate. Play with your clit. Rub it real good, just the way you like." She hesitates, but I don't want to let go of her hips. I want them in my hands while I fuck her. "Now, Kate." I slap her ass. "Don't make me wait."

The smell of sex whirls around us, musky and dirty, and I fill my lungs with it until my chest is about to explode. Her quick fingers brush against my cock while she circles her clit. I want to watch her play with that dripping pussy. I want to watch her rub it raw. I grip her hips tighter. "You're such a good princess. I'm going to fuck you nice and hard until you come all over my cock."

Her breathing is labored, as she grinds against her hand.

"Kate. I don't have much control left. I need you to take it." Her hand works overtime. Her moans are strangled pleas. She's sandwiched between me and her hand, when her body tenses. She buries her face in the mattress as she bucks, finding her release around my cock.

I press my mouth to her shoulders, fucking through her orgasm with mine in reach. My spine prickles with the familiar tingle before my sight disappears, before there's nothing but a black hole melting into the fuzzy outer corners of my vision. I erupt inside her with a roar that bounces off every surface in the room.





## KATE

Smith arranged for late check-out and we're laying on the sofa watching the basketball game. He's on his back and I'm nestled between his legs, on my back, too, wearing just a thin T-shirt he had in his gym bag. Eat, sleep, watch a little TV, and have sex, rinse and repeat. It's the best kind of lazy Sunday.

I scroll through my messages until I come to the one from Father Jesse, and as I read, guilt claws at my happiness, threatening to destroy a wonderful weekend. *I hope you're okay*, he wrote. *Missed you at Mass.*

He expected me at Mass. Until Friday night, I expected to be there too. Instead, I spent the weekend engaged in debauchery. *So much debauchery.* Where boundaries were tested, and the goalpost moved repeatedly, although not too far each time. I even ate a piece of sausage, which I still don't really care for, even when it's eaten from Smith's deft fingers. But the sex? The sex was—there really are no words. Even a woman who makes her living with words can't come up with the ones to do it justice.

"Do you know what surprises me?" Smith asks during a commercial.

"What?"

"Even though you were tentative about sex, you're comfortable naked."

*Were tentative.* It makes me smile and the guilt all about Father Jesse and missing Mass disappears. "That's what you're thinking about?"

He pinches my thigh and I squeal. "Among other things."

"I was on the dive team up until my sophomore year in college. Spent a lot of time in a bathing suit. It made me comfortable with my body. It's not perfect by any means, but it works the way I need it to and it's strong." It's

something I like about myself—that I’m not always at war with my body, starving it, and punishing it with excessive exercise.

He flips me over, so I’m facing him. “Your body is perfect. And it’s damned sexy that you aren’t embarrassed to take off your clothes or walk from the bed to the bathroom naked. It’s a huge turn on.” His hands cup my ass gently.

“Is there anything that doesn’t turn you on?”

He closes one eye, pretending to think hard. “I’m not big into golden showers.” I give him an exaggerated eye roll. “Oh, and you are, miss don’t-lick-my-pussy? Although I doubt you’ll ever say that again.”

“Humility is food for the soul. You should try it sometime.” I whack his chest. It doesn’t make a ripple, but that doesn’t stop him from grabbing my wrists and pinning them against the small of my back.

“What was your favorite event?”

“The high dive.”

“Really?” He says it with great reverence, and a hint of surprise. I smile proudly. It’s the most common reaction from anyone who has ever seen the height of a high diving board up close and gauged its distance from the surface of the water.

“Takes a lot of courage to jump from that height into a dark pit.”

“I’m a person of faith. I don’t take unnecessary risks, but I’m not afraid to die.”

He lets go of my wrists and gathers my hair in his hands, gently tugging it off my face. He has that alert gaze. The one he wears during careful studies, while he takes note of small tells, and collects bits of information to sort through at his leisure. I change the subject before we get into some intense conversation about faith and death that is heavier than anywhere I want to go right now. “You think I’m tentative about sex?”

One corner of his mouth curls, and his probing look softens. “You’re passionate—and you’ve got fire in your blood. You have some hang-ups that get in the way at the beginning. Once you’re past it, you’re sexy as fuck.” He kisses me, his lips smooth and tender against mine. “And highly responsive. I think you have all the makings of a dirty girl in you.”

I don’t know about a dirty girl, but I could easily become addicted to sex with this man. “*Hmm.*” I sigh contentedly, laying my head on his chest, while he runs his fingers through my hair, playing with the wavy strands.

“Tell me about it,” he says softly.

“I don’t understand what you’re asking.”

“Sure you do.” I don’t say anything. “Tell me why you’re so anxious about things that feel good to you. Did you have a bad experience?”

A small panic worms its way into my chest. I know what’s coming. He’s going to nudge and nudge, and I’m going to tell him. And then—I don’t know what happens.

“Does it have anything to do with what you asked me about sharing women with friends? Because my mind keeps going back to that.”

He strokes my back with his fingertips. “Think about the last thirty-six hours, Kate. How much you trusted me. I don’t think I took advantage of your trust, did I?”

I shake my head. “No.” I take a breath. “I-I-I don’t know where to begin.”

He wraps his arms tighter. The warmth against my skin is welcome, but it’s not enough to thaw the ice deep inside. “Start where you feel comfortable. For most people that’s the beginning. But you start wherever you want.” He kisses my head. “Take as long as you need. I’ve got you.”

*I’ve got you.* I so want to believe it. And right now, I allow myself that indulgence—even though Father Tierney’s words are tattooed on my brain in neon: *don’t mistake lust for love.* I’m not a fool to think this is love, but I believe it’s something more than simple lust. *I do.* And that belief nudges the well-protected pain from the dark corners of my soul, luring it out into the open where it hangs vulnerably.

“When I was a teenager,” I start at the beginning, “I had a boyfriend who was older. We were together for about six months. I was totally inexperienced, and he wasn’t. We—experimented. I was young and not ready for most of it. I don’t mean kink or anything.”

The shelter of Smith’s body, and the gentle touch of his strong hands make it easy to keep talking. “But I traded—I was basically like a prostitute—trading sex, not for money, but for affection, maybe for some misguided idea of love. I’ll never know for sure. But I wanted it so bad at the time, I did things that didn’t feel good or seem right to me.”

“How old were you?” His voice is low and hoarse.

“Fifteen,” I say calmly, hoping he won’t judge me harshly like the others.

“How old was he?” Smith stiffens under me, even before I say the word.

“Twenty.”

His heart is hammering, and as much as I want to, I don’t dare turn my head to look at his face. I’m not at all sure what I’ll find there.

“Twenty,” he repeats in a carefully modulated voice. “How did you meet?”

“A party. I went with friends. It wasn’t his fault—not initially. I was tall and looked older. I let him believe I was older.” *Although he never asked my age.*

“It was totally his fault—all of it,” Smith barks. “What’s his name?”

“Ryan. What difference does it make?”

“Ryan what?” I flinch at the demand.

“He said it was Cleary. But it wasn’t.”

“I want the rest, Kate. The part you’re not telling me because it embarrasses you. The only person who should be ashamed is the man who touched a little girl.” Smith’s voice has a cutting edge—all pretense of control has slipped away.

His response makes me uneasy. I don’t know what to make of it and I get defensive.

“I wasn’t a little girl. I own some of the responsibility too.” At least that’s what everyone said when it happened—everyone but Fiona. My brother Tommy thought I owned all of it for sneaking out and lying, and for being a stupid whore. That’s what he called me when he picked me up from the party with his girlfriend Tessa in the car. Tessa told her sisters, and by Monday everyone at school knew I had been found half undressed, in a room at the frat house with four boys. I squeeze my eyes tight, but it’s not enough to stop the memories from flooding me.

“Kate,” he prods, stroking my skin with his fingertips. “I need to hear the rest.”

I run the pad of a finger over Smith’s ribs, counting each one as the awful words tumble out. “One night, there was a party at the frat house and I drank some punch—usually I only had a beer, but Ryan urged me to try it that night, and I wanted to please him. After a couple glasses, I went upstairs with Ryan. That wasn’t unusual. We always went up to his room during the parties. But this time, a few of his friends came in. That had never happened.”

“I need a minute,” Smith chokes out, lifting me off of him. He opens the balcony door but doesn’t go outside. Instead, he rests his hand on the doorframe near his head, staring out over the city.

*This is where it ends.* Like it did the last time I cared about a man. The pain in my chest is excruciating. I should have never told him.

After a few minutes that seem to go on for hours, I get up to find my clothes. “Where you going?” he asks, from the balcony door.

“I-I think it’s best if I leave.”

He tilts his head to the side. “Best for who?”

*Best for both of us, but mostly for me.*

When I don’t say anything, he strides over and leads me back to the sofa. “I am so pissed off right now—I want to hunt the bastard down and twist his neck until he can’t breathe—not just him, all of them.” He kneels beside me, an angry vein throbbing in his neck. “Did they rape you?”

His voice is calm, but his eyes are aflame with dangerous sparks flickering wildly. And I know before this discussion is over, I will be burned. But it’s impossible to change course now. The embers have caught, and there’s no way out.

I shake my head. “They kissed me and groped my breasts. Pulled off my shirt. Then the police came and broke up the party.”

“Were they arrested?” I hear hope in his voice, but it’s not how that night ended.

“No. The officers who responded called my brother Tommy—they wanted to avoid a scandal. My father had just been named a captain on the police force. It was a huge deal. Tommy was so mad.” I’ll never forget his face—or his words. “He called me a whore, and took me to St. Claire’s—to the rectory—and woke up Father Tierney. He didn’t know what else to do.”

“He called you a whore?”

I hadn’t meant to say that out loud. I’m not even sure I did. I glance at Smith. His eyes are black, and his snarl mean. I must have.

“Your brother managed those bastards by blaming you?”

“They didn’t force me to do anything. They wanted oral sex and I would have given it to them.”

“You were an intoxicated fifteen-year-old and those bastards were miserable excuses for grown men. Despite what your religion teaches, there are no rewards for martyrs. Stop blaming yourself.”

He sits on the edge of the sofa beside me, his head in his hands. “I can’t believe ... I can’t—why didn’t you tell me this before we had sex? I specifically asked you about trauma, Kate. You lied to me. Why did you let me talk to you the way I did, and push you—I knew you were inexperienced. I fucking knew something was amiss. But I didn’t listen to my gut.” He strikes the coffee table with his fist and it splits in two, dumping the

decorative art books and my water on the floor.

I pick up the water, gripping the bottle in both shaking hands, gawking at the table in disbelief. It was almost the perfect weekend. How can it end like this? But it will, because I don't know how to fix it. My internal monologue goes on and on, moving faster and faster, but never getting anywhere.

I'm not sure how much time passes before he speaks. "I could have made it better—easier—on you. Cleaned my act up a little." He picks up a long shard of wood, twirling it between his fingers.

"You're going to get a splinter."

"A splinter? That's the least of my fucking worries."

"That's exactly why I didn't tell you."

He turns his head to look at me, his brow furrowed deeply.

"When I was in college, I had a boyfriend—my first boyfriend after... We were friends before things got more serious. I really liked him. We were working up to sex when I told him about what happened in the frat house." *He recoiled. Just like you did.* "It was a lot for him to handle—too much. He tried, but he could never get past the fact that if the police hadn't come, I would have given them all blow jobs and probably anything else they wanted."

Smith fills his cheeks with air and blows it out. The man who hasn't been able to keep his hands off me all weekend hasn't touched me since we sat down.

"Have a little faith in me. I'm not a stupid college boy."

"No. But you would have treated me like a girl with special needs. Like I was emotionally fragile and you needed to be careful so I wouldn't shatter. What kind of experience would that have made? I didn't want that. I wanted you to treat me like the other women you've been with. I like you—and I know it's premature, but I wanted us to have a chance."

He flicks his wrist and the long fragment of wood glides through the air like a paper airplane, landing just beyond the ruined table. "If I hadn't pushed, would you have ever told me?"

"I don't know." I shrug. I really don't. "I'd like to say yes, but I don't know. I didn't want the past to soil the future."

He doesn't say anything for a few moments, but his thick dark eyelashes flutter as the realization sets in.

"I've been in some hellish places." He leans back against the sofa, pulling me with him, until my head is resting against his shoulder. The emotion wells

up inside my throat. I wasn't sure he'd ever touch me again. "I mean, places that make hell look like a fucking walk in the park. I can get through anything—as long as I know what I'm dealing with. But keeping this kind of thing from me, Kate, isn't going to work. You want me to trust you, but you need to trust me, too."

I tip my head up. "I—"

"I understand why you did it. I know all about not dirtying life with ugly details from the battlefield."

He kisses me gently like I'm made of candy glass. When his kiss doesn't turn rough and demanding, I can't help but wonder if it ever will again, or if this truly is the beginning of the end.

"Don't pity me, and don't treat me like I'm broken. Anything but that."

He trails his nose along the edge of my jaw. "Broken? I'm just marshalling my energy. We only have this room until five and I believe I promised you a fuck against that window, so hard you wouldn't remember your name."

There's an edge of bravado to his voice that's never been there before. It's the decent, human part of him that's unsure about how to treat me. It makes me want him all the more. Not in a trade for affection—I can get that from him without the sex. I want all this man has to offer. Everything.

I throw my arms around his neck. "Thank you," I murmur into his warm skin, as he pulls me tight against him. "Thank you."

"Let's see if you're still thanking me tomorrow when it hurts to sit. Go stand in front of that window. Give me this," he says, pulling off my shirt. "I want your feet apart and those ripe rosy nipples grazing the glass while you wait for me quietly, like a good little princess."



THE POUNDING against the window requires a nap and a long shower that involves Smith shampooing my hair. Having his strong fingers massaging my scalp was almost as good as the sex. When we're done, he gets out of the shower and tosses me a warm towel.

"What's this from?" I ask, taking a break from drying my legs to run a finger along a scar on the right side of his abdomen. It's larger, and although it's healed, it's fresher than the others that are scattered over his body. I've

wondered about it since I first saw him with his shirt off.

“Should we order room service before we leave, or do you want to stop for food on the way to your place?” Nice pivot, Sinclair. But not today.

“Up to you. I can wait.” I reach out and touch the healed wound. He stiffens under my fingers. “What is this?”

“A scar,” he says in an *I’m not answering that question* voice that he hasn’t used with me since we met.

“I can see that. It doesn’t look as old as some of the others. What happened?” He doesn’t say a word. “I realize you can’t give me details, but you can tell me something about what happened.”

He finishes drying himself with his back turned toward me. “Not your business.”

*I’m sorry?* He can’t possibly think— “You think I’m going to write a story about how you got your scar?”

“No. That’s not what I think. But how I got the scar doesn’t involve you.” He tosses the towel over the tub ledge and stalks out of the bathroom. *Oh no, you don’t.*

I follow him into the living area, where he’s pulling on his pants.

“I just poured out my soul. You expected it because you hadn’t betrayed my trust. I’m quite certain I haven’t betrayed yours, either. And now I expect you to tell me about the scar. Not the classified part, but everything else, because from the way you’re acting, it’s a big deal.”

There’s not one peep from him while he buttons his shirt, like it’s delicate neurosurgery that requires his full attention. “Get dressed,” he says finally. “I’m going down to the front desk to explain the broken table. Meet me in the lobby when you’re ready.”

*Like hell.* “If you leave this room without talking to me about the injury, you don’t need to bother waiting downstairs. I’ll find my own way home.” He stops short, just inside the door. “While I understand that fair does not always mean equal, I believe relationships, of all sorts, thrive on give and take. I won’t have another man in my life whose behavior I have to justify to myself to keep my heart from breaking. You go, we’re done.”

He hasn’t faced me, but he’s still here.

“It happened three years ago. My niece needed a liver transplant. Her mother was a good match, but had she donated, she would have been too weak to take care of a sick child who needed her—but my sister would have pushed herself to do it anyway.” Smith takes a breath, and blows it out with a



long sigh.

“I was also a good match,” he continues, as though this is the last discussion on earth he wants to be having. “I donated part of my right lobe. A healthy liver regenerates within a short time. It wasn’t a big deal.” He takes a step closer to the door while I do the math in my head.

“That’s why you left the military.”

“I didn’t have to leave. They would have found something for me, but I was out of field operations forever—at least out of the kind of operations I’d been trained to do.”

My body is swamped with a dizzying array of emotion. I’m overwhelmed that he would give that precious gift. Overwhelmed that a little girl is alive because of his selflessness. And overwhelmed by the realization that she will carry that burden one day. It all hits very close to home. “You gave up a career you loved to give your niece life,” I say, the tears trickling down my cheeks.

Smith spins toward me. “It’s not at all like that, Kate,” he spits out. “Don’t make me out to be some kind of fucking hero. I didn’t storm the beaches at Normandy. I wanted out of the Army. It was a convenient excuse. Now if you’re done probing my subconscious, I’ll meet you downstairs.”

I’m left in my towel, tears still trickling as the door clicks behind him. There’s clearly more to this story, but what he shared will do for now. The fact that he told me about it at all gives me hope for us.



## KATE

It's been two weeks since Smith's birthday, and we've spent all our free time together, most of it naked. But tonight, we have a date before naked, and I need to finish getting ready or I'll be late.

Just as I finish brushing a final coat of mascara onto my lashes, there's a knock at the front door. *Hmm*. I'm supposed to meet Smith at the bar, but maybe his meeting finished early and he decided to swing by to get me.

I peek through the window. It's Father Jesse. My conscience twinges as soon as I see his face. After I missed church *again* last Sunday, I emailed him some samples of the bulletin I had planned on taking with me so he could make a final decision, but I haven't heard back.

I open the door, glancing at what appears to be some kind of *pet carrier*? "Hello," I say, trying not to stare at the thing in his hand.

"I'm sorry to drop in like this. I realized halfway here I should have called."

"Please don't apologize. It's fine. Come in," I assure him, trying to wrack my brain about whether there's anything lying around that a priest shouldn't see.

"I brought you a gift. It's another one of those regifts that I hope you'll accept." He holds up the carrier. "Someone left this little guy at St. Maggie's last night. Hoping that we would take care of him, I suppose. But I can't keep a pet, and Virginia is terribly allergic. I don't want to have to call animal control." I peer into his sober face. I don't want that either. "Although frankly," he continues, "as soon as I laid eyes on this sweet cat, I thought of you, and how as a child you had longed for a pet."

“A cat? For me?” I try to sound less surprised than I feel. Actually, I’m not sure how I feel.

“He came without instructions. Just with some dry food. Like Magdalene herself, so much about this kitty is unknown.”

While Father Jesse compares the cat’s history to Mary Magdalene’s, I rack my brain trying to remember what my lease says about pets. *Pets under twenty pounds are permitted. Yes, that’s right.*

“Why don’t we put the carrier on the counter? It looks heavy.” I peek at the cat through the small grate at one end. He’s cowering in the back of the carrier. *Poor baby. You don’t need to be afraid. I won’t hurt you.* “Does he have a name?”

“I’m sure he does, but I don’t know it. Maybe you can come up with something fitting.”

“He’s so sweet. But he’s shivering. I bet he’s scared to death. Do you know for sure that he’s a he?”

“I had him out for a bit last night. I haven’t had much experience with cats, but I know all about the male species.”

I smile at the roundabout way he describes the cat’s sex. Smith would have gone straight at it and made some sarcastic dick remark. I take another peek at the Tabby with his shiny orange coat that makes him seem like he’s meant for me. He looks back at me with a vulnerability that steals my heart without any effort at all.

“Cat’s aren’t as much work as dogs,” Father Jesse explains. “At least that’s what I’ve always heard. And this one isn’t a kitten.”

I take another peek into the carrier. “Sold,” I say cheerfully. “You’re right. I’ve always wanted a pet and this little guy needs someone to love him.”

Father Jesse glances around the kitchen. “How’s the TV working out?”

“I love it. I’ve been watching more of it than I should.”

“Good.” He gives me a lopsided smile. “I hope you love the cat even more. I should go. I have to stop by the hospital and visit a parishioner who was admitted this morning. Will I see you on Sunday?”

“Yes.” I lower my eyes, staring at my shoes like a child about to be chided for misbehaving. “I’m sorry about last Sunday.” *And the Sunday before that.*

“I’m sure it was important,” he says, and my conscience pings while I think about my nipples pressed against the cold glass and Smith’s—

“Did you have a chance to look at the sample bulletins I emailed?”

“Kate, I’m not very good at email. I couldn’t open the fancy attachment. What is it called?”

“A zip file.”

“I realize it’s a shameful waste of resources, but could you please bring paper copies on Sunday when you come to Mass? I’m a technological dunce, I’m afraid.”

“Of course.”

He starts down the stairs, turning to me before he reaches the bottom. “Someone left the cat in my care so that I would find a new home for him. I feel it in my bones. You’ll make sure to lavish him with love and attention, won’t you?”

“I’ll take good care of him. I promise.” He nods, and I watch him get into his car before shutting the door.

I traipse back into the kitchen, and peek inside the carrier. “Okay, kitty-cat,” I murmur. “There’s something you should know. I’ve never taken care of a cat, or any pet for that matter. You’ll go easy on me, won’t you?”

The poor thing is still cowering in the corner, even as I speak gently. I’m not sure whether to open the crate or let him be. But I better figure it out soon. I’m sure there’s a ton of information online. I grab my laptop and pull up what seems like a reputable post about bringing home a new cat. Then I call Smith.

“Running late?” he asks above the noisy banter in the background.

“I need to cancel tonight.”

“This better be good, because I’m already at the bar,” he says coolly.

“I’m the proud owner of a cat,” I announce, the smile on my face reflecting a heart bursting with excitement.

“A cat? The kind that meow and claw up everything they can get their little paws on?”

“Yes.”

“When did that happen?”

“About thirty minutes ago. I’ll admit the timing isn’t perfect, but he needs me.”

He grunts. “Cats don’t need babysitters. They’re independent little assholes that are gleeful when you leave so they can destroy your house while you’re out.”

“Will you stop? I realize he can be left alone, but not tonight. The poor

little thing is so nervous he's shaking." *Don't worry kitty, I'm not leaving you alone.*

"Understood," he says, without any sullenness. "Why don't I come over and we can figure it out?"

As difficult as he can be, in some ways Smith is easy and flexible. "I would love that. But would you mind stopping by the pet store first? I need some supplies and I don't want to take him out. Or if you'd rather, I can go and you can stay with him."

"Have you ever had a cat?"

"No. No pets. You?"

"Enough to make Old MacDonald jealous. Where's the cat now?"

"Right here. In a carrier on the kitchen counter."

"First, put the carrier on the floor. If he starts to go crazy, he can knock it off the counter and get hurt. Is there anything laying around in the second bedroom?"

"No. The walk-in closet is packed with storage, but the room itself is empty."

"Isn't there a rug?"

"Yes. An area rug."

"Roll it up and take it out of there. Or leave it in a corner and I'll take it out when I get there. Remove any curtains and pull the shades or window blinds all the way up. Don't let the strings dangle. Put the carrier inside the room with the latch closed. That way he can feel safe while he gets used to the smells in the room. I'll be at your place in less than an hour."

"Are you going to stop by the pet store or should I plan on going?"

"I'll stop. The only pussy I'm babysitting tonight is yours."

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SMITH SHOWS up fifty minutes later with a cardboard box filled with supplies and a tall carpeted tree limb.

"A scratching post?"

"You're going to be happy you have it. Every guy needs an outlet."

I laugh and wrap my arms around him. I can't get enough of his playful side. "Thank you. I don't know the first thing about cats."

"Where is he?"

“In the room, like you told me. I’ve been sitting with him, so he won’t be alone.”

“If you wanted something that gave a shit, you should have gotten a dog.” He hands me two shallow bowls. “Wash these, and rinse them good,” he instructs. “Fill one with fresh water.”

When I get to the bedroom the litter tray is set up on one side and the hitching post on another. Smith is talking to the cat in a gentle voice. “I hope you’re a mouser, and not just some freeloader taking up space. And the redhead’s mine. Don’t get any ideas.”

I grin foolishly as I eavesdrop for another minute. The man can be tough and bristly at times, but it’s all on the outside. Inside, he’s good to the core.

“Here’s the water. Where should I put it?”

“Give it to me.” He places it on the floor a few feet from the carrier next to a bowl with wet food. “You can move the litter tray and the post anywhere you want after a week or so, but just a few feet at a time, so he gets used to it. Eventually they can be closer to the edge of the room.” He opens the carrier door, and motions for me to follow him out of the room.

“Why are you closing the door? We won’t be able to see him. What if he’s terrified with it closed?”

“He’ll be fine. When he’s hungry, the smell of the food will draw him out, and he’ll start to get used to the space.”

“Too bad I don’t have a baby gate. Then we could watch him while he adjusts. I don’t like not being able to see him.”

“He’s a cat. He climbs.”

Of course, I know this. “Right.” Smith must think I’m an idiot—and with good reason.

“What made you decide to get a cat out of the blue?”

“I didn’t exactly decide,” I say, while Smith washes his hands in the kitchen sink. “It was—a gift.”

He glares at me over his shoulder. “A gift? Don’t tell me from the priest.”





## KATE

I'm not having this discussion with him. He's already made his feelings about Father Jesse abundantly clear.

"What should we do for dinner?" I ask. "I can make pasta, scrambled eggs, or cereal. That's all I have in the house. I normally grocery shop on Sunday evenings, but I was busy having my boundaries tested last weekend." I smile at him while he dries his hands on one of my yellow dish towels. One day soon, I'm going to have a talk with him about not washing his hands in the kitchen sink, and that yellow dish towels are strictly for drying dishes. The blue ones are for hands.

"The priest brought you a cat?" *Oh, God. He never lets a damn thing slide.*

"Yes," I say with little patience for what he's insinuating. "Have you decided about dinner?"

"Chinese from the place on King that delivers. You don't think it's odd that a priest gives you presents?"

"No. I'll order. What do you like?"

"Anything with meat. For the record, I think it's odd. And if you stopped people in the City Market and asked them about it, they would agree with me. And it wouldn't matter if they were from Des Moines, LA, Boston, or Charleston. They would all be weirded out by a priest bringing a woman gifts like he was fucking Santa Claus." He snatches the phone from my hand.

"What are you doing? I'm in the middle of ordering food."

"Using a lifeline. I'm calling a friend."

He fiddles with the phone.

“It’s locked. Now give it back and call your own friends.” I hold out my hand.

“Was locked.”

“How did you do that?” I demand while the phone is ringing on speaker. “Who are you calling?”

“Hey! I was just thinking about you,” Fiona says when she answers. I try to grab the phone, but he holds it out of my reach.

“Really?” Smith drawls. “What were you thinkin’, darlin’?” I want to laugh, but I won’t give him the satisfaction.

Fiona is quiet for a few seconds. “This is Smith Sinclair, Kate’s friend, and don’t pretend you don’t know who I am. I’m sure you already know how big my watch is.”

She snickers, holding back a full laugh. “Is Kate there?”

“Hi, Fi. Do not listen to anything he says.”

“We’re calling for an unbiased opinion. There’s a priest who’s been bringing Kate presents. First, he gave her an expensive TV, and then today, he brought her a cat.”

“What kind of cat?”

“An orange tabby.”

“I want a cat.”

Smith throws his head back. “Focus here, Fiona. Don’t you think it’s strange that a priest brings Kate presents?”

“Not really.”

“Not really?” He shakes his head.

“Kate is comfortable with priests and that makes them comfortable with her. She isn’t like most people.” *Thanks, Fi. Why don’t you tell him everything you know about me?* “Her childhood home abuts St. Claire’s. She was always over at the rectory. Father Tierney used to babysit her.”

“Babysit her?” Smith pauses, his forehead crinkling like he’s trying to understand what the hell she’s saying. “I don’t know anything about that. And I’m not sure I want to know about it,” he mutters. “But this priest,” he continues, sparing me a scowl, “looks at Kate like he wants to eat her.”

“Bullshit,” I say loudly.

“I’ve seen it with my own two eyes.”

“Is it true, Kate?” Fiona asks.

“No. The TV was something a parishioner gave him that he didn’t need. I already told you the story, and when we had dinner *to discuss the bulletin I’m*

*helping him with,*” I return Smith’s scowl, “I mentioned that I’ve always wanted a pet. So when a cat was abandoned at the church, he immediately thought of me.” I glare at Smith. “What is so hard about that to understand?”

He ignores me. “This isn’t weird to either of you?”

“I don’t care how big your watch is, you sound like a jealous boyfriend. It’s not a good look, Smith,” Fiona says, calmly but firmly.

“You’re just agreeing with her because she’s your friend. I bet if I asked your husband, he’d be thinking exactly what I’m thinking.”

“Two fools do not a genius make. Unless you want to tell me more about your watch, I need to feed my children. Kate, call me tomorrow.”

He disconnects the call and tosses my phone on the counter. “What do you want to do about dinner?”

“I thought we were having Chinese. How did you get into my locked phone? Let me guess, special commando training?”

“No.” He draws out the word, impatient with me. “It’s not part of special operative training. If you can’t get into a locked phone, you’re not getting anywhere near the training program.”

“It’s a neat trick.” *Hopefully this is the first time you’ve unlocked my phone.* “Do you want a beer?”

“Please.”

Smith disappears while my head is in the fridge. I find him in the bedroom doorway, the door ajar, watching the cat eat. For the first time, I get a good look at the tabby. He’s actually bigger than he looked in the carrier—a bit pudgy, actually. I squeeze Smith’s arm. “Poor thing must have been starving.” Don’t worry sweet kitty. We have plenty of food.

Smith holds a finger to his mouth and shuts the door quietly.

“The cat should see a vet,” he says when we’re back in the kitchen.

“I’ll set something up for a couple weeks from now. Maybe by then he’ll be more accustomed to me and won’t be so scared when I take him out in the car.”

“I don’t think you should wait. *She* looks pregnant.”

“Pregnant?” I should have known from the way he talked about the male species that Father Jesse wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between a male and female. “I thought he was a boy?”

“Did you see a dick anywhere?”

I grin until my cheeks hurt. “Only the big one in the kitchen, but I think he’s hiding a smaller one under his clothes.”

Smith laughs and pulls me into his chest. “I don’t like that priest.”

“Duly noted. But I do. Now let me finish ordering dinner and then you can help me find a vet.”

“You order, and I’ll call the vet—I know a good one who makes house calls.”

“I’m not sure I can afford a vet who makes house calls.”

“Just order dinner. I’m starving.”

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WE FINISH DINNER, and Dr. Long, the vet, comes by at about nine with a portable ultrasound machine that the cat wasn’t crazy about. “What’s the kitty’s name?” she asks, setting up a small table.

“I was going to call her Fenway when I thought she was a he. Not sure now.”

“Fenway’s a nice name. As long as you love her and say her name with affection, she won’t care what you call her.” She sits on the floor next to the carrier and opens a bag of fishy smelling treats, so pungent they could attract cats from all over the city. “I’m going to give her a few minutes and see if she comes out on her own.”

After a short time, Fenway slowly makes her way into the room, tracking the fishy smell to Dr. Long.

“She’s pregnant, alright. There’s the pinkening,” the vet says pointing to the cat’s underside. “Good call, Smith. She seems healthy and well-cared for. I bet your family misses you, Fenny,” the vet coos.

After a few minutes of treats and gentle petting, the cat lets Dr. Long examine her.

“I can feel the microchip in her neck, but it doesn’t appear to be registered when I scan it. That’s not uncommon. People bring home kittens and puppies that are chipped, but they don’t pay the twenty dollars to activate it.”

“I don’t know about her family. She was left at St. Magdalene’s church.”

“Is that so, Fenny?” the vet says, feeding her a treat. “Sometimes the prospect of kittens is too much for pet owners. I can’t say enough about spaying and neutering. At least they didn’t drop her off in the woods for a predator to find.” I shudder at the thought.

“Do you know when the kittens will be born?” I ask, watching how quickly the cat has warmed up to Dr. Long. I’m thrilled she’s not so scared anymore. Maybe it won’t take her too long to warm up to me, either.

“About a month. She’s a young mama.”

“Is there anything special I need to know to prepare for the kittens?”

“I’ll leave you with some reading material. She’ll mostly take care of business herself. But I wouldn’t let her outside, even if she begs at the door.”

“Can she stay alone while I’m at work?”

“Yes, of course. Although if you can come home during the day for a short visit, that might be a good thing until she has her kittens.” I can definitely rework my schedule to come home at least once during the day.

She gives me some papers and tells me to call the office on Monday to set up an appointment for two weeks. “Unless you want me to do another house call?” she asks, glancing at Smith. “I don’t mind.”

“I can take her into the office. By then I hope she’s more comfortable with me. What do I owe you for today’s visit?”

She gathers her equipment. “Nothing for today.”

“Are you sure? That doesn’t seem right.”

“Take good care of Fenny. That’s all I ask. And don’t worry. Cats are much better prepared for babies than humans are.”

Smith sees Dr. Long out and comes back into the bedroom. Fenny lets me pet her before she crawls back into the safety of her carrier. I think she’s warming up to me.

“I don’t understand why she didn’t want to be paid. Did you work something out with her when you called?”

“I tried. She won’t take money from me.”

“Someone you used to play with?” *That’s ugly, Kate.*

“Claws away, princess. Never played with her. She had some trouble with an ex-husband that we helped her with. That’s all I’m going to say on the subject.”

Now I feel like a total ass. Jealous girlfriends aren’t any better of a look than jealous boyfriends.

“Let’s leave Fenway in peace,” Smith says. “We can check on her in a little while.” He tugs on my hair as I shut the door quietly. “I wouldn’t like to see it all the time, but a little jealousy is hot on you.”

I smile shyly, the flush of embarrassment coloring my warm cheeks. “Just sayin’,” he adds, with the smug, self-satisfied preen of a peacock that makes

my pussy tingle.

“Do you want to watch a movie and have a sleepover? Maybe you’ll show me your watch, if you’re not embarrassed by the tiny thing,” I tease over my shoulder, on the way to the bedroom.

He lunges at me, tossing me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing. “I’ll show you my watch, princess. And then you’re going to worship it from your knees.”

His words and *that* voice he uses make me want to rip off his clothes and rub my body against his like a feline desperate for attention. But if history is any indication, I’m going to get all the attention I can handle.

“Now take off your clothes. And be quick about it,” he commands, slapping my ass while dumping me squealing onto the air mattress.



## SMITH

We slept on the floor at Kate's for the last time two nights ago. She's going to be pissed about the bed and the sofa, but too bad. I haven't been there every night, but we've still managed to wreck six air mattresses in the last three weeks. *Six*. Including two that were supposed to be indestructible. Although that kind of advertising is nothing more than a challenge, anyway.

The delivery guys texted me an hour ago to say they were thirty minutes away, so I expect a call from Kate any time now. *Bingo*. My dashboard lights up with her name. Bring it on, *Mary Katherine*.

"What possessed you to buy me a bed and a sofa?" She starts, before I even say hello.

"I don't want to be out-gifted by a priest."

"Please tell me that's a joke."

"Mostly. I'm too old to be sleeping on the floor. So are you. And I like a comfortable place to take a nap and watch the game." Plus, I'm tired of indulging your *I'm just here as a temporary thing* bullshit.

"What a second," she says, before the banging. "Dammit!" she cries.

"What the hell happened?"

"I'm making Fenny some fish broth to add to her food, and it boiled over. When I moved the pan off the stove, I burned my finger. Nothing serious."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. It's fine. Startled me, that's all."

"The cat's getting homemade fish broth?"

"She's pregnant. She deserves a few treats, and Dr. Long said the extra



nutrition and fluids are good for her.”

Kate is ridiculous about the cat, and I give her a ton of shit about it, but the truth is I love that side of her. She is going to flip out when those kittens are born. I’m kind of looking forward to it, myself. The question is, what are we going to do with all those kittens when they’re weaned?

“That cat gets treated better than I do. Just make sure she stays off my couch.”

She clicks her tongue. “Poor baby. Speaking of the couch. Did it occur to you to ask my preferences?”

“I’m working on finding out every one of your preferences, princess. It’s a job for a special operative, because you’re not very forthcoming. But I’m working on that, too.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“The bed is the bed. I picked out a decent mattress. As far as the sofa—I don’t know a paisley print from a blooming hydrangea, so I chose something safe. Besides, leather is easy to wipe down. I plan on making that sofa real dirty.”

“I’m not going to be in Charleston much longer. Even with both of us chasing down clues, the information has pretty much dried up. My lease expires in August, and by then the Boston Police Commissioner’s job will be set. It’s wasteful to buy furniture.” I hear the regret in her voice as it trails off. Or maybe that’s just what I want to hear.

“I’m getting tired of that excuse. Almost as tired as I am of sleeping on the floor.” I’m short with her. The truth is, I don’t want to hear it. Every time she says she’s leaving soon—every fucking time—my stomach balls into a tight fist. I’m not ready for her to go. Although, it’s still a month away. Maybe I’ll be ready by the time the summer ends. Maybe more than ready. *Right.* Even I’m starting to have trouble swallowing the bullshit.

“Do you want to come over tonight?” she asks. “I’ll make that crab dip you like.”

“Let’s go out for drinks and then grab some supper.”

“I don’t know about leaving Fenny alone. She’s close.”

“She’s not that close. Besides, she’s a cat, not a pregnant teenager. She’ll be fine alone for a few hours. We haven’t been out since you got her.” *Not that I’m complaining, because I’ve enjoyed every second that we’ve spent holed up with you naked and needy, begging for my cock.* “You’re due for a night out.”

“Alright,” she says hesitantly. “But let’s not go too far.”

“I’ll come by about seven—make that six-thirty—in case we want to take that mattress for a spin before we head out.”

“You’re impossible.” She sighs. “Thank you for the bed and the sofa. You’re right about sleeping on the floor.” She pauses for a second. “I know what you’re going to say, but I’d feel better if I paid for the furniture. At least for some portion of it.”

“I don’t want your money.” I hear her getting ready to fuss on the other end of the call. “But if you’re dead set on paying me back—you can work it off. But I warn you. I’m demanding and difficult to please.”

She’s smiling. I know she is, while she’s coming up with some smart-ass thing to put me in my place. But instead, she surprises me, like she often does. “I’d like the opportunity to work off my debt, sir. *Anything* you’d like. I’m told I follow instructions well.”

Her voice is low and sultry, and my dick is pushing against my zipper. *Fuck six-thirty.* “I’m on my way over now. When I get there, I want you naked on that bed, with your gorgeous ass in the air.”

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IT’S late by the time we get back to Kate’s for the night. The bed was well broken in before we left, which I’m not griping about. But then it took forever before I was able to drag her away from the cat.

Kate insisted on feeding it a dollop of whipped cream, *freshly whipped cream*, from her finger before we left. When I begged for a taste, she shut me down. That, of course, led to christening the sofa. By the time we made it out the door, the sun was dipping into the horizon.

I see it the minute we pull up in front of the house. My gut twists into a knot. *I hope to hell I’m wrong.* Kate doesn’t notice because she’s too busy telling me about an email she got from a former colleague at the Sun. Apparently, Warren King might not actually be sick. Big surprise.

It’s dark, and I can’t be certain, so I ask her to stay in the car. I don’t want to alarm her, and I sure as hell don’t want her to see— “Wait here for a minute. I need to check something.”

“What? Why can’t I come with you?”

“Please don’t argue. Just wait in the car until I get back.”

As I make my way closer to the stairs, I see Fenny sprawled on the sidewalk, not moving. *You have got to be fucking kidding me.* My first instinct is to pull off my shirt and cover the cat so that Kate doesn't see it like this, but I pause to make sure it's dead, and then it's too late.

"What is it?" Kate says, opening the Jeep door.

"Stay back. Get back in the Jeep, Kate. I'm not dicking around." I try to block her view of Fenway, but the piercing scream and the mournful wail that follows tells me I'm unsuccessful. My heart breaks for her as she fights me, kicking and scratching as I carry her back to the Jeep.

I've seen death up close. Some of it grisly. I've comforted soldiers under my command, and friends who have witnessed the horrors of war. In their grief, they don't want promises that can't be kept. They need someone to stand strong beside them. I've also lost pets, and it can be every bit as heartbreaking. It never occurs to me to tell Kate *it's going to be okay* as I force her into the Jeep. "I've got you," is what I promise. "I've got you."

Once she's situated, I grab a towel from the back of the car and place it over Fenny so that she doesn't have to see the damage. Someone sliced her down the middle. That's what it looks like, anyway. *Jesus Christ! How am I ever going to explain this to Kate?*

The cat got out of a closed house. It's not Houdini—someone let it out. There were no open windows when we left. I checked myself. *This was King's people. I know it was.*

I move Fenny a bit so I can take a better look at the wound. This is bad. A fucking nightmare kind of bad.

Kate is sobbing when I get back to the Jeep. I hold her while she cries in my arms. When I find the sonofabitch who did this, I will show them no mercy.

I don't want to leave her out here alone, but I'm not letting her go inside until I know it's safe. "Someone might have broken into the house and let Fenny out. I want to take a look around before you go in."

"No." She grabs my arm, clenching tight. "Let's call the police. I don't want you to get hurt."

"No one's going to hurt me. I want you to lay on the horn if anyone approaches the vehicle—actually, lay on it if you see another human being on the street. I don't care whether you recognize them. Lay on the horn until I get here. Do you understand?"

She nods. "Please call the police."

Kate has more faith in the police than I do. “I’ll call them if you promise not to get out of the car until I get back.”

She nods.

“Give me your keys.” Her hands are shaky. I kiss her right above her ear. “I’ll be right back. Doors locked. Stay in the car.”

I call my office and have them contact the police while I search the perimeter. There’s a blood-stained towel behind the bushes in the front yard, not far from where the cat was lying, and a screen in the back of the house is on the ground. It’s been cut.

I dread what else I’m going to find inside, but it’s not too bad. Some drawers are open and appear to be ransacked, and her laptop is gone from the dresser, but the backup and the television are still here. This was not a robbery. More reason to believe that the King camp is behind this.

When I get back outside, Kate’s kneeling on the sidewalk with Fenny in her lap, stroking her bloody fur and sobbing. “Kate. Come here. Let me take Fenny.” I wrap the cat in the towel and place her on the grass. “I told you to stay in the car.” It’s a stupid, unhelpful thing to say, but Kate doesn’t even notice.

“I didn’t take good care of her. She was counting on me. I let her down. And her babies. I let everyone down.”

I wrap my arm around her shoulders. The guilt this woman is going to carry about this is already gnawing at me. She wanted to stay home. I was the one who pushed to go out. “There’s not a single person—not a single thing that you’ve ever let down in your life. Let’s go inside and clean up. Then I want you to pack a bag. I’ll take care of Fenway.”

“Pack a bag? Where are we going?”

Good question. I can’t take her back to my house at Sweetgrass, because—I can’t. When a grown man can’t bring women back to his house, it’s time to find somewhere else to live. But that’s for another day.

I glance at the time. By the time the police get here, take a statement and a look around, things will be winding down at Wildflower, and it’s closed tomorrow. It’ll buy me some time. “Someone cut the screen and broke into the house. It’s not safe to stay here tonight. I think your laptop was taken, but not the backup. I need you to look around and see if they took anything else.”

We go inside through the front door, and I follow her as she wanders around the house. When she gets to Fenny’s carrier, she picks up a small toy mouse. “She loved this. We should bury it with her.” I lead her away from

the room with Fenny's things as quickly as possible.

"I don't see the laptop," she mumbles. Her voice is hollow, and I want to take on her pain and carry it for her. "But it's all backed up and saved to the cloud. Some jewelry is missing. Costume jewelry. It's not important. Not like Fenny." She holds up her hand and touches the Claddagh ring on her finger that belonged to her mother. "Should we call the police?"

"Already done." I open her bottom drawer where she keeps a small gun safe. It's empty. "What about your gun?"

"I didn't take it out of my bag before we went to the restaurant."

"We're going to the range tomorrow. I want to see if you can actually shoot that thing."

"I already told you I can."

More than once. But I want to see it with my own two eyes. Whatever sick motherfucker killed the cat was inside this house. "When's the last time you shot it?"

"Boston."

"Then you need practice."

"Her belly looked like it had been cut. Fenway. Could a car have done that?"

I shrug.

"If a predator—I would have expected her to be—did she get caught on the screen?" Tears are falling again.

She doesn't need to hear the truth tonight. "I don't know." I swipe a tear from her face with my finger. *But I'm going to find out.* That's a goddamn promise.



## KATE

I open my eyes and look around the room. It takes me several seconds to remember I'm at Smith's apartment at Wildflower. I fell asleep in his arms sometime late last night, but he's not here now.

Once I'm fully awake, it all comes flooding back. Fenny's dead. Someone broke into the house while I was enjoying dinner, laughing, flirting, and basking in Smith's light. They let her out. She must have been terrified. I pull up the covers.

Leaving her alone was a mistake. If I had been there, she would still be alive. Her kittens would still be alive. I'm cried out from last night. Now, I'm just numb. And I'm cursed. Everything I love dies.

I reach for my phone. It's almost noon. I want to talk to Fi, but she's either at church or on her way to one of the Nanas' for Sunday dinner. Maybe I should call my father? No. It would only worry him—*and he'll find a way to blame you*. I already blame myself. I don't need him to pile on. But I do need to get up and find Smith. I want to make sure that Fenny is buried. But first, I need to pee.

I take care of business and use the toothbrush he gave me last night. I start to finger comb my rat's nest, but right now, I don't care about my hair.

My clothes are not where I left them last night. Maybe he hung them in the closet. I open the closet door, but I don't find any clothes there. Not a single stitch.

What I do find is a large room, even larger than the bedroom, with the same high ceilings and wood floor. There are hooks on the ceiling in the corners of the room, and an array of items hanging on the wall. One is

definitely a flogger, but I don't recognize the rest. The room is otherwise empty except for a chest, a couple chairs, and two large items I don't recognize, although one resembles a hammock, and the other—

“Good morning,” Smith says hesitantly from the doorway. “I brought you coffee.”

I don't take the coffee. “What's all this?” I ask, cupping my elbows. I know what these things are used for, but I'm not sure what to call them.

“Toys.”

*Toys.* Of course. I might not know much about kink, but it's pretty obvious. What else would they be? “Are—are they yours?”

“They're on loan.”

On loan? Where exactly does one borrow this sort of thing? “From whom?”

“A friend.” He's terse, like he's already getting impatient with the questions. Well, I have a lot more.

“What's that?” I ask pointing to the hammock contraption.

“Just a swing.”

“Just a swing. Really? The kind you would put your nieces in?”

I glance at him. His face is hard. “That's a low blow, Kate. I get that this might be unfamiliar to you. And surprising. That's all well and good, but leave those little girls out of it.”

I feel a bit of remorse. I shouldn't have mentioned his nieces, but I'm not ready to apologize. “What about this thing?”

“It's a saddle.”

“A saddle?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you do with it?”

He cracks his knuckles. It's not to intimidate me. He's uncomfortable. “It's a saddle. Pretty self-explanatory.”

“Really? Because I don't understand it. But clearly, I'm stupid.”

“You want to know what it's used for?” He slaps the seat of the leather saddle. “You really want to know? Because you're pale and you look pretty damn horrified. You should have never come in here.”

I curl my lips over my teeth, and press my mouth together, weighing my words carefully. “Pale is my natural coloring, and I wasn't snooping. I was looking for my clothes. I thought it was a closet. And don't change the subject. What is this used for?”



“There are phallus shaped accessories you attach here.” He points to an area in the center of the saddle. “You pick the one that suits you. And here is where you connect an attachment that stimulates the clit.” He’s dispassionate and clinical. If I didn’t know better, I would say there was no pleasure for him in these toys. *But that would be stupid.*

“What do you do?”

“Watch.”

We’re back to one-word responses. Soon it’ll be grunts. This is what he does when he doesn’t want to talk about it. Well, Sinclair, I wish I hadn’t walked in here too. But now that I have, you are going to talk. “Watch? With your cock in hand?”

He lifts his chin. “Sometimes. But other times, I stand behind the saddle and slide my dick into her ass.” I swallow hard. “Bite her neck. Play with her tits. I might even grab that riding crop off the wall,” he says, pointing to the item near the flogger. “It doesn’t matter where I’m standing, I can see her pleasure reflected in the mirrors on the wall.”

That was a big fuck you to me. And it takes me a long moment to regain my equilibrium.

“So this—this is what—you’re into? That wasn’t some off-handed remark at the Blackberry Inn about floggers and hot wax. What we’ve been doing has just been a warm-up for what you really like.”

“Kate.”

I put up my hand to stop him. “Have you been using these with another woman—with other women since we’ve been—having sex?”

“I haven’t been with anyone else besides you.”

“When was the last time you *played* with someone?” I’m defensive and confused, and I don’t give a shit.

“I think that would be yesterday early evening.”

“Don’t be a smartass. When is the last time you were with a woman that wasn’t me?”

“I already told you, a few nights before your birthday.”

“Here.”

He nods.

“That was weeks ago,” I mutter, under my breath. “Why do you still have this on loan?”

Smith scratches his head but doesn’t say anything for a moment. “I’m not exactly sure.” He shrugs.

I walk over to the swing, and finger the mesh, imagining a faceless, naked woman reclining in the thing. I give it a push. It twirls, almost innocently. But there's nothing innocent about it. "You wanted me to know."

"No." He shakes his head.

"Yes, you did. Otherwise you would have returned it to your *friend*."

"It's not like we ever come here. If it hadn't been—"

"Stop lying. Stop."

"I'm not sure." He closes his eyes, squeezing the back of his neck a few times. "If you gave me truth serum—I would probably tell you I keep it here to remind me that this is an important part of my life. Something I shouldn't forget about—just because—I like you."

I glance at him before going over to the saddle and staring mindlessly at the groove where the phallus attaches. I don't think about the devices hanging on the wall, or what might be in the chest of drawers. All I can think about is that what we do is not enough. That I'm not enough. Of course, I'm not enough for someone like him. *God, I'm an idiot.*

"Talk to me, Kate," he murmurs in that voice he uses to coax me into telling him secrets.

My fingers find my hair, and I begin to play with it, because this is too much. "I thought we were having pretty great sex. That it was something special. I thought you were enjoying sex with me. But I guess I was the only one enjoying it."

He comes over and puts his arm around me and drags me toward him. "I have enjoyed every second of you. Don't you dare start conjuring up shit in that overactive little mind of yours."

"But what we have isn't enough?"

"It's enough. More than enough."

I pull away and search his face. It's earnest, but— "You're lying. The proof is right here in this room."

He doesn't look at me as he nods. The movement is so small it's barely perceptible. "It's enough—for now. But kink has been part of my life for a long time. A long time." He gazes at me. "I like it. A lot. What we have is enough, but I'm not sure for how long it will be enough. I'd be lying to say otherwise."

Everything is a little fuzzy, and if I hadn't thrown up twice last night, I'd be puking on my bare feet right now. *Fenny. Oh, God. One thing at a time, Kate. Stay present.*

“Tell me about the women you play with. The ones who like this.”

“No. I won’t do that. I can talk to you about the kinds of sex I’ve had, but my relationships, including the one I have with you, are private. All you need to know is that this,” he waves his hand between the swing and the saddle, “was all consensual. And that I respected my partners while we played, and after.”

I glance at the few items hanging on the wall that look like they are on loan from The Tower of London. “Consensual.”

“I guess you could say, at times, it was consensual, non-consensual play.”

*What the hell does that even mean? “You need this in your life?” Because this is so far out of my experience that I’m having trouble. And I don’t know if I can ever fully accept it.*

“Need it? No. We both know I get off without it. But it would leave a large void if it was gone forever.”

“And the vanilla sex we’ve been having will never fill that void?” *No, Kate, it won’t. How many different ways does he need to say it?*

“I wouldn’t say that it’s all been vanilla. More like butter pecan, rich with some crunch.” I ignore the tug at the corner of his mouth and the dimple winking at me.

“And what’s this?”

“Midnight cookies and cream,” he says matter-of-factly. “We’re making progress, but we’re a long way away from this.”

*Progress? “You’ve been grooming me? For this.” Oh. My. God. He’s a predator.*

“Whoa.” He raises both his hands. “That’s a loaded word. It implies manipulation. I told you straight up I was all about exploring and pushing boundaries. You were well aware.”

“Are you a dominant? A sadist?” I’m not even sure of the correct language to use.

“Those are complicated words. I consider myself a top. Although I’m occasionally, and I do mean occasionally, willing to let someone else take charge.”

“What does that even mean? I don’t speak kink. Speak in terms I can understand.” I’m trying to stay calm, but my insides are shaking.

“I prefer to be in control. In all aspects of life, including during sex. It’s not some deep-rooted psychological need. I didn’t experience abandonment or any other childhood trauma. I just like it. It’s how I’m built.” He squeezes

my shoulders and presses a tender kiss to my head. The clean smell of the sandalwood soap on his skin relaxes me—unlike everything else in this room, it’s familiar.

I take a deep breath and hold it for a few seconds before I let it go. “I don’t know, Smith. This isn’t what I signed up for.”

“I know.” He pulls me closer. “But you’ve been enjoying it. Even the things you thought you didn’t like.”

It’s true. “But what we’ve been doing isn’t this. And just like you can’t imagine a life without this, I can’t imagine a life with it.”

He hooks his finger under my chin, until I’m looking into those serious whiskey-colored eyes. “That’s not entirely true. I’ve thought about a life without kink. But you’ve never really thought about a life with it.”

“But—”

“You’re still upset about Fenway. You’re letting your emotions cloud your thinking.”

I jerk away from his grasp. “Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare tell me that I’m over-emotional and can’t think straight. Have some respect for me. I just walked in on this. I’ve been falling in—developing feelings—having sex with a man who has a whole secret life that I didn’t know a thing about.”

“What I do is no one’s damn business.” Now who’s defensive? “But it’s not a secret, Kate. At least I didn’t want it to be from you. But I didn’t think you were ready—and I didn’t want to chase you away.”

“You decided I wasn’t ready? Well here’s a little nugget you can slip into your back pocket: I’m always ready for the truth.”

We stand there, still, for what feels like months. The longer we stand there, the stronger the realization becomes that we aren’t meant to be together. We’re too different.

“The truth is,” he says, “this is fun—it can take even great sex to a whole other level. But I wanted to introduce you to it slowly. I hoped it was something we could share together.”

The sorrow in his face mirrors the one I feel in my heart. I’m confused and defensive, but I’m not ready to give up on us. Not without more information. *Well then, grow up, Kate. Figure it out.*

“I’m not a submissive,” I say haughtily.

There’s a glimmer in his eyes. “Good. Like I told you earlier, I’m not a dominant.”

“Does this mean we can never have normal sex?”

His hand moves to my hair, tentatively reaching for a curl. “It’s all normal, Kate.”

“You know what I mean.”

He reaches for me, and I don’t pull away. “We can have it all. I want to have lots of vanilla sex. I want to wake you up in the middle of the night and slide into your pussy while your body is warm and sleepy and my dick is hard from dreaming about you. But I also want to try all the kink with you. Kink so filthy it makes you pink when you think about it in the light of day. I want all of it. With you.”

I see the vulnerability in his face. I hear it in his voice. I know it cost him to lay out his feelings.

“I don’t know ... what if ... I don’t want any of this.” I shrug. “But while I’m deciding, there can be no other women—no matter how bad the urge gets.”

“This is not an addiction, and I am not an addict. And there have been no other women—the day you laid your head on that pillow at the Blackberry Inn, this—us—was exclusive. I made the decision that day.”

“What about asking what I wanted?”

He pulls me away, just enough to look at my face. “You wanted something else?”

I shake my head. “No. But I want you to ask—I don’t want you just to assume.”

“Fair enough. But about those *other women* you keep bringing up. It’s never going to work between us if you can’t trust me. My line of work takes me to all sorts of places with all sorts of people at all times of the day and night. I can’t share everything about what I do. As a matter of fact, I can’t share most of it. But I’m not a cheater.”

“Trust is a two-way street.”

He nods. “I’m getting better at it.” *He is*. There are still occasional lapses of trust, mainly involving the Wilders, but overall, things are better in that regard.

“You can give this up, until we figure it out? What if it doesn’t happen right away? What if it never happens?”

He places his hands on my upper arms, his fingers digging into the pliant flesh. “Look at me,” he says, in a sober voice. “This is not an open relationship, and I repeat, I am not a cheater. When we’re done with each other, we’ll talk about it. It might not be pleasant, but it will end with a

discussion, not with another woman in my bed. You have my word on that.”

*When we're done.* My stomach contorts into a painful knot that makes it difficult to take full breaths. My mind sprints from one awful scenario to another, but each with the same tragic ending. *I wanted it to work, but this is an important part of my life. I can't give it up forever.* No! I will not play the victim in this story. I will fight for this. *For us.*

“I want to try the saddle,” I say in a clear, determined voice.

His brows are knitted together. “I’m sorry?”

I square my shoulders and approach the damn thing like Joan of Arc riding into battle. “I want to try the saddle.”

“Now?”

I look him straight in the eye and nod.

“No. Absofuckinglutely not.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not fifteen, and I’m not an asshole in a frat house.”

I gasp. “I can’t believe you just said that. You think I’m forcing myself to tolerate this so that you’ll love me?” As I say the words out loud, I realize there might be a grain of truth to them.

He just stands there, the knob in his throat bobbing before he speaks. “That’s not what I meant. Don’t put words into my mouth. I think you’re willing to try things you’re not ready for because you think it will make me happy. You’re always too willing to disregard your feelings when it comes to people close to you. You don’t strap on a pair of skis for the first time and take a run down the expert trail. That’s a sure way to guarantee you’ll never put on those skis again. You’re not ready for this.”

“Why is it that you always get to decide what I’m ready for? I’m an adult. I want to see if this is something I can ever be into, or if we should go our separate ways now.”

“I want you to like this.” He gestures toward the toys. “Maybe not these particular things, but I want you to love kink as much as I do—as much as I know I can with you. This isn’t fiction where a virgin is taken to a dungeon and ends up a pain slut before the night is through. That’s not how it works in real life. If we play too much, too soon, you could be turned off and shut the door on it forever. There’s no reason to take that risk.”

“This is what I want.” I sound much more confident than I’m feeling. The pain slut comment rattled me a bit. “You can join me, or you can watch, or you can leave and think about me mounting that thing.” I reach for his hand.

“Or you can help me learn. I’m going to do this with or without you.” I give him a minute to settle in. “Where are the attachments?”

He shakes his head and turns toward the door.

“You’re a coward,” I shout after him. “Nothing more than a bunch of big talk. You don’t want to do this with me. You just want this to become the excuse when you’ve had enough of me, and want to walk away, guilt free.”





## KATE

He stops in his tracks, pivots, and stalks toward me. “You have no idea what you’re asking for.”

“Then show me.”

I see the turmoil in his eyes. The flicker of uncertainty across his strong features. I’m sure there are reels in his head playing on a non-stop loop. A drunk fifteen-year-old girl surrounded by young men in a frat house, pawing lewdly. He doesn’t want to add to her pain.

“I want to understand this.”

“I know.” He throws up his hands. “But what you’re suggesting— isn’t the way to understand it.”

“I want to know if this can be a part of my life. If I’m in it for the long haul. I need to know before I get any deeper.”

His tongue emerges, the tip nestled in the bow of his lip. He’s considering it.

I wait impatiently for him to decide. “Fine,” he says, his palm scrubbing a stubbled jaw. “I’ll play, if that’s what you need.”

I don’t believe him. He’s going to give me some watered-down version of what he likes. It will serve as a reminder to him that we’re different, and in the end, neither of us will know if we can reconcile those differences.

“Don’t you dare.” I pound my fist against his chest over and over. “Don’t you dare. I am not a fragile glass figurine, and this is not a Tennessee Williams play. I want to be treated just like all those other women you claim to respect so much. I want the same things you give them, during and after.”

He drags in a breath and blows it out with a long hiss. “Fine.” This time

the word pulses with life and fire. “If that’s what you want. But you are not in charge today, princess.” His body language shifts as he speaks. His eyes turn cold—his voice hard. He steps closer, mere inches away from me.

“Take off that T-shirt and get on your knees. Get comfortable there because you’re going to take out my cock and suck it like your life depends on it. Do you know why, Kate?” He grabs a fistful of my hair. “Because despite all your foolish bravado, you’re going to want me patient with you today. You’re going to want me to have some measure of control. So you’re going to use that sassy little mouth to settle me, and you’re going to do it real good, just like I showed you.”

He tugs harder on my hair until my scalp tingles. “Then I’m going to fuck you until you can’t remember if your name is Mary Katherine, or Katherine Mary, or Jenny from the block.”

Is this what I want? Should I be afraid? I push the thoughts away, every last one, and force myself into the moment.

When he lets go of my hair, I pull off the thin T-shirt and drop to my knees. It’s not an elegant landing, but I’m where I need to be to unbutton his jeans. His cock pushes its way out before the zipper is fully down, and I cradle it in a shaky hand.

I gaze up at him and see a myriad of emotions in his face. He’s still unsure. He could end this at any moment. I feel it. “Don’t you treat me like I’m broken, Smith Sinclair.” Then I lower my mouth and lick his shaft from root to tip, my tongue flicking the ridge of the flared crown. I use my teeth to gently scrape the dusky head before drawing it into my mouth.

“Kate,” he groans, sliding his hands into my hair, cupping my head with gentle fingertips so that I’m still setting the pace. I want to know if his head is tipped back and his jaw is slack, or if he’s watching me tease him with my lips. I let his swollen cock slide over my flat tongue, and that’s when he takes control. He doesn’t wrest it from me. I hand it to him, willingly.

In seconds, my eyes are watering and my gag reflex is working overtime. “Swallow,” he instructs with a raspy voice, each time he shoves deeper into my throat. “Breathe through your nose.”

I’m grateful for the reminders.

His breathing is labored. My fingers feel the tightening in his groin, and the jerky movements of his hips right before he pulls out of my mouth, spraying his seed on my breasts and belly, bits bouncing off my skin and splashing onto my hair and face. I gasp, gulping mouthfuls of air, like I’ve

been holding my breath underwater for an extensive period of time. It's shocking and exhilarating, and I want more.

He yanks me off my knees, kissing me roughly. "You just need to say stop," he murmurs, backing me up against the saddle, where he owns my mouth until I'm submerged again.

After a few minutes, he sweeps the T-shirt I'd been wearing from the floor, and wipes his mark off my skin. But it's not gone. It's smeared deep into my pores, where I'll smell him every time I sweat.

"Turn around and bend over that saddle you're so interested in riding."

I do as instructed. Draping my body over the worn leather saddle, my chin resting on the very edge. He stands over me, quietly. "Can I choose the phallus?" I ask softly, when the silence becomes too loud.

Smith slaps my bare ass in response, and I yelp at the sting. "I already told you we are not playing with that saddle. Today, you're just going to be anchored to it." He slaps my ass again, and the sting begins and ends in my cunt. "Don't move, and don't say a single word until I give you permission to speak."

He comes back holding a long bar with cuffs attached to it, and a glass plug with spheres attached to one another in increasing size as they approach the base. I recognize it immediately because we've been playing with butt plugs. Smaller than this though, and made of pliable material.

Smith holds up the bar. "This is a spreader bar. I'm going to attach the cuffs to your ankles and then to the bar. The bar is going to keep your legs open nice and wide for me, Kate. You tend to squeeze your legs together before you come. It deflects some of the intensity you're feeling. With this, you're not going to be able to do that. I'm going to lick your sweet cunt until I've had my fill, and you will take every orgasm, all the pleasure, I give you. Do you understand?"

"Yes." My mouth is so dry, I can barely form the word.

"Do you know what this is?"

I nod. "A butt plug."

"That's right. It's made of glass. Do you remember how cold glass is against your skin until it's warmed?"

When I don't respond, he slips the long plug between my legs, dragging it over my clit. I shudder and gasp at the cold. "We're going to warm it just like this." He holds it against my entrance and pushes it inside. I groan as it fills me.

He pulls it out, coated and slick, and holds it in front of my face, licking the glass like it's a popsicle to be savored on a blistering day. "Do you want a taste? Take a small taste." I slide my pointed tongue over the smallest sphere, acutely aware of where it has been and where it will soon be.

"You're delicious," he murmurs, taking another long taste.

He discards the plug, and standing behind me, he gently pulls back my hair. "I'm going to tie your hands to the base of the saddle so you don't fall over when the spreader bar is in place." He ties my wrists with binding, slipping his fingers between the fabric and my skin. "This won't cut into your wrists, but it will save you from a nasty fall if you let go of the base. I don't want you to get hurt." I'm grateful for the care he takes, but I can't help but wonder if this is an extra precaution for me, or just the norm.

He crouches, biting my ass, while he attaches the cuffs. I jump every time his teeth sink into the fleshy cheeks.

"Spread those legs for me, Kate. Nice and wide." The lever clicks and I grip the long thin base of the saddle tighter.

"Stop. That's all you need to say to end this immediately." He brushes his fingers down my back. "Say it, so I know you can."

"Stop."

"Say it again."

"Stop."

"If you don't stop me, I'm going to push hard, and I'm not going to stop until you're a muddled mess." He kisses the back of my head after he says it. I feel the reticence on his lips.

Smith licks me back to front, again and again. He sets his own pace. I shudder at each long stroke, overwhelmed by the feeling of being restrained while he tongues me with abandon. When his fingers join the party, I am filled with the urge to squirm. But my movements are restricted, and I am at his mercy while his fingers fuck me, twisting in and out with a rhythm that he controls. It's too much. *Too much.*

"Regulate your breathing, Kate." I concentrate, taking a couple carefully controlled breaths. "That's it."

His fingers have slowed, and his mouth has moved away from my pussy. *I need it back.* But I can't grab his head and pull it toward me. "Smith, I need more. I was almost there," I plead.

"*Shhh.* You can have more. Right now." I flinch when the cold lube makes contact with my ass, sliding between my cheeks. "This is a special

plug,” he says. “It will feel a lot like the others we’ve played with going in, but these little balls are going to blow your mind coming out. Push out,” he instructs, sliding the glass inside me. “Breathe.”

I am dripping. I don’t know if it’s all the lube he applied or if it’s my arousal. My pussy is clenching. I want him inside me. His fingers. His cock. I don’t care.

His nose brushes my clit. He grunts his approval, and then he eats me. His lips, his teeth, his tongue, they’re all at the table, while he sucks on my clit, occasionally rocking the plug. “Go ahead, Kate. Come all over my mouth.” His tone is lewd, almost taunting.

I feel his fingers slide into my pussy. *Two? Three?* I don’t know. But my walls clench, hugging tight. My hips buck, but the movements are small, controlled by the restraints. It’s maddening. I feel my body tighten as I soar. Up, up, up. *Yes!* All of the pent-up energy—the frustration of not being able to move, bubbles up and pours out, filling the room in a long loud scream.

Smith slides up behind me. He presses a kiss to my cheek. He’s trembling, fighting for his own control. “I’m going to fuck you, princess. It’s going to be so tight with that big plug in your ass.”

I whimper, as his teeth sink into my flesh, biting along my shoulders and back, like he’s tasting my skin.

“*Ahhh!*” The sensation adds to the sensory overload.

“Do you like being restrained?” he murmurs in my ear. His voice is thick, bathed in a delicious lasciviousness. I feel him at my entrance before I can answer, rubbing the flared crown against the tender flesh.

I open my eyes and gaze into the mirror to watch this beautiful man enter my body. The smell of sex wafts around us like frankincense in a holy ritual.

His jaw is slack. His eyes shutter as he ruts deep. My mouth falls open in a gasp, and I struggle to keep my lids up. He moves with a graceful command, emitting the low growl of a predator who has captured his prey. His lashes flutter, exposing dark slits that catch me watching in the mirror.

His mouth eases at one corner, the glint of hedonism lighting his dark eyes. He bends over my body, wrapping my hair around his fist. “You’re such a dirty little princess. Look at your pretty face with traces of my cum still on it.”

I squeeze my eyes tight, losing myself in the punishing rhythm of his powerful thrusts, enjoying his fingers digging into my hips. I’m a blissful mess, bursting with need. “Please,” I beg.

“Please what, princess?”

*I don't know.* I don't know what I need.

“Please, fuck you harder?” He picks up speed and delves inside the tight channel with a vigor that pulls silent screams from my well-used body.

“Please, your tits need some attention?” He palms my breasts, pinning me more securely between the saddle and his hips, impaled on his long thick cock. My nipples are so sensitive, every squeeze, every roll, sends a zing of pleasure to my core. I moan loudly, my desperation filling the air, as I grip the base of the saddle tighter. “Please, let you come?”

He lowers his head, murmuring in my ear. “Because that’s not happening yet.” His hot breath curling into the shell lights a nerve, and the fire runs wild, reigniting itself when it reaches the tips of my toes.

He has one hand on my hip, anchoring me, and the other on my clit. His fingers circling, my legs trembling, and just as I am certain I’ll die if I don’t find my release soon, he pinches my swollen clit, and pulls out the plug one bead at a time as I fall apart. I tremble and grunt, writhing under him as each ball finds its way out. His thick cock works furiously inside my throbbing pussy, and I scream his name and shudder with the final wrench of the glass.

He pulls my hair back in a rough tug. “Watch me come inside you, Kate.” His eyes are heavy. The sweat is dripping from his skin. My hair is twisted around his hand. With two violent thrusts he roars his release. His features ease, occasionally contorting until he stills.

Still breathing hard, he gazes at me in the glass. I’m not sure what I see in his face. In his eyes. I’m too afraid to think about it. Too afraid it will break my heart if I’m mistaken, or if it’s not real. I only know that I want to look at it forever.

He leans over and places a gentle kiss at the base of my neck, before pulling out. “Are you okay?” I gasp at the emptiness, mourning the connection, and simply nod because I can’t speak.

Smith ties the condom—which I’m glad he remembered, because I certainly didn’t. Then frees my wrists, rubbing them vigorously between his hands. “Just hold on, babe, while I get the spreader off. You might be a little unsteady, so just hold on.”

When I’m free, he carries me into the shower and turns on the water, using his body to shield me from the spray until it warms.

“Let me take care of you,” he murmurs, taking the soap out of my hands. He slides his soapy fingers all over my body, up into every crease and down

every slit. Then he soaps himself while the water rinses the suds from my skin. He shampoos my hair, and gently combs out the tangles like a pro. It occurs to me that he's done this before. But I don't let the thought spoil my happiness.

"Drink a little juice," he says, sitting me on the edge of his bed. "That's it. Now lie down. I'm going to hold you, like this, while you nap."

"Smith." I squeeze his arms, wrapped protectively around me.

"We'll talk about it later." He kisses my head and pulls me higher onto his chest. "You're a warrior, Kate. Don't ever lose that spark. Sleep, Princess Badass."

"I—I—" The words fade with me into the warm darkness, Smith's heartbeat a reassuring pulse against my cheek. I feel more like a sleepy princess than a badass.





## KATE

When I wake, Smith is on the phone. I hear his muffled voice from the other room. I wonder if he knows more about the break in—about what happened to Fenny. My heart still hurts.

I dreamt about her while napping. The kittens were born, and Fenny was sunning herself in the morning light that pours into the bedroom while her babies played nearby. But it was just a dream, because in the end, there were no fluffy kittens and no peace for her. How could it have happened? The one evening I go out, someone robs the place. I'm not numb anymore. I'm mad as hell.

The police were sympathetic but acknowledged that it was unlikely we'd find the culprit. But Smith feels differently. I remember exactly what he said. *Oh, we're going to find them. And they better pray the police find them first.*

After I brush my teeth, I get dressed, but not before peeking into the room where we *played*. I say the word out loud, let it tumble off my tongue. It rolls off in a confident, fluid motion that almost surprises me.

I wander inside the quiet room, much like I did earlier. But this time I don't hug myself, confused by what I find. This time I touch the saddle with great courage, in the very spot where I lay splayed and open to him. There is a great sense of relief.

"You ready for round two?" I turn toward the deep silky baritone in the doorway. His mouth is lifted at the corners. Not in a smile, but in something that could easily become one.

"I could probably use a small break." My voice is small, as though I'm suddenly shy.

He enters the room, eating up the space between us in a few long strides. “You okay?” he asks with an alert gaze. “That might have been more ambitious than it needed to be.”

“I’m good. Totally good,” I say through a forced smile.

“Did you enjoy it?” Smith searches my face, touching a fingertip to my lips. “Don’t tell me what you think I want to hear. Tell me the truth. Dig deep for the honesty.”

I blink several times, trying to unearth the right words. “More than I thought.” I smile, shy again. “A lot more.” The lines on his face smooth.

“It’s new to you. New to me with you. It gets better.”

“None of this is entirely unfamiliar—well except the saddle.”

His brow scrunches, forming strings of puzzled lines. “Oh yeah, you read porn. I almost forgot.”

“Romance.” I punch him in the arm.

“But?”

“But I never expected it to be a part of my life. Honestly, I wasn’t even sure how much of it actually existed outside of fiction. How about you?”

“I knew it existed outside of fiction.” He smirks, the dimple appears, and my knees wobble.

“That’s not what I meant.”

His head tilts. “It was—pretty amazing.”

*I think so too.* The tension slides off my shoulders in big sheets, evaporating into nothing.

“Even though I’m a newbie?” *Leave it alone, Kate.*

“Something to be said for teaching a newbie.” His eyes are bright, and soft. “Thank you for doing something so far out of your comfort zone. You’re not the only one developing feelings.”

His words are more difficult to accept than the punishing rhythm as he pinned me against the saddle, chasing his release.

“Thank you for trusting me,” he says. The words are heartfelt and it’s impossible to miss the gratitude in his voice.

“It’s not that hard to trust you.” What’s hard is not to let myself get too comfortable in the cocoon we created. Not to feel too safe there.

He tucks a wilted curl behind my ear. “We need to talk, Kate.” His face is somber, and my mind flies somewhere terrible, second guessing everything he just told me. *Maybe it wasn’t enough.*

“Fenway wasn’t a hit by a car and placed on the sidewalk by a good

Samaritan.”

*After holding her last night, I didn't think so. But please, please don't tell me a predator gutted her.* I don't know why, but this seems like the worst kind of death. “Do you think she cut herself on the screen jumping out the window?”

He shook his head. “No. There was no blood on the screen or anywhere near it, but there was a puddle of dried blood on the mattress under the comforter. We didn't notice it last night because it had soaked into the sheets, and was covered, but by this morning—my guys found it when they went to check the place. We think someone killed her there and carried her outside.”

“In my bed? Who would? Why? The cat didn't hurt anyone. Who would do something so awful?”

“I don't know.”

“Oh my God.” I sink to the ground. “It's my fault.”

“Kate, it's not your fault. It. Is. Not. Your. Fault.”

“But if I'd been home. If I had kept a better eye on her.”

“We can ‘what if’ this to death, but it's not going to help us find the bastard who did it. It's not your fault, but I am worried about you.”

You don't need to worry about me because I'm a survivor. It'll take time, but I know how to do this. “I'll be okay. I just need some time to come to grips with what happened. Think about how frightened she must have been. I want to help you find who did this.”

“It's not about your mental health. I'm worried that this was a signal meant for you. Are you working any angle of the King story I don't know about?”

“No.”

“What about the societies?”

“No. After the restraining order—I've been so busy with Fenny, and work, and the bulletin for St. Maggie's, ...” *and you*, “... that I've let it fall by the wayside.” I'm embarrassed to admit it. After all, isn't that why I'm in Charleston?

“Are you sure you haven't spoken to anyone?”

“Other than Lucinda, no. I'm sure.”

He has that faraway look he gets sometimes. He listens and soaks up everything in the environment, but it's like his brain is running on dozens of different circuits, all feeding him information that he's cross-checking.

“I want you to stay with me. Make a list of things you need for a week or

two, and we'll go by your house to get them."

A week or two? "No, Smith. I want to go back to my place. I want to bury Fenway."

"She's been buried. My guys did it when they secured your house. They put the mouse toy she liked with her like you wanted," he adds gently.

"Thank you."

"You can go back today, but then you're coming with me for the foreseeable future."

"I—"

"This is non-negotiable. Whoever killed Fenway is a monster. They are either sick or doing a sick person's bidding. Either way, it's unsafe for you right now."



## SMITH

I left Kate at her house with Ty and Josh. Ty is one of my best men. The best of the best. Josh is new to a civilian-protection detail, but he's had plenty of experience dealing with an enemy. He likes Kate, which isn't crucial to the job, but it will make it more pleasant for her.

When I arrive at Sweetgrass, Zack's nurse is leaving and lets me inside. I'm grateful it's Sunday and I don't have to stop to chit-chat with Lally in the kitchen or with Patrick, JD's assistant. I go directly to JD's study where I know he's waiting.

I knock on the door, but don't wait for an invitation to enter. There was a time when I would have said that nothing would ever come between us. But that was before Kate. The relationship is bruised right now, and I'm about to put it on life support. "I'm sorry to barge in on a Sunday evening, but I need a favor, and wanted to make the ask in person."

"You're always welcome here. What's up?"

I sit at the edge of his desk. "Someone cut open the screen to a window at Kate's. They killed the pregnant cat in her bed. We found it last night when we came home, clean slice through the belly. Looked like it was done by a hunter, or someone who has gutted an animal before."

"*Jesus*. Do you have any idea who might have done it?"

"No. They made it look like a burglary, but all they took was some worthless jewelry and her laptop—not the backup, which was sitting next to it. They left the expensive television sitting there in the open. It was staged. Poorly staged. I suspect it has something to do with King. A warning of some sort."

He nods. “They took her laptop. Is she close to something?”

“No. That’s the thing. Although sometimes you can be standing in a pile of horseshit and not know it. If they were afraid of what was on the computer—they would have taken the backup too. It’s a warning. I’m positive.”

“What’s your favor?”

“I want to move Kate into my place, here.”

“I’m sorry?” He grips the edge of the desk with both hands, his thumbs hooked under the lip. “You want to bring trouble to my doorstep?”

I lean across his desk to make my point. “There’s no safer place in Charleston than Sweetgrass. I’ve made sure of that. I just need her here long enough so that I can put together some airtight security at her place. I’m already working on it, but it can’t happen overnight.”

“Fuck no, she can’t stay here. And don’t you think you’re blowing this just a tad out of proportion?”

“No,” says a voice from the doorway, with one hand propped on her hip. I turn to face her, my blood at a full boil at JD’s callousness. “I don’t think he is blowing it a *tad* out of proportion. But it’s a damn funny accusation coming from your mouth.” Gabby stomps into the room, standing in front of JD’s desk, with her chin lifted for a fight.

“She cannot stay here,” he barks, standing and glowering. “You have a daughter. Have you forgotten?”

“You mean the one I pushed from my womb and fed from my breasts?”

The gravity of the situation hits me, and I feel awful they’re arguing over something I stirred up. But I’m not going to stop it. I need Kate here, where the security is essentially impenetrable.

“I forbid it.” JD raps his knuckles on the desk for emphasis.

“You forbid it? Is this not my home, too?”

“This is our home. Where Gracie should be safe, and Zack, and you,” he adds, his eyes darting to me. “I am so pissed off you would put my family at risk for some woman. I’m not sure I can ever get past this, Smith.”

Gabby walks around the desk and rubs JD’s arm. “Is this who we are? Is this who you are? Because it’s not who I am.”

“We have a daughter to consider.”

“This is not who I want my daughter to be. It’s easy to throw money at problems, or hand generous checks to people in need. This is the hard stuff. Sacrifice that demonstrates real charity and genuine compassion. The rest is window dressing.”

JD pounds his hand on the desk. His eyes are black with a fury that I haven't seen since Grace was born. "Goddamn you, Smith." His eyes flit from his wife to me. "Fine. You want her to stay here. You put your plan for the new business on hold indefinitely, because she's your responsibility while you're putting my family in harm's way. And you," he spits at Gabby, "you forget about going to Georgie's Place while she's here. You're under lockdown along with the baby." He glares at me. "Put the whole damn place under lockdown."

"JD," Gabby says. "You—"

"Do not say another word," he warns her. "If you want that woman to stay here, that's the way it has to be."

"JD," she pleads, squeezing his arm.

"No, Gabrielle. I almost lost you twice. I won't tempt fate a third time." He stalks out without another word to either of us.

"Is he right, Smith?" she asks. "Are we inviting trouble here, or is it just his usual paranoia?"

"I don't know. I can't say for certain." My conscience is biting. Not just because of the fight. Not just because I put our friendship at risk, but because I have no way of knowing for certain what kind of trouble will follow Kate to Sweetgrass. And I have no way of knowing whether the security here will hold up. It's never been really tested.

We have a saying in the army, *no battle plan, no matter how well-designed, ever survives first contact with the enemy*. It was my father's response every time someone asked if the plan was foolproof.

"Look, this was a mistake. I should have never put either of you in this position. I'm perfectly capable of protecting Kate, anywhere. We'll do something else."

"No," she says firmly. "Bring her here. There's no safer place for someone who needs protection than Sweetgrass. We all know it."





## KATE

Josh pulls up to the guard house at Sweetgrass, and we're waved through.

Getting onto the property is nothing like the night of Smith's party. He takes the familiar tree-lined drive, but we don't turn left toward the main house. Instead, we cross a small pond and continue past a stable, and a couple of barns on the right. I can't see it from the road, but the ocean is somewhere to the left. The property is enormous.

We pull into a cul-de-sac with three houses. All are more modest than the main house, but still lovely, with lush plantings and colorful flowers cascading from painted window boxes. Ty gets out and opens the door for me.

"We'll get your bags," he says. "Smith's inside waiting for you."

I don't bother to ask any questions, because I'm sure I'll get the same answer they've each given me at least a dozen times today. *You'll need to talk to Smith.*

When we get to the porch, Josh knocks on the door.

"It's open," Smith calls from inside. He meets us in the entryway, and gives me a quick, reassuring smile. "Just leave the bags," he instructs Ty and Josh. "I'll take them upstairs. Thanks, guys."

"We'll be in the office," Ty says, before they turn to leave.

"Appreciate it," Smith says, rubbing the back of his neck. "Wait a second." He turns to me. "Josh and Ty are your security team. There will be others, too, but they're the core of the team. The security office is located in the house next-door. That's where your team will be while you're on the property. It's also where my office is located."

He pauses, crossing his arms across his chest, his biceps straining the T-shirt fabric. “They’re in charge. You need to listen to them. To *everything* they say. They will protect you, with their lives, if necessary.”

A small panic begins to rise. “I-I don’t want that.” I cup my elbows, squeezing tight. “I don’t want anyone to risk their life for me.”

“It’s what we do. But it won’t likely come to that—and the risk is lower if you do as we say. It’s the best way to keep everyone safe. I need your promise.”

I glance at the two beefy guys. Both are well over six feet tall with muscle to spare. Josh has such a baby face the thought of anything happening to him because of me ... “I promise. Do you have children?” I ask them.

“Not yet,” Josh says, not blinking an eye.

“A boy and a girl,” Ty responds.

I peer into both of their serious faces. “Not one more person dies. Not one more animal dies because of me. Don’t do anything stupid on my account. Please. I couldn’t live with it.”

Smith squeezes my shoulder. “I’ll talk to you guys later.”

“I appreciate all this,” I tell Smith after they leave. “I know you’re trying to help, but it isn’t going to work for me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“No one—not one more person puts themselves at risk for me. I mean it.”

“Alright. Let’s get you settled and then I’ll show you around.”

I glare at him. I know a blow off when I hear one. “Don’t think this discussion is over.”

He grabs my bags, muttering under his breath.

The house isn’t huge, but no expense was spared. The kitchen has professional-style stainless steel appliances and granite counters. It’s nicer than anything I’ve ever worked in. It’s also vastly different than the apartment. It’s hard to believe they belong to the same man.

Unlike his place at Wildflower, it’s warm here, with dog-eared books on a small table near a recliner, and photos of smiley little girls on the mantle. But it’s the stick-figure drawings attached with magnets to the refrigerator that make my heart swell, and for a few minutes, I forget my life might be in danger.

I follow Smith up the stairs to a bedroom that is decidedly masculine. There is a wall of windows with an impressive ocean view. “Is this your room?”

“Our room.” He puts down the bags. “I brought in a dresser from one of the other rooms and made space for you in the closet. There are two more bedrooms in the house, but it seems ridiculous to pretend you’ll be sleeping elsewhere. I’d drag you into my bed every night anyway.”

I smile at him. “The Neanderthals really had nothing on you.” I’m rewarded with a dimpled smirk, arrogant as the day is long.

“The bathroom’s through here.” He points to French doors, which I suspect lead to a luxurious bath. “There are towels in the closet and extra toiletries. Take whatever you need. If we run out of something, or if there’s something you want that I don’t have, add it to the list on the corkboard in the kitchen. Same with food.”

