

HIGHEST BIDDER



Solo

LAUREN LANDISH
WILLOW WINTERS

SOLD

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Also by Lauren Landish

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations.
It is intended for mature readers.

All characters are 18+ years of age and non-blood related, and all sexual acts are consensual.

SOLD: HIGHEST BIDDER

BY LAUREN LANDISH & WILLOW WINTERS

She's scared and broken, but soon she'll be mine.

I was only a boy when I saw my mother murdered in front of me. That does something to a man. It turns him hard, cold and makes him an addict for control. In *all* things.

My desires are dark and what I'm interested in is far more than simple submission.

I've been waiting for someone as broken as me. Someone who truly needs to give up complete control and rely on me to take away her pain.

And then I found her.

Katia. *My* kitten.

The moment I laid eyes on her gorgeous face, full lips, and seductive curves, she stole the air from my lungs.

It's been so long since I've wanted something so intensely. She devours my every waking moment, teasing me with just a taste.

She's stronger than she knows, but haunted by a past that won't loosen its grip on her.

She's refused my collar and I know why. The last one she wore wasn't by choice.

But this time she's going to beg for it. I can give her what he didn't - true domination and trust. I'll own her pleasure, her happiness, and she can sate my desire for complete control.

I only need her to give me a chance.

Just one chance to buy her.

The moment she agrees and steps on that stage at the auction, *she's mine*. For a month she'll have to obey my every command. But she doesn't have to worry, I'll care for all her desires.

****Sold is a Dark romance. A full-length standalone novel with an HEA and no cheating.****



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PROLOGUE

ISAAC

I'm silent as I step into her room, taking in the sight of her tempting curves. She's spread for me as she lies on her back, her knees bent and heels digging into the mattress. My dick hardens in my pants as I see her pussy bared to me and glistening with need.

It's been so long since I've wanted something so intensely; she's devouring my every waking moment. Katia, my little kitten. Even when I close my eyes, she's there. I'm practically obsessed.

And now I have her.

My heart pounds with anticipation as I walk slowly toward her, the plush carpet muting the sounds of my movements.

In this moment, she's lost in her thoughts. Her expression is smooth, and her chest rises and falls with easy pressure. She belongs to no one. Not to me, not to her past.

The thick comforter beneath her small frame appears completely white, but upon closer inspection I can see the thin silver threads woven throughout create a faint damask pattern. The strands match the color of the thin scars that mar her soft skin, trailing from her shoulders down her back.

They only partially display her pain, but they also show her strength; they're proof of what she's overcome.

She has more healing to do. I'm going to help her. I know what she needs, and I can be the person who soothes her pain

by showing her the intense pleasure this kind of relationship can bring. A dark part of me craves it.

She refused my collar for weeks. I knew she wanted it, but the last one she wore wasn't by choice.

It's only several steps until I'm standing over her, admiring her gorgeous features. Her plump lips that beg me to kiss her, and her long blonde hair fanned out beneath her sun-kissed shoulders.

My gaze drifts to my collar, firmly fitted around her neck. She could take it off if she wanted. But she won't. She craves the trust and the bond between a Dominant and Submissive. But she needs the relationship of a Master and Slave.

And now she has that. I'm proud that I gave that to her.

At my seemingly sudden touch, her whimpers fill the silent room. Fuck. She's soaking wet waiting for me. My fingers trail over her soft, wet folds and I marvel at how ready for me she is, my dick straining against the zipper of my pants. Her head falls back slightly while soft moans escape her lips, but with the blindfold over her eyes, she can't see me. She didn't even know I was next to her until the tips of my fingers were hot and slick with her arousal.

I can prove to her that she can trust again, and she can sate my desire for complete control.

The moment she agreed and stepped onto that stage to be sold, *she was mine.*

"I've missed you, kitten," I murmur in a deep voice and even cadence that make her lips part with desire.

"I've missed you, Master," she breathes into the hot air, her breath coming in ragged and need lacing her voice. Her soft voice mirrors her skillful obedience. Obedience she learned from someone else, but it's mine now.

It's only been a few hours, but knowing what I had to do, the pressing matters that kept me away, made the hours seem like days and I truly missed her touch.

Her tight walls squeeze my fingers as I shove two in. I have to close my eyes as the divine feel of her begs me to take her in this moment. Instead, I pump my fingers in and out, listening to the wet noises mixed with the sounds of her soft moans. She deserves to be rewarded for waiting like the good girl she is.

Katia bites down on her lip, muffling her cries of pleasure. Her sticky wetness drips down my wrists. She's obviously missed my touch just as much.

I watch her gorgeous body as she resists the natural instinct to writhe on the large bed as I stroke against her front wall, feeling the fires of desire stoking ever higher.

Sometimes she prefers to be bound, the thick coarse rope holding her to the bed. Sometimes she even enjoys having it tied around herself. The sight of her waiting for me bound and helpless... I won't lie; I fucking love it.

Never her ankle though. I'll never wrap anything around her ankle.

The dim light in the room barely reflects the jewels shimmering from her studded ankle bracelet. It hides scars that have yet to fully heal for her. It's heavy, mimicking the weight of the chain that once pierced into her skin at the bone. It's her choice to wear it. One day, when I've truly given her freedom from her past, she'll throw it away forever.

She may be a Slave to me, but I'm her Master, and I know what she desperately needs.

Her thighs tremble as her orgasm approaches, but I don't let up. She knows not to cum yet. Not until I give her permission. I own her pleasure. We both know that.

I slide my fingers in and out of her and watch as the lust on her face changes. The thrusts of my wrist make her body jolt slightly and her legs are shaking with need for her release, but other than that, she's still.

I could do whatever I want to her right now. Not because I'm stronger, not because of a contract. But because she wants me to. No. Because she *needs* me to do whatever it is I want to do to her in this very moment.

“Why do you need me?” I ask her. I know she’s meant for me. I knew the second I saw her that she needed me just as much as I needed her.

“Master,” she whimpers, her head slightly turning to the side with the need to thrash as I continue the ruthless motions.

Even with the heavy, jeweled metal covering the scars over her ankle, she hasn’t realized. She has no idea why she needs me.

I grab her throat with my left hand, halting my movements. I put heavy pressure on her rough, sensitive G-spot with both fingers inside her. She’s close and she needs this release, but I need to hear her say it.

“Why call me a Master, Katia?” My voice is harsh as I withdraw my hand from her welcoming heat and rip the blindfold off of her. I’m careful to make sure I don’t catch her hair, but she doesn’t know that. She has no idea how careful I am around her.

She doesn’t answer, fear flashing in her pale blue eyes. Her breath hitches.

She wants to please me, but she can’t answer me. *Because she doesn’t know the answer.*

“Because you are my Master,.” she says with faux confidence.

I lean forward, tightening my grip on her throat and whispering into her ear, “Why?” My breath tickles the sensitive skin of her neck, creating a shiver down her shoulders.

Her shoulders rise and fall with deep breaths as her eyes stay focused on mine. “Because you bought me,” she answers in a soft voice, and even as she speaks the words she knows it’s not what I was looking for. I can see the disappointment in her eyes.

My lips press against her forehead, reflecting the pain I feel from her answer. “No, kitten,” I reply. That has nothing to do with it. Her safety is guaranteed with me. Her worries are nonexistent because I take the burden. She doesn’t understand that, because to her, the word Master meant something much

different. It was about control. And I have that, yes. But this is so much more than that.

I step back, leaving the cool air to replace my warmth as I unbuckle my belt.

I'LL SHOW HER WHY I DESERVE THE TITLE. THE THICK LEATHER SINGS in the air as I pull it through the belt loops.

She'll learn. And then she'll truly be mine.

“Get on your knees, kitten.”

CHAPTER 1

ISAAC

The rough pad of my thumb brushes against my bottom lip, my elbow resting on the desk as I stare at the monitor in front of me. There are twenty on this side of the room, and another twenty behind me. The screens flip between cameras, and I take it all in effortlessly. I'm not usually in this room though. I actually prefer being on the floor, but I'm the boss and right now this is where I'm needed.

Shifting in the large desk chair, I let out an easy sigh from the tiresome day.

Club X needs extensive security and constant monitoring.

The members, both male and female Dominants, go through extensive training before being allowed to engage in any activity, but accidents are bound to happen. And sometimes they aren't accidents, no matter how strict our acceptance policies are. It's been quite a while since we've had any issues that required serious attention. But a lot of these members are new to the scene, and with inexperience comes errors.

Errors like Submissives who forget to safe word, and Dominants who don't recognize the signs that their partner isn't alright. They get caught up in the moment, and trust that their Submissive will safe word.

Ninety percent of the time when we intervene it's for those reasons—miscommunication and misguided trust.

I fucking hate safe words for that very reason. A good Dominant should know when enough is enough. But a lot of the people here are new; they're still learning, pushing each other's limits. More than half of the relationships are new or knowingly temporary.

Mistakes are inevitable. Still, it's my job to make sure they happen as infrequently as possible.

Security lines each doorway in the club, and I personally trained all of them. Protecting the members is number one on our priority list and for that reason, privacy is an illusion at Club X.

By that I mean there's a reason these men and women *play* here. The atmosphere that's created is intoxicating and alluring, but it's more than that, they're *safe* here. Whether or not a Sub or Slave trusts their Dom or Master, we're here to ensure they'll be okay. We provide a sense of safety that's needed for many of these women to let their guard down and completely immerse themselves in the lifestyle.

When a couple exits the club, there must truly be trust between them... except for the auctions. Those are a different beast entirely.

A chill washes through me in a slow wave at the thought of the auction. It's rare that the buyer and buyee don't know one another intimately already. But on occasion, it happens. Just like it happened last week with Lucian and his new Submissive. The reminder heats my blood.

Yet another D/s. I clench my jaw absently, my eyes moving from one screen to the next. I've been to the last six auctions. Although I work here, and workers aren't normally allowed to partake in the scene, I've dabbled in play. Madam Lynn turns a blind eye so long as I'm discreet. One of the perks of helping to mold the club and shape it into what it is today.

I sit up straighter in my seat, repositioning myself and keeping my mind from wandering to the dark corners of my mind where my depraved fantasies lie. I'm working, and now is no time for me to unleash my desires. There's no one here to fulfill them anyway. I've gotten used to it over the past year.

I watch a monitor on my far left as Dominic's attention strays from the large carved maple doors of the front entrance out to the dining hall. He's one of the bouncers at the club, and looks like he was built to work in security. He can't see much of what's going on in the dining hall, but the thick red curtains are pulled back and several girls are on the stage. This isn't any typical club. And it sure as hell isn't a strip club, although some of the men and women do enjoy exotic dancing during theme nights. The reason the women are lined up on the stage is so they can be trained. Regardless, the sight of beautiful women displayed and chatting captures Dominic's attention.

Some of the Submissives are collared, their Dominants giving them permission to learn while they sit patiently in the audience or accompany them onto the stage to do the training themselves. The uncollared Submissives are mostly unattended. One has a suitor, but he's merely watching from the audience.

Being collared is a serious commitment. Only a minority of the couples within the club are collared. Several have paired off and continue their play exclusively, but without a collar the commitment has yet to be made and the Submissive is not off-limits. It's not an offense to not be given a collar, it's simply something that isn't rushed into. There's a sense of respect and commitment surrounding the process, and every Dominant or Master has their own way of going about it.

I've never had the honor of giving out a collar. None of the handful of women I've kept as slaves have wanted to stay. They may have said one thing, but I knew better. I have yet to meet the woman who is my match.

The women on stage I've seen before. The club has regulars, and the exclusive invites rarely allows for new members. It creates an environment of familiarity, which aids in allowing the members to feel at ease.

There are several trainers with them as well. The trainers are experienced in BDSM, another pivotal feature of this club that I played a part in. We needed a safe way for the Submissives and the Dominants to learn. This club isn't a free-for-all.

Although each Dominant has their own way of doing things, their own preferences and kinks, and we encourage the variety.

Dressed in leathers, the trainers are lined up and waiting for the women to choose instruments from the extensive collection. Their sole purpose is to provide a means for the women to explore their limits. One woman, I believe her name is Lisa, is concerned about her positioning. Although she's dressed in a simple cream chiffon romper, she's on the waxed floor of the stage, practicing with a trainer offering advice. She's not very graceful. Poor girl. She's going to really have to work on her balance.

A quick vision flashes in front of my eyes of how I'd train her. I'd use a flogger, certainly not a cane or paddle. Every unstable waver of her body would earn her a lashing. At first I'd have her balance on one foot, but ultimately I'd have her end up in the position she's in now. On her back, on the floor, her legs spread and opened for me. And as she worked on balancing herself, the heavy braided tails would whip against her glistening pussy. I can visualize how the skin on her thighs and ass would be flushed red from the punishing strokes. But the ones at the end of her training would already have her on edge. What was a punishment, would turn into a reward.

I glance back at the Submissive, Lisa. I can see it happening, but not with her. She's not for me.

Most of these women want a Dominant. They want to be able to rely on safe words. I don't provide that. It's something I'm not interested in. I want a woman's complete trust. Or at least her utter reliance on me, and total obedience.

I recognize Lilly on the stage as well. She's fairly new to the club, and she's yet to find a Dominant. She's eager to learn and excitable, but her energy is excessively positive. I've heard many men talk about how she seems more vulnerable and breakable than even the more experienced Subs in the club. *Bubbly* is a good description of her.

Oddly enough, she's the only one walking to the whips on the right side of the stage. Her bracelet is cream-colored, indicating that she's finding her limits.

I glance at the other screens before coming back to hers. Her fingers trail down the knotted ends of a cat o' nine tails, and several men in the audience perk up at the sight. I wouldn't have guessed she'd be a red woman. The women with the red in their bracelets are ones who enjoy pain. Masochists. She may be interested in the whip, but her reaction will be enlightening, I'm sure. Many underestimate the intensity of the pain. It takes time and several punishing hits before the resulting adrenaline rush and flood of endorphins work their magic and turn pain into pleasure. It takes the right partner as well.

My eyes flash to the next screen, and a rough chuckle makes my shoulders shake as Madam Lynn catches Dominic lingering in the large opening between the front lobby and the dining hall.

One look from her, and he's quick to go back to his place at the front. He may be nearly six and a half feet tall with broad shoulders to match his intimidating height, but Madam Lynn doesn't compromise. Everyone knows that. Dominic returns to his post while he adjusts his dick in his pants. I snort a laugh. I'm not hard in the least.

Nothing has excited me for years, but Dominic never fails to be aroused. I imagine it would be different if the employees were permitted to play in the club. But there's a zero-tolerance policy against it. Professionalism is the most valued attribute to Madam Lynn. I'm fortunate she makes an exception for me.

I glance around the monitors, but my sight is once again drawn to the stage. The cat o' nine tails is whipping across the screen and landing with a loud hiss against a dummy. Lilly walks closer to the dummy and runs her fingers along the marks left by the whip while the trainer talks to her, wrapping the whip around his hand and walking toward her.

I can't hear what he's saying, but she's listening intently. She's showing him her full attention and taking the lesson seriously. The Dominants may not realize it yet, but in the years I've been here, I know an excellent Submissive in the making, and Lilly will certainly be one.

Although she won't be mine. She's not my type. None of these women are. I'd rather be picky and choose one who is meant to fit my desires, just as I'm meant to fit her needs. I'm not interested in a quick fuck; most of the men here aren't. It's better to find a match that you can grow to trust. Someone who can help you delve deeper into your darkest desires.

"Poker on Saturday?" Joshua's deep voice distracts me from my thoughts. I turn in the swivel chair to face him. The room is a mirror image, and he's been in charge of monitor display of the second floor, while I've taken the first. The screens behind him flip among the other rooms as he looks over his shoulder at me.

Joshua is a co-owner of the club with Madam Lynn. We went into business together with security, and his relationship with Madam Lynn created all of this. They're good friends and nothing more. The ring on his finger and the collar on his wife make that more than apparent.

"Yeah, Saturday," I answer. I've been hosting the card games the last few weeks now. My cabin's on the outskirts of the city with no neighbors or wives, or in Joshua's case, children.

It's empty, which I used to enjoy. I'm fond of privacy. The only time I hear a voice at home besides my own is poker night. It hasn't bothered me much before, but now that most of the men seem taken with their partners, the halls seem quieter in a way I find slightly disconcerting. Especially this last week, with Lucian being quieter than usual and preoccupied with his Submissive.

I crack my neck, feeling the stiffness of my muscles. I'll hit the gym in my basement and take a shower before bed. I need to do something to get out this tension.

"How much you planning on losing this week?" I say and smirk at him.

Joshua's face scrunches as he focuses on a screen. He visibly winces as he watches one of the red rooms in the dungeon. I'm surprised anything gets to him anymore.

Finally recognizing my words, he answers, "I'm taking every chip you got, Rocci." I snort a laugh and hold back my yawn.

I stand up and stretch, picking up my worn brown leather coat off the back of my chair. It's time to go home anyway. I'm going on a fourteen-hour shift here. Derek called out unexpectedly, and I covered for him on his short notice.

I think about what's waiting for me back at home.

The mess is still on the table in the game room from last week's poker game. A few bottles and cigar wrappers. Nothing worth bitching about; the maid will clean it up tomorrow anyway.

I watch the monitors in front of Joshua, consumed by the image that's holding his attention. A Master and a Slave. They're a rarity here. The red rooms in the dungeon require the most attention, for obvious reasons.

I've seen Masters come and go in the club. Many are Sadists and that creates serious problems, so we don't allow many. I'm one, although my desire to use pain is only to enhance pleasure. And that's not the situation that's occurring on the screen at the moment. Joshua looks tense and concerned, but there's no reason to be. Becca loves the pain. She doesn't need a safe word because her limits are much higher than her Master's. She arches her back toward the cane, accepting the blow and greeting it with a look of ecstasy etched on her face. She's the only Slave here, and she's collared. I don't even know why they come here anymore.

It's been a long time since a Slave has arrived. Someone who's capable of trusting so wholeheartedly that they're willing to give herself completely over to a Master. Who's willing to give over to a 24/7 power exchange.

Maybe that's why nothing has interested me. My tastes are specific. *A Slave*. I crave the power being a Master allows me, and the desire to control and provide her every need.

Across the hall from the game room in my home is the door to a room I created for one sole purpose. A room fit for my match.

I shrug the leather jacket on my shoulders, trying to remember when the last time I even opened it was.

Too long. It's been far too long.

CHAPTER 2

KATIA

I can practically hear the clock ticking as I go about my daily routine. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* It's a quarter past five and I'm running behind schedule. I'm usually on time, but I had difficult time sleeping last night, tossing and turning for most of the night. I frown at the memory as I pull on my faded wash jeans over my hips, and tug down my cozy red sweater.

I haven't had a night that bad in a while. I cover my mouth with a yawn and try to ignore the unsettling feelings as I make my way to the bathroom sink. But I'm hoping it's just a fluke. It *is* just a fluke. I won't let things get back to the way they were.

Pushing the unpleasant memory away, I swipe on my favorite lipstick in a shade reminiscent of crushed rose petals, and smooch my lips together. Then I peer critically at myself in the mirror. The quick ponytail I coax my hair into is going a long way to hide my disheveled blonde hair, but when you're the owner of Paws Apartments, a doggy day care and shelter, your hair doesn't need to be pretty. You just need to show up and be there.

I've found dogs only care about two things. Well, three. Food, exploration and companionship. I love it actually. Working and caring for these dogs fills me with purpose and gives my life meaning. It's the one thing I look forward to every day. Just thinking about the excitement on their fuzzy little faces when I walk in to greet them warms my chest and brings a small smile to my lips as I reach for the small tube of thick concealer.

Another part of my routine.

My smile slowly vanishes as I run my fingertips along the scars littering my neck. No matter how much time passes, they barely seem to fade. It's been four long years, but they're still there, reminding me of a darker time in my life. As I stare at my neck in the mirror, a weight presses down on my chest, but after a moment I push it away in defiance.

I survived all that, I think to myself, dotting the concealer on my neck and right shoulder and then reaching for my foundation. *And I'm stronger now.*

He didn't ruin me. I won't let him hold any power over me anymore.

Straightening my back, I swallow thickly and square my shoulders as I delicately press the foundation onto my skin and smooth the concealer on the scars on my neck until they're all gone. After I'm done with my face, I toss the foundation into the decorative velvet-lined box where I keep my makeup, the memories already fading. Coffee is the next thing on my agenda.

Tick, tick, tick. The small ticks echo in my head, reminding me how far I'm behind already. I grit my teeth. *Crap.*

I almost call out, "I'm coming, Roxy!" as I make my way to the kitchen, but then I catch myself, a feeling of sadness coursing through me. I take a deep breath and rub under my tired eyes. It's a habit I have yet to break. I'm so used to Roxy being there every time I turn around that I still haven't gotten over the fact that she's gone.

Tears prick my eyes as my bare feet pad on the linoleum and I start the coffee maker. Two clicks, and it's brewing. I should grab something to eat, but instead I find myself lost in thought as the sounds of the water heating fill the empty space. The quiet space. Quiet because she's not here anymore.

Roxy, my Golden Retriever, was such a lovable dog. She was always there for me whenever I needed her. She was so happy. I swear dogs can smile, and she was always smiling. We were practically inseparable. And she didn't give a rat's ass that I

had scars all over my back or that I was scared of things I couldn't see, of dark memories that I desperately wanted to leave in the past.

She just loved me unconditionally and only wanted to comfort me. I clung to that love, fostering it. She was my therapy, and I came to depend on her for so much. I can't count how many times I woke up out of a night terror, frightened out of my mind, only to find Roxy sitting right there, nuzzling against me and whining with true pain from worrying over me. Her calming presence would almost always soothe my anxiety. It's times like last night, when I'd been plagued by a particularly dark terror, where I miss her the most.

It hurts so badly to think that she's never going to lay with me in bed again. To think I can no longer hold her close and pet her with long strokes as I whisper, *thank you* into her thick fur. She'd done so much for me, more than anyone else has: loving me, healing me, that even if she were here now, I'd never be able to repay her for it.

I try to lean against the counter and my elbow knocks the plastic travel mug off the counter. I try to grab it but miss, the plastic hitting the tips of my fingers before falling onto the floor with a loud clatter. I wince from the loud noise and wait for it to settle before picking it up.

"I guess it's just going to be one of those days," I mutter out loud to myself, wiping at the tears in the corner of my eyes with the back of my hand. At least it's not broken. I bend down, scooping the mug up and finally resting against the counter as the smell of coffee fills the room. Since Roxy's death, some days have been harder than others, with me nearly overcome with emotion. Unfortunately, this was shaping up to be one of *those* days. I suppose that's just how grief works.

It's even worse considering Roxy was the first pet I've ever had, and that she was the only companionship I had when I first came back home. I pause as I pour cream and sugar into my coffee cup. Maybe it's not right to call this place home. I'm still hours away from what used to be home. The small suburbs of New York will never be home again. I just can't face the constant reminders. I feel guilty about distancing

myself from my family and the life I used to have, but it's for the better. It's the only way I'll find happiness after everything that happened.

I take a deep breath, setting the mug on the counter and inhaling the smell of fresh hot French vanilla coffee, doing everything I can to let go of the painful reminder. Losing Roxy was very difficult, but I can't keep going on like this. I'll always love her, but she wouldn't want me living with this constant negativity. I just know in my heart she wouldn't.

Closing my eyes, I take a small sip of the coffee and let the warmth fill me, comfort me. When I open them a moment later, they focus like a laser onto the clock on the microwave.

5:45

Shit, now I'm really running late. Sighing, I take another sip of my coffee, trying to relax. I'm only behind by fifteen minutes, but the dogs are there and waiting. I don't want to disrupt our routine. They need it just as much as I do.

A low ding from my phone draws my eyes over to the kitchen table where my laptop is sitting open from the previous night, and I see my cell screen lit up on the edge of the lap top with a text. I let out a sigh and quickly grab it off the side of the table, hitting the keypad and waking the laptop to life. I don't really have time for this, but I can't not answer it. Before I can check my message, I see a notification pop up in the lower right corner on my laptop screen.

Darlinggirl86 has come online.

My phone dings again, but I ignore it as my last DM with Kiersten lights up with a message. I smile as I read what she's typed.

Darlinggirl86: <3 you girl. You were right! I should've gone shopping. It made me feel so much better. I finally got that red dress that I've been eyeing for like a month now. And you wanna know the best thing? I look damn good in it too!

Smiling, I type a response while huffing out a small chuckle.

Katty93: <3 you too! I bet you look damn good in it too!

It always makes me feel good to talk to Kiersten. I consider her to be one of my best friends, even though we've never met. I've never even seen her face. We've spent the last four years bonding over this support group message board, engaging in conversations about how messed up our lives were, sharing our dreams, hopes and aspirations. And most importantly, moving forward.

I wait for a response, but after almost a minute passes, I type in that I have to go. I really hate being late. I don't like making the pups wait for me. I finally take a look at my phone and let out a heavy sigh when I see who it is. *Mom.*

Katia, I miss you honey! When are you going to come home?

Seeing the message gives me mixed emotions. I'm lucky to have my mother, to have a loving family. But they're a part of my past I just can't come to terms with. In this new city, with a new life, the past doesn't matter. I can be anyone. But with them, I'll always be Katia, their daughter who was taken for four years. And worse, when I look at them, I see how the years changed them.

Maybe it's wrong of me, but when I think of her, I want to see the mother I knew. Seeing her reminds me of the time I was away. All the times I missed. When I last saw her, before they took me, she was happy, young and vibrant. That was over eight years ago.

I want to see her blonde hair that looks just like mine, not the silver shade that's taken its place. Her gorgeous smile that I always envied, and blue eyes that sparkled with laughter. She tries, but the pain is still there. And it hurts me too much to see it.

When I was gone she never stopped looking for me, never once gave up on finding her precious daughter. I hate that I caused her so much stress, so much pain. Even if it wasn't intentional, I still feel responsible. I still feel fucking guilty. I hate that she had to worry about me night after night, hoping, praying that she would one day find me alive.

But she couldn't save me. No one could. I had to save myself.

And looking at her only reminds me of that.

I REALLY CAN'T DEAL WITH THIS TODAY, I THINK TO MYSELF, TEARING my glassed-over eyes away from the screen and not bothering to look at the five other messages she's sent.

I love my mother dearly. But it's better this way. I don't want her tainted any more by what happened to me. That's not to say that I'm not better now. I'm a survivor.

I suck in a deep, trembling breath. I don't want to tell her that I'm not coming home. I'm trying to get over everything. And despite my trepidation about dealing with my mother, I do want to see my family again. But I can't right now. I'm just not ready. It's been four years of recovery, only nine months out here on my own, and I know I'm a stronger, better person for it. Yet, deep down I still feel like I'm... not whole. I'm still healing. And that's okay. But being away from home makes everything easier. It hurts me to admit it, but I just want to be alone.

Well not alone, alone.

My fingers find the dip of my throat as my heart pounds in my chest as I think back to my previous conversation with Kiersten before she abruptly logged off. I'd finally confessed what I'd been thinking for some time. Something that I knew I deeply wanted, but was afraid to admit; my need for a Master.

I shake my head at the memory, still not believing I admitted this, to me or to her. After everything I went through, how more fucked up in the head could I get?

Tick, tick, tick. Fuck, I need to get my shit together and get going.

My eyes stray back to my cell's screen and I read my mother's first text again, my heart feeling like it's being tugged down by an anchor. I want to answer her and soothe her worry. I want to reassure her that I'll be there soon. But deep down, I know that's not enough.

Taking a deep breath, I let my fingers fly across the touch screen keys.

I love you mom. I promise I'll come home soon.

I stare at the text for a moment, debating on whether I should delete it. I don't want to make a promise I know I can't keep. Yet at the same time, I don't want to cause her any more pain or guilt. I want her to feel better, just like I want to feel better.

After what seems like an eternity, I close my eyes and hit send, hoping desperately that I don't regret it.

CHAPTER 3

ISAAC

*M*y bare feet tread the cold porcelain tiles of my state of the art kitchen floor. The steel gleams with the bright morning light streaming through the large floor-to-ceiling windows on the far wall of the breakfast nook. My house may be quiet and empty, but it's luxurious and fitted with every upscale feature I could find.

Modern, and sophisticated. It's exactly what I wanted.

The coffee maker is already going and the sounds of steaming water get louder as the addicting scent of fresh ground coffee fills my lungs.

I cover my yawn and then stretch my arms above my head, feeling the stiff muscles ease. My flannel pajamas hang low on my hips as I crack my neck. Same shit, different day, but I'm ready for the excitement of the club. I'm determined to look into recruitment and go through candidates. I've been talking to Madam Lynn, hinting at the fact that I'm interested in finding a potential Slave.

She hears me, but I have no idea if she's really listening.

The door to the fridge opens with a small hum and I crouch down to grab a pepper and a few eggs for my morning omelet.

I love cooking. It's the one thing my mother used to do for me. Before things changed, she always cooked me breakfast. Even after things changed... for a little while.

I shake off the memories threatening to suffocate me and crack the eggs on the side of a bowl, whisking them as I try to ignore the memory of her laugh. She had a beautiful laugh, my mother. The sounds changed as she did. They were once light and airy, but they changed to a rough voice that cracked when she spoke. In the end, I didn't even recognize her.

I turn on the gas burner and let the pan heat as I grab my cell.

I work at Club X and its safety is my priority, but my security business is still private and taking inquiries.

I put the phone on speaker and listen to the voicemails from yesterday. I rarely get a call for RP Security. That's what we were called before transferring to the club. R and P, for Rocci and Payne. Zander and I still own the firm 50/50, but we hardly ever take clients. It's simply not worth it. Well Zander never took clients. He's a silent partner. Still, it's not worth it.

I listen to a message from a man wanting a security detail at an exclusive getaway trip for him and his mistress as I dice up the pepper and half of an onion. I shake my head, deleting it and not even thinking twice about calling him back as I toss the knife into the stainless steel sink.

That's not what my business is for. I started it myself around the same time Lucian quit college and created his company. It wasn't long before I followed suit. The three of us were inseparable, and in many ways we still are. Zander footed the bill for both Lucian and me. He's good for fronting money in exchange for stocks, and not doing any of the work. Hiring Joshua as my right hand man took the business to the next level and turned it high-end.

But I'm not interested in being a lookout while a cheater gets his dick wet.

I created this business for one reason. My mother's laugh echoes in my head again as I watch my breakfast cook in the pan. I'm losing my appetite more with every second that passes.

Murder. Vengeance. I needed the man who killed her dead.

She may not have been a real mother to me in the last two years of her life. The alcohol she used to numb the pain of losing my father overseas eventually turned to coke. Holding me close and crying on my shoulder because she missed my father turned to beating me because I reminded her of him.

She was responsible for her actions. I know that. But he didn't help. He made them worse.

Jake Shapero. Her boyfriend who got her addicted to harder drugs and led her down the path that ultimately destroyed the mother I once knew.

Also, the asshole who broke my jaw because I dared to talk back. I flex my jaw at the memory as I use the spatula to lift the perfect omelet off the pan and onto a plate. I have no desire to eat it at this point, but I still add salt and pepper and sit at the table. Routine is important.

I close my eyes, and he's there. It wasn't just one punch, but I didn't see him. As I covered my face with my forearms, I saw her in the background. Sitting at the table, bent over and wiping the coke from under her nose, not even bothering to show emotion.

That's not what made me want to kill him. That's not why I got into this business.

When I was fourteen, I watched him kill her. It was the culmination of two long years of abuse and neglect, night after night. I watched him hit her; I watched him strangle her. He didn't see me there, and I'd longed stopped defending her. A broken jaw, busted ribs, and beatings from both of them for interfering taught me to stay away.

I hadn't realized he was actually killing her. I couldn't believe she was really dead, even after she fell to the floor and his anger changed to fear as he shook her.

I watched him, and did nothing. The guilt weighs heavy on my chest as I take a bite of the tasteless eggs. Hating the memory.

I was tortured for years while I lived with my distant Aunt Maureen. She's much older than my mother, almost like a

grandmother. She gave me a good life; she took care of me as though I wasn't troubled. But I never forgave myself.

How could I?

I never wanted to go to college, but Aunt Maureen made me. I was happy to keep her preoccupied with me being in college while I learned more useful skills. Meeting Joshua and Zander was the best thing that happened to me in college. I learned how to track down targets, how to hack into databases and effectively get someone's records and backgrounds.

That someone being Jacob Shapero.

I wasn't surprised to learn he was in prison for assault and battery, as well as possession. I had to wait over a year. A year of growing my security business with Joshua and making it legit. Thanks to Zander, a silent partner, we had the funds and clientele to make it exclusive. But every day was just one step closer to my goal. The night he was released, I waited for a sign of activity. I had ten close contacts' phones monitored. And he made the call not fifteen minutes after leaving the station. The second night, I crept into his deceased grandmother's house and shot him in the back of the head. Waiting that long fucking killed me, but I had to do it right. I spent years preparing, and it only took two days to see it through once I had the opportunity.

I have a lot of connections now, six years later. Many powerful and also corrupt people, due to this clientele and because of the deals I've taken. It's not about the money. It's about making things right. The business is legit, although some of my methods toe the line. Occasionally I break the law to obtain information. That's the business I run. We call it security, but we've been known to do things a little less legal.

I haven't taken a private client in a long fucking time. It's been years. The club takes a lot of my time and if there's a client in need, I hand them off to someone who's qualified. The money's good, and the business is streamlined.

Sometimes I wonder if my focus on routine and careful practices, my seclusion and most notably my past, are why I

am the way I am. Why I thrive on privacy and control. Not in everything. Just things that matter.

In relationships, especially.

I need complete control. I need trust so deep that she'll give herself to me completely.

I'm not interested in normal. I've had a few relationships, but none that meant anything to me. None that lasted very long.

The two M/s relationships I've had in the club didn't last long either. Neither of them gave me what I needed. And they sure as fuck didn't need me. They wanted the relationship as a way to give up control, but not because they needed to; they just didn't want responsibility. They didn't want the other aspects of being a Slave. Neither lasted more than a few weeks. I want someone who needs me. I'm desperate for it.

I know what I want from my partner is fucked up. I want her devotion, and her only desire to be to please me. I want more than I deserve, but I'll provide every want, every wish, every need. In exchange for her worshiping obedience, I'll give her the same in return.

I don't want a safe word, I don't want negotiation and compromise. I demand complete submission, and nothing less.

It's fucked up, but I want it. And I'm tired of waiting.

It's Lucian's fault. Him wanting a Submissive and buying one on the spot is what's fueling this need. I know it is. I'm pissed. I'm jealous. It was so fucking easy for him.

I'll never have that.

What I crave is too rare. Too depraved to be so easily found and taken.

I don't know why, and I don't give a fuck. But I'm ready and tired of waiting.

CHAPTER 4

KATIA

Thum a Katy Perry song playing through my radio speakers as I pull into my designated parking spot of Pine Brook Apartments, my spirits high. Today was an awesome day, and it was something I desperately needed after a week of night terrors.

An older couple who were leaving for vacation boarded their Miniature Schnoodle, Mr. Higgins, for the week. He has to be the most adorable dog I've ever seen with his tiny, bearded face. He looks like an old man and my heart just melted whenever I laid eyes on him. The day got even better when three eager high school kids, bless their hearts, dropped in to volunteer. I had a blast working with the kids, and they absolutely fell in love with Mr. Higgins and his puppy dog antics. It was so cute to watch. It's not uncommon for kids to volunteer. I have a program set up with a local school, but it makes it that much better when the kids obviously enjoy themselves.

Since the kids had so much fun I'm hoping they'll go tell all their friends about the dog shelter so more of them will come play with the pups. That's all I ask them to do. Just give the dogs some attention.

I love each and every one of the dogs, but there's not enough time in the day for me to give all of them the attention they deserve. That's not to say I and my other four employees don't do enough for them, but these dogs deserve more than what we can give.

Stretching as I go, I climb out of the car and make my way to my apartment. I wince as I make it to the paved walkway that leads to the stairs, a sharp pain spiking up my back. I'm totally sore from hauling bags of dog food.

I take the stairs slowly, feeling the strain of the day on my muscles. I don't mind it, though. It feels good to just *feel*; even if it is because I'm sore. It lets me know I've had a productive day. Even if all I did was lift dog food all day, it makes me happy. Helping the dogs gives my life special meaning.

I take in a deep breath, still clinging to that happy feeling, but at the same time I feel a sadness trying to creep in. A sadness that is trying to remind me of what my life could be. I hate it.

I reach the door of my apartment and try to push that unwelcome feeling away, taking out my keys. I'm about to unlock the door when I look up to see the mailman coming my way with a small box in his hand, along with an electronic signature pad in the other.

I furrow my brow as he approaches, wondering what's in the box. I'm absolutely certain that I haven't ordered anything in the past few days.

"Miss Herrington?" he asks me, stopping right in front of me and giving me a friendly smile. He's an energetic young man, with blond hair and bushy eyebrows.

"Yes?" I say, flashing a friendly smile back.

He hands me the electronic device, along with a stylus. "If you could just sign for me here, please?"

I take both and quickly scribble my name and hand it back over to him.

He smiles at me again as he hands me the box. "Thank you Miss Herrington, have a wonderful day."

"Thank you," I reply absently, my eyes still on the box in my hands. "You, too."

With the box tucked under my arm, I open the door and kick it shut behind me. I turn it in my hands, the keys jingling as I toss them onto the kitchen table and look for the address label.

There's no return address listed, but I recognize the sender's name. Kiersten. A smile graces my lips as I plop down into my seat. She's such a freaking sweetheart. She knows this past week has been rough, and it's not unusual that we give each other a little gift here and there when we're going through something hard.

I instinctively look past my kitchen and into the cozy living room at the wooden owl on the bottom of my end table. It was a gift from Kiersten. She knows I love owls. I think it's a door stopper, but it looks just right where I put it.

My place is a nice, one-bedroom apartment with a spacious, open floor plan. It's not cheap, but it's not too expensive either, considering it's in the city. The kitchen and living room join seamlessly with one another. There's a large sliding glass door at the end of the living room that leads to a small patio. There are two windows with sheer curtains on either side of the couch. I always keep the curtains open because I like the sunlight. It helps keep the darkness away. I went a long time without sunshine, and I'll never take such a simple thing for granted again.

There's not much to the rest of my apartment, just a small hallway and then my bedroom and an adjoining bathroom. But I love it. It has a cozy vibe, and I've surrounded myself with little things that help keep my mood upbeat, like the stone bunny bookends on the shelf next to the couch, owl pillows, and beautiful glazed ceramic planters by the large windows filled with succulents. I forget to water the plants often, so they have to be succulents. And I filled this place with warm yellows that seem to pop out at you. I use yellow because I've always heard that it helps with depression. Just seeing the color stimulates endorphins that make you happy. And I want to be happy. More than anything; it's all I want.

My eyes stray back to the box and I wonder again what it is. Deep down, I know this is something different. Something... special.

There's only one way to find out.

I walk over to the cabinet and retrieve a letter opener and then come back to the box. My heart racing in my chest, I pry it open.

My breath catches in my throat when I see what's inside. A fancy golden envelope sits on a bed of purple plush velvet fabric. Holy shit, this is fancy. I pick it up, marveling at the soft feel of the parchment. It's unlike any paper I've ever felt before. It's thick and luxurious. After a moment of staring at it, I carefully open it to reveal a golden card with tassels on the side. There's a simple message inscribed inside.

You've been invited to Club X.

Madam Lynn

CLUB X. THE WORDS RUN OVER AND OVER IN MY MIND. I CAN'T FOR the life of me figure out what it is. It sounds like some sort of secret underground club, yet I can't make any sense of it. Why send me an invitation without any information about what I would be joining? And who the hell is Madam Lynn? It's just strange. I check the box again, and there's Kiersten's name. I can't get the scrunched expression off my face.

I turn the invitation over in my hand, examining it several times, looking for any clues of what this club is about. There aren't any.

Shrugging off my coat, I walk over to my desk in the corner of my living room, thrumming with excitement, sit down and open my laptop. When the screen lights up, I quickly type in my password and bring up the web browser. I type in Club X in the search bar and then hit enter. Kiersten won't be on till tonight. And I'm too impatient to wait to ask her.

My heart drops in my chest at the results that pop up. Nothing with "Club X" per se. But a bunch of porn websites and pornographic pictures are the first things listed. Some information about ecstasy. Certainly not what I expected. I click through a couple of them, but the sites are all set up to get you to put in your credit card. Screw that. I click through a

bunch more websites, trying to find any information that links to the invitation, but I come up short. There's absolutely nothing here. After clicking through a couple more, I shut down the browser, a feeling of disappointment running through me.

I'm about to close down my laptop when an email notification pops up in the lower right corner of my screen. The title of the subject makes my heart jump in my chest, and I almost click on it immediately.

Your invitation awaits

I sit there for a moment before clicking, my heart pounding in my chest as my skin pricks from a sudden chill. How eerie.

From: Madam Lynn

To: Katia Herrington

Katia, I've been notified that you've received my invitation, and I'm attaching information for your consideration before we move forward. I feel it's in your best interest as well as Club X's for you to consider enrollment. I personally invite you to check us out. I know you'll enjoy it. A bracelet is included in the package. Please bring it with you. I'll see you soon.

Yours truly,

Madam Lynn

My heart is nearly beating out of my chest as I quickly download the forms, open them and begin reading. My eyes go wide as I skim through pages and pages of what essentially amounts to a non-disclosure agreement. If I want to be a part of the club, I have to sign it and adhere to the rules listed. There are four other downloads, one with a list of themed nights. Another with rules for the club. And there are *a lot* of them.

Another download with testimonies.

And the last one, pictures of a gorgeous building. It looks almost like a mansion. But the inside is what steals my breath away.

I sit there for I don't know how long, greedily devouring every word that scrolls across the page. It takes a while, but when I finally reach the end, my mind is reeling from the wealth of information. A lot of what I read was legal jargon, but there are three words that stick out in my mind.

Auction.

Submissive.

Master.

Club X is an exclusive BDSM club.

I suck in a heavy breath as I stare at the screen, excitement coursing through my limbs, but at the same time feeling slightly sick to my stomach. Am I really going to do this? It could be a way to confront that part of me that isn't fully healed, the part of me that's still dark and twisted.

I mentioned it to Kiersten, but I didn't expect this.

I have fantasies. I have cravings. I don't want normal. I tried to have a sexual relationship with someone who doesn't want complete control. But I want to give someone my everything. I want the fantasy that I found sanctuary in. I survived because of it. It's so deeply ingrained in me, and I don't want it to leave.

I don't know if I was always like this. But there's a power in submitting wholly to someone. To giving them everything and trusting them. I want to do it again.

It feels wrong. But I know deep down that it's what I want. It's what I'm missing.

I know people live with the illusion I created for myself. It's their life. I want that. I want to trust someone to take me as their Slave, and cherish me like I made myself believe my Master did.

I try to push this feeling and dark thoughts away, but they remain.

I pick up the letter again, letting the tips of my fingers trail over the engraved "X." I want it, but I'm terrified to let go. In a place like this though... Maybe this is exactly what I need.

CHAPTER 5

ISAAC

I'm two whiskeys in, and I can't help myself.

I've read her files over and over. My poor Katia. Kidnapped at sixteen years old while walking home from school. It was a nice neighborhood, low crime. No reason to worry. But one day she just vanished. Marcio Matias kidnapped her and three other women that day. He was well known in the sex slave traffic industry, and is currently incarcerated and on death row. Which only makes me angrier that I can't get my hands on him myself.

Katia is only one of hundreds of women who Marcio kidnapped over a decade.

She was a virgin, and traded to a drug lord and head of a cartel in Colombia, Carver Dario. He went by Master C, and had many slaves and shared them freely. From what I can tell, Katia was no exception and her police reports go into detail about what a man named Javier Pinzan, second-in-command of the cartel did to her. Her life was hell. She was surrounded by abusive men who took pleasure from her pain. Her arm and jaw were both broken while she was held prisoner.

Her arm more than once.

In her psych transcripts I read about how she murdered him. How she broke a liquor bottle and stabbed Dario repeatedly, running away in the middle of the night wearing nothing but a large man's dress shirt. She was filthy when they found her in

a village on the outskirts of the tourist areas. She was bruised and scarred, and almost died of malnutrition and infections.

A group of tourists just happened to be in the area. Without them, I'm not certain what would have happened to her. My heart clenches in my chest, and I take another swig of the whiskey.

She saved herself.

It's been four years since she's been home. She spent a good amount of time in protective custody, adjusting to life again. She was in and out of therapy for the first few months until she started seeing a young woman named Meredith Beck. She stayed with her for two years, attending regular sessions that eventually dwindled. She hasn't been to her in over eight months and the last time she went, Dr. Beck prescribed Katia sleeping aids, a prescription that Katia never filled.

I've hacked into the support group that I know Katia is an active member in. Extremely active. She comes on daily, and is one of only a handful of users in here. This seems to be the only social interaction she has.

At first it was just to find out more about how she's healing. Just to read her messages and figure out if she still has problems sleeping. I've learned a lot about my Katia since logging in. She's a kind girl with a beautiful heart. She wants to be happy.

I take another sip of whiskey, ignoring the papers on the desk detailing her dark past, and focus on how she is now, in the present. How much better she is. How healthy and happy she is. Although there's still pain. Still a void in her life... for now.

I've created my own account and made a false identity. I didn't provide any major details, but most of the profiles here are lacking.

I know it's wrong, but I want to get to know her.

Madam Lynn would be pissed if she found out, but I'm curious. I have to know more about *her*. Katia Herrington. Her information was easily accessible, and I've been through all of it. All her background, multiple times.

Curious doesn't even begin to describe it. I know what she's been through, what she's survived. Even more, I know what she's looking for. I know what she *needs*. At first, when I read her transcripts from the protective unit, I was horrified. She endured abuse in every possible way for years, along with malnutrition, and constant violence. The poor girl has survived too much.

She's strong. She's fierce. But she's in need.

And I desperately want to fulfill that void for her.

I already know my ways are twisted, so something like this is just a drop in the bucket.

I check the blank screen again. She should be on soon. She's a creature of habit. Her login info has her on here almost every night. It's something I'll have to give her if I decide she's a good match. And if she agrees to be mine.

Her paperwork sits in front me on the kitchen table, just to the right of the laptop. I know everything that happened to her after she was taken. Everything she's done for the last four years. She's such a strong, brave woman. And lucky. So fucking lucky that it was a group of tourists who found her on the outskirts of the city. If it'd been anyone else, who knows where my kitten would have wound up.

She spent four years locked in a cell and treated like shit. Constant abuse and neglect until she caved to what Carver Dario wanted. She did what she had to do to survive. He wasn't a master. He was an abuser who deserved to die a painful death.

GROUPCHAT

Katty93 has logged in.

My heart races as I watch the blip appear on the screen. I've been waiting for her. It's wrong. I know it is. I'm not disillusioned into thinking this isn't fucked up. I just don't care.

Catlvr89: Hello Kat!

Katty93: Oh hi there!

Are you new here? Welcome!

A smile slips across my face at her willingness to please. Her happiness that's apparent on the screen.

Catlvr89: I am. Today is my first day.

Katty93: It's a nice place here. I think you'll find it really supportive.

Catlvr89: So far I have!

Katty93: ...

The dots signifying Katia is typing a response appear on the screen, but then vanish. I consider typing something, but then I wait a few more seconds.

Katty93: How are you doing today?

Catlvr89: Today is good. It's been a long time since I've had a rough day.

I type in the answer before I have a moment to think. I'm not blind to the fact that this is a support group and there are more people here than just Katia. I'm not interested in taking advantage of Katia or anyone else. I just need answers to make sure she's the one I've been waiting for. I know she's usually on late, and I'm only here for her. But I'll do my best to blend in and be discreet.

I may not have gone through what some of the people on here have. But others here are coping with death. I can relate to that.

Katty93: Oh! That's really good! What brings you here?

Catlvr89: Could we message in private?

GROUPCHAT

Darlinggirl86 has logged in.

KATTY93: OF COURSE CAT! AND HI DARLING!

Darlinggirl86: Hi all! Welcome Cat!

I don't respond to Darling. I don't want to create an illusion that I'll be staying here. I just wanted a taste of Katia. I wanted to see what she was like. To see if she's the woman I think she is. Strong and vibrant, but tainted by a sinful darkness that makes her perfect for me.

PRIVATE MESSAGE

Katty93: I'm happy to chat. But I do promise you the group is really supportive and judgment free.

Catlvr89: I'm trying to decide what I want in a partner. It's difficult with my needs

I stare at the blunt answer I've given her, and I know it's truthful at least.

Katty93: Oh! I see. Have you recently left a relationship?

Catlvr89: No, I haven't had one for years.

Katty93: I haven't either.

My heart thuds in my chest, and my brow furrows at her response. I was under the impression that she hadn't had a relationship since she'd been freed.

Catlvr89: How did your last relationship end?

Katty93: Horribly. I left... he was my abuser.

It's odd to me that she would call what they had a relationship. Her mental records don't show that she had Stockholm syndrome or any type of psychological problems other than the occasional night terror. Which seems reasonable.

Catlvr89: Did you love him?

Katty93: No. I hated him. But I was safe with him at least.

Catlvr89: Safe?

Katty93: I knew I wouldn't die. I'm sorry if this is ...dark. I didn't mean to bring it up.

Catlvr89: I like talking. You can talk about whatever you'd like.

Katty93: Thank you. Let's talk about you! Lol

Catlvr89: Lol I think I'm more comfortable talking about you if you don't mind. ...Unless you have questions for me.

Katty93: Oh! Well if that makes you more comfortable. We can talk about anything.

Catlvr89: Why do you call it a relationship? What you had with your abuser?

Katty93: Idk. I'm sorry I shouldn't have.

Catlvr89: Don't be sorry. It's okay. I was just curious.

Katty93: I guess cause he's the only ...idk how to say it.

Catlvr89: Has he been your only sexual partner?

Katty93: No, he shared me.

Catlvr89: Outside of who he shared you with?

Katty93: Yes. I tried to have other relationships. It just doesn't seem ...idk. Like I don't feel like ...idk how to say it.

Catlvr89: Like they can handle you?

Katty93: I guess something like that.

Catlvr89: What can they not handle?

Katty93: I want to be submissive. I want to feel protected and cherished.

I stare at her answer and I'm filled with confusion, revulsion. Anger. He didn't protect her. He didn't cherish her. My fingers tap angrily on the keys, the loud clicks filling the room.

Catlvr89: You felt that way with your abuser?

Katty93: I pretended I did. It made it easier to live. I created this fantasy and it made it easier to survive I guess.

My heart hurts so badly for her upon hearing her confession.

Catlvr89: I'm so sorry.

Katty93: It's fine.

Catlvr89: It's not fine. I didn't mean to bring up what happened.

I wait nervously for her response. I want to gauge just how affected she still is. What she went through is something that stays with a person for life. But what she makes of that life is her decision to make. I'm shocked she considers that a relationship. Or even thought of calling it that.

Catlvr89: So now you aren't interested in a relationship?

Katty93: I want one, it's just ...I tried other things. Normal relationships. It just didn't work.

My lungs still. We're so alike, yet so different.

Catlvr89: I'm the same way. I don't want normal.

Katty93: What do you want?

I debate on answering her. But I don't want to prime her responses.

Catlvr89: You first?

Katty93: LOL

Katty93: I'm weird I think.

Catlvr89: It's okay. I'm weird too. We can be weird together.

My blood heats, and my dick stirs at her answer and the playfulness of the conversation. I feel as though I'm luring the kitten, my kitten, out to play.

Katty93: I think I like to be dominated.

Catlvr89: What's weird about that?

Katty93: Like really dominated.

Catlvr89: Does it have something to do with what you went through?

I know it does, but I want to ask. The paperwork and her history, the fucking shrink report I looked up—all of that were other people's opinions. I want to know what she thinks.

Katty93: It does kind of. In that he was my master.

Katty93: And now I want another.

I suck in a sharp breath and force my dick to calm the fuck down. Seeing her confess only solidifies what I want from her.

I need to see her. I need to evaluate our chemistry.

Catlvr89: So you want a master? What do you want from him?

Katty93: It's fucked up.

Catlvr89: I like fucked up. I want fucked up too.

Katty93: I want him to own me. I want to be a true slave to him, but I need my life too. I've been reading these stories. They seem too good to be true. A normal life, but with a M/s relationship. Maybe that's why I want it. Idk. But there's a club I've been looking into and I'm thinking about going. Just to check it out.

Catlvr89: Why not just do D/s?

Katty93: I don't want a Dom. I want a Master. There's a difference and I know what I want. I want him to rule over me. But to do it justly. The way it's fantasized about. Where I'm cherished and safe and protected and his everything and he's mine too. I want it to be real.

I close my eyes and force my groan back. It's like she's teasing me. Taunting me by saying all the right words. I start to type a response, something about measuring her desires, asking her what she specifically wants. But all of this will be for nothing if the chemistry between us isn't there, or if she's simply not ready. I delete the words and the "... " signifying that I'm typing disappears.

Katty93: I realize that I don't know your history and I really hope you aren't offended. It wasn't my intention.

A huff of a laugh leaves me as I sip the whiskey, feeling the warmth flowing through me. She hasn't offended me in the least, merely given me every indication I was looking for to pursue her. I could push. I could chase. But I need to handle her delicately. She's like a kitten in a sense. My kitten. Sharp claws, and born into this world ready to claw her way to where she needs to go. But curious. I can rely on that curiosity.

If she wants me, if she truly wants this, she'll make the initiative.

I'm not a patient man, but good things come to those who wait.

Or so they say.

I down the last bit of whiskey in my glass, the ice clinking and the harsh burn down my throat spreading through my chest. Finally, I respond. Just one little push.

CATLVR89: YOU WON'T KNOW IF YOU DON'T GO, KATTY93

CHAPTER 6

KATIA

The sound of soft, elegant music envelops me as I step into Club X, my heels softly thudding against the plush, rich carpet. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim, ambient lighting as the bouncer that ushered me in gestures to the center of the foyer before leaving to walk back to his post. My eyes are drawn over to where he pointed and I inhale a shocked breath at the sight before me.

The club is absolutely luxurious with a huge ballroom that sports high vaulted ceilings and gorgeous, yet erotic Victorian paintings plastered along all the walls. My feet walk of their own accord closer to where the hum of chatter is coming from. In the middle of the enormous room, finely decorated circular tables dot the area, while a large stage lies in the background, its vast red curtains pulled shut. From what Madam Lynn's told me, the stage is used for BDSM shows, though there must not be one scheduled for tonight. On one side of the room is an upscale bar with blue ambient lighting that contrasts with the red lighting on the walls from the sconces. It's all very elegant and alluring. Every detail exudes sex appeal.

My body chills as I realize how far I've walked in. I cross my arms over my chest and the bracelet that I found in the box bumps against my breast. I stare down at it. It's simple but elegant, just two thin silver bands with an empty space in between. It means I wish to be a Slave. It's my membership here, but also a sign to those who are looking for partners. Madam Lynn asked me at least half a dozen times if I was

sure. She told me if I changed my mind, I could always have a band put in the middle. A color that would signify my limits. But I'm certain.

I glance up at the large room, and again I'm in awe.

But all of this pales in comparison to the guests milling about the room.

Handsome men wearing party masks, some with animal prints, some adorned with angel wings, and others with full joker masks, fill the large space. Their expensive-looking suits radiate wealth and power, as do their posture and the tone of their voices. Some are sitting at tables, talking with each other, while others are coming in and out of the room, flowing in from a large hallway off to the side that I'm sure leads to other, darker parts of the club. But most of the men have one thing in common—a chained, collared and barely dressed woman at their bidding.

These women follow their Dom or Master with absolute submission, that much is obvious. They're all so beautiful too, dressed in sparkly and elegant, yet racy dresses that show off their gorgeous curves. They look... healthy. And happy. It's what surprises me most. My body heats with the realization and I lean slightly against the wall, needing support. This isn't like my past. This is the fantasy.

I take in a shuddering breath, calming myself. I'm safe here. I open my eyes and watch as a woman seated in a kneeling position on a pillow next to her Master laughs at something he's said. Or maybe he's her Dom. I'm not sure. I can't see her bracelet or his. But what I can see is her obvious devotion and his.

My heart races and as I take in each of the couples, again taken aback by the beautiful clothes they're wearing, although many of them seem to be no more than scraps of cloth.

Fingering my newbie bracelet, I feel self-conscious with my short black dress that comes up above my knees. It's not anywhere close to as sexy as the outfits these stunning women have on, but I know I'm just here to check the club out. I'll have time to dress like them later... if I decide to join. I nod at

my inner thoughts. I'm only here to get a taste. A dark voice deep inside of me stirs, whispering that I belong here. I ignore it.

My breath quickens as I watch a Master stop in his tracks to pet his Slave who is obediently following him on her hands and knees. The room spins around me as I watch him gently stroke her hair, and I clutch a hand to my throat, my lips parted in awe.

EVERYTHING ABOUT THIS PLACE, THE LUXURIOUS INTERIOR, THE moody lighting, the powerful men and breathtaking women, is intoxicating! I take in a deep breath as a euphoric feeling runs through me. It's like I'm getting high off my surroundings, drunk off the interaction between the Subs, Doms, Slaves and Masters. My pulse races, and my core heats. Seeing these women following around these powerful men obediently, reminds me of how much I crave a Master. How much I *need* a Master.

I want to feel the safety they're feeling. The pleasure of being rewarded and cherished. My heart twists in my chest.

Madam Lynn, in a discussion we'd had online after I responded to her email, told me everything I wanted to know about the club and policies, but I would've never expected this. This is just... I shake my head. I have no words. It looks nothing like what I went through, but at the same time it carries a familiar feeling. For the first time since being back home, I have hope that I'll be able to find sexual pleasure. The thought thrills me to my core and terrifies me all at once.

My heart races and my palms sweat as I slowly begin to move through the club, picking up confidence as I walk past the couples. My hands are clasped and my head bowed slightly, but I'm taking in every detail. Keeping my eyes low, I begin the descent into the ballroom, my hand gripping the railing for dear life. My emotions are a stormy mix, but the overriding feeling is lust.

I ignore the stares of the men I pass, knowing not to look them in the eyes and waiting for them to address me. None of them

do, and I'm grateful for that. My heart is racing so fast; it feels like it's going to shoot up my throat. I'm here of my free will, but I don't want to give offense to anyone. As I step down into the ballroom, a few of the men at surrounding tables stop to stare at me. Two even approach me and I stand perfectly still, my gaze on the floor, waiting for them to command me, but when they spot my bracelet they look away. One gently fingers the bracelet and tells me in a hushed voice, "Welcome."

I respond quickly, "Thank you, sir," and wait for further instruction, but he simply leaves me and goes back to his table. I dare to look up, and the men seem to be enjoying whatever conversation they were having before.

Before I can ponder their actions, I watch as an untethered young woman, who's talking to a group of men at a table, rises from her seat and approaches me. As she gets close, I'm struck by how beautiful and sexy she is. Moving with an elegance I usually only see in a woman twice her age, she's dressed in a red babydoll dress with a black belt at its center, fishnet stockings and glossy black heels. Her dirty blonde hair is done up into a messy bun with wispy bangs that frame her eyes, and she wears a smile that is so warm and welcoming.

She holds out a manicured hand as she reaches me. "Hello, Katia," she greets me, her voice low and sultry. "It's so nice to finally meet you. Welcome to Club X. I'm Madam Lynn."

Her grip is soft and welcoming, and I feel completely at ease in front of her. "Madam Lynn?" I ask, unable to keep the disbelief out of my voice.

Madam Lynn flashes me a friendly grin filled with perfectly white, straight teeth. "In the flesh."

I know it must seem rude, but I stare at her, eyes wide, unable to respond. I just can't believe it. How in the world is someone so young in charge of all of this? Talking to her online, she seemed wise beyond her years. I assumed that she'd be much older than the youthful woman standing before me. It was so easy to confide into her online, I felt like I was talking to a maternal figure. It's a shock to see that she's only a few years older than me at most

“Is something the matter?” Madam Lynn asks when I’m silent for longer than a few seconds.

I shake my head. “No, I’m sorry,” I add quickly.

She chuckles at me, waving a dismissive hand. “No need to apologize.”

I get the feeling there’s more than meets the eye to Madam Lynn, but I’m not about to question her. It’s none of my business.

She turns and gestures at the grand ballroom. “So what do you think?” she asks. “Does it suit your tastes?”

I turn my eyes back on the room, seeing all those powerful men dressed in suits with their Subs and Slaves, my breathing becoming ragged again. “It’s wonderful,” I say breathlessly, and mean it. I shake my head as I continue, “I never thought it would be so...” and my voice trails off as I struggle to find the words.

“Intoxicating?” Madam Lynn supplies.

That’s exactly what I was thinking. I nod my head and shoot her a grateful grin. “Yes.”

She gives me a kind smile. “It truly is; you won’t find a place like this anywhere else. And like I told you, all of the members here have had background checks. In addition, they’re safe and clean, and the club is secured. I promise you.” Her eyes shine with sincerity. Before the emotions overwhelm me, she adds, “But there’s so much more to it than what you’re seeing here. Would you like a tour?” She gestures to a hallway up on the walkway overlooking the ballroom.

I shake my head gently; it took me nearly a year to feel comfortable saying no again. And even now, I can feel the tightness in my throat as I deny her. “Could I look on my own?” I ask softly.

“Of course,” she replies and nods her head slightly before turning her attention to someone calling for her a few tables away.

It's rude, but I walk off without saying a word, leaving Madam Lynn standing with an amused expression behind me.

I make my way to the hallway, the hum of the sultry music dimming, trying to keep my eyes to myself as Subs and Doms pass me by. They're enjoying the power play of their relationships, and I don't want to interfere by staring. Despite my nervousness, I'm excited as I step into the hallway. This place is a living, breathing fantasy.

I reach the end of the hallway and come to a room with several sliding glass doors. Through them, I can see naked masked men and woman engaged in all sorts of foreplay. My breathing catches in my throat as I watch a woman on her knees, sucking the massive cock of the man standing in front of her. My pussy pulses with need as I watch her head bob back and forth, the man watching her and gripping the back of her head to lead her movements.

I'm so engaged in the display of absolute depravity in front of me, I almost don't hear the approaching footsteps.

"I'm not sure what you're into, Katia," I hear Madam Lynn's voice behind me, and my heart leaps in my chest. I jump, startled and moving my hand to my frantically beating heart. My cheeks burn with embarrassment as I try to catch my breath.

"Sorry dear, I just wanted to let you know that the dungeons are downstairs."

As I turn to face her, her words make my blood run cold. *Dungeon*. I told her about some of my fantasies. And I do want to have a true Master who disciplines and punishes me. But the thought of seeing that right now... I just can't. I'm on edge and trying to take all this in.

"Katia?" Madam Lynn asks with concern, seeing the distress cross my face for a brief instant.

I straighten and flash her a brief, nervous smile. "Sorry."

Madam Lynn waves away my worry, shaking her head. I'm impressed by how forgiving and down-to-earth she is. "It's no problem at all. I can see you're a bit... overwhelmed."

“I think seeing the playrooms is fine for now,” I answer, changing the subject from her earlier suggestion. A part of me wants to go to the dungeon, but I want to see it in a way that fills me with desire, not trigger me. I know I do want to see it. Just not yet. I’m not sure why, exactly. I don’t know if it’s because I’m destined to crave this wickedness, or whether it’s something that’s burned into my soul because of my past. But I want to feel the sting of the whip. I learned to worship it, and crave the pleasure it led me to. I desperately want it. But not yet. Not right now.

So far, Club X is like a den for sexual pleasure, exactly the fantasy I’ve dreamed of. Desire fills my blood as my eyes fall back onto the Subs and Doms fucking each other’s brains out. I even notice whips on the back wall of the playroom, and my skin burns even hotter as I remember how good my Master was with them. He was so good with whips; I learned to love their bite. In fact, it brought more pleasure to me than anything else he ever did.

“If you’re interested in finding someone…” Madam Lynn says, startling me out of my trance, “you could wait here.” My heart races, thinking about feeling it again. Would it bring me the same pleasure?

“Who would…?” I start to ask, my words trailing off. *Whip me*. But Madam Lynn knows exactly what I mean.

She gestures at men walking in and out of the hallway, and others who are watching what’s going on inside the playrooms. “Whoever you choose, Katia. You have no collar on your neck. Everything here is a choice.” She lets that sink in for a moment before she adds, “Don’t be offended if not many approach you.”

My eyes dart to hers, feeling self-conscious once again. “You’re wearing the bracelet of a Slave. And that’s a lot of responsibility. Most men here aren’t interested in being Masters.” Her eyebrows are raised, and she’s looking at me as though she’s wondering if I follow.

I swallow thickly and nod. “I understand.”

“Good.” She takes my hand in hers and pats it. “If you show your submission, men will come and offer you their partnership. You can always deny them.” I nod again and whisper, “Thank you.” My heart clenches.

And then she turns and walks off, her heels clicking across the floor. I’m left alone, trembling with excitement and desire, my mind racing with possibilities.

Fingering my bracelet, I look back inside of the playrooms, my mouth watering with hunger. I want that. I crave that. I want someone to dominate me. *Own me.*

Every inch of my skin is humming with desire. Madam Lynn’s words come back to me, *Everything here is a choice.*

Sucking in a deep breath, I close my eyes and make a decision.

There’s no time like the present, and I didn’t come here to let my fear rule me. I need to see if this is what I want.

I kneel on the floor at the front of the room, bowing my head, placing myself into a submissive posture. The sounds of the sex coming through the playrooms reaches my ears, and my breathing becomes heavy as my pussy clenches with need.

It doesn’t take long before masked men coming in and out of the playroom approach me. A few stop to speak with me, but once they see my bracelet, they’re gone like the wind. I feel disappointed, but eventually others that are bolder stop to interact. One man even stops to tell me how beautiful I am, and what a good girl I’m being. Yet his words are hollow, because after a few more compliments, he leaves just like all the rest.

It shocks me how their denial affects me. It shouldn’t, but I desperately want to be kept.

I keep my position, though I start to worry that none of these men want what I want.

It also shocks me how they prefer Submissives. Being a Slave means you’re more vulnerable than a Submissive, and for men who crave power, this should make me a very attractive partner. But in a way, the fact that a lot of these men respect the differences between a Sub and a Slave, and aren’t taking

advantage of my vulnerability, the fact that they're respecting my desires, makes me feel even more comfortable with the club. It makes me hopeful that if I do find a Master, he will be someone that I can give myself to entirely and entrust with my safety.

I stay kneeling, my forehead lowered to the floor for what seems like an eternity, watching masked men stop to glance at my bracelet and then continue on as if I wasn't even there before I hear the heavy thud of footsteps approaching me from behind.

I resist the urge to raise my head as the footsteps come to a stop at my side. If this is finally someone who wants to be my Master, I want to show that I can be the most obedient Slave. At least for a taste. Just for a moment. I can always walk away. My heart pounds as I wait for them to say something, anything, my breathing slow and ragged. I jump slightly as a warm finger hooks my chin and I'm forced to look up into the masked face of a man with sharp, patrician features.

"Are you truly looking for a Master?" he asks me, his voice low and deep, his gaze penetrating. He speaks with authority and power. He has an air of dominance about him. But my desire is replaced by fear.

As I slowly nod my head, I feel a slight tremor go through my body. I breathe heavily, trying to calm myself as I see his bracelet is like mine. He's a Master. I try to imagine him whipping me, but the sexual tension is absent.

This was a mistake.

The moment the thought hits me, I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. A masked man walks up behind the man who's still gripping my chin, but this one radiates something far more than power, his walk filled with confidence, his piercing green eyes staring deep into mine. There's an air of anger, possession even, that's rolling off of him in waves and lighting my desire aflame. My nipples pebble and my pussy clenches as his heavy footsteps beat on the ground with his threatening presence. Just looking at him causes my heart to race and my pussy to clench with desperate need.

I can't even see all of his features because of his mask, but what I can see tells me that he's handsome as fuck, with his chiseled jawline that sports a six o'clock shadow, and his intense green eyes that cause my skin to prickle from his gaze alone. He's tall, broad-shouldered, and his dirty blonde hair is slicked to the side almost like an old school gangster, increasing his sex appeal.

Good God, he's so fucking sexy. My breathing refuses to regulate itself. *He* is a Master.

As he approaches, I forget that the man holding my chin is even there. This walking deity becomes the only thing that exists in the room for me, and his eyes seem to silently say to me, *You're fucking mine.*

CHAPTER 7

ISAAC

The moment Katia walked in, I was drawn to her. Her gorgeous blonde hair flows almost down to her hips. Her eyes are a paler blue than I thought they were. They're wide and full of curiosity.

My kitten is finally here.

It's killed me to stay away and let her make this decision for herself, but I knew she'd come when she was ready. She wants this. She *needs* this.

I watched her as she took in the club, walking slowly as she nervously picked at the hem of her dress. Her chest rose with heavy breaths as she peeked into the playrooms. I wanted her to grow accustomed to the club. I wanted her to feel safe here and make herself comfortable with the atmosphere.

But I'm sure as fuck not going to let some prick steal her out from under me before I have a chance.

Joe Levi has his hands on her. Just a firm grip on her chin. But it's a display of ownership and interest. He's debating on whether or not she's worthy to take on as a Slave. Some men like to break them, some like them already trained. In a way, Katia is both.

But not for him.

She's mine. And he needs to get his hands off of her.

“Kitten,” I call out to her past Joe in a voice that makes him turn. My heavy steps echo in the room as I approach. I can feel several eyes on us, but I don’t care if I’m making a spectacle. I won’t allow it.

Joseph Levi is known to have dark preferences. Like me in some ways, but darker. He enjoys degradation and humiliation. Or so I’ve heard. It’s his reputation, but he’s only been at the club for a few months and he rarely interacts. He’s been to every auction though, but he’s yet to place a bid. Like me.

I should have known he was waiting for the same thing I was. *For Katia*. But he can back the fuck off. He has no idea what she’s been through. He can’t give her what she needs like I can.

But she doesn’t know me. She has no clue what’s in store for her. And ultimately it’s her choice.

Katia raises her eyes to mine. A shuddering breath raising her shoulders. There’s an instant spark as her breath hitches. Every inch of my skin prickles with recognition. My heart beats faster, and my blood heats with desire. She’s kneeling and waiting for a Master. She was waiting for me.

“There’s no collar here,” Joe says, looking at me with narrowed eyes. I turn at the sound of his voice, ripping my attention from Katia and pissing me off even more. Irritated doesn’t begin to cover it.

“No, there isn’t.” I fucking hate that he’s right. And I intend on remedying that situation before she leaves. I don’t want her in here with anyone thinking they can take her. She’s vulnerable, impressionable. I need to make my claim on her now.

“Then you can wait,” he says in a cold voice, turning his back to me and stepping to the side to block my view of her. Rage spikes through my blood

Fucking bastard. My hand balls into a fist and from the corner of my eyes I can see a crowd forming, security making their way over to us. Everyone knows I won’t be taking that disrespect lightly. I have no right, but I don’t give a fuck. My heart races, and my blood boils. I won’t fucking allow it.

She does *not* belong to him.

I crack my neck, ignoring the approaching footsteps of Joshua and Dominic, and step up to him, my hand pushing on his shoulder to get his attention. I'm ready to beat him to a bloody fucking pulp if I have to, and I have a good feeling it's coming to that.

I'm not a hothead; I'm not an overtly angry person. But when it comes to her, things are different.

His dark eyes dart to mine and his grip on Katia's drops as he makes a fist of his own, preparing for what's to come.

But before either of us can do anything, Katia speaks up, slicing through the thick tension. "No," she says in a strong voice that rings out clearly. She instantly hunches in slightly, regret and fear clearly evident. We both turn to look at her, her wide blue eyes focused on the ground as she struggles to compose herself. Insecurity is washing off of her in waves. She lifts her head to look at Joe, vulnerability shining brightly in her eyes.

Fuck me, my heart crumbles in my chest. It will shred me if she feels something with him. I can feel the spark between us, the pull to her. Does she not feel it in return?

"I'm sorry," she speaks barely above a murmur, her voice cracking. She clears her throat and then her eyes find mine. "Sir?" she addresses me, turning slightly still in her kneeling position to face me and placing her small hands on my shoe before resting her cheek on the floor. A sign of complete submission.

She chose me.

My chest fills with pride and I'll admit it, arrogance.

Joe snorts at me and glances at Katia, but doesn't say anything as he storms off. He brushes past the crowd that's gathered and it's only then that I really notice them.

Madam Lynn and Joshua are staring at me with contempt. This certainly isn't discreet, and it's not going to go unnoticed. I hadn't planned on this. But I couldn't let her slip through my fingers.

I ignore them. I ignore the whispers and the way Madam Lynn crosses her arms with obvious disapproval. I give Katia my full attention, crouching low to place a hand on the back of her head.

“May I look you in the eyes?” she asks with her gaze forward, focused on the floor.

I hate that she has to ask that question, but she has no idea what the rules are. She doesn't know what it's like here, and her perception of a M/s relationship is skewed and inaccurate. But I'm going to fix that.

“You may. Always.” As her eyes reach mine, I cup her chin and take a good look at her for the first time. Her skin is soft and sun-kissed. Her neck and shoulders are gorgeous; they're my favorite parts of the female body. The elegant curves drive me wild. She has a splash of freckles along her skin, and thin silver scars scattered along them as well.

She's beautiful.

“Always look me in the eyes,” I say softly as I rub my thumb along her jaw, willing her to look at me. Those soft pale blue eyes seem to look through me, chilling my body. “Never hesitate to speak or to respond. Understood?”

I'm already laying down rules, but that's the way it works here. We all have preferences, and it's much easier to be upfront about them and ensure that the time spent isn't wasted. Tastes within the club are specific, so it's best to be forthcoming. And she needs to know what I expect.

“Yes,” she replies, and her voice lingers, as if she's not sure what to call me.

“Master.”

She sucks in a deep breath. I can see she's uncomfortable. That's to be expected. She's new to this. I need to slow down my approach and keep that in mind.

“When you're ready, you will call me Master.” I debate on allowing it, but I concede, “Isaac is acceptable as well.”

She looks hesitant, and I hate that. She's clenching her thighs slightly and her breathing has picked up. Which is a damn good sign since it means she's aroused at least. But she's still frightened and new.

"Yes," she says, and again she seems as though she's going to say more, but she doesn't. She hasn't budged an inch. She's on edge and tense.

What she needs is to get off.

"And what should I call you?" I ask.

"Whatever pleases you," she answers in a sultry voice, her body shuddering with pleasure.

I smirk at her response, feeling the adrenaline calming down and my dick hardening. "What's your name?" I ask her, even though I already know. I've already decided I'm not going to tell her what I know. I'll let her confide in me what she'd like to, for two reasons. The first is that I may have misinterpreted something and I don't want her to assume I know everything, especially when her perception may be different from what's written down on paper. And the second is that I want her to desire confiding in me. I want her to open up to me at her own pace. But to be a good Master, I needed to know her background, so I have no guilt or shame about looking into her past.

"Katia." She's quick to answer. Her voice is soft and soothing. It bothers me in some ways that she's well trained. Someone else has taught her obedience, and I hate that. It's even worse that she was trained with methods that are wrong and disgust me, by a fraud. An abuser is not a Master.

I whisper her name, loving the way it rolls off my tongue.

"Did you come here to get fucked, Katia?"

"No," she answers quickly. Her breathing is coming in pants now, and I can tell from the flush in her skin that it's because she's close to her release already. She's going to be easy to satisfy. I like that.

"What did you think would happen when you came here?"

“I just wanted to see what it was like.” There’s a soft innocence to her response I hadn’t expected. I pull her off the ground and move her to a bench in the room, sitting her next to me and placing a hand on her thigh. I take a quick look over to where the small crowd had gathered and smile when I see they’ve gone. Good. I’m grateful for the small amount of privacy.

“Are you happy with what you found?” I ask her, angling my body toward her so she can see my focus is on her.

Her pupils dilate, and she licks her lower lip. “Yes.”

“You’re horny, aren’t you, kitten?” I tease her, loving how close she is to me, how I finally have her here.

She blushes, and a small smile slips onto her lips. “I am.”

“What turns you on?” I ask her.

“Just,” she gestures between us, “just this.”

“I need you to be specific.”

“I like you taking control.”

“Your bracelet has no middle band, so that means you’d like to be a Slave? You want a twenty-four seven power exchange?”

“I think so,” she says as the smile vanishes, and the playfulness turns into uncertainty.

“What do you need to convince you?”

She looks up at me through her thick lashes. “It’s been a very a long time.”

I know we’re compatible, that we would fit well as Master and Slave, but she doesn’t. I need to show her.

I slowly unbuckle my belt. I’m going to push her limits, take control, and show her that she can trust me. And then reward her justly.

I’m vaguely aware that a few members of the club are watching from their places around the room. Although I’ve taken two Slaves from here, I’ve never participated in the playrooms. I’ve always brought them to a private room or

taken them home. I have my mask on, but that doesn't mean that they don't know who I am. At least the ones who matter.

I'm glad they know though. I want them to know she's mine.

I pull the belt from the loops, watching as Katia visibly tenses. The leather slides across the fabric, hissing as I remove my belt.

I let the belt hang from my hand.

"I need to know your preferences."

Her shoulders rise and fall quickly. "I'm not sure I know what you mean..." Her voice trails off and she visibly swallows.

"For instance, right now I want to fuck your throat." I crouch low, wrapping the belt over the back of her neck. "I want to hear the pretty noises you make when you choke on my cock." Her lips part, and the most beautiful moan spills from her lips. "Would you like that, kitten?"

"Yes," she says eagerly, lust dripping from her softly spoken reply.

I unbuckle my pants with my left hand, her eyes watching as I pull the zipper down and unleash my cock. I stroke it a few times. "You'll take what I give you."

"Yes," she answers obediently, moving to all fours on the bench.

I stroke my cock with my right hand and move her head down with my left. My fingers spear through her hair and make a fist.

"Lick it clean first," I command her. A bead of precum leaks from my slit and she quickly laps at it. Her hot tongue sends a chill down my body and forces my toes to curl. I remain stiff and in control, but the feel of her, the eagerness to please, makes me want to groan in utter rapture.

I tighten my grip on the base of her neck, knowing the slight pain I'm causing her. Her thighs clench and tremble, and a sweet sound of pleasure escapes her as I lower her hot mouth onto my cock. It's a clear sign that she enjoys the pain. I don't know how much she wants though. That's something we need to discuss before I push her limits.

“Good girl,” I tell her, pushing her down farther until I can feel the back of her throat. I close my eyes and groan, letting her know how good she feels. I hold her down, loving the sensation of her throat tightening around the head of my dick. I pump my hips and push her all the way down, all of me cutting off her air supply with her nose nearly touching my pubes. I let her up, pulling her off of my massive cock. She heaves in a breath, her chest swaying and her fingers gripping onto the bench.

“Again?” I ask her. If she were my Slave, I wouldn’t bother. But I’m also learning her desires.

“Please,” she begs as her voice comes out with desperation and I immediately react, shoving her face down as she eagerly devours my length.

I let her move this time, and she pushes herself down, as far as I did. Widening her jaws and taking in as much of me as she can. I let my hand roam down her back to her lush ass and inch her dress up. She’s wearing underwear, but that’s something that’s going to change. I want her pussy and ass easily available. For now, I push my fingers against the thin fabric and buck my hips up when I feel how hot and wet she is.

Fuck. She’s so ready. She’s fucking soaked for this. I pinch her clit lightly, and the vibrations from her moan around my dick nearly make me cum. But I hold back my own pleasure. Our first time will be together.

I push the damp fabric out of the way and tease her. Without any warning, I push three fingers into her tight pussy as I shove her head down farther onto my cock. I pump them in and out while thrusting my hips. Keeping up a rapid pace, and loving the noises from her wet cunt mixing with the sounds of her choking on my dick.

I pull her head off of me and let her suck in a breath. She’s shaky and wobbles slightly, her eyes glazed over and spit on the side of her mouth. She heaves in a breath and then another before I release my hold on the base of her neck. All the while I keep steadily fucking her with my fingers. Stroking her walls and pushing her closer to climax.

“May I please cum?” she cries out with desperation.

“Cum for me, kitten,” I say before shoving her head back down. She sucks me vigorously, bobbing her head and hollowing her cheeks, both in an effort to get me off and an eagerness to race toward her own orgasm.

She enjoys this. I throw my head back as my balls draw up. My spine tingles, and I know I’m close. I pull my hand out of her pussy and spank her clit, smacking my wet fingers against her pussy as she screams her pleasure around my cock.

Her throat opens, and I shove my dick down deeper. I continue thrusting my hips in short pumps while I resume fingering her over and over until her body tenses.

Yes!

Her cunt spasms around my fingers, and that’s my undoing.

Wave after wave of hot cum leaves me, and she obediently swallows it all down. The feeling only adds to my pleasure. I continue pulling her orgasm from her as she cleans my dick of every last drop, her body shuddering and her soft moans of pleasure filling my ears.

The sight of her with her eyes closed, enjoying the taste of my cock so intensely, makes me rock fucking hard again. I could take her for hours.

Her thighs are still trembling from the intensity of her orgasm as I lick her cum from my fingers. She’s fucking delicious. And tight. Next time I want her cumming on my dick.

It takes a moment for me to catch my breath as I pet her hair and let her lay her head on my lap.

Perfection.

I grab a blanket from the side of the room; they’re here specifically for aftercare. Pulling her panties back in place first, I pull her small body into my arms and sit down on the bench, nestling her into my lap.

“Did you enjoy that?” I ask her softly, kissing her hair. Her sweet taste is still on my tongue and I want more, but not here.

“Yes,” she says softly, her cheek resting on my shoulder. Her hot breath tickles my neck.

“Is it what you came here for?”

She clears her throat and shifts slightly in my lap. “I’m not sure what I came here for.”

“You’re looking for a Master,” I answer her.

“Yes.”

“You found one.”

She fidgets in my lap. The lack of a response makes me nervous.

“I’m not interested in play. I want the real thing.” I speak while holding her gaze.

“I do, too,” she answers softly.

“I want you, Katia. And I don’t want to share.”

She’s perfect. I can give her what she wants, and what she needs.

Everything is exactly how I imagined it would be. Up until this point. She isn’t giving me the answer I require.

“I don’t want anyone thinking you’re not off-limits.” I can feel my heart race as I talk to her. I want my collar around her neck. I want everyone to know she’s taken. No one else can give her what I can. She doesn’t know it yet, but I’m going to provide for her in ways she’s never dreamed of.

Her pale blue eyes fly to mine, and her body tenses. For the first time since she’s been in here, she’s showing signs of fear. Fear of commitment.

But I’ll be damned if she lets anyone else touch her. If she’s having second thoughts about me being her Master, I’ll convince her. “Are you unhappy with me?” I ask her.

“No, it’s not that. I’m just not ready.”

“In here, without a collar, others will approach you.” And I’m sure as fuck not going to allow that.

“You have my word.” Her voice is shaky.

“I don’t want your word,” I say in a gravelly voice displaying my dominance over her, and signaling the severity I feel at her denying me this request. I won’t give her an ultimatum. She’s not mine yet, and this demonstration of disobedience isn’t a good sign. But she has a past. And I’m acutely aware of the fact that her perception is different from mine. She has real fears that need to be addressed. Still, I want her marked as mine. “It will displease me if you deny my collar.”

She wraps her arms around herself and looks away, sadness apparent on her beautiful features.

She slowly raises her chin, her eyes finding mine. “That’s all I can give you for now...”

Her voice trails off before she gets the title out. But I can hear it on the tip of her tongue. *Master*. Now that our play is over, she’s reverting back. She’s giving herself safety. I don’t mind it, but she will have more than enough safety with me. She only needs to let go.

“What do you need from me?” I ask her, gently cupping her chin in my hand.

She’s hesitant at first, but she leans into my touch. Her eyes are closed as she answers, “I don’t know. I’m afraid.”

“You already know not to be afraid.” As her Master, I’m to carry the weight of her worries. “I want you as my Slave, Katia.”

“I have problems.” She looks away, toward the door and I can see exactly what’s going through her mind. She doesn’t want to be taken advantage of, and she doesn’t know if she can handle her. That’s fine. I can soothe her worries. I have to remember that I have a very large advantage here. And she has no idea how much I know.

She needs to be comforted, probably fed, and have a simple conversation. I can try to take this slow. I don’t want to. But she obviously needs that.

“Come,” I say as I take her hand and lead her out of the playroom, toward the dining hall. There’s a show tonight. Fire

play, which should be enjoyable to watch. It's not something I toy with, but nonetheless it's entertaining.

"I have to go." Her feet stay planted, and she looks up at me as though she's begging me for permission to leave. She's not mine yet. That's painfully obvious. But I'm not going to let her get away with that shit.

"You will never lie to me again." My voice is hard. She doesn't *have* to go.

She furiously shakes her head and insists, "I'm not lying." Her voice is laced with fear. "I really do have to go. I am not well right now." Her breathing is coming in panicked breaths.

"That doesn't mean you need to go. If you're in need, all you need to do is tell me." Adrenaline courses through my blood. I'm frustrated and angry. I should have planned this out better.

"I don't want to." She answers honestly, and I rub my thumb on the back of her hand. This is too much, too soon. I fucking hate Joe Levi in this moment. I wanted her comfortable. I wanted to take things slower.

I kiss the back of her hand and nod.

"This was too much for you, wasn't it?" Her eyes widen and she starts to answer, but closes her mouth.

"You don't understand." I do. I fucking understand everything. Had I played this right, she wouldn't be feeling so insecure. I can fix this.

"You'll come back here. Tomorrow night." I give her the command. She focuses her full attention on me. Her submission is obvious. "If you'd like to continue this, of course."

"I would," she answers in a hushed voice.

"I would too, kitten. I understand you need time to process this. Take tonight and tomorrow during the day to think about things. And then you'll come back here. Wait for me in the dining hall. I don't want you coming back here without a collar on."

She nods her head obediently. "I'll do that."

“You’re going to think of me tonight, kitten,” I lean into her, whispering and gripping her a little tighter, “but you will not touch yourself.”

I can see the desire back in her eyes as she whispers, “Yes”. Part of me wants to push her further tonight. Take her to a private room and talk to her about her needs. I can reassure her that I can provide for her, just as I know she can provide for me.

But she does need to process this. I need her full commitment, and without her willing to wear my collar, I don’t have that.

Tonight I will make her a list. I should have already made her a clear set of rules. She’s a creature of habit and routines, and she desires a Master. Which means she needs rules.

This is my fault. But I will make it right.

CHAPTER 8

KATIA

I roll over in the bed, unable to sleep, my nipples hard, my clit pulsing with desire. A low groan of sexual frustration escapes my lips as I scissor my legs together, trying to calm the incessant clenching of my pussy. It's been plaguing me ever since I left the club, along with the memory of my mouth being used for Isaac's pleasure.

Fuck.

I loved it. I loved every second of being with him. Being used and commanded. I roll over again, my body covered with a sheen of sweat. It's so fucking hot in here. It doesn't help that I'm on fire with desire, primed and ready for another explosive orgasm. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I wish I hadn't left. I need more. I want more. I should've stayed.

There was so much left to say to Isaac, so much to explore. God, I want him. The way he walked up and challenged the other Master for my body and then took control of me was so fucking sexy. My skin pricks as I remember the determination Isaac displayed in getting his way with me, the way he made me take all of his length.

MY LIMBS SHUDDER, AND MY CLIT THROBS AS THE MEMORY OF choking on Isaac's massive cock while he plunged his fingers in and out of my pussy runs through my mind. Another moan of frustration escapes my lips. It was so fucking hot. Isaac had

been in complete control the whole time. It was unreal. He'd instantly known what I wanted. What I fucking needed.

AND I NEED MORE OF IT. NOW.

I HAVE TO GO BACK, I DECIDE, RESISTING THE URGE TO REACH DOWN and smack my throbbing clit the way he did. I can't wait. The only problem is I'm afraid of committing completely. Afraid of the unknown. In the club though, I'll be safe.

I ROLL OVER AGAIN, FEELING FRUSTRATED AND WANTING TO GRIND my pussy against the bedding so I can get some relief. But he told me not to. I don't have permission. The very thought makes me breathe easier. I will obey him. I will not disappoint him.

I can't get over how powerful and commanding he was. The look in his eyes behind that mask... full of desire. I hear the roar of engines outside, cars passing by on the highway, adding to my frustration. The sounds aren't helping keep me from falling asleep, but even if they weren't there, I wouldn't be able to sleep. I'm too wound up and needing his touch. It's been so long since I've wanted like this. Since I felt this need.

BUT IT ISN'T LIKE NOT BEING ABLE TO SLEEP IS ANYTHING NEW. There've been many nights I've been unable to sleep, but for a different reason entirely. A shiver goes down my spine, and a weight presses down on my chest. I close my eyes and shake my head, refusing to go there.

I ignore the emotions threatening to smother me, suffocating me like they have night after night as another pulse rocks my clit. I'm too excited. Since getting my life back, I've dreamed of a place like Club X, somewhere I could fulfill my fantasies and make myself whole again. I deserve happiness in every way. Including my sexual needs, but I hadn't found an outlet. Until today.

BUT HE WANTS MORE. A COLLAR. I GRIP MY THROAT, MY PULSE picking up speed, remembering the metal chain around my neck and the spikes that dug painfully into my skin.

No, I think and shake my head, not wanting to go there. To the dark memories. But it's too late. I can't stop feeling the sensation of the choking collar my Master used to train me. The desire burning up my body flees as a flood of fear washes over me and I sit upright in the bed, my heart pounding like a battering ram. The burning sweat covering my skin turns cold as I try to gain control.

ISAAC IS NOT LIKE THAT, I TELL MYSELF. HE WON'T BE LIKE THAT.

THERE SHOULD BE NO COMPARISON. THE TWO AREN'T EVEN remotely the same. A collar would be the only thing that they have in common. And the title. Master. I already feel something with Isaac that I never felt with my previous Master. Respect. It's hard to understand, though. In some ways, Isaac reminds me of Master O.

TEARS PRICK MY EYES AS I REMEMBER THE ONLY MASTER THAT WAS nice to me. Whenever I was around him, I felt safe. He was caring, and always sensitive to my needs and wants. In a way, I hated him for making me feel safe because I wanted him to take me away and make me his. But he never did. He had the power to save me, but didn't. I felt betrayed by that, like he'd put on this show to be nice to me when he really didn't care about me. None of them ever did.

I PULL MY KNEES TO MY CHEST, INSTINCTIVELY WRAPPING MY fingers around my ankle. I was so filled with desire from tonight's events, I forgot to cover my ankle with my weighted blanket. But I need it now. I sit there for what seems like hours, but it's only a few minutes. Listening to the cars pass by

outside, my heart thudding in my chest, I keep trying to push away those dark memories.

It's gone. It's in the past. I've dealt with these emotions. I thought I'd come to terms with them.

Lies, the dark voice whispers inside of me. You'd barely acknowledged their existence.

I take in a shuddering breath, refusing to listen and counting softly in my head as I repeat the poem *Fire and Ice* over and over again. It's a trick I learned to lessen my anxiety, long ago. *Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice.*

I CLOSE MY EYES, WHISPERING THE POEM I'VE MEMORIZED AND letting the calming cadence block out all other thoughts until my heart has settled and the rush of adrenaline has waned. I just need to try to get some sleep.

SIGHING, I CRAWL OFF MY SMALL BED, AND IT GROANS AS I PLACE my bare feet on the cold floor and go over to the chair in the corner where my heavy blanket lies neatly folded. It's weighted and not meant for this use, but it works. With it under my arm, I walk back over to the bed, climbing in and then laying the familiar throw across my left ankle.

I need it. I need to feel the weight as though it's the shackle. Without it there, sometimes I wake up late at night, feeling just how I felt before. Right after I stabbed him to death and took the keys from his pocket, frantically searching for the one that fit the lock on the cast iron shackle that had been on my ankle for four years. The deepest scars I have are on the thin skin covering the knobby bone of my ankle. Whenever he'd drag me, replacing the other end of the chain with a weighted ball, the metal would cut into me. He didn't care.

To tell the truth, I learned to take that pain and focus on it rather than what he'd do to me.

I didn't fear much, but that night, when he told me he was giving me to Javier and that I should be good for him, I was

terrified. He warned me that I had better not be bad and make him break my arm again. He said I was getting old, and he'd have no use for a Slave with a bum arm. I couldn't take it anymore. Something inside of me finally snapped.

The fear wasn't fully realized until the lock came off and the weight was lifted from my ankle. I had the fear that I'd never get out. That they'd catch me and slowly torture me. That fear was so strong it nearly crippled me. If I failed to find my freedom, I knew I was dead.

Without the weight on my ankle at night, I tend to wake up feeling the same racing pulse through my blood and fear of death that nearly suffocates me.

I lie back and go still, waiting for the sleep to take me and the memories to fade. It's this position that I learned to sleep in years ago. Images of Master O and Master C continue to haunt me, causing me to want to toss and turn. But just like all those years ago, I don't move with the weight on my ankle, holding me in place.

FINALLY, I CLOSE MY EYES AND TRY TO CONCENTRATE ON ISAAC. HIS calm, commanding presence. His piercing green eyes. His massive, throbbing cock. My body relaxes as the vision of my possible new Master pushes the other two from my mind. My breathing becomes more stable, and the sweats leave my body as I'm finally able to drift off into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 9

ISAAC

The thrum of excitement is pulsing through the club as the pounding of the bass makes everything come alive with the need to sway to the beat. The lights flicker in time with the sultry music, and the women hanging from the swings in the center of the room and dancing in the cages on the stage sway their hips and flip their hair, their hands traveling along their bodies seductively.

Strips of their hair are decorated with a glow-in-the-dark paint in different neon colors. The dining hall is no longer a restaurant. The tables have been removed, and the dance floor and up lighting have created what's needed for the themed night. And this side of the club is dark.

It's meant to allow for some particular kinks tonight. Voyeurism being clearly evident.

Several couples are on the dance floor, and although at first it may seem that they're grinding in beat to the music and dancing like the others, they aren't. A woman on the outskirts of the crowd has her lips parted as her Dom thrusts from behind her. Her dress is only slightly raised in front, but I can see that it's lifted from behind. A rough laugh rises up my chest as he pumps in time with the music, holding her small frame to him. Her eyes are glazed over, and her neck is turned to the side.

This room is alive with sin.

The four women swinging from the ceiling are tempting the men below. They don't work for the club. Neither do the women in the cages. They're simply Submissives who are enjoying the clublike atmosphere. Nights like tonight provide the women a little more room to be free spirited, so long as their Dominants allow it.

I'm not on duty tonight. Nonetheless, my eyes scan the room. I'm just waiting for her. For my kitten. I have a small bag with a pure white simple silk dress, the straps made of thin gold chains. I brought a toy for her too that I'm eager to attach to her. It's a thin gold chain that matches the dress. It'll wrap around her neck, but it's more of a necklace, and very lightweight, so it's comfortable. The best feature is the long chain that will fall between her breasts and under the dress with a clip that secures around her clit. It's not tight, not painful, but a simple tug will elicit a spike of pleasure through her body. I intend to use it as a training mechanism for her tonight. I have my list of rules and requirements. One being she must wear this in place of a collar.

It's a fair compromise. I don't know what I'll do if she denies me this request. I want her, but I need her submission. Her complete submission. Both for her benefit, and for mine.

"I'm assuming you collared her?" A deep voice from my right grabs my attention. Joe Levi. It pisses me off. Not because he's out of line for asking, but because I have to answer that I didn't.

"She's not ready," I answer easily, as though I'm not in the least upset by the fact.

"Oh?" he says, and his eyebrows raise and I can tell he's genuinely surprised.

"She's mine." I don't care if she doesn't have a collar. He had better not go near her.

"Understood," he responds easily. "I have no intention of encroaching..." He takes a sip of whiskey from the short glass in his hand before adding, "so long as she shows no desire for me."

My eyes narrow, and I take the man in. His crisp suit is fitted perfectly to him. His broad shoulders mean it's custom. The man has an air of darkness around him, and it doesn't help that I know he's a crook. He's associated with bad men, with criminals. I have no fucking clue why he's even in here. Of course he's masked. We all are. But no one here is a fool, and it's obvious to one another who most of the men here are. There are only a few I'm not privy to knowing. Joshua and Madam Lynn are fully aware all the patrons though. Beyond them, some of the masked men are a mystery, even to me.

But there is no mystery to Joe Levi. His name has been headlined in the paper, and by some dumb luck he's never been convicted of any of the crimes he's been accused of.

The lights bounce around the room, glinting off his mask as he turns to walk away from me.

"No hard feelings, I hope?" he asks with his hand on my shoulder.

"None yet," I answer in a low voice. He only chuckles and walks toward the edge of the room, setting his empty glass on a silver tray held by a waitress. She gives him a tight smile and continues making her way around the edge of the room, avoiding the sea of bodies on the dance floor.

I'm not interested in staying here. I'm merely waiting for Katia. As soon as she walks into the foyer, I'll see her from this position. I watch Joe's back as he disappears into the darkness, searching for whatever he came for.

There's no way in hell we're staying here. In fact, as soon as she agrees to the rules, I have no intention of keeping her here at all. I want her in my home. In her room. Available to me at all times.

That's where she belongs.

Fuck, I need her, too. I need her to ease this tension. Lucian called and needed a loose end taken care of. It was easy to find the perp, but setting up the hit required a delicate balance with two of my contacts. I'm on edge and in need. I can't let it affect her. But I fucking need her.

But first she has to submit to me. I know she's scared of taking that jump, but all she has to do is agree and then I will make everything so much easier for her. I'll take the weight of her pain away, and give her a new purpose to replace the past that haunts her.

My fingers itch to check the rules again. My nerves are getting the best of me as I pull the paper from my pocket.

I rewrote them a few times, paying close attention to the wording of each line.

Rules are not something easily transferred from one slave to the next. Each is different, and each has their own needs and requirements. Katia is especially different and sensitive in what I must have her agree to.

The music seems louder as I unfold the paper and read each line.

RULES

1. You will wear my chain. Always. In and out of the club with pride, signifying my ownership of you.
2. You will not allow anyone to touch it, and you will also not touch the chain.
3. When we are apart, you will write my name on a body part of my choosing. Your attire and the place of my name will be decided by me and sent to you the night before.
4. You will stay with me when you're able. Conditions may be discussed.
5. You will serve, obey, and please your Master. And you will never show disrespect for your Master.
6. You will worship my body, and I will worship yours in return.
7. To receive pleasure, you must earn it.
8. You will trust me in all things.

9. You will not hesitate when responding to me, and you will be specific in your speech.
10. You will thank me for your discipline and punishments as much as your rewards.
11. You will always be in submission to your Master.
12. All of your choices will be based on whether or not they will please me.
13. Your eyes will never be cast down, and your head never bowed. You represent me, and you will demand respect.
14. You will keep your sex shaved and never wear undergarments. In my presence, your sex and ass will be available to me at all times. As well as your mouth.
15. All of your worries and fears will be the burden of your Master.
16. You will not hesitate to obey your Master.
17. You will always be ready to please your Master.
18. You are my greatest treasure, and your trust in me will not be taken for granted.
19. You will never reach an orgasm without explicit permission given. Should you do so, you will be swiftly and severely punished. I own your pleasure.
20. Through discipline and reward you will learn to behave properly and become a better slave for your Master.
21. You are allowed to suggest ways to further your training or your preferences, so long as you address your Master properly.
22. You must always respond both physically and verbally to whatever I choose to do with you. Your expressions are important to me, and you will not hide them.
23. If you choose to be marked by your Master, you will never tighten your body when you are being whipped, caned, cropped, slapped, paddled, belted, spanked, or anally or vaginally fucked. I want to see your flesh squirm and when you tighten your body, it hurts more. You will be proud to wear the marks I give you.

24. You will not be shared at any time, and you will not offer yourself sexually in any way to anyone else.

25. In my bondage, you will be made free. In submission you will find your true self.

These rules are specific to Katia's needs. I understand it's quite soon for her, but I'm not interested in having a different sort of relationship with her. This is the only relationship I'm able to give. And it's the one she desperately needs. In time, she'll come to see that.

I have a contract ready for her to sign. The rules are included in there as well, but I wanted them written down to give to her. So she could see exactly what I want from her. It's not uncommon for the Masters and Dominants of Club X to provide contracts. We're men of power and wealth. We need contracts for everything. This one though, is more for her benefit than it is for mine.

As I fold the list in my hand, readying myself to slip it back into my pocket, my eyes hone in on her walking toward me. Her hips sway gently, and I swear I can hear her heels clicking on the ground as her eyes take in the sight behind me. My breath stops short as she sees me, halting in her path. Her breath hitches, and her eyes fall to the floor as she slowly lowers herself to the ground, kneeling and waiting for me.

Submitting to me.

CHAPTER 10

KATIA

*M*y heart's racing as I press my cheek against the floor, the bass of the club music thrumming against my body. As I lie there in submission, I sense several men walk around me, causing the skin on my neck to prickle. They're watching me, almost taunting me. But I dare not move. I don't belong to them, and I'll stay like this until my Master says I can move. To do anything else would be disrespectful. He saw me coming over. I know he did. When his eyes met mine, I felt the same shock, the same awe I felt yesterday.

My heart pounds in tandem with the heavy beat of the music, my limbs trembling with anticipation. I can't wait to serve him. To please *him*.

I hope he doesn't make me wait long. I feel insecure without his collar, without his mark on me.

I'm ready to give him more. I shiver as I wait for him to come to me, my mind on the displeasure he must feel that I didn't submit to him yesterday. My heart skips a beat as I wonder, *What if he's pissed off and doesn't want me tonight?* It could be his first punishment, his first lesson for me.

But he told me to come. And so I did. And I'll obey. I'll do anything he wants me to do to please him. Even if he doesn't want me tonight, I'll do as he says. I need him. I *want* him as my Master. And I'll do anything to show him that I'm willing to obey.

My eyes pop open and my body tenses as his strong hand cups the back of my head, sending sparks down my neck and back. "Look at me, kitten," his deep voice growls over the bass of the music.

Chest heaving, I look up into those gorgeous green eyes as he brings his full lips against mine and parts the seam of my lips with his tongue. I deepen the kiss, loving his possession of me. How he didn't hesitate to take me. He pulls away before I've had enough, leaving me breathless. I instantly crave his lips back on mine, but I don't say anything. I'll take what he's willing to give me.

"Do you remember my name?" he asks after he pulls me up off the ground and steadies me.

"Isaac," I answer immediately, almost panting. My heart sinks at the flash of disappointment in his eyes. *Fuck!* He wanted me to say Master. How stupid am I? I've disappointed him already. Worry flows through my chest as doubt sets in. Maybe I was never a good slave, and this will end up being a major disappointment, leaving me with a broken heart.

Isaac splay his hand on my back and cups my chin, bringing my focus back on his masked face. "What are you thinking?" His tone is harsh, and I can sense his irritation. I'm already fucking up.

"I'm not being a good Slave for you," I say weakly, my voice nearly cracking and my body trembling. I'm afraid of failure.

I feel so hot, so vulnerable. The excitement is gone, and fear is very much present.

Isaac squeezes my chin and his words come out strong, but soft. "You are perfect for me. And I will not have you think otherwise. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I answer obediently, and the word almost slips out. *Master*. I want him, so badly. But I can't push myself to say it. So long the title belonged to someone else. Someone who didn't deserve it.

He stares at me for a moment, his magnificent green eyes searching my face before nodding and leading me down the

hallway and into the ballroom.

I have to keep my jaw from dropping as we enter the large room.

The vibe of the club is so much different today than it was yesterday.

The thick curtains to the stage are open tonight, with scantily-clad dancing women and gilded cages swinging from the ceiling. There are women in each cage, dressed in those same beautiful gowns as before, some even in bondage gear gyrating, twirling and dancing within the few square feet of room on the floors of the cages.

Some of the women are even in the acts of masturbation, their cries and moan overlaying the soft beats of the rhythmic music being played as powerful men watch from the tables below. My eyes widen, and my heart beats faster at the realization. I don't get time to marvel at the incredible scene in front of me because Isaac continues on through the ballroom and down the hallway and past the playrooms.

My heart begins to race frantically as I follow him. *Is he taking me to the dungeon?* A feeling of pure panic surges through me and I almost pull away. I pause for a moment, almost hyperventilating, but scurry forward when Isaac turns a raised eyebrow onto me. I will obey him.

Placing a hand over my throat, I try to calm my rapid pulse and chaotic emotions. I don't know if I can handle the dungeon right now, but I'm willing to take whatever punishment Isaac deems necessary. If he's taking me there, it's because of a greater good. I have to believe that. Trust and submission are key to this relationship. I have to obey even when I don't want to, trust even when I have doubts.

We reach another long hallway that's dimly lit with shades of dark red. I can hardly see, and move closer to Isaac as he leads me through the darkened corridor. Up and down the hallway, there are men in suits who look like the fucking Secret Service, guarding the doors we pass.

I feel their eyes on me as we walk by and a shiver goes up and down my spine, but I keep my eyes straight ahead. We reach large double doors that are manned by a single guard at the end of the hallway. The guard gives a nod to Isaac, and my cheeks burn as he turns his gaze on me. I don't drop my head, refusing to be ashamed. I know it would displease Isaac. I know he wants me to be proud that he's taken me as a Slave.

Isaac pushes the double doors gently and they easily swing open, revealing the room within. My breath catches in my throat as I step into pure opulence. The luxurious room is awash in vibrant neutral colors, grey and mauve. Even the ceiling is sumptuous, draped with panels of dark grey silk fabric and adorned with a gorgeous crystal bubble chandelier. Resting on plush, but shaggy grey carpet, a California king-size bed sits in the middle of the room with velvet grey throw pillows and a matching silk tufted comforter. The headboard is also covered in grey velvet and rises all the way to the ceiling, taking my breath away.

It's absolutely breathtaking. I've never seen anything like this bed. Or this room. Two glass nightstands sit on either side of the bed, and a swivel chair sits off to the left side. The wall has an abstract painting on it and there's a glass door that leads out to somewhere dark. But the most exciting thing is the gorgeous glass cabinet. Filled with whips, chains and other tools and toys meant for both punishment and reward, it makes my skin heat with desire.

Isaac pulls the double doors shut behind us and the room plunges into silence. The faint beat of the music vanishes instantly. My skin prickles as I wait for his command, my heart racing. He doesn't give me one. Instead, he grabs me by the hand and leads me over to the bed, bidding me to sit down. My heart beats faster and faster with every second that passes. Somewhere in the mix of my awe and desire is fear. But I'm safe here. I trust Madam Lynn. In this club, I am safe.

The plush bed creaks slightly as my weight settles onto it, and I almost moan at the soft caress of the lush material against my ass. I suck in a breath as Isaac remains standing, my eyes on the massive hard-on pressing against his pants. My mouth

waters as I remember him forcing his massive cock down my throat and my pussy heats with need, my nipples turning hard as fucking stone. Isaac watches my eyes with amusement.

He must know how hungry I am; how much I want him. I hope he knows there's more to it than that. I want to please him. Badly. I wait for him to give me a command, but disappointment flows through me as he walks over to the side of the bed and reaches down. He walks back over with a beautiful bag with satin handles in his hands and sets it down beside me. I resist the urge to look at it. I know he wants me to only have eyes for him, and to always give him my full attention. I need permission first. Always.

"May I?" I ask, looking up at him questioningly.

His beautiful green eyes watch me closely. "Yes."

"I missed your touch," I blurt out. I don't know why the words slip out, and I hate it the moment they do. It's the same words I used to tell Master C. The thought of it causes my blood to chill, and it's an effort not to show my disgust with myself.

Isaac's strong hand cups the nape of my neck and he leans down, pressing his lips to mine. I melt into him, reeling under the force of his powerful lips. It's a passionate kiss, one that makes me forget the pain summoned by thinking about my past. Just when I think the kiss is going to lead to something more, Isaac breaks away, resting his forehead against mine.

I swallow the disappointment that follows, knowing that I must accept what he gives, even if it's not as much as I want. "You think of me and only me when I'm with you," Isaac says firmly. "I don't care what is on your mind. Only I matter. Only pleasing me matters. Fuck everyone else. Do I make myself clear?"

My heart nearly jumps from my chest. He's right. He's the only thing that matters. I know better. But I'm worried I'm going to keep disappointing him. "Yes, Master," I say. Shock runs through me as I say the words. I hadn't planned on saying the title; I don't know if I'm ready. But too late now.

Without warning, Isaac pushes his hands between my legs and up my dress roughly, shoving me back onto the bed. I fall back onto the velvet pillows, my head coming dangerously close to slamming against the headboard as Isaac exposes my glistening sex and ruthlessly shoves his fingers inside of my pussy, causing me to gasp out.

“Say it again,” Isaac demands, his voice hoarse, but filled with both authority and desire.

I arch my back, my walls clenching around his fingers, wet sounds filling my ears as he thrusts his fingers in and out of my pussy like a mad man, forcing my arousal to pool down my thigh and all over his fingers. My body ignites with passion and pleasure. My limbs stiffen with an impending orgasm. “Master!” I cry, my voice filled with aching pleasure. I’m already close to climax, my core heating up like a fucking furnace, my stomach twisting into tight knots.

Isaac is obviously pleased by my obedience and he picks up the pace of his punishing fingering, and kisses along my jawline, his strong body lying against mine, forcing me to be still and take everything he gives me. I blush as I know the guard outside must be hearing the sounds of my pleasure, but I don’t care.

“Good girl, cum freely.” His rough voice sends a chill of desire through my body. “Cum for your Master.” Isaac lowers his head and bites down on my hardened nipple with a stinging force as he continues to assault my pussy. It’s more than I can bear. It’s what takes me over the edge, and rewards me my release.

Throwing back my head, I cry out as thousands of shockwaves blast through my body. My limbs jolt with each spasm of my pussy around his fingers. My breathing stills, and my body feels paralyzed with the intensity. When it’s all over and he finally pulls away from me, I lie still. Waiting for him to command me. I settle back onto the bed, lying limp with a shuddering sigh as Isaac walks over to get a small hand towel off one of the dressers where they’re neatly stacked. He smiles down at me as he wipes gently between my thighs, the rough

texture sending a residual wave of pleasure through me, though there are still fluid spots all over the bedding.

When he's done, he tosses the towel aside and sits next to me, petting my hair and comforting me.

After a moment he whispers, "I'd rather not be here, kitten."

My pulse spikes with fear. Had I done something wrong? "I don't understand."

He lifts me into a seated position in his lap, calming me. I'm exhausted and I lean against him slightly, although I pay close attention to his reaction, in case that's not what he wants.

"I want you in my home," Isaac clarifies, filling me with slight relief. "I have a room ready for you there. But I need your complete submission." Isaac reaches into his pocket and pulls out a piece of folded paper. "You need to read these now and you'll tell me if you find them acceptable to follow."

What's this?

My heart racing, I slowly take the folded piece of paper from his hand and open it, my eyes hungrily devouring every single word on the neatly creased paper.

RULES

1. You will wear my chain. Always. In and out of the club with pride, signifying my ownership of you.
2. You will not allow anyone to touch it, and you will also not touch the chain.
3. When we are apart, you will write my name on a body part of my choosing. You attire and the place of my name will be decided by me and sent to you the night before.
4. You will stay with me when you're able. Conditions may be discussed.
5. You will serve, obey, and please your Master. And you will never show disrespect for your Master.
6. You will worship my body, and I will worship yours in return.

7. To receive pleasure, you must earn it.
8. You will trust me in all things.
9. You will not hesitate when responding to me, and you will be specific in your speech.
10. You will thank me for your discipline and punishments as much as your rewards.
11. You will always be in submission to your Master.
12. All of your choices will be based on whether or not they will please me.
13. Your eyes will never be cast down, and your head never bowed. You represent me, and you will demand respect.
14. You will keep your sex shaved and never wear undergarments. In my presence, your sex and ass will be available to me at all times. As well as your mouth.
15. All of your worries and fears will be the burden of your Master.
16. You will not hesitate to obey your Master.
17. You will always be ready to please your Master.
18. You are my greatest treasure, and your trust in me will not be taken for granted.
19. You will never reach an orgasm without explicit permission given. Should you do so, you will be swiftly and severely punished. I own your pleasure.
20. Through discipline and reward you will learn to behave properly and become a better slave for your Master.
21. You are allowed to suggest ways to further your training or your preferences, so long as you address your Master properly.
22. You must always respond both physically and verbally to whatever I choose to do with you. Your expressions are important to me, and you will not hide them.
23. If you choose to be marked by your Master, you will never tighten your body when you are being whipped, caned, cropped, slapped, paddled, belted, spanked, or anally or

vaginally fucked. I want to see your flesh squirm and when you tighten your body, it hurts more. You will be proud to wear the marks I give you.

24. You will not be shared at any time, and you will not offer yourself sexually in any way to anyone else.

25. In my bondage, you will be made free. In submission you will find your true self.

The words burn into my memory as I look up from the paper at Isaac. I expected some of the rules and they're easy to agree with, but I wasn't expecting a list this long. As far as I'm concerned, there is only one rule. Obey my Master. I look back down at the paper and consider each one with careful diligence.

Isaac is staring at me, his green eyes boring into me with intensity, as if waiting for me to protest. "Understand that the only relationship I want with you is one in which these rules are followed. Some issues may be negotiable, but others are not."

Unconsciously, I bring my hand to my throat, my fingers trailing my scars. This all feels so real. I try to swallow but a lump grows in my throat, it's painful and threatening to suffocate me.

Isaac's next words causes my blood to turn to ice. "I have a contract for you to sign." I already signed so many, but I know this one will be different. One where I agree to be his Slave. It won't just be something I can do as I please. Coming into the club when I want to *play*.

My heart skips a beat as anxiety washes over me. I want this. I know I do... but I don't know if I can allow this. I part my lips to speak, but no words come out. I didn't anticipate this happening so quickly.

"You can walk away at any time without fear of losing me as your Master." Isaac rests his hand gently on my thigh as the paper crinkles in my hand.

I want to take solace in his words, but it's difficult. "I was a Slave before," I nearly whisper.

Isaac nods. "I know you were trained in some ways, but I have different tastes and preferences. I think that should be clear from some of the rules."

"It is," I say. I certainly could never look at my other Master without bowing. I couldn't look him in the eyes without permission. I learned those rules the hard way. They were never written out, nothing ever was. Nor was I able to demand respect from others. I was to act like I was nothing. Because I was nothing. It's hard to breathe as I compare the two. Isaac is not at all like my previous Master. Shame and guilt flow through me. The memories of what I went through consume me, the same chill and fear take over. "I can't," I blurt out, standing up quickly and nearly falling off the bed. I need to get out of here. I feel lightheaded and I need air. I can't breathe.

Isaac places a hand on my shoulder and another on my hip, bracing me, steadying me from falling. He can tell that I'm not alright, and he's not pressing me. I'm grateful.

"Shh, you're with me, kitten," he shushes me. Calming me, but I still can't breathe.

"Bathroom, please."

"Of course," he says and leads me out of the room, the men watching us as he takes me to a private bathroom in the hall. I grip onto his hands as he tries to leave me, not ready to let go.

"I'm here. I'll be here when you get back. I promise you, it's alright."

Slowly, I leave his side and concentrate on the click of my heels on the tiled floor and taking one breath at a time.

Inside, I slump against the sink, bowing my head, my mind racing with panic. Slowly the sound of the blood rushing in my ears is replaced by the dull hum of the music I heard when I first walked in. I'm safe here. I'm safe.

I whisper the words to *Fire and Ice* over and over again. Slowly, my pulse calms, my vision clears. I blink away the flashes of memories and look at the woman staring back at me.

I'm strong. I'm healthy. I'm healed.

Healed? I don't know. I don't know anymore. I'm unsure about everything. Sucking in a deep breath, I turn on the faucet, letting the cool water wash over my heated skin and greedily drinking some of it to soothe my dried, aching throat. The sound of the door opening causes me to jump, but I relax just as quickly as Madam Lynn walks in, her vibrant red heels clicking against the floor.

She walks directly over to me, her eyes wide with concern. "Are you alright, Katia?" she asks me gently, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I turn off the faucet, concentrating on the sound. My lower lip trembles as I answer her honestly. "I don't know... I'm trying." I let out a ragged sigh, feeling tears sting the back of my eyes, but I don't cry. "It's hard to let go and to trust that everything is going to be okay." Despite my confusion, I know I still want Isaac as my Master. All of him. But I can't submit so much power and control so quickly. I can't do it. I won't. I'm just worried that he won't be able to wait for me, that he might think I'm too broken to fix. But I won't do it. Not yet.

"This is about your Master?" she asks me. "Is he even your Master?"

"I don't know." Again I answer honestly, and it pains me as I realize he isn't. A Master needs control in all things. "No, he's not."

"Do you want him to be?" she asks in a comforting voice.

"Yes," I answer quickly. "I'm afraid I can't submit right now though." I have to close my eyes and push the emotions down. I know I can't fully submit to him, even though I want him. I want him as my Master. But I just can't.

"And you're afraid he won't wait for you?"

I nod my head, brushing the bastard tears away from my heated cheeks as I whisper in a choked voice, "Yes."

Madam Lynn is eyeing me with cool compassion as her words pull me out of my reverie. "Something tells me that he'd do anything to have you, Katia. So don't underestimate the power you have in this relationship." She rubs her hand down my

back as I try to pull myself together. “Be honest with him, and what you want will come to you. I promise you.” She lets her words sink in before leaving me alone with my thoughts.

God, I hope she’s right.

CHAPTER 11

ISAAC

I cannot let her leave like this. I run my hands through my hair, pacing the hall outside the women's restroom. I know this is a lot for her. I do. But I need her commitment so that I can start her training and help her.

I'm all in. I'm taking this completely seriously. I need her to commit.

Maybe I'm asking too much? But I don't see how I could be. She says she wants this, and I know she needs it.

Madam Lynn walks out first, and I stop in my tracks.

"I saw what you did," she says and I know she almost says my name, but someone walks behind us, stealing her attention and reminding her where we are. "You need to be gentle."

I stare at her, my blood heating with anger. "She is not your concern."

"Correction, she is not yet *your* concern." She takes a step closer, lowering her voice. "Maybe if you tried a different approach?" Her eyebrows raise as though I'm missing something obvious.

"You know I don't do subtleties," I say beneath my breath. I know I'm fucking this up royally. But how? I have no fucking clue. I only need her to agree, and then this will all be so much easier.

“Maybe show her what it’s like first. Give her a taste, ease her into it.” *Ease her into it.* How the fuck am I supposed to do that?

I let her words resonate with me as the sound of the bathroom door opens and my kitten walks out with her hands clasped and her head down, a solemn look etched onto her face.

“Think about it,” Madam Lynn says quietly before walking off, leaving me with the bit of advice she’s cared to offer.

“Katia?” I close the space between us, waiting for her to look at me. When she does, my heart breaks for her.

“I’m sorry, Isaac -” I press my fingers to her lips. She instantly silences and her sad eyes widen, her breath hitching.

“No need to apologize. You have done nothing wrong. I am only displeased with myself.” I move my hand away and plant a chaste kiss on her lips and then her neck, taking her small hand in mine.

I turn her hand over and kiss her pulse. “I need you to come back with me and talk to me. I have to know what you’re thinking so I can make this right, kitten.” I keep my eyes on hers and gently rub her wrist with the pad of my thumbs in strong soothing circles.

“Yes, Master.” A smile threatens to slip across my lips, but I don’t allow it. Not until I figure out what I’m going to do with her.

As I lead her back to the room, I’m quiet. Lost in thought. I don’t want to take it slow. I don’t want to let her return to her own home and be without me in the evenings. I have needs, but more importantly, she has night terrors. I’m supposed to be her Master, and what good would I be if I allowed her to suffer through them alone?

I can’t. I only need her to realize that.

I unlock the door, ignoring the fact that my own men are standing outside the room. The door opens with a loud click as I realize something.

She can't know that. Because she doesn't understand what a true Master is.

She only knows what an abuser is like in the guise of a Master.

I close the door, feeling a surge of renewed strength.

"Come here, kitten," I say as I sit easily on the edge of the bed and pat the seat next to me. She obeys obediently, placing the palms of her hands on her thighs. I'll show her what a good Master is worth.

"You do some things so well, Katia." I compliment her. "Like this." I place my hand on hers. "You know how to kneel and bow, how you're expected to sit and stand while you wait for me." Her eyes stay on mine, but in the soft, pale blues stirs a wealth of sadness and self-consciousness. She's waiting for the other foot to drop.

"Are you self-taught?" I ask her.

"No," she says and her voice is weak. "I had a Master."

"Just one?"

"He shared me, so I had many Masters." Although she remains still and gives me her attention, her body tenses and the shine in her eyes dulls. We need to get through this, but I hate that it's happening now. Without my collar, and with the very real chance of her leaving without a commitment to me. I can do this gently though.

"Did you enjoy being shared?"

"No," she replies and her breathing picks up with fear. I'm quick to calm her worries.

"That pleases me. I don't share well with others." I give her a small smile and gently rub her neck.

Her eyes close for a moment as I rub strong soothing strokes with my thumbs down her neck and her shoulders. She's tense, and her muscles extremely tight.

"Was it your Master who left these marks?" I ask her casually. Some M/s prefer permanent marks. But I already know that these weren't her preference.

“Some, and the others were left by another man.” The way she says the words leaves a chill to run down my body. I already have an idea of which *man* she’s referring to. I’ve been investigating his whereabouts. And several others in case I can’t find him myself.

I knead her shoulders, hating that I’m bringing up these memories.

“I don’t like leaving permanent marks,” I say easily. I do want to mark her. I want to give her pain to heighten her pleasure. But not like this.

“Were these punishment or pleasure?” I ask her.

“My punishment, and their pleasure.” I stop my ministrations at her confession.

“Your Master enjoyed your punishment?” I pause for effect and continue rubbing her shoulders as I speak quietly. “I don’t know a Master that would enjoy punishment. It should be carried out with disappointment.” I plant a small kiss on her neck. “I assume this Master wasn’t very good to you?”

“No, he wasn’t.”

“I want to be good for you.”

Her eyes lift to mine with a spark of desire, breaking through the negative air surrounding the conversation.

“Were the rules he gave you like mine?” Again I hand her the piece of paper to read through them. “I can modify some if you’d like.”

She opens the paper slowly, smoothing it on her lap and reading each line carefully. Her full lips part slightly as she reads silently.

“He didn’t give me rules like this. I was just to obey him at all times.”

“And what do you think of that? So long of course that his commands are for your benefit and safety, I think that’s something that’s inherent between the Master-slave relationship.” I trail a finger over her scars as I continue, “But

obviously some aspects disregarded your wellbeing, and that's not alright."

She nods her head slowly, clearing her throat and rustling the paper in her hands.

"It wasn't a good relationship, no."

"It doesn't sound like he was a Master to me." That gets her attention. "Violence and abuse shouldn't be tolerated under any circumstance." I move my hands to her arms, gently caressing her skin and kiss her neck. "Everything that we do, will be all be consensual. Every bit of training will be outlined for you with known consequences and rewards." She remains silent, but her eyes are wide and focused on me.

"Is this the Master-slave relationship you're looking for?" I ask her, looking deep into her pale blue eyes.

"Yes," she answers quietly.

"I want to dominate you sexually, Katia, but in other ways, too. I want to be responsible for every aspect of your wellbeing. At first, during training, it will be difficult for you. I won't lie. I want control, and I need honesty and trust in return."

"I want to make you cry, kitten. I want to whip you. I want to comfort you after. I want to give you a heightened pleasure that devours your very being." I kiss her gently on her lips and whisper into her ear. "I want to see my marks on your naked body. My intentions aren't pure; I assure you that. But I will be a just Master. I will provide for you in ways you never dreamed."

She stares at me for a moment, her breathing coming in ragged. My dick is so fucking hard just thinking about all the things I want to do to her.

I can't take it any longer. I lean in, gripping the nape of her neck and crushing her lips to mine. She moans into my mouth, parting her lips and letting me take her. I push her down onto the bed; she gasps and her hands fly to my sides, gripping onto me as she kisses me back with the hunger I know she has for me. For *this*.

My other hand moves under her dress, my fingertips tracing the lines of her underwear. My dick digs into her hip. I want to take her how she needs to be fucked. But not yet. Not until she gives me what I need.

I break the kiss, breathing heavily. My dick is hard as fuck and I want to take her right now. But I need to know she wants what I want. I need to be sated. As much as I want her for the person she is, I have needs, too. And I need to know my own desires will be met. I open my eyes, and watch as the dim light reflects off the faint silver scars.

“I want to leave my mark on you. Not permanent, but weekly.” For the first time in a long time, I feel shame admitting my dark desires. She has yet to react to my needs. I need to know she truly wants this aspect of our presumed relationship. I want to whip her, to bring the blood to her skin and let the wave of endorphins give her a higher pleasure than she could attain otherwise. I need it for myself as well.

I want her senses overwhelmed. I want her consumed by what I can do to her.

“Yes, please.” She answers with a soft voice, her eyes half-lidded. “Master, please mark me.”

“I told you what I want, Katia. But what do you want from me? You want a Master, but what does that mean to you?”

“I want to feel complete. For me,” she breathes heavily, clasping her hands tightly together, “it means I want to have someone command me.” Her eyes look at me with vulnerability. “I want to satisfy your every need and desire and be good for you.” She brushes the hair out of her face. “I don’t know if that even makes sense,” she says as she shakes her head.

“It’s perfect. You’re perfect.” She flushes at my praise.

“I need you to agree to these rules. Or tell me which changes need to be made.”

The lust slowly leaves her as she lies on the bed, her eyes searching my face.

I remember Madam Lynn's words. Give her a taste, and ease her into it. But I don't see how it's possible. The appeal for me is complete control in all things. I don't know how to meet her halfway.

I close my eyes, sighing heavily. I'm failing at providing a middle ground.

"This is what you described, this is what you want. All you need to do is agree," I tell her with complete sincerity.

"What about if we meet here?" she says, and her soft voice breaks the silence. "I agree to all of your rules, I just want our time limited to within the club for now. Until I'm ready." She swallows thickly, her eyes darting to my face and then back down to the lush comforter on the bed.

She looks guilty and uncomfortable. I touch her neck, where my collar should go. Faint marks of the collar she wore before are still there. Scars proving how it wasn't placed there with her consent. "I still want to collar you, but I'll take what you're willing to give me for now." She looks at me with surprise. I suppose she wasn't expecting that.

"I'll show you what it means to be mine while we're here. But I expect you to adhere to the rules when you're away from me as well."

"I will."

"Katia, what does being a Master mean?" I ask her to gauge her understanding.

"It means you own a Slave," she answers simply.

"Is that all it means?" I ask her.

She looks at me with curiosity.

"I want you to think about it."

"I will, Master," she answers with her forehead still pinched and her eyes narrowed as though she's really thinking about it. I hope she is.

I grab the gift bag and pull out the pale blue box from within, setting it in her lap. "I want you to wear my chain until you're

ready for my collar.”

She opens the box slowly.

Her fingertips gently trace the thin gold chain. It’s cut with a diamond edge so that it sparkles in even the faintest of light.

I take the box from her hands, removing the chain and holding it up so she can turn for me. She lifts her hair over her shoulders and barely breathes as I lock it into place. I brush her soft skin with my fingers as I lay it against her collar.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you, Master, for such a gift.” The sight of her wearing my chain excites a dark part of me that’s difficult to tame.

“You’ll never remove this. Only to wash, and then it will be put back into place.” I have the accessory in another box in my jacket. But it will have to wait.

She answers obediently, “I promise.”

CHAPTER 12

KATIA

TWO WEEKS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

THIS DOESN'T FEEL REAL. I STEP INTO THE REAR ENTRY OF CLUB X, my fingers gently trailing along the beautiful chain around my neck. Each step makes me feel the lingering ache between my legs. Isaac has been thoroughly using me. And I've been thoroughly enjoying it.

It's been over a week of seeing him every night, letting him take me and dominate my body, bringing me to sexual heights that I never dreamt possible. I enjoy our time together immensely, earning my pleasure, doing everything he commands so he rewards me. I live for it. I never stay here though. It's temporary. Every day I know I will see him, and I obey him when I'm outside of the club. My fingers gently run along the thick wallpaper lining the hall to the private rooms.

I don't want to stay here, and neither does he. But we have different reasons. He wants me all to himself 24/7. I don't. I can't commit to that.

It's gotten to the point where I can't wait until nightfall to see him, finding myself anxious all day out of my mind at work, which is unusual for me. Usually the adorable, playful dogs at the shelter can make me forget anything.

But not Isaac.

I feel guilty, knowing that I should be devoting my full attention to my dogs when I'm with them, but I can't get my mind off Isaac. He told me I'm free not to think about him at work, but I can't stop. He's in my thoughts every waking second. All I can think about is pleasing him and becoming a better Slave for him. A better pet. *His kitten*. A small smile tips the corners of my lips up and my cheeks heat with a blush. I love how he calls me *kitten*.

Isaac wants me at his house under his command at all times, and he tells me every night that it would please him. I crave it, but I can't pull the trigger. It's so close to the fantasy I've been dreaming of, but I'm terrified that once I accept, it'll turn into something terrifying. Something like my past.

The warmth leaves me, replaced with a chill that makes me hold myself, my arms crossed, my hands gripping my forearms. I can't let that happen.

I make my way to the bed, my thin, see-through robe flowing out behind me, confident in where I'm going even under the dim light. I've been through these halls enough over the past week that I won't get lost. The guards know me, and they know where I belong. Unlocking the door for me and letting me in to wait for my Master.

I suck in a deep breath as I take in my surroundings, enjoying the rich smell and all the luxurious materials in the room. I'm still not used to all this yet. It doesn't seem real. I'm happy thinking of it as a fantasy.

I walk over and sit down on the lush bed, sighing as I gently place my palms on my upper thighs and wait for him. Isaac has forbidden me to be anywhere else inside the club without him until I wear his collar. I can only walk to his private room, and that's it. I take in a shuddering breath at the thought of being collared again.

I don't know why I just don't accept his collar. He said he'll give me one with a buckle at first. One that can be easily removed, and has no lock. But even that makes me feel uneasy. The light chain that hangs at my collarbone is

bearable, but anything tight around my neck elicits more fear than pride.

I swallow thickly and try not to think about it as my mind turns toward tonight.

Yes, tonight. I've been looking forward to tonight.

My heart begins to race with excitement and my stomach twists with anxiety as I think about what lies ahead. Tonight Isaac's showing me off. I'm going to be on the stage while he demonstrates subspace to the club. He'll whip me for our shared pleasure, and bring me closer and closer to the intoxicating state. I claw my fingers into the lush bedding, needing something to cling to as my legs tremble with weakness. I'm more than ready for it. In many ways I'm excited, but in others, I'm terrified. I still have faint raised marks from the cat o' nine tails he used this past weekend. They're nearly gone, but they'll be replaced with new ones tonight. It's odd how the thought of a collar causes fear, but the idea of being whipped and flogged only arouses me.

I have trust in Isaac. The pain is temporary, and quickly turns to pleasure. He doesn't break my skin. He doesn't hurt me to cause pain. It's all for pleasure.

I bring a hand up to my neck as I think back to when Isaac took me to a level of pleasure so intense that I lost control of my consciousness. After over an hour of him playing with my body, doing whatever he saw fit, I was awake and aware, but I couldn't react as I normally would. It was almost like being in a trance, my body humming with pleasure so intense that I was literally paralyzed. He commanded me not to cum anymore, but I couldn't help myself. Worse, I couldn't respond to him. I lay there limp on the spanking bench, feeling nothing but the tingling delight of the intense pleasure overwhelming me.

Isaac yelled at me and the whip ripped across my skin, but instead of the sharp spikes of pain I felt only moments before, I felt a rush of intense heat, lighting every nerve ending in my body aflame. My nipples pebbled and I moaned loudly attempting to move, but only weakly thrashing my head as my

pussy spasmed and a warmth of fluid leaked from my hot core down my inner thigh.

“Kitten,” I remember him asking me, his voice full of a threat. “Are you deliberately disobeying me?” He growled as he gripped the hair at the base of my neck and lifted my head up.

“No,” I breathed the word, or at least that’s what I think I said. Or tried to say. “Master,” I barely whispered, pleading for his mercy and understanding. If I could have felt fear, I would have in that moment. But all I could feel was the heated pleasure and the desire for more of his touch. He raked his teeth along my neck before crashing his lips against mine, and then he lined his massive cock up with my dripping wet pussy and slammed into me so hard I screamed.

I came over and over and over as he tore into me, fucking me like he owned me. And in that moment he did. And every moment since then.

He’s given me so much. But I’ve yet to give him the one thing he’s asked for.

“Kitten.”

I gasp, as I look up to see Isaac standing in front of me, dressed in a crisp black suit, looking sexy as fuck, his gorgeous green eyes watching me with an intensity that causes me to shiver. I was so engrossed in my fantasy, I didn’t even hear him come in. “Master,” I say reverently.

“You look beautiful,” he compliments me, his voice low and filled with desire, his eyes roving over my body.

A blush burns my cheeks as I softly reply, “Thank you, Master.” I want to be perfect for him; I want to please his every need.

So why won’t you wear his collar then? Why don’t you allow him to have you when he desires? a voice in the back of my head says. My inner voice needs to shut the fuck up.

He walks toward me, each step making my breath come in faster and faster. His fingers trail along my shoulder at the edge of the silk robe. He bends down, leaving an open-mouth kiss on my neck and then a sweet, chaste kiss on my lips. I

have to work hard not to lean into him. I want more. So much more.

“You’ll show yourself on the stage,” Isaac says, holding my gaze, the look in his eyes making my skin prick. It’s a statement of a fact.

“Yes, Master,” I say obediently. In his proximity, I feel nothing but desire. Overwhelmed by the urge to please him and be rewarded.

“You know that it’s safe for you to do so, and that I would never ask you to something that would cause you harm.”

“Yes, Master,” I agree. It’s essential for the demonstration. And I don’t mind. I’m proud to be used by my Master in front of them.

Isaac runs a long finger along my jawline, stopping to hook my chin with it. “You’ll be perfect tonight,” he says and his voice is overflowing with ardor, and I’m getting even more turned on by the deep cadence, my sore pussy clenching with need. “Many of the members here have no idea how to perform this act. We’ll be doing them a service in teaching them how to do it safely.”

I nod my head, my heart racing in tandem with the want that’s pulsing my pussy.

Isaac looks like he wants to say more as he brushes my hair behind my shoulders and kisses my neck, but then he lets out a sigh. “I missed you today,” he admits.

My heart swells at his admission. I missed him as well. I want to tell him that I’m sorry as a deep hurt settles in my chest. It’s my fault. I’m broken, and can’t give him what he deserves. Because of my past. Because of the Master who had me before him.

Isaac hooks my chin and pulls my lips to his, seemingly reading my mind. “You will only think of me when you’re with me,” he whispers against my lips.

“Yes, Master.”

He pets my hair, soothing me.

“Come, kitten.” Attaching a thin, matching leash to my chain, he leads me from the room, to the stage.

CHAPTER 13

ISAAC

“Dahlia is all wound up now,” Lucian says with a smirk. He’s been excited since he got here. I’ve never seen him so happy.

“It’s not as easy as it looks,” I warn him. He enjoyed the show last night. Everyone did. Subspace is a particularly alluring mental side effect of BDSM. Katia was a perfect example last night. At the end of the show, I only had to blow gently on her clit to make her cum. She’ll be sore tonight. I instinctively look toward the foyer as I put the cold beer glass to my lips.

“No shit. She also doesn’t have a pain tolerance like your kitten does.”

My body tenses as he calls Katia by my pet name for her. It’s odd how I don’t mind a room full of capable, powerful men watching my sweet pet cum on command and get so lost in pleasure that she’s incoherent, yet the mention of her pet name by another man has me on edge. By my best friend, no less.

He raises his hands in defense. “*Your* kitten.” He emphasizes “your,” and my hackles lower some.

“You’ve been on edge lately,” he says softly. Lowering his voice, he asks, “Is it because of the,” he clears his throat, “the hit?”

My blood runs cold, and I shake my head. I hate even mentioning something like that once it’s done. “That went off easily, just like I told you.”

He nods his head, a grim look on his face as he takes a sip of his whiskey. “You’ll never know how much good that did for her.”

I looked into Dahlia’s uncle for Lucian. Killing that bastard did the world a justice. A man who hurts little girls doesn’t deserve to live.

“I’m happy to put her mind at ease.” I truly am. Life and death are two things I take with serious consideration. It was easy to find that prick. With a criminal record and a current location available in the databases because of his past conviction, he was an easy target.

I look down at my hands as I think about the men I’ve killed. I can count them all on both hands. And each deserved their deaths. But I hate it. I hate the man I am.

With all this blood on my hands, I’d never be able to keep a woman like Katia. She doesn’t deserve a murderer. But I can give her justice. I can heal her before I have to set her free.

The two men I’m searching for in Colombia for my kitten... they’re harder to find. Everything indicates they’re dead. But I won’t believe it until I see more evidence. I have friends in many places. Low and high both. And if they’re still breathing, I’ll find them. I won’t stop until I do.

Even if she never submits to me, I’ll make sure they pay for what they did to her.

“I’m sorry I brought it up.” Lucian sounds remorseful. “I can tell something’s bothering you.”

I sigh heavily. “You would be too if Dahlia denied you.”

I’m growing tired of it. She’s perfectly content living this way, but I need more.

Weeks have passed and each evening Katia comes and waits for me, with my chain around her neck. When I’m not there at the entrance to greet her, she denies everyone who gives her attention. She’s respectful, but she answers that she’s waiting for her Master.

It only took a few times of me fetching her and bringing her to the office for everyone to know she's mine. She sits at my feet while I work and then I take her to the private rooms.

The playrooms are entertaining when I wish to mark her, but I feel hollow.

She won't wear my collar.

She won't let me take her home.

She has night terrors still. She tells me after the fact, but it kills me that I'm not there with her.

She's denying me my role as Master... for this. I don't even know what I'd call it. It's like playtime. Yes, she's obedient and I enjoy her company. But this isn't what I wanted. It's only a taste of what she truly needs. And barely a fraction of what I want with her.

But she won't give me more.

I don't know how much more of this I can take.

Last night I punished her for denying me. I finally lost it. I have needs, and she's to meet them. She's my Slave, for fuck's sake! She can't be that if she doesn't see me outside of the walls of Club X.

I picked up the paddle and forced her onto her knees. Smacking the flat wooden paddle over and over against the flesh of her lush ass.

Right, left, center. Her pale skin turned a bright red. She screamed out the count of the hits and tears fell from the corner of her eyes.

Forty hits. Her skin was hot and blistering red. I know her ass is bruised.

She was hot and wet and ready for me when I was done. Angrily I took her, fucking her with every bit of anger I had. She wanted it. That's what throws me off so much. She wanted me to punish her. She'd rather that than to give me all her power.

I hated it. She came over and over on my dick, but I couldn't get off. Not like that.

I need something to change.

She feels guilty, and she wants this relationship, I know she does. But she can't commit. She's scared.

But I'm fucking tired of waiting.

I was restless as she lay next to me, nestling into the crook of my arm as I kissed her hair and rubbed soothing strokes over her arm. I don't just want sex. Yes, she follows the rules, but what's the point if I'm not there when she needs me?

I want *more*. But this is all she's giving me.

Madam Lynn walks past us and I quickly stand up, nearly knocking over the heavy table. Lucian pulls back his drink and steadies it. His brow furrows as he looks at me questioningly, but I don't respond. I need to go talk to her while I can.

"Madam Lynn," I call out to her.

She graciously turns on her heels. "Yes?" she asks.

"I'm in need of your advice," I say quietly.

"Is that so?"

"It is." I'm irritated by how casually she's speaking, but then again, I've been irritable for days now. "Katia is... content."

"She has no reason to further the relationship." I say to her.

"I see," Madam Lynn says, her eyes falling to the floor.

"She needs to be pushed. She's too afraid to give herself what she needs."

"You knew when you took her that she may not be ready?" She says the statement as though it's a question.

"Of course I knew, but she needs this. You know she does." Anyone looking at her know she's in need. I'm failing her as a Master because she's denying me. I can't allow it!

"That's not for me-" Madam Lynn starts to say, but I cut her off.

“She still has night terrors. Do you know that?” I ask her with a harsher voice than I should, anger and desperation flooding into my voice. Several men turn to look at me, but I ignore them. It’s not okay. “Late at night she screams, and she’s alone. She doesn’t even message me!” I only know because I look into her messages online. She needs me. “She doesn’t realize how much she needs this.”

Or maybe she does. Lately I’ve been wondering if she’s denying herself this. If she knows that I can help her, but she’s choosing to avoid it in favor of the pain.

It may be unconscious.

It may be her way of punishing herself for wanting this lifestyle. It rips my heart into two. I hate it. I can’t fucking stand it any longer.

“Convince her,” Madam Lynn says to me. I huff a humorless laugh, pinching the bridge of my nose as a pounding headache takes over.

“How?” I ask her.

“The auction will seal her fate.” Madam Lynn’s words turn my blood to ice. I don’t want her to go up for auction. I can’t stand the fact that she would be seen as available to anyone else.

“I don’t see how-” I start to say, but Madam Lynn cuts in.

“I’ll see what I can do for you.” She gives me a small smile and nods, holding my gaze.

The auction. My heart beats slower as I picture her on the stage upstairs in the dark room, the lights on her. I don’t know how Madam Lynn could possibly convince her. Katia has no interest in money.

But in this moment I trust her. I don’t know what else I can do.

CHAPTER 14

KATIA

“Go get it, Toby!” I cry, throwing the squeaky stuffed lizard across the shelter’s backyard and watching Toby, a Golden Retriever, take off like a bolt of lightning to retrieve it. I let out an easy sigh as he reaches the toy and grips it in his powerful jaws, resting back on his haunches as he chews, making it squeal.

“Now bring it to me!” I command, gesturing at my feet. Toby understands my command, but he doesn’t move, the squeak of the toy blending in with the noisy cacophony of playful whines and barks of the dogs behind us. “Now!” I demand. Toby continues to ignore me, and I let out a groan, shaking my head and placing my hands on my hips and making a face.

He’s taunting me, wanting me to come after him. I don’t mind it though, I’ve been needing some playful bonding time with my dogs. It’s the only thing that helps my mood when I’m down. I gesture again at Toby, asserting my authority, but he’s stubborn, his eyes on me as he chews the toy. “Okay, if you want to play that way...” I begin to rush forward, but before I can take more than a few steps a dull throbbing pulses my upper thighs and ass, reminding me how sore I am.

Reminding me of Isaac.

A heavy weight settles over my chest as my thoughts turn inward, and I sink to my knees in the grass, letting Toby play with the damn squeaky toy on his own. I don’t want to think about my troubles today, preferring to just get lost in my work.

But who am I kidding? I can never keep Isaac out of my mind, no matter how hard I try.

What's worse is that I feel practically sick about it all. He's upset with me. For the past week, there's been an edge to his whippings, an anger that causes him to be more savage when he whips me. They're true punishments. He always soothes me afterward, and the pain combines with the pleasure of his touch once he's done with me, but nonetheless, they're punishments.

The worse part about it is that I crave it. I get wet just thinking about it. How fucked is that? I don't know what's wrong with me, wanting him to whip me so hard. He never breaks skin, and it's never more than I can take. I think I only crave it so much because after he's done, he holds me, soothing my pain and then fucks me, giving me intense pleasure and showing that he forgives me.

But in the end it doesn't solve anything. We both know that I'm still going to deny his collar and refuse to be with him outside of Club X. I rub my temples as they suddenly begin to pound. Just thinking about how fucked up this all is makes my head hurt.

I feel a slight nudge against my side and look down into clear brown eyes. Toby's walked over and placed his toy at my knees as if he senses my discomfort. I feel a twinge of guilt as I look at him, as if my relationship with Isaac is a betrayal of my covenant with my dogs. Our whole relationship relies on kindness, gentleness and nurturing, while my relationship with Isaac is a dark, twisted thing, meant to sate my deepest desires.

"Come on, Toby," I say with a sigh, climbing to my feet. Other nearby dogs rush to my side, hip to the routine. "Let's go inside. It's your dinnertime."

I'm followed back inside the shelter by a pack of yelping, barking and excited dogs, my mood lifting slightly. I huff a small laugh, patting Toby's head as I open the door.

Seeing all their excited, furry faces around me makes me feel fuzzy inside. They depend on me. They need me. They don't

care that I'm being whipped by a man at night. They love me unconditionally.

After penning each of them and giving them their food, I grab a bucket of soapy water and a scrub brush to go about sanitizing the toys. As I scrub, my thoughts stray back to Isaac.

My owner. My master.

He wants me to depend on him, for me to need him. I look up at the sound of one dog barking and think about how it's similar in some ways. I shake my head, sighing heavily and wanting to scream in frustration.

I am not a fucking dog, and I should not be comparing our relationship to this.

My phone beeps, distracting me and bringing me back to the moment. Thank fuck. I clear my throat, dry with emotion, and stand up from the floor where I was washing the dog toys and walk over to the counter, grabbing my phone out of my purse. I bring up the screen and my heart drops slightly in my chest. It's a text from my mom. My breath tightens in my throat as I read.

Hey honey, the family is getting together for Christmas Eve. I would really, really like to see you this time around... and so would everyone else. Can you please come home?

Love,

Mom

I drop the phone back to the counter as the sounds of dogs barking in the background assault my ears, increasing the pounding in my temples. I really don't want to go. I hate that I feel this way, but I just can't bring myself to put myself through it. They all look at me like I'm broken, and worse than that, when I look at them I *feel* broken. It fucking shreds me.

What could I actually talk about if I went, anyway? Living in filth and absolute squalor, being whipped by a sadistic man while in chains? Or about how I found a new Master and how I'm grappling with the decision of giving him a 24/7 power exchange? I shake my head, desperately wishing I had

something to make this headache go away. There's no way they'll ever understand.

I look back to my cell's screen and feel a heavy weight settle on my chest. I know my mother is hurting, and I know she wants to see me. If I tell her no after I've been avoiding her all this time, who knows how she might take it. I don't want to disappoint her, but at the same time, I just don't want to see them.

Sighing, I pick up the phone and type out a response. I figure if worse comes to worst, I can always use the dogs as an excuse. They always need me. It's easy to hide behind work and pretend like it's not them. It's not the reminder of where I was, and what life was like before they took me.

I'll do my best to try to make it. But I can't make any promises.

Love you

Kat

As I hit send, the doorbell chimes at the entrance. I hear the click of heels against the concrete floor and smell a sweet floral fragrance before I see her. I blink in surprise as Madam Lynn steps up to the counter, her hair pulled up into an elegant bun, her piercing eyes framed by wispy bangs. She looks totally out of place here, dressed in a designer black and white color block dress with a glittery black belt at its center, her heels a glossy white patent leather. She's stunning.

I part my lips with surprise, my pulse racing in my chest. What in the world is she doing here? For a moment, I worry that I've done something wrong, violated some obscure rule of the club. "Madam Lynn-" I begin.

"You're going to walk onto a stage upstairs in my club," Madam Lynn tells me in a voice throbbing with authority.

Unconsciously I take a step back, my eyes wide. I've never heard or seen her act like this before, but the way she's looking at me, her eyes filled with an intensity that makes my skin prick, I know she means business. I feel relieved that she isn't here to tell me that I'm in trouble or that I'm being prosecuted for violating something I hadn't been aware of.

“I’m sorry?” I ask her, not understanding what she’s talking about.

“It’s time to take a leap of faith, Katia. You know you need it. Stop hurting Isaac, and stop hurting yourself. You’re going up for auction.”

My hand goes to my throat, gently tracing over my scars and I find myself answering, “Yes,” almost as if against my will. I’m still shocked more than anything. Madam Lynn has taken time out of her busy schedule of running the club to visit me at my shelter. I never anticipated this.

“You’re going to stand there and offer yourself to be owned for one month,” Madam Lynn continues, and her voice is full of power. “You will be sold. And you will go through with your end of the contract.”

I tremble as her words wash over me, my limbs going weak over the realization. I need this. I know I do. And Madam Lynn knows it. I should do as she says, but I’m terrified.

The sharp edge in Madam Lynn’s voice draws my attention back to her. “You are going up for auction, do you hear me, Katia?” She leans forward slightly, her elbows on the counter, her sunglasses in her hands tap, tap, tapping against the counter. “I don’t do this usually. You’re an exception.”

The way she says it makes my eyes fall.

“There’s nothing wrong with that, but I don’t like to see relationships fail when they could be so successful. Some people need a push, some a swift kick in the ass, and some need to be told exactly what to do.”

I take in a shuddering breath, at a loss for words. I know I should say yes; I’ve already been thinking about it. It will force me to commit. Kiersten was just asking me last night if I’d consider doing it, and now this.

She suggested I donate half of the money I received from the auction to an abused dog shelter, and half to the women’s shelter I was at temporarily. I could finally give back. I’ve always wanted to.

“Katia.” Madam Lynn’s voice is so powerful, I’m shocked to my core to see tears in her eyes. I thought I imagined the emotion in her emails. We sent them back and forth for a week or so. And I truly felt connected to her, why, I’m not sure. I knew she cared about me on some level, but her display of emotion clutches my heart. There’s no way I can bring myself to deny her request. “You cannot treat your Master like you are.” She shakes her head slightly, her voice hushed and cracked. “You cannot continue to deny him. Worse, you’re denying yourself.”

“He’ll be angry with me, won’t he?” I whisper, clutching my throat. How could he not be? If I were to make myself available for another? He would be furious.

“To be given the chance to ensure your possession for one month?” She shakes her head, but keeps her eyes on mine. “No, he will be grateful. You will please him.” She puts her sunglasses back on, making her look chic and confident, and hiding the fact that she was nearly in tears a moment ago. “He already knows. You will do this. By pleasing him, you help yourself, Katia.”

“If I do this, I don’t want anyone else to have a chance to buy me,” I blurt out, my heart racing. I won’t go to anyone else. I don’t want to. There’s no one else that I want to give my power to. “It has to be Isaac.”

Madam Lynn is quiet for several moments, studying my face. “I’ll make sure of it,” she reassures me. She reaches across the counter and gently pats me on the hand. “Everything is going to turn out fine. You’ll see.”

As she bids me farewell and walks out of the shelter, her fragrance wafts through the air, leaving me wondering how I can possibly go through with this.

CHAPTER 15

ISAAC

Dec. 15th.

“I WILL FUCKING MURDER YOU,” I SAY IN A LOW THREATENING TONE as Zander picks up his paddle.

“I’m only holding it. What’s the big deal?” he asks with a shrug.

Cocky fucker. He grew up with a silver spoon in his mouth, and everything’s a game to him. He’s a good man with a big heart, and I owe him more than I can ever return. But I will seriously smash his pretty boy face in with my fist if he bids on my kitten.

“I think he’s just fucking with you,” Lucian says quietly, although there’s a trace of humor in his voice. He’s a lucky fucking bastard, I think as I stare at his hard jaw and handsome smirk. Dahlia is his, only his, and he’s keeping her. He bought her here a month ago, but she loves him. She’ll never leave him.

And why would she? He’s worked his way from the bottom to the top. He wants a family—fuck, he has one to give her, if he wanted to. His parents are dead to him, but he has a sister who already loves Dahlia. He has wealth and a normalcy I’ll never have. I’m sure in only a few years, they’ll be a happy family, complete with children.

He's not haunted by the fact that he watched his own mother die. While he did nothing.

He's not a murderer.

I am. I'll never be anything more than that.

What's worse? I don't want anything other than this relationship with Katia. I only want the exchange between a Master and Slave. I've never known anything else. And I never will.

I may be able to buy Katia now. She may learn to love being my kitten. I'll make sure of that. But one day she's going to want more. I know she will. I'll just need to end it before she realizes it.

"I still don't understand why you even let her participate," Lucian says.

"There's no collar on her neck. He has no say." I grit my teeth at Zander's immediate response. As the last word comes out of his mouth, he catches my glare and at least has the decency to seem apologetic.

Lucian shoots him a look, and I fucking hate it. It's the same look everyone's been giving me. I'm hung up on a woman who refuses to wear my collar. I have ideas of what they think about her going up on stage.

The first being that she wants someone else.

The second that it's a punishment given to her, to give her to someone else for a month.

Both situations have happened before between couples in the club.

A few have gone to auction monthly. The Dominant purchasing his Submissive each time, like a game. Role playing of sorts. A fucking expensive one with bidding starting at 500K.

Of course, none of that is true for my Katia.

I owe Madam Lynn for this. I don't know how I'll repay her, but I will.

I tap my foot anxiously on the ground as I wait in the darkened room upstairs where the small stage is. There's red and black everywhere with small circular tables covered in pure white linens.

It reminds me of a burlesque room, only the show is the women, allowing themselves to be auctioned.

I glance at the pamphlet I was given when I walked in.

There are strict guidelines that must be adhered to by both buyer/seller to gain entry and to continue membership.

Membership is one hundred thousand per month and allows members to attend auctions and enjoy all the privileges of membership.

All parties are clean and agreeing to sexual activities and must provide proof of birth control.

The women are displayed and purchased in an auction setting with a starting bid of five hundred thousand. Subsequent bids will be in increments of one hundred thousand dollars.

NDA's are required, and paperwork will be signed after the purchase.

Any hard limits are noted at auction and will be written in the individual contracts.

THE ROSE COLOR OF THE SUBMISSIVE INDICATES HER PREFERENCES, so please take note.

Pink - Virgin

Cream - Finding limits/BDSM virgin

Yellow - Simple bondage D/s

Black - Carte blanche

Red - Pain is preferred S/M

No flower - 24/7 power exchange

THE BUYERS MUST ADHERE TO ALL RULES OF THE CLUB, OR THEY will be banned and prosecuted. The Submissives must also obey all rules, or buyers can take legal action and no money will be paid.

WITH THE ACCEPTED TERMS AND CONDITIONS, THE WILLING participants of this auction are as follows.

I turn the page, and there she is. She's the first one tonight.

A large movement at the entrance to the room makes me turn. My blood runs cold. Joseph Levi. He looks me in the eyes behind his mask before taking a seat on his own at an empty table across the room.

Thick waves of smoke from the cigars a few men are smoking cloud my view of him. Out of everyone here, he's the only one I'd consider telling what's going on.

Zander and Lucian know. But the other men? I couldn't give a fuck.

But Joe wants a Slave. And I'm tempted to let him know why I've allowed her to go up for auction.

Why I'm eager and grateful that she accepted Madam Lynn's proposal.

I don't know exactly what she said. But I do know that I'll have my kitten how I rightfully should in less than an hour.

My heart's beating frantically in my chest, and my nerves are high. I just want this to be over with.

"It'll be fine," Zander says, putting his paddle down on the table. "No one wants to fuck with you." He meets my eyes but I instinctively look back to Joe, whose eyes are on the stage.

The already dim lights in the room lower, and the room darkens.

With a click, the spotlight shines on the thick red curtains. The auctioneer, dressed in a simple black suit and slim black tie speaks into the microphone, "Good evening, gentlemen. Let the auction begin."

The curtains draw back slowly, and my skin prickles with a mix of emotions.

My kitten is standing front and center. Alone on the stage with lights shining on her sun-kissed skin. It's so bright that the scars are hidden. You can't see from here how they speckle her shoulders. But I know they're there.

She stands with her hands clasped in front of her, no rose present, and her head bowed.

My lungs still in my chest, and my grip tightens on the paddle.

She's going through with it. She's really taking this leap of faith.

"We'll start the bidding at five hundred thousand dollars," the man says, and I raise my paddle silently. I'll gladly hand over my entire fortune to have her. I only need this one chance.

"Six," Joe's voice rings out in the room, and my jaw clenches. My body heats with anger as I feel the eyes of every man in the room on me.

"Six hundred thousand, do we have seven?"

I raise my paddle silently, not trusting myself to speak. "Seven to the gentleman in the right corner."

Katia's head lifts slightly, and she looks up at me. Her eyes are wide and pleading. They fall as Joe yells out, "Eight." Her fingers play along the hem of her sheer black dress.

I know she's frightened, for many reasons, and I fucking hate that she's suffering in yet another way. Fear of a different man taking her.

"She's mine. Nine hundred thousand," I spit out, standing from my seat and making my position known.

"Gentlemen, please. The rules will be followed," the auctioneer reminds me, but I refuse to sit.

"One million," Joe says, looking straight into my eyes and then back to Katia. "Kneel," he yells out and her legs waver slightly. But she resists. She looks up at him with her bottom lip trembling. She's fucking terrified.

“Kitten. You will bow for me,” I say confidently. As she lowers herself to the floor, bowing for all to see, I raise my paddle again.

“One million and one-” the auctioneer starts to say, but he’s interrupted by the sound of Joe’s chair scraping across the floor as he storms out. He brushes past a few men and it’s obvious that he’s pissed off. But he’s conceded. Her preference and obedience toward me have been made clear.

There’s a murmur in the room as the auctioneer clears his throat and speaks into the microphone.

“One million one hundred thousand, going once,” he says, but his voice lacks enthusiasm and he doesn’t even bother looking around the room.

My eyes are focused on my sweet pet, obediently bowed on the shining wooden floor of the stage, her eyes straight ahead, focused on the fabric of the curtains pressed against the side of the stage.

“Going twice.”

I watch as she takes in a shuddering breath and her eyes become glassy. She closes them tightly, and tears fall down her flushed face.

“Sold.”

CHAPTER 16

KATIA

I can't stop shaking as I sit in a chair across from Madam Lynn and Isaac in her office. I can't *believe* I actually went through with it. I still have the rush of endorphins running through my body from standing up there on the stage in front of everyone. I was vulnerable and alone.

My mind goes back to the auction as I try to still my trembling hands. The lights were blinding and I could hardly see, but I knew they were there, watching me. Assessing me. That brought back memories. I close my eyes, hating the flash of my dark past.

My skin pricks as I force myself to think about the present. About the auction and all the emotions that ran through my body. I almost fell over, my knees screaming at me to buckle, when the masked man began the bidding war with Isaac, giving me an order to submit to him. I was scared that he'd outbid Isaac and take me as his property just for revenge. Even worse, if the man with the half mask won, I feared he would be a horrible Master to me, punishing me unjustly for denying him in the first place. Although something tells me he wouldn't be like that. The eyes behind his mask are full of sadness. It radiates from him in a way I relate to, yet something so different.

But I refused to obey him. He's not my Master. And he never will be. I wouldn't go through with the contract. I'd forfeit the money, my membership, I don't care. Isaac is my only Master.

The sound of leather creaking as Isaac shifts in his seat brings my attention on his handsome face. He's staring at me, the intensity of his eyes causing my skin to chill. He was here before I came in, waiting eagerly for my arrival. His eyes have never left my face since.

I can tell he's anxious to just get this over with and take me home like he's wanted to do for weeks. I can practically feel to the desire and excitement radiating from him. My eyes fall to the stack of papers laying in front of him. My contract. The rules are on top, written in large, black bold letters. I'm sure Isaac has memorized them all by now. I sure as fuck have.

My eyes are drawn to Madam Lynn as she says something else to Isaac. They've been talking for a while now, but I can barely breathe, let alone listen. There's also a stack of papers in front of her, a few that I have yet to sign. Papers that say I'll be consenting to a 24/7 power exchange. I suck in a deep breath, the realization of what this all means washing over me. There's no turning back now. I'm *his*.

He's a good Master. I know this. But it still does nothing to quell the fear I feel. Isaac's taking me out of Club X. I tremble at the thought of losing my safety net and having to rely solely on him.

"And about her work?" Madam Lynn asks, her voice coming into focus. She's been speaking on my behalf this entire time, and I've been too out of it to hear anything she's said. Although when they look at me, I know to nod and agree.

Isaac keeps his eyes on me as he replies, "She will attend all social gatherings and predetermined functions as usual."

Madam Lynn slowly nods her approval. "Christmas is in 10 days."

"I'll make sure she celebrates as usual," Isaac says confidently.

THEIR WORDS DRONE ON IN THE BACKGROUND AS THEY CONTINUE going over the contract and I find myself going back into a slight daze. I nod and answer yes as needed, my mind finding its way to my last Christmas. I'd gone home after New Year's,

thinking the attention of the holidays would have passed, only to find that my mother still had the Christmas tree up, waiting for me. Everything was still decorated.

She'd done it for me. Saved everything and made sure to give me a proper holiday. She'll never know how much it hurt. I don't want a holiday. I don't want the life we had before. I don't know why she doesn't understand how much it hurts. Everything from before, the traditions she's so eager to celebrate with me. They're tainted and a part of my past, where I want them to stay.

They were all there, her, the rest of my family. They had gifts wrapped and everything. Waiting. Watching. *Staring*. I hated it. Being there in front of them brought back flashbacks of being taken, but I had to force a smile and pretend to be thrilled while I unwrapped the gifts while they all watched as if waiting for me to break down.

I exhale sharply, something Madam Lynn uttered bringing me to the present. *I can have rules and conditions, too*. I need to state them before the meeting ends and I end up fucked.

"I—" I begin, my voice hoarse and unsteady. I shift in my seat and stare at the table. He is my Master. He is to have control. But there's one thing I can't do.

Under the desk, I feel Madam Lynn's hand gently rub my thigh in an effort to calm me as I speak. I'm grateful and I feel my anxiety ebb just a little. It's Isaac. I can tell him.

I lick my lips and swallow and try again. "I would like sunlight. Please don't take that away," I plead to him. "I can't go back into darkness." I shake my head, feeling a cold chill touch my spine. "Even as a punishment, please."

Isaac leans across the table and places his hand palm up in front of me.

I instantly grab his hand for the comfort and to show him my obedience.

"Of course you will have sunlight," Isaac assures me, squeezing my hand. "You need it. You can rest assured that I will never take a need away from you. *Ever*."

His words are filled with such conviction, it's hard not to believe him. I relax slightly as my breathing comes in steadier. And I try to remind myself again, that as my Master, Isaac will only be looking out for my best interests. All I need to do is trust him. He's already had me multiple times, bringing me such pleasure that I didn't think was humanly possible. He's not going to hurt me, and he's more than shown that he's a capable Master.

I INHALE A CALMING BREATH AS MADAM LYNN SETS A GOLD PEN down in front of me. She seems to approve of how this session has come along, her eyes warm and caring. I know this must be gratifying to her since she went through all the trouble to ensure Isaac got his collar around my neck, showing up at the shelter unannounced like that.

"Sign here, my darling," she urges me gently, her calming voice washing over me like a soothing, healing balm.

"If you'd like to take the night and decide-" she starts to say and Isaac's eyes whip to Madam Lynn for the first time, pissed off and not agreeing.

I shake my head, ignoring the rest of her words as I pick up the gold-plated pen and quickly signing on the dotted line. It takes a lot of effort to keep my hand steady as a mixture of powerful emotions flows through me and I sign my name. Fear and anxiety are present, but excitement outweighs them.

It's official. Isaac is my Master for the next thirty days.

Twenty-four hours a day; seven days a week. He will have control of everything. Every. Single. Aspect of my life.

I belong to him.

"I think it's best I go home with Isaac tonight," I say, trying to keep my fears from owning my voice. If I don't leave with him now, tonight I'll want to run. I know it. I don't want the chance. I lay the pen flat on the stack of papers, staring at the scroll of my signature.

I'M AFRAID OF GIVING AWAY MY POWER, AND GOING OFF THE CLUB grounds with Isaac where I'll be in his domain, completely at his mercy. I'm terrified, and yet, I know I need it. No more delays. Just do it. I've sold myself to Isaac so I would be forced to confront my fears. Now I just need to put on my big girl panties and face them.

Madam Lynn studies me for a long moment, her eyes soft and filled with concern. I feel like she sees and senses my emotions, but she's not disturbed by them. If she were, she'd call the meeting. I realize she's doing this because she feels I need this. She feels it will help me. After a moment, her eyes flicker over to Isaac before she nods and grabs the stack of papers, including the last one I signed and rises from her seat. Without saying a word, she quietly leaves the room, leaving me alone with Isaac.

"Are you alright, kitten?" Isaac asks as soon as Madam Lynn is gone, his deep voice filled with concern.

"I'm scared, Isaac," I admit after several moments of nervously biting my lower lip. I pause, my heart skipping a beat, hoping I didn't already break a rule now that he's officially my Master. "Can I even call you that anymore?"

To my relief, Isaac doesn't look angry. "We'll talk about the rules when we get home," is all he says, looking like his mind is on other things.

I nod my head, my fingers unconsciously finding my neck, trailing my scars. "And a collar?" I dare ask, my body going tense. Just thinking about it is causing my stomach to twist with anxiety.

Isaac hesitates. "When you're ready," he says finally.

Shock causes me to suck in a surprised breath. I didn't expect him to say that. At all.

"I know this is hard for you," Isaac says, his deep voice filled with absolute confidence. "But don't be afraid. I will care for all of your needs. You need not worry. *Ever.*"

God, his words sound so reassuring. So seductive, even.

I close my eyes, sucking in several calming breaths, telling myself I can do this. When I open them a moment later, I feel the faintest threads of determination thread through my chest as I breathe, “I’m ready,” praying I feel the same way tomorrow.

CHAPTER 17

ISAAC

I twist my hands on the leather steering wheel of my Porsche Carrera GT. It's fucking freezing outside, but the heated seats and my nerves are making my back sweat. I look out of the window as we pull up to one of the last street lights before taking a private road to my home.

I take a glance at my kitten. She's looking out of the window, twisting her fingers in her lap nervously. Her back is stick straight, and she looks like she's not even breathing.

The first thing she's going to do when we get home is drink. A large glass of sauvignon will do her well. I think I'll make stuffed peppers to go with it. I'm going to need to occupy myself while she gets accustomed to her new role and new environment.

I didn't imagine her taking it so hard. She's completely changed before my eyes. The confidence is gone, and the sexual tension between us has vanished.

She's scared, quiet. She hasn't said a word other than yes. Her eyes are heavy with exhaustion and her face still flushed from crying.

The drive home has been silent, but I'm ready to change that. As much as I feel for her, I'm still excited. Adrenaline is pumping through my veins, filling me with an electric spark. I've waited so long for her, to have her here. I'm ready to show her what she's truly capable of. And even more so, what I'm capable of.

“Do you like to cook?” I ask her. It’s been almost two weeks of seeing her every night. But I’ve barely learned much about her, other than her desires and a bit about her past. Of course I know much more than she’s told me. But the finer details, those are important and I need her to open up to me so I can learn them.

“I do, Master,” she answers softly. There’s a trace of fear in her voice.

“Are you good at it?” I cock a brow, giving her a humorous look as I slow the car at a stop sign. The hum of the engine vibrates up my back and fills the car with a quiet purr.

She opens her mouth and almost hesitates, but she quickly answers, “No.”

I let out an easy chuckle. “That’s more than alright, kitten.”

Her relief in my response is evident. “I enjoy cooking. I want you to help me though.”

“Yes, Master,” she says with a lighter voice than she’s had all day.

“We’re going to go over the rules and what’s required of you in the house while I make the sauce,” I say easily, pulling up to my house, the car jostling slightly as I drive up the driveway and wait for the garage to open.

I have a decent collection of cars. An expensive but carefully curated collection.

Katia sucks in a breath as she takes in my home.

It’s simple. I like simplicity, and the modern clean lines.

The house itself is very much like a cabin, except instead of stacks of logs there are large sheets of glass on the front. Being so far away from anyone else affords me the luxury of having privacy while also being able to expose my home. The entire front of the house is open to the deep woods we’re nestled in. I own the ten acres the house sits on, so it will always be like this. Quiet, serene and one with nature.

The soft grey sky disappears as I pull into the garage and quickly park the car.

“Come, kitten, come see your new home.”



I SLIP OFF MY JACKET AS I LEAD HER INTO THE OPEN KITCHEN. I HAVE to take off the cufflinks in order to roll up the sleeves of my dress shirt. I don't enjoy wearing a suit. I'd much rather be in jeans. But Club X has a strict dress code. Thank fuck we won't be going there anymore.

Every step she takes seems deliberate. She's on edge and waiting for something. Maybe waiting for my demeanor to change? I'm not sure.

“Have a seat,” I tell her easily, turning my back to her as she climbs onto the bar height chair at the granite island.

“I need to know your daily schedule and the plans you have every day for the next thirty days that I have you.” I continue to talk with my back to her, letting her get comfortable without having to worry about the possibility of me scrutinizing her.

I am. I'm taking in every little move and change. The angles of her body and the way she's presenting herself. But it's not for the reason she thinks.

I'm not judging her. I'm gauging her emotions. And so far it's worse than I anticipated. It's like the last two weeks haven't happened.

I pluck three tomatoes from the basket next to the sink and set them down on a wood cutting board.

“Start with tomorrow.”

“I have work. From seven in the morning until seven at night.” She clears her throat slightly, and I can hear the slight squeak of the chair moving under her weight. “That's all I have planned.”

“And the next day?”

“The same. Every day.”

“And the holidays?” I ask as I scrape the knife across the board, pushing the first diced tomato to the side.

“Nothing. Just work.”

The knife slices easily through the tomato and hits the cutting board. I'm still for a moment. I know her mother has sent her messages.

"You weren't invited to go anywhere with family?" I ask as I grab a hand towel off of the counter, wiping the juice from my fingers.

"I was."

"And?" I ask, my eyebrow raised. She's a very lucky girl she didn't lie to me.

"And I said I couldn't go."

"I see, and where was it that you were invited to go?" I ask her.

"To see my parents a few hours away." She shakes her head slightly, dismissing the invitation. "They won't be expecting-"

"We'll both be attending," I say, cutting her off. I don't know why I made the decision so quickly. I hadn't decided on whether or not I'd be going. But she sure as fuck is. She's in desperate need of contact and conversation in person. From what I can tell, all of her friendships are online. I want more for her.

And it should start with her parents.

She stiffens in her chair, but she nods her head and says, "Yes, Master."

"And for New Year's?" I ask her.

"I have no plans, nor was I invited to anything." Her voice is quiet, but clear.

"We'll spend that together then," I announce and turn my back to her again to continue dicing the tomatoes.

A moment later I pipe up and say, "Well, that's easy enough. You'll find someone else to work on the days I have off."

She's quiet until I turn to look over my shoulder. "Yes, Master."

I can't stand this tension anymore.

She needs to get off. That'll calm her ass down.

"Kitten," I say and wipe off the blade and gently set it down, putting dinner on hold. "Come here."

I take a look at the utensils and kitchen tools, my eyes scanning them to find something useful. Finally, I settle on a French rolling pin. It's a pale hard marble and cold to the touch, but it'll do nicely.

"Strip," I tell her as she stands to my left.

She's barely wearing any clothing at all. Without her coat, all she has on is a sheer black dress with skimpy straps that end mid-thigh, and a lace pair of panties. She slips the straps down her shoulders and the thin piece of fabric pools at her feet into a puddle of shiny black. Her nipples instantly harden. And so does my dick.

I lean forward, taking one of her pale rose nipples into my mouth and gripping both of her wrists in my hands as she attempts to pull her thong down her thighs.

She gasps at my quick movements and pushes her chest into my face. Like a good girl. I pull back, letting her nipple pop out of my mouth and then swirl my tongue around the other.

"Let go," I command her and in that instant she does, immediately releasing her grip on the lacy straps of her underwear.

I take a step back and look at her.

"You're gorgeous, Katia." The small intake of air and slight flush to her cheeks warms me. It touches a cold part of my soul I'm not used to feeling. I shake off the sensation and concentrate on the matter at hand.

"You will never wear those again. Or any underwear." I loop my thumb around the straps and easily rip through the lace, shredding the sides of her thong and letting them fall to the floor.

My dick stirs with desire as her lips part in shock. "Your cunt and ass will always be available to me. Easily."

I trail my middle finger along her lower lip, and she obediently opens her mouth. “And your mouth.” I slip my finger into her hot mouth. I don’t have to tell her to suck; she greedily suction her lips around my finger, keeping her hands at her side and hollowing her cheeks. Her tongue massages the underside of my finger as she closes her eyes and moans.

Fuck! She’s so fucking sexy. She has no idea what she does to me. “Ah ah, kitten,” I admonish her, pulling my finger away and turning back toward the counter. “I have something else for you to suck.”

I grab the rolling pin, and it’s cold and smooth. She’s really going to want to heat this up.

Fear flashes in her eyes for a moment, but I ignore it. I’ll never hurt her. Not that way she’s thinking. “Suck on this,” I tell her, placing the pin to her lips. There are no handles, just one long smooth pin. She has to stretch her jaw a little more than my finger, but the pin itself isn’t very wide.

I push the pin in a bit farther, letting her take a few inches and rock it in and out of her mouth. “Get it hot, kitten. Suck it like it’s my cock.” With my left hand I cup her pussy and reward her by pinching her clit and rolling it between my fingers.

Her brows pinch, and she moans the softest I’ve ever heard while taking a little more of the pin deeper into her mouth. “Do you remember how you took me?” I ask her.

She tries to push more of the pin in, but I stop her. The head of the pin is blunt and it’ll hurt her throat. I don’t want that. “No more.” I stop her, pulling it back and releasing her clit to grab her throat. The lust vanishes from her eyes, realizing she’s done something wrong. “You only get a few inches. Don’t be greedy,” I add playfully to lessen her anxiety.

She closes her eyes again, but I’m done preparing her. “Lie down on the floor.” I kick her clothes to the side as she crouches down and quickly lies against the tiled floor. Goosebumps flow down her skin. I imagine she’s cold, but I’ll have her hot and bothered in no time.

“Get wet for me,” I tell her as I crouch down and rub her clit and then trail my fingers down the length of her pussy. I feel her lips and the hot entrance to her cunt. Petting her gently as my dick starts leaking precum. My fingers move slowly and I watch her as she tries to stay still on the floor. Resisting the natural desire to move.

“I don’t want you still or silent.” My voice comes out sharp, but I soften it.

“Never hide from me.” As her eyes meet mine and she parts her lips, her tongue licking along the lower one, to tell me “Yes, Master,” I shove two of my fingers into her and curve my fingers upward, stroking the rough wall of her G-spot. Her back bows, and her mouth opens with a gasp. Her fingers are clawing at the smooth tiled floor as though she can grip it. “I want to watch you squirm under my touch.”

It doesn’t take long until she’s soaking wet. Her pussy lips are glistening, and soft moans pouring from her lips without effort.

I stand up, breathing heavily and shoving my pants down so I can get my cock out. The fucking zipper was pressed against it. I stroke it a few times with the hand that’s coated in her arousal. But I need to wait. While I’m standing I grab the French rolling pin. It’s smooth and long. I don’t have any intention of using more than a few inches of the smooth pin on her, but it’ll be enough to overwhelm her. And hopefully throw her off.

I want her to realize her expectations are wrong.

“Grab your knees and pull them up as high up as you can.”

She instantly obeys, showing me all of her.

I slip the pin into her pussy while spreading some of her arousal down to her ass. Her mouth opens with the sharp sound of her sucking in a breath. Her puckered hole clenches around the tip of my finger.

I pull the pin out and watch as her tight pussy closes. I tease her entrance, pushing the pin in slightly, and then pulling it out.

She whimpers, soft and sweet and desperate for more.

I take more of her arousal and rub it over her ass and then pull my hand back and quickly smack her. She jumps as my palm stings her lush flesh.

I don't wait for her to settle, instead I push the pin back in and pump it inside of her, angling it to rub against her front wall.

Her head lolls to the side as she moans. With her juices coating my middle finger, I push against her puckered hole and she instantly pushes back, granting me entry easily. I pump in and out a few times and her soft moans turn to louder groans. Her head thrashes, and a sheen of sweat forms across her gorgeous sun-kissed skin. I only wish I had another hand to pluck at her nipples.

Instead, she'll have to obey.

"Play with your tits, kitten."

She breathes heavily as she quickly lets go of her one knee and pinches her nipples, pulling them away from her and arching her back. Fuck! I pull my finger from her ass and the pin from her pussy. It's soaked with her arousal. I tease her asshole as my thumb brushes her clit.

"Cum!" I yell at her as her back bows harder and she grips her breast with a force that leaves a red mark behind. She instantly obeys my command, cum spilling from her pussy and leaking down her thigh. The second the first wave passes and her tight body relaxes, I push the pin up her ass.

Her mouth opens, forming the perfect "O" as I quickly pump it in and out, prolonging her orgasm.

With my right hand still pumping the pin in her ass, I line my dick up to her pussy with my body angled and my hand bracing me on the floor and I plunge deep inside of her. Filling her.

Fuck. She feels so good. Every time it's like this. I knew she was made for me. I knew she'd feel like this.

I don't give her time to get used to my girth; instead I thrust my hips in and out, at first in time with the pin in her ass,

filling both her holes at once and then leaving her nearly empty. Then I tease her a bit by fucking her with one after the other.

Her thighs shake as she lies on the floor, taking more and more as I fuck her mercilessly.

“May I cum?” she screams. “Please-”

“Cum!”

Her body shakes and trembles as she screams out her release. Her head is thrown back on the floor and her hair a mess, fanned around her as her head thrashes. She looks utterly gorgeous.

I lean forward for more leverage as she cries out, her pleasure sounding strangled as I pump the rolling pin into her ass in time with my cock in her hot, tight cunt.

I groan in the crook of her neck then graze my teeth along her jaw, shoving my dick as far and hard as I can inside her while quickly picking up the pace with my right hand.

Her pussy is so fucking tight, dripping wet.

I lay my body on top of her, letting go of the pin and leaving a few inches in her ass. “Cum with me,” I breathe, thrusting my hips faster and faster, fueled by the smacking of the rolling pin hitting the tile with each hard pump. Smack, smack, smack. Louder and louder as I lose control and rut between her legs, racing for my release.

My body heats, and Katia cries out her pleasure. Her hot body is trembling and her nails are digging into my sides.

My balls draw up, a tingling sensation at the base of my spine shooting through my body all at once. A blinding pleasure paralyzes me as I throw my head back and cum violently, harder than I’ve ever cum before, hot wave after wave filling Katia’s tight pussy.

I pump my hips a few times, drawing out both of our orgasms.

It takes a moment for me to catch my breath. I slowly lift my body off of hers and pull out, taking the rolling pin still in her

ass out with me. She still has one hand wrapped around her knee, and I tap her hand to let her know she can let go.

She lets it fall to the floor limp as she stares at me, her breathing erratic and her chest heaving.

I run my fingers along her asshole and then her pussy. Looking for any signs that she's hurt in the least.

"How do you feel, Katia?" I ask her.

"Good. So good."

"Just good?" I ask to toy with her, raising a brow.

"I feel wonderful, Master. Thank you."

A smile plays at my lips. "Good girl, kitten." I kiss her hair as her body shudders with a lingering wave of her release as my still-hard dick brushes against her clit. "Now clean yourself up while I make dinner."

CHAPTER 18

KATIA

I let out a sigh, my thighs still being rocked by occasional tremors, my limbs weak as I kneel on the dining room floor, still naked. I'm exhausted, but content. The way Isaac fucked me so thoroughly, and with that rolling pin... gave me pleasure that defied belief. My cheeks blaze with a blush and another shudder runs through my body, my nipples pebbling. Even now, I'm still being jolted by aftershocks that are rapidly fading, leaving me wanting more. Needing more.

I let out as a soft sigh as I feel wetness around my ankle where my ass is sitting. I'm not sure if it's my arousal or his cum, but I don't care.

The sounds of clinking glass break me out of my reverie, while the faint smells of the stuffed peppers and spices still fills the air.

I'm so full. But I want more. I feel like a glutton for sex and food.

Isaac is setting a dish for dessert down on the dining room table, some sort of fruit concoction.

I sat at the chair to my right for dinner. Eating as politely as I could and careful to mimic the way he gently set the fork on the side of his plate. It was odd to be sitting at the table.

I'm not anymore. For dessert he wanted me here. Beside his chair and on my knees.

How fucked is it that I prefer it this way?

He watches me, the corner of his full lips pulled up into a slight grin as he lowers himself into the carved walnut chair at the head of the table. “Are you hungry for dessert, kitten?” he asks.

Not trusting myself to speak, I nod softly.

I watch as he takes a silver fork and spears a slice of strawberry along with a raspberry, drizzled in some sort of thickened sugary cream.

“Open,” he commands, bringing the fork to my lips. Immediately, I part my lips and take the fruit into my mouth. Mmm. I close my eyes with pleasure as my taste buds are assaulted by a rich, sweet flavor. It’s absolutely delicious.

Isaac is watching me intently, enjoying the delight his dish has brought me. “Do you like that, kitten?”

A soft moan escapes my lips as I swallow the last of the fruit, and I nod my head. “Yes, Master.”

“Good.” Isaac drops the fork on the table and swipes his finger on the edge of the bowl, covering them with the cream spread. He brings his fingers to my lips. “Suck,” he orders.

Eagerly, I wrap my mouth around his fingers, sucking them as if they’re his cock.

“Look at me,” Isaac orders.

My eyes dart to his while I continue to massage my tongue along the length of his middle finger holding his beautiful green eyes with mine, savoring the sweetness of the taste.

“Fuck,” Isaac groans, and I watch as he palms his cock in his pants.

Fire burns in my core and I’m filled with anticipation, hoping he’ll take me again and give me even more pleasure, if that’s somehow possible. I suck every last drop of cream from his fingers, making sure to hold his gaze, and pull away when I’m done with an audible *pop*.

I wait for his next command, my chest heaving with desire, wanting badly to be used by him.

He lets me lick the servings off his fingers, and I find myself wanting it so much that I grab his hand forcefully, greedily sucking his fingers, imagining it's his dick that I'm sucking.

My heart skips a beat as Isaac lets out a chuckle at my behavior.

Fuck. I instantly freeze, the lust-filled haze vanishing as I'm snapped out of the fantasy.

I shouldn't have done that. I lower my hands to my thighs where they belong. He didn't give me permission to take control like that. I know better. I'll be better. It was a stupid mistake.

I stare into his eyes as I slowly pull away, his finger licked clean and waiting for his admonishment or a smack or some kind of punishment.

I know better.

I wait a moment, my breathing coming in shorter and shorter.

"I'm sorry, Master." I clear my throat slightly, sitting back on the balls of my feet and awaiting the consequences of my action.

"I don't mind your enthusiasm, kitten. I'll allow it."

A breath I didn't know I was holding leaves me, and I can feel my body sag slightly.

"You must really enjoy strawberries, kitten," he says, his deep voice filled with amusement.

"No, it's you," I say, the words slipping past my lips without my consent. I blush after I speak, realizing it's all true. I'm so caught up in pleasing him, I'd made an error in my strict obedience. Isaac doesn't respond and just looks at me, his green eyes so intense that I'm forced to look away. I shiver slightly, never remembering him looking at me like that before.

"Let me show you to your room, kitten," he says, adjusting his cock as he stands. "Come," he commands.

I'm quick to rise and obediently follow him through the opulent house, taking in everything in a sort of detached awe. The house is large, simple with modern features, yet elegant. I like it. It looks like something out of a magazine.

We pass a large den as we go down the hallway and then take a spiral staircase up to the second floor. The wide hallway has dark hardwood floors, and simple black and white scenic paintings that line the wall. At the end of the hallway are two large double doors, which I assume lead to the master suite. Isaac leads me nearly to the double doors, but stops at a single door that's closest to it.

"This is your room," he informs me, gesturing at the door and then to the double doors. "That one is mine. Both my doors and yours shall remain open at *all times*. Understood?"

Biting my lower lip, I nod. "Yes, Master."

Isaac stares at me, his striking green eyes causing goosebumps to rise on my arms. "If you need me during the night, you're to kneel at my bedside and call my name until I wake. Though I'm sure I'll hear you the moment you walk in."

I'm shocked. My old Master would never allow me such freedom. I was never allowed to go anywhere without his consent or without him present. *Ever*. Even with him present, the chain was always there, making each step difficult and painful.

Letting his words sink in, Isaac turns and opens the door to my room, motioning me inside. The memory of the chain, the comparison of then and now completely vanishes as the door swiftly opens and reveals what lies beyond it.

My breath catches in my throat and my lips part in surprise as I step in the room, with a push from Isaac. It's not what I was anticipating. It's a normal bedroom. No chains or sex swings or glass cabinet filled with toys and tools for punishment. Just a normal room. It's quite lavish with a fancy white plush rug underneath the queen-size bed with matching comforter, grey and white paint on the walls in stripes, and gossamer silk curtains adorning the windows. Their softness reminds me of butterflies. This is just so... normal. My breathing comes in

faster. I feel completely at a loss. I look over my shoulder at Isaac, feeling somewhat betrayed. Although it's my own fault. I don't know what to expect from him. I am his Slave, yet this is where he's keeping me.

"You can roam wherever you'd like in the house," Isaac says, his eyes focusing on my face as I nod. "But when I go to bed, I want you in this room."

"Yes, Master."

"Do you like your new room, kitten?" Isaac asks, still staring at me intently. He seems to be waiting for me to question all this. And I want to, but I don't want to seem disobedient. I don't want to tell him that I feel like I'm not worthy.

"I love it," I say and quickly add, "Thank you." In a way, it reminds me a lot of my living room with light colors that brighten my mood. There are even small copper birds on the ends of the curtain rods that I hadn't noticed at first glance. The whole room is just gorgeous. Quirky and cozy, yet spacious and luxurious.

"If it's missing anything, you'll let me know," Isaac says as more of a command than a statement.

"I will, Master," I answer quickly.

A slight smile plays across Isaac's full lips. "Good." He glances at the silver Rolex watch on his wrist and then looks back at me. "It's late, but it's time for your first lesson."

A chill goes down my spine at the intense look in his eyes. Excitement. Eagerness. Lust.

"I want to whip you," he says, slowly closing the door with his back to me, his voice low and filled with passion. "Every night I want you crawling into bed, your ass red and tender."

My breath quickens as my sore pussy begins to clench around nothing, and I close my eyes as images of being whipped by him fill my mind, my lips parting with desire.

Isaac steps in closer and I nearly fall to my knees, turned on by his closeness. "It's a reminder that you're mine. Your body

belongs to me. Do you understand?” His voice is hoarse and coated with lust.

“Yes, Master,” I sigh obediently, trembling from the heat radiating from his body.

“Whichever hole I want to use, you’ll make available to me,” he says, the tone of his deep voice making my clit throb. “And you’ll be satisfied once I’ve cum.”

If he means this to be a lesson by the way of torturing me with this dirty talk, then he’s definitely succeeding. I can hardly breathe, my sore pussy soaking wet.

His eyes never leave my face. “If I’ve decided you’ve earned your pleasure, I’ll make sure you cum as well. If not, you better not fucking touch yourself.” His words come out quicker, his eyes holding a threat. As he talks, he walks the length of the room and I follow his steps. “Denial will be your punishment, and taking your own pleasure will only result in a whipping meant to cause more than just a sting. Do you understand?”

“You own my pleasure, Master,” I manage to say as if in a trance, feeling weak in the knees and wanting him to end my torment. I want him to use my body for his pleasure. Right now.

A satisfied grin plays across his chiseled jawline. “Good girl.”

He sits on the edge of the bed and then motions at me. “Tonight I want to use my hand.”

Obediently I crawl onto the bed as he pats his lap. My breath quickening, I lower my body, lying in the end of the bed and across his lap, my hips digging into his thigh and my ass perfectly seated for the spanking. He moves his right leg over both of mine and lays his forearm across the length of my back, pushing my hair out of the way, so his heavy arm is laying across my naked back. “Put your hands behind your back and grip your wrists,” he orders.

I do as I’m told, struggling to stay still as my clit throbs. My cheek lays flat against the bed and I stare straight ahead at the mirror sitting on top of a vanity across the room.

I want this so badly. After him talking to me in that dark, forceful way, I'm eager for his touch.

The sight in the mirror makes me even more turned on. Him still in his suit, the power radiating from his broad shoulders and perfect stature. But there's a heat in his eyes as he roams the length of my body that makes me feel like the powerful one.

I watch in the mirror as he runs his fingers along my spine, sending a tingle of need and want flowing through me.

"I want my hand to sting when I'm done with you." His dick hardens beneath me and I feel it pulsing against me. I whimper from the teasing torture he's putting me through.

He sets his hand flat against my ass and lowers his lips to my ear, his piercing green eyes finding mine in the mirror. "I'll let you watch tonight. And if you're good, I'll let you ride my face and then fuck yourself on my dick. But if you make one sound, one movement, you'll get none of that, and you'll go right to bed once I've rubbed the cream on your ass so you can at least sit tomorrow."