“It looks like you thought of everything, and I brought stuff with me. But if I need anything, or if you need anything, I can pick it up on my way home from work tomorrow.”

He rubs his hand over his jaw, studying me. The hand scrubbing the jaw, or squeezing the back of the neck is never good news with him. “We need to talk.”

This is going to be particularly bad. I already sense it. “Let’s go downstairs,” he says, leaving the room. I follow him to the kitchen. “Do you want a beer?”

“No.”

“Some water?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“*Fine*. You keep saying that, but I don’t believe it.”

“I’ll actually be fine after you tell me whatever it is you’re avoiding telling me. Not that I don’t enjoy watching you play hostess.”

He sniffs, and his mouth twists into a snarl. *It must be worse than I imagined*. “Sweetgrass is on lockdown.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that there are limitations on who comes onto the property and who leaves.” He has the impatient tone he gets when the conversation is unpleasant.

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

“You can’t go to work while you’re here.”

*What?* “I have to go to work. I have appointments, a class, people who are depending on me.” He drums his fingers on the counter while I speak.

“It’s not happening. I’m sorry.”

“Take me home,” I demand, with all the dignity of a five-year-old.

He sits on a stool and pulls me between his legs. His hands clutch both of mine. “You are not safe at home. You need to stay here until I can make it safe. I’m working as quickly as I can to make it happen.”

“I’m a prisoner until then?”

“Not just you,” he responds soberly. “Gabby can’t leave here to go to Georgie’s Place or to go anywhere. There will be restrictions on Lally, and on many of the other people who work and live here. And no one else is complaining.” The last part stings, but I deserved it.

“No. I don’t want that. I don’t want everyone to be inconvenienced because of me.”

“They’re happy to do it, Kate. We don’t know what’s going on, but you’re safer here than anywhere. Everyone is aware of it.” This is a lot to swallow. Maybe too much.

“Please work fast on getting my place secure. I know you’re busy, and it’s a lot to ask, but I can’t have everyone inconvenienced. It’s not fair to them. I barely know these people.”

“They’re my friends. You’re important to me, and they know it. I would do the same for them—without hesitation.”

I nod. “There is one thing I do need to do—somewhere I need to go—it’s safe. Totally safe.”

“No place is totally safe. But where do you need to go?”

“St. Maggie’s.” His expression tightens, but I don’t let it dissuade me. “I need to talk to Father Jesse. I want to tell him in person about Fenway. He trusted me to take care of her. I promised I would. It’s weighing heavily on me. I’ll go straight there and come right back, and I won’t ask to leave again. Please let me do that one thing.”

He considers the request carefully, before grasping my hips, and pulling me closer. “You can’t go by yourself. Regardless of how safe you think it is on the island, you have to get there and back. I’ll be out of town for most of the day tomorrow at a meeting. My guys will be working on the extra security. I can’t afford to be paying a visit to the clergy.”

“You don’t need to go. They can search me at the guard house when I come back. Please, just this one thing.”

The tip of his tongue is resting on the bow of his lip. The skin beneath his eyes is smeared with black from not sleeping. *Because he’s been worried about me.* Regret twists like a knife in my conscience. I can make this easier

for him. I cradle his cheek in my hand. “I don’t need to go. It’s okay.”

He presses his warm cheek into my palm. “Ty and Josh will take you. No stops between here and the island, or on the way back. You will listen to everything they say. You will not argue with them, and if they give you instructions, you will obey immediately.”

I nod. “Yes.”

“You cannot let the priest know you’re coming, and you cannot tell anyone that you’re going. That includes Lucinda and Fiona. We don’t know if anyone’s listening. If they are, it could put everyone in danger.”

“Do you believe I’m at that much risk?”

“I’m not sure, Kate.” He reaches for an errant curl, twirling it around his finger. “But I’m not taking any chances with you, or with anyone else I care about. Why don’t you shower, and I’ll make sandwiches for us? We should go to bed early.” I expect him to make some suggestive or lewd remark about going to bed early, but he doesn’t. “I want to take you to the range first thing in the morning and see what you can do with that gun of yours.”



## KATE

I have a new laptop, a new phone, because apparently my old phone isn't secure enough for Smith's tastes, and I'm being chauffeured around like royalty, or perhaps like a prisoner. It depends on one's perspective.

The hardest part, aside from the fact that Fenny is dead and everyone at Sweetgrass is under lockdown, is I can't talk to Fiona about any of it. She leaves for their Cape house tomorrow with Brett and the boys, and she doesn't need to know about my predicament before she goes, otherwise, she'll spend the entire month worrying. It's the one time during the year where they are free from family obligations and the Nanas' prying. I don't want to spoil it for her.

Josh and Ty are quiet in the front seat. When they picked me up, they brought me a thermos of coffee and two muffins, courtesy of Lally. But I can see they're not crazy about this trip. The worst part is that Father Jesse might not be here. He's normally available on Mondays, but he could have been called away because someone has taken ill.

Josh pulls into the parking lot closest to the rectory, and a tall man with salt and pepper hair is raking the beds.

"Who's that?" Ty asks.

"The gardener who works here. His name is Silas, but I've never met him. He has a house on the property down that lane." I point to the dirt road, contemplating whether I should tell them about Silas's prison record, but decide that it was a long time ago, and it was told to me in confidence.

Thankfully, they agree to wait outside. "What should I tell Father Jesse, or the church secretary, if they ask about you?"



“Tell them we’re providing security. That Smith Sinclair feels your connection to the Wilders requires you to have a security detail.”

“I can’t lie to a priest.”

“It’s not a lie. You’re protecting them. Everyone who knows the details is at some risk.”

I’m not sure if that’s exactly true, but I don’t want to risk anyone’s safety. Josh and Ty know this, and I expect this is a bit of manipulation on their part, but I can’t take the chance. “I won’t say a word.”

I walk toward the rectory, admiring the giant stone turret against the bright blue sky. As I climb the steps, I catch Silas watching me. As soon as he’s caught, he averts his eyes and goes back to the garden. A chill runs through me. There’s something about the way he looked at me. *It’s your imagination, Kate. You’re holding his history against him. It’s not fair. He paid his dues.* “Hello,” I call to him, but he keeps weeding as though he didn’t hear me.

When I get inside, Virginia is on the phone. She waves and motions for me to sit. A few moments later, Father Jesse sticks his head out of the office.

“Kate,” he says softly with a smile. “Come into my office where we can talk freely.” I go meekly, my heart heavy with the news I’m about to deliver.

“Did you get a new car?” he asks after he shuts the office door.

“No. I—Smith Sinclair has some concerns—because of the Wilders—and he’s insisting that I have a security detail assigned to me.” I hate myself for the lie.

I’m so nervous, sitting still is a problem. “I brought the mock-ups for the newsletter, but first there’s something I need to tell you,” I blurt.

He stands and comes over to where I’m sitting, and places a hand on my shoulder.

“You look a little pale. Let’s go into the reconciliation room. It’s the perfect place for telling me things, and we won’t be interrupted. You’ll be happier talking there.”

The last place I want to go is to the reconciliation room, but I follow him, leaving the mock-ups on the desk. When we get to the room, he flips the sign that says welcome, to the side that reads *God is in Session, Do Not Disturb*. The corny sign suits him.

It’s a lovely space, overlooking the garden where Silas had been working. But I don’t see him now.

We sit in two upholstered chairs near the window. There’s a box of

tissues on a low pedestal table between us, and he brings me a cup of water.

“What has you looking so forlorn?” he asks gently.

“Fenway is dead. All her kittens are dead.”

He reaches for my hand. “Oh, Kate. I’m so sorry. You must be crushed. Tell me what happened.”

“Someone broke into the house and killed her during a robbery. It was awful.” I realize as soon as I say it, that I divulged too much. He’s a priest. This is a reconciliation room. He won’t say anything.

“That is awful. Were you at work when it happened?”

“No. I was out with a friend.”

He lets go of my hands and sits back in his chair. “I see.” The words seem laden with accusation, but I suspect it’s my conscience biting me.

“We were gone for a few hours. I don’t normally leave her alone unless I’m at work or running an errand.”

“You were with Mr. Sinclair?”

“Yes.” I clasp my hands in my lap.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with him, yes?”

I nod.

“He’s the reason we haven’t seen you at Mass?”

I shrug. “Yes.”

“Kate,” he takes both my hands, again, holding them in his. “You look miserable, like the weight of the world is on your shoulders. Although, I think it’s your conscience that’s heavy. Would you like me to hear your confession?”

No. I don’t know. “I’m not sure.”

“God wants to absolve you of your sins. Let Him carry your burden.”

I suppose it makes me spineless, but I don’t say no. I don’t know how to. “Okay.”

He gets up and brings over a kneeler. “We can sit, or you can kneel there, whatever you prefer.”

I’m accustomed to kneeling during confession, and maybe this would seem less awkward if I got to my knees. “I’ll kneel.”

“Whenever you’re ready,” he says, pulling a chair closer to the kneeler.

I lower my head and close my eyes, while making the sign of the cross. “In the name of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It’s been eighteen months since my last confession, and these are my sins.”

I confess to lying, swearing, and using God's name in vain. I confess to vanity and willfulness, and the list goes on and on, because I am a sinner. And while I don't fully embrace the sacrament of reconciliation, here in a church, on my knees before a priest and God, I choose to believe that my sins will be forgiven.

"Do you want to tell me about your relationship with Mr. Sinclair?" he asks when I quiet.

*No. I don't.* But I will, because if I don't, I'll be committing another sin while on my knees in the confessional. "I have had sexual relations outside of marriage. And used birth control." *Another sin.*

"Were you forced or coerced in any way to have sexual relations, or did you give your body willingly?"

I know confessing can be like this, especially during the modern reconciliation, but I'm not accustomed to having such frank discussions about my sexuality with a priest. Usually we both skirt around the issue with some embarrassment and dispose of it as quickly as possible.

"Kate?"

"I gave myself willingly."

He is quiet for a moment while I fidget. "Are you sorry?"

I attempt a deep breath, but the guilt and shame are heavy in my chest, clogging the airways and the most I can muster is a shallow breath. "No."

"Will you continue to have relations with him?"

I squeeze my eyes together. "Yes."

"Is this something you enjoyed?"

I don't understand the question. It's a sin, whether I enjoyed it or not. I want to get this over with. "Yes." I feel so exposed.

My head is bowed, but my eyes are open. I see a flash of anger in Father Jesse's eyes. Maybe I'm wrong. It's hard to tell from this angle.

"Let's sit, Kate."

It's quiet until we're both seated at the window, again. "I can't absolve you of your sins unless you have a pure heart."

I know this.

"I don't know how to put it delicately, so I'm just going to share with you my perspective as a priest, a shepherd, with many years of experience bringing lost lambs back into the flock." He pauses for a moment. "Sinclair is a bad influence on you. He's the devil tempting you into sins of the flesh. Bad things happen when you don't resist him. It's not a punishment, but

rather a sign from God who loves you. Your conscience will not be light again until you shun the devil's advances."

*The devil? No. I don't accept that.* "He's a good man," I say peevishly, in defense of Smith. "And he's my friend. I have feelings for him. Strong feelings—not just physical—I care about him. I might love him. I'm not certain."

Father Jesse moves to the edge of his seat, closer to me. "Lust and love are two emotions often mistaken for one another." He says it matter-of-factly. I feel like I'm fifteen sitting in Father Tierney's office on that awful night in the frat house. He said something very similar to me.

"God doesn't always make it easy for us, but He is always there to light the way. I will absolve you of all your sins, but for the sin of fornication. I will be here when you begin to see things more clearly, when you choose a righteous God, because I know you will. Until then, I will pray that the Holy Spirit imbues you with wisdom."

I nod. I know the devil reference was to make a point. But I'm hurt and angry at him for the comparison.

"I'm not going to give you penance—not a traditional penance, anyway." I glance at him. "I want you to think about Sinclair, about who he is, and how he fits into your Catholic faith. In a week, you'll come back, and we'll discuss your thoughts. Deal?"

"Yes." I give him a small contrite smile. But my anger hasn't dissipated.

"Why don't we go back to my office and take a look at the bulletins you created?"

*Yes, please.* When we step out of the room, I'm finally able to take a deep breath.

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WHEN I GET BACK to Smith's place, I change into shorts, and after a restless forty-five minutes where I can't stop thinking about what Father Jesse said about Smith, I decide to go for a walk. Maybe I can find the pond with the little bridge. I leave a note in case Smith stops in. Although he's in DC on business today, and I doubt he'll be back before me. I also text Josh before leaving the house.

**Kate:** I'm going to take a walk around the property. Is that a problem?

**Josh:** Not as long as you have your phone with you and you don't set one foot off Sweetgrass.

**Kate:** Yes to both. Smith said not to go anywhere without my gun. It's at the security office.

**Josh:** You can't have it on the premises. The property is closely monitored. You don't need it.

When we were at the range this morning, Smith told me I needed to carry my gun with me everywhere. I suppose he meant everywhere that wasn't Sweetgrass.

Being at the range with Smith was quite an experience. He's an excellent shot. Scary good. I've never seen anything like it, and I've clocked endless hours at the range. Me, on the other hand? I was rusty, and of course since I was trying to impress, I was off my mark a lot. But Smith was patient, and by the time we left, I was more confident, and hitting the target more often than not. He promised to take me back this week.

I walk past the stable, still thinking about the way Father Jesse talked about Smith. I realize Christians aren't very Christian when it comes to stomping out evil, and Catholics are no exception, but to call Smith the devil—even to make a point—that was wrong. Wrong in so many ways. I will do my penance and consider how Smith fits into my life, Catholic or otherwise. But I won't be choosing the strict teachings of my faith over him. That I already know.

Just when I'm sure I've lost my way, I stumble onto the pond in the center of the property. As I cross the bridge, I notice Gabby with the baby. They don't see me. Gabby is blowing bubbles, and Gracie is sitting in the stroller waving her hands and kicking her feet, trying to snatch bubbles from the air. I watch them for a few moments—deciding whether to spoil their fun, but more than anything, I am transfixed by the beauty of the pair. The natural simplicity of the bond between mother and daughter. In the ultimate act of indulgence, I allow myself to do something I haven't done in a long, long time.

I imagine a woman with wavy, burnt-red hair and alabaster skin, playing with her little red-haired daughter on a blanket in the park down the street from where I grew up. The woman's three older sons are off climbing on the playground equipment, so it's just the two of them. The mother tells the baby how much she loves her, cooing softly, while blowing raspberries on her belly. The little girl squeals in delight. It's fanciful, and exists only in my

imagination because there are no photographs, no evidence of it ever happening. But every time I walked by that park on my way to elementary school, I imagined my mother, on one of the few good days she had, taking us to the neighborhood park.

I take out my phone and snap some pictures of Gabby and Gracie. I'll frame one and give it to Gabby as a thank you for allowing me to stay at Sweetgrass, despite all the trouble. I scroll through the photos and save the best one to the cloud. I can edit it from my laptop and pick up a nice frame when I'm no longer confined to the premises.

Gabby will love it, and one day, maybe Gracie will, too. Although I hope she never needs photos to remember her mother.

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I FELL asleep in the recliner with the TV on while I waited for Smith to come home from DC. I don't wake when he comes in, but the foraging in the kitchen rouses me.

He's leaning against the counter eating cold macaroni and cheese from a casserole Lally sent over with some chicken.

"I can heat that up for you."

"I don't need it heated up. I need you to come here." He wraps me in a warm embrace. "I would say I'm sorry I woke you, but that would be a lie." He licks his way into my mouth, placing the food on the counter behind him.

"Eat," I say after a few long minutes of kissing that I know is going to end in sex.

"I thought that's what I was doing."

I roll my eyes as he grabs the dish. "How did it go today with Josh and Ty?"

"Better than I expected. Ty is a little scary, but I guess it's because I'm used to seeing Josh lurking." I want to ask him if he found anything more about the break in, but he looks exhausted and it can wait until the morning.

He rinses the dishes and places them in the dishwasher. He has the neat and orderly habits of a soldier living in close quarters. When my brothers first came home on leave, they would be neat and tidy too, but after a few days they were back to their old selves.

"How was your day?" I ask, while he puts the leftover chicken in the

fridge.

“Better than expected too. I caught up with a couple guys at the Pentagon from my old unit, and we had a beer before I came back. Rebel rousers.” He grins.

“Takes one to know one. I bet you got into your share of trouble in the desert and left a trail of broken hearts in the sand.”

“I didn’t leave a single broken heart there.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Believe it. I never once touched a woman while I was deployed—let me take that back. In the desert, never. On leave in the Mediterranean, might have been one or two.” He winks at me. “But never in the desert. Too risky.”

“You afraid some girl’s father was going to chase you down with a shotgun?”

“I wasn’t afraid for myself. But women who are even suspected of having sex outside of marriage are stoned to death. No way to protect them. Even sex with me isn’t worth dying for.” He pinches my ass, and I yelp and swat his hand.

*The devil.* There couldn’t be anything further from the truth. I’m angry at Father Jesse all over again.

“We didn’t get much of anywhere on the break in today. Cops still have nothing. Your neighborhood is residential and doesn’t have cameras that we can get into.”

“You have that capability?” It’s a dumb question, but it’s too late to take back.

“What do you think I run around here, some lame back-ass operation? I have a couple guys who are good. But Chase Wilder is a pro.”

“Chase? Really?”

“Yep. Little nerd’s got game.”

“It’s funny, people aren’t always as they appear. Delilah looked familiar. But it was this morning at the range, with her hair pulled back, when I finally put it together. I remember the trial and all the news coverage when she was outed. Her hair had been dark. It’s funny how such a small thing can throw you off the trail.”

“I don’t want to talk about Delilah. I want to talk about why you’re not naked in my bed, waiting for me, with a green-jeweled plug in your ass. The one that matches your eyes.” He tosses me over one shoulder and slaps my backside on the way to his bed. “We’re about to fix that.”





## SMITH

I t's been nearly a week since the break in, and we're not any closer to knowing why it happened. All the leads are cold. Nothing points back to King or to any of his cronies. Not a single thing. Although that doesn't surprise me.

The robbery itself was amateur hour, but that's what they wanted us to believe. The people surrounding King are pros. They don't give a shit about him. It's all about protecting his judicial seat. We'll eventually figure it out, but it's taking more time and resources than it should.

I've been dragging my feet on beefing up security at Kate's. I had the mattress replaced and the apartment thoroughly cleaned after we swept it for evidence. But I've got to get my ass into gear. She agreed to take the week off, but that's it, and Gabby is beyond restless. I can see it in her eyes. She stopped by to talk to me yesterday, wanted to know if we'd made any progress.

JD and I haven't exchanged a single civil word since Sunday evening. He's blown off our morning runs and avoided me at every turn. In truth, I haven't gone out of my way to see him, either. He's right. I'm putting his family at risk. It's a tiny risk, but it's not nothing. This pains me. I love Gabby and Grace, and my job has been to protect them, above all else. Up until now, I've never let anything get in the way of that.

What JD's wrong about is that I did it for *some* woman.

Kate's not just some woman. And the last few days while we've been playing house, it's occurred to me that I would miss her if she wasn't here. Not just in my bed—although I would sure as hell miss her there, but I would

miss the smell of her shampoo on the sheets. I would miss someone giving a damn about how my day had gone. I would miss her green eyes and her sassy smile and her clever retorts. And the way my heart stills and softens when she's in my arms.

I'm pretty much fucked. At least I know it.

I glance out the window to JD pulling up. From the looks of him getting out of the vehicle, I doubt he's here to apologize. It takes less than ten seconds from the moment the car door slams until he's breathing fire in my office.

"What the fuck is this?" He shoves a newspaper in front of me.

It's a photo of Gabby and Grace near the fishpond.

I stare at the image. But I can't fully comprehend what I'm seeing. It's as though my brain isn't firing on all cylinders. I'm not sure it's firing at all.

"That reporter took a picture of *my daughter* and sent it to the paper." He is spewing venom, out of his mind with rage, and I can't blame him. "From the moment she was born, I promised Grace, and myself, that I would not let her be dangled in public. That she would be a normal kid. That she would be safe."

He picks up the paper and slams it on the desk, like he's catching a fly. "The AP picked it up, and it's all over the internet. All over town. All over the fucking country—maybe the world. How much do you think the photograph of *my daughter* earned her?"

I still can't form a single fucking word. My chest is collapsing. It's as though a crane dropped a steel pallet on it.

"I want her gone. Now." He's going to want to exact retribution. I can't blame him for that, either. Right now, I want to hurt her, too.

"I'll escort her off the property myself if necessary." His voice is menacing. "I want her out of Charleston before the sun sets on the Sabbath. If you aren't man enough to do it, I'll find someone else to protect my family."

"I'll fix this."

"There's no fixing this. It's out there. Forever. We can only mitigate the damage."

"I'm sorry. I am so fucking sorry."

"You brought the enemy inside. Cozied up to her, and let her weasel her way into your bed until all you could think about was her pussy. You turned your back on the people who care about you. For what? For a stupid bitch that we knew all along couldn't be trusted."

After spewing venom all over the office, he turns to leave. “JD—”  
“Save it. If you give a shit about what happens to my daughter, help me pick up the pieces. Start next door.”

The outside door slams behind him. No one from the other room, aside from Delilah, lifts their head. They all heard it, though. Every word. Some leader I turned out to be.

Delilah peeks into the office. “Do you want me to go next door and take care of it?”

“No,” I bark. “Leave me alone for a few minutes.”

I pick up the paper, and then pull the image up on my computer. Gracie’s smiling little face. Her innocent little face. It’s everywhere. How could Kate betray me like this? How?

I grab the newspaper, and stick my head into the conference room, waving the evidence of my stupidity in the air. “Get on this. Call Chase Wilder for help. We won’t be able to shut it all down, but we can get the photo off the mainstream outlets.” That just leaves the dark corners of the web. *Fuck.*

I stalk next door, the rage and the pain of betrayal, *yes, fucking pain*, all-consuming. Kate’s in the shower. I take the steps two at a time, and drag her from under the warm spray. “Get dressed, get your things together, and get out. You have thirty minutes, so don’t stand there with your damn mouth open wasting time.”

“What? Wait!” She reaches into the shower and turns off the water, then wraps a towel around herself. She can stand there naked for all I care. She’s never looked less appealing.

I shove the paper at her. “Did you take this photo?”

Her eyes widen in surprise. “Yes,” she says softly. “I took it on Monday afternoon.”

“How could you do this? How? And why? If you needed money, I would have given you money. You didn’t need to exploit my friends like this. People, who despite the risk, opened their home to you.”

“I didn’t sell the photo. It—”

“You gave it away? For a damn Pulitzer?” I slap the paper against my thigh. “I don’t know what’s worse.”

“No! I took the photo—”

“I don’t want to hear your bullshit. You betrayed them. You betrayed me. In a way I can never forgive.”

“I—”

“No. I don’t want to hear another damn lie from your mouth. Get your things and Josh will take you home. Plan on leaving Charleston within the next two days.”

“I have responsibilities here. I can’t just walk away. You have the right to kick me out of your home, but you have no right to make me leave Charleston. I did nothing wrong. If you bothered to look into your heart for just a single minute, to see me as something other than the enemy, you would see that I love you. That I would never betray you—or the Wilders, for that matter.”

“You took the photo. You haven’t left this place with your phone since. The only way it could have gotten out is if you sent it to someone. You are the enemy. The one I let in.”

I slam the door on my way out. *Pussy makes a man stupid*. It never has before, but it certainly made me a moron this time. *Jesus Christ*.

“Go next door,” I instruct Josh, “and make sure she doesn’t get into any more trouble while she packs. Then take her home, and you and Ty take turns with the surveillance. We’re stepping back her security.”

“One man on her at a time?” he asks, skeptically. Josh likes her, and I can see he doesn’t agree with my decision to step back security.

I glare at him. “One at a time. I won’t waste any more resources than that on her. If you have a problem with—”

“No problems,” he responds coolly.

I’m tempted to pull everything, but—I crack my knuckles—but I can’t. I don’t have the balls to do it.

“The alarm is set up—teach her how to use it. Remind her to carry her weapon. But that’s it. She’ll be leaving Charleston in a couple days. Then she ceases to be my problem.”

“Should we take the tracker off her phone and car?”

I blow out a breath. “No. I want to know where she is. Go.” I glance at Gracie’s face on my screen. “Delilah,” I shout, as Josh is leaving.

“You need to calm down,” she says quietly, so no one else can hear. “You’re no good like this.”

She’s right, but I can’t, so I ignore her and her damn warning. “Who was manning the surveillance on the property Monday? What were they so fucking busy doing that they didn’t see Kate taking photos of Gabby and the baby?”

“LT.”

“We had only one person on it?”

“Between the new venture, what we were already doing, and the extra security on McKenna—you were gone all day Monday. We were stretched pretty thin.”

“Don’t make excuses.”

“I don’t make excuses.” Delilah’s not like Josh. She doesn’t back down from a fight with me—or with anyone—unless it’s part of a strategy. I rock back in my chair, hands behind my head.

“I want to see LT as soon as he arrives, and have someone pull the tapes from Monday afternoon.” She’s studying me, arms perfectly still at her side. “Why are you still standing here?”

“Let me investigate this. You’re too close to it. And there’s no reason you should have to beat yourself up any more than necessary.”

“Oh, that’s where you’re wrong. I need to beat myself up until I pass out, so that I remember never to do something so fucking stupid again.”



## KATE

The days since I left Sweetgrass have passed in a blur. Lack of sleep, too much wine, and not enough food make for a potent cocktail that has wreaked havoc with my system. The worst part is that there's no one to talk to.

Fiona knows something is up, but we don't talk on the phone much while she's at the Cape. Family time first—it's a deal she has with Brett. Fiona minimizes her phone time, and he doesn't play golf. She'll be back at the end of next week, and I'll talk her ear off then.

My phone dings with an alert. I reach for it and turn it over. *Oh God.* The Boston Commissioner's job went to Moniz. The blows just keep coming.

I pull up one article after another. Most are measured, but there are a few that tear into my father. One in particular, that cites the information that leaked from the police department to the Sentinel. My chest hurts, but I'm cried out.

I didn't steal that information any more than I sent the photo to the paper. If Smith sees the article, it will just remind him that I've done it before. I don't know exactly what happened at the Sentinel. My guess is someone in the department who supported Moniz fed it to a reporter. That certainly wasn't me. The issue with the photo is clearer. Someone hacked into my phone. There are no other possibilities.

A techie friend from the Sun tried to sort it out for me, but she could only get so far. It's too expensive for me to pay a forensic analyst to look into it. I don't have that kind of money.

*Why?* That's the question I keep asking myself. Why would anyone

bother? I keep coming back to the same answer—Grace Wilder’s photo was valuable because she’s been so carefully protected. My phone must have been the weak link.

I can’t think about it anymore. I need to call my father.

While the phone rings, all I can think about is how much I dread this conversation. He wanted the commissioner’s job bad.

“Yeah,” he answers gruffly.

“I just read about the job, Dad. I’m so sorry.”

“After everything I’ve given those bastards. They screw me like this.” He sounds like he’s been drinking. It’s not even eight in the morning.

“When did you find out?”

“They called me in on Wednesday,” he growls. *Three days ago.*

“Is Joyce with you?”

“Nah. Bitch left yesterday. Said she won’t put up with the drinking. I told her to get the hell out then.” *Oh God.* The last time he missed a promotion, he went on a bender that lasted two weeks. It was years ago. If it hadn’t been for his buddies staging an intervention and covering for him, he’d have lost his badge.

“Is Tommy staying at the house?”

“Nah. He hooked up with some broad.”

“How about if I come home for a visit? I’ll make you a meatloaf, and fill the freezer with things you can microwave. Maybe we can catch a Sox game. I’ll see if I can get tickets.”

He starts to whimper. “That job shoulda been mine.”

“I know. It’s not fair.” I need to tell him to stop drinking. But I have to tread lightly or he’ll push me away too. “I bet you haven’t had breakfast. You might feel better if you eat something. And—how about if, just for today, you don’t have any more to drink.”

“Don’t tell me how to live my life, little girl,” he shouts. “I’m your father.”

I finally hang up after another half hour of him grouching and sobbing, with a promise to visit in a week. I just took time off when I was on lockdown at Sweetgrass. I don’t want to lose my job, but I need to make sure he’s okay. If he loses his job, it will be a lot worse than me losing mine.

But I’m not going anywhere yet. Sinclair doesn’t get to kick me out of the city like he owns it. First, I need to figure out where I’m going and what I’m doing. I need to talk it through with Fi.



I call my brother Tommy to send him to check on my dad. When he doesn't answer, I text.

**Kate:** Hey. Just talked to Dad. He's been drinking. Sounds like for days. Can you check on him?

**Tommy:** Sure. I never have anything better to do than clean up your messes.

**Kate:** This is not my fault.

**Tommy:** It's all your fault. Still can't figure out how you live with yourself.

**Kate:** Just check on him. Please.

I toss the phone on the bed next to me. I can't go back to Boston—not to live.

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“HELLO.” I give Lucinda a peck on the cheek. “This place is gorgeous,” I murmur, taking the seat across from her. We're having dinner before I leave for Boston tomorrow. Stacey, whose job I took at the library, is filling in for me while I'm gone.

“I wanted to take you somewhere special on your last night. I'm going to miss you.”

“It'll only be for a couple weeks. Then I'll be back with a million questions for you about Charleston.”

“You haven't given up, huh?”

“On the societies?” She nods. “I've pretty much given up.”

“You done with Warren King, too?” she asks.

I shrug. “I have a feeling the final chapter of that story hasn't been written.”

“You don't believe he's sick?” she asks, choosing a flaky roll from the napkin-lined basket between us.

“I have my doubts. What about you?”

“Sick? *Pft.*” She rolls her eyes. “Not unless he's got the clap. It's a concocted story.”

I smile. She tells it like it is, always. “You really don't like him?”

“Always found him to be a weasel.” She leans across the table. “And nowhere near as good in bed as he claims to be,” she says in a hushed voice.

“Close your mouth, Kate. Women have been having sex with men they’re not married to for centuries.”

“Did you date him?”

“No! He was a bad mistake on a night I enjoyed one too many cocktails. I’m like Mae West. I never do the same mistake twice. Always look for new ones.”

I press my lips together, trying to suppress the laughter that’s bubbling in my chest from spilling all over the room.

“Tell me about your friend, Sinclair,” she says, with a wry smile. “He a mistake?”

“It’s complicated. I’m sure he sees me as a mistake. That picture of Gracie Wilder that ended up *everywhere*, I took it. I told you that. I’m not sure he’ll ever forgive me.”

“The Wilders should have sent a picture of that little girl to the press themselves after she was born. What did they expect? Sooner or later, someone was going to get a photograph of that child.”

“I don’t think it matters.”

“You are a convenient scapegoat. Do you know why that is, Kate?”

I swallow some water. “No.” Fortunately the waiter brings menus before she can explain.

“Because you allow it,” she says as soon as his back is turned. I should have known better. She’s not someone who is easily distracted by shiny objects. “You get all feisty about the women you work with,” she continues, “but when it comes to sticking up for yourself, you let people pile on.”

“Like Sinclair?”

“I’m reserving judgment on him at this time.”

We order and settle in with our pre-dinner cocktails. Lucinda knows everyone in the place, and everyone knows her. I meet more people before dessert is served than I’ve met the entire time I’ve been in Charleston.

“I’m glad you’ve let the societies be. I know it’s hard to believe, but there really isn’t much there. Did they do some bad things? Yes. Mainly to keep the old ways, and the power in the hands of the same families. The result was travesty and tragedy for many people.” She’s uncharacteristically sad.

“How so?” I ask gently.

“Marriages were arranged. Not to a specific person—at least not in my time. We were mostly free to marry our choice from the stallions in the stable—monied young men with good breeding and family connections from the

same society as our family.” She’s wistful. “The societies filtered out anyone who didn’t have the proper lineage. The powers vested there, came between true love on many occasions. That might be the worst thing the societies have ever done.”

Is she telling me her heart was broken as a result of the arcane rules? *I think she might be.* “You never married?”

She shakes her head. “Never.”

“Have you ever been in love?”

“The man who stole my heart was a young public defender who came to town right after I finished college. He was from New York, with a last name my father refused to pronounce correctly. We spent hours in each other’s arms and talked about getting married—until the day my father, with all his society connections, ruined his career and chased him out of town.”

“That’s awful. There was nothing either of you could do?”

“It was awful, but not uncommon. The worst part was that when he begged me to go with him, I didn’t. I didn’t fight hard enough for him. For our relationship. I put my fate in someone else’s hands. I kept hoping something would change my father’s mind—that my profound unhappiness would persuade him to have a change of heart. But it never did.”

“Did you ever talk to him again?”

She shakes her head. “It was a long time ago. There were no cell phones or internet. Communicating with someone so far away as New York seemed at the time, wasn’t easy. Not if it had to be kept a secret.”

Even after decades, she seems filled with regret. “I’m so sorry you never saw him again, Lucinda.”

“Oh, I saw him.” She gazes at me over her coffee cup. “I never forgot him. Built a shrine to him in my mind. There was never anyone as handsome, as smart, as kind, or as good in bed.” She sighs. “After six years of trying to forget, I hired a private investigator to find him. He was a rising star in the New York legal circles, married to a pretty girl.”

She glances at me. “Life waits for no one, Kate. Not even leggy redheads. But I couldn’t stop thinking about him, so I went to New York, packed my prettiest dresses. Sat in the back of the courtroom while he tried a big case. I watched his every move, admired the way his crisp white shirts fit around his neck, the way his suits tapered at the waist, the sharpness of his tone when he cross-examined a witness. By the end of the week there wasn’t anything about his courtroom mannerisms that I didn’t know.”

This is a heartbreaking story—and I haven't heard all of it. "But you never talked to him?"

She shakes her head. "He was married. He wasn't the kind of man who would ever step out on his wife, and I wasn't the kind of woman who would ask him to do it."

She smiles at me. "Don't look so forlorn, Kate. My life was full of fun and rebel-rousing. I've got no complaints. I've lived just the way I wanted." Even as she says the words, I don't believe them. Not after her story. "What would you do if you weren't a journalist chasing stories?"

"I would write books. In a pretty room that overlooked a garden, or maybe the ocean." I smile at the whimsy. "Someday."

"What would you write about?"

"I don't know. Maybe I would write a bittersweet love story about lovers who weren't destined to be together."

"Put some juicy sex in it, and I'd read it." We both laugh, and she orders a *small* after-dinner drink for us before insisting on picking up the check.

I wait with her outside the restaurant for the valet to bring her car. "If you leave me a key, I'll check on your place while you're in Boston," she says.

I've never told her about what happened to Fenny—other than that she's dead. "I would love for you to have a key. But there is something you should know." I give her as few of the grisly details as possible, just enough so she doesn't go there alone, and make a promise to drop off the key in the morning.



## SMITH

Kate's leaving Charleston. It took longer than planned, but she told Josh this morning she was headed out of town first thing tomorrow. "Pull all surveillance as of six a.m. Write it up, and then take a couple days off," I told him when he called to give me the news. "You've earned it."

The rest of the day sucked. Up until now, I've been able to distract myself by throwing everything I had into the new business. Day and night, until I couldn't keep my eyes open. But today, nothing could get her out of my head.

I managed to piss off or scare the shit out of every person I encountered today. I drag my miserable ass into bed at ten so that I don't drown my sorrows, or worse, call Kate to say goodbye, or even worse, stop by to tell her in person.

As it turns out, I'm highly susceptible to pussy whipping. Surprised they ever let me near the elite ranks of the military. No failsafe way to rule out that trait, I suppose.

I climb out of bed and tear the sheets off the mattress, literally, then chuck them outside along with the pillows and quilt.

They smell like her. It doesn't matter how many times they're laundered, her scent dug itself deep into the threads and it won't let go.

I lay on the exposed mattress, my sweatshirt balled up for a pillow. But I still can't sleep. Her scent is still everywhere. *I need to get to hell out of here.*

After throwing on some clothes, I pop into the security office next door. "I'll be at Tallullah's if anything comes up."

"I'm just finishing this damn paperwork, and I would love a drink," Delilah says, grabbing her purse.

“Not looking for company,” I snarl over my shoulder, on the way out.  
“See you in the morning.”

There was a time when I could have strolled over to JD’s with a bottle, or just showed up empty-handed and drank his booze. We’d shoot the shit until life’s problems were in the rearview mirror, so far back we could barely see them. But we’re still not talking any more than necessary, and it’s unclear whether we can salvage a business relationship, let alone the friendship.

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TALLULAH’S IS noisy and crowded, but there’s a seat at the bar where I can be left alone.

Before I can get to it, some bastard lands the stool I have my eye on. I’m prepared to wage war for it, but the little cocksucker takes a second look at me and decides he wants to live to eat his mama’s cookin’ again. He steers his girlfriend to a table, and I sit my ass down.

“What’s good?” Beau asks, setting a napkin on the bar in front of me.

“Not a fucking thing. Hook me up with a draft, and whatever you do, don’t let me have any whiskey. I won’t stop once I start.”

He brings me over a beer. “This one’s on me.”

I’m on my third beer when a blonde sidles up next to me and sits down. “I thought you might have a change of heart about some company,” Delilah says, rubbing her hands together as if to warm them. “And I haven’t had a cocktail in forever.”

“They stop selling drinks at the other bars in Charleston? All the liquor stores closed?”

“Got any apple cider, Beau?” she asks in that sweet voice of hers.

“Yes, ma’am. Any preference on whiskey you’d like with it tonight?”

“Surprise me.”

Delilah is attractive by any standards, and she can turn on the southern charm like it’s nobody’s business. But make no mistake, she’ll bat her eyelashes and smile at you while she’s cutting out your kidneys. Even so, she has that nurturing gene a lot of women possess, and tonight she’s determined to make me feel better, if it kills us both.

“Don’t you have anything better to do than babysit me? I’ll bet Gray Wilder could be convinced, without too much trouble, to use his dick instead

of his eyes to fuck you.” God love her, she doesn’t blink.

“You can put it on his tab,” she tells Beau when he brings her drink. *His* tab, meaning mine. She takes a sip and moans. “I needed this.”

I finish my beer, ignoring her as best as I can.

“You’re going to have to do a lot better than that Gray Wilder comment to get me to leave. It’s not that you’re not somewhere in the running to be the biggest asshole in the world, but you lack something. That *je ne sais quoi*.” She smirks at me. “I’ve met real champions. You’re not even the biggest asshole I’ve encountered today.”

I start to laugh—not because she’s funny, although she is, but because my emotions have topped off and need somewhere to go.

“I have the information you wanted on that guy with the alias, Ryan Cleary. His name is Ryan Donovan. Cleary is his mother’s maiden name. He lives outside of Boston.” She turns her head to look at me. “I figure it has something to do with Kate.”

It’s not her business, and I don’t want to involve her, so I don’t answer. “Leave it on my desk. I don’t want a paper trail.”

“No paper trail sounds right up my alley. Need help?”

“Nope.”

It’s after midnight and I’m still boozing, but Tallulah’s has mostly cleared out. Delilah’s in the bathroom when it happens. Some stupid bastard plays that stupid fucking song by Lady Antebellum. The one Kate likes. The one she sings when she thinks no one is listening. The one she got off on in the bathtub—*thinking about me*.

I’m sure it was one of the drunk college girls singing the lyrics in the corner who played it. But it doesn’t matter. It hurts like a sonofabitch.

I drain my beer while the force invades, raining pain that blinds me. I’m out of my mind, desperate to fight back. My life, or at least my sanity depends on it.

I grab the baseball bat that Beau keeps behind the bar. Then toss a credit card near my empty glass—“Put whatever the cost is on it. Repair it, buy a new one, whatever you need,” I tell him, following the music to the back of the room. When I get there, I lift the bat and take a swing, and then another and another, beating the shit out of the jukebox—until it stops playing the damn song—until Delilah wrenches me away.

“What is wrong with you?” she cries, yanking my arm.

I’ve been in real battles, with live munition and formidable opponents.



My system doesn't overreact. The altercation with the music box was satisfying, but not enough to get the adrenaline flowing. My pulse barely registered it. "Didn't like that song."

"That's all you have to say for yourself?"

I shrug. "Pretty much."

"Have you ever considered that maybe she didn't send the photo to the newspaper? Gabby doesn't believe she did. Neither does Josh."

"Gabby chooses to see the good in everything. Josh is green. But yeah. I've considered it." I've looked at every possible alternative—desperate to find a different answer. "I haven't seen anything that leads me to any other conclusion."

"Maybe you need to keep trying, because it's a bad idea to be wiping out innocent jukeboxes all over Charleston. They're practically extinct as it is." She lets go of my arm.

"I've heard what Gabby and Josh think. What do you think?"

She pauses for a few seconds. "Sometimes geese quack like ducks."

I have no patience to decipher low country talk right now. "What the hell does that mean?"

"The odds are it was her, but everything isn't always as it appears. Especially when bad men have power and money to throw around. They can turn ground beef into Salisbury steak, nap it with a tasty brown gravy and everyone gobbles it up like it's the best thing they ever ate."

Delilah knows that lesson better than most people. I run my palm over a scruffy jaw. "Call Chase Wilder in the morning. I know you've already talked to him about getting the photos taken down, but ask him to trace the digital prints. Unless the person who leaked the photo was exceptional, they left prints. Although I couldn't find any."

"Already talked to Chase. He's been conducting a forensic analysis for a few days."

"On his own?"

"Apparently, JD already asked him to find out who leaked the original image. Did I mention Chase doesn't think it was Kate?"

"Has he found evidence to support that it wasn't her, or is that his tiny dick talking?"

"No evidence yet."



## KATE

After I left Lucinda, I spent hours thinking about her tragic love story.

What would have happened if she fought for her public defender? Her true love. How might it have changed the course of her life? Maybe it wouldn't have mattered, but she would always know she tried. Not having done anything must make the regrets harder to bear.

Somewhere around two in the morning, I decided I wasn't giving up on Smith. There's too much about him that I love. I don't want to be a seventy-year old woman full of remorse. It doesn't matter how full my life becomes. I'll always be left wondering if it would have been fuller with him.

I'm at the library before it opens. Lucinda is always here early. We talked for a long time at dinner, but I want to give her the key, and hug her once more before the toddlers come in for story time.

I tap on the glass door to get her attention. "Good morning," she says, opening the door for me.

"Good morning. I only have a few minutes."

"I don't like that you're not making any stops between here and Boston."

"I'll take breaks, and I'm thinking I might stop in DC to say hello to some of my old colleagues. Here's the spare key and the alarm code. I have nothing to hide, but please don't go into the house alone. It's not safe."

"I'm sorry to hear it. A young woman like you should be hiding a few things in her drawers." She winks, clutching a long strand of pearls. She really is too much. "I know we already talked about this, but remind me. When can I expect you back?"

"Two weeks. Could be a little longer."

She pulls me into a hug. For such a powerhouse, there's nothing to her. I feel her ribs through her light cardigan. "Don't worry about anything here. You take care of your father and set him straight. Do not give in to any sob stories, or I'll have to make my way to Boston and that will just be unpleasant for everyone involved. We each create our own destiny and we live with the consequences."

I squeeze my eyes tight. She's right. And if I hadn't already decided to come back for Smith, her words would have spurred me there.

She pats my back before releasing me. "I'll keep an eye on Sinclair while you're away, make sure there are no floozies getting too close to him. But I suspect there's nothing to worry about in that regard. Although he wouldn't be the first man to act stupid."

I'm prepared for stupid. We're finished in his eyes, and it wouldn't surprise me if he got right back up on the saddle—so to speak. I have no illusions. My plan is to be the last woman he has sex with. The rest is out of my control. When I get back, I'll see to any *floozies* myself. "How did you know?"

"That you weren't done with him?"

I nod.

"I recognize the look. And you don't strike me as the type of woman who needs to touch the fire to know it's hot."

After we say goodbye, I walk the two blocks to the coffee shop where I'm meeting Gabby. It's strange not to have Josh or Ty lurking. But it also feels like a new beginning.

I see Gabby as soon as I walk inside the shop. I didn't expect Delilah to be with her, but try to rein in my surprise.

"I asked Delilah to come along," she says after our hello. "It was a last-minute decision, otherwise I would have emailed you." Gabby clasps her hands together, her index fingers sticking straight up, pressing against one another. "I have a long history of trusting people I shouldn't trust. I don't always agree with Delilah, but I value her opinion."

She's not pulling any punches. It stings, but I suppose it's fair.

"It's nice to see you both," I say, sliding into a seat across from them.

"We ordered coffee for the table," Gabby says, pouring me a cup. Her manners are so ingrained, she can be gracious even after making it clear she doesn't trust me. I pull the wrapped package from my bag but leave it on my lap. I'm having second thoughts about the gift. Not because Delilah is here

wearing a charming don't-fuck-with-me look, but because it seems ill-advised now.

“I asked you to meet me because I want to apologize in person. I took the photograph that appeared in the paper. I actually took a few photos that day. I'm very sorry.”

Gabby doesn't seem surprised, and I can't read Delilah. “Why, Kate?” Her brow is furrowed. “That's what for the life of me, I can't understand.”

“In hindsight it seems so foolish. I'm not sure I can distill it into words. It was never really about words. It was all about a feeling.” I swallow the lump in my throat. “I was out for a walk, when I saw you blowing bubbles with Gracie near the pond. You were both so happy.”

I'm struggling with tears now, but I'm determined not to cry. I don't want to seem even more pathetic than I am. “Something about watching you with your daughter called to me. I cherish the photographs I have of my mother and me. I wanted to capture that moment. I wanted you to have it. I wanted Gracie to be able to look at the photo when she got older—and see the beauty of the moment.”

My heart is filled with regret and sorrow, but my motivation had been pure. “At the time, it seemed like a nice way to thank you for all your trouble. I never meant for it to fall into anyone else's hands.” I hand her the wrapped package. “This is for you—I totally understand if you don't want it—it's not the same photo that was published.”

“If you didn't do it,” Gabby asks softly, “then who did?”

I wish I knew. I've made dozens and dozens of calls, but no one has been able to give me an answer. “I have no idea.”

Gabby nods, then unwraps the package. Her fingers gloss over the glass lightly, and she smiles, gazing at the photo. “Apology accepted,” she says softly.

I release a small breath, but the relief lasts for mere seconds. “Why should we believe you?” Delilah asks, pointedly. Clearly, she isn't accepting apologies.

I return her hard stare. “Because it's the truth. Because even if I hated all of you, which I don't, I would never do anything to betray Smith.”

“I'm not easily swayed by misty eyes,” Delilah says, her own blue eyes as cutting as her words.

Gabby places her hand on Delilah's wrist. “Hush.”

I glare back at Delilah, unwavering. It sounds easier than it is. “What

could I have possibly gained by sending that photograph to the paper, anonymously? It doesn't make sense."

"It never did." Gabby's voice is resolute, and although she's not the final arbiter, I'm grateful for her generous spirit.

"I think you were currying favor with an editor or publisher," Delilah says callously. "You wanted something from them, and what better way to ingratiate yourself than to send a photograph of the never-seen-in-print, Grace Wilder, the former president's only grandchild? That's what I think."

I think you're a mean-spirited bitch. That's what I want to say. But I know this is about more than a photo. This is about her loyalty to Smith, and I can't hate her for it. "You're entitled to your opinion," I answer curtly, before turning to Gabby. "I'm leaving for Boston, and I need to get on the road."

"Smith has been away on a project," she says. "Does he know you're leaving?"

I shake my head. "No—we haven't spoken since the day the photo was published."

"This is goodbye?" Gabby tilts her head. "I hope not, Kate."

"I hope not, too. I hope you'll forgive me and that we can be friends at some point. But either way, I have family matters to take care of in Boston, and then I intend to come back for Smith—for our relationship." I hold my head high—*screw Delilah*. "I'm not giving him up without a fight. I don't know how to make amends for something I didn't do, but I'll have a lot of time in the car to think about it." I place my folded napkin on the table beside the coffee mug. "And I'll expect an apology from him, too. He flew off the handle without bothering to hear my side of the story."

"When will you be back?" Delilah asks, her tone less severe.

"Two weeks, give or take a few days. Please don't talk to Smith about this. I want us to be able to work it out ourselves." Neither woman agrees to keep quiet, but I'm through groveling and begging for today.

"When you get back and you're settled, will you still consider volunteering at Georgie's Place?"

"Are you sure you still want me?"

"I never believed you sent the photos to the paper. It never made sense to me."

"Not that it matters," Delilah chimes in, "but I'm coming around to that way of thinking, too."

The olive branch she holds out is from a young tree, but the sapling has potential to sprout roots if tended carefully. I don't allow my pride to squander the opportunity. "It matters to me."

"Are you driving straight through?"

"Not sure. I might stop in DC on the way."

After a round of goodbyes, and a dire warning from Delilah about the dangers lurking in rest stops along the highway, I leave historic Charleston.





## KATE

On my way out of the city, I pass the sign to Albert's Island. I haven't been back to St. Maggie's since Father Jesse heard my confession. Since he called Smith a devil. It still makes me furious.

I dutifully completed my *Penance* assignment, and owe the priest my conclusions: I don't believe Catholicism requires me to choose between a man I love and a faith I love, but if it comes down to a choice between Smith Sinclair or the church, he wins. It's not even close.

At the traffic light, I bang a 'uey, as New Englander's say, and take the left onto the island road. It will add to my late start, but I'm going to pay Father Jesse a visit and get everything off my chest before I leave, because when I return to Charleston, I'll be focusing on new beginnings.

While I wait for Virginia to open the rectory door, I sense eyes watching me. I glance over my shoulder, but don't see anyone.

Virginia greets me with a warm smile. "Hello, Kate. What a nice surprise. Come in."

"How are you?" I ask, following her into the reception area. It's been almost three weeks since I last saw her.

"Good. We're all good. Father Jesse isn't here. Can I help you with something?"

"When do you expect him?"

"Not for several days."

"Oh—I didn't realize he was away." Well, this puts a crimp in my plan to tell him off.

"It's the only two weeks he takes for himself all year—readying his soul

for the Feast of St. Magdalene. It's just a week away. Father Martin, from St. Ray's downtown has been filling in while he's been gone. But he's only here for Sunday Mass. If you need something—"

"I don't need anything." I don't want to get into the reason for my visit with Virginia. "I came to say goodbye."

She pales, propping herself against the back of an upholstered chair. "Where are you going?"

"To Boston. I'll be gone for a couple weeks myself. I'll talk to him when I get back." *As soon as I get back.*

"You can't go," she pleads. "Father Jesse—you can't go without saying goodbye to him. He'll never forgive me if I let you go."

She seems genuinely afraid of his reaction. "I'll only be gone for two weeks," I assure her. "Then I'll be back."

"Let me make you a cup of tea before you go."

She's frazzled and behaving oddly. More oddly than usual. "No, thank you. I can't stay."

"Let me try to reach him," she says, waving her hands around. "I'm not sure if I'll be able to. Please. Just wait while I call."

Another five minutes isn't going to kill me. I don't know what's going on with her, but I don't want to make it worse. "Sure."

She places the call, getting more and more agitated with each ring. "He didn't answer," she mutters, staring out the window. "The reception is poor there, and the calls don't always go through."

"Are you okay? You don't look well."

Her eyes dart to mine. She seems more alert now. "I don't feel well," she says, placing a hand on her chest. "I hope it's just a bad case of indigestion. Would you help me upstairs before you go? Father Jesse keeps antacid in the kitchen."

She's still clutching her chest, and I'm a little nervous to leave her like this. "I can run up and get it if you tell me where it is."

"It's easier if I show you."

I follow her upstairs and into the kitchen. "It's in that cupboard. Down there." She points to a lazy Susan in the corner.

I crouch down and open the cupboard, turning the top tray. "I don't see —"



## KATE

**M**y limbs are so heavy I can't move them, and my head is pounding.  
*Where am I? Somewhere dark and musty.*

There are voices in the distance. Father Jesse and Virginia—I think. St. Maggie's. I must be at St. Maggie's.

"I didn't know what else to do," the woman says. "I wanted to give her tea with Petey's sleeping medicine. But she wouldn't take it. I wanted to make you proud."

"You did, little slave. You made your Master very proud. I'm going to reward you later. But first, we need to make sure she wakes up."

*Master? Little slave?* It can't be Father Jesse and Virginia. I must be mistaken. The throbbing in my head makes it hard to think. Maybe I'm dreaming.

The heavy footsteps come closer. Maybe whoever they belong to will bring me some Tylenol for my headache. And some water. My mouth is so dry.

"Magdalene." Someone nudges my arm, brushing cool fingers across my forehead. "Magdalene, wake up." I try to open my eyes but the lids are so heavy, they don't budge. "Father Jesse. Help me." I feel my lips move, but he doesn't seem to hear me.

"She's stirring a bit," he says, "but she's not ready to wake up. Let's give her a little more time. Why don't I give you your reward while we wait? Would you like that?"

"Yes, Master."

"Prepare yourself, then bring me your collar."

“In front of Kate?” *Kate. Yes. I’m Kate.*

“Magdalene,” the man admonishes harshly. “She’s Magdalene.” *Who is Magdalene?* “And yes, here. We shouldn’t leave her unattended. Don’t look so worried, my little slave. How about if we play kitty? Would you like to be my spoiled little kitten who gets a special treat?”

“Oh yes, Master. I love to be your kitten.” *It’s Virginia. I know it is, but she’s using a little girl voice. I don’t understand. Why is she calling the man who sounds like Father Jesse, Master?*

“May I, Master?”

“You may undress your Master.” *I’m struggling for breath. I want to wake up. Maybe I’m dead. I don’t think my head would hurt so much if I was dead—unless—this is hell.*

“Master, if I may ask. What is my treat?”

“You will be allowed to fully worship your Master’s body. And if you please me, you will be permitted to masturbate to orgasm.”

“With a new toy? Can I use one of the new toys from the chest?”

“*May I use a new toy? No, you may not. If you had convinced Magdalene to have the tea and put her into a gentle sleep, you would have earned a nice new toy and a warm bubble bath after we were through playing.*”

“I’m sorry, Master. I’ll try to do better.”

“Hold still,” the man says. She gasps and groans painfully. *Is he hurting her? I listen as carefully as I can, but my head aches, and it’s hard to focus. I don’t think I can help the woman, anyway. I can’t move.*

“Such a long pretty tail for my pretty kitten. I chose a nice big plug for you to squeeze. Don’t you dare push it out, or you’ll ruin our special evening. You don’t want that, do you?”

“No, Master,” she whimpers. *Is she hurt? Virginia! Are you okay? I scream, but there’s only silence where the words should be.*

“Let me brush you before we begin. Head on my lap, but keep that ass high in the air, like an appreciative little pet. I want to be able to admire your pretty tail.”

“Yes, Master.” *She sounds happy now. I don’t understand.*

“No new toys today, but I’ll allow you to rub your cunt against the toe-box of my dress shoes. The ones I save for Sunday Mass. You know how much you enjoy that. But only if you please me, otherwise, you’ll have to use your fingers to satisfy your dirty cunt, and that won’t be nearly as much fun for you.”

“Thank you, Master.”

“Have you sedated Petey for the night?” *Sedated Petey? No! Petey, Petey, Petey! I struggle, but I can’t move.*

“Yes, Master.”

“Good. Now take your reward. Worship your Master with that hungry little mouth, Gigi.”

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“MAGDALENE. Magdalene. You need to wake up, now. It’s time.”

My eyelashes flutter for what seems like forever before they finally open. Everything is fuzzy at first, and my eyes are gritty as though someone poured sand in them. “I’m Kate,” I croak. My throat is so parched it’s painful to speak, but it doesn’t hurt as much as my head.

“Kate was your sinner’s name. Now, you’re Magdalene.”

I turn my head to the side. My neck is stiff, and it moves slowly. Virginia is on her knees, naked, beside Father Jesse. She’s wearing a pink collar and furry ears. *Ears?* I try to make sense of it. But I can’t. It’s just a nightmare. I’m sure of it.

“I—I don’t understand.” My lips are cracked, and my mouth is split at the corners. It stings when I move my lips.

“You will understand. Soon enough. Rest tonight. Tomorrow, Gigi will bathe you and dress you in something clean. We need to keep you pure until your birthday. She’ll wash you inside and out, because Jesus doesn’t like dirty whores.”

*Gigi. Gigi. Who is Gigi?* A thick fog envelops me, and my eyelids shutter, dragging me back into the darkness.

“Go to sleep, Magdalene.” I don’t respond, because I can’t.

“Lie beside her bed, Kitten. She likely has a concussion, and we want her well by her birthday. Wake her hourly. Make sure she has a few sips of water each time. You sleep in between.”

“What about Petey?”

“He’ll be fine. Go home at six o’clock and see him off to camp. I’ll take over until you return. When you get back, draw Magdalene a bath. Bathe her as you would me, then prepare her some lightly buttered toast with a poached egg. Sprinkle some salt on it, and make her a cup of tea.”

“Yes, Master. I’ll be back as soon as Petey’s on the bus.”

“Don’t dawdle. I have Mass at nine.”

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WHEN I WAKE, the room is dark. I need to pee. My head is pounding. *Where am I?*

“How do you feel?”

“Father Jesse?” I ask tentatively, turning toward the figure by the bed clutching a bible in his hand.

“Not Jesse. I’m Jesus, Magdalene. You are a sinner, and I am here to absolve you. We will pray together for your soul and purify your body until it is a worthy vessel for me.”

“My head hurts—I—don’t understand what you mean. Is this a dream? Are you Father Jesse?”

“Jesus,” he answers impatiently. “I’m Jesus. I’m sorry about your head, but Gigi didn’t know what else to do. You were leaving until after your birthday feast. We couldn’t have that.”

The rectory. I remember, now. Virginia wasn’t feeling well. My eyes dart to the rounded stone walls at the edge of the room. *The turret*. I lift my head to sit up. I can’t. My arms and legs are heavy. I inch them slowly until the rattle startles me. *I’m chained*. I remember it from last night when Virginia helped me to the bathroom.

“Calm yourself,” the man says. “You are restrained. It will be easier for you if you place your fate in my Father’s hands, as I have.”

He thinks he’s Jesus. *He’s crazy*. I’m going to die here, like this, at the hands of a delusional priest. I try to control the rising panic. Prayer would be where I would normally turn at a time like this—I glance at the priest. But that source of comfort has been ripped from me.

“There have been others, but none like you,” he continues in an eerie, detached voice. *Others?* “You were sent from my Father. But I don’t know if I’m meant to keep you as a bride, until my work on earth is done, or if you are to be a sacrifice like the others. We’ll pray for a sign from Him.”

Terror digs in its sharp talons, as my brain fully registers the priest’s words. My empty stomach seizes. I lift my head inches off the pillow, turning my neck when I begin to wretch. Sour liquid dribbles out of the corner of my

mouth onto my chin, puddling on the cushion.

When I'm too weak to hold it up any longer, I lower my head beside the vomit, barely noticing the urine leaking from my bladder.

*This is how I'm going to die.*





## SMITH

**A**nother fucking interruption. I'm never going to get a damn thing done today. "Yeah?"

"There's a woman at the gate in a brand new Cadillac, bigger than she is," Ty says. "Her name is Lucinda McCrae. She needs a word with you."

*Jesus Christ.* "Let me talk to her." I hear the back and forth, before Ty is on the phone again.

"She's says she wants to see the whites of your eyes while she's talkin' to you."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Bring her to my office. Do not let her drive on the property." I'm sure this has something to do with Kate. Nosy old woman.

Before I turn around, Lucinda McCrae is standing in my office doorway. "Good morning, Miss McCrae, what can I do for you?"

"May I come in?"

Only if you have to. "Of course." I stand and usher her inside to a chair near my desk.

"I don't know what kind of people you have working for you, but you might want to shut the door, so they don't hear everything I have to say." I do as I'm told so I can get her the hell out as fast as possible.

"How can I help you?"

"Where is Kate McKenna?" she asks pointedly.

"No idea." I shrug. "Haven't spoken to her in weeks. I would guess Boston."

"Wrong. She's not in Boston. Try again."

"Miss McCrae, with all due respect, I don't see why Kate's whereabouts

concerns either of us, especially me.”

“I received a frantic phone call at the library this morning from a woman named Fiona Nash. She hasn’t spoken to Kate for nearly a week. The last time they spoke, Mrs. Nash got the impression that something was bothering her. Perhaps something concerning *you*.” She glares at me, waiting for an answer.

“You’ll have to ask Kate.” I’m dismissive, but I’ve already had enough of Lucinda McCrae, and she’s only been here two minutes.

“I would. But no one has seen or heard from Kate since she left Charleston five days ago. Unless you have.”

My heart drops into my stomach. There were at least a dozen messages from Fiona that I deleted without listening to.

“Ms. McCrae, I appreciate you coming by. I’ll look into it.”

“No, Mr. Sinclair, you will not dismiss me like I’m a doddering old woman. I need assurances that you will contact Mrs. Nash and that you will search for Kate until you find her. I will not leave your office without those assurances.”

“You have my word. I’ll keep you abreast of any news.” *Now get to hell out so I can find her.* She’s still sitting.

“Do you have a key to her house?”

“No.”

“You are planning on going there?”

“Maybe. But if we do, we can get in without a key.”

“Charming, I’m sure. But here,” she says, placing a single key on my desk. “Take the one Kate left me. I want it back when you’re through. And don’t make a copy,” she adds sternly, standing to leave.

“You have a key to Kate’s place?”

“She left it with me on her way out of town in case there was an emergency. Made me promise I wouldn’t go there alone.”

“Have you?”

She stands taller, nose in the air. “On my way here. Mrs. Nash was so distraught. She’s coming to Charleston, but won’t be here until this evening.” *Just what I need.* “Nothing seemed amiss. I looked in the closets, and her shoes were lined up in a row, and her clothes were still hung on hangers neatly. Nothing was disturbed.”

“What do you mean her shoes were lined up in a row? She moved out, didn’t she?”

“Her lease is up in August. She was planning on looking for a new place when she got back.”

*Wait.* “She’s coming back?” I’d like to say her returning to Charleston pisses me off, and while it does rile the emotion inside, I don’t think it’s anger.

“Yes. Stacey is filling in at the library. But only until Kate gets back. She wants to stay at home with the baby.”

Right now, I really don’t give a shit about Stacey and her parenting choices. “Miss McRae, I need you to go so I can get to work. Ty will see you back to your car.”

She wags a boney finger at me. “I want to be kept in the loop. I’ll be at the library until six. She was coming back to Charleston—because—it was a matter of the heart. You find her,” Lucinda says, on her way out the door.

“Josh!”

“Yeah?”

“Did you take the tracking devices off of Kate McKenna’s phone and car before she left Charleston?”

“No,” he says sheepishly, and I want to plunk a big wet one on him.

“I need the coordinates on her location. As fast as you can get them to me.”

I call Fiona, before he’s even out of my office.

“You son of a bitch!” she shrieks into the phone. “Where is she?”

“Calm down, Fiona.”

“Don’t you tell me to calm down. I’ve left you a dozen messages in the last few days. Where is she?” I’ve never met Fiona, but nothing Kate ever said about her would make me think she’s a drama queen.

“I don’t know.” *No one has seen or heard from Kate in days.* My heart thumps hard, as the realization sinks in. “Lucinda McCrae was just here. As far as I know, Kate was last seen on her way to Boston. Have you spoken with her family?”

“I paid her father a visit—the bastard was drunk as a skunk. He couldn’t be bothered. I tracked her brother Tommy down, too.” Fiona’s breathing so heavy, she’s panting.

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘She’s probably shackled up with some guy. She’ll show up eventually.’ He’s an asshole.”

Who talks about their kid sister like that? I’d like to beat his face into the

ground.

“I filed a missing person’s report yesterday morning. They wouldn’t let me do it before then. I’ve called twice to check about it, but I keep getting the runaround. I have a flight out late this afternoon. It’s the soonest I could make arrangements for the kids. I’ll be in Charleston by nine.”

“Where did you file the report?”

“Charleston police.”

That’s a problem. I haven’t heard a single word from them, and Lucinda didn’t mention it, either. You’d think the first place they’d go, after her house, is to the library where she worked. The next thing would be to pay me a visit. They’re not looking for her. It might not mean anything more than incompetence, but it could also mean someone on the inside doesn’t want her found.

“Stay put for now in case she shows up in Boston. I have it covered on this end.”

“Kate would have told me if she was coming to Boston. I would have talked to her—kept her company while she was stuck in traffic on the turnpike. Something happened.”

That’s becoming crystal clear. “We still have a tracking system on her phone and car. It will tell us where she is.” Or at least give us the location of the vehicle. I keep that last part to myself.

“Smith—there are few people on this earth I love more than Kate. Few people who are handed the short stick every damn time, and who always take it without complaining. So many people have let her down. Not this time. We need to find her.”

My feelings about Kate are so tangled up with my job, my relationship with JD, and my general mistrust of reporters. I’m not sure a relationship with her could ever work. But I am sure I won’t stop looking until I find her. *I’m damn sure of that.*

“Stay in Boston. There is nothing you can do here. As soon as I find her—the very minute—I’ll send a plane so you can be with her wherever she is. Until then, take care of your kids—Kate would want that.”

Josh jogs into my office, green around the gills. “Fiona, I need to go.”

“All we have is an occasional weak signal from her car—too weak and sporadic to gather coordinates,” he says gravely. “Nothing on her phone.”

Weak signals mean the car is well-hidden or submerged. Well-hidden in the way a professional could do. In the way King’s people could do. I don’t

let myself think about submerged. “Any chance the tracking devices are the ones that store records we can access?” *Say yes. Please, say yes.*

He shakes his head. “She wasn’t much of a threat when we started keeping tabs on her. We used the basic equipment. When we upped the security—I was going to swap it out before she went back to work, after the lockdown was lifted. But then—we cut back her security.”

“Find Chase Wilder and have him call me immediately. Then meet me at Kate McKenna’s place.” He starts to leave, still looking ashen. He might be a seasoned veteran, but Kate was his first civilian gig. It’s different.

“Josh.” He turns. “*We* didn’t cut back her security. *I did*. I gave the order.” That knowledge snakes its way into my conscience, with a sharp venomous bite. “This is on me.”



## SMITH

I climb into the Jeep, hoping the change of scenery will help clear my head so I can think logically. If I had only listened to Fiona's first message, instead of acting like a bratty teenager, Kate wouldn't still be missing. *And if you hadn't cut back her security, she wouldn't have gone missing at all.*

My chest is tight. I don't have a single good feeling about this.

*If* a hostage is taken alive, the first twenty-four hours after an abduction are vitally important. But it's more complicated than that. I've rescued hostages who have been held for more than five years. It all comes down to *why* they were taken. If King's people have Kate, they're not looking for a trade. They're looking to shut her up.

My phone rings, interrupting one macabre scenario after another. I have to stop thinking like that, or I can't run the investigation—and there is no fucking way I'm handing it over to someone else.

"Chase," I bark into the phone. "I need your help. Kate McKenna is missing. We have her car and phone tagged, but the signal is weak and infrequent."

"I heard. Where are you now?"

"On my way to her place to see what I can find."

"How long has she been missing?"

"Five days."

"*Fuck*. I'll meet you there."

"No. We don't know what we're going to find when we get there. It's not safe."

"I can help with this," he says pointedly. "You're tracking her



electronically, and I'm better at that than anyone on your payroll." Truth.

"I need you tracking her phone and car more than I need you at her house."

"I can walk and chew gum at the same time."

This is just another bad decision in a line of bad decisions. *Go big or go home.* "Do you know where she lives?"

"Give me the address."

"If you get there before I do, *do not*, I repeat *do not*, get out of your car." I give him the address, and call Delilah.

"Go to St. Maggie's on Albert's Island, and talk to Father Jesse Creighton and the church secretary, and anyone else you can find over there," I instruct. "Ask them about Kate. Make up some bullshit so you don't alert anyone that there might be a problem." I considered going myself, but I can't stand that fucking priest. I'm too biased to get a good read on him.

"Is he a suspect?"

"She's been gone five days. Today makes six. Everyone's a suspect." *Six fucking days.* I want to throw a huge tantrum, kick shit over, break things with my fists, but it'll have to wait until I find her.

"Gabby and I had breakfast with her the day she left."

*What?* "You're just telling me this now? What the fuck, Delilah?"

"It wasn't an issue until now. She didn't leak that photo."

"How do you know?"

"Because before working for you, I had a nice little career as a CIA agent, remember? I sat less than three feet away from her. I pushed her, watched every reaction. Her eyes. Her body language. Her expressions. She isn't savvy enough to fool me. I'm telling you she didn't do it."

I don't say a word because what's on the tip of my tongue is so damn ugly, my relationship with Delilah will never recover from it. This is just another damn betrayal from someone I trusted. *Gabby, too.*

"She told us she was going to take care of some family issues, and then she was coming back for you. She wanted you guys to work it out on your own terms and asked us not to say anything. She loves you, Smith."

My mind is going in a dozen different directions. I don't let the *she was coming back for you* part in. There's nothing there that can help us find her, but plenty to trip me up. Delilah is nobody's fool. I'm not sure how Kate's innocence fits into the equation. Does it point more to King, or somewhere else? We need a tighter timeline.

I clear the lump from my throat. “This is what we’re going to do. You’re going over to the church like we talked about. Take Ty. Find out everything you can. Call Gabby and Lucinda McCrae—send someone to the library to pick her up. If you know of anyone else Kate might have spoken, or met with that would have anything to add, round them up. I want everyone in the conference room by one o’clock.”

There’s silence on the other end of the phone.

“Is there something about what I just said that you don’t understand?”

“Do you want me to take the lead on this? You’re awfully close to it.”

“No,” I bark. “And don’t question my ability to manage this again.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that.” There’s passion in her voice, and even though I’m pissed, I count on her to call me out when necessary. She’s one of the few people willing to do it. “You’re assembling a group together in a room without first debriefing them individually. That’s a bad idea.”

“I’m well aware.” I grip the steering wheel tighter. “But she’s been gone for almost a week. We ran out of time to do it by the book days ago. This is the best way to create a timeline of her last forty-eight hours in Charleston and pull resources together quickly. We’re out of time, Delilah.” As I say it, my heart pumps hard.

There’s a long silence on the other end. “I’ll get everyone there. If the priest or the church secretary have anything to add, should I bring them to the meeting?”

Kate trusts that priest. But I don’t. There’s something about that guy that rubs me the wrong way. I’m going with my gut on this. “Hold off for now. I don’t want them to know too much. But I want your impression of the priest after you meet him.”

“What about the homeless women she works with?”

“I’ve thought about that.” If we have to start hunting them down—we’re screwed. “It could be important, but we don’t have the manpower to go there right now. It’ll be like looking for a needle in the haystack. No one keeps accurate records of their comings and goings, for privacy reasons.”

“I’m at Kate’s. Call me right away if anything turns up at the church.”

“Are we okay?” she asks softly. I can almost see the worry lines creasing around her eyes. It wasn’t a betrayal. It was women sticking together, thick as thieves, the way they always do. I’m grateful Kate found that with them.

“Yeah. We’re okay.”



## KATE

I don't know how much time has passed. But I'm pretty sure they're drugging me, so I eat and drink as little as possible. I don't have an appetite, anyway.

My situation feels hopeless, growing bleaker with every passing hour. I haven't fully accepted my fate, but it's settling in.

I'm chained securely, and I hear the lock click on the door as they come and go. There's no escape. *And no rescue.* No one knows I'm missing, so I never imagine anyone coming for me. Maybe it's less painful this way.

If only I had told Fiona I was going to Boston. But I wanted to surprise her—that's not entirely true. I didn't want to hear her beg me not to come or have her tell me my father would wear me down until I agreed to move back and take care of him—until the next time he didn't need me.

While I lay here waiting for the rape and death sure to come, I comfort myself by practicing gratitude—focusing on all the good I've enjoyed in my life. I'm not a Pollyanna and certainly not a saint. It's just that I have nowhere else to turn at this moment.

Most Catholics prepare for death with prayer, but there is not a shred of comfort for me in my faith. Only betrayal.

Instead, I think of Fiona and her boys, of all the happiness they've brought to my life. While I tick through the seasons, Fi is the one person who shows up consistently in my good memories.

Each spring, we picked lilacs together in the backyard and brought them inside to perfume my room, and we always shared the leftover cupcakes from Rita's that some kind soul brought to school on my birthday. Someone was

always absent, leaving at least one for us to share on the walk home.

I think of my mother often, too, wondering if she would have made the same decisions, if she knew what my life would hold. At times, when I'm especially groggy, she speaks to me. *You need to stay strong*, she pleads. *Prepare yourself for a fight. It's not your time yet, angel. I love you.* There are times in the darkness when I'm certain she's by the bed.

But what I think about most is Smith. When I need comfort desperately, I find it in the memories we made together. I shut my eyes and feel the shelter of his protective arms. When the pain becomes too great, I imagine him smoothing my hair, murmuring, "I've got you," like he did the day I told him about the frat house, and the night Fenny died.

But my time has not all been spent wallowing in memories. While there is little chance for escape, I have formed a skeleton of a plan. It's not likely to save me, but at least it will be a death of my own choosing. When they discover my body, they'll know I made an effort.

Virginia is exhausted and stretched thin. I've been here longer than planned and she bears the brunt of responsibility. She's emotionally fragile, and the added anxiety has left her psyche even more vulnerable. Each time Father Jesse mentions keeping me as his bride, she tears up. I think she's worried I'm her replacement.

I've started to feed her anxiety. Dropping little breadcrumbs here and there, about how much *Jesus* adores me.

Her anxiety is causing her to be careless. She's left the bathroom window uncovered several times. It's a small thing, but it's helped orient me to day and night, and planted an idea. The swamp is located directly under the double casement window—four stories down. My plan is to persuade her to let me jump into the murky water. My survival is dependent on the depth of the water, what lies beneath the surface, and whether she's willing to free my hands.

The lock clicks, and the door opens. *Today is the day.* The Feast of St. Magdalene is approaching—it has to be. I'm not sure what significance it holds for me, but I've caught enough to know my fate is tied up in it.

"I need to bathe you," Virginia says, putting down a small tray by the bed. "Eat quickly."

"I'm not hungry right now. I'll try after my shower." Even though I'm bathed daily, I smell wretched. My ankles and wrists are cuffed continuously, and the skin underneath stays wet after I bathe. It's become infected, emitting

a foul yeasty smell. Not to mention something she feeds me causes me to vomit frequently.

Virginia adjusts the chains so that they reach the bathroom, where she shortens them again, with my wrists securely fastened behind my back. “Can we remove the chains just while I’m in the shower?”

“No. I’ll get into trouble.”

“I can help you,” I say softly.

“I don’t need help.”

“I know you love Jesus. He’s planning to keep me as his bride. He told me that. What will happen to you then?” When she stiffens and the tears begin to pool, I know I’ve plucked the right nerve.

“We don’t know who he’s going to choose to be his bride,” she admonishes, brusquely.

“We do. He told me,” I whisper. “I’m not supposed to say anything to you.”

“I don’t believe you.” She lays out a wide tooth comb on the sink for after the shower. “He’s loved me for a long time,” she says.

“Then why hasn’t he made you his bride yet?”

She stills, staring into the shadows. It’s the haunting stare of a petrified woman. “Unchain me,” I say softly. “Let me jump out the window.”

“You’ll die.” *Probably. But it couldn’t possibly be worse than what’s to come.*

“I know. I’ve prepared myself for death.” She rushes around the small room, gathering shower supplies. “You won’t need to worry about me anymore, Virginia. You’ll be able to live with your Master and play kitty, like you’ve always done. Think of Petey. He needs you.”

She freezes for a moment, before going to the window. “It’s a big drop to the swamp,” she murmurs, peeking over the ledge. “Even if you survive the fall, there are creatures in the water.” *There are far worse creatures here.* “No one could survive the fall,” she mumbles to herself.

“You can unchain my ankles. Undo the restraints on my wrists. Tell Jesus I overpowered you and jumped.”

“Okay,” she acquiesces finally, in the little girl voice she normally reserves for her Master. “But only your legs. Not your arms.”

I draw a large breath and fill my lungs with air that I’m going to desperately need—but it can’t be reserved. That’s not how it works.

I wanted this moment, and I’m not fearful of heights or of water. But still,

the sheer gravity of a dive into the unknown with my hands bound threatens to consume me. I've reached the hour.

"Okay," I agree quietly. It probably wouldn't matter if my hands were free, anyway.

She opens both panes. Just as she begins to unhook the chain from my cuffed ankle, the wind howls, blowing one side of the window shut. The bang is so loud, it startles us both, leaving Virginia pale and shaken. "No," she says, "you need to get into the shower. It's your birthday tomorrow."

"That's correct, Gigi," the priest says from the bathroom doorway. We both freeze at the icy voice. "Her cleansing will wait for now. Bring Magdalene out here."

"Yes, Master."

Without another word, we follow him out. *How much did he hear?* "Sit her there," he instructs, positioning a chair a few feet from the bed. "Prepare yourself," he tells her. By now I know that means use the toilet and undress.

He adjusts the restraints, without a word, so that I can't move. When he's finished, he stands back, apprising my naked body until my skin crawls.

When Virginia returns, he drags her to the wall by her hair. She whimpers while he shackles her wrists to the rings fixed to the stone. Her back is facing me, but I hear the muted sobs. "You were going to let her go. I am so angry with you, Gigi. So disappointed," he says, unfastening his belt, and pulling it through the loops.

He's going to beat her. "It was my fault," I plead. "Don't hurt her."

He turns to me and smiles, before the belt flies through the air and catches her skin, landing where her buttocks and thighs meet. Her scream is blood-curdling.

"Gigi is pure," he says. "She didn't know she sinned, unlike you. You offered your body to Sinclair. Do you know how much pain it caused me every time you let him soil you? I watched as you sullied yourself with the devil. I needed you pure."

He lets the belt fly again, and Virginia screams when it lands on her back.

"Beat me, instead. She didn't do anything."

"I tried to warn you, but even a dead cat wouldn't stop your whoring. Do you know how much trouble it was to find that cat for you?" *He killed Fenny.* "Do you?" he asks, his eyes burning. He turns the belt on Virginia when I don't answer.

"No," I say quickly.

“You were an ungrateful whore. Each time I got a little closer, you would run to Sinclair.” He lashes Virginia’s thighs. Her screams echo in my veins.

“Then the picture of the Wilder girl, the president’s granddaughter, showed up in your files. Instead of turning you away from him, I turned him away from you. Don’t look so surprised. You didn’t really think I was a fool who didn’t understand technology, did you?”

He stands over me, belt in hand. His arousal evident. “I spent hours gaming at my grandmother’s, then later, I learned to hack into secure files. It gave me such great pleasure all alone in my room. It was the kind of pleasure you derived from the pink vibrator you fucked yourself with when Sinclair wasn’t around.” I cringe when he mentions my vibrator. *It is pink.*

“I watched you hold it against your cunt, before sliding it inside the wet swollen flesh. The more aroused you became, the more you writhed all over the bed, your face red and sweaty. Do you know that your hips buck erratically right before you come?”

He takes a drooping curl between his fingers. I flinch at the touch. “You were beautiful when you were alone, curled up on your bed, sated. You were a Madonna. But when Sinclair was there, you were nothing more than a filthy whore for him.”

I feel faint and shut my eyes. It’s only seconds before the belt slithers across my thighs, and I jump.

“Your penance is to watch and listen to Gigi’s screams.”

He lashes her again and again. Her agony bounces off the walls. When he’s done, he unshackles her.

“Isn’t this lovely, Magdalene?” he asks, showing me the angry welts on her skin. I can barely stand to look at them.

“Bring me your brush,” he instructs Virginia.

She obeys immediately, scurrying on all fours to retrieve the brush. She carries it to him in her mouth. He pats her head and sits on a chair across from me. Without a word spoken between them, she lays her tearstained cheek on his lap. Her welted buttocks in the air, as he caresses her gently and brushes her hair.

After a little while, he murmurs something to her that I can’t hear. Her fingers go to his pants zipper, and from her knees, she releases his swollen cock, tonguing the stretched skin. Eventually he peers over at me.

“She’s very skilled, Magdalene. I watched you with Sinclair. You’re skilled, too. Would you like to be my pet?” Virginia continues to suck him



while he speaks to me.

When he wants more, he holds her head between his hands, and roughly fucks her mouth. He stares longingly at me while she gags on his cock, the drool dripping from her mouth. It goes on and on, but I don't dare look away.

Finally, with a grunt, the priest finishes inside her throat, his gaze still on me.

Virginia averts her eyes, gasping for air.

"My good little slave," he coos. "Choose a toy from the chest."

She crawls to the chest and returns with a wand.

He smiles. "You plan on being well-satisfied, don't you little slave? Has worshipping your Master in front of company made you especially aroused?"

She nods, lowering her eyes demurely. "Let me see," he says. She parts her legs, and he sweeps his hand between them, then holds his glistening fingers in the air so I can see the prize. He smiles, a sadistic curl, and brings them to her mouth so she can lick them clean.

"Sit at my feet, Gigi, and spread your legs wide," he commands. "Turn the wand on high and place it on your cunt." When she does, her mouth falls open with a gasp.

I shut my eyes. "Magdalene, if you don't keep your eyes open, and on Gigi, I will shackle her to the wall and beat her again. It's your choice."

I force myself to watch as she leans back on her elbows, her cunt fully exposed to us. She adjusts the wand on her folds, and he lowers the sole of his shoe over it, grinding the vibrating head into her flesh.

"Do not come without permission, or I will put welts on your skin that will be raised for a month. And there will be no pleasure for you, until the days grow short again."

"Master, please," she begs in a breathy, tortured voice.

"Stop squirming, or we're done." But she doesn't stop.

He yanks his foot away, and the wand clanks to the floor. "Leave it," he instructs cruelly.

Eventually, he lets her pick it up and they begin again. But she doesn't please him, and he takes his foot away and the vibrator falls on the stone floor. She's a shaking sweaty mess, but it happens three more times before he finally lets her come.

It's abusive and awful, but God forgive me, my body is behaving as though it's aroused. Even though I'm not. Even though I don't want to be. Even though I'm disgusted by all of it, and terrified, not of death, but of rape.

Still, my nipples furl and tingle, and the dull ache of arousal lurks low in my belly. A piece of my soul withers and dies as my body betrays me in this unimaginable way.



## SMITH

I use the key Lucinda gave me to get into Kate's house. When I step inside, it's as though a huge crater swallows me.

The place smells like it's been closed up with the air conditioner turned up high, just cool enough so mold doesn't grow. But Kate is everywhere. Calling to me from every corner.

Lucinda was right, it doesn't look like anything has been disturbed. Her new laptop isn't here, but she probably took it with her. The backup is still on the dresser, and that ugly rug is here, too.

I scour the usual places with the blacklight and another instrument, looking for blood, or bleach, or solvents used to clean up blood and other bodily fluids. It's normally tedious work, but today it's heart-wrenching. Every inch I cover where there is no evidence of Kate's blood feels like a major victory.

Josh comes in while I'm working. "Let me do that," he says gruffly, taking the instrument out of my hands. "There must be something else you can do."

The door creaks again. It's Chase. "Anything?" he asks.

"Not yet." It's a double-edged sword. If we find something, it's not likely to be good news. But if we find nothing, it doesn't get us any closer to discovering what happened to her.

Chase sets up his equipment on the kitchen table, then methodically sweeps each room for listening devices and cameras. When he gets to the bedroom, he stops short in front of the television. After a few seconds, he heads to a utility closet off the kitchen where the fuse box is located.

“What did you find?” He meets my eyes, shaking his head, and motions for me to follow him back into the bedroom. When we’re there, he unplugs the television from the wall.

“This is a smart TV,” he says. “It can be hacked into and used as a spy tool. They watch you right here, through the camera. The microphone carries back, too. A hacker can get into the system and access bank accounts, anything, really.”

It was right in front of my goddamn eyes the entire time, and I didn’t see it. “How did I not know this?”

He shrugs. “There’s been chatter since the TVs first came out. But the FBI just started talking publicly about it sometime around Thanksgiving.”

“That was eight months ago.”

He shrugs. “You’re not a tech guy, so you don’t think like us. You’ve become a big picture guy, but basically, you’re a grunt with mad skills.”

“The priest. The fucking priest.”

“What priest?” he asks, looking at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“This weird priest gave her the TV.”

“All priests are weird, if you ask me. But don’t jump to conclusions. Usually hackers get in using the serial numbers and passwords that come with the system. People don’t understand the importance of changing passwords on their computers, let alone on a TV. You don’t need high-level skills. It’s not like infiltrating the president’s calendar, but you have to have some idea of what you’re doing.”

I know that fucking priest is involved. First the cat, and now the TV. Both *gifts* from him.