I want so badly to breathe, to blink, to move. But his dirty words and dark promises keep my gaze straight ahead, locked into his trance.

"Yes, Master."

I count the smacks along my ass in my head, each one making me wetter and wetter, anticipating the reward for being such a good girl for him. My body jolts and after only eleven, my thighs are soaked.

At fifteen, the tears start to leak from the corner of my eyes and he starts fingering me, playing with my pussy between the blows.

At twenty-one, he picks up the pace, eager to end it, I think.

I was such a good girl for him.

He whispers it as he fucks me. *Good girl.*

I pass out in his arms, sated and exhausted, and I think... I think he whispers it again as he kisses my hair and then leaves

me alone in the room.

CHAPTER 19

ISAAC

I sigh heavily, hearing the words of my mother and that abusive prick. *Worthless.*

That's the word she loved to use.

"Why are you up?" she asks, and my mother's voice is flat and hoarse. She's at the small kitchen table wearing nothing but a ripped nightshirt and a hot pink bra underneath.

Memories of what life used to be like flash before my eyes. The laughter and pancakes. Mom used to cook. Back before everything changed.

Now the fridge is always empty and the linoleum floor is always dirty from whatever she did last night with him. I'll clean it all up after school. It'll be okay. I can fix this.

Her eyes are so red as she rocks at the table. I know she's high. I'm old enough to know. I think my teacher knows. Mrs. Klintsova keeps asking me questions. But I don't tell them anything. I don't want her to get in trouble. She just needs help. I can help my mom. I love her.

She must know that.

"I never should've kept you. I knew your father was going to leave me."

I stare at my mother, not understanding. Dad died overseas. "He died at war." The words come out before I can stop myself, and I wish they hadn't. Mom lunges from the table, her

ripped night shirt exposing the bright bra underneath. She smacks me hard across the face, gripping my shoulders and yelling into my ear.

“You’re just like him!” She keeps shaking me, and I let her. She just needs to get it out of her system. I know she’s hurting. I wish someone would help her. Tears roll down my cheeks and that only makes my mom angrier, but I can’t help it.

It all hurts. I just want my mom back.

I stare at the ceiling, not moving. These memories come to me often, and they only remind me of the fucked up past that made me who I am. But I’m fine with that. I’ve grown to realize I can live with knowing who I really am.

I’m not worthless to Katia. I can do so much for her. She’ll put her faith in me, she’ll give me control, and I’ll give her everything she needs.

It’s important that she has privacy, a place that she feels at home. I know this, but I hate it. I want her tied to my bed so I can take her easily in the morning.

I roll onto my back, the sheets and thick comforter pulling with me. The dim light of the moon spilling through the slit in the curtains and casting shadows across my bedroom floor.

She’s doing so well. She’ll adjust soon. She’s going to realize this isn’t what she anticipated.

She thinks she knows what a Master is, what’s required of a Slave... she has no fucking idea.

I can faintly hear the crickets from outside as a smile creeps up to my lips.

Just as quickly as it comes, it vanishes. A shrill cry from her room makes me leap from the bed.

My heart races as my feet slam against the hardwood floors on my way to her.

Her small frame is twisting under the sheets, fighting them as a strangled scream is torn from her throat.

“Katia!” I yell, grabbing her hip to pin her in place and her wrists with my other hand. I still both of her wrists above her head, holding her down with a good bit more strength than I thought I’d need.

“Katia, wake up!” I scream at her, so loud that I feel the wretched soreness in my throat. I imagine hers is worse. The screams haven’t stopped, and she’s only fighting harder.

Tears are leaking down her face, although her eyes are closed tightly.

She may think this is play, or a fantasy come to life. But for me this is real. I know she needs someone to heal her, and I so badly want to be her Master. I want to take those terrors away from her, to replace them with the pain and pleasure she needs.

My Katia. My kitten.

“Kitten,” I lower my head to the crook of her neck, bringing my body closer to hers and forcing her head to stop thrashing. I keep my voice low and soothing as her screams turn to sobs. “I’m here, kitten, you’re safe.”

I press my body against hers, my hip on her hip and gently stroke her side.

“It’s alright. You’re safe. I’m here,” I gently murmur into her ear.

I can’t describe the rush of relief, pride, and satisfaction that washes through me as she settles her body and her breathing calms. Her struggle dies, and her fear vanishes.

A sense of ownership, and worthiness. I kiss her neck, my lips leaving open-mouth kisses along her skin, prickled with goosebumps.

“You’re alright. You’re safe. You’re with me,” I almost say, *your Master*. I almost speak words that I know are true. But she doesn’t. Not yet.

My resolve strengthens as I pull away from her and gently run my thumb along her jaw, wiping away the residual tears.

My poor kitten.

Her eyes slowly open and sorrow and disappointment shine clearly in them, even with the dim light in the room.

“I-” she starts to speak, but I press my finger to her lips.

“Come, kitten. I want you in my room with me,” I say easily, scooping her small body up in my arms and carefully balancing her as I climb off the bed and walk swiftly to my room.

Katia nestles her head under my chin, her arms wrapped around my neck. She buries her face in my chest, and I know she’s ashamed more than anything.

“I’m sorry, Master,” she whispers as I lower her into the bed.

“Why are you sorry?”

“It’s my fault.”

“Why’s that?” I ask her, hating that she would think having a night terror is something she needs to apologize for.

“I use a blanket. I brought it with me, but I was tired. It was my laziness, Master. I’m sorry.” Her voice is choked. “I won’t do it again.”

“A blanket?” I ask her. This sparks an interest. She’s never mentioned a blanket before.

“I like the weight on my ankle when I sleep.”

It takes me a moment to register what she means. “Like the shackle.” My blood goes cold, and I pull her closer to me. My poor kitten.

“Yes, I’m sorry-” I cut her off before she can once again apologize when she shouldn’t be.

“You’re my responsibility, so it’s my fault. Not yours. “

Her breath hitches and her body tenses.

“You’ll sleep here tonight, and tomorrow I’ll fix this.” I kiss her hair gently, at odds with the strength in my voice. It’s an effort to soften my tone as I say, “Sleep, kitten.”

Her wide eyes look up at me with slight wonder and disbelief. So pale, so clear it once again feels like she can see through

me. She licks her lower lip and lays her head down on my forearm, but she doesn't close her eyes.

After a moment she tilts her body some to look at my face.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks me softly. "Master?" she tacks on my title at the end, and we both know she shouldn't have. She should have started with it. She looks frightened for a moment, that she let the question slip without respectfully addressing me, but I haven't the energy to care.

My mind is reeling with the revelation of what she's just told me. And how I need to find a solution to this problem.

"Why do I want to be a Master?" I ask her.

"Why are you trying to help me?"

She still doesn't realize that being her Master dictates that I have to help her. Her welfare in every way is my responsibility. The room fills with the soft sounds of our breathing and the chirps of the crickets and other soft sounds of the night.

Why do I want to be a Master?

I've thought about that a lot over the years. Especially when the nights are cold and lonely and a simple, quick fuck holds no interest. I don't have an answer, but I want to give her one.

"When I was younger, I tried very hard to help someone." My heart hurts as I think back to when I was younger. When I first felt needed, and failed so miserably. "It only hurt me when I tried to help her. She hurt me. I gave up. I stopped trying, but I still wanted to love her." I think I did love her. I don't think I ever stopped. How can you stop loving your mother? I was only a child. I think it's ingrained in our DNA to forgive and continue to love them.

Katia moves her small hand from my chest, cupping it and putting it under her head. I trail my finger down her cheek as I continue my story.

"One day she needed me badly," I take in a deep breath, the vision of that night flashing before my eyes. "But I didn't."

"So now you try to help others?"

“No,” I respond quickly. I don’t, not really. I’m not interested in many people. But something about Katia called to me. It’s still forcing me close to her. Wanting to give her more and more.

“Oh, I don’t understand.”

I grunt a response. I don’t understand either. I was just thinking out loud. I don’t even know why I said anything.

“Who was she?”

“My mother,” I answer simply.

“What happened?” she asks, and I run a hand down my face. The vision of her lying cold and lifeless on the ground haunts me in that moment.

“Go to sleep, kitten.” I shouldn’t have said anything. I shake my head slightly; none of my past means anything. It has no relevance to Katia and her night terrors. The exhaustion from the day is clouding my judgment.

“I just...” Katia starts to say something, but her voice trails off. The worry is evident in her voice. It shouldn’t be there at all.

I shouldn’t have opened my fucking mouth. I regret saying anything.

“This conversation is over. I’m a Master because I take pleasure in it.” My voice is strong and she should more than understand that I mean what I say. “That’s the end of this conversation.”

“But-” Katia starts to question me, eagerness to learn more in her voice. She doesn’t use my title, and I’ve had it. My kitten is a playful one, curious and wanting to please me and learn more about me. But she should know better.

I grip her hip in one hand and flip her forcefully onto her back, pressing my body against hers and pinning her wrist above her head.

She gasps from the force and my rough hold on her.

“Did you question me?” I ask, my eyes narrow, my voice low and full of a threat.

“I’m sorry, Master.” Her words come out quickly, full of fear. Her body is tense and still.

“Did. You. Question me?” I repeat louder, my dick hardening simply from the feel of her soft body beneath mine.

“I did and I’m so sorry, Master.” Her pale blue eyes tell me everything. She’s truly repentant. But she needs to be punished.

“On your knees,” I hiss in the crook of her neck, my hot breath sending a chill down her body. I release her and sit on the balls of my feet, waiting for her to get into position.

She does so quickly and obediently.

I have to lean over to the nightstand and turn on the light. Her pussy and ass are sore, I’m sure of that. As I click it on and move back behind her, I gently place a hand on her ass. It’s still bright red. Her upper thighs are virtually untouched, which leaves possibilities. I don’t have the cream in this room for aftercare though.

Fuck. I clench my jaw. I hate being so limited. I spread her pussy lips to see how swollen and red she is.

Denial it is.

“You will not cum, do you hear me?”

“Yes, Master,” she says, her voice clear, yet low and full of agony.

“This is a gentle punishment. Do not push me again.”

“I won’t Master.”

I shove my fingers into her tight cunt, stroking along her G-spot before she’s even able to finish. I’m quick and rough, watching how her body moves roughly with the force from me finger fucking her.

Her soft moans and her thighs trembling only make me want to fuck her more. But this is a punishment. Not a reward.

As soon as her pussy tightens and her upper body shifts and twists, trying to avoid the inevitable, I know she's close. Katia pleads in a whisper, "Master," as I pull away from her. I watch as she stays on all fours, letting the intensity of her impending orgasm fade. Her eyes are closed tightly, and her breathing is coming in pants.

I could do this for hours, but I don't fucking want to.

I'm hard as fuck, but I'm irritated. I ignore my own needs. We'll both suffer tonight.

"Go to sleep, kitten," I say flatly, lying on my back, but holding my arm out for her.

She cuddles beside me and I kiss her hair. Hating that I'm leaving her in need, but she needs to be punished.

Even after she's fast asleep and safe in my arms, I'm wide awake, wondering if I'm a capable enough Master for her.

CHAPTER 20

KATIA

I stifle a yawn as I lower myself into the cushioned chair in the corner nook of Isaac's large chef's kitchen, the smell of rich coffee filling the room mixing in with smell of bacon, eggs, sausage and pancakes. My heart skips a beat as I look out through the beautiful large windows at the early sunrise, marveling at the spectacular view of the immaculate landscaped grounds. Isaac's property is truly picturesque, and the golden halo from the morning sun makes it almost look worthy of a scenic postcard portrait. It's a far cry from the hell that I lived in under my last Master.

I shake my head slightly, by forehead pinched, feeling like this isn't real. Instead of a Slave, I feel more like a pampered pet. Like I'm really his actual kitten. More than that, there's been a shift between us. Last night, something changed. It's only been one day and I'm already feeling like I've seen a side of Isaac that I'm sure he hasn't shared with anyone. I just don't know what to make of it.

"You need to eat something, kitten," Isaac says, drawing my eyes over to him where he's standing at the coffee maker. He's stopped manning the multiple skillets he has going on the stove to pour sugar into a cup of fresh coffee. The long silver spoon clinks against the ceramic mug as I watch him stir it.

My heart jumps in my chest again at the sight of him. God, he's so fucking sexy. Just like this is how Isaac should always be. He has no shirt on, his rock-hard abs on display, and his black silk pajama pants hang low on his chiseled hips,

showing off his perfect V. His large cock imprint is easily visible and makes my mouth water with need. He's not wearing any boxers and I'm just waiting for his cock to slip out of the slit in his pants.

Isaac finishes stirring the coffee, licking the residual drops off the spoon and walks over to the table and sets it down in front of me. "I know you normally skip breakfast, but I want you to eat when you're with me. I will not eat breakfast alone; do you understand?" It's hard to focus on his words with his cock imprint in my face and I swear he has a semi hard-on. I can practically see the vein running through his shaft. "Look at me," Isaac orders.

I swallow back the sudden dryness in my throat and look up into his stunning green eyes.

"You will eat," he says as a statement. As a fact.

I'm not hungry. I don't do breakfast, and he knows it, but I must do as he commands. "Yes, Master," I say, doing my best to keep my eyes on his. The way he's looking at me, like he wants to devour me, is making it hard to concentrate. This is nothing like what I thought it would be.

I pull the pink silk see-through robe a little tighter across my chest. It already hugs my curves. Even more, the outline of my breasts and hardened nipples are clearly evident and the outline of my mound is visible whenever I'm walking. He's told me that he wants me to wear this every morning, so I can be accessible to him whenever he pleases. I shiver as I remember his words. *I want your pussy available to me at all times.*

"Good." A twinge of happiness goes through me as he turns away and goes back over to the stove to operate the skillets he has going. I didn't imagine it'd be this easy to please him. I pick at the hem of the robe, and take a small sip of delicious hot coffee. I had no fucking idea what I was getting into.

I take solace in staring at his back, admiring each ridge of his muscles, the outline of his muscular physique, the crack of his chiseled ass. The small dimples on his lower back that my fingers itch to touch. I still can't get over the fact that he's

making breakfast for me and serving me coffee. I should be serving him like the Slave I'm supposed to be. My last Master never did anything like this for me, never even cared if I ate at all. This relationship isn't like what I thought it would be at all, and I have to keep reminding myself that Isaac is my Master. In this moment it doesn't quite feel that he is. But I suppose even pampered pets have *Masters*.

I watch the muscles in his back contract with each movement as he deftly turns over bacon, scrambles eggs and flips pancakes in the skillets. I sit back against the cushioned seat, my mind turning to the previous night. What he told me. God, my heart hurts for him.

How could I not have realized? I was so concerned with fixing myself, and facing my own past that I never once stopped to think that Isaac might be hurting, too. That he might need help just as much as I do. I felt terrible when he held me so early this morning, comforting me, trying to make me forget about my night terrors, when it's clear he needs to forget, too. When he told me about his mother, it all clicked. He's had a darkness around him from the moment I met him, a sadness that I missed because I was too self-absorbed with my own issues.

Absentmindedly, I bring my cup of coffee to my lips and take a sip, enjoying the rich taste.

"Today you can go to work," Isaac says, pulling me into the present and drawing my eyes back to him, "but the rest of the week, you'll have someone cover for you. I've taken some time off for your training," he finishes, as he piles several pancakes into a neat stack on a large plate.

I part my lips to object, but then close them. My dogs are my everything, and I would hate to upset their routine they've become accustomed to. And dogs are nothing if not sensitive to routine. If I don't come in for several days in a row, I know more than a few of them will get worried; we're a pack, I'm supposed to be there. It distresses me to think that I could upset them by obeying Isaac's demands, but I signed a contract. I have to obey his rules. He *owns* me. "Yes, Master," I reply dutifully, hoping he doesn't notice my hesitation and praying that my dogs will forgive me.

If he notices, he doesn't say anything. "Good," Isaac says, half-turning to me as he continues to scramble eggs.

I have enough help to take over what I do in person.

"Master?" I ask.

"Yes?"

"May I do some of the administration work on my laptop from here?"

"Yes, when you have a moment, you may."

"Thank you, Master."

WELL AT LEAST THAT WON'T CAUSE ANY PROBLEMS WITH MY WORK. It's easy enough to handle. My laptop is still open on the counter. Isaac wanted me to go about my morning routine. Which means coffee and checking my messages. It makes me feel uneasy to be on my support group with him in the room, but at the same time I can see that he should know. Kiersten had sent me a slew of messages last night that I wasn't able to answer until early this morning. I'd told her all about my contract with Isaac and she wanted to know all the details of my relationship. I pull the laptop into my lap and click the spacebar until it's awake again.

I open to screen to find that Kiersten is already online and has replied only a few minutes ago.

DARLINGGIRL86: WHAT'S HE LIKE?

I nervously pick at my fingernails. Both loving and hating that I'll be talking about Isaac while he's in the room. He could easily walk over and see.

My hands resting above the keys, I think for a moment, wondering if I should tell her. The truth is, this relationship resembles nothing like what I think a true M/s relationship should be. While Isaac is still demanding, I have more freedom than I think I should as a Slave, and his kindness totally throws me off.

Katty93: Not what I expected.

I only have to wait half a second before I hear a ding.

Darlinggirl86: What do you mean?

I sneak a peek at Isaac; he's almost done with organizing breakfast, piling bacon on one plate and eggs on another. I bite my lower lip, wondering how to best answer her question.

Katty93: He's too nice.

Crap. I feel awful after typing that, but I had to say it. That's why this feels so wrong to me.

Darlinggirl86: Too nice? Is that good or bad?

I take a sip of coffee, staring at the screen and not knowing for sure if it'd be okay to tell her about what happened early this morning. It's one thing to be vague about being purchased at an auction and not providing any concrete names or scenarios. It's another to divulge something so personal. Plus I don't want to violate the non-disclosure agreement I signed.

Katty93: It's good in some ways, bad in others. But I'm only just learning what he truly needs.

Darlinggirl86: It's only been one day, Kat. Give it time.

KATTY93: I WILL.

FEELING GUILTY, I SHUT MY LAPTOP AND SET IT ON THE WINDOWSILL just as Isaac brings breakfast over to the table, setting down plates of everything he's prepared.

"Is everything alright, kitten?" Isaac asks me as he sits down across from me.

"Yes," I say, flashing a smile that I hope doesn't betray my nervousness. "Just was chatting with a friend who wanted to know how I'm doing."

"What's your friend's name?" Isaac asks as he grabs a butter knife.

“KIERSTEN,” I ADMIT.

Isaac slathers butter on each layer of pancake. “Ah. A coworker, I assume?”

I shake my head. “She’s an online friend I met on a support group message board. I’ve never met her before. She’s good people though.” I hope he doesn’t ask me about her past. I honestly don’t know much about it, even if he insisted I tell him more about her.

Isaac grabs his fork after layering his pancakes with a river of syrup and cuts into the stack. “I see.”

I’m surprised that Isaac doesn’t inquire into Kiersten’s background further. I thought he’d be very interested in the dynamics of my relationship with Kiersten and want to control my interactions with her.

I pick up my fork, and spear a small piece of eggs, but I’m unable to bring it to my lips. Instead, I watch Isaac devour his pancakes. I don’t know what game he’s playing here. I feel so lost and like I don’t belong here.

Isaac swallows his mouthful and gestures at my untouched plate. “Eat,” he commands. “Don’t make me have to tell you again.”

“Yes, Master,” I say immediately. I pick my fork back up and can only take a few bites of eggs before I’m forced to put it back down again. My appetite is nonexistent, and I can’t get my mind off how much I want to know more about Isaac. “Master, may I bathe you?” I dare ask.

ISAAC LOOKS UP FROM HIS PLATE WITH SOME SURPRISE, ARCHING A sculpted brow as he looks at me.

“In the shower I mean,” I say quickly, my heart beating erratically. I want to give him more of me. Help him the same way that he’s trying to help me. *Please don’t deny me.*

Isaac shakes his head, filling me with disappointment. “Not this morning, no. I have to leave after breakfast.”

I try to hide the hurt that flashes in my eyes, but he sees it and sets his fork down, pushing his plate away from him.

He scoots his chair back away from the table. “Come sit on my lap, kitten.”

I’m quick to take him up on his offer.

“Tonight,” Isaac promises as he looks down at me with his lust in his eyes. “Tonight I’ll let you wash me... if you’re good today.”

At least that’s something. “Thank you, Master.”

CHAPTER 21

ISAAC

I set the small gift bag on the bathroom counter, the silk handles falling gently to one side as the steam fills the room. I'm not sure if this will work, but I'm hopeful. It's a heavy anklet, two inches thick and studded with Swarovski crystals. I would have had it studded with diamonds if I intended on her keeping it, but I don't.

I had two errands today, and both were successful in some ways. Although I feel cheated by the second. The first was to get this anklet. Easy enough. The second was to meet with my contacts deeper in the world Katia was once a part of. When she killed Carver Dario, she set off a chain reaction of events. His territory and contacts were vulnerable with him gone, leaving two rivals fighting for his territory. His cartel is completely shattered. The other men in her past—Master O, and Javier Pinzan—are dead. I fucking hate it. I had to know for sure, and the dental records confirmed it.

I wanted to kill them for her. I wanted them to truly suffer for what they did to her. Every last one of them.

They're all dead, but I don't know how to tell her. Worse, I don't know if she should know. I'm not certain how it will affect her. I need to wait for the right time.

The soft, rhythmic sounds of Katia's bare feet padding into the bathroom make me turn toward the open door. Although the room is hot with the steam from the shower already pouring out, her nipples are pebbled. As my eyes travel down her body,

she's still, her arms at her side. Her fingers are fidgety though, betraying her inner anxiety.

I know if she didn't know any better, she'd want to cover herself. I'm just not sure which part of her body she could possibly feel the need to hide from me. I circle her once, making it that much more obvious that I'm assessing her. My steps are slow and deliberate.

I watch her face as I near the front of her again. Her eyes are closed for a long moment until she hears me step in front of her. Those soft, pale blue eyes, staring straight ahead and then sneaking a glance at my face. I let my eyes move slowly, waiting for a reaction.

As I focus on her slender shoulders, her body tenses. And I have my answer.

Her scars.

"You're beautiful, Katia," I say easily, unbuckling my pants with my eyes still lingering on her body. "Every inch of you."

"Thank you, Master."

My words aren't enough. But I'll prove to her I mean what I say. She'll see her beauty. And if she detests her scars, I'll take them away.

I won't let her think she's anything other than the gorgeous creature she is.

"Into the shower you go." I shove my pants down and follow her to the other side of the spacious bathroom.

The river rock on the floor of the large shower stall travels up the wall. The rainfall showerhead and three side spouts are going at full steam.

Katia's lush lips part as she steps under the warmth of the spray. Her skin turning pink and the water darkening her hair and spilling over her lips, her shoulders, her breasts.

She's so fucking gorgeous. She only affords herself a moment before she opens her eyes and turns to face me, waiting for her next command.

I let her stand under the spray as I open a bottle of lavender and vanilla body wash and pour it into the palm of my hand. I slowly lather it, thinking about which inch of her I want to wash first.

“Spread your legs,” I say and barely breathe the command, but she instantly obeys.

I crouch down, the water pouring over my back as I massage her calves and work my way up her body. I keep moving in slow, soothing circles. As I rise and my fingers inch closer to the insides of her thighs, she closes her eyes, nearly falling backward and reaching out to steady herself by gripping my shoulder.

She almost pulls her hand away once she’s straightened herself again, but I hold her hand down and look into her eyes as I kiss just above her wrists. “Stay.”

With her breath coming in quickly, she nods her head and says, “Yes, Master.”

I continue my ministrations, working the lather over her body, teasing her sex slightly and grinning as her eyes heat with lust. She stays still as I massage her ass, taking great care to make sure she’s healing nicely, which she is. I suck her nipples, my dick hard and pressing into her soft curves. But only for a moment. I just want to see them reddened from my touch.

“Rinse and then get on your knees,” I give her the command while I pour the shampoo into my hand.

I massage the shampoo into her scalp while my dick brushes against her lips.

It’s a tease. Her lips slowly open until the head of my cock is being licked as I move slightly.

I shouldn’t allow her to tease me back. But I fucking love it.

“Lean back.”

She does as I ask, and the water rinses her hair clean. My fingers spear through her thick blonde locks.

I do the same with the conditioner, but I allow more of my cock to enter the heat of her mouth. She closes her lips around

my head and gently sucks, a tingle of need shooting through me as her soft tongue runs the length of my slit accompanied by the soft vibrations of her moan.

As I pull her hair back slightly, she releases me to rinse the conditioner from her hair, and our eyes lock.

“Your turn, kitten,” I tell her reaching a hand down to help her up from her position.

She takes her time, grabbing the bar of hard milled soap and looking over my body. She’s aroused, but taking her task seriously. She lathers the bar, large suds covering her hands, before gently caressing my body.

I close my eyes, enjoying the strong motions from her small hands.

She works her hands over my shoulders as she stands on her tiptoes, and then moves them down my back and over my ass. I have to smile as she hesitates to move lower.

She moves in front of me, her eyes focused on my hard cock and quickly lathers her hands back up, and runs them over my chiseled abs. The look of desire reflected in her eyes makes me want to take her against the shower wall right now, but I stay still.

She moves lower, making her circles smaller and smaller until her hands wrap around my cock.

I let her stroke me a few times, loving the feel of it.

“Enough,” I say and admonish her.

Her eyes fly to mine and she stills, but nods her head and continues washing my legs.

I love both her desire and her obedience. And she’ll be rewarded for it soon enough.

It doesn’t take long until we’re both cleaned and I can turn the water off.

I grab a towel off the heated bench and pat her dry in the stall, opening the glass door to let the cooler air in.

Satisfied with her being patted down and quickly drying myself, I take her hand and lead her to the front of the sink.

Without speaking, I put her chain on her, kissing her neck. And then I attach the leash with the clip at the end, and fasten it to her clit. It's tight enough to stimulate and stay attached, but not nearly anywhere near tight enough to cause any pain.

I tug it gently, outward from her stomach, watching the pleasure on her face as the chain round her neck pulls away from her, clinking softly and then pulls at her clit. Sending a bolt of pleasure through her body.

"You'll wear both of these and nothing else in this house."

My dick is nestled in her ass as I speak. The sight of her in my chains, even if they are thin and more like jewelry, makes me want to spill my cum deep inside of her.

But not yet. There's one more thing, one very important addition.

I stand behind her, splaying my left hand on her lower belly and pulling her closer to me. "This is for you." I hand her the gift bag with my right. "But you'll need to put it on yourself."

She turns to look at me over her shoulder, hesitantly taking the bag.

"Put it on now," I tell her.

She quickly set the bag down on the counter, pulling out the large, black velvet box. She opens it slowly and then runs her fingers along the crystals.

"It's beautiful," she whispers.

"It's for your ankle," I tell her. Her body tenses for a moment, and recognition flashes in her eyes.

"You and you alone will put it on and take it off." I swallow thickly, hoping this is going to work for her. "I'll throw it away the moment you leave it. You can only take it off when you shower."

"I don't understand."

“If you need to wear this at night, then you must wear it all day as well. If you don’t wear it, I’ll throw it away.”

“It’s a shackle?” she whispers.

“It’s yours. It’s whatever you want it to be.”

I give her a moment to let the rules and the meaning of the anklet to register. “Put it on,” I tell her.

She bends down and clasps it into place. It’s a little large on her and slips down, but firmly stays in place.

Once she stands, I pull her closer to me and kiss her neck, running my fingers through her folds. She’s no longer wet. But I’ll make it up to her.

I pull the chain at her stomach, reminding her of the chains she’s wearing that are mine. “This is how I want you while you’re home, unless I tell you otherwise.”

I kiss along her neck and nip her ear, looking between the soft curve of her neck and her pale blue eyes in the mirror.

I tug the chain again and I’m rewarded with a sweet moan of pleasure and arousal moistening her pussy.

I lead her with the chain to the large whirlpool tub in the middle of the bathroom, loving her soft whimpers. I sit on the edge and turn her so she’s facing away from me. The anklet clinks as I pull her down on top of me roughly, her back to my front, my dick hard and ready to be buried in her heat.

“Do you think you were a good girl today?” I whisper against her ear. My lips gently caress her sensitive skin and cause a shudder to go through her body.

“Yes, Master,” she answers with lust in her voice.

“You were,” I admit as I slam my hips up, shoving my cock deep inside her. She tries to buck forward out of instinct, but I keep her close to me, fucking her roughly and tugging at the chain.

Rewarding my kitten.

And sating us both.



“KATIA, WHAT DOES BEING A MASTER MEAN?” I ASK HER AS SHE CRAWLS UNDER THE COVERS.

“It means you have complete control over someone.”

“Is that what it means, kitten?” I ask her.

She clears her throat, looking as though she’s questioning her response. “There’s more to it than that,” she finally says.

“It’s very simple, kitten. Soon you’ll know.” Her eyes flash with disappointment as she takes in a heavy breath.

Sleep well, I tell her before turning off the lights and leaving her alone. Wearing my chain and contemplating what it truly means for me to be her Master.

CHAPTER 22

KATIA

I step into the steam-filled bathroom, dressed in my flimsy gown, my skin prickling from the inner fire inside the pit of my stomach, my body on edge. I'm sweaty and dirty from crawling on my hands and knees all day, obeying every wish of my Master and now he's ordered me to take a bath and to let him clean me. And if I'm good, he's going to let me bathe him.

I couldn't be happier to oblige. I hunger for his strong hands on my body, giving me the pleasure I so badly crave and he's tempted me with all day. It's hard to even think of myself as a Slave when I feel more like Isaac's pampered pet. It's definitely not what I was expecting going into this relationship, but I fucking love it. It feels like I'm living a fantasy.

I'm his fucktoy, his kitten, his everything. But what he does to me, what he commands me to do only makes me feel desired and cherished.

I catch sight of the faint scars on my shoulder and my mind drifts back to earlier today, to one of my training sessions that left me appreciating him even more.

"I want you to paint your scars," Isaac told me as I sat on a leather training bench. He grabbed a bowl of whipped cream and strawberries off a stand nearby and held it out to me. With the bowl in his left hand, he held the long stem of a large, fresh strawberry and dipped it in the homemade cream.

“Open,” he commanded me. “Stick your tongue out flat.”

I did as I was told and he traced a line down my tongue with the point of the berry and then around my lips, teasing me. “You’ll paint them with the cream for me to lick off.”

He pulled it away from my mouth and I responded as I knew I should. “Yes, Master.” I’ve learned to love those words. I love pleasing him. He makes it so easy.

Obediently, I took the strawberry from his hands, and only then did I really register what he’d told me to do. I didn’t know why he wanted me to paint my scars with cream and fruit, but I knew I shouldn’t question him. Everything he makes me do is for my own good.

My skin pricked with his eyes on me as I carefully dipped the strawberry into the cream in the bowl and began painting my scars, slowly and deliberately. My eyes watched my movements in the trifold mirror from the vanity he’d placed me in front of. The vanity was from my room, but the bench was in his. I started with my neck first, covering all those ugly marks I so hated, before moving to my collarbone and then my shoulders.

I remember how I got them. How my old Master would chain me to the bed and let the whip rip across my back. Occasionally it would break skin, but that’s not what made the scars, it was the tips of the braided tails. In the beginning, when I wasn’t perfect, he’d attach the punishment spurs. They’d stick into my skin and when he pulled back... I closed my eyes, hating the memory.

The second I shut my eyes, I felt Isaac’s strong hand between my legs and his tongue licking along the faint bit of cream painted over my scars.

I gasped with pleasure at the sensation, reveling in the feel of his warm wet mouth, and had to fight the urge to wrap my arms around his neck and keep him in place. I knew I could only accept what he gave me, and nothing more.

He moved up to my neck, kissing away the cream, sucking on my neck.

Isaac continued kissing and sucking on my neck until all the cream was gone, and when he pulled back I was so fucking out of breath. I'd never experienced having food literally licked off my body, and the sensation of it had been incredible. The places where he licked me felt alive, tingling with sexual energy from his hungry lips and tongue. God, I had felt so good.

"Master," I breathed, panting, my chest heaving and my pussy clenching uncontrollably. Seriously, I almost came just from that. "More. Please."

Isaac responded by grinning at me and standing tall in front of me. "Be careful what you wish for, kitten."

I wasn't sure what he meant until he walked away and came back with a buzzing object. A huge fucking vibrator. Grinning, he placed it on the bench, making the tip of the head barely touch my pussy lips and clit. I instantly shivered at the sensation, so turned up already and wanting so badly to cum.

Smack!

I cried out from the pain and pleasure stinging my ass as Isaac drew back the riding crop he'd picked up from the side of the bench.

"You're not to move," he told me. "You're to stay perfectly still while that vibrator teases your pussy and the only thing I want to see move is your arm as you cover your scars with whipped cream again. Understand?"

I was breathless, wanting to protest. I needed to cum so bad. I was so turned on it was unreal. But I did as he commanded.

"Yes, Master," I replied.

The session went on to last another hour, and I was whipped several times for moving, but each time I didn't, Isaac rewarded me with his mouth and a bit of pleasure, licking and cleaning my scars. By the time it was over, I'd gotten better at being perfectly still and I was rewarded with one of the hardest fucks Isaac had given me.

My eyes flicker back to the mirror, to the scars on my body. Scars that now have a different memory. My heart clenches in

my chest. This isn't what I thought it would be. It's so much more. Submitting to Isaac makes me feel liberated.

My past is losing its grip on me. And it's all thanks to Isaac.

AS IF SUMMONED BY MY THOUGHTS, A TERROR THAT CONSTANTLY haunts me, one of the recurring images that has viciously torn me from my sleep and kept me a captive to my past for years, rages in my vision.

I can see my old Master's sick smile as he hits me, delighting in the perverse pleasure my pain brings him. I can see the scene unfold as if I'm having an out-of-body experience, and I see myself cowering in the corner as he beats me over and over again, the back of hand slamming against my cheek, splitting my lip open and filling my mouth with the metallic taste of blood. Unconsciously, I raise a hand to my face, touching where he struck me.

But there's no pain there. No bruises.

IT'S NOT REAL, I TELL MYSELF CONFIDENTLY, SHOCKED AT HOW little I'm affected by that horrible image, just a fading memory.

"YOU NEED A BATH, KITTEN," ISAAC SAYS, BREAKING ME OUT OF MY reverie.

I take in a sharp breath as I see him standing in front of the beautiful garden tub, cloaked in steam, his dress shirt unbuttoned and rumpled, his black dress pants doing little to hide the huge bulge in his pants. My nipples pebble, my mouth waters, and my pussy clenches with need as I think about how he will soon be cleaning me himself, his hot hands roaming every inch of my body. I want it. I want him.

"Yes, Master," I say obediently, a feeling of warmth lacing with my desire. I feel so safe in Isaac's presence. I could not have asked for a better Master. But I'm starting to feel a little lightheaded from the steam. Today has been such a long day,

and I'm tired. Taking a warm, steamy bath will hopefully help me relax.

HE GESTURES AT MY ROBE. "TAKE THAT OFF."

I DO AS HE SAYS, LETTING THE PINK ROBE SLIP OFF MY SHOULDERS and fall to the floor. I don't miss the flash of desire in Isaac's eyes as he surveys my naked body, my hardened nipples, my flesh riddled with goosebumps, and the chain attached to my clit. Exactly how he likes me.

HIS EYES BURNING, HE WALKS OVER TO ME AND PLACES A HAND ON my abdomen, tracing his name he's written across it before taking the chain off from around my neck and then unclipping the other end from my clit. The action makes my back bow with the sharp release on my tender throbbing clit. My head falls back and his fists my hair at the base of my neck. "Good girl, kitten," he whispers, kissing my exposed neck and releasing me. I glance down at my midsection where his name is scrawled, feeling a sense of pride. Every day he writes his name on me, reminding me that I belong to him... but I want so badly to ask if I can write my name on him. I haven't, afraid it might displease him.

HE'D PROBABLY LET ME IF I ASK, I TELL MYSELF. AS MUCH AS I WANT to please him, my happiness matters to him. It's obvious to me now.

"TAKE OFF YOUR ANKLET, KITTEN," ISAAC ORDERS NEXT, HIS VOICE heavy, his eyelids hooded with lust. He never touches the anklet. It's truly mine. And so far, it's helped at night. The weight mimics the shackle. But the way Isaac looks at it makes me uneasy.

I'M QUICK TO BEND DOWN AND REMOVE IT FOR THE SHOWER. JUST like I've done every day.

I know where the clasps are and I lean against the wall, still feeling exhausted and weak from the day and unhook the first, and then the second.

My heart stops short as the metal falls over my ankle.

So much like before.

I'll always be your Master. I hear his voice, and see his cruel, smiling visage. My heart races, and the room starts spinning around me. Oh my God. Not here. Not now. I feel like I'm going to throw up as a crushing weight settles on my chest and my whole body begins shaking. Fuck. I can't catch my breath as my heart pounds out of my chest, and my vision begins to narrow into a tiny little dot.

I can't breathe. My fingers grip the anklet, but I don't feel the studded Swarovski, instead it's the rough cast iron. I lean against the drywall of the luxurious bathroom, but that's not where I am. It's the hard, rough concrete walls of the small room he kept me in.

He's dead. My Master's dead. I can feel the key in my hand as the shackle falls to the ground with a loud clank.

Did they hear? My heart races faster. What I have I done? Fear grips me. I have to run. I need to run. They can't find me. I can't let that happen.

The metal slips from my hand as I cover my mouth and feel paralyzed, knowing if I can't escape, they'll kill me. Slowly, painfully, for nothing more than their enjoyment.

AS THE FLOOR RUSHES UP TO MEET ME, THE LAST THING I SEE IS A blur rushing at me and deep voice yelling, "Kitten!"

CHAPTER 23

ISAAC

Fuck! My fingers dig into Katia's waist as her knees buckle and she nearly topples forward. I saw it happening in slow motion. I've been waiting for something, anything to come of the anklet, but I didn't think it would be this.

"Kitten!" I hold her close to me, keeping her upright as her nails dig into my skin. Shit! I seethe through my teeth as her nails scratch down my arm. My heart twists in my chest so tightly, as if it's wrapped in barbed wire. The pain is unbearable.

I hate this. I never thought this would be the outcome.

"Katia, I'm here." I call to her, holding her close, but she's not listening. She's not here with me. She's far away and caught in a hell that was meant to be lit on fire and left in her past where it belongs.

She cries out, her eyes open, but not seeing what's in front of her. I shake her, I cup her face, forcing her to look at me. "Look at me!"

But she's not listening. She's fighting me, pulling away and scratching and trying to run.

He has her.

Her former Master. I want to spit the word.

He's not allowed. He's dead. I won't let him have this control over her.

She's mine!

I push her back against the wall and shove my forearm under her chin, keeping her from biting me. With her wrists pinned above her head and my hip pushed against hers, I have her still.

"You think of only me when you're with me," I command her, pushing my thigh between her legs and pressing her back firmly against the wall. She whimpers, and her eyes finally find mine.

"You belong to me. No one else." Her body tenses as her pupils dilate and recognition flashes in her eyes. My kitten. Stay with me. Only me.

I crash my lips to hers, slowly lowering my arm and she responds. Her lips part and she fights me again, but it's to hold me back. To grip onto me and kiss me with a passion that makes her heart beat so hard I swear I can hear it even over the sound of my own blood rushing in my ears.

"Only me."

"Only you."

"Who do you belong to?" I ask her, pushing my hand between her thighs and rubbing her clit.

"You," she says in a strangled cry.

"Why did you take it off?" I ask her.

She breathes in a sharp inhale and her eyes widen, afraid to answer for a moment. But she obeys. "Because I was told to. You told me to."

"You're such a good girl," I whisper into the crook of her neck as I rub my palm against her clit.

I kiss along her jaw and down her neck, rocking my hand and feeling her grow wetter and hotter. I need to get her off. I need her to be rewarded for facing her past like she did.

I bury my head in the crook of her neck, feeling her long blonde hair against my nose and cheek. "Such a good girl."

I slip my fingers into her heat.

"Thank you, Master," she moans. Her head turns to the left and then the right.

She runs her hand down my forearm and I can feel the blood smear along my arm from where she scratched me. Her eyes are closed. She's just enjoying my touch.

Thank fuck. She needs this. She can't be afraid to take it off. She needs this more than she could possibly know.

"Cum for me," I tell her, pulling away slightly and looking at the soft curves of her face. Her forehead's pinched and her soft lush lips are parted. Her flushed skin and quick pants of heated breathing only prove to me that she's close. I can't take the sight of her so wound up and turned on. So fucking gorgeous. This is how she should always be. Lost in the pleasure I give her. Never in pain.

"Please cum for me," I practically beg her, my heart hurting and my body feeling cold and nearly numb.

She cries out as the warmth of her arousal leaks from her and her thighs tremble. Her body stiffens as she grips me with a force equal to the intensity of her orgasm.

"Good girl," I softly say as I pull my hand away and hold her close to me.

I kiss her hair, then her cheek and her neck as she lolls her head to the side, gripping onto my shoulders and resting her cheek on my shoulder.

It takes a moment for her to calm, and all the while I just hold her to me.

"Are you alright, kitten?" I ask softly, pulling away from her for just a moment. She hides her face at first and I hate it. I hate that she's ashamed of confronting her past.

I grip her chin in my hand and force her to look at me.

She pulls away, moving her head to the side and responding softly. "I'm okay."

I think about questioning her. Making her talk about it. But we both know what happened.

I don't want her to hurt anymore. I pull her into my chest and rock her slightly. She holds me back with a force that's new to her. She's holding me as though she'll fall if I let her go. As if she'll shatter without me here to hold her up.

My poor Katia. I kiss her sweetly, my heart breaking.

I wish there was more I could do.

But this will take time.

Every time she puts that anklet on, she knows what she's doing, what she's enabling.

This was bound to happen, but I still hate it.

I lay her on the ground, breathing heavily and catching her breath while I turn the shower on. The loud sprays hit the wall, drowning out her heavy breathing. I turn to look at her, my hand under the stream, waiting for the water to warm and she's still, her eyes wide open, staring at the gorgeous anklet, laying across the bathroom floor from her, as though it's a snake waiting to strike.

I'm not surprised though, when she's showered and pampered and the time's come to either wear it or throw it away. I'm not surprised that she puts it back on to keep the night terrors at bay. But the look in her eyes is different now.

It's progress.



"KATIA, WHAT DOES BEING A MASTER MEAN?" I ASK HER AS I SIT ON her bed and gently pet her hair.

"I don't know, Master." She answers so quietly I almost don't hear her.

"What do you think it means?" I ask her.

"I feel so confused," she admits.

“What if I told you you’ve only had one Master, Katia? What would you say then?”

She turns in the bed, finally looking me in the eyes. “I’d say a Master is a good thing. A Master is a savior.”

Her admission makes my heart hurt. I want to save her. And I will.

CHAPTER 24

KATIA

I can't believe I'm doing this.

I look over at Isaac as he drives us down the road toward my family's house in his spare Mazda CX-5, handling the car in a way that manages to turn me on, even when I'm on edge. Everything he does is just so sexy. His mannerisms, the way he talks, the way he moves. The way he *owns* me.

I shake my head. I can't believe I'm letting this man meet my family after only knowing him for a few weeks.

10 days into being his slave... A man that owns me, mind, body and soul no less. It almost makes me laugh that we're even coming with gifts, after I've avoided my family like a plague, all because he thinks meeting them will be for my own good. As much as I don't like this, I have to trust him. And deep down, I know he's right. I still love them. And I know they love me.

But that doesn't change the fact that this entire situation is fucked.

My heart jumps into my chest as we turn onto Waverly Road, the familiar houses popping up in front of me, my childhood memories coming back to haunt me. I walked down this street the day they took me. I close my eyes, trying to block the visions, not wanting to get emotional. The last thing I need to do is break down in front of my parents with Isaac standing there. Who knows what might happen? I suck in several calming breaths before opening my eyes and focusing on the

present as Isaac pulls up in front of my childhood home, parking the car next to the curb.

There it is. *Home*. I sit there for a moment staring at it. It looks just like I remember. A two story rustic brick home, with partial cream-colored vinyl siding and a cozy porch with several rocking chairs sitting out in front of it.

“You okay?” Isaac’s deep baritone penetrates my thoughts.

I look over at him, blinking rapidly as something pricks the back of my eyes. That better not be a fucking tear. I just need to hold it together for maybe an hour. Hopefully by then we’ll be long gone. “Yes,” I reply, trying to keep the dread out of my voice.

Isaac’s lips draw down into a point as he frowns, but I hardly notice it. Even with dressing down, in just blue jeans, a red sweater, and a worn brother leather coat, he looks hot. His hair is parted and slicked to the side, the scent of his masculine cologne filling the car.

I was surprised when he didn’t wear a suit, but when he brought out the Mazda for us to drive in, I figured he didn’t want to show up looking like he was drowning in cash.

“You will not lie to me, kitten,” he growls, his voice low and dangerous.

I lick my lips. I know I can’t argue with him. “I’m terrified,” I admit. “I really don’t want to do this.”

Isaac shakes his head. “I know you don’t. But you will. Do you understand?” His voice is firm, indicating that he’ll accept nothing less than my perfect obedience.

I hate it, but I force myself to nod, not trusting myself to speak.

Isaac stares at me, the intense look in his beautiful green eyes making me squirm. “You will engage in every conversation that’s initiated, and you will answer honestly. Even questions you find make you emotional. The only exception is questions about us.”

I hold in a groan. Oh God, why is he doing this to me? I can lie about the two of us, but everything else that makes the pit of my stomach churn is fair game? Does he want me to cry? ‘Cause that’s exactly what’s going to happen. I know it. I’m tired of crying. I’ve never wanted to defy him more than in this moment. But I don’t. “Yes, Master,” I reply, barely able to keep the tremor out of my voice.

I can’t take staring into his stern gaze, so I look back over to my family home.

My mother refused to leave it after I was taken. She had deluded herself into thinking I’d come home somehow. Like one day I’d just appear for her, but if she moved, I wouldn’t be able to find my way back to her. Bless her heart.

Thinking about it causes tears to form in my eyes, and I fucking hate it. I hate that I feel so raw still. I’ve been on a roller coaster of emotions the past week, feeling as though I’m invincible and then completely raw and vulnerable. I don’t know what I am, but right now I know I don’t want to do this shit. It’s just too much, all at once. Why can’t Isaac see that?

“Text your mother,” Isaac says, taking my hand and gently kissing the back of it. His tone has softened, and he seems to recognize how terrified I am. But he’s still going to make me go in there when I don’t want to. “You’re going to be perfect for me, kitten,” he reassures me in an attempt to boost my confidence, and giving my hand a slight squeeze. “Trust me, you can do this. You *will* do this.”

I want to tell him no, tell him that I can’t do this. I don’t want to have to face my mother, to have to be reminded of the pain I caused her. But looking at Isaac, I know there’s only one answer he’ll accept. “Yes, Master,” I whisper.



“KATIA!” AS SOON AS I WALK THROUGH THE DOOR, MY MOTHER IS pulling me into her arms, gripping me into a fierce bear hug. I’m already filled with anxiety, so I can hardly breathe as she squeezes me and kisses me, telling me she loves me and how much she’s missed me over and over.

“I’ve missed you so much, baby!” she cries with tears in her eyes, finally pulling back and allowing me to breathe, giving me a chance to look at her. She looks really nice, dressed up in a tweed skirt suit with heavy makeup on, something that is totally unlike her. I don’t remember her this way at all. She always had pajamas on for most of the day with her hair in a messy bun during the holidays. It was typically even worse on Christmas Day, when she’d have stayed up the whole night before wrapping presents and baking treats for the family.

Today, she looks beautiful.

“I missed you too, Mom,” I say, my voice quavering from emotion.

Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry, I tell myself over and over in a litany meant to strengthen me, knowing that if the first tears fall that I’ll turn into a blubbering mess. I don’t know how I can’t do anything but break down, I feel too weak.

Isaac’s words come back to me in that moment. *You’re going to be perfect for me, kitten*. As if he knew I was thinking about him, I feel a gentle squeeze on my left hand and I look over to see Isaac gazing at me with strength and confidence in his eyes.

My mom freezes as her eyes fall on Isaac, her jaw going slack as if she’s just now noticing he was there. “Well,” she says, her voice filled with wonder, her eyes wide with shock, “who is this handsome young man?”

I know seeing Isaac with me must be hitting her pretty hard, since I’ve never had an official boyfriend. She probably can’t believe I wound up in an actual relationship. But what I have with Isaac is anything but normal, and probably never will be.

“Mom,” I say, swallowing back a tide of emotion, “this is Isaac, my-“

A quick pinch on the ass from Isaac reminds me to be careful of what I say next, and my cheeks burn with fire, my heart pounding from the oh shit moment. I hesitate for a moment, not wanting to make a mistake, but Isaac steps in.

“Boyfriend.” It’s such a strange word, especially coming from his lips.

“Boyfriend,” I agree quickly, hoping my mom doesn’t notice my flub. “Isaac is my boyfriend.” *Boyfriend*. I can’t believe that word just came out of my mouth. It sounds alien, and it certainly doesn’t fit the description of what Isaac is to me. Nor the name I call him every night. And he sure as fuck isn’t a *boy*.

My mom can’t keep the shock from her face as she extends her hand in greeting. It’s like she thinks Isaac must be a hologram that’s going to vanish at any second. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Isaac. Kat told me that she had someone new in her life, but she didn’t tell me that you were so handsome.” She shakes her head and gives me a look.

Isaac takes her extended hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Mrs. Herrington. I see who Kat inherited her beauty from.”

My mom turns a furious shade of crimson. A warm sensation flows through my chest at her expression. I haven’t seen her light up like that in... well, I don’t remember when. And I must say that I’m impressed by Isaac’s demeanor and charm in front of my mother; he’s nothing like he is when he’s at the club where everything revolves around sex. It’s a side of him that makes me curious. I like his charm, but it has me wondering how much of this is an act.

“Oh stop it,” Mom says when she can finally find words, waving away Isaac’s compliment and chuckling nervously, trying to hide her embarrassment. She turns and motions us toward the living room. “Please, come and meet the rest of the family.”

Isaac looks over at me and winks before we follow her into the living room. I’m really liking this side of him. He wraps his arm around my waist, and the display of affection catches me off guard. But In a good way though. It’s just something I wasn’t expecting.

The minute we step into the room, I’m greeted by the sight of my family huddled together and overwhelmed by everyone talking at once as they rush forward to greet me.

“Well, long time no see, Katia!” My father’s voice comes from across the room as my sister hugs me, saying softly in my ear, “It’s so good to see you!”

“It’s been too long.” The voices seem to blend as I imagine turning right around and leaving. Of course I don’t, and instead I plaster a smile on my face, hugging each person in turn.

“Why, you look like you’ve lost so much weight!”

And from my cousin Lyssa, “Who’s the hot guy?”

I’m surrounded by relatives, each one pulling me into one hug after another, telling me how much they love me and how happy they are to see me. I have to once again start chanting to myself, trying to keep my emotions in check. I try to answer every one the best as I can, almost becoming dizzy with confusion from all the questions, and not even knowing who’s talking to me. I think I count ten people in the room, several aunts, uncles and cousins who are around my age. But the last person to come to me is someone I’ve been avoiding just as much as my mother.

“Hello, pumpkin,” Dad says, holding his arms out to me. He’s dressed in grey slacks, matching tie and a white dress shirt. Like my mom, he’s aged quite a bit with his almost fully grey hair and a spider web of wrinkles around his eyes. He worried himself to death over my disappearance. “God, how I’ve missed you.”

Once again, it’s an effort not to just break down and I know if I let out one sob, one sigh even, it’s over for me. I have to keep reminding myself of Isaac’s words. *You’re going to perfect for me, kitten.* If I can get through this without turning into a complete mess, I know I’ll be rewarded. It’ll make him happy. It’s my job to please him. I cling to that fact, letting it be my strength to pull through, letting it be my armor.

“I’ve missed you too, Dad,” I say, my voice heavy with emotion, but not in danger of cracking as he pulls me into his arms for a fierce bear hug, kissing me multiple times on my cheek and telling me how much he loves me, much in the same way Mom did.

When he's done showering me with affection, he pulls back and eyes Isaac with slight apprehension, his body language instantly changing and on edge.

He's definitely not giving Isaac the warm welcome my mother gave, but I understand why. "Who's this young man?"

I open my mouth to tell him, but Isaac steps forward, extending a hand. "Isaac Rocci, your daughter's new boyfriend." Just hearing the word *boyfriend* come from Isaac's lips again nearly causes me to swoon. I just can't get used to thinking about him in that context. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Herrington." Isaac's words are smooth and confident as he places a hand on my lower back, sending a subtle but powerful message to my father.

My body tingles with the wave of anxiety. This is something I hadn't anticipated. I didn't give any thought to it whatsoever.

My dad seems taken aback by Isaac's boldness for a moment, his mouth opening and closing several times before he takes Isaac's hand and shakes it. "It's a pleasure." I'm not sure, but I think Dad's respect for Isaac has gone up several notches, which is surprising. I half expected him to challenge Isaac to a duel right then and there.

"Now," says Lyssa as she steps forward and playfully pokes me in the arm, "Kat, can you please tell me where you found Isaac?" She shakes her head and pretends to wipe imaginary sweat from her brow. "Because Lord Jesus, please tell me there's more where he came from."

My mother snickers, and my aunts erupt with laughter in the corner of the room and even I have to chuckle a little, my face turning red and my mood slightly lifting. Somehow I know one of my crazy aunts put Lyssa up to it.

"SO, HOW DID YOU TWO MEET?" DAD ASKS AS EVERYONE SETTLES IN their seats. He's sitting across from us in a loveseat with Mom, leaning forward with intense interest, his elbows resting on his knees.

“AT A BUSINESS CLUB,” ISAAC SAYS EASILY.

DAD FURROWS HIS BROW AND ASKS, “A WHAT?”

Isaac nods. “It’s a business club, for young entrepreneurs. It’s a place where likeminded, business-driven individuals can come together and share tips and ideas to help drive sales and success.” Isaac sits back easily in the seat, and I watch him with interest. I’ve never seen him speak like this. It’s different. “I own my own security company, and Katia runs her own business with the dogs. We didn’t have much in common in terms of business needs but I gravitated toward her. She’s strong, and smart. Independent.” Isaac smiles at me. “The first time I laid eyes on her, I knew she was something special. But when I heard her speak, the sound of her voice...” Isaac looks at me, rubbing my back and causing warmth to spread up and down my torso. I’m just sitting here awkwardly, blushing like a fiend, and with a stupid look on my face. “...She had me sold.” I almost choke on the irony of his words.

My father sits back in his seat, a look of relief crossing over his face. “Oh, Katia didn’t tell us about all that.”

Isaac nods, and takes my hands in his. “I’m a very lucky man. This has been the most... satisfying relationship that I can ever remember being in. I’m very happy to have found her.” My cheeks burn even hotter, turning a crimson red.

Before we came, I thought I was going to break down and die from crying, but now I think I’m going to die from embarrassment. I’m so not used to being treated this way, much less being complimented in front of my entire family. I just don’t know how to take it all, or how to react. It’s crazy going from being Isaac’s pampered pet/Slave, to pretending to be his new, doting girlfriend. Is that what this is? Pretend? I have to shake off the question as my aunts “aww,” from across the room.

Act normal. Act normal. Act normal, I repeat to myself over and over.

“I’m happy, too,” I add in quickly, shyly. My voice is low compared to Isaac’s. I’m hoping all my blushing just makes my family think I’m nervous to be in front of them with a new boyfriend after so long.

Daddy says to Isaac, “Tell us a little bit more about yourself, Isaac.”

Isaac sits back in his seat. “What would you like to know?”

“Well, where’s your family from? Have you already celebrated the holidays with them?” My father asks the natural question, but I wish he hadn’t.

Isaac pauses, pain flashing in his eyes as he searches for the right words. “I only had my mother, and she passed away when I was younger,” Isaac admits finally, clearing his throat, his deep voice very quiet. Looking at him, a feeling of sadness presses down on my chest. I remember his confession, him telling me how his mother needed help and how he didn’t help her. Tears burn my eyes, but I blink them away rapidly. I didn’t know she’d passed away. I find myself scooting closer to Isaac, wanting to comfort him. Wanting to ask how it happened. My blood feels ice cold. I made it this far through the meeting, I can’t start crying now. I have to be strong. I reach out and grab Isaac’s hand without thinking. It’s not something a Slave should do, but an adoring girlfriend would. And I feel like he needs me.

“I’m so sorry to hear that, Isaac,” my mom says, speaking for the first time since we sat down. She turns to me and gives me a sad, small smile and pats my thigh as she says, “I’m happy our Katy cat brought you home for the holidays at least. We expected her not to make it.”

Katy cat. My old nickname. Tears threaten to spill from my eyes again as I remember how I used to run through the hallway of this house, and swing around the banister just a few feet away. Hearing my nickname being yelled by my mom and dad, even my aunts, uncles and cousins.

Before they took me. Before that bastard stole my innocence. Back when I was just Katy cat. Just a girl, getting yelled at for

running through the halls. A lump forms in my throat, and I have to continue smothering my feelings.

“Katia, are you alright?” Mom asks, seeing the conflicted expressions cross my face.

God, if I get through this without crying, it will be a fucking miracle.

“It’s just been a long time since you’ve called me that,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

“It’s a cute nickname, Katy cat,” Isaac says, giving me a wink, all traces of his unease and pain gone. He looks so cheerful that I almost forget he was even upset a moment ago, and I’m forced to laugh as I wipe at the tears that threaten to spill from my eyes.

“You know why I called her that?” my father asks. *Oh God, here we go.* Dad proceeds to tell a story I’ve heard a million times before, of how I kept my cat costume on for nearly two weeks after Halloween one year, refusing to believe I wasn’t a cat. As he goes into detail, I drown out the sound of his voice, a small smile stretching over my face.

It’s a good memory. One that makes my father happy to tell. My mom is smiling in the corner. Happiness overwhelms me.

Isaac gives my hand a squeeze, and I wish I could just crawl into his lap and hold onto him. I rest my cheek on his shoulder and give him a quick kiss, whispering, “Thank you.” I didn’t realize how much I was missing by avoiding my family. How much happiness was still here, waiting for me? How much love was here?

I look back over to Isaac as he chuckles at something my dad says and my heart does a backflip as the strongest feeling that I’ve ever felt surges through me. It frightens me. And it can’t be what I think it is. Isaac is my *Master*, not my boyfriend. And only for less than thirty days. I need to remember that. I can’t be falling for him. How could I? It’s too fast.

But as I watch him laugh at my father’s joke, I know I’m lying to myself.

CHAPTER 25

ISAAC

The little box is sitting on the edge of the outdoor coffee table. Taunting me. I should know better than to give her a gift and create expectations. I didn't go out of my way to gift her something for Christmas. After all, I provide her with everything she wants or needs on a daily basis. But it hasn't been sitting right with me.

I want to spoil her. I want my kitten to be nothing but happy.

The silver wrapping paper is folded perfectly; the edges of the box are sharp with a white ribbon tied neatly on top. It's picture perfect, and inside is something I think she'll love.

A bracelet, or an anklet if she'd like. It's from Pandora, and customizable with trinkets on it. The first is a yellow topaz charm surrounded by small diamonds, for the month of November. It signifies the first time I ever saw her. A little silver dog is the second one I picked, and was the easiest to decide on. She's told me a few times about Roxy, her dog, passing and I'm hoping this will give her happiness to see it dangling from the bracelet. I picked out a cat as well. I'll have to tell her it's because of her nickname, Katy cat. Not that there's a difference between a cat and a kitten on these little charms, but still. There's a difference to me.

Then there's a Merry Christmas bauble for the holiday we shared together, and a New Year's charm with champagne glasses and the year for tonight. A turquoise charm for the month of December, when she finally became mine.

The last one is a silver heart with “kitten” engraved on it. It looks like a tag that would hang from a collar. Even though she hasn’t yet told me she’s ready for a collar, I want her to have it.

I wouldn’t give her a collar with that anklet still on her. I don’t know why it bothers me so much, but it does. I won’t allow her to wear my collar while she has that anklet on. Simply because of what it symbolizes. He still has a part of her, and I want all of her. We’re halfway through this arrangement already. But we can always renew the contract.

A bit of insecurity weighs down on my chest, making it feel tight and uncomfortable as I light the last candle in the enclosed patio.

The glass enclosure all opens to the outside, as though they’re extravagant windows, but it’s far too cold to open them in December. But with the candles lining the room and the stars lighting the night, it’s gorgeous out here.

I have the large flat screen TV on with the ball drop from the New Year’s countdown on, although it’s muted.

It’s... romantic. Which isn’t my normal scene.

But for her, I wanted to give her something. She’ll never know what spending Christmas with her family did for me. It wasn’t a selfish act. It was all for her, but in the process, something switched and I owe her this.

Being with her family only showed me how different we really are.

And how much is available to her.

The lies flowed so easily for me as I tried to blend in. They couldn’t know who I really was. They’d never understand. But it was nice to fake it, at least for a little while. It was a real pleasure to feel a sense of family.

She has a collection of people who love her, and who want to be loved by her in return. They’ll be there for her when I’m gone. When I send her away. I’ll have to. I can never truly fit in with her family.

Lying about us only emphasizes that fact.

“YOU KNOW ALL YOU DO IS MAKE ME SICK.” MY MOM SITS ON THE sofa, staring straight ahead and for a moment, I pretend she isn’t talking to me. I’d just walked through the door. I stole for the first time. Christmas is next week and I know my mom needs shoes. Hers have holes in them. Mine do too, but I could only fit one pair in my coat. I was so afraid of getting caught. I think the cashier saw me, but let me walk out. I don’t know for sure. So for my shoes, I’ll have to go somewhere else. I’m too afraid that the cashier from before will recognize me.

I hear my mom talking about how I’m pathetic and weak, but I pretend those words aren’t meant for me. Like she’s talking to the wall she’s been staring at since I walked in. But I know she is, and when she finally turns to look at me, I can see she’s high again. “He wasn’t supposed to go to war. It’s your fault. It’s all because of you,” she sneers at me.

She tells me I drove him to leave. They fought because of me. He went to war because of me.

Sometimes she admits that she loved him. Those moments at least make me a little happy. I thought I was starting to imagine the memories of us being a family.

She doesn’t tell me she loves me. She doesn’t admit that.

But she does. I know she does.

The sound of the front door opening makes me move faster through the living room to my bedroom. I’m not safe there, but if I stay away, I may be able to avoid him beating on me.

“Yeah, run away, Isaac. Run away, just like your father did,” I hear her voice continue to taunt me as I shut the thin veneer door to my small room. “Run away, coward!”

I CLEAR MY THROAT AND STRAIGHTEN MY DARK RED TIE, IGNORING the painful past.

I fucking hate these suits. I have to wear them at the club, but I wasn't meant to wear them. But again, it's a romantic date of sorts. And I bought her a dress to wear.

It's short, but elegant. A sparkling silver shift dress that'll probably come off as soon as I get my hands on her, but I thought she'd like it. The way the fabric flows made me think of her twirling in it.

I hope that's what she's doing now, twirling in her room to make the ends of it swish around her upper thighs.

A small huff of a rough laugh leaves my lips as I sit down on the modern white sofa and take a look around.

It's simple, but it's something.

Champagne and chocolate-covered strawberries, a bracelet and candlelight. My gift to her. It's not enough. I can never give her enough.

The thought makes my skin prick with a chill that runs from my shoulders down to my toes. I crack my neck and try to ignore the thoughts that have been creeping into my head late at night.

Seeing her family... did something to me. It reminded me of her purity. The life she's working toward gaining back. The life she wants, although she doesn't realize it. Again it makes me think I'm not a capable Master for her. It's a life I don't belong in.

I enjoy having her here. But the time with her family made it very obvious that this arrangement is temporary. She may not know it yet. She isn't looking that far ahead.

Until it's time, I'll continue my role as her Master.

She does need to pick a collar. One that will suit her. It's time that she wore one. It's time to push my kitten a little. I won't make her wear it until she's ready, but she can choose which one she wants.

I picked out new anklets, too. Just to gauge her reaction.

I don't want her to get so used to it that it replaces the shackle. I hate that she's still using it. Although I'm not surprised, not

really. She fears the memories more than she desires her freedom. Although the latter does seem to be taking on more of an edge since the bathroom incident.

Every time she takes it off, there's still a hint of pain there.

She's quick to put it back on after the shower.

One day she'll take it off, and it will give her strength. When I'm a worthy Master for her.

The faint sounds of clicking heels from behind me snap me from my thoughts.

My heart stutters in my chest, the world blurring behind her as she walks into view. Her head is partially bowed, but with shyness, not from submission. Her cheeks are flushed and with a touch of makeup, her natural beauty is only heightened.

My Katia is utterly gorgeous.

Her eyes widen and her lips part slowly as she takes in the room. She stands still at the entrance, not sure where to go or how to react.

I'm quick to walk to her, taking large strides until I'm by her side, planting a small kiss on her cheek. My heart seems to come to life once again, pounding rapidly and heating my blood as I wrap my arm around her back and let my thumb run up and down over her hip.

"Thank you, Master," Katia breathes, looking up at me through her thick lashes as I lead her to the lounge.

I kiss her cheek again and she does something she's never done. She leans into me, resting her head on my shoulder as we walk and wrapping her arm around my waist.

No one has ever done that.

I continue walking as though nothing's changed, but as soon as she sits I leave her.

It was one thing to engage in that display of affection for her family's sake. For her sake in front of her parents, really. But here, it means something different.

And I allowed it.

I should correct it. I should draw the line once again since it seems to have blurred, but instead I reach into the bucket and pop the cork off the champagne bottle with a flourish.

Although I'm not facing Katia, I can still see her smile. She even brings her hands up as though to clap, but she stops herself.

She has a brightness about her. Desire to be happy. It's one of the things that drew me to her, but also one of the reasons I know I should stay away.

"Master?" she asks me as I pour the chilled champagne into our glasses. The fizz of the bubbles and clinking of the glasses make a smile stretch across my face. It's been a long time since I've enjoyed this type of luxury.

"Yes, kitten?" I turn to face her, a glass in each hand. The dress has slipped up on her thighs and I was right. It looks fucking gorgeous on her, but it'll look better on the floor.

I set the glasses down and sit easily next to her. My dick is already hard from sitting so close to her. The easy touches and soft sounds of her sigh as she leans against me make me want her that much more.

I don't see how I'll ever have my fill of her.

"I'm afraid." She whispers her words, looking away from me and out into the woods.

"Don't be," I tell her easily. Her worries and fears are my burden, not hers. "Let me take your fears away."

"It's not what you think. "

Her breathing picks up as I flick the chain at her neck, kissing down her body and enjoying the soft sounds of her sighs.

"What is it?" Whatever it is, it can wait till after tonight. I plan to reward her with overwhelming pleasure until both of us have had our fill.

I slip off the lounge and onto my knees in front of her, my fingers trailing along her upper thigh, playing with the hem of her dress and inching it upward.

“This seems so real,” she says, and her voice cracks. Her fingers dig into the thick, white fabric as I lean forward, my eyes roaming her body.

I leave an open-mouth kiss on the inside of her knee and work my way upward, moving closer to her clit. She’s been such a good girl. She’s earned this.

“This is real, kitten.”

“I’m afraid... That it’s going to be more for me than just ... more than a Master.”

My hands still on her thighs, my fingertips just barely touching her soft skin, and for a moment I don’t respond.

“I’m afraid I’m falling for you,” she admits. I already felt that she was, but her admitting it makes it worse.

I kiss just below her hem and then push her dress up higher, scooting her ass closer to the edge for me. Remaining calm on the outside, but my heart’s beating faster.

I can’t give her more. But I’m too selfish to send her away just yet. I glance down at the anklet she’s still wearing. She needs me still. I can’t let her go.

“Who do your worries belong to, kitten?”

“You, Master.”

I pull her pussy into my face and give her a long languid lick.

“And your body?”

“You, Master.”

I suck her clit, moving her hand to the back of my head. And then her other. Letting her know she can touch me, she can lead me.

I pull away slightly, her fingers spearing my hair.

“And your pleasure? Who does that belong to?” I ask.

“You, Master.”

I’m a selfish prick for allowing it. But I make a promise to myself that once she’s healed, I’ll let her go. There are only fifteen days left.

I won't break her.

I'll only heal her and then let her walk away.

"Tonight it belongs to you, kitten." I lick her once and then look into her beautiful eyes glazed with desire. "Take it from me."



"KATIA, WHAT DOES BEING A MASTER MEAN?" I ASK HER AS I LAY HER in bed.

"It means you own someone. Mind, body and soul. They belong to you completely. And their Slaves desire it. They are complete with their Master."

"Is that all, kitten?" I ask her.

"I don't know, Master," she answers in a hushed voice, exhausted from the long night. She's so very close to understanding.

CHAPTER 26

KATIA

I lie still in bed, my eyes wide open and staring at the ceiling. Just like I have the last few nights. The terrors don't come in my dreams. Now they flash before my eyes as soon as I lie down.

The soft sounds of the night turn into something else. The chirps of the crickets morph into the drips of water from the pipe in the dungeon. It leaked every fucking day I was in there. Drip, drip, drip. In my mind it became a part of my fucking punishment. No daylight, and never any quiet.

But the sound I keep hearing over and over in my head is different. The sound that keeps me wide awake and on edge is the sound of metal. Of the chain scraping on the bare concrete floor.

The chain. Always the chain.

They'd drag me by them, either the one on my ankle or the one on my throat. Choking off my air supply, not caring whether they broke my neck or how much pain it caused me. I can still feel it now, biting into my tender flesh as I'm dragged across the concrete floor. My thighs would scrape against the floor as I was dragged, opening wounds and causing nasty abrasions that would last for days. I learned to be good because of those chains.

The ankle was worse, because even when they weren't there, I was enslaved by it. And the scratching of the chain followed

me everywhere; the pain in my ankle from the shackle was a constant in the four years I spent there.

I sit up with my hands clenched, anger consuming me in my darkened bedroom, sweat covering my forehead. There's a stream of moonlight coming through the window, making it easy to see. Everything seems so easy to see in this moment.

I rip the covers off to gaze at my anklet. My heart skips a beat the sight. It's gleaming in the moonlight, seeming to taunt me. Rage fills me. I hate it. I hate this. I hate what those bastards did to me. I could never take the anklet off. *Ever*. Tears fill my eyes, but I refuse to acknowledge them. Instead I stare at the blurred vision of the beautiful anklet. I'm still imprisoned, still under his control. The thought sends a chill through my body. He doesn't own me.

He *never* owned me. Never!

I CLENCH MY TEETH AS A FIERY RAGE BOILS UP FROM THE PITS OF MY stomach, spurring me to rip off the anklet. I nearly scream with frustration as my fingernails cut into the tender skin as I try to get this fucking thing off of me.

Get it off!

The tiny cuts are nothing; they can't scar me any worse than I already am.

Because of *him*.

Because of this! I scramble from my bed, the anklet in my hand, staring at it as though it's him. The sparking of the crystals are akin to his gleaming smile. Always smiling. I made him so happy. A sickness stirs in my stomach. I hear his laugh, smell his breath. Even the night I murdered him, just moments before I stabbed him, plunging the shard of glass deep into his throat over and over, even then he was smiling.

I rush over to the nightstand and set it down gently, ever so gently even though my hands are trembling. I quickly grab the lamp sitting next to it. It's beautiful, with a crystal base, but it's sturdy. And heavy.

Screaming with fury, I smash the base of the lamp over and over onto the beautiful piece of jewelry.

But that's not enough. I throw the lamp down and grasp the anklet, slamming it into the nightstand while it's in my fist. And then the wall. It needs to be destroyed. That's all I know. I need it gone.

"Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you!" I scream, slamming the metal into the wall over and over with all my might. I feel something wet and warm flow down the palm of my hand and my arm and then drip onto the floor. A chill goes through me as I realize it's my own blood. I've torn open my skin in my rage, but I don't care. I want to be free. Free of it. Free of *them*.

"You don't fucking own me!" I yell at the ceiling, my throat dry and aching with a pounding I know will hurt later. Slamming the now twisted and mangled anklet into the wall again, tears stream freely down my face. There's now multiples indents all over the wall, and the fancy paint is chipped in places. But I don't care.

"You were never my Master!" With another furious yell, I throw the anklet across the room where it hits the wall, making a jagged dent, before falling to the floor with a loud *clink*. I stare at the object, my breathing ragged and my shoulders heaving.

It's only an ankle, only a piece of jewelry, but it had so much power over me, power I didn't willingly give. Power that I'm taking back.

Exhaustion takes over my body as I realize I don't fucking need it. I don't want it either. Maybe the nightmares will come, maybe they won't. But I won't give that bastard any power over me.

Never again.

SNAPPING ME FROM THE REALIZATION, I HEAR THE DOOR CREAK OPEN and the flick of a light switch. The light stings my eyes, even though I can barely see through the tears. I didn't even realize I was crying. I wipe the tears from my eyes and suddenly feel

like I can't breathe. I stare at my hand, seeing it shaking. I close my eyes and try to calm down, the adrenaline coursing through my veins suddenly feeling like too much.

"Katia?" Isaac's deep voice is filled with worry, but I hardly notice. It hurts so bad.

"I'm sorry," I croak, my voice so hoarse and garbled that it doesn't even sound human.

I hear the sound of heavy footsteps and suddenly I feel myself being lifted and gently placed on the bed. I look up through my tears to see Isaac's handsome face looking down at me in disapproval. His green eyes slowly trail down to my bloody hands, and anger flashes in his eyes.

"Isaac," I croak, shaking my head. I can't have him disapproving. Not of this. Please. Please don't.

He sits down on the bed next to me. It groans with his weight as he leans forward and brushes my hair away from face. "Shh, kitten," he tells me softly as I continue to sob. "I need you to calm down now so I can clean you. Then you can tell me what's wrong."

The sound of his deep voice is soothing and I relax a little, pressing my palms to my hot, stinging eyes to keep from crying any more. I don't want to cry. I don't want to feel *anything* for my past anymore. Isaac stares at me for a moment, before leaving me for a moment to gather something from the cabinet in the bathroom. I listen as the door opens and he rummages for something, all the while my heart hurting. It's worse than the throbbing pain in my hands. He goes about cleaning up my hands. It burns like fuck, and I seethe from the pain, but he has my wounds cleaned and dressed quickly. Neither of us speaking all the while.

I'm dreading telling him. I don't know if he'll quite understand. But if anyone could, it would be him.

"Now, what happened?" he asks, when he's done, placing the dirtied cloth down on the nightstand.

As I stare into his green eyes, I suddenly realize what I've done. I've let my emotions overcome me and acting in a way

that could displease him. Looking at the battered walls, I feel like I've disrespected his house. Ashamed, I quickly try to climb off of the bed and fall to my knees at his feet, but he grabs my waist and stops me, pulling me back onto the bed.

"Please, Master, don't be upset with me," I cry, trembling. My heart hurts so fucking bad. I want to hide. I don't want him to see what I've done. I don't want to admit it either.

"Shh. None of that," Isaac says softly, pulling me beside him and wrapping his arms around me, rocking me gently back and forth. I feel so safe in his arms, enveloped in his warmth. I just wish I could stay here *forever*. "I could never be upset with you over your pain." He pushes the hair out of my face again and cups my cheek, forcing me to look at him. His hand feels so cool against my hot skin. "You just need to tell me what caused this."

Isaac's peering at me, his gorgeous green eyes soft and caring. There's no judgment there. I'm grateful. I thought he'd be angry with me.

I shake my head slightly, trying to swallow the lump in my throat.

"I don't want it anymore," I say, and it hurts just saying those few words.

"I can see that," he says with a touch of humor before taking my chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Tell me what caused it."

I take in a long and shaky breath. "I don't know why. I just know that I don't want it anymore. I don't want any more reminders." I swallow thickly, closing my eyes and not knowing how to explain but not wanting to explain any more either.

SEEING MY RAVAGED VISAGE, ISAAC GENTLY SMOOTHS MY disheveled hair out of my face and moves in close, kissing me on the cheek, my lips, and then kissing away my tears with his full lips.

“I NEED TO TELL YOU SOMETHING, AND I THINK YOU NEED TO KNOW now.” I stare into his piercing gaze, my heart refusing to beat. He’s serious, and his expression tells me it’s something he doesn’t want to say.

“They’re dead,” Isaac tells me. His words are firm and filled with finality. It’s a statement of a fact. “The other men in Carver Dario’s cartel. They’re all dead.”

Shock twists my stomach, taking my breath away. Did I really hear him right? I couldn’t have. But I look into his eyes, and my skin pricks at the ruthlessness I see in them. “Dead?” I whisper.

Isaac gently strokes my cheek, his caring actions at odds with what he’s telling me. “I did some digging. I needed to know.” They’re really dead? The words seem to slowly sink in, a warmth of satisfaction surrounding me and then moving through me, giving me a sense of strength I didn’t feel before.

“If I could, I would’ve killed them myself.” He hooks my chin and makes me look into his gorgeous eyes. “I wanted to. I wanted to make them suffer. But I can’t. And I’m so sorry I can’t give you that.”

My heart beats faster and I feel a strong pull toward Isaac, a strong bond forming and drawing me closer to him.

“They will never harm you again. You are safe. Always. Do you understand?”

I nod my head, searching his green eyes for the same thing I feel. “Yes, Master,” I whisper.

CHAPTER 27

ISAAC

“I want you to choose one, for when you’re ready to wear it.” There are only five days left in our contract. Even if she only wears it for a day, I’ll be satisfied. I haven’t decided how to tell her that we may not be able to continue this... once the contract is done. Her wounds are still fresh from what she confronted days ago. I won’t leave her on her own while she’s healing, but any longer than that would be unfair of me.

I know I need to tell her, but not yet. I’m not ready to say goodbye.

“I’m ready now, Master.” Her soft voice and confession shock me. The ease of her tone and the way she looks at the row of collars I’ve purchased for her as though they’re a reward and she’s choosing the best one. It’s not what I anticipated.

It should make me relieved. I should be happy. But I’m not.

It only means she’s so much further along than I thought she was.

I know I need to send her away.

I don’t want to though. And we have a contract. I at least need to see that through.

But once it’s over, I have nothing more to offer her. I can’t provide for her in the ways she’ll need. I can direct her, but she’ll only grow more attached. It’s too selfish.

She purses her lips as she lifts one of the five collars. The bracelet on her wrist, the Pandora one I gave her on New Year's, jingles as she lifts the collar and holds it up to her throat.

It's the thinnest of them all. It's rose gold and two thin bands of metal that cross at the center. It would look gorgeous on her. All of them would.

In truth, I'd like her to desire all of them. I want a collar on her neck every second of the day. Even when she's out of the house and around people who aren't in the lifestyle. That's why four of them resemble jewelry.

The fifth is a traditional collar, but the leather band is a soft pink the color of rose petals.

"I really love this one," Katia says as she turns and presents the collar to me. She knows better than to put it on herself. My chains are to be placed on her by me, and taken off by only myself.

"Master?" Katia asks softly as I clasp the collar around her neck. "May I wear the chain as well?"

"Of course." I absently touch the thin chain, once again satisfied with my claim on her. "I expect you to."

As she plays with her collar in the mirror, I remember last night. She asked to sleep with me and when I asked if it was because of her missing anklet, she answered no. She hasn't asked for the weighted blanket either, and for the last three nights she's slept soundly.

She wanted to be available for my needs. And she admitted she enjoys it when I hold her when she sleeps.

I enjoy it as well.

I almost said yes, simply because I wanted to feel her soft body against mine as we slept. I wanted to be there in case she has another night terror. But there was something else in her eyes, something that made me push her away.

Things have changed for her, I know they have. The way she touches me, kisses me, even the way she talks to me.

She's at ease and trusts me. She's given me control of everything. Completely.

"Do you think I'm a good Master?" I ask Katia, my fingers teasing down her side before pulling her back into my chest and resting my chin on her shoulder. Her pale blue eyes find mine in the mirror.

"You are. I'm grateful to have you," she says sweetly, turning her head slightly to rub her cheek against mine.

I close my eyes, loving her warmth, her sincerity, but New Year's continues to play through my mind.

How she told me she was afraid. She has every right to be afraid. Her life and her goals aren't aligned with mine. She knows this, but she'd continue to put faith in me and the fucked up relationship we have for as long as I'll allow.

I have five days left.

I kiss her softly on the lips, hating how much I love the tenderness in her touch and the soft sounds of her sighs.

I don't want to tell her goodbye, but I must.

I'll carry out the contract for the next few days, only because I'm selfish. But I'll keep my distance. I'll make this as easy on her as I can. I don't want to hurt her, but I have to let her go.



"KATIA, WHAT DOES BEING A MASTER MEAN?"

"It means loving someone so strongly that your life revolves around them. That every action is made with their wellbeing in mind. Their happiness is yours. Their pleasure is yours. Their life is yours. And the opposite is true for them."

Love? I wish I could tell her she's wrong. But she's not. "My happiness is yours?" I ask her.

She looks me in the eyes and answers confidently, "Yes, Master."

CHAPTER 28

KATIA

I sit back on my heels at Isaac's desk, watching him work on his laptop. I can feel the warmth of his leg and I want to lean against him, but I don't. His brow furrowed, he's typing something important, not paying me any mind. Yet, he's all I can think about. I've been worried about him. About us.

He hasn't been himself lately, his words and actions distant, his eyes filled with pain as if he's losing something. I want to help him with whatever is bothering him. Like he's helped me. But when I try to get him to open up, he shuts himself off from me. A surge of emotion threatens to choke me, but I push it away. I hate it.

I STUDY HIS PROFILE, HIS CHISELED JAWLINE AND THE STUBBLE shading it, the clicking sounds of his fingers running across the keyboard in my ears. I don't know what it is, but something's off. Something has shifted. I feel like he's less attached to me.

Maybe it's his collar, I wonder to myself, unconsciously bringing my hands up to my neck to feel it. I love it and his claim on me. But ever since I put it on, it seems like a wall has sprung up between us. *I hate it. I want back what we had. I want to get past whatever is bothering him.* We can get through this together. All he needs to do is allow it.

I think he may be doing this on purpose, being distant from me. He knows our contract is over soon. I constantly remind

myself that our days are numbered, and the contract is ending. But I don't want them to be. If he wanted to keep me, I'd happily stay. I don't care about the money. I care about everything he's done for me. I would never have this inner strength without him. I know I wouldn't. I feel whole again. I feel untouchable even.

I don't want to leave him. I may not say it out loud, I may not want to admit it. But I love him. Whether that's wrong or right, I don't care.

I need to give him a reason to keep me.

"Master?" I ask.

Isaac pauses midtype, looking down at me. My heart skips a beat as those green eyes prick my skin. But not because of the intensity that used to be there. He doesn't look at me the same anymore. His eyes are filled with sadness. "Yes?"

Disappointment flows through me that he doesn't use my pet name. Another sign that something is wrong. But maybe I'm paranoid and am reading too much into it. Something tells me I'm not though. "What can I do to please you?" I ask, swallowing the lump in my throat, hating the tightness that constricts my chest.

Isaac stares at me, and I bite the inside of my cheek, increasingly feeling as if there's something wrong. It's there. "You're already doing it," he replies, gently petting my hair. Normally, I would feel assured, but his words only make me more uneasy. They have no strength to them, no passion. Even his petting of me is weak.

I lick my lips, not wanting to outright accuse him of lying, but I know I can't let this go. "But I don't feel as if I am pleasing you right now. I feel like... I need to do more to satisfy you."

Isaac frowns, his hand falling from my head to hang lifelessly over the side of his chair. "You don't need to do more."

His words are saying one thing, but I'm feeling something entirely else from him. It almost feels like a spear of ice is slowly being pressed into my heart. "I can't take that you give

me so much pleasure, yet I give you nothing in return.” *I know you’re in pain. I can see it every day.*

Isaac flashes a me a look that makes me tense. His eyes narrowed as if daring me to continue with my train of thought. But at least there’s passion there. “How can you think that you give me nothing? You give me so much, Katia.”

“I want to make you happy,” I say thickly. I look him directly in the eye as I say, “And you aren’t,” challenging him to say otherwise. Challenging him to *lie* to me.

Isaac takes a long time responding, his emerald eyes studying my distressed face. “You’re worried for me?” he asks finally.

I nod my head. “Yes.” *I’m more than worried. I think you want to get rid of me as soon as this contract is over. You don’t want to deal with what’s hurting you.* Just thinking the words brings tears to my eyes. I’m hoping desperately that I’m wrong and I’m just imagining things. But I know I’m not.

“Then that’s my fault.” My breath catches at my throat at the pain reflected in his eyes. “I’m sorry I failed you in that respect, Katia.”

Oh God no. My heart pounds in my chest and my breath comes in pants as I cry, “No, Master. You haven’t failed me at all.” I’m trying to stay calm. We can talk our way through this. I can help him. Please just give me something.

“I have.” His words are emotionless, as if he doesn’t see me breaking down right in front of him. God, he’s fucking killing me! “Your worries are mine, not the other way around.”

I tremble at his feet and try not to break down, hoping this is all just a bad dream. It isn’t real.

“Go to your room,” he orders coldly, not appearing to notice my distress.

I look at him, seeing the pain in his eyes, and feel defiance. He can’t fucking blow me off like this. He doesn’t have to do this. “No,” I say rebelliously. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He reaches down, gripping my chin. “Go,” he growls right in front of my face, his hot breath sending chills down my neck

and shoulders. “Now.” His voice holds a threat. But I don’t care.

I try to shake my head, but can’t. He’s holding my head in place. “No,” I say breathlessly, my heart beating frantically. “I don’t want to leave you. I feel like you don’t want me anymore.” It hurts saying the words and admitting the truth.

At first, pain flashes in his beautiful eyes, but then anger twists Isaac’s handsome face. He releases my chin and rises to his feet, pulling me up along with him. “Is that what you want?” he growls, grabbing me by the hips and pulling me into his hard body. He takes both my arms and pins them behind my back, his powerful grip sending sparks of want through my body. I just want this passion. Always.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Take me. Use me. Do whatever you want with me.” *I just want to help you.*

Isaac stares at me for a long moment, his chest heaving, and then without a word, he pulls me from the room, dragging me down the long hallway. I don’t resist as he takes me all the way to my room, opens the door, and slings me into the room.

“Please stay!” I cry imploringly, scrambling to my feet and rushing for the door. “Talk to me, Isaac! What did I do wrong?” *Let me fix you.*

“Nothing, Katia. There’s nothing you did wrong.” His voice is hard, but at least he’s talking to me.

“Just tell me, tell me what happened! I want to fix it. I want you back!”

He stares at me for a moment, his expression vulnerable, wanting and raw. He needs me. His grip tightens on the door and I swear it’s so hard it’s going to crack. *Isaac, please, just tell me.*

“Stay,” he commands.

Before I can get there, he slams it shut with powerful force.

I stand there staring at the door, a range of powerful emotions running through me. Pain, sadness. Rage. I feel so helpless, so

incredibly lost. I don't know what's going to happen from here, but something tells me this could be the end.

I bring my hands to my collar, wanting to take it off and throw it against the wall in rage. If he's going to just break up with me at the end of our contract, why draw it out? It only has a few days left. I should just get it over with now. I place my finger over the latch, my heart racing as tears stream down my face. But I can't bring myself to do it.

I don't know what he's feeling or going through right now, but I know one thing for sure.

I want to be his.

CHAPTER 29

ISAAC

She thinks I'm in pain.

I'm the one needing help?

She's wrong.

I pace my office, hearing her words over and over. A rage building inside of me. I'm not broken. I'm not in pain. I have a scarred past, I know that. But I'm fucking fine.

I breathe in, ragged and trying to calm myself. She shouldn't be trying to *fix* me. Or heal me.

That's not her place.

And it's not mine to require that from her.

I knew I should have sent her away.

Selfish! It was selfish of me, and now I'm paying the price.

She's paying the price.

I run my hand down my face, clenching my jaw and trying to calm down, but as the anger wanes, a sadness replaces it. My body trembles as I sink into the leather chair at my desk, my breathing erratic.

I don't deserve her. Not at all.

She shouldn't have to bear my pain. It's not her burden. I can't ask her to live with a man like me.

I lean forward, rubbing my forehead with my hand and closing my eyes tightly, wanting to deny it, but I can't. I'm not worthy of her.

She needs to get out. Now.

I've already been thinking of reasons to keep her.

There are two days left, but I can't continue. My Katia is full of happiness; a purity has survived in her that I will taint. I can't do that to her.

I won't.

I rise from my desk, feeling a surge of conviction and hating it. I fucking hate who I am. I hate that I'm only capable of breaking and scarring and causing pain.

Feeling the rage coming back, I swipe at the clutter on my desk as I scream in fury, spewing it over the floor, the papers fluttering in the air as if taunting me.

She needs to leave. She needs to go now.

I can't have her here. I'll hurt her. I know I will.

"Katia!" I scream her name so loudly it makes my throat feel raw. "Katia!" I yell even louder, anger apparent in my tone. I've never called her for like this. I stare at the open door, and when she doesn't instantly appear, I stomp over the papers and folders now scattered on the floor and grip the door as I swing it open harder, slamming it against the wall and storming toward her room.

It's not like her not to come when I call. *It's my anger*, I nod my head at the thought as I approach her doorway.

For a moment, I think maybe she's already gone.

Maybe I scared her away. She knew she needed to leave a monster like me.

My heart stops and I nearly topple forward, bracing myself against the wall.

No.

I take in a breath, torn between the pain that just the thought caused me, and the necessity to save her.

I feel torn into two, and I don't know which side will win. I want to keep her forever. I don't want to deny these feelings I have for her any longer. But I want to save her beautiful light from my darkness.

I need to let her go.

I take the last few steps with my eyes closed and slowly open them as I walk into her room, half expecting to find it empty, but she's there.

Kneeling on the floor.

She's naked, in only my chains and even with a sadness surrounding her, a hint of anger even, she's perfect in her submission.

"Get dressed, Katia," I manage to say easily. I need her to leave. Now. Before I lose my resolve.

As she stands I catch a flash of anger in her eyes. A look that verges on disrespectful and it begs me to take her. I want to push her onto the bed and punish her.

But I can't. In this moment, I have the strength to send her away. And I need to do it now before I lose it. I watch her as she opens the dresser drawer, the sound of it opening is the only noise in the room. I'm on edge and holding on by a thread as she dresses with her eyes shining with tears. But she doesn't question me. She pulls on her jeans and I grip onto the door, closing my eyes. Hating that I'm doing this. Hating myself and that I'm not good enough to keep her.

"Master?" she asks me.

It breaks my fucking heart to hear her call me that. For the last time.

"Yes?" I answer as she opens a drawer and slips on the clothes she brought here. Simple jeans and a tank top.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks and the anger slips, replaced with something worse. Sadness. She pulls a sweater

over her tank top, not looking me in the eyes. “I’m sorry, Master.

It hurts to see her like this. But it’s for her own good.

I ignore her question. I ignore her apology.

“You can go now. I’ll have your things sent to your place tomorrow.”

Katia takes a step back, looking as though I’m going to hurt her.

“You can go.”

“I don’t want to go,” she says, shaking her head with wide eyes.

“You must.”

“Don’t do this.” Her voice is weak. She’s begging me, and I so badly want to submit to her wishes.

“I am not what you need,” I finally admit to her.

“You are-”

“I’m a murderer!” I scream at her, cutting her off. She cowers from the harsh tone. I finally said it; I told her.

“I’ve killed men before, Katia. I’m not a good man.”

She looks up at me with a coldness in her eyes that I’ve never seen. “So have I.”

“You need more than what I can give you.”

“I want you! I can decide for myself.” She’s on edge and angry, but mostly upset. I don’t think either one of us is thinking clearly, but this needs to happen now, before this goes too far.

“I’m your Master! You will listen to me!”

“You need to go home, Katia.” I tell her with a straight face, refusing to acknowledge the gouging pain in my chest. I give her the keys to my car. She can have it. Fuck, she could have it all if she wants. But she needs to go now before I snap and keep her forever.

“No!” she yells at me, and I can’t take it. I grab her waist and pull her body close to me, lifting her off the floor and storming to the stairwell.

“Stop it!” she screams at me. “Isaac, no!” Her body shudders with a sob, and I hate myself. More now than I ever have for hurting her. But I have to. I have to save her. I can’t let her stay with me and ruin her beauty. Her strength. I need her to leave me.

“You have to go.” I try to tell her flatly, but my voice breaks.

“I need you to know how much you own me,” she screams at me, her voice so loud it hurts my ears, but I don’t care. I drag her toward the front door. She hits me, pulling her fist back and slamming it against my chest. I feel a tug and hear a snap of something, but I’m not sure what. My eyes fly to her bracelet, but it’s still intact.

“You can’t throw me out,” she says, pushing me away with no success as we reach the foyer.

“I won’t let you.” Her voice lacks conviction and strength. Tears stream down her face and onto my shoulder, breaking my heart at her pain.

Better now. Better this way. I finally put her down and she stumbles as her feet struggle to find purchase. I swing the front door open.

“Leave,” I tell her, trying to rid all the emotion from my voice.

“I love you, Isaac.” Her voice cracks with emotion.

Hearing those words from her lips almost makes me fall to my knees.

To beg for her forgiveness.

To beg her not to leave me.

I stand there silent, not moving, not responding.

“Please,” she says and her voice shakes, “Please don’t, Master.”

“Go, Katia.” The words are forced from my lips. I’ll only be her Master. That’s all I can promise her. And she needs more.

This is the only way I can give her more.

Her beautiful lips part and a huff of disbelief leaves her. The pain still there, but a hint of anger is slipping in. Hold onto that anger, my kitten, it will make this easier.

It takes her a moment to gather herself. Grabbing the keys and walking out the door, but before she leaves for good, she turns to me.

“I won’t stay with someone who doesn’t want me.” Her words are soft and full of pain. Her wide eyes are pleading with me, begging me to tell her everything I selfishly want to say. “Do you not want me?” she says with her composure breaking, tears slipping down her face.

I want so badly to take her in my arms and crash my lips to hers, to brush her tears away and keep her.

But I can’t do that to her.

Not if I truly love her. And I do. I know so strongly in this moment I do.

“No,” I finally say the word. It’s hard to push it out, but once it leaves my lips, it’s done. She turns abruptly, taking in a breath and walking straight to the car. She doesn’t turn around, not once. Even when she’s in the driver’s seat, she refuses to look at me.