I don’t buy it’s a coincidence. *But what now?* Should I go over to the church and lean on his carotid artery until he talks, or do I sit on the information until we have a timeline?

Even if he’s involved, he’s probably not the ringleader. But whoever is pulling the strings is not playing. If I show up at the church, I’m likely to tip someone off. I’m not ready to do that yet. I’m going to have to trust Delilah.

“I turned off the Wi-Fi,” Chase says. “This way we don’t need to worry that someone is watching us. Did you ever log onto any of your devices using her Wi-Fi?”

“No. I never use someone else’s internet.” I’m stupid, but not that stupid.

“I’m going to stay here for a little while,” Chase says, “see what I can find.”

“Josh will stay here with you. Meet me back at the security office when you’re done. Don’t forget about her phone and car. Those might be our best clues.”

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BY THE TIME Chase and Josh get back to the security office, we’ve put together a timeline, but it has holes. Huge gaping holes. My guys are working on piecing together her movements using footage from cameras across the city, but that takes time. *Too damn much time.*

“She didn’t send the photo to the paper,” is the first thing Chase says, entering the conference room. His eyes dart from Lucinda McCrae to me.

I nod at him. “Say what you gotta say.”

“Someone was using the TV to spy on her. They hacked into the system and got into her Wi-Fi, including everything she had stored in the cloud. They had access to it all. Her bank accounts, everything. I was able to do some forensics using her backup device. They did leave prints everywhere, but they weren’t readily traceable. It was somebody who knew what they were doing. It’s going to take some time.” The one thing we don’t have.

“Tell me more about the gardener,” I say to Delilah, who has already confirmed she got a hinky feeling from both the priest and Virginia.

“His name is Silas Drury. He has a record. Spent ten years in jail for rape. It appears he’s stayed out of trouble since. But I’m not done looking at him.”

“Don’t go too far down the rabbit hole. It was statutory rape,” JD says. “Underage girlfriend. Rumor has it that it was consensual.”

“The youngest Beaufort girl,” Lucinda pipes in. “There was only three years between the two. Her daddy hated him. Their families traveled in different circles. But no matter what he did to keep them apart, they always managed to be together. The day Silas turned eighteen, they were caught in the act and her daddy had him arrested. There was a set-up, a quick trial, an inexperienced court-appointed lawyer, and a judge who belonged to the same society as the Beauforts.”

“Where does he live?” I ask.

“North Charleston with his girlfriend,” Lucinda answers. “I think his official residence is on Albert’s Island, but he stays with his girlfriend.”

“Get an address,” I instruct Delilah. “Miss McCrae, how do you know

this?”

“There is very little that I don’t know about Charleston. Lived here all my life. I volunteer where I can, and work at the library,” she adds, like the library is the font for all information. What she failed to say is she’s a busybody.

“What about Father Jesse Creighton?” I ask. “What do you know about him?”

She purses her lips. “Albert’s Island isn’t *exactly* Charleston. But he’s been here about ten years. Comes into the library with cards for us to give to the homeless women. His secretary has a boy who was born with some mental limitations.” She shrugs. “That’s all I know. I don’t get too close to preachers.”

“Got the address. The house belongs to Melinda Beaufort,” Delilah says. “Does that sound right, Miss McCrae?”

Lucinda nods. “That’s right. Let that be a lesson to all you daddies.” She doesn’t spare JD a glance, but that comment was aimed at him.

I nod at Delilah. “Meet me in the Jeep.”

“Chase, reconnect the Wi-Fi and the TV at Kate’s. Take two of my guys with you. Give whoever might be watching a show, so they think we’re looking for her because of something related to the photo—make it up—let them believe we’re giving up our search, because it appears she’s left town, and it’s not worth our time to chase her.

Before I leave, I pull JD into my office. “What do you need?” he asks before I can say anything.

“Another favor you’re not going to like.”

“Name it.”

“I trust Lucinda McCrae—to an extent. Make sure she doesn’t leave Sweetgrass or use the phone. Delilah took her cell phone to be on the safe side.”

“Does Lucinda know Delilah has it?”

“No.” JD’s lips twitch.

“We’ll take her over to the main house. That’ll keep her busy. Don’t give her a second thought.”

This is the way it’s always been with JD and me. We rarely apologize with words. We apologize by standing up when the other needs something. Doesn’t matter how big or small.

“You’re going to find her,” he says, with a hand on my shoulder.

“You bet your ass. And when I do, I’m bringing her here.”  
“Wouldn’t expect anything different.”

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WHEN WE GET to Silas’s house, before I break in the front door, Delilah gives me a stern warning. “We need Silas alive until we find her. You can kill him later,” she calls over her shoulder, heading to the back of the house, where she grabs him by the throat when he opens the backdoor to sneak out. While he begs for his life, she drags him inside with a gun barrel against his head.

Prison breeds two kinds of men. Those who assimilate, thrive in the structure, and don’t mind going back. And those who will do anything in their power to never go back. My bet is that Silas falls into the latter camp.

We’ve got to make him believe the alternative to telling us the truth is far worse than any prison.

“Have you ever seen this woman?” I ask, holding up an image of Kate from my phone. My foot is on his chest in an encouraging gesture.

“No.”

Delilah reaches over and grabs his testicles. “I’m going cut off your balls one at time and shove them down your throat, before I scatter your itty-bitty brains all over this pretty rug.” The stench of his bowels emptying tells me he doesn’t want to die.

“Y-Yes,” he stutters, sweat dripping off his face.

“Where?”

“The rectory. St. Maggie’s.”

“When was the last time you saw her?”

He doesn’t say anything. “When?” I bark my heel grinding into his chest.

“Last week.”

Delilah pulls out a knife and runs the point over his crotch. “We don’t have time for starts and fits. Tell us everything you know, and be quick about it,” she says, scraping the blade over his balls.

“They have her. Not sure where they keep them when they’re alive.”

“Who is them?” I interrupt.

“The women. Buried in the back in the old well after St. Magdalene’s Feast.

*You have got to be fucking kidding me.* “When is that?”



“Tomorrow.”

“Who kidnaps and kills women?”

“Not sure,” he coughs, and I grind into his chest harder. “I think just—the priest and Virginia. I don’t know anything about it.”

“Any weapons at the church?”

“Never seen any,” he grunts.

“Have you ever talked to the police about the dead women?”

He looks up at me. “Who would believe me? An ex-con. They’d blame it all on me. I never saw them do it.”

I reach down and compress the artery in his throat. “Not yet,” Delilah warns. “We might still need him.” I don’t kill him, but I squeeze while he teeters on consciousness.

“Call Ty,” I tell her. “Get him over here and have him bring another guy with him.” I stand up and shove my boot into Silas’ ribs. “When they get here, you will give them any information you have about the layout of the church.”

“Let’s tie up this bastard so we can get out of here.”

While we conducted the interrogation, I was in full commando mode. Not one emotion interfered with the mission. But in the car on the way back to the office, I’m struggling mightily.

She might be dead before we get to her. And if she’s not, she will be soon. My mind goes to all the awful places. The things they could do to her until all I see is her face—contorted in pain.

“Don’t,” Delilah admonishes, without a trace of empathy. “Wherever your head is, get it the hell out. There’s no time for licking your wounds. She’s just another hostage. We have a rescue to plan, soldier, and no time for dicking around. Man the fuck up.”

Her words are jarring. The years of training, of developing mental toughness and laser focus, flood in with a force that won’t let up until I tell it to stand down. And I won’t do that until the rescue is complete.



## SMITH

When Delilah and I get back to office, the Wilder brothers are all there, along with my entire security team not on duty elsewhere. Even those who are off. The show of support almost dredges up emotion I can't afford.

"Where's Lucinda?" I ask JD.

"With Gabrielle and Lally. They know the score." *God help her if she steps out of line.* "She's staying the night," he continues. "They have her so busy, she hasn't looked for her phone."

"Did someone contact the police?" Gray asks.

"No," I say pointedly. "We have no idea what involvement, if any, the police have in this. Judge King has always been a law and order guy. The cops love him." They sat on the missing person's report. They don't get any more chances.

"Delilah." She looks up from her laptop. "Vests, night-vision goggles, a scope—"

"I know what we need," she says, out the door before I finish.

"You're going in tonight?" Gray asks.

I don't have time for twenty questions from someone who is as useless as tits on a boar hog. But I'm sure he means well.

"No choice. This might be connected to the Feast of St. Magdalene, which is tomorrow."

"Connected how?"

*Why can't he just shut his damn trap?* "No fucking clue."

"I made a few good friends at the FBI while DW was president," Gray says, watching me carefully. "We've stayed in touch. I can call in a favor."

“Not yet. I’m not sure how far up the food chain this goes. I want to be on the scene before any cowboy gets there.”

“All set,” Delilah says, coming back into the office.

“Chase, I need you to draw a perimeter and text me the coordinates. Have one of my guys help you. And see if there’s any way to get a visual inside the church or the rectory. Ty is with the gardener, if you need additional information on the layout.”

“Anything else?” Chase asks, his nose already in the computer.

“One more thing. We need to go in through the main road—it’s our best bet tonight. I want to know how close we can get the vehicle without being seen. We’ll hike the rest.”

“Who you taking with you?”

“Small team. We’ll secure the perimeter, and Josh will man it unless you tell me it’s too big for one guy. There’s water on three sides, so I don’t see containment as an issue. Delilah will go in with me.”

“No.”

Delilah whips her head around, following Gray’s booming voice in the corner.

“You have no idea what you’re going to find when you get inside,” Gray says through gritted teeth. “You’re working off thin information. It’s too risky. Not to mention it’s a fucking church, Smith. She can’t afford another scandal.”

“No?” Delilah repeats incredulously, walking straight up to him. “You haven’t earned the right to tell me no, pretty boy.” She might have a sweet voice, but she’s not using it now. The room is deadly quiet, mouths hanging open, eyes trained on the pair.

“Hey, asshole,” I bark at Gray. “I need her with her head on tight. When this is all over, you two can rip off your clothes and have at it. But not until Kate’s back.” I turn to Delilah, “Are you in or not?”

“I’m in,” she snaps. “Don’t ask again.”

“Hey.” JD steps closer, so only I can hear. “I know my way around a gun.”

“I’m well aware, and I appreciate it. But I need you here.” He nods. “I also appreciate that you went behind my back and paid extra for those goggles and the heat-seeking devices. We’ll need them tonight.”

“Call if you run into anything unexpected,” he says, ignoring the last part of what I just told him. “Antoine is keeping me company until we hear

something.” Antoine is a former Marine and JD’s driver. He’s a good person to have on the premises tonight in the event of trouble.

I glance at Gray on the way out. “Give us a thirty-minute lead, then make the call.”



## KATE

Virginia spent the afternoon *purifying* me. She scrubbed my skin raw, administered a douche and an enema. The degradation was unspeakable, but I didn't say a single word while she worked. All I could think about was the beating she endured earlier because of me.

I'm given salty broth for dinner. I suspect it's laced with something sinister, but I am so dehydrated from all the cleansing, I drink most of it anyway.

There's something afoot. I felt it all day, but when the priest and Virginia come for me, I know my instincts were right.

Virginia takes my nightgown, and dresses me in a hooded cloak that reaches mid-calf. I am leashed by one ankle, my hands restrained behind my back. Otherwise, the chains are gone.

"Where are we going?" I ask, although I'm not sure I want to know.

"It's the eve of your birthday, Magdalene," Father Jesse responds from the doorway. He gives me a ghastly smile. "We have rituals to perform and the altar to prepare."

They lead me down the turret stairs, out through the back of the rectory, and into the church through the sacristy. In the sacristy, the leash is attached to a wardrobe door while Father Jesse puts on white vestments. Virginia takes the cape from my shoulders and hangs it in the closet.

When the priest is done dressing, he turns his attention to me. His eyes slither over every inch of my skin while he oohs and ahhs. It's vile and degrading, and my mind begins to turn itself off. A trick it's learned since I've been here.

“Magdalene, you’re not like the other women. You’re heavenly with your creamy pale skin and red hair. The others were imposters meant to tempt me, but you are a gift from my Father. I will not sacrifice you.”

“You must,” Virginia cries frantically.

“Gigi,” he tips her chin so that she looks at him. “Jealousy is a grave sin, punishable by God.”

“I’m sorry, Master. I want to be your special kitten forever.”

“Jesus,” he admonishes. “We’re in the sacristy.”

“Jesus,” she repeats. The back and forth is too much for my brain to process. The drugs must be taking effect.

“You’ll always be my pet. But Magdalene will be my bride.” He steps away from her. “Let’s begin the ritual.”

I am taken, naked, into the sanctuary. I glance up at the cross. The bitterness of betrayal fills my soul as I stare into Christ’s face.

“Light the censor,” the priest instructs Virginia, “and bring it to me.”

I stand idly, my mind refusing to rouse itself.

Father Jesse takes the censor, shaking it while he walks around the altar, chanting a Latin prayer. The frankincense and myrrh curl around us. It’s trancelike and strangely calming.

My leg is tethered to the foot of the massive altar, but my hands are freed. I watch my fingers wiggle slowly. They seem to belong to someone else.

My hands have not been free since—since I was taken captive. But I’m not elated, as I would expect to be. It’s as though my emotions—my reactions—have been muted.

Virginia and I follow Jesus’s commands carefully. We prepare the altar with fresh cloths and add three long leather straps, which are hidden underneath.

“You will be strapped to the altar tomorrow, while I anoint you with my seed.” My brain is slogging. The thoughts are disconnected and floating in slow motion.

Father Jesse sits on the high-backed, cushioned seat reserved for priests during Mass. There is a basin of water and a Purificator—the white linen cloth used to wipe the chalice, near his feet. “Kneel before your Lord and Master, Magdalene.”

I kneel immediately. “Remove my shoes, and wash my feet.” My hands move to do as he asks. But it’s as though they are disconnected from the rest of my body. “Now dry them.”



When I'm through, I sit back, still on my knees. "Bring Magdalene the nard, Gigi."

She gingerly places the alabaster jar with the perfumed oil into my hands. "You will anoint my fingers," he says. "For tomorrow, I will use these fingers in sacrifice. I will probe your body and satisfy myself with your flesh. It is my reward before I die for mankind. You love your Lord, don't you, Magdalene?"

"Yes," I murmur.

Jesus smiles. "Now my feet," he instructs. "Then wipe them with your hair, as written in the scripture."

*It wasn't Mary Magdalene, Jesus. It was Mary of Bethany who wiped your feet with her hair. Don't you remember?* I want to remind him, but I don't. Instead, I rub the earthy oil into his feet and lower my head to wipe away the excess with a handful of my hair.

"Get the hell away from her, you animal," a familiar voice booms from the nave.

While I'm still on my knees, Jesus stands so abruptly, I fall back.

"How did you get in here?" Jesus demands.

The man approaches. I know him. But I'm not sure. "Get away from her," he says in an outraged voice, "or I'll kill you on the altar where you pray in blasphemy."

"Magdalene," Jesus says calmly, holding me in front of him. "The devil has come to wrest you from your Savior."

"Her name is Kate," the devil says.

*Kate. Her name is Kate. Why is that so familiar?*

I freeze in place. Kate. My name is Kate. Smith. Is he really here, or am I dreaming? How would he know where to find me? *My name is Kate.* I step away from the priest. The man steps closer. He looks like Smith. I hug myself. But what if he is the devil? "No! Get away!" I shout at him, hurrying back to Jesus. The big man stops.

"You are a saint, Magdalene," Jesus murmurs. "He is the devil. Stay with Jesus. I'll protect you."

"Kate," the man says gently. "I talked to Fiona this morning, she needs you in Boston."

"Don't listen to him," Jesus says. "The devil is full of trickery."

The big man is getting closer, and Jesus is stepping back from me.

"Kate," he says, handing his gun to me. "You can save yourself."

I snatch the gun from him with a trembling hand and take several steps away from them both. I wave the gun between them. Jesus and the devil.

“Give me the gun,” Jesus says. “So I can protect you from the devil, Magdalene.”

“I trust you, Kate,” the devil says.

“Gigi, go get the gun from Magdalene.” She doesn’t move. “Go,” he says harshly.” She begins to walk toward me, but in just three steps she falls to the ground with a thud, screaming and gripping her ankle. It’s bleeding.

It’s as though she’s been shot. But I didn’t hear anything, and I don’t see anyone. I’m the only person with a gun. It’s the devil’s trickery.

“He’s going to hurt you, Magdalene. Just like he hurt Gigi. They’ve come for me. I’m not ready to go. My work on Earth isn’t done. Don’t let them take me. Shoot him. Shoot the devil.”

I turn toward the devil. “It’s going to be okay, Kate. I’ve got you,” he murmurs.

In a heartbeat—I swivel, cock the gun, and take the shot. The boom reverberates throughout the church. The recoil takes me to my knees, and instantly, Smith is behind me, stripping the gun from my trembling hands. We watch the priest writhe, and gurgle his last breath on Earth.

“You killed him,” Virginia shrieks, draping her body over his. “You murdered Christ.”

I collapse into Smith’s arms.



## SMITH

Delilah drags me out of Kate's room when the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner arrives to collect evidence for the rape kit. "If she wants you to know what happened," Delilah says, "she'll tell you. In her time."

"She can't be alone in there."

"I'll stay with her until Fiona gets here. We can call Gabby, if she prefers, or if you think it would be better. It's her story to tell, Smith. You don't get to learn the details by overhearing them. Not if you ever expect to be the man in her life."

"Fine," I snap. "Go. But give me your weapon. It was fired."

"I didn't take a single shot," she says. "Although I considered shooting you when you gave her your gun."

I ignore the last remark. "Who shot Virginia?"

"I'm not sure. It came from up top. I didn't detect any movement. But I couldn't leave my position. You gave a delirious woman your weapon. What the fuck, Smith?"

"You never saw anyone?" I ask.

"No. I went right over there when that bastard excuse for a priest was laying on the ground. But whoever took the shot was long gone. I checked with Josh. He didn't come into the building until later. The FBI showed up not long after. That team was assembled quickly, maybe someone came inside before the rest got there and didn't want to be caught violating protocol."

I nod. "Maybe. Go be with Kate."

"I'll take good care of her. No one's going to hurt her without getting

through me.”

Not a soul leaves Kate’s room for two hours, except for the nurse in search of a warm blanket. It’s Charleston, at the end of July. The only explanation for a warm blanket is—the fuck if I know. The nurse assures me she’s holding up well. But that’s all she’s willing to say.

Soldiers are good at waiting. That’s mostly what we do. But I’m climbing the walls right now. Blaming myself at every turn. I knew there was something wrong with that priest. I knew it from the first moment I laid eyes on him with Kate. But I let it happen. I glance at the door hoping Delilah’s nurturing skills are cutting it—and wonder if I should call Gabby. But I decide against it.

There’s someone else who might be better to help Kate. Someone who has had decades of experience comforting young women who lost everything.

“Smith,” a groggy voice says when she answers the phone. I didn’t even give the late hour a second thought. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine, Mom. Sorry to call at this hour and scare you.”

“You don’t sound fine.”

“A friend of mine was captured and held hostage for almost a week. We’re at the ER now. She’s got friends, but her mother died when she was a baby. It seems that if a woman ever needed her mother, it would be now. I’m wondering if you can come to Charleston. She could use your help.”

“How is she?”

“Physically she appears to be okay. But—a week in captivity is a long time.”

“She must be a very special friend.”

“Yeah. But I managed to be one of the bad guys in this mess.”

“When do you want me?”

“Give us a couple of days. I’m sorry, again, for waking you up.”

“I’m glad you did. Sometimes a sincere promise to do better,” she says softly, “with some real effort behind it, goes a long way to mending fences. Especially when it’s accompanied by a big man groveling.”

Although I can’t picture it, I suspect my father has done a fair share of groveling over the years. “I’m not sure this is salvageable.”

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BEFORE THE FIRST light peeks over the horizon, Gabby and JD are at the hospital, along with Lucinda and all my people. Fiona is here, too. JD had his plane waiting in Boston so we could get her here as soon as we had Kate.

Her father refused to come. With all his law enforcement connections, he never lifted a finger to find Kate. I wanted to give him a piece of my mind, and drag his sorry ass here, but he's still drunk and cursing his daughter. He's on my list of people to deal with later.

The FBI and the Charleston police questioned me extensively, wanting to know how Kate got my gun. They stopped when I vowed to take out a billboard and sue their asses for every dead woman buried on the church property.

I never use my father's connections—not for myself. *Never*. But I remind every one of those bastards that he was head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and there will be hell to pay for every sonofabitch who knew something that might have stopped the carnage. That pretty much shut them all the fuck up, especially the police.

By the time I'm allowed to see Kate, she's sitting on the edge of the bed, ready to be discharged. She's dressed in clothes that don't match, but they're hers. I am overwhelmed with emotion. I don't remember ever feeling this way. We almost got there too late. But somehow—somehow—she managed to survive a week. Physically, anyway.

"Hi," I say, gently, taking a seat next to her on the bed. "Someone brought you clothes."

"Josh. Delilah sent him over to my house. Thank you for rescuing me," she says so softly, it's almost a whisper.

"You rescued yourself."

"I'm sorry—"

"No, Kate. You're done apologizing to me—to your family—to the entire damn world. But I have plenty of apologizing to do. Not now—but when you're up to hearing it. I have a lot to say."

"Why did you give me your gun? I could have killed you. I haven't stopped thinking about it the entire time I've been here."

"I wanted you to know that we're a team. That I trust you. And I wanted you to know you could save yourself."

"What if I had killed you? I was drugged. I didn't know for sure if you were real, or part of a dream, or a delusion, or—I could have never lived with myself."

“I didn’t think about the last part—at all. Maybe that was wrong. I just wanted you to know—”

The door opens and a doctor comes in. I get up and offer to step outside. Not because I want to, but because Delilah is right. This is Kate’s story to tell, when she’s ready.

“Stay,” she says. “Please.” *Stay*. Such a small word, but it fills me with hope.

“You’re dehydrated,” the doctor says, “but the fluids we gave you will help. Your skin already looks better. Just as the preliminary bloodwork showed, you had drugs in your system when you arrived. I expect you were also given things that we can no longer detect.” My chest is closing in and I want to go find that priest and kill him again.

“The CAT scan’s negative,” he continues. “If you don’t have someplace safe to stay tonight, I can admit you. Offer’s still open. Otherwise, you’re good to go. Follow up with a primary care doctor in a couple days—we found you one, and I would highly recommend mental health services. You’ve been through a lot.”

“I’d like to go home,” she says. “I have a friend staying with me for a few days, but thank you.”

“You bet. I’m going to finish up the paperwork, and we’ll have you out of here in no time.”

When the doctor leaves, I sit back down next to her on the bed. “Can I hold your hand?” I ask.

She looks at me with gut-wrenching sadness, and nods. I cradle her hand gently in mine. I want to squeeze, but I don’t. “We’re not sure if there was anyone else involved. It’s not safe for you and Fiona to be at your house until we finish putting the pieces together.”

“King,” she says. “It sounds far-fetched. But the priest called Virginia ‘Gigi.’ Do you remember what Judge Sorlin said about Gigi?”

I nod. “They’ve questioned her. Petey is King’s son. He had sex with her when she was underage. There was some kind of botched abortion attempt, and the baby was born prematurely. Sorlin was a member of St. Magdalene’s at the time. The priest took her in, and she’s been there ever since.”

“Father Jesse has only been there for ten years.”

“Priest before him who retired. He wasn’t a psychopath, just an asshole. Creighton had some trouble in the seminary, and in his first parish. They thought putting him at St. Maggie’s—a dying parish, would keep him out of

trouble. He kept King's secret."

"I'm so numb and exhausted," Kate says, hanging her head. "I don't have the energy to summon any anger, but I'm sure I'll get there."

"Everything in time."

She gazes up at me. "Did they kill Fenny?"

I suck in a breath. "Yes, according to Virginia. There are so many layers. Some of which are still being unearthed. We don't have to do it all today."

She sighs, taking back her hand and placing it on her lap. "I'm not up to any more right now."

"I want you and Fiona to stay at my place. I'll stay next door at the security office. There are beds there—we're set up for overnights."

"I don't think I should go back to Sweetgrass."

I ignore that comment. "Gabby wants you to stay in the main house. It's definitely more comfortable, but I thought you might like some space."

She twists her fingers nervously.

"I can set you up, and Fiona if she wants, upstairs at my place. Or she can take one of the bedrooms downstairs." Even though I mean every word, I grapple with the next part. "You don't need to be in my bed tonight, or tomorrow, or ever, if that's not what you want. The invitation to stay at my place isn't contingent on anything."

She's quiet, struggling with her thoughts. "I'll stay upstairs with Fi," she says after a little while. "We're used to sharing a room. You don't mind staying downstairs?" There's a knock on the door, and Fiona pokes her head in.

"Just checking," she says, coming into the room. Kate smiles at her. It's a weak little smile, but it's promising. Apparently, she hasn't said much to Fiona about what happened, but just having her around is comforting for Kate. I can see it.

"I'll leave you two alone," I say to Kate. "Do you need anything before I go?" She shakes her head.

"Smith," Kate calls. I turn. The concern in her voice seeps into my chest. "Please don't go too far."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right outside the door if you need me."





## KATE

Fiona went back to Boston this morning. We clung to each other and cried when she left.

I'm sure she was disappointed I didn't confide in her more while she was here. I couldn't find the words. She didn't push, and Smith hasn't, either. Although we really haven't had much time alone, and we won't for another few days because his parents are visiting.

I hear his mother in the kitchen making dinner. I should go down and see if she needs help, but I'd rather hide up here.

Neither of Smith's parents have said a word to me, but I'm sure they know all about what happened. It's awkward. Although, it's not just that. My relationships with older women have always been strained, with well-meaning souls trying to make up for the mothering I missed, or maybe they were just trying to curry favor with my dad. Either way, I've learned to shy away from them. Lucinda is one of the few exceptions. She's content with friendship.

As the clattering of pots becomes louder and more frequent, I decide staying up here isn't an option.

"Hi," I say when I get to kitchen. "Do you need some help?"

"I'd love some help." She glances at me with a quick smile before going back to pounding chicken cutlets. "Thank you for letting me use your kitchen. I'm not much of a woman of leisure, and as pretty as it is here, I like to be useful. I was planning on breaded cutlets and a big salad for supper. It'll be light enough to have blueberry crisp for dessert."

"It's not my kitchen, but I know it pretty well. Do you have everything

you need?”

“I went to the grocery store this morning but forgot the ice cream. On purpose.” She waggles her brows at me. Her eyes are light brown with gold. Same as Smith’s. “Figured it would give my husband something to do this afternoon. He likes being idle less than I do.”

She washes her hands and brings me a bag of green beans and a colander. “You sit right there and keep me company.”

I start to trim the beans with a paring knife from the counter and notice her side-eying me. “Kate, don’t feel you need to trim those beans fancy because I’m here.”

*Fancy?* “This is how I normally trim them. Is there another way?”

She takes a bean and snaps off the top. “They’re not as pretty or even this way, but they taste the same, and there’s something satisfying about snapping the damn things.”

She goes back to mixing breadcrumbs and spices, and I give her way a try. She’s right. There is something satisfying about snapping the heads off.

“I’m sorry you’re staying at the main house. I’m sure you would have liked to stay here with Smith.”

“Don’t be sorry,” she says in a stage whisper, with the gleam of fun all over her face. “It’s so much nicer over there. It’s like staying at an exquisite bed and breakfast run by people you adore. And it gives me a chance to cuddle with Gracie. My children are scattered everywhere, and we don’t like to visit too often. They’re entitled to their own lives, but I miss my granddaughters when I don’t see them. They grow so fast. Do you have siblings?”

“I have three brothers. *Had* three brothers. The youngest died in Iraq. No sisters.”

“What was your brother’s name?”

“Liam.”

“I’m sorry about Liam. War is a terrible thing. Not just for those deployed, but for those who are left behind to carry on, and to worry.” She’s wistful. “You made quick work of those snap beans. You ready for the blueberries?”

“I think I’m up for the challenge. Any tricks?”

“Afraid not.” She replaces the beans with two quarts of blueberries. “It’s tedious.”

“This is a lot of berries.”

“I’m making a big crisp. Smith likes to eat it for breakfast. He never asks for much, so I like to spoil him when I can.”

It’s true. I smile to myself. After his run and a protein shake, he scrounges for leftovers before he leaves for work.

“My mom died when I was thirty-five,” she says, with a touch of melancholy. “I was married with children, but it was still awful.”

Here it comes. I’m not sure what exactly, but—

“My dad remarried a few years later,” she continues, wiping up the counters as she talks. “To a woman named Alice. It was uncomfortable when he started bringing her around, but he had loved my mother deeply, and he was lonely. My sisters and I decided we were going to suck it up—to use a phrase my children are partial to.” She smiles. “What I love most about Alice is that she never tried to replace my mother. She let my sisters and me dictate the boundaries to a large extent, and we each have a wonderful relationship with her—but all different. She was wise from the start. Mother’s aren’t like trading cards. You don’t swap them out.” She sighs, drying her hands. “How do those berries look?”

She just sent a message, in her own roundabout way, which is interesting because her interactions with Smith and her husband are very direct. But I appreciate it, because I don’t have a heart-to-heart in me right now, or the fortitude to deal with direct. “The berries are plump and juicy,” I respond with a grateful smile. “They’re almost destemmed.”

“Give them a quick rinse when you’re done.”

She looks out the kitchen window. “He’s already back with the ice cream. That didn’t take long. I hope you’ve got some errands to keep him busy. I don’t care how many presidents he’s advised, when he’s sitting around with nothing to do, he’s a pain in the ass.”

I laugh. There might be plenty of people who have taken orders from General Sinclair over the years, but I suspect this woman, standing right here, isn’t one of them.

“I don’t. But maybe Smith has something to keep him busy.”

“Now that would be interesting,” she says.



## KATE

I go down to the kitchen to find Smith's dad sipping coffee. "Good morning," I say, glancing at the toolbox at his feet.

"Good morning."

"Smith out for a run?"

He nods. "I noticed last night that this faucet leaks. I didn't mean to interrupt your solitude."

"My guess is I interrupted yours." The corner of his mouth twitches as he takes another sip. "Can I make you some breakfast?"

"I've already had breakfast, but how about if I get you something? I make a mean omelet."

He says it with such zeal that I laugh. "No, thank you. Just coffee for me."

It's quiet while I pour cream into my coffee. Almost too quiet. "What are your plans for today?" I ask, as he organizes some tools at the base of the sink.

He doesn't say anything for a moment, and the quiet vibrates in the room.

"Kate, bring your coffee and keep me company for a minute," he says on his way to the kitchen table.

I don't want to keep him company, but I follow his directions, because he didn't mean, *if you feel like it*. He meant, *get over here and sit your ass down*.

Smith might have his mother's eyes, but he has his father's strong jaw and his build.

"I'm not what you call a big sharer," he begins. "I mean, I'd share my last drop of water with a thirsty man or my last bite of food. Unless it was

chocolate cake, then all bets are off.” He smiles, and I smile back—his is wistful and mine is nerves.

“But I don’t share my feelings. I’m a private man. Especially about things that happened while in combat.”

I glance at him. He’s clutching the coffee mug between his hands. “But there’s something that happened to me when I was a young soldier that I think you need to hear.”

His tone is serious, and although I don’t know exactly what to expect, I suspect it’s not a heart-warming story about teaching Iraqi children how to play soccer in an empty field.

“When I was a young captain, a mission I was on went bad. I was captured. Held for a month before they found me, and longer before I could be extricated safely.” He peers into my eyes, seeing more than I want to show him.

“During that time,” he continues, “I was beaten, waterboarded, starved, left naked in a room with rats who fed off my open sores. I didn’t know day from night, and I was penetrated with objects by men who believed they were doing God’s work.”

Despite my numbness, I feel the trickle of a lone tear slide off my chin.

“I had a new bride, and a war to win, and a lifetime of shit to get done. Just like you. There’s nothing that you can tell me that I haven’t personally experienced, or that I haven’t heard before.”

We sit in silence for what feels like an eternity. “When you’re ready,” he says gently, sliding me a card with his contact information. “I’m a good listener.” He stands and starts toward the sink.

“I don’t remember everything,” I say with a wobbly voice. “Sometimes I think I don’t remember the details because they’re too painful—physically painful—to recall.”

General Sinclair comes back to the table and sits down quietly.

“I woke up chained to a bed in a cold room.” The story, everything I know, begins to pour out. It starts dispassionate, a bubbling brook, but the storm surges, until the flood of emotion breaches the barrier and the memories spill out.

The general sits calmly across from me. He offers a pressed handkerchief but doesn’t say a single word until I’ve gotten it all out.

“You did great, young lady,” he says after I’ve quieted. “You had one objective, and that was to stay alive. You did it, and the enemy has been

defeated. You deserve not only a medal, but a promotion.”

“What if I had killed Smith? Why did he take that chance with his life?”

“Because he’s a good soldier. A natural leader. He was born with instincts some men never learn.”

I still don’t understand. *What if I had shot him?* It haunts my dreams.

“He could have taken out the enemy, but that would have left you always looking over your shoulder. Always wondering if you could take care of yourself. You must be pretty important to him.”

I snifle.

“Can I touch you?” he asks, before taking my hand, just the way his son did. It’s clearly something they were taught about trauma victims. Only from him, it’s not so hard to hear.

I nod.

“Smith is up to this, Kate. He’s been in some bad places with some bad people. What you have to say to him will surely feel like a dagger through the heart, but it’s not the first time he’ll have heard it, or something damn close.”

“I don’t know how we can go on from this.”

“Because you’re broken? Dirty? Ashamed? I felt that way for a long time. There’s something about being sexually violated—and you were, even if you weren’t raped. You were forced to watch what he did to that woman and made to believe your turn was coming. You felt as close to death as you’ve ever been.” He grips my hand tighter.

“But not getting through it. That’s bullshit, Kate. I can’t tell you how, because it’s different for everyone, only that you can. I’m sure of it.”

“I’m not,” I whisper.

“You gotta want it bad enough. My biggest regret was that it took me a decade to tell my wife what happened. I held the shame close. Took it everywhere, even into our bed at night. It didn’t make me a better man, or a better husband, or even a better soldier. Don’t make the same mistake.”

I’m wiping away tears when the kitchen door slams shut. “What the fuck did you say to her?”

General Sinclair stands, with his shoulders squared and his head high.

“Smith, stop!” I jump up. “Please, stop. He didn’t do anything.”

“I don’t need you to defend me, Kate,” he says, before turning to his son whose hands are fisted at his side. “I told her some things she needed to hear. I don’t need your permission, son, to talk to anyone. And if I were you, I would learn to use my words more judiciously. This might be your home, but



I still outrank you in every way that counts.”

He lays a comforting hand on my shoulder. “I know it doesn’t seem like it, but everything I said earlier about him, it was all true.”

I turn and wrap my arms around him, clinging tightly as he embraces me. He’s a four-star general, the former head of the Joint Chiefs. I’m not under his command or his responsibility. He doesn’t even know me, but he threw me a rope, one human being to another, and secured it to an anchor. He recognized that I needed to talk but didn’t know how. He trusted me with, perhaps, his darkest secret, *even though I’m a reporter*.

“Thank you,” I say quietly. It hardly seems like enough.

“Hang onto that card,” he tells me, before giving Smith a stern look, and walking out the door.

“What happened with my father?”

I’m not sure what to say. “He told me about an experience he had as a young soldier.”

“When he was captured?”

“If you want the details, you’ll have to ask him.”

Smith nods. “You sure you’re okay?” I expect him to pull me in, but he’s still careful about my personal space, and he doesn’t. It’s another one of the many things that’s changed between us.

“I’m fine.”

“Why are his damn tools all over my kitchen?” he asks, in an obvious pivot. I’m sure the changes eat at him, too.



## SMITH

My father is fixing a leaky faucet that I keep forgetting about. Something about seeing him taking care of it makes me feel inadequate. Like I'm not man enough to take care of my own business.

"You don't have to do that," I say more gruffly than I intend. "I'm capable of putting in a new washer."

"It's the gasket, and you've got a lot on your hands. I've got nothing but time on mine. Retirement is horseshit."

My mother has stronger words for it. I'm sure he's insufferable hanging around the house without wars to plan, or troops to inspect, or presidents to confer with. I owe him an apology, and this seems like as good a time as any to grovel.

"I don't know what you told Kate, but she seemed to appreciate it. I'm sorry—I was disrespectful earlier—but she's been through a lot, and sometimes you're heavy-handed."

He chuckles. "I have a wife, three daughters, and five granddaughters. All of them handfuls—especially the wife. I have plenty of experience talking to women. Hand me that socket wrench, will you?"

"I can fix the leak later."

He ignores me. "She's going to need some time, and someone to listen without judgment, and without flying off the handle when they hear the story. I told her you're up to the job." He grunts as he pulls off the washer. "Why didn't you call me when you knew they had her—before you went in?"

"I knew I could take care of it."

"Men don't go in alone."

“I wasn’t alone.”

He hands me the wrench. “You took a risk handing her the gun. She was disoriented.”

The image of Kate in that church is something I’ll never get out of my mind. “It was important.”

“I told her that, too.”

“I didn’t call because it was a simple extrication that any rookie could have successfully completed.”

“Extrications are never as simple as they look from the outside. You can’t plan for all the contingencies. That one certainly wasn’t simple. The thing that made it complicated was how much you care about the hostage. It would have been prudent to run the plan by someone.”

“I’m sorry I disappointed you.”

“I’m not disappointed, although the plan was ill-advised. But do you know how many times I’ve headed into danger with an ill-advised plan?”

I shake my head. “Not about the rescue. I’m sorry I left the Army—that I didn’t make it a career. I don’t regret the decision, but I’m sure it was hard for you to swallow.”

“You’d have never been satisfied with their plan for you. Not at your age.”

“I volunteered to give up a piece of my liver—it was an excuse for getting out. I’d had enough of the politics. That doesn’t make me a very good soldier.”

“You are the best kind of soldier. You served with honor.”

“I didn’t want to follow orders anymore.”

“So you left. That’s what good soldiers do. What they don’t do is stay in, and then do whatever the fuck they want. You served honorably right up until the moment you were discharged. You have never disappointed me. Was I disappointed by your decision? Not going to lie—you’re the kind of man that men like me dream of having under our command. It’s a loss to the United States military and to the country. So yes, I was disappointed in the way it worked out, but never in you, son. Never in you.”

He looks up at me. “But when I hear you talk like this—I’m disappointed in myself that I didn’t speak up. That I didn’t tell you how proud I am, and have always been, to be your father. I’m sorry I pushed you into the military.”

“You didn’t push me. From as far back as I can remember, I wanted to be

a soldier—like you. It was an honor to serve ... until it wasn't."

"You didn't go to West Point because your mother believed you should have a choice. She understood that you had a rebellious streak in you that would make following orders that didn't comport with your worldview difficult. I thought it made you a badass. I should have bent over backwards to make sure you looked carefully at all the choices."

"I don't regret one second of it," I say firmly. It's the truth. "It's just the politics became too complicated, and it was showing up in all sorts of ways that made it hard for me to sleep at night."

"I respect that. More than you can imagine. And what you're doing—what you're planning to do—I respect that too. Not everyone who serves wears a uniform."

"What I'm planning requires a good deal of expertise and sound judgment. JD is helping me get the business aspect off the ground. But there's the planning and execution—I could use some advice with that part."

"You want me to work for you?"

I laugh because he asks it in a way that screams, "You have to be fucking kidding me, kid."

"Yeah."

"It would be an honor, soldier. But I promised my wife I'd retire, so it will have to be strictly on a consultant basis. She probably doesn't need to know the details. And I still outrank you, of course."

"I could have fixed that faucet about three times by now. I think you've been polishing the brass for too long."

He hands me the wrench. "Have at it."



## KATE

I'm alone for the first time since I've been back. Smith's parents left early this morning, and he's at work. I assured him I would be fine, but a panic threatens to derail me when the doorbell rings. I force myself to take several calming breaths. It's impossible to get onto the property. At least that's what I tell myself.

When I get the courage, I peek through the peephole. *JD*. What could he possibly want at this hour? I grip the wooden frame, opening the door.

"Good morning," he says, in a non-threatening way that helps me relax a bit.

"Smith already left for work. He's probably next door."

"I came to see you," he says pointedly, in that clipped tone he uses.

Immediately, I want to say, *I'm sorry I'm still here. I know you don't want me here, but I'll leave as soon as I can*—but I don't say anything resembling that. I'm through apologizing to every goddamn person just for breathing.

"What can I help you with?" I ask in a voice that's not aggressive, but not particularly friendly, either. It's *déjà vu*, I realize, only this time, he's the unwelcome guest.

"May I come in?"

I step aside. "It is your house."

"It's Smith's place," he answers curtly, on his way in.

"But you own it."

He doesn't respond to my churlishness. "I came to apologize."

My jaw falls open. He's caught me off guard and I don't know what to

say.

“I’m surprised too,” he quips. “I’m not big into apologies.”

“Did Smith ask you to come?” Why else would he be here?

“Smith doesn’t know I’m here.”

“Gabby?”

“No, Kate,” he says impatiently. “Despite what everyone seems to believe, I’m quite capable of conducting my own affairs without input from my wife. Although if she learns about this, it’s likely to buy me a lot of goodwill.”

I almost smile, because he’s right.

“Gabrielle likes you,” he continues. “And Smith liked you from the minute he set eyes on you. I did everything I could to discourage it. That was wrong,” he says, sincerely. “You’re Smith’s person, and that should have been enough for me. More than enough.”

He seems so contrite, so earnest, I almost feel bad for him.

“I know you’ve dealt with a lot of press in your life, and I’m sure that it’s often been unpleasant,” I say. He raises his brow, leading me to believe that unpleasant is not the word he would ascribe to the encounters.

“That’s part of it. No doubt. But this was more personal than that. When you came around last year to do a story on my brother Zack, you insured a top spot on my enemies list.”

He takes no prisoners. I should have known his feelings for me were rooted there.

“I won’t make any excuses or offer any apologies for that.” I tip my chin up. “Your father sought me out. He encouraged me to write the article. He was the president-elect. I had no way of knowing what was happening behind the scenes.”

“I know. But I protect everyone I love—especially those who can’t protect themselves. That’s my most important job in life.” The man is intense. But what he misses in style, he more than makes up for in substance. I have to give it to him.

“That includes Smith,” he adds. “Although the big lug can take care of himself pretty well.”

As much as I want to, it’s hard to stay angry at JD for protecting his brother, or Gracie, or Smith.

“You need to be good to him,” he warns. “If it gets to the point where you’ve had enough of his shit, let him down easy. Otherwise, he’ll be crying



on my shoulder for months. He's a pussy."

JD and Smith are actually a lot alike at their core. For the first time, I see what they have in common. I try not to smile. "Delilah already warned me that I'd have to answer to her if I hurt Smith."

He lifts his hands. "That's a threat I would take seriously. That woman looks like she descended directly from the angels, but she is one scary motherfucker. Don't get on her bad side."

"You should tell Smith."

"He knows all about Delilah. He hired her."

"Not about Delilah. About how you were wrong not to trust him."

"Smith knows. But I'll remind him. I wanted to talk to you first. I might not be much for apologies, but I am big on putting things right. I am who I am, Kate. It's rarely pretty, but you'll never wonder where you stand with me."



## KATE

Smith and I are eating dinner at the kitchen table, making small talk to avoid the elephant in the room. We're alone together in the house for the first time since ... I'm still not sure what to call it. *An abduction? Assault? Kidnapping? Imprisonment?* I don't know, but I suppose I'll eventually find the right word.

"Heard you had a visitor this morning," he says, side-eyeing me for a reaction.

"I almost didn't let him in, but then I remembered he owned the place."

Smith rests his fork and knife on the plate, giving me his full attention. "We can find somewhere else to live. It's about time I bought something, anyway."

"If you want to buy a place, that's fine. Don't do it on my account."

"Why not?"

*Why not? Because I'm not staying. Because I can't bear to watch the fractures in our relationship widen until it splinters apart. Because I don't have the energy to repair it, to fight for it, or even for you. I'm exhausted, and broken, and trudging through emotion so dense, it seems impenetrable. I might never get through it, even if I live for another fifty years. But I don't burden him with any of that.*

"I like it here," I say quietly. "It's comfortable and safe. Someone's always right next door."

He picks up the fork, pushing Lally's brisket around his plate without a bite. "How did you leave things with JD?"

"He didn't tell you?" That's hard to believe. Those two tell each other

everything—or at least they did.

“He did. But I want to hear it from you.”

He wants to hear it *from me*. The implication of those simple words is not lost on me. There was a time, in the last month, when JD’s word was enough. It still stings.

“We talked,” I say matter-of-factly. “He apologized for the way he behaved—toward both of us. Promised it would be different—*even though I’m a reporter, which still gives him heartburn*. Basically, he called a truce—more than that really—he gave us his blessing.”

“What he thinks isn’t important.” Smith is dismissive. Too dismissive, and I don’t buy it for one second. They’ve been thick as thieves for too long.

“If his opinion isn’t important, then why did you keep pushing me away? Why were you so conflicted about dating a reporter?” Then I ask the question that burned a hole in my heart after he kicked me out. It’s still raw, but there’s so much pain now, it’s a dull ache in comparison. “Why did you immediately take JD’s side when Grace’s picture was published?”

He throws his head back with a grunt. “My new business. I can’t afford to have stories showing up in the news. My loyalty to the Wilders—to JD—played a big part, too. I don’t deny it. And on top of it all, I’m an idiot.” He hasn’t looked at me or apologized, but I feel his turmoil from a few feet away.

“What’s changed?”

“I’m still an idiot—and I am so sorry.” There’s distress in each syllable of the apology. “If I hadn’t—” He pauses, for long awkward moments, with his eyes trained on the plate. The silence is so extended, so sober, I begin to think he’s searching for an end.

“I want to build a life with you,” he says tentatively, testing the words the way a newborn giraffe tests its legs. “I didn’t want to admit it to myself for a long time—I wasn’t ready. But when you almost slipped out of my hands forever, it brought it home pretty quick.” He was searching, not for the end, but for a beginning. Wrestling with the emotions, molding them into words. “We can live wherever you want. Boston—it doesn’t need to be Charleston.”

My heart pounds with the blood rushing in my ears, so hard, I almost miss the last part. Build a life together—*I wish it was possible*.

“I’m broken,” I confess, before I get too caught up in happy endings that will never happen. “I was probably already a little broken, but now—I’m shattered inside. The kind of shattered you can’t fix.” It’s heart-wrenching to

admit, even to him. “My emotions are erratic. They move at warp speed at times, until the build-up is so great that I might explode, and at other times, they stand perfectly still inside my numb body.”

Although I don’t have the courage to look at him, I hear every strangled breath. “I’d like to stay here for another week or two until I figure out what’s next. If that’s okay.”

“Of course, it’s okay. But two weeks isn’t enough. I want more, Kate.”

“I’m not ready for a relationship. And I might never be.” I force myself to speak the words through the agonizing pain of a twisting knife.

He drags his chair against the wooden floor, until his knees are almost touching my thighs. “Look at me,” he says, tucking the hair off my face. “You’ve been through hell.” Hell? *Hell* sounds about right. “It’s been less than a week. You’re going to feel dozens of emotions while you heal. Sometimes all in the same moment. There will be good and bad days. There’s no linear path to recovery. That’s not how it works. But you will heal. Until then, you’re not going to be in any condition to make a decision about relationships. I have some work of my own to do, too.” He squeezes my fingers. “The only thing I know for sure is that if you go your own way to heal, and I go mine, we’ll drift apart.”

“I killed a man, and I’m not sorry.” I gaze at him as the words tumble from the depths of my soul. “I feel no remorse. Not a twinge of conscience. What does that make me?”

“Human,” he says flatly. “I’ve killed more than my share of men in battle —”

“I didn’t kill him on the battlefield.”

“Yes, you did. You absolutely did.” He cradles both my hands in his. “There are three kinds of killings that happen in war. Your conscience should be restless at two. The killing of young enemy soldiers, duty bound, not always there of their own volition, and the innocent casualties. People who are in the wrong place at the wrong time.” He’s pensive, bringing my hands to his mouth and pressing a kiss onto the them before continuing.

“The third type, is the elimination of evil motherfuckers who need to die. That priest was one of them. You’re right to feel no remorse. He was a monster and his reign of terror would only end with his death.”

I get up and begin to clear the dishes, because this is too much and I need to do something to deflect the angst that’s building inside me.

“Don’t, Kate. Don’t walk away from this conversation. It’s hard because

it's important."

I freeze, my hands clutching the edge of a ceramic plate.

What we have—our relationship—isn't built for the long run. It might have been at one time, but fate intervened, creating a chasm between us that will only grow larger. I'm certain. Just like I'm certain that I can't face any more loss. But I sit down and have the discussion, anyway. Because it is important.

"The climb is too steep," I say softly, the dishes still in my hands.

"Steep? Yes. But *too* steep? I don't buy it." He brushes his palm along his jaw. "I'm not an expert on relationships, but I've watched my parents, my sisters with their husbands, even Gabby and JD. The struggle is what makes the foundation airtight."

The foundation already had holes. We patched them, but it's not even clear they were sealed—and then *hell* happened.

"I don't think I was raped," I say with a wobbly voice. He takes my hand, weaving his fingers through mine in unshakeable solidarity, and I continue before I begin to cry. "But I was drugged for a lot of it, so I'm not certain. But I witnessed—I watched him do things with Virginia that were a lot like some of the things we did—like some of the things, that maybe, you were hoping we'd do."

"What you witnessed, was it really like the things we did? Was it consensual and about mutual pleasure—and safe?" His voice is gentle as he ticks off the differences. "Did he respect her? Did he check in with her to make sure she was okay, and her needs were met? Or was it some bastardized form of sex? Of kink?" He lowers his head, his forehead touching mine. "Because I like to think what we did was pure—that it was something we both enjoyed. Not just a huge mind fuck, one animal preying on another."

*It doesn't matter.* I still see them vividly. I smell their filth everywhere. Their voices, the sounds of pleasure and punishment shriek inside my head when I lie quietly in bed at night.

"At the time, even now, it feels similar," I whisper, knowing I'm causing him pain.

When he pulls away, his features are flat. "We don't need to go there any time soon—or ever," he adds. "I'm totally okay with that."

I gaze up at him. "Now I know why you don't deal. You're giving too much away in the negotiation, Smith. Kink is important to you—you said so yourself."

“It’s not—not in the grand scheme.” I’m not sure if he’s trying to convince himself, or me.

“Don’t do this. Please don’t do this.” I sigh, tortured, but staunch. “You’re not being honest with me—or with yourself. It’s the sense of duty and honor imprinted on your DNA talking. You blame yourself for what happened, and now you’re bound by a sense of responsibility to me. That’s not a relationship that either of us should want.”

“I do feel responsible.” His head bobs slowly. “And I am. But that has nothing to do with why I’m here begging for another chance. Sex is one aspect of a relationship. It’s not any more important than any other part.”

Oh, Smith. “Sex is an important aspect of a relationship between two people who are as young as we are—let’s not kid ourselves. One day, you’ll wake up, and it won’t be enough, or you’ll spend your whole life compromising on something you said you’d never compromise on.” He buries his face in his hands and I want to comfort him, but it would weaken the fortress I’m constructing around my heart. “You know I’m right.”

When he lifts his head, he looks beaten. “Let’s take it one day at a time. That’s all I’m asking.”

He’s not making this easy, but I’m determined to save us both from any more sorrow down the road.

“I’m not sure I can. The feelings I have for you are already so intense. I can’t get any more involved. It’s not just the kink—I’m a shell, Smith. I have nothing to give. I don’t want you to live half a life.” I pause to catch the breath that the ugly cry has stolen and blow my nose on a paper napkin. “You deserve to have everything. I want that for you.”

Smith pulls me onto his lap, smoothing my hair with his lips. We sit quietly for long minutes. The warmth of his body and the strength he projects is soothing. Eventually I stop sobbing and gasping for air.

“We’re all a little broken,” he murmurs. “Love is about finding someone who has the right glue to hold your pieces together. You’re my glue. I’ve always known it—even when I didn’t. But the fact that you care enough about me to let me go, even though you love me—and I know you do—it’s more than I deserve,” he chokes out, in a voice teeming with emotion. “Life is full of challenges—we were tested early, that’s all.” He pulls me closer. “Don’t give up on us yet.”

I feel the prickle of his unshaven beard against my scalp. He’s been through hell, too. I do love him. I don’t want to give up on us. Maybe I don’t

need to decide today, or even tomorrow.

“I love you, Kate,” he whispers into my hair. “I’m not letting you go.”





## 8 MONTHS LATER

### Smith

Today is my birthday, and I'm on my way to Miss Macy's to meet Kate.

She has something up her sleeve. First, she wanted to drive tonight. Then, she wouldn't tell me where we were going. Imagine how twitchy that made me. I finally managed to convince her we should get a driver for the evening. But other than supper at Miss Macy's, I still have no clue what we're doing.

It's been a busy eight months since I found Kate in that church. My business is off the ground and I have more work than we can handle. Things between Kate and me are rock-solid. In many ways, she's stronger than before the abduction. In others, she's more vulnerable. According to her therapist, it's a normal part of recovery.

Her therapist has been great. She's even helped us with the physical part of our relationship. Not gonna lie, having a weekly *prescription* for sex—that's what it's called—left me feeling more inadequate than I've ever felt. I wanted to be the man who fixed it for her, and no matter how many times I told myself it was beyond my ability, it was still tough.

It was also unnatural. I've never been the guy who got enjoyment from planning a scene. I like to keep a well-stocked playroom, get naked, and see where it takes us. Prescriptive sex was a slow process, consisting of multiple baby steps. First week we cuddled, second week was massage, third week was kissing, which turned into a make-out session where we incorporated massage. What happened next wasn't my fault.

Kate was giving me a massage. My eyes were closed while I tried to

focus on something besides my aching dick. All of a sudden, I felt her lap a bead from the swollen tip, and before I could stop her, she was climbing on my cock. That's the story I'm sticking with.

Truth is, I've been more hesitant than Kate. I'm in this for the long haul, and I don't want to do anything stupid that could fuck up what we have now, or what we might have in the future. Soldiers understand the benefit of patience.

One of my birthday presents to Kate—the one she's never going to hear about—is that I didn't snap Ryan Donovan's neck.

I hunted down all four bastards from the night in the frat house. Two of the guys appear to have become decent men, with that night being more of an anomaly than a way of life. The third is a weasel lawyer, but the worst thing I could find was that he cheats on his taxes. He has a young son and a mother who he supports. As much as I believe they need to be punished, I left them all alone.

Ryan Donovan, the ringleader, and the one who took Kate's virginity when he was a man and she was still too young—the one who set her up that night—he's still a scumbag. No surprise there. He amassed a small fortune doing dirty deals, and until he got caught, cheating on his wife was a way of life.

I would have enjoyed watching him take his last breath—but it was a present for Kate, not for me. After Silas Drury hung himself the night before his trial was scheduled to begin, she fell apart. He had been charged as an accessory after the fact in the murders of ten women. The state had a strong case against him. I was right about Silas. There was no way he was going back to jail.

Kate doesn't want any more death in her name—and I will respect that as long as no one comes near her again. But that sonofabitch Donovan wasn't getting off scot-free.

Chase and I collected every bit of information we could find about Donovan's whoring, and traced the assets he was hiding overseas. On Kate's birthday, right before we boarded a flight to have dinner with Fiona and Brett in Boston, I sent the entire folder to his estranged wife's lawyer. It was almost as satisfying as snapping his neck. *Almost.*

I see Kate's new car parked on the street across from the restaurant. Her old car had been found in the ocean, submerged off of Albert's Island. It had been pushed off the dock.

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KATE and I have finished all the shrimp and grits we can stuff into our bellies, and she's still hiding something. She's the worst liar—and poker player. I laugh every time she tries to bluff. We'd be piss poor if she ever had to earn a living playing cards.

Jasper and Jolene, and the entire waitstaff, come over to the table and sing "Happy Birthday." I throw Kate a look, and she grins. I'm willing to play along with the nonsense for the big slice of chess pie and the bowl of chocolate ice cream they brought with them.

Kate is glowing tonight. It makes my heart swell to see her like this. I often watch her while she sleeps, or when she's busy and doesn't notice me. I came so close to losing her. I'll have nightmares about it, forever.

After Jasper gives me shit about being an old man, they leave us. "Where's your dessert?" I ask, dipping a fork into the pie. "Didn't want any?"

She laughs. "I thought we'd share," she says, bringing her fork to my plate.

I swat her away. "Forget about it."

As I take another bite of pie, she reaches over, dips her finger into the ice cream and brings it to my lips. "Midnight cookies and cream," she murmurs, while I suck it off her finger. It's so damn sexy, for a minute I forget that it's how I first described kink to her.

"Finish your dessert," she says in a husky voice. "The evening's just beginning."

"I'm good." Without another bite, I grab her arm and haul her out of the restaurant. "Put it on my tab," I call to Jasper on our way out.

Someone will pick up our cars later. Antoine is driving tonight, and from the look of Kate, I'm damn happy I made that decision, instead of having one of my guys drive. "Where we goin'?" I ask, leaning in for a kiss.

"You'll see." She speaks to Antoine in a hushed voice, and slides in beside me for the short drive to Tallulah's.

When we get to the bar, it's standing room only, and the music is slow and easy. "You want to play a game of pool?" I ask, after the waitress takes our order.

"I want to dance," she says, brushing her hand over my chest.

"Dance? What kind of birthday present is that?" I groan and complain as

she pulls me onto the crowded dance floor, but I don't mean it, and she damn well knows it.

The lights are low, and I'm not shy about pulling her against me until my cock is pushing into her belly. "Mmmm," she murmurs, pressing into the thickening shaft.

"You are the best birthday present." I palm her ass, pinning her against me, while my lips find hers in a lazy kiss that goes on forever.

When I pull my mouth away, her eyes are dark, and she's gasping softly. She's gorgeous. I want her, here and now. It's only my more evolved ego that stops me.

"Do you remember the song that was playing the first time we were on this dance floor?" she asks, nuzzling my neck.

"Mhm. There was more than one song, but I'm pretty sure you're talkin' about the one by Lady Antebellum."

She nods. "I like that song. It's a shame Beau banned it from being played in the bar." She's trying to keep a straight face, but when I grin, she loses it.

"Delilah is a snitch."

"You best remember that," she warns, still smiling. "Do you remember the secret I told you about the bathtub?"

She has that look about her that she gets. Part coy, part sass. The one that says, *you can fuck me, but you'll have to catch me first*.

"I'll never forget it. You still get off in the bathtub thinking about me?"

"Shower. The nozzle in there is *amazing*."

My dick can't take too much more of this teasing. And she's well aware, because she keeps rocking her hips into it.

"What do you think about when you're letting the spray beat on your pussy?"

She tips her chin up and meets my eyes. "The saddle."

I swallow hard. She smiles at me, angelically. And I swallow again. "I climb onto the saddle—it's already prepared. You caress my breasts and whisper how much you want to fuck my ass. Your voice is rough and sexy. Then you wrap both arms around me and slide inside, 'til both my holes are full." She says all that with her sweet mouth.

My jaw is on the floor, and I'm sucking air, trying to breathe. But I play along. "You wanted me to know."

"I did. What are you going to do about it?"

*Fuck you right here on this dance floor right now*, doesn't seem to be the appropriate response. While I'm searching for it, she continues to stoke the fire.

"I think about it all the time. Is the saddle still in the apartment?"

"Not sure," I answer gruffly. "Haven't been there in ages."

"We should go check."

---

IT'S LESS than thirty minutes from Tallulah's to the Wildflower apartment. Have I mentioned I'm so damn happy Antoine is driving?

The privacy screen is all the way up and Kate is straddling me, rubbing her bare pussy all over my cock. My pants are on, but she lost her underwear somewhere along the way.

"Are you sure?" I ask, with my lips on her throat.

"Never been more sure."

I force my mouth away from her soft skin and tip her chin until we're eye to eye. "You don't have to do this."

"Don't be a chicken," she says.

"Kate." I don't want this to be some ill-conceived birthday present from her. One she's not ready to give. "Don't rush it, for me."

"Are you rusty?" She tilts her pretty head to the side, and her hair grazes my arm. "Have you forgotten how? I can show you how to use it."

"Wench." I sink my teeth into her neck until she moans. "I would show you, right now, how out of touch I am, but I want you needy and begging when we get there." I feel her lips curl against my skin.

When we arrive, Antoine drives through the crowded parking lot into the garage. A year ago Kate would have been thrilled to be here. I gaze at her. She's still pretty damn happy, but this time it's because of me.

We take the elevator up, and I drag her down the hall and into the apartment. We shed our clothes on the way to the bedroom. But I stop before heading into the playroom. I glance at her, and begin to have second thoughts.

"Don't you dare," she says, walking her fine naked ass into the room with the toys.

"It's here," she squeals. I follow her in, and pull her luscious body toward

me, lifting her off the floor. She snakes her legs around my waist, rubbing herself on my steely cock.

“Let’s start here.” I lower her carefully onto a chest. “I want to lick your pussy until you’re begging for it.” Her eyes shimmer as she leans back on her hands and spreads her legs for me.

I growl as my tongue connects with the sweet pink flesh. My mouth takes her to the edge, but I don’t let her come. It’ll be better for her first time with the saddle if we don’t take the edge off.

She’s breathing heavily when I pull away. “More. I need more.”

“There’s more. Come with me.” I take her by the hand, to the drawer with the silicone phalluses, wrapped in plastic. “Pick one.” Her hand reaches for a long fat one. “No. It’s too big.”

“I like big,” she says, her eyes on my throbbing dick.

“You’re going to have big, princess.” I bring her hand to my cock. “But they don’t both need to be big.” I kiss her, roughly, because I’m all out of gentle.

“Isn’t there another attachment?”

“You are a greedy little princess.” I brush my nose against hers. “There is, but I’ll choose that one for you.”

She’s intently focused on my hands, as I attach the silicone pieces. “Are you going to watch or—play?” she asks.

I touch her cheek. “It’s your fantasy. I’m just along for the ride.”

She brushes her fingers over mine. Her skin is soft and warm. “Can’t it be both our fantasies?”

I nod. “Why not?”

“I want you to play,” she says, in a breathy voice, her rosy nipples furled tight.

“Then let’s play.” I lower the mount and help her straddle it. “Put your feet on the footrests for leverage. I can help, but it might be better if you insert it yourself.”

She nods carefully and lowers herself onto the silicone cock. I don’t take my hands off her. I’m so hard, my dick is leaking. “How does it feel?”

“Like a vibrator. Before it’s turned on.” I pull up a padded leather-covered board that’s tucked underneath, and angle it so she can rest her chest on it when she leans forward. “This will prevent you from falling off. You can wrap your arms around it or hold it any way you like.”

She’s flushed, and her eyes are hooded. She leans forward, gasping when

her clit makes contact with the ridged wedge. “*Ohh*. It vibrates,” she murmurs, squirming against it, before pulling back.

“Feel good?”

“So good,” she moans, forcing her body forward again. Both her arms are wrapped around the leather pad. She’s angled, cheeks spread wide, and all I can think about is sliding into the tight little rosebud.

“You can move,” I tell her, sweeping my hands up and down her back, and across her shoulders. “Ride it just like you ride me.”

Her hips rock back and forth, tentatively at first, and then they sway from side to side. I watch her blissful expression in the mirror. She needs no more instruction.

“Smith,” she gasps. “I want you, too.”

“Anything you want, princess.” I lube my finger and spread it over her pleated hole, before sliding it through the tight muscle. She moans as I press into her.

I feel the plastic cock through her walls. It sends a prickle into the base of my spine.

I add another finger, with my tongue in the hollow of her back, licking my way up, and kissing my way down, all while working her good, so she can take me.

When she’s ready, I’m long past that. “Kate. Open your eyes. Look in the mirror.” I lube her well and coat my cock with the thick liquid. I pause at the entrance. “Open your eyes.” When she does, I slide in, an inch at a time. Carefully breaching each ring of muscle. “You’re so tight with that fake cock in your pussy.” I enter her hot body, slowly. It’s sweet agony.

“Relax. Breathe. Push out.” I remind her when I can form words. She always forgets.

Her face is sweaty in the mirror, her red hair matted against her creamy skin.

I’m nearing the end of any control I had.

When she begins to move, riding the silicone cock and grinding her clit against the ridged rubber. I begin to move, too. Deeper and faster.

Palming her breasts in my hands, I kiss her neck, and slide my teeth over her flesh.

“Look at you, princess.” I wind her hair around my hand. It’s soft and silky around my fingers. When I tug her head back she gasps. I feel it in my groin.



“You’re so tight, Kate,” I murmur near her ear. “I’m going to come so hard inside you.” I push her forward with my hips, pinning her clit against the vibrating wedge. Her entire body tightens and she bucks wildly. The orgasm consumes her, milking my cock until I can barely see. I wrap my arms around her torso tightly, fucking her right through the waves of pleasure.

We gaze at each other in the mirror, while I thrust with abandonment. I feel her climbing again and force myself to find a sliver of control. When she trembles, with my name twisting its way free from her lips, a roar escapes from somewhere deep and primitive, and I empty myself inside her.

My legs are still jelly when I find the strength to separate. I lift her off the saddle, and sweep back her hair so I can see her face. Her eyes are closed, but she smiles at me. The groggy contented smile of a woman who has been thoroughly fucked by a man who loves her.

## EPILOGUE

*Two years later*

**Kate**

In the end, I didn't want to go back to Boston. Not because I don't love Boston, and Fi, and even my family, but because I love Smith more, and the life we've built is in Charleston.

For months after *hell*, I lost entire days fitting the pieces together, large and small, until the puzzle was complete. There were some days that I only got through because Smith was beside me, and his rock-solid strength was enough for both of us.

With the help of Dr. Long we were able to track Fenny's original owners. Although I didn't know it at the time, Smith contacted her the night Fenny was killed. Fortunately, she had the presence of mind to remove the microchip before the guys buried what was left of the poor cat. The serial number on the chip helped us locate the original owners, Jessica Daniels and Rory Lister, graduate students in town. Rory was odd on the phone, but it was a strange call to receive, I'm sure. We agreed to meet at their home the next evening.

I spent the following day assembling a small scrapbook for them, with two dozen of the best photos I took of Fenny while she lived with me. When we got to the house, it reeked of weed. Smith coughed several times in what was a gross exaggeration, and within five minutes I could tell he was done with those two.

They hadn't known *Disco* was pregnant—that was her real name, and

although they missed *the little bugger*, they never bothered to look for her, either. They couldn't explain it—she just never came home again. By the time we left, I decided to keep my photos. While Fenny's end was tragic, her last month spent with me was probably the best of her life. "Those two morons should *never* reproduce. The world can't take it," Smith said loud enough to be heard on our way out.

Virginia is serving a life sentence in prison for her part in the murder of ten homeless women, who nobody ever reported missing. *Don't get me started*. I spoke at her sentencing hearing in favor of leniency, because I believe she is also a victim of Father Creighton and Warren King, and all the others who covered up the abuse of a young girl.

It's been difficult for Petey, who doesn't understand why his mother can't come home. But his father has deep pockets and that's made it a little easier on the boy. It took sworn testimony, court orders, blood tests, and a threat to send the Federal Marshals to his doorstep, but Warren King is officially Petey's father.

Judge King never made it to the Supreme Court, but he remains on the federal bench. There were not enough votes to impeach in the House. At the time, I was speechless, but perhaps it's for the best. If he had been impeached and convicted in a Senate trial, he would have slithered away from the public eye. But now, whenever a case comes up involving—well almost anything, the attorneys ask for his recusal. Each time it happens, it makes the news, reminding everyone that he impregnated an underage girl and tried to abort the fetus without her consent. Even for a scoundrel, it must be embarrassing.

Smith and I were married at St. Claire's by Father Tierney, who had been such a big part of my life growing up. When he first proposed, we thought a civil ceremony made the most sense. I still wasn't sure about priests or churches, or even God some days, and Smith didn't have an opinion. He just wanted it to be legal so I couldn't get rid of him easily, as if I would ever.

But as the prospect of marriage sank in, I began to have second thoughts about being married by a layperson, even if he was the governor. The Catholic church had played an important role in my life, and in my family's history. Ultimately, I decided a psychopath, masquerading as a priest, wouldn't destroy my faith.

The only hiccup happened on the day of the rehearsal. There had a been a funeral Mass that morning at St. Claire's and traces of frankincense and myrrh hung in the air, clinging to surfaces as incense is wont to do. It started

with an unease and the bitter taste of adrenaline. Then my chest tightened, as the airways closed in.

I blamed the lightheadedness on pre-wedding jitters and not eating lunch, but it didn't fool Smith, or Fiona, or Gabby, or maybe anyone for that matter. It was a panic attack.

When I came clean, Gabby had the solution: have the entire church scrubbed by fire restoration experts. "With an experienced company," she assured me, "you won't be able to detect the smell."

When you have unlimited resources and are a former presidential family, like the Wilders, you can make things happen that seem like miracles to everyone else. The church was thoroughly scrubbed before morning Mass the next day.

I slept in my childhood bedroom the night before the wedding. With Joyce out of the picture, the room has been restored to my liking.

For weeks, I had been torn about my father walking me down the aisle. He had a way of sneaking in little digs when I least expected them, and I didn't want anything to spoil the day. But I didn't want to be vindictive, either, because that would ruin my happiness too.

After watching me wring my hands about it for too long, Smith gave me the answer. "He doesn't deserve the honor, if you ask me. But if that's what you want, talk to him. Tell him straight up there will be no bullshit that day. If you want, I'm happy to have the discussion with him."

And that's what I did. Not Smith, but me. I should have done it long ago. When we were finished, my dad and I were both in tears. I was under no illusion he would stop overnight, but I was done tolerating the bad behavior, and we both knew it. My brothers were another matter.

My brother Tommy couldn't get any of the wedding weekend off—probably because he didn't try. I didn't miss him. Liam, however, I missed terribly.

Sean was deployed at the time, but he sent me his good wishes and a package containing my mother's rosary that he keeps with him. I hung it out my bedroom window the night before the wedding, because that's how Catholic girls from Boston ward off the rain before they get married. I held the rosary close during the ceremony, and then sent it back to Sean on my way to the reception. He's far away from home, in his own hell, and although I know my mother is with him, just as she was with me, I also know it brings him great comfort to have her rosary.

“*What?*” my new husband asked incredulously. “You want to make a stop at the post office, in your wedding dress? Today? What about the reception?” But when I explained, he gave my fingers a quick squeeze. “It’s just a small detour,” he murmured. “The guests can wait a few extra minutes.”

During the ceremony, Father Tierney reminisced about my childhood, recalling my love of reading and of chocolate cupcakes with white frosting from Rita’s Bakery. He never actually admitted to it, *but it was him*. He sent the cupcakes to school on my birthday. My smile reached from ear to ear. Smith kept glancing at me while I grinned like a fool, which made me grin longer and harder. I half expected him to lean over and say something lewd about my smile and the wedding night, or to pinch my ass. Thankfully, he did neither.

I felt my mother’s presence strongly the entire weekend, just as I did while chained in the tower. She protected me until Smith got there. The gust of wind that prevented my dive out the turret window was her. I know it was, just like I know the nagging feeling that brought me to Charleston and kept me there until Smith and I could work things out was her.

I never did win the Pulitzer Prize for my mother and I never will, because I’m no longer a journalist. With Smith’s support, I’ve forged my own path doing something I truly love instead of living my life in service to my mother. I’m quite certain she wouldn’t have wanted that for me.

I write books now, telling stories of heroes and villains. They are everywhere, in all walks of life, sometimes existing side by side within the same person.

After I was able to remember the events of *hell* without reliving them, I wrote a book. There are both heroes and villains in the story, and plenty of heroines. I’m proud of the accomplishment. My mother would be proud, too. If my story saves even one woman, I will have honored her sacrifice.

Writing a book forced me to unearth painful memories and examine them closely. I didn’t always like what I found, but in the end, the exercise made me stronger. It was cathartic not only for me, but for Smith too, because I didn’t write it alone, of course. I relied on chunks of my husband’s memory to round out the edges. To give life to the moments I wasn’t privy to. I did my very best to convey a true and honest portrayal of the events as we lived them.

Bound is many things, but at its very core, it’s the story of two people

constrained by duty and loyalty to others, tethered with a hefty dose of guilt. It's about a hard-fought journey to love. Mine and Smiths. I hope you enjoyed our story.

# **DECADENT**

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## THE DEVIL'S DUE (BOOK 4)



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## DELILAH

When I'm outside the gates of the archbishop's lavish home, I pull off the mask and snake my way through a series of barren alleys to the rental car, careful to stay in the shadows. I've made this kind of getaway dozens of times, and used every precaution to ensure I wasn't followed tonight.

*Then why does it feel like I'm being stalked?*

I glance over my shoulder. Nothing—not a nocturnal hunter tracking a meal, or a leaf rustling in the distance. *Nothing*. Still, I can't shake the feeling.

I don't know what's spooking me. Probably that bastard priest who thought he was Jesus Christ.

This is the second time in a week that I've sensed someone close. The last time, Virginia Bennet's ankle was shattered by a bullet inside St. Maggie's Church. We still don't know who fired on her, only that the shot came from the balcony, near where I was positioned. Someone had gotten close to me that night. *Too close*.

As I reach for the car door handle, a large, gloved hand muzzles me, with a strong thumb positioned beneath my jaw in such a way that I'm unable to sink my teeth into the leather palm covering my mouth. A second hand captures my wrists, while powerful thighs cage my legs. Before my brain fully registers the danger, the muscular body has me pinned securely against the car door.

In mere seconds—that's all it takes—the attacker divests me of every tool I have to protect myself. He's a trained professional. *He has to be*.

I draw a deep breath, as reality sinks in. There's no escape.

*No escape.*

*No escape.*

*No escape.*

The warning blasts inside my head, activating the floodgates until the adrenaline rushes in, triggering every human survival instinct my body knows. Fortunately, years of CIA training fall front and center. Leaning on those lessons is my best chance for survival, but only if I keep my wits about me.

I curl my toes, digging them into the soles of my shoes, pressing hard enough that I can almost feel the hard ground beneath me. The connection is enough to shift my focus.

There's no *immediate* escape, but I need to let it play out a little. I need to wait for the opportunity to present itself. He wants something. Otherwise, he would have already slit my throat.

"Who are you?" I sputter through clenched teeth.

The man says nothing, letting my anxiety build.

*Can he sense the growing fear? Smell terror seeping from my pores?*

I regulate my breathing, and concentrate on detecting a scent or a tic, anything that might help me identify this stranger.

But there's nothing. Not a single thing to clue me in to his identity.

I'm at his mercy, and the longer this goes on, the more control he has over me. But there's not a damn thing I can do to help myself. *You can keep your head and find some patience.* Yes. That I can do.

While I wait for the stranger to reveal himself, I peer into the pitch-black night, at nothing.

The air around us is still, thick enough to choke a horse. And the only sound is the high-pitched call of the cicada, escalating the drama inside my head.

Will the assailant deliver his response with razor-sharp words or with a brutal physical act? I brace for the latter with the laser focus only adrenaline provides.

If he moves to strike me, I'll be able to free myself—as long as I don't hesitate. I can't squander the opportunity. It might be the only one I have.

Somewhere I find the discipline to remain quiet. It might be the most difficult thing I've ever done. But when I asked *who are you?*, the ball moved squarely into his court. Anything I say now will only be a show of weakness.

Finally, after what feels like hours, he lowers his head, his warm breath

an inch from my temple, and the ridge of his steely cock pressing into my lower back. “More than just a pretty boy,” he taunts.

## DELILAH

**G**ray Wilder. Using my own words to mock me.

I'd know his voice anywhere. It haunts my dreams. Day and night.

It's always Gray. *Always.*

His clever fingers teasing my needy flesh. His lazy drawl coaxing me to come again and again. *Demanding it.* And before the tremors subside, it's his spicy scent that lulls me into a restless sleep, stirring a primal need to submit that I haven't felt since Kyle died.

Gray Wilder is dangerous.

*Never more so than now.*

"Let go of me," I mumble into the supple leather stretched across his palm.

"In good time. I'm enjoying this too much. You, helpless. Mostly silenced. My hard cock near enough so you can think of nothing else, but not close enough to where you want it. It's like Christmas Eve at Wildflower, all over again." He lowers his head, until I feel his warm breath on my scalp. "I hope you've been a good girl. Otherwise Santa will leave you wet and wanting."

The memories come flooding back.

"Remember?" he murmurs, his lips grazing my hair.

When I don't make any effort to answer, he squeezes my thighs between his, tightening the vise little by little, until all I know is the ache in my core.

"Remember?"

"Yes," I concede in a muddled response. It's enough to satisfy his arrogance, but not enough to bow fully to him.

“The opulent Sultan’s Palace. You, bound to the bedposts with long silk cords. Open to me. A jewel in your navel and another in that pretty little ass. Do you remember how you whimpered when I tightened the jewels on your nipples? Do you remember how much you begged?”

I don’t utter a sound.

“What were you beggin’ for, Delilah?” His voice is low, wrapped in a luscious timbre as he cajoles an answer from me.

But tonight, unlike Christmas Eve, I don’t acquiesce easily. If he wants something from me, he’s going to have to take it.

As if he reads my mind, his teeth sink into my neck, into the very spot he knows will make my knees weak.

“Ahhh.” The lusty moan escapes into the humid night before I can stop it. *Damn you, Gray Wilder.*

“I can’t hear you,” he taunts, with the ring of victory in his voice. He loosens his hold on my jaw. *Why not? He knows he’s won.* “What were you beggin’ for that night?”

I’m not afraid of Gray. Not physically. But I do want him to let me go. *And I want to know how he managed to overpower me so easily.* He’s a billionaire playboy, and I’m a trained agent—a lethal one. It’s no contest.

*Then why can’t I move?*

“Release,” I hiss into his leather-clad fingers. The asshole loosens his grip so I can speak audibly, but not enough that I can weaponize my teeth. It’s the only reason he still has all his fingers.

“You’re going to have to do better than that, Delilah,” he purrs. “What were you beggin’ for?”

*I’m going to knee the bastard in the balls the second I’m free.* “An orgasm.”

“Better. But not good enough.” He sinks his teeth into me again. Biting and sucking the tendon in a way that’s sure to leave a bruise—in a way that sends shivers skittering in every direction. *Dammit.* There’s no way to hide my body’s reaction from him.

The slow curl of his mouth singses my skin. *Bastard.* I squeeze my eyes shut.

There’s no response too small for him to miss. I learned that lesson on Christmas. At the time, it felt like a gift. But now, I imagine a smug, self-satisfied smirk. The same look he had right before we left Wildflower late Christmas morning—when he told me I’d be thinking about his cock all day

—every time I walked, or bent over, or sat down, or relieved myself. *The muscles will scream*, he murmured, while we waited for the elevator, his forehead resting against mine, *and every time they do, you'll remember how I owned your pussy. And you'll long for me to own it again.*

The bastard was right. The exquisite ache lingered for days. First as a stark reminder of the hedonistic pleasure, then as a craving, eating at me until I fed it. But no matter how much I gorged, neither my fingers nor my favorite toy ever satisfied the urge completely. And no matter how hard I tried to forget, I saw him everywhere, in everything. It scared me to death. Sometimes it still scares me.

*Pull up your big-girl panties and swallow your pride, Delilah. He owns you right now. You can still get your licks in, but not until you're free.* I never swallow my pride easily. I'm not that kind of woman, but there's no damn choice.

*"I begged for your cock." Something I'll never do again, asshole.*

*"Mhm. That's how I remember it too. You writhing, back arched off the mattress, your juices soaking the silk sheets. The musky scent saturating every molecule of air I breathed."* He licks the bruised tendon, before blowing on it gently. I shiver at the sensation. *"But your helpless screams thrumming in my veins—that's what made my cock weep."*

I wish I could say his filthy talk isn't affecting me. That my breasts aren't growing heavy, that my nipples aren't tightening and tingling, sending steamy messages directly to my throbbing pussy. I wish I could say that I don't want his cock. That I don't want him. But I can't say any of it.

*"Do you know how many times I've thought about that night? How many women I've fucked in that room, trying to replace the memory of your tight little pussy? How many times I've pushed away images of your submissive body, spread in glorious offering under the sheer canopy that enclosed us in our own dirty little world? Do you know how many times I've come thinking about that night? Do you?"*

I can't let him pull me back into the fantasy. Not here. Not now. *Not ever.* I draw a long breath in an effort to slow my pounding heart.

My muscles are beginning to cramp from being immobilized, but I don't ask him to release me. He won't until he's good and ready, and I refuse to give him the satisfaction of telling me *no*.

What does he want? *I don't have a damn clue.* But I do know *all* about the Sultan's Palace on Christmas Eve. I knew then he would destroy me if I

allowed it.

Without a word, Gray removes his hand from my mouth, freeing it completely. I open and close my jaw a few times, wiggling it from side to side before speaking. “How did you—”

The hand that had been over my mouth is now tangled in the hair at the base of my neck, pulling on the long strands hard enough to tip my head back. “*Shhh!*” he hisses. “You’re going to listen, not talk, for a change. This is the address where I’m staying tonight.” He slips something deep into my front pocket. His long fingers linger at the edge of my mound while he speaks. “I have a job for you. Go directly to that address when you leave here and we’ll talk.”

*What?* “You have a job for me?” *What the hell is wrong with this man?* “Most people just text or email when they want something.” I feel his cock twitch against me. “I’m not having sex with you. If that’s the kind of job you’re talkin’ about, you can forget it.”

He tugs my hair harder. “You are *done* giving orders.”

“That remains to be seen. But regardless, I’m still not having sex with you.”

“I advise you to do as I say. Otherwise, this goes to the authorities.” He holds his phone up so I can see the screen. It’s a photo of me hovering over the archbishop’s lifeless body.

My pulse hammers as I struggle to breathe. “You—you wouldn’t do that—to me.”

“Try me,” he threatens in a tone that bears the shrill ring of finality. With nothing more, Gray releases me and walks away.

When it seems safe, I turn my head cautiously, catching his long familiar stride in the distance. He’s so certain I pose no danger, he doesn’t spare me even a fleeting glance over his shoulder. It’s arrogant and foolish, but the confidence it exudes is heart-stopping.

For several seconds, I watch him, taking note of the sharp lines and creases. His proud gait. His hair, which he’s let grow, secured in a knot at the nape of his neck. His broad back tapering gently as it approaches narrow hips. His dark shirt stretched across his shoulders, yielding to the muscle. The same muscle I clutched and buried my fingers in as he carried me to the steamy shower and took me hard against the imported stone.

It was early Christmas morning. We hadn’t yet slept. His unshaven face was covered in translucent droplets. A mixture of condensation and sweat

shimmered under the soft light. I craned my neck and lapped the salty beads from his skin like a thirsty whore, while he rutted deeply. He had already used me well, but still, he showed no mercy.

*Stop it, Delilah! Pull yourself together, woman.*

I force myself into the car and lock the doors. But when I close my eyes to clear the cobwebs, all I see is the force of his release. His slack jaw. His shuttered eyelids. His face contorted as though the surrender cost him deeply. As though pain had clawed its way into the bliss, until it pried a strangled roar from somewhere deep within.

I bang my forehead on the steering wheel, cursing softly.

When I open my eyes, Gray has disappeared into the moonless night, like an apparition that visits while we sleep. But he exists. Everything about those fevered hours we spent together was real. And late at night, alone in my bed, I still hear the echoes of his pleasure off the Italian marble.

My fingertips find the place on my neck where he marked me. Despite his little show of strength tonight, I'm still not afraid of him. Not in the traditional sense of the word. But I am terrified of my feelings. Feelings I developed while working at Wildflower. Feelings that found me submitting to his every whim, after too much brandy milk punch and too many warm and fuzzy emotions. The magic of Christmas can lure a woman astray. Even a woman like me.

*But not tonight, Satan.*

I lift my chin. I'm not going to his damn hotel room. No matter how curious I am about the job, and about how he subdued me so easily. No matter how much I want...*no, Delilah.* Just no.

*Was it Gray in the church? Did he fire on Virginia?* I grip the wheel tighter. It doesn't matter. I'm not going to that hotel.

He went to a lot of trouble to take that picture of me with the archbishop, but he's not sending it to anyone, because once he does, it's of no value to him. And he wants something. It might not be help with a job, but he wants something from me.

I turn on the radio, and before I know it, I'm at the rental car lot.

After dropping the keys into the after-hours depository, I walk over to the coffee shop across from the station, where I wait for the bus that will take me back to Charleston.

I sip a Dr. Pepper in a booth at the back of the shop, where I can watch the street for any sign of trouble. By now, Gray knows I'm not meeting him.