My knees threaten to give out as every inch of my skin burns with the need to go to her, to stop her.

I watch her walk away from me.

I watch her leave me.

And I stand there in the doorway, waiting to realize that I’ve done what’s best for her. And this pain is justified.

But it hurts too much.

As I start to shut the door, I see what broke earlier, when I brought her down here while she was fighting me. The chain. *My chain.* I close the door and bend down to pick it off the floor. The thin silver with diamond cuts shimmers as I pick it up and clench it in my fist.

I broke it.

The vision of my mother's necklace, as she lay on the cold hard floor of the kitchen, flashes in my eyes as my thumb rubs along the chain.

Why is she so still? My heart beats faster and faster but my body only gets colder as I slowly come out from the hallway and walk toward her. He left, the monster left after I watched him do this to her.

I didn't know. How could I know that this time he'd kill her?

"Mom?" I call out to her in a whisper, still scared that she'll beat me for interfering like she always did.

But her eyes are open. They're red, but not like they usually are. Not from the drugs. It's blood. Her blood vessels broke and her eyes are so red.

"Mom?" I say louder as I walk closer to her.

Her chest isn't moving. She's so still. So quiet. I stare at her chest, waiting for it to rise with a breath as I kneel down next to her. My eyes are so blurry, why am I crying?

She's not dead. She can't be.

I shake her shoulders. "Mom!" I yell at her, and my heart beats faster with fear. Both that she'll hurt me for yelling, and that she's really dead.

I shake her, but the only sound is the chain around her neck. The necklace I bought her with the only money I had. She's wearing it today. She wears it on days when she wants me to know that she loves me I think. She wore it today.

I sob as I shake her shoulders harder, screaming her name.

The necklace clinks and clinks as I pull her up, and I break it. It's an accident. I just wanted her to breathe.

I didn't mean it.

I didn't mean any of it.

I wish I could take it back.

It's my fault.

I hold the broken chain to my chest, leaning against the door.

Struggling to breathe and cope with the fact that she's left me.
I wanted her to though.

She can't be with a monster like me. I only wish I was able to
hold her longer.

I wish I was good enough for her.

CHAPTER 30

KATIA

*M*y shoulders shake as I sob uncontrollably as I sit at my desk chair in front of my open laptop. The pain is searing and I haven't been able to sleep at all. Not that I want to. All I've been able to think about is him and how he sent me away. And how much it fucking hurts.

I desperately need someone to talk to, someone who understands me. But Kiersten isn't online. I almost want to call my mom. Just to hear her tell me it's going to be alright. But I can't. Not yet. I don't want to admit what's happened to anyone. I want it to just be a nightmare.

I glance at the screen again, waiting for Kiersten to come on. She's always here at night. I know I've been busy with Isaac, but I've kept up with her messages. I'm there for her. I made sure to tell her that. I always will be. And I need her now. I feel so selfish. But I truly need her now.

I've waited for the last two hours for her to appear, but she hasn't logged on. I've sent direct message after message, hoping she'd get a notification on her cell, but nothing. I wipe away my tears with the back of my hand, trying desperately to get a hold of my emotions. I don't know what to do.

I pull my knees to my chest, my feet sitting on the microfiber seat, biting down on the inside of my cheek with enough force to almost break the skin.

You can survive this, I tell myself. I am a strong woman. I've been through hell and back, and look at me. I survived.

“I’m a survivor,” I intone, but my voice cracks and a wave of emotions threatens to send me over the top, and I cover my mouth to keep sobs from escaping. *Stop crying. I can’t let him do this to me.* It’s my fault for pushing him. But I knew something was wrong. I just wish he’d tell me how to fix it. I will. I’ll do anything I can to fix it.

Fighting back more tears, I look around the house, trying to gain comfort from the yellow color, my animal ornaments, every little knickknack that was put here with purpose. To create a happy, soothing environment. A place that feels safe and inviting. But right now, it does nothing for me. I feel so empty.

A knock on the door causes my head to snap up so fast, I almost get whiplash. Hope spreads through my chest. Isaac?

Knock. Knock.

The sound is soft, not like Isaac. But I can’t help but hope. I know he didn’t mean what he said. I know he loves me, even if he won’t admit it.

I quickly rise from my seat, the chain lock sliding and then clinking as I move it off the track and open the door without looking to see who’s there.

STANDING IN THE DOORWAY IS MADAM LYNN, LOOKING GORGEOUS as all hell. She’s wearing a claret red dress with a white belt at the waist and matching white pumps; her hair pulled up into a gorgeous sleek ponytail, her makeup flawless. A soft earthy scent tickles my nose as she gives me a gentle compassionate smile that calms my anxiety somewhat. She’s holding a thin envelope in her hand, but I’m more worried about how awful I look right now with my red-rimmed puffy eyes and disheveled hair. She has to think I look an absolute mess. I want to question why she’s here, but more than that, I want to run into her arms and just be held, to confide in her and tell her how I fucked it all up.

She must see how upset I am, as if it isn’t completely obvious. But I ignore her look of sympathy and let her come in, shutting

the door as she walks into my tiny apartment.

“Hello, Katia,” Madam Lynn says, handing the envelope out to me. “I came to give you this.”

I look at it for a moment before taking it. “What’s this?”

“I got a call from Isaac, stating that the contract ended before schedule, but that you were to be paid in full.”

Anger tightens my chest and I offer the check back to her. “I don’t want this,” I say stiffly. “He can keep it.” *I just want him, or nothing at all. Fuck the money.* I cross my arms and back away. I’m pissed, but more than that, hurt.

Madam Lynn refuses to take the check back, placing her hands behind her back and peering at me closely. “I see things didn’t end well between the both of you. I normally don’t inquire into the business of my clients, but if someone was hurt... well, I have to know. Can you tell me what happened?”

My heart pounds as I think about a response. “I-I-I think I pushed him.” My heart clenches. If I’d just stayed quiet and behaved... but I thought, he needed me to push him. I thought he needed me. “I just wanted to-” my throat hurts, and it’s hard to say what I’m feeling. It’s hard to form what we had into words. “He wouldn’t let me in, when all I wanted to do was help him, just like he helped me.”

Madam Lynn’s expression is sympathetic as she looks at me. “That sounds like him.” She shakes her head. “I wouldn’t take it too personally. I’ve known Isaac for a very long time, and because of what happened to him, he doesn’t let many people in.”

*But this is different. I’m not just any person. He cared about me. I know he did. What we had was **real**.*

The pain gripping my sore heart is almost enough to bring me to tears in front of Madam Lynn, but I fight them back.

“You can find someone else?” Madam Lynn suggests tenderly, her expression turning hopeful. “You don’t have to go to pieces over just one man, no matter how good he was to you.”

I suck in a breath, anger gripping my throat. I've never had reason to be angered with Madam Lynn, and I know she's just trying to get me to see another point of view, but the very idea of finding another Master is appalling. There can be *no* other Master for me. Only Isaac.

"I have no desire for a new Master," I say with utmost confidence. "I only want Isaac."

Madam Lynn shakes her head, a small smile stretching on her lips. "And I'm sure he wouldn't want you to have another Master either." Her eyes shine with mischief. "He's going to be regretting this. Very soon."

I want him to regret it, but more than that, I want him back.

"Do you really think so?" I ask, trying to not sound too desperate.

Madam Lynn nods, a devious smile playing across her lips. "I do; I think he just needs a push to realize what he really wants and how desperate he'll be to make that happen."

I swallow thickly, not knowing what to think. "I don't want another Master. Ever. If I can't have Isaac back... if he doesn't want me," my voice trails off and it's hard to think that he's really through with me.

"Isaac is being foolish, and he will have you back. Trust me, I know when a man is in love."

Love. My heart hurts so fucking much.

I close my eyes, praying that what she's saying is true. I don't want to hope if it's really over.

As if reading my mind, Madam Lynn says, "It's not over, Katia. Just give him this push."

I nod my head, feeling as though I at least have a plan. "I'll go."

It's not over just yet. I won't give up hope.

CHAPTER 31

ISAAC

The faint hum of the car seems louder than usual as I drive through the dark night on my way to Katia.

It's only been hours, but I know I've made a horrible mistake. I've thrown away the most beautiful and pure creature to ever light up my life.

I can't believe I let her go. No, I threw her away.

Fuck!

I grip the steering wheel tighter. It hurts so fucking much. I keep seeing the look in her eyes.

She told me she loved me. I know she does. She did.

But now...

If she doesn't forgive me, I'll never recover from this. I had my perfect kitten. So gorgeous and full of life and hope and happiness. And *healed*. So strong in every way.

I take in a breath so violently it hurts my lungs. My chest feels like it's collapsing in.

My kitten. My Katia.

I lean my head forward, resting on my fists as I sit at a red light and fight with the emotions tormenting me.

I'm not worthy of her, that's the problem. I've murdered. I've watched men die. Worse, there's a darkness in me that will

dim her beautiful light. That's my biggest fear. I need to remember that.

But for her, I'll try. I promise to fucking God, I will try to be better for her.

I just need a chance. I need her to forgive me.

I need her back. I'm a selfish man for it, but I need her back in my life.

It's a reckless thing for me to do. To go take her back. But if she lets me, I'll never let her go.

My phone rings in the car, and for a moment I think it's her. My kitten.

I swerve on the road, nearly losing control, but only for a moment. Fuck! I'm losing it.

Because I lost her.

I nearly throw the fucking phone out of the window when I see it's Madam Lynn. I don't know what the fuck she wants, but I don't have the time. I almost toss it onto the floor, but I can't. It's late. It's really fucking late, and if she's calling at this hour, there's a damn good reason for it.

"Fuck," I curse beneath my breath and try to answer the phone without anger as I drive closer to Katia. I'll have her back soon and then everything will be alright.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Hello, Isaac," her voice is even and calm, no hint of urgency.

"Now's not a good time," I grit out between my teeth. I instantly regret answering.

"Oh? I thought you should know as soon as possible that Katia has agreed to go up for auction tomorrow. But I suppose if you don't have the time..."

My blood chills, and my heart nearly stops beating. "Bullshit."

"No, that's what stomping on a woman's heart will do to you, Isaac."

I slow the car and drive off the road, stopping in the shoulder. My throat dries, and I can't fucking stand the pain. It's only been hours. It was one mistake.

One fucking mistake.

And she's done.

I threw her out. I deserve this. I shake my head, denying it. I didn't want to. I didn't mean to.

I was scared. Scared to let her close. Scared that I would destroy the strong woman she is.

"I'm sorry," I say into the phone, but it's not for Madam Lynn, it's for my Katia. "I fucked up."

"I know you did."

"She can't go up there. I can't let her."

"You don't have a choice," Madam Lynn huffs into the phone.

"You don't understand-" I start. I'm not going to let anyone else have her. There's no fucking way anyone in there deserves her more than me.

"Oh, don't I, though?" Madam Lynn's voice is hard. "She fell in love; you fell in love. You need to go get her, Isaac. You need to apologize and make this right."

Before she's even finished, I'm slamming my foot on the gas and making my way to her.

"She's not going up there tomorrow," I tell her.

"I hope I don't see her, but if I do, I will feel very sorry for you."

"She won't be there," I say flatly and hang up without waiting for a response.

She belongs with me.



KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK. I SLAM MY FIST AGAINST THE DOOR. THE outside air is bitter cold and harsh on my skin. Making my

knuckles pain with every hard blow to the door. I relish the pain. I'd rather feel it than the hole in my chest.

As my hand slams down against the door, it opens. The swift swoosh brings the cold air past Katia's bare shoulders and she covers herself with the shawl wrapped around her.

Her long blonde hair blows slightly and the chill causes her shoulders to shudder. Her cheeks are flushed and red, and obviously tearstained. My poor Katia. I did this to her.

But I'll make it right. I'll fix this.

"Isaac." She says my name softly.

"Katia." I want to pull her into my arms, but I can't. Not knowing what she did. Agreeing to go up for auction. "You're going up for auction?" I ask her, although it's more of a statement.

Her eyes flash with a heated anger. "It's none of your business, if that's why you're here." Her grip tightens on the door and I know she's going to slam it shut in a moment.

"I won't allow it, Katia." I say the words hard and take a step in. Katia slowly closes the door and it looks like it takes restraint not to shove it closed with an angry push, but the look on her face is anything but submissive.

She's pissed.

She shakes her head and says, "You told me you didn't want me." She's trying to be strong, but the pain in her voice is evident. It shreds me.

"I was wrong to say that," I say calmly, holding my hands up and approaching her like a wounded animal. My poor kitten. I did this. This is all my fault.

"I will have a Master," she says slowly, her voice gravely low.

"Then you will have me," I say with conviction, balling my fists at my side. There is no fucking way I'll let another have her that way.

"Will I?" she asks, crossing her arms. I tilt my head slightly, my heart beating frantically and anxiety coursing through my

limbs.

Please don't deny me, kitten.

I don't show fear. I take a step closer to her, and she holds her ground. "You will," I answer her.

"You will never lie to me again, Isaac." Katia stares at me with red-rimmed eyes. Her bottom lip is trembling, but strength is the dominant feature in her expression.

I'm struck by the strength, but also the hurt in her voice.

"Lie to you?" My eyebrows raise in surprise.

"You said you didn't want me."

Fuck, my heart drops in my chest.

"I'm sorry, Katia. It wasn't true."

"I know it wasn't true. But you will never lie to me again," she says as she brushes the tears angrily away from her face.

"Never," I say just above a murmur, moving forward to take her in my arms, but she takes a step back.

"You need to tell me," she says softly. Her defenses are crumbling around her. My breath is stolen from my lungs at the raw vulnerability on her face.

Tell her what? Whatever she needs to hear, I'll tell her. Anything, just to get that hurt look off her face. I need her happiness back. "I'll tell you anything."

"Then tell me!" she yells at me, and I'm at a loss for words. I take a step toward her again, so close to touching her, but she steps back, moving from my reach. I drop to my knees in front of her. Desperate for her to stop moving away from me, to stop denying me.

"I'm sorry! I'm so fucking sorry! I'm broken. I'm hurt. I need you in my life. I need to lean on you and learn to put faith and trust in you like you do me!" I reach out for her, gripping onto her thighs and pulling her closer to me. "Is that what you want?"

Her shoulders rock forward with a sob as she shakes her head no. My heart shatters into a million shards.

“Just tell me what you want to hear!” I’ll tell her whatever she needs to hear. Whatever it is, I need her. I have to have her back.

“I told you I loved you!” she yells at me before covering her mouth and breathing in deep.

That’s what she wants?

“Of course I love you!”

She falls to the ground, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and finally letting me hold her again.

“I’ve loved you since I first laid eyes on you,” I whisper in her ear, kissing her shoulder, her cheek. Finally, her lips. She kisses me with the same intensity I feel. She’s equal to me in every way.

“You deserve better than me. More than what I can give you. But if you want me, I won’t deny you.” I give her a soft chaste kiss, pressing my lips to hers and feeling closer to her than I’ve ever been to anyone. “I fucking love you, Katia.”

“I love you, Isaac.” Her voice is soft and gentle. “My Master,” she says in a whisper. “I love you.”

“I LOVE YOU, KITTEN.”

EPILOGUE

“*I*’m gonna bring you home to daddy,” I coo, rubbing Toby’s belly, the Golden Retriever I’ve fallen in love with, even if he is a stubborn dog sometimes. Toby grins at me, his mouth open, his teeth exposed as he paws playfully at my hands. “Yes I am, boo boo.”

Looking at him makes me think of Roxy, but today I’m not filled with sadness when the image of her pops up in my mind. Roxy would be ecstatic for me right now. I’ve finally found someone who I can spend the rest of my life with. I only wish Roxy was here to spend it with us.

“But you’re going to fix that, aren’t you, Toby?” I ask, tickling his belly, eliciting a cute whine from his canine lips. Toby will never take Roxy’s place in my heart, but I think he’ll be a good substitute. I just know that Isaac is going to love him. He told me he’s ambivalent with dogs, but I’m positive that Toby will win him over. He can win anyone over. His adorableness is infectious. “Aren’t you, boo boo?” Toby continues to grin at me, pawing at me and my eyes fill with tears of happiness. God, I’m so happy. I can’t remember ever feeling this complete. Things are going far better than I expected.

It’s been two months since I moved in with Isaac, and everything is perfect. Not just between us, but everything. Absolutely *everything*.

I know it’s early to say that I want to spend the rest of my life with Isaac, but what we have is stronger than anything I could

ever imagine having with someone else. I can't even imagine being with anyone else. Isaac is my heart and soul. My Master. But he's so much more than even that. One day, hopefully soon, he'll know how much meaning he's brought to my life, how much I appreciate him for saving me.

I feel normal now. Which is a weird thing to say, since I'm anything but. But I'm making friends and feeling at ease. I feel whole.

I've even made a friend at the club named Dahlia. Isaac's been taking me to the club more and more. I love it there. Not only because of the allure, but for the company. Like Dahlia. Her Dom and Isaac are close. I don't know what all they've been through, but I know he helped heal Dahlia. They're going to therapy together, which is new for them. Lucian said they should go together. She's proud of it. She's proud of him. But she still hasn't told me why. I understand not wanting to open up to me just yet, but she tells Lucian everything. And it shows when they're together.

"So is this the one?" asks that deep familiar voice.

Speak of the devil.

I suck in a breath as I take in Isaac standing in the doorway, his hands casually stuffed inside his pant pockets. He's a fucking vision today, wearing a breezy dress shirt that's unbuttoned at the chest, showing the beautiful tanned skin beneath. I almost feel guilty at the sinful thoughts that run through my mind as I pet Toby, ashamed that I'm aroused in my place of work. But I can't help myself. Isaac *always* does this to me. I could be in the same room with the pope, and one look from Isaac would have me blushing violently.

"Why yes he is, Master," I answer playfully. I'm not supposed to call him Master in public. Only at home or at Club X. But fuck it, I can't help it. He shouldn't be so fucking hot, and then there'd be no issue.

Isaac smirks at me, looking to his left and to his right, wary of any employees as the dogs bark in the background. He needn't worry. They're all in the back. "Are you looking to be punished, kitten?" he says threateningly under his breath.

I return his smirk as I say, “Maybe I am.”



Isaac

“PLEASE, MASTER,” KATIA BEGS ME FROM THE BED AS I WALK TO the dresser.

She’s heaving for air and her fingers are digging into her thighs to keep herself from taking over.

She wants more. She always wants more. I’m going to have to take a fucking Viagra just to keep up with her.

Fuck, she feels so good. I’ll never get enough of her. I could fuck her all day and still not be sated. All I want to do is give her unmatched pleasure.

Not today though. We’re helping her cousin move into Katia’s old apartment. Lyssa’s excited to be moving to the big city, and Katia’s happy to have her close.

In fact, she’s been wanting to see her family more and more. Especially her mother. It’s about time she opened up to her. She doesn’t talk about the depraved aspects of our relationship. But she tells her mother everything else. She’s honest and open. She’s raw and vulnerable. She’s not afraid to share her pain, because she knows with that there’s healing. For all of them. Katia and her family.

She’s finally accepted that.

I’ve never seen her happier and more confident. She’s a beautiful woman, inside and out.

How I got suckered into helping her cousin move, I have no idea. Well, the movers I hired will be doing most of the work, but still.

I have to admit, it’s nice being included. There wasn’t even a question as to whether or not I’d be there. They all just assumed I would be. If it were anything else, I’d be irritated. But it’s Katia’s family. She says they’re my family too, and I may one day feel that they are. But not yet.

Just like Katia, we need time.

I'll have more of it to dedicate to her now that I'm not taking new clients for the security firm.

I don't see the point. I don't want to be the man I saw in myself when I pushed Katia away.

I want to be the man she sees. She keeps telling me every night what a Master means to her.

And I promise I'll be that man. I'll make every effort to be the perfect Master for her.

As I open the dresser drawer to pick out what toys I'm going to use on her, I see the black velvet box in the corner of the drawer.

Her family is having a dinner to celebrate Lyssa's departure into her independence, or so Katia thinks. Her entire family already knows that I'll be proposing. I promised them she'll forever be surrounded by love. She deserves it.

Her mother cried when I told them, and even her father got teary eyed. I feel an odd sense of family with them. Something similar to what I had with my Aunt Maureen before she passed.

With time it will grow, and I'll make sure Katia is there, front and center, surrounded by love and family.

"Master, may I touch myself?" Katia begs me, her voice desperate but respectful.

I pluck the vibrator from the drawer.

"No, you may not." I'm stern with her, and she nods her head in recognition. My kitten is needy. "On your back," I command her. "And hold onto your knees. "

My kitten instantly obeys, falling backward and gripping the inside of her knees. Her pussy is glistening and clenching around nothing. She glances at me as I click the switch to turn on the vibrator and the gentle hum fills the room. Her head falls against the bed, and a lusty moan spills from her lips.

“Please hurry,” she begs me, and it forces a chuckle to rise up my chest. She makes it hard sometimes to stay in this *Master mode*.

One truth I’ll never deny is this:

I’m more of a Slave to her than she ever was, or will be, to me.

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A BAD BOY NEXT DOOR ROMANCE BY LAUREN
LANDISH & WILLOW WINTERS

**One look, and panties drop. One night, and they're ready
to marry me.**

Too bad I'm not interested in anything more than a taste.

Until I'm tempted by Little Miss Goody-Two-Shoes. She's a
good girl, the kind I want to possess, dominate, ruin. No one's
ever told me no, and I'm not about to let it stop me now.

She keeps pushing me away, even with her curvy body pressed
against mine and those soft moans spilling from her lips.

But I'm persistent. She doesn't stand a chance. And now that
she's moved in next door, it's only a matter of time before I'll
have her screaming my name.

She can try to run, but she's not getting away from the bad boy
next door.



PROLOGUE

MADELINE

*T*urn on my side and face my window, waiting for him to come into view. I feel so naughty. So needy. This is turning into a bad habit.

I bite my lip as he moves his curtains so he can see me.

Our eyes meet, and the hunger I see in his makes every doubt disappear. I want him, and he wants me. There's nothing wrong about that.

His lips turn up into a sexy smirk as his eyes roam my body. He takes his shirt off, his corded muscles rippling with the movement. He's the epitome of power and sex. His jeans are slung low, and the urge to lick the deep "V" at his hips makes my legs scissor. My hand dips down to my pussy and I love that he sees. I love that he watches me.

"Covers off," he mouths, and I obey. I'm wearing a tank top and a skimpy lace thong. He tilts his head and tsks. A small laugh escapes my lips as a blush creeps into my cheeks. I knew he'd want them off. But tonight I want him to take them off of me.

A few weeks ago I would've given him the finger and yanked my curtains closed. But not tonight, not now that I've become addicted to the inked-up bad boy next door.

"Come over." I whisper my plea, and his eyes heat with desire.

"Get wet for me, peaches." I smile shyly at his command and slowly push my fingers against my clit, massaging small

circles over my throbbing nub. My head falls back against my pillow, and a faint moan escapes from my parted mouth. I turn my head to the side and with my eyes half-lidded, I watch him watching me.

“More,” he says in a deep, rough voice that makes arousal pool in my core. I make my movements faster and hold his heated gaze. His breath comes in shallow pants, and his hand pushes against the bulge in his jeans. I know he wants me. I want him, too.

“Please,” the word tumbles from my mouth as I feel my back bow and a hot tingle take over my body. My eyes close as I almost fall and crash with an intense orgasm, but it escapes me. I’m on edge. I *need* him.

I open my eyes, and he’s gone. I bite down on my lip and slow my movements. He’ll be here soon. He’ll fill me, stretching my walls with his massive cock and thrusting his powerful hips until I’m writhing beneath him and screaming his name.

When did I turn into a slave to his lust? I don’t beg. I’m not that kind of girl, but he broke my walls down, and I’ve learned to love it.

He’s bad for me. I know he is, but I still crave him. And now that I’ve given in, I’m all his. Until he’s done with me, anyway. I know it’s coming.

This arrangement isn’t going to last, but I push the thoughts away and force myself to live in the moment.

For now, I belong to the inked-up bad boy next door.

CHAPTER 1

MADELINE - ONE MONTH AGO...

“*I*’ve never seen so many hot guys in my life!” cries Katie Butler, my partner in crime and childhood friend. We’re standing in line outside of Club Dusk, the hottest nightclub in this town. As new residents to Grim Lake, a bustling town nestled in the lush Midwest, we’ve come to check out the nightlife scene on our last night of freedom. Not that the party scene is *my* scene.

Katie has been adamant all week that we go out and have a good time before we spend the next several years with our noses stuck in a book and stressing about exams. While I agree wholeheartedly with her, I’m just not sure if I want to spend the night with horny guys breathing down my neck.

I make a sour face as I survey the sea of young men standing in line in front of us. “Are you sure we’re looking at the same people?” I say loudly over the bass of the music coming from within the club.

Honestly, I don’t know what Katie’s smoking. I wouldn’t give a second glance to any of these dudes even if I was walking down the street, desperate to find a man. And the few that are good-looking, already have a chick on their arms.

Not to mention I’m not here to find a boyfriend, I think to myself. I’m just here to have a couple of drinks and unload some stress. That’s it.

Despite being the goal of maybe eighty percent of the women in attendance, I have no intention of getting sloppy-ass drunk

and winding up in some strange asshole's bed the next morning, not knowing how or why I wound up in it.

Besides, after the way my last relationship ended, a boyfriend is the last thing on my mind.

Just thinking about my ex, Zachery Haynes, makes my stomach tense with a mixture of anger and anxiety. We'd been high school sweethearts who thought we'd be spending the rest of our lives together. Our endgame goals were even aligned. College degrees. High-powered jobs. White picket fence. A full-sized family. The whole nine yards.

That dream shattered when I walked in on Zach getting a blowjob from my high school nemesis, Jenna Stout. Seeing her there on her knees, slurping my boyfriend's dick felt like a spear piercing my heart.

Of course, being the egotistical, narcissistic asshole he was, Zachery tried to make it seem like HE was the victim. It was an accident, he claimed. He didn't mean to do it. It was all Jenna's fault for showing up on his doorstep looking hot as fuck in her cheerleader uniform.

She'd seduced him he said, she'd made his dick hard and made him take it out so she could slurp on it like a fucking cherry popsicle. The ridiculous explanation was more than I could take. I left him and Jenna right then and there to continue their oral session, and I never spoke to the bastard ever again.

I did suffer for it, though.

The whole trauma from Zach's betrayal put me in a deep depression, causing my GPA to fall. And by mid-semester, I was close to failing several of my classes. Luckily, with the help of Katie and my father, I was able to pull myself out of my rut in time enough to get my grades back on track to allow me to qualify to go to one of the best universities in the nation.

It's funny how things turn out.

There was one valuable lesson I learned from Zach's betrayal, and that was you could never trust a man.

Fuck a boyfriend, I think to myself. I'll only enter a relationship when I'm good and ready. And that won't be for a very long time.

I don't intend on dating until I've graduated and landed my dream job. Then, and only then, will I give the male species a second chance at regaining my trust. Besides, I certainly won't find Mr. Right in a club full of horny guys just looking for the next girl to fuck.

"I must be blind then," I say. "Or just plain stupid."

Katie tears her eyes away from the object of her affection and scowls at me. I must say Miss Katie's makeup is on point tonight, with false eyelashes that would make a drag queen jealous, rosy blush, glossy pink lipstick and dramatic eye shadow. Her hair isn't too shabby, either, styled into a trendy shoulder-length side bob that shimmers under the street light. A tight red dress that hugs her pear-shaped frame completes her look. "You really need to lighten up, Maddy. We came here to have fun, remember?"

I hold Katie's scowl for a moment before letting out a resigned sigh. "I know, I know, I'm just not looking forward to having a line of horny guys buying me drinks and reading me their lame pick-up lines in hopes that I'll sleep with them."

Katie looks at me like I'm crazy. "If you don't want that, then why the hell did you agree to come in the first place?"

It's a good question. If my goal is to relieve stress, there are a lot more relaxing things I could do rather than come to a rowdy nightclub... like enjoy a bubble bath with a chilled glass of wine, or cuddle up on the couch with a good romance book. I *love* wine now.

Last year, my twenty first, was all about hard liquor and beer. Simply because that's was the go-to for everyone else. Katie got me hooked on wine. First a White Zin and then a smooth Cabernet. It's easy to just have a glass and let the stress slip away. Especially when you're in the habit of avoiding the things that upset you. That's simply what I do, I steer clear of anything that could hurt me.

The truth is I've been avoiding the opposite sex since Zach's betrayal. Maybe subconsciously I wanted to see what it feels like to be desired again, even if it's by a horny guy looking to land his next lay. Yeah, that had to be it. I wanted a boost of confidence.

At five foot four, with green eyes, long blonde hair and a voluptuous figure, I've gotten enough compliments to know that I'm not bad-looking, maybe even pretty. But Zach's cheating had been a blow to my self-esteem. I mean, if I was so beautiful, why did he feel the need to cheat on me?

Stop it, I tell myself, something I do every time I find myself falling into the trap of internalizing my ex's actions. Zach cheated because he was a narcissistic asshole that only cared about himself. It had nothing to do with my looks.

It's a mantra I repeat frequently to keep myself from getting depressed. Lately though, I've been having trouble believing it.

"Are you kidding me?" I demand. "You're really going to act like you weren't bugging me all damn week to come out and have some fun?" I look at her like she's lost her mind. "I think your exact words were, 'Your face is starting to look like cracked asphalt because of the perpetual scowl you've had on your mug for the past month.'"

"You still didn't have to come," says Katie defensively. "And your face *was* starting to look like cracked asphalt."

I roll my eyes. "Get real. If I hadn't come I would've never heard the end of it." I put my finger to my lips and make a thoughtful expression. "Hmm, what was one of the arguments you were using to blackmail me to be your partner in crime? Oh yeah, that's right, 'I'm going to be so pissed off at you Maddy, if you don't come get shitfaced with me before we move into our new condo together.'"

"I did not say that."

I glower. "Yes, you did."

Placing her hands on her hips, Katie scowls back at me and admits, "Okay, maybe I did. Now what?"

“Nothing. Just letting it be known that I had no choice in the matter if I didn’t want to deal with a pissed off diva for the next couple of weeks.”

“I am not a diva!” she wails.

“Tell that to Vanessa! She’s the prissiest person I know, and even she knows you’re a diva!”

“Vanessa is a cat!” Katie protests.

“That’s my point exactly.”

“Ugh, whatever. I just don’t know why you’re giving me so much grief over this. What’s so bad about me wanting you to come out and interact with the opposite sex for just one night, huh?”

I fall silent for a moment as the line moves up. We’re only a couple of feet from being let inside the club, and I have to admit I’m feeling a little excited. “I don’t know,” I say finally. “I guess I’m still not over Zach.”

Katie shakes her head, her bob swishing to the side. “You’re crazy. Why wouldn’t you be over that ego-inflated douchebag?”

“I don’t mean him per se, I mean what he did.”

Katie frowns. “Oh. I understand... but we talked about that, remember? We agreed that Zach was an asshole who never cared about you, you were better off without him, and that you wouldn’t let what he’d done bother you anymore.”

“I know, Katie, and for a while I didn’t let it get to me... but... I... lately I’ve been feeling like I’ll never be able to trust guys again,” I confess reluctantly.

“Who says you have to trust a guy to fuck him?” she replies with a shrug.

“Katie!” I object in horror.

Katie makes an innocent face. “Wha?”

“I’m not here for that!”

“Why not? Your muffin has cobwebs.”

I cross my arms over my chest and threaten, “I’m going to leave.”

Katie lets out a wild laugh at my exasperation. “I’m just playing! Sort of. You know, just because Zach cheated on you, doesn’t mean you can’t have a sexual relationship with someone.”

“It does in my book. Besides, I’m not one to sleep around.”

Katie snorts. “Why sell yourself short? There’s nothing wrong with having sex with someone, no strings attached. Then you don’t have to deal with all the bullshit that comes with a relationship, like what happened between you and Zach.”

Katie has a point. Since Zach, I’d sworn off sex and probably would remain celibate for years to come. Why deny myself the simple pleasures in life because of the actions of one heartless bastard? What harm could come from fulfilling a primal need from time to time?

Because I want it to be special, I tell myself. If I sleep with a guy just to satisfy an itch, it won’t mean anything.

“If anything,” Katie continues while I’m lost in thought, “Zach’s betrayal should make you want to use guys and leave them.”

“No thanks,” I say. “I won’t stoop to his level.”

“That’s not stooping to his level; it’s called empowering yourself.”

“How is becoming the village slut empowering?”

Katie laughs. “Hey, guys do it all the time, and they’re rewarded for it. We do it, and we’re sluts. How is that fair?”

“You know I know it’s not, but it just doesn’t interest me.”

“Won’t you even consider the possibility?”

“Nope. I’m only here because you made me come... and because I want free cosmopolitans.”

Katie giggles. “Don’t we all? But seriously, if a smoking hot guy comes up to you and wants to have a little fun, are you really going to turn him down?”

“Yep.”

“Liar.”

“Just watch me.”

I have every intention of keeping my word. I don't care if some guy buys me a dozen free drinks or is a clone of Charlie Hunnam and Channing Tatum put together, I am not going home with anyone.

We get through the line and into the club and the whole time I'm thinking, a few drinks, a flirt here and there, and then I'm going home.

No screwing whatsoever.

And then I see *him*.

CHAPTER 2

ZANE

I down the third shot of whiskey and relish the burn. It feels good to unwind after a long, hard day of work. Not that I didn't love it. I slam the glass down and lean back, cracking my neck.

I had a great day at the shop. Time flew by, and I loved every minute of it. I only had one client all day, but he was so fucking grateful and happy for the portrait piece I gave him. I used to love the challenge of tattooing portraits, but it got old real quick. It's so draining. Not physically, but emotionally.

When someone comes in to get a portrait tattooed, more times than not it's because they lost someone close to them. They cry when they come in, and then I have to hear all about it. I don't mind being a shoulder to cry on, but damn. Fucking sucks.

Some days I feel more like a therapist than a tattoo artist.

If it's not a person who's passed away, it's their boyfriend or girlfriend.

A few times I've even turned down requests. Yeah, I lose out on money when that happens, but I'm not going to tattoo a portrait of some chick's ex on her. Not gonna happen. Once a girl came in, only eighteen years old, wanting to get a profile of her "soulmate" on her shoulder. I asked her how long they'd been together. One month. Yeah, I'm not fucking doing that.

I know where to draw the line.

Not today though. A proud pop wanted his son on his bicep, and I was fucking thrilled to make it happen.

I smile to myself and wave at Tony, the bartender closest to me, for another beer.

Jackson's sitting next to me enjoying the club atmosphere. This is a normal night for the two of us. Usually we're surrounded by more of the guys, but tonight the club's packed, and they're on the prowl. He's had a cocky grin on his face ever since we got here, and for good reason.

Jackson's a playboy and every chick knows it, yet they fall right into his lap every night. He's got a classically handsome thing going for him, and he knows how to let charm and alcohol convince any woman to spread her legs for him. He's young and stupid, and going to knock up one of these broads one day.

He likes his reputation though. I don't get it. He's had more than one woman come up and slap him for fucking her in the back room and then leaving to go make out with someone else. He's a fucking asshole. Every time, he just takes the hit and smiles. Like I said. Playboy. Asshole.

I'd prefer it if Needles were sitting next to me, but he had shit to do tonight. So I'm left with Jackson.

He drums his fingers on the bartop and looks at me as he asks, "Hard day?" He's asking 'cause of the shots I'm knocking back, I'm sure. I'm not usually a heavy drinker. And if I'm being honest with myself, these shots aren't because of the pride I have from today's work. But I'd rather not think about the shit that's eating at me. It's not like I can change it.

Today's been a hard day, but not because of work. And no one here needs to know why. I school my expression and decide to focus on all the good shit going on in my life.

"Nah, fucking fabulous." He snorts a laugh like he doesn't believe me. "Not joking. Great day at the shop."

He nods his head as Tony pushes our beers toward us. Cindy, the other bartender, looks pissed that Tony was the one to give us the beers. I'm not sure if she's after Jackson's dick or mine.

I couldn't really give two shits if she's after me though. I just wanna drink and be distracted enough to forget. I'm not interested in women tonight. I make a mental note to avoid her for the rest of the night.

If it's Jackson she's after, she can have him. She knows what she's getting into.

Jackson turns his back to the bar and faces the dance floor. The lights are dim, but the strobe and spotlights in the center of the room are enough to see all the women shaking their asses and putting on a show.

He stretches out and takes in the view. He does this shit all the time. Like it's a fucking buffet. He does get all the pussy he wants, but he could at least be modest about it. Shit, I'm way better looking than that motherfucker, and even I don't brag about tail as much as him. Being a playboy isn't my thing though. Maybe I'm just pickier.

"Which one tonight?" he says with his typical cocky grin.

The bass drowns out the sounds of all the chatter and clinking of the glasses behind the bar.

And that's when I see her. She's fucking stunning.

I notice the pretty little blonde the moment she walks in. She's curvy in all the right ways, and just my type.

I wasn't in the mood for a lay tonight, but seeing that gorgeous body, fuck yeah I am now. *She* could be the distraction I need. I know her body can take a punishing fuck. Thick thighs, and an even thicker ass. Her hips sway a little as she walks.

I find myself mesmerized as she takes a seat at the far end of the bar. I watch her for a minute, waiting for her to look my way. She looks everywhere but at me, and it's starting to piss me off.

My brow furrows, hating that I can't get this broad's attention.

She's fucking gorgeous and I already know I want her. Tonight. In my bed. I'm definitely taking this sweet little thing home with me. I watch as her clutch slips off the bar top and

she lets out a little yelp, nervously looking around to see if anyone noticed.

A short brunette sitting next to her says something I can't hear, and then belts out a loud laugh and nearly twirls in her seat like the barstool is gonna spin for her.

I hadn't noticed her friend before; too busy eyeing up that ass. My girl looks embarrassed by her friend but smiles anyway, shaking her head.

I can see the two of them being friends. A sassy over-the-top chick with a trendy bob and a more traditional beauty who'd keep her in line. I bet between the two of 'em, the brunette will be the first on the dance floor. I can only hope her friend lets loose and I can squeeze in to take her spot on the barstool.

Her gorgeous green eyes finally catch mine but she's quick to look away with an innocent blush. I let a smirk kick up the corner of my lips. She's fucking cute. And she's got a pouty mouth and a heart-shaped face that add to the innocent look. I'd love to see those lips wrapped around my cock.

I stifle a groan as my dick hardens in my pants at that last thought. It's been a while, a long while since I buried myself in some hot pussy.

She looks like a good girl though, and I don't think it's an act. That could be a problem. Or maybe it could add to the fun.

I've seen girls come in here acting all cute and innocent, but what they really want is some thick gangster cock. Just so they can say they got dirty with a bad boy. A few shots and they're taking off their tops, letting anyone in here play with their tits.

I take another look at my sexy-as-fuck blonde and she's still a little stiff as she orders a drink. Right now I wish Tony would let Cindy take over that end of the bar. He's quick to get their orders and adds a little flourish to the pour of citrus vodka before adding some tonic or some shit to it. A girly drink. Yeah, she's definitely a good girl.

Her friend orders a Long Island Iced Tea, and I snort. Of course she would. I clench my teeth. That drink could put a wrench in my plans. I'm not sure I want her friend getting

wasted. I need Blondie coming home with me, not babysitting her reckless friend.

Blondie cocks her head and her friend holds up one finger. I grin. Good. Well that solves that problem.

The two of them keep chatting, but it's mostly her friend doing the talking while Blondie just shakes her head and smiles. I can't hear a damn thing they're saying over the music.

I wish I could. I'm trying to think of how to cut in and lay on the charm. But I don't know shit about this broad.

My girl looks like she doesn't belong here. And she doesn't. Neither of them do. This is where the Koronav hangout. Everyone knows it in this town. The women in here are dancing to catch our attention. The men are Koranavs or prospects, or maybe associates. They're all men who are in on the business. Everyone knows what this place really is. Cops too, but they can't prove a damn thing.

Not that it matters. This is just where we hang out and relax, not do business. To be honest, I still don't feel like I fit in here. Not unless Needles is with me, or Nikolai.

I may be under the boss's thumb, but I don't like associating with most of these pricks. I look to my right. Like Jackson. I could do without this asshole. Still, it's nice to get a drink. And in this town, this is *the* place to go to unwind.

Plus it's expected of me. If I didn't show up... well, that's not a good look.

This sweet little thing obviously doesn't know shit. And it doesn't look like her friend does either. I want it to be true 'cause that makes it all the more challenging, and it means she doesn't already have an opinion of who I am and what I do.

Blondie twists in her seat to reach down from her spot on the stool. The sight of her bending over to pick up her clutch makes my dick jump in my pants. Her long blonde hair sways gently as she sits upright and finally relaxes a bit.

I catch her peeking up at me through her thick lashes, but I keep my gaze focused on the TV at the back of the bar. I watch from the corner of my eyes as she takes a sip of her drink and

a small smile slips into place. She sets the glass down carefully on the napkin and takes another covert look around.

The guys have eyes on her even though she doesn't know it. Plenty of cops have come in here. We don't do business here for that reason. It'd be fucking stupid to.

It's obvious to me she's not undercover, but the easiest way to tell if a woman is a cop is to try to fuck 'em. Jackson gets up from his seat next to me and licks his lips. His eyes are steady on the two of them.

That's not gonna fucking happen. Not her, and not her friend. He'd blow this for me for sure.

I strong-arm him, stopping him from getting all the way up and his ass falls back onto the stool. A few people look up interestedly, including Blondie, but I don't give a fuck. I shake my head with a grin, and the fucker actually pouts like I just took away his puppy.

She's mine, and he's not ruining this for me.

He looks me in the eyes and grudgingly gives in. "Fine, she's all yours."

I may not be high in the ranks. Shit they may not even think I really belong here, but I can sure as fuck call dibs on whoever I want. Simply because I'm a tough motherfucker, and everyone in here knows I could take them if I wanted. Shit, Vlad wanted me as a muscle man in the mob. Took a lot of guts for me to tell him it wasn't going to happen. I wanted my shop and my art more than anything else. I thought it was going to be a showdown. Thank fuck for Nikolai.

Either way, I'm all hard muscle and every fucker in here knows not to mess with me. A few had to learn the hard way. A few others picked fights with me just to see if they'd win. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a bit cocky about going undefeated. Either way, Jackson has a reputation for fucking. Mine is for fighting.

If I want something, I'm gonna get it and no one's stupid enough to get in my way. Of course if it was Vlad or Nikolai,

it'd be a different story. The boss and the underboss are two people I don't fuck with.

But they aren't here tonight, and no one's gonna stop me from pulling that dress up and feasting on that delicious pussy I know is between those thick thighs.

I down my beer and get up, ready to find out how sweet and innocent Blondie really is.

CHAPTER 3

MADELINE

Trouble.

That's the only word I can think of when I lay eyes on the stranger dressed all in black. Tall, dark-haired and incredibly handsome, the dude literally takes my breath away. At the other end of the bar with one other guy and throwing back shots of what I think is whiskey, he's sitting there, staring at me with an intensity that makes me shiver all the way from across the room.

I can't get over how handsome this guy is, tattoos and all. Seriously, I'm not one for tattoos, but this guy is so sexy that his ink only adds to his appeal.

I stare back, challenging him to look away. He doesn't, and I'm almost spellbound by the way he continues to look at me. His gaze is so intense that I swear that my ovaries are doing the hokey-pokey.

But why is he staring at just me?

I know I'm not ugly, but there's a sea of beautiful women on the dance floor who are probably more than willing go home with this guy and ride him like a mechanical bull.

Who says he's looking at me because he wants to take me home and have sex? I wonder, even though I know that's what most men in the club are here for. He might just think I look good.

I'm comforted by the thought and feel a surge of confidence at being admired, but the look in the handsome man's eyes says otherwise. It seems to say, 'You're mine, and there's nothing you can do about it.'

I'm suddenly irritated. This is a guy, I feel, who's used to getting his way with women.

Well, he won't have his way with me, I vow. I don't care how hot he is.

I'm about to turn my nose up, you know, to give him the proverbial snub, when the guy sitting next to him jumps up. I hadn't noticed him until this moment, but he's a hot piece of ass himself, and I wouldn't mind it if he came over to say hi. But oh no, Mr. Sexier's ass isn't having it. He jumps up right after him and practically strong-arms the poor guy back down into his seat. The two exchange words before Mr. Sexier turns his intense gaze back on me. My heart thumps in my chest.

Oh no he didn't.

"Holy shit!" Katie exclaims over the heavy thumping bass of the music and gawks. Just a second ago she'd been laughing with some annoying douche who'd bought her a drink, but apparently she has her eyes on the two of them, too. "Did you just see that? Dude just made that guy sit down like he was in time out."

My mouth open and suddenly dry, I'm unable to respond because Mr. Sexier begins moving through the sea of undulating bodies toward our end of the bar. Even the way he moves is sexy, gliding forward with incredible swagger.

"I gotta go," I squeak suddenly, ready to make a run for it. There's no way I'm sticking around to be accosted by Satan himself.

"Oh no you don't, missy," Katie growls, clamping an arm down on my wrist and holding me in place. "You're going to sit right here until Mr. Tall Bottle of Champagne gets to meet you."

"Let me go," I hiss, watching the man, who's almost halfway to us. I can't believe Katie is doing this to me. I'm totally

petrified. “I don’t wanna talk to that guy.”

Katie scowls at me in disbelief. “You’re crazy. Do you see how hot he is?” She stares right at him, and I wanna hide. She’s making it so obvious!

“That’s the very reason I’m trying to get away. Now let go!” I try to pry her fingers off, but Katie is a stubborn bitch.

“No,” Katie refuses. “You’re going to give this guy a chance. Live a little.”

Bitch.

I tug sharply, trying to disengage from Katie’s grip and run for safety, but she suddenly appears to have the super strength of Wonder Woman and I’m kept in place. I’m about to summon everything I’ve got to shove Katie off her barstool, but too late. Trouble has arrived.

“Mind if I have a seat?” asks a deep, sexy voice that sends goosebumps up along my arm. I almost close my eyes as my pussy clenches with need.

I turn to look up into the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen, and my breath catches in my throat. Now that he’s up close, I can see he’s even more handsome than he looked from across the bar, if that’s even possible. His features are perfectly chiseled, with a strong jawline, sharp cheekbones and a cleft in his chin. The way his dark hair hangs down just above his eyes makes him look all the more enigmatic.

I can see the tattoo on his arm clearly now. It’s a serpent, and it’s a beautiful piece of art. It wraps around his arm in a tight coil. The rest of the sleeve is jam-packed with a combination of scrolls and intricate designs, with layers of colors that blend seamlessly. I find my eyes focusing on all the detail and wondering how long it took. Hours, no, days. And holy hell, it must’ve hurt.

Katie turns in her seat and smiles up at the stranger, acting as if she hasn’t just held me hostage. “Not at all, Mr....?”

“Zane,” the handsome man supplies.

Fuck. Even his name is sexy. There's no way I'm going to survive this. This is what I get for spending so much time away from men. The first one that gives me any attention is knocking me flat on my ass.

Katie beams and offers her hand. "Nice to meet you, Zane. I'm Katie, and this is my friend Madeline."

I lean over and whisper in Katie's ear, "I am SO going to kill you for this."

Zane quickly shakes Katie's hand and then offers me his. I stare at it for a moment like it's a snake before taking it. The minute our hands touch, I feel a jolt of electricity go up my arm. Seriously, it's like a thousand volts just shot through my body and I swear my hair must be sticking up like I just stuck my finger in a power outlet. I wanna pull away, but I can't. I'm paralyzed.

"Nice to meet you, Madeline," Zane says in that deep, throaty voice of his, shaking my hand, unaware that his touch is doing some serious things to my body. After a moment, he lets go of my hand and I feel a twinge of disappointment.

"Nice to meet you, too," I manage, but I'm barely audible over the music and I'm sure Zane doesn't hear me. He doesn't seem to care though, and his eyes continue to burn into me.

Katie suddenly jumps off her stool. "I was just telling Maddy here that I needed to take a tinkle." She motions at the packed bar. "You can have my seat until I get back." Oh. My. God. She did not just say tinkle. Kill me now.

Before I can object, Katie takes off like a speed demon, leaving me all alone with Zane.

Katie, you are dead, I send telepathically, wishing bad luck on my best friend for her treachery.

Zane nods at Katie's seat. "You mind?" I catch a whiff of alcohol on his breath. Whiskey. I don't drink whiskey. Personally, I hate it. But the faint smell of it on his breath combined with his unique, masculine smell makes me want to lean into him.

Do you even have to ask?

I'm actually kind of surprised by Zane's manners, considering that he looks like a fellow who takes what he wants without asking.

Not trusting myself to speak, I shake my head. Zane grins and sits down next to me. Being this close to him, I feel my body temperature rise. I almost feel like I need a fan.

Not noticing my discomfort, Zane signals the bartender, but the man who poured my earlier drink nods to the female bartender. She's a slim brunette with big tits. She's in the middle of serving some guy a drink, but I swear she puts on speed boots to get over to us.

"What will it be, honey?" she rasps breathlessly, looking like she's ready to bend over right then and there and let Zane fuck her in front of the entire crowd. Suddenly I'm wishing the other bartender were here, and not this bimbo.

I start to look away to give them some fucking privacy, but Zane doesn't pay her an ounce of attention and replies, "A cosmo for my lady friend here."

What the hell? I wonder. Is he a mind reader, too?

"Nothing for you, Zane?" she asks, putting emphasis on his name. I'm reading her loud and clear, but if Zane is, he isn't showing it.

"Nah," he says, putting a hand on my barstool, a little too close to my ass. "Just my girl's drink." *My girl's?* I feel a blush rise up my chest and into my cheeks. I have to admit, being called his girl feels nice. But I'm quick to push those emotions down.

The bartender looks at me for a second with disdain, and then she looks back at Zane and winks. "One cosmo, coming right up." She sashays off to the mixer, swinging her hips with every step.

I decide to ignore both his hand and claim on me and instead I gape at Zane with shock when she's gone. "How the hell did you know I liked cosmos?"

Zane grins, a boyish grin that makes my inner voice scream at me to run away now before it's too late. "I'm good at reading

women.” His eyes seem to say, ‘That’s not the only thing I’m good at, either.’ And I believe it.

“Can you read my horoscope, too?” I ask playfully. *You know, the one that says that if I don’t get away from you now, I’m in serious trouble?*

“Huh?” he asks and I almost laugh.

Instead I smile and toy with the empty glass in front of me, running my fingers down the stem and leaning into the bar. I shake my head and say, “Nothing.”

The brunette’s back in a flash with my drink. “Anything else, handsome?” She’s trying hard to get Zane’s attention, practically sticking her tits in his face. But he only has eyes for me.

“Nah, that’s all.” He tries to give her a tip, but she pushes it away.

“It’s on the house,” she purrs as another patron calls for her service. She leaves with a wink, saying, “If you need anything else, just holler. It’s always my pleasure to please.”

I’m not absolutely certain, but I’m pretty sure Miss Minx was letting Zane know that she’s down to fuck whenever he’s ready.

“Do you get that all the time?” I have to ask, even though I already know the answer. He’s fucking hot. Of course he does.

Zane shrugs as if it’s no big deal. “I’m used to it.” He stares at me. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

Yep. He’s a mind reader.

Shaking my head, I take a sip of my cosmo. I’m impressed. It’s actually really good. I half-wonder if she spit in it though, just to spite me. “No, actually. Katie and I are new in town. We move into our new place tomorrow.”

Zane looks very interested. “Oh yeah? Where at?”

Alarm bells go off in my head. *Don’t tell him where.* I don’t know why I don’t want to tell Zane where I’ll be living. It’s

not like he would stalk me considering he can have any woman he wants.

“1212 Candyland Road,” I lie. And the drink must be hitting me, because that is a horrible street name to think up. This town isn’t that big. He’s gonna know.

Zane makes a face. “Candyland Road? I’ve lived here all my life and never heard of that street.”

I gesture vaguely and take another sip. “It’s near the edge of town.”

“Oh, okay.” From his demeanor, I can tell Zane knows I’m bullshitting, but he doesn’t press the issue. He gives me a grin and leans forward, looking like my lie was more amusing than anything else.

“Aren’t you going to order yourself a drink?” I ask. I really don’t wanna get wasted while he’s sober. I’m actually surprised he’s not showing any signs of being tipsy with those shots he downed.

“Nah. I think I’ve had one too many shots of whiskey.”

“I saw.” I smile playfully. “How about something a little lighter, then? Like my cosmo?” It’s not in my nature to share a drink, but the thought of this man taking a sip from this girly glass makes me smile. Shit, maybe I’m already a little tipsier than I thought.

“Nah. Not my style. Besides, cosmos are pussy drinks.”

I know I should be turned off by his crude words and the diss on my drink, but the way he says it summons up the image of him down in between my legs and his powerful jaws clamped down on me.

Jesus, I haven’t even known him more than five minutes and I’m already thinking dirty thoughts. Get a hold of yourself, Maddy!

“Hey, they’re not that bad,” I protest, hoping he’s not clued in to the dirty image flashing through my mind. My nipples are hard, and my breathing is coming up short though. I clear my throat and take a quick drink. I need to get a grip.

“I’ll stick with whiskey, or vodka,” he replies as he shakes his head.

“You’re missing out,” I say as I take another sip of my drink.

“Doubt it. I’m particular with my intake of sweets.” The way he looks at me drives home his pun.

I nearly spit out my drink into his lap. Holy crap. Did the bastard know I was just thinking about him between my legs? I try hard not to let on that I’m picking up what he’s throwing down, but judging by the smirk on his face, he knows exactly what I’m thinking. Cocky bastard.

“So what brings you two to this shithole town?” Zane asks, looking as if he’s trying not to laugh at my reaction. “Wait, let me guess. You’re both going to the state university?”

I gulp, trying to keep my mind clear of that image of him eating me out. “Yeah.”

He grins. “I knew it.”

“What about you? Do you go to college there, too?”

A dark shadow passes over Zane’s face and I feel like I’ve hit a nerve. “No,” he says flatly after a second. That heat flowing through my body chills some. He obviously didn’t like that question. Shit, I’m not buzzed enough not to realize his displeasure. It was just an innocent question though. I retreat to my drink.

The beats of the music fills the silence that ensues, and I wonder if Zane’s decided I’m not worth his trouble. I figure the conversations he has with the women in places like these usually revolve around how soon can he take them home to his bed, not getting to know you type stuff.

“So, what do you do?” I dare ask when the silence between us stretches on for more than thirty seconds.

Zane seems to perk up at the question. “I’m a tattoo artist,” he says proudly.

“Really?” Tattoos really aren’t my thing, but I have respect for people with artistic talent. “That’s pretty cool. I’ve never

known a real artist before.” I turn in my seat to face him. I really like that he has a job that’s... different.

“Yeah. I own my own shop, Inked Envy on Second Street.” He points at the serpent tattoo on his arm. “I gave myself this one.”

I gawk. The whole thing is so beautiful. “You did this yourself?”

He nods. That’s impressive. I know next to nothing about tattoos, but I know that had to be hard.

“How?” I can’t even imagine how long that took. I look at his right arm and see there’s no tattoos on that arm.

“I’m good at what I do,” he says matter-of-factly, without a trace of bragging in his voice.

“Wow.” Unconsciously, I reach out to touch his arm, feeling along the length of the tattoo. His muscles bulge underneath my touch, and once again, sparks seem to pop off his skin.

“Your hands feel so soft,” Zane says, grabbing hold of my wrist and pulling me in close. He runs his finger up along my arm, shooting off more sparks. “I could fix you up, free of charge. Would you like that?” It takes a moment for me to realize he’s asking about a tattoo.

I have an immediate urge to say yes, but I don’t, and I stare at him, trembling in his grasp. In that moment, I’m more afraid than I’ve ever been in my life.

I feel like he has absolute power over me. His question could have been, “Will you come home and have sex with me?” and I would have said yes.

That’s it. I have to get away.

“Sorry, gotta go!” Not giving him a chance to respond, I jerk out of his grasp and quickly disappear into the crowd of people grinding on the dance floor. I look around for Katie, but don’t see her beneath all the flashing lights. Moving as fast as I can, I make my way into the club’s hallway and stop to rest against the wall.

I breathe in and out, trying to get a hold of myself, my legs shaking. All I can think about is how close I came to losing control, and Zane had only asked if I wanted him to give me a tattoo!

“Where do you think you’re going, sweet thing?” asks a deep voice that makes my knees weak.

Oh no.

I try to make a run for it, but suddenly I’m sandwiched between the wall and a rock-hard body.

Fuck.

“Did I say you could leave?” Zane growls in my face. His voice is soft and sexy, not meant to be a threat, only a dare to stay. The smell of whiskey is even stronger on his breath at this distance. Instead of disgusting me, it only makes me more turned on. His hot breath makes my nipples pebble. My core is soaked and my pussy is clenching around nothing. This isn’t good. I fucking *want* him. Every inch of my body craves him.

“Y-y-you’re not my daddy,” I stammer, ignoring every instinct in me.

“No. I’m not.” Zane gives me a cocky grin, moving in closer. “But I can be... if you want.”

I’m almost on fire. My dress seems to be rising up my thighs, practically inviting Zane in. “What are you talking about?” I have to close my eyes and will the naughty images away.

“I think you know,” he whispers in my ear.

I do know. And it would be so easy to give in, so easy to just melt in his arms. And he *wants* me. He *chased* me. That has to mean something.

“You know you want it.” He says it as if his words are a dare.

He’s right. I do want it. So fucking badly. My body is burning. Every inch of me wants him inside of me, even right here in this hallway. I don’t care who sees.

Zane inches in closer as if coming in for a kiss. If his lips touch mine, I know it’s all over.

I can't do this!

“Get the fuck off me!” I yell out as the thought of him sliding my dress up and fucking me against the wall becomes a very real possibility.

At the last possible second, I summon every ounce of self-control I can muster and shove Zane away from me. Then I take off like a jackrabbit down the hall, and out the club, not daring to look back.

CHAPTER 4

ZANE

I watch Maddy's back as she practically runs from me. Her hands grip the hem of her dress as she pulls it farther down her thighs. She's speeding off like I just told her I was a hitman and she's first on my list.

What the fuck?

I stand dumbfounded in a lust-filled haze. She's leaving? It takes a moment and the sounds of the club filling my ears to realize she's really gone. I was two seconds away from crashing my lips against hers and inching her dress up to give her the release she needs. Well maybe not here, where anyone could watch, unless she'd be into that.

She pushed me away. What the fuck did I do? I replay everything in my head, but I don't know where I crossed the line.

She had to know I'd follow her out here. Shit, I know she didn't think I'd let her get away that easy.

And she was loving it. I know she wants me. Or wanted me. Fuck!

By the time I think about chasing her and head out to the exit, she's nowhere in sight.

I push past the crowd and jog my way to the front. She's not here. I check every dark corner, but Maddy's fucking gone.

I search the dance floor and find her friend. Fuck me, but I can't remember her name for the life of me. Did she even tell me?

She's dancing with a group of women, having a blast and not paying attention to anything.

I have to grab her arm to get her attention.

She whips around like she's gonna bitchslap me until she recognizes me. Her eyes dart around me and she looks confused. Shit, that's not a good sign. I was hoping Maddy went to her before going wherever it is she went.

I scream over the music, "I lost your friend!"

"Fuck!" she yells out and starts pushing past me and everyone else, making a beeline for the door.

I follow her outside. Shit, did I really chase her off to the point where she felt like she had to leave?

I turn to look at her friend who's now got her cell phone to her ear. She's got one finger shoved into the opposite ear to drown out the sound of all the people still waiting in line. The bouncer's watching us, but I give him a quick nod.

"You good?" he asks with his brows raised. I give him a short nod. I'm not really good though. This fucking sucks. And I feel like shit for pushing her away like that.

"Goddamn it," her friend mutters after looking down the sidewalk and shoving her phone into her clutch.

She makes a move to go back inside.

"Did she leave?" I ask her.

She shrugs her shoulders and says, "Sorry." She gives me a sad look and a tight smile before making a move to open the door. Fuck.

I get it for her, opening it wide enough, but I don't go in.

"You think you could give me Maddy's number?" I ask her with a little embarrassment. I don't think I've ever asked for a chick's number before. And definitely not from her friend. She

looks like she's considering it, but then she scrunches her nose and shakes her head.

"I'm sorry." She really does look apologetic. "I'll bring her ass back here though." She nods her head confidently.

"That's alright." I watch her go in as my hope of seeing Maddy again dwindles.

I stand outside the club feeling the crisp cold air of the night against my skin. The bass of the music beats in my ears and it pisses me off.

Anger replaces confusion. Not at Maddy, but at myself. I knew she was too much of a good girl. I needed to play it smooth and slow, and instead I went for the kill too fast and freaked her out.

But damn, I couldn't help myself. Feeling her body against mine... I stifle my groan.

I just had my hands all over that lush ass. I could practically feel how tight that hot pussy was gonna be cumming all over my dick. Speaking of my dick, the damn thing is currently hard as fucking steel in my jeans.

What the fuck did I do? She was all over me. She wanted me just as much as I wanted her. She felt so good with her curvy body pushed against mine. And she would've felt even better impaled on my dick. She was so fucking responsive, and I can only imagine what she'd be like under me.

I take another look around the crowd and then back down the sidewalk to the left and the right. She's not there. Fuck! I pushed too hard, too fast.

I run my hands through my hair and clear my throat.

Well, shit. That fucking sucks. I close my eyes and remember the soft, sweet sounds of her moans. My dick jumps in my pants and I have to turn and head back inside.

I need a drink.

I make it halfway there when a hot platinum blonde with a tight ass and perky tits stops in front of me.

“Hey handsome, I was looking to get out of here.” Her perfect white teeth bite down slightly on her bottom lip, drawing my eyes to her mouth. Vixen is the first term that comes to mind as I take her in.

“I could use a ride,” she whispers in a low, sultry voice.

Her lips are almost the same shade of red as her dress, and I have to admit that any other night with my dick this hard, I’d take her up on her offer, but not tonight. Not after Maddy.

“Not tonight.” I give her a tight smile and move to walk past her. Her eyes narrow and she looks like she’s gonna yell at me for some perceived insult, but then she remembers where she is.

“Fine, asshole,” she grumbles as she pushes past me with her fake tits brushing my forearm.

I watch her walk off sashaying her ass and going right for another Koronav member. Yeah, she just wants to get fucked by a mobster. Doesn’t matter who. I grit my teeth, feeling more agitated than anything else.

As I head to the back, all the thoughts I’ve been avoiding start coming to the surface. Fuck, I was feeling so damn good tonight.

Maddy took that away. She was a beautiful distraction. But she fucking took off, and with every step I take I want more and more just to drown myself in a bottle to forget this shit. She could’ve distracted me tonight. She could’ve taken that pain away, even if it was just for the night.

I walk back to the bar and my stool is taken by some redhead who’s got her legs spread and wrapped around Jackson’s thighs. His tongue is down her throat and his hands are up her dress. Usually I don’t give a shit, but tonight it pisses me off.

“Wanna buy me a drink?” I turn my head to the left as I rest my hands on the bar and see a second redhead standing there. She’s sweet and cute, not like the viper in the red dress from a minute ago, but I can’t get Maddy out of my head. I give her a tight smile, ‘cause it’s all I can manage.

“Sure thing.” I keep my voice even and casual. A smile lights up the broad’s face. She’s gonna be real disappointed in a minute.

I yell at Tony, “Her next drink’s on me!” and then turn back to her. “Have a good night, sweetheart.” I leave cash on the bar and head out, ignoring the protests from the pretty little thing I’m leaving behind.

At least she got a free drink out of it. She’ll find someone else. I’m just not in the mood.

I turn on my heels, giving Tony a curt nod when he catches my gaze. He looks like he wants to ask a question, but I’m not one who likes to talk. He should know that by now.

I walk out the back exit where it’s less crowded and get in my Audi without a second thought.

Damn, tonight could’ve been so fucking good.



THE DRIVE IS AN EASY ONE. I LIVE CLOSE TO WORK, AND PLAY CLOSE TO work, too. It makes life easy.

I twist my hands on the leather steering wheel and grip on tighter. I fucking hate today. Not what happened, just the fucking date. It always reminds me of things I’d love to never have to think about again. Every year it seems to get worse.

As if knowing I’m feeling like shit, Nikolai calls. His name and number pop up on my dash and whatever fucking music was playing is replaced by a ringtone. I push the button to answer as the streetlight turns green.

“Nikolai,” I keep my answer short, and my voice even. He’s the underboss, and in a way the one person who saved me. I hardly talk to him or to the boss, Vlad. But every year he reaches out, without fail. He’s the only one who knows how much it affected me.

“I’m sorry, Zane; I forgot.” His voice is etched with sincerity, and I believe him. “I went to the club expecting to find you there, but they said you just left.”

I trust him alone out of all the Koranavs. He never shows emotion. Never. It's something that makes you appear weak in this line of business. Even Vlad's anger and hot temper make him look like a loose cannon in my eyes. But on this date every year, Nikolai always opens up to me. He's done this ever since it all happened.

"No need to apologize. I'm doing alright." As I say the words, the pain comes down harder on me. I twist my hands on the leather again and glance out the window as I come to another stop. I just wanna get home now.

"I'd believe you if you went home with some pussy, but they said you didn't." He says it with a touch of humor in his voice and it gets a short, rough laugh from me. I run my hand through my hair and stare at the stoplight.

I remember the feel of Maddy's ass in my hands, and my dick starts to harden. Yeah, I'll be fucking fine. As long as I can work and fuck, I'm fan-fucking-tastic. I try to forget Maddy and her soft curves. Fuck. I close my eyes, willing my dick to not get hard for a woman I can't fucking have. I haven't jerked off in years, not when I can get laid whenever I want. I'm sure as shit not doing that tonight.

"Promise you, it's all good," I tell him.

"If you say so." From his tone I can tell he doesn't believe me. I don't blame him. Anyone who was forced to kill his father would be fucked up. Even if his father was an abusive fuck like my old man.

It happened years ago, but fuck me, I can't let it go.

I was only ten or so when I started stepping in front of my mom to take the hits. I couldn't stand the way he hurt her. I tried to protect her. I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought she loved me.

I woke up one morning to him screaming about how "the bitch left." The beatings only got worse after that. Because of course to my father, I was the reason she left. It's hard to imagine it wasn't true. Why else did she leave me with him?

My old man was more than just an abusive drunk though. He was a degenerate gambler, and got into some serious debt with the mob.

Nikolai, Vlad and two soldiers who are probably long dead came for him when I was fourteen. They found him beating the shit out of me, but I was fighting back. I didn't have much weight to me since I'd barely hit puberty, but it didn't stop me from fighting back.

The mob doesn't like witnesses though, even if they are just kids.

Nikolai spoke up for me. Said he'd teach me. Vlad put a gun in my hand and gave me a choice. Kill my father and join them, or die with him.

It might sound like an easy choice, but it was harder to pull that trigger than I thought it would be. So many nights had passed where I wanted him dead. I swore one day I'd kill him for what he did to my Ma, and what he did daily to me. But when it came time, I almost chose to die with him.

He stared up at me and instead of telling me to do it to save my life, he called me every name in the book and spit on me. Maybe he did it to make it easier for me. But maybe he really did fucking hate me.

I think you always love your parents somewhere deep down inside. Even if they don't love you back. Even if they don't deserve it.

If it wasn't for Nikolai, I never would've survived.

"Yeah, I'm alright. Just wanna crash tonight," I tell him. "I've got an appointment tomorrow I wanna get up earlier for." That's true in a way.

"Good to hear. It's always nice to get lost in your work." I can see him nodding the way he does. I grew up with Nikolai as my only father figure despite the fact he's not even a decade older than me. It wasn't optimal, but at least I had someone.

It sure is fucking nice to get lost in work. He taught me that. I'm not gonna lie, I was a fucking punk kid growing up. I graffitied everything I could. Got in trouble a few times for it.

The first time I went to jail wasn't for fighting, it was for tagging an abandoned building.

Nikolai was pissed. He said the mob doesn't need delinquents, and getting in trouble for dumb shit puts a target on my back. So he got me a job at a tattoo parlor. They smuggled drugs out the back of it. I didn't care though. I just wanted to get my art out there. And Nikolai said it'd be good for me. He told me not to fuck up, and to take it seriously.

I got a reputation pretty fast—a damn good one, and the family hooked me up with my own shop. I was eighteen with my own business, and had clients who fucking loved me. The only condition the mob gave me was that they would handle the books, and they were free to use the back for whatever they needed. I signed that day without thinking much on it.

A few weeks in, Garret and Vlad came into my shop and told me they needed me to cover up a tattoo on a body. I wanted to say no, but I knew better. She was a young girl, maybe my own age, and a member of an MC gang. Garret tossed her on my table and said the tattoo that could identify her needed to be covered. Her body was covered with bruises of varying colors, making me wonder how long they'd tortured her. But what was worse was that she was still bleeding. They'd used a knife on her and mutilated her.

I almost threw up looking at the poor girl. Vlad said they'd "had a little too much fun with her." I kept my composure and quickly added a layer of art to the dead girl's tattoo, but I knew then what kind of sick fucks they were, and that I didn't want anything to do with them. But it was too late. I didn't have a choice. The memory sends a wave of sickness through me. I thought then that I'd have to get used to that shit, but it's only happened the one time. Thank fuck. Other than that day, they stay out of my business, and I stay out of theirs.

I hate being under the mob's thumb.

I can't deny that they could have killed me. Nikolai saved my life, and gave me something to be proud of. And I do love my shop and my work.

I wish it was just mine. After all, people come to me for a reason. They want a Zane original. My art on their bodies.

Maddy comes to mind as I think about how I'd love to put my art on her. I start thinking about what I'd go with, but then I push that thought away. It's pointless to think about.

I pull up to my condo, coming to terms with the fact that I'll probably never see her again. To my left I see a car I don't recognize at the neighbor's place. I'm always aware of that shit. Just in case. You can never be too laidback when you're involved with the mob.

I guess they finally got the place rented out.

It's a cute little car. I'd bet good money a woman drives it. I check out the tags as I lock up my Audi. The locks slam down, and a small beep rings through the night.

Georgia.

Whoever they are, they're a long way from home.

CHAPTER 5

MADELINE

“*W*atch what you’re doing with that!” Katie yells at one of the moving men who’s attempting to pick up a heavy ornamental vase from inside the moving truck. It’s the day after the disastrous night at the club, and we’re busy moving into our new condo. Despite what happened last night, I’m pretty excited about starting a new chapter in my life. “That’s a special gift my mom gave me as a graduation present!” she squawks.

“Sorry,” apologizes the young guy, who looks barely older than eighteen. He gently picks up the vase and carefully walks off the van, moving as if he’s carrying something worth more than gold.

Hands on her hips, Katie growls, “You better be.”

“Jesus, Katie,” I complain, shaking my head and wiping at the sweat on my brow. It’s a sweltering ninety-five degrees outside and I feel like going inside and flopping down on the floor and enjoying the cool AC, but Katie insists I help her oversee the moving.

At least I’m not one of these guys, I think with sympathy. They’re doing all this hard work for less than minimum wage. And to make matters worse, they have Katie making their lives even more miserable.

To fight the heat, Katie and I are dressed in cutoff shorts and midriff-baring tank tops, but I’m still sweating like a dog.

“You didn’t have to be so mean to the kid. He hadn’t even picked it up yet.”

Katie turns to scowl at me. “Did we, or did we not pay these guys out of our hard-earned student loan checks?”

I snicker at the thought of our student loans being ‘hard-earned’. I guess I know what she meant though, since it’s not like we won’t be paying exorbitant interest rates after college. “Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you can just treat them like that —”

Cutting me off, Katie turns to watch the young guy make it off the moving truck and onto the sidewalk with the giant vase. “Okay then. I can tell them whatever I want, especially when they’re handling things that are dear to me.”

“Psycho,” I mutter under my breath, giving up.

“Hey!” Katie screams when the guy almost trips stepping over the sidewalk. Luckily, he regains his balance without dropping Katie’s precious vase. “Watch it, clumsy!” After the guy makes it into the condo unscathed, Katie turns on me with a murderous glare. “See,” she says flatly.

“Why are you being so bitchy today?” I demand.

“Because I have a nasty hangover.” About time she admits it.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have drunk so much.” I don’t know why I even bothered responding though. She never listens to me. At least she didn’t wake me up at 3 a.m. by puking into the toilet.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have run from the club and left me stranded,” she says without missing a beat. Fuck, that hits a nerve. I do feel bad about that. But what the fuck was I supposed to do? She wasn’t going to leave with me, and I *needed* to get out of there before I did something I’d regret.

I wipe at a trickle of sweat running down the side of my face. “You know what? I’m too hot to deal with your shit today. Can we not do this, please?”

Katie bites her lower lip and says, “Sorry,” even though I know she isn’t. “Speaking of hot, I can’t believe you turned

down that Zane guy!”

“I can. The dude was an asshole.” I’m not sure why I’m lying to her. Zane hadn’t done anything particularly wrong, unless you can call making me want to have sex with him a crime.

Just speaking about him brings up the memory of how hot I felt against his body, and how much I wanted him inside of me. When he pressed up against me, I could feel it. His cock was fucking *huge*. Somehow I get a little hotter thinking about what he could have done to me with a dick that big. I can’t help but feel a little regret, but I know it was the right move to leave him there. Wasn’t it?

“Who cares? If it was me, I would’ve fucked him every which way but sideways even if he’d slapped me around and called me his bitch.” She thinks for a moment, and her frown morphs into a naughty smile. “In fact, I think I would rather enjoy that.”

“Katie!” Thank God my face is already red from the heat so she can’t tell how much the idea of him doing that to me turns me on, too.

Katie looks at me with typical feigned innocence. “Wha? That guy was the hottest guy I’ve seen in a long time. I would’ve killed to have him lusting after me like he was after you.”

“He wasn’t lusting after me,” I argue. “He just wanted to buy me a drink.”

“He wasn’t? Remember how he shoved that other hot guy down in his seat just to get to you?” Fuck, that *was* hot.

“Nope.” The word comes out easy as I shake my head.

“Liar. You said he had you up against the wall in the hallway, ready to bang your brains out.”

The image of his lips being inches away from mine flashes in front of my eyes and I try hard to push it away. I wish Katie would stop going on about Zane. Thinking about him just makes my temperature rise, and it’s already hot as hell. “What does it matter now anyway? I’ll never see him again.”

Which is a good thing, I think to myself. He was nothing but trouble.

Katie shakes her head at me in sympathy. “You just don’t get it, do you? You’re so scared to live a little just because of what happened between you and Zach that you’re missing out on the simple pleasures in life.”

“How is going home with a total stranger and getting screwed by him ‘missing out’?” I demand. “If anything, it cheapens me.”

“Are you kidding me? That guy was hot as fuck, with a big ass dick to match.”

“And how would you know what he’s working with?” Despite my question, I agree with Katie. When Zane was pressed up against me, I felt his bulge. And if the size of it was an indication of anything, he was hung like a horse.

“Did you see the size of his nose?” she says with a wink.

I roll my eyes. “You’re impossible.”

“And you need to get laid. Preferably last night. Hey!” Katie yells at the other mover. “Don’t carry that like that!”

Katie begins badgering this guy about how to properly carry a box of her precious items of God knows what, even going as far to follow him into the condo, leaving me alone in the hot sun.

I’m about to follow her in when I see a box with my name on it on the back of the truck. If memory serves me correct, it’s filled with a bunch of personal hygiene products that I don’t want anyone to see. I’ll take my tampons in myself, thank you very much.

“I’ll just get that, and then I’m staying in the cool air until they’re done,” I mutter to myself. “I don’t care how much Katie bitches and whines at me.”

I jump onto the truck and grab the box. It’s not that heavy, but it’s awkward, and I make it off the truck before I have to set the box down to try to get a different handle on it.

“Need help with that, peaches?” asks a deep, familiar voice.

Oh my fucking God.

I look up into that cocky grin and those beautiful blue eyes. Instantly, images of last night are back in my mind and I'm filled with burning desire. Dressed only in a pair of blue jeans that are ripped at the knees, Zane is standing in front of me with his shirt off.

I can only marvel at his incredible body. Seriously, his abs looked like they were etched by a grandmaster mason, chiseled to perfection. To make matters worse, a sheen of sweat covers his entire torso, and droplets are running down the hardened lines of his stomach muscles. I have to fight an extreme urge to want to bend over and lick it off.

If I thought I was burning up before, now I'm in the fiery pits of hell.

"What are you doing here?" I croak with disbelief, trying to keep my eyes level with his face and not that washboard stomach of his.

Zane's grin grows wider and his eyes seem to assess my body, making me feel even hotter. He's pleased that he's shocked me. "I live right there," he says, nodding to the condo that's directly next to mine.

I gape with shock. Seriously, I'm fucking floored. What are the odds? What are the odds that I meet this guy at the bar and run away from him, only to find out that he lives right next door to me?

One in a billion, I think to myself. Fuck! I can't run away from him now.

"You're shitting me."

Zane chuckles. Fuck. Even his laugh is sexy. "Nah. Actually, I was surprised myself when I saw you guys out here. I was like, no way. Apparently fate's decided to bring us back together again." The way he looks at me conjures up the memory of running from his sexy touch. His eyes are telling me I've committed a crime, and he won't let me get away with it.

"Then fate must be fucked up in the head."

Zane throws back his head and laughs again. “You’re funny, I’ll give you that.”

There’s nothing funny about this situation. I ran away last night because I knew Zane was nothing but trouble, and now fate’s put him right next door.

Almost as if to torment me.

“And sexy,” he growls throatily, his eyes roaming all over my body.

I suddenly remember what I’m wearing, daisy dukes that hug my ass cheeks and a cropped tank top that bares my midriff, and I blush furiously under Zane’s appreciative stare.

God, he makes me feel so sexy. Wanted.

“Yeah, somehow fate changed the name of my street to Candyland Road without even telling me.”

My cheeks heat with embarrassment. “It’s alright peaches,” he winks at me.

Right then, Katie comes back out of our condo with one of the moving guys in tow. She stops and stares when she sees Zane, her jaw dropping. After composing herself, she walks over.

“Well, well, well. Look at what we have here,” she says with a huge smile plastered on her face.

“Hey,” Zane greets her politely.

Katie encircles her arm around Zane’s sculpted waistline and looks up at him admiringly. “Sup, hot stuff?”

I roll my eyes at Katie’s silliness.

Zane chuckles. “Not much.”

“Can you believe he lives right next door?” I demand. For some reason the sight of Katie’s arms around Zane is irritating me, though I don’t know why. It’s not like we’re an item. Or like Katie would ever go after a guy I liked. My brow furrows at the thought. *Do I like him?* It’s nothing. It’s fine. Whatever.

“Nope. Can you believe these abs, though?” she marvels, actually running her hands along Zane’s muscular lines that

are slick with sweat.

“Get your hands off him!” I snap with so much venom it causes Katie to jump away from Zane.

“Damn, Maddy, I didn’t realize he was your property.” I bite down on the inside of my cheek and stare at the house.

She’s right. I don’t know what’s come over me. I ran away from Zane like he was the devil last night, and here I am getting pissed because Katie’s admiring his perfect body?

“I’m sorry,” I apologize to Zane quickly, my cheeks burning from embarrassment. “I don’t know what came over me.”

Zane has an amused smirk on his face. He doesn’t look bothered by my outburst in the least. In fact, I think he liked it. “It’s cool.”

“And you were calling me bitchy earlier,” Katie complains.

“Well you were,” I point out.

“Says the one who just screamed at me for touching our hot new neighbor.” She raises her voice on the last words and gives him a wink.

I ignore how much I hate that I feel jealous. “I didn’t scream.”

“You didn’t? I think they heard you on the other side of town.”

I roll my eyes with exasperation and turn to Zane. “Do you see what I have to deal with?”

Zane chuckles. “I think it’s cute.”

Katie sticks her tongue out at me. “See Maddy, even Zane takes my side.”

“Hey,” Zane protests. “Don’t put me in the middle of this.”

“You sure about that? The three of us would make a good sandwich.”

I blush. “Katie!” Jesus. She’s so embarrassing. I know she’s joking, but he might not!

“Wha?”

I shake my head. “Never mind.” I cross my arms and lean back against the van.

Katie badgers him with question after question about the area and I watch them interact, only half-listening to what he’s saying. He keeps looking back at me when he answers, even though I’m not the one asking. And as much as Katie loves pissing me off, she’s at least keeping her hands to herself. With every move he makes, his muscles ripple and glisten in the sun. It’s not fair. Fate really is a bitch.

“So, you going to help us out then?” Katie asks him. It’s only when he answers he’s more than happy to oblige that I realize he’s staying to help the movers. Which means he’ll be in our house.

“I gotta go inside,” I bite out and push off the van.

“You alright?” Zane asks.

I fan myself and walk backward. “Just need to cool off.”

“You’re telling me,” Katie says with a smirk. I roll my eyes and nearly fall flat on my face as I try to turn around and walk normally. Fuck. I am not looking back. I refuse to check to see if he saw me.

Despite saying I was going to go inside and enjoy the A/C, I watch Zane at work, admiring his glistening muscles and washboard abs until they’re done. Which happens all too quickly. I fucking hated packing, but I’d go out and buy all of Ikea if I could right now. I wish I had some new furniture I could ask him to assemble for me, giving me an excuse to check him out some more.

I grab a case of water from the kitchen and set it on the table for the guys. It’s the least we can do.

It looks like Katie has set her sights on a new man and is chatting with one of the movers as the guys walk out.

I give them a wave and yell after them, “Thanks again!”

My heart beats faster as Zane, at the very end of the line, closes the door, rather than walking through it.

Oh, fuck.

I can't run now.

I grab a bottle of water and walk to the kitchen to start unpacking, completely ignoring the fact that he followed me in here. This is bad. I'm hot and sweaty and worked up. My lungs aren't even working right.

I stand near the fridge and consider bending down to open the closest box, but I know I need to say something. I look up and I'm trying desperately not to stare at him and his sweaty, hot body. Trying desperately not to think naughty thoughts. Trying, and failing miserably.

He's leaning against the sink, looking at me with hunger in his eyes.

"Would you like a drink?" I offer the bottle, holding it out to him. He has to know I'm so horny I can't think straight, and I can't stand being this close to him right now.

"No. I'm good." He pushes off the sink and takes a step forward. I'd take a step back, but the wall is right there.

"Why are you here?" I ask him.

"You know why." I do, but I lie.

"No, I don't."

He walks over and pushes me up against the wall, cornering me. His sweaty body is inches away from mine. My chest feels tight.

A feeling of déjà vu sweeps through me.

"You owe me."

His eyes seem to say, 'You won't be escaping this time.' His hand grabs my hip. Not a single part of me even thinks about pushing him away.

"Owe you what?" I ask in a hushed voice.

"This."

He kisses me, and my body comes alive with electricity. Everywhere he touches me sends sparks of desire straight to

my core. I groan and lean into him. He can have me, right here. Right now.

No, Maddy! You have to stop!

I don't know how I do it, but I summon the will to shove him away. "Get out!" I gasp, stabbing a finger at the door. I'm shaking all over. Just a few seconds more and I would have been ready to have this man's babies.

Frustration flashes across Zane's eyes, but it's gone in an instant. "If that's what you want," he says.

It's not what I want. I want him to take me right there and fuck my brains out. Zane knows it, too. My heavy breathing says it all. I'm barely in control of myself.

I can't let him do this.

"Yes," I say weakly. "Go, please."

It's for my own good.

"Fine." He opens the door, but turns to give me a cocky grin as he says, "But I know you're lying."

When he's gone, I slump down against the wall.

"Oh Maddy, what have you gotten yourself into?" I whisper to myself.

CHAPTER 6

ZANE

I pull up to the shop with a huge ass grin on my face.

I fucking love how much I shocked her. That flush I saw on her cheeks makes my dick jump in my pants. I can imagine that blush on her chest, rising up to her cheeks as I pound her tight little pussy. Fuck, I want that. I groan as my dick hardens and my balls fucking hurt. I need a release. This broad has me so worked up.

Peaches. My sweet Georgia Peach. I'm definitely getting her under me. I don't give a fuck how hard she pushes me away. She wants me, and I want her.

I almost had her in her kitchen. I'm surprised she let it get that far. She's definitely losing her will to fight this. I'm enjoying it though, breaking down her walls.

I'll have to wait and play this right. I wasn't sure if she was really that sweet innocent thing I thought she was pretending to be at the bar. But she is. A little uptight, too. Which makes it all the more challenging.

"Yo, Needles!" My partner in crime turns around at the desk when I come in.

He's young. Just turned twenty-two last week, which was a fucking fabulous night out. He doesn't look it though. He's got pale blond hair and a patchy beard that looks like he's going through puberty.

Poor bastard. The clean-shaven look only makes him look that much younger. He tatted himself up pretty good to add some age to him. He did a shit job on his left arm though. That's how we met. He had to come to a professional to fix it up.

Ever since then it's been the two of us running this place. There are a few other artists working out of our shop. But we're the only ones here open to close, and we're the reason the shop is so well-known.

At first Vlad didn't like it. It's not good to be in the spotlight. But then he saw it as the perfect opportunity to launder some big accounts through here. I don't know how big, and I don't ask questions.

I set my keys on the counter and take a look around. The place is everything I ever wanted. The entrance is spacious and open with floor to ceiling windows, and a large granite-topped counter in the center. The back wall is lined with art we've done. There are four sofas, two on each side, and a coffee table in between the two sets. Photo albums of what we've done in the past sit on the table.

Two hallways lead to a total of eight rooms in the back. We're always comfortable while we're working since the other five artists helped decorate our rooms exactly how Needles and I wanted. Room six is our stockroom, and the last two are for the mob. They're always locked, and I haven't even looked in them for nearly a year. I like to forget Vlad has his hands in my shop. Some days I don't even notice when the Koranav come in and out. For the most part, we ignore them, and they ignore us.

It makes it easy for us both, and that's the way I like it.

It feels like home in here. I fucking love this place.

"What's going on?" he asks, turning from organizing a station cart. We've got all sorts of products for aftercare that the customers can buy.

He looks back over his shoulder and then does a double take. "What's going on? Why the hell are you so fucking chipper?" he asks with a grin.

“What? I can’t be happy?”

“At eight in the morning? No. You’re a real unpleasant fucker this early.”

I laugh at him and take a seat at the counter. “Met a girl who keeps pushing me away.”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “She’s smart.” He stands up and takes a last look at everything he’s refilled. Looks good to me. I trust Needles to handle this shit. He can handle the business aspect of things.

“You take a look at your first client?” he asks and I know why, too.

“Yeah, gonna be fucking boring, but I got something fun planned later on.” My first client needs a touch-up and his ink refreshed. It’s fading and looking an ugly shade of green as a result. It sucks because it’s mindless work, just coloring in what someone else has done. I’m gonna do some fading on it though. I’ll give it a professional touch, but it’s still mindless.

I hate doing those jobs almost as much as those damn anchor and butterfly tattoos. Nothing’s worse than when a young girl comes in and picks a generic tat out of a book, something that I’ve done a thousand times. I could draw them with my eyes closed at this point.

If only I could get my hands on peaches. I bite down on the inside of my cheek thinking about how fucking smooth her skin was. I wanna press my lips against her neck and kiss down her collarbone. Farther. I’d kiss down her breasts. I know just how they’d feel in my hands.

I could put something there for her, something on the underside of her plush tits. Maybe have it travel down her side. Fuck, she’d be so fucking sexy with a touch of ink. She’s got a beautiful sun-kissed tan. She’d look even more beautiful with my art on her. Not that she isn’t already gorgeous.

But she’s a good girl. I bet if she has anything on her body it’s just some sweet little butterfly on her shoulder. And I didn’t see a damn thing on her shoulder. Her tight body’s just the perfect canvas for my art.

Just as I start thinking about every inch of her body and what else I'd love to do with it, Marky comes in. He's a regular. He's retired and comes in here all the time just to hang out. When we remodeled a few years ago he even did half the work. He didn't want to be paid, just wanted to be useful.

I gave him a free tat and we called it even.

I like that he comes in here just to hang out and keep us smiling. He brings a good vibe into the shop. Adds to the comfort of this place.

"Zane, Needles," he says in a gruff voice as he sets down a carrier with four coffees. He's got his own in his other hand. Trisha and Logan will be in soon to snag their coffees. Marky's pretty fucking reliable for bringing in the morning brew.

Trisha wasn't into it at first. She's a picky broad. But Marky was determined to break down her walls and it started with getting her latte right, or whatever the fuck she drinks. Out of all of us, she opens up to him first when she has something she needs to get off her chest.

"Yes!" Needles grabs his cup and doesn't even check the temperature before guzzling it down. I take mine in my hand, but I don't like mine kissed-the-fucking-sun scalding hot like he does. I vent the lid, giving it a chance to cool off some.

"Thanks, man. What are you up to today?" I ask Marky.

"Not much." Marky grabs his usual seat in the chair next to the counter. "Just needed to get out of the house this morning." He lost his wife a while back. They'd been married for nearly forty years before cancer took her from him. I know it still hurts him to live in the house they'd had together since they got married. But the stubborn fuck won't leave.

Can't say I blame him, but I don't envy him either.

"What's new with you?" he asks. "You look too fucking happy for not having had your coffee yet."

Needles snorts. "See, told you."

I look between the two of them like they've lost their damn minds. "What the fuck?"

"Just saying, you're not much of a morning person is all." Marky looks at me expectantly.

"I can't be happy?" I ask.

"Quit fucking around," he says, rolling his eyes.

"Met a girl," I say with my grin spreading into an all-out smile.

Needles laughs at me, and Marky cracks a smile.

"She's that good in bed, huh?" Needles asks as he slaps my back and sets his cup down on the counter.

The smile leaves my face. I don't wanna tell them I haven't tapped that yet. But at the same time, some part of me also kinda does. There's something about having to chase her that I fucking love.

"She's not that kind of girl," I say before taking a sip of my coffee, trying to play this cool.

Needles looks at me incredulously. "You're hung up on a girl you haven't even had yet?" Marky chuckles at him and leans back in his seat. Needles has no fucking room to talk. I don't even know the last time he got laid. He's all talk, no game. So he can shove it.

"Fuck off," I say. "She's a challenge. I like that about her."

His brows raise. "Ten bucks says she's too good for you. Either that or she's stuck-up."

My jaw tics at his words. I don't like either of those thoughts. I also don't like that the first one is true. Yeah, she's too good for me, but good girls love bad boys. So I have a shot. Even if she thinks she can get away from me.

"What's her name?" Marky asks, snapping me back to the present.

"Madeline, but she goes by Maddy."

“Madeline is the name of a bitch with a stick up her ass,” Needles immediately blurts out. He says the words confidently, and he’s real close to getting his ass kicked. I don’t like it. I don’t like how he’s thinking about her, and that it’s so easy for him to talk about her like that.

“Your fucking name is Cody. I don’t think you have much room to talk, you preppy jock, you.” Marky laughs at the two of us. Cody Lewinsky is as far from a jock as you can get. He’s lanky and goth as fuck. At first I wasn’t sure I’d like him, to be honest. And he didn’t talk much during our first session. Apparently, he doesn’t like other people inking him. Can’t blame him for that though, because I don’t either. As soon as I was finished with the first session and he saw my work, he started talking and hasn’t stopped since.

We bonded over our shared passion for tattooing and I really got to know him. He’s a funny guy, but real standoffish. I like the fucker though. And his art is on point and on trend. That’s what people go to him for, and it works out nicely for the business.

“Where’d you meet her?” Marky asks as Garret walks through the front door.

Garret Duncan is best described as Vlad’s go-to henchman. He’s tall and classically handsome like Jackson is, but he’s fucking ruthless and coldhearted. One look at him and you can tell. What’s worse is the fucker doesn’t like me. He sees me as a threat because the rest of the mob is too fucking scared of me beating their asses to fuck with me.

I’m no threat though. I have no intention of being any more involved with the mob than I already am. I don’t want to be Vlad’s lapdog. But Garret does, and he thinks everyone’s a threat to that goal. I’m just waiting for the day he steps up, thinking he can take me. I’ll be ready though.

“Garret!” Needles calls out as he walks toward us. “It’s in the back.” He keeps his voice even, but he’s tense. No one fucking likes Garret being in here. But once a week he comes to get the cash.

It’s a necessity. An unfortunate one.

As Garret walks past us with a simple nod and not a single word said, I see Trisha walking toward the front door. She spots Garret and does an about-face. She fucking hates him. Trisha is short and petite, doesn't have an ounce of muscle on her. She also doesn't have any visible ink on her either. She's tatted up though. She's got a UV tat on her back. It's fucking gorgeous.

When people come in, they're surprised a cute little thing like Trisha is an artist. She went to school for ballet, for fuck's sake. She's an artist through and through. And she's damn good at her techniques. Her specialty is in unique tattooing methods. She doesn't work much because of it, but she's happy with that.

Trisha can be a strong force when push comes to shove, but she's a smart woman. She avoids conflict whenever possible. And for her that means staying away from Garret, and the rest of the mob for that matter.

She'll come back when he's gone, I'm sure. I feel for her though. She's a damn good artist and a real sweetheart. I hate that I put all of them through this shit. But I'm firmly under Vlad's thumb. There's nothing I can do to change this shit. Maybe someday if Nikolai ever takes over things will be different, but I'm not holding my breath on that one. Not with Garret in the picture.

"So?" Marky asks, and it takes a minute to remember what the hell he's talking about.

"So what?" I ask.

"The girl, Maddy?"

The tight feeling in my chest lets up and an asymmetric grin slips into place. I can't fucking stand Garret being in my shop, but I can get the fuck over shit I can't change. I don't let things I can't help keep me down. If I did, I'd be one real miserable fucker. Besides, we're used to this. It's coming on four years now of this routine. It's easier to just ignore it.

"Met her at the club the other night." I take a sip of coffee and stare at the label. "Turns out she's my neighbor." I don't tell

them she took off that night and now she's stuck with me. My grin widens; her ass really is stuck with me this time.

Needles chuckles. "That's a real fucking tease."

"You're telling me." I think about how she pushed me away. She's teasing both of us. I fucking love it.

"She's a good girl and real fucking smart, too." I took a look at her books when I helped her unpack. I have to admit, the more I get to know about her, the more I like.

"Sounds like she's out of your league." Garret walks past us as Needles puts his two cents in.

Out of my league? Probably. But I still fucking want her. Besides, I'm just talking about a fuck. Every good girl likes a little taste of the bad boy.

"If she's a good girl, and she's not slumming it for the night, my money is on her staying far away from you." It's like he read my mind and he's determined to put me in a bad mood. I know how she felt with my body pressed up against hers. I know she wants me.

"What's that supposed to mean?" My fist clenches, and my brow furrows. What the fuck? Needles is like my fucking brother. He's supposed to be on my side.

"I'm saying she's too good for you." He takes a look up from the books and realizes how pissed off I am. "Not that that's a bad thing. She's probably stuck-up and wound too tight anyway."

"All 'cause her name is Madeline?" He doesn't even know her.

"No," he says in a hard voice. "'Cause you wanted her, and she turned you down. She's the bitch from the club who left you hanging, isn't she?" Fuck, I wish I hadn't told him that.

"Watch it. She's not a bitch." My voice drops low and I narrow my eyes at him. Yeah, she turned me down. Nothing fucking wrong with that. I need to take it easy and slow with her, but I'm going to have her. I fucking know I will.

He puts his hands up in surrender and gives me a look I've never seen from him before. A look as if he's scared I'm

gonna kick his ass. And he should be scared. I don't like the way he's talking about her. This protective nature in me is something new to me. But I can't help it. I don't want my best friend talking about her like that.

"I'm just saying, if she doesn't like you, then that loss is on her. That's all I'm saying."

I let it slide and try to get this tension out of my shoulders and just relax. He's only looking to defend me. He doesn't like her for running off, but he doesn't know enough to judge. If he met her, things would be different. Just that simple thought calms me enough to let it all roll off my shoulders.

"Who's that?" Garret asks. As far as I'm concerned, it's none of his damn business.

"Just Zane's neighbor," Needles answers, and I wish he hadn't. I don't want Garret knowing about her. Or Vlad, for that matter. They sure as fuck don't need to know where she lives.

Garret's brows raise and a crooked grin grows on his face. I don't like it. My stomach sinks, and I have to set my coffee on the counter.

"She givin' you a hard time?" he asks with a wicked twinkle in his eyes. Both he and Vlad have been known to rough up women. That, and fuck women a little *too close* to being *too young*. My first thought is to make it very clear that I want him to stay far away from her, but I can't say that. Knowing him, he'd go after her if he knew that's what I wanted. Just to fuck with me, and just to hurt her.

"Not at all. She's just making me work for it." I try to come off casual, and I think it works.

Garret lets out a humorless laugh. "Well if you need any help taming her, I'd be happy to join in." A sickness rolls through me and Needles is quick to look away. His face is pale, and he keeps his eyes on the floor. He forgets all the fucking time who we're dealing with, and what Garret's capable of. I'm the only one in here who's a member of the Koronav. I'm the one who has to deal with these fucks. I try to keep the two

separate, but I wish Needles would shut the fuck up sometimes.

Marky starts to say something, but I cut him off. “All good,” I say. I’m quick to just shut it down. “If I ever need anything, I’ll ask for it. But on this issue, I’m all good on my own.” I hold his gaze, daring him to push any further.

He tilts his head and grins. “Alright then.” I hope I didn’t tempt him. I don’t think I did, but I’m sure as fuck gonna be keeping a closer eye on Maddy, and Katie, too.

“Catch you boys later,” Garret says. I give him a nod, still holding his gaze until he turns away.

It’s quiet in the shop for a minute. I take a sip and cut Needles off as he starts to apologize to me. I shake my head and reassure him, “It’s all good.”

“So about this girl?” Marky asks. I stare back at him, wondering if I should even go for her. She is too good for me. I shouldn’t bring her into this shit. I’ll look out for those two if Garret starts coming around, but I shouldn’t bring trouble to her doorstep.

“You really hung up on her?”

I cluck my tongue against the roof of my mouth. It’s not like I wanna marry her. I’m just intrigued by the challenge. And I know she wants me. I remember the way she molded her body against mine. I remember the spark between us. Fuck, yes. I need to have the broad.

I clear my throat and give Marky a small smile as my first client walks through the door. “She’s a real good girl who’s gonna find out what it’s like to be with a bad boy like me.” I give Needles a smile which finally puts him at ease.

He chuckles as he says, “Yeah, okay. I’ll believe it when it happens.”

CHAPTER 7

MADLINE

For the next week, I avoid Zane like the plague. Not that I have any time to see him. My class schedule is packed, and I'm usually awake by six a.m. and home by seven p.m. on most days. I don't have much time after homework to do anything but argue with Katie over dumb shit and then turn in for sleep.

She gets on my damn nerves, but I love her. I'd be lost without her, and the same goes for her.

The bus I'm on comes to a stop a couple of blocks away from my condo. I get off after thanking the driver, mentally cursing that I didn't just wait for Katie to get out of her class so we could have carpooled. Though, I could have just taken the car home myself and left Katie there to take the bus.

I would have never heard the end of it, I think to myself. Besides, riding on the bus wasn't that bad.

That's one thing I hate about sharing a car in a strange town. I can't move about like I want. I'd love to go find a coffee shop and open my books up and just relax as I study. I used to do that all the time back home. The walkability in my town was fabulous. Not here though. For a state college there's literally nothing around it. Main Street has four stores on it. Four! I'm not used to being so far away from shops. I wanna get out and go somewhere to unwind.

I smile as I remember the purchases I made before I left campus. Thank God one of those stores was a liquor shop. A

glass of wine will make this economics homework far more enjoyable. Or at least less miserable.

The whole ride home I'd been thinking about the scene in the kitchen with Zane. How hot his body felt against mine, how much I wanted him to take me right then and there, and how close I'd come to giving myself over to him totally.

That would certainly make my night more entertaining. And God knows I need some sort of release. Badly. And soon.

Now my panties are soaking wet, and I can't wait to get home to change out of them. Inwardly I curse Zane for my affliction. If he would just stay away from me, I wouldn't be spending half my time thinking naughty thoughts and fighting my desire for him. I'm starting to wonder why I'm even fighting him. It's not like it'd be the worst thing in the world to give in a little. He'd be a distraction though. Not like a coffee shop where I could just pick up and leave whenever I wanted.

I can already tell he'd be an addiction. And then when I was at his mercy and begging for his touch, he'd break me. Yeah, that's why I need to stay away.

By the time I turn the corner and the condo comes into view, I'm tired. I've been walking across campus all day and the bag I'm carrying feels like it weighs a ton. My shoulders feel sore.

I'm halfway there when I hear, "You look like you had a rough day, Peaches." The deep voice sends a chill down my spine, and I have to close my eyes.

Is this guy a ghost or something? Seriously, he always seems to appear without warning.

I turn to see Zane standing there with that cocky smirk on his face. His hair is slicked back, he's wearing blue jeans, and a white, short-sleeved shirt that shows off his bulging biceps and tattoos. Tatted and ripped. That describes him perfectly.

I don't know what it is, but he seems to get hotter every time I see him, I think, practically salivating over the sexy bad boy.

I scowl at him to hide my lust, letting him know he's nothing special.

“Where did you come from?” I demand coolly. I’m sure as shit not going to let him know how he really affects me. He’d only try harder if he knew how I’ve started thinking about him at night. His bedroom is right across from mine, and I’m ashamed to admit how I’ve peeked through my curtains a time or two. I’ve already decided we need to move when this lease is up.

Zane twists his chiseled features into a mocking pout. “Damn, I don’t get a ‘Hi, how are you?’”

I cross my arms across my breasts. “No,” I say flatly. I want to say, *I’m not going to be nice to you when you make me feel so... sexually frustrated.* “Sorry.” I tack on the sorry and only partly feel like a complete bitch. I need to push this guy away. He’s no good for me. If that means I have to be a bitch, so be it. He’ll get the hint and leave me alone.

Zane lets out a mock sigh. “Damn, and here I was thinking that you couldn’t wait to kiss me.”

Despite pretending to be bitchy, Zane seems to sense I want to kiss him. Badly.

It only further irritates me.

“No, what I can’t wait to do, is go inside and take a nice hot shower.”

Zane’s right eyebrow shoots up. “A *hot* shower, huh?”

I curse inwardly for making myself an easy target, my face flaming from his implication. “Yeah, now out of my way.” I barge on past Zane, intent on leaving him in the dust. But he’s not about to let me get away, walking me down in two quick strides. Come on! What do I have to do to get him to pick on someone else?

“Not so fast, peaches. Let me handle that load for you.” Without asking, he removes my bag from my shoulders. My arms slip the loops before I can stop them, and I whip around to face him. I swear sparks penetrate my shirt when his hands get near me.

“Better now?” he asks.

I open my mouth to make a biting reply, but then close it. Despite his playfulness, Zane is only being a gentleman to me, and I'm treating him like crap. Maybe I should stop being so abrasive toward him and give him a chance.

But that's what he wants, I argue with myself. For me to let my guard down so he can get in. If he's being nice, it's only because he wants to win this little game since I'm probably the first girl that's turned him down in years, and he can't handle it.

I do have to admit my shoulders feel a lot better without the heavy weight on them.

"Yes," I say grudgingly as I roll my shoulders. "But you didn't have to do that. It's only a few more steps."

"I didn't *have* to, but I wanted to." He seems so sincere that I immediately feel guilty.

I look away and give him a small, "Thank you. I really appreciate it."

"Anything for a pretty lady," he says, lightening up the mood.

I snort. "Please."

"Why do you always give me such a rough time? I'm just trying to get to know you."

"Because you're bad news," I say, "and knowing you is probably more trouble than it's worth." I have to be honest. Maybe if he knows what I'm thinking, he'll respect my decision and leave me alone.

Zane makes a hurt face. "Why do you have such a low opinion of me? What have I done to deserve it?"

I gesture at him. "Just look at you. You look like trouble in the flesh, the good looks, the tattoos. You have such a... bad boy vibe."

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with that. And since when did being good-looking and having tattoos become a crime?"

"Don't try to sit here and act like you aren't a player that hasn't been with a billion girls and doesn't have several

girlfriends right now.”

“I don’t,” Zane says. I don’t fucking believe in that, and I don’t do liars. I *hate* liars.

“Sure.” *I bet he probably has ten packs of Trojans in his pocket right now. The extra large kind.*

“What will it take for you to believe me?” he asks, and I don’t even look at him when I answer.

“Nothing.”

“Come on, you can do better than that. Ask me anything you want about my personal life, and I’ll give you a truthful answer.”

As much as I want to grill Zane on his past, I don’t want to seem like I’m too interested. Besides, I doubt he’ll tell me the truth about his sexual escapades. “I don’t have to ask anything. You’re a player, and that’s all I need to know.” The scene from the other night with the bartender flashes in front of my eyes, the way she looked as if she wanted Zane to fuck her right then and there.

I wonder if he’s already been with her. She knew his name. *He must be good if she wanted seconds.*

“Okay. You got me. Yes, I’ve been with a few girls, and yes I haven’t been a model citizen. But I can swear to you that I don’t have any secret girlfriends or anything like that. In fact, you’re the first girl in a long time that’s intrigued me.”

“I’m the first girl in a long time that’s resisted your advances, you mean,” I say bitchily before I can stop myself.

“Yeah, that too, and I can’t lie, it makes me want to get to know you.”

I knew it, I think to myself. He’s only after me because I haven’t fallen at his feet like all the other girls in his life. The second I do, he’ll drop me like a bad habit.

Decision decided. There’s no way I’m letting my guard down for him.

“Thanks for proving my point.” I don’t know why, but I wanna cry. It hurts thinking I was right about him. I knew it though.

“That doesn’t prove shit,” Zane growls. He seems irritated with my assumptions about him. I must say, he looks even sexier when he’s angry. “And it has zero to do with whether I’m looking for a quick hookup. Which I’m not.”

“Bullshit. The way you’ve pushed me up against the wall, twice I might add, suggests otherwise.” As annoyed as I am, just thinking about our close encounters sends goosebumps up my arm and makes my clit throb.

Zane gives me an intense look that makes butterflies flutter in my stomach. “But you liked it. And you wanted it.”

I open my mouth to swear at him in denial, but then snap it shut. It’s true. I did like it. And boy, do I fucking want it. But luckily, I have enough wits about me to know that nothing good would come from doing the sideways tango with him.

“Sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say. My cheeks heat and he smirks at me. Damn it. Now *I’m* a liar.

“Don’t lie, peaches. You just need to give me a chance, get to know me. All I need is one night with you to change your perception of me.”

“Never,” I swear, though inwardly I’m trembling at the prospect of having one night with Zane.

We reach the doorstep of my condo and I stop to stare at him. “Well?” I ask. I just need to get my bag. Have some wine and study. I need to focus.

He knows exactly what I mean, but he plays coy. “Well, what?”

I hold out my hand. “Give me my bag back so I can go inside,” I order flatly.

Grinning, he keeps my bag out of reach. “What’s the magic word?”

“Now!” I growl.

“Eeenh. Wrong.”

I place my hands on my hips and give him the most murderous scowl I can manage. “I’m not saying it, so you can either give me my bag back, or you can get the hell out of my way.”

He studies me, and I have the distinct feeling that he’s loving my sass, judging by that cocky grin on his face. “You’re a stubborn little peach, aren’t ya?” he remarks, his eyes twinkling.

I continue to scowl at him. “Will you stop calling me that? It’s friggin’ annoying.”

“You know you love it.”

I hate to admit it, but his little nickname is growing on me. I’ll be damned if I let him know that though.

“In your dreams.”

“Indeed.” He lets out a mock sigh when I remain unmoved. “Alright peaches, being the nice guy that I am, and even after how rudely you’ve treated me, I’ll let you slide with no apology—”

“Good—” I say, interrupting before he can finish. I try to snatch my bag out of his hands, but he evades me easily and says, “If you go on a date with me.”

My jaw drops like a bridge during a siege. Zane just isn’t going to take no for an answer. “Are you serious?” I should be flattered, but instead I’m shocked. And maybe a little scared. How long is he going to keep pursuing me? If he just wants another notch on his headboard, he could easily find someone else.

He nods. “I’ll take you somewhere nice and show you I’m not the bad guy you think I am.”

“No,” I say after a moment. “I don’t want to go on a date with you. Not now. Not ever.”

Zane is shocked by my refusal, though he tries to hide it, and he stares at me for the longest time before finally saying, “As you wish.” He comes forward and gently places my bag in my hand.

I snarl, “Thank you. Now have a nice day.” I move to walk past him, when suddenly he grabs me and pushes me up against the front door.

“I didn’t say that you could go in yet,” he growls, his breath hot on my neck. Apparently he’s not as shocked as he looked by my rejection. I’m doing a shit job at hiding how much he turns me on.

Why do I keep winding up in the same position? I wonder. Once again, I’m sandwiched between Zane’s hard body and a hard place. And once again, I’m turned on to the max.

Oh fuck, I can feel his erection digging into my side. Shit, shit. My pussy clenches. A primal side of me wants him to take me like this and fuck me against the door for being so rude to him. I bite my lip and feel my core heat for him.

His lips are so close to mine and I want nothing more than to kiss them, suck on them. Devour them. Down below, my pussy clenches again with longing. I’d love for him to punish me with that thick cock of his. This is bad. Why does he keep doing this to me?

Zane stares into my eyes, and I’m suddenly lost in his. All I can think to myself is, *Why am I resisting this man? Just give in. Let him take me. All of me.*

Yes!

By now I’m hyperventilating, burning up with desire. I feel like all my defenses are crumbling, like I’m a few moments away from being totally his. And I want it. I want him.

Zane knows this too and he gives me an arrogant grin. He moves in close, bringing his lips close to my neck. I can feel his hot breath on it and it’s driving me wild, making my limbs shudder with anticipation.

Take me, I groan inwardly. Take me right here. Right now.

Zane trails his lips up my neck, grazing my flesh, all the way to mine. This is it. This is the moment he kisses me and I give in to him.

Ready to finally surrender, I close my eyes and wait, my breathing ragged.

A second later, Zane lets out a mocking laugh and I pop them back open.

“Sorry peaches, but I gotta go,” he says, releasing me and stepping away.

I gasp as fury twists the insides of my stomach. The bastard just made a fool out of me!

“If you want to take me up on my offer, you know where to find me,” he says in parting. As he walks off, he’s wearing a cocky smile that says, *Payback is a bitch.*

In anger, I watch him walk over to his place and disappear inside, leaving me feeling sexually frustrated. Again.

CHAPTER 8

ZANE

I lean my head into the spray of hot water and run my hands through my hair. The water feels good, but it's not doing a damn thing for this erection Maddy left me with. I rinse my body, feeling a million times better now that I have the sweat of the day off of me. I got in the shower as soon as I was done helping her loosen up some. But fuck, what I need is definitely not a shower.

I almost have Maddy where I want her. She was so close. But she would have regretted anything I'd done to her. I know she would have.

And that's something I don't want. She's gonna be right next door to me. She can't get away from me, but I also can't get away from her.

It'll be nice once I finally get her impaled on my dick, but I need to make sure she's gonna be happy about it afterward. I have to admit, it felt fucking good teasing her, too. It felt real good, knowing she wanted me and leaving her to suffer with her little pussy in need. My dick jumps with the need to satisfy that itch for her.

My sweet little peach is too fucking stubborn. I know she wants this. But something's holding her back.

'Cause I'm a bad man. And she's too fucking good for me.

Anger rises up as I have the thought.

Maybe that's true, but she still wants me. And I can give her the release she desperately needs.

I walk out of the shower and feel the hot steam that's filled the room. I grab a towel and pat down my face and dry off my hair. I'm too fucking hot. I almost move the towel to my waist to cover myself out of habit.

But then I remember that she's right there.

Maddy's condo is parallel to mine. Our bathrooms are right across from one another. I'm sure she could see me from her bedroom, too. I lift the blinds and open the window. There's a few feet between the buildings, so it's possible that someone walking by could see, but it's real fucking unlikely.

If my girl is in her room, I bet she could get a good look.

I look down at my cock and stroke it a few times, I need it to look good. I lean against the wall and pump my cock until it's hard as steel. I think about how her breasts felt pressed against my chest, those soft moans that spilled from her lips, and that's all I fucking need.

Shit, precum's leaking out. It's been weeks since I've had a release. I need one bad. If she'd just let me in I could be over there in a heartbeat and have both us cumming like we need to.

I open the blinds and smile wide when I see her on her bed with a large ass textbook in her lap. Yes! I open the window as far as it'll go, my thighs hitting the windowsill, and I smirk when I see her head turn to me from the corner of my eye. I pretend like I don't see her though. As if I just open my window stark fucking naked all the time. She doesn't know I don't.

Knowing how she's trying to push me away, there's no way she'd ever do this if she knew that I knew she was watching.

Damn it's hard keeping the cocky smile off my face. I turn to my side and stroke my dick once. I hear her little gasp, but I make sure I don't look out the window. In my periphery I wait for her to get up and close the curtains, but she doesn't.

Fuck yeah, my girl likes what she sees.

My forearm rests against the wall and my face is just barely showing in the window. Just enough to take a peek at her, but she can still see the goods. And judging by her face, she's happy with the merchandise.

I feel fucking cocky, knowing a girl like her is being so bad just so she can have a look at me. I let out a small groan that she can hear, and stroke my dick nice and slow.

Her eyes widen and search for mine, but I keep my face hidden in the crook of my arm.

I can practically see the wheels turn as she considers what she should do.

Be a good girl and touch yourself for me. Come on Maddy, be my sweet little peach and give me something to work with. Fuck, I wish. But that's way too much for me to hope for.

She's a smart girl, I bet she knows what I'm up to. I can see the hesitation, but more than that, lust. For a second I think she's going to leave, or get up and close her curtains. But she doesn't.

She watches as I stroke myself for her. I angle my body so she can see how I'm trimmed up and she can have a better angle of that sexy "V" at my hips. I've been told more than a time or two that it's my best feature. I'm pulling out everything I have to show her what I've got. Fuck, I'm peacocking like a bitch, but I don't care. I want her drooling over me and wanting me more than she's ever wanted anything else.

Seeing that heat in her eyes makes it worth it. No fucking shame at all.

Fuck me. She moves the book off her lap and leans back against the bed. Yes!

I stroke myself again as another bead of precum leaks out. I use it to rub along my head, and I swear to God her lips part with a moan and her tongue licks along her lower lip.

Yes, fuck yes. That's my girl. Let loose, baby. My peach needs to unwind.

I picture her licking the seam of my dick, and I stroke myself faster.

I see her hand slip under the covers and I almost lose it. Fuck, that's so hot. She's so goddamned turned on by what I'm doing she has to touch herself.

I imagine myself on top of her right fucking now. I'd slip that tank top off her body and suck her hardened nubs into my mouth. I wanna feel the weight of those tits in my hand. I can hear her moan as I twirl my tongue and bite down slightly. I keep up my strokes and rub the bit of precum over the head of my dick.

Fuck, she'd feel so good. Her mouth, her pussy. I want it all. I want to feel how good she is when she cums on my dick.

I look out of the corner of my eye and she sees me. Her hand stops, and her mouth parts. She's been caught in the act. I turn to her and stroke myself again.

"Pinch your nipple," I mouth to her and she stares back at me. Right now's not a time for teasing. I can't fucking take another standoff ending with both of us still hot and bothered. I need to cum, and she needs it, too.

I tilt my head down and stare straight into her eyes.

"Do it. Now," I tell her. I know she wants this. It's now or never, peaches. Don't disappoint me.

Her left hand moves to her tank top and she pinches her nipple quickly through her shirt and lets her hand fall after that. I smirk at her. I'm not letting her get off that easy.

I shake my head. "Let me see." I stroke myself again and her eyes fall to my dick.

Fuck me, she licks her lips and her hand moves under the sheet. I should let her have this. I know I should. I could scare her away by taking control, but I need to push.

I clear my throat, drawing her attention back to me.

"I wanna see." She bites her bottom lip as a flush moves up her chest and into her cheeks. She looks so vulnerable, so damn beautiful. She nods her head and slowly pulls the strap

of her tank top down, exposing her plump, milky breasts and small, pert nipples. Fuck, I want my mouth on her right now. For a second I think about going over there. But I don't want to risk losing her. I feel like the second I lose eye contact she's gonna run far away from me. I need to make sure she gets off.

"Pinch it," I mouth. She's slow to move, but she obeys. That in and of itself is an accomplishment. Finally, she listens to me. She gently pinches her nipple, rolling it between her finger.

"Again." She keeps eye contact and pinches it again before taking the other strap down and doing the same to her other nipple.

Fuck, I'm so close to cumming. This broad has me wrapped around her finger and she doesn't even know it.

"Harder." I give her the command and she moves both her hands to her nipples, but I shake my head.

"One hand. Play with yourself." She stares at me for a moment and I wonder if she heard me right. But then she slips her hand back down.

"I wanna see." That right there is the line. She shakes her head and the same fear I keep seeing in her eyes is there. I stop my movements and consider going over there right now and showing her how fucking good it's gonna be when she surrenders to me, but then I think twice.

This is a broad who needs time and space. I have to earn her trust. I can give her that. I can show her she can trust me.

I repeat my words, "I wanna see you." She shakes her head slightly and I don't push for more. "Don't stop, peaches." I stroke myself again. "Cum with me."

She's slow to move, but after a long moment she does. And I feel so much fucking relief that she does.

That's my girl.

I start pumping my cock, watching her ease back against her headboard.

She spreads her legs wider under the covers, but she leaves the blanket there covering herself.

Even covered, she's beautiful and tempting in every way. Maybe even more so since she's still hiding from me.

"Again." I give the command aloud and her eyes widen, darting to the narrow path between our buildings, but there's no one there, only us in this moment.

She bites down on her lip and pinches her nipple hard. Yes. Fuck, yes. I quicken my pace and give her another order.

"More." *More.* That's what I want from her. More of whatever she'll give me. I give her the command and watch as her back arches from how intense her touch is. I wish I were there. I wish I was the one giving her that pleasure.

I watch as her head tilts back, and her orgasm rips through her body. Her lips part and I faintly hear her moan as she cums from her own touch. It's the hottest thing I've ever seen.

My spine tingles and my balls draw up. Oh, fuck. *Maddy.* I moan her name as I cum. I cum violently, leaving a mess everywhere as hot streams pour into my hand.

I breathe out deep and look up just in time to see her pulling the curtains closed and I have to smile.

The next time I cum, it'll be inside her pretty little pussy, that's for fucking sure.

CHAPTER 9

MADLINE

“God, I can’t decide what I wanna wear,” Katie complains, twisting sideways to look at her ass in my bedroom mirror. I’m sitting on my bed, having watched her complain for the past twenty minutes as we get ready for class. I think what she’s wearing, blue jeans and a colorful blouse, is fine, but for some reason Katie simply can’t take my advice. She’s tried on at least ten different outfits and each one has something wrong with it.

“For the millionth time,” I say with exasperation, “Just wear that. You look fine.” I don’t know why she insists on asking for my advice if she isn’t going to listen to me. But then again I don’t know why she keeps coming in here, knowing I’m going to say the same thing. She’s looked perfectly fine in everything I’ve seen so far.

Katie is still twisted to one side. “I would, Maddy, but it makes my ass look flat.”

“But it is.” I hide my smile. She does have a flat ass. She’s got a skinny waist and wide hips I admire though.

Katie turns to glare daggers at me. “What did you just say?”

“Your ass *is* flat,” I clarify. “Flat as a pancake.” I don’t let on that I’m fucking with her, partly to get back at her for keeping me prisoner while she tries on her entire wardrobe.

Katie rushes forward, grabs a pillow off the bed and lobs it at my head. “Bitch.”

I dodge it, giggling. “I’m only kidding!”

Katie crosses her arms over her breasts and scowls. “No you’re not!”

“I am. I swear.” I put my hands up in surrender, but apparently she’s really pissed off.

“I don’t believe you, Miss Evil. But you know what? Your ass isn’t exactly anything special either, so there.” Katie sticks her tongue out at me.

“Oh honey,” I warn, “don’t go there.”

“Why not? You just did.” Touché. But I didn’t say it to hurt her. I’ll try being honest with her, see if that doesn’t make her less pissy.

“I only said it to get you to stop complaining.”

“That worked out well, didn’t it?” she asks with a bitchy tone. What the ever loving fuck? She better be kidding.

“It stopped you from complaining, didn’t it?” I point out.

Katie sighs. “I knew I should have picked Vanessa for my roommate. She would have never had the nerve to tell me I have a flat ass.”

“Hey!” I protest.

Katie sticks her tongue out at me again. “Now you see how it feels.”

I cluck my tongue. “You need to get laid.” She’s either PMSing or seriously deprived of sexual gratification.

“*You* need to get laid. I can’t believe you pushed Zane away for a second time.”

If only you knew what happened last night, I think to myself. While I told Katie about my episode with Zane in the kitchen, she has no idea about our encounter the previous day, and I’m not sure if I’m going to tell her about that. *Or how close I am to having wild, crazy sex with him.*

“Have you seen him at all since moving day?” she asks, interrupting my thoughts.

Oh yeah. I've more than seen him.

Images of his naked, hard, chiseled body and big, fat fucking cock flash in my mind and my temperature starts to rise as I relive the events from the previous day. It felt so good to relieve some of that tension that had been building since we first met. Still, there's a lot of tension left, and down below, my pussy starts to feel moist and my clit throbs. In vain, I try to push these naughty thoughts away, cursing how horny they make me.

"Are you okay?" Katie asks, peering at me with concern.

"Huh?" I say breathlessly. I'm literally in a daze. Seriously, I'm about two seconds away from shoving Katie out of the room and spending some quality time with my rabbit, my favorite vibrator.

"I asked if you'd seen Zane."

"Oh. Nope," I lie. "I haven't seen him."

Katie frowns with disappointment. "It's a shame you won't give him a chance. I'd kill to have a guy that hot that crazy over me."

"Why would you? You'd be killing for a guy who probably has several different girlfriends that don't even know about each other." And that's it right there. I know he can have anyone he wants. There's nothing special about me except that I keep pushing him away. So the moment I sleep with him, it'll be over and I'll be crushed. It's a horrible fucking position to be in... because I *really* wanna fuck him.

Katie taps her fingers against her chin. "You know what? You're probably right."

"I know I am."

"I still wouldn't let that stop me from having at least one night with him. Shit, if I were you, I'd be over there riding him right now." She grins wickedly, as if imagining all the naughty things she'd be doing with Zane. "Some early morning foreplay before class."

“Katie!” I flush. Shit, I’d love that. And he’s right there. He’s so close.

Katie makes her customary fake innocent face. “Wha?”

I smack a palm against my forehead, and shake my head. “Never mind. I just can’t with you.”

Despite my objection, I can’t help but think about what Katie said. How I would love to be over there right now, riding Zane’s big fat cock, feeling him pump those powerful hips beneath me, thrusting deep inside of me with powerful force. My clit throbs in response to my fantasy, and I unconsciously touch myself.

“Maddy?” Katie asks, looking closely at me with curiosity.

I snatch my hand away from my lower stomach, my heart pounding, shocked by how close I’ve come to touching myself in front of my best friend.

Screw you Zane, I rage, for making me feel this way, for making me lose control.

I have no idea how I’m going to get through the day with all these dirty thoughts running through my mind. There is no way I’ll be able to focus. I might as well stay home.

This is why getting with a guy like Zane is no good. We’re not even an item yet and he’s already affecting my school performance. And my sanity.

“Yeah?” I say, trying to play it cool.

“You alright?” she asks with a cocked brow.

“Yeah, why?” I clear my throat and can’t even look her in the eyes.

Katie shook her head. “I dunno, you started panting and looking all funny and then you were reaching down for your... umm... hoohaw. Got a yeast infection?”

I scowl with indignation. “Heck no!”

“Oh. Because I do,” she says with a shrug.

“Okay, that’s TMI.”

“Why?” Katie complains. “Aren’t we besties that are supposed to share everything together? Anyway, it itches like hell! I was scratching my stuff so much this morning that my labia turned all—”

“Katie!” I yell.

“Wha?”

“TMI!”

We spend the next ten minutes arguing over whether Katie should just wear what she has on or change into another outfit until I point out that if we don’t leave soon, we’ll wind up late for class. After a quick breakfast of Corn Pops and OJ, we walk outside.

It’s a cool morning, the sun is radiant, and the sky is crystal clear. It’s beautiful. It’s so pretty here. It doesn’t have the walkability of being in the city, but I’m starting to love this place.

“It’s a beautiful day today, isn’t?” Katie echoes my sentiment.

I’m about to respond when something that’s even more beautiful appears out of the condo next door. His hair slicked back, Zane looks like he’s stepped out of GQ magazine with his dark pants and dress shirt that’s opened at the chest, exposing the tanned bronze skin underneath. I swear I can see my tongue rolling along the lines of his chest. His shoulders are so broad, the shirt stretches tight over his muscles. Fuck, he’s so hot.

With swagger to die for, Zane walks up to us with a playboy grin on his face. It’s hard to look him in the eyes. I just want to stare at his dick, as if it’s out on display again.

I’m not sure what the protocol is for watching your neighbor masturbate, but my plan is to just ignore it and hope he doesn’t say shit about it. I’m just going to pretend like it never happened.

He better not say anything. My heart beats faster in my chest. I can see him teasing me for it. Holding it over my head. Shit! And then Katie will know I lied. Fuck, he better not.

“Are you stalking me now?” I demand, trying to act cool and confident when I’m really shaking inside. All I can think about as I look at him is how hot he looks naked and about his big fat, pulsating cock.

“Hey,” Katie protests, “you don’t have to be so rude to Zane, Maddy. Geez.”

Unperturbed, Zane chuckles, a deep throaty sound that does strange things to my nether regions. “Don’t be so vain, peaches, I have to work, too.”

I snort. “Well those are some pretty nice clothes just for a tattoo parlor.”

“What can I say? I like looking good.”

And you smell good too, I think to myself. Zane’s wearing a spicy cologne that turns me on big time. I wanna know what it is. I think I read somewhere that we remember scents the most out of all the senses. I wanna remember this smell. It’s like a masculine scent that was made just for him.

I’m stumped for a comeback. I’d be lying if I say he looks bad, because he looks like sex on legs. Hell, he’s practically a sex god, Zane Adonis Whatever-the-fuck-his-last-name-is.

Katie giggles. “Dude, you look more than good, like a million bucks!”

I shoot Katie a murderous glare for her treachery. She’s supposed to be on my side.

Zane grins at Katie’s compliment and then says, “But maybe I did decide to leave the second you came out.”

“See. You’re a stalker.” I hold back my smile and the small thrill I get from him admitting it. It shouldn’t make me so freaking happy, but it does.

“But I won’t have to be one if you’d just hang out with me, preferably by watching a movie or something.”

Katie leans in and growls into my ear, “Maddy, if you don’t say yes, I’m going to possess your body and have violent sex with him.” I have to laugh from her threat.

I'm silent for almost a full minute, my mind racing, before I finally say, "Fine. You win. I'll hang out with you."

Victory flashes in Zane's eyes, but he's not surprised. He knew I would give in eventually, the arrogant bastard. "A movie at your place it is. What movie would you like to see?"

"I heard Deadpool is good," Katie chimes in.

I turn to Katie and scold, "He didn't ask you!" I turn back to Zane and deadpan. "Deadpool."

Zane laughs while Katie mutters something under her breath about finding a place to hide a dead body.

After Katie and I exchange a few more feisty barbs, Zane says, "You girls are hilarious, but I gotta get going. Got a busy schedule up at the shop." He nods at Katie and says, "See ya." And to me, "Catch you later, peaches." I blush at his words and tuck my hair back behind my ear. Shit. This is not good. He's really affecting me now. Shit!

Katie squeals with delight as we watch him walk off. "Peaches! I just love that nickname. It's so frickin' cute."

I roll my eyes. "Oh please, it's obnoxious you mean." No it's not. I fucking love it. Damn it.

Katie turns to me, a big grin on her face. "You know why he named you that, right?"

"No, why?"

"Because he wants to eat you out."

I smack Katie on the arm and she howls with laughter. "I'm so done with you, Katie Butler!"

"I'm serious. He thinks you taste sweet, and he probably thinks about your juices, rolling down his chin while he's in between your..."

I plug my fingers in my ears. "I'm taking the bus!"

Katie laughs even harder, going red in the face.

"It's not funny!"

"Oh yes it is. You should've seen your face!"

I roll my eyes and walk off to the car. A few minutes later, we're driving down the road toward the university.

"Will you watch the movie with us and be my third wheel?" I ask, interrupting Katie in the middle of singing a Katy Perry song. It's gonna be bad if I don't have her there. I already know it. I'm ready to cave. I can't let it happen. I'm... I'm scared. That's the truth, and I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I am. I'm so scared that I'm on the edge of a cliff, and he's gonna fuck me and then throw me off.

Katie glances over at me. "Hmm. I dunno, Maddy. You've been pretty awful to me."

"I have? How?" She actually sounds hurt, and that worries me. I feel like I'm losing myself; I can't lose her, too.

"Well, let's see here, you said I have a flat ass."

"I already said that was a joke."

"And you didn't want to hear about my itchy vag." Okay, now I know she's joking. Thank fuck.

When I open to my mouth to curse, Katie holds up a hand. "Okay, okay, don't pull out your machete. I might watch with you."

"Might? What do you mean *might*?" I make sure to put a hint of a threat in my voice, because I *need* her there.

"I just don't understand why you would want me there. I mean, the guy is hot as all hell. I wouldn't want to share him in the least."

"That's the very reason why I need you to come. To keep me from doing something I regret. I mean, we're going to be in the living room on the couch together, all alone and in the dark..." My voice trails off as I think about how hot the setting sounds. I could just imagine us on the couch, Zane's lips on my neck, my hands stroking his rock-hard cock through his jeans. Just thinking about it makes my body shudder with anticipation.

"That sounds like the beginning of a porno movie."

"Katie," I growl.

“Alright, alright. I’ll be there.”

I lean across my seat and give Katie a brief hug. “Thank you, Katie.” She really has no idea how much this means to me.

Katie looks over at me and winks as she says, “You’re welcome... peaches.”

I resist the urge to kill her and settle on a death glare.

CHAPTER 10

ZANE

Fuck, I don't think I've ever been nervous like this before. It's stupid. It's not like I'm some dumb kid trying to get laid for the first time. But that same anxiety is racing through my blood.

Maybe it's the challenge? The fact that I don't *know* this is going to end in a good fuck.

That's gotta be why I'm so damn nervous. I wanna make sure I do this shit right so she'll give me more. 'Cause I sure as fuck want it.

I did my homework. I've got a funny movie she's gonna love, Deadpool. I heard the guy gets pegged though, not sure how I feel about that. And I picked out some flowers for my girl. She seems like a girl who'd like sunflowers.

Something about her tells me she'd like them more than other kinds of flowers.

I almost went traditional with a dozen red roses, but I think she'd like these better. I fucking hope she does.

I knock on the door and wait. I look down at the flowers. Shit, this is stupid.

I've never fucking bought flowers for a girl in my entire life.

I almost chuck them behind the bushes, but then the door opens.

My jaw drops slightly and my heartbeat slows.

She looks fucking gorgeous. She's in a shift dress that fades from white to pink and ends mid-thigh. It's not hugging her body, it's loose. I could rip that up and off of her in a second flat. She's teasing me by hiding her curves under that dress, but I already know how voluptuous she is.

My lips kick up into a smirk as I ask, "You get dressed up just for me, peaches?" I have to tease her. It wouldn't be the same if I didn't.

She looks like she's going to say something smart, but then she sees the flowers. She blushes a bit and rocks back on her heels. "Did you really get me flowers?"

The way her voice softens and color rises into her cheeks, I think I struck something in her. A chink in her armor. Fuck yes, sunflowers are my new favorite flower. Not that I already had one to begin with. But if I can get her guard down with a bouquet, I'll get one for her every day.

I hold them out for her to take and then lean in. My hands grip the door jamb and I take a peek inside.

"You letting me in?" I cock a brow and wait for my words to sink in.

Her smile falls comically and she rolls her eyes before turning her back to me and walking straight back toward the living room. "I'll take that as a yes."

I take a step in and close the door behind me. Her place is the mirror opposite of mine.

Except it's littered with Ikea furniture and girly shit.

"Hi Zane!" Katie bounds down the stairs with a bright smile on her face. "You're looking scrumptious today," she adds with a wink. This girl is ridiculous, but I love how Maddy whips around and gives her the evil eye. My girl's a bit jealous. Usually that's a turnoff, but on her, I fucking love it.

"Hey there, Katie," I greet. My brow furrows as I watch her swing around the staircase and head in the wrong fucking direction. What's this shit? She's gotta get her ass upstairs or preferably out of the house. The only reason I even suggested

we do this here is because I knew Maddy would flat-out say no to a movie date at my place.

I walk back to the living room and find Katie taking a seat on a slipper chair in the far corner and Maddy walking into the room with the sunflowers in a vase. She sets it down on the coffee table and completely ignores my look as she walks back to the kitchen.

The look that's saying, *What the fuck is your roommate staying here for?* Katie pulls a throw blanket over her lap, completely ignoring me, too.

Maddy walks back in with two bowls of popcorn. They've got red and white stripes on them, obviously meant for movie dates. She hands one to Katie, who's apparently in charge of the remotes.

I follow Maddy to the sofa, choosing my battles. Specifically, choosing not to make this a battle. She's sitting under a blanket with a bowl of popcorn on her lap continuing to pretend she can't feel my eyes boring into her skull.

"You're gonna miss it if you don't sit down." Maddy doesn't even make eye contact with me as she says it.

If that's the way she wants to play it, fine by me. Katie's in for a show then.

I toss Katie the movie, giving in to this little battle. "All yours," I tell her.

She grins, loving that she gets to stay for this showdown. That girl is trouble and she fucking knows it.

I take my seat next to Maddy and spread my arms out over the back of the sofa. I don't even mention the obvious.

A few minutes tick by of Maddy and Katie exchanging small talk as Katie fast forwards to the start of the movie. I just watch, letting them get comfortable. The two of them take covert glances at me occasionally. I keep a smile on my face so they know I'm fine with this.

Honestly, it's fine with me. It's not gonna be fine for Maddy in a minute. But for right now, it's all good.

I try to look straight ahead and watch the movie. My peaches is leaning against the armrest, her feet are a few inches from me and she's got the blanket over her lap.

I have to figure out a way to play my next move right.

I'm sure as shit not gonna be a good boy and stay seated during the movie and have her kick my ass out as soon as it's over.

Fuck that! That's not a date. And she promised me a date.

I pick her legs up and put them on my lap. I have to hold in a laugh as a piece of popcorn falls from her mouth and lands on the floor. I've obviously startled her. She looks back at me nervously, eyeing me up and down. I keep my hands on her calves and start giving her a massage. My thumb kneads into her muscles, not too deep. Just enough to give her a soothing touch.

I wait for her to say something. To tell me to stop, but she doesn't.

Katie laughs at something we both missed. I look at the screen and a dude's getting shot.

I look back at Katie, that fucking psycho. She's cracking up.

I shake my head and grin. I look at Maddy and see she's picking at the bits of popcorn left in her bowl.

I'm quick to take it out of her hands and lay it down on the floor. She doesn't need another distraction. As I set it down I slide in behind her so my chest is to her back. She's stiff at first, but she gives in to me.

Yes, good girl. Progress.

She clears her throat and tries to lean away from me slightly.

That's fine, she can play like that.

I slip my hand under the covers and rest it on her thigh. I don't squeeze, and it's on her outer thigh and over her dress. As if it's just a simple touch and there's no intention of going further. Her breathing picks up, and she knows exactly what I'm doing.

She turns against me and opens that smart mouth of hers, but I cut her off before she says anything.

“Shh, the movie’s on.” I keep my eyes on the screen as Katie turns.

“Hush, Maddy.” I can’t help the rough chuckle and wide smile as Katie admonishes Maddy.

Maddy presses her lips into a tight line and backs her ass up hard into my dick.

Oh, damn. I bend over her body slightly and hold my breath for a second. “That was real fucking close, peaches,” I whisper in her ear.

She turns back to give me some of that lip, but Katie cuts her off.

“Guys!”

Maddy looks back at Katie likes she’s ready to snap. I fucking love this. It’s more entertaining than any movie I could’ve picked out.

I take advantage of the two of them engaging in a stareoff and slip my hand up Maddy’s dress.

Katie gets a sly look on her face and whips her head to the TV. I’m sure my girl gave it away. But I don’t give a fuck.

She arches her back as I move my hand to her pussy. The sight of her pushing her breasts out like that makes my dick even harder.

Her eyes go wide and I lean in close to her, resting my head just behind hers.

“Shh,” I tell her and plant a kiss on her neck.

Her breathing picks up, but she lets me. She looks back at me and bites her lip, but she doesn’t say anything.

Yes!

I tap her thighs, waiting to see if she’ll let me go farther, and she does. My girl must need this ‘cause she’s not fighting me.

That sassy mouth of hers is closed, and her legs are spread just enough for me to get her off. I chuckle in the crook of her neck.

My stubborn peach is at least willing to put her guard down long enough to let me get her off. Maybe she's thinking she'll just get off and leave me hanging, and to be honest, I'm fine with that. For now.

Her chest rises and falls with her heavy breathing and she licks her lips as I slip my fingers past her panties and circle her clit. My dick is hard as steel as I feel how hot and wet she is. Damn, she's good at putting on a front and denying herself what she wants.

I watch as her eyes go half-lidded and her lips part.

What I wouldn't give to be able to bite that lip right now.

I circle her clit and nip her earlobe as she whimpers. "Quiet," I whisper into her ear.

She tries to keep her expression neutral, but her eyes close as my fingers dip into her hot, wet cunt.

Fuck, she's going to feel so fucking good on my dick. I pump my fingers in and out, stroking her G-spot and press my palm to her clit.

I'm so fucking hard, I'm leaking precum.

I gotta get her off and try to get Katie outta here, cause I *need* to be inside her.

I feel it the moment she cums. It's fucking perfect.

Her pussy clamps around my fingers and her body trembles. She shoves her ass into my dick and I can't help but to rock a bit into that thick ass so she knows how much I want her.

An explosion on screen muffles her small gasp. She throws her head back and I catch her lips with mine.

It's fucking perfect.

And then I see Katie get up and tiptoe her way out of the room from the corner of my eye.

CHAPTER 11

MADLINE

Explosions jolt my body, and it's hard not to cry out as I throw my head back. Zane's thick fingers continue to assault me even as I spasm around his fingers and press my ass against his big dick. My breathing quickens, my vision blurs and the room spins as pleasure becomes my existence.

I don't know how much time passes before I come back to earth, but when I do, Katie is mysteriously gone from the room and Zane is staring at me with a big satisfied grin on his face.

Wow. I can't believe I just let him do that, I think with shock, falling out of Zane's lap and shuddering. But it felt good. Incredibly good. And I want more. But how could I let this happen in the first place?

It's Katie's fault, I blame. She was supposed to keep this from happening.

I search for her in a panic and find she's nowhere to be found. Shit! Did she see? Or did she leave before things got so heavy? Was it her way of giving Zane permission to have his way with me? I bet she fucking did. Whatever it was, she's gonna pay dearly for her treachery.

Damn you, Katie!

I decide to take my anger out on Zane. "You asshole!" I snarl.

Zane looks bewildered. "Huh? Why are you mad at me, peaches? I was just trying to loosen you up."

Oh, you loosened me up alright, I think wryly, trying to keep my eyes level with his face. I'm painfully aware of the huge bulge in his pants and my juices all over his fingers.

"Our date is over." I stab a finger at the door. "Leave. Now." I'm not sure why I'm being this way. This man just gave me the best orgasm of my life and now I want him to get away from me before...

Zane doesn't budge. "Come on. Our date can't be over, especially after that."

But *that* is the very reason our date should be over. Because I'm too fucking scared of what's coming next.

"Oh yeah? What do you think we should do then?" I don't give him a chance to answer and instead say accusingly, "I know exactly what you want to do."

Zane stares at me with a hunger that is palpable. "I ain't gonna lie, peaches. I want that sweet, tight pussy of yours cumming all over my dick. Right now."

His words almost make me swoon. Seriously, the way he says things, he could open up his own phone sex line. And the bad thing about it is, I want exactly what he wants. Even though I just experienced an explosive orgasm, I'm ready for another one. So fucking ready.

"I've wanted you since the moment I laid eyes on you," he continues. "You're smart, sassy, sexy and very funny. And I haven't ever met a girl like you, so how can you blame me?"

I stare at him, fighting my raging hormones, fighting my emotions. With each passing second, I'm losing the battle. After just cumming all over his hand, it's hard to justify not giving in and letting him have his way with me. Fuck, I want him to use my body.

"Just give me one chance, peaches," he reasons, his voice dipping even lower than I thought possible. "To cherish you, worship you, and... be inside of you."

That's it. I can't take it. I want him to fuck me like he owns me. I want *him*.

I grab him by the hand and lead him upstairs. My heart pounds in my chest and my body heats with equal amounts of anxiety and desire. We fall back on my bed and he doesn't waste a moment to kiss me passionately. His hands roam all over my body as our tongues do battle, and I moan with need. Maybe I knew this was going to happen. I couldn't avoid it. He wants me, and he's a man who always gets what he wants.

Before I know it, my dress is being ripped over my head and I find myself in just my bra and panties. Zane moves to remove my bra, but I stop him, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Wait," I gasp.

"What?" His eyes are burning with fiery intensity, his breathing ragged. He looks like a man that's run a mile and is thirsty as fuck.

I tremble beneath that hungry gaze. "I don't know if we should do this." How I'm still resisting right now, I have no idea.

Zane is having none of it, and begins undoing my bra, his eyes promising pleasures beyond my wildest dreams. "Come on peaches, let me show you what you're missing." He brings his lips forward and kisses me up my neck until he reaches my lips, which he devours, sucking and gently biting on them.

It's over. I'm fucking done.

As he lays me back on the bed and begins to take off my last pieces of clothing, dismantling my resistance bit by bit, I finally surrender myself to him. And somewhere, through all the moaning, I hear him whisper in my ear, "And you're going to fucking love it."

CHAPTER 12

ZANE

I see her defenses fall down around her. I see the vulnerability in her eyes. Her lips part, and a soft moan escapes. Finally! I crawl toward her slowly and press my lips against hers. I'm not going to let her regret this.

I moan into her mouth, and slip my tongue in, massaging hers and enjoying her hands tangling in my hair. *Let go, peaches.*

She rocks her pussy against me and it's almost more than I can take.

I'm so fucking hard for her. She's all I've wanted for so long. I want this to last.

I gently pull her bra free of her arms. She shakes out her hair and tries to cover herself from me shyly.

"No you don't, peaches." I can see the hesitation in her eyes and the distrust. My girl doesn't like to be told what to do, but that's only because of another man doing her wrong. She'll learn to love what I do to her.

She'll learn to trust me. I'll show her.

"I wanna see you. I wanna see every inch of your beautiful skin."

I lean down and kiss her neck. She tilts her head, letting a soft moan of pleasure escape and exposing more of herself to me.

My fingers grip the edge of her panties and I'm slow to pull them down her thighs. I kiss my way down, loving the feel of

her beneath me and the way she writhes from my touch. I plant kisses on her breasts, her sides, her hips. I look up at her and leave one on her clit.

She looks down at me with a vulnerability I'm growing to love.

I take a languid lick of her heat.

I groan and close my eyes. Peaches. "So fucking sweet." A beautiful blush colors her cheeks. I stare into her eyes as I suck her clit into my mouth and massage it with my tongue. She tries to keep my gaze, but her head falls back and her hands fly to my hair.

I suck harder and slip two fingers into her soaking pussy.

Fuck, she's so tight and hot. She's going to feel like heaven on my dick. I curl my fingers and stroke her G-spot, needing to get her off again so I can get inside her.

I *need* her.

I kick my pants off as she cums on my fingers. Her arousal leaks out of her pussy and I'm quick to lick it up. Her body jerks and trembles, and her eyes close tight as her release takes over.

I push my boxers down and cage her small body in under me.

I line the head of my dick up as the last of her orgasm flows through her. I dip into her pussy slowly, loving how tight and hot she is for me. I hold my breath as I push all the way in, making her back arch. Her nails dig into my back and her forehead pinches as she struggles to take all of me. I kiss the crook of her neck and give her a moment to get adjusted to my size.

She feels so fucking good. I knew she would. I groan against her neck. I knew she'd feel just like this.

I rock slowly and listen as her moans of slight pain become moans of intense pleasure. It doesn't take long until she's rocking her pussy and pushing me in deeper. Her heels dig into my ass, begging me for more. And I give it to her.

I don't hold back.

I thrust into her, holding her hips down so she forced to take all of me and everything I'm giving her.

Over and over I impale her with my dick. She screams out my name and it's the sexiest fucking sound I've ever heard.

I need to cum, but I don't want to yet. I don't want this to be over.

I've finally gotten a taste of her. I've broken down a wall I'm not sure she'll leave down for me. I know there's a good chance that the moment this is over, she's going to regret it. And I don't want that. I can't stand the thought that she'd ever regret being with me.

I push harder into her. I pound into her tight little pussy with everything I have, holding back my need to cum.

Her neck arches, and she screams out as her body trembles beneath me. The urge to cum is strong, but I don't. I won't. I want more.

I need to give her more.

I cover her nipple with my mouth and suck, keeping up my ruthless pace.

Her body pushes against mine as she screams, "Zane!" Her scream is a plea. I know this is intense, but I'm going to give her everything I've got.

I pull back and release her nipple with a pop before doing the same to the other side. My blunt fingernails dig into her hips, holding her still as I pound away, taking pleasure from her, but giving her so much more.

"Cum for me, peaches," I whisper in her ear. And just like the good girl she is, she obeys.

The feel of her hot cunt pulsing around me is more than I can take. I erupt inside her, releasing wave after wave of hot streams. I cum harder than I ever have in my life.

I give her short, shallow pumps until I'm spent.

I look down at her, her eyes closed, mouth parted. Her skin is flushed with the most beautiful pink. She slowly opens her

gorgeous green eyes and I can see everything in them.
She can't hide a thing from me.
I see her desire, her fear. I see her for who she really is.
And I want her.
I need her.
I refuse to let her regret this.

CHAPTER 13

MADELINE

I hear the door creak open and I become slightly annoyed. I don't like being woken up before my alarm clock goes off. Katie should know that by now.

"Go away!" I growl at her from under the covers, pulling them tighter over my head and burying myself in the warmth of the bed. It's too comforting. I'm not getting up.

If Katie knows what's good for her, she'll leave me alone and go on a run by herself.

A soft smile slips into place as I hear the door close and I'm able to relax slightly. I prepare to drift peacefully back to sleep.

But then I hear a sexy chuckle that causes my pulse to quicken.

"You're not a morning girl, peaches?" Zane whispers.

I have to blink a few times and lower the covers, but only enough to see him.

Crap, I have no makeup on. I'm in an old baggy t-shirt... I look like shit.

And oh my god. Morning breath.

No, he cannot be here.

I totally kicked his ass out last night for this very reason.

I mean I was as nice as I could be, but I don't want to ruin this before it even starts because of my morning breath!

I open my mouth to tell him to get out, but he crawls on the bed toward me with a heated look in his eyes. The look of a predator.

I shake my head and sit up slowly, backing away from him.

He smirks, like it's cute.

"How the fuck did you get in here?" I ask him, just to change the subject from you-can't-fuck-my-brains-out-when-I-have-morning-breath to anything else.

He smiles, and I'll be damned if he doesn't look completely doable right now. He hasn't shaved, so he has a sexy bit of stubble I want to feel scratching on my inner thighs as he eats me out. His hair looks wild, and it's begging me to run my hands through it. But I still haven't even processed what happened last night. He left me exhausted and sated. I kicked him out, took a quick shower and crashed. Hard.

"Katie let me in."

"That bitch!" Fucking Katie is going to be my downfall.

He laughs at me and cocks a brow as he says, "I can see why she said good luck."

I bite my bottom lip and look down at the covers. What happened last night was amazing. I can't deny that. I can't deny how alive I felt under him. But I'm too scared to fall for him so quickly. It's not safe. And I know that's what's going to happen if I'm not careful. I can't let it happen.

I have to protect myself.

"Zane, I—"

"Shh," he puts a finger to my lips. "Don't think about it." My lips soften against his finger and he pulls away. "I just need you this morning." He leans forward for a kiss and I reluctantly give in. I can't deny I want him. I'm tired of fighting.

"Let me make you feel good."

I try to talk, I have every intention to object, but the soreness between my thighs reminds me of last night. My clit throbs as if I've been primed and ready for him since he left.

He pulls me down under him by my hips and I let out a small shriek.

He grins at me as he says, "You need to be quiet, peaches." He lifts my t-shirt up high enough to kiss my belly. "In case Katie comes back," he whispers against my pussy. His thumbs loop around my panties and with a quick tug, he shreds them into nothing.

My eyes go wide and my mouth opens into a perfect O as he licks my clit and pushes two thick fingers inside of me. Yes! He feels so good.

My nipples harden and I remember pinching them for him. I remember how he came watching me. I quickly pull the t-shirt off and do it again. My fingers roll my hardened peaks and then I gently pull. There's a spike of pain that's hardwired to my clit and I fucking love it.

He taught me that. He gave that pleasure to me.

He looks up at me from between my legs with a hunger that makes my pussy clench around his fingers.

He groans, "Fuck, baby. I need to be inside you."

He sits up between my legs and moves his dick back and forth between my pussy lips, pushing in before I have a moment to even think.

Fuck, I barely think as my head falls back.

I hold in my breath as he pushes his rigid cock deeper and deeper.

The stinging pain of being stretched to my limit combined with the ache from last night makes it almost too much. But then his thumb rubs against my clit, and the delicious mix of pleasure and pain makes my body crave more.

He stills deep inside of me and kisses my neck, my jaw, my lips.

I arch my back and then tilt my hips. I need more of him. More.

As he thrusts his hips, I let out a strangled cry of pleasure.

My head thrashes, but he grips my chin and crushes his lips against mine.

I feel like I can't move; I don't even want to breathe.

I only want him.

He kisses me with a passion I thought I'd imagined last night.

I kiss him back with everything I have. No thought, only feeling. My body is moving on pure instinct. He devours my kisses like they were meant for him and him alone. My nails dig into his back, and I urge him on.

He pounds into me, taking more and more of me each time.

He pulls away and takes in a breath, pulling his shirt off. His muscles ripple, and the sight alone makes me clench around him.

He owns me in this moment. I know it. He knows it. He towers above me with power and lust. And I *love* it. I *want* it.

He doesn't ask, he merely flips me onto my knees and hammers into me from behind, taking me how he wants me. I can barely hold this position. My fingers dig into the mattress and I struggle to stay up as he fucks me ruthlessly. The wet sounds of him slamming into me again and again fill the room. I feel so weak and helpless, but more than that, deliciously used. And overwhelmed with a pleasure I've never felt before.

He leans down, pressing his chest to my back. His deft fingers find my clit and he rubs mercilessly.

Too much. Too much.

I bury my head in the pillow and he bites and sucks my neck and back, alternating with kisses. All the while fucking me with a relentless pace. I arch my back and he goes in deeper. Fuck! I moan into the sheets, biting down on them to muffle my need to scream.

And just when I think it's too much, and I can't take anymore, we both cum violently.

A blinding white light flashes before my eyes, and paralyzing pleasure flows through me.

He kisses my spine all the way up to my neck. He grips my chin in his hand and kisses me like he needs me. My heart swells, and I find myself kissing him back passionately. In this kiss I'm not holding back, I'm kissing him with the same intensity he's giving me.

As my orgasm leaves me and reality sets in, fear begins to overwhelm me. I didn't want this. I don't want to be in a position to get hurt again. And that's just what he'll do. Like all men do. My breathing speeds up, and the only thing I can hear is my heart pounding in my chest.

"You have to go," I tell him as the tears threaten to reveal themselves.

I've fallen too hard, too fast. I'm only going to get hurt.

"You okay, peaches?" he asks. He asks because he cares. But that'll change. I know it will. And I'll be stupid enough to believe he really does care about me. I'll be the one getting hurt, and it'll be all my fault.

"I'm fine, but Katie's going to be back soon." I wipe my eyes with my back turned to him. But he sees.

He grips my arm and makes me face him.

And I can tell by the way he tilts his head and gives me sad eyes, that he knows I'm going to lose it any second.

CHAPTER 14

ZANE

Fuck, I don't know what happened, I don't know what I did. But she's already trying to run from me. I'm not gonna let her.

"Come here." I pull her into my arms without giving her an option to leave me.

As soon as she's in my arms, she starts crying.

"Did I hurt you?" I know it's a tight fit and I was a bit rough with her, but I thought she was loving it.

I finally got her underneath me, and I took it too far. Fuck! I've never hurt a woman like that before, but I lose control when I'm with her. I can't believe I hurt her. I feel like such a selfish prick.

She shakes her head in my chest, and I don't understand.

"Tell me what to do," I say as I sit back on the bed and pull her into my lap. Our cum leaks out of her and onto my leg, but I don't give a fuck. I'll clean her up later.

"I'm scared, Zane," she whispers so quietly I almost don't hear her say it.

I smile gently into her hair. My chest feels like a weight's lifted off of it. I didn't hurt her. She just thinks I'm going to.

She's too sweet. Too much of a good girl. But now she's *my* good girl. I'm going to make sure she knows it.

"You're scared I'm gonna hurt you?" I ask her.

“Yes,” she heaves a breath and lifts her face away from me. Her cheeks are reddened and tearstained, but somehow she looks even more beautiful. Her vulnerability and raw emotion are things I find even more gorgeous. I fucking love that she’s sharing with me. But she wasn’t going to. She was going to push me away. That shit’s not happening.

“I know how guys are,” she says flatly. Huh? Where’s all this coming from?

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask her.

“Guys cheat—”

“Women cheat, too,” I say as I cut her off. I’m nipping that shit right in the bud. I stare into her eyes, willing her to tell me what the fuck is going on in her head.

“Yeah, well, men are good at making up excuses for it and telling you that they love you and making pretty promises all the while thinking about fucking someone else.” She’s tense and on edge, and I get the feeling this isn’t about me, and it’s not about us. It’s about something else.

“Women cheat too.” I stare into her eyes, willing her to tell me what the fuck is going on in her head.

I pull her closer to me and tell her truthfully, “Whatever asshole did that to you, didn’t deserve you.” Her eyes widen slightly and I add, “I’d never do that.”

I take her chin between my fingers and make her look at me. I brush my lips gently against hers and rest my forehead on hers.

“Listen to me, Maddy,” I start to tell her. My heart thumps in my chest with anxiety. I’m making her a promise in this moment. But I know she’ll be the one to break it.

“I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

She opens her eyes slowly and looks at me like she’s afraid to believe me.

“I’ll be yours and only yours, if you’ll be mine,” I offer her.

She wipes her tears away and searches my face. My heart stalls in my chest as she seems to take forever.

“Don’t leave me hanging, peaches. Haven’t you done that enough?” I ask her with feigned desperation.

That gets a laugh from her. I fucking love that sound.

“Deal,” she says simply with a small smile and a spark of happiness in her eyes.

“You wanna go somewhere later?” I ask her to change the subject.

“Where?” she asks with a little pep in her voice that wasn’t there a moment ago.

“The parlor,” I suggest. I’ve been wanting her to come see it. If I give her a little more of me, maybe she’ll relax and just enjoy this. My eyes roam her naked body as she tries to cover herself with her bed sheet. I’m tempted to rip it out of her hands, but I let her cover herself. She needs it.

“You mean where you work?” she asks, and my eyes snap up to meet hers.

“Can we bring Katie?” Maddy asks. “She’s been wanting to check out a tattoo parlor for some time now.” I think that’ll make her happy, and if it means she’ll say yes, then fuck yeah Katie can come. She seems better when she’s got Katie around her, more at ease.

“Sure. I don’t see why not. It’ll give Needles someone to talk to.”

Maddy frowns. “Needles?”

“He’s a friend.” I’m trying to be casual about it all, but really I’m excited. This is my passion, and Needles is a good friend of mine. Really my only friend.

She seems a little giddy at the prospect of getting to see where I work.

“And maybe you’ll agree to get a tattoo from me,” I add.

Her eyes widen like I’ve lost my mind. “I don’t know about that.”

“Oh come on,” I lean in and kiss her neck before whispering in her ear, “Tattoos are sexy.”

She leans away and seems to consider it.

“What kind of a tattoo do you think I should get?” she asks and then purses her lips. I know she’s the kind of chick who would detail out every curve of a tattoo before letting me put it on her. It’s no fun for me, but that’s just who she is.

“I have the perfect idea,” I tell her.

She stares at me, waiting for me to continue.

I wink at her as I say, “Peaches.”

She playfully slaps my arm and leans into me. It makes me feel good. Disaster averted. For now, anyway.

It’s only a matter of time before she realizes how fucking bad I am for her. But I’ll let her be the one to call this off. I’ll let her walk away if it gets to be too much for her.

But until that day comes, I’m gonna enjoy her as much as I can.

She really is too good for me, and one day she’ll realize it.

It fucking sucks, but I know it’s going to end before I’ve had my fill of her.

CHAPTER 15

ZANE

“Wow, this place is pretty rad,” Katie quips, looking all around as I open the door for the girls to the tattoo parlor. I feel that Maddy needs to see where I work to be at ease. I know she has her doubts about me, and I need to show Maddy that she doesn’t have any reason not to trust me. Hopefully this’ll do it. Or help at the very least.

“It is,” Maddy agrees. Even though I know tattoos aren’t her thing, I can tell she’s impressed with the layout of the shop. We have squeaky-clean checkered floors, a lot of goth artwork on the walls, and framed pictures of clients with our most impressive tattoos. Maddy walks around, leisurely looking at all this stuff before she finds her way over to the counter.

“So is this where you give tattoos?” she asks as she runs her fingers over a photo album of our work.

“Yup,” I respond. “I’ll show you the back later, peaches,” I say with a smirk at Maddy and give her a wink. In typical fashion she rolls her eyes, but I know she’s dreaming about me fucking her on my table now. Fuck, I’d do it right now too if I could, but I don’t want Katie to get the wrong idea about me. Right now she’s on my side, and I wanna keep it that way.

Needles comes out of the back carrying some tattoo tubes in his hands. He’s about to say something, but he stops when he sees us.

“Hello,” Maddy says politely.

“Heya,” Katie greets. She eyes Needles with curiosity, who’s dressed in all black with his goth tattoos on display. I can tell that neither Katie nor Maddy are used to being around guys like Needles, and I wonder how this meeting is gonna go down.

Needles looks at them and then at me. “Who are these chicks?” he asks.

“Prostitutes,” Katie says before I can respond. “The two dollar kind.”

I chuckle. “These chicks are my girl, Maddy, and her friend Katie.” I gesture at Katie and then add, “Ladies, this asshole is Needles.” That gets a laugh from them and I expected the side-eye from Needles, but his eyes are focused on Katie.

“Oh, sup,” Needles says. “Welcome to Inked Envy, where we hook you up with the best tattoos.” He pauses then as if he just realizes something and looks at me with his forehead pinched. “Your girl? Since when did you get pussywhipped?”

“Since I broke up with your mom.” I’m quick with a response, and I keep it light.

Katie snickers at my response, which I know she loves.

“Well that was bound to happen, considering mom’s as loose as a sinkhole.”

“God, show some respect, douche,” I growl. Seriously, Needles is making me wanna fuck him up. He’s a shit wingman.

“Sorry,” Needles says without a hint of authenticity. He turns to Maddy. “It’s just that Zane hasn’t been in a relationship in... well... ever.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Maddy asks. She’s side-eyeing me nervously, and I can only assume all sorts of dubious thoughts are running through that pretty little head of hers.

Needles walks over and sets the tubes down at his workstation. “I just don’t see him settling down is all,” he replies. “He’s never been able to have a relationship that lasted more than a week.”

Maddy grows quiet and I literally want to take Needles outside and curb stomp him. Does he have any idea that I'm trying to make Maddy feel comfortable with dating me? It's like he's going out of his way to shit all over my effort.

It's one of Needles' character flaws. He always speaks bluntly, even if it means offending someone. It's one of the reasons why he's my friend. He's real, not fake and phony like most of the people in my life. But right now his penchant for truth is annoying the fuck out of me. She doesn't need to know that shit.

An uncomfortable silence falls over the room, and I feel like I need to say something to put Maddy at ease, but I'm saved by Katie.

"One of you give me a tattoo!" Katie demands out of nowhere. "Right on my ass!"

"Katie!" Maddy protests. "I thought you hated tattoos."

"Not anymore."

"I'd be more than happy to if you're serious," Needle says, staring at Katie intently. He seems to have a thing for Katie, but I think she's out of his league. I'd give him less than an hour before he said something that would offend her and have her clawing him for blood.

"Well, I'm not," Katie admits.

"Damn," Needles says with disappointment. "That would've been the highlight of my week.

Katie blushes.

"How'd you two even meet?" Maddy asks, looking between me and Needles. She seems quick to keep Katie and Needles from getting a little too close, and it makes me wanna laugh at her. They're grown ass adults. If they wanna have a go, let 'em.

I look at Needles with a grin.

"So he came into my shop one day. Not this one, but a different one."

Needles is turning red, and I can't help but crack up laughing. "He got hammered one night and decided he'd give himself a tat."

I turn to Needles. "Show 'em."

Needles looks a bit pissed at me for even bringing it up. He's done all his tats himself, and he's good at what he does. But that night he shouldn't have done that shit.

"Nothing good happens after 2 a.m.," he says, lifting up his sleeve.

"Looks good to me," Katie says and shrugs her shoulders as she lets her fingertips graze Needles' skin. His lips turn up into a soft smile.

"That's 'cause he came to a pro to fix his shit work."

Needles' smile vanishes. "You were sober. That's the only difference."

I chuckle and wrap my arm around Maddy's waist, bringing her closer to me. She seems so much better now. So much happier.

"What about you and Katie?" I ask her.

Maddy looks with a scowl at Katie, who is grinning mischievously. "Don't. Just don't," she warns.

God, this is gonna be good. I can already tell from the look on my peach's face.

"Well, we're kinder buddies," Katie says.

"Kinder buddies?" I ask. My brow furrows, what the fuck is a kinder buddy?

"Yeah, we met in Kindergarten, so we're Kinder buddies. We were so young though, I don't remember much."

Maddy seems to relax and trust that whatever Katie has on her, she's not gonna tell. But judging by the way Katie's smile just grew on her face, she's not gonna keep quiet.

"Except this one time, where Maddy—" Maddy runs to Katie and gets a hand over her mouth, cutting her off, but Katie

manages to pull away and dodges Maddy's next grab. They're on opposite sides of the counter now. Katie's got a huge ass grin on her face, but Maddy just looks pissed.

"It's not funny, Katie!" Maddy's shooting daggers at Katie, but Katie just keeps grinning and continues.

"She was on the playground," Katie begins. Maddy darts around the counter, but Katie's faster.

"And she fell from the top of the slide." They look like two kids playing as Maddy chases Katie around the counter, trying to catch her. "And I went to help her. 'Cause you know, I'm such a nice person and all."

I look at Needles, not believing this shit is really happening.

Maddy stops running, and the two try to catch their breaths. Maddy points her finger at Katie and says, "Just stop right now, and I'll never tell—"

Before Maddy can finish her threat, Katie spits out, "And she had completely soaked her clothes!" She starts laughing hysterically, and Needles follows suit. "She literally scared the piss out of herself."

"I was like four!" Maddy yells. She still looks pissed, but more embarrassed than anything else. I wanna laugh, but I hold it in. Something tells me she'll never forgive me if I laugh at her for this right now. "I swear to God, I'm going to tell every story I can when you finally hold down a boyfriend," she mutters.

Needles stops laughing and looks at Maddy and says, "I mean, at least you were four. It could be worse."

I grunt out a laugh. "How old was that fucker that shit himself while you were giving him a tattoo?"

"Too fucking old!" he answers, and just like that Maddy relaxes a little.

"Oh. My. God. Are you for real?" Katie asks Needles with disbelief.

"I shit you not," Needles says, and I just shake my head, but it gets a laugh out of Katie.

“Oh my God!!” Maddy shrieks out of nowhere. I actually flinch. Grown ass men can’t even make me flinch. “This is my song!” she yells out and takes my hand. I didn’t even notice the music in the background. I generally just tune it out. It’s more to help customers relax, not for us.

“What are you doing?” Needles asks as she pulls me in front of the counter.

“Dance with me!” she says. I stare into her beautiful green eyes, and I can’t deny her.

“You’re really fucking gonna dance!” Needles crows. He’s having the time of his life with this shit.

I shoot him the finger behind Maddy’s back as she sings along to whatever song is playing.

Katie whips out her phone to take a picture. Fuck, not a picture. Probably a video judging by the fact she’s still got the damn thing raised.

Normally I’d just sit down and refuse to do this shit. But looking down at Maddy, she’s so fucking happy, just having a good time.

Whatever, I can sway back and forth and let her have the time of her life over a song.

I push her away for just a second and she looks up, thinking I’m done. But I’ve got her hand in mine and I go for the twirl. I figure if Katie’s recording, I might as well do something to make it worthwhile. Seeing Maddy smile makes it worth it.

She busts out a laugh and so does our little audience.

My heart swells in my chest as she gives me a wide smile and leans into my embrace again.

And then, in a split second, all the happiness is gone when I see Vlad walk up to the building with a scowl on his face.

“Needles,” I call out even though my eyes are on the door. “You wanna take the girls out back for a second?”

Maddy’s forehead pinches and she looks at me like I owe her an explanation. But she sees where I’m looking and turns in

my arms.

“Just head out back, baby.” I plant a kiss on her nose. I’m trying to keep it casual and not let on to the fact I’m pissed he’s here. I don’t want her around this shit. And I don’t want him to ever lay eyes on her. But it’s too late.

Vlad bangs on the door with his fist. Since the shop is closed, the door is locked. He fucking knows that.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” I say and give Maddy a smile as she looks at Katie, and then to Needles. She looks uneasy, and I know I need to settle her down some.

“It’s just business.” That’s not enough to get the nervous look off her face though. Vlad’s a scary ass looking dude. “I promise after this I won’t be working any more tonight.” I speak with a relaxed, easy voice as Needles starts walking them back.

“Let me show you guys the equipment I have in my trunk.” Both women stop dead in their tracks, and I shake my head on the way to the door. Dude has no fucking game.

“I mean, my stereo system,” he says.

Katie cracks up and asks, “What year is this?” She’s joking, but Needles doesn’t laugh. He knows how serious this shit is.

I walk to the door and pull out my key, listening as they open and shut the back door. I open the door wide and move to the side to let him in. “Vlad, nice to see you.” It isn’t really, but what else are you gonna tell the mob boss?

I’ve never liked Vlad or the shit he does. If it wasn’t for Nikolai, I’d never feel comfortable enough to stay anywhere around these fuckers.

When the head of the mob is a cold-blooded killer with a taste for women way too close to being underage, it’s hard to feel safe. He’s backstabbed more than a few people. But I’ve always felt like I was on the inside. I guess that’s only because I know Nikolai would give me a heads-up. He said if you don’t know who’s on the hit list, then it’s ‘cause your ass is close to being on it.

Every move Vlad makes is calculated. I've never given him a reason to even think about me. I stay out of his way and just let them take over the books for their laundering.

"You throwing a fucking party in here?" Vlad sneers. His cruel blue eyes stare back at me. He's a tall blond man with combed-over, thinning hair.

"I'm just showing a couple of friends the place is all."

Vlad's glare says it all. His eyes seem to say, *'What the fuck is the matter with you?'*

"Get those bitches the fuck out of here. Now."

Everything in my body screams at me to tell Vlad to go fuck himself, and I would, if I didn't think he would do something to harm one of the girls in retaliation.

"Okay boss." I turn my back on him and go right to the back. At least he doesn't follow me back here. I don't need him around either Katie or Maddy.

"You guys have to go," I say as soon as the door shuts behind me. Katie's leaning into the trunk of Needles' car messing with one of the speakers.

"Why?" Maddy asks; she's got concern written all over her face.

"We were having so much fun," Katie whines in protest.

"Just take my car and head back home."

Maddy looks like she's going to argue as I pull her a few feet down the street to where I parked. I need to make sure she doesn't. When it comes to Vlad and all this shit, I need to make sure she listens to me.

"It's just business, peaches." I open the door to my car and hand her the keys. "I'll be back as soon as this meeting is over."

It hurts to see Maddy's unanswered questions in her eyes. She wants to know what's going on. But I can't tell her. No fucking way.

I can see her starting to question everything, and I fucking hate it. I wanna tell her. I want to make sure she trusts me. But I can't. The more she knows, the worse it'll be for her. That, and she'll leave my ass.

"I shouldn't have brought you here with the chance of my old partner coming by," I tell her. It's a mix of white lies. It's true that I didn't know he was showing up tonight. But "old partner"... well that's just a flat-out lie.

But it does the trick. Her lips purse and her shoulders relax some. "So you're just settling *old* business?" she asks with her arms crossed, and the keys tapping against her forearm.

"Yup. And it'll be over with soon. So I'll be right behind you." That part's true. At least it better be.

This is my shop and if I want my girl here, she can come here. I just need to make sure I keep her ass away when *business* is going down.

CHAPTER 16

MADLINE

“So how’s things with Zane?” Katie asks as we pull into our parking space in front of the condo. As we stop, I notice a car across the street that looks familiar, but I’m distracted and can’t quite place it.

I glance over at Katie who’s staring at me intently, hungry for juicy gossip. Dressed in a red tank top and white pants, her side bob is on point today and looks extra shiny underneath the bright sun. I have to admit, she looks cute. Too bad she hasn’t been acting cute. For the past few days she’s been pestering me with constant questions about Zane. How good is he in bed? Does he know how to work it? Did he have a monster dong? And so on and so on.

“Where they shouldn’t be,” I respond flatly.

Katie scowls, sensing my bitchiness. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That I shouldn’t have had sex with him, much less be talking to him.”

“Oh, come on Maddy. Really? It can’t be that bad. You’ve had a serious glow about you for the past few days.”

“Seriously, thanks to you, I’m in this predicament.” I know I shouldn’t be doing this to Katie right now, but I’m about falling for Zane. Hard. When I’m with him, everything’s great. And then I leave his side and doubt spreads through me. I just don’t trust it. There’s something off.

Katie eyes go large and her mouth opens so wide a giant trout could jump through it. “Me?!” she exclaims. “What the hell do I have to do with this?”

“You didn’t protect me from Zane like you were supposed to,” I accuse. She knows it, too.

“What the hell? What are you, two years old? I mean, what was I supposed to do, tell his big dick to stop wanting you?”

I roll my eyes. “You know I don’t mean that—”

“Seriously Maddy, grow up. You need to have this experience with Zane. If nothing else than to teach you that not all guys are the same.”

“That’s the problem, he talks a good game, but in the end he’s not any different from any other horndog out there.”

Katie sighs, and places a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Maddy, I understand how you feel, I really do, but that’s not the way to live life. You’re supposed to have these experiences, so that you can grow. Shit, I’d rather have lived and smoked cock every once in a while than to never have smoked cock at all.”

As serious as I feel right now, I have to laugh. “Really, Katie? Smoked cock? That’s a horrible analogy!” Leave it to Katie to say some ridiculous crap to pull me out of a bad mood.

Katie scowls at me. “I never said I was good at it. I’m just trying to get you to cheer up and see reason.”

“I know, Katie, I know. And I’m sorry about blaming you for what’s happened. It’s not your fault. I wanted this just as much as Zane. Maybe even more. I’m just feeling really scared right now and I guess I’m just freaking out.”

Katie smiles at me. “Well, I’m glad you see that. And I think you should stop worrying. Now. Sit back, relax, and let this all play out. If Zane doesn’t wind up being a good guy, you know what? Fuck him. Trust me, there are many more big dicks out there in the sea.”

I giggle. I’m already feeling somewhat better. “Oh Katie, what would I ever do without you?”

“Probably never laugh and be a sourpuss all the time.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” I agree, chuckling.

We gather our books, get out of the car and go into the condo. As soon as Katie swings open the door, my jaw drops at the sight before me.

“Daddy?” I ask in shock. “What are you doing here?”

There, standing in the middle of the living room, is my father, Kenneth Murphy. At sixty, his hair is white as snow, but that’s his only visible sign of aging. He has a smooth, unlined face and crystal clear blue eyes. If not for the hair, he could easily be mistaken for a man half his age.

He’s wearing black slacks and a white dress shirt with a tie, just a little too formal for a retired parole officer. There’s a bulge on the side of his dress shirt letting me know he’s carrying. Daddy never leaves the house without his gun. Ever. Now I know why the car outside looked so familiar. He could have flown, but knowing Daddy, he decided to drive so he could make a nice vacation out of this visit.

The bigger question though, is how the hell did he get inside?

“Well, hello Mr. Murphy!” Katie greets my father before he can respond, walking over to him and giving him a big hug. “Boy, do you get more handsome each time I see you, or what?”

Daddy chuckles at Katie’s shameless flirting. “Thanks, Katie. It’s nice seeing you, too. How’s school been treating ya?”

“Oh you know, a little bit of that here, and a little bit of that there. I think I’d go crazy if it weren’t for Maddy.”

Daddy’s eyes twinkle. He’s always been one to play along. “So you two been getting along well, I take it?”

Katie nods. “Uh huh, except—”

I cringe, bracing myself for Katie to blurt out something stupid about me and Zane.

“She farts so loud when I’m trying to sleep.”

My father lets out a goofy laugh and I roll my eyes while loudly protesting, “Katie!”

“I’m just kidding.” She points at the hallway. “I’m gonna go take a shower and let you two play catch-up. It was nice seeing you again, Mr. Murphy.”

“It was nice seeing you too, Katie.”

When she’s gone I ask, “How the heck did you get in here?”

Daddy walks over and sits down on the couch. “You two left the door unlocked. I figured after the door swung ajar when I knocked I’d better sit here until you two arrived back home.”

How the hell was the door unlocked? I could’ve sworn I locked it when we left.

“You really should always lock your door,” Daddy says with a disapproving frown. “There’s all sorts of sick predators out there, waiting to prey on young, vulnerable women like you both. Have I not taught you that?” As part of law enforcement, my father was big on safety growing up, and he never failed to lecture me when he thought I was being careless with my welfare.

“We do lock the door,” I object, trying to fight back irritation. I hate being scolded. But I know my father is only saying these things because he cares about me. “I just don’t know why it wasn’t locked today. That’s all.”

“Well you can’t afford to not know, Maddy. One mistake can cost you your life.”

I sigh in exasperation. “Daddy, I know—” He cuts me off before I can finish speaking.

“Do you always carry that can of mace with you like you promised me you would?” he demands.

I look down guiltily. “No,” I reluctantly admit. “But I’m going to start doing it, I promise.”

He shakes his head and stares me in the eyes with disbelief. “Damn it Maddy, it won’t do you any good sitting at home!”

I'm taken aback by the venom in his voice and tears begin to well up in my eyes. I never have been able to take it when I felt I let him down. I feel sick to my stomach. I hate making my father unhappy and disappointing him. "I'm sorry," I choke out. My father never yells at me like that over something stupid. "I haven't been able to think..." my voice trails away as the image of a cocky, smiling Zane pops into my head.

Suddenly repentant, Daddy pats the seat next to him on the couch. "I'm sorry baby, come sit down over here. I didn't mean to yell at you."

Pushing back my tears, I drop my bag and go over to him. Damn, I'm just so emotional lately. With Zane and the stress from school, every little thing is getting to me. As soon as I'm there, he envelops me in his arms and kisses me hard on the forehead. "Will you forgive me?" he asks.

"Of course," I say. "I know you're just upset because you worry so much about me." He's a cop, and ever since mom died, all he does is worry about me.

Daddy nods. "Yes, I do." After a moment, he leans back to study my face intently. "Is something else bothering you, or are you still upset with me?"

"Huh?" I ask, astonished at his unerring observation. I shouldn't be surprised, though. Daddy's an expert at reading body language, and he probably sensed there was something wrong with me the moment I walked through the door.

He gives me a knowing look. "Don't play stupid with me, Maddy, I know when something is on your mind."

I bite my lower lip and think. My father will know if I'm lying if I try to play it off. I don't want to tell him though. Daddy's overprotective as it is, and I already know he's going to hate Zane. I can imagine his disapproving stare already.

"Maddy?" he persists.

He's not going to stop until I tell him.

I let out a big sigh and admit, "I'm seeing someone."

My father's instantly back on edge. "Who?"

Taking a deep breath, I tell him everything, holding nothing back. He's been my voice of reason my entire life, and I can't lie to him. I don't want to. I even admit to my father that I'm falling for Zane. I don't know why, but I'm always able to confide in him.

When I'm done I feel relieved. It's almost therapeutic, telling my father about my feelings, worries and doubts.

"So let me get this straight," Daddy says slowly, "You met this fellow and you think he's a player, yet you still slept with him?"

Cringing, I nod.

He asks disdainfully, "And he's a tattoo artist?"

I nod again. Fuck, I should not have done that. Regret consumes me as my body heats.

He stares at me, his eyes boring into me so hard I can sense the anger behind them.

"What?" I ask, flinching at what's to come.

"Jesus, Maddy, a tattoo artist?" he snarls. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Daddy, I—" Again he cuts me off.

"Do you think I let you go off to school just to get involved with trash? You're supposed to be looking to go places in life. Not hanging around with some trashy, deadbeat womanizer."

Anger twists my stomach. "He's not a deadbeat," I say hotly. "Nor is he trashy. And he obviously supports himself well enough as an 'artist' since he has own place."

Daddy snorts with derision. "He might be peddling drugs on the side, for all you know. You've already said you don't even know if he has other girlfriends, so what reasons do you have to trust this guy?"

As much as I hate to admit it, he's right. What did I know about Zane before I slept with him, except that he was sexy as all hell and a tattoo artist? I know nothing of his past, don't

even know how many sexual partners he's had. And with what happened at the shop with his *old* business partner, I'm beginning to have serious doubts.

Daddy's features soften. "I don't mean to be an asshole to you, Maddy," he says, sensing my inner turmoil. "I just care about your well-being. And I would prefer you not get mixed up with someone who obviously isn't a good fit for you. You need to let this fellow go so you can focus on your studies."

For a moment, I begin to seriously regret telling my father about my business. I have this sneaking suspicion he's going to start suddenly showing up on my doorstep unannounced just to check on me.

While I appreciate his concern, I won't be able to handle that. Whether or not Zane is bad for me, I don't need someone else dictating what I should do in this situation. As Katie said, I need these experiences to grow and mature.

"I know where you're coming from, really I do," I say softly, but then I harden my tone and add, "But I'm fine. You shouldn't worry about me. Whatever happens between me and Zane is my business."

He stares at me for a long moment, but I hold my ground. I feel like he wants to tell me that I'm forbidden to see Zane and that he wants me to move, but at the same time he's conflicted by the fact that I'm an adult who can now make my own decisions.

"Are you sure about this?" he asks finally, grudgingly.

"Yes," I reply, visibly relaxing. "Don't worry, if I do need you, I'll call you."

"Promise?"

I smile. "I promise."

I feel a sense of relief. We got through this discussion without my father demanding to see Zane so he could threaten him to stay away from me. Now all I need to do is to convince him that I don't need him to check up on me, and I'll be more than fine.

I open my mouth to ask my father about what's been going on his life instead of focusing on me, when the doorbell rings.

Right then, two words run through my mind along with a feeling of dread.

Oh no.

CHAPTER 17

ZANE

The door opens, and all I can think is, *fuck this shit*. A white-haired man dressed in black slacks, a dress shirt and tie stares back at me, and I watch his eyes as they take me in. Narrowing, judging. Yeah, I've seen this before.

I'm a beast, and I look the part.

I usually don't give a fuck, but my girl is standing by the stairs looking nervous as hell. My heartbeat picks up. My nerves buzz with an insecurity I'm not used to feeling.

I know this isn't going to last. We're just enjoying each other for now.

Shit, when she's done with school, she's gonna leave me far behind. I know it. I've accepted it. But I just got a taste of her. I'm not ready for this to end right now.

"You must be Maddy's father," I say as I reach my hand out to the old man. "Nice to meet you, sir." He lets it hover there for a moment, a moment that lets me know what he really thinks. Finally he takes it in his with a firm shake.

"You must be Zane." His voice is hard and unforgiving. "Maddy's told me about you."

I nod. "Yep. Zane Stone." I say this clear and proud. Although shit, I wish I'd known he was here.

Maddy clears her throat, and I can practically hear her heart pounding.

Maddy takes a few steps toward us and pushes him out of the doorway so she can take my hand in hers. My heart swells in my chest.

“Daddy, as I was telling you, Zane is my...” she hesitates to finish, but looks right into her father’s eyes with squared shoulders.

I’ve never been anyone’s *boyfriend* before. But for her, right now, sure. I can be her boyfriend. “Boyfriend,” I say the word with my eyes on her, but clear my throat and look up at her father.

He’s fucking pissed.

It means a lot that she’s willing to stand by me as her father clearly dislikes my existence, but I don’t need to stay around for this shit.

I just came by to fuck you. I can’t say that. But shit, it’s the truth. I was looking forward to it too. “I just came by to see how your test went.” She’s been on and on about this damn test lately. But I’m sure she aced it ‘cause she’s a smart girl. And that sounds a fuck ton better than her dad hearing me describe all the ways I wanted to relieve her from all that stress.

She pulls me into the foyer and I resist, but she whips her head around and tugs harder. Her father stares at our hands and I wish I could just fucking leave. Fine. For her, I’ll put up with this. Only because she stood by me. And that felt so fucking good. She’ll never know.

I walk with the two of them to the dining room. Maddy’s books are open on the other end, with her notebook out and highlighter.

She takes a seat at the other end and pats a seat for me. This ordering me around shit isn’t my forte. But I’ll let her take the lead on this. After all, it’s her father. And I’m sure I’ll get brownie points if he likes me.

I take the seat next to her and look up at the old man. Fuck, there’s no fucking way he’s gonna like me.

He's looking at me like... well, like I'm fucking his daughter. I can't help the grin that grows on my face.

I lean forward and give Maddy a smile. "How'd it go?" I ask her.

I can feel his eyes on me, but I ignore him. I usually don't take this shit. If a fucker's gonna give me a look like he's got something to say, I don't stand down till that shit is dealt with. But this is her father, I've gotta show some respect.

He gets this one moment. One day. That's it.

Maddy takes a deep breath and pulls her hair back. "Well, I think it went *okay*."

Before she can say anything else, her father interrupts. "So your real legal name is Zane?" he asks.

I turn to him and sit straight in my seat. "That's right, Zane Michael Stone." I don't like how he's looking at me.

"That's an interesting name." He says the words in a monotone, his eyes boring into my face. Also, what the fuck does that even mean? An interesting name?

I shrug my shoulders and say, "I didn't pick it." Maddy huffs a small laugh, but it's forced. The tension in the room is thick, and this is uncomfortable as hell.

"So, Maddy," he says as he looks at her like I'm not even in the room with them. "You didn't say Zane was a smartass."

I keep my mouth closed and let him have that one. Point one for Pops, I guess.

"Daddy, please don't do this now." Maddy's lips are pressed into a thin line and she's staring back at her father like she's ready to tear him apart.

Fuck, maybe I'm lucky not to have my parents around anymore.

Her father looks back at me, but before he can speak, Maddy tries to lighten the mood by saying, "So, I think we should all go out to eat. We could go to a nice restaurant," she suggests. She looks at me and says, "Besides, you owe me a date. And

this way Daddy could get to know you.” She sounds slightly hopeful and upbeat. I take a look at Papa Fuckoff, and I know that’s not happening. My stubborn peach is apparently also delusional.

“I just don’t get it. What do you see in him, Maddy?” he asks, leaning close to her with his elbows on the table.

I drop Maddy’s hand and clench my fists under the table.

“Daddy,” Maddy’s tone takes on a hard edge. I’m not sure what the protocol for this shit is. I’ve never been in this position before.

“She’s seen a lot of me, to be honest; she must’ve liked at least one part,” I say with a straight face.

He looks fucking furious. I can’t really blame him, but I’m not gonna let him talk to her like that. After a minute he shakes his head at Maddy like he’s disappointed in her and that’s the last straw, but before I can say anything, Maddy lays in on him.

“Daddy, I love you,” Maddy says as her eyebrows raise, and I can see she’s holding back that inner bitch she’s unleashed on me a time or two. “But you need to stop this. Now.”

I stare at my stubborn little peach who’s all full of sass today. But this isn’t the same shit she gives me. This is different. She’s not playing a game, she’s clearly upset, and I don’t like it.

“Hey, it’s alright.” I take her hand in mine and rub soothing circles on the back of her hand with my thumb. “It’s fine.” I’m partially amazed at how well trying to calm Maddy down diffuses my own temper. So what if he doesn’t like me? He’s not the first. And I’m sure he won’t be the last.

She doesn’t need to get worked up over this. I mean, isn’t a dad supposed to hate the prick who’s doing his daughter? I’m pretty sure this is all normal. And her father’s right. I don’t look like the kind of man who she’d normally pick. Not that she picked me. I had to fucking fight for her.

My heart sinks a little, and I hate all these bullshit emotions that are hitting me. I need to get the fuck out of here.

I stand up from the table and give Maddy a small smile as she grips onto my arm. “I should give you two some time, peaches.” I let her nickname slip, and see her father stiffen on my left.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Murphy.” I say it as a formality and don’t look him in the eyes as the words come out hard.

“You don’t have to go,” Maddy says in a soft voice with her forehead creased. I bend down and give her a chaste kiss.

“I get to see you every day.” I look back at her dad and give him a curt nod as I say, “You should spend some time with your father.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Maddy says and tries to get up, but I stop her.

“I’m only next door, I can find my place myself.” I have to repress my laugh as her father starts coughing. Maddy’s mouth presses into a thin line and she gives me a look. I can’t help the smile growing on my face.

“Talk to you later, peaches,” I say and give her another kiss goodbye.

“Have a nice stay, Mr. Murphy.” I give him a wave as I open the door and walk out.

CHAPTER 18

MADÉLINE

I spend the next five minutes scolding my father for his rude behavior toward Zane. Just because I have reservations about him, doesn't mean it gives Daddy leeway to be a total jerk to him and judge him like that.

He argues with me, telling me he doesn't like what he saw in Zane, and that I don't need to be messing around with him. Through it all, I hold firm. Despite my misgivings, I'm not leaving Zane without good reason, and that's final.

Eventually, Daddy gives up, but he does warn me, much to my chagrin, that he'll be watching.

As soon as my father's gone, I decide I need to go next door and apologize to Zane for his behavior. I feel anxious and embarrassed by what's happened, and want to make amends.

I walk over to Zane's and knock on the door. After a moment, the door swings open and my jaw nearly drops.

Zane's standing there in a pair of pajama bottoms hanging low, balanced precariously on his chiseled hips, that incredibly sexy V-shape at his lower abdomen fully on display. Down below, his bulge presses against the flimsy material, making my mouth water.

Good God, this man is going to be the death of me! I think to myself. He makes me want to be his sex slave.

Seriously, I want to fall to my knees and take that big fat cock out and start slurping on it like a straw jammed into my

favorite milkshake. It's a nice distraction, but I can't help how my heart is squeezing in my chest.

I forcefully tear my eyes away and ask, "Are we okay?"

For a moment, Zane stares at me and my heart begins to pound with anxiety, but then he cracks that boyish smile of his. "More than okay, peaches." He reaches out, grabs me by the waist and pulls me into him. I melt into his body. Lower, I feel his cock pressing into me and I'm immediately turned on.

I'm so turned on that if he wants to fuck right here in this doorway for all the world to see, I won't have any objections.

Zane must have plans though because suddenly he pulls me inside, closes the door, and hefts me up onto his shoulders. I cry out with surprise, my legs trembling. "What are you doing?" I demand.

"We're better than okay," he says as he pulls my dress up and pushes his thumbs through my panties, ripping them off of me. Oh fuck. That's the sexiest thing I've ever seen. I push my head back against the wall and grip onto his hair as he licks me. Holy fuck. He's not wasting any time.

He says something about me being a good girl before dipping his tongue into my pussy. "Ohh!" I lean forward involuntarily as my legs tremble around him.