*Did he follow me here?* It's possible. After all, he found me at the archbishop's summer home outside Charleston. *How could that be?*

As I board the bus thirty minutes later, I glance over my shoulder, taking one last look around the deserted road. Not for the authorities, but for the man who already overpowered me once tonight without breaking a sweat.

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## DELILAH

The alarm blares, startling me from a deep sleep. I set it every night, but I'm always awake before it goes off. *Not today*. Hopefully it's not an omen of things to come. It's been awhile since I've had an uneventful day, and I can sure use one.

Once the alarm is silenced, I scroll through the messages, half-expecting to find a threatening one from Gray, but there's nothing.

A small pang of regret shifts inside my chest. It's short-lived, but annoying. I should be focused on the damning photo he has of me with the archbishop—not that the holy bastard didn't get everything he deserved. But instead, here I am, hoping the hot guy texted while I was asleep, like I'm some stupid high school girl crushing on the bad boy. The one draped in fire engine-red flags that nobody with a lick of common sense would go anywhere near.

But Gray Wilder messes with my head in a way that no one has ever managed to do. *Not even Kyle, and he was an expert at messing with my head.*

It's precisely why he's so dangerous.

After brushing my teeth, I throw on running clothes, and head to the Battery section of Charleston while most of the city is still asleep. Rain or shine, I never miss a morning run. No matter how much upheaval there's been in my life, it's been the one constant. A comforting ritual that rarely disappoints. My version of afternoon tea.

I give my mind a wide berth while running, let it wander freely until the thoughts venture into forbidden territory. When that happens, I push my body

harder and harder, allowing the pain to reel me back into the moment and ground me. *The way Kyle's belt did.*

The Battery is a far cry from the dirt-poor corner of Mississippi where my mama raised me. Never knew my daddy. There were times when I wasn't sure Mama knew him either—or at least knew who had actually planted the seed.

Mama had one ambition in life that she never strayed from: to be a wealthy man's queen. Despite her gorgeous veneer, it never worked out for her, of course, because rich men marry rich women, or women who bring something more than beauty to the table. Beauty is a depreciating asset. Nobody understands that better than a powerful man who regularly dips his dick into a pretty face.

My looks might have made me prom queen and a Magnolia Princess. *Imagine that.* But unlike Mama, my dreams have *never* included marrying a rich man.

As I round the corner onto Water Street, I nearly collide with the junior senator from South Carolina. He stops, continuing to jog in place. “You all right, miss?”

I nod. “Thank you.” He's on his way before I have the chance to ask if he's all right. Even in skimpy shorts, with a thick sweat covering his red face, I recognize him. He's a regular at Wildflower, Gray Wilder's *social* club.

While there's plenty of socializing at Wildflower, the most interesting *socializing* happens deep in the bowels of the club, in rooms with names like the Dungeon, the Stable, and the Sultan's Palace.

When I came to Charleston to work for Smith Sinclair, Gray's father was running for president. Smith is in charge of security for the Wilders and their businesses. He stationed me undercover, as a hostess, at the club. Even shrouded in the kind of secrecy money and power can buy, Wildflower was an obvious liability for a presidential candidate. Smith expected trouble and he didn't trust Gray to see it coming.

No one knew I worked for Smith. Not even Gray. To him, I was just the accommodating hostess, happy to help out wherever needed.

That's when the attraction between us blossomed. It started out innocent, as these things often do, but there was an undeniable pull from the beginning. Gray looked for excuses to have me work longer hours, and I looked for every excuse to be there too.

Although I was never allowed downstairs, I was privy to all the comings

and goings at the club. I didn't need to see Gray in action to know he was an experienced Dominant. His demeanor, the subtle shift in tone, broadcasts that vibe to anyone familiar with the lifestyle.

On the surface, Gray is a charming playboy. That's what he wants people to believe. Although most everyone he's rubbed elbows with knows he's not to be crossed. That becomes abundantly clear the very second someone gets too close to the line he's drawn carefully in the sand. It's all fun and games—until it isn't. And even in the best of times, all the fun and all the games are controlled by him.

Gray doesn't use a big stick to grab control—not normally. There's no need. His employees and the club members are more than happy to hand over their power to him. In exchange, he makes sure all their needs are met.

He pulls off the ruse with a winsome smile that rarely reaches his eyes, and an innate understanding of the human condition. I've watched him draw out even the most reticent, enticing them to do whatever he requires in the moment. They don't see it coming until it's too late. Most people are so captivated by his bank account and good looks that they never see it at all. But I saw it.

I recognized his thirst for control right away. It beckoned, pulling me toward him like he was the center of gravity and I would be forever adrift without him. The attraction was potent, and late at night after the club closed, when we were alone in the office, sipping expensive whiskey, it became a demonic temptation.

On those nights, I wanted nothing more than to hand him control *over me*. And there were many times, when he tracked me with the dark gaze of a predator, that I was sure he wanted it too.

But I was there to do a job, not to play sexy games. It didn't matter how much I wanted or *needed* those games. And it didn't matter how much he wanted or needed them either.

We fought the attraction. Gray with any number of beautiful women who sailed in and out of his aura, and by training submissives. The part of his job, I once overheard him say, that he enjoyed most.

I resisted too. I threw myself into the work, put miles on my running shoes, and reached for a sleek vibrator when I craved release. I never strayed from my mission, and kept far, far away from the powerful men who frequented the club. That would have been my mother's game. But I believe queens are most powerful when they ascend the throne by their own devices,

not when they stand on a man's shoulders to reach the vaunted seat. Besides, there was only one king who interested me.

Then *the* kiss happened. It changed everything. There was no going back after that. For either of us. I have only myself to blame.

Gray Wilder is many things, not all of them honorable, but he isn't the kind of man who would *touch* an employee—and he didn't—until I touched first.

When I didn't have anywhere to go on Christmas Eve, he invited me to Sweetgrass, his brother JD's home. The starry night, coupled with the free-flowing booze, made us both stupid. When the pull became too much to resist, when I couldn't deny myself any longer, I kissed him. And he kissed me back. It was *everything* my mind had conjured, and so much more.

Although I might have acted first, from the moment my lips grazed his, he had complete control. Looking back, I often wonder if the kiss was actually my idea or something he orchestrated.

I went directly to Smith the day after Christmas. The day after Gray *thoroughly* fucked me—body, mind, and soul. There was no heart in anything he did—in anything I let him do. It was safer that way.

While I didn't share the sordid details with Smith, I confessed my attraction to Gray was getting in the way of the job. Smith knows the pitfalls in this line of work too well, and didn't bother to tell me to suck it up. He moved me from the club immediately.

That's when Gray learned that Mae, the accommodating hostess, the woman who begged shamelessly for his cock, was Delilah Mae Porter, outed CIA agent who testified before Congress wearing a disguise, so she could go on to live some semblance of a normal life. He didn't take the news well.

The contents of my desk and locker were left at the curb, and I wasn't permitted back into the club to explain. Gray never spoke to me after he learned I was a plant. It was for the best, I assured myself then, but the attraction never waned. Not for me.

Now I satisfy my longing with a sneak peek at him from across the room when he isn't looking, or with the heat that filters through me when I feel the sear of his gaze on my skin.

But the man who cornered me last night—I'd never seen that side of him before. And I'm not sure what his game is, but I'm not playing. I can't afford it.

## DELILAH

When I get to the office, I pour myself a coffee and glance at the top news of the day for anything that might impact our ongoing cases.

That's when I see it.

Archbishop Darden's death is front and center. Although it's jarring, I expected nothing less. But there's something else. A plea from the local authorities for help in identifying a photo *of me*. The image is grainy and distorted, and it's impossible to tell if it's a man or a woman hovering over the archbishop.

*That sonofabitch.* How could he compromise me that way? *How?*

Before I lose it completely, I shut the office door quietly, so as not to alarm anyone, and call Gray's cell phone. My blood pressure climbs while I wait for the call to connect. It goes straight to voicemail. There are so many things I want to shriek into the phone, but I hang up without leaving a message and call Wildflower.

Gray's assistant answers on the second ring.

"Hello, Miss Fox, this is Delilah Porter."

"How are you, dear?"

"Very well, thank you." The last thing I want to do is chitchat, but the road to Gray is through Miss Fox, or Foxy, as she's better known. While she comes off as a nice middle-aged lady, she's as sly and mean as any mama fox when it comes to protecting him. "How have you been, ma'am?" I inquire with all the politeness I can muster.

After she tells me *all* about her son's family in California, she's ready to get down to business. It's a good thing too, because my patience with Girl

Scout cookies and T-ball practice is limited on the best of days, but at this moment, it takes everything I have not to reach through the phone and shake her. “I’m sure you didn’t call to get an update on my grandchildren. What can I do for you, Delilah?”

I unclench my teeth and take a deep breath. “I need to speak to Mr. Wilder, please. I believe he’s expecting my call.”

“Let me see if he’s free to talk.” She puts me on hold and when the annoying music begins to play, I want to scream. The longer it plays, the louder I want to scream.

When the acoustic torture finally stops, Foxy is back on the line. “Delilah, I’m sorry. Mr. Wilder isn’t available right now.”

*What an asshole.* I break the point off the pencil clenched in my fist. “Did he say when he’d be available?”

“I’m afraid not. Why don’t I take your number? I’m sure he’ll call you when he’s free.”

*Really?* Because I’m sure he’s free right now, probably sitting back with his feet up on his desk, laughing at me. But there’s not a damn thing I can do, so I give her my number and wish her a good day.

I glance at the image of the dead archbishop on the screen. *Fuck.* What now? Smith’s parents are visiting, and he’s got his hands full with Kate. Besides, I can’t share this with him. Once he knows, he’ll be implicated in the cover-up, or worse. I can’t have that. There’s no other choice but to wait for Gray to contact me.

*What if he doesn’t?* He will. He wants something. *Patience, Delilah. Patience.*

I study the image carefully. It’s been heavily edited. There’s no way to identify me from what they have now.

But what if it can be enhanced? *What then?*

I won’t survive prison.

Thanks to that scum Congressman Marino, my personal life was broadcast all over cable news. After I refused to be his plaything, he retaliated, outing me as a covert agent and ruining my career. The worst part of the entire episode was being dragged before committees by congressmen and senators who wanted to pick a political fight with the other party.

Under oath, there was nothing I could do but answer their probing questions truthfully, some of which were designed to tease out the most salacious details of my sex life—the one I’d shared with Kyle. At the end of

each day, staffers leaked the most tawdry bits and pieces to the press. One side made it seem like the congressman had a right to expect that I'd play kinky games with him, and the other side made it seem as though he was a miscreant because he wanted a filthy whore like me.

Somehow the fact that he was a traitor got lost in the scandal. Little by little, they tore at my soul, and I was alone to pick up the shreds when they were done.

I take another peek at the screen.

Prison isn't a walk in the park for anyone, but it would be a special kind of hell for me. I was a covert agent. *A spy*. In some quarters, that's a notch or two below a snitch. Sure, they'll promise to protect me, but I know *all* about that kind of protection. Men's prisons are unsafe, but women's prisons are far, far worse.

My stomach turns somersaults just thinking about it. Every guard will feel as though it's their right to dominate me, to beat and rape me on a whim. The prisoners too.

I'm prepared to die before I allow that to be my fate. But it's too soon to think about swallowing the barrel of a gun. Gray laid down a threat. He doesn't want me in prison. Not yet, anyway.

I need to marshal my resources and create a plan while I wait for him to show his hand. I'm not running. It's not in my nature, and besides, I have family here. They're not blood kin, but I wouldn't love them any more if we shared DNA.

Why would Gray do this? What could possibly make him behave this vindictively? Is this his way of exacting revenge because I spied on him and reported back to Smith? *No*. It's something else. It has to be. *But what?*



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## DELILAH

After spending the rest of the day hunting through Gray Wilder's personal information—the files Sinclair Industries has access to—I go home and splash some bourbon over a big ice cube.

When the glass is empty, I head for the shower, leaving a trail of clothing in my wake. I'll pick it up later or tomorrow. It's one of the benefits of living alone.

I take my time under the spray, letting the sweet combination of hot water and whiskey work out the knots. When I'm done, I slather some fancy lotion over my damp skin. The lotion was a birthday present from Gabby, my best friend and Gray's sister-in-law, who uses every opportunity to spoil me.

When I inhale the rich scent, it reminds me to count my blessings. Even if Gray is hell-bent on destroying my life, I'm loved, and not alone in this world. *Not like last time.*

After hanging the towel, I crack the bathroom door to let the steam escape. That's when something catches my eye. By something, I mean Gray Wilder sprawled in the chair a few feet from my bed, with the clothing I shed earlier folded neatly on the corner of the mattress.

It takes several long seconds for my brain to process the handsome intruder lounging in the rocking chair, one leg crossed over the other, an ankle resting on a knee, nimble fingers tapping a denim-clad thigh. The soft, faded fabric conceals the smooth muscle. But it's there. I've seen it. I've felt the power of those legs, run my hands over the thick cords, clenched them tightly while his cock was in my throat.

I blink away the memory when Gray whistles, long and low. "*Delilah,*"

he murmurs. “How can such a beautiful woman be such a slob?”

My arms fly to shield my girlie parts. “Fuck you,” I hiss, but the bravado quickly evaporates when I realize how silly and vulnerable I must look with my hands, fig leaves, covering my breasts and pussy like a nymph in a Renaissance painting.

*Screw him.* This is my house. I ignore the prickle of gooseflesh and drop my arms to the side, before marching into the bedroom, *my* bedroom, to grab a robe from the closet.

His eyes rove shamelessly while I slip the thin robe over my shoulders and belt it snugly. “How could you have sent that image to the authorities? I hurt your little boy feelings because I didn’t show up at the hotel, so you throw a fucking grenade.” I unleash all the negative energy that’s been building all day. Apparently, it didn’t drain away with the soapy water. “Why are you doing this to me? And who are you to be breaking into my house and stalking me without—without me knowing? I mean—who are you, *really*?”

Gray cocks his head and takes a good long look at me. When his eyes linger on my breasts, I feel a flush bloom, as though the robe wrapped around me is made of saran, allowing him to see everything.

“I’m the man who requested your presence last night,” he says, his hard gaze finding mine. “The one who was crystal-clear about the consequences if you didn’t obey. Smith might allow you to do whatever the hell you want, but I won’t put up with it.”

He gets up and strides over, our eyes still engaged in a knife fight, and splays his hand on my throat. When I attempt to pull away, he applies some pressure, drawing me to him with my back against his front. “I have time for a little breath play. Would you like that?”

I will myself to stay calm and let my training take over.

“Use your words, *De-li-lah*.” He emphasizes each syllable, drawing it out with a mocking twang.

It’s not easy, but I force my body to relax against his, brushing my backside casually against his cock to lure him into complacency. When his mouth grazes my outer ear, I catch the low rumble in his throat, and lift my leg, building momentum to slam a heel into the top of his foot. I want him to recoil from the unexpected pain and drop his hold, but Gray senses the attack and twists me around, still holding my neck firmly.

“If you ever try something like that again,” he murmurs, lowering his forehead to mine, “you’ll be a snot-covered mess before I show you an ounce

of mercy.”

The combination of the harsh words and the low, silky baritone he uses to deliver the threat takes my breath away. Only a man in complete control lowers his voice like that. Scores of women are attracted to Gray’s gorgeous face and fat wallet, but it’s his unrepentant brashness and cool demeanor that’s always called to me.

“You need to learn to behave,” he chides, “and I’m going to teach you.” His eyes fall to my nipples poking through the thin fabric. He cups my breast lightly and skims his thumb over a tight furl with the patience of a man who has nothing better to tend to and nowhere else to be.

When I’m lulled by the gentle sensation, he adds some light pressure to my throat, his fingertips on the carotid artery. It’s just a few seconds, but enough to cloud my vision with black spots dotting the edges. “I can make the lessons as difficult or as easy as you wish. That part is completely in your control.”

“Why do you want to hurt me?” My voice is shaky, laying bare my fears. While I’m cursing myself for the weakness, I see a glimmer of compassion in his striking blue eyes. But like a sleight of hand, it’s fleeting and I can’t be sure my eyes aren’t playing tricks. I can’t be sure of anything when it comes to him.

“I have no reason to hurt you. None.”

He drops his hand, although I wasn’t talking about his hold on my throat. It’s the bullying that I hate.

“But don’t give me one,” he adds, “because I won’t hesitate to destroy you if necessary. The photo was a warning. The image is formatted in a way they’ll never be able to enhance. You’re safe. *This* time. But don’t push me, Delilah.”

My heart is pounding, and even though he’s taken his thumb off my airway, I’m still using my breath judiciously.

“Get dressed. As much as I enjoy watching your nipples respond to my voice, we have business to discuss, and you’re too much of a distraction in that flimsy robe.”

He glides two long fingers down my throat, over the hollow, and between my breasts, sliding deep into the vee of the robe that has fallen open. “Are you wet for me?”

My brain is in a fog, and I couldn’t answer him if I wanted to.

“Put some clothes on,” he demands softly, although his eyes are

smoldering and he doesn't look at all like he wants me dressed. And right now, I'm not entirely sure I want to be dressed.

"Be quick about it," he warns, before pulling his hand away and striding out of the bedroom, leaving me standing there with my mouth agape and my flesh tingling.

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## DELILAH

Despite Gray's warning, I take a few extra minutes to dress, trying to right my head before dealing with him. My body and brain are sparring, and any survival skills I might have possessed are a bloody casualty of the battle.

When I get to the kitchen, Gray's leaning against the counter, eating the last slice of blueberry pie like he owns the damn place. His eyes rake over my body deliberately as he takes the final bite. It's bold and arousing. But unlike the satin robe, the baggy sweatpants and oversized hoodie that belonged to Kyle hide all my interested parts—the ones that haven't gotten the message that sex with Gray Wilder is a *very* bad idea.

His gaze pauses on the FBI logo on the sweatshirt, regarding it carefully, but he says nothing.

“Surprised you didn't help yourself to some ice cream to go along with that pie.”

“Not a fan of ice cream with pie. Makes the crust soggy.”

“I'm not interested in your food eccentricities. But I'm *very* interested in knowing how you followed me the other night without being detected, and then restrained me so effectively—in the way only a trained professional could do.” I square my shoulders, holding my head high and my gaze steady.

“I'm not discussing anything else with you until I have answers to those questions.” I plant my feet firmly, bracing for an attack that doesn't come.

“I'm better trained than you are, bigger and stronger.” His cunning eyes drill into me while he speaks, telling me nothing. “It's that simple.”

“No. You are—”

“A pretty-boy billionaire who runs a sex club?”

Yes. “Clearly there’s more to you than that.”

“Clearly.” His mouth quirks at the edges, and I’d like to slap the smirk off his pretty-boy face. “Where do you keep the whiskey?”

“This isn’t a social call. I didn’t invite you here, and you already ate my pie. You’re not drinkin’ my whiskey too.”

“The whiskey is for you. You need to settle your nerves.”

“My nerves don’t need settling.” I search his face, hoping to find a clue about what he’s up to, but there’s nothing to see. Nothing but a day’s worth of stubble and a tiny cleft in his strong chin. “What do you want from me?”

“I’m in need of some arm candy. It would be a huge plus if that arm candy was multilingual and knew how to use a weapon.”

*What the hell?* I release the breath I’ve been holding. “I’m in need of a new pair of shit-kickers, but I don’t go around stalking people who might have a pair I like, and breaking into their homes to harass them into giving them up.”

There’s a twinkle in his eyes. *Bastard.*

“I’m glad you find me so amusing. But ain’t no arm candy here. Sorry for your trouble.” I take the empty dessert plate out of his hand, rinse the crumbs, and place it in the dishwasher.

When he steps closer, I pull out a scouring pad from a box under the sink and begin to scrub the stainless-steel basin like my life depends on it, ignoring the singe of his glare.

“Perhaps I wasn’t plainspoken enough for a simple girl from Mississippi. You *will* join me for an upcoming mission. And it *will* require you to terminate your employment with Smith.”

I’ve officially entered the twilight zone. My hands are shaking, and I suspect there are at least a half dozen other tells that I don’t want him to see. “You’ve lost your damn mind.” I toss the scouring pad in the trash and wipe my hands. “I hear there are doctors who can help with that sort of thing.” My back is toward him as I head out of the kitchen. “Lock the door and turn on the alarm on your way out so no more assholes break in tonight. My quota for the day has been met.” I pause for a second before reaching the doorway, but I don’t turn to face him. “If that’s not *plainspoken* enough for a spoiled rich boy from Charleston, let me put it another way. Fuck you. And get out of my house.”

In one move, he grabs my arm and spins me around until I’m between him and the kitchen counter. “Don’t you dare turn your back and walk away

until I'm finished."

He's in a mood, and I'm about to bear the brunt of it—maybe that's apt since I believe I'm responsible for the crankiness.

"These are your choices," he says, as though he might actually give me a choice. "One, you continue to behave like a brat. I walk out that door and send every image I have to the local authorities and to the Bureau. You go to prison." He tugs on my arm. "How much fun do you think the guards will have with your pretty little covert ass? Within a day, you'll be everybody's favorite cum bucket." I cringe because it's true. "And Smith's business will be ruined by his close association with the woman who murdered Archbishop Darden in cold blood. Everybody will think he put you up to it, to avenge Kate. That's what they'll all believe, and you know it."

He doesn't miss a beat. "Or two, you learn your place, and do as I say. This is an important mission. One that will allow you not only to do good, but to get your hands good and dirty in the process. To use all the tools in your arsenal, just as you were trained to do."

*Important mission. Allow you to do good. Use all the tools in your arsenal, just as you were trained to do.* His words spin round and round in my head. I'm intrigued, but I'm also out of sorts and not thinking straight. "What's behind door number three?"

I should have asked about door number two, but I lashed out impulsively, because I'm a fighter. I don't run. Never have. I punch back, hard. It's my default setting when I'm cornered. "Is that where the shiny new car and the beach vacation is hiding? There's always a car." As soon as the words come out of my mouth, I regret them.

The fury in his eyes is stunning, but I don't blink.

"Number three," he says, in a tone that raises the hair on the back of my neck, "is I bend you over this," his knuckles rap against the countertop, "pull down those ratty sweatpants, and fuck you until you can't walk for a month. Then you'll do what I want, because you know I'm not playing about those photos."

I lift my chin defiantly.

He shakes his head. "You might be able to handle being the prison whore, but I don't think you're prepared to see Smith ruined."

Of all the things Gray has ever said, that holds the most truth. I will slit my wrists before becoming the prison whore, but I will not allow Smith to go down in ashes because of me. He is the most important member of the little

family I've cobbled together. He's the man who took me in and gave me a job after I'd become a pariah. He held out his hand, when everyone else was still kicking me. No, I will not let anyone destroy him. And Gray damn well knows it.

"Smith is part of your family, as much as he's part of mine." I'm surprised my voice doesn't echo how powerless I feel right now. "You would hurt him to punish me?"

Gray steps back, and I can breathe again.

"Smith lost his big-brother status when he planted you in my club without a word about it."

"He did it to protect your family. To protect you."

"I have no desire to see Smith burn. But if he becomes collateral damage, so be it. His fortune is in your hands."

*Bullshit. I don't believe it.* "What would your brother say about this? Smith is JD's best friend. And Gabby. What would she say?"

His teeth slide over his bottom lip, with a nasty snarl. "The more people you involve, the more people get hurt. But the bottom line is still the same. The stakes are high. Bigger than any one person—any one family. Even my own."

His words are sobering, and I don't know what to make of them. While I can't say for sure how he feels about Smith, I am absolutely certain he loves his brothers. And Gabby. And his baby niece. You can't hide those kinds of feelings, and they're plain as day when he's with them.

"What am I to tell Smith?"

"Whatever you want. You might start with the truth. How dissatisfied you've become, because you miss the field work. He'll understand that. He just went through something similar himself. Then tell him you need him to trust you. Bat those long eyelashes at him when you talk."

*Fucker.* "Bat my eyelashes? That's not what my relationship with Smith is about. He respects me and the work I do."

"He does. And he should. But you need more than someone who respects you. You need someone to capture your attention and keep you in line so you don't run around killing off the local clergy." He takes a fistful of my hair.

"Have I captured your attention, *De-li-lah?*"

"You're a vile excuse for a human being. I hate you."

"That matters not at all in this equation. Although the prospect of a little demon fighting back does make my dick hard."



I look away, focusing on a tiny gash at the bottom right corner of the refrigerator. I never noticed it before, but I'm desperate to find a distraction. Because I'm ashamed. Ashamed that I would like nothing more than for this despicable asshole to shove his hard cock into me. I've wanted him so bad for so long that I don't know how not to want him—even when he's behaving like a world-class prick.

"Why did you do it?" he asks, letting go of my hair.

I'm still thinking about his cock and not at all sure what he's asking.

"Kill Archbishop Darden."

*We're back to that.* "He was the one who put that devil Creighton at St. Maggie's."

"So?"

"So, do you know how many women Creighton tortured and killed? In my book, Darden was just as responsible." *And that's not even the half of it. That sonofabitch has been spreading evil for decades.* "I spent hours with Kate at the hospital. I held her hand while she was being examined. Stood there and listened to the things he did to her. I listened to the fear in her voice and to the shame she's going to carry for a long time—maybe forever. Shame that should *not* be her burden."

Gray eyes me suspiciously. *I need to stop talking.*

"Let's see if I've got this straight. You're such a big fan of Kate McKenna that you decided to seek vengeance in her name. You murdered a man of God while he slept, because of loyalty to the sisterhood. Did I get that right?"

I don't bother responding because he knows I'm not being entirely truthful, and it can only get worse from here. "It's none of your damn business, asshole."

He wedges his thumb under my chin, forcing me to look into the depths of those ice-cold blue eyes. "Pick number three," he goads, snapping the waistband of my sweatpants. "Go ahead. Do it. I'm begging you."

"I could kill you in your sleep, too," I assure him sweetly, without a thimbleful of self-preservation. It's not that I'm so brave—or foolish, for that matter. It's that I'm confident he won't hurt me.

"You could try." He takes his hands off me and moves a few feet away, leaning back against the counter with his arms crossed. "But you won't. Because I'm promising you things you haven't had in a long time. Things you enjoy."

God, he's insufferable. "And exactly what are those things?"

"Excitement. Fun. A chance to use your skills—all of them—for the benefit of humanity." He watches me carefully as he continues ticking off the perks. "An opportunity for submission—an outlet for your deepest desires. That's the icing on top."

"In your dreams." The words come out rough and low, and reticent, because for the last few years, that's been *my* dream. But there's no way I'm telling him that. It will just become one more thing to use against me.

"Submission isn't demanded—through extortion, no less. It's given freely to those who earn it. You haven't earned a fucking thing."

"I'm well aware." He captures my gaze and doesn't let go. "But this is a mission we're discussing. Not a relationship."

I swallow the retort on the tip of my tongue. I'm tired and it's not worth the energy. We both know I'm going to pick door number two. Maybe we've known it since the beginning. "I need more information before agreeing to anything."

"I'll read you in as much as I can when the time is right. First, you need to cut professional ties with Smith."

*Read me in?* It's a classified mission. *A black op? Can't be.* "Who exactly do you work for?"

"The good guys," he answers, without hesitation.

"That's it? I'm supposed to quit my job and go on some half-cocked mission with you? I don't even know who you are anymore." His Adam's apple bobs, but he doesn't say anything. "Quit my job—hell. Are you even planning on paying me?"

"In cash?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, in cash. A woman's got to pay her rent and eat. If you can't promise—"

"You'll be paid. In all sorts of ways, including cash."

"I'm only interested in the cash. The rest I can take care of myself."

Gray studies me with a wicked gleam in his eyes, as though he's imagining me on my back, naked, feet sole to sole, strumming my clit for his pleasure. After several long seconds, his mouth twists into the mocking sneer of a predator who has cornered his prey and wants to spend some time toying with it before he eats. "You wound me, Delilah."

"Your cock is nowhere near as magical as you seem to think it is. Doesn't even warrant an honorable mention. But maybe they have a participation

trophy for you.” I meet his eyes with a self-satisfied sneer of my own. “Someone had to tell you.”

He doesn’t say anything. But if that smug look on his face could talk, it would say, *we’ll see how magical my cock is when you’re begging for it.*

I need him to leave. It’s not that I want the damn thing pressing against his zipper. *Not right now, anyway.* It’s that I could be persuaded. And men with erections are not to be trusted. *Ever.*

“It’s late,” I say, turning off the light over the sink. “Are we done?”

“For tonight. Get in touch with me after you talk to Smith.”

“I haven’t agreed to anything.”

“Yes, you have.” He pulls a phone from his pocket. “Use this to contact me. Only this. My number is already programmed. The password is Sultan’s Palace. All one word.” He tips his head to the side. “Just like that night, you have the ultimate control. You just have to be prepared to live with the consequences.”

He opens the back door and steps out into the night. Seconds after the screen door bangs behind him, my new phone vibrates. When I turn it over, there’s a message with a series of images. They’re all of me with the archbishop.

I want to chase him into the darkness, all the way to the gates of Hell, and use the damn phone to beat some decency into him, but I don’t. Not tonight. But the moment will come. I can be cold and calculating too.

**GRAY**

**B**efore my feet hit the pavement, I send Delilah a reminder of the consequences if she goes rogue. Then I send another message.

**GW:** She's in.

**Unknown:** How did you get her on board?

**GW:** Between me and her. Not your concern.

**Unknown:** If you ruin her, I'll kill you myself.

**GW:** Fuck you, Smith.

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## GRAY

### **T**wo weeks earlier

It's hot as hell, and sticky from all the rain last night. There's not a soul back here, nor will there be, until the sun burns away the remnants of the storm. Wet brush overhead, pesky critters swarming, and no Wi-Fi makes Jessamine Café the perfect place for a clandestine meeting.

I'm here to drop a bomb. The mother of all bombs. Not an actual explosive, but it will cause plenty of damage, just the same.

I hope like hell that I haven't misjudged the players I'm assembling. While there's no shortage of talent and character among them, the yarn that holds us together is a complicated weave, with a number of weak spots that could unravel the entire mission. Those weak spots are emotions, and that mission is the culmination of my life's work.

The frosted glass door swings open and Smith steps onto the deserted patio, coffee in hand, startled look on his face. *And it's just the beginning.* His composure returns before he reaches the table where I'm seated. "Didn't expect to find you out here in the swamp. Aren't you worried about melting all over your custom-made shirt?"

I snicker and take a gulp of coffee before peering into his eyes. "That's interesting, because you're exactly the man I expected to see here."

Smith stiffens, every inch of muscle tense, but the wheels turning madly.

While he searches his internal drive, his eyes narrow, with the surrounding skin drawn into tight creases. "You were expecting *me*?"

I nod.

I've known Smith since I was sixteen, and I've never seen him quite so

off his game. He can be deadly serious, but he's never at a loss for words. He's the guy who always has a quick comeback at the ready. Something clever and cutting. But right now, he's got nothing.

"I'm Lone Wolf," I say, divulging my covert identity. He's been told his meeting is with Lone Wolf, but this is more than he bargained for—much more.

Smith continues to eye me cautiously. "You're Lone Wolf?" he repeats, testing the words as they roll off his tongue, much the way one does when speaking a foreign language.

"It's a bit pretentious, even for my tastes, but Gray Wolf would have been too obvious." I motion toward an empty seat. "Take a load off."

Smith pulls out the chair across from me and plops his ass down. "I—I—*fuck me.*" He leans back and rubs his palm over an unshaven jaw. "You better start talking, princess."

*Princess.* The nickname my brother JD tagged me with when we were kids. It stuck because he's always thought I was soft and liked to be comfortable. And because it's what brothers do. Taunt each other and wheedle themselves under each other's skin. I call him asshole every chance I get. It's one of the many dysfunctional ways we say I love you in my family.

"What the hell is going on, Gray?" The color is gone from Smith's face, and the alarm in his voice is palpable.

My gut burns like a sonofabitch. Smith's not blood family, but he's damn close.

I mulled over the words I would use with him today. Sifting carefully until they were milled into a fine grain that could be swallowed easily. My focus had been on making it palatable for him, without divulging too much. What I never considered were my own feelings and the emotion that would bubble up as I prepared to tell him that everything he knew about me up until this point was a lie. Maybe not everything, but enough to unsettle anyone, even a tough sonofabitch like Smith.

I had imagined there would be some measure of relief in confessing. Some lightness from the unburdening. But reality feels more like the heavy ache of grief.

As I wrestle with my emotions, I draw a breath and blow it out slowly. Even after my lungs are empty, the weight in my chest is still there. But I don't hide. I look Smith right in the eye, because I'm not a coward and he deserves the respect.

“I’m running a black op that’s going down sometime in the next month—six weeks at the outside. I need to borrow a couple operatives for the duration, and I might need your team to provide cover if the mission comes to Charleston—although I don’t expect that to happen.”

Smith’s brow is furrowed tight. “I already know all that from my meeting at the Pentagon. I want to know how *you’re* involved. I do want the details, but first—what the hell are you doing running a black op? And who the fuck do you work for?”

“I can’t talk about who I work for, not specifically. But from your meeting, you know the government is involved—the US and the Amidane governments. That’s all I can say about it. You know the drill as well as I do.”

“No.” He pounds a fist on the wrought-iron table, causing it to wobble. I grab my coffee so it doesn’t become a casualty of the outburst.

“That’s not good enough. How did you become involved in paramilitary activities? And when?” he barks.

“Not paramilitary. Covert.”

“The CIA?”

I shake my head.

“The Bureau.” It’s not really a question, and I’m not a fan of guessing games, so I don’t respond. “Did they reach out to you while your father was running for president, or after he was elected?”

I take another drink of coffee, letting the bitter roast saturate my tongue. “I was recruited in college.”

Smith gapes at me like I have two heads. “College?”

I nod.

“*Christ*. How have you kept it a secret for so long?”

“It really wasn’t that hard to pull off.” Sad, but true. “My mother was dead. My father focused most of his energy on criminal activity, and on keeping JD in line. As it turns out, he spent some of that energy molesting little girls too.” The thought of it makes me want to dig up the bastard and kill him again. *This time with my bare hands.*

I glance at Smith’s stony face. He isn’t a babe in the woods, but he doesn’t have an inkling about how my father got his just deserts. This isn’t the time to savor my father’s death.

“JD was preoccupied with everyone’s safety,” I continue, “especially Gabby’s, taking care of Zack, and plotting his revenge against *Dad*. Chase

was young. By the time you came into the picture and began poking around in my business, it had become a way of life. And I had gotten good at it.”

He opens his mouth to say something, but I raise a hand to stop him. “We can discuss the particulars of my life at another time, if it’s really necessary, but right now we have more important things to talk about.”

Smith rolls the coffee cup between his hands, seemingly transfixed by the motion. “Puts me in a difficult position,” he says quietly. “JD is my business partner, not to mention—”

“JD is an interested investor in Sinclair Industries. He’s not an active partner. In any case, he doesn’t have the clearance necessary to be read in on any aspect of this mission. Wouldn’t matter if it were me or someone else running the show.”

Smith nods. He knows it’s true, and I know he would never disclose classified information to anyone—not even JD. “What do you want from me?”

*If something happens to me during the mission, I want you to protect Delilah with your life. I want you to get her out and ensure her safety.* That’s why I selected his company over the other two I was offered. I know he’ll do everything in his power to save Delilah, if it should come to that.

“I need you to lend me an operative who can provide security and act as my driver. It has to be someone known to you. They need strong skills, and must be entirely trustworthy. Some familiarity with Amadi culture is a huge plus, but not a deal breaker. It will require at least one trip abroad. I’ll expedite the necessary clearance and paperwork.”

“What about Trippi? I’m sure he’s involved in this somehow.”

Trippi is my driver and provides security. He’s not here now, but he’s close. Smith is right. Trippi is involved and has been for a long time. “He’ll be providing security for someone else.” I look Smith squarely in the face. “I want Delilah too.”

“What?” he roars.

“The mission requires a woman. One who’s multilingual, won’t crumple in the face of danger, and who looks like someone I might fuck. Delilah fits that to a T.”

His fists are clenched on the table. “It makes me sick to hear you talk about her like she’s a whore. If I didn’t know how you really feel about her, I would grind your pretty face into the cobblestones.”

This is the part—one of them—where emotions weaken the fabric. But



rightfully so. His reaction tells me that my instincts are right. He will do everything in his power to protect her if things take a bad turn.

He contemplates me carefully, trying to put the pieces together. “You need a driver and security because you’re assigning Trippi, your trusted sidekick, to Delilah?”

“I’m assigning him to Delilah for a whole host of reasons that I’m not getting into with you.”

“The Bureau is bringing her in?”

“I’m bringing her in. I can use whatever assets I feel are necessary to complete this mission successfully. As you are fully aware, that’s how these things always work.”

“No one knows about her?” Smith cocks his head, gauging my reaction.

“Everyone who needs to know, knows. I don’t take any unnecessary risks with my team, and I won’t take any unnecessary risks with yours.” *And I sure as hell am not taking any risks with Delilah.*

Smith is fuming, but he knows that even the best-run ops are messy. It’s the nature of the beast. From his meeting at the Pentagon, he also knows this is a vital mission for the country. Words like duty and honor mean everything to him. Plus, he hasn’t told me to go fuck myself yet. That’s encouraging.

“Delilah came to me after Christmas. Said she couldn’t work at Wildflower anymore because her feelings for you were getting in the way of the job.”

“Did she?” I knew Delilah had run to Smith after the night we spent together. It had pissed me off that she went to him without talking to me first. I’m still pissed about it. But I never knew what she told him. “What else did she say?”

“None of your goddamn business.” Smith empties his coffee cup and places it carefully on the table. “She agreed to this?” The skepticism in his voice is scathing. But if I were in his place, I’d be skeptical too.

“She will.” I respond with more confidence than I’m feeling. I’m still not entirely sure how I’m going to convince her, but it’s going to be ugly. That part I am sure about. “It will be easier on her if you let her go without a fuss when she asks. I don’t want her to know you’re involved with this yet.”

“Why not?” Smith challenges. “Why can’t I loan her to you the way I’m loaning my other guy? Why do I have to let her go?”

“Because she’ll begin overthinking everything if she believes she’s serving two masters. If she isn’t focused, she’ll put the mission at risk and it

will become dangerous for everyone, especially for her. It's not a big secret that Delilah worships you."

Smith swats a swarm of gnats away from his face. "You're going to use her feelings for you, and your feelings for her, to make whatever story you're concocting believable. That's not going to interfere with her focus?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I don't have *feelings* for her." The only person I'm kidding here is myself, but I force a jeer to make a more persuasive argument. "But I must be on top of my game, if I've convinced even you of that."

"You're a sonofabitch, and a goddamn liar." The tips of his ears are flaming and his words are caustic, but his tone is measured. "I don't care who you work for or how long you've been running ops. You're playing a fool's game if you involve a woman you can barely keep your hands off in a covert mission."

"Why don't we let Delilah make the decision? I'm just asking you not make it difficult for her to leave when she comes to you. This is a matter of national security," I add for good measure. "You know this from your meeting at the Pentagon."

Smith's lips are pursed, and the smoke is bellowing from his ears.

"She's perfect for this assignment—and it's perfect for her," I say quietly. "She needs this." The last part is the nail in the coffin. It's manipulative, but it's true. And Smith knows it.

He fills his cheeks with air and when it escapes, it's like a deflating balloon. "How is someone who was in the limelight like she was going to be able to fool a big fish with airtight security in place?"

"She can't. We're going to do it in plain sight. She's the flavor of the month—actually, she'll have to be more than that to be convincing."

Smith glowers and curses softly.

"Delilah's gorgeous. There isn't a man alive who wouldn't want to trade places with me. She's been publicly shunned by her government, and she's found a nice little landing place in my lap. It won't be difficult to sell that story to the people I'm dealing with."

"Pfft. Delilah will never agree to what you're proposing."

"We'll see."

"So this is why you're so damn protective of Wildflower. It's your cover. I can't believe I've been so stupid."

It is a cover, and a vehicle for me to spy on political and industry leaders

from around the globe. My father opened Wildflower to gather dirt on his detractors so he could blackmail them when it became expedient. I harvest member information and feed it to the government. Their motivations aren't always any more noble than my father's were. Perhaps mine aren't either.

"It's more than just my cover. Maybe it started that way, but it's become an important part of who I am." It's true. Wildflower has allowed me to indulge and perfect my Dominant ways to my heart's desire.

Smith looks beaten. He might feel stupid, but I suspect he mostly feels betrayed.

My gut twists, and the coffee sloshes against my stomach wall, the acid burning the lining. Smith's feelings are nothing compared to the pain my brothers would feel if I told them I'd been lying to them for nearly fifteen years—especially JD. The betrayal would be devastating. Unforgiveable. I push the thought away.

"You're not stupid. I was always JD's little brother," I say gently. "There was never a reason to look any further." I don't apologize. Smith isn't a naïve civilian. He was a member of the elite Delta Force, and has plenty of his own dark secrets. Although none of this makes me feel any better as I watch him battle with his emotions.

When I've had enough of sitting with the guilt, I stand to leave. "I'll take care of your team. Get them back to you in one piece. You have my word." Smith doesn't look up. "I'll be in touch," I add, before walking away.

"Gray?"

I stop and turn.

"She's good people. The best. She's tough and prickly and she can slit a man's throat in the blink of an eye, but inside, her heart bleeds like any other woman's. Don't add to the heap of misery she's already faced in her life."

My hope is to lighten her burden, not add to the pain. But I don't share that with him. "Understood."

"You better do more than understand."

"We worked up close for the better part of two years. You don't have to tell me about her vulnerability." *It keeps me awake at night. It has for years. Long before she ever set foot into Wildflower.*

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## DELILAH

### **P**resent Day

WHEN I ARRIVE at the security office, Smith is already here. I was hoping to have a few minutes to myself, but maybe it's better if I don't have any more time to think. I spent most of last night tossing and turning, worrying about telling him that I'm leaving.

As I approach Smith's doorway, he's on the phone, looking out the window. All I see is the back of his sandy head above the chair.

If I go sit at my desk until he's finished, I might not find the courage to come back. So I stand outside his office quietly, trying not to eavesdrop. It's not hard, because my mind is elsewhere, bogged down by my own problems.

*What am I doing?* Leaving a job that I love—well, maybe not love, but I like it a lot. It gives me security and stability. And I love my teammates—all of them—and Smith. He trusts me implicitly, and leans on me more than anyone else. This feels like the most selfish thing I've ever done. *Damn you, Gray Wilder.*

"Delilah. You need something?"

I blink a few times. I didn't hear Smith end the call.

"Um." I nod. *It's only a temporary leave, Delilah. Like a vacation. You've earned a few weeks off.* "Got a minute?"

He motions for me to come inside. I shut the door behind me, my fingers white-knuckling the cold knob. My mind is racing, but my body is moving in slow motion, weighed down by a sense of dread.

“You okay?” he asks.

“I’m fine,” I assure him, taking a seat across the desk.

He leans back in the chair, bouncing a pencil eraser on the desk top. I don’t know where to begin. Smith watches me patiently, waiting for me to speak, but my well-rehearsed bullshit is stuck in my throat.

“How’s Kate?” I ask, in a grand show of cowardice.

“She’s tough. The road’s rocky, littered with landmines, but we’ll get through it.”

“It’ll take her some time. It’s amazing what the human spirit can withstand. If she needs anything—if you need anything—” *I can’t do this.* I can’t leave him now. Not until things are better with Kate. It’s not right. “I should get back to work.” I stand and rub my sweaty palms on my pants, pretending to smooth the wrinkles.

“Sit,” he says gently, but firmly.

I’m not sure what to do, so I sit my backside on the edge of the chair.

“Do you need me to do something?” I ask, hoping he’ll give me an assignment that requires all my attention so I don’t spend the day thinking about what I’m going to tell Gray.

Smith chuckles. “Yeah. I need you to tell me what’s on your mind.”

*Of course you do.* “Not a lot. You know me.” *Sweet Jesus, that sounded stupid.*

“I do know you. You’re not an airhead. And you don’t beat around the bush. You plow straight through it. So cut the bullshit and tell me what’s going on.”

I’m fresh out of pep talks for myself. Exhausted from weighing the pros and cons about working with Gray again, albeit in a different capacity. And I’m bone-tired of justifying to myself why I deserve a chance to do work that I love, even if it’s temporary. I have to do this. Not because of some picture that I’m afraid of, but because I will regret it if I don’t. My life is already too full of regret.

When I glance at Smith, my left eye twitches, but I press on. “I need some time off. Like a leave of absence—or something.”

He doesn’t say anything right away, and the silence is so heavy it’s suffocating.

“I’ll be gone a month, maybe a bit longer.”

“You sick?”

I shake my head. “No. It’s nothing like that. I—I’ve been offered an

opportunity—that I’d like to accept. It’s not something I’m free to talk about.” There. I said it. But I don’t feel any better.

Smith eyes me suspiciously while I try not to squirm. “The agency call you to come back?”

Even as he asks, I hear the disbelief in his voice. He knows the agency would *never* call me back. The director himself made it clear they were done with me. *You’re no good to us as a covert operative now, Special Agent Porter. I could put you behind a desk, but you won’t be happy. I’m sorry this happened to you.*

I blink away the memory. “No. It’s something different.” I take a long breath. “It’s all legal—as legal as this shit can be—but I’m not at liberty to say anything more.” I don’t actually know anything more. Not really.

Smith is quiet.

As well as I know him, I can’t read him right now. This was a mistake. That I do know. “I realize this is bad timing—I had actually changed my mind about asking you because I know this isn’t a great time to be asking for time off.”

“It’s actually not a bad time at all. We’re in a transition period. That’s not what concerns me.” He captures my gaze and holds it steady. “Are you sure about this? Are you certain it’s something you want to get involved with?”

No. I’m not at all sure. I’m not nervous about the work. I would love the opportunity to be part of a covert operation again. *Love it.* I live for the opportunity. But I am terrified of the man running the op. There’s no denying it. Not to Smith, and not to myself. “Before I answer, can I ask you a question?”

He sits back in the chair. “I’m listening.”

“As you branch out and Sinclair Industries takes on more covert operations—will there ever be an opportunity for me to work in the field?” I know the answer. I just need to hear him say it.

“You work in the field now.”

“Not like that. Undercover. The way I did at Wildflower. The way I was trained.”

He shifts in his chair. “Delilah. You’re damn good at what you do, and you are, hands down, the most important and trusted member of my team.” His brow is drawn tight, and even though he knows I won’t be surprised, it pains him to deliver the news. “But I won’t lie to you. I don’t see how I can put you undercover again. You were outed publicly. Your face—your story—

it doesn't take much digging to put it together. We were confident that no one at Wildflower would look hard at you. That's why I put you there. It would have to be something like that—something unique—I can't even think of what it might be.”

I nod, staring at my hands, squeezing the fingers I've laced together until they ache. “I don't know the full extent of the operation. But it seems like it would challenge me and—and that it might be one of those unique opportunities where my past won't be an issue.”

I glance up at him. I need to see what's in his eyes. In his soul. I need the connection—and in a way I don't really understand, I need his blessing. “It's hard,” I continue, “so hard to say this. It feels like such an enormous betrayal, but yes, I'd like to do it. I might never get another chance.”

It's true. Every word. Even if Gray weren't involved—if the CIA or the FBI or the NSA or any of them, came to me with the proposition that Gray laid at my feet, I would do it in a heartbeat. At least, I would want to. “I don't want to leave you in the lurch. That's my only hesitation.” There's Gray too, of course, but I don't tell Smith that.

“It would require you to start right away?”

I nod.

He drums his fingers on the desk. “If you want to do it—if you feel it's important, I won't stand in your way.”

It's not exactly a blessing, but close enough. “This should make me happy, but I feel bad.”

“I'm the one who feels bad,” Smith says softly. “You've brought so much to my team, but I haven't given enough thought to what the work has given you.”

“It's given me plenty—so much.”

“Maybe. But not enough. For people like us, the challenge is what fuels us. It wears you down if you feel like your skills aren't being fully utilized. I know that feeling well.”

“Smith—”

“Go. Do what you need to do, then come back—if that's what you want. There will always be a place for you here. But if you don't do it, if you stay, you'll get fat and sloppy from being insufficiently challenged. It'll wear on your soul and you'll be a risk to yourself and to the team.”

Anger, or maybe pride, is bubbling up and it tastes rancid. “I would never  
—”

“Not intentionally, but it would happen, eventually. Now that it’s out in the open, I can’t afford the risk. Neither can you.”

“So I can come back when the mission is over?” He’s already said as much, but I need to hear it again.

“I hope you do come back. But that’s up to you. You need to feed your soul, Delilah, and as much as I’ll miss your sassy mouth, I want that for you.”

Smith gets up, and I stand too. “Thank you. I’ll never forget everything you’ve done for me.”

He comes around the desk and wraps me in his arms. We’re close, but he’s never hugged me before. I press my eyelids together firmly, until the sting of tears dissipates.

Smith releases me, but keeps a heavy hand on my shoulder. “If at any point the operation goes south—at *any* point—or if you just want out, you call me.”

I don’t dare look at him, because the dam will open, releasing a flood the likes of which we’ve never seen.

He squeezes my shoulder. “Promise me, Delilah.”

My chest aches. There haven’t been many people in my life who have given a damn about my well-being.

Smith squeezes, again. “Promise me.”

I cover his loyal hand with mine, and clutch it tightly. “I promise.”





## GRAY

“Come in.” I glance up from the screen as Foxy marches into my office, like the taskmaster she is, carrying a tray that she sets down on my desk.

“I had the kitchen send over breakfast.”

“I already had breakfast.”

“Yes. I know. A protein shake.” She rolls her eyes, not bothering to hide her disapproval. Something most people who want to continue to work for me wouldn’t dare do. But Maggie Fox isn’t most people. She’s been with me since long before I took over at Wildflower. Saved my ass more times than I can count. That’s not hyperbole.

“Eggs and an English muffin isn’t going to ruin your girlish figure,” she snaps, lifting the silver dome off an omelet.

“Keep it covered. I’ll have it later.” Foxy knows it’s a lie, but she reads my mood, and holds her tongue.

I take another glance at the tray. “No coffee?”

“You’ve had enough.”

I don’t utter a word, but I glare at her until she understands that I’ve about had my fill of insolence.

I’m edgy, but it has nothing to do with coffee and everything to do with a smart-mouthed blonde who should be terminating her employment with Smith about now. But with Delilah, who knows what she’s actually doing? The woman makes me crazy.

After Foxy collects the contents of my outbox, she turns to leave, and I go back to studying a spreadsheet with the monthly expenses. “When you get

back to your office, have them send over a fresh carafe. *Please.*” I add the nicety, because she means well, and I’m not a total dick.

“You’ve been jittery and irritable from the moment you arrived. It’s a bad look. You need some food to counteract the effects of the five cups of coffee you’ve already enjoyed this morning, not more of the same.”

It’s six, but who’s counting. “Is there something else you need before you go back to your desk and kindly order me some coffee?”

“Eat,” she mutters, shutting the door behind her.

“Coffee,” I bark before the door latches.

No matter how many times I review this motherfucking spreadsheet, I can’t make sense of it today. And the stench of eggs isn’t helping. *Damn Foxy.* I get up and dump the tray on the credenza across the room.

Delilah will contact me. Any minute now. I’m confident about that. The truth is she wants what I’m offering—all of it. She needs it too. Although I’m not convinced she understands that part yet.

I sink back into my chair and glance at the phone. Thirty-seven emails in the last forty-five minutes. Not one worthy of my time. The phone lights up, but it’s not her, so the call goes to voicemail, where I’ll deal with it later, or Foxy will.

Time is a bitch for those who wait. Shakespeare was right, and nothing’s changed since then.

I push aside the spreadsheet, and check my phone again.

Hopefully I haven’t made a mistake dragging Delilah into something without giving her ample time to prepare. This mission is tailor-made for her. *If only there was more time.*

I slam my fist on the desktop. I’m not impulsive, but I don’t second-guess myself *ever*—it’s too dangerous in my line of work. But everything with Delilah pushes me in directions I rarely go. *Damn woman.*

The timing on this isn’t perfect—it never is—but she’s beginning to take risks that will only get her into trouble...or worse. Mission or no mission, I’d have to intervene now, anyway.

This opportunity will be good for her. I’ve watched her closely for nearly three years, and even before that, when she was married to that stupid fucker Kyle, I knew her secrets.

Kyle had no honor and a big mouth that he ran all the damn time. He was a piss-poor excuse for a Dominant, and I was a piss-poor excuse for a man, so I let him be an abusive asshole and did nothing to intervene. But I have a

chance to make it right. Something we don't always get in life. At least that's been my experience.

Delilah needs new coping mechanisms. She needs to be reined in, and allowed to live her dream—even for a short while. And she needs a safe place to submit, a way to quiet her anxiety, and a Dominant who will help her find peace without gaslighting and manipulating her for his own needs and wants. I'll begin the process with her, and when the mission is over—*I can't entertain it*. I'm not into long-term relationships, contractual or otherwise. Period.

The phone rings while I'm still trying to convince myself that when the mission is complete, I'll move on.

I don't need to look at the screen. It's her. I feel it in my bones. I should be pleased she obeyed, but I'm torn up inside. Delilah is a wild card who's wedged her way under my skin. Smith is right. I'm playing a fool's game.

I take a deep breath before answering. "Good morning."

"It's done. Like you asked." She fires out the words with a good dose of resentment.

But I hear the sorrow, and it lands on my conscience with the sting of rubber pellets.

What many people don't understand about Dominants is that we have hearts. That it's often easier to wrap a submissive into a warm embrace than to show her the steel spine that the moment requires—and that she needs.

Delilah isn't my submissive, and aside from the game we're going to play for the benefit of the mission, she never will be. But my heart aches for her. That doesn't mean I'll give in to the soft feelings. It won't further the mission, and it won't help her at all.

"Where are you now?" I ask calmly.

"In my car, outside Sweetgrass, wondering what the hell I just did. Why I left a good job with security and health insurance. And I'm wondering how the hell I'm going to pay my mortgage when it comes due next month."

The money itself is a small factor. It's the security it gives her that she's already mourning. I've never gone without—at least not when it comes to the things money can buy—so I don't pretend to know what it's like for someone like Delilah. All I can do is provide assurances and follow through. "You don't need to worry about any of it. You'll earn good pay, and you'll have everything you need if you get sick."

"I better."

I ignore the implied threat—for now. It’s something we’ll work on in the next couple of weeks. “Enough about your needs for now. What I need, is you, at Wildflower. Trippi will meet you in the parking lot. Give him your car keys, and he’ll take you upstairs. Stay out of my bedroom and my office. Otherwise the apartment is yours to do as you please.”

“Where will you be?” she demands.

I rub my forehead in an effort to remain calm. “I’ll be downstairs at the club until lunchtime, and then I’ll be up.”

“What am I supposed to do until then, bake cookies?”

The thought of Delilah in my pristine kitchen creating a disaster that would rival the destruction of a tornado makes me cringe. “You’ll have plenty to do. A personal shopper, Jessica, and a seamstress whose name I don’t know, will meet you there in about an hour. They’ll bring fabric and some samples with them. Don’t worry about the cost of anything. Just try to have fun with it.”

“I don’t need a personal shopper,” she replies, indignantly, “or a seamstress. And shopping is not my idea of fun.”

There’s not a single woman I’ve been with—*ever*—who wouldn’t just say *thank you*. But I expected this from her. “You need both if you’re going to be spending time with me.”

She’s breathing heavily, and I brace myself for the fury about to be unleashed.

“If my clothing choices aren’t up to your standards, then maybe you need to find someone else for the job.”

*Not a chance.*

“You’re not dressing me like a Barbie doll,” she adds, in case I didn’t get the message.

I adjust my hardening cock roughly. “Oh, but I am dressing you. All the way down to the color of your silk thong. You can be Covert Agent Barbie. Or maybe I’ll call you Charleston Barbie. I’ll even buy you a sparkly pink convertible to drive around town in.”

“Fuck you, Gray Wilder.”

“Listen carefully, because this is the last time I’m going to say this. I don’t care if you run around in rags from the thrift store or bare-ass, but there’s no way you can accompany me to some of the places where the mission will take us if you aren’t expensively and exquisitely dressed. It’s part of your cover, so get over it.”

It's not entirely true. While I don't care what she wears, I like the idea of her being dressed in ways that seem as though she has no financial worries. I don't care if she shops at Goodwill, as long as she knows she doesn't have to.

"I—"

"You will do as your told or suffer the consequences. You can meet with the shopper and have input into your wardrobe, or I'll meet with her and choose your clothing for you. Your choice." I sit back and wait for her to come to terms with the shopper. There's no way in hell Delilah would let me choose her clothes.

She stews for several seconds. "Fine. But at other times, I wear my own clothes, not the costumes you pay for. I'm not your whore."

*Oh, Delilah.* My gut churns. That's what this is about. "First, we both have a clothing allowance to purchase the things we need to make it believable. I have everything I need, so you can use my allowance and yours." I'll personally cover any overrun—happily. But I don't say that. No reason to throw gasoline on a raging fire.

"And second, you're not a whore." I say it with the utmost respect and sincerity. It's not a judgment I make about anyone when it comes to their sexual needs and desires—and I sure as hell would never judge her in that way. "You'll never hear me call you that unless it makes you wet. Then I'll say it all the time."

Delilah doesn't utter a peep. She likes dirty talk. I remember how aroused she was when I whispered filthy things to her. How she moaned and whimpered, and how willing she was to repeat my words back to me when I demanded it.

"In the future, things will go a lot easier if you just tell me what's bothering you, rather than have me guess. I'm not a mind reader."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about."

This is bullshit. She let me see a small piece of what's inside and now she's playing dumb.

"You could have said, *I feel cheap when you make decisions about my clothing or pay for it.* And I would have explained that it was necessary for the mission."

"Isn't that the conversation we just had?"

The woman is going to kill me before this is over, or I'm going to kill myself. One way or the other, I'm not going to survive her. "We have a lot to accomplish today. Come directly here, so we can get started."



## GRAY

I t's nearly two o'clock before I finally break away from the club. When I get to the apartment, Delilah is in the living room, scrolling through her phone.

"How did it go?" I ask, although I already know how it went. Jessica called me as soon as she left the apartment. Delilah was pleasant and polite, but preoccupied with how much things cost. So much so that she only purchased a small fraction of the clothing she needs for the trip. I instructed Jessica to send over everything that she liked but didn't purchase. I'll deal with the fallout when it happens.

"I hope that allowance is mighty big, because the clothing I bought today was mighty expensive. Are we going to visit the royal family as part of the mission?"

*Yes. But not the harmless crew you're thinking about.* "Something like that."

"When exactly will I be learning what's expected of me?"

"Today." I drop my keys and wallet on the console table in the foyer. "I'm going to change. I'll be out in a few minutes."

Delilah jumps off the sofa and follows me down the hall into my bedroom. She's not going to give me a moment's peace.

"Are you expecting me to live here?"

"What part of *I'm going to change and I'll be out in a few minutes* did you not understand?"

"Don't tell me you're shy all of a sudden. I've already seen your droopy white ass. Answer my question."



I unbuckle my belt and drop my pants in front of her. Despite her bluster, Delilah takes great pains not to look anywhere below my chest. “What question is that?” I hang my trousers, and go into the bathroom to wash my hands and splash some water on my face, mostly ignoring her.

“Are. You. Expecting. Me. To. Live. Here?”

“Temporarily. And it’s not an expectation. It’s a requirement. You need to be mission ready in two weeks. That’s not a lot of time for training.” *Even if you’re completely sold on the op, and we won’t know that for a few hours.*

When I come out of the bathroom, she’s chewing on the edge of her bottom lip, looking completely fuckable, but there’s no time for that right now. And it isn’t part of the plan—not yet.

“What kind of training are we talking about?”

“Well, you know how to use a weapon, and you seem to have no trouble killing a man with your bare hands, so that leaves training your sassy mouth.” I pretend not to see the exaggerated eye roll. “We need to learn to live together comfortably, so that it appears natural even under close scrutiny. You also need to learn all the moving pieces. That part is complicated.” *Hopefully not too complicated.*

“Complicated how?”

“It’s a chess board. My expectation is that you’ll rise as the queen, not wither as one of the pawns.”

She’s perched on the arm of a chair, listening intently.

“Things never end well for the pawns. This operation won’t be an exception.” *And I’ll be damned if you become a casualty. I simply won’t allow it to happen.*

“You seem to keep forgetting that I worked for the CIA as a covert agent.”

“Watch your tone with me,” I warn with a pointed look. “I haven’t forgotten. That’s why you’re here. There are a lot of pretty faces with nice asses in the world. Most of them are more charming, too, might I add.”

Delilah gives me another eye roll that I’m not prepared to let go this time. She’s begging for a good tug of the leash and I won’t deny her.

I stride over to where she’s sitting and grab her chin between my fingers, forcing her to look at me. “From the way you’re acting, it seems you got your training in the playground of a trailer park or a middle school. Are you up for this, or are you more interested in a schoolyard fight? Because I can arrange that right after I wash my hands of you and find a real agent with some heart

and balls. This is too important for bullshit.”

“I am a real agent,” she replies softly, with just a trace of indignation. The woman doesn’t back down easily, but she responds some to my pushback.

“Then start acting like one.” As soon as I move away, her hand flies to her chin, rubbing, as if trying to banish the sensation of my fingers from her skin. “You’re highly skilled in some areas, and you’ve been trained in deceptive tactics, but you never had a chance to test those skills—not in the way that this op expects of you. You need to be immersed, so that when we get the go signal—you’re ready. My job is to get you ready, so you don’t endanger the mission, the team, or yourself.” *Especially yourself. Fuck that.* It’s *all* important. It’s also my job to see that it’s a success and that *everyone* comes through safely on the other side. Not just her. This is another weak spot in the weave.

Delilah swallows hard, digesting every word. She knows it’s all true. “If I’m going to live here, I need to get some things from my house.”

“You need nothing from your house, or from your life as Delilah Mae Porter. Not a single thing.”

“I need—”

“Did you get to take all your mementos and personal belongings along when you were training with the CIA?”

Her chest rises and falls erratically, but she doesn’t respond because the answer is *no*. When an agent goes undercover, they leave the clothes on their back and their wallet in a locker, and walk away from their old life. That’s how it is. You shed your identity completely to make it easier to take on a new one. That’s not exactly what’s happening here, but it’s the best way to get her to accommodate to her new role quickly.

I grab a long-sleeve T-shirt and a pair of jeans from the closet, and glance across the room at her. She’s wearing a pair of black pants that are molded around her gorgeous ass and closed-toe shoes. Not perfect for a bike trip, but it’ll do. “Did Jessica leave a jacket for you?”

“Yes. Why?”

“You’ll need it for where we’re going.”

She cocks her head. “Where are we going?”

“To the beach. We’ll spend a couple days there getting you up to speed on the mission. You’ll gain an understanding of the players, the operation, and your role in it. When we come back, you’ll be immersed in training. We don’t have a lot of time, but we can make it work if you don’t fight me every

step of the way.” *Not that there’s a prayer in hell of that happening.*

“What about a bathing suit and a toothbrush?”

“Everything we need is there.” She’s watching me finish dressing, but her mind is somewhere else. Nowhere good, I’m sure.

“You’re taking a good long look for someone who thinks my cock isn’t magical and my ass is droopy.”

Delilah blinks several times. She squares her shoulders, but she’s worried—her face betrays her. Her facial expressions, as much as I love them, are something we need to work on. They could unknowingly give her away.

“Gray—is this some kind of huge mindfuck? You pretend there’s a mission to reel me in, but it’s all about you humiliating me because you’re still angry that I was undercover at Wildflower?”

There’s uncertainty in her voice, and it doesn’t matter what I say—she doesn’t trust me. And she’s right not to, because I haven’t earned it. “I knew who you were the moment you stepped through the door.”

She opens her mouth, and closes it. The realization has to be a bitter pill to swallow. “You didn’t answer my question. Is there a mission, or are you planning to humiliate me and use me for sex?”

“Would that be so bad?”

I don’t know why I ask. Except the woman is wedged so deep under my skin it’s impossible for me to be around her for long without my mind drifting back to Christmas. There was no humiliation, but I used her well, and in truth, she used me well, too. The sex was—epic. *Yeah.* That’s the right word.

Her eyes are narrowed, the irises the color of a washed-out sky rather than the crystal-clear blue I’m used to. “I need to know,” she says firmly.

“While I’m all for an angry fuck, I don’t use sex for revenge. Not my style.” *Unlike your asshole dead husband.* “There’s a mission. You’ll be an important member of the team. Maybe the most important.”

“The most important? I don’t believe—”

I nod, and hold a finger to her lips to silence her. “I realize it’s a lot to ask, but I need you to trust me. I might not answer all your questions the moment you want the answers, but I won’t lie to you.”

She pulls away and steps back. “But you have.”

“As have you.”

She winces at the words, perhaps from the realization that we’re not all that different. Our paths started out differently—mine paved in gold and hers

in base gravel—but somewhere along the line, they converged.

“We can’t change the past, Delilah, only the future.”

“I want you to understand something.” She moves closer, until she’s almost near enough to touch. “I’m choosing to work with you as part of the team, but I reserve the right to back out if when we get to the beach, I learn it’s some harebrained scheme that’s not sanctioned through the proper channels.”

I’m not at all worried about her backing out once she learns more. Infiltrating a foreign power is a once-in-a-lifetime gig for most operatives. She’s not going to love every aspect of the preparation, but she’s going to relish the mission itself. “You’ll find—”

She holds up her hand to stop me. “Let me finish.”

I pause to give her my full attention, and to admire her pluck. She stands tall, head high and proud, like a fucking queen who isn’t going to bow to me under any circumstances. This is not an attitude I normally enjoy or tolerate, but right now, I’m enjoying the hell out of her.

“If, after hearing the details,” she explains, “I still choose to work with you, it won’t be because of those photos you took. I know you won’t really send them to the authorities. It will be because—”

“Because you miss the work,” I say quietly. “Because it was your dream.” I step closer. “Because you never had a real chance to experience it, before it was stolen away.”

She nods. It’s barely a perceptible movement, and I wonder if she’s even aware she’s doing it. It’s the truth, *her* truth, laid bare, without the usual masks and disguises she uses to protect herself. It’s far more intimate than any sexual act could ever aspire to be.

We’re both taking heavy, shallow breaths—her, grappling with the intimacy, and me, waiting for her retreat.

After several seconds, she blinks away the fog. “I thought we were going to the beach. What are we waiting for?” she asks in a sassy tone.

I’m not surprised she reached for that mask. It’s her favorite.

“Well?” she asks again, this time with her chin tipped up.

Her resilience is something to see. I both respect and loathe it at the same time. It’s the protective shell of a survivor, a retreat buttressed with pride. It appears strong and tough, and it is, but it’s built on a foundation of neglect and abandonment, the sides erected from bits of shoe leather left after she was kicked and stepped on.

It enrages me to think about all the ways she's been hurt. Her scars gnaw at my soul, and have for some time. I could have made life easier for her—not all of it, of course, but some of it.

But I didn't.

I gaze into her eyes. They've lost the gray clouds from earlier, but the sparkle that touches my soul is gone. I motion for her to lead. "After you, baby girl."

She glares at me over her shoulder, with fire in her eyes. "You better find something else, *boy*, because mission or no mission, I'll whoop your butt good if you even think about calling me that again."

I smile and follow her out of the room, my eyes locked on her tight little ass. The next two days shouldn't be too bad. The real challenge begins when we get back.



## DELILAH

“Have you ever been on the back of a bike?” Gray asks, as the elevator doors close.

“A motorcycle?”

“No, a Schwinn Sting-Ray with a banana seat.” He peers at me, his eyes as sharp as his tongue, burrowing deeply, searching for answers that have nothing to do with bikes.

There’s nothing worse than someone trying to get inside your head—especially someone who’s good at it.

The elevator seems too small right now. We’re standing too close. Even as I fill my lungs with the stale air, I’m suffocating. I start to look away, but one edge of his mouth twitches, and I feel the nervous tug of my lips too. Nobody on this earth wears a playful smirk better than Gray. *Nobody*.

“Yes, a motorcycle,” he adds, when I take too long to respond.

“Many times. I’ve driven one, too. When Kyle and I were first married, it was our only mode of transportation.” I don’t know why I mention my marriage. I rarely bring it up. There’s something about being a widow—a young widow—that makes people uncomfortable. It always results in long, awkward pauses, so I’ve learned to avoid the subject. But today I needed something substantial to wedge between me and the man with the scruffy chiseled jaw and the panty-melting smirk.

Awkward did the trick, because after I mention Kyle, Gray says nothing more, even when the elevator pings and the doors open.

I follow him to the corner of the pristine garage, to where a Ducati and a Harley are parked. Who has a Harley *and* a Ducati? Not to mention three cars

and a truck, that I know of. People with too much money on their hands, that's who. This is just another reminder that Gray and I come from different worlds.

"Nice bikes," I say, admiring the sleeker one. I've never seen a Ducati up close. "How about if you take the Harley and I'll take this baby for a ride." I'm only half-joking. I'd love to get it on the open road and see what it can do.

His mouth curls gently, and for a few seconds I forget I'm here to work, not to play.

"How about if you put on that jacket and try these gloves on for size." He hands me a couple pairs of vented gloves from a drawer tucked under what looks to be a fiberglass shelf where several helmets are lined up in a neat row. Everything about Gray is clean and orderly—except for the way he fucks. Nothing clean about that.

"The helmets are equipped with Bluetooth," he explains, "but occasionally it fails. If you talk to me and I don't respond right away, it's because I can't hear you. If that happens and you need me to pull over, tap my left shoulder, twice. If it's an emergency, grab my right shoulder. Understand?"

I nod as he lowers a helmet onto my head, adjusting the chin strap snugly. He's careful with my hair, but focused on getting the fit right. Once he's tugged at the rear of the helmet, and is satisfied with the fit, he puts on his own helmet.

The care he takes to make sure that I have protective gear and a secure helmet is touching—and seductive. I'll admit it. This kind of behavior is difficult to reconcile with the man who pinned me against the car door and threatened to send me to prison for the rest of my life.

While I worked at the club, I occasionally caught a glimpse of callous ruthlessness, and when I left, it was ugly. But otherwise, I never saw the cruel side of him, and I'm struggling to understand it.

After stowing a small backpack in the side compartment, he climbs onto the Harley and I climb on behind him. The backseat is elevated and I can see over his shoulder. "Ready?" he asks, as the garage door opens.

"Yes." I say it with confidence, but I'm not sure I am ready. Not about the ride—that's the easy part—but about spending a night alone with him. A night with unspoken expectations, in a place far removed from real-world ramifications. Like Christmas at Wildflower. *How did that work out for you,*



*Delilah? You want another chance to wreck your life? It's not too late to back out. Not yet.*

I was born with the common sense and practicality of a Depression-era mamaw. And I listen to my gut all the time. Always have. But that Spidey sense is different from the little nagging voice. The one that whispers *you shouldn't have that fourth margarita, or you shouldn't kick the asshole harassing you in the nuts*. I've always found that voice to be a whiny little bitch and I rarely pay it any mind. Today is no different.

When we're out of traffic, Gray lets the bike go. I hold on tighter, my fingertips acutely aware of his skin, even though there are layers of fabric between us.

It's been almost six years since I've been on the back of a bike. *Right before Kyle died*. It's as exhilarating and as thrilling as I remember. But I don't recall it ever being as freeing and calming as it is today. I cling to Gray's waist, enjoying the ride while the powerful machine hums between my legs.

The temperature has dropped a few degrees by the time we pull into the driveway of a two-story shingled house, with sprays of bright-pink beach roses climbing a wooden fence. The house sits all alone at the end of the point, practically on the sand. There's a widow's watch with an enclosed cupola where a copper rooster sits at the highest point, basking in the afternoon sun. The house seems like an integral part of the natural habitat. Everything about it exudes peace and serenity.

"Is this your place?" I ask, removing the helmet, and running my fingers through my hair.

"You ask like you're surprised."

Shocked would be more apt. "I thought your tastes were more hoity-toity—like the club and your apartment. Never figured you for a white picket fence kind of guy."

"Why don't you tell me what you really think." Gray chuckles, fixing his gaze on the rose-covered fence. "I'm not. The fence was here when I bought the place, and when the house was renovated, the architect insisted we keep it. It's grown on me." He takes my helmet. "Let's go inside."

After unlocking the door, he steps aside so I can go in first.

"Wow. Gray." I walk straight to the back of the house, barely noticing the professional kitchen on my way to the wall of glass, where I gaze out over the ocean. It's breathtaking. "The view is incredible. I'd never leave this

place. Do you get out here often?”

“Not often enough,” he says, from another room.

While I’m still gawking, I feel him approach. He hands me a water bottle, but I’m too mesmerized by the waves breaking against the shore to take a drink.

Since moving to Charleston, I’ve been in some swanky places. Sweetgrass, where Gray’s brother and Gabby live, is show-stopping, and then there’s Wildflower and the apartments upstairs. Much of historic Charleston is monied. It was a lot to take in for a girl who grew up in a single-wide trailer. Normally, I pretend to take it in stride so that I don’t seem too much like a hick, but this blows me away. “I can’t believe this place.”

“You haven’t even left the window. Although the view is the best part of the place. Come on. Let me show you the rest.”

I reluctantly leave the window and follow him for a tour.

Downstairs is an open floor plan, with a sleeping porch. At least that’s what we call them where I’m from. The ceilings are high, but the house doesn’t have a lot of heavy furniture or dark colors like Wildflower. Everything is light and airy, pale grays and tans, and an array of blues and greens—all the colors of nature. The woodwork is painted a soft white, which gives the house a warm, cozy feel.

Gray points to a door on the opposite side of the kitchen. “My office is through there—it’s my private space, same as at the apartment—don’t go in unless you’re invited.”

Something about the way he says it annoys me. As though I might go poking around in his personal business. Okay, I might want to, but I would never—not unless I had good cause.

I follow him quietly up the stairs.

“Not a lot to see up here,” he says, “although the view’s better.”

That’s hard to believe.

The entire top floor is a single bedroom with hardwood floors and a soaring ceiling. A crystal chandelier hangs from an exposed beam that runs the width of the room. There’s a wall of windows, and a window seat—a *window seat*—that I can’t stop smiling at, and some furniture around the fireplace.

But the star of the room is an elaborately carved Tantra chair. Although the name is deceiving. Except for the characteristic dips and curves, Tantra chairs are actually more like Victorian fainting sofas or chaise lounges than

chairs. Gray has one in the apartment too, but it isn't as beautiful. This one's a sturdy antique.

His eyes twinkle when he catches me admiring the chair. "It's a beauty, isn't it?"

It's hard to see the chair without imagining him enjoying it with *some* woman. Someone leggy and glamorous, who was born knowing the difference between a wine glass and a water goblet. All of a sudden, I'm feeling peevish. "It looks like a museum piece. Not something you'd use." This is wishful thinking.

"It's never been used."

"Never?" I challenge, even though I don't really want him to say otherwise. "It's hard to believe you haven't at least christened it."

"Never." He pivots to the corner of the room. "The bathroom is through that doorway. There are towels and extra toiletries in the cupboards. Trippi picked up some things from your house that you might want. They're in that closet." Gray points to a door on the far wall. "Some of it's hanging, and the rest is in the bank of drawers on the left side."

I still for a moment. Even the serenity of the room isn't enough to temper the anger simmering inside. "You went to *my* house, riffled through *my* belongings, and violated *my* privacy, Mister Stay-out-of-my-office-it's-my-private-space?"

"Pfft. Not me. That would have about given me a heart attack. I saw your closet when I was at your house. Once was enough."

I'm going to wring his neck. "Gray—"

"Let it go, Delilah. Let's just try to make some peace while we're here. We can fight about it when we get back to the city."

He doesn't wait for me to respond before continuing the tour, but I won't be brushed aside that easily. Although the prospect of peace is inviting.

I glance at Gray, and then out the bay window—the one with the padded cushion on the seat, where I imagine nothing better in life than curling up with a cup of hot tea to watch a storm roll in. I glance back at him, and sigh. We'll have the discussion, but maybe it can wait a few days.

"There's only one full bath in the house. I'll need to use this bathroom to shower, and my things are in that closet too. Otherwise, this space is yours while we're here."

It occurs to me, for the first time, that there's also only one bedroom in the house, and I don't remember seeing anything that looked like a pull-out

sofa. Maybe in his office. Although I'm not even sure rich people have such things in their homes. I catch myself chewing on the corner of my thumb, a habit I thought I broke years ago. *One bed.* "Where are you sleeping?"

"Downstairs."

*Downstairs.* I feel a twinge of disappointment. *Why? So you could argue with him when he said he was sharing the bed with you?* I don't know what I expected. Or what I want, for that matter.

"You can work here, or you're welcome to use the kitchen table."

I'm not interested in the kitchen. But the window seat or the porch? That's a big yes. "I'd like to work on the porch, if that's not a problem."

"There's no table or desk in there."

"I don't need one. It's such a treat to be at the beach—in this house." *With you.* I don't say the last part, because even if I was sure of those feelings, which I'm not, I would never take the risk. A heart is a fragile thing. It can only withstand a certain amount of punishment before it stops working altogether. Mine doesn't have much life left in it. I need to be careful.

"I'd love to hear the surf while I work," I admit. "I'm perfectly comfortable on the floor."

"Whatever you want." He pauses at the staircase, and when he looks at me, it seems like there's something more he wants to say. I feel it. But then he blinks a few times, and we're back to the mundane. "I have a secure laptop for you to use, and a few other things I want to give you. We're here to work," he grumbles under his breath. "Don't forget that."

I nod, but I'm not sure if he was talking to me, or to himself.

When we get downstairs, Gray's all business. He goes into the office and returns with a laptop, a fat binder, and some office supplies. "Here's the briefing book. It will fill in a lot of holes. By the time you're finished, we'll be ready for supper, and I'll answer the hundreds of questions you'll have while we eat." He hands me a manila envelope. "Fill this out, too."

"What is it?"

"It's the form we use at the club to match people who have similar interests."

I pull out the paperwork. I've never seen this particular form, but I've seen one like it. Kinksters fill them out at sex clubs before they play. It can also be used as the basis for a contract in a power exchange dynamic. Kyle and I never had a contract, but I've learned a lot about them since he died.

"Are you familiar with this type of questionnaire?"

I glance at the first page, not really seeing any of the individual words, and nod.

“What I want you to do is use the red, yellow, green system. Mark the color next to each one and then tell me if you’ve done it with a yes or no. Then tell me why you’ve marked it red or yellow—don’t bother about green. I don’t need a treatise. A few words should suffice. Ordinarily we’d create our own negotiated terms, but this isn’t...fun and games,” he says, haltingly. “It’s a job for both of us.”

Gray hesitates for a few seconds and his brow furrows before he speaks again. “I can’t promise that I’ll be able to respect all your terms,” he pauses, to run his tongue over his bottom lip, “but I’ll make every effort. You have my word.”

I take a deep breath to right myself. This goes against everything I now know about power exchanges and consensual play—but this isn’t play. *Still*. “If you can’t agree to respect my limits, then why am I bothering to fill this out?”

“Because I don’t want this to be more difficult on you than it needs to be. I’ll do my damndest to stay within the boundaries you set.” His voice is raw, and his eyes ripe with concern. “And if it can’t be helped, I’ll attempt to mitigate where I can.”

He’s lost some of the color in his cheeks. *What have I gotten myself into?* “Gray, what’s this about? What *exactly* is expected of me?”

“It will all make more sense after you read the briefing book. When you’re through, we’ll talk.”

I hold up the questionnaire, and wave it in the air. “Will I be getting one of these from you?”

“If you’d like.” He turns toward the doorway.

“I’d like. I want to have some understanding of your boundaries, too.” At least I think I do.

He nods. “I’ll be in my office if you need anything.”

I need a lot of things. *So many things*. Answers, chief among them. *I guess that’s where you come in*, I say to the briefing book. *Just don’t tell me a bunch of shit that’s going to give me heartburn—or nightmares.*



## GRAY

I find Delilah out on the porch, sitting cross-legged on the sisal rug, her back against a chair. “Crown Prince Ahmad bin Khalid,” she says soberly. “What a monster.”

I nod, and sit on the chair across from her. “Throughout history, the Amadis have proven themselves time and time again to be a brutal regime. But the crown prince makes his ancestors look like saints.”

“Whoever prepared the briefing book did a great job. But I still have a ton of questions.” She points to a yellow legal pad. “I made a list.”

I expected nothing less. “Shoot.”

“This doesn’t seem like a CIA operation—not exactly. It feels more like something the CIA’s Special Activities Center would be involved in.”

Delilah’s smart, and she understands the big players in the world of espionage. There’s no sense in hiding my association from her. I had already decided that it would be a futile exercise. But let’s see where she goes with this. “CIA’s not involved at all.”

“The Bureau,” she says, keen eyes on me, watching for a tell. “The EAD.”

*Bingo.* That was quicker than I expected. The Elite Activities Division is the FBI’s equivalent of the CIA’s Special Activities Center. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, they mirror one another. While the CIA still operates only on foreign soil, *theoretically*, the FBI operates at home and abroad.

Both organizations have an elite paramilitary unit, and a covert political action unit. Delilah had her sights on the CIA’s political action unit, and I’m

a member of the FBI's political action unit. They are the government's two most secretive weapons to protect national security.

"I'm with the EAD, although no one at the Bureau would ever confirm that." It's a big admission, at least to me, but she takes it in stride.

"You're with the FBI," she says, carefully. "Kyle was with the Bureau. Did you know him?"

She chews on her bottom lip, maybe hoping I'll tell her something. It's only natural that she'd want more information about Kyle's work—about his death. I wish there was something to tell her. Something good, like he was a hero or a stand-up guy. But I've got nothing like that. The truth would only cause her pain, and I'm not going there.

"It's a big agency. I don't know everyone." It's not technically a lie, more of a duck and cover. But I promised her I wouldn't lie, and my conscience is twitching. "I just told you I was with the EAD and that's all you've got to say?"

"I'm still coming to terms with it. But since the night you followed me, I've known you were some sort of agent. It couldn't have gone down like it did otherwise." Delilah studies me for a few seconds. "You shot Virginia Bennett?" she asks, her eyes trained on me.

I have nothing to lose at this point from admitting to a fact that's on record—buried to the hilt, but still on record somewhere. "I did."

"Why?"

"Because Smith was being a stupid bastard, taking risks he shouldn't have been taking, and if I hadn't, you were going to take the shot."

"So you took it for me?"

She's fuming.

"I wanted you for this mission. That would have put an unnecessary spotlight on you." *And I wanted to protect you from any more scandal.* I leave that part out. "Let's forget about the clusterfuck at the church, and focus on this one. I need your head here."

"Why did you follow me? And threaten me? Instead of just straight up asking if I wanted to be part of this? You knew all along I would say yes." She shakes her head. "I don't get it."

"I believed you were perfect for this from the beginning. But I wanted some assurances." *I needed to prove to myself that you were up to the job and that it wasn't just my dick making decisions.*

"I needed to see how you'd react under pressure, when cornered without



any moves. That's the real crux of this work, right?" She nods, but I'm not sure I've convinced her. "Anybody can pretend anything when the stakes are low and the wolves are at bay. What matters is how you react when your life's on the line and the bastards are nipping at your ankles. That's what separates the boys from the men. Or in your case, the girls from the women."

She gathers her hair and pulls it back into a ponytail, taking a purple band off her wrist to secure it. She's buying time, wondering if she should let it go and move on, or if she needs more from me. "You've been on this case for more than a decade?" she asks, still playing with her hair.

"It hasn't been the only thing I've worked on, but yes. I infiltrated the Amadi royal family while I was in college."

"So I'm going to be your—woman."

"You make it sound so distasteful."

She tips her head to the side, and there's a small pull at the corners of her mouth, but it never becomes a real smile. "And my job is to get a message to the crown prince's sister, Princess Saher bint Khalid, without tipping anyone off. The message is to beg her father, again, to let her go to London with her son to visit her dying aunt. She's to insist on taking her son."

"In a nutshell. But getting her alone to pass the message is going to be difficult. There is surveillance everywhere in the palace. She's closely watched, and you will be too. If you're caught, it will mean prison for you—for all of us, probably—and death for her." The ramifications are sobering as I lay them out.

Delilah nods, appropriately pensive. The stakes are enormous. "I know what I read, but what I still don't understand is, if her father's the king, why can't he orchestrate this himself? Why does he need the United States government to intervene?"

She looks young and innocent with her hair pulled off her face. And beautiful—no hairstyle can change that about her, but she's also savvy. "It's complicated, and so far out of our realm that you'll probably never understand it. You just need to trust the intelligence. He can't have the discussion with her without causing turmoil in the country. Maybe a civil war."

"A civil war?" She wrinkles her nose. "Now I'm more confused."

I've been immersed in this for so many years that the peculiarities of the relationships are second nature to me. But I need to distill this into something she can wrap her head around. "The king is old and ill. The crown prince has

taken over most of his father's royal duties. He essentially oversees the day-to-day operations of the country. Many of the people who were once loyal to the king are now loyal to the crown prince. Everybody understands the king's days are numbered, and they know where their bread is buttered. It's unclear who the king can trust."

"This still doesn't make sense to me." She hugs her knees to her chest and rests her chin between the peaks. "We're talking about the US government getting involved in a scheme to move an Amadi princess and her son to London as a favor to a king who has one foot in the grave? There's got to be more to it than that."

*That's for damn sure.* "There is. But your level of clearance doesn't allow for you to know any more than what I've already told you."

She stares at her wiggling toes, weighing the risks. It's dicey to get involved in a mission you don't fully understand. But that's the way it is when you work for the government. Only the president and a few top aides have the whole picture. Delilah knows this, but I'm sure she hates that I know more than she does.

"If it makes you feel any better," I assure her, "I don't know everything either. But you're on the right track. The government wouldn't get involved unless it was beneficial to our own national security interests."

She nods, and I see the wheels turning. "If this is classified information that requires a clearance, why are we discussing it here?"

"I'm glad you asked. This place has been cleared." While Delilah skims the list of questions she prepared, I get up. "I'll be back in a minute."

I retrieve a deck of cards from my office that I use to keep my focus laser sharp, even when I don't know all the answers. When I get back to the porch, I move the coffee table out of the way, and lay out the cards carefully on the rug. One at a time. Making the same promise to each individual face: *The bastard will pay.*

"What's all this?" she asks.

I don't answer until I'm finished. When the last card is faceup, I pull Delilah to her feet.

"One hundred and eighty-one American passengers from the crash outside of Houston. Two *New York Times* journalists dismembered. Seventeen teenage girls, three of whom were from right here in South Carolina. These are just the Americans. There are countless others, faceless and nameless.

“All dead. The innocent victims of Crown Prince Ahmad bin Khalid.” Delilah’s mouth is open. A hand clutches her chest. She’s speechless. This information was in the briefing book, but once you put a face to a number, everything changes.

“I try not to let myself get caught up in the bigger picture,” I explain quietly. “In the things I don’t know. This mission is for them.”

After giving her a few minutes to meet each face, I pick up the cards reverently, one at a time, and hand them to her. We don’t talk until I’m seated again.

“Do you have any pressing concerns before we break for supper?” I ask, hoping to pull her outside of her head.

She lowers herself onto the rug, avoiding the area where the cards had been, as though not to desecrate a holy burial ground. “This,” Delila says, lifting the deck of cards, “gives me everything I need. But there is one thing I’m worried about.”

“Just one?”

She taps an index finger against her lips nervously. “If you recall, I was dragged into a public scandal while at the agency. The reason I left covert work was because my face is recognizable—maybe not to the average person, but to anyone who knows, or bothers to look. All you need to do is a simple Google search.”

I nod. “That’s why we’re doing this out in the open. We’re not giving you an alias or pretending you’re someone other than who you are.”

“And you think that’s going to fly?” She eyes me skeptically.

“I do.” I lean back in the chair. “There are things about you that will make it easy to believe we’re involved. Even to someone like the crown prince, who has spent a lot of time with me over the years.”

She swallows hard. “What things?”

“Your face. Your history with kink. And you’re sexy as fuck.”

“Well, my brain and my winning personality have never been my best assets.” Her forehead puckers, as the insecurity rises to the surface.

“They are to me,” I say decisively.

She glances up, a bit startled, as though she didn’t mean to say it out loud, or maybe she’s surprised by my response.

“I need your brain and your professional skills for this mission. The pretty face and luscious curves are a distraction to keep *others* off guard.” *I just can’t allow them to become a distraction to me.* “As for the winning

personality, I don't know a thing about that."

She reaches over and swats me with the questionnaire, before tossing it in my lap. "If I had filled it out prior to reading the briefing, it would have looked different. But this is clearly a matter of national security, and I'm willing to push myself beyond my ordinary boundaries."

I feel her stare while I study the form.

"There are things I would have never green-lighted under any other circumstances," she adds.

I skim the rest, before glancing at her. "You like pain." I know she does, but I want to hear it from her mouth.

She draws a breath, and nods.

"Do you need it?"

"Is that somehow germane to the mission?"

"Not really." I read through her responses again, and stop at a question she red-lighted. My stomach twists as I prepare to break the bad news.

"I can't promise that you won't be used by more than one man at a time." She lowers her eyes, so that I can't see the result of the blow I just delivered. "I *can* promise that I will do everything in my power to prevent that from happening." *To save you from that. To save myself from that.* "But these are bad men. And we both know that even the best-laid plans can go awry."

"You don't need to coddle me," she says indignantly. "I understand the perils."

That might be true, but understanding is different than experiencing. I don't say it, because I don't want to make her any more anxious than necessary.

"The one thing I am sure about is that you'll be watched constantly. We'll be watched. Nothing we say or do will be private. *Nothing*. I can't protect you from that."

Delilah red-lighted exhibitionism on the questionnaire. She's okay with voyeurism, but she doesn't want to be watched having sex. I don't want anyone watching me fuck her either, but there's no goddamn choice.

She pulls her knees back into her chest, hugging them tight. "I can put up with anything for the sake of a mission. I might not be the most experienced operative, but I'm not a coward. And I'm a good team member—I'll more than pull my weight. I understand there will be things that I don't like."

My insides burn with regret. *She needs this*, I remind myself. *Regardless of how uncomfortable it makes you*, she needs it. "I need you to do more than

understand. I need you to come to terms with it.”

“I’m a professional,” she snaps, glaring at me, but I see the concern in her face.

Society shames women into using their bodies sparingly—and only—for love. It’s such a crock of shit. But regardless of how modern a woman is, how comfortable she is with her sexuality, or in this case, how professional she might be, asking any woman to use sex as a prop is a big ask. It is for some men, too.

“You’re a highly skilled professional. That’s why I chose you to be part of the team. But you’ve never done anything like this before. You’ll be on display, like an animal at the zoo. It can be unnerving, even for an experienced operative.”

“Nice analogy.” She squints at me. “I thought I was getting your form?” I watch her for several seconds. She’s avoiding the discussion because she knows the complete lack of privacy is going to be hard. I hand her my form, but we will revisit this.

“It’s blank.” She looks up at me. “Really? You made me write down all my stuff, but you didn’t want to share yours?”

“It’s not blank—it’s all green—read the sentence before my signature.” She scans the form, fixated on the last few sentences. “You’re open to anything?”

I nod. “I make mistakes and I’m not a mind reader. But I understand how to train a submissive, and what it means to be a Dominant. A submissive’s needs come first—*always*. Not her wants, but her needs. I’m willing to set aside my own needs and wants to fulfill that promise.” *Especially for you.*

She’s quiet, wetting her lips, while she wraps her head around what I just said. It’s unclear how much experience she’s had with power exchange relationships since Kyle. But Kyle was an abusive asshole who groomed her for pain to fulfill his own sadistic needs. Then bragged about it. He met her when she was seventeen and vulnerable. He was patient, gaslighting and manipulating her up until he took his last breath. He ruined her. I’m not a saint, but I’m not the devil either.

She still hasn’t said a word, but she’s guarded, looking at me like I have two heads.

“Why don’t you go up and shower? I’ll throw a couple steaks on the grill.”

Delilah gets up, still without saying anything. She makes it as far as the

doorway. “Yes.”

*Yes, what?* I don’t have a damn clue.

“I need pain.” She hesitates. “It grounds me. And I almost always need it—you know—for sex to be satisfying.” She hasn’t turned to look at me. I might not be able to read her expression, but her body is rigid.

“Almost?” I ask softly. “Tell me what you mean.”

She clutches the doorframe as if to steady herself. “The night we were together—I don’t know. There was some pain, but not as much as I normally need to find release. Maybe it’s because it had been so long since—since I had that kind of sex. You know—with another person. It was intense enough for me to—I need pain. Physical pain. Not emotional pain. I don’t need, or like, humiliation—but I’ll put up with it for the mission, if I need to. Just don’t expect me to like it.”

She just gave me a lot. My jaw is on the ground. I want to say something to acknowledge her courage and forthrightness, but I don’t have the words. “We’ll talk more over supper.”

When she starts to walk away, it hits me that her honesty is a double-edged sword. As much as I crave her openness, I can’t let the waters get too muddy. Not for either of us.

“Delilah.”

She turns from the landing, and her slumped shoulders almost prevent me from saying what I need to say. But I can’t be swayed by soft feelings or we’ll all end up dead. “I appreciate your candor. More than I can express. Thank you for trusting me.” I pause, to let her absorb the praise, because I mean it. I’m grateful and humbled by her honesty. But it’s not that simple. “The paperwork you filled out is a guide. You’re not my submissive. This is a mission. It’s going to be hard at times, but you’ve got to keep the roles straight.” My voice is sterner than I mean it to be, but she doesn’t flinch.

“I’m a big girl. Don’t you worry about me.”

I watch her jog up the stairs until she disappears.

Now, if *I* can just keep the roles straight, we’ll be good. Although it’s starting to feel like it’s going to take a goddamn miracle to keep things separated.

She’s tempting. And everything about her calls to my worst impulses.



## GRAY

While Delilah's showering, I pull the steaks out of the refrigerator and light the grill. Once the charcoal catches, I call Mel. Master Sergeant Melvin Walker, the man who taught me how to be a man.

The lessons weren't always easy to learn, and I'm sure they weren't easy to teach, either. I was hard-headed back then, in the way that boys are when they lack confidence down deep. Mel had little patience for it. He put me through basic and advanced training—the EAD's version, which is even more challenging than the military's—and kicked my ass until I had every lesson down pat.

He answers on the third ring. "Walker here."

"Hey, Sarge."

"Hay is for horses, didn't your mama teach you that?"

"I was probably napping during the lesson."

He chuckles. "What's good, boy?"

I check the coals and walk off the patio, onto the sand. "Same shit, different day. No complaints. How about you?"

"Can't complain, either. I've got food in the pantry, a roof over my head, and a beautiful woman who warms my bed every night and tolerates most of my nonsense with good humor. Can't ask for more than that. What can I do for you, son?"

"I have a favor to ask."

"Ask away. My supper's gettin' cold."

I reach down to turn over a shell. It's empty. "I need a yoga instructor."

After he left the military, I convinced Mel to move to Charleston and



helped him start a fitness business. He's raking in the money hand over fist now. I might have given him a leg up in the beginning, but his success belongs all to him and his no-nonsense approach to life.

"Is this someone for your personal enjoyment, or you looking for a good stretch and to get your mind right? Because I don't run a dating service."

I smile. He's just what Delilah needs. "It's not for me," I say with some hesitation. "There's a woman—"

Mel groans. "Nothin' good ever started with *there's a woman*."

"Before you say anything, it's not what you think."

"Course not," he mutters.

"She's a former CIA agent. Kyle Reade's widow. Did you know him?"

"Knew of him, but I can't say that I ever had the pleasure."

"You didn't miss anything. Although he could have used your foot up his ass. Anyway, she's smart, tough as nails, and wields a weapon like nobody's business. Physically, she's strong, lots of lean muscle, and limber—although not as flexible as she thinks she is. But she needs some grounding. A place to turn when the boogiemer comes knocking. Right now, she runs, longer and harder than she should. But it doesn't seem to be working anymore, and she's spinning out of control."

"And you're thinking she can find that place inside of herself." He says it more as an observation than a question, but I answer anyway.

"I'm not sure. That's what we're going to figure out."

"I'm guessing you've already tried a different kind of pain."

"No," I say defensively, grinding my heel into the sand. "She needs to move away from pain as her sole source of comfort."

"Did she say that, or is that your opinion?"

"She has an intimate relationship with pain, Mel. She was groomed to need it."

Mel is a Dominant. A real Dominant, not some bullshit poser who takes advantage of vulnerable women to get laid.

"I don't think she knows how to find comfort elsewhere."

"I see. Like someone else I used to know."

He's referring to me. When I met Mel, I acted out solely for the punishment it would get me. The more it hurt, the better it made me feel, and the more I grew to like it. It's a circular pattern, not uncommon. But I wasn't groomed for it, like Delilah. I just needed guidance. "Not exactly. Although there might be similarities."

“You want—”

“To expand her horizons.”

“Okay,” he says matter-of-factly. “I assume the yoga instruction will take place in the studio at the club? We are still talking about yoga here, right?”

“My apartment at Wildflower to start.” We’d have to drag her kicking and screaming to the studio. I keep that tidbit to myself. “Day after tomorrow, at 5:30 a.m. And yes, yoga.”

“That’s awfully early. Let me see who I can find.”

“No, Mel. She needs you.” *Like I needed you.*

“You expect me to leave my lady before the light peeks through the blinds to teach yoga to some woman you’ve decided needs to be gentler with herself?” He didn’t say, *you’re crazy, boy*. But it was implied.

“I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” he says, low and gruff. “I don’t like how you’re thinking about this, Gray. You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make them drink. Ever hear that before?”

“I’m familiar with the sentiment. Look, she’s working with me on an important op, and needs to be mission ready in two weeks. A lot’s riding on it. And I don’t trust anyone else but you to handle her. You’ll know what she needs.”

“Son?”

“Sergeant?”

“You’re asking for trouble. You stay clear of subs who crave pain for a reason. The urge to cross that line and give her what you know she’s hankering for is too tempting. It’s a fine line, easy to cross, but it won’t serve either of you well if you do.”

“I never said she was a submissive,” I say with a defensive tone that even I don’t miss.

Mel clears his throat. I suspect his patience with me is getting thin. “I’ve been holding the leash for a long time. I don’t require your input in identifying a submissive.”

“You meet her first, before you draw any conclusions. But regardless, it’s not important. I’m not training a sub, Mel. And I’m well aware of the perils.” *Only half of which you know.* “It’s all under control.”

“Sounds like bullshit to me, but if you say so. This woman got a name?”

“Delilah.”

“*Delilah*. I suggest you dust off your Bible, and become acquainted with

a different man who got involved with a woman named Delilah. You might learn a thing or two from his mishap.”

“It’s more likely she’d take my balls than my hair.”

He snorts. “Sounds to me like she’s already done that.”

I go back toward the house to see if the grill’s hot enough. “Speaking of which. Send my love to Violet. Tell her there’s always a spare room at my place when she gets tired of your shit.”

I end the call, and slide my phone into my back pocket as Delilah steps onto the patio. She’s barefoot, golden hair fanning her slender shoulders, wearing a sundress that skims her thighs with straps so thin that a bra is out of the question. *Damn Trippi*. What the hell was he thinking, packing that little number? He either wanted to kill me or make my night special. Either way, I’d like to beat his ass.

*It’s all under control*. What a crock of shit.

“That shower is something else,” she says with a relaxed smile. “I felt like I was in a cave or a lagoon—showering in nature. I was half-expecting a squirrel or some other woodland creature to scurry across the stone.”

I smile now, too. “It’s a grotto shower. That’s how it’s supposed to make you feel. It’s got a lot of bells and whistles. I should have shown you how it works.”

“Was it here when you bought the house?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Gil and Jolie planned it. They’re the same people who designed the playrooms at Wildflower.”

“Explains the fantasy element,” she says, approaching the grill.

Delilah must have found the toiletries. There’s a faint smell of orange surrounding her, not a cloying scent, but something very grown-up.

“Need me to do something?” she asks, catching my eye.

*You have no idea. If you did, you wouldn’t ask.*



## DELILAH

While we ate, the sun set over the ocean, painting the sky in swirls of oranges and reds that melted into darkness. Unlike in the city, millions of stars keep the moon company here.

Gray and I talked over supper like we sometimes did at the club after closing, when everyone else had gone home. We brainstormed about the mission a bit, but mostly we chatted about movies and music and food. Topics that are easy on the heart.

We've about finished a second bottle of wine, and I'm in the languid mood of a lazy housecat after a good meal. Gray is relaxed too. I've seen his smile more than a few times tonight. The *real* smile that makes his eyes twinkle, not that phony thing he pastes on for the world.

"Your brothers must love this place. Gabby too."

He scratches the back of his head. "My brothers came out after I first bought it, but they haven't been back since. Gabby's never been here."

"Really?"

"No one—besides you—has been out here since the renovation."

"Really?" I ask again, because I'm flabbergasted, and don't know what else to say. Gray is close to his brothers. He might keep his association with the EAD a secret from them, but that's a non-negotiable aspect of the job.

"It's a gorgeous spot, but I keep it to myself. It's selfish, I suppose." He leans back in the chair and stretches out his legs. His ankle brushes mine. He doesn't seem to notice, but I can't stop thinking about it. "I come out when I need a break from my life. It's uncomplicated here, and being by the ocean soothes me."

*But you brought me here. You welcomed me into your oasis.* I sit quietly with the knowledge, even though it's heavy. Although I have no idea what it means. *If anything.*

"I brought you here to regroup," he explains, as though he needs to. Sometimes I think the man reads my mind. "We both needed the break. A fresh start with a new focus." He pulls his legs back, and I immediately miss the warmth of his skin. "You up for dessert?"

I guess that's the end of that discussion. Just as well. I'm not in the mood for anything too serious. "What do you have?"

"Peach cobbler. The kitchen at Wildflower brought it over before we got here. There's cinnamon ice cream to go with it," Gray adds, as though I might need convincing.

I feel a grin spread across my face. The kind that makes your cheeks ache. It's my favorite summer dessert, and when it was on the menu, it was my go-to dinner at the club. Gray knows it, too. He gave me endless grief about it. "I wish I could, but I'm too stuffed to eat another bite. I'll have some for breakfast."

"Breakfast?" He raises his brow. "You might as well dip a spoon into the sugar bowl. What kind of breakfast is that?"

"A tasty one." I get up to clear the plates, and before I can blink, he's on his feet too, holding my wrists with a gentle, but firm grasp. There's a gleam in his eyes, and I feel a tug of desire that's not in line with a fresh start and a new focus. *Isn't that what he said earlier?*

"I'll take the dishes," he says. "I need to grab a couple of things from inside. Where's the hairband you had earlier?"

"On the nightstand in the bedroom. Why do—"

He interrupts before I finish. "While I'm gone, why don't you use the bathroom?"

"Gray." I say his name because I'm not sure what else to say—or even what he means. The wine and the emotion have hit at once and I'm a little lost.

He places a fingertip on my lips to shush me. "It's not what you think. I planned to start when we were back in the city, but the wait is too much. You're too tempting." He cups my cheek, weaving his strong fingers into my hair. "I need to touch you."

I need it too. More than I'll ever admit, even to myself.

His thumb grazes my bottom lip. I wait for him to lower his mouth to

mine, but instead, he pulls away abruptly and begins to collect utensils from the table.

Unsettled, and more than just a tad confused, I wrap my arms around myself to ward off the uneasiness. “I don’t need you, or anyone else to tell me when it’s time to use the bathroom. I’m not a four-year-old.”

“When I suggest you relieve yourself, it’s not for my comfort.” His glare is piercing. “Do it, or don’t. I won’t be standing outside the door listening for the tinkle. I also won’t be the one living with the consequences of a full bladder.”

I can’t remember the last time I had a discussion that was so infuriating—*and embarrassing*. “Your seduction game needs work.”

I see the corner of his mouth twitch when he turns to go inside. “I already told you it’s not what you think.”

After I regain my composure, I go inside, trying not to overthink *everything* while I use the bathroom. *It’s not what you think*. Then what the hell is it?

I dawdle in the bathroom, because even though I’m aggravated with him, I want him to touch me, and I want to touch him too. After primping my hair in the mirror, I brush my teeth with my finger because my toothbrush is upstairs, but mostly I spend the time hoping that his plans are exactly what I’m thinking.

When I get back outside, Gray has changed into a pair of light sweatpants. Shirtless, he’s covering the table where we had supper with fuzzy blankets, folded in half, and layered atop one another. I’m riveted by the muscles in his broad back, the way they contract, as he lays a snow-white sheet on top of the blankets, letting it drape over the sides of the table.

“What’s all this?” I ask, still riveted by his hard body.

Gray smooths the sheet and rests his backside against the padded edge of the table, his hands on either side for support. He catches me steal a glance at the outline of his cock through the thin, stretchy fabric. He’s not wearing underwear.

He doesn’t say anything snarky. Instead, his eyes wander over me from head to toe without a single word. I tuck some hair behind my ear while he appraises me, like chattel he’s interested in bidding on.

When he’s through with my body, he finds my eyes. “Take off your clothes for me, Delilah.”

His voice is cloaked in the warm, deliberate cadence of seduction. *Maybe*

*his game doesn't need work.* It's so mesmerizing, I begin to reach for the bottom of my dress to pull it over my head. But common sense kicks in before my hands get anywhere near the hem. "You expect me to take off my clothes—out here?"

He tips his head to the side. "It's exactly what I expect."

"You said it's not what I think."

He shakes his head. "It's not."

"Then why do my clothes need to be off?"

"Because I asked you to undress, and you've agreed to trust me—even when it's hard." He's got a take-no-prisoners kind of attitude going on, and I brace myself for an earful. "You're not comfortable being naked in front of me, in a secluded area without another soul in sight, but you're prepared to have sex while who knows how many men are watching?"

The bastard is actually calling my bluff.

"If you can't do something this simple, then I don't see how you'll ever be mission ready in two weeks."

He aimed well, and struck a nerve. "This is manipulative bullshit."

"If that's what you think, go pack your things and I'll drop you off at your house tonight."

I don't move. Our eyes are locked in a pissing match that I'm clearly going to lose. I don't want to go home. *And it's not just about the op.*

While I'm trying to come up with a way to take my clothes off without seeming like I've given in to his whims, he gets up and cradles my face in his hands. His eyes never stray from mine. The heat between us is suffocating.

I can barely breathe, but I don't look away. Not when his fingertips glide down my cheeks, over my jaw, and past my throat. Not when they reach the neckline of my dress and rest impatiently at the top of my breasts. Not even when he tears the sundress down the middle, and the decorative buttons scatter as they bounce off the flagstone floor.

"I asked you to get undressed. But it was too hard for you." He pauses, his teeth scraping his bottom lip. "I'm here to help you when life's decisions become too hard." He's holding the tattered fabric in his clenched fists. "If you're partial to those panties, you'll have them off before I'm finished preparing the table." He opens his hands, letting the torn dress pool at my feet.

His show of strength leaves me breathless, and the tug of desire is powerful, and building as I remove my panties. I want him, but I'm not



prepared to blindly hand over control. I will never again give my submission to a man who hasn't earned it. I made that mistake with Kyle. I won't make it with Gray. "What, exactly, is the plan?"

"Right now, I'm going to tie back your hair so that it stays out of the oil."

*Oil. He didn't say lube. He said oil.* Before I can question him, he takes my hair, handling it like this isn't the first time he's braided a woman's hair. The jealousy creeps up, but before it causes injury, Gray intervenes.

"On the table. This side up," he murmurs, squeezing my ass lightly.

"What's this about?"

"Pleasure," he says, and the word, with all its promise, vibrates between us. "You're going to do nothing but lie quietly while my hands work out some of the knots in your beautiful body."

"You're going to give me a massage?" *A massage? Now?* It's not at all what I expected and I'm off-kilter. But I suppose that was his intention.

"Lie down, Blue Eyes. I'm getting impatient."

I climb on the table and stretch out on the soft, cool sheet, resting my head in my folded arms. There's a light breeze over the ocean, and the surf has picked up, the white froth striking the shore before retreating. It's a good night to sleep with the windows open. It's all true and total nonsense, but it's what I think about to distract me from my nakedness.

"Close your eyes," he whispers, before bringing an unfamiliar scent to my nose. Something spicy, but subtle. "You okay with the smell of amber?"

I nod, opening my eyes slightly.

"It's just lightly scented oil. There's nothing in it that will hurt you."

I nod again, letting my eyelids flutter shut. I do trust him—at least with this.

"Clear your head," he commands in *that* bossy tone, "and just feel."

With long strokes, he glides his hands up and down my back, before settling into my shoulders. My body yields without struggle as he prods the tight muscles to relax. The surrender is sweet, with soft moans escaping from my lips as he works.

"Where did you learn how to give a massage? And how am I just finding out about it now?"

"I learned a long time ago. It's a nice way to reward good girls. You've had a rough few days. I thought you could use a little pampering."

I gasp when he starts on my lower back.

An electric current races through me as his fingers coax the muscles into

submission. It feels amazing, but I still can't understand why there had to be so much secrecy about him giving me a massage. Had I known what he was planning, I would have gladly taken off my clothes.

"Why couldn't you just tell me, up front, that you wanted to rub my back? It would have saved us both some grief."

He applies more pressure, his fingers digging deeper into the flesh. "I lead the team. You need to follow my instructions, without hesitating, and without asking me to justify every order. This isn't a foreign concept. It's how every mission works. Right?"

I push the errant thoughts away. The ones that push and pull, messing with my brain and my body. And yes, my soul too. "Right," I somehow manage, as his hands knead with unremitting focus.

Once my mind begins to clear, my breathing slides into a comfortable rhythm. I hear the waves crest and hit the shore, but they're starting to sound far, far away. I've drifted somewhere heavenly when Gray's hands move to my buttocks, manipulating the large muscles.

His touch is intimate, and I try to remain relaxed. But when the warm oil drips onto my lower back and slides between the cheeks, I shudder, squirming against the tabletop.

"You're tense again. Let go," he encourages, his fingers deft and skilled. "This isn't about sex. This is about you getting comfortable with my hands on your body. Instinctively knowing that they will only bring you pleasure—even in pain."

I sigh wistfully. There is nothing I crave more desperately than the delicious pain that brings pleasure. When he nudges my legs apart, there is no resistance. Lavishing one leg with attention, and then the other, he works the warm oil into my skin, his knuckles occasionally grazing my pussy. I wait in anticipation, longing for more of that kind of touch.

I'm no longer relaxed. All I can think about is my arousal, growing and growing, until it's bigger than I am. Until it's bigger than both of us. It's then, when I'm about to beg him to fuck me, that he slides two fingers into my aching pussy. A gasp twined with a grateful groan twists its way out into the salty air. Somewhere in my head, somewhere faraway, a little voice reminds me that this is a mission. But the surf and the unremitting bliss drown out the good counsel.

"Squeeze," he demands, and I do, eagerly obeying. I clench my walls around his fingers, hugging tight. "Release, and relax."

He keeps his fingers inside me, while the other hand massages the back of my neck. “Squeeze those walls around me,” he instructs, again. “That’s it. Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“*Mmhm*,” I whisper. It’s as though his careful ministrations have zapped so much of my strength that even my voice is barely audible.

Without any warning, he pulls his fingers away. I whimper at the loss. “Turn over,” he says simply.

I roll onto my side, and then to my back without giving it any thought. It’s as though, in my listless state, I’ve been programmed to follow his commands. In a sense, that’s what all this is about—but right now, I don’t care.

I lie quietly, looking up at him. His features are relaxed, and even in my dreaminess, I admire his maleness—maybe even more so in my fog.

He brushes a few strands of hair off my forehead with the back of his hand. It’s a gentle caress. “Your skin is so soft, I can’t get enough of it. But you are still much too tense. Let’s see if I can fix it.”

He begins with my feet, and when I’m purring, he moves to my calves and then higher and higher until my back arches off the table. “Keep still.” He splays a hand on my belly, his thumb skirting my mound, and presses until my back is flat. “Close your eyes. This is about what you hear and smell, and above all, what you feel.”

Gray slides his hands up my body, avoiding my breasts in a cruel tease. He rolls my arms and shoulders, finding the pressure points and excising the negative energy.

*Ahhh!* His warm mouth covers my nipple, sucking it into a hard, tight tip. When I whimper, he rests a heavy hand on my belly, holding me firmly in place while his mouth and tongue massage my breasts. My nipples ache from pleasure, but it’s nothing compared to the throb between my legs. A throb I can easily remedy.

I let my hand find its way to my pussy. But in seconds, he snatches my wrist, wrenching it away from the hot, slick flesh. My desperate groan echoes.

“As tempting as it would be to watch you play with your pussy until you come,” he says in a lazy drawl, “that’s not happening right now. Squeeze those inner muscles,” he murmurs, “just like you did around my fingers.” He lays his hand low on my belly, where he can feel the muscles quiver as they tense. “That’s it. Do it again.”

I'm so worked up. My nerve endings are screeching like banshees, and my core is wet and needy, wild with want, but the rest of my body is heavy and limp from the massage.

He stands over me, and brushes my cheek. "Let's get you up."

I don't want to get up. I want more. But I'm slightly woozy from the massage, and let him help me.

"Just sit for a minute. Let your legs dangle." He hands me some water. "Take it slow."

As I sip the water, I notice the tent in his pants. I reach for it—for him.

He grabs my wrist, before I hit my target. "Not tonight. I told you this wasn't about sex."

Even in my fog, I'm embarrassed for begging.

"Go up and take a quick shower," he says in a gruff, thick voice. "You'll sleep well tonight. Good night."

I pick up my torn dress and panties, balling them under my arm. "Good night." I turn in the doorway, glancing at the outline of his cock. The thin fabric is no match for what's awakened inside. He's as ready as I am. Why is he doing this? "I would sleep better if—you're clearly interested too."

"Not tonight, Delilah." His tone is final. I might get off, but he's not going to participate. "Don't make me say it again."

I take my clothes inside with as much dignity as I can muster. There's nothing that can cut a woman to the quick faster than being turned down after she asks for sex. At least I didn't beg. *Did I? Oh, God.* This is going to be one big mindfuck, as training for a covert mission always is. Only this will be worse. It already is.

After a long shower, I fall into bed. I think about giving myself the release I desperately want, but I'm not sure if there are cameras. I'm also not sure why I even care, although I don't want him to see me give myself an orgasm, after begging him for it. I do have some pride.



## DELILAH

The burble of running water wakes me from a sound sleep. It's pitch-black in the room. I fumble for my phone—one thirty.

It takes me a minute to orient myself. *The beach*. I'm at the beach, in Gray Wilder's bed. I glance at the undisturbed side of the mattress. *Alone*.

Once my eyes adjust to the dark, I throw off the quilt, and follow the sound of water into the bathroom. I don't know why I go—*yes you do*. We have unfinished *business* from the patio—*business* that he started. Even after a nap, I still want the grand finale.

The light's dim, but the glow of the chandelier casts shadows on the ceiling. There's something enchanting about it, and I take a few seconds to admire how the light and the prisms play off one another.

When the splash of water beckons, I creep to the edge of the room and peek into the cave-like entrance to the shower.

I freeze there, with a silent gasp, my toes curling into the cold floor.

Gray is under a cascading waterfall. His legs apart, one hand gripping a smooth stone jutting from the wall, the other gripping the rock-hard cock jutting from his body.

There's no door into the natural setting of the grotto shower. Nothing separating us.

He's at an angle, and I can't see him full on from here, but I can see plenty.

My eyes dart between his handsome face with its taut jaw, and the fist pumping his swollen cock. The breath gets caught in my chest as I watch his sculpted muscles clench—beauty and violence intertwined in each rough

pull.

While he doesn't stop, his movements slow as though he senses someone watching. I continue to stand perfectly still, breathless. Only when his head pivots in my direction does my pulse take off. But even after he catches me, I don't shy away.

His eyes are ablaze when they meet mine, his hand still on his thick angry cock. I'm mesmerized by his stark arousal. His primitive need.

I don't want him to finish without me.

The possibility consumes me as I yank the nightshirt over my head like a madwoman, and step into the shower. The drive of arousal propels me forward, and I don't stop until I'm under the spray, inches from him.

His sure hands slide into my hair, splaying flat against my scalp while his mouth ravages mine, until we're both gasping for air. "You were spying on me. In my own house."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't think you are," he drawls.

It's a warning, and anyone with good sense would run.

I tip my head back and stare into his hooded eyes. "Punish me." It's a simple, yet potent invitation, each syllable enunciated carefully. Not a dare or a challenge, but a plea, and it's rewarded with a low growl.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" he demands, the words raspy through the rushing water. "If I grabbed my belt and welted your ass?"

"Yes," I say without a moment's hesitation, or a drop of shame.

His cock jumps against my belly, prodding for an entry point. "You do need to learn a lesson."

"I do."

He steps away and presses some buttons inside an enclosed case. A glass door descends from the ceiling and seals the shower entrance. The main waterfall stops, and jets emerge from the stone, filling the cave with warm steam and a woody scent, like a lush forest after a good rain.

Gray stalks toward me, backing me into the wall. His eyes are wild, and I'm exhilarated by the primal energy filling the enclosure. *I want him.* I want the rough edges, and all the unyielding demands he'll make on my body. I want it all.

"Keep your hands on the stone," he commands, lifting my arms over my head and guiding them to the spot where he wants them to remain.

Before I can form a coherent thought, his mouth is on mine. He's ruthless

and unapologetic as his tongue explores freely, leaving lingering traces of costly bourbon behind.

Every nerve ending is dancing on the surface, and even the warm droplets of water prickle when they land on my sensitive skin.

Gray palms my breasts without a whiff of gentleness. And his impatient cock nudges my flesh, as though it's already waited much too long. There's no pretense between us, only unfiltered lust.

I'm on overload. The steam has taken over the cave, with gurgling bursts fanning the stone. It's as though we've ventured into the canopy of an Amazon jungle, deep in the rain forest, enveloped by dense fog.

I *need* to touch him. But when I lower my arms, he captures them in one swoop and pins them securely above my head. "Please," I beg. I don't know what I want, or what I need. My senses are intoxicated and there's no clarity to be found.

I feel the brush of his fingers against my pussy, confirming what he already knows. "You're soaked, Delilah. You need it bad, don't you?" I nod, and he slides his cock across my wet flesh, again and again, rubbing the thick crown over the swollen nub. My legs quiver with each swipe. It's merciless—too much, yet not enough.

"You want me to fuck you?" he murmurs near my ear.

"Yes." I whimper.

"That's why you came into the shower, isn't it? Even after I told you no."

"Yes."

He turns me around, and pulls my hips well away from the stone. "Keep your hands flat on the wall to buttress yourself. This is going to be hard. Harder than you can imagine," he adds in a whisper, running his tongue along my spine. "I don't want your beautiful body scraped by the stone. Although a scrape or two might teach you a lasting lesson."

I want that lesson. God forgive me, but I want it.

He holds me steady, and notches at the opening of my cunt, pausing briefly before pushing inside. It's a long, brutal slide, and I groan at the invasion, but he doesn't stop. Instead, he ruts harder, and deeper, biting my neck and shoulders. *He's marking you*, a voice inside me cautions. But I'm so close, I don't give a damn.

Gray's panting, and bucking erratically. He's close too, with his cock hot and hard inside me, nudging me closer to the edge, then wrenching me back.

I'm struggling to keep my face away from the stone, while I chase my



own orgasm. It coils tighter and tighter with each thrust. Just as I give in to a few scratches for the pleasure, I hear the roar of his release.

His body trembles against mine as he ruthlessly pounds out every drop of seed. It takes all my energy to brace myself so that I'm not ground into the unforgiving stone.

After a final brutal thrust, he pulls out and lets go of my hips. I reach to drag him back as the semen runs down my inner thigh. For a split-second I panic. *I'm on birth control. I decided no condoms. I put it on the form.*

I'm so unsteady without him, that I almost collapse, limp on the floor.

"You still need to come, Delilah, don't you?" He's towering over me. His upper lip curls cruelly. "How bad do you need it?"

Enough to beg as much as necessary. "Please," I plead, not grasping that his words are merely a taunt. But when he walks away, it hits me. "That's it?" I pant. "It was just for you?"

He presses a few buttons and the steam begins to dissipate before the door slowly rises. His back is to me. He doesn't have the courage, or even the minimal respect, to face me. "You can use your fingers to get off, or hump anything in the room that suits you. Next time when I say no sex, you'll listen. Consider it merciful that I'm not binding you to the bed with your legs spread so that you'll have nothing but an ache to keep you company tonight. When I say *no*, that's what I mean."

Some people are fueled by anger. It ignites a fuse that launches them into action. I'm one of those people. But here and now, naked and spurned, that fury has a heightened dimension. And I wouldn't be at all surprised to see fire coming out of my mouth as I fight to breathe.

I pull myself up straight, with my back supported by the wall. My insides are shaking, but I will not be silenced by this arrogant sonofabitch. "I might be forced to my knees before this is all over," I shout from the safety of the shower wall, "but I will *never* kneel for you. I will *never* go to that calm head space that kneeling provides. I will *never* get on my knees as a sign of respect for you. Yes, I might kneel, but it will be *nothing* more than a charade." My heart is beating so hard, I'm certain he would see it if he bothered to turn around. But he's done with me.

The door continues its maddeningly slow ascension. It's such a contrast from the energy ricocheting inside me.

"If you think the voices inside your head are important to me, then you're a foolish little girl," he says over one shoulder, without turning his head

enough to glance at me. “I don’t care about your intent. And I don’t give a damn if you respect me, as long as your throat can handle my cock.”

He ducks under the door, and I pause to catch my breath. By the time I get to the bedroom, he’s gone.



## GRAY

**D**amn woman. We haven't even officially started preparing for the mission, and I'm already regretting reading her in. I knew the risk, but I was confident I could put firm boundaries in place.

*So much for that.*

The sun's peeking over the horizon, as I grind fresh coffee beans, trying not to make too much noise. Just because I can't sleep doesn't mean she shouldn't. Although, after the meltdown last night, I doubt she slept much either.

Sex wasn't supposed to be on the table—not yet. I took it off so it wouldn't weigh on her—so that she could relax for a couple of days without the elephant in the room. The problem is, whenever we're together, the goddamn elephant's always in the room, trumpeting loudly in shiny, bright colors neither of us can ignore.

*No more excuses.* I fucked up last night. *Big time.* Plain and simple.

I hear her on the stairs, and before I can figure out what to say to her, she's in the kitchen, dressed for a run. "Good morning," I say cautiously. It seems like a reasonable place to start.

"Mornin'. I thought you'd be out by now—jumpin' in the waves or whatever it is you like to do."

"I decided to run this morning. I waited for you."

"I run alone," she tosses over her shoulder on the way out the door.

"Not today." I'm not giving her a chance to work this out alone with a punishing run. She can pound the ground, but I'll be alongside her.

"Don't expect chitchat," she huffs.

It's impossible to explain the effect her spurious contempt and sass have on me. It's not how I normally interact with women. I don't even like it—unless it's from her. Unless it's her smart mouth telling me to go fuck myself, in that Mississippi drawl that I feel deep in my balls every time I hear it.

We hit the sand at the same time. “You didn't expect there to be consequences when you interrupted my shower? Even after I had made it clear there would be no sex.”

“I expected—”

“Me to slap your ass and give you a nice big orgasm. Is that how it worked in your relationship with Kyle?” Douchebag move. The very second I say it, I regret it.

“The relationship I had with my husband is out of bounds. It's a hard limit. So if you need me to stroke your ego and tell you how much better you are than any other lover I've ever had, or that your dick is bigger, then you'll be disappointed. Because it would be a lie—and even if it weren't, I would never sully any past relationship with the likes of you.”

Just because I deserve being notched a few pegs below an abusive asshole doesn't make it sting less.

Delilah lengthens her stride and takes off ahead of me. I let her go, staying just a few steps behind. She pushes harder and harder as we run up the beach. I'm in excellent shape, but I'm struggling to keep pace. This needs to end. *Now.*

I pick up my stride and grab her arm, forcing her to stop.

“Let go of me,” she cries, trying to shake her arm free.

But I don't let go. “If you want to finish the run, you need to talk to me first. Say what's on your mind. Go ahead.”

“You're an asshole.”

“That's a start. Now tell me why.”

“There aren't enough hours left in my lifetime for me to fully answer that.”

I squeeze her arm tighter. “You have a voice. You'll always have a voice with me.”

“Like last night, you mean? Or this morning when I told you I run alone?”

“I said you have a voice. I didn't say you'll always get what you want. I need to hear your words,” I say softly. “I care about how you feel. And if you don't talk to me, it will be hard to meet your needs.”

She lowers her eyes, and some of the pent-up energy dissipates. I drop her arm, but not before rubbing the spot where I clutched it.

“I’m confused, Gray. I like the waters clear. It’s how I work best. This—between us—it’s murky. I don’t navigate murky very well.”

“I can navigate for both of us, but you need to let me.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“I fucked up last night. I should have sent you back to bed when you came into the shower. That’s what you needed—what the moment required—consistent, firm boundaries that we could both respect.” She gazes up at me. The anger is mostly gone but the pain from last night is all over her face. “But I wanted you. More than I’ve ever wanted anything. And I acted without self-control or discipline.”

As much as I want to look away, I force myself to stare into her sad face. To memorize every furrow and line. To commit the lifeless color in her eyes to memory. I want the vulnerability that’s surrounding her to be tattooed on my brain. All of it. So that the next time I’m tempted to be reckless, it’ll all come flooding back. “I should have never let it happen.”

She regards me quietly, her chest rising and falling. I expect her to say something. I *want* her to say something. But instead, she reaches for my hand, squeezes my fingers in a quick, easy move, and takes off running down the beach.

“I suppose that’s how rich boys from Charleston apologize,” she calls over her shoulder. “Apology accepted.” The last part is carried by the wind, but it reaches me. Her grace is not lost on me either.

She’s much too quick to forgive an asshole. But I’ll take the peace...*while it lasts*.

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WHEN WE GET BACK to the house, I hand Delilah a water and pour some coffee. I keep half an eye on her while I scroll through a barrage of messages.

While these moments seem insignificant, the routine interactions are vitally important. It’s the way a trained eye will assess our relationship. Even strangers can play kissy games. It’s the other stuff, the small stuff, that’s the real test of whether a relationship is authentic or bullshit. That’s why we’re spending the next two weeks together, day and night. It should be enough

time for us to fall into a comfortable rhythm.

After Delilah finishes her water, she goes to the refrigerator and pulls out the cobbler we didn't eat last night. "I'm going to warm this. Do you want some?"

I shake my head. "I'm all set." She spoons a generous portion into a glass bowl and shoves it into the microwave. Chef Renaud at Wildflower would have a heart attack if he knew she was microwaving his precious cobbler. "You're really going to have that for breakfast? There's yogurt, eggs, and some fresh fruit."

"I like something sweet in the morning. I usually have a Pop-Tart."

"A Pop-Tart?"

"Yeah. You know, the toaster pastries."

"The breakfast of champions."

She whacks me on the arm playfully. "Don't be a snob. We can't all enjoy foie gras on toast points. Not enough ducks and geese in the world for that." She grimaces, sticking out her tongue. "I like strawberry Pop-Tarts with icing and rainbow sugar crystals. If I'm going to stay at your place, you better put it on the shopping list."

Delilah takes the ice cream out of the freezer and puts a scoop on the warm cobbler. She glances my way and catches me watching her.

"You want a taste, don't you?" she teases, taking a bite. "Oh. My. God. This is so good."

I'm sure it's tasty, but mainly she's putting on a show for my benefit. "You have the eating habits of a teenage boy."

"I get a ton of exercise. Besides, if I would rather eat cobbler and tacos than have a flat stomach, that's none of your damn business. I didn't hear you complaining about my body when you were using it last night." She turns toward the stairs.

"Where are you going?"

"To take a shower."

"No food upstairs."

"What?"

"No food upstairs, here, or in the bedroom at Wildflower. It's a non-negotiable rule. Finish your dessert. I'll shower first and leave you to enjoy some quiet time, unless you want to join me."

She stares at me, not as though she's contemplating the shower, but like she wants to smash the cobbler in my face but doesn't want to waste any of it.

“I’m good. But you go, and take care of yourself, darlin’.” Her voice has more sugar in it than her breakfast. She flashes me a sweet little smile before taking another bite.

I should just go upstairs, but she needs to hear this before we get back to the city. “That voice I said that you have, it’s to be used privately. Say what you want when we’re alone, but if you question me publicly, especially while we’re in Amidane, or undermine me with your sarcasm, or in any other way, you won’t like the consequences.”

Her eyes are wide, but she doesn’t say anything. Although it’s apparent from her expression that the small truce we forged on the beach is on shaky ground. It was fragile, anyway.

“There’s one more briefing book for you to study before we leave. I’ll leave it on the porch.” I know she’s pissed, but my job isn’t to make her happy. My job is to get her mission ready. To give her the tools she needs to be successful. Happiness will follow.





## DELILAH

When we arrived at the apartment, Gray went directly downstairs to the club after instructing me to order dinner and make myself at home.

He sent me up a slice of cheesecake, but once it was gone, I was still alone.

It's after midnight when he comes upstairs. I'm already in my pajamas, rereading the section of the briefing book on Princess Saher, and wondering how I'm going to make nice with her.

I'm well-trained, but I've had little practice with this kind of mission. Sure, I can subdue a suspect and force them to talk. I have all sorts of tried-and-true methods for that. And I'm not afraid to maim or kill. Archbishop Darden can attest to that from the fires of Hell. But I left the CIA with little field experience in high-stakes spy games. Maybe because I'm exhausted, but right now the possibility of an Amadi princess befriending me seems highly unlikely.

"Sorry," Gray says somewhat sheepishly, when he comes into the living room. "I hadn't planned on being so late tonight. Did you eat?"

"I did. And I would be asleep right now, but I wasn't sure if it was okay to get comfy in the room at the end of the hall. I didn't want to break any *non-negotiable* rules."

"You'll sleep in my bed—our bed, for now. We need to get comfortable with the sleeping arrangements." He glances at me from the corner of his eye. "But we can start tomorrow if that suits you better."

Honestly, I'm not sure anymore what suits me. Sleeping in the same bed with Gray, especially if touching is off the table, is likely to be as comfortable

as sleeping at the edge of the swamp after a rainstorm. But he has a point about getting accustomed to one another.

*It's not like he's asking you to storm the beaches of Normandy.* That's Smith's favorite saying to silence a whiner. *I wonder how he's doing? I miss him. Miss the whole team, but especially Smith. I was on top of my game with them, rarely second-guessed myself. Not like this. But that's precisely why I'm here—to stretch and challenge myself in new ways.*

“We’ll likely be assigned separate bedrooms in the palace,” Gray adds, “but there will be an expectation that we’ll share a bed, at least for some portion of the night. They’ll make it easy for us, but we need to be discreet.”

“*Discreet.* What you’re describing is nothing more than us sneaking around while they look the other way. But I get it. We’ll all pretend that I’m virtuous and that you’re a gentleman.”

He smiles, but it takes some effort. “I think the expectation is that you’re virtuous. No one expects me to be a gentleman. But a lot of pretending goes on in the Amadi royal family. It gets old after a while, but you’ll have to remain respectful and play along the entire time.”

I’m not worried about that. The one thing I can do is pretend.

I watch while he goes behind the bar and fixes himself a drink. He’s dragging. It’s not like him. “Did you eat?” I ask.

He hesitates for a few seconds, and nods.

“Sending me cheesecake isn’t going to make up for leaving me alone every night,” I tell him, pointedly. “There are things I can do downstairs. The mission is gearing up, and Wildflower is a full-time gig—you could use the help. I worked at the club, remember?”

Gray takes a long swig of bourbon, then rubs the heel of his palm over his jaw. “Beginning tomorrow you’ll have plenty on your plate.” He disappears into the foyer and comes back with a sheet of paper, hands it to me, and walks away.

“What’s this?”

“It’s your schedule for the next few days. I emailed you a copy too. I didn’t know which calendar program you prefer.”

*Calendar program?* That would be the one hanging in my kitchen, inside the pantry door. I read through the schedule, becoming more and more agitated. “Yoga with Mel at five thirty a.m.? You’re fucking kidding me. That’s when I run.”

“It’ll be good for you. And more challenging than you think. Mel’s a

hard-ass.”

I have to calm down and try to reason with him. If we get into an argument, chances are I’m going to lose. “I *need* that run, Gray. Especially now. Need it more than my next breath.” What I don’t need is yoga. I leave that part out because it doesn’t help my case at all.

“What you need is to broaden your horizons.”

“I’ll agree to the rest of the schedule, but I need the run.” My voice is shaky. “You’ve turned my world upside down in the matter of a week. Don’t make me give up that too.”

“I’ll take responsibility for part of it, but you agreed to have your world turned upside down.”

I don’t respond. A part of me is shaken by how important the run has become. No, not important—necessary. The thought of not running is painful. It’s become an addiction. A *healthy* addiction, I remind myself.

“What happens if you’re injured or stuck someplace where there’s no place to run,” he asks calmly, “like on a boat, or on a plane, or in a palace where women aren’t free to do as they please? You’ll need another outlet. Otherwise you’ll be no good to yourself or to the mission.”

I’m conflicted. I know he’s right, but I also know that I’ll be a mess without the outlet and the grounding that the early morning run provides.

“I’ll help you find other ways to get to the same place,” he continues. “This is going to be a challenge. For both of us. We talked about it at the beach. Nothing’s changed now that we’re back in the city. If anything, it’s going to be harder while we prepare.” My phone slides off the edge of the sofa, and he picks it up and places it near me, giving my hand a quick squeeze. “Normally I would tell you to enjoy the ride, but in this case, I think you need to keep your focus on the endgame.”

“I’m a simple girl from Mississippi,” I admit candidly. It’s been eating at me all evening. “You said so yourself. I’m never going to be royalty or a high-society type. It’s not baked in. What if the princess doesn’t want to have anything to do with me? What happens then?”

Gray swoops me off the sofa, and deposits me on the bar in the corner of the room. It happens so fast I barely have time to protest.

“Listen to me. You’re a smart, well-educated, beautiful woman.” We’re eye to eye and he doesn’t let me look away. “You’re not a princess. You’re a damn queen. A badass queen. Don’t ever let anyone make you feel less than that.”

I don't know where to look, so I glance down at my toes. There's a pedicure on my schedule for tomorrow. Good thing, too.

"What is it?" he asks, lifting my chin.

I push his hand away. "Nothing,"

"I've told you, I'm not a mind reader." He nudges my thighs apart and steps between them, his hands resting low on my hips. "I want to know what you're thinking."

"I need some fresh polish on my toes."

His eyes are steady and probing. He's not buying any of it. I don't know where to begin—or even if I want to talk about it at all. But I force myself, because of all those faces on the cards. Because we have to work through our challenges if we're going to be successful—for them.

"You—make me feel less than that." The words come slowly. It takes some doing to pry them loose, but I'm determined. "Not when I worked for you—but—when you talk about me being a simple girl from Mississippi, or learning how to fight in a trailer park. Those comments cut to the quick. Not because they're a lie, or even because I'm ashamed of my roots, but because you use them as a weapon to hurt me."

He blinks a few times, his long, dark lashes casting spiky shadows on his cheeks. There's sorrow in his face. It's what I've always adored about him, even from the beginning. He feels empathy. He knows compassion. When I reach out to smooth a worry line with my fingertips, Gray takes my hand and brings it to his lips.

"Say the rest. I need to hear it. All of it." His voice is low and rough, like it gets when there's too much emotion stirring inside him.

I'm not sure I want to say the rest. I don't know how to share it with him in a way that he'll understand. The feelings are right there, on the surface. I can touch them. But the words—searching for the right words is like playing a matching game. At the beginning, there are so many cards and it's only sheer luck when you turn over a match. That's how this seems. I'm holding the feeling card, but I can't find the word to match.

"Hey," he says softly.

His gaze is alert and steady, and I know he's not going to let me off the hook. *And maybe I don't want to be let off the hook.* I sigh, and somehow find the words to pair with my fears and insecurities.

"I've worked hard to trim the scraggly edges and shed the outer layers, because it makes people more accepting—more comfortable around me. But

it's who I am inside. A simple girl from the poorest corner of the South." The facts aren't new to either of us, but saying the words out loud is freeing, and the more matches I make, the easier it gets. I don't stop.

"Nobody pulls themselves up without help. I had some, too. But I paid my dues," I say proudly. "I never took anything that didn't belong to me, and I never cheated. That simple girl is proud and loyal, and she might not be for everyone, but she informs the woman I am—every single day. I don't want that to change. But it doesn't mean that in some situations I don't feel small and like less."

After I stop talking, it's quiet. Not just silent, but still. My soul feels like it's been wrenched open, exposing all the oddities, the nicks and bruises. He doesn't say anything for what feels like forever, but it isn't awkward. The silence is productive and healing. At least for me.

"I'm sorry." His voice is tight, but he has the courage to look right at me when he speaks. "So sorry." It's earnest and sincere. Gray smooths my hair in a way that I suspect soothes him. In a small way, it soothes me too.

"I don't mean to make you feel that way," he continues, rubbing his thumb along the curve of my ear. "Although I suppose I did at the time. I wanted to get under your skin. But I don't feel that you're any less." He lifts his heavy shoulders. "I've never felt that way. I've always felt that you're more."

I press my cheek into his hand.

"I don't want you to change. I admire that girl. She's infuriating at times, and I'm quite sure she's going to be the death of me." He pauses for a beat. "But she's perfect. As is the woman she's become. I'm the one who can do better."

My eyes sting. But my heart is full. Not because the road is going to be smooth from now on—it isn't—but because I didn't make a mistake this time. I didn't misjudge Gray. *Although the fat lady hasn't sung yet.* Unlike with Kyle, I used my voice when it mattered, and this time, I hold all the power—even when it doesn't appear that way.

"I'll follow your lead," I say softly. It's not acquiescence. It's a decision. *My* decision. It's what I want. What I need. *What we both need.* And most importantly, what the mission requires. "I'll reserve my input for the times when we're alone. But you best bring your A game, because I'm not an easy woman."

The grin spreads slowly across his beautiful face, before he throws his

head back and laughs. The sound of his happiness makes me smile. Maybe it shouldn't, but it does.

“Not easy?” he teases. “I’ve tangled with crocodiles less troublesome than you.”

I smile to myself. Adding a wrinkle to his carefully ordered life pleases me. But I’m sure it makes it difficult for him. Although maybe that’s not all there is to it. Maybe, *just maybe*, he’s attracted to me in a way that complicates the mission for him as much as it does for me. *If by attracted you mean he wants to have dirty sex with your pretty face.*

“I need a shower and you need to get some sleep,” he says, helping me off the bar. “You have yoga at five thirty, and a run late afternoon, if you’re not too tired by then.”

*Well, what do you know?* Rich boys from Charleston not only know how to apologize, they know how to compromise, too. I stop to appreciate his lean, muscular frame while he checks the locks and turns out the lights.

“Hopefully Mel is worth my time. I don’t want to waste my morning with some New Age Karen who mainlines oat milk and gluten-free crackers when I could be exercising. What’s that sly smile about?”

“Nothing,” he says, heading toward the shower.

*Nothing, my ass.*





## DELILAH

The next morning, I wake up cranky and frustrated that there is no run happening until later today, if at all. After I do my business and throw on some sweatpants and a baggy T-shirt, I follow the voices into the kitchen. One is Gray's deep timbre, and the other, which I don't recognize, is even deeper.

"Good morning," Gray says with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "This is Mel, your yoga instructor. Mel, meet Delilah."

Mel isn't the bony-ass woman I was expecting. *He* must be six feet four, with wide shoulders, dark-brown skin, and close-cropped black hair. I can't see his backside, but I assure you it's not scrawny. He looks to be well into his forties, but you'd never know it from the muscle rippling in his arms. Mel nods, and holds out an enormous hand. "Nice to meet you, Delilah."

For a half-second, just a half-second, I hesitate.

"Do we have a problem?" he asks when I don't immediately jump to take his hand.

"No—no problem," I stammer, reaching for his hand. His grip is firm and no-nonsense, like him. "It's just that—"

"Just what?" he challenges. "You got a problem with black men?"

"Of course not," I say indignantly. "I was expecting someone with perky tits and a high ponytail, that's all." *Oh my God.* I can't believe I just said that out loud.

"Me too," Mel replies, while I'm in the throes of a heart attack. "And I expected her to be dressed appropriately for yoga too. I guess we'll both have to get over our disappointment."

I look from one man to the other. Gray is doing a poor job of hiding a grin. “I apologize, Mel. I didn’t mean to be rude. Gray led me to believe the yoga instructor was a skinny white girl.” I glare at Gray. “Do you two know each other from yoga?” It sounds preposterous, but whatever it takes to steer the subject away from me works.

Mel hooks his thumb toward Gray. “He was my bitch, here and there, years ago.”

When I pick up my jaw off the floor, I glance at Gray, hoping he’ll shed some light on that last comment.

“I did basic and advanced training with the master sergeant,” he says with a gleam of pride.

*Master Sergeant Mel* sounds so much better than *New Age Karen*. “So he’s a ballbuster?”

“He’s a ballbuster,” Gray repeats, his eyes sparkling. “You won’t find a bigger one. I don’t know anything about oat milk, but I assure you, he won’t waste your time.”

“Oh, that’s a guarantee,” Mel chimes in. “And I hope you’re not planning on wasting mine,” he says, emphatically. “You ever practiced yoga?”

I shake my head. “I’m more of a runner and a pull-up kind of woman.”

“I’ll leave you two,” Gray says, with the smirk not far from his lips. “I’ll be up to shower after my run.”

*After my run? I’m going to kill him.* I shoot daggers at the back of his head as he leaves.

“I’m not exactly sure what Gray told you he wants from me,” I say to ease the silence, “but—”

“This isn’t about what he wants *from* you,” Mel says, as though chiding a bratty middle-school girl. “It’s what he wants *for* you. Gray’s a giver, not a taker—right down to the marrow. If you see something else in him, it’s because you’re only seeing what you want to see. Or maybe you’re the kind of woman who uses every opportunity as an excuse.”

He pauses, his eyes burrowing through the layers of carefully constructed façade that I reserve for strangers. It’s not going to work with him. He sees too much.

“This here,” he raises the rolled mat he’s holding, “this is about what you want for yourself. Let’s get started. We’ll see if you have the courage to look inward.”

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NINETY MINUTES LATER, I'm in the shower, aware of muscles that I never knew existed. It wasn't stretching and chanting like I expected, but controlled breathing, taxing poses, and mindfulness—Mel said it was a basic lesson for a beginner, although it was challenging enough to give me my comeuppance. It wasn't anywhere near the same as a run, but he did give me a decent workout.

By the time I get out to the kitchen, Gray is there, freshly showered, and looking divine in a dark bespoke suit with stripes so subtle they wouldn't be noticeable unless you were gawking at him like I am. "Hey," I say casually, like we bump into each other in the kitchen every morning.

"Hey. What did you think of Mel?" he asks, holding what looks to be a protein shake.

My empty stomach quivers at the murky green drink. It's probably spinach or kale or something equally dreadful. It's not that I don't enjoy leafy greens. I'll eat almost anything. But not for breakfast.

"He kicked my ass. I'm sure you already heard the ugly details." I approach the coffee service that must have been sent up from the Wildflower kitchen while I was showering, and pour myself a cup. "You want some?"

He shakes his head. "Actually, Mel said you're strong, and that you held your own pretty well for a beginner."

Mel doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who hands out praise like chocolate bars on Halloween, so it's nice to hear.

"I've committed to yoga," I say, splashing some milk into my coffee, "and you've committed to adding a daily run to the schedule." He didn't actually commit to it, but I want to see if I can wheedle it out of him now. "I also have a workout plan that includes weight lifting and resistance training, plus I'm at the range twice a week. It's all part of what I do to stay sharp for the job." Gray's leaning with his back against the counter, listening attentively. His expression isn't giving anything away, but I'm quite sure he's thinking something. "If my skills get rusty, they'll be hard to sharpen."

"So we're clear, I never *promised* a daily run. I recall saying there was room in the calendar for a run this afternoon." He takes the last gulp of swamp juice, and rinses the glass. "I expect you to keep your skills sharp, and maybe even pick up one or two new ones while you're working with me. You can use the gym downstairs any time you'd like. It's less crowded mid-

afternoon and after eight in the evening. I'm at the range a couple times a week too. We'll go together."

*I expect you to keep your skills sharp, and maybe even pick up one or two new ones while you're working with me.* That's what a strong leader would expect—that those under his, or her, command would grow and develop from the association. It's why Smith was upset when he realized he wasn't giving me enough. I let Gray's words marinate a bit while I scan the kitchen counter for any sign of food.

"I don't suppose you had a chance to pick up Pop-Tarts?"

He chuckles. "There's a yogurt parfait with fresh berries and some granola in the refrigerator. The granola is made in house. It's sweet, but the kitchen sent up some honey in case you prefer it sweeter."

I open the sparkling-clean refrigerator with its blindingly white interior and spotless glass shelves. Aside from the parfait, there's nothing in there but water and a jar of brandied cherries. Luxardo cherries, but not a single egg or a bottle of ketchup. I've opened empty refrigerators before, plenty of times, but it's not like Gray can't afford to keep his stocked.

I shake my head and take out the tall, stemmed parfait glass. While it's not exactly the kind of sweet I like with my morning coffee, it does look good. I refuse to admit that to Gray, though.

"There's no food in the refrigerator." I snatch a long-handled spoon from the coffee cart. "Does the kitchen prepare all your meals?"

"Pretty much. Unless I'm meeting someone at a restaurant, I normally eat in my office or at the bar downstairs."

I take a bite of the yogurt concoction, while Gray watches. "I'd like to have supper in the apartment," I tell him. *Like a normal person.* "If you don't want to join me, that's fine. But what's the sense of having a nice kitchen if you never use it?"

"We'll be eating out a lot. But you can talk to Renaud and plan menus for the evenings we're in."

"I don't need to discuss menus with the chef," I say emphatically. "I'm talking about simple meals that I can prepare from staples most people keep in the house."

Gray looks like that swamp juice is repeating on him.

"Your schedule is busy—the last thing you need to think about is cooking. I don't normally eat fancy. Renaud doesn't like it, but he's capable of having one of his minions make a burger or roast a chicken. Work it out

with him. And count on me joining you,” he adds. “It’s a good time to catch up from the day and spend a little time together. I don’t want to short-change that part of the preparation.”

“Preparation? That’s so disappointing. I thought you were talking about playing house.”

He ignores the cheeky comment. “Most nights, I’ll have to go back to the club when we’re done.”

*Maybe I can go with you and help out.* This isn’t the time to bring it up—maybe tonight over supper. “Besides swamp grass, what do you like to eat?”

“I have a protein shake in the morning,” Gray says a tad too defensively, “but I’ll eat anything after that. Not big on toaster pastries or foie gras, though.” He squeezes my arm as I reach around him for the honey.

I’m sure he intended it to be just a playful squeeze, but it becomes another one of those intimate moments that we can’t seem to avoid. The ones that pulsate with live sparks and electricity.

Gray’s eyes darken and for several seconds I’m convinced he won’t be wearing that suit for much longer, and I’m more than ready for whatever he’s thinking. But something shifts before we’ve taken off a single article of clothing, before our lips even meet. He pulls away, physically and emotionally. It’s a small physical movement, with a powerful message that’s enough to send us both spiraling into retreat.

The hot and cold with him makes me crazy. There are so many mixed signals, half the time my head is spinning.

I drizzle honey on my yogurt like I’m conducting brain surgery, and he pours hot coffee into an insulated travel mug. We don’t talk.

That’s when it hits me. This is what I’ll be eating for breakfast in Amidane. Yogurt and fruit with honey, and maybe, because there’s probably a pastry chef at the palace, a croissant or other delicate pastry. *Gray Wilder, you need to stop being so damn obtuse.*

In college, with my heart set on the CIA, I learned to speak several languages, and studied numerous cultures from around the globe, but I don’t know much about the Amadis. I glance at Gray. He wants me to get accustomed to the food I’ll be served so that the change isn’t too disruptive. The less disruption, the easier it is to maintain a high level of focus.

*Would it be too much to expect you to just read me in, instead of manipulating and controlling everything like a sneaky bastard?*

“I’ll speak to Renaud,” I say, between bites. “Maybe he can prepare a few

typical Amadi dishes for us. That way our palates will begin to adjust.”

There’s a ghost of a smile on Gray’s lips, and he visibly relaxes. *I’m right*. “Did you see what I just did?” I ask.

He glances at me with a blank look on his face.

“I didn’t plan exotic meals behind your back. I was up front about it. I clearly stated, I’m going to do *this*, so that we get *that* result. It’s not rocket science. You could have done that with the yogurt instead of making me feel that my food choices were not worthy of your fancy apartment.”

His jaw is clenched. And it’s not clear that he’s taking my little lesson to heart. “It’s not just about the food,” he explains in his *I’m the boss* voice. “It’s about you doing what I ask, without questioning me. It’s about learning to trust that I’ll make good decisions for you, and for the entire team.”

*Nice try, Captain America*. “Your best chance of winning my trust quickly is by including me in the decision-making process. I might look like Covert Agent Barbie, but I have a brain and I understand how to get from point A to point C without a map. You can be in charge. I don’t need to be the boss. It’s not how I’m built. But you might be surprised at how amenable I can be when I’m included in the planning.”

I pour another coffee, letting him think about what I’ve said—what I’ve offered.

“I’m accustomed to working alone,” he says without any real emotion. “And your clearance is limited. But your concerns are duly noted.”

“Duly noted?” Someone needs to put him on his ass. “The correct response was, *I’ll work on it*.”

Gray pulls out a card from his wallet, and hands it to me. “It’s a last-minute change to the schedule that we haven’t discussed. Mira will be coming by at ten. She’s a professor of Amadi studies at the University of South Carolina and speaks fluently. She’s not read in at all. As far as she knows, this is a business—mostly pleasure—trip we’re taking.”

“I understand. I won’t divulge anything.”

“I’m not worried,” he says, without hesitating. It’s a huge boost of confidence. “You can practice your conversational skills with her,” he continues, “and she can also answer any questions regarding the culture. She has some limited knowledge of the royal family, but I’m probably a better resource in that regard. Mira is at your disposal for the next two weeks—or until we leave. She’s an invaluable resource, and I would schedule her every day.”

I haven't met Mira, so I shouldn't start celebrating yet, but this feels like an enormous gift. It's how any operative would be briefed before a mission, if time provided, but I didn't expect to have an Amadi expert at my disposal. I thought my knowledge would be limited to the briefing books and to information Gray shares with me. "This is great. Thank you."

He nods. "She can accompany us on the trip if it would make you feel more comfortable. It wouldn't be unusual, at all, for a woman of your stature to bring along an assistant."

*Of my stature.* That's pretty damn funny.

"But there are pros and cons to bringing a companion."

"Like?"

"The most obvious benefit is that it will be easier for you with an ally who is a font of knowledge. On the other hand, there would be some danger to her. It's small. I don't expect things to go bad, but if they do," he sighs, "it will be the shitstorm of all shitstorms."

Gray pauses for a few seconds before continuing. "And if you bring along someone to keep you company, the crown prince will be less motivated to introduce you to Saher. He's going to want to have a little fun with me, and if you're alone, I won't be as free to play."

I don't need to think about it. I have enough concerns about connecting with the princess without adding additional obstacles. "Let's leave Mira in Charleston. I want this to be a success as much as you do."

He gazes at me, and I'm certain that's pride shining in his eyes. "You're a tough cookie, Blue Eyes. Still floors me. It shouldn't, but it still does."

Although I don't need constant reassurance, his approval matters to me. I look down, concentrating on fishing the last fat blueberry from the bottom of the stemmed glass, and contemplating exactly what *I won't be as free to play* means. The prince is married, but I doubt a little thing like that keeps his dick in his pants. But what about Gray? Will our relationship mean anything when he's presented with a willing partner?

"We're having dinner at the club tonight," Gray says, jolting me out of my head. "Think of it like a coming-out party for us. A lot of eyes will be on you."

*Sweet Jesus.* The thought of being on display isn't at all appealing. But that's what the assignment requires of me. *Suck it up, Delilah.* "Good thing you hooked me up with a mani and a pedi." I'm only being half-sarcastic. The other half is relieved for a little polish before encountering the vultures.

“I need to go,” he says, from the doorway. “You know where to find me if there are any problems.”

“Gray.”

He turns. The dark circles that were under his eyes last night are gone, and from this angle, the navy swirls in his tie play off his eyes, making them seem brighter and bluer.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For engaging me in a discussion about whether Mira should accompany us. And for not telling me to dress appropriately tonight, like I might not be able to figure out what to wear on my own.”

He raps his knuckles against the elaborate doorframe, and nods. “Call if you need anything.”

For the first time since he dragged me into this, I feel like it’s going to be okay. *Maybe better than okay.*





## GRAY

Delilah is adjusting an earring when I get to the apartment. I can't take my eyes off her reflection in the mirror. She's stunning, with just enough makeup to let her natural beauty shine through.

Neither of us says a word while we gaze at each other in the glass. There's a glimmer of apprehension in her eyes that I hate. It's that little girl she described last night—the one who never feels she's enough. My gut twists when I think about it.

"Turn around," I say gently, drinking in every inch of her. She smooths the dress, nervously, as she swivels to face me. The silky fabric falls gracefully over her curves, hugging, but not clinging to her luscious tits. She chose a sophisticated dress that's modest enough for dinner at the club, but dips low enough in the front to keep my attention all evening. It's the perfect tease. "You're gorgeous."

The color in her cheeks deepens, but she waves off the compliment. "Anyone can look good with a couple hours in the salon, and a closet filled with beautifully made clothing."

"Good? That's an understatement. Good enough to eat, maybe." I pick up the jeweled necklace off the console, and move her hair aside before I clasp it at the back of her long, graceful neck. Her skin is warm against my fingers, and my cock immediately takes notice.

"You smell delicious," I murmur, my lips grazing her earlobe. She shivers, and if I don't stop now, *right now*, dinner isn't happening. Tonight's too important to blow off to make my dick happy. I force myself to step back.

"What time is it?" she asks, slipping on a pair of heels that make my

mouth water.

*Nice pivot.*

“We have a few minutes. I have something for you before we go.” She follows my hand, as it retrieves the pouch from my pocket. I hold the small velvet bag out to her. “It’s just a little something.”

She’s apprehensive, but she takes it. “I hope this isn’t some fancy piece of jewelry that cost enough to feed a family of four for a year.”

“It’s an accessory, but not jewelry.” She glances up at me through long, thick lashes. “It doesn’t bite. Open it,” I coax, when she continues to hesitate.

While Delilah loosens the strings on the pouch and peeks inside, I use the app on my watch to activate the small bullet vibrator. It rattles, startling her—at least momentarily. I laugh at her reaction like I’m a stupid teenager who just got a rise out of the pretty girl.

“I can control it with a remote, or from my watch, or my phone, or from all the way across the world from my laptop.”

Delilah flinches, backing away. “There’s no way I’m wearing that thing out in public.” She shoves the bag at me, but I don’t take it.

“We’re not going to a sex party,” she adds, aggrieved. “We’re having dinner in the most exclusive restaurant in Charleston—*that you own*. We’ll be out together for the first time. The busybodies will be falling all over each other while they crane their necks to get a good look. Are you crazy?”

*I’m beginning to think so.* I have two weeks, give or take a few days, to make it believable that kink is a part of our relationship. There is no way Ahmad buys it otherwise. He’s known me for way too long. “Put your hands on the console, and bend over.”

“Gray—I’m not—”

“You are, and you will. The vibrator will remind you to behave. It’s the newest Lush prototype, not even on the market yet,” I explain, hoping to garner some interest in the toy, but that little fact doesn’t seem to impress her.

“To behave?” she spits back at me. “You’ll zap me when I get too close to the property boundary, like I’m a dog?”

*Jesus Christ.* I don’t know if I’m more annoyed at her, or at myself for using the analogy. “You’re not a dog. And you’re also not a naïve girl. You’re a grown woman who consented to this relationship, and who agreed to let me lead. Implicit in that agreement was that you would follow. Now turn around and place your hands on the table. Don’t make me say it again.”

Delilah lifts her chin, but to my surprise she does as instructed. “Do it,”

she grumbles, with resignation. “Just get it the hell over with.”

*Fuck.* I don't want her to simply tolerate the vibrator. I want her to enjoy it, physically and emotionally. I want her to willingly *and happily* relinquish control. That's why this whole thing is so fucked up. I wouldn't care so much if she was just another operative. But she's not. And I'm on shaky, unfamiliar ground. *You're playing a fool's game if you involve a woman you can barely keep your hands off in a covert mission.* Fuck you, Smith.

After a few seconds pass, I stand directly behind her and gently tug at the ends of her hair, until her reflection meets mine in the mirror. “Tonight's important. There won't be photographs, because the paparazzi aren't allowed anywhere near the club, but as you surmised, there will be a lot of tongue wagging. I need you to trust that I've thought through every detail carefully. That includes your feelings.” I run my hand down her back, and her lips part as she draws a large breath.

Above all else, the one thing that will make the mission successful is our insatiable desire for each other. It's also what makes it soul-wrenching.

“The only thing I hadn't anticipated is how gorgeous you'd be all dressed up, and how much I'd want to fuck you. But that's my problem, not yours. And I won't allow it to interfere with the plan.” I pause, allowing her to digest all of it.

I have responsibilities to Delilah that I intend on fulfilling at some point. But I also have a mission to think about, and while I'm not prepared to scrap her role in it, I need to know if she's still on board. Better now than in a week.

“We're going to be late for our reservation,” she says softly, gazing at me in the mirror.

I search her face, hoping for something more than resignation. As if she knows what I need, she nods. And I can breathe again.

“Think of tonight like one long scene.” I let my hand slide across her ass and down her shapely legs. “Do you trust me not to wrinkle your dress, or would you like to pull it up?”

She reaches down, and carefully lifts the bottom of her dress, until her ass is bared to me. I resist the urge to sink my teeth into the firm muscle.

I want her aroused. It will give her the flushed look of a woman in love—a new love. If she pulls it off, I have a reward for her, and if she doesn't, she won't get to ease the ache I'm going to make sure she has all night.

I rub my palm over her round little ass, and when I feel her relax, I bring

my hand down hard on her tight cheek. She gasps at the bite of the blow. I'm going to give her the pain she craves, just enough to take the edge off and settle her.

Spanking her eats at me. It's not what I want for her future—at least not all the time. But emotionally she needs the pain, and I haven't had enough time to guide her elsewhere.

I might be conflicted, but I'm also aroused.

I slap her ass several more times, letting my fingers dip into her pussy between the sharp strikes, but never for long enough to give her the orgasm that she deserves. That's for later.

When her skin is reddened, and her pussy primed, I nudge her thong aside and slip the pink vibrator into her, carefully adjusting the thin curve over her clit and the antenna on her almost bare mound. "Panties are optional," I murmur, kissing the top of her head. "What do you think? Want to leave them here?"

"I think I would quit while I was ahead if I were you."

I laugh softly. "You okay?"

"Other than my tender backside?"

"It sounds like you're complaining." Our eyes meet in the mirror. There's no uncertainty now. Her eyes are bright and clear.

Delilah shakes her head. "No," she says so softly I can barely hear it. "No complaints."

Her calm demeanor should make me feel better, but it doesn't. Inflicting pain is easy. It takes no skill and little effort. She deserves better.

After running a damp washcloth between her legs, I adjust her thong, smooth her dress over her hips, and help her upright. "Showtime."

The walk to the elevator is quiet, with each of us embroiled in our own thoughts. While we wait for the doors to open, she peeks at me from the corner of her eye. The evening, and all it holds, is weighing on her again. She needs another distraction, and I reach for my phone, but change my mind. Not yet.

When we get into the private elevator, I cage her in the corner, with one hand on the side of her head and the other on my phone. I stop the elevator. "You're beautiful, Delilah. No one will be able to keep their eyes off you. But you're mine." I kiss her roughly. "Say it."

"I'm yours for the mission," she says with a spark of defiance that makes my cock harder.

*We'll see.* I shrug off the idea of keeping her when we're done. That's *not* the plan.

"If you behave yourself tonight, I have something special planned for you. Something you'll really enjoy."

"Maybe my reward can be that you'll stay on your side of the bed and leave me the hell alone." There's a glimmer of challenge in her eyes.

*Challenge accepted.* I activate the vibrator and it jumps to life. There's not the faintest buzz, but her mouth falls open and she sucks in a breath. I'm so close to her, I can feel the heat off her body. "Feels good, doesn't it, darlin'?"

When she holds onto the elevator wall to steady herself, my mouth crashes into hers. It's only the small moans in her throat that pull me back to reality. *What the hell, Gray? What are you doing? It can't be like this. You need to be in control. Otherwise the entire mission and everything you hope to accomplish is going to blow up in your face.*

I turn off the vibrator, and restart the elevator.

Delilah pulls out a small compact and begins repairing her lipstick. The phallic tube against her lips sends a signal straight to my dick. I look away, trying to right myself before the damn doors open.

*You're fucking with my head, woman. And it's my own goddamn fault.*



## DELILAH

When we get off the elevator, Gray's hand is on my back guiding me toward the hostess station—to the very spot where I stood, night after night.

As we walk through the restaurant, I smile and say hello to at least a half dozen staff who I know. It's uncomfortable—I don't know why exactly, maybe because I'm more at home being a staff member than a guest in a place like Wildflower.

Gray whispers something to the hostess, Laurel, who was hired right before I left. She nods and smiles, but I'm not sure she recognizes me. When they're finished, he leads me into the dining room, to a table in the center of the room where everyone can see us.

The familiar way he touches my back and waits for me to be seated suggests this isn't a business meeting. I'm sure the nosey-noses trying not to gawk think we're a couple—or at the very least, on a third or fourth date.

The waiter and sommelier come over together to greet us, and though normally they would introduce themselves, no introductions are necessary.

“You can leave the menus, but we'd like a few minutes to enjoy a drink before we order.”

“Of course,” the waiter says, respectfully, turning his attention to me. But before I can order a drink, Gray takes the reins.

“Miss Porter will have a champagne cocktail, and I'll have Blanton's. A generous pour, please.”

My expression must betray my distaste for the words *champagne cocktail*, because the vibrator jumps to life for a second, zapping me like I'm



a dog with an electric collar. I don't care what Gray says about it. That's what it feels like to me.

When the waiter walks away, I smile adoringly at Gray. "I know a champagne cocktail is dainty and ladylike, but the next time you order me an aperitif, remember how much I like Blanton's too, darlin'."

The vibrator springs to life, this time for longer than the last. One more time, and I'm going to pull it out, right here in the fancy-ass dining room, and drop it in his *Blanton's*.

"I appreciate you speaking so lovingly. But I'm in a wolfish mood tonight, Delilah. It's best you keep your wits about you."

I make every effort not to roll my eyes. The pretending to be something I'm not is so much more difficult than I imagined. If Gray and I were at Tallulah's Bar, or even in the apartment, sharing a meal would feel more natural, the way it did at the beach. But a dinner with pressed linen and more forks than I own makes it awkward, even in a familiar place.

Fortunately, Gray is a master at small talk. And I dust off my Southern manners and partake of the bullshit until the white-gloved waiter returns. He places small bowls of warm nuts, olives, and cheddar crackers on the table, along with our drinks. Gray's bourbon is over a large ice cube with a strip of orange peel lying on the surface. It makes my mouth water. I glance at my drink. In comparison, it looks—better than nothing.

When the waiter walks away, Gray lifts his glass toward me. "Have a sip." I'm surprised he's sharing. But I suppose that's what couples do. "Go on. See if it's as good as you remember."

I lift the tumbler while he watches attentively, a small sparkle in his eyes. "Better than I remember," I reply in a low, husky voice, as though the whiskey primed my throat for sex.

"Take another sip, just to be sure."

"*Mmmm*. It smells like vanilla caramels," I say, bringing the tumbler to my nose, before taking another sip.

"There's nothing I'd like more than to indulge you, Blue Eyes. Let me."

The flush creeps up my neck, and I search for a distraction. "I love these little crackers. The chef puts cayenne in them."

Gray takes a long drink of bourbon, but doesn't take his eyes off me. The growing flush moves from pleasantly warm to toasty. If he hasn't already noticed the pink stain on my skin, he'll surely see it now.

"Tell me about your day," he says, popping an olive into his mouth.

“My day.” Such a perfectly civilized question, but wrought with so much angst and turmoil. “Aside from Gabby when we meet for supper or a drink, I don’t think anyone’s ever asked about my day.”

“Hmmm.” He scoops up another olive. “Never?”

I shake my head. “I’ve never thought about it before, but I don’t think so.”

“Well, I’m asking, and I’m going to keep asking, at least for the next few weeks.”

*The next few weeks*—then it’s over. *Then you’ll be free of him, Delilah.* It doesn’t give me the jolt of happiness I would expect. “Busy. The day was busy, although I accomplished *nothing*.” It’s true. I’ve never had such a busy but unproductive day. “The yoga was challenging. But you already know that. Have I thanked you yet for leading me to believe Mel was a white girl with a scrawny ass?”

Gray laughs.

“I don’t think Mel is that impressed with me, but he’s going to let me incorporate martial arts and kickboxing into our routine.”

Gray raises his brow, offering me a cheddar cracker. “Really?”

“If he’s satisfied that I’m committing to my yoga practice, on my own time. Don’t worry, he’s not letting me off easily.”

“How did it feel to run on a treadmill in the afternoon?”

“Not anywhere near as satisfying, if you want to know the truth. But better than nothing. Kind of like my champagne cocktail.”

The edge of his mouth quirks, and I flash him a small, feigned smile, which he ignores.

“How did it go with Mira?”

“I liked her. A lot. You were right. She’s a font of information. Apparently, women don’t run outside in Amadi. Not on the public streets anyway.”

“Is that right?” He brings the amber liquid to his lips and empties the tumbler.

“That’s what the yoga is about. You’re preparing me.”

He scoffs, but the gleam in his eyes betrays him. “Pity. I’m disappointed you didn’t continue to believe I’m a monster in that regard for a bit longer.”

Before I can respond, there’s a loud thud at the entrance to the restaurant, like something heavy fell over, and staff are scurrying out front.

“Excuse me,” Gray says, getting up.

I follow him out, and close the French doors behind me so that guests can continue to enjoy dinner.

Laurel is on the floor with the hostess stand on top of her.

Gray shoos everyone away, and with little effort he pulls the stand upright, then lowers himself to his haunches, beside her. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she gasps. “I’m so sorry.” She starts to sit up, and then lies back down again. “Mr. Wilder, I’m so nauseous, I’m afraid if I lift my head, I’ll be sick.”

Poor woman. She sounds mortified.

“Get a bag, or something, in case she vomits,” Gray tells the busboy loitering a few feet away. Laurel drapes an arm over her eyes. “What happened?” Gray asks. His voice is gentle and filled with concern.

When I worked at Wildflower, Gray was always fair-minded. Not just toward me, but toward others who worked here too. He was demanding and exacting about *everything* at the club, but he was also generous and kind, especially with the long-term employees who had demonstrated their loyalty over the years. Laurel hasn’t been here a year, but he’s clearly fond of her.

“I got dizzy and held onto the stand. When I fell, it came with me. I’ll be fine as soon as my head stops spinning. It’s just the heat.”

*The heat?* It’s pretty cool in here.

“Does it hurt anywhere?”

“Only my pride,” she says with her arm still shielding her eyes.

The busboy returns back with a large disposable container.

“You hold this,” Gray instructs, wrapping Laurel’s fingers around the container. “Don’t be afraid to use it if you need to. I’m going to carry you to my office and we’ll call your husband and an ambulance. Hold on.” He lifts her off the floor, and I follow behind, through the kitchen, to the rear of the building.

Trippi appears out of nowhere and stops me at the entrance to Gray’s office. “She needs a little privacy,” he explains, in his own terse way. That’s how it always is with him. Short and never sweet. No one ever accused the man of talking their ear off. That’s for sure. “This is a personnel matter,” he adds, when I don’t immediately back off.

I’m not prepared to make a stink, and I’m certainly not going to bother Gray. Plus, Laurel is entitled to some privacy. “Of course. Let me know if I can help in any way.”

He nods and shuts the door in my face.

*What do I do now?* Go back to the table, I guess, and wait. I don't relish the idea of sitting alone, with dozens of eyes watching and wondering if Gray is ever coming back.

When I get to the front, a waitress and a waiter, who know the floor well, are discussing who should take over for Laurel. Gray prefers the term *hostess*, but the hostess at the club is actually the *maître d'* with the *de facto* job of restaurant manager for the evening. With Laurel and Gray both out of commission, and Foxy gone for the day, no one's in charge.

This was my old job. I can welcome guests and keep the floor running smoothly in my sleep. I did it for two years.

"I'll be the hostess for the rest of the evening," I advise the much relieved, albeit cautious, waitstaff. "Let's all go back to our stations."