"Zane!" I call out, trying to balance myself. His blunt fingernails dig into my ass, forcing me to rock against his mouth. Holy fuck, it feels so good. My toes tingle and a low stirring of pleasure builds in my core. My back goes straight and my legs go stiff as he sucks my clit into his mouth, and then dives back to my entrance. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I'm going to cum. It's the fastest I've cum in my entire life.

My breathing comes in short pants.

I rock myself against his face and grip his hair tighter, shoving him deeper. I'm so close. My nipples harden, and I want so badly for his dick to be inside me. I need him. My head rocks to the side. So close. He pulls away and I almost curse at him for leaving me on edge, but he quickly shoves two fingers inside and massages my clit with his tongue. Fuck yes! His

fingers mercilessly stroke my G-spot and he bites down lightly on my clit. Oh shit! YES!!

My back bows, and I let out a strangled cry.

“Fuck!” I scream out as he acts like he’s starving and my release crashes through me. My pussy clenches around his tongue, and he groans as I feel the pool of arousal leak down my thighs. My cheeks heat with embarrassment, but I feel so fucking good I’m not sure I care all that much. He keeps lapping at me until I’m limp.

He gently sets me down on shaky legs. I lean against the wall and catch my breath.

“My peach is juicy,” he says with a smirk as he wipes my cum from his face. I feel that heat in my cheeks again and try to right myself.

I’m out of breath and shocked, and I don’t know what to say.

“Come on, I want to take you somewhere,” Zane says to me after our explosive oral session. I’m barely over my orgasm, my legs still trembling. It’s amazing what Zane can do with his mouth and those powerful jaws.

Just remembering the way he suctioned my pussy makes me want to experience it again... and again... and again.

“Where?” I ask, feeling completely off-balance.

“A date,” he says simply. “You’re delicious and all, but I gotta eat a bit more tonight.”

I rock nervously on my heels, feeling stupid for even asking after *that*. “So we’re good? My Daddy—”

Zane puts a finger over my lips. “We’re good, peaches,” he says and starts to say something else, and I can feel my heart beating faster. *I love you*. I know that’s what he was going to say, but instead his mouth slams shut.

I feel a tinge of disappointment, but I shove it down.

I bite my lip, debating on saying it first. But no, that’s not fucking happening. I pull up my bra strap and then pull my dress down.

“Dinner it is.” I give him a small smile and I can tell he’s waiting on me to say more. But he’s not getting it.

If he thinks I’m going to be the first to say I love you, he’s wrong about that. Just as soon as the smug thought comes to mind, I realize maybe he wasn’t going to say that.

Insecurity sweeps through me. Fuck. When did I let this happen? I love him. The realization hits me hard, but it’s true. It just happened so naturally with all the time we’ve been spending together lately that I wasn’t even aware of it until now. I’m in love with Zane... but he’s a bad boy. I’m sure he doesn’t love me. Guys like him don’t fall in love.

It’s only a matter of time before he leaves me.

“Let’s go, peaches.” He wraps his arms around me and I do my best to forget my father’s advice screaming in my head and ignore the painful insecurities telling me I need to end this before he breaks my heart.

He plants a kiss on my cheek and opens the door.

I know he’s bad for me, and this is really going to hurt when he ends it. I won’t tell him I love him, but I’m done pushing him away.

I may not say it out loud, but I fucking love him. How the hell did I let that happen?

CHAPTER 19

ZANE

“*Y*ou’re so bad,” I whisper into Maddy’s ear as we leave my workroom.

I lock it behind me like I do every day after my shift. But today we’re leaving a little early.

She’s been coming here every day to hang out while I work. It’s our little routine. She goes to school, then comes here on Tuesdays and Thursdays. She’s got all-day classes the other days of the week, which is perfect with my schedule. So on those days I meet her at her place later on, and fuck up her good study habits.

“We’re gonna be so late now.” Maddy’s freaking out.

“Well you’re the one who bent over in that short ass dress.” That’ll teach her to wear something like that out. Actually, knowing my girl, she’ll probably wear them more often now. I smirk at her as she tries to fix her hair in the mirror behind the counter.

“You look good, babe.” She does. She looks sexy as fuck. “How’d I get so damn lucky?” I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her toward me. I yank her up enough that her feet come off the ground and I bury my head in the crook of her neck.

“Stop!” she yells at me with a smile on her face while she’s pushing off of me. I chuckle at her. I don’t think she’ll ever stop pushing me away.

“We gotta go,” she says and grabs my hand the second I put her down. She starts pulling me toward the back exit where she’s been parking.

I’m so caught up in how happy she makes me, I don’t think about what day it is, or what time it is. I just let her lead me to the back.

As soon as she pushes the doors open and I see the van, I pull her back in, but it’s too late. Four men are moving a pile of coke bricks onto a cart to take inside.

Fuck!

“What the—” she starts to ask, but I pull her to me and turn on my heels with her in my arms. My body heats with anxiety, and then I look up and see Garret walking out of the stockroom. I’m quick to pull Maddy to my side and walk past him.

“Whoa, where are you two headed?” he asks the two of us, but his eyes are on Maddy. She shifts on her feet and puts her body behind mine. I can tell she’s not okay. She finally put two and two together.

My stomach drops, and I feel like shit. I feel like I lied to her, even though I didn’t really. It was a lie of omission. Worse than that though, I put her in harm’s way. Real fucking danger.

I’ll do everything I can to keep her safe, but the way Garret’s eyeing her is making me want to put a bullet in his head right now.

“Heading out,” I answer him flatly. I know I look pissed. I can’t help it. I can’t school my features and play this off like she didn’t see shit.

He gives me a crooked grin and nods. “See anything you like out there?” he asks Maddy.

She shakes her head, but doesn’t give a verbal response. Her fingers dig into my skin, begging me not to let her go.

“See you later, Garret,” I say and pull her to my other side. We walk straight out to my car. We’ll come back for hers later. Right now we just need to get the fuck away from here.

I can't think. I don't know what to do.

This shit isn't good.

Witnesses don't live to be witnesses. I know that much. I know Garret's gonna tell Vlad, and then I'm fucked. I need to call Nikolai. But first I need to fix this shit between us.

I pull the passenger door open and gently push Maddy into her seat. I know she's still fucked up because she's not talking. She's chewing on her thumbnail and looking all around her. Shit, she doesn't even look like she's breathing.

I reverse and pull out without saying anything. The silence stretches between us for way too fucking long.

I need to say something, do something to make this right. But I don't know how. This just drives home the fact that I'm all wrong for her. I'm trouble, just like she said I was.

"You alright?" I finally ask her. I can't look at her though. My hand grips the steering wheel tighter as I slow to a stop at a red light. My heart beats frantically and my lungs won't fill. But none of it matters, because she's not looking at me. She's not saying shit.

Her walls are up, and she's looking out the window as silent tears fall down her cheek.

Fuck! I can't stand this. The light turns green and I step on the gas to get us home.

A lump grows in my throat and it stays there until I park the car.

She's quick to unbuckle her seatbelt and try to get out, but I don't let her. She tries to smack me away, but I'm not letting her leave like this.

I pull her into my lap and let her beat her fists on my chest. A sob rips up her throat. Her face is red and her cheeks tearstained. She's fighting my hold on her, and I take it.

I take it all. I fucking deserve it.

When she finally seems to give up and collapse into me, I tell her, "I'm sorry, peaches." I don't know what else to say.

“You—” she tries to speak as she wipes under her eyes, but she can’t. Her gorgeous green eyes stare out the window as she tries to calm herself.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her again, but I know apologies don’t mean anything to her.

“You deal drugs?” she asks with an accusatory tone. She doesn’t look at me. She’s staring at her condo.

“No. The mob does.” That gets her attention. She faces me with her brows raised in both fear and surprise. Her voice goes up an octave as she says, “You’re in the mob!”

I shake my head and say, “It’s not like that.”

She shakes her head and hunches her shoulders, wrapping her arms around herself. “I need to go.”

I grip her hips, I can’t lose her. I know if I let her go right now, she’s gone forever. But it needs to happen. Fuck, as the realization hits me, my chest seems to collapse with pain.

“Peaches, don’t—”

“Don’t call me that!” she yells at me, and looks at me with a raw sadness I’ve never seen on her face. I hate it. I hate what I’ve done to her.

“I’m sorry, Maddy.”

Her composure breaks, and I can tell she’s holding back more tears.

“I’m sorry. Just, just tell me that you won’t say shit.” That’s all I need from her, and I’ll let her leave me.

She looks at me with fear in her eyes. “I didn’t see anything.”

“Good girl.” I try to kiss her, but she pulls away from me. I should expect that.

“I’m sorry, Maddy.” I know this is the end. But I don’t want it to be over. “Is this it?” I ask her, hating how I’m leaving it in her hands.

Her body shudders with a sob, and she falls limp against me.

“I don’t know,” she answers with her head buried in my chest, and I hate it. I hate that she’s making me be the one to pull the trigger. We need to be over and done with though. I can’t let this shit I’m in get to her.

I’ll make sure no one comes after her. I’ll call Nikolai. I’ll get this dealt with. I knew I was going to be bad for her. I never should’ve let it get this far.

“I’m sorry, Maddy. I’ll leave you alone now.”

She cries harder against me. But only for a moment.

“Fuck you, Zane.” She pushes against me and opens the driver’s door, climbing out. She angrily wipes the tears away and walks to her door with her arms crossed over her chest. I sit in the car way longer than I should. Wanting to chase her, but knowing I shouldn’t.

CHAPTER 20

MADELINE

I walk up the stairs, each step feeling heavier than the last, my breathing labored. I'm feeling an array of emotions; anger, sadness and rage. Unspeakable rage. I want to hit someone, preferably Zane.

I knew it! I rage, holding on to the anger and ignoring the pain in my chest. *I knew he was no good for me. Why did I have to be so stupid?*

I tried to fight him. I can't deny I knew this was bad. I brush the tears away and hold on to the railing as I slowly walk up the stairs.

He's a drug dealer! I want to scream, but if I open my mouth, I know I'll just cry. *A fucking drug dealer!* A shudder runs through my body. That man was no good. My heart freezes remembering the way he looked at me. I nearly fall on the step remembering the man from a few weeks ago. Fuck! The signs were there. I'm so stupid. He lied to me! How could he?

If my father only knew. He'd be fucking furious. He all but warned me not to trust Zane, but even with my misgivings, I went along with the bad boy anyway. How stupid am I? How stupid could I have been to not see what was in front of me this whole time?

I make it up the stairs and to the window of my bedroom. I peer out and see Zane's car still parked by the sidewalk. He's sitting there, staring straight ahead. A part of me wants to run back out there and scream at him, accuse him of lying to me,

but another part of me just wants to remain away from him. Far away. It doesn't matter what I do though. No matter what, I'll be hurt. And if I run to him, he'll only hold me and try to make me feel better. And then what will I do? When I'm in his arms, I'm a fucking idiot. I'm weak and stupid when I'm with him. I slam the curtain closed and turn my back on him. I put my hand over my mouth and try to stop crying. It just hurts so much.

My bedroom door opens and my heart stops, thinking it's Zane.

"Maddy?" Katie asks with astonishment. "Maddy, what's wrong with you?" She's quick to run to my side and I lose all composure.

I collapse in her arms, sobbing like a baby. "Zane," I wail. I try to tell her what happened. About the drugs, the man, the breakup. I try, but even I can't understand my words.

"Huh?" Katie asks in bewilderment. "Maddy, stop crying, you're babbling and not making sense."

It takes great effort to get a hold of myself. I sit up, wipe at my teary eyes and focus on Katie. She's looking at me with shock, probably wondering what the hell is going on. "It's Zane," I manage to choke out over a sob.

"Zane? What did he do? Cheat on you?" Katie scowls darkly. "If he hurt you in any way Maddy, I swear to God, I'll twist his dick until it's curved."

"No, not that," I say and gulp back another sob. "At least I don't think so." But he's a fucking liar. *What else did he lie about?* Even as I think the nasty thought, I know it's not true.

"Then what? What did he do that was so bad that you're in here acting like a maniac?"

"He's a drug dealer. Or at least he deals with people that deal drugs." It's the second one. It has to be the second one. I refuse to believe he's any more involved than just owning the place. A million ideas run through my head.

Katie's jaw drops. "A drug dealer? Are you serious?" she squeaks.

Sniffing, I nod. “I saw these guys unloading it at his shop.”

“Holy shit!” Katie exclaims. She pauses and then asks, “Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes! I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m sure they’re using the parlor as a front. Zane’s reaction after confirmed it.” I rub my eyes. They feel swollen and tired. I feel exhausted. And most of all, broken.

Katie shakes her head. “I can’t believe it. He even brought us by there and let us meet Needles.”

“I know, right?” I sniffle and try to hold on to that anger. “What a fucking fraud.” I give her a pleading look. “What do I do, Katie?”

Katie takes a long time to respond, but she finally says, “The only thing you can do. Stay away from Zane. Far, far away.”

CHAPTER 21

ZANE

I wanted so fucking badly to go after her. I watched her close the door to her condo and I stared at it for a long time. I could've begged her to take me back. But what could I promise her?

I can't leave the mob. They'd hunt me down. They'd hunt *us* down. Marky's there now at my place, keeping an eye on her house for me. I refused to leave until I had eyes on her. I called him the second I had the strength to get my ass back here and confront Garret.

I have a sick feeling in my gut. I may be overreacting, but I'd rather that than risk her safety.

It can't have been more than an hour since we left, but the shop's deserted. I walk to Trisha's room, but it's locked. Needles' is open though.

"Yo," I call into his room, holding onto the jamb of the door. "When did they leave?" I need to know. Once they pick the shipment up it takes a few hours to drop it off. But then they'll be free to do whatever. I was hoping I'd catch them and make sure Garret stays away and leaves her the fuck alone.

Needles looks up at me from his drawing pad and opens his mouth to answer, but then his expression changes and he stands up, letting the pad fall to the floor with a dull thud.

"Bro, what's wrong?" he asks me and I back up, running my hands down my face.

I keep telling myself it's alright. I keep thinking she'll be fine.

But I can't fucking lie anymore.

This shit isn't right. I'm not alright.

My heart twists in my chest. *She's* not alright.

"Maddy," I start to tell him, but my throat closes. I shake my head and pound my fist into the wall.

"How long?" I ask him again. My words come out harder than they should.

"Like fifteen minutes." I nod my head and swallow thickly. "What happened?" he asks again, and I know I need to tell him.

"I gotta call Nikolai," I tell him as chills run down my arms.

Fuck, having to make this call makes it that much more real.

I pull my phone from my pocket and dial his number. I shouldn't. I shouldn't be calling to talk about this shit. It's against code. Nothing is ever discussed on the phone. It's the reason I drove here.

I press the buttons and put the phone to my ear. Every ring makes me worry more and more, like he's avoiding me. Like maybe they're gonna take a hit out on me and keep me in the dark about it.

It's Nikolai, I tell myself. He wouldn't do that to me. He was everything to me growing up. He's not gonna fuck me over like that. Right?

Finally, he answers, "Yeah?" Hearing his voice answer the same way he always does is a good sign. A good fucking sign.

"Nikolai, I got a problem." I pinch the bridge of my nose and close my eyes. Fuck! I wish this weren't real. I wish I could just take it back. I'd take it all back to save her.

"You need me?" I can hear him move the phone and I'm guessing he took it off speaker.

"You don't know?" I ask him.

“Know what?”

“Something happened today at the shop.”

“How bad?” he asks.

I shake my head and reply, “Not bad. It’s just, my girl.” I swallow thickly before continuing. “She was here and went out the back when the van was here.”

“That’s not good, Zane.” Nikolai’s voice is low. There’s a pause before he asks, “Did she see anything?”

I can’t lie to him. “She saw a bit, but she knows not to say shit.” I say the last words with conviction. “She’s not gonna say shit to anyone.” I start pacing the room with my hands in my hair. Needles is watching me like he’s ready to go to war with me. He’s always been a loyal friend like that. But he’s nervous as fuck. “She’s good for it. I’d put my life on it.”

“Just calm down, Zane.” He’s talking like there’s nothing wrong with what happened.

“I think Garret’s gonna want her,” I say, and I have to pause. I can’t finish the sentence. I shouldn’t, first of all. This is all going down on the phone and I can’t say shit like that. But that’s not the reason I can’t get it out. The thought of them going after her makes me physically sick, almost unable to speak.

“We won’t touch her. *He* won’t touch her.” He’s quick to answer, and his words are absolute.

“I have a bad feeling, Nikolai.” I’m telling him the truth. I really do. Something in my gut is telling me she’s not okay, that she’s still in danger.

“It’s me, I got your back, Zane.” Hearing Nikolai’s voice telling me it’s alright calms me down a good bit. Maybe it’s all just in my head because I had to end it with her. Maybe that’s why I feel so fucked.

I did need to end it though. She can’t be around this shit. I’ll never be able to bring a good girl into this shit life. I should’ve known better.

“She’s a good girl, Nik,” I tell him simply.

He chuckles low and rough on the other end. "I'm sure she is, and she's fine."

"Do you need anything from me?" I ask him. I can't imagine it's that easy. That she saw some shit, but they're just gonna let her go.

"Nah, it's all good." It's silent for a moment. "You alright?" he asks.

No. I'm not alright.

"Yeah, I'm good." I nod my head and look out the small window in Needles' room. "If it's all good and she's safe," I feel the need to clarify so he knows exactly what I'm saying. "Then I'm good."

He hesitates on the other end and my heart stops in my chest. But finally he responds, "It's all good. And I give you my word that she's safe. Go calm your ass down."

I wait another moment, letting the words sink in before I end the call.

"What'd he say?" Needles asks. I shove the phone back in my pocket and try to calm down.

"He said she's good... It's all good."

We stare at each other, neither of us saying shit, but I'm sure we're both thinking the same thing. *He's lying. She's a witness, and that means she's dead.*

"Needles, help me take her car back, man." I can't even look him in the eyes.

"Yeah, sure," he says as he takes a hesitant step toward me. "It's gonna be alright." He nods his head weakly, barely keeping eye contact with me.

Even he doesn't believe it.

CHAPTER 22

MADLINE

I shouldn't be here.

It's been days since I last saw Zane. Yet, he's been on my mind ever since. Every waking moment has been spent thinking about him. I can't get him out of my head. The more I think about my situation, the more I begin to rationalize. So what if he's mixed up in a world of crime? Does that make him a bad person? He said he didn't sell them. That it wasn't like that. Maybe they pressured him. Maybe *he's* the victim.

I raise my hand and pause right before I knock on Zane's door, thinking, *I should leave.*

But I can't. All I can think about is Zane. I want to see him again, that cocky smile, that chiseled body. I want to feel his strong hands again, touching me, feeling me, caressing me.

I want to feel better, and I know he can make me feel good. I know he can. He's like a drug made just for me.

Taking a deep breath and gathering my courage, I knock. There's no answer. I knock several more times. My knuckles rap against the wood and each time the hollow sound makes my heart squeeze harder and harder in my chest. Still no answer. I stand there for what seems like eternity before finally giving up.

He's not coming to the door. Bastard.

Feeling tears well up in my eyes, I turn away and walk back over to my door.

It's a good thing he didn't answer, I tell myself as I storm back inside feeling mad as hell. I should stay away. I always thought he was bad for me, but now I know for absolute sure.

As much as I want to believe those words, I can't stop thinking about him. Maybe right now he needs me. God, I wish this ache in my chest would just go away. I wish we could get lost in each other and just run away. I think about how well we went together, when the world would disappear around us. How much I miss his touch, his hot lips, his naughty words spoken in my ear.

Goddamn it, Maddy! Be strong!

But I can't. Just thinking about Zane makes me weak.

"Are you okay, Maddy?" Katie asks with concern as I brush by her.

I ignore her and continue on to my room. There's nothing she can say that will make me feel better, and in a way, I blame her for my misery. After all, wasn't she the one that encouraged me to see Zane?

Katie follows me down the hall and up the stairs, but I pretend she isn't there. When I reach my room, I close the door on her. Before I can lock it, she pushes her way in.

I turn my face to the side to hide the tears. "Please, just go away!"

Kate walks in and closes the door. She crosses her arms across her chest and defiantly says, "No, Maddy. I refuse. I'm not going to let you walk around and treat me this way."

"I'm not treating you in any way," I deny.

"Bullshit. You're taking what happened with Zane out on me."

"No I'm not." My words sound hollow. Empty.

"Keep telling yourself that." Katie pauses and then accuses, "I saw you go over there."

"So what?" I reply defensively. "I wanted to talk to him."

"What the hell are you thinking? I told you to stay away from him." She's angry, and her words are like venom.

“You know that’s funny, Katie, when you’re the same one that encouraged me to give him a chance.”

“Yeah, I did. I’m not ashamed of it either. How was I supposed to know he was involved in that shit?” I want to argue with her, but I bite my tongue. She’s right. I can’t blame her for not knowing the truth about Zane.

“You weren’t,” I admit grudgingly.

“Okay then. Now that I know the truth, I want you to do me a favor. Don’t see him. *Ever.*”

My heart twists in my throat. It hurts. It hurts just thinking about it.

Seeing my tormented expression, Katie presses on, saying, “He lied to you.”

“He didn’t really,” I find myself saying, “He just kept the truth from me. Which isn’t exactly the same thing as lying.”

I can’t believe I’m defending him, I think to myself. After all I’ve said about guys being no-good dogs, and now I’m taking up for someone who’s been dishonest to my face.

“Maybe I can change him,” I say, trying to convince Katie as much as I’m trying to convince myself. “Maybe he’ll stop.”

“Are you even listening to yourself?” Katie asks with disbelief. “Is the same Maddy I grew up with, or did aliens abduct her and stick me with this clone? ‘Cause you can’t be serious.”

“I know it sounds stupid, Katie, but... maybe Zane will change for me... I mean, I feel like he would...” I trail off weakly.

Kate raises a finger sharply, cutting me off from whatever I might say next. “Stop it, Maddy, just fucking stop. You tried this very thing with Zach. And did that work?”

“No,” I admit reluctantly. Katie’s right. It’s just that I hate how I feel inside. I hate how I feel my very existence depends upon being with Zane. Being with him is intoxicating beyond words. Being without him is like being in a dark, lifeless abyss. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“It’ll take a while, but get back involved in your studies and try your best to stop thinking about Zane. I’ll even do whatever it takes to help you keep your mind off him. After a while, it’ll be easy.”

Katie’s being overly optimistic. The guy lives next door and we’re stuck in our lease for the rest of the year. How the hell am I going to stop thinking about him when I can look through my bedroom window and he’s right there?

“You’ll find someone else somewhere along the line in the future, someone who loves you and that’ll treat you right.”

I can’t take it. I break down and start sobbing. I feel Katie’s arms wrap around me a second later.

“Shh,” she coos. “Everything’s going to be alright.” She comforts me. It feels good to be held. I just feel so damn alone without him.

When I finally stop sobbing she says, “Come on girl. Pull yourself together. We got class in the next thirty minutes. That jerk-off is not about to ruin you like Zach did. Just be happy that you found out what you did before the relationship went any further.”

After Katie’s sure I’m okay, we take off to school. When we arrive, I’m a cauldron of bubbling emotions I can hardly contain.

I don’t know why I agreed to come to class today, I think to myself as Katie pulls in between two trucks on the west side of the parking lot. I’m a total mess.

Katie gathers her books and begins to get out, but pauses when she sees I’m not budging. “What are you doing?”

“Sitting here,” I say, trying to hold back tears.

Katie frowns. “Aren’t you going to get out?”

“In a minute.”

Katie opens her mouth to protest but I sharply say, “Katie, not now. Please. I need a moment to collect myself.”

Katie stares at me long and hard. “Fine,” she says reluctantly. “But don’t stay in here too long. You’ll just be making it worse.” She climbs out of the car. Before she shuts the door she adds, “I’ll be sending you a text to check on you. Answer it. And I’m taking the keys.”

Then she walks off and I watch her for a moment before breaking down into tears. Luckily, this crying fit only lasts a few minutes, and after a few sobs, I’m able to pull myself together.

One day it’ll stop hurting. I know it will. I just need to live through the pain and it’ll go away. One day.

I gather my books and then check my makeup in the mirror. My mascara is all runny and smudged. I quickly fix it and then step out of the car. I’m about to round the car when I hear the sound of running footsteps.

Before I can turn around, rough powerful hands clamp down on my mouth. I try to scream, but there’s a rag pressed to my face. I try to shake the hands off of me. I inhale deeply, and then belatedly realize I need to hold my breath. The rag is obviously laced with something to knock me out. Fuck! I struggle against the man. Or is it men? But my body feels weak. I’m losing control of my limbs.

Then I go unconscious.

CHAPTER 23

MADELINE

I come to with my hair in my face. When I try to push it out of the way, I realize that my arms are pinned behind my back. I groan. I feel sore all over. Slowly, I open my eyes and experience a jolt of shock.

This can't be happening.

Though I'm bent forward with my hair in my face, I'm able to distinguish my surroundings. I'm in a chair, in a dark room and it's very quiet. Panicking, I struggle against my bonds, my fingers grazing against the rough material. Rope. Fuck! They tied me up. I pull harder, but I only succeed in burning my skin. It's tied too tightly. *Damn it!* Tears flood my eyes. Nausea twists my stomach.

Please tell me this is all just a dream.

But it's real. Very fucking real.

My mind is rushing with all sorts of doomsday thoughts. Who kidnapped me? Why was I kidnapped? And worse of all, what do they plan on doing with me? The latter thought terrifies me and chills my body.

Is it because of Zane?

I don't want to believe it. Zane wouldn't do something like this to me... would he? It's a scary thought. If it's true, it means I never really knew him all along. I try not to despair.

“Vlad, I have a gift for you,” a deep, familiar voice says, startling me. Up until that moment, I thought I was alone. I turn my head slightly to get a visual on who’s talking. My blood goes cold when I see who it is. Standing in a darkened corner is Garret with a phone pressed to his ear. He’s staring at me in a way that makes me want to writhe against my bonds and get the fuck out of here, but the fear is so strong that I’m paralyzed.

“What do you think, boss, eh?” Garret asks on the phone. “She’s older than what you’re used to, but she’s just your type.” Garret laughs and then adds darkly, “The fighting kind.” He smiles, a sick and disgusting sight that turns my stomach.

I can hear a voice on the other end and then silence, but Garret doesn’t respond and keeps staring at me with those dead, chilly eyes.

I go dizzy with terror. “Zane!” I yell, tears streaming down my face. “Zane, please don’t let them hurt me!” I shake violently in my chair, struggling in vain to break free.

Garret’s handsome face twists with rage and he walks over and backhands me in the face. I gasp with pain as my head whips to the side, and he snarls, “Shut up, you stupid bitch! That piece of shit ain’t coming to save your ass.”

The taste of metallic blood fills my mouth as stinging pain shoots through my face. Fuck, that hurt.

“Thanks to you, he’s good as fucking dead.” My heart stops beating. No. No!

Garret gives me a wicked smile at the look of confused distress on my face. “Yeah that’s right, bitch. Zane is dead because of you.”

“I-I-I didn’t do anything for Zane to deserve this,” I stammer. “Please don’t hurt him.

“Lying whore!” Garret backhands me again and I cry out with pain. Hot fluid pours out of my nose. Blood. “You saw us unloading. Ain’t no way we’re gonna let you live after that.”

“I won’t tell anyone!” I try to yell, but my mouth hurts so fucking bad. The small cuts sting, and I spit up blood. “I

swear,” I say weakly as tears prick my eyes.

Garret chuckles evilly. “No amount of begging or lying is gonna save you, cunt. If you didn’t want to end up like this, you should’ve never got involved with Zane.”

I start sobbing incoherently. This isn’t fair. Not for me. Not for Zane. Not for anyone.

I feel a hand touch my shoulder, and my heart nearly stops.

Oh no. Oh God, no.

Garret chuckles at my terror, guessing my worry. “Don’t worry, bitch. We’re not going to rape you... yet. I gotta wait for the boss and the camera so we can give Zane a nice parting gift.” His fingers touch my chin and I rip my head away. He smiles down at me as he says, “I want him to be able to watch.”

“Fuck you!” I scream at the top of my lungs, no longer caring about what happens to me. At this point, I feel like I have nothing to lose. They’re not going to spare me, and I’m not going to give him the pleasure of seeing me beg for my life.

Garret laughs at my rage. “We’ll see how much shit you’ll be able to talk when I have my dick in your mouth.”

I sneer. “Fucking try it, and I’ll bite your dick off.”

“Fucking cocky bitch!” Roaring with rage, Garret shoves me and my chair topples over backward. My head slams against the floor, and I see stars. Through the pain I smile, pleased I made the evil fucker mad.

Garret lets out a snarl of frustration. “I can’t wait to fuck you, bitch,” he growls from somewhere above me. “You won’t be talking shit after I get done. You’ll be begging me to end your life.”

As defiant as I’ve become in this predicament, I don’t offer a response because I’m filled with terror.

When it’s obvious I have nothing else to say, he mutters something I can’t hear and leaves. I hear the sounds of footsteps, followed by a door closing. I’m left alone with my

thoughts and the knowledge that I only have minutes or possibly even hours left to live.

Please God, help me! I plead within the depths of my mind.
Please don't let my life end in this way!

But God is either deaf or not listening. The truth is, no one is coming to save me. Not Katie. Not Daddy, and definitely not Zane.

I feel like there's only one thing left to do.

I close my eyes and pray for the end to come swiftly.

CHAPTER 24

ZANE

*M*y chest hurts so fucking bad. It hasn't stopped hurting since she came to my house the other day. I had to ignore her while she knocked on my door, but hearing her crying was like a knife to my heart. I wanna talk to her. I wanna explain everything. More than that, I wanna leave this life behind and take her away. But we'd have to run. We'd always be running.

You can't leave the mob.

Fuck, I can't handle it. But it's for her own good. I know it is. I've been keeping an eye on her. Marky has, too. I can't be around her all the time, and I trust him. He'd tell me if there was anything going on.

I can't sleep. Every time I hear a car pull up, I instantly think it's someone coming to take her. I've dialed up Nikolai's number at least a dozen times, but I never hit send. I need to know she's gonna be alright, and she's not on their list.

He told me she's alright. I have to believe him. I trust him.

But at the same time, I don't.

And Marky's still watching her when I can't. Just in case.

As if reading my mind, not ten minutes later I get a call. I stop working on the mock-up of the tat I'm doing later and calmly pick up my phone.

I'm trying to keep the worrying down to a minimum. Every time he calls my heart rate picks up, and dread runs down my spine. But each time it's always been to tell me she's fine.

I answer it and try keep my voice even, but before I can ask him about her, he's yelling on the other end.

"They got her." My blood runs cold. "I wasn't sure, Zane. I didn't want to freak you out." He's talking rapid-fire, practically shouting, and it's hard to hear. I stand up and pace the room as my body goes numb with fear. "I didn't know what to do so I just watched, but it was them and they took her. I tried—"

"Stop. Stop." It can't be true. My lungs refuse to fill. "Who has her?"

"Garret. That fucker and two others. I wasn't sure if it was him. It wasn't till I was pulling in and they got out. I wasn't fast enough. I followed them as fast as I could, but I lost them."

My blood races with adrenaline, anger takes over the fear. I'm gonna kill him. I'm gonna slice his fucking throat open.

"Where?" I ask him as I try to keep my hand from tightening on the phone to the point where it feels like it's going to break.

"I followed them onto Washington and then they went past—"

"Where?!" I scream into the phone. I'm barely able to breathe, my vision's going white. I need to get there now. Right fucking now. Every second away from her is a second he could hurt her. Fuck, my heart sinks. He's going to. I know he is.

"I lost them going north on Market Street." Market Street? What the fuck is on Market Street? I don't know. I don't know shit about the mob's operations. Fuck!

I hang up the phone and immediately dial Nikolai. I'll fucking kill him. I'll kill all of them.

He answers the phone, and I don't give him a second to give me his bullshit.

"You lying motherfucker," I seethe into the phone.

“Whoa!” he yells on the other end, but I don’t stop. I’ll never stop.

“You told me she was safe. You’re fucking dead.”

“Zane!” he yells out.

“All of you are dead.” I’ll start at the top and work my way down.

“Zane! Who has her?” I pause in my oath to make all them suffer. I wasn’t expecting him to deny it. “Who has her?” he asks again, but I don’t answer. I don’t know if he’s bullshitting me. My body’s shaking with anger, and I’m not sure what to do. I don’t know if I believe him. I don’t know what to believe anymore.

“It’s not us, Zane! I didn’t lie to you. Zane!” He’s quiet for a second. “Zane! Are you there?” He sounds panicked, and his voice is filled with concern.

“You didn’t know?” I ask him while trying to calm myself down. A shred of relief goes through me. But only a shred. This will be easier if it’s just Garret. So much easier if I have Nikolai’s backing.

“It’s not us—”

I cut him off. “Garret took her.”

He’s quiet for a second. I let it sink in, but in my head I hear the *tick tick tick* of time passing.

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“Yes,” I’m quick to answer.

“Do you know where?” he asks. My phone beeps, and I’m sure it’s Marky calling back. I pull the phone away from my ear and see I’m right. I ignore the call.

“They went down Market, but that’s where we lost them.”

“Give me her cell. They’re probably at the warehouse.” I rattle off her number and pace the room, feeling like a caged beast.

“What’s the address?” I ask him. That’s all I need. Just the address, and I can go.

“Hold on Zane, we need to know who’s there.”

“We’ll find out when we get there.”

“It only takes a minute, hold the fuck on,” he scolds me, and I can’t stand it. I need to move; I need to go to her.

“Fuck!” he yells into the phone, and it stops me in my tracks.

“What? What?” I ask him. Fear runs through me. Not Maddy. Please, fuck, don’t be about Maddy.

“Vlad’s there.” His voice is hard and devoid of emotion.

“Vlad and Garret?” I ask him. My head feels dizzy and I have to lean against the wall. Pain tears through my heart.

“He’s fucking dead.” Nikolai’s voice is cold. I nod my head at his words.

“How many others?” I ask him. He’s tracking their cells to locate them. I’ve seen him do it before. Thank fuck for Nikolai keeping me from going in with no plan.

“I only see four of them. But there could be more.”

“Do you have anyone?” I ask him. I can’t ask Needles or Marky to come with me. They aren’t trained for this shit. They wouldn’t know what to do.

“Yeah, I do, but you need a vest, Zane.” I don’t fucking want to wait on a vest. “We have the element of surprise on our side. They won’t see us coming. But we need to be smart.” I don’t care about being smart or being prepared, I just need to get to her.

“If I ever meant anything to you, you’ll help me keep her safe.”

“Zane, I’m on your side.” He sighs into the phone and says, “We’ll get her back. I promise you.”

My throat closes as other emotions take over, but I hold on to the anger. I picture what I’m gonna do to them when I get there. They’re dead. Every fucking one of them.

“Garret’s mine.”



“YOU NEED TO BE SMART ABOUT THIS, ZANE,” I HEAR NIKOLAI speaking, but I’m not listening. We’re close, so close to getting her back and keeping her safe.

“You can’t go in there guns blazing,” he says. The fuck I can’t.

“Nik,” I say as I look him square in his eyes, “If you think I can go in there and not put a bullet in every one of their skulls, you’ve lost your mind.”

“That’s fine by me,” he replies as he keeps my gaze, “But we need to go in quietly.”

My jaw clenches. “I don’t like it.” He wants me to sneak in and find her. He wants me to wait for his call. I’m not fucking waiting. If they’re in there... if they’re with her. My throat closes and my fists clench at the thought. “I’ll fucking kill them!” I slam my fist on the dash.

Nik looks at me like he’s not sure what to do. “If it was up to me, Zane, you wouldn’t be going in,” he says quietly. “And you don’t have to like it. But you need to respect my plan. I promised you we’d get her back, and I fully intend to keep that promise.”

I bite my tongue as he continues. “You need to be quiet. You can’t let them know we’re there.” He’s right. Logically I know that. But logic can go fuck itself right now for all I care.

I hold his eyes and nod once. “Done.” I’m lying. I’m not holding back. I refuse to stand by and watch and wait.

Nik looks behind me and asks, “Lev, Alec, you two loaded?”

“Damn right, boss,” Alec answers. Lev nods. I look behind me at the two men. I’ve seen them before—hell, I’ve grown up with them. But I don’t trust them. I don’t trust any of them. I barely trust Nikolai.

For all I know, this is a setup and they’re going to stab Nik in the back.

I’m going in and grabbing my girl, and getting the fuck out. If I can kill those fuckers who took her on my way out, that’s what I’ll do. She’s all that’s important. I need to get her out of there.

“We’ll head in through the back,” Nik says and starts giving orders. We’re parked in a lot just behind the warehouse. He said there’s no cameras here. I’m taking his lead, but I don’t like waiting. I need to make sure she’s safe.

Nik looks at me while he talks. “This hotheaded fuck is staying with me.” He turns back to look at the other men while my eyes bore into his skull.

“You two need to make sure the place is secure. Sweep the place and kill anyone in there. Every single one of those fuckers is a traitor. He’s not the boss anymore.” They nod and agree, and with that I’m moving out of the car and I don’t stop until we’re there, staring at the steel double doors to the warehouse.

Nik is slow as fuck compared to me, but he’s quiet. The other men are also quiet. All I can hear is my heavy breathing, and the sound of blood rushing in my ears.

I move to open the door, but Nik stops me. His hand flies to the handle and he rips my hand away.

Nik puts his finger against his lips and stares me in the eyes.

I nod my head and back away, following his lead. My heart’s beating so fast and loud. I can feel it pounding against my chest.

As soon as I’m in, I hear her. The warehouse is nearly empty. To our right, I can see half a dozen folding tables with boxes piled high in two rows in front of them.

This must be where they pack and ship the product.

In an instant my head whips to the left.

I can hear her muffled cries for help. They echo off the wall. I move straight back, to the left. There’s one hallway on this side, and her voice is easy to follow.

Keep screaming. I need to hear you, peaches. I need to know which door. My feet move of their own accord, and I’m only half-aware of Nik moving behind me.

I hear her cries from the far door, and I’m on it instantly. I’m there. She’s still alive. I’m here. I can save her.

I go to grab the door handle, but Nik pulls me back. My fists clench and I almost knock him out. But his attention isn't on me. It's on the door.

My shoulders heave as I wait for him to get going. I hear her scream out, and it's too much.

Nik's hand settles on the doorknob, gently turning it. I resist the urge to kick it open. I need to get to her. Her cries are louder now, and I don't know what's happening to her. My hands grip my gun and sweat pours down my face. My heart's beating too fast.

Maddy. I'm here.

Nik gently and soundlessly pushes the door open enough for us to creep through. As soon as I'm in, I see her in front of a desk, on the ground tied to an overturned chair. Vlad's standing above her with a large knife in hand. There's plastic wrap and duct tape on the desk. Their *equipment*.

Maddy's struggling against the ropes, trying to pull her hands free as she bucks off the ground. She's helpless and trying to scream through a gag. Tears are running down her face. My heart pangs in my chest.

Vlad's got a sick smile on his sunken-in face as he cuts her leg with the knife. Behind him, Garret's setting up a video camera.

Sickness threatens to take over, but more than that, anger. How dare they touch her? My body trembles with barely contained rage. Those sick fucks!

I can't let him touch her. I won't. In the distance, I hear gunshots. Alec and Lev must have found other people in the warehouse. But now we've lost the element of surprise as Vlad and Garret look up and realize we've come for Maddy.

I hear Nik yell as I run out to the middle of the room, my gun pointed at Vlad and firing. My hand's shaking so hard, I miss. The bullet sounds off and barely grazes Vlad's back. Garret comes from my left and throws a chair at me. The fuckers aren't armed.

Good. I aim my gun at him as the chair flies through the air.

It hits my calves and trips me up as I try to run to Maddy. I try to cover her, but I fall and the gun slips from my hands. It lands on the ground with a loud clank next to me, and I brace myself. I'm quick to get up and move to her side.

At the same time, I hear another bullet go off and see Nik go after Vlad from the corner of my eye. Garret's quick to run into Nik, knocking the two of them to the ground. Vlad's focused on Nik, and I can tell Nik is his target. I reach up to the desk and grab the knife.

Maddy first. I have to save her. Before I do anything else, I need her to be safe. I need to give her a fighting chance at least. I crawl to her and quickly cut the rope from her wrists. The knife saws back and forth.

I hear the sound of bones crunching and fists slamming into flesh. By the noises echoing off the walls of the small room, I know Nik must be putting up a hell of a fight.

Finally, the rope breaks and I hear Nik call out for me. "Zane!"

I put the knife in her hands, knowing she needs to cut the rope on her ankles. "Run, Maddy!" I yell at her. "Run!"

I grab the gun on the floor next to me and turn to aim, but I can't fire. I could hit Nikolai. I move quickly through the room, kicking the chair and aim as soon as I have Garret lined up. He lifts his head and sees as I pull the trigger. He ducks and kicks off the ground, shoving his weight forward and pushing his body into my thighs.

I fall hard and the gun goes off as I crash to the floor. My hand hits the floor hard and I wince as Garret punches me in the gut. The gun slips from my hand and he reaches for it. I grab his waist and yank him down and away from it. He kicks my thigh and reaches for the gun again, practically climbing up my body. I headbutt his stomach, and he keels over in pain. I slam a fist in his jaw and it sends him sliding away from me, away from the gun.

I reach for the gun. I can feel the barrel with the tips of my fingers.

I see Maddy using the knife to cut the rope around her ankles from the corner of my eye. I need to kill him. I can't let him get to her. I need to get the gun first.

Maddy's screaming, and keeps looking at me. She needs to get out. Just save herself. But she's not running. She hurls her body at Garret with the knife in her hand. But he's too quick. He kicks her hard in her face, sending her flying backward. Fuck! "Just run Maddy!" I scream to her, but she ignores me. I'll never forgive myself if something happens to her.

The knife slices his leg, but doesn't do anything more than slow him down for a moment. It's a moment I'm able to scoot closer to the gun than he is though.

Garret grabs my leg and tries to pull me away. I kick him. Hard. I miss, but on the way down my foot hits his jaw and he slips off of me. I kick against the ground watching Garret, and look up to see Maddy crawling on the floor and pushing the gun to me. I take it in both hands and roll onto my back, steadying it down my body and just as Garrett looks up, I shoot.

Bang! Maddy shrieks. *Bang! Bang!* I keep shooting until the gun's out of bullets.

Garret falls to the ground lifeless, but the fight's not over. I turn to my left and see Nik and Vlad both grappling on the ground, both with their hands at each other's throat. I aim my gun and fire, but it's empty. Fuck! My body's hot and my heart feels like it's racing to climb up my throat.

I search for another gun, but I can't see one. There's nothing.

I watch as Vlad puts all his weight on top of Nik and tightens his hands around his throat. Nik doesn't let up, but he's losing the fight. I can see it happening.

I run toward them and slam my body against Vlad's. He falls, and his hands slip. Nik takes in a heavy breath, coughing as his lungs fill for the first time since Vlad started choking him. I struggle to get up as Nik pushes against me and tries to pin Vlad's heavy weight down.

Nikolai's hands wrap around Vlad's throat. Vlad tries bringing his legs up to pin Nikolai to the ground, but I'm quick to grab him. I leave Maddy behind me and grip onto his calves. I push all my weight down and pin him. I don't let up until I see Vlad's hands move from Nik's throat to the hands strangling him.

The blood vessels in his eyes pop and his face turns red. Maddy screams. She doesn't stop screaming. I leave Nik and scoot backward to hold Maddy. She's on the ground, knife in her hand with the cut rope on the floor next to her.

Her clothes are torn, and the cut on her leg is bleeding pretty bad. I grab her in my arms and push my hand against her cut to stop the blood from flowing. I try shushing her. Her body shakes in my arms.

"I've got you. You're safe." I try petting her hair, but she's pushing me away.

My eyes focus on Alec and Lev as they come into the room with their guns out. I start to push her behind me, but they take in the scene and lower their weapons.

I hold Maddy closer to me as I see the life drain from Vlad's eyes. Lev walks over and holds a gun out to Nik as Vlad's body goes limp.

I turn Maddy's head away and watch as Nik puts the gun to Vlad's head and pulls the trigger.

Bang! Maddy jolts once in my arms, but she doesn't scream.

A clean shot in the skull. Blood spills from the wound as the head turns slightly and Nik moves off his chest.

"It's over, peaches. It's alright," I whisper into her hair, but she doesn't respond. That's when I notice she's not holding on to me anymore. She's limp in my arms.

"Maddy?" I give her body a firm shake as my heart races with panic. She's breathing, she's alive. But she's not responsive.

CHAPTER 25

ZANE

She won't stop shaking. I hold her closer to me. I think she's in shock. "It's alright peaches, I've got you." I repeat the words over and over, holding her tighter to me.

I look up at Nikolai. "I need to take her to the hospital." She needs help. She needs it now.

He looks back at me with hesitation. That's something the mob doesn't do. At the hospital they ask questions. Questions are something for snitches.

I grind my teeth. I'm not going to let her go without a fight.

"I'm done with this shit, Nikolai." I nearly spit my words out. I look up at him, holding my girl closer to me.

He's the only one I had in my life for the longest time. But that's over now. I'm ready to move on. And this isn't the life I want. It's not the life of a man she deserves. And more than anything, I want to deserve her.

"What's that, Zane? You're done with what?" he asks with a small threat in his voice, but I don't care. I'm not letting go of Maddy, and her and this life simply don't mix.

"I'm out. I don't want this anymore. Take the shop, do what you want. You're the Don, and I'm asking to go. I'm asking for peace."

Nikolai looks at me and then back at his men. They heard, but they keep their heads down. Nikolai is the boss now. He holds

the power.

He takes a few steps back and runs a hand down his face. "Get these fuckers out of here now!" he yells at his men.

"You need to wait till it's clean." I nod and agree, but I don't like it. Nik passes me the plastic wrap and duct tape and it takes me a minute to realize it's for her cut.

I take care of it and keep an eye on her as time passes. I rock her in my arms and watch her breathing. She seems to be doing better and not worse, so that's a good thing.

"She'll be alright," Nik says. I look up at him and his eyes move from her to me. "She's alright."

"I wanna take her to the hospital."

Maddy nestles into my chest, she's quiet and still trembling. This was too much for her.

Nikolai nods his head at me. "Call 'em."

I don't hesitate to reach in my pocket and dial up the ambulance. I'm short and to the point. "I have a young woman in shock on 32 and Sussex." They ask questions that I don't answer. "She needs an ambulance." And with that, I hang up the phone. I may want out of the mob, but I'm sure as shit not going to give them any information.

I'm not a rat.

A long moment passes. "You okay, peaches?" I whisper into Maddy's ear. She nods her head and offers me a small murmur, but her eyes aren't focused.

"What's the shop worth?" Nikolai asks, bringing my attention back to him.

"No clue," I answer him. I don't fucking know. I don't handle the books. "You can check the books."

Nikolai looks at me for a moment. "I'll give you the money, whatever it's worth, and you go where you want." I hold his gaze, feeling a weight lift off my shoulders.

I nod my head as I hear the sirens coming. They're always fast when you hang up.

“It’s been a long time coming,” Nikolai says. “I’m proud of you, Zane.”

I don’t know why, but it hurts to hear him say that. My eyes water and I’d feel like a little bitch if Nikolai’s weren’t all glassy-looking, too.

“It’s over,” he says.

I nod my head and lean down to give Maddy a kiss.

“It’s over, baby; we’re safe now.”

CHAPTER 26

MADELINE

“*I* think she’s awake, Mr. Murphy,” I hear Katie say. Her voice sounds muffled, almost as if I’m under water. I hear other people talking too, but their voices are too distorted to understand what they’re saying.

Groaning, I struggle to open my eyes. They feel heavy, like they weigh a thousand pounds. On top of that, my body is sore all over and I feel incredibly weak. After a moment, I’m able to lift my eyelids enough to see. Everything is blurry. There are several people, I think, standing over my bed. I blink rapidly to clear my vision, and slowly the room comes into view.

I’m lying in a hospital bed, surrounded by Daddy and Katie. Katie is holding my hand and looking down at me with a mixture of relief and love. Daddy looks like a man who’s been told he’s won the lottery.

As grateful as I am to see these two, I notice one person missing.

Zane, I think with panic. *Where’s Zane?*

I try to lift my head to look around, but it’s too much for me and I fall back. Seeing my distress, Daddy rushes forward and places a hand on my shoulder to calm me. “I’m here, baby,” he reassures me, leaning down to plant a gentle kiss on my forehead. “No one is ever going to hurt you again. I swear it.” For a moment, I feel comforted by his words.

“We’re both so glad you’re alive,” Katie adds, her voice filled with joy. She places her hand over her chest. “For a while there, I thought you wouldn’t make it. You almost gave your father and me a frickin’ heart attack.”

I smile briefly at her, so she doesn’t think I’m an ungrateful twit. “Where’s Zane?” I croak. My voice sounds raw, like I’ve smoked a hundred packs of cigarettes.

“He had to leave,” Katie says, glancing apprehensively at Daddy.

“Why?” I demand, sensing something’s not right. Why would he leave me like this?

“Because I told him to,” Daddy replies sternly, his smile morphing into a scowl. “I told him to get out and to never come back. He’s the reason why you’re here, and he can go to hell for it.”

Anger swells up from the depths of my stomach. “Why would you do that?” I snap. “Zane saved my life!” I can scarcely remember the events following my rescue, but I clearly remember being held in Zane’s loving arms before I lost consciousness. My father was wrong to send Zane away when he’d risked his life to save me.

He snorts. “Saved you? Had you never met the lying bastard, you wouldn’t be in this situation.”

“I’m only alive because he saved me!” I yell, my voice croaking like a frog. Through the large doorway, I see several nurses stop to stare at me, but I don’t give a damn. I’m fucking pissed.

“You have no idea why you’re alive,” Daddy says. “You’re clearly delirious, so I’m going to forgive how you’re acting toward me.”

“I am not delirious. As soon as they say I’m well enough, I’m out of here! And the first thing I’m going to do is find Zane to tell him how much I love him.”

Daddy’s face turns red with fury. “You’re going to do no such thing, young lady!”

I glare back at him, pretending not to notice Katie fidgeting and looking uncomfortable. I know she must feel pretty conflicted right now, stuck between her best friend and my well-meaning father. “I’m a grown woman. You can’t tell me what I can or can’t do!”

He glowers at me, the veins standing out his neck. I swear if I wasn’t already half-dead, he’d strike me. He takes a deep breath, as if to calm himself and opens his mouth to speak. “You know—”

“Mr. Murphy,” Katie says, quietly interrupting him. “I think Maddy and I need a second alone.”

He turns on Katie, and at first I think he’s going to cuss her out, but he just stares at her.

“Please?” Katie pleads. “Just a few minutes, and I’ll let you take the helm.”

Daddy turns his gaze back on me for a long moment before grudgingly saying, “Alright. You have five minutes.” Not saying another word, he bends down and kisses me on the forehead, and then he walks out of the room, gently closing the door behind him.

“What happened?” I ask her as soon as the door clicks shut. Katie grabs a chair from the corner of the room and drags it over to the bed. She sits down and takes my hand.

“Are you okay?” she asks, her eyes filled with concern.

I shake my head, tears welling up into my eyes. “No,” I sigh. “I’m not.” Tears roll down my face as I relive the trauma of my kidnapping, and it’s an effort to wipe them away. “I need Zane,” I say.

Seeing my distress, tears well up in Katie’s eyes. “Oh Maddy,” she sighs. “I can’t imagine what you went through.”

My throat feels like it has a lump the size of a bowling ball in it. “They were going to...” I can hardly get the words out. “Rape me... and kill me.” I’m grateful my father isn’t in here to hear this part of my story. I fear he might blame Zane and go find him and shoot him.

Katie places a hand over her mouth in horror. “Oh God, Maddy, no.”

I nod. “It was so awful, Katie. I didn’t know if I was going to live or die.”

“And Zane really saved you?” she asks in wonder.

“Yes,” I reply. “Against all odds, he found me. And then he killed them. He saved me.”

Katie’s eyes go wide with shock. “He killed the guys who kidnapped you?”

I nod. “And they fucking deserved it,” I snarl, half-rising in the bed, my eyes blazing with hatred. “They deserved to be fucking dead!”

Katie’s taken aback by the venom in my voice and the savage scowl on my face. I know she thinks that this behavior isn’t like me, but she wasn’t there. She didn’t live through the horror like I did. It changes a person.

“When was Zane last here?” I ask, looking all around as if he’s about to pop out of thin air.

“Yesterday, when you were admitted. He called me and told me to get your dad. I did, and then when I got here he told me you had been kidnapped, but everything was fine now. He didn’t say anything about killing anybody, though.” She bites her lower lip anxiously.

“He didn’t tell you because he didn’t want Daddy to know. Daddy hates him, so imagine if he knew what Zane did, even if it was to save me.”

“He’d arrest him.”

I nod. “Exactly. So I need you to promise me, Katie. Promise me you won’t tell a soul about what I’ve told you.”

Katie is a long time in responding, and I fear she’s going to run out and tell my father, but finally she nods. “I promise, Maddy. You don’t have to worry. I won’t tell a soul.” She bites her lower lip again and then looks anxious. “But there’s something you need to know.”

I hold back a groan. I've had enough surprises to last me a lifetime.

"The cops interviewed your dad and me, and I'm sure they're going to interview you as soon as they think you're well enough."

"Ugh," I groan. "That's the last thing I need right now."

"You're going to have to lie to them, Maddy."

"I know that."

"I hope you know you could get into serious trouble for that."

"I don't give a fuck." I don't care what crime I'll commit by covering for Zane, I'm going to stand by him until the very end.

"Just making sure you know that."

"Thank you," I say sarcastically.

Katie scowls. "Bitch."

I don't miss a beat. "Ho."

Katie laughs and leans down to hug me. "Maddy, I'm just so happy you're alive!"

I wish I could rejoice with her, but I feel sick to my stomach. "Damn, I really wish there was a way I could get out of being interrogated."

"You know, you don't have to talk to them right now. You're the victim in this, you can stall them by saying you're not ready to talk about it. And then when you are well enough, you can lawyer up first before saying anything, if you have to say anything at all."

"I'll just say I don't remember shit, that I fell and hit my head, which I did, and I'm having trouble recalling anything." They can't make me talk.

"You always were sort of brain-damaged," Katie agrees, and we both laugh.

"Do you really love him?" Katie asks me in a serious tone after a moment of silence.

“Yes,” I reply with conviction. “I do. I don’t know if he loves me, or if he and my father will ever get along, but I do love him. Very much.”

Katie looks at me with a proud gleam in her eye. “That’s good, Maddy. I’m so happy for you, and I’m glad to know you’ve finally given a man your heart.” Then she wryly adds, “Even if he had to murder two guys to capture it.” “Katie!” I protest.

“Wha? You know I’m just pulling your leg. You know, I talked to Needles too, during all this.”

“What did he say?” I ask.

“He told me that they’re moving shop. That Zane’s out of the mob for good and moving on. When you’re well enough, if you still want, I’ll take you to Zane.”

My eyes brim over with tears. “Thank you so much, Katie.”

She rubs my arm affectionately. “That’s what friends are for.”

I feel so much love and appreciation for Katie right now. She’s been my rock throughout my life, and I’m honored that she’s going to stand by me and my decision to cover for Zane. I’m not even worried that she’ll ever talk about what I’ve shared with her.

Still there is one last thing that is bothering me. “Katie, am I wrong?” I have to ask. “Zane killed those people, and I’ll have to live with that knowledge for the rest of my life. But even knowing that, I still love him and want to be with him. Do you think that makes me a bad person?”

Katie snorts with derision. “I think your refusing to tell me how big Zane’s dong is makes you a bad person.”

“Katie!”

Katie laughs, and a moment later, I’m laughing right along with her. We laugh and laugh until our sides hurt. When we’re done, Katie’s expression turns serious and she grabs my hand and rubs it. “No, I don’t think you’re a bad person, Maddy. You’re the best friend a girl could ever ask for.”

“Thank you.” My eyes well up with tears, and I’m truly touched. I know then that Katie and I will be friends for life.

Our bond is stronger than ever.

Katie smiles at me with great affection, the same that I feel in my heart. “Besides, you can’t help who you love.”

Grinning and filled with happiness, I squeeze her hand and reply, “Truer words have never been spoken.”

CHAPTER 27

ZANE

“*Y*ou sleep at all last night, man?” Needles asks as I place the machine in the cardboard box as carefully as I can.

“No.” I don’t mean to be short. But I’m worried about her, and tired as fuck. I stayed up in the waiting room downstairs.

I just can’t get the image of her tied up and helpless out of my head. I wish they were alive so I could kill them again. I never wanna leave her side ever again.

I know she left me. I know this shit is my fault. But I couldn’t leave her. I respected her father’s wishes, but I wasn’t going to leave.

The nurse on duty was nice enough to keep me posted. I know she’s awake now. I know she’s alright. I keep checking my phone, thinking she’ll call me. But nothing yet.

I wouldn’t even be here if Nikolai hadn’t told me the shop needed to be cleared out today.

“It’s gonna be alright.” Needles slaps my back and gives me a reassuring look. He has no fucking clue how I feel though.

“As soon as this shit is packed up, I’m going back to her. Her father can’t stay in that room forever.” I don’t know if she’ll want me. But I have to try.

“Even if he does, so what?” Needles says with a scrunched nose. “Fuck him.”

I give him a sad smile. I thought about just being an ass and refusing to leave. But he's her father, and I know she doesn't want us fighting.

"It'll hurt her," I tell him. I know she didn't like it when we fought before. Who am I to go in there causing problems when she's recovering from that shit? The shit I caused her.

I want her though. I need her.

I have to try.

I breathe out deep and get back to loading my shit into cardboard boxes.

I hear the door open behind us and I assume it's Trisha. She's got a box in the back that she needs to move to the new place.

But then I hear Katie's sarcastic mouth. "You better not be leaving town."

I clench my jaw and try to hold in everything I wanna say. I need to know how my girl is. I wanna tell Katie there's no fucking way I'm leaving her. Instead I slowly turn around, and I'm speechless.

Maddy's standing there with a bandage on her leg and a bruise on her face. Her gorgeous green eyes are staring at me with so many emotions shining through.

I drop the shit in my hands and stare back at her, taking her in. I wanna run to her, take her in my arms, and kiss her. I'd drop to my knees and promise to make it up to her. I'd spend the rest of my life doing it.

She looks so uneasy. Like she doesn't know why she's here.

Fuck it!

I only have one life to live, and I wanna spend it with her.

I take large strides across the room to take her in my arms. And thank fuck she wraps her arms around me in return. I bury my head in the crook of her neck and kiss every inch available.

"I'm so sorry, Maddy."

She doesn't say anything which makes me nervous, but she holds me tighter.

"Is it true?" she asks in a voice that tells me she's scared to know the answer.

"Is what true?" I pull away and search her eyes. My heart races with panic.

"Are you done with that? *All* of it?" she asks me. I slowly nod my head as I realize what she's asking.

"I am. It's over. I swear to you."

I hear her sob, and it breaks my heart. I brush her tears away with my thumb and hold her face in my hands.

"I'm sorry, peaches. I'm so fucking sorry." I take her lips with mine and kiss her with all the passion I have for her. I want her to feel it, and to know it, never doubting me again.

"I'll make it up to you," I whisper with my forehead resting against hers. "Every day for the rest of my life." I kiss her again and she leans into my touch. My hand splays across her back and braces her against me. I don't want to ever let go.

"I love you, Zane." She whispers her words and my heart swells in my chest, but I'm still worried. I wait for a "but". After a moment she pulls back and looks at me, her eyes searching my face and then I see her vulnerability.

She's just waiting for me to say it back.

"I love you too, peaches. Forever."

CHAPTER 28

MADLINE

“*Y*es!” I scream out as he pounds into me. Fuck, he feels so good. Every time is like the first time. He groans in the crook of my neck.

“That’s right, peaches,” he says as his callused thumb presses against my clit, and I fall hard against the bed. My back bows, and my pussy spasms with an intense orgasm.

“Cum on my dick, baby.” He continues fucking me through my release as waves and waves of heated pleasure light every nerve ending on fire.

He thrusts into me, forcing the headboard to bang repeatedly against the wall.

The haze of lust clears for only a moment.

I push up against the wall as if I could stop it, but it’s useless. Zane is lost in pleasure and overpowers me, caging me in and fucking me as though he needs his release more than his last breath.

“Fuck!” I scream out as the waves dim and the tips of my toes and fingers tingle. Again. Slight fear overwhelms me as my body heats. My head thrashes, and I try to push him away.

I almost say the words, *I can’t*. But Zane’s lips find mine. He kisses me with such passion, I’m forced to give myself to him.

His hips pound against mine, each time pushing against my throbbing clit, once, twice, three times and he explodes in me.

The feel of his massive cock pulsing inside of me sends me over the edge again.

And we find our release together.

After a moment, my breathing evens and Zane pulls out of me. I wince from how sore I am. We finally moved in together, seriously this time. Not just one of us staying at the other's place. No more roommates. Just us. And he's taken advantage. Not that I'm complaining.

Shit! The headboard.

I peek up at the wall and cover my face.

"Damn it, Zane," I groan into my hands.

"What?" he asks all innocent-like. He knows what he did. He hasn't even sanded the spackle from the last time he dented the wall.

"We need a new headboard." I concede. I fucking love this one. It's beautiful. But Zane is a beast, and there's no way this is going to work.

He chuckles, all rough and low. And sexy as sin. My clit throbs, and my legs scissor. I can't get enough of him.

"Already?" he says and grins. "You're insatiable." I playfully push him away as he tries to crawl on top of my body.

I giggle and lie on my side, facing him.

I was so scared only weeks ago that we were ruined. That everything that'd happened was just too much. I didn't think our relationship would survive.

Especially when my father came over and saw us together on the sofa. I stood up, ready to tell him not to say anything, but Zane and he took it outside.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't eavesdrop.

My heart nearly leapt up my throat when I heard Zane tell him he killed the men who put their hands on me. He told him everything.

My father still isn't sure that I should be with him, but at least he has some respect for my decision to stay with him and he keeps his mouth shut when he sees him.

The truth is, I needed Zane, and he needed me.

Without each other, we wouldn't have healed like we did. My fingers trace the snake on his arm. It's my favorite thing to do while we're in bed.

"When are you gonna let me give you a tattoo?" he asks me.

I've been thinking about that a lot lately. We have a fresh start. A new home all to ourselves. I want everyone to know I'm his. I'd be proud to wear his art.

But I'd be prouder to wear something else.

"When you put a ring on it."

He gives me a panty-melting smirk and crawls on top of me. "Is that so?" he asks, cocking a brow and chuckling.

"Hell yeah. Haven't you heard the song, if you like it you shoulda..." My voice trails off as he reaches over to the nightstand.

Oh hell no. No. He. Did. Not.

He pulls the drawer open and pulls out a small black velvet box.

I cover my mouth with both my hands as tears well in my eyes.

"Madeline Murphy, be my wife." He doesn't ask, of course. I roll my eyes and snifle before letting out a small laugh.

"You didn't even ask." I look into his eyes and feel so freaking loved.

"Last time I asked you for something, you gave me the runaround for weeks." My shoulders shake with a soft giggle, and my eyes go glassy with tears. "I wasn't willing to take the risk this time."

"I fucking love you, Zane." I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him with every ounce of passion I have.

He looks into my eyes and smiles wide as he says, “I love you too, peaches.”

EPILOGUE

ZANE

“Are you sure it’s not going to hurt?” Maddy asks me again. I’ve told her it’s gonna fucking hurt. Tattooing over any bone isn’t a walk in the park. But somehow she keeps getting it in her head that I’ve told her it isn’t going to hurt.

“Just a little, but don’t worry, I’ll make it up to you.”

She looks up at me warily and takes in a deep breath. “Alright. Let’s do this.”

She opens the door to the new shop and walks right in like she owns the place. And I guess she does, since what’s mine is hers, now that we’re married.

“Hey Needles, do you guys have cosmos here?” she asks Needles, and I can’t help but laugh as he gives her a look like she’s crazy.

He looks past her and right at me. “She for real, bro?” he asks.

“Give her what she wants, man. She’s getting my mark on her.”

Needles gives her a big smile and Trisha walks out from the back. She must’ve heard us come in.

“I got something in the back you’ll like.” She grins at Maddy, and I get the sense that the two of them have talked about this before.

“Whatever you’re drinking, take it down fast, baby.” I pull her into my arms and hold her tight to me. “I’ve been waiting for

this for a long time.”

“What’d you decide on?” Needles asks Maddy.

She looks back at me with a small smile and then to him and says, “I told him whatever he wants. I trust him.” That’s almost true. She told me she wanted peaches. Her confession nearly knocked me on my ass.

She said she needed it. She needed me to make my nickname for her permanent, so she can’t run from it.

I think I’m going to throw in some sunflowers too. She lights up every time I get them for her now. If she’s having a bad day, it’s real easy to put a smile on her face and then take her to bed and help her forget whatever’s bothering her.

Needles snorts a laugh as Maddy pulls away from me and grabs a small pink bottle of something from Trisha. “Well, it’s your funeral,” he says under his breath.

“Kinky?” Maddy asks.

“Fucking delicious,” Trisha says, shooting back her own tiny ass bottle.

“You on the clock?” I ask her.

“Nah, me and Katie are going out tonight.”

Maddy rolls her eyes and sets her empty bottle down. “Don’t let her get you into trouble.”

“Us?” she asks. “Never.”

I pull Maddy into the back as I nod to Trisha and Needles. “See you guys later.”

She squeezes my hand and takes a deep breath as she sits on the table.

I decide to give her a little laugh. She’s too stiff, too worked up.

“How about on your inner thigh? Right near your pussy. Since it’s so fucking sweet.”

She smiles a bit and bites down on her lip, but she’s still nervous.

“You don’t have to do this, you know?” I’ve given her so many chances to back out of this. I know she’s not into getting a tat herself. I wouldn’t blame her if she never got one. I’ve been trying to hide my excitement just in case she did want to back out.

She shakes her head emphatically and says, “I want this, Zane.”

She lifts her shirt and leans back on the table.

“Make me yours forever,” she says.

I bend down and kiss her stomach. Faint stretch marks are still there from when she carried our little man, Gabe. He’s safe at home napping with the sitter while we go on our first “date” out. She could do anything she wanted, and this is what she picked.

She took a chance on me. She loved me, married me, and gave me a family.

I look into her gorgeous green eyes and know I’m cherished.

“You are mine forever.” I wait for her to look up at me before I say, “I love you, peaches.”

She gives me a sweet smile and says, “I love you too, Zane.”

BAD BOY

BY WILLOW WINTERS

**They thought I'd do my job. They thought I'd kill her.
They thought wrong.**

I'm a dangerous man. It only takes one panty-dropping,
mouth-watering look to know it. You may be fooled by my
good looks and charm.

But my eyes give it away.

I'm the hitman for the Valetti *familia*, and I'm f*cking good at
it. They want men to talk, and I make them talk. They want
men gone—bang, it's done. It's as simple as that.

Until her.

She's on my list, but I f*cking want her. On her knees and
submitting to my every command.

I'll give her a simple choice — die, or be mine.

I've always wanted this. Now that I have the chance, I'm
taking it.

**I can fulfill those fantasies I know she has. I'm going to
make her beg for it.**

This is a standalone, full-length mafia romance with a filthy-mouthed, possessive bad boy. Dark mafia themes throughout.
Guaranteed HEA.

CHAPTER 1

ANTHONY

I stare at the picture from the envelope and feel so damn conflicted. I crumple the edges in my hand, not knowing if I really wanna go through with this. My eyes travel along each feature of her face, pausing to admire her large, brown eyes and long, thick lashes. She has gorgeous full lips I want to bite, but also see wrapped around my cock. Her nails are done in a classic shade of red, and her light brown hair hangs over her shoulders in loose curls. Her breasts peek out just above the neckline of her flowing blouse. I wish I could slowly strip her out of those clothes. But I can't. She's not mine. Even worse, I'm supposed to kill her.

I shove the slip of paper back into the envelope containing the other photos, those hits I couldn't give two shits about. They're for assholes who have it coming to them. One stole and ran in order to keep up with his addiction. You don't steal from a mob boss and think you can get away with it. The second killed a made man. He knows it's coming. Neither are doing a good job of hiding. They'll be easy hits.

I take another swig from my beer and debate on taking the sheet back out. But I have her face memorized already. I want her. More than that, I want to break her. My thoughts are depraved, and I know it. I think back to the last chick I had. She liked to play. But that's all it was to her. Play. I want the real thing. I want to earn a woman's submission, earn her desire to please me through training. So far, it's always been

pretend. I've never had an opportunity like this. But it's wrong. It's so fucked up and wrong.

But then again, so am I.

I carve up assholes and kill them for a living. The torturing and their screams don't affect me in the least.

This broad has it coming to her, even if she doesn't know it. She probably thought she was doing the right thing by going to the cops. She probably thinks she's safe in the witness protection program. She's not. She didn't know what she was doing, and now it's my responsibility to make her disappear. She cost the Cassano *familia* a lot of money, but more than anything, they lost face. The fucker she was involved with doesn't care that she's on a hit list. He's just pissed she ratted on them, even if the charges didn't stick.

Killing her is purely about their pride and the deal they lost.

I grind my teeth and slowly peel back the label on my beer bottle. I have to be delicate so it doesn't tear apart. Patience. I need patience. With everything I do, I need patience.

I've been looking into her, and I know she'd fit the part. Poor girl didn't know what she was getting herself into when she started fucking around with a member of the Cassanos. She's a sweet little thing who thought she'd like a taste of the more dangerous things in life. I can give her more than a taste though. I can give her exactly what she was looking for and fulfill those fantasies I know she has. And she can give me what I've always wanted.

I spied on her again last night. She was reading one of her books, and I watched as it turned her on. Of course she had no idea, but I was right fucking there. The only thing separating us was a brick wall. With her window open, I clearly heard all those soft moans coming from her lips. I had to know what she was reading, so I snuck in and took a look around.

I Googled that book the second I got home. Her own dark desires sealed her fate.

She has deviant fantasies just like me. She's fucking perfect.

“Anthony, you wanna talk now?” I hear Vince ask as he pulls up the stool to my right. I messaged him earlier. I place my bottle on the bar and push it to one side as the bartender slides Vince his usual Jack.

I lean back a bit and tap my knuckles on the bar before facing him. Vince is a ruthless fucker, and he doesn't take any shit. He's also my cousin, so I feel safe with him. But this is the mob, and he's the Don. I'm never *that* safe.

“It's about the hits we got in,” I tell him in a low enough voice that no one else present is going to hear. Not that it matters. It's our bar, and we know everyone in here.

“You need help? Tommy's not enough?” he asks, cocking a brow. Tommy's my brother, and he's also my second-in-command. Technically we're both contractors for the *familia*. We only do hits, and we don't bother with that other bullshit.

“No,” I say with certitude. I never need help. Hits are easy for me, in addition to being good money.

He takes a sip and licks his lips. “What's the problem, then?” he asks.

“There's one that I'd rather not do,” I tell him.

“Why's that?” he asks, setting the glass down to face me with his shoulders squared. He's in business mode. Right now he's not a friend, and he's not my cousin. Right now he's the boss.

“I want to make them an offer instead,” I explain.

His brow furrows as he replies. “I'm listening.”

“One's a woman.” His eyes flash with sympathy. None of us like taking women out. It's something that rarely happens, but when it does, we don't like it. We make it quick and painless for them. Maybe it's sexist, but I don't give a fuck. I've tortured a lot of men for information. Never a woman though. That's where I draw the line.

“They won't let her walk.” His words are said with finality.

“I want to ask if they'd accept a substantial monetary offer from me to buy her.” I feel my blood rushing faster and hotter. No one knows about my perversions. I'm sure they can all

guess. But I've never said a thing about my tastes, and they've never asked. They keep me on the edge of the social circle for the most part. I'm fine with that. It's better that way.

"Buy her, and then what?" he asks with his eyes trained on the back of the bar.

"I want to keep her." My voice is low, but steady.

"As a pet? As a slave?" Equal amounts of disgust and disbelief color his voice, and it almost makes me regret letting my dark desire come to light. Almost. But I want this. I want it more than anything.

"If that's what you want to call it." The determination in my voice rings out clearly. I'm sure my eyes look dark and absolute. I'm not ashamed of what I want. But I'm not willing to risk my position in the *familia* over it. Not yet, anyway. It's been a week since I was given the hit. Each day my obsession with her has only grown. I cleared out a room for her already. In my head, she's already mine. This is just a formality. But to Vince, this is a twisted sickness.

He looks me dead in the eyes as he begins, "After that shit Ava went through—"

I stop him right there and say, "This would be nothing like that." My voice is louder than it should be, and the dark stare he gives me in return makes that clear. I settle in my seat and continue with a respectful tone. "I would never hurt her. Not like that. Not beyond any pain she didn't want."

"Ava said some days she would've rather been dead than been in that position." My heart hurts for her. Ava's a *comare* to a member of our *familia*. To Kane. He's a good man. He saved her, and in a lot of ways, she saved him as well.

She went through a lot of shit. Her captors loved hurting her and humiliating her. She's a strong woman to have survived all that. That's not what I want though. The idea of doing that to a woman makes me angry. I'd never do that. Never.

"It's not the same." I reach for my beer and turn away from him slightly. He doesn't understand. I didn't expect him to

anyway. “She’s already dead. She’s on their list.” I take a drink and then look back to him. “I’ll give her a choice.”

“Death, or your slave?” he asks with a humorless grunt. I know to him she’d be seen as a slave, as a pet. That’s fine. To me, she’d be *mine*. Nothing else but mine.

“Better than death with no escape,” I respond flatly.

He takes a sip of Jack, looks at me, and says, “It may not be to her. You want to hurt her and abuse her, rather than carrying out an order that would give her a quick death.”

“No. I don’t want that. It’s not like that.” He doesn’t fucking get it. I torture and kill people for a living. I can see how he thinks that’s what I’d do to her. But I wouldn’t. I don’t know how much I should explain. To be honest, I don’t fucking feel like explaining anything.

My blood heats with anger, but then I have a pang of worry and think, *What if she doesn’t get it either?* I brush my doubt aside. I’ll show her. I’ll have to teach her how perfect it would be to be mine. I’ve looked into her. I’ve been obsessed with learning everything about her. She’s smart. She’ll learn. She’ll catch on quick that I’ll be a good master to her. And she’s familiar with the concepts. She’s read enough to have an idea of what I want from her. “Think of it as hardcore BDSM,” I say. I look at him from the corner of my eye, but it’s not convincing him.

I want this too fucking badly to let this opportunity pass me by. And after thinking about all the ways she’d calm the beast in me, I don’t know if I could actually go through with killing her.

Vince shakes his head and asks, “What are you looking to get from me, Anthony?”

“I want your permission to offer them a deal for her.” I need my proposal presented to the Cassano boss. He’s the one who ordered the hit. A number of other bosses come to us for hits, and we take care of their messes. For the right price, anyway. I don’t want to piss anyone off, and I want this to be a clean deal. Vince is quiet for a long time as he considers.

“You won’t hurt her?” he finally asks.

“I won’t. It’s about something else for me.” Control. Desire. Submission. I want it all from her, but not her pain.

He nods his head once and I take that as an agreement. I can’t help that an asymmetric smile grows on my face. Step one is done. Now to contact the other mob head. He’ll be easy to convince, I’m sure. He didn’t give a fuck about the soldiers she gave up. He cares about the deal he lost, and the money that went with it.

I down the rest of my beer and nod a goodbye to Vince. I don’t have anything else to say to him. I’d rather he forget this conversation ever happened.

As I turn to leave, eager to clear out the cell I’ve prepared for her and put the finishing touches in her room, he turns in his seat and grabs my arm to stop me.

“What are you going to do if she chooses death?” he asks as I turn to face him. The idea of her dying makes my heart stop in my chest.

“I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.” Chills run down my body at the thought of those beautiful eyes staring into mine, begging me for death. That’s not what I want. I know she’ll want this when I show her how good it can be.

“It might,” he says, looking at me with sympathy in his eyes. I don’t want his sympathy.

She’s going to fucking love what I do to her. But I’ll have to break her first.

CHAPTER 2

CATHERINE -3 WEEKS LATER

*T*ip the edge of the porcelain cup to my lips and close my eyes as the perfect temperature of tea spills into my mouth. My eyes close and the comfort of routine washes through me. But the feeling is only temporary. That's when I register the change. Something feels off. I remember thinking that earlier as well. It's too quiet. Crickets and other creatures of the night always provide soothing background noise for my evening tea. But tonight the noises are muted. It's as though something's scared them away.

I always drink chamomile tea to help me relax and sleep. My normal routine is to sit on the porch while I finish a cup, followed by a melatonin pill. I've had issues falling asleep for the last year or so. Ever since my life completely changed. Staying asleep is never an issue, but falling asleep is difficult. In the year that I've been here, I've done the same thing every night.

Before my life changed forever, I didn't have a care in the world and slept like a baby every night. I did whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. Then I hit my mid-twenties and decided I needed to sow my wild oats. My mother had just passed away. She was older when she had me, and she died peacefully—as peacefully as you can with cancer—but it was hard on me and I didn't want to face the pain. To say I engaged in high-risk behavior would be putting it lightly. Then I fell in love. Or rather, what I *thought* was love with an asshole named Lorenzo Passanova. I called him my Cassanova

because I was a fucking idiot, high on lust and loving the risk that came with being with a man like him.

I thought being with him would be just like the books I love to read. Like I'd be living out the plot of a romance novel. I was a fucking idiot.

Meeting that asshole was the worst thing that ever happened to me. I didn't even realize it until it was too late. He sucked me out of my safe little bubble into his world, and I felt alive for the first time in my life. But it was a mistake. A horrible fucking mistake.

When you play with fire, expect to get burned. Over and over, I'd heard my mother's warning, but I ignored it. The first time it happened, I knew I'd seriously misjudged him. Lorenzo smacked me so hard across the face that I fell to the ground. Even worse, I eventually tried to sneak out and leave his ass behind, but ran into his *familia* beating the shit out of a guy. Bags of dope were scattered everywhere as they made their threats. That was it for me. I saw and heard too much. I ran like hell, but they got me. They cornered me and took me back to Lorenzo and then to their Don.

Lorenzo beat the hell out of me in front of them. He told them he'd keep me in line for now, so they didn't have to kill me right then. His *familia* were cold-blooded murderers who wanted me dead. I'll never forget the looks in their eyes. Or the disgusting joy that filled Lorenzo's dark eyes when he would repeatedly hurt me. I had one chance to slip away, and I took it. I ran like hell and blabbed to the police so they'd protect me.

That's what living on the edge got me. As a result, I've settled my ass down tremendously. And now I'm back to being the good girl my mother raised me to be. Being through that shit and getting placed in the witness protection program will do that to you.

So now I stay in my cozy house feeling alone but safe, and surround myself with comfort and familiarity. It's different now; I'm more alone than I've ever been in my entire life, but at least I'm safe. The last time the marshals checked in on me

was nearly three months ago. Now I'm on my own and settled in.

This screened-in porch is now my favorite room in this snug, raised ranch house.

My toes sweep across the soft and high pile of the rug beneath the wicker furniture set. Across from me I have my antique curio cabinet. It contains my large collection of teapots and cups. When I run a load of laundry, I can faintly smell it from here. I inhale deeply and my lungs fill with all my favorite scents.

But the best part is the location. I'm nearly half a mile away from anyone. My home is set back into the woods and I'm surrounded by trees. The moonlight shines down and tonight it's full, illuminating the woods as though it's nearly dawn. Usually my ritual helps put me at ease, but tonight it's less familiar, less comforting.

The night air feels a bit colder on my shoulders, sending a shiver down my back. I wrap the cashmere throw tighter around myself, all the way up to my neck. I feel my forehead crease as I realize I feel someone's eyes on me. The sensation freezes my body for a moment as the fear I had nearly every night when I first moved here returns. I turn quickly in my seat and feel my heart racing. The sound of blood rushing through my ears is all I can hear. When I first moved here, I was terrified the Cassanos would find me. But they didn't. It took a long time for me to feel safe, and an even longer time for the nightmares to stop, but it's all over now. I breathe in deep and concentrate on relaxing.

I settle my back against the seat, thinking I'm just being paranoid. A thought occurs to me. *Maybe this is my survival instinct warning me.* The idea causes a row of goosebumps to travel down my arms. But just like all of the anxiety I've dealt with this week, I push it down and chalk it up to my nerves.

I place the teacup down gently on the table and stand up, stretching slightly and covering my mouth as I yawn. The blanket slips off my shoulders, and a chill runs through my body. I'm quick to pull it back up to cover me and grip it

close. Fall must be coming. It's the change of the season that's throwing me off. I close my eyes and listen harder. Some noises are faint, but they're still present. I just need to relax and accept the approaching transition from summer to autumn. Some things can't be helped.

Still, I check the locks at the front door twice after depositing my cup in the sink. Being alone in a cabin in the country isn't the smartest thing for a young woman on her own. My options for disappearing and starting a new life were limited though, and when you want to hide, it's best to be far away and alone.

I move the curtain away from the large window in the front room and look down the gravel driveway, seeing nothing. The grass is tall and needs to be mowed. I sigh and again the throw slips, but it's warmer inside the main part of the house, so I let it drape over the crook in my arm.

My bed is made and I can't wait to sink into it and drift to sleep, but I need to check over my email and messages one last time before I can pass out. The one good thing about my job is that I can do it from anywhere. When I first moved here, I had to stop working on anything associated with my real name. My blog, my columns and articles, anything else tied to my online presence, you name it—done. I was crushed. I had been a renowned book reviewer, beta reader, and part-time writer. The money was great, but I would have loved it all regardless of the pay.

I had to say goodbye to my former life though because the Cassano *familia* could have found me that way. The mafia that saw me as a rat could have easily tracked me down if I'd continued working under my real name, and it wasn't worth it.

So I started over under a pen name, and it's going better than I ever imagined it could. The experience and knowledge that I gained in my former life helped me tremendously. Now I'm firmly established in the industry, and I'm doing even better than I was before.

This is my life now—books and tea in a remote cabin in the woods. I love it, but lately it's felt empty. I could go on like this, feeling as though I'm living a full life, but I'm so alone. I

wanted nothing more than to be by myself when I was running and hiding. But now I find myself questioning if I'll ever have anyone real in my life, and anything substantial.

I've thought about getting a dog—a big one, to help make me feel secure. A dog's love is unconditional. I want that love desperately. I need it from someone, or something. But a dog would need walks and interaction, plus dogs have to be taken to the vet. Those are all opportunities for people to see me. I don't want that. I want to stay hidden. I *need* to stay hidden. But I do need companionship. I've been craving it more and more as I've settled into this new life.

At least I have my business. I have my blogging, my books, and my friends, even if they're all online. I almost didn't start over. I almost gave up and poured my heart into a book of my own. But my life is no romance. And writing it down would make it real. Once I'd gotten over the fear, I didn't want to relive it. So I did my best to move on.

I was hesitant to start from scratch, but I pushed myself to do it anyway. Within two months my new blog had taken off, and I'd revitalized my income. I log on and see twelve new messages in my email. The first few are easy enough to reply to, requiring nothing more than copying and pasting from a template of other answers I've already given. The next email takes some time to write out though. I'm responding to a new author who messaged me looking for advice on her series. I'll have to get back to her in the morning. I don't have the energy right now. But I take this business seriously, and it shows. And it pays. Just before I close the laptop, I hear a *ping*.

It's a message from a new book friend. She joined my book club a few weeks ago. Right now it's just a small Facebook group, but it's my baby. Although she's not very active in the group, she's messaged me a number of times. I get so many messages a day. Some are from other bloggers and columnists who are just starting out and looking for advice. Others are from authors wanting to send me advanced reading copies and beta reads. I can read two books a day, so I'm always happy to help where I can. But Val's messages are different. They're more personal.

What did you think of the book?

I scan the message twice as my fingers hover above the keys. I read and receive so many books that most of the time I have to sift through my emails before replying in order to make sure I'm keeping everything straight, but not this time. I know exactly which book Val's referring to.

Smut, also known as erotic romance to some, is a genre with which I'm intimately familiar. I prefer the term smut though, because it fills me with life. Like I'm naughty for reading it. The book she picked out though is exceptionally taboo. Arousal heats my core. The idea of being taken by a strange man has certainly been a dark desire of my own. I clench my thighs and bite down on my lip. I won't admit how I touched myself to some scenes.

I decide to respond with a professional answer.

I thought the author did a fabulous job of depicting the scenes with vivid imagery and capturing the heroine's emotions and character arc. Overall a well-written book.

She's quick with a reply. *So you enjoyed it?*

I did, I message back.

Is it so wrong that I'd want it to come true? Her reply makes me stop and consider her words.

I don't think there's anything wrong with the fantasy. But I'm sure real life would be much different.

You don't think you'd enjoy it in real life? Her question forces a small laugh from my lips. Although it's wonderful to get lost in them, these books aren't real. I know I'd enjoy some things. I've often fantasized about them. But this conversation is veering a little more into the territory of my personal preferences and is less about the book. It's also late, and I need to go to sleep while the melatonin is still active or I'll never get to bed. So I settle for a quick reply with a little humor that she'd enjoy.

Oh there are scenes I'd enjoy, but I'll stick to role playing for that ;) Gotta go to bed, ttyl!

Night!

A shiver of want travels through me as I exit her message and look at the list of remaining emails. I'll get to them all tomorrow.

I close my laptop, but I feel more awake now than I was when I first sat down. The book Val mentioned is all I can think about as I change into a nightgown. The imagery of a dark, damp cell and chains flood my mind. I can picture being the heroine. I can understand her desire to please her master. I wasn't a huge fan of the ending though. It wasn't the happily ever after I enjoy from romance. It was more realistic. After all, how could you ever fall in love with your captor, but still be sane? Would it even be possible to have both the sweet fantasy and the dark reality?

As I crawl into bed and lie on my back, I let my fingertips gently brush along my clit as I think about the book. I hear the clinking of the chains and the smack of the whip. I see her back arch as she raises her lower half to him for more. He takes her however he wants, and she's more than happy to let him use her body. My legs part, and I dip my fingers into my slick pussy and run the moisture over my clit. A small moan escapes me as I see the scenes play out in my head.

She's been trained to love the sting of the belt, and the feel of his hand slapping her ass. His bites. His marks. My hand grips my breast and I pinch my nipple between my fingers and pull, imagining it's him. I turn my head as though his lips are touching my neck, as if his teeth are about to pierce my skin. Anything and everything he does to her is a reward. He thrusts into her and takes his pleasure, over and over. Using her body. And she enjoys it. She thrives under his touch. I circle my clit, wanting him to reward her for her obedience. It's all she lives for. She is his, and that's all she desires. She only lives to please him. He doesn't stop until he has his fill and cums deep inside her. That alone is enough to bring her over the edge. And I find my own release with her.

You don't think you'd enjoy it in real life?

I remember Val's question as my breath steadies and I turn on my side, feeling exhausted from cumming.

In real life, that scenario would be a fucking nightmare. Just as I close my eyes, I feel a pinch in my neck. My lips part as I wince and raise my hand to feel what caused the sting, but it falls lifeless to my side. I vaguely make out a dark figure rounding the bed to approach me.

"Sleep, kitten." I hear his voice. But I can't respond as darkness overwhelms me.

CHAPTER 3

CATHERINE

*M*y shoulders are so sore. I roll onto my back against the cold, hard concrete and wince. After taking a moment to adjust to the discomfort, I push off the floor and into a sitting position. My eyes open and try to adapt to the darkness. I can barely see anything. My heart pounds in my chest, beating faster than it ever has before. I have no idea where I am or how I got here, but this shit isn't good. A cold sweat prickles my skin as I think back to last night. I remember lying down in my bed. I was tired, and then I fell asleep.

I have no clue how I've ended up here, in the middle of what looks like a small basement cellar. It's nearly pitch black. The only light is streaming through three small windows high up on the ceiling of the far wall. Each window is only about the size of a cinder block, and all three are blocked by something, but a small bit of light is still shining through. Terror runs through me and seems to freeze my blood.

I open my mouth to scream, but I'm too scared. *They'll* hear me.

I've been taken. They found me, and they took me. I know exactly who it is. The Cassanos. Fuck! I never want to go back to him, to Lorenzo. I won't let him touch me ever again.

Tears threaten to reveal themselves. But it's useless to cry. Some small part of me always knew it would come to this. You can't escape your death. I didn't really think I'd ever be able to run. I swallow the lump growing in my throat. My eyes

fall to the ground. I have no idea why they would keep me alive, since I'm no use to them. I'm certain they'll kill me soon. Or worse.

There are only two options I can think of. One, they left me alive to torture me because I went to the cops. Two, they left me alive to torture me for fun. Knowing Lorenzo, it's number two.

I close my eyes, letting the realization settle in. My body shakes as tremors of fear run through my limbs, but I try to soothe them. I got out before. I'll do it again. I may be a meek little mouse, as that fucker used to call me, but I fight when I have to. And right now, I have to.

My eyes slowly open and adjust to the light.

The air is cold and damp, but my throw is in a pile on the floor next to me. I quickly grab it and wrap it around me as though it can protect me. Fear cripples me as I hear the sound of a chair moving across the floor. My heart stills and a chill prickles my skin. I'm not alone.

As I search the dark, vacant room, I see him. The look of a hunter stares back at me. I don't recognize him. His broad chest and chiseled muscles flex as he leans forward. His eyes are a brilliant light blue and they pierce through me. His cheekbones are sharp and only appear more contoured with the shadows from the dim light. If he had any other expression on his face, I'd think he was the most gorgeous man I've ever met.

As if reading my mind, he smirks at me. The fucking bastard thinks this is funny. My heart tries to climb up my throat as he sits back in his seat and his hand settles on the raging erection in his jeans.

Fuck!

My eyes dart back up to his. That shit's not happening. I'll claw his fucking eyes out. I look for a door and then back to him. I don't see one, but I don't care if I kill him and I'm locked in here and starve to death. I won't let that happen.

We stare at each other in silence. I want to ask him what he wants from me, but I already know. I want to plead for him to let me leave, but I've learned that doesn't work. Instead I wait for his move. He cocks his head after a moment and slowly stands.

As he moves toward me, I resist the urge to scoot away. I can't do that. I can't back myself into a corner.

He crouches in front of me and leans in closer. His eyes hold a hint of danger, but also a spark of desire. I'm just not sure what he wants to do with me exactly, besides the obvious. "I'm supposed to kill you," he says. His deep baritone voice is low and threatening. He tilts his head as I slide slightly backward on my ass out of natural instinct. I take control of my body and tilt my chest away from him, giving myself leverage to kick this motherfucker in the balls if he gets any closer.

His full lips pull into an asymmetric grin. "You can't get away from me just yet." I hate how he's taunting me, like he expected this.

My breathing is ragged, and my heart is beating so fast I swear my chest won't be able to contain it. It feels as though my heart's trying to leap out of my throat. I barely get the words out, but I manage to say, "I don't want to die."

His grin widens into a perfect smile. This man's too handsome to be a predator. There's a darkness about him, but he could fool anyone with just a small amount of charm.

"I don't want you to die either, kitten." His pet name sends a bolt of desire to my clit. Shame washes through me. I shouldn't like it. *This is wrong*. He stands up and towers above me. I tilt my head to keep my eyes on him. "You have a choice," he says.

I wait for him to continue as I stay huddled in a ball beneath him. My blood rushes loudly in my ears and I try to calm my racing heart. He doesn't want me to die. That should relax me; it should make me feel even the faintest bit better. But it doesn't.

“You can die.” He speaks to the far wall, not looking at me. I find my eyes searching for a door, looking for a way out. To my right, I finally spot a steel door, with a keypad to its left. “Or,” he continues, and I feel his gaze on me as my eyes fly to meet his and my heart thuds painfully in my chest. “You can agree to be *mine*.”

I can't help that the way he says it makes my core heat. A wetness pools between my thighs and I feel ashamed. This isn't a fantasy. This is real life. I feel the blood drain from my face as I become lightheaded. The only reason I'm not dead is because he wants to keep me. But I doubt his intentions are anything but kinky and sick.

I don't want this. Tears leak from the corners of my eyes and I shake my head. “No.” My voice is hoarse and barely audible.

This isn't real. This isn't happening. I wait for him to grab me. As soon as he does, I'll strike. But he merely searches my face for something and stands far enough away that I can't do any real damage.

He cocks a brow and his voice softens as he says, “You haven't heard my terms. How sure are you that you don't want to be my pet?”

Terms?

Again the offer makes my pussy clench and my cheeks redden with a violent blush. “No,” I blurt out without thinking.

His chest rumbles with a deep chuckle. “Some part of you wants me. There's hope for us after all.” He smiles down at me and turns to walk away. My limbs refuse to move and attack him. Instead I stay frozen on the ground. I watch his corded muscles ripple as he walks to the door and enters in a code.

“Where are you going?” I ask before thinking. Apparently the fear of being left alone in this room to rot is greater than my fear of him. I don't want to die here, left to starve because he changed his mind. I may have said no, but I sure as fuck don't want to die here.

He turns and gives me the same sexy smirk. “My kitten needs to eat.”

Tension coils in my body. I can't let him leave. I need to get more information. I don't like not knowing anything about this situation and not having any other options.

"Wait. What—" I swallow thickly before continuing. "What are your terms?"

He smirks at me as he opens the door and says, "The first is that you'll listen to me. I'll be back soon."

My chest rises and falls with anxiety and fear as I stare back at him in silence. I pull the throw tighter around my shoulders and watch as he walks through the door and leaves me in the dark room. I'm all alone and barely able to breathe. After a short moment, lights in the ceiling slowly come to life, illuminating the room dimly and gradually getting brighter. I look around my surroundings and see a small toilet in the corner and the metal chair my captor was sitting in, but nothing else. Tears prick my eyes and my blood runs cold. I can't stay here like a prisoner.

I stare at the door waiting for him to come back, letting everything sink in.

I've been taken.

And he wants to keep me.

The only thing I'm certain of is that I need to find a way out of here. Run as fast as I can, and never look back. But I'll have to rely on him to get out of this fucking cell first.

CHAPTER 4

ANTHONY

I've never done anything that's felt this *wrong* before. Nothing's ever come close to giving me this thrill that's surging in my blood. Her reaction was perfect. I knew she'd deny me, but the fight in her is something I didn't expect. I fucking love it.

I had to be in there when she woke up. I didn't want her freaking out, thinking she was going to die. Instead she can be absorbed with thoughts of me and being mine. My dick is fucking leaking in my jeans. I can't help that I want this. I want her. And now I have her. But not her submission though. That much is obvious and expected.

I feel like I'm on the highest high I've ever had in my life. I should feel conflicted. I should have second thoughts about this, or feel remorse. But I don't. *She's mine.*

I pace back and forth in the kitchen as I think about what I'd like to feed her. I'm not sure what to offer her first. I need to make it tempting for her to obey me, but this isn't a reward. I have to stay vigilant. I want to shower her with everything she'd ever want to convince her she'd enjoy being my pet. But that would defeat the entire purpose of all this, and she needs to know what her position is. She needs to earn her rewards just as much as I need to earn her submission.

There are simple truths to this relationship.

I will always give her shelter and food, no matter how disobedient she is. Even if she refuses every order, which I

imagine will happen at some point. Hell, I fully expect her to try to kill me at some point, too. Even the best submissives refuse their positions at times. And she's being forced into this, so I wouldn't blame her if she did. There's no reason for me to deliver physical punishment unless I'd like to prep her for pleasure. Which I can't fucking wait to do.

I imagine it'll be her mouth that makes me blister her ass red. My dick jumps in my pants at the thought of watching her ass turn a beautiful shade as my palm smacks against her pale skin.

Equally as important as punishment is reward.

Although I'll always feed her, some kinds of food are definitely a reward. This won't be one of them. But it needs to be good. She didn't eat dinner, so I know she must be hungry. It's far past breakfast, so a light brunch it is.

I looked up her credit card history and I know what she likes to eat. I've taken everything she does into consideration. I know everything about her. I've spent every day for nearly a month studying her habits and learning how best I can meet her needs and reward her. I also needed time to get the rooms together and decide on the best way to go about everything in between taking care of the other hits. I've fantasized about this day since I got the approval from the mob bosses. But I never imagined I'd get this fucking rush of adrenaline.

One thing I hadn't decided was what her first meal should be.

Although she's not too picky, I don't want it to be mediocre. However, I can't spoil her just yet, so I decide on fresh ahi tuna. It's something that will be simple to feed her. I smile as I realize I'm going to feed my kitten tuna. A rough chuckle rumbles through my chest. I'm sure she won't find humor in that, but I sure as fuck do.

I grab the tuna tartare from the fridge. It's fresh. I bought it just for her since it's one of her favorites. I'll give it to her now even though it's certainly on the reward side of food. She needs to know I'll treat her well and give her what she likes so long as she obeys. She'll probably throw it in my face or on the ground, but I'm prepared for that to happen. And then

she'll have to settle for something less appealing when I serve her dinner.

If she's a good girl, I'll move her into her room. I don't think she'll react well to being kept and told to obey, but the thought makes my dick press even harder against my zipper. I'm dying for her to disobey me, but there's a very real possibility that it'll take a long time to convince her that she should listen to me. I can't get carried away with my excitement. I have to be patient. I have to give her every reason I can to submit to me willingly.

She will though. I'm certain of it. I know this turns her on as much as it does me. It's what sealed her fate. We both have this fantasy, and I'd be a fucking idiot to let it pass us by. That's why I watched her for so long. I needed to make sure this is really what I wanted. And it is. She's exactly who I want. Everything she does is perfect. She's a natural submissive.

I pull back the plastic wrap holding the delicately pressed chunks together, and place the stack neatly in the center of a ceramic plate. It looks delicious. I grab the accompanying plastic container of sauce and put it on the dish. She'll enjoy this...if she eats it. I thought about using a plastic plate, but I want the dish to be breakable. I want her to think about smashing it and using it against me. Fuck, in all honesty, I hope she tries. That way I can show her how useless her struggle would be. It feeds into my need to train her to be submissive to me. Maybe it's wrong of me to tease her like that and to dare her to disobey me, but I don't give a fuck.

Right now I just need to get her to agree and follow a simple command. To eat.

I have to adjust my erection at the thought of her parting those full lips and letting me slip chunks of tuna into her mouth. I'm so fucking hard for her. All I want to do is pin her down and sink deep into her hot cunt. I know she's turned on by this. If nothing else she wants to fuck me. It's a long way from her craving to be all mine, to wanting to submit to my every wish. But at least her desire is a start. A really good fucking start. I wasn't anticipating that just yet.

I thought she'd be crying by now. I imagined her screaming and begging to be set free. That's not what I want, but that would be a natural response. Maybe that'll come later. I'm hopeful that it won't though. She's too smart for that shit. I think she'll probably pretend to play along and wait for the perfect opportunity, just like she did earlier. She'll go along with everything, waiting to see my hand and then calculate her next move.

I'll be ready though. I can't wait till she lets her claws out and tries to fight me so I can show her just how easy it would be to take her.

I shake my head, hating where my thoughts are going. I'm such a sick fuck. For as long as I can remember, I've had these dark desires. I want her to fight me, to run from me. I want to feel her body struggle against mine. But I want her to do all of that willingly. I want her eager for me to chase her and pin her down, forcing her legs open and fucking her until she's limp and filled with my cum. I won't give in to that temptation, not until she begs me. Not until I earn it.

I can't get carried away. I need her to *want* this just as much as I do.

As I prepare to head back to her cell, my phone goes off in the dining room. From the sound I can tell it's a text, and I know it's from Vince. I put the plate on the counter and walk to the table to give him the news.

Is the shipment taken care of? he asks in his text.

Usually I'd reply with a simple yes, meaning that the unlucky bastard on my list is dead, but that's not the case this time.

It's been delivered, I respond.

You've kept the shipment?

Yes. I'm quick to answer. My heart beats faster in my chest. He gave me permission, so now I'm keeping her. I don't like that he's questioning me. Maybe he was wondering if I'd really go through with it. I watch my phone and see he's writing a response. Then nothing. Then he starts typing again. I'm not

sure if he doesn't know what to say, or if he's just trying to figure out how to word it.

Will the order keep a shelf life? he asks, and I know what he's really asking. Will she live? Am I going to kill her? Or possibly he thinks she'd rather die than be with me.

I stare at my phone and look through the kitchen toward the back room where the door to the basement is. I've got all three of her rooms set up with locks on them. The cell, her suite, and her office. I didn't do all this prep work and make sure she was the one for me only to have her taken away. Or worse, have her choose death. She may have said no to being mine out of a knee-jerk reaction at first, but she's curious, and I know I can change her mind. She doesn't mean it. Before I leave her cell tonight, I'm going to leave her wanting more. I want her to start fantasizing about being mine and what an opportunity this really is for her.

I type in my answer and push send, leaving the phone on the table and walking quickly to get back to her.

I'm keeping her.

CHAPTER 5

CATHERINE

After a minute of watching the door, I slowly rise and take a look around the room. It's small and a bit cold. The only escape is the door he went through. The one locked with a keypad.

I can't fucking stay here like a caged rat. My heart stills in my chest. That's what I am to them. My eyes rise with defiance to the door. I did what I thought was right, and the only thing I could do to survive. They can all fuck off. I don't deserve this shit. I'm not a mouse or a rat.

I picture that sexy smirk and hear the man keeping me here call me *kitten*. It sends a shiver down my spine. I'm not his fucking kitten either. Even if I do think that pet name is sexy as hell, and it makes my pussy clench.

I walk to the chair and imagine smashing it against his head when that fucker gets back in here. I don't know the code to unlock the door though. I'd have to be on the other side of the room to get a good view of him punching in the keys. Even then, I doubt I'd be able to make them out; it's too fucking dark. I need to get the fuck out of this room, and I don't know how I'm going to be able to do that unless he physically lets me.

I know pleading with him to let me go would be of no use, but maybe I can beg him to let me out of this room and into another. One without a fucking lock. I need to be smart about this. I grip the back of the chair wanting so desperately to just

beat the shit out of him, but I can't. First of all, I'm weak as shit. Second, no matter how much I don't like it, I'm stuck here until he decides to let me out.

My body tenses as the door opens. I watch as he walks into the room with a plate balanced in his hands. Anger heats my blood. This is a game to him. He thinks he can play with me. He stops as the door clicks shut behind him and he stares at me. I try to school my expression to neutral, so I don't reveal how I'm really feeling. But then I see his expression, and he looks *pleased*. He's happy that I'm angry. I release my grip on the chair and take a step back before I give in to the urge to pick it up and throw it at him.

"You look upset, kitten."

My nostrils flare. I decide to settle on the truth. "I am." I keep my hands straight so I don't ball them into fists. It won't do me any good to fight a man like him head on. I need to save my energy for when I'll *have* to fight him off, since I'm sure that's coming. I should also be adopting a more submissive tone considering I've come to terms with the fact that he's the only way I can get out of here. But I'm holding on to my anger. It's better than giving into the hopelessness of the situation.

"With me?" He tsks and shakes his head as he takes slow and deliberate steps toward me. I take another step back as he sets the plate down on the chair. "Don't be angry with me, kitten. I ___"

"Stop calling me that!" I scream at him, hating how he's talking to me. Like he's placating a disobedient child.

His shoulders stiffen, and the soft angles of his face harden with anger. "Now now, you shouldn't speak to me that way. You're a smart girl, so you should know better." His tone is soothing, like he's trying to appease me, but it's right on the edge of taunting me with condescension.

"What do you want from me?" I ask with a choked voice. I want to get this part over with. That's really what I need to find out. I want to know what I have to do to get the fuck out of this room.

“I want you to submit to me,” he answers simply.

“Fine.” I whisper the word. I need to play along in order to get the fuck out of here. I relax my shoulders, trying to channel a softer side of me.

He tilts his head and echoes, “Fine?” A low chuckle rises in his chest, and I have to keep my eyes wide open and my lips slammed shut to avoid showing how much it turns me on. What the fuck is wrong with me? My breathing picks up and I take another step back, not trusting him or my reactions.

“Alright, then...*kitten*.” He stares at me, waiting for a response to his pet name for me. I don’t give him one. Instead I hold my tongue and push down my pride. “Come over here and get down on your knees.”

My heart sinks. I’m not doing that shit. He’s out of his fucking mind if he thinks I’m going to suck him off. As much as I want to obey him so I can get the fuck out of here, I’m not going to do that. I’m not a whore. I could bite his dick off though. I feel my eyebrows raise at the thought, and the tiny cellar fills with a deep, rough laugh from the man standing across from me.

“You’re adorable, kitten. But that’s not going to happen. Not yet.” He shakes his head with a small smile on his face.

“What’s not going to happen?” I play dumb, like I wasn’t that obvious just now.

“You haven’t earned my touch yet, and you don’t need it right now.” He picks up the plate and moves the chair so it’s facing me before sitting down. “Now come here and get on your knees so I can feed you.”

I hesitate to move. I don’t believe him, not for one second. And kneeling before him would put me at an even greater physical disadvantage.

“Come on, I know you’re hungry.” He sets the plate on his lap and motions with his fingers for me to come to him. “It’s almost eleven, and you didn’t eat last night. You must be starving.”

My eyes narrow on him. I hate that he watched me last night. I knew it. I should have trusted my instincts. I knew someone was out there. “How long did you watch me?”

“I’ve been watching you ever since I got the hit on you.” He’s quick with his response, and it chills my blood.

“Are you a member of the mafia?” I ask.

He chuckles and says, “Which one?” The fact that he thinks this is funny really pisses me off.

“Are you a Cassano?” I ask with force.

“No. I’m not.”

“So why are you going to kill me then?” My heart sinks. I don’t understand. How many fucking people did I piss off?

“I’m not going to kill you,” he says with a hard voice. His blue eyes turn dark and I can feel the weight of the conviction in his voice. “It took a lot for me to be able to have you. But I bought you from the Cassanos, and now I’m keeping you.” I can’t help that my pussy twitches at his words.

“Why?” my voice asks, without my conscious consent.

He leans forward slightly. “I’ve asked you twice now to come and get down on your knees. You need to learn to listen.”

My feet move of their own accord until I’m standing in front of him. My legs tremble as I slowly kneel before him. I swallow thickly. Finally, I sit on my heels and keep my eyes on the door behind him. I have to do what needs to be done. My heart sinks and I just want to cry.

“Look at me, kitten,” his deep voice commands me, and I look up at him reluctantly. I feel weak, and I hate it. Everyone assumes I’m weak. Now that I’m on my knees without a fight, it’s hard for me to disagree. I look at his gorgeous face with nothing but sadness on mine.

“Don’t be sad. You’ll enjoy this.” He leans forward and places a large hand on my shoulder. I fucking lean into his touch and close my eyes before I can stop myself. “Trust me.”

My eyes harden at his words, but before I can spit back that I don't even know him, let alone trust him, he takes his hand away and says, "You'll learn to trust me."

I bite the inside of my cheek and wait for his next move. My eyes are drawn to his fingers as he reaches for a chunk of what I think is tuna. My mouth waters as he dips it into some sort of sauce and brushes it along the side of the cup until none of the sauce is dripping from the chunk of fish. He brings it to my lips and I instinctively lean back and move my hands up in front of my face.

The man's deep voice rings out. "No." My body jumps at his disapproval, and my heart races as I look into his eyes. Half of me still expects him to be violent toward me, even though he hasn't yet. "You know what I want."

He seems to relax some as he registers my fear. "Hands on your knees like they were, and mouth open. You were seated perfectly."

I obey him even though my fear seems to paralyze my body. I'm simply moving to his commands in order to survive. I have to admit him saying I was "seated perfectly" gives me a small thrill. And I fucking hate that. I wish he didn't have this affect on me.

"Open," he commands, and I do as he says. He gently places the chunk of tuna in my mouth and as he does, my stomach grumbles from hunger.

He smiles down at me and dips another piece in the sauce. "I knew you were hungry, kitten." He looks at me again with curiosity, holding the piece over the plate. "Do you like it?"

My heart beats slowly as I search his face. I wonder if he's toying with me. If I admit that I like it, he might take it away and make me starve.

"I'd like you to answer me quickly and honestly, Catherine." His voice holds a note of admonishment, and I feel compelled to apologize.

"I'm sorry, s—" Sir is on the tip of my tongue, but I pause as I realize I don't know what to call him.

“Anthony,” he says, answering my unspoken question. “No need to be sorry.” His other hand grips my chin to get my attention. “You’re learning. I can be reasonable so long as you’re making an effort to obey. Is that understood?” he asks.

“Yes, Anthony.”

“Good.” His fingers stroke my jaw briefly. “Did you like that?” he asks.

“Yes...Anthony.” It feels odd saying his name again so soon. But I imagine it’s what he wants.

He smirks at me, the fucking bastard. “You don’t have to say it every time.” He holds the fish out and I open my mouth obediently.

It’s so fucking good. It’s not fair that I am fucking loving this fish. It’s sweet, with a hint of spice. I’d eat this every day if I could. My eyes widen. He knew I’d like it. He smirks at me again as if reading my mind.

“Open,” he says, holding out another piece.

I do as he says. And again and again. His fingers brush against my lips more and more. He puts a piece up to my mouth, and I take it and swallow before I realize his finger is still in front of my face.

“A bit of sauce, suck.” My core heats and stirs as I maintain eye contact and open my mouth. His lips part as he slips his finger slowly into my mouth. I gently suck and massage him with my tongue. His eyes go half-lidded, and his breath comes in pants. And that’s when I push my teeth down. Not hard, but enough that they scrape against him as he slowly pulls his finger free from my mouth. I know it didn’t hurt him, but he got the message.

Once his finger is finally released, he grabs my jaw forcefully. He shoves his thumb into my mouth, tilting my head slightly. I’m forced to remain still, with my neck bent at an awkward angle. “Be a good girl, kitten. I know you could hurt me if you wanted to.” He leans in closer and whispers in my ear. His hot breath sends shivers down my back. “Just remember, I could hurt you too, *if I wanted.*”

The threat makes me regret my action. My eyes fall, and tears prick the back of them as he releases me. My heart hurts, and anxiety races through me.

“Open.” I hear him give his command, but I can’t. I feel sick to my stomach. I fall back onto my heels and turn away from him. I can’t. I can’t do this. I back away slightly as he moves to the floor, setting the plate on the metal chair with a clink. Tears leak from my eyes.

“Hush, kitten,” he says as he wraps his arms around me and pulls me against his chest. “I understand, I do.” He rubs my back gently and it calms me. I lean into his touch, loving the warmth. It’s been so fucking long since I’ve been held. Once I went into hiding, I was always alone in that house. It’s made me weak.

“I don’t want to hurt you. I want you to enjoy this, and I don’t want you to be sad. But I don’t want you to push me either. Not unless you *want* to be punished.” I bury my head deeper into his chest, trying to resist how everything he’s saying is making me want to play. This isn’t pretend though. There’ll be no stopping this once it’s started, and that terrifies me. But as much as I’d like to tell myself it hasn’t started, I know it already has. And I’m playing into his hands.

The realization sobers me. I slowly back away and get back into a submissive position, although my eyes aren’t on him at all. I stare at the floor and try to gather some kind of composure. I quickly wipe the tears away and chance a look at him as he sits back on the chair. He looks uncertain. It’s an expression I haven’t seen on him before. It makes me fucking terrified. He’s quick to adjust the look on his face.

“Come,” he says with a firm resolve. He pats his left leg. “Let’s try this again.” He waits patiently as I stand and sit awkwardly on his lap. His left arm wraps around my waist and he pulls me closer to him. Even though he’s so tall compared to me, his head is nearly level with mine with us seated like this. He rests his left hand in my lap, dangerously close to my pussy. My nightgown has ridden up some and I feel exceptionally vulnerable. I’m stiff on his lap, and I can’t relax with his hand where it is.

He waits a moment before saying or doing anything. It's awkward as fuck.

"You need to relax." He dips his finger into the sauce and brings it to my lips. He stares into my eyes rather than giving me the command. I do as he wants and open my mouth. He slips his finger past my lips. His eyes are drawn to my mouth as I gently suck his finger clean. When he pulls his finger away, he gives me a satisfied look.

"Good kitten." He puts another piece of the tuna tartare to my lips and I accept it. Seeing his approval eases something in me. I know so long as he's pleased, I'm safe with him. And so far, pleasing him is simple, but I don't know what other *terms* he has.

On the next bite, I find myself leaning into his fingers. He tsks and pulls the piece away from me. My heart rate speeds up until I realize what I've done to upset him. I swallow and sit back on my heels, exactly the way I was positioned before. His left hand runs along the thin fabric of my nightgown, just above my clit. "Good job, kitten." My pussy spasms around nothing. I close my eyes, hating how my body is betraying me. My nipples are hard, and the light brush of the fabric against them only turns me on even more. Other than his hand edging closer and closer to my pussy, he shows no signs of his own arousal.

"Eat until you're full." He grabs another piece, and we continue like this. Each time he feeds me his fingers brush a little closer to my throbbing clit, until finally his deft fingers are massaging small circles over my clit. I'm soaked for him, and primed for him to fuck me. And I fucking hate it. He's playing me and using my body against me.

He leans into my neck and whispers with his lips barely touching the shell of my ear, "I knew you'd like this. You just need to admit that you want it."

I'm not sure what angers me more—that I've allowed myself to be such easy prey for him, or that he's right. I want him to fuck me, and I fucking hate him for it. But I'm not going to let him reduce me to nothing but a whore.

I push away from him and kick the plate off his lap while I fall to the floor. The dish smashes on the ground as I fall backward.

He rises quickly, somewhat bracing my fall. The anger washing off of him is so strong that I scoot backward on my ass without even realizing at first. My heart races in my chest, and my blood rushes in my ears. Fear consumes me.

Making Anthony angry is something I shouldn't do. I know this as a truth, but I pissed him off anyway. I was going to play along. Why couldn't I just do what I needed to?

I expect him to hit me, or to grab me like he did earlier for my outburst. Inwardly I'm cursing myself for not just going along with this. But I can't. I'm more than *that*.

I anticipate his aggression. He doesn't get violent. Instead, he turns his back on me.

"I'm disappointed in you, kitten," he says as he carefully picks up several pieces of thick porcelain. He's slow to pick them up, and for a moment I imagine myself grabbing a single piece, the one closest to me. But I don't. I'm frozen with fear. After a moment of him cleaning up the mess I made, he looks me in the eyes as he picks up the last shard.

He turns to the door with an expression of discontent and that's when I realize he's leaving me.

My racing heart tries to leap from my chest. I can't be left here. I need to get out. "Please don't leave me here!" I scream and beg. I didn't want to, but I have to try. I don't want him to leave me here alone. I can't sit here with nothing. No plan, no hope, fucking nothing.

"I'm sorry, kitten," he says as he turns his back on me. "Tonight training will begin. It's best that you put this rebellion behind you. You won't enjoy being punished."

Tonight? How fucking long will I have to wait in this room alone?

"I have a life! Please just let me go!" I feel weak and hate what I've become.

“I know you do, kitten. And I would provide for you in every way you need.”

“I want *my* life back!” I don’t want to be his version of a pampered pet. I want my job and my friends. I worked hard to create this new life for myself, and I want it back. I don’t want it torn from me.

He turns back to me with anger sparking in his eyes. It’s enough to make me retreat until my back hits the wall. He strides toward me with a dark aura surrounding him.

“You want an office? You want to go online so you can work? Do you want your books, kitten?” I stare at him, not knowing what to say.

“I told you to answer me when I ask you a question,” he says with barely contained anger.

“Yes. Yes, that’s what I want.” I answer him in a strangled voice I don’t recognize.

He smirks at me, and that expression is completely at odds with the aggression choking the air between us. “You would’ve had all of that, if only you’d behaved.” I stare at him with disbelief as he makes his way back to the door.

He’s lying. He must be. I can’t help but hope.

“Please. Just another chance.” I take a hesitant step forward as he punches the code into the keypad.

He turns to face me with sympathy in his eyes. “We’ll try again at dinner.” Before he leaves me alone again, he turns to face me. “I’m going easy on you right now, but remember this is only because it’s your first day and we haven’t discussed terms yet.” He looks at me expectantly as I wipe the angry tears from my eyes.

“I expect you to answer me,” he says with the hint of a threat in his voice. “You will look at me when I’m speaking to you.”

My eyes dart around as my breath catches in my throat. I don’t even remember what he said. My mouth parts, but words don’t come out.

He takes long, quick strides toward me, letting the door fall shut behind him. I cower and find my back up against the wall again. He stops inches away from me like last time, but this time he grips the nape of my neck and pulls me toward him.

“I want you so fucking badly.” His low voice sends a chill down my body. “I want to show you how good this is going to be.” His fingers tangle in my hair, and he makes a fist at the base of my head, forcing me to expose my neck to him.

He leans forward, pressing his body against mine and his large erection digs into my belly. Being held like this sends a need coursing through my body. Every nerve ending is on alert and ready to spark to life. I clench my thighs as my nipples harden.

He leaves an open-mouthed kiss on my neck. It’s so gentle, and so at odds with everything else.

“You’ll learn to obey me, kitten, and you’ll fucking love it when you do.” His hand pushes between my legs and he cups my pussy. His lips brush against my ear as he whispers. “I will give you everything you need. Everything you want. But you need to submit to me.” His hot breath gently caressing my sensitive skin forces a moan from my lips. He takes my earlobe into his mouth and gently nips it. “You’re going to beg me to fuck you, kitten. I’ll wait for it. I’ll wait for you to beg me.”

With that, he leaves me. My body sags against the wall and the chill of the damp cell replaces his warmth. I take in a ragged breath and barely catch sight of him as he leaves me cold and alone. I watch the door close quickly behind him, like he couldn’t get out fast enough.

I close my eyes, hating that I’m so turned on by him. I shouldn’t be. All of this is wrong in every way. Even worse, I hate that I already crave his touch.

CHAPTER 6

ANTHONY

I hear the door shut with a loud click and lean back, reveling in how perfect she is. She's caught up in her own mind and holding back, but she's exactly how I dreamed she'd be.

It's going to be so fucking good when she finally lets go. I need to break those walls down and I'm doing that as soon as fucking possible. Fuck patience. She needs a push. She's desperate to get out of that room and I can't blame her. Come tonight, if I don't let her out, she'll be sleeping on a hard as fuck floor. I don't want that for her, and I don't want her in that cell. But I don't have a choice. She needs to learn.

The thought brings to mind the memory of her scraping her teeth against my finger. If I'm honest with myself, it was hot as hell. I love how brazen she is, but she knew what she was doing.

She had to be punished. There's a lot of research on the psychology of motivation via punishment and reward. Reward is always better, but when punishment needs to happen it's best if the severity of the punishment is in direct proportion to the offense. Ideally it should also be swift, taking place as soon as possible after the misdeed. If you merely give a slap on the wrist, the behavior is more than likely to occur again, and also more likely to be a worse transgression.

I needed that punishment to be aggressive to keep her from pushing. But I didn't like that I had to do it. It's better now that

it's over with. Hopefully things will continue to go as planned, and the next time she pushes it'll be minimal. And that way I can get my hands on her ass and move this along to other forms of play.

My fingers twitch with the need to touch her again. I don't know if she noticed how she rocked her cunt against my hand. I know she was hot and wet from what we did, and she should have been. There's nothing wrong with being turned on by what happened. It's natural.

I just need to break down the social constructs she has built in her head. She has to learn to give in to her needs and desires. She has to learn to trust that I'm gonna give her everything she could ever want. The life she's built; she can have it. But I can add so much more. I can let her give in to her own dark desires and show her a world she's only dreamed of. I'll teach her that. Tonight I'll give her a test, and if she obeys the one command I give her, I'll let her out of that room. That will be huge for us. I only hope she doesn't disappoint me.

She's too headstrong and preoccupied with right and wrong. She knows she wants this, but I don't think a girl like her gives into desires. She's strict in her regimen, and doesn't reward herself much. I'll have to ease her into enjoying this, one reward at a time.

I make my way to the dining room where I left my phone and cringe when I see I've missed messages. Three are from Vince. I put my password in and take a look. The first and most recent text is from Tommy, my brother, but also my partner in the hits.

Cassys have another for us.

Cassys are the Cassanos. Ever since we started taking on outside hits, they've been good customers. Apparently they get pissed off. A lot.

The next three are from Vince. It looks like he sent them within minutes of each other, and the first one arrived almost immediately after my last message to him.

They seem to be under a different impression.

They want a timeline.

We're talking tonight.

Fuck. I don't like any of the shit in those messages. I don't really give a fuck what impression the Cassanos are under. I bought her freedom from them. If they changed their minds, that's on them. I don't have to do shit for them, and neither does Vince.

I finally text back, *I paid for this shipment.*

What the fuck am I supposed to tell them? he asks, and I can practically hear his anger.

The deal's done. I tell him simply.

I know we do a lot of business with them, but I don't like where Vince's head is at. He's the Don and even though technically Tommy and I aren't included in the *familia* shit, we're not fooling anyone. He's the boss, and we're still untouchables. We're still family and *familia* and nothing changes that. It also means I have to listen to the fuck. Usually I agree with him. But on this? No. I don't fucking like the way he's talking.

What do you need from me? I ask after a moment.

I need a timeline.

I stare at the phone. I don't know what to say. I never had one in mind. And I sure as fuck don't plan on making one now.

I don't have one. Your call.

I send the text, knowing full well that whatever deadline he gives me, I'm going to try to and extend it. The phone goes off, but I don't look at it. I'll figure this shit out later. Nothing is going to ruin this for me.

I put the phone down and leave it there, knowing damn well I'm not going to like anything he has to say about this. I need to get started on something to eat tonight and make sure her room is set up.

I don't want to get my hopes up, but I have a good feeling that she's going to pass this test. I fucking hope she does. She

desperately needs to cum. My eyes fly to the door to the basement. Fuck! I didn't tell her she wasn't allowed to touch herself without my permission. Fuck me, I didn't tell her anything.

She's a smart girl though, and she's read a lot of dirty books. She should know better.

She had better know better.

CHAPTER 7

CATHERINE

I'm fucking rocking like a crazy person. I could sit in the chair, but it's tainted now. So instead I'm huddled in the corner rocking. It's not because I'm crazy though. It's because there isn't a fucking thing to do, not a damn thing to do in this empty cell.

I've walked around every inch of this room. Even though it's dark, the cell's not too dirty. I should know, since I've searched everywhere for a second door, or crack, or opening. Anything. I bet he watched me; in the books, they always watch. I even expect some kind of punishment for it, but I had to do it. I had to try.

All the flashbacks keep coming forward, and I keep pushing them down. They make me weak. I can't go back to that. He's not one of them.

"Come on, little mouse," Lorenzo says as he parks his car in front of the restaurant.

"I don't want to." I already told him I don't want to, but he's not listening.

He has his dick out and he's pushing me to go down on him here, but there are people everywhere. At first when we met, I was looking for that thrill. But we kept getting caught by his friends, and now they give me weird looks and make jokes that I don't like.

He moves faster than me, and it takes me by surprise. He fists my hair and yanks my head back. I scream out in pain and try to pry his hand off of me. "Stop, it hurts." Tears prick my eyes. "It hurts!" I scream out.

"Dumb bitch," he says under his breath. "You know what you got yourself into. You fucking want it this way." My heart sinks in my chest. I don't want it, and especially not like this.

"Suck it," he says, releasing me while pushing my head forward. I look back at him with daggers in my eyes.

"Fuck you," I sneer at him, and wipe my eyes. He barks out a laugh.

"Aw, little mouse. You don't want to play?" I feel sick to my stomach. Things never used to be like this. When he's rough with me in bed now, it's different, too.

"I said no." I hate that I have to tell him twice.

"Fine," he says as he tucks himself back into his pants and I feel a small sense of relief.

"Come here, you know I didn't mean it." He leans across the console to give me a kiss and I hesitate, but I lean in anyway. Because I'm a fucking idiot. Because I thought I just needed to make the lines clearer. Like it was my fault.

That was right before I tried to leave him. I had no one else, and I was afraid to be alone. I was so desperate for his "love" that I stayed with that fucking creep far too long. Things only got worse after that. I remember the night I tried to sneak out and run away. Before I left, I looked down on his sleeping body and thought about slitting his throat. How awful of a person had I become where I thought I should kill him? Not fucking awful at all. That bastard deserved to die. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't lower myself to becoming a murderer, so instead I sneaked out through a window and hoped I could start over. Instead I fell right into a new world of hell.

I hear them laugh as Lorenzo backhands me again. This time I fall. I learned to make it look real.

When he was drunk that's the game he played. How many hits until the mouse would fall? He liked his nickname for me even more after I saw what happened. He was daring me, taunting me to be a *rat*. If I stayed on the ground, he'd only kick me a few times. I learned to just stay curled on my side and wait for the beatings to be over, no matter how much he urged me to stand. He only made it worse if I obeyed him. Bruises gave way to broken bones, but by then, I had no way to leave. I was trapped and beaten regularly for his enjoyment. I barely escaped them. And I only managed because they were reckless. Their desires to cause me even more pain is what eventually gave me my out.

They came into the room they kept me in. It'd only been a few days of being trapped there, feeling helpless and weak, trying to recover from the beating he gave me. The three of them came into the room and left the door wide open as they stalked to my bed. I knew what they were going to do. I rock harder, remembering the fear. I fucking bolted. I just kept thinking, *Please don't let them catch me.*

They can never catch me. Never. I had to do everything I could to escape that hell. But I had no one. Not a single soul to run to. My mother was everyone and everything to me. But she'd been dead for nearly a year. I ran to her grave and prayed for a sign. That's when the cops showed up, sirens blaring. I thanked my mom every day.

I thought she'd saved me like she always did.

But they did catch me.

Only they didn't come after me directly like I thought they would. They sent someone else.

I have no clue how long it's been. I don't know what he's doing. Or what this training is going to be like when he gets back. I have absolutely no control in any of it either, and I don't like it. I tug at the hem of my nightgown, wishing it were longer so I could cover myself up more. My knees are drawn up to my chest, and I rest my head on them as I consider my next step.

I don't know what to do. I don't know what my options are. He said he'd give me my life and everything I needed. I want to believe that's true, but what's the catch? I know his intentions aren't pure. And I'm certain his terms aren't negotiable.

I'm eager to hear what he has to say though. I want to know what I've gotten myself into. That way I can figure out how to get the fuck out of here.

My back is killing me, so I keep up my rocking. It feels better than just sitting still for however fucking long it's been. I'd get up and stretch or do yoga, but I don't want to be standing when he walks in. I want to be ready.

Well, as ready as I can be.

I close my eyes and remember his words. An office, my books. How much does he know about me? He's been watching me, obviously. I wonder if there were signs I missed. Red flags I should have seen, but didn't.

The only time I ever felt that things were off was last night. That was the only chance I had. I should have gotten into my car and driven away. I should have listened to my gut.

But I didn't.

I've never felt so fucking helpless. Not when I was with Lorenzo. Not when I was taken by those fucking Cassanos. Not even when I went to the police and they told me I'd have to leave my old life behind forever. Never. Because there was always hope. But now, I only have his word. And I don't trust him.

For all I know, he has a bet going with someone. How long would it take him to get into my pants willingly? And then boom. He'll kill me. Or he'll let someone else in here to have a go at me. How the fuck would I know? I don't know shit. And it's not like he's offering up any information. He's just playing this game with me.

In all the books I've read, there's been some sort of contract, or list. Terms. Like he said before.

That always happens first.

But he's playing with me. Testing me. And as far as I'm concerned, he's winning.

My body betrayed me, and I gave into the weakness. I was practically ready to cum on his lap. If he'd flipped me over and put his mouth on my clit rather than whispering in my ear, shit. I don't know what I would have done. I was so weak. So desperate.

It's pathetic. *I'm* pathetic.

But what real choice do I have? I can fight his game, or I can play along. I can stay here and let him toy with me, or I can use him to get out of here.

Use him.

I like that idea. It almost makes the desire for him to touch me feel justified. That giving in and caving to his touch is alright. I'm merely playing into his hand because it's what I have to do.

As if hearing my thoughts, Anthony opens the door.

My breath stills in my lungs as the loud click echoes off the walls.

I make a promise to myself. I'll do whatever I have to do to get the fuck out of this room. I need to see if I can trust his word at least.

Just as I make that promise to myself, I see what he's pulling behind him. It's a large bench with leather shackles. Fuck! Tears prick my eyes.

I bury my head in my knees and just fucking cry. He's going to chain me to the bench. He's going to fuck me.

A wretched sob heaves through my chest.

I shake my head, and that's when I hear his footsteps. But I don't back away. I have no options. What choice do I have?

CHAPTER 8

ANTHONY

*T*urn around as soon as I hear her crying.

Fuck. I wanted to shock her, but I didn't think she'd cry.

She had so much fight in her when I left her. I don't know what happened while I was gone. I know that being alone for hours can be torturous when you have nothing. No noise but the sounds you make, nothing to touch but yourself and the walls and floor.

But I didn't think it would affect her like this.

"Kitten," I begin as I crouch down next to her, although I keep my distance. She could be playing me for a fool. Waiting for me to comfort her so she can strike. I'm certain I picked up the large chunks of the plate. There were only three or four of them. But maybe she found a smaller piece and she's planning to stab the shit out of me with it. She doesn't trust me, and I sure as fuck don't trust her.

I didn't watch her in the monitor. I was driving myself crazy watching her do nothing. More than anything seeing her like that pissed me off, because all I wanted to do was to go to her. But she's being punished.

This is a part of her punishment.

"Yes, Anthony," she answers in a strangled voice. She raises her head with tears staining her reddened cheeks. I'm surprised she answered. She wipes the tears from her face and

I see she doesn't have anything in her hands. She's not armed, and she's not trying to fight me. She's just genuinely upset.

"Why are you crying?" I ask her.

"Because I give up. I'll let you do whatever you want. I just want this to end." My heart stops in my chest. That's not at all what I expected, and so far she's done everything I thought she would.

I haven't broken her yet. But maybe I've taken away her hope of getting out of here unless she obeys.

"And that makes you sad?" I ask to clarify. "You're upset that you're giving me control?" Truthfully though, she never had any control. Maybe over her own actions, but not at all over the situation. She's a strong woman. I guess that very realization could be troubling her.

She takes in a small gasp and shakes her head. "Of course I'm upset about that. Normal people don't do this."

Although I appreciate her honesty, that fucking attitude is going to be the first thing I correct.

"Watch your mouth, kitten." She looks up at me with nothing in her eyes.

"Yes, Anthony. I'm sorry, sir." She says the words without a hint of sarcasm in her voice. And it's disappointing. I'm surprised by my reaction to it.

"Could I know the terms, please? Before you chain me?" she asks in a flat voice. It's unsettling how much I don't like it.

"No." I watch her as I answer sternly. She merely nods her head slowly, as if she figured I wouldn't tell her anything.

"Okay." Her voice is small and she's finished crying. She sniffles once and nods her head again. "I'm ready."

I was foolish to think that this behavior didn't indicate her inner strength. She's resigning herself to a fate she doesn't want so that she can move forward. That in and of itself is strong. I feel my tense muscles relax now that I understand.

I grip her chin with my thumb and forefinger and make her look me in the eyes.

“You won’t regret this, Catherine. I promise you.” As I say the words with confidence, I remember Vince and the Cassanos, and I fucking hate myself for thinking of them right now. I won’t let them take her. And I won’t let her regret this either.

“I’m going to put you on the bench, and I want you to hold onto the straps.” She nods her head and then whispers, “Yes, Anthony.”

“Once you agree to the terms, and only then, I’ll bind your wrists.”

She closes her eyes and I can see her pride leave completely as shame overwhelms her. I knew this would happen. But I still don’t like it. This isn’t the part of this relationship that I looked forward to. But the next part, the part where she learns she can trust me and that it’s not the nightmare she perceives it to be? That part will be worth all of this.

“Up, kitten.” I stand up and hold a hand out for her. She starts to get up on her own, but then she sees my hand. She looks dejected and depressed. That’s exactly what she is. Depressed that she’s given in to me. But I’m going change that. I’m going to make her love giving in to me.

I walk her over to the bench and help her on. I fucking love this idea. It’s meant for spanking and fucking, and I intend to do both in time. But for now, that’s not what we’re going do. I lay her down so that her chest is flat against the lowered part and her ass is in the air. Her eyes are focused on the leather binds.

I take one strap out and hold it for her to take. “Go on, kitten. It won’t magically wrap around your wrist.” Again her eyes meet mine and I see a spark of the smart-mouthed woman from this morning. But it’s only a dim flicker of defiance, and she takes the leather without much hesitation. She does the same with the right without my help. She lays her head and body flat with her legs and hand off the side. She waits for my next command with her pussy almost fully bared to me, covered only by a thin layer of fabric.

She's perfect like this, vulnerable and waiting for me. But she's obviously unhappy and only doing it because the other choice isn't really a choice at all. I splay my hand on her back, and although she stiffens, she doesn't move away from my touch. I walk around her slowly, moving my hand in soothing circles until she slowly relaxes her body.

I keep my voice soft and comforting. "The terms are simple. You do your best to obey me. If you don't, you come back here." Her eyes close as I speak. "If you please me, I will reward you. I will give you everything you need. You want your old life, and you can have it." Her eyes fly to mine, but before she can question me I add, "I will simply be a new constant in that life." Her eyes fall to the floor and then close again.

She whispers, "Yes, Anthony. I understand." That was too easy.

"You don't have any questions?" I'm surprised by that.

"What questions should I ask?" My dick finally starts hardening. Her submission is just now starting to arouse me.

"Any questions you have, kitten. I'll answer them all truthfully."

"If I do this, you'll let me out of this room? You said I'd have an office and my old life back?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I'll be able to keep working?" she asks.

"You will," I reply. I walk around to where her head is and place my hand on her chin to make sure she sees my face and knows how serious I am. "It will be heavily monitored though. And any sign that you've disobeyed me by doing anything at all that would obviously upset me will result in you being sent here. And not just for a few hours, kitten."

She nods her head and says, "I understand."

"Anything else?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "No."

“You don’t want to know what I’m going to do with you?” I ask. I imagine she’s already made up her mind.

“You’re going to do what you’d like to me.” Her voice is flat, but dampened by sadness.

“Close,” I answer. “I’d love to fuck you, kitten. But I’ve told you I won’t do that until you beg.” Her head lifts slightly off the bench and her eyes widen with hope. That’s the woman I want with me. Her reaction makes me smile.

“You thought I was going to fuck you right now?” I ask her.

“Yes,” she answers with a tinge of confusion.

“I told you I wasn’t going to until you begged. I mean it,” I say.

“Do I have to let you do that in order to get out of here?” she asks.

“No,” I answer, and love how much her body relaxes at my answer. I love it because she’s showing trust in my words. I’m giving her hope and her strength back. Even if she doesn’t realize that.

“Will I ever have to...?” she starts to ask, but trails off. My eyebrows raise and I lay a hand on the small of her back.

“I want to reward you as a dom should reward his submissive.” I let my hands travel to her ass. I cup her cheeks and spread them slightly. “I’ll let you know if I’d like to be pleased. But it’ll be your choice if you’d like to give me that.” I let my thumbs skim along the seam in the center of her panties.

“I do want to reward you, kitten. Do you know what that means?” I ask.

She nods her head, seeming very much at ease with the knowledge I’ve given her.

“Tell me what you think it means.”

It takes her a moment to respond, but when she does, I’m pleased. “It’s what you were doing earlier.”

I smile at her backside as my fingers slip past her panties. I run them along her slick heat and I'm rewarded with a soft moan.

"You rubbed my clit," she says as she continues her answer.

"Why?" I ask as I gently place her panties back where they belong.

"To reward me," she says.

"What was I rewarding?" I ask her. I'm sure she'll say it's because she was listening to me. Or because she did as she was told. But in actuality it's because she was enjoying it. I rewarded her desire for my control to continue. I'm intentionally conditioning her reactions and her emotions.

"Because I listened to you and obeyed. Because I earned it." She adds the last part forcefully. I smirk behind her. That's how that dirty book went about it. You obey, and you get rewarded. Disobey, and you get punished.

I agree to an extent, but emotions are far more powerful a tool. She'll thrive with my touch. She'll love my control. And it'll only bring her happiness.

"I want to reward you now, kitten. Should I?" I ask her.

Yes. Yes, I fucking should. But right now I want her permission. I want her to control this next step. If she answers yes, I'll have her shackled and cumming harder than she ever has before. If she'd prefer not, that's fine, but I won't shackle her. I'll merely move her to her room, unrewarded in some ways, but feeling safe in others. It's a fair trade. And either way, she's rid of this room so long as she isn't disobedient.

After a quiet moment, I look at her face. She seems lost in contemplation.

"I think so," she finally answers. I chuckle at her response.

"You're being very good, kitten. How would you like me to reward you?"

She bites down on her bottom lip.

"I—" she starts to speak, but stops herself. I know she's ready. I know she's craving a release. Each time I rest a hand gently

on her lush ass, she tilts it slightly.

“Tell me, kitten. I want you to know that you can tell me anything. So long as you’re respectful, you won’t be punished.”

“I don’t want you to...have sex with me.” Hearing those words fall from her lips is disappointing. But I simply tack on the unspoken “yet” to the end. Obviously she won’t admit that she wants me just yet. She’s angling for control as well. This is her bid to ensure that if she says no, it’s not going to happen. And that’s a truth. I want to earn it. I want her to yearn for my touch and desire pleasing me more than anything else. And I will. This is just a step, a small hurdle, in that direction.

“I don’t intend on fucking you. Not until you *beg* me, remember?” She eyes me warily and I know I should just play my cards so she has more confidence in her decision. I reach inside my pocket and pull out a small vibrator.

“You’re doing very well, kitten. I’ll be honest, I’m very pleased. But you haven’t earned my touch yet.” Her brows creases and she almost looks disappointed. “This is all I’ll use.” She looks between my face and the vibrator.

“You’re going to tease me? Until I beg.” It pisses me off that she makes that assumption. Although I know she’s read that shit in her books.

“No. That would not be a reward. I’m going to put this vibrator against your clit and make you rock yourself on it until you cum. That’s all there is to your reward.”

She may not notice that her ass raises just slightly, but I sure as fuck do.

“I asked you a question. Do you think you should be rewarded?”

“Yes.” She finally gives me the green light in a breathy voice that makes my dick impossibly hard.

“I think so too, kitten.” I push the vibrator under her, past her clit and snug between her body and the bench, just to warm it and then walk around to the front of the bench. I take the strap in her left hand and move it into place. She pulls back and

nearly falls off the bench. “This is your reward, but you will receive it how I see fit.”

Her big brown eyes look up at me with worry. I can’t wait to ease her concerns.

“I told you what’s going to happen. I won’t lie. Once you’ve cum, I’m going to want you, and I’ll ask. But if you say no, or don’t beg well enough, I’ll release you and show you to your room.” She nods her head and places her chest flat on the bench again. Her breathing is coming in pants and I know she’s scared. But she’s trusting me. In only a day, I’ve gained enough trust to make her bared to me, completely vulnerable—and she did so willingly.

The realization thrills me.

I strap both her wrists and her ankles, letting my fingers trail along her exposed skin. I gently pull the nightgown up to her waist and then slip her panties slowly down her thighs. They don’t go far, but it’s enough to expose her. I bend slightly and blow against her glistening sex. She’s so fucking wet. I want to lean in and take a languid lick of her sweet cunt. I want to slide my fingers inside and feel her tight walls clench as she cums. But right now, I’m limited. Soon. Soon, she’ll beg me for more. She’ll desire nothing else. I smile as I pull away and pull out the warmed vibrator and twist it on.

Soon, she’ll be begging me.

CHAPTER 9

CATHERINE

I pull my wrist slightly, but I can hardly move. My arms don't even bend. The leather straps around my wrists have virtually no give. My ankles are strapped as well and I can barely move my legs at all. I'm completely restrained. My heart beats frantically as his hands move down my body. My ass is higher up and I know why. This bench was made for fucking. And I'm strapped to it. Willingly.

As soon as he locked in the first buckle, I felt regret. I don't know him. He's not a good man. That's really all I'm sure of, at least about him. I know one other thing. I have to do this in order to get out of here. And he promised he would let me out. He's made all sorts of pretty promises. My blood heats as his hand lingers on my ass. His other hand moves to the other cheek and he spreads them. I can't help that I'm turned on. I'm so fucking hot for him. It's been over a year now since I've felt a man's hands on me. And I've definitely never felt the hands of a man like Anthony. It's exhilarating.

I'm wet and hot and desperate for his touch. It's sick. I shouldn't want this, but I do.

And he knows it. My cheeks flame with embarrassment. My pussy is fully exposed to him and I'm completely vulnerable. The only sounds I can hear are my own ragged breath and the humming of the vibrator. My lips part and I hold back a moan as he gently pushes it against my pussy lips, just beneath my clit.

“Are you an over or under girl, kitten?” he asks in a sexy-as-fuck voice while putting slightly more pressure against me. I instinctively try to pull away. The intensity is just too much. He moves the vibrator over my clit, and my entire body heats and tingles. The pit of my stomach stirs with a hot, radiating pleasure. My ass bucks up, but the rest of my body remains in place due to the restraints.

“Ah, over it is.”

I whimper and turn my head from side to side. I’ve never felt something like this. It’s too intense. My body’s pleading to move away as the sensation grows and grows and my legs quiver. “Stay still. You’re going to enjoy this,” he whispers.

I try to keep my body from wanting to move, but it’s useless.

“Move your hips, kitten.” I instantly obey him, wanting and needing to move. The motion sends a surge of arousal to my core and soft gasps fall from my lips. I grind harder, loving the intensity of the pulses shooting through me. Close, so close. My neck arches back as I desperately search for my release.

His large hand splays on my lower back and pushes me down harder onto the vibrator. His force is what does it; I cum violently and scream out as the waves of pleasure roll through my body. The first wave is the most intense, then the rest grow dimmer and dimmer. My body feels limp on the table as I take in deep, uneven breaths.

“Have you ever used a vibrator before, kitten?” I shake my head no, and try to answer aloud, but he starts talking before I can respond. “You obviously enjoy the stimulation.”

I nod my head and breathe out as I agree. “Yes.” I swallow thickly, realizing I’m still pinned down. My eyes open a little more and I look at him to my left as he looks from my bared pussy to my face.

“Do you want to cum again?” he asks.

My breath stalls in my chest. I do want that again. But not from him, not now. I only did that so I can get the fuck out of here.

“You do, but not like this,” he says. I break eye contact, hating how obvious I am. But then again, anyone else in my position would be this fucking obvious.

“Time to see your new room.” he says, shutting off the vibrator. He reaches down and unstraps the bands. I stay still, feeling uneasy yet relaxed at the same time. I want to be tense and on guard. But I’m too exhausted from all the shit I’ve been through. He unstraps the last restraint and I try to brace myself on the bench, but his hand comes down on my shoulders, pushing me back down.

It sets off every red flag. My heart beats faster and fear sets in.

“Let me pick you up. Your legs are still trembling.” His voice is calming and soothing. I instantly feel myself relax. At the realization, I throw my guard up even higher.

I blink a few times to clear my head. I feel drunk on lust and pleasure. I breathe in deep as his arms tilt my body and he cradles me against his chest. He gently sets my feet down, but holds onto my waist. I want to push him away. I don’t need his help. My legs are shaky, but I’m fine. It was just one orgasm, for crying out loud. One intense, earth-shattering orgasm, but still. I can manage on my own.

I’m sure as fuck not going to tell him that though. I just need to be good so I can get out of here and see where he’s taking me. His body brushes against mine as he releases me. My eyes nearly close as I feel his massive erection through his jeans. I have to bite the inside of my cheek as my thighs clench and my pussy clamps down around nothing. I trap the moan in my throat.

His hand grips my shoulder and he leans down, placing a kiss on my shoulder before whispering, “You alright?” I can practically feel his smile.

He knows exactly what he’s doing. Instead of telling him off, I continue to play the role. That’s what I need to do now. “Yes, Anthony.”

He lets out a deep chuckle as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a piece of black silk cloth. He holds it up with both

hands and that's when I realize it's a blindfold.

Fuck. I was hoping I'd be able to see where we're going so I can get the layout of this place. I need to come up with a plan to get out of here. I'm sure the next room will be locked as well though, and then what? I'll be fucking stuck there, just like I am now. *He promised though.* I hate that I'm relying on his word. But I am. His word is the only hope I have.

My lips press into a hard line and his response is to smirk at me and raise a brow.

"Come on kitten, behave." His tone is playful and it makes me hate him even more. It's like we're playing cat and mouse, but he's always two steps ahead of me. I swallow my pride and turn around so he can place the cloth over my eyes.

I have no other option but to trust him. And I fucking hate it.

CHAPTER 10

ANTHONY

*M*y little kitten thinks she's slick. It's fucking adorable. I can practically hear her thoughts. I know all of this is an act, but for a moment, I had her. I had a sweet submissive who trusted me and craved my touch. I want more.

I tighten the sash over her eyes and take a step back. Her arms move out slightly, as though she's off-balance. Without me there to guide her, I'm sure she is. Her mouth parts, but then she closes it and moves her hands to her side.

Good girl. She's trying hard to obey. I know it's only so she can use me. She's not doing it because she *wants* to. Not yet, anyway. But we'll get there. I just need to be patient.

I put my hands on her shoulders so she knows I'm there, and then let them fall to her hips.

"Walk with me and hold my hand." I take her small hand in mine and slowly lead her to the door. Her other hand opens and closes. I know she'd like to reach for the blindfold. But she doesn't. Not yet. It won't do her any good to get it off though. Even if she does manage to get it off and race up the stairs somehow without me on right on her ass, she'd just come to another lock. And the combinations to enter her rooms are all different.

The entire basement is soundproofed. She could scream all she wanted, but she would be locked down here. The doors are programmed to unlock after three days though, if anything were to prevent me from returning to the house.

I punch in the code and lead her through the door. Her right hand twitches, and I know she's fighting the urge to bolt. She's working hard to stay by my side and not take off.

But ultimately she obeys. It's a fucking relief. Also, quite an achievement. A dozen or more scenarios played out in my mind, ranging from her starving herself to her throwing the chair at me. But this is nearly all I could hope for. It's perfect really. She's still resistant, but cooperating. I knew she'd be like this. She's perfect.

She's making it easy while still being a challenge. I like that. No, I fucking love that.

We get to her bedroom and I punch in the code. I see her shoulders sag slightly and the corners of her mouth turn down. She should be smarter than to think I'd place her in a room without a lock. I'm sure she knows better than that.

As soon as the door shuts behind us, I take off the sash. She blinks a few times before letting the astonishment show on her face. I look over her body and realize how unkempt she looks. Her skin's still flushed and gorgeous, save for a few smudges on her face. But her feet are bare and dirty, and her hair's tangled and in need of a wash. Even her nightgown looks rumpled and dirty on the part covering her ass since she sat on the floor most of the day. She was only in the cell for one day, but one was enough for her to get this disheveled. I'm not looking forward to having to send her back there, but I know she's going back. It's only a matter of time.

I made sure her room was spacious and would satisfy her every need and desire. It's a combination of her bedroom and living room. The en-suite is to the left, through a pair of large antique doors, and to the right she has an office that's accessible through another locked door. I hope that it will be hers one day. For now, all contact she makes with the outside world will be monitored. I made sure to take her phone with me when I left. She hasn't received any messages or calls yet, but her social media shit is fucking constant. I have my ways to ensure we'll both be happy as far as that's concerned.

This room that I've prepared for her is nearly the size of her entire cabin. It takes up the majority of my basement. But she needs the space since this is all she'll have from now on. I tried to section it off for her so she'd have a clear separation between the living room and bedroom. It's all the same soft grey in color though, which helps to unite the spaces. Most of the linens are white, giving it a very clean and modern look. The accents are pink though. Very pale pink. I even hung floor-to-ceiling crushed velvet curtains for her. They're only covering small windows that hardly let in any light, but they make the room look larger and more luxurious. I'm hopeful that everything is to her taste. Every piece I selected reminded me of her. I want this to be a dream come true, and the setting is every bit as important as the story.

In reality, her new home is much nicer than her cabin. Everything is new and fresh. I wanted everything to have the same feel as her cabin, just with more luxurious furnishings and decor. A huge bookshelf is in one corner. Some of the books are favorites of hers, but the others are my choices. I even brought her laptop for her so that she can keep working. Of course she'll only have access to it when I'll be present for now, and I installed a tracker and a logger so I'll be able to remotely monitor her, but she should still be thrilled to have it.

I watch her as she walks to each item, putting her hand out, but barely touching the furniture. She seems shocked, but also pleased, and that makes me happy. I'm proud that I can provide for her. I want that. I want her to see how good I can be for her.

She walks slowly to the table in front of the sofa. It's where I set her Kindle. The tablet's in its case, and she pauses as she recognizes it as hers. Her eyes widen, and she looks back at me.

"I told you I'd give you what you need. And I understand your needs," I say. I know all of her needs, and I can't fucking wait to fuck her exactly how she needs it. She looks at me hesitantly, but I don't give her a moment to respond.

"You will obey me." Now's the time for me to start going over the terms since she's seen the alternative. "You will do what I

say, when I say. I'll do my best to be reasonable and keep your limits in mind." I smirk and add a touch of humor to lighten the severity of the situation. Her eyes remain clouded with worry. I can tell she's thinking there's a catch beyond what I've told her. "But I will push you, and you will obey. If you don't at least try to obey me, you'll be punished, and this room will be taken from you."

I give her a moment to digest what I've told her.

"You said..." She pauses to clear her throat before continuing.

"You said I would have to agree?" I nod.

"On physically pleasing me, yes. I only want your touch if you're eager to give it to me." That's absolutely true. I have no interest in taking my pleasure from her, I want her to give it to me freely.

She nods her head in understanding, appearing a bit more relaxed, but still unsure.

"Kitten, I have desires. And I want you to fulfill them." My hand burns with the need to touch her soft skin. "When I come into the room, I want you to kneel and wait for my command. My needs will be your priority." I want her submission more than anything. I want her to need me, and to look forward to my company. I need her complete trust. I will earn it.

Her breath comes in short pants, and I'm hoping this is turning her on more than anything else.

"Yes, Anthony," she answers in a respectful low tone.

"You can speak freely, so long as you're respectful. But I will punish that smart mouth of yours if you back talk or raise your voice to me. Is that understood?" I keep my voice soft, but firm as I face her. I want to brush her hair off her shoulder and wipe the smudges off her face. She needs to be cleaned and pampered.

She nods her head and says, "Yes. I understand." Her body language tells me everything I need to know. She's scared, and she doesn't trust a word I'm saying. She'll learn though. She just needs time. She needs space as well. I can't rush this fantasy. Deep down, she wants this. I'll still be here when

she's ready for it. Until then, I'll have to control my own needs and desires.

"Now," I begin, as I walk to the soft grey sofa and pat the seat next to me as I sit down. She listens and quickly sits with her hands in her lap. Her eyes keep dancing around the room, so I wait for her full attention. It doesn't take long, which pleases me.

"I want to go over your earlier behavior," I say.

Her eyes widen slightly and she inhales deeply. I keep my face impassive, but it makes me happy that she's nervous to discuss it. She should be.

"You know what a good submissive does and how she behaves, don't you? I was under the impression I wouldn't have to teach you that," I say with a frown.

Her eyes lock on mine as she replies. "Yes, Anthony." Her complete attention and obedience is fucking beautiful. And hearing my name on her lips makes my dick jump. I know she has expectations just as much as I do. They'll help us for now, but they can hurt us, too.

"Earlier, you hadn't agreed to be mine. In fact, you said no and chose death at first." Her eyes stay locked on mine, but her mouth stays closed. "Because you weren't aware of my terms, you weren't punished. But now, you're mine. That behavior you displayed will get your ass whipped, kitten."

She nods her head diligently.

"You deliberately teased me." I bring my finger to her mouth and trace her bottom lip. Her mouth parts slightly, but I pull away. "Next time you'll find out what happens when you tempt that side of me." I have to work hard to keep my eyes locked on hers rather than roaming her body and picturing those sweet lips wrapped around my cock. "Do you understand, kitten?"

"Yes, Anthony." A wicked smirk pulls my lips up.

Now that she's agreed, we can really play.

CHAPTER 11

CATHERINE

“*Y*ou need a bath and then dinner, kitten.” Anthony rises, towering above me as I sit paralyzed on the sofa.

“Yes, Anthony.” The words fall easily from my lips in a tone I’ve only ever imagined could come from me. I feel...numb. Almost as though I’m not present in my own body. I don’t understand how things have changed so quickly. I’ve gone from being in a dark, cold cell with nothing, to this room that’s more beautiful than anything I could ever imagine.

“Come.” Anthony holds his hand out for me and I quickly place my hand in his. I’m relying solely on my instincts and what I’ve read in my romance novels. My heart flutters as he leads me to a set of double doors carved from wood. I want to touch them, but I don’t. Not with him here. I imagine he has cameras everywhere, but as soon as he leaves, I want to touch everything. I need to see what all he brought from my home and what he has for me here. A part of me wants to cry with joy and feel nothing but gratitude. But that part of me is fucking stupid.

And I’m not stupid. This is a gilded cage for his pampered pet. And he intends for me to be that pet, his *kitten*. I can play along. I *will* play along. At some point I’ll be able to get out of here. I just need to survive and be whatever it is that he wants me to be until that time comes.

He opens the doors and reveals the most gorgeous bathroom I’ve ever seen.

The walls are lined with a beautiful pale blue paisley wallpaper. Hanging from the center of the ceiling is a silver and Lucite chandelier positioned directly above a large, oval soaking tub. Running the entire length of the back wall is a huge walk-in shower complete with waterfall shower heads and massage jets arranged symmetrically on the walls. There's a large double vanity to the left, and that makes chills prick over my skin. Is he staying here, too? It never occurred to me that he would. This space is feminine and designed for a woman. I try to ignore the fact that there are two sinks and walk forward to the shower.

My heartbeat picks up. I know what he's going to want. I'm not an idiot.

"Kitten." I hear Anthony's rebuke from behind me and I quickly turn around to face him. I don't know what I did wrong. My knees weaken and my immediate reaction is to lower myself to the ground to show complete submission. I don't want to go back to the cell. I can't. I can't go backward.

Before I can drop to the tiled floor, Anthony reaches out and firmly grips my arm and waist. "Now now, you're alright. I just want you to relax." His hands loosen on my waist and I struggle to look at him. I feel lost and powerless.

"I want you to undress out here. I need to take a look at you." I nod my head at his words. Obviously that's what he wanted. He's already made me cum and seen my naughty bits, so this isn't that far of a stretch. But it feels dirty somehow. I guess in a way it's more intimate. I pull the straps off my shoulders and let the thin nightgown fall into a heap around my feet.

Naturally I want to cover myself, but I don't. I've read enough dark romance to know better. A submissive doesn't hide her body from her dom.

Anthony's quiet. He doesn't move to touch me, and he doesn't say anything at all. I find myself growing more anxious the longer he stays silent. What if he doesn't find me attractive? What if he changes his mind? I close my eyes and try to breathe easy, but I can't.

I'm not skinny, but I wouldn't say I'm overweight either. I've got a pear shape and the cellulite on my ass to go with it. My breasts are small, but perky. I think I could be cute if I wasn't so fucking pale. His eyes don't give anything away. I wish he'd just say something already.

Before I can go into a full panic attack, he reaches out and places his hand on the dip in my waist. He crouches low and puts his face just inches above my pelvis. His fingers trace over a small scar on my hip.

"Where did this come from?" he asks.

I look down at the shiny white scar. It's hardly noticeable. I've had it most of my life and I've never thought twice about it. "When I was younger, I hit something I guess, or fell." I swallow thickly and say, "I don't remember."

He nods his head and walks around my body, looking over every inch. I feel like he's evaluating whether or not he's going to keep me, and I'm terrified he'll find me lacking.

From behind me, I feel his hands gently rest on my hips, and I close my eyes as I feel his hot breath on my shoulder. I gently tilt my neck, expecting him to kiss me there, but he doesn't. In an instant he's gone, and I'm left standing awkwardly as he completes the circle and stands in front of me as though it didn't happen.

For a moment I wonder if he even touched me at all. Maybe I imagined it.

I clear my throat after a moment of silence, but he speaks before I can and says, "You're beautiful. Every inch of you." I look up at him with surprise and wonder. He sounds so sincere. I can't help but believe he really does find me beautiful.

"You're dirty though. Let me clean you." I back away out of instinct as he walks around me toward the shower. My breathing picks up, and I can't hide the fact that I don't want this. I don't want his hands roaming my body for a mix of reasons. He's fucking good at this game, and there's a small

piece of me that I know would cave at his touch. I don't trust him. I don't want him to take care of me.

"Would you rather I give you space, kitten?" he asks.

I can't hide my shock. I can hardly believe that he would leave me alone in this room. That's a lot of trust for him to extend to me. I could easily break the glass and use a piece as a weapon. Either on myself or him. As if reading my mind, he cocks a brow.

"You aren't going to make me regret that, are you? You've been so good today. I'd hate for you to upset me just before bedtime." There's a dark threat in his voice, and I'm quick to shake my head and alleviate any worries he has.

"I didn't think you would. You're smarter than that," he says.

"Yes, Anthony." My response earns me a warm smile, and I hate that it eases the apprehension in me, but it does.

"Dinner will be ready in an hour; you'll need to be done by then."

"I'm not very hungry." I speak just above a murmur and stare at the beautiful marble floor. The silence he gives me in return compels me to look at him. He gives me a tight smile.

"I understand not having an appetite, but you need to eat, kitten." He takes a step back and looks into my eyes. I try to break eye contact, but I can't. The intensity of his gaze has me pinned.

"Tomorrow will be different; you know that, don't you?" he asks with an even voice.

Tomorrow I'm his, and I'll have expectations to meet. I know. I know what this is. Regret overwhelms me. I've read this story so many times. Girl gets taken and held against her will. But this is no story. It's not something I can edit and critique. What's happening right now isn't the same as words on a page that can be changed on a whim.

"It's going to be good, kitten." His calm tone eases the stress threatening to consume me. He grips my chin in between his thumb and forefinger. He leans down with his lips close to

mine, but he doesn't let them touch. My body ignites from the proximity of our bodies—mine naked, and his fully clothed. He holds such power over me, yet his touch is gentle. I almost lean into him, expecting him to kiss me, but he doesn't. He whispers, "You're going to love this kitten; I promise you."

I close my eyes, waiting for him to kiss me, but instead he drops his hand and turns to leave me. "Sleep well, kitten," he says as he opens the double doors and leaves me alone.

I watch the doors shut as his body leaves my view. The loud click fills the bathroom and I finally wrap my arms around my body. I feel stunned. Confused. And scared. More than anything, I feel lost.

I turn the water on and let the steam fill the room before I finally get into the shower. The heat feels like absolute heaven on my sore shoulders. I stand under the stream, letting the water hit me as I absorb everything. It takes a long while for me to reach for the soap and wash the grime of the cell away. When my fingers travel lower, the anger comes along with bitter disappointment. I let him touch me.

I scrub my body harder and turn up the heat. The reality of the situation makes my breathing become ragged.

I close my eyes as the tears leak out and lean my body against the cool tiled wall. I slowly slide down until I'm on my ass and holding my knees to my chest.

I don't know how I'll ever get out of here. But I will.

Part of me thinks I should be grateful. The fucking psycho who took me is at least giving me space and letting me stay in a beautiful prison. It could be worse. But it's still a prison. And I don't deserve this. *It's better than death.* I can't deny that. I'm safe for now. Or at least I've been given the impression of safety.

I'll obey him to save myself from punishment, but I can't forget what's really going on here.

I can't let him break me. I can't let him win.

The first chance I'm given, I'm running and never looking back.

It takes me an hour before I finally go back to the bedroom.

I stop in my tracks when I see a tray on the end of the bed. I walk closer to it with disbelief. Sitting on the tray is a sage green teacup with the corresponding saucer on top to keep the heat in. And next to it are two melatonin pills.

I reach down and slowly move the saucer; the steam spills out beautifully from the freshly steeped chamomile tea.

He was watching. I already knew that though. I knew he would be watching me.

I've read countless books where the heroine is taken and forced to submit. I pick the teacup up and put it to my lips. I close my eyes as I take a sip and sit down on the bed. I look around the bedroom, the one he designed with me in mind, and think back to all those dark romances.

I've already read this story, but this is different. The way this story ends is entirely up to me and my choices from here on out.

CHAPTER 12

ANTHONY

I pull the covers closer around me. I do it every night as though they'll protect me, but they won't. No one can protect me. This is something that has to happen. I ruined her life. When she had me, everything changed. She's hurting because of me. Dad's never nice to her anymore. He always makes her cry now. When he hits her, she hits me. It's only fair, she says. I deserve it. I should never have been born.

I hear the door creak open and shut behind her. I know it's coming. The belt comes down hard and I cry out as little as possible. I hear her, but I ignore it. I feel the pain, but I pretend I'm numb. I think about Tommy. As long as she stays here, he's safe. He didn't do anything. It's not his fault. It's my fault. I try to be good and stay quiet, but the belt whips through the air and smacks across my face. I can't help that I screamed.

I can't help it. I hear them coming. No! I shake my head as she shoves the belt under the covers. My heart beats faster. I tried to be good. I tried. Please forgive me.

My eyes slowly open and my body seems frozen. It takes a moment for my heart to calm. I'm used to this. Everything will be fine. It's nothing that matters anymore. My racing heart is the only indication that I've had that fucking nightmare again. I clear my throat and get my shit together. I do my best to feel nothing, and for the most part that's true.

I don't feel a god damned thing reliving that memory.

I look over to my alarm and move the switch before the clock has a chance to display 6:00 AM and go off. I can't remember the last time the alarm actually had a chance to go off. It doesn't matter though, as long as I'm up to start the day.

I check my phone again. Vince still hasn't written me back.

I look at the last message he sent me. It reads, *I month*. I have one month with her until the Cassanos want proof that she's dead.

One month, my ass. I'm not giving her up in a month. No fucking way. I've only just gotten my hands on her.

I calm myself by thinking about how she's safe here. Having her in her room soothes the beast inside of me. My kitten is where she belongs, and she's adjusting well.

She cried for nearly an hour last night. I hated watching her break down like that. It's only natural though. And now that it's out of her system, she's taken to her surroundings well. She checked everywhere for an escape though. I chuckle as I make my way to the monitors in the closet.

Her alarm is going to go off at 7 a.m., and she's still curled up in bed. I imagine she's going to want to fight me on this one. She's used to getting up at 8 a.m. I'd be happy to let her have the extra hour, if she asks. I may prime her to ask for permission so she can see that I'm willing to adjust for her. But I'm not sure she'll bring it up and risk going back to the cell. She might be afraid that even just asking me will displease me. Her fear is a big part of what's holding us back. I just need to give her time and let that dissipate.

I watch her sleeping peacefully and something inside of me seems to shift into place. I know everything is going to work out perfectly. Every ounce of worry leaves me.

I walk with purpose to the bathroom and go about my daily ritual. I look at my reflection in the mirror and run my hand over the stubble on my jaw. I need to get myself together before I go to her. And she should be doing the same for me. She isn't though.

I cluck my tongue before pulling out the razor and shaving cream.

I'm happy about that. This will be a perfect training opportunity. I asked her if she needed me to explain what being a submissive means, and she said no. She was wrong. Obviously my little kitten missed some vital information in her books. She should always be presentable for me. I can't wait to show her what happens when she doesn't meet my expectations. My kitten's in for a treat.

As I rinse the razor in a hot stream of water, my phone pings. I close my eyes with frustration.

I've told them I'm taking some time off, but Tommy insists I'm needed. I'd do anything for my brother, but sometimes he gets on my fucking nerves.

I text him back that I'll meet him later tonight. I just want to enjoy this, but instead I feel tense. It's because I know they're going to take her from me.

They can't.

He said I could have this.

He gave me his word.

I don't give a fuck about the business that we get from the Cassanos, or what their expectations were. I bought her, so she's mine to do whatever I fucking want with her.

And right now, I want to get information from her, whip her ass for not being ready and then have her writhing beneath me.

My shoulders loosen up and I let out an easy breath as my dick springs to life. Maybe if I just keep all the blood in my cock I won't get so fucking worked up over Vince and his lack of a god damned backbone.

I splash some water on my face and pat it dry. I'm only in pajama pants that are hanging low on my hips, and my erection is obvious. That's good though. I want her to know how much I want her.

I look back in the mirror and breathe easy.

It's only me and her right now.

Time to play with my kitten.

CHAPTER 13

CATHERINE

I wake up with a shriek ripped from my throat as a hard hand smacks against my ass.

I bolt upright from the bed and grab the covers, pulling them close to my body as I stare wide-eyed at Anthony. My heart beats rapidly with fear, but then is replaced by something else entirely. The brief dread that I feel fucking vanishes.

Holy fuck, he looks like he came straight off the cover of my favorite smutty novels. That chiseled “V” at his hips and his hard and lean muscular body are exactly what I’ve longed to wake up to. Except that he just spanked me, and he’s looking at me like I kicked his puppy.

I have no fucking clue what I did to piss him off. I slowly move into a submissive position, watching him cautiously. But his eyes aren’t on me. They’re on my ass and probably admiring the bright red mark he left.

“Nice of you to wake up.” He finally gives me a clue as to what I did wrong. His tone is playful and it eases a small part of me, but I can’t forget. This is an illusion and a game to him. I can’t relax; I need to keep my guard up. I pull at the hem of the nightgown I’m wearing. It’s the longest one I found in the dresser, but it still shows far too much of my ass.

My eyes home in on the clock on the nightstand, but I can’t see the time. I vaguely remember smacking that annoying fucker when the alarm woke me up earlier. My heart sinks, and

my stomach drops with fear. Day one, and already I've fucked this up. I didn't fucking know, although I should have.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" he asks with a heated stare.

I'm fucking exhausted because a psycho took me from my home and said psycho happens to get up earlier than I do. Add that to the list of things that make you a prick.

I clear my throat as softly as possible and decide to apologize. I can't risk getting in even more trouble right now. I can't go back to the cell. I remember how nice he was last night, I just need to appeal to that side of him. "I'm sorry, Anthony. I didn't realize."

"You're supposed to be presentable for me." His voice is stern.

I keep my eyes on his as my breathing picks up. He's right, I should've known that. It's not like I thought I could sleep in and lounge around all day.

"I wasn't sure when you'd be here," I say as softly as my voice allows.

"You should *always* be ready." He walks to the nightstand and picks up the clock, holding it out for me to see. "But this should give you a pretty good fucking clue as to when I'll be here."

A yawn creeps up on me and I really do try to hold it in. But I can't stop myself, and I literally let out a huge yawn as he's reprimanding me. I cover my mouth with my hand and shake my head. "I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"You didn't what?" he asks with a hard edge. His eyes narrow as he sets the clock down with more grace and care than is needed. I can tell he's trying to hold in his anger. A darkness I haven't seen yet gathers around him. Fuck, this isn't good.

"I'm sorry, Anthony. I didn't mean to upset you." Fear heats my blood as I scoot backward on the bed. "I didn't mean to yawn. It just slipped out, and I didn't know about the time."

"You seem to have relaxed a little too much, kitten. Did you forget who you are?" he asks. His words send chills down my

spine and strike fear into my heart.

I don't know how to respond; my mouth opens, but words don't come out. I don't know what he wants me to say. He puts his knee on the bed and reaches out, grabbing my ankle and dragging me across the bed. The nightgown travels up my body and I desperately try to keep it down. But I don't struggle against his hold, and I don't fight him. I let him drag me over to him.

“Mine. That's who you are. You. Are. *Mine*.” His anger wanes as I look back at him. He commands me in a calmer tone. “Say it.”

I hold his gaze and answer quickly. “Yours. I'm yours.” His chest rises and falls with his steadying breath. My pussy clenches as I see how my words have tamed him somewhat. I love the power I have over him, but I'm not a fool, and this isn't right. It's wrong. What I feel for him, this entire situation—it's all wrong.

He's still trying to calm himself down and I know I need to say something to make him less angry with me. “I will be pres—present—” I try to tell him I'll be ready for him at all times. But I stumble over the words. Although he hasn't hit me, I'm scared to death he will. Or worse, that he'll throw me back into the cell and leave me there.

“Shh.” His hand cups my chin and he looks me in the eyes. “You will be presentable for me by 8 a.m. every morning. Unless that's too early for you?” He cocks his head at me, daring me to disagree.

I swallow the lump in my throat and nod my head. “Yes, Anthony.” He looks back at me like he's waiting for more. But I don't know what he wants me to say.

After a moment he asks, “Have you disobeyed me?”

I shake my head no. My breathing becomes erratic as I wonder if I've defied him unintentionally. “I didn't mean to. Not on purpose.”

“I know you haven't. But you also haven't been a very good pet, have you?”

“I’m sorry. I’ll be better.” I don’t want to go back to the cell. I can’t go back there. My heart begins to thump painfully in my chest as I imagine being imprisoned there again. I’ll be better for him. I know I can be better.

“You need to try harder, or this will never work.” I search his eyes for sympathy or understanding, but I see nothing. He doesn’t wait for me to speak as he continues.

“Right now, for instance. You’re hesitating to answer me. You aren’t speaking to me. You aren’t ready.” I draw in a short breath at the no-nonsense list of shit I’ve done to displease him already. The worst part is that I really should know better. I’ve read dozens or more books about submissives and dominants. I know all about power exchanges—fuck, I’ve fantasized about it. And yet here I am. Failing at it. Failing at being a submissive pet like I’ve dreamt about.

“I don’t like that,” he says quietly. Fear grips my heart as I register his words. I can do this. I can be better. I need to be better so he keeps me. At least until I can get the fuck out of here. “I’m going to punish you for it.”

I start to shake my head; my body feels paralyzed. It was just one mistake. I can fix it. “Please don’t send me back—”

“No, kitten,” he says as he strokes my cheek and looks me square in the eyes. I instantly close my eyes and hold my breath. “Not a punishment for disobeying me.” He gently pulls me by the hands into a seated position and pets my hair. “The kind of punishment that will push your limits and end with both of us being satisfied.” His anger completely vanishes as he gives me a small smirk and says, “You know the type of punishment I’m talking about.”

Everything in my body relaxes as I nod back and reply, “Yes.” I know what he means, and the thought makes my blood race. I have to break his gaze as a blush comes over me and my core heats. What the fuck is wrong with me?

A low chuckle rises in his chest.

“Now that you’re here, kitten, it’s time to really start playing.” I look anywhere but his eyes and end up staring right at the

erection in his pants. Oh, fuck, another wave of arousal hits me. I close my eyes and try to ignore it. This is just pretend. This is something I need to get through until I can escape.

I feel the bed dip, and I know he's sitting next to me. I slowly open my eyes as he speaks. "Time to be a good pet and take your punishment, kitten." I want to ask him why he's doing this. I want to ask him to just let me go. But a darker side of me wants to be punished. I want to feel the pain turn to pleasure, just like I've read about before. I want those scenes to come to life. I crawl on my knees and move to drape my body over his lap with my hips atop his thighs. I know that I have this coming. I have to be better next time. It'll be easy. I've read so many god damned books so I should fucking ace this.

I think about them as he slips my gown up to my waist. I'm not wearing any underwear because he simply didn't provide me with any. My heart sputters in my chest as his hand caresses one of my ass cheeks and then the other. My body is stiff and I keep waiting for the smack every time I feel his hand lift up, but he just continues to massage my ass, drawing out my punishment. I turn my head to the side and just breathe. My shoulders ease lower and I close my eyes, enjoying his touch.

He positions me across his lap and places one of his legs over mine. My eyes open, and I know it's coming. A hand gentles on my ass and then lifts before landing hard with a loud *smack!*

"Fuck!" I yell out, and resist trying to move away. My eyes scrunch as another hard, stinging smack lands on my right cheek and then again on my left. I ball my hands into fists and close my eyes tightly as the stinging makes my eyes water. My throat closes, and I can't help that I flinch at the next smack. Tears leak from my eyes. Fuck, it hurts. Fucking hell. I cover my face with my hands as another hard smack lands on my ass and forces a scream from me.

I prepare for another blow, but it doesn't come. He rubs my tender ass and whispers, "You're close, kitten. So close." My ass feels so fucking hot and so damn sore that even the faintest

soothing touch stings. He lifts his hand and brings it down over the crack of my ass. His fingertips barely touch my pussy. I try to arch my back as a warmth stirs in my belly. I shake my head as he continues my spanking. Soon the stinging pain turns into a numbing sensation, and the numbness is replaced by something else. Something hot and delightful that makes my core clench.

I groan into the sheets as his hand slaps my tender skin repeatedly. He pauses to rub my ass, and I find myself moving against him.

“Stay still, kitten,” he says as a warning. His fingers dip between the folds of my pussy.

“Yes, Anthony.” The words fall from my lips with lust. He raises his hand, and another hard spank greets my ass. “Uhh!” I scream out as my body bows. I’ve never felt this before, this heated need for more. I writhe under him, but then remember his command.

Still.

I force myself to remain motionless as more blows rain down on my ass. Right, left, center. Over and over again. Each time he hits the center, his fingers sink lower.

The pain morphs into something entirely different and I feel myself rise higher and higher. My head thrashes as I try to resist, but my body betrays me. I’m fucking soaking wet for him. After a few more hard swats, he stops and leans down, planting a kiss on my left ass cheek.

“What do you say, kitten?” he asks as his hands gently caress my ass.

I have no fucking clue what he’s talking about. My heart beats faster with the desire of wanting to answer him correctly. And then it hits me.

“Thank you for my punishment,” I say just above a murmur.

His fingers travel down my ass and over my puckered hole. My lungs stop as his fingertips hover there. They prod slightly, but only for a moment. Then they travel lower and dig into my heat. The feeling is so unexpected, and so shockingly needed.

I grind on his hand as his fingers pump in and out of me. I moan into the sheets shamelessly. He pulls them out, only to move the moisture to my clit and circle it with no mercy. My back stiffens and my body tingles as every part of me is on edge. And then he pinches my hardened nub and I shatter. I fall off the edge and break, with waves of pleasure controlling every inch of my body. It's a paralyzing release that leaves me breathless.

It's quiet for a long moment as I lie limp across his lap. Finally he breaks the silence. "Good job, kitten. You did really well. I'm proud of you." For some reason his praise makes my heart swell. I quickly look away and try to ignore the warmth I feel in my chest. Not to mention his fucking erection digging into my stomach.

He reaches over me to grab something off the nightstand, but I don't see what it is. I hear a cap snap open and I hiss as a cool dab of cream lands on one ass cheek and then the other. He chuckles, and it's the sexiest fucking sound I've ever heard. He gently rubs the cream into my skin and I practically purr with affection. *Aftercare.* A small smile plays at my lips, but then I remember everything. Shame replaces every good feeling. I swallow as spikes seem to grow in my throat. *What the fuck just happened?*

He reaches over to the nightstand for something else, and this time I look. My brow furrows as I catch a glimpse of something that I'm almost positive is a syringe.

He stabs the needle into my ass, making me wince before I can do a damn thing about it. After a second he pulls it out and rubs the tender spot. "There kitten, now you've had your shots."

I look at him from the corner of my eye as he lifts me off his lap to sit next to him. Fuck, my ass hurts! I'm too scared to ask what the shot was, but I can't take my eyes off of it. I need to know what he's putting into my body. I swallow thickly and bite out the words.

"Anthony, what was that?"

"A shot of Depo-Provera," he answers confidently.

Birth control.

He sits me upright, making me cringe from the stinging sensation and moves off the bed. I keep my head lowered and try not to show how fucking worried I am.

“I’ll be back in one hour. Be ready for me this time.” He cups my chin in his hand. “I’ve been going easy on you, so don’t make me regret that.”

His lips hover an inch away from mine, but he doesn’t lean in. My breathing picks up and I wait for him to kiss me. But he doesn’t.

He drops his hand and walks quickly to the door.

“One hour. Don’t disappoint me, kitten.”

CHAPTER 14

CATHERINE

I breathe in deep and look at my reflection as I layer on one more coat of mascara. The cabinet is filled with high-end beauty products that are all brand new. It also contains my makeup bag, which he obviously stole from my house.

I've been watching the clock like a hawk.

My hair's tied back in a loose braid, and my makeup is clean and natural-looking, just enough to cover the imperfections.

The closet is stuffed with all sorts of clothing. From cocktail dresses, to slutty role-playing costumes, to everyday pieces that I actually love. He also brought along a duffel bag packed with a few items that I wear all the time.

The variety of clothing, makeup, and accessories is strangely familiar. Some things I recognize as mine, but the new additions are all nicer, more luxurious versions of what I already own.

The one thing he didn't grab were the owl earrings my mother left me.

They were hers, and when she found out she only had three months left to live, she gave them to me.

They're gorgeous. I'd admired them since I was a little girl. The earrings are yellow gold with ruby flowers in the centers of the owls, but I've never worn them. I was always too afraid I'd lose them. And now they're gone.

I tilt my head back and exhale, waving my hands around my face to cool my eyes and keep me from crying. It's almost time, and I can't ruin my makeup and piss him off.

I don't know why I was so lackadaisical when he came in this morning. Maybe it's because I slept so damn well. It took forever to actually get to sleep, but when I did, I slept wonderfully. I guess allowing myself to cry some helped. I'm not sure why I wasn't more alert this morning. Maybe it's because he was so lenient last night, but whatever the reason, I can't let it happen again.

I calm myself down and put the mascara back. Everything's neat and put away. It makes me feel at ease. I just need to make the bed and then I can wait for him.

I always make my bed in the morning. I think staying at home all day has made me a tidier person than I ever was before. So long as I'm capable of making the bed, I'm able to do anything. I snort a humorless laugh as I move the sheets into place and reach for the duvet. It's so pretty and soft. It's off-white, with thin silver threading making a paisley design throughout.

I bend at the waist to lay my head down on the bed and love how I sink in to the mattress and smell the comforting scent of fresh laundry. As I inhale deeply, I hear the doorknob turn and the door slowly open. I quickly climb the bed and kneel at the end of it. I don't know if this is where he wants me. My heart races. I don't know any of his preferences. He never told me. He may want my hair a certain way, my makeup to be heavier, or my clothes to be different. I have no fucking clue. I need to ask him. He hasn't given me anything. He's not playing fair.

As soon as I find out what kind of mood he's in, I'm asking. So long as it's a good mood.

I hear him walk by the sofa and toward the bed, but I don't look up. I keep my head bowed and wait. I'm on my knees, sitting back on my heels with my hands slightly in front of me, palms up.

I've read a lot of books and there are so many damn positions. I don't know which one he means by kneel. For Christ's sake,

in movies they kneel on one foot, but I'm sure he doesn't mean that though.

I watch as he picks up my hand and places it gently on my thigh and does the same with the other. His fingers tilt my chin up so I have to look at him.

"No need to bow, kitten." He pets my hair as he talks. It's soothing and rhythmic. "I want your eyes on me always. You never have to look away."

"Yes, Anthony." I feel like I'm playing a role. It gives me a small thrill, but I have to remember this is an act. All of this is an act.

"Did you find everything you need?" he asks.

I look up at him through my lashes. He's so fucking handsome. It still amazes me that he felt the need to take a woman when he could have anyone he wanted. That a man like him would stoop this low. I realize I haven't answered his question and bite my lip. I want to tell him I want more of my things, but I can't. I'm too scared to do anything to upset him. Because of that, I merely nod my head in assent.

"So I packed everything that you need, then?" he asks with slight disbelief in his tone. The way he says it makes me feel like I'd be a liar now to tell him that I want more of my things. My skin heats and I feel nauseated. I feel trapped in a corner, like no matter what I do, it'll be wrong.

"Kitten," he says as he leans my body against his chest and runs soothing strokes along my back.

"You can tell me anything. I promise I won't get mad," he says.

"I want to go home." The words fall out easily. As though they've been perched there, waiting for me to release them.

"I know you do, but you can't." He keeps petting my back and I hate him for it. I want to move out of his embrace, but at the same time I don't. I need the comfort.

"What else did you want to ask?" he says. I'm quiet for a moment and he adds, "If you want certain things, you'll need

to ask for them.”

“I have other things I want,” I say softly into his chest. I wait with bated breath for his reaction.

“We’ll go together. Later tonight.” His answer surprises me so much I go completely still. I’m afraid if I move, or if I even breathe, he’ll change his mind.

“I want you to be happy here. You know that, don’t you?” he asks.

“Yes, Anthony.” I respond with the only answer that seems fit, but really, I don’t know that to be true. He wants me here to serve him. To play his fucked up game. He doesn’t want me here to be happy. He’s not doing me any god damned favors.

He finally releases me and I maintain my position.

He looks me over, assessing me before taking me by my hand.

“It’s time for breakfast, kitten.” He leads me off the bed and to the door. We’re leaving the room. Hope rises in my chest. I wait for the sash, but he doesn’t pull it out. Maybe he’ll let his guard down today, and I’ll have a chance to run.

He looks back at me as he enters in the code. I bite my bottom lip and look away. Damn it. He grunts a laugh and it pisses me off. At the click he opens the door and reaches out to prop it open with his foot. I consider grabbing the door, swinging it open and running. My heart beats fast and adrenaline rushes through my blood at the thought. But I don’t do it. I watch as he wheels in a steel cart and the door slowly closes. My eyes fall to the ground and I feel like a fucking coward.

“Now now, kitten, stop that.” I look up at my captor, at my dom, with sad eyes.

“I just want to go home.” I say the words again and I’m sure I sound pathetic.

“You are home,” he says absolutely. It crushes something inside me and I have to work hard not to cry. I stand there while he wheels the cart over to the sofa and sets up covered dishes on the coffee table. I look between him and the locked door.

It could be so much worse. He was supposed to kill me. I close my eyes and steady my breathing as I consider how many other ways this could have gone. I just need to behave. He can't keep me here forever.

"Come, kitten." My feet move toward him before I'm even fully conscious of his command.

I start to sit on the sofa, but he holds his hand up and I freeze.

"On your knees," he says.

I only hesitate a fraction of a second before gracefully sitting on my heels. I put my hands on my thighs where he placed them earlier. I can do this. I know I can. And I can win his trust and I can get the fuck out of here. I just need to role-play. I can do it. I know I can.

"Let's play a game, kitten." He starts talking and I give him my full attention, but I don't want to play a game. I want to go home. I want to read my books, talk to my clients, and engage with my group of readers on social media. Every hour I'm away from them kills the interaction rates. It's fucking horrible for business. I breathe in deeply. My books and my work are my life. And he's murdering both of them right now.

"Between every bite we'll ask each other a question." He lifts a silver dome off of a plate and a delicious scent fills my lungs. I inhale deeply, loving the smell of peppers and sausage and eggs. I eye the dish. Omelets. My mouth waters. "Does that sound like fun to you?" he asks.

No, I think, but of course I answer, "Yes."

"Does it really?" he asks, immediately countering my simple answer.

"Fun? No, it doesn't. But it sounds like something to do," I answer honestly out of instinct. I don't have time to be nervous about it. He barks a laugh at my answer and lays a gentle hand on my hair.

"Thank you, kitten." He leans down and plants a kiss in my hair and strokes me gently. It's soothing, and I hate how comforting it is.

I look his body over as he moves to cut a piece of the omelet. I still don't understand why a man like him would do this. I want to ask him. But I'm not going there. I think I'll stick to, *What's the weather like outside, since I can't fucking see it?*

"I'll go first, kitten," he says as he stabs a piece of the egg and puts the fork in front of my mouth. I obediently open and wait for his question. "I know what happened with the Cassanos. But I want you to tell me what you saw." I chew the food slowly as my blood chills. I don't want to talk about it. I also don't know if this is a test. Maybe he really does work for them. Maybe this is all a ploy of some sort. Anxiety creeps up on me. As if reading my mind, he reassures me.

"It's not a trick. I'm just curious how it happened." He sets the fork down as I swallow.

"Would it help if I tell you what I know?" he asks. I nod my head, still unable to speak. Everything that happened fucking destroyed me. I may have been a sweet, shy, book-loving nerd before, but at least I was strong and confident. Going through that shit robbed me of that. I don't want to go back to that fucked up place.

"You saw three of their soldiers kill Judge Hawthort. He was killed by Michael Davis, and Joseph and Brandon Becker. And later you were able to identify them all as well as account for their missing kilos of dope," he says.

I shake my head no and say, "He was alive. I'm fairly sure he was alive." I didn't testify that I saw him dead, and I'm confident that he was alive at the time that I witnessed everything. His body was never found though. It's a very real possibility that he's dead simply because I saw them. Talking about this triggers the memory. I see the hammers in their hands and hear the sound of Brandon smashing his against the judge's knee. He was alive. I hear his screams echo in my head. The bricks and the bags are there. My body turns to ice.

He holds another bite to my lips; my appetite is gone, but I take it. "What else did you see?" he asks.

"Nothing. I never saw anything else," I say.

“They were charged with more,” he points out.

“Nothing that I testified to,” I answer quickly.

“But you testified to attempted rape and kidnapping?” he asks.

I look away and nod.

“I have another question for you and then I’ll lighten it up, kitten.” My eyes fall. I don’t want another question. This game fucking blows. “I want you to be honest.”

I wait nervously for his question.

“Did they touch you?” I know what he’s getting at.

I shake my head no. “They tried,” I answer, looking to the floor. “That’s when I left.” Not a single one of them did. Not even Lorenzo. He was having too much fun beating me for sport.

“What about your boyfriend?” he asks. I fucking hate that I ever called him that. Lorenzo helped me escape the pain of losing my mother. He made me feel free and wild. And then he destroyed me. I shake my head no, and I don’t realize until Anthony says something, but my hand moves to my cheek.

“He hit you?” I lock my eyes on Anthony’s. His voice is calm. He’s been calm the entire time. But his eyes spark with a darkness I never want to see directed at me. I give one curt nod in response. I’m ashamed that I let Lorenzo hurt me. I’m ashamed that it all ever happened.

He scoops a piece of omelet onto the fork and holds it out for me.

I take it simply to fill my mouth so I don’t have to talk.

“Your turn, kitten. Ask me anything.”

CHAPTER 15

CATHERINE

I can ask him anything at all. Anything I want. “Why me?” I ask simply. I want to know what I did that put a target on my back.

“Well. I told you I was supposed to kill you,” he says. The reminder makes my stomach churn. “You were on my list, and like everyone on my list, I did a little digging. In your case, I liked what I found.” He spears a small piece of pepper and puts it to my lips.

“Have you...done this before?” I ask before accepting the bite. I fucking hope the answer is no. If it’s yes, I know what my next question will be, but I’m afraid of the answer. *Did you kill them when you were done with them?*

“I’ve played before, but it was only play. You’re the first real submissive I’ve had. And the first complete 24/7 power exchange.”

I don’t know why, but I hate that there were others before me.

“What happened to them?” I ask before receiving another bite.

“We weren’t a good fit,” he answers without looking at me. It’s the first time he’s done that, and I don’t like it.

“What did you do to them?” I ask before I can think twice.

He cocks a brow at me. “You mean, did I kill them?” he asks.

My throat closes as I answer in a choked voice, “Yes.”

“No, kitten. I didn’t kill them.” He doesn’t answer my unspoken question. *If we don’t fit, will he kill me?* He holds another piece out for me to take. But I shake my head. I’m not hungry. The thought of eating another bite makes me sick to my stomach. Of course he will. I’m already supposed to be dead. If we don’t fit, or once he’s done with me, I’ll be dead.

Tears prick my eyes, but I push them back. I need to be good. I need to be fucking perfect until I can get out of here. And the first chance I get, I need to run as fast as I can. I can never stop running. Never.

His strong arms wrap around me as he picks me up and pulls me into his lap to lean against his chest. “I chose you for a reason, kitten.” He gently strokes my back and I concentrate on how good it feels to distract myself from the pain. He kisses my hair and then pets me as I lay my head flat against his hard, hot body. I hear his heart beating as he speaks. “You fit me, and this is exactly what I wanted. *You* are exactly what I want.”

For now. I focus on the plan. Survive until I’m given an opportunity. I’ll be as perfect as I can be. I’ll make him want to keep me. I pull back and he readjusts me so I’m sitting in his lap.

I don’t know what to say to move past this, but I really just want to move forward and forget that this breakdown ever happened.

“Do you like your new home?” he asks. I’m grateful to discuss a more casual topic, but I can’t forget that the fact he’s even asking me that question is fucked up. I didn’t need a new home. I loved my cabin, and I want to go back.

I glance around the room again. It’s as perfect as a gilded cage can be. “Yes, it’s beautiful.”

“Do you have everything that you need?” he asks.