About fifteen minutes later, Trippi approaches me outside the dining room after I've seated a small party. "Mr. Wilder is wondering if you know the name of the doctor who delivered Gabby Wilder's baby?"

Laurel must be pregnant. Hopefully the fall is nothing serious. I don't bother asking, because Trippi isn't going to divulge a thing. "Dr. Williams. With Angel Oak Obstetrics and Gynecology." Dr. Williams is my doctor too, but I keep that to myself.

"He also wanted me to tell you to go up to the apartment, and he'll meet you when he can. He said to order dinner for yourself and the kitchen will bring it up."

*Did he? Well, I'm going to go into the bathroom and take out his little toy, and he'll have to come tell me himself, with words, if that's what he expects.*

"Tell Mr. Wilder that he should take as long as he needs. I can amuse myself until he's free."

Trippi, who is a former SEAL and the size of a Mack truck, glances between me and the menus in my hand.

"If you tell him I'm working the floor, I'll help myself to your balls when you least expect it. It won't be a good time for you."

He's twice my size, but has the good graces not to laugh in my face. "Yes, ma'am," he says deferentially before walking away.

I'd say there's a less than fifty-fifty chance he'll keep his mouth shut.



## DELILAH

I've changed into a pair of shorts and a tank top by the time the lock clicks, and Gray drops his keys into a small glass tray in the foyer.

"Hey," he says from the living room doorway. "I didn't expect you to still be up." He's carrying his jacket, his tie is off, and his sleeves are rolled to the elbow. He looks beat.

"Is that why you stayed away so long?" I tease. "Hoped I'd fall asleep before you got home? How's Laurel?"

"She's fine. I'm sorry about the way things turned out tonight." He walks to the bar in the corner of the room and pours a bourbon. One glass.

"No thanks, I don't care for any."

His hand freezes mid-pour, his lips pulled into a tight line. "Do you want a drink, or are you just busting my balls?"

"I'm all set for now." I sit up and lay my iPad on the sofa beside me, and watch while he drains his glass and pours himself another. He's broody tonight, with a darkness surrounding him that's not normally there. At least not one this gloomy.

"I'm going to shower."

"I'll put out supper while you're showering. Don't deep-condition your hair and shave your legs, and all that other stuff that takes time. I'm starving."

He stops, and turns to me. "You haven't eaten?"

"I waited for my date. It seemed ladylike and proper, like a champagne cocktail."

When he shakes his head, I spy a whisper of a smile, but not enough to

lift the gloom. “I’ll be out in ten minutes.”

While he’s showering, I reheat the crab dip and pull the chicken salad from the refrigerator. I wonder if something happened with Laurel. Maybe that’s what’s put him in a mood. It was hot as hell outside and soupy, but the club was cool and dry. I doubt it was the heat that made her go down, even if she is pregnant. It’s not as though pregnant women turn into hothouse flowers.

While I’m still figuring things out, Gray comes out onto the balcony where I’ve set out the food and lit a few candles I found decorating the inside of the fireplace. His hair is damp, and he’s wearing a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt with the sleeves cut off. I’d bet my last dollar there’s no underwear under those thin gray sweatpants. Just like at the beach.

“This is nice,” he says, almost surprised.

“I thought we’d eat out here. It’s cooled off and the fresh air feels good. I hope you don’t mind that I borrowed the candles from the fireplace. I’ll put them back just like they were when we’re finished.” *Wouldn’t want you to have a heart attack because something was out of place.*

“Don’t worry about it,” he says, stretching out on a chaise lounge. “What did you order?”

I lift the lids off the platters. “Chicken salad on soft white bread, with sweet potato fries and some crab dip.”

He’s sitting back, with his eyes closed, but he’s not asleep.

I slather some crab dip on a piece of baguette and bring it to him.

“Chef Renaud must have loved filling your order.”

“He’s lucky I don’t trust him to make a decent taco, because that’s what I really had a hankering for. But not to be outmaneuvered, he chose a *crisp chardonnay that would pair well with my choices.*” I purse my lips. “I never cared for that guy. Too snooty for my tastes. But he can cook. Got to give him that.”

Gray gets up and opens the glass door to the living room. “I’m not a fan of chardonnay, crisp or otherwise. Do you want a beer?”

“Love one.”

The balcony overlooks the city, with the harbor in the distance. It’s a nice view, but nothing like the beach house.

I make us each a plate with some of everything while he’s inside, and take the seat closest to him.

He hands me a beer. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was. This is perfect.

Thanks for—”

“Ordering? It didn’t take much effort.” I pick at my food, unsure about whether it’s okay to ask what happened with Laurel. I don’t want to violate her privacy. I suppose Gray will let me know if I overstep. “I heard you went to the hospital with Laurel.”

“Where did you hear that?” he asks, taking a bite of the sandwich.

“Chatter among the waitstaff. You know how it is in the restaurant—no secrets, even if the ambulance pulls up around back. Plus, they like her, and they were worried.”

He shrugs. “She’d never been in an ambulance before. She started to cry when the EMTs hooked her up to an IV and said she needed to go to the emergency room. She was shaking, and I couldn’t see sending her alone. Trippi followed in the car. We stayed until her husband could find someone to take care of their kid.”

Empathy and compassion—there it is again. “That was nice of you.”

“It’s not like I had a choice.”

“We always have a choice. But you have a soft spot for vulnerable women. I’ve seen it before.”

“Don’t ever ask Trippi to lie to me. He won’t, but it puts him in a bad spot. Especially since he’s fond of his balls.” He reaches over and tugs on my hair, stealing a fry off my plate, while he’s at it.

I swat his hand away from my food. “The last thing I want are his balls.” But my instincts are right not to trust him to keep his mouth shut.

Gray gets up to grab another sandwich. “I asked you to come upstairs and wait for me.”

“Actually, you *told* me to go upstairs and wait. It might be just semantics, but there was no asking and a lot of telling. Trippi might have gotten the gist of it wrong, but I doubt it.”

He deposits a handful of fries on my plate before sitting down. “You were my guest. When I—”

“It was the right thing to do,” I interrupt, before he goes any further down that road and I end up wanting to smack him. “You own the place, yet when something needs to get done, regardless of what it is, you pitch in. Your woman would do that too. Besides, I can run that dining room in my sleep.”

“My woman, huh?” There’s a small smile playing on his lips.

“Isn’t that what we want the world to believe?”

He doesn’t respond, and all of a sudden, he seems faraway and broody



again.

I rest my plate on the small table between us, and close my eyes, enjoying the breeze. It's been a long day, filled with new experiences and bits and pieces of information that I need to hold onto. No wonder I'm tired.

"Am I a monster?"

*What?* My eyes shoot open, and I turn my head toward him.

I need him to repeat the question, before I go anywhere near it. What if I nodded off and completely misunderstood? "I'm sorry. I missed part of that."

"No, you didn't. You're just not sure how to answer." He snickers. It has a ring of sadness to it. "You're probably the wrong person to ask."

*Monster? Where did this come from?*

"I'm exactly the right person." I respond too quickly and reflexively, almost as though I'm gearing up to defend him—but against what? Himself?

"I've seen a lot of sides to you, Gray. And I'm the right person to ask because I'll tell you the truth." I shrug. "When I worked at the club, I saw mostly good in you—toward everyone. But once I left, you were ugly to me. And now?" I gaze up at him. "Some of your behavior has been downright deplorable, and confusing, to be honest. But no, I don't think you're a monster. Far from it. That's why I agreed to join you in a mission."

"You agreed?" The cords in his neck are so tight, I can see them under the dim light. This is the broodiest he's ever been around me. "Is that what we're calling coercion now?"

"Yes. I agreed. I've been clear about that. Your threats got my attention, but they didn't play *any* role in the final decision. I'm not afraid of you. I never have been." I get up and reach for my plate, but Gray grabs hold of my arm, and pulls me into his lap. There's something about his mood that guts me.

"Sit here with me for a minute. Let me enjoy the way your hair and skin smell. The way you feel. All soft, and at the same time strong. You're such a contradiction. It's beguiling."

I curl into him, laying my cheek against his hammering heart, and close my eyes. He's a contradiction too. *Maybe we're made for each other.*

His heart eventually slows to a beat that feels familiar. "What did you get for dessert?" he asks after several minutes of just quietly being together.

"You want dessert?"

"I thought you might."

"It was pecan pie. And it was delicious." I feel his shoulders shake before

I hear the laughter. A great relief washes through me. This is the man I know—the version of him that I like best. “It was getting late, and it’s not like you keep any food in the house. I didn’t want to pick at the chicken salad. I was saving it until you got home.” *Home. Why did I say that? This isn’t my home.*

“I don’t want dessert.” He holds me tight, so I can’t move, and kisses my head. “Make a list of things you think we should have in the apartment. Next time someone goes to the market, they’ll pick it up.”

*A list of things we should have in the apartment. Not I should have, but we should have.*

*It’s pretend, Delilah. All pretend. You’d do well to remember that.*

I should probably leave it alone, but his heart was heavy when he came in tonight. I can’t believe whatever was on his mind is gone completely. “What made you ask if you were a monster?” I ask, rubbing his chest lightly.

He doesn’t respond immediately, and after a couple minutes I’m convinced he isn’t going to respond at all. But sometimes it takes a little extra time to collect the courage to bare your soul.

“Laurel didn’t want to tell me she was pregnant. She needs the health insurance and thought if I knew, I’d find a reason to fire her.” Gray lifts my chin until our eyes meet. “Am I so shallow that someone who works for me would think I’d fire her because she’s pregnant?”

There’s something about him that looks vulnerable. I’m sure he wants my reassurance, but the truth is, in her shoes, I would have been concerned too.

“Pregnant women have a whole host of hormonal things going on that neither you nor I can appreciate. Hell, Gabby once cried at a commercial for a feminine hygiene product. But I can understand why Laurel was worried,” I say gently.

He stiffens under me, and I feel terrible about hurting him, but I’m not going to lie. That serves no purpose. “It’s not you, Gray. Wildflower is a carefully crafted fantasy. Everything about it is beautiful and decadent—even the part that’s above ground. You sell sex. A big belly and swollen ankles are a repellent to the kind of sin you peddle. They’re the result of sin, a warning of what’s to come when you partake in the fun, not an enticement.”

“I’m a perfectionist and I demand loyalty. But I was always under the impression that my employees understood that their loyalty would be returned. I’ve always tried to do right by them. It’s important to me.”

“While I worked at Wildflower,” I say, sincerely, “I always had the impression that everyone adored you, despite your exacting ways. You’re

good to people who work there. You do it quietly—like going in the ambulance with Laurel without making a big deal.”

I pull his face toward mine, until my lips reach his. It’s not the kind of kiss that’s big and sexy—it’s the kind that says *I’m on your side*.

“You’re a good soul, Delilah.”

His mouth meets mine, with a raw energy that stokes the sleeping fire. He sinks his teeth into my bottom lip, sending jolts of pleasure through me. When I begin to pant, he slides a hand under my shirt, caressing one breast, then the other. Not sweet, gentle caresses, but firm, skilled strokes that demand my nipples furl in appreciation.

“What are we going to do about the little lapse tonight?” he murmurs.

My brain is in a fog. Between his sexy mouth and those hands—I’m a muddled mess. “What little lapse?”

“The one where I told you to go upstairs and you defied me.” His tone has a roguish edge that makes my heart skip a beat.

“I guess you’ll have to punish me.”

Gray wraps my hair around his hand, tipping my head back and leaving my neck exposed. “I don’t punish grown women unless it’s part of a scene.” He runs his tongue along my throat until he reaches my ear. His teeth sink into the lobe, making me shudder. “I dole out consequences for behavior, good and bad. Everything we do, or fail to do, has a consequence. Human behavior is shaped by our willingness to bear the consequences.”

“It sounds complicated. Maybe you can show me what you mean.”

The edge of his mouth curls. “You just bought yourself another consequence, Blue Eyes. Let’s go inside.”



## DELILAH

Gray opens the door and steps aside so I can go in first. I stop just inside the living room because I'm not sure where to go. I'm not even sure what we're doing. Not exactly. But I'm all in. That, I am sure about.

He cradles my face in his hands. "This is going to be a short, uncomplicated scene. But intense. Will you follow where I lead?"

I've come to understand that this is Gray's way of asking for my consent. "Yes." I emphasize my assent with a slight nod.

"Yes, what? What are you agreeing to?" He stills, waiting for my response.

"You lead, and I'll follow. Wherever it takes me."

I feel his hands tense around my face. He places his warm lips on my forehead, where it meets the hairline. "Green, yellow, or red when I check in with you during the scene. Red anytime you want to stop. It's your safe word. Don't be afraid to use it."

"Of course." I can handle whatever he has in store for me—physically, anyway. I don't plan on using the safe word. Although I don't suppose anyone ever does.

I follow Gray to the bedroom, past the enormous bed we'll be sharing tonight, into his closet.

I've never been inside before. It's not that different from the one where my new clothing hangs, although this closet is decidedly more masculine. It's the size of a large dressing room, outfitted along two walls with rods and racks. A bank of drawers covers the far wall, and there are two built-in dressers flanking a wide, floor-to-ceiling gold-framed mirror. The woodwork

is dark, and the walls and ceiling are lined with cedar panels.

Gray locks the door from the inside, making sure I see him slip the key into his pocket. I'm his captive. His *willing* captive.

He leaves me standing in the center of the dimly lit room, while he climbs into an elaborately carved chair. It appears to be some sort of a throne, resting on a dais off the floor. But as I examine it more closely, I realize it's a vintage shoeshine chair that men once sat in to have their shoes polished to a mirrored finish.

Even in sweatpants and a T-shirt cut at the sleeves, Gray looks like he belongs in that leather chair with its gilded frame. Rich, powerful men don't relinquish their birthright when they shed their fine clothing. By the same token, you can't put couture on a girl from Mississippi and expect her to be a queen.

"Is this my consequence?" I ask tentatively.

He peers down at me from his antique perch, like a king on a peasant. "No. This is play time. We'll discuss the consequences later. Or tomorrow. I don't think you'll be up to discussing anything when we're done."

The buzz of anxiety is well-entrenched inside me, humming along nicely. Just like he wants.

"But for now," Gray continues, "unless I ask you a question, or you need to use your safe word, I want you quiet. No words. But not silent. I want to hear those whimpers of pleasure and the groans of frustration. I want your screams to thrum in my veins." I shudder in response, and he smiles devilishly. "What's your safe word?"

"Red." I don't need to think about it.

Gray nods. "Take off your clothes, Delilah. *For me.*" He leans back with his forearms propped on the chair. "Every. Last. Stitch."

I lift my head and pull my shoulders back, not in a balk, but resolute and determined. I intend to do this not only for his pleasure, but for mine.

Although it's not my intention to put on a show, I feel myself disrobing with moony, graceful movements, my gaze drawn to his. I'm already aroused and Gray is too. The evidence is not just his hard cock probing the thin fabric, but in his dark eyes, with their heavy lids.

"You're beautiful, darlin'. I don't tell you that often enough." His voice is the soothing stroke of a master caressing a pet. "Look into the mirror."

I swivel, following his command without wavering.

"On your knees," he instructs with that same inviting tone.

Only this time, I don't rush to obey. Instead, I meet his eyes in the mirror. Pleading silently. I'm not ready to kneel for him.

"I'm not requiring you to get into a submissive pose. That's entirely up to you. But I do want you on your knees. *Now.*"

I'm not sure if it's a concession, or if he never expected me to kneel for him. Getting on my knees is different from *kneeling*. It's not just semantics. I wouldn't expect just anyone to understand the distinction, but Gray does.

I lower my knees to the well-padded silk rug, with my body long and proud, and my arms dangling at my side. It's not a submissive posture. It's nothing like it. Although it doesn't take long before I realize the humble position might be more comfortable. But I don't move.

Gray watches me in the mirror with a keen eye. "Quiet your mind," he demands. The soothing tenor is gone, replaced by the commanding Dominant. The shift is subtle, but unmistakable.

I lower my head to save myself from his probing stare. But I'm not spared. The sear sizzles on my exposed skin, and I struggle not to squirm.

His patience will surely outlast mine, especially with the heady scent of cedar whirling with his spicy cologne. When I first entered the closet, the dance was subtle and oddly comforting, but now, it's loud, permeating my senses, and it's all I smell.

After what seems like an eternity, there's a rustling behind me. I glance into the mirror as he approaches with a swath of fabric in one hand and what appears to be a crop in the other.

My skin is already singing for the crop.

"Spread your thighs wide," he instructs. "That's it. A little more."

I'm unsteady with my knees so far apart, and even though my legs are strong, I don't know how long I'll be able to hold this position without toppling over.

Gray places a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. "I'm going to blindfold you," he explains, before tying the soft fabric around my eyes and robbing me of all sight. "I prefer not to tie your hands. But I want you to keep them behind your back with your fingers laced. Can you do that of your own accord, or do you need the assistance of the binding?"

Anyone can be kept immobile when bound. But it takes a strong will and great fortitude to keep still and embrace the sting of the crop. He's challenging me.

I choose my words cautiously. "I don't need to be bound to submit to the

crop.” I’m careful not to say a word about submitting to him from my knees.

Gray slides his hands over my shoulders and neck, with firm but gentle strokes that make it difficult not to sway. It would be easier if I were in a submissive pose—and I consider it briefly. *No*, I decide. He hasn’t earned it, and if I give it up too easily, it will be an empty offering that means nothing.

I lace my fingers against my lower back.

His lips carefully graze the hair at my crown, as the crop slithers between my thighs, inching up slowly, in a satanic tease.

The striking part of the crop, the keeper, is a pliable, unforgiving leather tongue that will sting sweetly when wielded by a skilled hand. The darkness heightens my anticipation, and every nerve ending is on high alert, waiting for the first scrumptious bite of the crop.

Gray slides the keeper across my mound, taking great pains to avoid the sensitive pink flesh begging for a taste.

He lays a steady hand on my shoulder, and strikes my ass. The *swoosh* of the crop cuts through the air almost as the sting lands. “*Ahhh!*” I gasp. Before I have time to collect myself, he strikes the other cheek.

Just one wallop on each side, before he begins the excruciating slide up the other thigh. Stopping at my pussy, he rests the leather tongue against the wet skin and holds it there.

Focused on self-preservation, I draw a breath and brace myself for what is sure to come next.

Gray hovers over me, and I feel his hand between my legs. But it’s much too brief. “Such a needy girl,” he murmurs, bringing his fingers to my lips.

I suck them clean. I don’t need to be told.

“You’re so good, darlin’. When you lave my fingers with your hot little mouth, I feel it in my cock.”

I begin to sway, and he brings a hand to my breast, fingering the nipple roughly while the crop snaps and licks my pussy with rhythmic beats against the slick flesh. Gray wields it expertly, varying gentle caresses with delicious bites.

He holds me steady, by my breasts, kneading one and then the other. When my legs begin to quiver, the crop disappears. I groan at the loss, squeezing my interlocked fingers in agony.

My pulse slows, and Gray begins again. The soft blows build, the cadence sure as I climb. But this time I know. It doesn’t matter how desperate I am to come, he won’t allow it. My cunt is aching. I need the release. I concentrate



on keeping my legs still so he doesn't know how close I am, but it's all for nothing. He pulls the damn thing away when I'm *right there*.

The pressure behind my eyes is growing. The tears threaten. Not from the sting of the crop, but from the frustration.

I feel Gray move. He's in front of me, with his cock on my lips. My tongue darts out eagerly to taste the smooth, stretched skin, and I'm rewarded with a milky bead.

"Just like my fingers, Delilah. Suck it good."

He feeds me his thick cock little by little. I want to use my hands to pull him closer, to dig into the cords of muscle on his thighs, to grip the silky shaft and fondle the tightening sack, but I don't dare. Instead I lick the taut skin, running my teeth gently over the crown.

He hisses, pushing deeper. "Relax and breathe," he demands, in a raspy voice. "Take it all."

*Count on it.* I tip my head back to lengthen my throat, and swallow as he pushes deeper. The saliva pools and dribbles. But I don't gag.

I hear the rumble of release, and feel his seed on my skin before my mouth registers the loss of his cock. The spray goes on and on. I ache to dip my fingers into it and taste the salty brine.

His hands are in my hair, petting me, with the tender touch of a man who has just had his cock sucked. "Give me a color," he says, in a voice that still sounds like fine gravel.

"Green. Green," I repeat louder, so he understands I'm not anywhere near ready to stop.

He's behind me again, untying the blindfold, and binding my hands with the silky fabric.

"I want you to see what I see. A smart, strong woman, on her knees, marked, swept up not by unrelenting pain, but by intense pleasure."

My eyes adjust to the low light quickly. The woman in the mirror is uninhibited, covered in a wanton flush, with heavy breasts and swollen lips, her hooded eyes filled with lust.

She reeks of sin.

Gray picks up the crop off the floor and brandishes it mercilessly, harder this time and faster than before. The intensity overshadows the smarting sensation. My hips buck wildly and my legs won't hold me up any longer. I begin to topple, but he catches me with a free hand, using my breasts to steady me, tweaking one nipple, then the other, until pleading moans are all I

hear.

I lean back against his legs for support, and pull at the bindings as my orgasm rushes through me in an almost painful explosion. I don't see myself in the glass as I fly. I see him. Only him. His soft eyes riveted on me, his strong frame ready to absorb everything I can't handle, ready to catch me before I fall.

Gray lowers himself behind me, freeing my hands as I tremble. And with the utmost care, he carries me to the bed and lays me on the quilt.

I'm exhausted and sated—physically and emotionally spent. But my body doesn't ache like a woman who's been beaten.

He brings a bowl of warm water and a soft cloth, and gently washes away the evidence of our play. His touch is tender and kind, and contented mewls slip from my lips as he dries me with a heated towel.

When my teeth chatter, Gray rubs a firm hand over my skin before pulling down the quilt and layering me with luxurious blankets, delicate and weightless. "I'll be right back," he murmurs, smoothing my hair.

I'm not sure how long he's gone, but he brings apple juice back with him. I shake my head. I'm too cold to drink anything.

"Just a few sips," he insists, bringing the straw to my mouth.

When he's satisfied I've had enough to drink, he lies down beside me, enveloping my body in his warmth.

"You're safe," he promises. "I'll keep watch while you sleep. Just rest. Let me take care of you."

"We're partners," I mumble, already half asleep.

"We are," he agrees, wrapping me tighter against him. "In all things."

As I drift off, it occurs to me that there was no pain. No real pain. No belts. No beatings until I screamed. No welts that needed immediate attention so they wouldn't scar.

I fall into a fitful sleep. Because even Gray's careful vigilance can't keep my inner demons at bay.



## DELILAH

There's a big pot of oil heating on the stove, slaw in the refrigerator, and biscuits almost ready for the oven. Plus, the corn pudding I made earlier smells divine. I'm just waiting on Gray. He's supposed to text about thirty minutes before he comes upstairs.

We've been out most evenings, and I thought it might be nice to make him supper for a change. Something decidedly Southern and homey that he can't get in a five-star restaurant or in Amadi.

The more I study with Mira, the more I realize how much effort Gray has put into preparation for the mission. To prepare *me* for the mission.

*Pass along a message.* Child's play—unless you're a spy in a foreign country who's under constant surveillance. Then words like treason and espionage get thrown around.

Gray and I have been making it work. Relationship building—in and out of bed. Most days the lines seem only slightly blurred, and on others, I'm convinced there's more to what's going on between us than just the mission.

He has the last word on anything mission-related, but with the day-to-day stuff there's negotiation and real compromise. In the bedroom, he's always in control of the play, whether it's vanilla-ish or kinky, and I always have the power to end it with a safe word. I've never once worried that he might not stop if I used it.

Although the sex is mostly kinky and always intense, it's without the kind of torment masochists and sadists normally revel in. Gray stays clear of the bruising physical pain. He prefers to raise the intensity by toying with my mind.

Once or twice, there have been moments of internal panic when I've been sure that I'm being groomed again. But they turned out to be just remnants of my relationship with Kyle—it had nothing to do with Gray.

The man is a beast. But not the kind of monster Kyle turned out to be.

Kyle was an abuser and a cheat. Although I don't have any solid evidence of the last part, just innuendo and speculation from the congressional hearings. But I don't doubt it's true. I could investigate his past, and I have thought about it over the years. But why bother? I've already given my relationship with Kyle too much time and effort.

I was young and naïve when we first met, living off ramen noodles and boxed mac and cheese, but mostly I was alone. My mother had taken up with yet another *man of her dreams*, and they went off together the summer before I started college. She didn't bother to tell me that she'd sold the place until two men in a pickup truck showed up one morning to clean out the trailer a week before I left for school. When I finally reached my mother, she swore up and down she had told me about the sale, and chastised me for being an airhead. I'm quite sure I would have remembered her telling me a small thing like *I sold the house and you'll need to find somewhere else to live*.

The Marshalls, who lived across the street, let me stay with them until I left for college. They gave me a wonderful send-off with a hummingbird cake and a silver charm in the shape of a key. *It's to remind you that you, and nobody else, hold the key to your future.*

It was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for me, and the Marshalls had done plenty. Even then, the small charm seemed weighty.

Richie Marshall gave me a teddy bear that he'd picked out himself so I wouldn't be too lonely at school. *We're so proud of you, Lilah*, they gushed, when they hugged me at the bus station. *Don't forget us.*

*I never have.*

The hole in my heart hasn't gotten any smaller. Even stealing the archbishop's last breath didn't help close that gap. But their deaths have been avenged. Although it turned out to be small comfort.

I check the temperature on the oil, and turn it up a drop. I expect to hear from Gray any minute. He's good about following through—if he's says he'll call or text, he will. *Unlike Kyle.*

Kyle and I met at a symposium on careers with the government. He gave the presentation on the FBI. He approached me while I was waiting in line to talk to the CIA recruiter, and teased me endlessly about choosing the CIA

over the FBI. Kyle was handsome and charming, and I was a not-quite-eighteen-year-old freshman. It didn't take much effort to convince me to have supper so he could change my mind about joining the Bureau.

He never did change my mind. My heart was long-set on being a spy. But he did convince me to go out with him again, and again. He eventually confessed he was a Dominant, and introduced me to the BDSM lifestyle.

It wasn't until after he died, when I screwed up the courage to dip my toes into the local BDSM community, that I learned Kyle was a poser. There are a lot of them out there. Men who pretend to be Dominants to get sex, or to abuse in a socially acceptable way. Kyle was good-looking, and he had no trouble finding sex, but a willing partner to play his sadistic games was harder to come by. No family, new to the area, and broken inside, I was perfect.

At a community get-together, I met Tony, who was significantly older than me, and an experienced Dom. *A real Dom*. We spent at least forty-five minutes talking, and I agreed to meet him for coffee the next day.

Over a frothy beverage, he gave me an education. He asked me questions and patiently explained the exchange of power, and so many other things I didn't know about the lifestyle. He recommended books, websites, and informative articles to read. He would have answered my questions too, but I was too overwhelmed to come up with any.

There was no sex, and there would be no sex with Tony, ever. Dominants like Tony don't play with big messes like me. He never said that, and honestly, sex was the last thing on my mind once he started talking. Tony was a good guy, who did me a huge service without making me feel any stupider than I already felt.

I never showed my face at another community gathering, and I never saw Tony again either. But I read and researched everything he recommended, and the more I learned, the more I realized my relationship with Kyle was fucked up.

Kyle gaslighted me into believing I was a pain slut—created just for him. It didn't happen overnight. He was patient, carefully grooming me, step by step, until in the end, I couldn't have an orgasm even with a Hitachi held to my clit, unless he'd beaten the shit out of me first.

I should have talked to a therapist, but I spoke to no one about that part of my life. I was too ashamed of having allowed the abuse. As it turns out, being abused is a lot like being widowed at a young age. It has no place in polite

conversation—it makes people too uncomfortable. That’s fine. The victim tag isn’t one I’ve ever been willing to wear anyway.

My phone buzzes, but it’s Gabby returning a text from earlier. *I should set the table.* I don’t need to even think about which glasses to take out. Gray likes water without ice, and he drinks red wine, never white, but prefers a beer or bourbon. We’re comfortable, not the married-twenty-years-with-four-kids kind of comfortable, but the crown prince won’t expect that level of familiarity from us.

Sometimes, I worry I’m getting too comfortable. Fancy clothes. A driver. I look around the well-appointed kitchen. They’re all empty trappings, I remind myself. Nothing more than window dressing. Things my mother would have longed for. Not me.

I set out small dishes of baking soda and sliced lemons to absorb the odors. As I dredge the catfish, I can’t help but think about Mrs. Marshall. It’s her recipe. Her lemon and baking soda trick. “I hope I do you proud,” I whisper out loud, just in case she’s near. “I miss you. Send my love to Mr. Marshall, and give Richie a big hug for me.”

The phone vibrates again.

**GRAY:** 30 minutes.

I put the biscuits in the oven and add the catfish to the hot oil. It splatters, and I jump back to avoid a nasty burn. After a few minutes, I turn the sizzling fillet over. It’s brown and gorgeous when I pull it out of the oil bath and lay it on a rack in the warming tray under the stove. I repeat the entire process, until—*the smell. Fuck.* It’s so pungent it’s starting to overwhelm the kitchen.

Gray’s going to kill me. *Oh my God.*

I run around like a crazy woman, shutting all the doors in the apartment to contain the odor while I call Lally. She was the cook at the Wilder house while Gray was growing up, and now she works for Gabby and JD. She’s also a good soul and my friend. If anyone has a solution to this, it’s her.

I open the balcony door and turn the fan on full speed, while I wait for Lally to answer. I don’t even pause for her to say hello. “I ain’t got no time for pleasantries. I’m in trouble.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I fried catfish and even though I set out lemon slices and small bowls of baking soda, Gray’s apartment stinks to high heaven.”

It’s quiet for a second, before her voice booms through the phone. “You fried catfish in Gray’s apartment? The same Gray Wilder who doesn’t put on

a piece of clothing that hasn't just returned from a visit to the laundry? The same man who has floors you can eat off?"

Yes. Yes. Yes. "Are you going to bust my balls or help me? He's on his way up. How can I make the stench go away?"

"You can't," she answers decisively. "It's stubborn. Goes away in its own time. That's why most people fry fish on the back porch or out in the yard. Even then it can stink up the house if you're not careful. That baking soda and lemon thing is just an old wives' tale. It doesn't really help much."

*Oh my God.* "He's almost here! What am I going to do?"

"First, calm down. Put a lid on the pot with the oil and open all the windows. Then get some grime-cutting cleaner, and wash off any splatters on the stove and around the countertop."

I race around the apartment, following her instructions, but there's not enough time.

"When you're done, take out the trash. And don't burn yourself—oil stays hot for a long time."

"I've gotta go. He's here. Thanks." *He's here. I can't tell if the smell has dissipated or if I've just gotten used to it. I am so screwed.*

"Jesus, it stinks in here," he says, before the door clicks shut. "What the hell is going on?"

My stomach turns somersaults at the sound of his voice, but I'm fresh out of time.

Before I can come up with a decent apology, Gray's in the doorway, eyes wide and alert as they scan the kitchen. He looks like he belongs on a magazine cover, while I smell like a grease pit and probably look like one too.

"I wanted to surprise you—"

"I'm surprised," he says, before I finish. "Maybe in the future, you could limit the surprises to exotic-smelling body lotions and lacy lingerie. Let—"

"With supper," I say softly. "I felt like I wasn't earning my keep, and I wanted to do something special for you."

He doesn't utter a word for several long seconds, and I'm dying inside, like someone who hands over a gift they spent hours selecting, and as the present is unwrapped they grow more and more uncertain about the choice.

"So what did you make?" he asks almost nonchalantly, his initial irritation replaced by genuine curiosity.

"Catfish, slaw, corn pudding, and biscuits. Tartar sauce, too." I spit it all



out in a single breath. The menu sounds ridiculous as I look at Gray in his designer suit. It's as though I let the little girl inside out to play, and she made mud pies and expected the grownups to eat them for supper.

His features soften while I talk. "I'm starving and it sounds delicious. I love catfish."

I'm so focused on his facial expression, I don't really hear the words. But some part of me understands that it's okay, and the stress rolls off my shoulders.

"Let me get out of these clothes. I'll only be a minute. Why don't we eat on the balcony?" he calls over his shoulder, as he strides down the hall.

He's gone, but I nod anyway. When I turn around, I get a fresh look at the kitchen as he just saw it. *What a mess.* A stinky mess. I'll clean it later, after we're done eating.

By the time I get my bearings and put the food out, Gray's back in shorts and a Gamecock T-shirt. I hand him a plate. "Help yourself. The fish is keeping warm in the tray."

"This is delicious," he says, breaking off a piece of crispy fish and popping it in his mouth.

"You're not mad about the way it stinks in here?"

He shrugs, taking an extra spoonful of corn pudding. "It's not often that someone I'm not paying makes me supper." He runs his thumb over my cheek. "Thank you," he murmurs, placing a small kiss on my nose. "As for the smell, we can call one of those industrial restoration companies that people hire to clean up after a fire or flood to get the smoke and mildew out. If that doesn't work, we'll have a big bonfire, invite the neighbors, and toast some marshmallows for s'mores."

My face-splitting grin turns into a laugh.

"Come here." He uses his free hand to pull me into him.

I don't complain because I like it here. I like the smell of him, the way his skin feels, and the sound his heart makes while he holds me against his chest. I like all of it. And if that makes me a weak woman, so be it. Life's too short not to treat yourself now and again.

"The clearance came through today, on both ends," he says, his chin resting on my head. "We leave in four days." When I don't answer, he pulls away. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I'm ready." No one is ever fully prepared, but I feel good about my chances. "What are you thinking?"

“I’m thinking that this is a pretty good way to end a long day. A good start, anyway.” His thumb caresses my breast, and I feel the low pull of desire. “But after we eat, I have something to show you. Downstairs.”

My emotions twist into a wanton curl while I run my fingers through my hair. It doesn’t matter that it’s a greasy rat’s nest. He makes me feel sexy and wanted just the same.

“Dessert’s on me,” he murmurs.

The way he says it. The raw quality in his voice. The lust on his beautiful face. I know that *downstairs* means the club. I’m not sure how I’ll get through dinner knowing there’s dessert waiting there.

“Let’s eat,” I say, without hiding my enthusiasm. “So we can get to dessert. You know how much I like that.”

For a second, there’s a flicker of uncertainty in Gray’s eyes, but I don’t dwell on it. Instead, I take my plate out to the balcony, confident that he’s right behind me.



## GRAY

“Do we have time to clean the kitchen before dessert?” Delilah asks when we finish eating. “Lally said not to let that grease hang around for too long. Otherwise it could be days before the smell goes away.”

*Days?* “You called Lally?” Just imagining their conversation makes me laugh. “I bet she got a kick out of that.”

“She was laughing so hard, she might have wet herself.” Delilah throws her head back and laughs. It’s a glorious sound.

“I’d have paid good money to be sitting in the same room as Lally while you were telling her that you fried catfish in my apartment.”

She leans over and slaps my thigh hard enough to get my full attention. I grab her wrist, and pull her onto my lap, exploring her mouth with my lips and tongue until I’ve sucked all the air from her lungs.

“Why don’t you take a shower and put on something easy to take off. I’ll call housekeeping and have them come up to clean the kitchen while we’re downstairs.”

“That doesn’t seem right.” Her brow furrows, and I smooth the lines with my thumb. “It’s a huge mess.”

“They’re paid well to clean huge messes. Trust me when I tell you they’d rather clean some greasy counters than some of the other things they regularly clean up downstairs.” I slide my fingers lower, until I reach the button on her shorts. After untethering it, I pull down the zipper. “You need to wear clothing that gives me better access to your gorgeous little body—all of it. It would serve us both well.” I rub the outside of her shorts where they cover her pussy until she whimpers against my neck. “Go shower, and don’t

be too long.” I slap her ass once before nudging her off my lap.

“Delilah.”

She turns, with one hand on the French door.

“Do not—I repeat, *do not*—take care of that little ache between your legs while you’re in the shower. You won’t like the consequence.”

To my great surprise, she doesn’t respond before she saunters inside.

*Fuck.* When I planned tonight, I had no idea she was making me supper. A meal that took a lot of thought and effort.

There’s a cruelty to tonight’s plan that seems particularly evil after all her trouble—her kindness. But I can’t change it now. We leave in four days, and I have no idea how shaken she’ll be after what’s in store for her. The mind is a funny thing—unpredictable as hell. She might need all that time to recover.

I’m torn. I want to stay here, well-fed and happy, pour a bourbon, watch a movie, and fuck her into oblivion between scenes. I get up and go over to the edge of the balcony. It’s a clear night and I can see all the way to the ocean. Tonight can’t be about what I want. It has to be about what Delilah needs.

I tighten my grip on the railing as I watch the sailboats bob in the distance. It’s my job to set her up for success. If she fails, she’ll blame herself. Instead of moving her forward, I’ll have dragged her back. That can’t happen. *End of story.*

While she’s showering, I call housekeeping to come up in forty-five minutes, text Mel to come by at 7:30 tomorrow instead of 5:30—Delilah’s going to need the time—and phone my sister-in-law Gabby, who I’ve known and loved my entire life.

“Hey.”

“Gray! How are you? It’s been ages since I’ve seen you. I think a long lunch, just you and me, is in order.”

“I’m glad to hear you want to see me, because I was hoping JD, Chase, and I could have supper at your house this time?”

“Why? You expect the smell of catfish will still be stinkin’ up your place?”

I laugh. Gabby isn’t a busybody, but she’s never had *any* problem sticking her nose into my private life, and since Christmas when I showed up at Sweetgrass with Delilah, she’s been relentless. “I expect the smell to hang around for a bit, but that’s not why I’m asking. Although I guess you’ve heard that Delilah and I are trying each other on for size.”

“News travels fast around these parts. But I’m annoyed I had to hear it

from Lally. I wouldn't have expected you to say a peep, but Delilah and I are good friends."

I had some misgivings about this conversation. Specifically about how much to share with Gabby, but this settles it. I don't want her all over Delilah. It's one thing to take the relationship out for a test drive at my brother's, but it's another to have Gabby adding to Delilah's anxiety—even if she means well.

"I was hoping you and Delilah would join us for dinner."

"Really?" Gabby hesitates. "Must be something pretty special if you're letting us crash your boys' night. Have some news you want to share with the family?"

She's fishing, and I ignore it. "Delilah and I are taking a trip. The relationship's new. We haven't tried it out with company yet. The trip is a little out of her comfort zone. I was hoping maybe we could practice on you and my brothers."

"You were hoping? What about Delilah?"

Gabby doesn't let anything slide. She's tough. I guess she has to be to handle my brother as artfully as she does. "Delilah knows I want to bring her to a family supper. But she's—I bought her a few things to wear on the trip—she's not comfortable with that idea. It makes her feel cheap." This still bothers me a lot. It just does. "I'm going to encourage her to wear her new clothes to your house, but it would be helpful if you didn't make a big fuss."

"Delilah has a lot of pride. I can see how she'd hate you buying her things. It took me a long time to get comfortable spending JD's money, and I'd been around it forever. I'll think about how I can help make it easier for her." Gabby's fully on board. "I'm so glad Smith's giving her some time off. She needs it. Where you going?"

"Visit the Amadi royal family."

She whistles. "That's out of anyone's comfort zone. I can't believe you're friends with that guy—the Prince of Assholes. I'll never understand it."

When she says it, I cringe. I want to tell her that the prince and I aren't really friends. But of course, I don't. "Some relationships are hard to understand from the outside. Take you and JD, for example."

"Isn't that the truth." She chuckles. "I would love to host supper. It makes me so happy that you guys get together every week. Your mother would be ecstatic."

It's true. Julia Wilder would be beside herself if she knew her sons looked

out for one another—always—and broke bread once a week. We usually meet at the club on Monday nights when it's quiet.

Gabby's prattling on about something, but since I wasn't really paying attention, I can't respond. "Can I bring something?"

"Only if you want to insult Lally."

"I'd like to live to see another day."

"I've waited a long time for you two to come to your senses," she says. "You're perfect for each other."

I scoff in response to her happily-ever-after talk. But a lifetime with Delilah doesn't sound anywhere near as bad as I make it out to be.

After we say good-bye, I think about going inside to pour a bourbon, but decide against it. Tonight is going to be tough on Delilah, and I want to have the presence of mind to know when to stop, and how to support her when it's over. Whiskey will only make those things more difficult.

The door opens, and I glance up at the gorgeous woman in the doorway. Delilah has on a white sleeveless dress with a zipper all the way down the front that I'm going to enjoy taking off. I'm sure she knew that when she chose it. She's wearing casual sandals, and not a lick of makeup. Her hair is in a loose braid. She looks like a college kid.

My stomach rebels at the thought of what I have planned.

"You told me to be quick, so I didn't bother getting fancy."

I move slowly toward the doorway. "You don't need to be fancy tonight. And for the record, I like you best when you're dressed just the way you are right now. Although naked is my hands-down favorite."

As her smile lights up the porch, it sends the guilt worming its way back into my conscience. We've come a long way in a short time. In large part because Delilah is open to doing whatever the mission requires.

I bring her hand to my mouth and put a small kiss on her inner palm. "The scene tonight will be challenging—for both of us. Will you follow my lead?"

Her thick lashes flutter on her cheeks, as she averts her eyes. "Yes." She nods. "I'll follow wherever you lead."

The sincerity in her voice is alone remarkable. But when she lowers herself to her knees in a posture that is unequivocally submissive, her trust shakes me to the core. This might be her surrender, but she captured my soul as she quietly offered me her submission.

I know the precious gift is only for now. Delilah will expect me to earn it

every day, as she damn well should. But she owns me. I can try to convince myself otherwise, but there's no going back from here—not for me.





## DELILAH

The elevator ride to the lower level is quiet. Gray stands behind me, his arms wrapped tightly around my torso, his chin resting on my head. He doesn't say a word, but he's preoccupied and tense, and his sullen mood begins to make me wonder if kneeling for him was a mistake.

He's not a man who would take the gesture lightly. He knows what it means, especially coming from me. Maybe it was more than he bargained for tonight. Brooding with dessert on the horizon is not at all like him.

When it comes to sex, whether in a scene or not, Gray's fully present and in charge. *Always*. He doesn't share the power, nor does he apologize for the way he wields it. This elevator ride would normally be a prelude, the beginning of a long, seductive tease. But it's not, and the change in him has me unsettled.

The elevator door pings open, and Gray takes my hand and leads me down the grand hall. We pass rooms with plaques affixed to the doors, each one hinting at the fantasy inside. I remember all of it from Christmas. The only thing missing are the boughs of fragrant pine and spruce draping the doorways, and the gilded pinecones scattered on the elaborate consoles stationed up and down the wide hall.

The room we enter has no plaque. It's a spacious suite, with a bathroom and a place for aftercare beyond, I'm sure. It's done in rich golds and purples that complement the dark wood floor, and lush fabrics that remind me of the Sultan's Palace, where we played on Christmas. There have been many *memories* since, but that night will always hold a special place for me, because it was our first time.

A luminous incense lightly perfumes the room—it's luxurious and exotic, mixed with sweet orange and maybe vanilla. Not elixirs for religious ritual, but oils to anoint the body and awaken the senses.

Gray brushes my arm as he passes. His stride is assured, and the stress I sensed earlier is gone. This is his domain. Whatever was weighing on his mind earlier, he must have left at the door.

I look around the room and begin to relax.

Gray observes quietly from several feet away, letting me soak up the ambiance with all its possibilities. The room is ripe for pleasure. Beckoning and cajoling us to add our bliss to the carnal screams of others, swirled into the plastered walls. It's tantalizing foreplay, and he's enjoying it as much as I am.

I smile shyly at him. His eyes flare, but he keeps his distance, letting me explore the Tantra chair on a raised platform in the center of the room. It doesn't have the fragility of the antique at the beach, or the practical simplicity of the one in the apartment that he fucked me on last night. No, this is larger, sturdier, with rings disguised as an adornment, hanging from the carved edges at the bottom. The possibilities make my mouth water.

I glance from Gray to the purple velvet coverlet that is hiding something on the platform floor. It's plush and decadent, meant for a king's bedding, and I wouldn't be at all surprised to find something similar at the palace. But there's more. Something that I suspect is neither luxurious, nor soft.

"What's your safe word?" Gray asks, approaching me.

"Red. Will you tell me more about the scene?" He always does. Not everything, but he hints at what I might expect from him, or what he expects of me.

"I'll show you," he says, leading me to the platform. We stand silently while he carefully pulls back the velvet topper to expose a long, mirrored tray filled with all sorts of delicious torments that excite me.

"I have jewels for you," he murmurs, pointing to the nipple clamps and then to plugs adorned with purple stones. Nearby is a strand of amethyst glass beads, of varying sizes.

*Anal beads.* I shiver at the beautiful spheres and the pleasure they hold.

"We're going to do a little rope play." The rope is purple too—it looks to be of soft cotton. "Just some simple ties and knots that won't take forever. Nothing elaborate. That's not the objective tonight."

"What is the objective?"

“Pleasure—ultimately, it’s always pleasure.”

Not the forthright answer I was hoping for. He’s illusive. I don’t believe for one second that he doesn’t know *exactly* where he’s taking me and how. He’s just not telling.

There is also a satin blindfold and a pair of headphones on the tray. Elaborate binding might be out, but sensory deprivation is clearly on the table.

I look up and smile coyly. Gray’s lips twitch at the corners, and his dark gaze scorches my skin until I look away.

My eye finds something unfamiliar. It looks like a wand with a glass end. Maybe a vibrator of some kind? Whatever the instrument is, there’s something about it that raises gooseflesh on my arms.

“What is this?” I ask, my fingertips cautiously grazing the object.

“It’s a violet wand.”

I stiffen. It might not look familiar, but I’ve read about it.

“For electric play,” he adds. “It’s special.”

*For whom?* Surely not for me. “I—”

He places his hand gently on my arm. “Just some light play. You’ll be highly aware of the sensations—but it won’t be painful. The wand won’t hurt you. I won’t hurt you.”

I love a good lightning storm. But electricity makes me nervous.

I’m not afraid of pain, but I don’t want to be electrocuted, especially in a sex club. Wouldn’t that be a fitting ending for my life? *Jesus*.

Gray reaches for the zipper on my dress and hooks a finger through the ring before beginning a long, slow, downward tug. His eyes never leave mine. “What’s your safe word?” he asks again.

I trust him, but I’m not ready to consent to electric play. “Red,” I say clearly, “but it won’t help if I’m being electrocuted.”

He stops, dropping his finger from the zipper, and takes the wand off the tray. “Let me see your arm.”

Like a trusting fool, I place my wrist in his hand. He touches the wand to my forearm, and I jump, not because it hurts—it doesn’t—but because the sensation comes as surprise. We both laugh—me out of nerves, and Gray because he knows I’m going to like the wand.

He zaps me again, on my upper arm. The purple sparks and rods that light up inside the glass ball are quite beautiful. The next time, the tingle is stronger but not at all unpleasant.

“I won’t turn the current up any more than that,” he assures me. “But on your nipples, and your wet pussy, where the skin is more sensitive, the zings will pack a more powerful punch.”

The anticipation of the pleasant sparks dancing on my skin is arousing. I nod, and feel the shift in my mind occur as the scene begins.

Gray turns me around, facing the brocade drapes that span the wall. They hang from a brass rod with polished finials, and pool gracefully on the wood floor. From the corner of my eye, I see him reach for something, and the curtain opens slowly to reveal a glass wall and a room filled with people—*men*—chatting in small groups. They’re seated in chairs set on risers, like at the theatre, so everyone can see the stage. There must be fifty or sixty men—maybe more.

My breathing is labored, and I feel lightheaded and weak as panic threatens. For the first time since I’ve been with Gray, I consider using my safe word.

Before I decide, Gray twirls me around to face him, hooking a thumb under my chin so I’m forced to look into his eyes. My brain is still trying to make sense of the room behind me, but it’s slogging, struggling more than it should—maybe it doesn’t want to know what he has planned. Maybe it’s too much to bear.

“You have an audience tonight,” he says calmly. “Dozens and dozens of eyes on your luscious body. Probing and judging, but mostly enjoying you, helplessly bound, a servant to my cock.”

I’m beginning to sweat, and I’m sure he notices, but there are no reassurances to make me feel better.

“How long do you think it’ll take before they have their dicks in hand? Five minutes? Ten? Or will they wait until you’re writhing shamelessly, begging for release?”

He pulls the zipper on my dress lower and lower, until it falls open. I didn’t wear anything underneath—for him. But now—

Gray slides his fingers into my hair and kisses me. No, it’s not a kiss. It’s the demanding mark of ownership, and the unrepentant claim leaves me reeling. As I spiral, his words run through my mind on a continuous reel, not just those from tonight but from the last two weeks. *You have an audience tonight. Dozens and dozens of eyes on your luscious body. Probing and judging... There’s surveillance everywhere in the palace. You’ve never done anything like this before. You’ll be on display, like an animal at the zoo. It*

*can be unnerving, even for an experienced operative. I can't protect you from that.*

This is a test. A test to determine if I'm mission ready. If I can weather the storm or if I'll fold when the first gust blows through. *You can do this, Delilah. You can do this.* I draw a breath and release it, and do it again. I will outrun my fear—my shame of being watched.

“Close your eyes,” Gray instructs, securing the blindfold. The darkness comes as a relief. But it's a short-lived reprieve.

“These are noise-canceling headphones,” he explains matter-of-factly, as he fits them on my head. There's not a smidgeon of judgment or sneer in his voice. “The room next door is mic'd.” He runs his tongue along my shoulder, biting when he reaches the tendon where it meets my neck. I tremble as he nips at my skin. “The sound will vary. I'll set it to capture the ruckus of the entire room, and at other times I'll turn on the individual areas, so you can hear the grunts of pleasure coming from your adoring audience. They're going to love watching you, Blue Eyes.”

I push the bile down. This isn't going to beat me. I won't let it.

Gray's voice disappears, and I hear murmurs and snickering. Someone laughs. Another comments on my ass, and yet another on my tits. I'm not human to them.

The men are behind a wall, but it feels as though they're here in this room, close enough to reach me—to touch me with their filthy hands. Although I know I'm physically safe, there is something terrifying about this—something bone-chilling.

*He won't let them hurt you.* I repeat this over and over, but the men's voices are deafening, drowning out any attempt to soothe myself. Being blindfolded only makes the catcalls seem louder, and more dangerous.

Gray's voice cuts in as I feel something cool on my lips. “Open your mouth. They want to see you warm the plug, before I slide it in your ass. Good girl,” he murmurs, when I part my lips for him. The plug will feel more comfortable going in if it's been warmed first. Normally it's arousing to prepare, but today, there's nothing but humiliation. The taunts and raucous laughter take away all the pleasure.

Gray's mouth is on my nipple, coaxing it to a pointed peak, while his fingers tweak the other. “*Ahhh.*” He's readying me for the clamps. I know it, but still, I gasp at the first pinch, and brace myself for the second bite.

He brushes some loose hair off my face. “You're beautiful in purple. The

color suits you. As do the jewels.” His voice is a welcome reprieve. When he speaks, the din from the other room falls silent, and it’s just us. “I need you to fold your body forward. Let it rest on the platform. I’ll help you.”

Unable to see, I move carefully, as he guides me to where he wants me.

“Just relax.”

I feel the lube collect in the hollow of my back, and Gray’s fingers work it between my cheeks and into the pleated hole. His touch feels good, but there’s a part of me that’s ashamed I feel pleasure in the middle of the spectacle.

“What a whore. She loves it,” a nasty voice jeers, and then others join the taunting. There’s more laughter as Gray takes the plug from my mouth and slides it into my most private place. I try to tune the noise out, but it’s a struggle.

“Let’s get you on the lounge,” he says gently, helping me stand. “There are three steps to the top.” He wraps his arm around my waist so that I don’t fall.

I count the steps in my head, trying to block out the noise from the other room, and reminding myself over and over that this is a test.

But it’s impossible to silence the ugly chatter from the next room or the one happening inside my head. I’m fully on display, like a sex slave being sold at auction. *That’s how he wants you to feel.*

Gray secures my wrists and attaches the rope to something above my head. There’s enough play so I can move my arms as they rest on the platform, but not enough to escape my fate. *You have a safe word. That’s your escape. He will respect it. He will.* But I’m not safing out. I will not let a bunch of faceless, nameless freaks beat me.

With little effort, he has me in a loose froggie, with my thighs spread open. “Pound the whore,” someone calls as Gray’s fingers dip into me. My walls embrace him. It’s not a conscious act, just a reaction.

“You’re wet, Delilah,” he murmurs, and then his sensuous purr is gone, replaced by the vulgar taunts and whistles.

Hours seem to pass while I wait with only the mocking from the other room.

My mind eventually wanders to the beach house, where there was so much peace and serenity. I focus on the majestic views, and soon the crash of the waves drowns out the impatient catcalls from the other room and I feel myself relax. Just a bit—until the first jolt of electricity hits my naked flesh.

My body jerks from the exquisite tingling, and for a short moment, I relish it. But then the crass shouts come flooding back—a stark reminder that we’re not alone.

Gray plays on my skin, rousing the nerves in a way that makes my core clench. It feels amazing, but I try not to move, and just focus on staying quiet. I don’t want to add to the pleasure for those bastards in the other room. But when Gray pulls off the clamps, I wince and whimper. And the men cheer.

He soothes each nipple with his tongue, until the sting is nearly gone. I’m still catching my breath when the glass ball grazes my nipple. “Ahhh!” His warm mouth wasn’t to ease the ache. It was meant to prepare the nipple for the wand.

I’m in an inky cave. There’s nothing but black—not even a shadow to guide me as I wait for the next jolt. Will it be to my thigh? My nipple? My belly? The uncertainty adds a heightened awareness that is unsettling and delectable at the same time.

The wand touches my almost bare mound, and I arch my back and squirm. I can’t stay still any longer, and the sounds from the other room dim as the pleasure increases. There’s no pain, just thrilling charges that skitter through my body.

Before the bliss subsides, the current licks my clit. The first wave has all the excitement of a sparkler, with its beautiful glow. But there is a reason children are taught to hold the sparkler away from their bodies. The second wave comes with the power of a thunderbolt. I jerk and bounce off the platform. Not in pain, but with a heavenly sensation I’ve never felt before. It’s almost too much. But he does it again. And again.

My body absorbs every bit of the hedonistic indulgence, writhing and pulling at my bindings as I thrash. All I see and hear, all I feel, is my own pleasure. There’s nothing else.

I feel Gray’s soothing hands pet my prickly skin. “Give me a color,” he murmurs through the headphones.

“Green.” My voice is hoarse, but the word is clear, and not a second passes before Gray’s hot mouth is on my cunt. Licking and lapping, tracing circles with a pointed tongue, finding my clit hiding under the hood. He sucks gently, coaxing it out.

I whimper. “Please.”

The voices are loud again. “Slut. Whore. Fuck her in the ass until she screams.” They’re indistinguishable.



“They want to see you come, Delilah,” Gray drawls. “You want that too, don’t you?” He doesn’t wait for my response before his tongue is back on my pussy, his mouth and hands plucking the screaming orgasm from me, as I twist beneath him.

“Good girl,” he soothes in a gentle, reassuring tone.

I can’t stop whimpering. It’s an incoherent babble, dwarfing all other sounds.

Gray unties my legs and massages them with strong fingers. It feels so good that I don’t want him to stop. But he turns me over and hoists my hips, adjusting my body on the chair until I’m on my knees, draped over the highest curve. My ass is exposed. But I don’t give a damn who sees me.

“I need this,” he says, gently removing the plug. “I have something better for you.”

*The anal beads.* The climax will be earth-shattering. I picture the amethyst beads, the long strand, with the glass globes graduating in size. *How many will he push into me?*

The crowd erupts each time he forces a bead inside. But it’s a muffled blur. Nothing more than scratchy background music. I barely hear them.

“I’m going to fuck you, Blue Eyes. And they’re going to watch while I own your pussy.”

Gray pushes his cock into me. It feels enormous, and I groan at the tight fit. But he doesn’t stop. He moves in and out, teasing my clit, unhurried, while I loll in a dreamy state. Higher and higher he drags me, and as I approach the peak he begins to pull out the beads one at a time.

I gasp and shudder as he removes the balls slowly, deliberately, each small pop nudging me higher. I’m lost, struggling for breath.

His cock and my cunt. There’s nothing else when he pinches my clit, yanking out the final beads while I clamp down around him, screaming my release.

He doesn’t slow, and I tremble while he ruts deeply. He’s close. I want the headphones off. I want to hear the roar of his release. I twist my head to dislodge the damn things, but it’s too late. I don’t hear his pleasure.

But I feel it. I feel him empty himself inside me, and I squeeze my walls, milking each precious drop.

He presses his lips to my spine. Resting his forehead there for a moment. It’s quiet. I must have knocked off the headphones.

Gray eases out of me, and the semen begins to find its way out. He pulls

me onto his body, nestling us into the welcoming slope of the chair. “Are you okay?” he asks, caressing me gently.

I nod. “Yes.”

He pulls the velvet coverlet from the platform and lays it over us, taking great pains to make sure that every inch of my skin is covered. “Are you warm enough?”

“Yes.” I don’t have the energy for anything more. I close my eyes, and the voices return. I’m not sure if they’re real or if they just live in my head now—*maybe forever*. I clutch him tighter as the anxiety starts to burrow its way in again. “Are they still watching?”

Gray is quiet for a moment, before his lips graze my head. “They were never watching.”

I’m not sure I understand what he means. I lift my head off his chest, and slowly turn toward the curtain. It’s dark. There’s nothing there. I don’t understand. I saw them. The show’s over. Maybe they left.

“It was a trick,” he says cautiously.

“A trick?” No. I saw them with my own eyes.

“I blindfolded you to help with the deception. Once the initial shock wore off, you’d figure out there was no one there. It was basically a high-tech hologram.”

“But the voices?”

“A recording.”

My body that had been so relaxed is now on edge. The limp muscle is rigid and I’m not sure what to think.

“You’ll be watched constantly at the palace. We’ll be watched having sex. I didn’t want your first experience with exhibitionism to be while you were jet-lagged, in unfamiliar surroundings. I want you to feel prepared when you’re there. To be confident, that even if you’re experiencing something that feels dreadful, you can get through it.”

It’s not an apology. But I hear the remorse in the clinical words. Somewhere inside me, buried under layers of exhaustion and confusion, I know this game we’re playing is hard for him too. But I can’t find any empathy right now.

I’m emotionally overwhelmed, and I need an escape, so I allow myself to be dragged over a jagged path toward sleep. My brain has had enough. “I need to sleep. Just for a few minutes.”

“Close your eyes,” he says with a tinge of regret in his voice. “Sleep as

long as you need to. I won't leave you."

*I passed the test. I did it. It doesn't matter that they weren't there. I believed they were, and I pushed through and drowned them out.* The realization swamps me, and I cry out softly.

"You're safe with me, Blue Eyes—always." Gray rubs small circles on my back. "I promise."



## DELILAH

We leave for Amidane the day after tomorrow. It's been almost three weeks since the beach. It feels like a lifetime on a merry-go-round. Days poring over briefing material, picking Mira's brain about tiny details that might help me befriend the princess. How I'll actually pull it off is still a bit of a mystery.

I've also had countless meetings with Trippi and with Baz, Gray's new driver, and Gray himself. Then there's yoga with Mel, hours at the range with Gray, and the white-hot nights we spend sealing the relationship. Neither of us will have trouble convincing anyone that part is real. *It is real.*

Although it doesn't mean that what we've rekindled will last beyond the mission. I try not to kid myself too much, but late at night when I'm falling asleep with his body wrapped around mine, it hurts to imagine that it won't be long before I'll be lying in my own bed, alone.

I glance across the seat at Gray, who's banging away on his laptop. Baz is driving us to Sweetgrass so Gray can work a little longer. I offered to drive, but that earned me a snicker and a *hell no*.

Baz has been on the job since Gray assigned Trippi to my protection. That was a knockout, drag-out fight that I clearly didn't win. Like Trippi, Baz is a former SEAL, and though they're often behind the wheel, that's not their primary skill.

"What's eating you, Blue Eyes?" he asks, reaching over to pinch my thigh.

"Nothing a cocktail can't cure."

He smiles and is back to business without another word.

I stare out the car window as we cross the Battery. The ocean is like glass, but the heat and humidity have kept the early evening walkers and runners away. I ran along these sidewalks every morning less than a month ago. Rain or shine. I miss the early morning run, but I'm beginning to learn that spreading my wings is not a bad thing. Plus, I love Mel. I'll miss him when it's over.

The sun is shining, but a small bolt of heat lightning flashes in the distance. It reminds me of the brilliantly evil violet wand. I squirm, remembering the pleasing jolts. *That was some prep work.*

Much to Gray's surprise, I quickly put that evening behind me. There was no malice on his part—*none*—and that made it easy to compartmentalize. I simply stuffed it in the box marked *training* and closed the lid.

I never shared all my concerns about being watched during sex. But somehow Gray knew it was weighing on me. Thanks to his efforts, I made it through the experience without falling apart, and whatever I encounter in Amadi will be easier because of it.

But tonight is the biggest test. *My biggest test.*

I've been a bundle of nerves since Gray suggested supper at Gabby and JD's house. Gabby is my closest friend, and there are few secrets between us. "It's a good test," he coaxed when I took refuge inside my head. "Gabby will know immediately if something doesn't smell right. And she won't hesitate to mention it to either of us. If we can fool my brothers and Gabby, especially Gabby, we can fool anyone."

He's right, of course. But I don't want to fool Gabby. I might be a killer and a spy, but I hate the idea of lying to someone I love. It was bad enough talking to Smith—although I didn't lie to him. I just stayed clear of the truth.

Before we left the apartment, Gray and I had words about my outfit. I insisted on wearing my own things so Gabby wouldn't think I was being bought. That would be too much for me to bear. Gray, on the other hand, was adamant that I get used to my new clothes—the clothes he paid for, because there's no way the government ponied up for a closet full of designer clothes. Gray can say whatever he wants, but I don't believe for one second that Uncle Sam bought two dozen thongs and matching bras from Agent Provocateur. If that's where our tax dollars are going, we should all be pissed.

Gabby knows my wardrobe, and while she would never judge me, wearing things bought and paid for by a man makes me feel like my mother,

with every inch of me aching to rebel. In the end we compromised—although it wasn't much of a compromise.

I have on my own jewelry and undergarments, but the sundress and sandals are things the shopper sent over. The jewelry was a hard *no* for me, and the underwear also made me a bit queasy. Too much like a kept woman. In exchange for those concessions, I gave in to the rest.

Baz lets us off in the horseshoe at the front of the house. I fidget with my dress as we climb the steps to the front door without a word. At the top, Gray pulls me into his arms for a kiss, but I jerk away before his lips get anywhere near mine.

“What if someone’s looking out the window?”

Gray chuckles. “That’s why we’re here. Relax. These are your friends. Gabby loves you. Besides, if I had a nickel for every time I caught her and my brother sucking face, and more, over the years,” he shakes his head, “we could pay for college for every child in South Carolina.”

“I don’t like lying to people I love.”

He takes my hand and gives it a reassuring squeeze before ringing the bell. “Anybody home?” His voice booms through the screen door.

In seconds, Gabby appears, with JD behind her carrying Gracie.

I shake JD’s hand because my relationship with him doesn’t involve hugging.

Gray kisses Gabby on the cheek and steals Gracie out of her father’s arms, plopping a big smooch on her head. “I brought you a piece of chocolate from Chef Renaud,” he says to the little girl, in a loud stage whisper. “Don’t tell your parents. What’s that? You prefer cigarettes and whiskey? That can be arranged too. Just come see Uncle Gray.”

“Give me my daughter back,” JD barks. “She’s too young for chocolate. You ever give her cigarettes or liquor, you’ll be dealing with me and my shotgun.”

Watching Gray with Gracie would make most women’s ovaries explode. But not mine. I have no interest in children, and seeing him so charmed by his niece is just a burning reminder that our compatibility begins and ends at the bedroom door.

Gabby rolls her eyes at her husband, and touches my wrist. “Any chance I could impose on you to make a pitcher of margaritas?”

Gabby and I bonded over margaritas, and we haven’t stopped drinking them since. “If you want a mean cocktail, I’m your woman.”

“A pitcher?” JD teases. Although with him, it’s hard to tell for sure if he’s teasing. “It’s just you two drinking them.”

“That’s right,” Gabby responds, “but we have to put up with the likes of *you two* all night. And Chase. Although he’s nowhere near as annoying.”

“Where is Chase?” Gray asks.

“He’s going to be a little late.” JD catches Gray’s eye and holds it steady. “I’m going up to put Gracie to sleep. Why don’t you go and read to Zack?”

The color drains from Gray’s face. It’s no secret that he avoids visiting with Zack. His brothers, especially JD, don’t like it. I don’t know what it’s about. A month ago, I might have said that he didn’t have the stomach for it. Not everyone has it in them to spend time with a loved one who has deteriorated beyond recognition. But Gray’s not a coward, and given his association with the EAD, he’s stared down death. No doubt about it. It’s something else.

Gray blows a raspberry on the bottom of Gracie’s foot until she’s giggling so hard the drool’s leaking out of her mouth. “I never have a chance to put this sweet little girl to bed. How about if I read to Gracie and you read to Zack?”

JD’s brittle expression speaks volumes. He’s determined to force Gray to spend time with Zack, and he’s not budging. “If you want to put a baby to bed, get your own. They’re easy to make. I can recommend a video, if you don’t know how. But it’s not a do-it-yourself kind of thing.”

Gray doesn’t react to JD’s mocking. There’s anguish in his face. Real anguish. For a few seconds, I’m not sure what he’s going to do, but he relents, and lumbers toward the wing of the house where Zack stays. I want to wring JD’s neck.

“JD,” Gabby hisses. “That was an unfair ambush.”

Her husband pinches her arm playfully, as he heads to the stairs. “He’s my brother,” JD says over his shoulder. “Zack is on borrowed time, and I don’t want Gray to have any regrets. He barely lives with the ones he has.”

JD is heavy-handed and often misguided, although he means well here, I’m sure. But I have an overwhelming impulse to defend Gray. “He’s a successful man, and he lives his life just fine,” I say with enough snark to halt JD in his tracks.

He turns and scowls at me, but swallows whatever is on the tip of his tongue, and disappears up the stairs.

“I would tell you to ignore him,” Gabby assures me, “but you already



know that. You also know I'm dying for a cocktail."

If I were married to JD, I'd be dying for a cocktail all the time too. *Not my business.* I smile. "Then let's go juice some limes."

When we get to the kitchen, I set up on the center island to make the drinks. My entire house could fit into this one room, but all of a sudden it seems too small, like the walls are closing in. It's only a matter of time before Gabby begins the interrogation. I can feel it coming as I juice the limes into a glass measuring cup.

"All right, enough with all the secrecy."

*Oh God. Here we go.*

"I can't believe I had to hear about you and Gray from Lally."

"There's no big secret. I didn't say anything because I don't know where it's going between us. We're taking it slow."

"He's taking you to visit his friend the crown prince—who, by the way, is a first-class bastard. A trip halfway around the world doesn't sound slow to me."

I'm squeezing the limes so hard they're practically squealing. Matchmaking is her jam, and she's not going to stop until there's a ring on my finger.

"Do you have everything you need for the trip? I'm happy to go shopping with you."

"I'm all set. Gray—bought me some things." I can barely spit out the words.

"Ugly things?" she asks. "Because from the puckered expression on your face when you said *bought me some things*, it seems like he picked out some hideous clothes."

I side-eye Gabby. She's barely keeping it together. I start to laugh, and she bursts out laughing too. "Pull yourself together, and get me the tequila."

"It's right behind you," she says. "I want to hear more about the clothes and accessories. You can't go to Amadi without at least one suitcase full of designer clothes and some bling. It's just the way it is."

I measure the tequila carefully, until Gabby clears her throat, signaling that she expects some type of response. "The clothes are beautiful, and there's enough to fill a dozen suitcases. I'm not comfortable wearing things some man paid for, and I'm not comfortable talking about it, either." My discomfort might dissuade some people, but Gabby will just press on more gently.

She hands me a large wooden spoon and a pitcher filled with ice. “I could tell you that those Wilder boys have more money than they could spend in ten lifetimes. But I’m sure that won’t make you feel any better than it made me feel when JD started buying me things. It gets easier. That I can say.”

I hold out the spoon to give Gabby a taste of the margarita.

“A little more agave,” she says. “Not too much.” She leans across the counter, resting her forearms on the marble. “Lilah, I’ve got eyes.” *Lilah*. I got the nickname when little Richie Marshall couldn’t say Delilah. Gabby’s one of the few people left who uses it.

“Gray isn’t just *some* man,” she says with great emotion. “*Everything* you have inside, you’ll give him. That means so much more than anything money can buy—especially to men like JD and Gray. After their mother died, they grew up with nothing. The money didn’t love them, or tuck them in at night, or dole out hugs when they were sick or heartbroken. It certainly didn’t stand up tall in the foyer to defend Gray.”

A cloud falls over me while I add another ounce of agave to the pitcher and stir until it dissolves. I don’t know if it’s because I’m telling lies to my best friend, or because my relationship with Gray is temporary. “Gabby, don’t get too invested in my relationship with Gray.”

As I collect the used limes for the trash, I feel her watching me the way she does before she calls bullshit. I can’t get out of here fast enough.

“What about you?” she probes. “Are you invested?”

*It’s too damn late for me. I’m a lost cause.*

“I’m going to see if Gray needs a little moral support,” I say, drying my hands on a dishtowel. As I leave the kitchen, it occurs to me that I didn’t avoid her question. I answered it straight on.



## GRAY

**D**amn JD. What an asshole. I should have known he'd pull this shit. He's always trying to get me to spend time with Zack. I thought Delilah being here tonight would spare me. It takes me weeks to fully recover after these visits. Time that I can't afford right now.

I push through the set of glass doors that separates Zack's wing from the rest of Sweetgrass. It's not because JD has him banished to the far corners of the house. It's so that they can keep things sanitized, and control the spread of infection in this part of the house. Zack is unlikely to survive a bad flu or pneumonia.

Zack suffered a traumatic brain injury in the accident that killed my mother and sister. He's been unresponsive since then, but JD, and now Gabby, make sure he has everything he needs to be comfortable. It's never been that easy for me.

After washing and drying thoroughly, I work a dollop of sanitizer into my hands before entering Zack's room.

"Hey Gray," the nurse, Maureen, says with a warm smile. She's hovering over the bed, adjusting the quilt.

"If I'm interrupting, I can come back." I don't wait for a response before I turn to leave.

"Don't go. You're not interrupting anything. Zack's ready for bed. Just waiting for his story."

That's a lie. He's not waiting on anything. Not now. Not ever. It doesn't matter how much my brothers and Gabby and the nurse act like he's a normal functioning human being. He's not. And it's my fucking fault. I did this to

him.

“Are you reading to him tonight?”

I nod, avoiding Zack’s curled limbs and blank stare.

“JD started this last night.” Maureen hands me a book.

*The Adventures of Robin Hood.* My stomach twists into a knot that nearly knocks me over. Zack loved fantasy stories when he was a kid.

“I’ll take my break while you’re here. But I’m right outside if you need me.”

I nod. I still haven’t looked at Zack. I can’t. It’s too painful. After it happened, when I eventually made the connection, I forced myself to look at him for hours. It was punishment, to remind me of what I did to him—and to the others. But I don’t need reminders. I live with the guilt day in and day out.

If only I hadn’t been so selfish. So self-centered. They might still be alive.

*It was a warm June day. School had let out the day before. I wanted to hang out with my buddies, and that’s all I could think about. But my mother had other plans. She insisted that JD and I had to attend the cotillion practice later that afternoon. We’d been going to classes all year, and today was a dress rehearsal for the formal.*

*I couldn’t understand why we needed to go to a stupid rehearsal when I could be playing video games in the playroom. JD complained too, but I nagged relentlessly. She wouldn’t budge, and by the time we were ready to leave, I was a pissy little brat.*

*Olson, my father’s henchman, stopped me on the way to the car, where the others were already waiting. “Bring your mother this sandwich. She hasn’t eaten all day and your father’s worried about her.” I looked at the tuna sandwich wrapped in wax paper. Tuna salad was her favorite. She ate it for lunch several times a week.*

*“Don’t tell her it’s from your father. They had a little spat, and she might not eat it if she knows it’s from him. But he wants to make sure she puts something in her stomach.” What I didn’t know at the time was that the little spat was about my mother catching a young girl with my father in his office. “Tell her Lally sent it if she asks. Okay?”*

*“Yep,” I answered, taking the sandwich from him, and jogging out the back door like a little asshole, thrilled to pull one over on her. To punish her for making me waste the afternoon doing dumb things, when I could be*

*hanging out with my cool friends.*

*“Lally made this for you,” I said, handing her the wrapped sandwich, while holding the glee inside. She didn’t even ask where it came from, but I lied to her anyway.*

The last thing I said before slamming the car door was *don’t forget to eat your tuna fish.*

It was the very last thing I ever said to her.

The mayonnaise in the tuna sandwich was mixed with sodium soltrite, a compound mixed at Sayle Pharmaceuticals. Our family company. *My mother’s* family company. It incapacitated her, causing her to drive off the road into a ravine with my siblings in the car.

She died on impact. My siblings weren’t as lucky. Chase was in the car for six hours, unable to move, surrounded by death, and Zack screaming in pain. Each time I visit, I hear those screams for days.

“Hey,” Delilah says softly from the doorway.

“You can’t be in here without washing your hands.”

“I know,” she replies, walking into the room. “I’ve hung out here before with Gabby and Zack.”

She goes directly to the bed and pats Zack’s hand gently. “Hey Zackie, it’s Delilah. Remember me? Gabby’s friend. I’m Gray’s friend too. How are you?”

I draw a breath as she has a one-sided conversation with my brother—the one I can’t bear to look at. “He can’t hear you.”

“Sure he can. What’s Gray reading you? Something good, I hope. He likes soulless writers, like Hemingway. I hope he’s not making you listen to that crap.”

“Hemingway’s not soulless,” I mutter.

“The man didn’t believe in using adjectives. That’s what gives language color.”

“He believed they complicated sentences. He used verbs to tell his stories.”

“Spare me the literature class, frat boy. The night’s slipping away. I’m starving and we don’t get to eat until you read, so get a move on. Zack and I are waiting.”

She sits on the floor and peers at me until I begrudgingly open the book to the page with a stamped leather bookmark. I focus on the words, on the smell of Delilah’s perfume, and on her calming presence, which I feel from several

feet away. But none of it dulls the memory of Zack running around the backyard chasing the dog, dragging Chase, the quieter and smaller twin, along for the fun. *He was so full of life.*

As if she senses my anguish, Delilah crawls over, and sits at my feet with her head resting against my leg. There is something so visceral, so pure in her actions. They're a quiet reminder that I'm in control, born of strength—not of weakness. I slide my hand into her hair and let the silky strands comfort me as I read to my little brother.

There's nothing I can do to bring my mother or my sister back, or to make it right for Zack. Or even for JD and Chase, whose lives would have been dramatically different if my mother had lived. I can't change any of it for them, but there's one mistake from the past that I can correct.

I didn't intervene when Kyle bragged about his abusive behavior. I called him out, told him he was a fucking dirtbag, but I took no action. I didn't contact Delilah and tell her to get the hell away from him. And I didn't kill the sonofabitch on the spot, which is exactly what he deserved—and what he eventually got—although not at my hands.

It might be too late for the others. But it's not too late for the woman at my feet.

When I'm through reading, we say good night to Zack. Actually, Delilah says good night, and I grunt when she urges me to say something.

With that behind us, supper is lighthearted and fun. We laugh more than usual with Gabby and Delilah here.

No one raises an eyebrow at our relationship. They've always believed we were destined to be together. Except JD. He's as much as said that I'd rather be alone and miserable, hanging out in a sex club, where everything is fantasy.

Maybe he's right.





## DELILAH

We had our last team meeting on American soil this morning. Gray, Trippi, Baz, me—and Foxy. For the life of me, I still can't figure out why she's sitting in on team meetings, and Gray hasn't given me a satisfactory answer. It's not that we discuss anything classified in front of her, but it's unusual.

I always liked Foxy, although I never bought into the idea that she's some sweet mamaw. She might have grandchildren, but she can't be much more than fifty and she's in great shape. The granny act is a carefully crafted persona so she can catch you off guard and go for the jugular if you mess with Gray. She didn't get the name Foxy for nothing.

But in the team meetings, there's something about her, the way she takes notes and winces quietly when she disapproves of things she knows nothing about, and that are, frankly, none of her business. It rubs me the wrong way.

"You almost ready?" Gray asks from the bedroom doorway. He looks young and carefree in a pair of jeans and a casual T-shirt, much like the day we left for the beach. It seems like an eternity has passed since then.

"I think so," I say with some hesitation, peeking into the sack with the small compacts I brought along for gifts. "I'm just double-checking my carry-on to make sure I have everything I need on board."

"This isn't a commercial flight. All our luggage is carry-on."

"Right," I mutter, only half-listening. My focus is elsewhere. Checking and rechecking every tiny detail before a mission is my thing. It centers me, and gives me the opportunity to walk through the entire plan sequentially, scene by scene, reel by reel, one last time. If there's a snag, I often catch it at

this stage. It's why I've been valuable to Smith's team.

The twist here is that not everything has been planned. While we know a lot about the crown prince, and even the king, Princess Saher has been sheltered from the public eye for years.

I check the inside pocket of my bag, the one that holds my compact. The case with a false bottom that contains a note for Saher in the event there's no safe place to talk. I can't risk being seen writing the note there. The note I carefully packed is written on stationary ordered from France that can't be traced back to us. The paper was treated to repel fingerprints and identifying fibers.

Until we get to the palace, we won't know for sure how to approach Saher. *I won't know how to approach her.* Certainly we've discussed the possibilities, but possibilities are all we have right now. Gray will keep the crown prince busy, but the final decision about how to approach the princess is mine alone. It's too risky for Gray and me to discuss the particulars once we're there. But maybe a go-between could work if we used some type of code, although that has risks too.

"Do you have a handler?" I ask, sliding my iPad into the zippered side compartment.

"Why do you ask?"

Gray is somewhat aloof, and doesn't bother to glance up from his phone. It's almost as if he's blowing me off.

Although it's not as if I asked some crazy question. Covert agents have handlers. I don't care which agency you're with. "If something doesn't go as planned, it would be important to have a contact." He whips up his head, and I now have Gray Wilder's *complete* attention.

"I have a handler," he replies cautiously. "But my handler is not your concern. You're an asset, not an agent. You don't have a handler." He pauses for a beat. "You have me if there's a problem."

"What if—" I can barely form the words. "Something happens to you? Should I contact Foxy?"

"No," he answers curtly, and much too quickly. "Do *not* call Foxy. Do you understand me?"

I nod, watching him stew from the corner of my eye. His reaction is more than a little strange, especially since she's been sitting in on the damn meetings.

"I left the final details for the plane," he says before I can ask any more

about Foxy. “But since you brought it up, call Smith if I’m incapacitated. I don’t care whether Trippi or Baz are in perfect health. If I go down, you call Smith.”

*Smith? What?* “Smith’s been read in?” I’m surprised, but also annoyed that I’m just hearing about this now. I’m sure there will be some bullshit excuse they expect me to buy. I’d like to bang their hard heads together.

Gray bends over to pick up a stray thread from the wood floor. “Smith’s been read in on some parts of the op. But if something happens to me, tell him everything you know so he can help you.”

“Gray—”

He stalks over and grabs me by the shoulders as if to shake me. “Look at me.” His voice is stern, but not as stern as his gaze. “Do not fight me on this. I don’t plan on checking out, but if I go down, do *not* contact Foxy. But you figure out how to get a message to Smith right away, and tell him everything. Every. Fucking. Detail.”

Smith’s clearance goes a lot higher than mine, that’s for damn sure. *But still*. Purposefully divulging classified information is a crime—a treasonous crime. Not to mention a risk to national security. I’m no Girl Scout, but I took an oath not to betray my country, and even though representatives of my country have betrayed me, I’m not a traitor, and neither is Gray. “Surely you can’t mean everything?”

He scowls at me. “That’s *exactly* what I mean.”

His eyes flit over my face, as if searching for assurances. “Am I clear?”

Crystal. *And you’re deranged too*. But we’ll save that part of the discussion for the plane. “How long has Smith known about the mission?”

Gray pulls away, not just his body, but his eyes too. “He knew before you. He first learned about it during that meeting at the Pentagon sometime early in the summer. I filled in some of the details later.”

I lower myself to the bed. *He knew before you. He first learned about it during that meeting at the Pentagon early in the summer. I filled in some of the details later.*

The knife wedged into my back is akin to torture. I take a deep breath and lace my fingers together to control the pain. Otherwise, I’m going to fly around in a blind rage, destroying everything in this room that Gray Wilder holds dear. Then I’ll deal with Smith.

Gray places a hand on my shoulder.

I swat it away. “You and Smith conspired behind my back.” I don’t need

a response. I know it's true.

"I went to him first because I wanted to pave the way for your conversation with him. He agreed to let you go because he knew you needed the challenge, and an opportunity to live out your dream, even for a single mission. He wants you happy and fulfilled. He cares a lot about you, Delilah. And just like me, he's on your side."

The risk of cavorting with men who require absolute control is precisely this. Not just Gray, but Smith too. There's never a real partnership with them, because their patriarchal bullshit doesn't allow for partners.

"I'm so happy that you and Smith had a little soiree to decide what was best for me even *before* I had a chance to weigh in." I glower at him, with his chin up and shoulders squared. He doesn't want to upset me, and I'm sure he's sorry about that part, but otherwise, the bastard is entirely unrepentant.

"That will *never* happen again. I won't tolerate that kind of misogyny from either of you." I bounce my fingertip off the small piece of luggage to emphasize my point. "It's disrespectful, and I deserve better from Smith, and certainly from you."

Gray sits down on the bed near me, but far enough away that I don't immediately have the urge to get up. "I had a choice of a few contractors to provide backup for this mission. One of those companies was Smith's. Initially, I rejected the idea because it meant coming clean about my work with the EAD—and all the lies I've told over the years." Gray draws a breath, but instead of calming him, it seems to crush his spirit, making the tiny lines around his eyes more prominent. "Telling Smith was hard enough, but now that he knows, there's a risk my brothers will find out too. And the real possibility that they will never forgive me."

His voice is heavy, tinged with sadness, but I'm still too mad to offer even a word of comfort.

"But even with all the risks," he says frankly, "in the end I chose Smith's company because I'm confident that if something happens to me, he'll never leave you behind. He will use every resource he has to help you."

Gray inches closer, placing his large hand over mine.

I don't push him away this time. I don't have the heart, or the desire to shun him.

"If you contact my handler," he continues, "she won't lift a finger to protect you unless she can do it without compromising the agency. She won't even protect me, if it comes to that. Her job is to protect the integrity of the

mission, and that of the agency. It's not to save us if things get too messy." He squeezes my hand, and weaves his fingers through mine. "I dragged you into this, and I need to be absolutely certain you'll be safe no matter what happens. I won't apologize for that."

The man's impossible, but I'm thawing.

Gray cradles the back of my head, pulling me toward him. "If I die, I want to die knowing you'll be okay. I need that peace of mind. Give me that."

My heart clenches. I know the risks. There are always risks in this type of work. Every day. I've lain awake worrying about the safety of my team members plenty of times. But this is different.

*If I die.* If you die, a big piece of me will die with you. If you die, my heart will take its final breath, withering inside a barren shell.

I reach up and rub his arm, finding solace in the friction. "I won't let anything happen to you," I promise him. "I couldn't bear it, Gray." I've kept my emotions mostly in check—at least outwardly—but my voice is thick and weepy, and if I don't get a grip, I'm going to cry all over his clean shirt. "But if you pull any more crap, I'll kill you myself before we're done."

His shoulders begin to shake as the laughter consumes him, and he draws me tight to his chest. I close my eyes and let the familiar rhythm of his heartbeat lull me into a false sense of security. Because there are no assurances in this life.

"I have something for you," he says after a few minutes, pulling away to reach into the nightstand for a black velvet box. "A little something for your carry-on."

I've learned with Gray that marvelous toys come wrapped in pretty velvet boxes and pouches. "A little something for the plane?" I tease lightly, running my fingers over the luxurious nap before opening the deep, hinged box. Four pairs of earrings. The brilliant jewels wink at me: emeralds, topaz, rubies, and sapphires—each pair a different cut and design.

That prickly haze that yokes every cell when I'm overwhelmed has arrived. It prompts me to respond to his extravagant gift in the only way I know. "I'm sure this isn't costume jewelry from Claire's at the mall." I close the box and hand it back. "I can't accept it."

Gray's expression is unreadable as he takes the velvet box from me. He carefully opens the lid, holding the contents not far from my chin. "We won't be able to do meaningful check-ins while we're there. Wear the green pair to

let me know everything is proceeding well. Put the yellow pair on if you hit a speed bump that you can manage. The red pair will signal me to quickly find a place where we can talk safely.”

*God, he’s annoying, with an answer for everything.* “And the sapphires?” I ask with more of an edge than the moment requires.

“When it’s done, I want to see the sparkle of the gems reflected in your dazzling blue eyes.”

I tilt my head up. The haze has lifted, but the prickly feeling lingers. “I suppose these are government issue, like the shoes and gowns?”

Gray has the good grace not to lie through his smug little smirk. “These are on me. I hope when we’re finished, you’ll accept them as a bonus for a job well done. You’ll earn them. But like everything else, it’s ultimately your choice.”

I have no intention of keeping the earrings, but there’s no reason to argue about it now. “And what will the consequences be if I don’t want them?” It’s an impertinent question to lighten the mood. A flirtation laced with innuendo, nothing more.

But a dark, joyless shadow descends over his face, sweeping across the sun-drenched room.

“The flight plan’s been filed.” He grabs my carry-on bag from the bed. “We need to get going.”

I nod solemnly, following him out, with wisps of melancholy trailing behind, but never close enough to swallow us.



## DELILAH

The sun is shining, with the light drizzle just a memory by the time we reach the plane. It's not just any plane. It's a jet. A Boeing, with the words *Wilder Enterprises* scrolled in imposing navy script along the side. I've flown on private planes. I've actually flown on the Wilders' smaller Gulfstream, but even that doesn't compare to this monstrosity.

The crew greets us inside. "Mr. Wilder." A man who appears to be the pilot holds out his hand. "It's a perfect day for flying. It should be smooth skies all the way to Amidane."

Gray smiles. "That's what I like to hear. This is Delilah Porter. I know that you, all of you, will make her comfortable. Delilah, meet Lou. He'll be the pilot on this leg of the trip. The co-pilot," Gray gestures to a lovely woman who looks to be a few years older than me, "is Lou's wife, Samantha. I believe she's our pilot on the return trip."

"It's nice to meet you, Miss Porter," she says courteously. "I do indeed have the honor of bringing us home."

I detect a faint British accent, formal, but not as posh as something you'd hear on the BBC.

"And finally," Gray says, "Lori and Dobbins round out the very capable crew. They'll make sure you have everything you need while you're on board." We smile politely at one another.

"Lori, why don't you give Miss Porter a quick tour and help her settle into the bedroom?" Something passes between Lori and Gray, and I can't help but wonder... "The master bedroom," he adds.

Lori nods and turns to me. "You're going to love it," she gushes.



“Trippi and Baz are in the conference room.” Gray places a hand on my arm. “I’m going to catch up with them. They need to review the layout of the palace again. You have it down cold, so make yourself at home and relax. You don’t need to be seated until takeoff.”

Lori leads me around the massive space, pointing out every feature along the tour. The interior of the plane, including the chairs, sofa, and tables is warm tan leather and glossy dark wood.

“The guest bedroom is on the other side of the plane, near the conference room. We also use it as a dining room, although Gray rarely uses it that way.”

“Guest bedroom? The plane has a guest bedroom?” I sound like the country girl who’s visiting the big city for the first time, *but who has a guest room on a plane?* It would come as a surprise to almost anyone not named Wilder.

Lori laughs. “The plane is designed for comfortable family travel. When Mr. and Mrs. Wilder are aboard—JD and Gabrielle,” she clarifies, “Gracie sleeps there.”

Of course. I’m sure her daddy has the room outfitted with monitors so he knows every time she passes a little gas.

“This is the master bedroom. It has all the amenities of home. Maybe a few extras.”

My large tote with essentials is already on the bed. Lori shows me how the lights and sound system work. The room has a walk-in closet, and an en suite bathroom with a shower that’s bigger than mine at home.

“I hung everything from your garment bags so your clothes wouldn’t wrinkle any more than necessary. I can unpack your bag once we’re in the air,” Lori says, pointing to my tote, “if you’d like.”

I wrap my arms around my waist. This is just a small taste of the luxury to come. Some people like to be fussed over, but I’m not accustomed to the doting and it makes me itchy. “That won’t be necessary. It’s a long flight. I need something to keep busy.”

“Would you like a drink or a snack before we take off?”

I shake my head. “I’m fine, thank you.”

“We’ll need to take our seats soon. But you still have a few minutes,” she says, before leaving me alone with my thoughts.

After a short time, I’ve had enough of the room and the wealth and power it represents. I take out my iPad and go back into the main cabin, making myself comfortable in one of the recliners near a window. While I’m

configuring my tablet for Wi-Fi, Gray joins me.

“There’s been a change in plans,” he announces, taking the seat across from me. The plane is taxiing, so the change must not involve aborting the trip.

Gray’s agitated, tapping his fingers on the armrest, looking as though he appreciates last-minute changes less than I do. And I *despise* them.

“What kind of change?”

“We’re meeting Prince Ahmad on his boat rather than at the palace.”

There was an entire section of a briefing book dedicated to *The Great Escape*, the crown prince’s yacht. Gray thought there was a possibility that at some point during the visit, the prince would decide he needed more privacy than the palace allows, and we would all spend a night or two on the floating fuck toy.

“Will Princess Saher be there?” I ask, with some trepidation. If she’s not there, everything we’ve prepared for is out the window.

“I highly doubt it.”

My heart drops into my stomach as soon as the words are out of his mouth. “Why—what do you think happened?”

Gray glances at me. “Trippi thinks the prince might want to lay eyes on you before he welcomes us to the palace.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t like it. We’re more vulnerable out on the Mediterranean. But I think it’s the most likely explanation.”

“Why the last-minute change of heart? He must have had concerns about me all along.” And if he didn’t, certainly his security had them.

Gray nods, stretching his legs out in front of him. “Gives us less time to regroup. It’s exactly what I would have done.” He reaches over and squeezes my knee. “This changes nothing. He’ll meet you, spend a little time chatting you up—he’s good for that—and we’ll be on our way to the palace before you know it.”

“What if it’s not okay? What if after meeting me, he decides I haven’t changed my stripes? What if we’re walking into an ambush? Maybe I can board the boat alone, and you and the rest of the team can go on to the palace.” All those faces on the cards. This is too important. And I certainly don’t want anyone in danger because of me.

He scoffs. “You’re not going anywhere alone with that asshole. Not while I’m still breathing.”

“Did the crew file a new flight plan?”

“Same plan. We’ll be boarding a helicopter at the airport.”

I have fifteen hours to regroup. No sweat. *Then why is my stomach hurting like a sonofabitch?*

“I need to work for a few hours, but you should take it easy. *The Great Escape* is luxurious, but you’ll be working and it won’t be very relaxing. Try to stay awake. We’ll sleep later. That way, we can begin to adjust to the time change. I have a sedative if you need it.”

I stare at the window. A last-minute change is a bad way to begin a mission.

“Delilah, I have every confidence in you. When I told Ahmad I was bringing you with me, I didn’t give him an opportunity to say no.”

“Does he normally allow you to bring guests?”

He shrugs. “It’s never come up. I always go alone. That’s why this relationship,” he gestures between us, “has to be convincing. I don’t think that’s going to be an issue,” he says, his eyes darkening. “It’s going to be fine.”

“I know.” *Although I don’t know.* “I just need a little time to wrap my head around the change. Let me comb through it a bit.”

Gray unbuckles his seat belt. “I’m going up front, because if I stay here any longer, I’m going to initiate you into the mile-high club—unless you’re already a member.”

“I don’t belong to any clubs. Certainly not that one.”

He smirks, and his eyes twinkle with mischief. “I brought the Lush vibrator along. It’s the perfect size for travel. Can I interest you in a little fun and games?”

I could use a big, fat orgasm right about now. The kind that makes my legs shake. “I’m good. Neither of us will accomplish anything if you pull that thing out.”

“You can have your way now, because I have things to do, but when I’m finished...” He leans over, his lips hovering just above my ear. “You. Are. Mine.”

I glance up at him, and smile flirtatiously. “Then you best get a move on.”

Gray tugs my hair back, and moves in for a kiss. But when his mouth reaches mine, he grabs my bottom lip between his teeth, holding it securely for several seconds before releasing it. He places a small kiss on the bridge of my nose and strides off, leaving my heart racing.

Once he's gone, I push the seat back a bit and put on my headphones to listen to an audio book. Dobbins brings me a Blanton's, which I savor slowly while listening to the narrator's sexy baritone, until the story is over.

Don't ask me about the book, I'm sure it was fascinating, but I've been ogling Gray from afar for the past two hours, and truly, he's a far more interesting character than any author could conjure.

He's abandoned the laptop and is sitting back, studying the clouds. I suppose he has a lot on his mind too. Everyone prepares differently.

Although I don't pretend to know every detail, he put a lot of time and energy into this mission—including thoroughly preparing me for the trip. Some of it's about his need for control, but the rest—the rest was about making it as easy on me as possible.

There are many things that could go wrong, dreadfully wrong. But if they do, I'll die doing something I dreamed about since I was a teenager. But what about Gray? Is this the end of a decade's worth of work? After this, can he still pretend to be the prince's friend, or is that over? And what if the mission takes him down? That's my worst nightmare. It's been nagging since Gray told me to call Smith if something happens to him.

I tip my head from side to side, to stretch the tight muscles. But I can't stop thinking about one of us dying.

Nothing prepares us for when the door closes suddenly. *Nothing*. All the words left unsaid—the opportunities to make things right. That all evaporates with the last breath.

Gray turns around and catches my eye, giving me one of those lazy half-smiles that makes me melt.

He's stopped asking about Archbishop Darden. But I want to tell him. I want him to know that I'm not a cold-blooded killer—that I wouldn't kill a man without an excellent reason. I'm not some crazy, out-of-control chick. I've wanted to tell him for almost a week, but the time never seemed right.

I remove the headphones, setting them on the table beside me, and fuss with my hair, finger-combing the flat strands. I don't want this to go unsaid for another minute. And I don't want to lose my chance to make it right.



## DELILAH

When I reach Gray, I take the seat across the table from him, tucking my legs up under me. “You busy?”

“Mostly banging my head against the wall. You need something?”

“Company, I guess.”

He watches me like he always does. Not so much to figure out what I’m thinking, although he sometimes does that too, but to give me time to right my emotions, and to square them with my thoughts. I burn hot inside. Everything moves lightning-fast. I often need extra time to shape my reflections into words fit for civilized discussion.

Gray understands this idiosyncrasy—in a way that no one has ever bothered to before.

But it doesn’t matter how much time he gives me today, because the words, like the reality they describe, are inelegant, with rough, jagged edges. And time won’t change any of it.

“I grew up differently than you,” I blurt gracelessly.

“Is that right?” he drawls, one corner of his mouth tipping up. “Tell me about it.”

“My mama wasn’t like yours.”

Clouds descend over his brilliant blue eyes. Not the white puffy cotton ball ones, like those outside the window, but stormy ones, bleak and hopeless. Gray never talks about his mother, and I probably shouldn’t have brought her up.

“The Marshalls lived across the street,” I continue, hoping that my sad story will make him forget about his—at least for a few minutes. “They had a

son, Richard, who was born after they had given up all hope of a baby. Mrs. Marshall stayed home to take care of him, and out of the goodness of her heart, she took care of me too.” I glance at him and the clouds are gone, but they’re likely to return because this isn’t the retelling of a fairy tale. “She patiently combed knots out of my hair and taught me how to bake a flaky biscuit and fry catfish without stinkin’ up the house—” I smile sheepishly. “That part didn’t work out so well.”

“It worked out just fine,” he murmurs. It’s soft and gentle. He’s careful not to spook me, so that I don’t stop talking.

But what he doesn’t know is that no matter what he says, I won’t stop. I can’t.

“Mrs. Marshall invited me to supper regularly, Friday movie nights, and to the carnival when it was in town. In exchange, I entertained Richie while she fixed supper or cleaned cupboards, or when she visited with a friend.”

This was the best part of my childhood. It might be trite to the listener—but not to me. It’s part of my story—and the end can’t be fully understood unless you know the beginning.

“As the years went on, I spent more and more time with the Marshalls. They insisted on it. When I was old enough to understand, I realized they were the shield between my developing teenage body and the men Mama brought home.”

Gray comes around and takes the seat next to me, twirling the chairs until they face one another, with nothing between us. He runs a gentle hand over my hair. I want to hang onto it, because the saddest part of the story isn’t yet told and I’m already feeling shaky inside.

“Did one of those men hurt you?” he asks, the wariness seeping around the edges.

I shake my head. “No. There were a few close calls.” *One in particular that still makes my skin crawl.* “But it never came to that.” I hear the air leave Gray’s lungs.

He brings my hand to his mouth and places a kiss on my knuckles.

“Tell me more.” He kisses my hand again, then rubs small circles with his thumb on the inside of my palm. “Tell me about your mother.”

*My mother. She’s both a central figure and inconsequential at the same time.*

“She was weak, and I don’t doubt for a second she would have traded my innocence for her survival, or perhaps even for a piece of jewelry or a pretty

dress.”

I hear the words as they emerge, and the events are achingly familiar, but the thin, detached voice isn't mine. It's as though someone else is telling my story.

Gray is outwardly calm—for my sake, I'm sure—but rage flickers in his eyes.

“While they never let on in front of me,” I continue, dispassionately, “I'm sure the Marshalls knew it too.”

The clouds are back, obscuring his vision. This time they're dark and angry, threatening an eruption that would rival anything Mother Nature might summon.

“Mr. Marshall was a math teacher at the high school. He tutored me in algebra, and helped me fill out college applications. We cobbled together enough financial aid and scholarship money so I could have a fresh start. Like his wife, he stepped in to help whenever he could. But I was a huge burden.”

“I sincerely doubt that.” In his rush to protect me, he's dismissive. “You were a little girl. I'm sure they were happy to help.”

“You don't understand.” I jerk my hand away. “They were black. I was a cute little blonde thing. It was rural Mississippi. They were harassed by the sheriff, social services. Even the principal called me into his office one afternoon to question me about the *untoward* relationship I had with Mr. Marshall. He almost lost his job. No one gave a goddamn that my mother left me alone for days on end without a morsel of food, but they lined up one after another to accuse the black man of diddling the pretty white girl.”

I pause to rein in some of the skyrocketing emotion. “But you know what? The Marshalls *never* blinked. They *never* once turned their backs on me, not even when the association threatened their reputations.

It wasn't my mama who saved me from a life of poverty, barefoot and pregnant, with a brood of young ones chasing me through the weeds. It was the Marshalls. I owe them everything. *Everything.*”

The clouds are gone again, and there's a sparkle in his eyes.

“What's so funny?” I ask.

“Not funny. Sweet, actually. You barefoot, running through the fields with blonde babies trailing behind you.”

“More like a nightmare,” I grumble.

“Do you still keep in touch with them?”



I squeeze my thighs so hard, Gray takes my hands, gently prying my fingers loose.

“What happened, Blue Eyes?”

This is the wretched part of the story, where my brain requires additional oxygen to churn through the sludge. I draw a large breath, and then another, to sustain me. “When I was in college, there was a scandal at the church in town. The priest was accused of molesting little boys.” The passion has crept into my voice, accompanying the dull ache inside my chest.

“Richie was one of them,” Gray says with the utmost care, as if helping to unburden me of the especially difficult parts.

I nod, my heart breaking like it happened yesterday. “He was fifteen when it became public. It was humiliating. No matter how many times we explained that he was a little boy when it happened—a victim—it didn’t help. He was bullied at school, called all sorts of names that were too hard for a teenage boy to bear.” I shield my face, because I don’t want him to see the anguish twisting through me. “He shot himself with his daddy’s gun.” I let out a small, strangled sigh.

“*Delilah.*”

Gray pulls me onto his lap, and I let him. Because I still need to finish, and I can’t stop to argue or it’ll never all come out. And because I feel safe there—safer than anywhere I’ve ever been.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, softly. “So sorry.”

I have no doubt he’s sorry—no doubt he would carry my pain if he could.

“The Marshalls never got over Richie’s death. Two years after he was gone, they were gone too. Mrs. Marshall developed a brain tumor. It was only a matter of weeks. Mr. Marshall died of a heart attack five days after we buried her.” My chest is so tight, I can barely breathe.

Gray holds me closer, and strokes my back with strong, nimble fingers, lightly kneading the stiff muscle.

“Archbishop Darden put that priest—that child molester—in the parish.” The rage is building inside me. “He had a history of molesting little boys. But it was a poor parish and our children weren’t worth saving.”

I nestle into Gray’s chest, letting the angry energy tell the rest of the story.

“I’m not Catholic, and I never thought about an archbishop, or how priests are assigned to churches. But while Kate was being questioned, I was there, listening to every detail. Something told me it was the same

sonofabitch who kept moving bad priests around, hiding them, to avoid scandal in the church. Sure enough, it took about ten minutes of research to put the pieces together. When I discovered it was the same bastard—I had to do it.”

I sound vindictive and hateful, but I refuse to sugarcoat any of it. “There was some element of revenge involved, I’m not going to lie. But what drove me more than anything—I was not going to let that man ruin any more innocent children—or women, or families. He was done.”

The emotion—grief, anger, sorrow—it’s welled up, and beginning to seep out. I wipe a lone tear from my cheek.

I don’t want him to watch me fall apart, so I reach for the anger that’s right on the surface, and turn my face to Gray’s. “At the time, you accused me of going off half-cocked, but it wasn’t like that. I planned his execution to a T.” I feel no remorse as I say the words. None.

“I’m sorry about...” He pauses. “I was going to say your friends, but they’re your family, really.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “They were.”

We sit quietly for a long time.

“I’m honored—beyond honored, Delilah. Humbled,” he tucks my head under his chin, “that you shared this with me. But why today?”

I’m wrecked, and it’s hard to think. But I quietly play with the words and the feelings. They’re looped together in complex knots. But the answer to his question doesn’t require pulling too many threads.

“If something happens to either of us—I don’t want it to go left unsaid. It bothers me to have you think I’m a crazy woman who runs around murdering clergy.”

“Hey.” He tilts my head up, until he’s peering into my eyes. “Nothing’s going to happen to us. There are too many monsters left in this world that need a reckoning. Do you feel bad about it?” he asks, without judgment.

“Killing the archbishop?”

“Yeah,” he says softly, his lips grazing my forehead.

“Only that he didn’t suffer,” I admit, with neither real joy nor remorse. “Otherwise, not in the least. I suppose that makes me a vile human being.”

“Ever read Hemingway?”

“Only the SparkNotes. I prefer books with adjectives.”

Gray laughs softly. “Hemingway believed, ‘What is moral is what you feel good after, and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.’ It’s my

favorite quote.”

“It sounds like a justification for bad behavior.”

“Maybe for some. But not for those who take stock of their humanity.”

I appreciate the effort to soothe my conscience. Although a few choice words from Papa Hemingway will never convince me that I’m not a sinner who deserves to burn in hell. I’m not at all repentant, and therefore don’t deserve forgiveness. God will do what he must, but I hope Gray is able to see past my moral failings.

I let my fingertips explore the taut ripples below his rib cage. “Did you notice there wasn’t a single adjective in that quote?”

Without warning, Gray stands, tosses me over his shoulder, and slaps my ass. It lifts the mood. Something I desperately need right now.

“Put me down!” I squeal.

“Not a chance.”

“Where are we going?”

“Where we can have a little more privacy. There’s no way I’m fucking you out here where everyone can hear you scream.”



## DELILAH

Gray deposits me on the edge of the bed, and lowers himself until we're nearly eye level. He weaves his hands through my hair, devouring my mouth until we're both gasping for air.

His warm skin awakens the notes in his spicy cologne—bergamot and leather swirled together, wafting gently, enveloping us in his achingly familiar scent. I'm home.

Gray brushes the tendrils gingerly off my face. "Thank you for sharing that part of you with me. For letting me in *everywhere*."

*Everywhere* requires no further explanation. I know exactly what he means. Before today, I welcomed him into my body, and even into my head—but that takes little courage. The harrowing places are the dark corners. The shadowy spaces that leave you naked and ashamed.

I reach for him, clinging to his chest with both hands. "I need you." With every cell in my body. "I need the pain—please." There is no shame in my plea. It comes from somewhere dire, but pure.

"*Shhh*," he murmurs. "I'll take care of you. Give you everything you need. Do you trust me to do that?"

I nod.

"Good girl." He places a small kiss on my nose. "Take off your clothes for me—everything but your shoes and jewelry." His voice has made the subtle shift it always does before he takes command—when the moment calls for more than the normal bossy Gray, when it demands the power and control of a man who takes no prisoners. "Leave your panties for me."

I undress, *for him*, laying each item neatly on the bed, until I'm left in a

piece of lace, sandals that crisscross around my ankles, and the noisy bangles on my wrist.

“You are spectacular.” He’s seen me naked more times than I can count, but his voice is almost reverent, filled with awe as if he’s seeing me anew. “I don’t know what I’m going to do after the mission—I’m not prepared to let you go, Blue Eyes.”

*I’m not prepared to let you go, Blue Eyes.* I don’t have time to sift through the tsunami pulling me under before he demands my attention.

“Get back on the bed.” When I’m seated, he spreads my knees apart until my cunt is fully exposed to him. “Touch your breasts. Explore the smooth skin.” My hands move without embarrassment—all I can think about is pleasing him—pleasing myself. “Silky, aren’t they?”

I nod, because I can’t speak.

“Squeeze your nipples. Harder.”

“Ahhh.” Every cell in my being welcomes the bite.

“Can you feel the throb in your pussy?”

My eyelids are heavy, and I let them flutter shut, as my head falls back, following the curve of my spine.

“Open your eyes, Delilah. Don’t hide from me.”

I force the lids open, gazing at him.

Gray lowers his hand to his thickening cock.

I see the outline through the denim.

“See what you’ve done to me. How are you going to fix it?”

I don’t respond because the words have vanished with all thoughts.

He rips the delicate thong off my body and casts it aside. “I think you need to rub your pussy, make it swollen and uncomfortable like you’ve made me. Go ahead,” he drawls. “Rub your pretty cunt, until it aches for me.”

My fingers find their way to the wet, slippery folds. I slide the tips of my fingers over my clit, while the other hand digs into the bed linen. My body is on fire. I’m slipping away, but I don’t close my eyes. Not even when the urge to hump my hand consumes me. Not even then.

I let Gray see me—all of me—until the impulse to end the torment has my thighs inching together.

“Don’t you dare close your legs. I want to see your fingers strum that tight little pussy.”

I’m close, and squirming with abandon, when he gets down on his haunches and shoves my hand away. *No!* I push my fingers back between my

legs, but Gray isn't having it.

He lifts my legs up and apart, holding them behind the knees. With the first long sweep of his tongue, I gasp and whimper.

He raises his head, and meets my eyes with a wicked gleam. "Pinch your nipples while I lick you. Don't let go until you're coming all over my mouth."

I gasp as my fingers wrap around the sensitive furls. But I don't shy away. I lean into the throb, letting each pulse carry me higher.

Gray licks me with abandon, pushing his long tongue inside my slick core, swirling, before withdrawing. He sucks my clit, gently nudging me closer to the precipice, but releases the swollen bead as my body begins the dance to release. "*No!*" He's going to play at the edge—oh my God. *No.* "Please. Gray. Please."

"*Shhh,*" he admonishes. "The more you beg, the longer you'll wait."

I squeeze my nipples harder.

"You're a dirty, dirty girl, Blue Eyes, and I'm going to give you the release you crave."

My words are a reflection of the cluttered nonsense running through my head. *Please. Yes. More. Don't stop.*

His tongue sweeps across my slick flesh. I buck and moan—and his hands are on mine, prying my fingers from my nipples. When I let go, the blood floods the sensitive peaks, sending currents to my throbbing pussy. I tremble, begging him to end it.

And he does. Spectacularly. Nipping, and sucking, lapping my pussy until the tremors weaken, and I'm wrung out.

When he climbs onto the bed with me, he's naked.

"You don't need pain. You might choose it, but you don't need it. Pain is just a lazy way to ramp up the intensity. But there are other ways to find that high during sex, where your mind empties and peace rushes in to fill the space. Sometimes nothing but pain will do, but there are so many ways to get there. It doesn't always have to hurt."

I'm sobbing. I don't know why. But I'm overwhelmed by *everything*. All of it. The powerful orgasm. Telling him about the Marshalls. And for letting him in—fully inside. Because that's what I did.

"It's okay to cry, darlin'. Sometimes it's the quickest way to get it all out."

"I'm a mess. We have a mission—I need to be ready."

“Think of it as all part of getting ready.”

He flips me onto my belly and straddles me, a knee on either side of my hips. His hard cock brushes against my ass, and I wiggle toward it. “Keep still.” He holds me steady between his muscular thighs, his hands massaging my back with long, sensuous strokes, lulling me into a dreamlike trance.

“I killed my mother.”

My body lurches out of the sex-induced stupor. His confession comes out of nowhere. In a voice that’s eerily calm. I wait, with my heart pounding, for him to say something more. Julia Wilder was killed in an automobile accident. She drove off the road after being drugged by her husband. There seems little dispute about that among those in the know.

“You were a child,” I say with as much compassion and empathy as he showed me earlier.

His hands freeze, and he stiffens over me.

I reach behind and clutch his hips, digging my fingers into his backside.

“She didn’t simply lose control of the car,” he says flatly. “She was poisoned. I gave her the sandwich that contained the poison.”

*Oh Gray.* My heart breaks for the little boy forced to carry this burden, and for the man tormented by guilt. I want to turn around and wrap my arms around him, soothe his pain. But when I try to move, he holds me in place. I don’t like it, but I’ll respect his wishes. He doesn’t want to look at me—or maybe he doesn’t want me to look at him.

“You were eleven years old. You didn’t put the poison in the sandwich. How could you have known?”

“I was angry at her. I lied about where the sandwich came from. She might not have eaten it if she had known it was from my father.” He lowers his forehead to the hollow of my back. “I was happy to help trick her into eating it. They would all still be alive if I hadn’t been such a little asshole.”

“*Gray.* You don’t actually believe that, do you?”

“Our lives would have all been different. Even JD’s and Chase’s, who didn’t die, but who live with the consequences of what I did.”

“Surely your brothers don’t blame you?” I’m ready to wage all-out war on those Wilder boys.

“They don’t know. I’ve never told anyone besides you, and a therapist I was forced to see in college.”

“The one who recruited you to the FBI.”

“*Mmhm.*”



*I've never told anyone besides you...* It's a gift—the gift of trust.

“Let me see you,” I whisper into the mattress.

After a few minutes, he moves his legs enough for me to flip onto my back. I reach up and cup his jaw, easing my fingers over the stubble. His jaw is clenched. His skin sallow. But it's the suffering in his eyes that reaches in and twists my soul. I don't say anything. I'm just here—fully present, for whatever he needs.

“I trust you, Delilah,” he says, the words coming directly from his heart, “with the mission—with everything. You need to trust yourself.” He hoists my legs up, pushing my knees into my chest, and slides his cock into me. It's not an easy slide—for either of us.

His thrusts are ruthless. His face contorts in agony, with droplets of sweat forming in clusters.

I reach up to smooth the sorrow, caressing his lips with my fingertips. He nips the tender pads, and jerks his head away, lowering his mouth to mine.

Gray devours me—taking and taking. And I let him, delivering the pieces he misses in benevolent offering. I want to *give* him everything. In this moment, I know nothing else.

Every kiss, every breath, every heartbeat brings us closer—not just to the edge, but to each other.

When I'm almost there *again*, he reaches between us, circling my clit until I come apart, clutching his shoulders as the turbulent waves crest and break, wrecking me.

But Gray doesn't stop to let me catch my breath. He doesn't stop for anything as he rolls his hips, driving blindly toward release.

With my legs quivering from the final savage thrusts, he follows me into his own anguished surrender. The control has evaporated and his grief escapes in a deafening primal roar, spilling into the cabin, and echoing in my soul long after he's emptied himself inside me.



## GRAY

We climb aboard *The Great Escape*, Prince Ahmad's luxury yacht. The Great Escape—*pfft. It's more pretentious than Lone Wolf, even.*

Something changed between Delilah and me yesterday. Not a seismic shift, but an intimacy that develops not from carnal pursuits, but from sharing secrets that others don't know.

I can't explain why I confided in her about my mother—not exactly. I've been telling myself it was her reward for opening up to me. Something big and important to entice her into continuing to share more about her past. I've also told myself that it was to demonstrate my unwavering confidence in her. All these things are in part true, but they are eclipsed by a greater truth: I wanted to tell her. Five simple words, filled with complexities.

It's not that I can't explain why I confided in Delilah. It's that the emotions are too thorny to parse through right now. My focus needs to be on the mission and on the safety of my team.

The crown prince is waiting to greet us, dressed casually in linen shorts and a button-down shirt rolled at the elbows. It's similar to what I'm wearing. Unlike the palace, the atmosphere on the boat is always relaxed.

"Your Highness," I say, polishing the exaggerated reverence with a mocking smirk that Ahmad has come to expect from me. "You look well-rested for someone with a new baby in the house."

His eyes light up and his grin widens before he erupts in laughter. My relationship with the crown prince is complicated. It started, in earnest, as an easy friendship. We both come from powerful families with vast wealth, where cultivating genuine friends isn't simple. Despite his selfish ways,

which I originally attributed to cultural differences and royal lineage, I once enjoyed his company.

The prince doesn't take my hand, but embraces me, instead. "It's good to see that you're still a sarcastic bastard. I need a bit of levity in my life." He pats me on the back. "I'm so happy you're here."

When he pulls away, he turns to Delilah, who is dressed conservatively with a scarf covering her hair. But even with a modest neckline and her arms and legs hidden by billowy cream-colored fabric, she exudes an effortless sexiness. It's impossible to hide, certainly from men like Ahmad, who are always on the prowl.

"What tender morsel have you brought with you?" The question is directed at me, but his eyes are all over Delilah.

The way he's leering, I'd like to grab him by the neck and toss him overboard. But I can't afford to be a jealous bastard right now, so I force a smile. "Crown Prince Ahmad bin Khalid, please meet Delilah Mae Porter."

Delilah smiles, but doesn't make eye contact with Ahmad. Instead, she places her hand over her heart with her head bowed slightly. "It's an honor to meet you, Your Highness."

Pride washes over me—not because of anything I've done, but because she threw herself into the study, soaking up every detail she could get her hands on, or pry from Mira and me—all for this very moment. She's perfect. I catch a whiff of the brackish water and feel myself relax.

"The pleasure is mine, Miss Porter. I appreciate the show of respect, but on the boat, we dispense with all modesty and most formality. May I call you Delilah?"

"Of course." She's poised, but a bit nervous, which is good. It makes it more realistic.

"It's not necessary for you to lower your eyes in my presence," Ahmad continues, "as it makes it difficult for me to see their beauty. Yes?"

She looks up with a demure smile.

"Much better," he says, with the cunning assurance of an animal with no natural predator. "At the palace it will be different, but while we're on the sea, you needn't cover yourself. After all, this is *The Great Escape*."

Even after a century of secular rule, Amidane women are still required to wear the abaya and behave modestly, rules that Ahmad dispenses with any time it suits him. The laws are stricter for women, but men have onerous restrictions too. No one is permitted to practice religion of any kind inside the

country. The king is the supreme ruler—not a demigod, but a god. In his absence, the crown prince has the last word on everything.

A man dressed in a pressed white uniform appears, and nods at the prince.

“Malik, please show Miss Porter to her suite.”

Malik is the crown prince’s eyes and ears on and off the boat.

“Once you’re settled, perhaps you’d like to catch some sun on the top deck,” Ahmad suggests before Delilah goes. “You’ll find the sunbathers there without swimsuits. You might choose to do the same. I understand it prevents tan lines.”

Delilah defers to me for guidance on her outfit, as though it’s the most natural thing in the world. It’s almost comical. “Wear a bathing suit.” I speak to her, but my message is for the prince. “I’m not adverse to tan lines.”

Ahmad watches the interaction carefully. Delilah is looking directly at my face, unlike how she behaved with him.

“If there’s anything you need, please tell Malik,” he says, dismissing her.

Delilah is not his to dismiss, but I hold my tongue. For now.

When she’s out of view, I follow Ahmad up the stairs to a private seating area on the middle deck.

He motions for me to sit. “What would you like to drink?”

“Whatever you’re having.” I roll up my sleeves while he turns to say something I can’t hear to a crew member, before taking a seat across from me.

“So you brought along a little plaything.” He’s not wasting any time, but this tells me everything I need to know about why the plans to go directly to the palace changed. He has concerns about Delilah.

“She’s lovely, isn’t she?”

“Is there something wrong with the women I normally provide? All you had to do was ask for something special.”

When I don’t bite, he keeps talking. “Unless she’s a plaything for me? A gift for your host, perhaps?”

*Fuck you.* The crewman brings us each a beer, pouring the contents of the bottles into tall glasses while we watch silently.

“I sent a gift. Did it arrive?”

“It did. Thank you. The port’s magnificent. I finished one of the bottles, but I saved the other for us to enjoy while you’re here. Tell me, is it as delicious as your blonde toy?” He raises his glass, touching mine in midair, but not offering a good cheer. “You still eat pussy, I’m sure.”

“And you still don’t, I’m sure.”

Ahmad leans in closer, while I sip my beer. “What were you thinking, bringing a CIA agent to the palace?” He’s visibly agitated.

I would be too.

“Former CIA agent,” I explain carefully. Although, by now, his goons have told him everything there is to know about Delilah. “She spent virtually no time doing covert work before she was ousted. You were provided with all the appropriate documentation and paperwork. Don’t act like I’m trying to pull a fast one on you.”

“What’s your relationship with her?” he asks. His stare is icy, but his tone is less hostile, maybe even a bit curious.

I never let my guard down around Ahmad, not for a nanosecond, and this visit won’t be any different.

“I’m not sure.” It’s mostly honest, not that he deserves honesty. “I’ve known her for a few years. She worked security at Wildflower—undercover.” I don’t tell him that she was Smith’s plant. “We got involved. In the US, fucking your employees is still a big no-no. We’ve been sneaking around—I’m tired of it. I told her she needed to leave her job with Sinclair Industries if we were going to make it work.”

He sits back in the chair, crossing his legs. I’ve known Ahmad a long time. He’s not buying it yet. “Make it work?”

“I want to keep her—at least I think I do. But first I need to see how she fits into my life. In the meantime, she’s off-limits. Even to you.”

Ahmad begins to laugh. “Tradition requires that I take a wife. But I can’t believe you’re willing to settle down.” He shakes his head.

“Whoa!” I raise my hands. “I never said anything about getting married. Let’s not get carried away. There’s a world of difference between *let’s see where this goes* and a ring choking my finger.”

Ahmad’s aware that I don’t do relationships—even agreements with the submissives I train are for set, *and limited*, amounts of time. And they’re *never* exclusive agreements—that’s not what it’s about for me. Submissives are part of my job at the club, an enjoyable part, but that’s it. And other kinds of relationships don’t comport well with either of my jobs.

“She’s worked hard to understand the nuances of the Amadi culture, and I don’t see any problem with her at the palace. Otherwise I would have left her behind. But ultimately, it’s your decision.” *Although I’m pretty much screwed if you send us packing.*

I didn't bring my cards with me, but it doesn't matter. I've memorized every face and their names. I take another drink, eyeing him carefully over the glass.

He nods. "She seems meek for a covert operative."

My lips twitch, because, describing Delilah as meek is—funny as hell. "Meek, *no*. She's a hellion. But she wants to please me. I've decided I like a woman with a little life in her. They're more fun to train."

A thin smile spreads across his face, and his eyes grow dangerously dark. "I love a woman who fights back. *In bed*. It gives me every excuse to subdue her as I please."

*Fucker*. The bastard needs no excuse to act brutally. It's not that I'm opposed to rough play. I'm not a stranger to the crack of a whip, or the scrape of a sharp knife if the situation warrants, but for me to indulge, it has to be consensual.

"How about if you share her with your host? We can make a trade."

I'd like to break him in half for even suggesting it.

"A trade? That's mighty generous of you. I didn't realize Noura was on the boat."

He gulps his beer, emptying half the glass. When he glares at me, the venom in his eyes is something to see. "*Princess Noura*, my wife, is not on the boat. Nor is she available for trade." His chest is heaving. "I've ordered men killed for less."

"As have I. I'm not sharing Delilah. When I'm finished with her, *if* I'm finished, you can have first dibs. But until then, she's off-limits, just like *Princess Noura*."

He lifts his chin, but he's decidedly calmer. "Gray, one of the things I've always liked about you is that underneath your playboy exterior, you're a smart, tough sonofabitch. We're cut from the same cloth."

*Not a chance, you prick*. "Why did you want me to make this trip now?"

"We're friends, aren't we?"

"Cut the bullshit."

Ahmad snickers. "Before your father died, he and your brother, JD, visited the palace to discuss the wholesale purchase of a vaccine and some other pharmaceuticals. My father would like to pursue the negotiation, and he asked me to reach out to you because of our friendship."

So this is how the king planted the idea of the visit with Ahmad. *Clever*. "I could have saved you the trouble. I have nothing to do with Sayle

Pharmaceuticals. JD is in charge. But I can put you in touch with him.”

Ahmad shakes his head. “I met with him during the visit. It’s hard to tell that the two of you are related. He was such a dreary bore.”

I chuckle. “That’s what he said about you too.” Actually, JD said he was an entitled, pampered prick, and he doubted the prince wiped his own ass.

Ahmad laughs, and shrugs. “I suppose your brother and I have different interests.” He contemplates me, soberly, for a long minute. “I also needed some cheering up.”

“The women sunbathing naked on the starboard deck don’t provide sufficient cheer?”

He scoffs. “If only it were as simple as a tight cunt.” He sighs, and pauses for a beat before continuing. “Noura is on the Riviera, recuperating from childbirth and ruminating, I’m sure, over whether I’ll divorce her before she has another chance to produce a male heir.”

“I hate to be a drag by involving science, but it’s the father’s sperm that determines the sex of a child.”

“Fuck you, Gray. I took biology, too. But it doesn’t work like that in my world.”

“I take it you don’t want to divorce her?”

Ahmad waves me off. “She’s easy. Does all that’s required of her—aside from providing me sons.” He scratches his head. “Noura has the right pedigree. She’ll make a perfect queen. Those kinds of women aren’t a plentiful resource, especially as Amidane becomes more modern.”

“I understand the importance of a male heir to succession. But by the time your daughters are of age, maybe things will have changed enough to allow the crown to pass through women.”

He looks me directly in the eye. “That’s never happening.”

“What if you don’t divorce her? Aren’t you permitted to have more than one wife at a time? Maybe you can find someone who can produce a male heir.” I can’t believe I’m actually having this conversation with a straight face. Aside from the archaic custom, this bastard is weeks away from being removed from the line of succession—although he doesn’t know his father plans on bypassing him and giving the title to his younger brother. That’s why Saher needs to leave the country. She’s her father’s favorite child, his only daughter, and that makes her a perfect pawn in a succession battle. Ahmad will barter with his sister’s life and her son’s, to persuade his father to keep him in the line of succession. He won’t hesitate to kill them to get his



way.

“I’ve promised reform for women. That’s how I’ve been getting the West to warm up to me. I need their support in order for the kingdom to continue to thrive. I can’t take another wife—now is not the right time.”

I’m so done with this conversation.

“I don’t know what to tell you, buddy. But I’m happy to engage in a little fun and games to cheer you up.”

“I plan on taking full advantage of your generosity. But there is one last thing I can use your help with.”

“*Jesus*, you packed my schedule pretty full. I thought this was a vacation.” I press my shoulders into the back of the chair. “What do you need?”

“In that same vein of making the kingdom more modern, I want to install a sex club in the lower level of the palace. Not a place for big parties, but a place with some fantasy rooms, where the younger princes can work off a little energy. Something along the lines of Wildflower.”

“Isn’t that why you send them abroad?”

He nods. “Except when the pandemic was out of control, and they couldn’t travel and started playing with the local girls. It was a fucking nightmare. I’m hoping you’ll spend a little time with me and a designer. What you have at Wildflower would be ideal here.”

It’s the perfect way to keep him occupied without having to dirty my hands too much. With Delilah here, I’d like to keep Ahmad’s *girls* as far away from me as possible. “Filthy fantasies are my specialty.”

“I’ve missed you, Gray,” he says sincerely. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too.”

“Enough about my problems. Why don’t you change, and take a swim? I instructed Malik to put you in the same part of the boat as Miss Porter, but I also reserved you a room downstairs in the event you see something you’d like to sample.” He raises his brow. “I assume she demands discretion, at the least.”

I’m not exactly sure what Delilah expects. This is a mission and she knows it could get messy. But I have no interest in sampling any of the local wares.

“I think she’d be pretty pissed if I dragged her halfway around the world and left her alone for long periods of time—to fuck someone else. But I suppose a small, discreet taste wouldn’t hurt.”



## DELILAH

I glance at the clock on the nightstand. It's after two in the morning, and I'm in bed reading. Despite our efforts to make the time adjustment easier, I can't sleep, and I don't want to take a sleeping pill. Not in the middle of the ocean with these shady fuckers.

Gray is with Prince Ahmad, who is charming in the same way the devil is charming. He stashed away his little harem during dinner for my benefit, I'm sure. But I'm just as sure they're all decked out and ready to play now.

If all goes well and we're allowed to continue to the palace, this little side trip will have been worth it. It's allowed me to get accustomed to the eyes and ears that are *everywhere*. They mostly fade into the background, and it's easy to develop a false sense of security if you let your guard down, but my antenna is up and fully attune.

The lock snicks, and I automatically reach for my gun, which of course is in Charleston, locked in a safe at Wildflower. But when the door opens, it's Gray.

"I came to check on you," he says, lying near me on the bed, on his side. "Maybe you can put this down, and give me your full attention." He takes the Kindle out of my hand and tosses it on the nightstand behind him.

He smells of whiskey and cigars and white blossoms—jasmine, to be specific. I loathe jasmine, even on a good day. It smells like rotting flowers—and my mother...only she wore a cheap version.

I know entertaining the prince is part of the plan, and I shouldn't be mad. But my emotions have taken me back to the plane, to the cabin where we shared not just our bodies, but our secrets, less than twenty-four hours ago.

I'll pull it together, but I'm not a robot that can be turned on and off easily.

My stomach churns as Gray's lips meet mine. The floral perfume is overwhelming. He's drenched in it, and I shove him away before I gag.

He grabs my wrists, holding them firmly above my head. "You want to fight me? Go ahead. But I warn you, I'm in the mood for a little demon."

*Oh, you're going to get a little demon. But it might not be the kind you're in the mood for, asshole.* "You're coming to me smelling like the woman you just laid, and you expect me to spread my legs for you? You didn't even have the decency to take a shower and wash away the stench of sex before you came to my bed."

When I pause, a sudden panic swarms, nearly crippling me—I'm not in role. I search Gray's face. There's no alarm anywhere. My response is legitimate and natural. *It is* in role. It's exactly the reaction I should have to his indiscretion.

"Is that what you smell, Delilah? You smell sex? Another woman's juices mixed with mine? Maybe there was more than one."

He pulls my hair back, and I see something in his eyes—a glimmer that wouldn't be there if he was being cruel.

*No, I don't smell sex. I smell god-awful perfume. Even though he's practically on top of me and my nose is working overtime, I don't smell anything resembling sex. Maybe you don't want to smell it.*

"I was planning to show you the respect of a shower, but since you haven't shown me any respect, I'm just going to fuck you here and now. Have you suck my dick and taste another woman's cunt on me. Would you like that?" he drawls.

My heart is pounding. I know we're being watched. Now that I almost forgot my role, I can't seem to forget about the hidden cameras.

"Take this off," he says, tugging at my nightgown. "Don't dally."

I hesitate, before my fingers find the buttons on my nightgown. My anxiety grows, along with my anger at Gray, coiling tighter together with each button I untether. He undresses too, which makes me feel slightly more comfortable. But it does nothing to assuage the anger.

"Look how hard you make my cock when you fight me off. Look," he demands, more roughly.

I glance quickly at the flare of the dusky crown, and then into his eyes. There's a flicker of compassion in them, a modicum of empathy, even as he drags me to him.

“On your knees, Delilah, and suck it good, or you’ll spend all night on your knees practicing until you get it right.”

I reach for the compassion I saw in his eyes, clenching it to me while he weaves his hands into my hair.

His fingers have a firm hold on my scalp, but he doesn’t shove his cock down my throat. He lets me set the pace. My tongue laps at the taut skin, and I smell a faint muskiness—that’s him. I taste nothing on his cock but the salty bead forming at the tip.

He didn’t have sex. That’s what he was trying to tell me. *Do you smell another woman’s juices mixed with mine?* No. No, I don’t.

My pulse slows, and the cameras are a distant memory.

I gaze at him for a few seconds, before pulling his cock into my mouth, the way he likes. I’m rewarded with a loud hiss of air. *He didn’t shower.* Because if he did, he wouldn’t reek of that putrid perfume. Even if he cleaned himself with a washcloth, there would be a lingering telltale scent. I bury my nose into the well-groomed hair. *Nothing*—it smells only of Gray. My throat relaxes with little effort, and I swallow him deep, again and again, until he wrenches away from me.

“Are you wet?” he pants.

I sit back on my heels, softly gasping for breath, and nod.

He reaches down, his fingers exploring my needy pussy. “You are wet. You enjoyed swallowing my cock, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

He brings his fingers to my mouth, and I suckle until the ache between my legs is my most pressing concern.

“You know what I enjoy?” He pauses, as if waiting for a response.

“Fingering you, Delilah, until you come hard. Until you’re shaking and pushing my hand away, and I have to tighten my grip on your throat to let you know that *I decide* when you’re done.”

I shiver at his words and harsh tone. It’s not the shudder of repulsion, but the tremble of desire.

He takes his cock in hand, pulling and jerking on the swollen shaft. My gaze flits between his busy hand and his eyes. There’s no warning, at least none that registers, when he erupts. I squeeze my eyes shut, while he sprays his cum all over me—in my hair, on my cheeks and arms, and across my breasts.

The signal is clear to anyone watching. He’s marked me. I’m his.

“Next time,” Gray warns in a scathing tone, “don’t question me about where I’ve been or who I’ve been with.” He pulls me to my feet. “Let’s go take that shower you were so concerned with, because I have no desire to sleep beside someone who smells like a filthy whore.”



## GRAY

Last night was a good test—for us both. Delilah was challenged, and she stayed in control, with her anger pushing at the edges, which made it all the more believable.

I was cruder with her than necessary, but I wanted Ahmad to love the show so much that he would crave more. That even if his good sense was telling him to turn us away, he wouldn't listen.

We're engaged in a dance. Letting our real emotions creep in just enough to create a realistic scenario, but not enough to shatter us and blow our cover to smithereens. I'm acutely aware of how difficult it is for Delilah, and I do what I can to help her. But that's a dance too.

She needs me to respect her as an operative—as a deserving partner in this mission. If I coddle too much, it has the opposite effect. It implies, with all the subtlety of a blaring siren, that I don't have confidence in her abilities.

None of this is easy on me, either. It weighs on my mind, and in my heart, more than it should. Certainly more than I can afford, right now. That's for damn sure.

Ahmad and I are having breakfast on the upper deck with a trio of nearly naked women. Not one from Amidane, or from the United States, for that matter. One woman is Eastern European and the other two, Burmese. They appear to be just above the age of consent. *Maybe*. Are they here of their own accord? It appears that way, but appearances are deceiving. Although it doesn't matter, because that's not why I'm here.

My purpose is sealed with official orders, and I'm not allowed to veer off to save anyone. It doesn't matter whether the scourge of the sex trade lurks



nearby, or something equally as evil. I have to look the other way. It's one of the most infuriating aspects of this life I chose. But like it or not, that's how this business works. When the government climbs into the mud with pigs, they never come out smelling good.

One of the young women is sitting on Ahmad's lap while he feeds her orange sections and grapes. The other two are flanking me. I have absolutely no interest in slipping *anything* into their mouths, so they've taken to bringing bites of food to mine.

That's when Delilah appears. Despite what Ahmad told her, she's dressed modestly in a summery outfit that covers her arms and falls below her knees. Her conservative clothing sets her apart, and above, the women at the table. In the crudest terms, she's a queen and they're whores.

She approaches us with her head high and shoulders back. Delilah's a hair below five feet five, but her presence is unmistakable, especially today.

Her sunglasses hide any disapproval in her eyes, but I see her body stiffen when one of the young women brushes a piece of croissant across my bottom lip, urging me to eat from her hand. I'm sure Ahmad saw Delilah's reaction too, because he whispers something to the girl on his lap and when she gets up, he shoos the others away too.

"Good morning. I hope you slept well," he says, standing to greet Delilah. The sign of respect, especially coming from him, is a bit of a surprise.

I stand too, because she certainly deserves my respect, and because this is her show, and she's killing it.

"Come sit by me," he says without a glance in my direction. "Leave that dog you brought along to his own devices."

I scowl at him, hoping to send a silent message, but he ignores it.

"Coffee or tea?" he asks.

"Coffee would be wonderful," Delilah replies. "Thank you."

The waiter brings her coffee, along with some yogurt topped with drizzled honey and crushed pistachios. "Would you prefer something else?"

"This is perfect."

Ahmad peels a fresh orange, carefully removing the bitter pith, and feeds her a section.

She laughs softly, before taking a bite.

I'm two seconds from tossing the table over, and grinding my heel into his neck. I clear my throat, and he smirks.

"As much as I would enjoy indulging you, I will stop. I think we've made

your friend Gray jealous.” He glances at me, and then whispers to Delilah, “I suspect he prefers to indulge you himself.”

“Where did you say Noura was? The Riviera?” I grin at him, waiting for a response.

Ahmad narrows his eyes, and chuckles. It’s not a happy sound, more of a threat, or perhaps a promise. I don’t give a shit. But he doesn’t need to worry, I wouldn’t fuck Noura if he paid me to do it.

During breakfast, we chat about art, Brexit, and movies. Delilah holds her own. She doesn’t give herself enough credit, but despite her humble beginnings she’s well-educated and well read.

“I’m needed at home this evening,” Ahmad says soberly. “We’ll enjoy the last rays of sunshine and freedom before leaving the boat. We’ll disembark late afternoon, and travel the last leg by helicopter.” He turns to Delilah. “This suits you?”

She smiles shyly at him. “I spent the last few weeks reading about the palace and your customs. It would be an honor—and a delight—to visit there, if it suits you.”

*Oh, baby.* Delilah’s polish and deference is familiar to him. She’s not as sophisticated as Noura, who grew up in a palace herself, but that would be too studied anyway. Ahmad would be suspicious. Delilah’s a little nervous at the seams, like anyone meeting a prince for the first time, but she has the luster of the women he met in the Ivy League.

Either he has seen enough of Delilah to be swayed, or he’s decided being in her company is worth a small risk. Maybe both. I need to remind Trippi to stay close to her. Ahmad will have no qualms about helping himself if the urge becomes strong enough. We didn’t need Trippi and Baz to be as vigilant on the boat, but the palace is enormous and Ahmad knows all the hiding places.

Delilah finishes her coffee, and excuses herself to change and pack.

“I didn’t expect to leave for the palace so soon. If at all.” I want to know what he’s thinking.

“She was thoroughly vetted,” he says. “As you can imagine. I just wanted to see for myself that she wasn’t a threat.”

“And?”

“And I think she’s far too lovely for your ugly ass, but I have no concerns. Although, she’ll be observed closely, because a beautiful face hides a multitude of sins.”

I stare out over the ocean, while the waiter brushes the crumbs from the table. It's inviting today—perfect for a swim off the boat. Although on the open sea, the calm surface can be deceiving. I glance at Ahmad when the waiter steps away. “Close observation doesn't involve your hands—or your dick for that matter, Your Highness.”

“Be careful, Gray. Your weakness is showing.”

“Don't be fooled. Every time I mention Noura, your eyes send poison darts in my direction. And I'm quite sure she's not your weakness.”

He nods. “It's a matter of respect, not just toward her, but toward me too. Noura is my queen, not to be sullied by another man.”

“Then we do understand each other.”

He nods curtly, and drinks some water. “It appears that way.”

The fucker can say whatever the hell he wants, but I don't trust him for a single second. Especially with Delilah.

But there's no turning back now.



## DELILAH

Italian marble floors, intricately carved ceilings, and gold embellishments adorning every piece of real estate, the sprawling palace is grand, dwarfing even the excess of Versailles. It's an audacious display of vast wealth and power, especially callous in a country where people are starving. The Amadi royal family is estimated to be worth upward of twenty-one billion dollars. This is *real* oil money.

When we arrive at the palace, Gray disappears with the crown prince, and I'm ferreted off to a winding tour that ends in the wing where honored guests stay. Baz remains with Gray, and like on the boat, Trippi shadows me. Our security seems primarily for show. We aren't allowed to have weapons anywhere in the palace, and even if we were, the four of us would be no match for the small army of soldiers both inside and out.

As we tour, I keep an eye out for Princess Saher, but we don't go anywhere near the private residences, and she's nowhere to be found in the common areas. It's disappointing, but not a surprise.

My room and Gray's are connected by a sitting room, Fatima, the knowledgeable tour guide, explains. Trippi and Baz have rooms across the hall.

By the time we get into the suite, my belongings have been unpacked and stashed in drawers, cupboards, and a walk-in closet. It feels like a gross invasion of privacy, but because I haven't brought an entourage of maids and assistants with me, not entirely unexpected.

"This," Fatima explains, holding up an envelope with a raised seal, "is an invitation from King Khalid. He would like you to join him for light

refreshments this evening in his private quarters.”

She doesn't ask if I can attend, so I assume this is more of a summons than an invitation. Not that I had any intention of begging off. This mission was set in motion by the king. I suspect that he'll make an effort to help us connect with Saher.

“Will Mr. Wilder also be attending?”

She tilts her head to the side, looking at me curiously. “Of course,” she says in perfect English.

For a moment, I wish Mira was here to answer the myriad questions I have about tonight's protocol. I hadn't anticipated *refreshments* with the king.

There's a knock from the sitting room, and Fatima answers the door. She speaks to a woman in hushed tones, before shutting and locking the door.

“We have some tea and snacks in the sitting room, if you'd like to relax there.”

“Thank you.” I want to ask if Saher will be joining us this evening, but that wouldn't be at all prudent.

Fatima hands me a card. “My office is in this wing. I will check with you regularly, but you can also reach me at this number, anytime, day or night. I'm available to answer any questions or concerns you might have while you are with us.”

Fatima is not just a tour guide—she's our attaché for the trip. I'm sure she can answer questions, but unlike Mira, I have no idea who she reports to, and I can't trust her.

When I'm alone, I open the envelope and carefully take out the card. But before I'm finished reading, there's another knock on the sitting room door. I assume it's a maid, but when I open the door, Gray, in all his gorgeousness, is standing there.

I'm so relieved to see him that in the space of two seconds, I've launched myself into his arms and I'm holding on tight. I'm not sure which of us is more surprised by the uncharacteristic impulse, me or him.

But he recovers quickly, holding me tight against him for a few minutes while his lips graze my head tenderly.

When I finally pull away, he eyes me carefully. “I came to tell you that dinner will be brought to our room,” he says. “It's already been a full day and the king would like to spend some time with us this evening.”

I hold up the invitation. “Fatima, our attaché, mentioned tonight. I was

just opening the invitation and trying to decide what to wear. Although, to meet with the king, maybe an abaya and one of the chiffon headscarves I packed would be appropriate.”

Gray nods, still studying my mood. I’m sure he’s thinking about my leap into his arms. I still don’t know what got into me. Gray and all the comfort and safety he provides—that’s what’s gotten into me.

“You’re an American. The abaya isn’t required, but King Khalid will appreciate it. How about jewels? Did you pack some?”

Gray’s checking in with me, and his concern warms my heart. I smile. “Yes. I brought several pieces to choose from. I have a pair of emerald earrings that I think I’ll wear tonight.”

“Choose whatever feels right,” he says quietly, smoothing my hair with his hand. The ends slide between his fingers, while he gauges my reaction. “Why don’t you come sit with me, and we can relax a bit before we shower. Unless you’d like a nap.”

“A nap? Is that a euphemism for something more lively?”

A lecherous smile follows a small snicker. “Shower is a euphemism for something more lively. But I thought you might like to rest first.”

I know we’ll be watched. My most vulnerable moments will be fully on display—perhaps even recorded. Strangers will be aroused by what they see. Perhaps even the crown prince. But I don’t care. Right now, I need Gray and everything he gives me. “You underestimate my stamina.”

Gray reaches behind him, and the lock snicks. “I underestimate nothing,” he says, his eyes burning. “Let’s get you good and dirty, so we can get you clean.”

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AFTER WE’VE GOTTEN DIRTY, then clean, we nap for an hour, which doesn’t leave much time to get ready. It also doesn’t leave too much time to stew about whether the princess will be there tonight.

Fatima comes by at the appointed time to shepherd us to King Khalid’s private residence at the opposite end of the palace. Trippi and Baz don’t accompany us, because as the king’s visitors, he’ll personally vouch for our safety. Considering he can’t trust a soul in the place to get a message to his daughter, I’m skeptical about his ability to protect anyone. It’s a farce, like so

much else here.

We're ushered into a room with several people. Ahmad, I've met, but I recognize the others from the photographs I studied. The older man is King Khalid. He's seventy-eight, but the Parkinson's tremor makes him seem older and feeble. The crown prince's half-brother Prince Faud bin Khalid is here, as well as Princess Saher. My heart hammers so hard, I'm grateful for the extra layer the abaya provides. I hold my gaze steady in the direction of the king, but as custom requires, I never look directly into his eyes.

King Khalid greets us through a translator, first Gray and then me. But it's clear he understands the gist, if not everything, we say. I understand everything he says too. "If there is anything you require while you are in Amidane, it must be brought immediately to my attention." He nods at Fatima.

The king motions for us to sit, and offers me the seat closest to him. "You have met the crown prince, but have you met Prince Faud and Princess Saher?"

"I haven't had the pleasure."

"It's my pleasure, Miss Porter," the prince says kindly. "I'm scheduled to be in Aman tomorrow, and I won't be back before you leave. So we'll just have this evening to get acquainted."

Prince Faud is younger than Ahmad, and doesn't have that smug look his brother wears all the time.

After the introductions, Gray and the princes chat animatedly in the corner, and the princess, the king, and I are left mostly alone at the table. Mostly, because staff hovers nearby. Ahmad glances over at us periodically, the way a mother does when she wants to be sure her children are behaving.

"Saher is a lovely name." It's trite, but anything to engage her in conversation.

"Thank you," she replies. "Traditionally, it is a boy's name. My parents were hoping for a boy and had considered only boys' names."

"That is not true," the king interjects. "You were the light of our lives from the moment you were born. Pure poetry." He reaches for her hand, and turns to me. "The name we had originally chosen, before she was born, did not do her justice. We wanted something unique. The songs and poetry of Kazem Saher were favorites of ours, and we decided that our beautiful daughter should be named Saher."

"It might be nothing more than a fairy tale concocted to amuse a young



girl, but I never tire of that story.” She brings her father’s shaking hand to her lips and places a small, tender kiss there.

Saher speaks English fluently, although not as flawlessly as her brothers, who studied in the United States and London. She’s charming, but reserved, almost standoffish with me, which could pose a huge problem. Fortunately, tonight, the king bridges the gap with lots of questions for us both.

When the food is served, *the boys* rejoin us. Gray takes a seat beside me, and Saher watches us carefully, not missing a single interaction. She also eyes Ahmad occasionally. Her gaze flits from Gray, to me, to Ahmad, and back. It’s as though she’s sizing us up, and our relationship to one another. It’s a little off-putting, but it gives me an opportunity to study her unnoticed.

“What will you do while Gray is occupied?” she asks.

It’s an interesting way to phrase the question, but I’m not complaining. I’ll take any and all engagement she offers.

“I’m hoping to visit the World Heritage sites, maybe do a little shopping.” The last thing I need is more things, but according to the briefing book, Saher is a big shopper—it’s one of the few reasons she’s allowed to leave the palace, albeit with guards. “Otherwise, I’ll probably read and do a little yoga.”

“What kind of yoga practice do you have?” she asks, with a sparkle in her voice. She is so much friendlier now that we’ve eaten.

“Right now, my practice is limited to Ashtanga.”

“Hot?”

“I’ve never tried it, but it looks challenging.”

She beams. “It is challenging, but rewarding. If you would like to join me in the morning, I can have someone escort you to the studio. I usually begin my practice at ten, once my son has had breakfast and is with his tutor.”

*Oh. My. God.* I don’t dare steal even a tiny glimpse at Gray. “That would be wonderful,” I gush. “Thank you.”

The next hour passes quickly. All I can think about is yoga with Saher. An opportunity to have her alone. At least as alone as we will ever be.

When Gray excuses himself, Saher comes around the table and takes his seat. “The studio is just women. We have complete privacy, so wear whatever you would at home. Just cover yourself while on the way to the studio. A mat and everything else you need will be provided.”

“Thank you. I can’t tell you how much I’m looking forward to stretching my muscles. It was a long trip.”

She smiles brightly and nods. If I didn't know better, I would say that she's almost as excited as I am. "I will send my maid at ten, to escort you."

"I can ask Fatima, our attaché, to take me there if it's easier for you."

"Fatima?" She raises an eyebrow and her expression is wary. "That's not necessary. Fatima is a very busy woman." Clearly there's bad blood between those two. Saher pauses for a beat and her smile returns. "After, we can enjoy lunch on the terrace, and I will help you decide the best places to shop. Yes?"

Ahmad is watching us closely. I've felt his eyes on us since Saher took Gray's seat. He doesn't like us chatting. I need to appear less eager so that he doesn't stop us from getting together.

"Perhaps Miss Porter would prefer to have lunch in the dining room or in the garden," Ahmad says. "She's not here to satisfy your insatiable thirst for the West."

Saher is flushed, but holds her head high. "There are few places for me to visit where I can practice my English—the crown prince is correct, though. I love to hear about Western culture." She turns to her brother. "About all cultures. Forgive me, Miss Porter."

I don't want to get involved in a pissing match between the crown prince and his sister, who he clearly controls, but I want to signal some solidarity with her, and show some small kindness. Not just because I need her friendship, but because her brother is a total asswipe.

"I'll tell you everything you want to know about American culture, if, in exchange, you'll share the beautiful Amidane culture with me. I read several books to prepare for the trip, but it's not the same as hearing stories from someone who loves their country."

She flashes me a grateful smile.

"Saher," Ahmad says, like the condescending bastard he is, "you should sleep if you plan on having a full day tomorrow. I heard the little one was up several times last night."

There is a flash of fear in her eyes when Ahmad mentions her son. "His stomach was upset, but he's better now."

"Weak stomach. Must be his father's genes."

Saher doesn't respond to her brother, but she doesn't cower, either.

Ahmad is lucky we're on his turf, because otherwise I'd grab him by the neck and kick him so hard in the balls, having a male heir would no longer be a concern for him.

The princess stands and crouches beside her father to say good night. She

kisses his forehead, and he murmurs something that sounds like a blessing. When she stands, her hands smooth the wrinkles from her abaya. “Good evening,” she says politely, meeting only my eyes, before making her way out of the room.

Not long after, the king excuses himself, and that’s our cue to say good night too.



## DELILAH

“Wow,” I say, leaving the studio. “My muscles are going to be screaming later. That was a great workout.” And the fact that Saher and I were in the same room sharing an experience adds to the exhilaration. “Heat makes it a completely different experience.”

“Screaming?” She looks perplexed.

“In pain,” I explain.

“Ahh, yes. It is exhausting and energizing at the same time.”

Saher leads me into an area where there are showers, changing rooms, and a lap pool behind a glass wall. I study the area, looking for cameras and opportunities. I see neither, but they’re here—at least the cameras. “Do you practice every day?”

“Hot yoga, two or three times a week,” she replies. “The other days I do Pilates or a gentler yoga practice.”

“Would you mind if I join you while we’re here?” As soon as it’s out of my mouth, I realize I might have been so forward as to be impolite. “Forgive me. I don’t mean to intrude on your routine.”

“I would enjoy the company. Normally the class is larger, but everyone is on holiday. It is quite lonely the month they are away.” Saher hands me a bottle of water and a fresh towel. “I should have mentioned to bring a change of clothes to shower. I always go back to my room after class and I did not think.

“There is a spa through that door,” she adds. “You can book a massage, or a manicure, or any beauty treatment you would like.”

We mop up some of the perspiration and cool down a bit, mostly in

silence. I'm not sure she remembers inviting me to lunch last night. The little stint on the boat means that we'll have less time here, but I don't want to be too pushy. It could backfire.

I take my abaya off a coat hook just inside the entrance to the studio, pausing for a second, to be sure that the one I take is mine. Unlike the ones we wore last night that had some embroidery, these are plain, and identical.

Saher watches me with a bit of mischief in her eyes. "They all look the same." She laughs.

*They all look the same. Yes.* This might be useful in delivering a message. But I can't put all my eggs in one basket. I need to be open to other possibilities.

"But mine," Saher explains, "usually has a small drawing or a note from my son, now that he has started to write." She pulls out a piece of paper from the deep pocket, with three stick figures: one large figure, a medium-sized one, and a smaller one that appears to be a child. It's a family. They're smiling and holding hands. A little boy's dream that has no connection to reality. "He always leaves me a little surprise."

"It's adorable. He's talented." I'm not taken with children's drawings or their other antics, but I've learned that making a fuss over a beloved child is expected, and I need to make friends with this woman.

"I will send Raksha back to your room with you. She will wait while you shower and rest. At one thirty, we will have lunch."

My brain is scattered in a dozen different directions, sifting through scenarios that might allow me to pass a message to her, and I almost miss the part about lunch.

"I would love to have lunch with you, but if you need Raksha—I don't want to impose. Would you prefer if Fatima escorted me to your suite at one thirty?" I gauge her reaction carefully. Like last night, she stiffens at the mention of Fatima.

"I would not prefer. I will send Raksha. You can trust her."

*But apparently not Fatima.*

We part at the end of the hall. Trippi, Raksha, and I go in one direction, and the princess in another.

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GRAY IS NOWHERE to be found when we get back to the rooms. When he left this morning, he said he'd be gone until late afternoon, but I'm a little disappointed anyway. All the sneaking around like teenagers and pretending we're not sharing a bed has made my hormones explode. Either that, or I'm an exhibitionist at heart. *I don't think so.*

Raksha tidies up the sitting area while waiting for me. She's quiet, and I don't ask her any of the millions of questions I have about the princess and the royal family, because that would be sure to make her uncomfortable, and maybe alienate Saher.

She says a few words to staff we pass along the way, but the palace staff are mostly migrants, and they speak to one another in a dialect I'm struggling to understand. We also pass numerous soldiers along the way to Princess Saher's quarters. Some are more circumspect about ogling than others. I miss my weapon.

When we arrive, Raksha pulls a key out of her pocket, and unlocks the door.

I follow her inside.

"Welcome," Saher says, coming into a main room to greet me. A little boy is on her heels, hiding behind her legs.

My heart clenches as soon as I see him. This is the child we're trying to save. This small, harmless boy and his mother are prisoners. *They deserve to have their story heard.*

She steps aside, taking his hand. "Prince Amir bin Jalaal, please meet Miss Delilah Mae Porter. She is our guest."

He has a head of dark hair and a shy smile. The formality is stiff, but as soon as the introduction is over, she crouches and plants a kiss on the crown of his head. "Just a few more minutes with your tutor," she assures her son. "Then you may play. There is a surprise if you behave while I visit with our guest."

Raksha raises her brow and grins at him. It's genuine and affectionate, and I'm certain they adore each other. Although it's too early to trust her. The petite maid scoots the boy back through the doorway he entered while he asks about the surprise. Listening to him ask about the surprise makes me smile. It's exactly what I would do.

"Are your muscles screaming?" Saher asks impishly.

"Soon."

"We are all women," she says, helping me remove my abaya. "Soon

Amir's tutor will be a man," she sighs, "but until then, we are free to dress as we like here."

She hands the black robe to another young woman, who appears out of nowhere. "It's not necessary for you to wear the abaya in the palace, provided you dress modestly, but still you choose to wear it."

She's probing, but I suspect it's more out of curiosity than anything else. "It's a privilege to be a guest of the king, and I want to respect your customs." *And the more respectful I am, the better my chances of success.*

"When in Rome," she quips.

I'm taken aback for a second, and don't respond immediately.

"Did I confuse the proverb? My English is not always on point. Or my Italian." She chuckles.

"No, it's absolutely correct. Look at you," I tease, "a woman of the world."

We share a laugh, and she glows.

"Let's sit on the terrace. It's peaceful there."

Like everything else in the palace, the terrace and courtyard are lush and manicured, with a fountain rivaling the Trevi itself. It's difficult to believe we're in the desert.

Raksha brings juice and dates, and coffee so rich and potent, I might never sleep again.

"I have something for you." I pull a wrapped package from my purse. It's one of the gifts I brought along to be used as a small thank-you. "It's a compact made by silversmiths in Charleston, where I live," I explain while she unwraps the package. "It's designed to look like the famous gates made by Philip Simmons." I tell her about the gates, with their heart shapes that grace buildings all over the city.

She smiles wistfully. "Such a romantic notion, gates of hearts."

"They're quite beautiful. You'll have to come visit and see for yourself."

Saher blinks a few times, and takes a sip of coffee. "You are soon to be betrothed," she shakes her head, "*engaged* to Gray?"

For some reason, this embarrasses me. It's almost as though she sees how much I want him—but *engaged*? *I don't think so.* "No." I shake my head. "Gray and I are still getting to know one another. He's special, but it's too early to discuss the future."

She cradles the glass of coffee between her hands, smiling wistfully. "He loves you."



My immediate reaction is to push back on that ridiculous remark, but I'm more measured, and shrug instead. This is what we want people to believe, after all.

"My mother and father loved each other in a romantic way. It is uncommon in my world."

According to the briefing book, Saher's mother died unexpectedly, although the US government believes the crown prince is responsible for his stepmother's death. She had a lot of influence over her husband, which didn't sit well with the prince.

"Yesterday, when we were with the king, I saw how Gray gazed at you, and how your eyes were soft when you looked at him. It was like a movie."

I feel my cheeks warm, but I don't let myself get side-tracked by her fantasy.

"I was not intruding—it is just—you are very beautiful, and I was uncertain if you were here for the crown prince's enjoyment. But you have no interest in Ahmad. I saw that too."

She's right about that. My only interest in Ahmad is watching him burn. "You're protective of Princess Noura."

"Have you met Noura?"

I shake my head.

"She and I are friends. We were once good friends." Her brow is knit tight. "But I am, how do you say, like poison."

"Toxic."

"Yes. Toxic. Princess Noura keeps her distance. I do not blame her. She has herself and her daughters to think about. She will need all the goodwill she can garner to deal with the prince when it comes time. Amadi women do not have the same freedoms that men enjoy, but we make up for it by forming strong bonds with each other."

*Like the one I'm trying to forge with you—although ours won't be real. At least I don't think so.*

"In the United States, women have many freedoms, but we still form strong bonds with other women. Sisterhoods, we sometimes call them."

Raksha collects the glasses, and tells Saher that Amir is playing happily with his new action figure.

"It must be lonely for Amir at the palace with the other children on holiday."

According to the information I was given, Amir is a prisoner in the

palace, as is Saher. Unlike her son, who cannot leave the grounds, she is permitted to come and go, but her outings are brief and local because she doesn't trust her brother. I'd like to hear Saher's take on her circumstances. Not that the specifics are important to the mission, but personal conversation builds friendship.

A cloud descends, marring her young, flawless features. Her life has been so tragic, it's easy to forget she's twenty-four. "Amir does not have much opportunity to play with the other children."

Her pain has a pulse that I feel from across the table. My nurturing instincts leave a lot to be desired, but she looks so forlorn that I sit on my hands so that I don't get up and wrap her in a hug.

"Amir's father, my husband Jalaal, was killed for disloyalty to the king." She gazes at me, and I can't tell if it's grief or terror I see. "Inside the walls of the palace. Our home. Ahmad had me dragged to the back courtyard and forced me to watch as they murdered the father of my three-week-old child. It was a message, for me, that my son could meet the same fate if I do not behave as they desire."

I want to know more, but I'm concerned she's already said too much, and that the punishment will be to keep us apart. I know she's under surveillance—she must know that too. *Why is she telling me this?* "Perhaps we shouldn't discuss this."

She studies me for a moment. "You are worried that there are ears listening. That it is not safe to talk openly."

*YES!* But I don't reply.

"Do not worry. What I tell you is not a secret. Jalaal's murder was a warning, not just for me, but for everyone. It was open and celebrated. The traitor was dead."

She's bitter, but resigned. I doubt she celebrated. "Did you love him?"

"Like you love Gray? No. I grew to have great affection for him. But I am a princess, and my duty is to marry someone my family chooses for me. A man who brings honor, or something else they want. Jalaal was chosen for me."

Although the briefing book contained everything she just confided, hearing the story from her, in the flesh, is staggering.

"Jalaal's family believe that they are the rightful heirs to the kingdom. My father wanted to appease them by making the marriage. But it was always doomed. I do not know what Jalaal did to anger the king, or more likely, the

crown prince.” She peers into my eyes, and I know instantly she believes her brother was behind the murder. “But this is why Amir cannot play with other children. He is not allowed to cultivate friendships that might become alliances as he grows to be a man.”

These people are freaking nuts. I mean, *insane*. Saher is in an impossible position—as is her child. Amir will not survive to adulthood. In her heart, she knows it too. I want nothing more than to get them the fuck out of this hellhole. Maybe the boy can have a real life, and maybe Saher won’t have to watch her son murdered in the name of a crown. The responsibility to complete the mission has never felt heavier than now.

“I’m also a widow,” I say quietly.

Saher puts down her glass to give me her full attention.

“I’m not sure if I loved my husband either.” I’ve never admitted that to anyone. Not even to Gabby. But somehow it seems right to share with her. “I was alone and confused, and he offered me—I don’t know exactly what it was, but it made me feel less broken.” I smile at her. “Life is complicated.”

Raksha brings out a tray with our lunch, and the sober mood lifts. We spend the rest of the afternoon discussing the Kardashians and American movies. Saher is a binge watcher. And she also wants to know whether I keep the door between my bedroom and the sitting room locked.

“Unlocked,” I confess, with a hint of embarrassment.

She grins broadly. “Maybe one day we will know each other well enough that you will tell me if he makes your toes curl.”

As she says it, I feel a small tug low in my belly, thinking about all the ways Gray makes my toes curl.

When it’s time to say good-bye, she insists that Raksha stay with me through the visit. “You should have a woman with you who is trustworthy. She will take the room next door to yours. It is empty. She is discreet. Raksha knows the palace well, and she can help you with anything.

“Do not trust Fatima,” she whispers, embracing me. “She is loyal only to Ahmad and herself.”



## DELILAH

Gray has been keeping the crown prince plenty busy for the last forty-eight hours, and I've seen so little of him. Last night, he crawled into my bed smelling like he'd been rolling in a musky flowerbed. But the late hour and the roiling stench didn't stop him from curling his body around mine, like it was his God-given right.

"I've been thinking about fucking you all day," he murmured, rucking my nightgown up around my hips and slipping his hand into my panties. "How are you, Blue Eyes?"

"Tired," I muttered through sleep, but not too sleepy to shove his hand away. "And not interested."

I was interested earlier, plenty interested, but as I waited alone for hours while he caroused with the prince, my petals dried up. It doesn't matter that Gray's only job while we're here is to distract Ahmad. My head knows that, but my emotions, no matter how much I try to convince them otherwise, aren't having any of it. I'm a professional and I'm working to get through the morass with all its tangles to complete the mission, but it irks me when I'm alone at night.

When I woke up this morning, my bed was empty and the pillow next to me was cool to the touch. Before I left for yoga, I tried Gray's bedroom door, but it was locked. By the time I got back to the suite, he was gone.

Saher and I spent the afternoon sightseeing, and there was no time to dwell on Gray. I was focused entirely on finding an opportunity to get her the message—but there was none. I'm beginning to feel a little desperate. The clock is ticking loudly. This is when mistakes happen. I need to stay focused.

I slide my hand into the pocket of the abaya, feeling the outline of the small compact that contains the note. I've been carrying it around with me all day, and brought it to dinner, just in case.

Gray is sitting at one end of a banquet table, panty-melting in a custom tux, and I'm at the other end beside Ahmad. I expected to see Saher, but she's not here. I'm not sure what it means, but I hate when plans change.

The banquet is in honor of our visit, and I chat amicably with the other guests seated near me, speaking to Ahmad as little as possible without being outright rude.

At the end of the meal, guests begin to stand and stretch, many saying their good-byes. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Gray approaching. I haven't seen him all day. There's so much I want to discuss with him, but of course we can't talk about any of it. Although, being with him, just the two of us, would help quiet my mind. I glance around the room. *I wonder how much longer before we can escape to the suite?*

"Hey," he says softly. "Your earrings were on the dresser in the room. I put them in the top drawer." I left the emeralds out to let him know that everything was on track. "You didn't want to wear them?"

"I really did, but I wore them yesterday."

He laughs. Our interaction is chaste, but the flare in his eyes tells a different story.

He wants what I want, to get lost in the intensity he creates, letting it spiral and spiral, the pressure building and building until the coils are wound impossibly tight, and then, only then, does he release the spring, sending me into a free fall.

I can almost smell the arousal, the pheromones seeping through his sun-kissed skin. The tension escalates as we stand inches apart, unable to touch each other in public.

"Even covered from head to toe, you look gorgeous," he murmurs. "Good enough to eat." The predator has come to play, and for a small time, the din fades into the background and there's no one beside us in the room.

"We have just a few more days in paradise before we head home." His reminder falls hard, jolting me into the here and now.

But I don't need his prodding. I have a plan. I just need an opening. A tiny window where everything falls into place. "It's incredible here, but I'm almost ready to leave. You know what a homebody I am."

He gazes at me, running his straight pearly whites over his bottom lip. "I

need to go. I just wanted to tell you that I miss you.”

*What?* It’s like a punch to the gut, stealing the air from my lungs. “Aren’t you coming to the room with me?”

He shakes his head. “I have a meeting.”

“A meeting? At this hour? In a tux?” I sound like a nagging, jealous girlfriend, but honestly, I don’t give a shit. “Does this meeting involve—”

“Don’t start, Delilah.” His voice is well-modulated and hushed, as is mine. I’m not sure how much of this is real, and how much is for show. All I know is my heart sags with disappointment—just a drop.

“I’m tired,” I snap. “I’ve had a big day, and another tomorrow. I need some uninterrupted sleep. Don’t bother coming to my bed.”

Gray’s eyes flit briefly to something behind me. “I wasn’t planning on it,” he sneers, in a cruel twist. “You ready?” he asks, glancing over my shoulder, dismissing me.

“Just waiting for you,” Ahmad says, the levity in his voice is unmistakable, adding to my embarrassment. “Miss Porter, shall I have something sent up to help you sleep?”

*The fucker.* I am so angry, I’m afraid to open my mouth, but I turn my head slowly, reminding myself of the reason I’m here. “That won’t be necessary, Your Highness. I know just the prescription for sleep.”

The prince might not pick up on the innuendo, but Gray most certainly will. I gaze up at him and smile sweetly. Let him spend some time thinking about me rubbing my pussy. “Good night, gentlemen.” I saunter away with my head high, pausing to say a few words to everyone I pass on the way out of the room.

*Just a few more days in paradise before we head home.* Hopefully tomorrow will hold more opportunity than today.





## DELILAH

*I t's done.*

Just like that. No fanfare. No exploding fireworks. Nothing but my pounding heart when I handed Saher my abaya, and slipped my arms through hers, making a quick getaway before she caught on to the switch.

“I wonder what surprise Amir left you today?” I said cheerily, as the door closed behind me. Then I disappeared down the hall before Saher noticed that she had the wrong robe. Even Trippi had trouble keeping up with me.

*It's done.* The sense of relief is exhilarating. I've never felt anything like it.

I turn off the shower and reach for a fluffy towel, patting my skin dry. I can't wait to parade in front of Gray with those sapphires in my ears. I can't wait to see the expression on his face.

*It's done.*

Although, in many ways, the real risk comes now.

We took precautions so the note couldn't be traced to us. So there would at least be plausible deniability if Saher panics and takes it to her brother. But I push the thoughts away, because for just a few minutes, I want to revel in *mission accomplished*.

I belt the robe around my waist and go out into the bedroom. Raksha is there, waiting, hands clenched by her side. *Trouble already?* “What is it?”

“Fatima is here for you. She says it is important to speak with you immediately.”

My heart falls into my stomach. I need to contact Gray. *And say what? You don't even know why she's here.*

I gesture toward the sitting room, and Raksha nods. “Shall I get dressed first?”

She nods. “I will tell her you are preparing yourself, and you will be available then.”

What could she possibly want? My gut is churning. What if Saher went to her about the note? *No*. There’s no way she would have gone to Fatima. With little thought to my outfit, I finish dressing, add a bit of makeup, and go to the sitting room where Fatima is waiting.

“Hello.”

“Hello, Miss Porter. The king wishes to see you.”

I’m not sure what I expected, but *the king wishes to see you* wasn’t on my list of possibilities. I don’t like this. “The king?”

She nods, smiling.

“Will Mr. Wilder be joining us?” I need to buy some time to think.

“I don’t know,” she says with a small smile. “I’m simply carrying the message.”

*Carrying the message. Fuck.* “Give me a moment to get an abaya, please.”

“A moment, but we must hurry. The king has a very full schedule, and he does not like to be kept waiting.”

“I understand.”

From the bedroom, I try to reach Gray, but the call doesn’t go through. It was a long shot. The reception here is spotty at best. I consider sending a text or an email, but decide against it.

“Do I go?” I ask Raksha.

“You must,” she says resolutely.

*Yes, I must.* But I’m shaking inside.

I open the door to the hall, and thankfully Trippi is there, right where I left him. “The king wants to see me. I can’t reach Gray. Please let him know.”

There’s a flicker of alarm in his face. “I’ll escort you.”

I shake my head. “Not to the king. We need to observe protocol. I’ll be fine.”

“I’m up for bucking protocol,” he says. “Pretty sure I’ve done it once or twice in the past.”

“Shall we go?” Fatima asks from behind me.

“I’m in good hands,” I assure Trippi. His jaw is tight, and he doesn’t

appear at all convinced. “But do let Gray know where I am so he doesn’t worry.”

While Fatima and I wind our way through the palace, she makes polite chitchat. “Are you enjoying your visit?”

“It’s been wonderful. Everyone has been so kind and accommodating.”  
*Hopefully that will continue where I’m going.*

We cross over into the official working area of the palace. This is not what I expected. “The king is in his office?”

“He is,” she says simply, leading me down a long, wide hall lined with soldiers, and through a set of security doors. The gold plaque on the door reads *Crown Prince Ahmad bin Khalid*.

As we pass staff working in tight cubicles and offices, I squelch the rising panic. “I thought it was the king who summoned me?”

“He will be king one day. Soon,” she says brazenly, outside the crown prince’s personal office.



## DELILAH

“Your Highness,” Fatima says with the utmost reverence. “Miss Porter is here, as you requested.”

The crown prince ignores her, walking around his gargantuan desk to greet me. “Come in, Miss Porter. Have a seat.” He motions to a chair in front of the desk. “I’m so pleased you decided to meet with me.”

*Really? Did I have a fucking choice?*

He nods at Fatima. “You need not wait. Close the door when you leave.”

Fatima looks almost as twisted up inside as I feel.

I raise a finger to stop her. “Your Highness, if I may.”

He nods, sitting on the edge of his desk, towering above me.

“I don’t want to cause a scandal and ruin either of our reputations.”

He lifts his chin toward the door, in a gesture for Fatima to go. “Ruin our reputations?” He snickers when the door clicks shut. “I’d say it’s a bit late for that, Delilah, don’t you agree?”

While I try to make some sense of what this all means, he goes to the wall behind the desk and draws the drapes. “But don’t be alarmed,” he assures me, as the drape opens to a line of soldiers carrying serious artillery. They stand at attention, facing away from the office. “You will be well-chaperoned.” His tone is light, but the signals he’s sending are deadly serious.

“Is Gray joining us?” I ask, my voice steady and strong.

He sneers. “While you’re with me, I assure you, you won’t need Gray.”

He has the look of a jackal as he approaches me. I need to keep him at arm’s length.

“Let’s take a seat on the sofa, where we’ll be more comfortable.”

Maybe this isn't about the note.

I sit at the far corner of the tufted sofa, hoping to put some distance between us, but he pivots and takes the chair closest to me. "You've come a long way from your modest beginnings in Mississippi."

"Have you visited Mississippi?"

He shakes his head. "I have never had the opportunity. But had I known about you, I would have moved mountains to get there." He teases with a smile, but it feels more mocking. "Gray is quite a prize, isn't he?"

"We're very different, that's for sure." I smile patiently, but my patience is wearing thin.

"Different is good. It kindles the fire like nothing else. You and I are different too, Delilah."

While I'm not a stranger to cutting off assholes at the knees, I take great care to be respectful. "We are, Your Highness."

"When we are alone, even in the palace, you may call me Ahmad. Your Highness makes me feel old and out of touch. I assure you, I am neither."

I could kill this jackass with one hand tied behind my back. Although that would create a nasty mess for Gray to clean up, and I wouldn't be around to help because those motherfuckers outside the window would gun me down in a heartbeat.

"It seems Gray does not pay enough attention to his beautiful kitten."

*Kitten?* I glance briefly in the direction of the soldiers, and it reminds me to play nice. "He's been looking forward to spending time with you, and I support that. You've kept him busy."

"You didn't sound *supportive* or pleased last night."

"I don't share well, sir."

His smile turns into a chuckle. "Neither do I." Ahmad leans back in the chair, crossing one leg over the other. "Whatever Gray has offered you, I can offer you more. You have only to look around to see that it's true."

*I need a shower.*

His pick-up game is weak, but that doesn't make him any less dangerous. "Gray has only offered me his company, and that's all I'm interested in."

"His company?" He laughs out loud. "What do you offer him in return, kitten?"

This is over. "Your Highness, I mean no disrespect, but this conversation is going in a direction that's making me exceedingly uncomfortable. I'm sure you don't want that."

“You’re charming, Delilah. If we had met at another time, perhaps things might have been different.”

I don’t say a word, because there is no way I could ever convince him that I would be willing to allow his filthy, murderous hands on me.

“You’ve won my father’s affection, and Saher’s. Even Gray’s, which is impressive,” he adds. “But I’m not entirely sold. Beautiful women have been the downfall of many great men—especially women named Delilah.”

*Really? I’ve never heard that before.* “I’m a visitor in your country, your home. I have no interest in making trouble for anyone—men or women.”

He glares at me for some time, his face darkening as the seconds tick by. “Saher married a traitor. She carried the traitor’s baby in her womb. Like his father, he will grow up to believe that Amidane is rightfully his, and he will die a traitor, like his father.”

*Jesus Christ.*

“Saher is a prisoner of her own making. Don’t fill her head with fantasies that will never be hers. It will make her captivity more painful than it is already.”

“It’s not my place to tell others how to live their lives.”

“Of course it is. You’re an American—and a woman at that. You can’t help yourself. It’s in your genes.”

I fold my hands in my lap. This conversation isn’t going well. It’s not that it’s veered off track. It was never on a good path. “I’m not sure what it is you expect of me.”

He studies me for a long time, before placing a call from a phone on the end table beside him. It’s on speaker.

“Tell Gray where you are,” he instructs as the phone rings.

“Hello.”

My heart skips a beat when I hear his voice.

“Gray, it’s me.”

“Delilah? Where are you?”

“I’m with the crown prince. In his office.”

“Is anyone else with you?” His voice is controlled and brittle, with rage buttressing every word.

I glance at Ahmad, who is sitting there like he owns the world. “Just the two of us. We’re on speakerphone.”

Gray is deathly quiet. The prince is grinning. The combination raises gooseflesh on my arms. “Are you okay?” he asks cautiously.

“I am.”

“Is she okay, Ahmad?” Gray demands, with a fury I’ve never heard from him.

“She seems very well.”

“Delilah, go back to the room,” Gray says. “Right now.”

I get up, but the prince remains seated. “Miss Porter, ask my secretary to call Fatima. She’ll escort you back to your suite. Or perhaps you prefer Raksha.”

He wants me to know that nothing happens here without him knowing. Even something as simple as a maid being reassigned. Ahmad gauges my reaction, but I don’t flinch.

“Either would be fine,” I reply with a small, polite smile. “Thank you.”

“I expect an explanation, Ahmad. And it fucking better be a good one.” That’s the last thing I hear as the office door closes behind me.

I pause for a moment to collect myself, as the stress melts off me. I dodged a major one, but I might not be so lucky next time.

The prince’s secretary doesn’t bother with either Fatima or Raksha. He sends a young woman in the office to escort me back to the room. I’m so preoccupied with the thoughts racing in my head, I don’t really remember anything about the walk.

Raksha is dusting when I arrive. The compact that was in the abaya that I handed to Saher this morning is on the nightstand, with a note canceling the shopping we had planned for the afternoon. It’s on Saher’s stationary, but not signed.

I don’t know if Saher canceled the outing, or if it was canceled by the prince, or someone else. Raksha doesn’t know, either—although that seems unlikely.

The prince’s threats, and now this. My gut’s sending warning flares, but without any clear direction. I’m in limbo, and I hate the feeling.

What seemed like a great coup two hours ago is suddenly blowing up in my face.





## GRAY

I've had enough.

Enough bullshit. Enough tits shaking in my face every night. Enough of Ahmad. And certainly enough of fucking with Delilah's head—sitting on the scales just right, so they don't tip too far in one direction or the other—the relationship and the mission, teetering precariously while I hold my goddamn breath. Maybe it's my head that's been fucked with enough.

It's time to go home. Let these stupid bastards with their fucked-up family dynamics clean up their own damn messes.

*If only it was that simple.*

I nod to Raksha, who's become a fixture in the sitting room with her embroidery, and knock on the door to Delilah's room, before entering.

“Hey.” Her face is washed out, and her shoulders slumped. I've never been more pissed at Ahmad. “How are you doing?”

“I'm fine.”

If she thinks she's going to brush me off, she's nuts. I put her in this position, and I'm going to take care of her. Her pain, her fears, and her anxiety are mine.

I place my hand on her upper arm, gripping gently. “What happened? I want the details. All of them.”

She shrugs, but's not enough to free herself from my tightening grip. “I think the prince was testing me. Sending me a message not to fill Saher with Western ideas. He wasn't hiding anything. It was his idea to call you.”

*Only because he knew you would tell me about meeting with him.* “How did you end up there?”

“It’s a long story. Fatima told me *the king* wanted to see me.” She glances up at me warily. She was tricked, and I’m sure she’s plenty pissed. “I asked Trippi to get a message to you.”

“By the time he reached me, I was already on the phone with you.” The bile rises in my throat every time I replay that call in my head. Her voice was controlled in the way it gets when she’s anxious. Ahmad was fucking with both of us.

“What are you doing here?” She pulls out of my grasp. “I thought you were busy on a project today.”

“Fuck that. I was doing Ahmad a favor. He can shove it up his ass.” I wrap my arms around her from behind, pulling her flush against me. After a few minutes, her body still hasn’t relaxed one iota.

My eyes fall on the dresser, where a topaz, a ruby, and a sapphire sit side by side, as though she couldn’t make up her mind, or she didn’t have enough holes in her ears to wear all three.

*I’ve run into a snag but I can handle it, I’m in trouble and need to talk, and it’s done.* That’s what they signify, but what it means—at least how I read it—is that she’s in trouble...emotional trouble.

*Fuck.*

Jet lag, not enough time to fully prepare for something this big, that bastard Ahmad toying with her... I don’t give a shit what he said to me on the phone. He would have fucked her in a heartbeat if he thought he could get away with it.

I swivel her around, so I can reach her mouth, and ravage it with a long, rough kiss. Someone else might caress her gently as a way of saying I’m sorry. But that’s not us. And it’s not what *she needs* right now.

My blood runs cold, when I force my mouth away. “I know what you need.” My heart aches, as she gazes at me with more trust than I’ve earned. “Will you allow me to give it to you?”

“Here?”

“I’m afraid so, Blue Eyes. I don’t think it can wait.”

“I’ll follow you, wherever it takes me.” These words, from her, never fail to humble me.

I don’t deserve Delilah’s submission right now, but I’m going to accept it. I kiss the bridge of her nose, before sticking my head into the sitting room. “Please allow us some privacy. Perhaps you can take a walk.” Raksha nods, and I open the door to the hall where Trippi is stationed. “Take Baz and hang

out at the end of the hall. I'll let you know when I need you back.”

“She okay?” he asks.

“Okay? She'd have your balls in half a second if she knew you asked.”

He shakes his head and chuckles.

I shut the door and turn to her. “Take off your clothes. For me.”

She tilts her head to the side, and I see the hesitation. Something that I will not allow. “Now, Delilah, unless you want my help. I'm in the right mood to rip the clothes off your body to tatters.”

She lifts her chin, and my cock twitches. With every piece of clothing she removes, it lengthens and thickens. The curve of her breasts, how her hip meets her thigh, the dip of her navel—it all calls to me at once.

I step closer to her and place my hand on her throat, fingering the very places that would rob her of breath. She gasps, and shudders. “Drape yourself over the footboard. Face and hands on the mattress.”

Her mouth opens slightly, and I see her begin to relax. It kills me. All that we accomplished in the last few weeks, I'm about to eviscerate. The very minute my belt lands on her ass, it'll all be gone.

I don't warm her up. I don't warn her. I don't have to. She knows what's coming, and she's relishing the assault.

*Crack.*

*Crack.*

*Crack.*

Over and over, leaving my handprint on her flesh.

When her skin is well-flushed, I slide my fingers to her pussy. She's wet. But not wet enough.

I step back and pull off my belt, folding it in half so that the first strike will have the snap of a whip. *This is for her*, I remind myself. *Not for me*. It's not what I want for her, but what she needs from me at this moment.

I let the belt fly, and she screams—the harrowing sound muffled by the linen. I let it fly, again, and again, until the stripes on her ass, where it meets her thigh, are raised and angry—until I can't stand it anymore.

I toss the belt aside and reach between her legs, rubbing her clit with the fingers of one hand and sliding three fingers from the other into her swollen cunt. “Keep your face buried in the mattress.”

No one, not one fucking person gets to see her face when she comes. That privilege belongs only to me. In seconds, she's choking my fingers, bucking off the bed, and I finish her off, yanking her into the abyss without mercy.

While she's still whimpering, I take off my clothes and crawl into bed, pulling her on top of me and stroking her back while she cries. Delilah is not a crier, and it's heartbreaking to hear her sobs, but she needs to release the bottled emotion. It doesn't matter that I feel like a monster. All that matters is what she needs.

When she's finished, when all the pent-up stress and anxiety is gone, I grab my shirt and wipe the remnants of a good cry and the smeared mascara off her gorgeous face. "You okay?"

She nods, smiling at me through hazy eyes. Content and unburdened, I want this feeling for her—always. *But not like this.*

"You up for a shower?" She nods, again, the languid smile lingering like a punchy drunk. "Then let's go. I'm not done with you."

In the shower, I turn the water on full blast, both fans, and some music. I'm careful to shield her ass away from the sting of the hot water. "Why is there a ruby, a topaz, and a sapphire out?" I murmur softly into her neck, while the spray rains on us from all sides.

She turns and twines her arms around my neck. "It's done," she whispers, licking my ear, and even though this is partly business, my cock hardens at her touch. "But I'm terrified for her."

"You can't save her." She stiffens as I mutter the words into her skin. There is absolutely no doubt she heard me.

I slide my hand into the hair at the back of her neck, with a firm hold, and walk her deeper into the shower, until she's in the corner, facing the stone. "This is going to be quick and rough. I suggest you hold on." With one hand fisting her hair, I nudge her legs apart with my knee and sink into her pussy, balls deep with one thrust.

"Oh, Blue Eyes. You're so hot and tight. My cock can't get enough of your sweet pussy." *This is not going to last long.*

She gasps and moans, egging me on. My fingers find her belly, creeping lower and lower, until she's sandwiched between my throbbing cock and my hand, both working her until she can't stand of her own accord.

My balls are heavy, and the telltale prickle is gathering at the base of my spine.

I can't stop.

I can't stop.

I can't stop.

"Hold on." It's the last thing I remember before sinking my teeth into the

cord at the back of her neck, and riding out the wave.

After we've soaped up and rinsed off and fucked again, I hold a terrycloth robe for her to step into, and belt it around her waist. "We're leaving in the morning, or as soon as we can get clearance to fly."

She licks her lips, and nods. There's reluctance in that nod. "After I eat something, I'll pack."

"Let Raksha help you. It'll go quicker, and you'll have more time to relax."

Delilah leaves the bathroom without replying. I'm sure the idea of someone helping her pack gives her heartburn. Although not as much heartburn as I'm planning to give her on the trip home.

When I go into the bedroom, Delilah is in her robe, holding an envelope. "It's from Saher," she says, handing me the card. There's a sparkle in her eyes.

*Please join me for shopping in the morning. We leave promptly at eleven.*

"I'm going," she announces, with a fire in her eyes that dares me to say otherwise.

"We're leaving as soon as we're cleared to go."

"I haven't bought one souvenir to take back with me. At the very least, I need something for Gabby. Please." She begs not only with her words but with her eyes. "I need to do this one thing."

*Souvenirs.* What a crock of shit. But brilliant, at the same time. I understand why she wants to see Saher one more time—to silently plead her case. But her job is done and we need to get out of here. Delilah was to pass the message, not to ensure that the princess followed the instructions.

"Wheels up the very second we have clearance to fly. If time allows you to go shopping, fine. But there are no promises."



## DELILAH

“After the stunt Ahmad pulled yesterday, I’m not excited about this.”

I wince, and the glossy stain I’m applying smears past my lip line. But when I glance at Gray in the mirror, I realize he didn’t misspeak. He’s still pissed, and doesn’t care if Ahmad is privy to our conversation. I sometimes forget that not only does Gray have the kind of power that all multi-billionaires have, but that he is also the son of a former president. That kind of power can stand up to kings and queens, and the shield it provides is incomparable.

“I’ll be fine. You might be slightly poorer, but otherwise, there’s nothing to worry about.” I stay in role, reminding him to, also. “Besides, because of the weather we can’t leave until late this afternoon, anyway.”

He mumbles something about me being up all night praying to the weather gods. I might have been chanting and pleading all night, but it had nothing to do with weather.

“Take this,” he says, placing a credit card that he knows full well I won’t use, near my purse. “And take some more Advil, before you go.”

He flashes me that wolfish grin I’m so fond of, which sparks an idea for the long trip home.

“What will you do while we’re gone?”

“Have a word or two with Ahmad. We spoke by phone yesterday, but he deserves to hear it from me in person. Take Trippi and Baz with you. I’m sure they’ll love a shopping trip.”

I don’t like the idea of leaving Gray at the palace without an ally. This place is fraught with peril, most of it shrouded in secrecy. We’re vulnerable



here—even Gray, who can take care of himself. “Trippi *and* Baz?”

“It’s the only way I’m allowing your little shopping trip to happen.”

I open my mouth to argue, but I’m silenced before a single word emerges.

“This isn’t a negotiation. Save your breath.”

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RAKSHA ESCORTS ME, flanked by Trippi and Baz, to the limousine where Saher is waiting. “Good morning.” My voice is cheery and upbeat as I climb into the seat next to her.

“Hello,” she says softly. Her eyes are ringed with dark circles, and she has lines on her face that I don’t remember seeing before. “Thank you for joining me.”

I do something next that pushes the boundaries of protocol, and is completely out of character for me. It’s something Gabby would do, or Lally, or Mrs. Marshall. But not me. I reach down and place my hand over Saher’s, squeezing gently. “I wouldn’t have missed it.”

Saher nods, staring out the side window. After a few uncomfortable minutes, she turns toward me. “Saks is not too far,” she says brightly. “The store in Amidane carries brands from all over the world.”

We chat for a few minutes about high-end shopping, which I know very little about, so mostly I listen and try to ask questions that don’t sound too unsophisticated.

About twenty minutes into the trip, Saher presses a button to speak to the driver. “We’ve changed our minds. Pull right into there.” She points out the window. “To Harvey Nichols.”

*Wait. We’ve changed our minds? What?* I can’t get a good look at Trippi and Baz from where I’m sitting, but I’m sure they’re alarmed too.

“I’m sorry, Princess,” the man seated next to the driver says. “We were told you were going to Saks. We cannot deviate from this instruction.”

“You can and you will.”

*Whoa.*

“I am King Khalid bin Abdullah’s daughter. You pray every day to remain in the good graces of my father.”

*She’s a fighter, God love her.*

“The crown prince instructed—”

“The crown prince has my respect,” she interrupts tersely, “but the king, while he has even a single breath in him, has not only my respect, but my loyalty. As he should have yours. Shall I call his secretary and have him wake my father from his nap so that he can tell you what he told me, that I may shop in any store that captures my fancy?”

Without another word, the driver crosses the median and pulls into the front of Harvey Nichols. This gives “bitches get things done” a whole new meaning. Still, I’m wary of the change in plans, and I’m sure my two sidekicks are none too happy either.

She turns to me. “You will love the merchandise. It is of high quality. Saks is in the US—you can go there any time. This will be special.”

She has a plan. I see it in her eyes. Hopefully it’s not some half-cocked scheme, or a trick *on me*.

We leave the bodyguards, mine and hers, behind, because men are not allowed in the store. “We will be one-and-one half, to two hours, at the most,” Saher instructs the driver. “Let us go,” she says to me.

Once inside, two saleswomen fawn all over us. It’s not me, but the princess who is not only the king’s daughter, but no stranger here.

Saher whips around the room, handing hanger after hanger to the saleswomen, with clothing in both our sizes. I say very little, but nod and gush in all the right places.

In thirty minutes, she’s amassed quite a haul. “We should start to try on the clothes so we have enough time.”

The dressing area consists of a few smaller changing rooms off one large room, with a few chairs, a triad mirror, and refreshments. When we’re settled, she dismisses the saleswomen. “We would like privacy, please. I will call you if we need help. In the interim, would you please find us some accessories to wear with our new clothes?”

“Yes, Princess Saher, of course.” They fawn one more time before leaving us alone.

As soon as they’re gone, Saher pulls me into one of the small changing rooms. “Try this,” she says, handing me a designer gown with a floppy bow at the shoulder. It’s not something I would ever be caught dead in, but she didn’t ask my opinion, and I’m not here to shop anyway.

I assume she’s going to find her own changing room, not because I’m modest, but because this one is tight. But she doesn’t. She strips down to her birthday suit, and grabs another gown off the hanger. She holds a finger to

her lips, and motions for me to take off my panties and bra. This is getting weird, but I'll give her a little more rope.

After we're dressed to the nines in ballgowns without a shred underneath, she takes our belongings, all of them, and arranges them on the floor in a heap, like she's going to start a bonfire. Then she covers the pile with the stacks of clothing we brought into the dressing room. *Oh my God.* She's a savvy little thing. She thinks our clothes are bugged.

I begin to help her, until everything we brought into the room is piled on the floor.

She hands me another dress, and motions for me to follow her into a changing room on the far end of the larger room.

"We only have a few minutes before they come back," she whispers. "I don't understand. Who asked you to pass me the note?" she demands. "Is it a trick by the Americans?"

"No. It's not a trick." I want to tell her it's a message from her father, but I can't. "Please trust me. It's for your safety and Amir's. When your father receives a cable about his sister's declining health, you must act immediately."

"The last time I begged to take Amir abroad, I was punished." Her tone is dire. "They would not let me see my son for one month. Ahmad promised that the next time the punishment would be far more severe."

"I can't force you to act, but I hope you will. We haven't been friends long enough for you to trust my motivation, but I would never do anything to put you in danger."

Her features contort as she struggles to process all of it. We're going to run out of time. I need to say something that will convince her it's safe.

"Your father will smooth the way for you."

She eyes me suspiciously. "And once we are in London?" she asks with some skepticism.

"You'll be protected by the British government. That's all I know. This wasn't engineered by the Americans. I promise you."

"But we will be prisoners there, like here." Her shoulders slump under the weight.

She's right. But the Brits won't have her and Amir murdered. "It's your decision. But I'm not sure it will continue to be safe here."

The saleswoman calls from outside the dressing room.

"We are not yet in need of assistance," Saher replies quickly.

“I want to trust you, but Amir is my life. He is my reason for being.” The emotion in her voice is so tangible, so real, I could hold it in my palm.

The image of the Marshalls at Richie’s funeral pops into my mind. They were broken. Devastated beyond repair. I can’t push the grisly image away.

“Amir is a prisoner, but he is alive,” she adds, the gravity of her circumstances gripping us both.

I don’t make any more assurances, or encourage her to take the risk. Because honestly, I am one small cog in a big wheel, and I don’t know what’s in store for her—for either of them.

The saleswoman calls again, from outside the dressing area. She has shoes for us to try on.

Saher sighs as we leave the cramped room. It’s a deep, mournful sigh, of a mother whose child’s life hangs precariously in the balance. Her decision can save him, or doom him. Or as Saher knows too well, perhaps there’s no winning hand to be played.



## DELILAH

Boarding the plane is an adventure. Every bag, every electronic device, every article of clothing is swept for explosives and recording devices. Trippi and Gray are like men possessed, combing through every inch of our belongings. Baz and I repack bags as items are cleared.

It drives home the danger lurking in Amidane. I shudder, thinking about the implications for Saher.

When we got back to the limousine after shopping, the guard in the passenger seat informed Saher that the crown prince wanted to speak to her the moment she returned to the palace.

She didn't seem surprised. While we hugged good-bye, I begged her to let me have Gray intervene on her behalf.

But she shook her head. "You cannot save me. No one can." It's the same thing Gray said, but it wasn't any easier to hear it from Saher, and I can't stop thinking about it.

"Delilah." I finish zipping a small suitcase and glance up. Gray looks worn and edgy. We're not out of the woods yet, and many a mission has gone sour at this stage, especially when people begin to let their guard down.

"We're done here," he says briskly. "Take a seat so we can get out of this shithole as soon as humanly possible."

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NINETY MINUTES LATER, the pilot announces in her very proper British voice that we've left Amidane airspace.

Gray visibly relaxes, and reaches for my hand. “You did great, Blue Eyes. You’re the hero.”

“Do I get the game ball?” I tease, trying to deflect the praise. Or maybe I’m trying to shield my heart from the reality that the mission being over means Gray and I are over too. I haven’t allowed myself to dwell on it much. I’ve been too worried about passing messages, and until a few minutes ago, our plane being shot out of the sky. But it hits me now with a profound sadness that makes my soul ache. *Put it away for now, Delilah. You can wallow in your misery at home.*

“Not the game ball, but I do have something for you.” His weaselly expression spells trouble.

“What?”

Gray starts toward the front of the plane, ignoring my question. It better not be some wildly expensive jewelry like those earrings he supposes I’m keeping. I don’t know where he thinks I go to wear jewels.

Although I do have to admit, it was fun pretending to be some glamorous high-society chick for a little while. More fun than I expected. I loved the intrigue, and the covert nature of the mission. I loved everything about it, even when it was hard, or in the end, when I felt lost.

Covert operatives are expected to experience a wide range of emotions. It goes with the territory. But that’s done too. The mission, with its clandestine opportunity, was one and done. I knew it when I agreed. But that doesn’t stop me from wishing there were more opportunities for covert work—*with Gray.*

He proved himself to be a worthy leader. I’d follow him into battle. That’s for sure. In truth, I’d follow him anywhere.

Before I get too carried away with my thoughts, Gray is sauntering down the aisle, carrying a tray. His boyish grin makes his eyes twinkle like a rascal. He sets the tray down in front of me and lifts the silver dome.

“Pop-Tarts!” I squeal like a child. The pale-pink icing is smoothed to a shiny glaze, with a sprinkling of pastel sugar crystals. They’re smaller and far more delicate than the toaster pastries from the box on a supermarket shelf. But they look amazing.

“Yep.”

“Where did you get them?”

“Take a bite, and I’ll tell you.”

I take a small bite of the strawberry-filled pastry. It tastes nothing like what I’m used to—it’s sweet and buttery and wonderful. “It’s delicious.

Really delicious,” I add, taking another bite.

“They’re from a small bakery in Paris I love. The pastry chef is a bit of a snob, but when I explained that I was trying to win over a beautiful woman, he was all over it.”

The emotion winds its way into my chest, and it takes up so much space, I have trouble swallowing even another small bite. “Paris. Not exactly around the corner. Thank you. I can’t believe you went to all this trouble—for me.”

“You earned it. Besides, I would do anything for you, Blue Eyes. But those Pop-Tarts just took a phone call.” He reaches for his briefcase and pulls out a manila envelope. “This is a bonus for a job well done.”

“The government is handing out bonuses now?” I ask, opening the tiny clasp.

“That’s from me.”

His face gives nothing away, but God knows what he’s scheming. *At least it isn’t jewelry.*

I pull out the paperwork, and read until my brain stops firing. I glance at Gray. “Please tell me you didn’t sign over the deed to your beach house to me. *Please,*” I plead.

“I can’t tell you that.” The response is resolute. He’s dug in—I sense it. *Well, you’re going to be disappointed.*

With trembling hands, I put back the paperwork, and shove the envelope at him. “I’m just going to pretend this didn’t happen.”

He places his hand on mine, lacing his long, strong fingers through my smaller ones. “It’s a gift.” His hand tightens around mine. “It comes with no strings.”

I’m having trouble breathing, and my first inclination is to fight, but I don’t. He doesn’t deserve the churlish response of a little girl who is embarrassed and overwhelmed, and doesn’t know what to do with her feelings. I can’t accept this outrageous *gift*, but he deserves a civil response from me.

“A gift is a bottle of bourbon or a nice pair of gloves. Maybe concert tickets. Not waterfront property worth millions of dollars.” My voice is starting to get prickly and I pause for a beat to recalibrate. “You love that place. It’s your escape.”

“I do love it. But not as much as you love it. I’ve never seen you happier than you were gazing out over the ocean.”

There’s nothing worse than trying to reason with a man who’s decided



that his idea is the best thing he's ever heard, and has his mind set on it.

"I can replicate the house anywhere," he continues. "But you won't."

*Because I can't.* "Gray—I can't afford the property taxes on the beach house, let alone the upkeep."

He rifles through the envelope and pulls out a single sheet of paper. "It's been taken care of for the duration of your lifetime."

I don't even glance at the paper. "It's too much."

"I don't have anyone special to spend money on. My brothers have more than their great-grandchildren can ever spend. I set up a trust for Gracie, so she'll always have her own money—money her father doesn't control." The mischief in his eyes tells me JD doesn't know about this little gift. Even in the middle of a testy discussion, it makes me smile.

"But other than that," Gray says softly, "there's no one. Let me do this."

*No!* "I don't know. I'm not sure I can."

We sit quietly for a long while. Each alone with our separate thoughts. I don't know what his are like, but mine are so jumbled they don't resemble anything coherent. The only thing I recognize in the morass is my mother. *"Don't be a little fool," she says, primping her hair, with the smell of cheap jasmine practically gagging me. "Let him take care of you."*

That would be a big *no*.

"I promised myself when the mission was over," Gray says, his brow crinkled tightly, "I'd help you make it right with Smith or find some work that suits you better. I convinced myself that I'd introduce you to a few guys, stand-up men and experienced Doms, who would be good to you." His voice is heavy with sorrow, the grief twisted into every strangled word.

He might not be thrilled about it, but he's willing to *introduce* me to experienced Doms. *What did you expect, Delila? You are a fool.* I swipe a lone tear from the corner of my eye before he notices.

"But I can't do it," he concedes with the rawness that accompanies unfettered emotion. "I'm not prepared to let you go, Delilah. I love you."

The tears are falling too fast to swipe them away unnoticed. Gray gets up and lifts me off the seat, carrying me into the bedroom while I sob into his chest.

He kicks the door shut behind us, and lays me on the bed. My eyes are closed, but I feel the mattress dip beside me.

"I want us to be partners, in everything." He brushes some hair off my face, his fingertips so gentle it makes me melt. "The club, the work I do with

EAD, and in every other aspect of my life—I want you by my side. We make a great team.”

I feel as though I need to say something to acknowledge his unguarded confession, but I can't find the right words to convey what I'm feeling. I don't even know what I'm feeling. “This comes as a surprise. A shock, really.” I gaze at him, grazing my fingers over his scruff. “I need some time to sort through it all.”

Gray kisses my nose. “Take as much as you need.” His eyes glaze over, and his Adam's apple bobs not once, but twice. “There are two other things to throw into the mix for you to consider as you're deciding.” He rolls onto his back, staring at the ceiling. “I knew Kyle from the Bureau.”



## DELILAH

I draw a slow, jumbo-size breath, and brace myself, because the other shoe is about to drop. I feel it in my bones.

“He was an abuser,” Gray says flatly. The same way he might say grass is green or cotton balls are soft—simple, incontrovertible facts. “The worst kind of sadist. He bragged about how he preyed on you, reeled you in, and groomed you for pain.”

The sear in my chest is pure agony. Gray’s words are a rusty blade piercing the skin and snaking into the muscle until it’s wedged deep.

It’s one thing to know I followed the scraps into the trap like a fool—manipulated and gaslighted for years. A *victim* of my own stupidity. But it’s quite another to have others know the extent of my idiocy. To have Gray know.

My relationship with Kyle was tortured and conflicted, especially as I got older and wiser. I’ve worked hard to create the perfect façade around it, not just for the benefit of others, but it’s a lie I tell myself too. Not to protect Kyle. He doesn’t deserve my loyalty. I keep the truth hidden to protect *me*.

Gray knows I was weak and stupid—an operative who couldn’t even save herself from an asshole. He knows everything. *He’s always known.*

I cover my face with my arm. *Jesus Christ.* It’s so humiliating.

“I’ve never forgiven myself for not reaching out to warn you the fuck away from him.”

I want to shake Gray. To grab him by the throat and scream *shut up!*

“I should have killed the sonofabitch when I had the chance. I’m sorry, Delilah. I let you down.”

“I didn’t need a protector then, and I still don’t,” I spit out, with as much dignity as I can muster. “It was a lesson that needed learning.”

My head is throbbing, the loose fragments racing through my mind in damning circles. Then it smacks me in the face. *Oh God. No, please. No.*

Smith’s father, General Sinclair, was the head of the Joint Chiefs during all that mess with the congressman. He was there when I testified, and at the end of the hearing, he approached me in the hall: “*A life well-lived is the best revenge,*” he said, handing me Smith’s card. “*Tell my son I sent you.*”

*Was it all a con?*

“Did you arrange my job with Smith?”

He turns his head toward me, meeting my eyes. “Nope. I had nothing to do with that.”

I feel myself relax a little. “There’s no need for you to harbor any guilt for what happened between Kyle and me. I take full responsibility for my part in it.”

Gray rolls on top of me, pinning my hands near my head. “Oh no, you fucking don’t,” he growls. “That was not your fault. None of it.”

“I had a brain and two good working feet. I could have walked away. I wasn’t a prisoner.”

He glowers at me, and I turn my cheek to the mattress so I don’t have to look at him. I don’t need him trying to make excuses for me. It only makes me feel worse. “Get off me.”

He doesn’t budge.

“You were an anxious kid who had never been out of her small Mississippi town. You had stars in your eyes about joining the CIA. He was a grown man, trained in high-stakes mind games. He had a federal badge. It wasn’t a fair fight.”

I’ve never allowed myself to make excuses for my choices. That’s a coward’s game. I take responsibility for every decision, especially for the ones involving Kyle. I am not a helpless victim, and I will not allow Gray to make me one.

He eases off me, onto the mattress, and turns on his side, stroking my arm with his fingertips.

“Don’t touch me.”

He takes a ragged breath, and moves his hand.

“We knew each other three years,” I say with the sharp bite of a woman whose feelings are bruised. “We were friends. We had sex. We were

teammates on a mission where trust was everything. But you never thought to tell me that you knew my husband. Not even when I asked.”

“I couldn’t say anything when you worked at Wildflower. It would have blown my cover. After you quit, we didn’t say a civil word to each other.”

“And whose fault was that?” I snap. “There was no reason you had to carry a ruse that far.”

“It wasn’t just subterfuge. I was pissed you went to Smith instead of coming to me after we spent so much time together—after what happened at Christmas. It felt like a betrayal. And then not talking just became what we did.”

I roll onto my side with my back to him. It’s bad enough I have to listen to this, but I don’t need to look at him.

“I didn’t tell you while we were getting ready for the op—there was too damn much going on already, and so little time. And,” he pauses, “I hoped you would tell me about your marriage one day. That you’d trust me enough to show me that part of you.” He sighs. “But I’m tired of waiting. I want us to start—not over...what came before is worth keeping. But I don’t want secrets between us.”

I let my eyelids flutter closed, focusing on the familiar rhythm of his breathing. But it provides no comfort today.

Gray curls behind me so we’re almost touching. He doesn’t lay his hands on my body, and I don’t push him away.

*Two things for you to consider.* That’s what he said when we started this discussion. I don’t know if I have the energy to deal with any more, but I can’t stand the thought of a landmine still out there waiting to detonate. “You said there were two things.”

He’s so quiet and his breathing is so shallow, for a few moments I think he’s asleep. But he’s not.

“I delivered my father to his death,” he says dispassionately, his tone devoid of *any* emotion.

I gasp softly. *His father was the president.*

“I lured him to within easy range of the bullet. I wanted to take the shot myself, but couldn’t get anybody to buy that plan.”

His lack of emotion is chilling.

We’re discussing a presidential assassination like we’d talk about hunting turkey. Even the conversation we had about the archbishop’s death had more verve. “Was it sanctioned?” I ask cautiously. “Because that’s the vibe I’m

getting.”

He lays his hand on my hip. “Please don’t ask me to share the details.”

*It was sanctioned. Jesus.* “Why are you telling me any of it?”

“Because going forward, there are no secrets. Nothing separating us.” I feel his knees dip into the back of mine. “I don’t want there to be any doubt about how much I trust you. I’m going to take a lot from you, Delilah. The little girl inside you—the one who drops her Gs hard, and is proud and resilient—her anxiety will increase and her innocence will disappear in my world. It’s bound to happen.”

“She’s not innocent. That’s the whole point. She’s simple, scrappy and tough, and she knows the streets are dangerous.”

“She’s also forgiving and loyal and much too hard on herself. Whatever you think you’ve done, I’ve done worse.” He wraps his arms around me, enveloping me in his body. “I told you about my father because I want you to have serious power—in case you ever need it. My world is dangerous, and the danger often lurks in unexpected places. Think of it as the ultimate safe word, to use if you ever need to save yourself.”

I allow myself to slip into sleep, dragged by the emotional tsunami. I don’t fight it, because I need the escape that even restless sleep provides.



I WAKE up a couple of hours before we’re scheduled to touch down. Gray isn’t in the room, and I’m relieved to have a few minutes alone to think.

Last night comes flooding back. He lured his father, *the president*, to his death. Suddenly, *I knew Kyle from the Bureau* doesn’t seem like such a big revelation.

Damien Wilder was the monster of all monsters. Molested little girls, and had his wife and daughter killed. There were so many other evil deeds, but selling dangerous compounds to the enemy, compounds that could be lethal to our soldiers on the battlefield—simply to line his pockets—that was a bridge too far even for his most ardent supporters.

There were hushed whispers that the assassination was an inside job, but no evidence ever surfaced. Shortly after the funeral, Americans moved on to other things. All but the most fanatical kooks tire of conspiracy theories eventually. In truth, President Wilder needed to die. Even more than

Archbishop Darden.

I shower and compose myself before going out into the cabin. Gray's there. His dark hair above the leather seat is what I see first. I square my shoulders as I approach. There's no telling what fresh hell our next conversation might hold. But I'm well-rested and clear-headed. And more than anything, I don't want to fight with him.

"Good morning, or afternoon," I say, sitting across from him. "I haven't slept that long in forever. Did you sleep?"

"Here and there. How are you?" he asks cautiously.

"A good night's sleep always makes things clearer."

"Have you decided?" He's hopeful, and confident that we can make it work—but I'm not sure. I haven't had as much time to rifle through the layers.

"If I want to be your partner in crime?"

He laughs, and I hope the sparkle in his eyes is a good barometer of his mood.

"No. I haven't decided."

"Would it be easier to make a decision if I slipped a ring on your finger?"

*What?* "No." I put my hands up to stop any further discussion along those lines. "I need to go back home. To Mississippi."

"Are there answers there?"

"I'm not sure, but something's telling me that I need to go and see for myself if the little girl inside—and the woman she's become—is strong enough to survive in your world without losing herself. Her values. Her very essence."

He nods, resigned to the necessity of the trip. "Give me a day or two to put out fires at Wildflower, and then we can leave."

I shake my head. "I need to find those answers alone. If you're with me, the setting will be different, but it'll all still be murky."

Gray leans back and stretches his legs out, tapping his foot against mine. "Take Trippi with you."

"I need to go alone."

He gets up and takes the seat near me, arranging the chairs until our knees are practically touching. "We have no idea what we just left behind, or what the next few weeks hold. None. Take Trippi, or don't go."

Inky flickers have replaced the sparkle in his eyes. It's about to storm, and it's going to be a belly-washer.



“I will not be your prisoner.”

“You damn sure will be, if that’s what’s necessary. Your safety, *your life*, isn’t up for negotiation.” His jaw is so tight, it’s twitching.

“Look,” he adds, with far less harshness. “I fully respect your need to get away from me, but there’s no reason for you to avoid Trippi. He doesn’t talk much. It’ll be like you’re alone.”

He’s cajoling. But it’s true. Trippi’s not a chatterbox. “I’ll think about it,” I mutter, but we both know Trippi’s coming with me.

Neither of us say another word until the wheels hit the tarmac.

Gray’s not happy, but he doesn’t fight me when I insist on going back to my house for the night. I’m sure there will be security all over the place, but I appreciate him not making a big fuss about it.

When it’s time to say good-bye, he cups my face and presses his lips to mine. The kiss is at once a slow burn, filled with pleas and promises, and a mournful dirge.

Before I pull away, I cradle his jaw, enjoying the prick of the stubble on my palm. “Do you know what my favorite quote is?” He tilts his head to the side, waiting for me to tell him. “*Some men just need killin’.*”

A lazy smile spreads slowly across his face, and embers of hope catch fire in his eyes. He pulls me into his chest. “I love you, Blue Eyes. Pack that away, and keep it with you.”



## DELILAH

I haven't been home in a while, and there are chores to tend to that can't wait until I return from the trip. At least that's what I tell myself. The truth is, I haven't been to Mississippi since we buried Mr. Marshall, and I'm not looking forward to revisiting ghosts from the past.

By the time I work up the courage to go, nearly a week has passed.

I'm in my driveway when Trippi pulls up in a black Mercedes sedan, wearing a somber suit. The poor guy doesn't have a chance to get out of the car before I start flappin' my jaw. "We are *not* taking that thing."

"Good morning, ma'am. It's a comfortable ride. What exactly is the problem?"

"We'll take my car."

He glances at my soft-sided Jeep. "That would be a resounding *no*. I'm not driving that thing for fifteen hours through the back roads and across state lines."

"Who said anything about you driving? You can ride shotgun."

Poor guy looks like he ate something that didn't agree with him. He's right. I love my little Jeep, but it's not built for a long trip. The bouncing gets old after a while.

"Okay. Here's what we're going to do," I tell him. "You go back to Wildflower, and choose a vehicle from the fleet that doesn't look so *Driving-Miss-Daisy-ish*. And while you're at it, put on a pair of jeans or some shorts, anything that looks less like you're a pallbearer at my funeral. Makes me nervous."

Trippi, God love him, is watching me like I've lost my mind.

“You can take the first shift behind the wheel,” I offer, as an olive branch.

He turns around and gets into the car, slamming the door so hard it rattles. But he doesn’t say a word, returning an hour later in a shiny black Grand Cherokee with a sunroof, and wearing a pair of faded jeans.

“Good choice.” I toss my bag in the backseat and take the passenger seat up front. I’m sure he’d prefer me in the back with the bag.

“Where we going?” he asks, backing out of the driveway.

“Gray didn’t tell you?”

“All he said was that I’m to escort you to Mississippi, and to pack casually. You’d give me the details.”

“Ever hear of Digger’s Hollow?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“It’s near Vicksburg, in a corner of the state nobody visits.” That doesn’t seem to ring much of a bell for him, either. “It’s fifteen hours to the Mississippi border from here, but Digger’s Hollow is clear across the state. A few hours from Baton Rouge.”

He rubs a thumb along his jaw. “Enter it into the navigation.”

I play with the nav, but I can’t enter a location. “Something’s wrong. It’s not working. I’ll plug the address into my phone.”

Trippi is quiet. I am too, but only on the outside. Inside, my mind is hard at work, combing through every word Gray said on the plane. I’ve spent hours and hours this past week examining every side, weighing the evidence for and against. Do I want to be his partner, *for life*? Ring or no ring, that’s really what he’s asking.

I click through the four distinct parts that I keep coming back to. The part about him knowing Kyle is where I always end up first. I’m still embarrassed, but less so now, and I do understand about protecting one’s cover. I’ve all but forgiven him on that account.

Then there’s the beach house. *Sweet Jesus*. What else is there to say?

The Parisian Pop-Tart? *I’m keeping him forever*.

The president? While it does give me pause that *the president* he conspired to murder was also his father, *some men just need killin’*. I haven’t changed my mind about that.

Trippi’s phone rings forty-five minutes into the drive. “Yeah. Fine as a fiddle,” he says sarcastically. “She’s sitting right here, waiting for an opportunity to drive.” He scoffs. “Like that’s ever happening.”

I give him the stink-eye as he hands me the phone. “Hello.”

“Hey,” Gray says. “I know I’m supposed to give you some time, but I thought you’d like to know Saher’s plane landed in London overnight. She’s under the protection of the British government.”

“She went.” *She went.* I can barely form the words. “She got on the plane.” *Oh, God.* “I can’t believe it. I wasn’t sure she’d take the risk.” If I were in my kitchen right now, I’d be dancing and cheering loudly for her and her sweet little boy.

“She’s not out of the woods.”

The thought is sobering. He’s right. The celebration should wait.

“Neither are you,” he adds, emphatically. “This might be the most dangerous time. Watch yourself.”

“Thanks for letting me know about Saher. I feel like she and Amir have a fighting chance now.” There’s nothing more I want to say, but it pains me to hang up. “I’ll call you when we get back.”

I hand Trippi the phone, and he grunts a few times before ending the call.

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WE STOP at a small convenience store for drinks, but I stay in the Jeep. When Trippi comes back, I’m in the driver’s seat. He shakes his head, but doesn’t complain.

“Let’s go,” he says. “Try not to kill me.”

“Just think. You could be with Baz right now on vacation, lying on the beach with someone warm and pretty.”

He doesn’t reply.

Trippi is a big, scary-looking dude, who gives off a Southern California vibe unless he’s trying to intimidate you. But he’s from the center of the country, if I remember correctly.

“You’re from Missouri?” I ask. I’m not into idle chitchat, but it’s better if I talk while I’m driving. It’ll keep me from disappearing inside my head. It’s dusk, and we’ve been on the road for more than twelve hours. I need to concentrate. Besides, I’ve already spent too much time in my head this trip.

“Yep. The heartland. Where mom, apple pie, football, and ribs rule.”

“Ribs are Southern food.”

“Pfft.”

“So no girlfriend, huh?”

“I’m gay, Delilah.”

*Oh.*

“You surprised?”

“With all that mom and apple pie shit, I figured you hooked up with the girl next door. But to be honest, I never gave your love life any thought until now.”

“Once someone knows I’m a SEAL, their mind never goes there. You ever met a gay SEAL?”

“Maybe.” I shrug. “I don’t know.”

“You should check out some gay SEAL porn. It’s an eye-opener.” His laugh booms through the Jeep.

“I’ll pass. But thanks for the tip.”

“Your loss.” He reclines the seat a bit, and settles in. “What the fuck are we doing?”

“Going to Mississippi.”

“I get that part. But why?”

“That’s where I’m from. I need some answers.”

“You got family there?”

“No.”

“Friends?”

“No. What got you so chatty all of a sudden?” I’m churlish, which he doesn’t deserve.

“I’m a chatty guy. Not at work. I have a role to play there—serious driver and bodyguard to a mouthy blonde who handles herself pretty well without anyone’s help.” He opens a bag of kettle corn and offers me some. I shake my head. “But we’re on a road trip,” he continues. “To find some answers in bumfuck Mississippi.”

I grab the bag of popcorn out of his hand. “I changed my mind.”

“If you don’t have family or friends there, where are those answers going to come from? Are we going to stake a flag and wait for a sign from God? Maybe a burning bush or a flood?” He snatches the popcorn from my lap.

“I don’t know,” I admit after stewing a bit. “Something’s been pulling me to Digger’s Hollow. Can’t explain it. I think the answers are there—although as we get closer, I’m not as sure anymore.”

Trippi gazes out the window. “I’m no expert. But I suspect the answers you’re lookin’ for are in Charleston, with Gray.”

“What are you, Dear Abby? I talked to Gray. There were no answers.

Only more questions.”

“Oh, I get it. You were looking for something easy. I never pegged you for a lazy-ass woman.”

“I’m not,” I snarl.

“Finding answers takes a lot of work and a lifetime of discovery. They unfold one day at a time, one problem at a time. The good times, they don’t provide answers. Only the turbulent times.”

This conversation has me agitated. *Of course, there are no answers in Digger’s Hollow.* Well, we’ve come this far, and I’m not turning back now.

“Hey,” Trippi shouts. “Lift your foot up off the gas. I want to live to see the Chiefs accept the Lombardi trophy. It’s their year.”

I ease up on the pedal, but I’m still twitchy.

We’re alone on the road, cloaked in darkness, with the streetlights few and far between. It’s a lonely part of the drive. Fits my sullen mood perfectly.

“Home must have been a real sucky place,” Trippi says, needling me.

I liked him better when he didn’t talk.

“That’s the only reason anyone would go there looking for answers. People who have happy childhoods never go looking for anything.”

“My mother wasn’t as batshit crazy as the crown prince, but she had her own special charm. If that’s what you’re askin’.”

“She pass?”

“No. But I haven’t seen her in years. She hasn’t had any influence over my life since I was a teenager. Maybe before.”

“Sure she has. She’s got a stranglehold on you. Pulling your strings from afar. Why else would we be going to Digger’s Hollow?”

*Fuck you.*

We ride in silence for another hour, but it’s not quiet inside my head. There’s nothing in Digger’s Hollow. I’ll ride by the old trailer, if it’s still there. Park across the street and let the memories of my mother chasin’ rich men convince me that after all is said and done, I’m just like her.

Only I didn’t chase Gray, looking for a payday. *I didn’t chase him at all.*

Without warning, I pull into a path on the highway, where police officers set up speed traps, and change direction.

“What the hell?” Trippi hollers. “What are you doing?”

“I need answers. Apparently, they’re in Charleston. Plug it into the navigation.”





## GRAY

There's a faint scratching sound outside my office door. Almost like a small animal. I continue to listen, but I don't hear it anymore.

*Jesus, I need some sleep. But I'm not ready to go up and lie in my bed alone, with nothing to do but jerk off while I think about Delilah and wait for her to make a decision. Fuck that.* It doesn't matter what she decides. I'm not going to walk away that easily. I'll fight to my death to convince her to give us a chance.

I get up and pour a bourbon. The club closed two hours ago, and other than me, the only person still here is the security guard.

*There's that noise again.* I take my gun from the desk drawer and go to the door, opening it cautiously, but there's nothing.

When I step out into Foxy's area, nothing seems out of place there either. I slide my gun into my back waistband, and rifle through a stack of folders on Foxy's desk, until I find the one I need.

As I turn to go back into my office, I notice a shadow on the floor that shouldn't be there. It's too big for an animal.

I reach for my weapon, but a gun's wedged into the back of my head before I can grab it.

"Hands out in front of you," the man emerging from the shadows barks. He's of medium build, dark hair, dark clothing, and English is not his primary language.

I've never seen him before.

He trains a gun on my chest as he approaches.

When the assailant behind me moves for my weapon, I twist free and dive

to the ground, pulling him with me as a shield. Just as I grab my gun, a bullet from behind shatters my shoulder, but before I'm restrained, I get a shot off that kills the bastard from the shadow. Three intruders. One down. Two to go.

"We will kill you if you do not cooperate." The smaller of the two glowers at me with nothing but hate in his eyes.

Another man skulks from somewhere in the shadows. He's wearing a Yankees baseball cap, and carrying a large duffel. *Four intruders, not three. One down. Three to go.* I repeat this to myself, so I don't lose track of the moving pieces. Unlike the others, the Yankee's fan is hesitant. He seems to be here of his own volition, but he's not brandishing a weapon.

No one bothers to check to see if their friend is still breathing. They don't even glance in his direction. *They're trained killers.*

"What do you want?" I demand, as they cuff me. My voice is louder and sterner than my position warrants. The response is a swift smack in the head with the butt of a gun. Not hard enough to take me down, but hard enough to make me see stars.

I resist as they bind my legs together and drag me into the office. The taller of the men squeezes my injured shoulder to subdue me. *Fuck!* It hurts like a sonofabitch, but I continue to struggle, because once I'm in that room, there's nowhere for me to go, and my chances only get worse.

One shuts the door, and the other two shove me onto the conference table. I wriggle to free myself, as they secure me with straps to the table. But they're quick and well-trained and I'm screwed. These are not run-of-the-mill burglars. *Mercenaries or soldiers is my best guess.*

They grunt and mutter a few words to each other in English, nothing that gives their purpose away. They're Amadis, I suspect, but it's a mistake to jump to conclusions too quickly.

I don't shout for help. It's a sure sign of weakness. Besides, they wouldn't have reached my office unless they took down the security guard first. There's no one to help.

I've been trained for this moment. I'm not sure it makes it any easier, but at least I'm not shitting myself—yet.

They make no effort to conceal their faces, and they don't blindfold me—because they don't plan on me being alive to identify them.

"Where is your whore?"

*They are Amadis.* They're talking about Delilah. No one else would ask for her in that way.

“I don’t understand.” I respond in a colloquial dialect often used by the Amadi people, to see if I’m correct. The recognition on their faces is my answer, but one of them is stupid enough to respond.

“Delilah Porter. Where is she?”

A boost of adrenaline floods in, and my heart races at her name. But I need to stay in control. “She’s a bitch,” I say with some distaste. “We had a fight on the way back from Amidane. She took off and I haven’t seen her. Maybe she’s at home.”

With any luck, she and Trippi are tucked away in rural Mississippi.

“She is not at home.”

The gun comes down hard on my face, and within seconds my left eye is so swollen I can’t see out of it. I need to get word to her. To Trippi.

“Where is she?” the shorter of the three screams into my face.

The pain in my shoulder is lessening. I’m coasting on adrenaline. “If you release me, I’ll help you find her.”

The gun comes down on my right cheek in response, and the pain is excruciating.

“Where is the whore?”

“Let me call her.” I know that neither Delilah or Trippi can be tracked by their cell phones. It’s a safety precaution. There is no immediate response from my captors, but I see their eyes dart about in an unspoken language.

While I wait, I hear baseball guy tussling with the zippers on a bag behind me, but I can’t see what he’s doing. “You’ll never find her without my help,” I say calmly, even though I’m holding back panic.

“If you do not tell us where she is, we will kill you.”

*You’re going to kill me anyway.* They haven’t entirely shut down my offer to call her. But I’m not hopeful.

While I try to think of some way to warn Delilah, my brothers’ faces appear inside my head. We’re playing pool, not far from where I am right now.

*I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean for you to find out about my covert life like this. I hate that you have to plan another funeral.*

We’re still playing pool when Delilah’s beautiful face comes into focus. *You’ll be okay,* I assure her. Good thing I re-deeded the beach house when I did. *She’ll be okay.*

I say my good-byes to them, because there’s no way out for me. But I can save Delilah. The best option to get her a message is my death. When Foxy

discovers my body tomorrow, or when she finds me missing, she'll suspect the Amadis, and she'll contact the rest of the team immediately to warn them.

It's the only option. I watch the attackers carefully. At least I'll die knowing that I protected her with my last breath. Unlike so many others, I didn't fail her. As I lie here, I find great solace in that thought.

I feel the internal shift the instructors described during EAD training. The moment when you stop fighting the inevitable, and make peace with something bigger than you.

I don't believe in God. But like other sinners at the hour of death, I pray for a quick end. If it doesn't come that way, I'll dig deep for the mental toughness to resist, like I've been trained to do. I might not have lived a virtuous life, but I will go out with honor.

"Doctor," the lanky man calls in his native language. "It's time."

The quieter of the trio approaches. He stands back from the table in his baseball cap, holding a mallet and chisel.

Sweat is spilling out of every pore. I'm drenched. The human stench is humbling.

The shorter of the three waves a pair of needle nose pliers in front of my face. "You will tell us."

I reach into my cavernous soul for courage, but it's empty. Instead, I find it in the memories of Delilah, flashing before my eyes.

"I'm not telling you a fucking thing," I growl.



## DELILAH

I lean over and slap Trippi's arm playfully. "You were right. We needed to stop to sleep."

"I'm always right," he says, pulling up to Wildflower. I gaze out the window at my future. In the moonlight, it doesn't seem so scary, anymore.

I'm eager to see Gray. To talk to him. To negotiate. To compromise. I love him, and I'm through denying myself. I'm not my mother.

I glance at Trippi. "Do you want to take my phone, since yours is dead?"

"Whose fault is it that my charger is in the town car?"

I snicker, and hold out my phone.

"Nah." He shakes his head. "I'm all set. I'm going straight home."

"Suit yourself." I grab my bag from the backseat. "Thanks for making the trip with me."

"Thanks for not making me hang out in Digger's Hollow, waiting for a sign."

After shutting the car door, I slap my hand against the chassis, gesturing for him to go, but he waits for me to get to the door. Gray never asked for my key back when I left Wildflower. I'm sure he assumed I turned it in to Smith. I didn't. And I hope it still works, because I'd love to surprise him.

The grin on my face explodes when the key turns. *Voila!* I push open the door, and wave Trippi off. He pulls a quick U-turn and he's gone.

When I reach down for my bag, I notice that no one is in the guard house at the far side of the building. *That's really strange.*

I walk over to the edge of the portico, and my eye lands on a puddle at the perimeter of the parking lot. Something is dripping off the curb near the

arborvitae. It hasn't rained for weeks.

The prickle of awareness creeps in slowly, as I draw my weapon and go around to the gate, hugging the tall bushes as I move. When I snake back around through the brush, TJ, the security guard who mans the parking lot gate, is on the ground between the fence and the bushes. He has a hole in his head, but I touch his neck, searching for even a faint pulse.

He's still warm, but he's dead. *Fuck.*

*Gray.* Gray! The panic rises, but I squelch it as I place the call. Gray doesn't pick up. My hands are trembling as I call Smith. I scan the area, looking for threats while waiting for him to answer.

"Sinclair," he barks.

"Bring a team to Wildflower. The security guard at the gate took a bullet. He's dead and I can't reach Gray."

"On my way," Smith says. "Is this related to the op?"

"Can't say for sure." I glance up. There's light peeking through the shutters in his office. "I think Gray's inside."

"Do not go in until we get there. I repeat. Do not go inside without backup."

"Hurry." I hang up without making any promises.

Other than the light in the office, the building is dimly lit, with some areas in total darkness.

Gray never turns on the alarm until he goes upstairs for the night. Security wasn't near the door when I unlocked it, but that's not unusual, although I would have expected the guard to notice the door ajar by now.

This is bad. Worse than TJ being dead, bad. I can feel it.

I scan for danger one more time before abandoning my position. It's clear out here. At least it appears to be.

Without lowering my guard, I approach the front of the building low to the ground, and squeeze through the door, making as little noise as possible. Once inside, I creep along the wall so as not to cast a shadow. It's dark in the inner hall and I almost trip over something. *An arm. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.*

It's not Gray. There's no real relief, just building fear. *What if I didn't get here in time for Gray?*

The guard appears to have bled out—there's no pulse. It's Ainsley. *Shit.* I take his weapon and proceed cautiously, every move deliberate. I dread what's waiting for me ahead. Gray can't be dead. He just can't be. *Get it together, Delilah. There might still be assailants in the building. This is no*

*time for a meltdown.*

“*Fuckkkk!!*” Gray’s harrowing scream cuts into the deathly silence.

I want to run toward the voice, but I know better. My heart pounds wildly as I inch along.

“Where is she?” a man’s voice shouts. “Where is your whore?”

*They want me.* Gray groans. It’s tortured, sending chills up my spine. From outside Foxy’s office, I see Gray’s door is closed. But that’s where the voices—

There’s a body on the floor. I inch closer. He’s not moving.

Maybe I can make a deal. My life for Gray’s. They’re asking for me. *It won’t work.* It’ll just get us both killed.

“Where is Delilah Porter?”

The sound of my name strikes terror in my soul. I need to get him out of there. *How?*

*A distraction.* That might work. I could go in through the back door of his office. Surprise them.

I slip into the dining room and crouch under a banquet table at the far end, out of sight. Risk be damned, I have to make the contact.

**Delilah:** Gray is being tortured. What’s the code to the back way into his office?

**Foxy:** How many?

**Delilah:** Unclear. Two voices besides Gray’s.

**Foxy:** You can’t get into the office unnoticed. In the storage room, there’s a false wall that contains a vault with gear. Can you get there?

**Delilah:** Yes.

Gray screams as I make my way to the storage room. Foxy texts instructions to open the safe and I follow them explicitly, grabbing a pair of night vision goggles and a silencer from inside.

I’m going to create a distraction. *What kind of distraction, Delilah?*

Gray’s warning blasts in my head. *If you contact my handler, she won’t lift a finger to protect you unless she can do it without compromising the agency. She won’t even protect me if it comes to that. Her job is to protect the integrity of the mission, and that of the agency. It’s not to save us if things get too messy.*

Screw it. I’m not entirely certain, but to be safe, I send one last text.

**Delilah:** If you do anything to clean this mess up before I get him to safety, I’ll claw my way out of hell and find those grandchildren you love so



much, and I'll torture their parents while they watch, slit mommy and daddy's throats, and let the kiddies live out the rest of their lives with the horror.

**Foxy:** You're on borrowed time.

*"AHHH!"*

My heart jolts at the sound of his voice. It's tormented, and growing weaker.

*Think, Delilah. Think.*

Okay. I have it. Create the distraction, wait, kill, and then take the other one. I repeat this like a mantra as I go into the kitchen, and set off the smoke alarm. There's no mistaking the sound. It's the internal alarm that's used for testing. It's not hooked up to the central system. But it's loud.

I'm on pins and needles waiting for the door to open, praying to a God I've never known. As soon as the figure turns the corner, I take the shot using a silencer, and he's down. My breathing is ragged as I take his gun, and slink toward the office.

The door is ajar. It will be a few minutes before his friend comes looking for him, and I need to decide whether to enter the office or wait.

"Where is your bitch?" a man yells from inside.

He's going to punish Gray now. That's been the pattern: Question. A brief silence. Gray's tortured voice. Over and over.

I position myself outside the doorway. I can't see much, only the back of the attacker, hovering over someone on a table—*that must be Gray*. The strangled cry comes, and I lean into the doorway and take the shot while the bastard is distracted by the scream.

*Two down.*

Without thinking, I enter the room. The presence of a third man surprises me. He freezes, eyes wide, and I shoot him in the forehead without hesitating.

My gaze goes to the table. To Gray's bloody, swollen face. It's agony. His shirt has been cut away and his chest looks like it's been sliced in several places. I need to get him out of here. *Now.*

"How many are there?" I ask, lightly brushing my hand over his hair.

"Four," he mutters. My knees wobble, and I blow out the breath I'm holding.

"It's going to be okay," I promise him. "They're all dead. But we still need to get out of here in case there are others on the way. Can you sit up?"

He shakes his head. "Ribs. You. Go."

I nod. My soul weeps. It's a brutal technique used by the Amadis and others to torture captives. They break one rib at a time, until eventually, both lungs are pierced and the victim dies. Gray can't go anywhere. And I'm not going anywhere without him.

I call Smith while I lock the office door, and pin a chair under the knob. It's not much protection, but it's something.

"We're about to enter," Smith barks. "Where the fuck are you?"

"Gray's office. I think it's over. But use caution. He needs an ambulance." I toss the chair and unlock the office door for Smith before returning to Gray.

"Right outside," Smith replies.

Gray's breathing is shallow, and he slips in and out while I unstrap him from the table. I use the utmost care, but he grimaces as each strap loosens. "An ambulance is right outside. I know it hurts like a sonofabitch. They'll give you medicine for the pain as soon as they get here. You're going to be okay." I murmur it over and over, as much for me as for him.

"You—shouldn't—be—here. Consequences," he chokes out each word in a lucid moment. I smile softly at his threat.

"I came to tell you I love you." I rub the top of his hand. "And of course, I'm here. Where else would I be? The queen's the most powerful player on the board—always in service to her king."

His hand tightens around mine, and he chokes up blood. He's barely breathing, and I pray that both lungs aren't damaged. If they are, he won't be alive when they get here. "Stay with me, Gray."

Somehow I manage to keep the worst of the alarm out of my voice. "Don't you dare go anywhere. Not before I get that ring you promised." I hear Smith's team in the building. "And the damn thing better be big enough to choke a chicken—screw that, a horse."

Smith barges in with the EMTs right behind him. A sob escapes that I can't stop.

Reluctantly, I let go of Gray's hand and back away slowly from the table so they can work. I make a call, my eyes never leaving Gray's face. "It's done. Sinclair Industries is cleaning up."

"Gray?" Foxy asks.

"Bad shape. But he's fighting. The EMTs are working on him."

"I've known him since he was wet behind the ears," she says with considerable distress. "I would have never done what you suggested."

“We don’t always get to choose our orders.”

“No. But we always get to choose whether we follow them.”

She’s loyal to Gray—to the bone. No one likes their loyalty questioned, and I feel a pang of regret. “I’ll keep you in the loop.”

“One more thing,” Foxy says in a stern tone. “Those grandchildren are real and entirely off-limits.”

“Understood,” I agree mindlessly, my entire focus on Gray.

I end the call with Smith beside me. “I told you not to go in,” he scolds. “That was a stupid, stupid thing to do.”

“As stupid as handing a delirious woman your weapon?” That’s exactly what he did when Kate was in trouble. “I don’t think so,” I toss over my shoulder, blowing past him to get closer to Gray.

They’re positioning him onto a stability board to get him on the stretcher. “Can we get a hand here?” one of the EMTs hollers.

Smith and I are there before all the words are out of his mouth.

The transfer is difficult. Gray isn’t conscious, but I feel every bump, every bounce, every anguished move, as a stab of pain I’m experiencing myself.

“Is he going to survive?” I whisper to the medic once Gray is on the stretcher safely.

“He’s young,” the dark-haired emergency technician says briskly. “That’s in his favor.”

“Caucasian male, thirty-four, unconscious. Blood type unknown.” The younger EMT lists Gray’s vital signs and other pertinent information into a walkie-talkie on our way to the ambulance. “Multiple contusions, several broken ribs. A gunshot to the shoulder. High suspicion of internal bleeding, and a pneumothorax on the left side. We bagged him.”

“We’ll prep the surgical trauma room,” a woman says calmly from the other end.

“We’re on our way.”

I clasp Gray’s cool hand until he’s lifted into the ambulance. A reel plays in my head. *Motorcycle rides. Sitting in his lap with my eyes closed and a breeze blowing lightly. Gray teasing about the smell of catfish. The distress consuming him when he told me about his mother’s death. Supper at the beach house under millions of stars. I love you, Blue Eyes. Pack it away and take it with you.*

My brain is sluggish and my emotions are tangled, but my eyes are sharp,

trained entirely on Gray. They don't stray until the ambulance door closes, and it speeds away.

I hug myself tight as the lights cut through the darkness and disappear. But it's not until the wails of the siren grow faint that I give myself grace and let the tears fall freely.

It can't end this way. *It just can't.*



# GRAY

## *Twelve Weeks Later*

A punctured lung, a shattered shoulder, a dozen broken ribs, an orbital fracture, a concussion, and countless contusions. It was ugly. But I survived.

Early on, there were days when I longed for the peace death surely provides. But through the surgeries, the intubation, and the initial rehab, the bossy blonde—emphasis on bossy—was having none of it. And every time I opened my eyes and she was by my side, like an angel, I wanted none of it either. I needed to live—if not for me, for her.

The initial four weeks were particularly rough. I couldn't do a thing for myself. *Nothing*. When I was finally discharged from the hospital, we hired a live-in nurse. Delilah squawked a bit. She wanted to take care of me herself. But there was no fucking way I was letting that happen. My body might be broken, but my mind was sharp. Our relationship was too new, too fragile to take away all the mystery. And I had too much pride to subject either of us to the most unpleasant matters.

There were two major breakthroughs during my recovery that propelled me forward.

At the end of the first month, Delilah rushed into the bedroom where I was resting after a particularly rough rehab session. She was pale, and shaken. “You’re never going to believe this,” she said, placing my laptop where I could see the screen.

**Crown Prince Ahmad bin Khalid Dead in a Fiery Helicopter Crash in**

big bold letters splashed across the screen.

Ahmad's death didn't shock me as much as it shocked Delilah. Political coups are messy, and I was still numb from a near-death experience. "I guess the crown prince didn't want to go away quietly."

"What does this mean?" she asked, her face ashen and her voice laden with concern. "I'm glad he's dead. But what does it mean for us?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. The king was going to remove him as heir to the throne. Ahmad would have had no qualms about killing his brother if it was necessary to consolidate his power. I doubt the king was willing to risk it. It has nothing to do with you or me."

The worry eased from her face, and I was happy to provide some small measure of comfort, because I'd been a worthless fuck since the attack.

After Delilah left the room, I stared at the screen that day, and the next. I consumed every word of every news article about his death. Devoured every broadcast. I ordered a half dozen newspapers with the headline of his demise.

I kept the newspaper clippings tucked into various places so I could look at them anytime it was hard to breathe or when the pain was particularly excruciating. It saw me through some of the rougher patches, driving me forward when I wanted to throw in the towel.

I won't apologize for reveling in his death.

In a twisted way, it fueled my recovery. But while it buoyed me, it didn't fully restore my spirit. That took a force of nature, beautifully packaged.

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AS THE WEEKS DRAG ON, I've become such a miserable wretch that even my brothers and Gabby stop visiting.

Mel still comes by three times a week. Not for me, but for Delilah. "Some people are worth the extra effort," he told me one day. "You might want to take that to heart, son."

I'm making physical progress, albeit slower than I would like, but my mind is one big clusterfuck of emotion. Anger, resentment, pity, shame—it's a huge party, and I'm the guest of honor with nothing to do but lick my wounds. And although I don't care who watches, Delilah has had a front row seat to the misery. She nudges and nags, but she never complains. In some ways, it makes it easier for me to descend into the darkness.

Despite my apathy, Wildflower is running smoothly. Delilah and Foxy fill me in daily, and try to enlist me in decision-making, but I have little interest in anything besides brooding.

Although Delilah is never far from my most pressing thoughts.

My brooding and moping are mostly about her. I toy with the idea of sending her away. Her mere presence makes me feel small, like I've lost my purpose in life.

She saved me. And she risked her life to do it. That's not how it's supposed to work. I should have been protecting her. *I should be taking care of her now.*

It's not misogyny or an outdated notion. It was my role in the relationship that we forged. *I lead. She follows.* But some days, I can't walk from one end of the apartment to the other without getting winded. I'm of little use to anyone. Especially Delilah.

But I can't do it. I'm too selfish. I love her too much to send her away, like a decent man might do. I'm taking the coward's way out instead. Acting so obnoxious that eventually she's going to tell me to go fuck myself, and slam the door behind her. It wasn't a conscious decision. Not at first. But when it became obvious, even to me, I didn't stop the destructive behavior. I still haven't stopped.

There are footsteps approaching, and I glance up from my tablet to Delilah sashaying into the bedroom. Her beauty and resilience still slay me. She has a bounce in her step, even after working all day and evening. Even knowing that she's coming home to a cranky bastard.

"Everything's closed up downstairs," she says, handing me the remote to the bullet vibrator I'd made her wear in public that first night we had supper at Wildflower.

"What's this about?"

"It's the remote to that evil little vibrator," she says, with the throaty voice of a vixen. "I know the app's on your phone, but I didn't want to mess with it. I thought we'd use the remote instead."

"I know what it is," I sneer. Sex had been an important part of our relationship. It had been a safe harbor for Delilah's submission. The one time where she always let me lead, without argument. But we haven't had sex since the plane on the way home from Amidane. I glare at the vibrator with disdain. "What exactly do you expect me to do with it?"

She steps closer to where I'm resting, and straddles my legs with her feet



on the floor and her hands on the arms of the chair. She's in my face. "What I expect," she declares in a clear, exacting voice, "is for you to show some interest in meeting my needs. That is, if you can stop feeling sorry for yourself for the ten minutes it'll take to give me an orgasm."

Shame washes over me, and I feel smaller and less like a man than I had already been feeling. I lash out without bothering to sugarcoat a single word. "Meet your own needs. Or have you gotten so spoiled you've forgotten how to take care of yourself?" I toss the remote across the room, but it doesn't go far, because I'm still a weak sonofabitch.

Without blinking, Delilah picks the damn thing up off the floor. "Fine," she replies, in a voice that means things are far from fine.

But I don't give a shit.

She doesn't spare me even a small glance before she reaches under her skirt, pushes aside the lacy thong, and dips her fingers into that pussy I once worshiped. With great aplomb, she pulls out the small toy—all while I watch, captivated by her self-assurance.

"Stand up, turn around, and bend over. Ass in the air," she demands, grabbing a tube of lube from the nightstand.

She's never spoken to me in this way. *No one has. They wouldn't dare.* Sure, she's been insolent and argumentative, putting me in my place when the occasion called for it, but this is different. This is a direct challenge, aimed at the very heart of who I am. "What the hell are you talking about?" The bitterness curls around each syllable.

"Since you don't want to control the remote, I figure you must want me to shove this special Lush prototype up your ass, so I can control the remote. Works for me."

I gape at her. The vibrations inside are the equivalent to an earth-shattering seismic event, catapulting me from the bowels of hell, and unleashing a basic, primal drive that shakes me to the core.

"It works for you, does it?" Her face tilts up, in a huffy little pout—a rebellion.

*You are not staging this kind of a rebellion against me, Blue Eyes. Not while I'm still breathing.*

"I'm the team leader. That kind of insolence won't be tolerated." My tone is firm, and unyielding. It invites no backtalk. "There will be consequences. Not just today, but ongoing."

Her brow is raised, as she continues to test me. It's a silent, but

unmistakable prodding.

“Take your clothes off, Delilah, *for me.*”

A ghost of a smile forms as she undresses slowly, shaking her gorgeous ass at me more than necessary. It awakens my cock from a slumber that’s lasted too damn long.

When fully naked, she drops the vibrator and the remote into my lap, and stands waiting for instructions, with her hands behind her and her eyes lowered.

“I won’t be needing these.” I place the toys on the table next to me. “Get the leather case from the bottom shelf of my closet.” I stand, and the pain claws at me with every movement, but I don’t wince. “But first, come here.”

Delilah steps closer, so close I feel the heat emanating from her body.

With the resolve of a dying man wanting to save himself, *wanting to save us*, I slide my fingers through her silky hair and press my mouth to hers, feeding off her lips, her tongue, exploring every crevice of her body with eager hands and probing fingers. I’ve missed this so damn much. Missed *her* so much.

All I hear are the sounds of arousal. Pounding hearts, blood coursing, and Delilah’s sultry moans and purrs filling my soul until the need for more pulls us apart. “Go,” I murmur, but neither of us wants her to go. I sure as hell don’t.

Eventually she turns toward the closet, rolling back a satchel of toys that she lays at my feet. I can’t bend to rifle through the bag. The realization rattles me, and the anxiety starts to build. Aside from a few unsatisfying attempts at jacking off in the shower, my dick has been largely dormant. *What if—*

“Sir,” she whispers, jolting me from my fears.

Dominance isn’t about sex. For some people, it doesn’t involve sex at all. I’ve repeated this countless times to Dominants and submissives just entering the lifestyle. For most of us, it’s who we are at our center. The roles are a state of mind, not a sexual missive.

I gaze at the remarkable woman who threw me a lifeline tonight. “Take out the Hitachi.”

Her eyes shimmer at the word. The flush creeps across her chest in a web pattern, making my dick throb.

“Do you need to be bound?” It’s a challenge, because I know before I ask that she’s too damn proud to say yes.

She lifts her chin, and shakes her head. “No, Sir.”

I motion to the Tantra chair, steadying her while she drapes her prone body over the highest arch, where I can have easy access to everything that will give us both pleasure.

“I want to see *my* pussy,” I demand.

She spreads her legs for me, hooking her feet around the chair.

My cock jumps at her glistening pink flesh, and I lower my mouth. It’s impulsive, and not what I had planned. But it’s what I need. It doesn’t matter that my chest aches to bend. I need to taste her more than I’ve ever needed anything.

“I take care of you. It doesn’t matter if it’s with my mouth, my fingers, my cock, or a toy. I do the fucking. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she gasps. The word tumbles off her tongue with a breath.

I lower my mouth, and lick, and suck, and nip, sliding my tongue into her wet little hole until she tightens and thrashes, with my name on her lips, and the tremors of her release on mine. Her orgasm, her needy little moans, her trembling body—it’s like a shot of energy that spurs me on.

I want more. More of her. More of everything.

“What’s your safe word?” I ask, plugging the wand into an outlet.

“Red.” She’s panting, but she doesn’t hesitate.

I slap her exposed pussy twice before I hold the wand to her quivering flesh. Her back arches as she white-knuckles the sides of the chair. “Is this what you wanted?” I taunt, while I yank the first orgasm from her.

“Yes,” she screams, as my cock grows thicker and harder. “Yes.”

I ask the question over and over as I wrench one orgasm out after another. She stops answering after the third time I ask. But I’m a man possessed, and her trembling body is the only response I need.

“*Please*. I can’t. No more,” she pleads. But she never uses her safe word.

I run my hand over her inner thighs, enjoying the satiny skin against my fingers. “I decide when you’re done. And I don’t think you are.” I lower the wand and turn it higher.

With her legs shaking as she writhes through the next climax, I let the toy drop and unbuckle my belt, tugging at the button and zipper, until my angry, fat cock is in my hand.

I hover over her, pulling and jerking the swelling shaft while it weeps.

My eyes never leave Delilah’s, but I don’t really see her. I don’t think of her softness, her sweet musky scent, or even how much I love her. I’m

blinded by a desperate need for release—from my demons, my pain, and the fortress I built around my soul after the attack. I don't want to live like this anymore.

I'm so close. All I know is the force driving me over the edge in a gallop to bliss. I hear the roar of release detonating every cell. Every nerve. I shudder as it claws its way out of the pain.

"This is what I wanted," she cries, finally answering the question I repeatedly posed to her. Her voice is joyous, like a prayer for the rain that falls after a punishing drought. As I spray thick ropes of cum over her skin, I see the blurred edges of a jubilant smile.

*Now we're done.*

Not just her, but me too. Done with the pity parties, and the sullenness that's become a way of life. It's done. *Done.*

When I look back on tonight, I won't remember anything about sex or consequences. It was so much more.

Delilah gave me back my honor tonight. My purpose. I was rudderless, headed into the darkest depths of the ocean, and she threw an anchor.

The feisty little blonde gave me my life back. *Again.* She forced me to take it.

Beginning tomorrow morning, and every one after that, I vow to wake up early, rehab, shower, put on a suit and go downstairs to work. I'll set lofty goals, because I have big plans for us, and I promise myself that I won't act on them until I'm back to normal.

It's all the incentive I need.

## SIX MONTHS LATER

### Delilah

This morning, I received an engraved invitation to join the king for dessert. *My king*. I was instructed to take the elevator to the lower level at exactly eight o'clock. I have no idea what Gray's planning, but I do know that Jolie and Gil, the fantasy creators, have been here a lot recently, reimagining some of the rooms.

As I descend into the playground of the rich and powerful, I think of nothing but Gray's heart-stopping smile and his bright-blue eyes that twinkle playfully again.

While I'm sometimes overwhelmed by the excesses of the life we lead, I no longer worry about earning my keep, or that I'm not enough. I do, and I am. It's that simple. And when it's not, the man who owns my heart, sets me right.

Gray and I have forged a true partnership. At work, at home, and at play.

Most portrayals of Dominants and submissives are crafted to fit a stereotype. We found our own unique identity, as every couple should.

The rules are renegotiated frequently, and compromises are made. Except in the bedroom. I choose to follow there. It frees me in a way that's impossible to explain to anyone who doesn't appreciate the dynamic.

Although Gray looks healthy and gorgeous, and he's regained all the muscle he lost, I'll go to my death with the image of him strapped to the table in his office, bloodied and barely breathing. The space has been entirely redone, the table is gone, but I still see the horror every time I enter the room.

His body *and* his mind have healed. The former took courage, perseverance, and heart. More than most humans have inside them for a lifetime. The latter took the threat of a vibrator shoved up his ass. If I had known it was going to have such a big impact, I would have made the threat sooner.

The elevator stops with a tiny bounce that makes the butterflies in my belly swirl faster. When the doors open, my man awaits.

“I hope you have something special for dessert. I put on my favorite dress.” It’s actually Gray’s favorite, with a lace-up bodice that he loves to unfasten with skilled, unhurried hands that never fail to bring me pleasure.

He pulls me to him, kissing me slowly, until I sway into his body, brushing against his cock. “You’re a tease,” he murmurs. “Let’s go find your treat.”

Gray leads me to a room at the very end of the hall. The plaque outside the door is covered. “Go on,” he encourages. “Peel off the wrapping.”

I glance between him and the plastic covering. “Is this my kind of dessert, or *your* kind?” I tease.

“We have similar appetites. But you’ll have to see if it suits you.”

I pull the sticky covering off. *Queen’s Quarters* is etched into the brass plate.

He hands me a shiny key and nods.

My hands are a little shaky as I slip the key into the lock and turn it. Not because I’m afraid, but because I’m eager and aroused. And Gray has the hungry look of a predator. I know everything that comes with that sexy look.

I pull open the door, and Gray flips the switch that illuminates a crystal chandelier hanging in the center of the room. It’s similar to the one at the beach that I love. The one that makes shadows dance on the ceiling.

The room is decorated opulently, in every shade of blue, the palest creams, and warm gold tones.

“Jolie wanted to make the room silver and blue,” he explains, “but the silver felt icy and aloof. I wanted something more inviting. Something that would envelop you in warmth, especially after we play. You get so cold.”

I turn to him and take his hand, squeezing his fingers. “It’s beautiful.” My heart is full, but the words don’t come easy.

“This is your room,” he says, the edges of his mouth curling ever so slightly. “Dedicated to your needs and desires. You’re the queen. No one else plays in this room besides you.”

I blink away the moisture building. “Who will I play with, if it’s only me?” I ask coyly.

Gray laughs, and his eyes glitter with the best kind of mischief. “Mostly the king, although you might need a knight to save you on occasion, or maybe even a rogue. Although the king is a bit of a rogue.”

His expression turns dark and sultry, but I’m a bit overwhelmed and I don’t respond in kind. I don’t respond at all.

“Why don’t you explore a little?” Gray is in tune to my moods, my fears, and anxieties. He must sense that I need space to untangle the welling emotion.

I ignore the throne in the room, the stocks, the hooks on the ceiling, and those protruding from the walls, cleverly disguised as embellishments. I walk past the bank of drawers filled with the queen’s toys, or maybe they belong to the king. I glance up at the goodies for impact play that are part of every room on this floor. But what captures my attention is the wall of portraits, each positioned in an ornate gold frame.

Some are sexy images that I realize are actually priceless paintings. Interspersed between the precious art are renderings and photographs, framed exquisitely, making them appear priceless too. There are pictures of Digger’s Hollow, of me as homecoming queen, and another as a Magnolia Princess—the pictures had appeared in the newspaper, years ago. They’ve all been enhanced and fit in perfectly alongside the more valuable pieces. There’s also an array of photos Gray took over the last several months—candid of me, and a picture Gabby took of us at Christmas.

“This is where the past and the present meet to build the future,” he says quietly.

“I still worry that my life will swallow you and turn you into something that neither of us recognize.” He combs his fingers through my hair, gently brushing the loose strands off my face. “This is where we come to recalibrate when we can’t find the little girl from Digger’s Hollow, or when my own demons are rumbling, or when the world is making so much noise that it threatens our love.”

The lump in my throat is far too big to swallow. Gray wraps his arm around my shoulder, and kisses my head.

I’m lost. Lost, because although the bones of this fantasy were designed by Jolie and Gil, Gray’s hand is all over it. There is not one object in this room, big or small, that doesn’t have some significance. There is *nothing* in

this space that doesn't have a reason for being here, one Gray can explain to me if I ask. I'm sure of it.

But I'm mostly lost, because his love is so much more than I ever dared to imagine for myself.

"Come with me," he says, leading me toward the door where we entered.

"This is where the queen disrobes." He points to a small alcove with an elaborate coat rack and a tufted bench. "No clothes are worn in the Queen's Quarters. While she's far, far more important than the politicians, the media moguls, and the titans of industry who play on this floor, like them, she must fully submit to the fantasy when she enters, handing over her worries, her fears, and her burdens. They remain at the door."

I'm not overwhelmed by the riches in this room, or even by the comparison to the rich and powerful. No, I'm overcome by this man—his regard for me, his seemingly endless love. A man who would pour himself into creating a jewel box just *for me*.

"The only thing you're permitted to wear once you enter is this," he says, pulling out a small velvet pouch from his pocket.

I assume it's a bullet vibrator or some other small devilish toy, and I grin at him.

Gray no longer has the hungry look of a predator. His characteristic smirk is a small, humble smile, and his eyes have a vulnerability that he would be loath to admit.

As soon as he places the pouch in my hands, I know it's something weightier than a toy.

I stare at it for several seconds, using my index finger to circle the circumference of the object through the luxurious nap.

"Do you need some help?"

I shake my head, and pull open the strings, gently removing the ring from the pouch.

It's silver—maybe white gold or platinum—with a brilliantly cut stone. A sapphire, I think. But I'm not sure of any of it. It's not the sort of thing a girl from Digger's Hollow comes across every day. The one thing I do know is it's big enough to choke a chicken—maybe even a pony.

Gray tips my chin up. "It's a blue diamond," he explains, without making me feel inadequate. "This one is pure, without any secondary colors to enhance it. It's the color of your eyes when you're happy, and when you're aroused," he adds, tracing the contours of my face. "It's rare, like you."



He takes the ring out of my hand, and slips it on my finger. “You don’t need to tell me now. Wear it and see how it feels.”

I reach for him, and he wraps me tight against his chest. I can’t talk, because I’ll start to cry and I still hate that. But I don’t need to wait. It feels right. Not the ring, but his arms. His heartbeat. His rock-steady presence.

We hold each other for a long time, while the last year melts away, reshaping itself into foundational bricks sturdy enough to build a life on.

I peek around him to the words inscribed in gold leaf on the wall:

You can have structure without suffocating.

You can guide and lead without being overbearing.

You can follow without relinquishing all power and control.

You can hold each other up without holding each other back.

Without a drop of hesitancy, I gaze into his eyes, letting my fingertips caress his strong jaw. “I will follow, wherever you lead, for all my days on this earth.”

There is no gentleness as he claims my mouth. No apologies. I wouldn’t want it any other way.

“The queen kneels, you know,” he murmurs near my ear. It’s playful, but the gravel in his voice suggests a game not meant for children.

“She sucks cock, too,” I whisper. “I watched *The Crown*.”

He throws his head back, his chest heaving with a rich laughter that will warm me on the coldest days, for the rest of our lives.

When he unlaces my dress, his fingers engage in a long, slow tease. He doesn’t seem at all surprised to find I’m not wearing a single thing underneath.

“You’re a dirty little queen.” He grins wolfishly. “The best kind.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After being a confirmed city-girl for much of her life, Eva moved to beautiful Western Massachusetts in 2014. There, she found herself living in the woods with no job, no friends (unless you count the turkey, deer, and coyote roaming the backyard), and no children underfoot, wondering what on earth she'd been thinking. But as it turned out, it was the perfect setting to take all those yarns spinning in her head and weave them into sexy stories.

When she's not writing, trying to squeeze information out of her tight-lipped sons, or playing with the two cutest dogs you've ever seen, Eva's creating chapters in her own love story.

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