“There are a few things I’d like to get,” I say quietly.

“Yes, you told me that. Other than a few trinkets, is there anything important that I’ve forgotten?” I feel like he already knows the answer to his question. Like this is a test.

What's the one thing I need here? One thing he hasn't given me is my laptop. I'm afraid to ask for it. It'd be stupid to ask. There's no way he'd let me go online.

He reaches past me to the cart and my mouth drops open.

"I told you earlier, you only need to ask," he says.

I stare at my laptop in his hands. My fucking life is on there. I reach out to take it, expecting him to snatch it away, but he doesn't. Instead he kisses my hair and gently rubs my back. I hug it to my chest and wait for the other shoe to drop.

"Go ahead. I know you have work to do." I swallow the lump in my throat and slowly open my MacBook Pro. It's ten years old. I got it in college. It's really past time to get a new one, but I fucking love my baby.

I type in my password, and the same screen pops up that's greeted me every morning for the last year. It's a meme that says, "You can't read all day, if you don't start in the morning!" I can't help my smile. I instinctively look to check the internet connection. I have a few books loaded on here that I need to put on my Kindle, but what I really need to do is catch up with my FB group and my blogs, plus the editor for my column. I also need to check my email, my website for beta readers, my Goodreads account, and the reading groups online. I take a deep breath and click on my web browser and then hold my breath and stiffen as the screen pops up. I quickly hit exit and look back to Anthony self-consciously.

"Go ahead, kitten. I want to watch you work." I release a breath I didn't know I was holding and look back at Anthony with disbelief.

"I told you I'd give you your life back. I'm a man of my word." I search his eyes for anything but sincerity, but that's all I see. I bite my lip and look back to the computer.

I have work to do, and this is going to take me fucking forever. I shift in his lap. This isn't going to work, but I don't want to push my luck.

"You typically write on your bed, don't you?" he asks.

A chill runs through me at the reminder that he watched me before taking me. “I do.”

“Go ahead. I’ll sit here. I have a book I’d like to read.” It takes a moment for his words to sink in, but when they do, I take my chances and get my ass up and move to the bed with my laptop. I keep my eyes on him as I put the pillow against the headboard for support, and another on my lap for the computer. I’ve always typed this way. I imagine I always will. It’s a bad habit to break.

I watch as Anthony rises and walks to the bookshelf, choosing a paperback and lying down on the sofa. He crosses his ankles and it’s the sexiest sight I’ve ever seen.

It’s fucking unreal that he’s letting me get online.

Something’s up though. And I don’t fucking like it. Everything is a test. Every last fucking thing. My eyes stay on him as I type in my password. My email is slow to open, but it does. I click on my emails one at a time and type my responses, but I keep looking back to Anthony. He simply turns a page, appearing fully engrossed in his reading.

I feel so fucking uneasy. He’s not at all what I expected, and the thought that I’d be able to do this is just...insane. He’s fucking insane. Not just mentally unstable, but certifiably insane if he thinks I’m not going to message someone—anyone—that I’ve been taken. I don’t give a fuck that he’s been nice, or that he’s hot, or that this is literally a fucking dark dream come true for me. There’s no way I’m not going to try to get the hell out of here.

I click on a new tab and bring up Facebook. Cheryl’s my personal assistant and my go-to gal for everything. My cursor hovers over the box to message her, but she’s already sent me five messages. The third one was her freaking out that I didn’t respond at all yesterday, but the fourth and fifth are her fixing my shit and wishing me well because she refuses to believe that I’m dead and I better fucking message her back or she’ll find me and kill me. Yeah, that’s Cheryl.

I type in a lame excuse and don’t mention shit. Yet. I want to. Every fucking voice inside of me is screaming to do

something and tell someone. But I'd be stupid to think I'd get away with it, right? I watch Anthony for a minute as I copy and paste an email to send to another reader.

What would he do to me if I did? Kill me. The answer is obvious, but he hasn't hurt me yet. My ass smarts at the thought. It still fucking hurts, although the cream he rubbed in did wonders for the worst of the pain. I don't know where I am. I'm not sure that there's any way they'd find me.

Hey, Cheryl. Some psycho took me, I'm not sure where. Could you figure out a way for someone to rescue me?

Yeah...that's not going to fucking work. My heart races and my fingers itch to type something, *anything* to help me get the fuck out of here.

I will be good. I will not email the police and post all over social media that I've been kidnapped. 'Cause that would be fucking obvious. But I could sure as fuck sneak in some clues.

I type in, *Busy with Comfort Food*, hoping she'll catch on. It's a classic book where the heroine is kidnapped. I hope she understands and catches the subtlety. Maybe she can help me. She can relay information for me, and I can figure out where the fuck I am.

She instantly replies, *Whatcha eating?*

Jesus, Cheryl. I barely keep myself from rolling my eyes. As I consider what to type next, Anthony's phone pings in his pocket. He takes it out and looks at it and then right at me. My heart stops. But he merely gives me a tight smile and goes back to his book.

I can't help but think that message was about me. That I'd been caught. My skin prickles with goosebumps and my hands shake. What would he do if he caught me? What good would it do for people to know I'd been taken if they had no way to find me? It takes me a moment, but I'm finally able to type back, *Omelets, brb.*

No more of that shit. I go back to checking all of my notifications. I post a few memes, along with a fun pic of a hot man with a question for the readers to answer about Linda's

new book release. I download four betas to my Kindle as I message three authors that I'm a day behind. The hours tick by as I make small dents in my work.

I only look up when I see Anthony rise and stretch. I hold my breath and wait for him as he strides toward me.

"I'll be back, kitten." He leans down and looks over my computer for only a second and then gives me a smile. I feel that sexual tension between us, the need to lean forward and kiss him.

But instead his brows furrow and he looks back at the screen, reading over the posts in my group. After a moment he breaks the silence. "I wonder what your group would suggest, kitten," he says, taking a seat next to me. His arm wraps around my waist. Like this is normal, like we're a couple.

"Ask them this." It's a command.

I click the box and prepare to type in a question. My heart beats chaotically in my chest as he tells me what to write. "What would you do if you woke up in a basement and a man gave you two choices: die, or be his?" I type in his words and hover over the submit button. It's fucking insane that he's having me ask them. But it's also a common thing I do. I pose a question by picking a scenario from a common trope to engage them. I already know what most will answer.

I hit enter, and it doesn't take long for them to start commenting. They love these questions, and frankly, so do I. But not this one. Because this is real.

"Well, your friends have some good ideas as to what you should be doing." I consider pointing out the comment from a reader about gouging his eyes out, but I don't.

I read down the list of responses. Nearly forty comments already. Most say the same thing.

Be his!

I choose the second option!

Well, if he's hot—that's a no brainer!

All their responses seem so natural online. They're meant for humor, and to be cheeky replies. A week ago, I would have said the same. But it's not *real*. You wouldn't really do that. It's not that easy. I want to yell at Anthony. I'm pissed that he would do that shit to me, that he would make me feel like I'm the one holding back.

"Given that the choice is to die or to be his, it's clearly a given." I read the words flatly. It's one of the comments, but also the truth. I keep my voice even and my eyes on the screen.

I can feel Anthony's eyes on me, and I regret opening my mouth at all. I can't look at him, so I stare at the screen. The comments continue coming in.

Agree to be his...duh! lol

Well I wouldn't make it easy for him...

Agree! It could be hot as hell ;)

I close the laptop and try to swallow the lump growing in my throat. I can't read them. I hate the ease at which the replies come in. Normally I love them. I love my group of readers and authors. But right now I can't stand how easy they make giving in sound. Anthony pulls the laptop from me and cradles me in his lap.

"I just wanted you to see why it was easy to pick you." His voice is gentle and it vibrates up his chest. I lean deeper into him. "You're primed to enjoy this because deep down you know how good this can be."

I shake my head against his broad shoulders. Those are fantasies.

He grips my chin in his hand and leans into me. Our lips are closer than they have ever been before. "Real life and fantasy can blur, kitten. This can be whatever you want it to be."

My heart aches in my chest. *Be his*. How easy it seems to give in.

And I do. A piece of my armor cracks enough that I lean into his embrace and brush my lips against his. He doesn't kiss

back, not at first. And it kills something deep down inside of me. Before I can pull away, his hands grip my hips and he pushes me down onto the bed and kisses me with passion. His erection rubs against my clit and he rocks against me as our tongues meet and our kiss turns into something more. I feel my walls falling down around me. It would be so easy to give in to him. To live something I've only ever thought would be a dream.

Just as the word touches my tongue, *please*, he pulls back and stands, leaving me panting and lost in lust. I slowly push myself into a sitting position as he climbs off the bed and gives me a heated glare. I know he wants me. I would have begged him though.

I close my eyes and turn back to my computer. A moment of silence passes. I fucking would have begged him. I was going to do it. What the ever loving fuck is wrong with me?

"Time's up, kitten," he says, reaching for the laptop.

"I need to work." I speak without thinking. His eyes narrow and I reword my plea. "I'm really far behind. Please, Anthony." I sound so pathetic and weak. I hate it. *I'm so fucking weak.*

"You can download the books and write your articles without going online," he answers, and he's partly right, but he's fucking wrong, too. I have to be available. That's why I'm so successful. I respond immediately. If they need something done, I get it done that fucking second. Yesterday took a toll on my work already. I'm going to have to bust ass to get it back up. And his internet is so god damned slow that everything is taking longer than it should.

"You don't understand, I have to be available," I say.

"You want to be able to go online without being monitored?" he asks.

I nod my head even as I realize how ridiculous my request is. But he said he'd give me my life back. And this is my life. It's my passion.

“Alright, kitten,” he says as though it’s perfectly normal. As though there’s no harm whatsoever in allowing me to do this without him here. I remember the ping from his earlier text. But that had to have been a coincidence.

Hope rises in my chest. Maybe I can get the fuck out of here after all. I don’t need him fucking with my emotions and manipulating me into fucking begging him like he just did. He hands me back the computer and I take it as gently as possible to hide my intentions. I’m going to escape. I just need to figure out how.

CHAPTER 16

ANTHONY

I have shit to do, but I'm waiting. I know she's going to push. Especially after leaving her all hot and panting for my touch like I did. I walk about five steps away from her door and lean against the wall. If I've learned anything about my sweet little pet, it's that she acts on impulse. And right now, she's not too happy with me. But she needs to learn that she's not always going to get what she wants. I readjust my erection and think back to how she writhed under me. She fucking wanted me. But she didn't beg. And I had to get the fuck off of her before I broke my word.

I log on to my phone that's now on silent and go through the alerts. There's a logger on her computer and I set up a script to monitor what she's doing. Even shit that she types, but doesn't send. Titles of books or authors that could trigger clues. Words and phrases or certain sites that she'd think of going on. There's also a feed. I can watch everything she's doing as she's doing it. And I can veto it, too. I go through the list of triggers again. Three triggers—*Comfort Food*, “help me, please”, and “taken.” The last two triggers seem harmless enough in context, but that first one? I know what my kitten was up to. I thought about going over and busting her ass. But I'm gonna wait until she makes a clear offense. Something she can't deny is wrong.

I lean my head against the wall realizing what that means. I don't want her back in the cell. But she's going back. I'd bet

my life on it. And that fucking sucks. I was hoping we'd make more progress; I was sure we would, but I was wrong.

Ping. Another notification pops up and I'm quick to hit—blackout. My kitten is about to freak the fuck out. I hear her cuss and move around in the room. Her screen just went black, and she sure as fuck knows why. I pocket my phone and punch in the key code to her room. I check my other pocket for the sash and it's there. Good. I'm gonna need it. I've got all sorts of shit I use for work out here in the hall. She doesn't need to see that and think it's for her.

I open the door and examine her room. She's nowhere in sight, and the room is silent.

I close the door behind me quietly. "Kitten," I call out for her, but she doesn't respond. Even I have to agree the calm manner I'm calling out with is creepy as fuck. But it's better that I'm calm. She's already on edge, and I can't push her away with my anger. She's scared, and I don't need her to turn violent. She would. I'm sure she would.

"Kitten, you will answer me." I take a few steps past the living room area and into her bedroom. "Do you want to make this even harder on yourself?" I ask. There's only a hint of anger in my words. I don't want her scared of me. I want her scared of displeasing me. There's a very big difference.

"I'm sorry, Anthony." I hear her words as I open her closet doors. They came from behind me. I look at the bed, and then at the space underneath. Oh, how...pitiful. I walk over and stand where she should be able to see me, if she has a view from wherever she is under there. At least I feel a little relief knowing she responded to me at all. That's a good sign.

"Kitten, you need to come out," I say.

"Please," she begs with a sob. She sounds remorseful and truly upset. And she should be.

"Please what, kitten?" I ask.

"Please don't kill me," she whimpers. I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose as I exhale with frustration.

“I’m not going to hurt you, kitten.” My words come out soft to help her relax somewhat. “I can promise you I won’t. You already know your punishment.” I hear her snuffle amidst the small sounds of movement. “I knew I’d have to wait to leave. At least I can say I’m only mildly disappointed that you disobeyed me so quickly. It’s best we get this out of your system now.” A moment passes, and she doesn’t appear. I’ll give her one more chance.

“Come out now.” I make my voice harder and then regret that I did. She cries louder, but I still don’t hear her moving to come out.

“If I have to come get you, you’re really gonna regret it.” The thought of dragging her out makes my cock jump in my pants. Fuck, I would fucking love it. I can’t wait until we’re at that point. Once that pussy is all mine, I want her to hide from me so I can punish her. I want to punish that ass with my dick, rather than my hand. Soon. I remind myself that I just need to be patient. If I did it now, it would ruin everything.

As I open my eyes, I see her sliding out. Her small body drags on the floor as she squeezes between the floor and the frame. Poor Catherine. She looks so despondent.

I stand with my arms folded across my chest and watch as she slowly stands up. She hangs her head low and she’s angling her body in a way that makes it obvious that she expects me to hit her. She should know that I won’t. But she’s still going to be punished. It will help her. I remind myself that this needs to happen. She’ll learn. I only want the pain to be pleasurable. And this punishment will contain zero pleasure.

“I had to try.” She looks at the ground as she speaks, and I fucking hate it.

“You didn’t. You didn’t *have* to.” It makes me angry that she thinks she needed to disobey me. She needs to get over that shit. Hopefully a day and a half in the cell will be enough. “You *chose* to.”

I pull out the blindfold and she submits to me, turning around so I can tie it and lead her to the cell.

We're quiet the entire way to the cell. The only sounds are the echoes of our footsteps and her uneven breathing. I pet her back with every step and at times she seems like she's ready to lean into me, but she doesn't. She's rejected my touch, my comfort, my trust. I sigh heavily as I take off the sash and prepare to leave her, but then I see mascara running down her cheeks as she crumples onto the floor and scoots away from me.

I need to wait until she's calm. She'll learn to accept her punishments. When she's fully aware of what she'll receive in return, that knowledge will keep her from failing to obey me.

I lean down and stroke her cheek. "It's alright, kitten." She doesn't respond, but she doesn't move away from me either.

"I'll have to go get your things without you. You need to tell me everything you want." I don't tell her that her things will always be there for her. I plan on keeping up with her mortgage and bills. Every contact that she gets will go through me, and to her, and then back to the sender. I don't need any red flags to go to the WPP. Fuck that.

The reminder of life outside of these walls pisses me off.

None of that will be necessary if I have to kill her at the end of the month. I press my lips into a straight line. That's not going to happen. I've only just started to have my time with her. Vince will give her to me. I bring in so much fucking money with these hits. He'll give me this. I just need to deal with the Cassanos.

"I—" She hesitantly looks at me and then back down, grabbing onto her fingers nervously. "I have a pair of earrings in my armoire." She speaks so quietly I can hardly hear her. "I need them. Please." She looks up at me with a pleading expression. "They're owls," she says as her voice cracks and she breaks down at my feet. She bends over with her hands on the floor as a wretched sob heaves through her chest. She needs me right now. This is more than just being sorry about getting caught. It's more than being ashamed that she broke the rules, or fearing that I'm going to hurt her.

I sit on the floor next to her and pull her shaking shoulders into my embrace.

“I’ll make sure to get them. Anything else?” I speak softly into her hair and breathe in her sweet scent. Her small body is so warm against me. She’s leaning into me like I’m her savior, regardless of the fact that I’m about to leave her in a cell with nothing.

After a few minutes of me gently petting her back and her hair, she pulls away slightly. She still doesn’t look me in the eyes. “I can’t remember.” She wipes her eyes and sighs. “Nothing I can think of.”

I’m going all the way to her house for one pair of earrings. It’s nearly two hours away. Obviously they mean something to her though. I give her a curt nod that she doesn’t see, because she’s not looking at me.

I take her chin in my hand and force her eyes on me. “You’ll be here until tomorrow night. That’s your punishment.”

She noticeably swallows, but nods her head and manages to push out, “Yes, Anthony.” Good girl. She’s taken this well at least.

I have to leave her. I don’t want to, but I do. “I have to go, kitten,” I tell her gently. I hate that I’m leaving her in here, but she knew the consequences. It’s important for her training that I stick to my word.

She leans against my leg as I pet her hair. I know she doesn’t want me to leave, but I have to.

I pat her head to let her know I’m going, and she responds by looking up at me with sad brown eyes, glossed over with tears.

“I promise I won’t do it again,” she says, but her plea is weak. She’s resigned to her fate.

“You earned your punishment, kitten. I’ll be back to give you dinner,” I say.

With that I turn and leave her. She barely grips my leg, but releases me without me having to scold her.

It fucking hurts my chest as I press the keys to leave.

I wish she hadn't done that shit.

But if I was her, I would have done it, too.

CHAPTER 17

ANTHONY

Rigs, Vince's giant ass lab, is lying pathetically on the floor begging. He's a good-looking dog. I look to Vince and say, "See, told you the kids would ruin him. He's a biscuit-begging mutt now."

Vince shakes his head and my brother laughs, taking another drink of his beer. All the women are in the living room with the kids. Usually Rigs goes where the kids go, but we're still in the dining room, and so is the food. Smart dog.

"He was so fucking good before the kids. You could drop a steak a foot from his face and he wouldn't move," Vince jokes, and we all have a laugh even though he's shaking his head.

"God, the kids. Cockblocking and dog ruining," Tommy says with his hands over his eyes. He's worn the fuck out with the little ones. But he still says it with a smile.

"Gotta love 'em though," Vince answers.

"I need another beer," Tommy says with a touch of humor.

"Grab me one, too?" I ask him. He gives me a nod and heads out. Vince gets up from his seat to pour more Jack in his glass.

As soon as no one's looking, I give the dog the last meatball from my plate. He swallows it down so fucking fast there's no way he even tasted it. I chuckle at him and watch him lift his head up higher so he can see what's left up here. Greedy ass dog.

Vince takes the head seat again and leans back with his glass at his lips. When he looks at me this time, there's tension surrounding us. I know what it's about, too. I've been waiting for it.

"We gotta talk, Anthony," he says.

Tommy makes his way back with the beers and passes me one. I don't want him in here for this though. I don't want him to know about Catherine. She's my secret. She's *mine*. I wish even Vince didn't know. It kills me that he does. Even worse is that I know he doesn't understand.

"Hey, bro, could you give us a minute?" I ask Tommy as I pop the cap off my beer. He looks between me and Vince with a touch of confusion, but nods his head with a bit of a frown.

"Everything good?" he asks. He's always worrying about me. He always has.

Vince and I both nod as I answer, "Yeah, I just need a minute."

"Suit yourselves," he says, grabbing a bun off the table. He whistles at Rigs and the dog bounds off after him, wagging his tail.

"You need to take care of her," Vince says the second Tommy's out of earshot.

"See the thing is, I *am* taking care of her, Vince. We had a deal." I put my beer down and lock eyes with him. "I paid, and she's mine."

"They seem to think otherwise." He says the words as though them backing out is acceptable.

"That's their fault. They made an assumption. They were wrong."

"They give us almost thirty percent of the income from the hits, Anthony. *Your* income. You really wanna piss them off?" he asks.

"I couldn't give two fucks about them, to be honest." I say it with a hint of menace in my voice. I take another drink, trying to calm myself down.

Vince looks at me with hesitation. “What’s gotten into you? You aren’t usually like this.”

“Like what? Stubborn? Opinionated?” I ask. I know I’m pushing my boundaries. But I don’t care. I’m always on the outside with them. I have been for most of my life. I never ask for anything. This is the first and only request I’ve ever made.

“Look, I know you have your issues and all.” He talks in a hushed tone, and I fucking hate it. I hate how the entire family feels sympathy for me because of that shit with my mother. They talk about it behind my back. I know they do. But they fucking fear me, too. I’d rather have the fear than the sympathy any fucking day.

“My issues?” I ask, putting the beer down on the table and staring back at Vince like he’s going to have to spell it out.

I look back at him, and suddenly he’s not the Don. He’s one of the boys huddled around the broken, bloodied dumb fuck we were supposed to teach a lesson.

They all stare back at me. I can feel their eyes on me as I breathe heavily and try to calm myself. My shaking fists are dripping with his blood. He had it coming to him. They all know I’m fucked up. He should’ve known better than to push me.

“You alright, Anthony?” Tommy lays an unsteady hand on my shoulder. I look up at him and past him to see the other guys. They look nervous as fuck. Like they could be next. I’m not a savage. I can contain this. I do contain it. Every fucking day.

“Good job, Anthony.” Vince says as he looks between the dead fuck and me. “Pops is gonna be proud.” He says the words, but there’s more to it than that. I don’t know if it’s jealousy, or if he hates that he fears me.

That day I decided not to give a fuck about any of them. All of them except for Tommy. Tommy’s all I have.

That was the day they started giving me a little more space than normal. I had to push my humor onto them to loosen them up. But it wasn’t quite the same. Not with us doing jobs together. Thank fuck for Uncle Dante. He gave me the hits and

the other shit I could do on my own. It was a release for me, but more than that, it saved me from being the social pariah. I always knew they felt that way about me. But having Vince say the words...fuck, it hurts to know it's true.

"You know what I mean, Anthony." He straightens his back and meets my gaze head on. I have to hand it to him, he deserves to be boss. But I can fucking smell his fear from here.

"I bought her, and now she's mine. That's what happened. End of story," I say flatly.

"It's not the end. You also agreed to one month, and that's what they were told," he says.

"I didn't—" I start to answer, but he cuts me off.

"You did." He says the words with finality. I never should've said it was his call. It pisses me off. I shouldn't have trusted him. It wasn't his decision to make.

"I have work to do, and I need to get home to check on her before bed."

"Check on her?" he grunts a humorless laugh and it takes everything in me not to plant a fist on his jaw. I can hear Aunt Linda in the kitchen and the kids playing not twenty feet from us. I clench my fists at my side, but hold back. I finish the beer and grab my keys off the table.

Checking on her is my job. This isn't about getting laid, it's not about fucking her or using her, or demeaning her. That's not what I want. This is more than that. It's deeper than Vince could possibly know. It's about having someone *need* me. And she does, whether Vince likes it or not.

"I mean it, Anthony," he says to my back.

I don't answer him. I still have time with her. It may be best that I don't get too attached though. I close my eyes as I open the door and step out into the night.

The cold air whips against my skin. She's in a cell for trying to get away from me, for fuck's sake. I shake my head and feel torn. I thought this would be perfect, but it's not.

I'm just damaged goods. That's all I am.

Perfection doesn't exist. Neither do fantasies.

CHAPTER 18

CATHERINE

I wake to the faint hum of the lights being turned on in the cell. I'm so fucking cold. The only thing he gave me besides the chair was my chenille throw. At least it was freshly washed. Not like that matters now though, since I've got it bunched up underneath me as a makeshift mattress. It fucking sucks.

The lock clicks and the doorknob turns. I quickly get into position. I'm mindful of keeping my hands exactly how he likes them.

My heart flutters in my chest. Last night he didn't stay. He left me with dinner and watched me eat it in silence. An air of disappointment and distrust surrounded him. I don't understand why he's angrier with me now than he was when he put me in here. I feel like I'm failing, and I don't know what I'm missing. I wish I could go back in time. If I could, I would.

He walks in front of me and stops. I look up at him, hopeful that today he's in a better mood.

"Good morning, kitten," he says simply.

"Good morning, Anthony," I respond.

He puts a bowl down on the floor. It's oatmeal with strawberries and cream. It's my favorite. I had a shit-ton of it at my house and I find myself wondering if he went back there. I want to know if he was able to find the earrings, but I

don't ask. I stay in my position and look at the bowl and then back at him. He didn't feed me dinner last night like he did before, and I didn't think much of it. But this morning reminds me of the first time we met, of him feeding me.

He shakes his head no and walks to the chair to sit down. "You don't get my touch in here, kitten. That's part of your punishment."

My heart sinks as I pick up the bowl and watch him cross his arms. I feel fucking sick. He's so fucking angry with me, and I don't know that I'll ever be able to take it back. I had to try though, didn't I? *No, I chose to.*

"I got your earrings. You won't get them until you're back in your room." His voice has a hard edge.

"Thank you." My voice cracks, and I have to take a deep breath to steady myself.

"What do they mean to you, kitten?" The use of my pet name brightens my spirit and my chest fills with hope. It's not lost on me that if he decides not to forgive me, he could kill me. He *will* kill me. It's not just that though. I hurt him. I disappointed him. That shouldn't affect me like this, but it does.

I jump at the opportunity to answer. And at the chance to do something and to talk to someone after spending hours alone and barely sleeping in this room. "They were my mother's." I wipe the sleep from my eyes and clear my throat of the knot growing there.

"I'm sorry for your loss." His words are short and simple, but I can hear the faint compassion in his voice.

"Cancer," I answer as I stir the oatmeal. I'm hungry, but it's not nearly as appetizing as it was before. I don't talk much about her. I don't like remembering.

"I know," he says, not moving from his position. A small, sad smile forms on my face. Of course he knows.

"Do you want to play the game, kitten?" he asks.

“Yes,” I immediately answer, and I don’t even care that I sound desperate. I fucking hate that game, but I want him to stay.

“How does a girl like you wind up with a man like Lorenzo?” I hate his question. I don’t want to talk about him or think about him. I have to work hard not to show how upset it makes me.

“I just needed something different. He distracted me, I guess.” He did. I nod my head thinking about how I went from crying all day and struggling to pack up my mother’s things, to getting drunk and doing things I never thought I would.

“So you went for the *bad boy*.” He says the words like he’s disgusted by them, which is fucking ironic.

“It works in the books,” I barely get the words out. It’s what I really wanted. I wanted to find love. Even if he didn’t love me back at first, I was hopeful that I’d eventually find my own happily ever after. I thought I’d found a hard man who’d melt for me in time. Instead I found an abusive fuckface. ‘Cause let’s be real, that’s what life gives you when you go out looking for Mr. Wrong.

“Your turn, kitten. One question.” He leans forward in his seat like he’s ready to leave, and I hate it.

I ask the one thing that’s been on my mind for hours. One thought that sickens me. I wish he’d just hit me and make that my punishment. I’d let him beat me if it meant this would be over with.

“I’m surprised you haven’t hit me,” I say. He makes no move to answer me, and there’s no change in the expression on his face. He’s silent for a moment.

“I don’t want to hit you,” he finally answers. And I believe him.

“Why?” I just don’t understand. Lorenzo thrived by showing me how strong he was. He fucking loved dominating me physically. I keep expecting the dams to break and for Anthony to let loose on me. I expect to be physically punished

for my infractions. I'd thought he was restraining himself before, but now that I look back on it, I don't think he was.

"I'll never hit you. My father used to hit my mother, and it made her do bad things. I don't want that for you or anyone else."

"I'm so sorry." My heart twists with agony. That's a horrible thing to grow up with. I can't even imagine. My own father passed away when I was younger in a car crash. I hardly remember him. I can't imagine growing up in a house with abuse. My eyes search his, but he gives nothing away. "Bad things?" I ask tentatively.

"She beat me instead since she couldn't hit my father back." My mouth falls open with a gasp as he continues. "I was young, but I remember." His voice is flat and devoid of emotion. My heart is fucking destroyed by his words.

"I'm so sorry." I shake my head, as though I can deny the truth.

"She's dead now." My throat closes and dries. His life just gets sadder and sadder. I want to scoot closer to him, but it's obvious he doesn't want that. He doesn't want sympathy. I don't even think he'd accept compassion.

"Did your father...?" I don't finish, but I don't have to. He nods his head once with his eyes locked on mine.

"He killed her when he saw what she's done; snapped her neck in front of me. He thought he was doing the right thing."

My mouth hangs open in shock.

"I don't even know if he ever hit her or if he didn't love her. I know next to nothing about what their relationship was like, apart from what my mother told me. We never talked about it. She beat me and he killed her for it. That's all I know." He gives me a sad smirk. "There's a lot of, 'let's not talk about it' that happens in the familia."

"I'm so sorry." I repeat my words; I don't know what else to say. I feel pathetic that I have nothing to offer him. Tears threaten to fall. I feel nothing but empathy for him and the

pain he must've felt. Both our mothers are dead, but mine never hurt me. I never once questioned if mine loved me.

"Don't be. My brother's always been there. And in a lot of ways so has my father." His hard expressions soften somewhat. "I have to go, kitten," he says.

"No, please," I say. The bowl falls from my lap to the ground as I crawl closer to him.

"Are you telling me no? Are you the one giving orders now?" My shoulders hunch in as I lower myself to the ground. Tears slip down my cheeks. Some for me, but most are for him. I want to hold him and soothe the broken part of him I know exists. But I also need to be touched. I can't stay here like this.

"Please, Anthony. I want to earn your touch." I say the words with the desperation I feel.

His eyes widen with surprise and the darkness that's plagued him since last night seems to lift slightly.

"What are you thinking, kitten?" he asks.

"Whatever you want. I'm yours." I've never said truer words.

"Lie on your back and spread your legs for me." He gives his command and I obey. I refuse to think of this as anything but meeting my own needs. I need to feel something other than this emptiness.

"Good kitten," he says and rises from his chair. "I'll come back tonight once your punishment is over."

With that, he leaves me.

Alone and pathetically bared to a man who won't touch me, I curl up on my side and cry. I don't know how long, but it doesn't matter. It's not long enough to fill the emptiness inside of me.

CHAPTER 19

CATHERINE

*I*t's been over a week. He's barely touched me or said anything to me. It's as though my punishment still hangs over my head. All I have is this room and my laptop. *My old life*. I'm surprised he gave it back to me.

I feel empty though. It's like I've hurt him. It's like he doesn't want me. I don't understand it. *He* doesn't trust me.

A few nights ago he came for me. Only one night has he touched me like he did before. He said I was being good and I deserved a reward. He laid me across his lap and instead of making my ass red with his hand, he pumped his fingers in and out of my needy pussy. He knows that I've been craving his touch, but I haven't begged him to fuck me yet. I just haven't been able to get the words out.

"I want my mouth on you." I remember him saying that as I came on his hand. I can't deny that I wanted it, too.

He throws me on my back and I part my legs for him. His shoulders dive between my legs, but he bites my thigh. I scream out as his fingers stroke my G-spot. It feels so good. My body heats with need. I wait for his lips to touch my clit. But they don't. He sucks my inner thigh, so tantalizingly close but not quite there, and I wish that touch was where I need it most.

I beg him, "Please, Anthony. Please!" He pulls away from me and fingers me until I cum again from the ruthless pace of his touch.

I'm breathless and limp. I lie there until my body's no longer useless.

I press my fingers against my hot cheeks. Everywhere still feels hot, but my cheeks and chest are burning. Each time he touches me, it's more and more intense. I've never been so... sated in my life. It's more than foreplay. It's like he's taking me higher than I could have taken myself. And what's better is that he wants to push me there.

It's a game to him though. I can't forget. It's not like he's doing a good deed. He wants me to break for him. He wants me to beg. And I did. The memory reheats my body. He said he wanted to put his mouth on me, and I begged him to, but he didn't.

"I said yes." The words tumble from my mouth without a filter. He looks up at me with a neutral expression. "I heard you."

His admission makes me feel self-conscious. Why have me beg for him if he wasn't going to do it? I don't understand why, but it hurts. I pull the duvet up and around my body and scoot up into a seated position. I can see him putting his shirt back on, but I don't really watch him. I just want him to leave.

"You hesitated." Anthony sits on the bed next to me, making it dip. I look up at him through my lashes but I keep my mouth shut. An apology is trying to climb out, but I won't. I'm not going to apologize for not begging quicker. I fight to keep my face from showing my anger. He cups my chin and leans down to kiss me and I lean into him. I can't help that I want his affection. I won't deny that it fills a deep need I'm only now realizing how much I craved. His lips break from mine and I miss them instantly. I know he's leaving, and I'll be alone until tomorrow.

He gives me a soft smile and rubs his nose against mine. It makes me close my eyes. When I open them he's already across the room. Before he leaves he says, "Next time you'll answer more quickly, kitten."

The words come out before I'm even aware I'm saying them. "Yes, Anthony."

That was three days ago. And he hasn't touched me or hinted at anything else since. Most of the time I think he regrets this. I think he really doesn't want me anymore. I'm not the pet he wanted. But then I think maybe I'm just missing something. Maybe he's waiting for me. If that's the case, I'm ready to beg. I hate this empty feeling that I'm not wanted or that I'm not good enough.

I look at the clock and it's almost three. He's come in everyday to check on me around now. My fingers tap on the keys, but I'm not typing anything. I'm just waiting for him. My work's done anyway. It'll pile up quickly, but it can wait.

Finally, I hear the sounds I'm used to. He's coming. I set the laptop to the side and climb to the foot of the bed. I kneel there for him and wait.

I hear the door open and I watch as he walks into my room. He gives me a small smile and it fills my chest with warmth.

"Kitten," he greets me as he walks toward me.

"Anthony," I say his name with a breath of reverence. He cups my chin and I lean into his embrace.

"How are you today?" he asks.

"Well." I look up at him through my lashes and almost don't say the words, but I need to. I need to let him know that I do want this. I'm sick without his presence. "I missed you."

His eyes light with a flash of something I don't recognize. "I missed you as well."

I just need him to touch me and tell me that I've been good. I've done everything he's told me to. I don't understand why he's treating me so differently now. I'm doing everything I can to prove I won't betray his trust again.

"Will you stay with me?" I ask him.

"I have to work tonight, kitten." I love the use of my pet name. "I only came in to check on you."

"Please, don't leave me here." I grip onto him and he gives me a look of reproach, but I don't let go.

“This is your room.” He looks around the gorgeous suite. “I made it just for you.”

I don't want this room if it comes with this feeling of nothingness. I need more. I say the words that have been eating me alive.

“I want to prove to you that I'm yours.” I feel so needy, so pathetic. I just don't want him to turn me down and throw me away. I don't give a fuck about anything other than being his. I need his touch. I need the taste of the fantasy he gave me before I betrayed him. I've had a lot of time to think, and I want to try. I may be forced to be here, but I want to give in to the temptation. I'm scared to do it, but I have nothing to lose. I can't deny that a growing part of me finds all of this incredibly sexy.

He says nothing and a feeling of complete despair washes over me. “Please.” I cling to him, needing something. I can't keep going like this. I'm trying so hard to be his, but I feel like I mean nothing to him. I'll beg him; I'm ready.

He strokes my hair and says, “We'll see when I get back.”

“Can I give you something now, please?” I would do anything to hear him tell me I'm a good girl.

“Please, Anthony. I want to please you,” I say.

A moment passes as he searches my face for something. And then my eyes fall to the button on his jeans. I watch as his deft fingers easily undo them.

“On your knees, kitten.” His voice holds a hint of danger to it as he issues the command. I love it. It reminds me of our first morning together. Well, technically the second. Before I disobeyed him. Before he changed.

I climb off the bed and move to my knees for him.

He strokes himself once in front of me. I lick my lips and wait patiently. If he wants me to suck him off, I will. I want to. I'll make him want me. I know he will. My pussy clenches and heats with excitement as I watch him stroking himself, his eyes focused on my mouth. This turns him on as much as it does me. The intensity of my desire rises. I have a power over

him that he can't deny and it's simply intoxicating. I'll make him need my touch.

"Open, kitten," He starts to put the head of his dick on my tongue, but then he pulls away. "No teeth this time," he says with a dark look in his eyes. I nod my head and feel a wash of shame. I'd never do that. Never.

Maybe the old me would have considered it, but the new me... Mentally I shake my head. I had an old life before my mother passed away, and a new life after I went into witness protection, but deep down I'm the same person I've always been. It's just taken my time here with Anthony to really open my eyes to that fact. My training with him has awakened all my hidden and taboo desires. All the things I always thought could never be more than unrealized fantasies. But we can make our fantasies come true together. I just need to submit to him fully.

I feel a small sense of shame that he feels like he'd have to tell me that. I've changed. I've accepted that I'm his, but he isn't acting like I have. I open wider and wait for him. I want him to know I'm willing. I want him to see me as his so I can really live this dark fantasy.

He fills my mouth with the head of his cock, but then pulls back. "Only the tip kitten. No more than that."

I look up at him and nod with my mouth still open. I'll take anything he's willing to give me.

I moan around the head of his cock and swirl my tongue. His large hand strokes his cock and I wish I could do it for him. My fingers dig into my thighs as I gently rock back and forth doing everything I can to get him off. The tip of my tongue dips into the slit of his dick and I fucking love that he hisses and throws his head back.

I'm so wet for him, so needy. But this is all for him. I want to take him all in. I want to shove him so far down my throat that I choke on him. But I obey him. It takes all of my willpower, but I do it. I suck his head so hard it hollows my cheeks. He takes it out with a pop and smacks it against my cheek.

“Again, just like that,” he says with a ragged breath.

I look into his eyes as I do it again and I see the moment he reaches his climax. He keeps my gaze and parts his lips with an admiration I’ve never seen before. Hot jets of his cum stream into my mouth and I’m quick to swallow it and gently suck him until he’s done.

“Swallow it all,” he says with a rough groan that makes my pussy clench. I do.

He pets my hair as I wipe the corners of my mouth. I lick his slit until he takes it away from me. I bite my lip, staying exactly in the position he left me in. I’ll prove to him that I’ve learned to listen and that I can obey.

“I’ll be back tonight, kitten,” he says as he buttons his pants. “Beg for me tonight, and you can have whatever you want.”

CHAPTER 20

ANTHONY

“Do you know what I don’t want to be doing right now, Tommy?” I ask my brother.

“Taking this guy out with me?” my thickheaded brother answers. He used to be the muscle for the *familia*. Now he does hits with me. He just happens to fucking suck at some aspects. Give him a long-distance kill, and he’s fine. Up close though, and he’s sloppy as fuck.

I tap my pointer to my nose.

We’re in a car parked across from Barcode. It’s a dive bar on the strip and we’ve been waiting in the dark for a good two hours now. I keep looking at the monitors in the app on my phone. My kitten’s been lying in bed reading and stretching or doing some yoga shit on the floor. I want to get back to her. I want to hear her beg for me. Even more, I want to hear those soft moans from her lips as she cums on my dick.

Instead I’m doing this stupid shit ‘cause Tommy didn’t want to do it on his own.

“Hey, I don’t wanna be out here either. I’ve got more important shit going on, but we need to take this guy and not just kill him.”

I can’t blame him for being hesitant to take over and do this without me. I grunt a response and then think about his wife and my sweet little niece as I say, “Yeah you do. You gotta be happy to not be hearing all that screaming for once.”

He smiles back at me. I don't fucking get it. He's overjoyed about that little bundle of high-pitched lungs. She is a cutie, but damn, if only they could come out already talking and walking.

"You know she's adorable." He smiles back at me, finally taking his eyes away from the bar across the street.

"She's real cute, Tommy." I can admit that. She's adorable when she's sleeping. "You did good. I'm proud of you."

"I meant what I said, it's gonna happen for you. You don't have to be so fucking jealous all the time," he says.

I hold in a deep laugh. Jealous isn't quite the right word. I made up my mind a long time ago. That world isn't for me. I'm not meant to be a husband or a father. I don't have that ability. I know I'm capable of love, because I truly love my *familia*. But I'm fucked in the head. I know I am. They know I am.

There's no reason for me to ever think about taking that path in life. Even with my sweet Catherine.

My thoughts are interrupted when I notice the movement from across the street. I lean forward in my seat as the fucker on our list exits the bar, nearly stumbling as he lights a cigarette. Tommy starts talking, but I simply nod my head and keep my eyes on the dumb fuck who skimmed off the top of our shipment. He fucking knew better. He's been on the inside for a while now. He's almost a made member. Maybe he got tired of waiting. Maybe he just wanted the money. I don't know, and I don't care. I just need two pieces of information from him and then we can get this shit over with.

Who'd he sell it to, and where's the money?

Louie leans against the wall, taking a few puffs of his cigarette. I'm sure he thinks he got away with it. He looks like he doesn't have a care in the world.

I take a look down the street and it's busy as fuck. There's a narrow alley in between the two shit buildings. I'm sure we could take him for a walk. I've gotten away with that shit

before, and I know I could keep his ass from screaming too loud.

“Let’s do this shit,” I say.

Tommy looks at me anxiously. “Out in the open?” he asks.

“Yeah, quick and easy. Let me show you how it’s done,” I reply.

I step out into the street and walk quickly, keeping my head turned to the right. The only camera is on the side of the street where we parked. But it’s angled so they shouldn’t get shit. Better safe than sorry though. I already messaged Tony about it. I’m sure the owners won’t have any problems erasing the feed tonight. Not when the orders are coming from the Valettis, and their business has been going steady on the loan we gave them.

That’s one good thing about the *familia*. We want this town running like a well-oiled machine. And it does.

“Louie.” I let a grin slip into place as he kicks off the wall and walks toward us like we’re his pals. Like he didn’t steal from us.

“Anthony, Tommy, what’s up guys?” His words are slightly slurred and it pisses me off. I find when they’re drunk they’re more likely to piss themselves. More than that, they scream louder, sooner. Tonight that can’t happen. “You here for a drink?” he asks.

“Nah,” Tommy says and he starts to say something else, but I cut him off. I want him to watch this time, so he can see how it’s done and be able to do this shit himself next time.

“Louie, we gotta talk.” I say the words firmly and hold his eyes. The fucker holds his breath and I know he’s scared shitless. I need him scared, but more than scared, I want him willing to talk and wanting to make me happy. I want him to think I need him.

I lean forward and lower my voice so it seems like I’m letting him in on intel. “There’s someone,” I start talking then look to my left as a group of young women dressed in sequined, glittery dresses that ride up their asses pass behind us. The

street's not packed, but it's busy enough to want to get out of the open so we can have some privacy. I make it a point to look at the entrance to the alley and nod my head. "Let's go down there for a sec."

He starts to put his cigarette down with a look of dread on his face. But I don't want that. I don't want him thinking anything's wrong.

"No need, I don't mind the smoke," I tell him as I start walking ahead of him. "You first, Tommy." I need my brother to catch on to the fact that you don't intimidate targets in public. Not till you have them where you want them. Tommy walks ahead of me with a nod. My brother's smart, even if he does do dumb shit sometimes. He's good at reading people. My back's to Louie. It's a sign that he's not a threat to me. The two of us walk quickly while Louie stays behind for a moment. I keep walking. I know I don't have to tell him twice.

It only takes a minute for Louie to follow us down the alley. It's a few feet wide and blocked off at the back entrance by a dumpster and a chain-link fence. That's not good for the clean-up crew. They're going to have a hell of a time getting the body out without anyone seeing, but that shit's not for me to worry about. Tommy stops about halfway down the alley and leans against the wall. I put my hands in my pockets and face the entrance, waiting for Louie to catch up. He's walking slow, but he sure as fuck isn't stumbling around anymore. Having the feeling you're about to get caught by the mafia for stealing from them is a surefire way to sober the fuck up.

"What's going on?" He tries to keep his voice from wavering, but he's shit at it. To be fair though, I've tortured a lot of men. And almost all of them are scared at first, even the ones that didn't have shit to tell because they were genuinely innocent. Poor fucks. But this prick is dripping with sweat and his shifty eyes are looking all around us for some hidden door that will lead him to safety. There's no safety here though. Just me, my knife, and Tommy's gun.

I want Tommy to stay out of this one. There's no need for him to get involved beyond keeping this fucker here.

“Listen, Louie. There are some things I need to know before I kill you.” His eyes go wide and he takes a step back. He’s closest to the entrance, so he’s thinking of running.

Tommy’s already got his gun on him and we all hear the click of him cocking it back. Louie’s eyes lock on the barrel and he nearly tips back as his legs go weak.

He shakes his head and I know he’s getting ready to deny it. His hands are raised in the air. “Hey. I wanna make this easy on us all, Louie,” I say as I reach into my pocket for a rag as I slowly walk toward him. He takes a step back and I shake my head. His breathing comes in short breaths as he starts spewing off, “Whatever you heard, it wasn’t me. I didn’t do it.” The desperation is clear in his voice.

I wrap the cloth around my fist a few times. It’s thick; thick enough so he won’t be able to bite down on my hand. The thought reminds me of my kitten. My sexy-as-fuck little minx, scraping her teeth down my finger. I close my eyes and will the images away. It only fuels my need to get this shit over with. I walk around him and let him retreat until his back is against the wall. We’re still almost halfway down the narrow alley. It’d be hard as fuck to see or hear anything from us, as long as he doesn’t scream. I look at my left fist, wrapped tightly with the rag and back at Louie.

“You’ve got one chance. Who’d you sell it to, and where’s the money?” I ask him clearly, but I already know I’m going to have to ask again.

He’s shaking his head, thinking he can talk his way out of this.

I’m quick to shove my fist in his mouth. He only gets a partial scream out before the rag mutes his frantic screams. He struggles against me, his hands wrapping around my wrist, trying to rip my fist from his mouth. I push my fist harder into his mouth, stretching his jaw. I need to be careful not to break it though. I need this fucker to talk. He’s a pretty decent-sized guy and he’s doing a good job of throwing my body off of him, but I pull out my knife and hold it to his throat, my forearm bracing his shoulders against the wall. That makes his entire body still. Tommy comes up to my right and holds the

gun to Louie's head. Louie looks between the two of us and starts fucking crying. It's pathetic.

"It's just two questions, Louie, then we get to move on from this. You had a chance. You should've taken it." I gave him a warning, and he chose to ignore it. Now he has to accept the consequences.

I nod at Tommy. "Get his hand."

Tommy grabs Louie's right arm, still holding the gun to his head. Louie's quick to pull his arm away, but I dig my knife into his neck, slicing his skin to make a point of what will happen if he keeps this shit up.

He tries to speak into the rag, but it's too late for that. I'll give him a chance in a minute, once the screaming is over with. Louie's got his fist balled, which is a bad move on his part. It would've only been one finger, but with them all bunched together, I slice into his middle finger and thumb as I cut off his pointer. Tommy struggles to keep the fucker's wrist up as I cut his finger off and the dumb fuck screams into the rag.

I let the finger fall and the blood drip down onto the ground as I wipe my knife off on his jacket and push it up to his throat again. I choose a new spot, one an inch up from the first cut. "Stop your screaming," I growl out as I push my fist deeper into his mouth. He whimpers in response, tears flowing down his cheeks as he cradles his arm in his hands.

I talk while I wait for him to calm down. "We have you on tape taking the product, so there's no backing out of this one. You know it. There's only one way out. You just tell me who you sold it to and where the money is, and it's all over."

He cries out something muffled by my hand, but I keep it there until he's calm.

I hold his eyes and wait.

When I take my hand away, his body sags and he closes his eyes. "The Cullums, they bought it."

"Did they know it was ours?" Tommy asks.

Louie shakes his head no.

“Where’s the money, Louie?” I bet the fucker’s already spent it, but Tony couldn’t find it anywhere in his bank accounts.

“I gave it to my brother.” Hearing his confession makes my heart sink. I know his brother has a problem with alcohol. They both do. His brother’s also a gambler though. And that’s not a good combination. I nod my head and wait for him to look me in the eyes.

“You stole from us to get your brother out of debt?” I ask him and I see a flash of hope in his eyes. Like maybe that’ll save him. But it won’t. As he raises his head to speak, I stab the knife through his neck until it comes out the other side and quickly push it up toward his face, splitting his throat open. It’s a silent kill, efficient and quick.

Once his eyes glaze over and his hands fall to his side, I let him drop to the ground. I shake my head as Tommy dials up the crew to come clean this shit up.

He should’ve known better. No one fucks with us for a reason.

“Damn, Anthony. I need to practice with a knife.” I turn around to look at my brother. He’s looking at me the same way everyone always has. Like he fears me, because I do this shit without thinking twice and without feeling remorse. It’s simple. He had it coming. It had to happen. Catherine used to look at me like that too; only sometimes though in the beginning. Not anymore. She would if she knew I did this shit. If she really knew who I was. When people break the rules, they die. That’s just what happens. Just like my mother. I’ve come to terms with it long ago. I don’t get why everyone else gets so shaken up over it.

I don’t feel any different than I did when we walked back here. A little bit of a high on adrenaline, but I just want to get the fuck out.

Tommy says, “I don’t think I could do that shit.”

“Sure you could, anyone’s capable of it.” My words remind me of my kitten. Her patiently waiting for me, and telling me all the things I want to hear. I don’t think she would ever hurt a fly. That’s just not the kind of person she is. But if she wanted

to kill me, she could. I still expect it at some point. If I was her, I'd try to kill me. The thought makes my blood run cold. At some point she's probably going to try to kill me.

"You alright?" Tommy asks. "It's alright, Anthony. He had it coming to him."

He had it coming to him. I bet that's what she's going to think when she gets the courage to try. I want to believe in her, but ever since that night with Vince, all I keep thinking is that I'm fucked up. That I was wrong. That this is destined to fail.

I school my expression and look at Tommy as I say, "Let's get out of here."

It's late, but I need her right now. Even if my little kitten wants to sink her claws into me. Even if it's all lies. Even if it's completely fucked up. I *want* her.

CHAPTER 21

ANTHONY

As soon as I put the keys on the table, I make a beeline for the door. I need to get to her. She could be lying to me; she could be gearing up for a fight. I don't fucking know. But right now I want her, and she's ready to beg for me. I'm giving in. Whether it's my dark needs and *issues* or something else causing this impulsive behavior, I don't give a fuck.

I go straight down to the basement. My steps are loud as fuck. I enter the code and swing open the door just in time to see her falling to her knees and breathing heavily. Her hair's a mess, like she was sleeping when she heard me coming. I look past her at the bed and I know that's exactly what happened.

"You want me, kitten?" I walk to her with hard steps. "You still want to prove to me that you're mine?" I ask her.

"Yes, Anthony," she responds with a deep need in her eyes. I run my hand down my face, knowing this is stupid as fuck. But I'm going to do it. I'm tired of questioning this shit, and I'm tired of waiting.

I lean down and grab her by her waist, carrying her in my arms.

She snuggles into me and stares at my face as I take her up to my room. I want her there. If she's really mine, she'll be mine everywhere. She doesn't look around; she doesn't try to squirm away. She grips onto my shirt and kisses the dip in my neck.

I lay her gently on the bed, but she's quick to pop up on her knees and wait for me.

"You want my dick, kitten?" I ask her.

"Please. Please, Anthony," she begs me as she pulls the nightgown over her head and lies naked on my bed. She's desperate for something from me. Anything. This is what I wanted, but right now, I fucking hate myself for it.

Her lust-filled eyes look back at me as she whispers, "I want to prove to you I'm yours." Fuck, she sounds so sincere.

I nod my head slightly and kick my pants off. If that's what she wants, then she's going to get it. She's going to earn it.

"Fuck yourself on my dick," I command.

I climb on the bed and stay on my knees stroking my cock. Precum's already leaking out and I use it to lube up the head.

She's quick to get on all fours and look back at me over her shoulder. She's too fucking sexy for her own good. She lowers her breasts to the bed and lays her head to the side, keeping her eyes on my dick as she backs her ass up.

I put a hand on her hip to steady her and let her take me in. My breath comes in short pants but I make sure they're low so she can't hear how much I need this. Her ass looks so fucking good. I give it a loud smack. She jumps, and I slip out of her.

"Uh-uh, kitten. You're going to take it. This is your cock right now. Lean back and take it." Her mouth stays parted as she reaches between her legs for my dick. Her small hand strokes the head and I almost cum right there.

Smack! I hit her ass to keep from cumming as she slips the tip inside of her welcoming heat and moves back, stretching her walls slowly around my dick. I watch my cock slowly disappear. So fucking slowly. It's almost too much to take. I ball my hands tightly into fists and fight the urge to just let go. I want to collapse on top of her and bury my head into her neck. I want to bite down on her and fuck her ruthlessly and let my savage beast out. But I need control. I thrive with control. And this is for her, not for me.

She rocks on her knees to get more of me inside her tight little pussy. Fuck, it feels like heaven. I place my hand on the small of her back, but I don't take control. This is for her own needs, not for my pleasure. There's a difference.

I grip her hips, but she's still in control. She slides easily on and off my dick. Her sweet sounds fill the air. That's when it really hits me, she really has given herself to me. I've broken her down to this. She *wants* this. She wants me. She's doing this to please me. What more could she possibly give me? My heart clenches in my chest, and I can't fucking stand it.

Not now. I can't think about this shit right now.

She moans as she slides back deeper and my dick fills her cunt. I can't help the groan that slips past my lips. She feels so fucking good. She rocks forward and I watch as her cream coats my dick. It's the sexiest fucking sight I've ever seen. I want to push deep into her and pound her pussy so fucking hard her body collapses. But not yet.

She fucks herself on my cock, searching for her release, but she's so far from getting that highest high that I can give her. I tilt my hips and thrust back as she impales herself onto my dick. I'm rewarded with a sweet strangled cry of pleasure. "Yes!" she screams out. The sound of her panting and smacking her wet pussy against me is everything I ever dreamed of.

"Please, Anthony!" she cries out as she fucks herself faster and harder. "Please," she begs me.

"Please what?" I ask her. I just want to hear her tell me how much she needs me.

"Please, Anthony," she begs again.

"You want me to make you cum?" I ask her.

"Yes!" she answers.

"You want to cum all over my cock to please me, is that it?" I smack her ass again and again.

"Yes!" she cries out, and it's the last straw. I give in and lose what little self-control I have left.

“Coat my dick with your cum,” I growl into her ear as I push her shoulders down and hammer into her. My other hand moves to her slick clit and I strum it until she screaming into the sheets.

Her pussy latches onto my dick and starts milking it with her release. I pump into her harder and faster, and with each thrust her cunt holds onto me tighter, trying to suck me in deep. I nip her earlobe. I bite, kiss and suck all over her neck. Her pussy pulses around me and her body trembles beneath me. She cries out my name, and it’s what takes me over the edge. I cum deep inside her. I groan in the crook of her neck, loving that I gave her more than she could give herself.

I slowly release her and her body falls forward and I slip out of her, our combined cum leaking from her pussy.

She lays on the bed panting and curling on her side as I leave her to get a shirt from the hamper to wipe up with. She hums softly in appreciation as I clean her off. She looks so weak and tired as she slips her nightgown back on. I love the sight of my cum leaking out of her tight little pussy, but I need to clean her up before bed. And she’s obviously fucking exhausted.

I watch her as I climb in next to her. I expect her to plead with me to stay. I expect her to ask me for something. But she doesn’t. She scoots her body against mine and rests her cheek on my shoulder. She cuddles with me. She holds me.

I feel my guard lower from her comforting touch. I should put her back in her room, but I need this as much as she does. I don’t think I’ve ever felt someone hold me with such need and adoration. She rubs her body against mine and I relax into the mattress.

I kiss her hair and pet her back as she nestles into my chest.

“Sleep, kitten,” I whisper into her ear.

She looks up at me through her lashes with a small smile. “Good night, Anthony.” And she plants a kiss on my lips. I can still feel it as she lies back down and gets comfortable in my arms.

I watch her for hours before I can finally sleep. It never once occurs to me that in the morning she won't be there.

Because I know she will.

CHAPTER 22

ANTHONY

*M*y eyes slowly open and I move to turn onto my side, but a warm and comforting weight rests against my side. *Kitten*. A slow, lazy smile graces my lips. It feels good to wake up next to someone. I never have before. I'm not angry that I let her sleep here last night. But it's a one-time thing.

I stare at her while she sleeps. Her chest rises and falls in a steady rhythm. Her chestnut hair is fanned out on the pillow. I gently brush the hair off her face and fucking love how at peace she is. *With me*.

This is going better than I ever imagined it would. My hand gently eases on her hip as my eyes roam over the dip in her waist. She begged me to fuck her. She wants me. She truly wants me.

I lie back down on my back and sigh. She's seen my darkness, and she craves my touch.

Only because she has no choice. Only because I've conditioned her.

All traces of her warmth and tenderness leave me. And then she stirs beside me. I close my eyes and wait to see what she's going to do. I've no idea what kind of trouble my kitten will get into if I let her roam the house without supervision.

But I'm curious. The idea that locks aren't needed makes me feel powerful, as though I've perfected the relationship I desired. But there's only one way to find out if it's possible.

I feel her body press against mine as her cheek nudges gently against my chest.

She's trying to wake me, but I don't move.

It's been a long time since I've pretended to be sleeping, but I'm still good at it.

Maybe she has no intention of leaving my side. Maybe she's scared of being punished if she does.

I've never said I would. There are no rules against it. But she's made up in her head what this is supposed to be like. She's decided on her own that it would upset me if she wandered around the house without me. That's smart of her, but I want her to push. I want her to learn I can give her freedom if only she'd ask for it.

I wait as she rests on her side and lies still next to me. I know she doesn't want to disappoint me. That's a good thing, but it's also holding us back.

She runs her fingers along my jaw gently, and I have to stifle a soft groan of tenderness so she won't realize I'm awake. I crave her touch as much as she craves mine. But she'll never know that. I can never show her that weakness.

After a moment, she slowly and easily slips off the bed. My little kitten's curiosity got the best of her. Good.

Excitement races through my blood as I hear her walk through the room. I peek through my lashes as she opens the closet.

She can see all the monitors, but she seems unaffected. She knows I watch her. She closes them after a moment of watching the screens flash to different angles in her rooms. She walks slowly and quietly across the room. Her fingers trace over the notebook on my dresser. She slowly opens it and I don't like that.

It's my list. There are names in there she shouldn't know. Her brows raise and she quickly shuts it, taking a step back as though it bit her.

Good girl. She turns on her heel and walks quietly to the door, looking back at me once.

As soon as she's out the door, it's my cue to get up and follow my sweet submissive who's being a bit naughty.

For all I know she could be trying to leave. But I doubt she would. I'm fairly certain she just wants to snoop. I can't blame her. I listen from my bedroom and hear her walk to the next room. The door opens, and she gasps and quickly shuts it.

It's the armory. If she wanted, she could grab a gun in there. But none are loaded and the ammunition is locked away separately, so I'm not worried. But she doesn't. I hear her feet patter faster away from the room and move on to the next door. It's just a guest room, so there's nothing in there, but I can't hear her any longer and I imagine she walked in.

So I decide it's time to put my kitten to the test. My dick hardens at the thought of chasing her. YES! I need this. I want to prepare her first and give her a fair chance to run. I'll catch her though. I'll always catch her; she can never escape me.

I walk silently to the door and peek in. She's fiddling with a wooden puzzle on the desk.

I walk up behind her and quickly press my front to her back, wrap my arm around her waist and cover her mouth with my hand. She screams out of fear but I gently kiss the crook of her neck and she instantly relaxes.

"My kitten is being naughty," I say as I move my hand from her mouth to her throat and the other lifts her nightgown up for me to splay my hand on her bare lower belly. My fingers tease along her clit.

"Did you find anything you shouldn't have?" I ask.

She nods her head obediently. I smile behind her back.

I could ask her what she found, but I already know and I know she'd tell me the truth.

"Did you find anything interesting?" I ask her instead. She presses her body against mine and her ass rubs against my dick.

"Yes," she says. My dick is so fucking hard for her.

She turns her head slightly to see me and I reward her with a rough kiss.

“I have to punish you, kitten. You should know better than to run off without me,” I say sternly.

That knocks the confidence out of her, but she nods her head and stays still in my arms. Once she realizes what this is, she’ll fucking love it. So sweet and obedient. She’s so fucking perfect.

“This is as much for you as it is for me.” She closes her eyes and tries to hide her smile. “It would make me very happy though, if you fought me back.” She arches her back and moans softly as I whisper the words into her ear. My fingers slip past her clit and I cup her pussy. She’s so fucking wet. “Do you want to fight me, kitten?” I ask.

“Yes,” she whispers into the hot air between us as I push my palm against her clit.

“You have five seconds,” I say as I pull away and take a step back. She turns to face me, breathing heavily with lust-filled eyes. “Run, kitten,” I say.

At my words, she takes off.

It’s the longest five seconds of my life. One. She runs out the door, slamming it into the wall. Two. I walk slowly to the hall behind her. Three. Her small feet bounce off each step as quickly as possible. Four. She holds onto the railing and swings around making her way toward the kitchen. Five.

My long strides and taking the stairs three at a time has me on the first floor before she’s through the dining room. She doesn’t turn around to look at me. Instead she keeps running, pumping her arms and nearly crashing into the table.

She makes a sharp right to go through the hall and I’m on her tail before she can do a damn thing. Her hand grips the doorknob, but she doesn’t have time to open it. I grab her waist and pin her to the ground. Her legs thrash against my body and I lay my weight on top of her. She tries to push me off, but I’m bigger. I’m stronger. She doesn’t stand a chance

against me. My kitten's fighting me though. I fucking love it. Her hands smack against my face and push against my chest.

I growl as I take both her wrists in my hands and pin them above her head, moving them together so I'm able to hold them with one hand. She continues to struggle against me as I rip her nightgown open with my free hand and pin her down with my hips. I stare down and marvel at her gorgeous body laid out under me. I take one perky breast in my hand and squeeze. Her tiny pink nipples harden and I take it as an invitation to suck them in my mouth one at a time and nibble them as she writhes under me. I pull back and let one out with a pop, leaving a red mark. Fucking beautiful.

Her eyes are shooting daggers at me as she plays along, but they're filled with lust. Her breathing is heavy and labored. I can feel her passion, and that's everything I want. I push my forearm against her chin, pushing her head back so I can lean down and kiss her, knowing she won't be able to bite me.

Her lips are hard at first, but they mold to mine. I'm quick to pull back and keep this fantasy alive.

Her back arches as she tries to buck me off. But I have her right where I want her. My free hand pries between her legs and I push my fingers into her heat. She's so fucking wet.

"You're so fucking dirty. You want this," I say.

I lean down and take her earlobe in my teeth before nipping at her skin, leaving tiny pink marks all over her neck.

"Please!" she cries out.

"Your cunt is *begging* me to fuck you," I whisper in her ear.

"Is that what you wanted, kitten? You wanted me to punish you like this?" I ask as I push a third finger in and pump them in and out as she begs me. "Please, Anthony. Please fuck me. Punish me, please."

She stops struggling and moans as I curve my fingers and stroke against her G-spot. My dick is so fucking hard for her.

My blood heats as I line my dick up. Yes! I've waited so long to sink deep into her hot cunt and take her like this.

I don't ease in slowly, and I'm not gentle as I thrust all the way in and keep myself buried deep inside her. Her walls tighten around me as I rip through her, taking her exactly how I've wanted since I first laid eyes on her.

"Fuck!" She screams and cums as her walls stretch and spasm around my cock. Her arousal leaks out between us and onto my thighs. I easily move in and out of her tight pussy, pumping my hips against hers and watching my cock slide in and out.

"Anthony." She moans my name as her body trembles. I pull almost all the way out and then piston my hips over and over, pounding her hips into the floor. Her arms pull against me, but her wrists are still pinned.

I groan as I rut between her legs, watching her tits bounce slightly with each hard thrust of my hips. I push all the way in and grind my pelvis against her clit until her mouth is open with a silent scream and her pussy pops around my dick.

I want her cumming harder than she ever has before, so I don't let up. I grind harder and let her scream and struggle against me with more force than before. Her legs stick out straight and her head falls back hard against the floor as wave after wave of pleasure and heat consume her body. Her eyes glaze over and it's only then that I pull back.

I let go of her wrists so I can spread her legs wider and sink in deeper. My hands grip her thighs as I pound into her.

"Anthony," she moans softly. Her hands travel down her body and then to mine. She moans into the air and her soft eyes stare at me. I reward her by keeping up my relentless pace and pushing the pad of my thumb against her clit.

"Good girl, watch me fuck your pretty little pussy." Her mouth opens as her body stiffens again. Her back bows and she cums a third time. Her nails dig into my back and she urges me to get closer to her body.

I won't deny her. I lay my forearm above her head and let my lips fall onto hers.

She pulls back to breathe and whisper my name. “Anthony, Anthony.”

Her fingers grip my hair, holding my lips close to hers.

Over and over she says my name against my lips and then presses them to mine in a sweet kiss.

I cum violently inside her, harder than I ever have before as her lips part and she kisses me with more passion than I’ve ever felt.

I stay buried inside her, lying down beside her while we both catch our breath.



IT’S ALMOST BEEN A MONTH; LESS THAN TWO WEEKS LEFT. I CAN’T let them take her. She’s everything I’ve ever wanted.

I won’t let them take her from me. I pull her body closer to me and kiss her shoulder. I won’t let her go. They’ll have to kill me first.

CHAPTER 23

CATHERINE

I'm still sore from yesterday and last night. Plus this morning. Ever since he had me in the hall, he fucks me nonstop. That's the only difference now. Every morning's still the same otherwise. I get ready and wait for him. I greet him on my knees. And I still stay in my room.

"Your pussy's open for business now." His dirty words echo in my head.

Maybe it's wrong to be so turned on by him, but I don't care. I am. Just thinking about him has my nipples hardening and my back arching off the chair. I clench my sore pussy and instantly hate that he's not here to sate me. I *need* him.

My computer pings and it's only then that I realize my hand has slipped into my blouse and I'm pinching my nipple between my fingers.

I'm ready for him.

I look down at the message and smile.

My kitten is needy today.

I don't know which camera he's watching so I wave to the screen and nod my head. A blush travels up my chest and into my cheeks.

Get back to work, kitten. I'll take care of you tonight.

I no longer feel trapped. It's like he's given me my life, but filled a hole I was only vaguely aware was empty. All my

needs are met. He's seen to that. I have my work, my friends, and a sex life that somehow manages to be hotter than anything I've ever read about. And it's all thanks to him. It hurts to think I may have lived my life without this. Without *him*.



I'M BUSY EDITING THIS PIECE FOR MY COLUMN, AND SO IMMERSSED IN getting this paragraph flowing better that I don't hear the lock or the doorknob turn. I don't even hear the door open.

The only thing I can hear is the language of the text over and over that I keep reading in my head. The wording is just clunky and passive, but I don't know how to reorder them. I bite down on my lip and copy and paste a few times, reordering the sentences. My fingers click against the keys.

"Kitten." His voice holds a threat and my body stills. My heart slows but even with the fear of displeasing him clouding my emotions, my pussy aches with need.

I push the chair away and fall onto my knees. I crawl around, keeping my body lowered. Once I see his shoes I stop and sit back on my heels with my hands where they should be. I don't look up though. My heart beats chaotically. I've never not been ready for him. Not since that first day. Every time I hear the click of the lock, I immediately kneel and wait for him. It's been what, maybe weeks at this point? I've been his good kitten and he's kept his word. But this time, I failed.

"I didn't hear you enter." My neck strains as I resist the urge to look at the clock. He usually comes to me around the same time every day. But I got lost in work today.

His hand comes down and rests in my hair. I close my eyes and wait for his response. "Please forgive me, Anthony." The words slip out and I don't try to catch them. My heart swells with agony in my chest. I don't want him upset with me.

"What were you doing, kitten?" he asks as he pets my hair. I open my eyes and finally look up at him. His stubble is a little longer than usual and his hair is as well. It has a tousled look that's fucking sexy.

“Work,” I reply easily, and then realize he may want more. “My column is due tonight, but the editor is overbooked. So I’m trying to get it done myself.”

He hums, “I see.” He looks past me and to the laptop sitting on the desk. I love this little office he made for me. It’s so cute with all the book nerd touches, and the large window gives me more sunlight than I’d ever get in the bedroom.

“I think maybe a short break would be nice. We could go get you more flowers.” I look up at him with surprise.

“Would you like that, kitten?” he asks.

“Yes, Anthony.” I nearly crawl up his body with the need to press my lips to his. But I’m an obedient pet. I keep my hands planted firmly on my thighs and wait for his direction.

“Do you think you’re ready to go out?” he asks.

I nod my head. I’m never been outside of these locked rooms. The only exception was that one night. The night I gave myself to him completely. I crave a different environment. A voice deep inside me tells me I can run; I just need one chance. But it’s such a small voice, I barely hear it.

“Come, kitten. I think you need a break.” My brow furrows with confusion at first and then I realize he meant I need a break from work. He holds his hand out for me and I take it instantly.

He chuckles as he reads the writing on my tank top. It’s a racerback that hangs just past my ass and is almost as long as my yellow shorts. The top reads, *Book lovers never go to bed alone.*

I give him a small smile and walk with him as he presses the keys to unlock the door. I know not to look even though he doesn’t try to hide the code from me.

It’s cold and dark and empty down here. Only a florescent light is above us. It looks so dungeonlike compared to my room. I stay behind him as we walk up the stairs and he presses in keys to another lock. He doesn’t give me the chance to look, but I don’t mind. I just make a note of it. I’m not sure why though.

My eyes wince as he opens the door and leads me into an open-concept first floor. I take a look around in wonder as if seeing Anthony for the first time in a new light. I don't remember this room when I was out before.

There's a large slate fireplace with a flat-screen television above it. Everything is modern with dark accents and clean lines. It's orderly and nearly barren of any character at all. For some reason it makes me sad. His bedroom was like this, too.

"There's a farm stand down the street," he says as he leads me through the hall without giving me a moment to look around. There are stairs to the right, next to the front door and a hallway that looks like a dead end. *That's where he took me.* A smile spreads on my face as I remember.

He opens the door and keeps my hand in his. I'm surprised to see that his home isn't in the middle of nowhere. It's just a normal house, in a homey cul-de-sac. There are two kids riding bikes to our right, and a third playing with chalk on the sidewalk. Anthony walks to the left and leads me past the houses to a busier street. The sounds of kids playing and a car passing me by seem odd, but comforting. Out in the cabin, I never had this. I like it. It's different.

It doesn't fit with how I pictured Anthony would live though.

"You look surprised, kitten," he says without looking at me. He knew I'd be surprised. He does this often. He says things or asks questions when he already knows what my response will be. He thinks I haven't caught on, but I have. He needs it though. And I'm happy to give it to him.

"I am," I answer honestly.

"Monsters don't live in the dark; they hide in plain sight." His response makes my heart twist in my hollow chest.

"You're not a monster." I spit out the words and look away. I can feel his eyes on me as we stand at the stop sign and a car drives through the intersection. He tugs my hand and we walk to the front of the development and to the right. I can see the stand ahead. It's a shabby-looking shack that's probably been there before the development was built.

“I don’t understand.” I can’t help that the words fly out of my mouth.

“What’s that?” Cars fly by us but the breeze still feels fresh against my skin.

“Why do you think you’re a monster?” I ask him. Ever since he told me about his mother, I’ve thought he was broken, but never a monster. He’s just missing a piece of his heart. I ache to fill that hole for him.

“Many people have died because of me, kitten. That makes me a monster in a normal person’s eyes.” I know he’s including his mother in that statement. And I hate that.

I stay quiet as we walk closer to the empty stand. There’s an old man sitting behind a wooden counter in the shack. Baskets of produce are on the ground, but the flowers are on the counter.

“What are you thinking?” he asks as he lifts a bouquet of purple and pink flowers to my nose. I inhale deeply and close my eyes.

I shake my head at his question and take the flowers from him with a smile. I whisper close to him so the old man doesn’t hear, “I don’t think you’re a monster.” My fingers play with the tiny soft petals, but I’m careful not to break them.

He looks down at me while he digs in his pocket for his wallet. “You did at one point, kitten; you were right about me then.”

CHAPTER 24

ANTHONY

I'm so fucking tired. I haven't slept in I don't know how many hours. I drag my hand over my face. Fuck, that hit was brutal. It was a former Cassano who double-crossed Marcus. The Don, Marcus Cassano, wanted him to suffer, but I wasn't prepared for that shit. It was a struggle to get him to say a damn word and when he did, it left me frozen with panic.

"Cassanos are coming for you." His dark eyes stare back at me as blood drips from his mouth. The bruises are already starting to show as he wobbles in the chair he's chained down to. Even with all the pain we've inflicted, he laughs at me as I stare back with anger.

He looked right at me and I knew why. Tommy smashed his fist into the dumb fucker's face. Too hard and too fast though. That's the only info we got from him.

Tommy kept asking me what I thought he meant. I couldn't even look him in the eyes as I lied to him, and told him I had no idea. They want her back. They want her dead. My time's up.

I push the door open to the house and then kick it shut. That didn't go as planned. My eyes fly to the backroom, to where the stairs are to the basement. If I'd die, she'd be in there alone for three days until the door would unlock and let her out. I need to change that shit. She wouldn't be okay for that long. She'd be hurting and hungry. I decide on twenty-four hours, tops. And then all her doors are opening.

I head to my bedroom and go right to the monitors so I can change that shit now. It's done within two minutes and I find myself staring at her sleeping form on the bed. She's got a book in her hands still. I squint at the screen, but I don't recognize which one it is. That stack of books on her nightstand has been there for a week. I don't remember what books I got her though. It's rare that she's got a paperback. She's usually on her Kindle whenever I check on her. I'm glad she found something that I picked out for her. Well, she fell asleep, so maybe she didn't like it all that much. A lazy smile kicks my lips up.

She should be waking up soon and getting ready for me. Waiting for me. I don't give a fuck that I'm worn out. I'm not making her wait. Not today. Not ever again if I can help it.

I need to program something for her to let her know what the hell happened if those doors ever open because I never made it home. Or maybe leave a note each time I go. I don't know what she'd do. Or what she'd think. I drag my hand down my face. I can't deal with this shit right now. I'm tired as all hell.

I drag my ass to the shower. I want to make this fast. I have one thing on my mind, and I need it as soon as fucking possible.

All I care about right now is feeling Catherine cum on my dick. It's all I want. I need to feel her body against mine and hear those sweet moans as I push her closer and closer to her release.

I'm in and out of the shower and punching in the code before I know it. She's sound asleep. Doesn't wake up at all. She doesn't hurry to get on her knees and in position like she's supposed to. I walk over to the desk in her room and see on the clock that it's already past 9 a.m. The alarm's supposed to go off at 8 a.m., if she set it. Which she didn't.

She finally had the courage to ask me to change the wake up time from 7 to 8. It's one of the first things she asked me to change. And I was more than happy to do it. I think if she never set an alarm though, my kitten would sleep in all morning. She used to on the weekends when I watched her.

But then she'd feel like shit when she woke up to all the work that piled up. I love how she told me that. I love how she's starting to open up to me and really be her true self. It's perfect. *She's* perfect.

I sigh heavily with my eyes closed. I don't fucking want to punish her. I don't want to do this shit right now.

I study her beautiful body on the bed. She's still in her shirtdress from last night. I wonder if she ever even got out of bed after I left her. I bet I just wore her out and she wanted to relax.

I make my way over to the bed and see a pad of paper on the other side of her that was hidden from the cameras. I take a quick look at her scribbles before tossing it onto the nightstand. It looks like my kitten is keeping a diary. I make a mental note to read that later.

"Kitten," I say loud enough that should wake, but not so loud that it should startle her. She rolls her head a bit, but she doesn't wake up like I want her to.

I kick off my pajama pants and crawl into bed with her. I fucking need her right now. I lay my body next to hers and pull her in close, loving her warmth and how she molds her body to mine in her sleep. I gently kiss her neck, hoping that will rouse her. I get a small satisfied moan and a rock of her hips, but nothing else.

"Catherine." My lips barely touch the shell of her ear as I speak just above a murmur. "Wake up for me, kitten."

Her eyes slowly open and seem to settle on my face. A faint smile crosses her face before her eyes shut and she settles her head into the crook of my arm. It makes my heart swell. It only takes a minute for her brain to catch up and her eyes pop open and her body stiffens slightly.

I instantly take her lips with mine, wanting to ease her worry. Her lips are hard at first, caught by surprise, but soon they mold to mine and she leans into my touch. Her small hands press against my chest as my tongue slips into her hot mouth. My hands travel along her body. The feel of the fabric pisses

me off. I need to feel her. I grip her dress in both hands, pushing her onto her back and ripping the dress open.

She gasps and clenches her thighs as the buttons pop off and her gorgeous skin is exposed to me. Nothing separates us and that's just how I want it.

I kiss the underside of her breast, taking the other in my hand to feel her soft, supple skin. My tongue swirls along her nipple, leaving a wet trail in my path and then I blow lightly until it's a hardened peak. I do the same to the other side and then pinch and pull them slightly. Her back bows and she moans in complete rapture. The sight of her and the sounds of her pleasure make my raging erection leak.

My fingers dip into her heat and thank fuck, she's already soaking wet. I could play for hours, but not right now. I need to be inside her.

"Spread your legs for me, kitten." She immediately obeys and I don't waste a second as I thrust into her all the way to the hilt. Her eyes open wide and her mouth parts with a silent scream as I pound into her tight cunt.

My fingers dig into her hips as I keep up my ruthless pace. She screams out her pleasure and claws at the sheets before fisting them and biting down on her lip. I usually start up nice and slow, but I need her. I need this. It's so fucking sexy to watch her take this punishing fuck I'm giving her. Her breasts bounce with each thrust and her lips slowly part in ecstasy as she gets closer to her release. I don't let up. I need more of those noises coming from her lips. I need her eyes to squeeze shut with the intensity of her pleasure.

I'm hitting her cervix every time, but I still don't feel deep enough. I want more. I turn her onto her hip and straddle her leg, bringing the other up to rest on my shoulder. I fuck her hot pussy and there's nothing stopping me from pounding into her farther and deeper than I ever have before. She thrashes on the bed and tries to move away, but I push down on her hip, forcing her into the mattress and making her take every brutal thrust. Her pussy spasms around me and I lose it. I stay deep inside her until her pussy's filled.

It was a quick fuck, but I needed to feel her. I needed to be deep inside her.

She falls to the bed limp, breathing heavily with her eyes closed. Her body rolls slowly onto her side and those sweet lips part as she winces and brings her knees up. For a second I'm worried I hurt her, but then she gives me a sated look with a soft smile.

I still have to ask. I push the hair out of her face and cup her jaw. "You alright, kitten?"

She nods her head slightly in my hand, "Yes, Anthony." She responds like she should, but then adds, "I am." A blush makes her flushed cheeks even redder. "Better than alright."

"I was worried I hurt you." I want to make sure I didn't. I search her eyes for the truth to make sure she's not just giving me the answer that she thinks I want to hear. And they shine back with sincerity.

"I like it when you fuck me like that," she says with a shy smile. I always knew it turned her on, but hearing it makes it different.

I'm fucking exhausted, but I can't sleep here. I need my own bed. I want her companionship though. I don't want to go to sleep alone.

I wrap my arms around her and carry her to my room. Cum drips onto my hip and leg, but I don't care. I kiss her hair as she snuggles into me. I'm so fucking grateful I have her. I don't know what I'd do without her.

CHAPTER 25

ANTHONY

Catherine pulls away from me slightly as we make our way up the walkway. “Are you sure?” she asks. No. I’m not sure. I’m taking her to dinner at my aunt’s house, but Vince has no clue. He just needs to see her. He needs to know what she means to me so he can understand. I know she’ll be good for me.

“No one has any idea about how we got together, and what we do behind closed doors. That’s our business. Just be yourself, and everything will be fine,” I tell her with so much confidence in my voice that even I start to believe it. I take a deep breath and open the door. If they’ve accepted me, they should sure as fuck accept her.

When I open the door, I can hardly fucking breathe. I’ve never done this before. I’ve never asked for acceptance. Maybe because I never wanted it. Maybe because I never thought I could have it. But now I need it.

The guys look over at me and do a double take. Tommy looks shocked at first, and it guts me. He’s quick to replace the shock with a wide smile. He’s the first to get up and greet us as we make our way to the dining room.

“You brought a friend?” he asks with his eyebrows raised. I look past him at Vince and answer as Tommy pats my back. “Yeah,” I say as I bring her close to me. “Meet my girl, Catherine.”

My sweet kitten blushes a beautiful shade of red and holds her hand out for Tommy. He chuckles but accepts it, which is a good thing. He doesn't need to have his paws all over her.

I expect a lot of things when I walk in, but I don't expect the cheers from the women and Aunt Linda rushing over to greet Catherine.

It's obvious that she didn't expect that either. She holds onto my hand for dear fucking life. The sounds of the kids playing and the men laughing fills the room. But all I can see is Vince, staring at me like I've betrayed him. And maybe I have, but I had to do this. He needs to know she's not going anywhere.

Vince just needs to understand. What happened wasn't her fault. That fucking prick hit her. She had to leave. He can't expect that she wouldn't have done otherwise. She's strong for what she did.

I'm not going to let him take her. He'll listen and he'll understand. My confidence sways, but I ignore it. *She's mine.*



I STAND FROM MY CHAIR IN THE DINING ROOM. VINCE IS ALONE IN the kitchen. The women are in the den and the men are all in here. Now's my chance to talk to him. I push the chair back, pick up my dishes, and go to him. I need him to hear me out. The tension's been thick between us all night. I just need him to understand. Now that he's seen her, he has to know what she means to me.

"I don't want a rat here. Around my *familia*. In my *home*." He speaks to me in a hushed tone as I set my glass in the sink. It takes all my strength not to break it, not to smash him over the head with it.

"She didn't have a choice, Vince." He just needs to listen to me.

"You're defending her?" I hate that he questions me at all. Someone has to defend her. She's not a rat. She doesn't deserve to be killed, and I won't do it.

“He beat her. When she saw that shit, he made her life hell. She had no choice!”

“He kept her? Are you fucking serious? What’d he keep her as, Anthony? A fucking pet?” He sneers the last word and it’s the last fucking straw.

“How fucking dare you!” That fucking prick! He has no right!

“How can you do that to her when you were supposed to kill your own wife? Catherine’s not good enough to spare?” I ask, raising my voice.

“I love Elle. She’s my *wife!*” he screams at me. I don’t hold back any longer, I can’t. I let loose and swing as hard as I can, landing a punch on Vince’s jaw. He staggers back a few feet, cupping his chin and looking up at me with daggers, but he doesn’t make a move to counter. He stands there waiting as he rubs his jaw. He gave me a pass this time. But I won’t get another.

He takes two steps and spits in the sink. “If you can tell me right now that you love her, I’ll back off. You going to marry her, Anthony?” He’s asking like it’s a dare. Like he knows me. It fucking tears me up inside that he’s right. He doesn’t know her. He doesn’t know *us*.

“She’s as close to a wife as I’ll ever have.” I didn’t even know how true the words were until I spoke them.

“Until you kill her.” Vince says the words just as Catherine walks into the doorway. Her mouth parts and her eyes widen as she looks between us.

“Fuck you,” I say with disdain at Vince and quickly go to her. I take Catherine by the hand and brush past my brother as he walks into the doorway.

“Whoa,” he says with shock. “You guys alright?”

“We’re leaving,” I answer with my back to him and drag her out of the house with everyone staring at us.

As the door slams shut behind us, I look at my girl, but I know she’s not okay.

My heart hammers with a fear I've never felt before. Although I'm gripping onto her like my life depends on it, she's already gone. I've lost her.

CHAPTER 26

CATHERINE

I sure as fuck wasn't expecting this to be so...comfortable and normal. I'm usually a bit awkward with people—and I still am today, don't get me wrong—but I don't feel the nervous energy I thought I would. I'm able to relax somewhat and just be my usual awkward self. At least around the women.

“So, do you want to be a writer?” Elle asks me. She's Vince's wife. Her voice is soft like you'd think it would be after taking one look at her since she's sweet and petite. Vince isn't. He looks scary as fuck. All the men are intimidating. I'm super fucking happy to be in a room with just the girls.

Being around the men is different. I felt like a sheep brought to the slaughter. I couldn't stop trying to determine which position in the mafia each man had. I couldn't even breathe for the first few minutes. So many fucking flashbacks made me feel like I was drowning. But this is nothing like what I experienced with the Cassanos.

Lorenzo would start talking about things with the other members of his *familia* anywhere, and then look at me like I shouldn't have been there. Like it was my fault. It happened a few times, and then they started doing it on purpose and blocking me from leaving. They liked scaring me and taunting me by calling me the meek mouse. I never felt safe, and they said that was a good thing. Lorenzo said it was good to be afraid. And I was. They made damn sure to keep me afraid.

I stayed with Lorenzo far too long because of that fear and then...well, by the time I had the courage to leave, that's when I actually saw shit. Shit that changed my life forever. I shake my head and try to forget. I don't want to go there in that headspace. Not now.

It's not like that here though with the Valettis. Everything is lighthearted. It took me a while to even want to eat, but when I did it seemed to help. I just kept something at my mouth the entire night hoping no one would talk to me. It's odd how I still felt included in conversations even though I only really ever smiled and nodded. It felt nice though. It's been a long time since I've even talked to anyone. I've been too afraid. Back when I was in hiding, I had the ridiculous idea that the very first person I talked to would somehow know the Cassanos and they would tell them where I was.

But that doesn't matter anymore. I have Anthony now. I've never felt more safe in my entire life than I do tonight. It's the first time I've felt like I could fit in, like I could have a family again. And I want it. I haven't wanted for anything in so long. But I want this.

The kids are all in bed now and the men are in the dining room. Anthony left me alone with the wives. I start to answer Elle's question, but hear a crash of toys from the living room. His aunt, Linda I think, is straightening everything up. I feel weird sitting here not helping. Even though it's not my mess.

"Should we—" I start to ask.

"No," Becca answers before I can finish. She's a bit older than me and she's a no-nonsense kind of person. "Trust me," she places a hand on my forearm, "she will not let you help."

"Okay." I draw out the word and the girls all laugh. It forces a smile from me. I can't help it. I feel included. It's been a long time since I've felt that. My mom was everyone to me. She was my best friend. When she died, I had no one else. It feels good to feel like I belong here. Even though I don't.

"So do you want to write? Or do you just do the columns and blog thing?" Elle asks again and I know she's genuinely interested. She's been asking me questions ever since Anthony

told them that I work in romance literature. I literally laughed when he said it like that. *Romance literature*. I love *smut*. That's my genre. Smutty smut smut. I shut the fuck up real quick when he gave me that look though. I'm still a little worried about that look. It could be a good thing though.

"I think I'd like to," I start to answer, but I hear Anthony yell something. We all look to the doorway to the kitchen. But none of the women stand up. Elle grabs my wrist as I start to walk toward him, but I shake her off.

"Don't," I hear her whisper, but I ignore her. The women stand up, but they don't stop me. I know they're right and I should stay away. But something deep down is telling me Anthony needs me. I need to be there for him.

I walk into the kitchen in a daze and see Vince and Anthony yelling at each other. Their hair is a mess and they're both breathing hard. Vince has the start of a bruise showing on his face. Anthony doesn't see me as he says, "She's as close to a wife as I'll ever have." It soothes my soul to hear those words coming from him. But then my heart shatters as I realize what's happening.

"Until you kill her." Vince's words ring out clearly, and I hear them repeated in my head. Over and over. *Kill her*. Anthony finally sees me and I expect to see something in his eyes that proves to me that Vince didn't mean that. That there's no truth there. But it is true. I can barely breathe. I feel him take my hand in his and squeeze, but I don't return the gesture.

People move around us as he leads me away. It's as though I'm watching this scene play out from a distance.

"We're leaving." I barely register Anthony's words as he leads me away. What just happened? *Until you kill her*. No. I shake my head. No, it's not true. But he said it with such conviction. And didn't I always think he would? Didn't I know this would happen? *I should have run*. A small voice whispers inside of me. *Weak, you're so fucking weak*.

"You said they didn't know." I barely speak the words as Anthony leads me to the car. I have to keep blinking to focus. I

feel lost and confused. That didn't just happen. It couldn't have. Everything was perfect. It was perfect. *It was fake.*

"Vince was the only one." *Was.* But now they all know.

I remember the look in Vince's eyes and everything changes. My world tilts on its side and my vision blurs with my tears. Vince isn't a forgiving man. He wants me dead, just like the Cassanos. I don't belong here. I watch Anthony as we drive away and the same cold, impassive look he had when I first *met* him is on his face.

In this moment I don't know why Anthony brought me here, but I do know two things for certain. The first is that Anthony lied to me. And the only other thing I know is that the Valettis want me dead.

CHAPTER 27

ANTHONY

“*Y*ou’re going to kill me?” she whispers as I shut the front door behind me. She walks aimlessly in the hall.

“No,” I tell her again. She said it in the car and I shut that shit down. But she won’t look at me. She doesn’t believe me.

“I don’t understand. Why?” She still doesn’t look at me, and I hate it. What we had was pure. But now it’s tainted with doubt.

“I’ve told you repeatedly I won’t hurt you.” She finally looks at me, but I can tell she doesn’t believe me.

“Come here, kitten,” I hold out my arms for her. She just needs my touch. I’ll keep her safe. Vince can go fuck himself. They all can. I’ll run away with her if I have to.

She looks at me, but takes a step back.

“I said come here.” I take a step forward and she turns her back on me to run. She’s defying me. She’s running from me. It only takes three strides until my arms are wrapped around her small body and she’s shrieking for me to let her go.

It hurts. It fucking kills me.

I walk to the basement with her struggling in my arms. She flails and kicks. She yells and cusses as I take her down the stairs. I almost drop her as I enter in the code. She’s fighting me. She hates me. I know she does. My heart hurts, but I ignore it. I hold on to the anger. I hate that she thinks I’m lying to her. I’ve done nothing but tell her the truth. I will take care

of her. She needs to calm down and listen. She has to listen to me.

I open the door to her cell and she looks up at me with anger and then betrayal in her large brown eyes. She needs to learn she can never question me. She'll learn.

She shakes her head and backs away from me as I stand in the doorway. Her body language and the look in her eyes make my heart squeeze with pain.

"You *will* obey me." I say the words with force, but they're choked. She looks back with defiance in her eyes. I don't recognize her, and she doesn't recognize me.

What we had is gone and I wish I could take it back. I hate Vince. I hate myself.



I WATCH IN THE MONITOR AS SHE HUDDLES INTO A BALL ON THE concrete floor. Hard sobs rock through her small body, making her look weak and fragile. I know she's not at all weak. But she's become reliant on my approval and I know this hurts her.

I've seen this before. I've only had two subs before who thought they'd enjoy a complete power exchange.

They think they want to be told what to do. And they think they'll be able to listen, and be rewarded and pampered. But there always comes a time when the desire to obey is challenged too far. The desire can be lost over some concept of degradation or pride, or an issued command can simply be too far outside their comfort zone. Submissives have to learn to trust that everything their dom does is for their benefit. Doubt and lack of trust are the real issues.

Susan and Cassie were sweet girls. But when it came time to push them, it ended up like this. It would have never worked with them anyway. They cried and then left me. The only difference here is that Catherine can't leave me. Instead she'll hate me.

She doesn't trust me. I pace my room, not knowing what to do. I can't leave her in there to think about leaving me. Her cries

ring out from the monitors and I walk quickly to turn them off. I can't take it.

It's my fault. It's all my fault. I don't think about anything other than what I want. And right now I want to comfort her. I want her in my bed. I need her in my arms. I take the stairs two at a time until I'm at her door. No more locks. She'll learn to trust me. I'll do anything I can to prove it to her. She just needs to stay with me.

Stay with me.

I walk into the room with purpose, but she doesn't lift her head. I scoop up her body into my arms and hold her to my chest. I rock her gently and pet her back and her hair. Just holding her calms the beast pacing within me. She needs me, and I need her. That's all that matters. Doesn't she know that? She's all I need. I kiss her hair, but she doesn't look up. I walk us slowly to my room, but I don't even know if she notices.

I try to kiss her, but she shoves me away. I hold her closer to me, but she tells me, "No." She won't let me in. I watch her deny me over and over as she sheds her pain in my arms.

I want to make love to her and show her what she means to me. But I feel like I've already lost her. My need to control her was wrong. I shouldn't have punished her. It's my fault. I hold her close to me as she cries herself to sleep.

"I'm sorry," I whisper into her ear as her shoulders gently shake. "Please forgive me." She doesn't respond and I don't know if it's because she never will, or if she's fallen asleep.

I hold onto her as tight as I can and watch her. That security I've had since I first laid eyes on her is gone. I look down and I know I've lost her.

I shake my head and swallow the lump in my throat. I don't know if I can make this right. I don't see how it's possible to move forward. I've broken her trust. I need her to forgive me, but I know she won't.

CHAPTER 28

CATHERINE

I can hear his steady heartbeat and feel his warm body against my back. We fit together perfectly, and that very thought frightens me to the core. My heart hurts as I try to ignore it. But this isn't right. I'm not okay. I'm falling in love with a man who's taken me against my will. These feelings can't be real. I need to leave. I have to get the fuck out of here before I lose what little sanity of I have left. Before he kills me.

I slowly move away from him and hate myself. I watch him sleeping peacefully and I have to cover my mouth to keep the sob from coming up and waking him. If I don't leave now, I may never have another chance. And I know I have to leave.

I walk as quickly and quietly as I can. I remember him leaving the keys in the dining room. I know it's a risk trying to leave. He could come down here. He could take me back upstairs by force, or he could lock me away in the cell, and part of me hopes he does. I'm sick for having these thoughts, and I know it. But I use the knowledge that his *familia* won't keep me safe to motivate me. I summon my strength and force my limbs to move and go to the door. I take one last look around, gripping the frame and try to keep down the sickness threatening to come up.

I can't even take anything with me, because it's all locked in a room I don't have a code for. If that's not a fucking sign that this was never real, I don't know what is.

Rain beats against my skin and thin clothes as I run to the car. My heart pangs sporadically and I don't know if it's from the pain or the fear.

What hurts the most is knowing I would have stayed. I never would have questioned him. What we had was fucked up. But it was my fucked up fairytale come true. I loved him. I know I still do.

Tears cloud my vision and I brush them away, shoving the keys into the ignition. I look over my shoulder and hate the pain growing in my chest. I'm leaving him. I don't want to, but a small part of me is saying if I don't leave him now, I never will. Is it so wrong? I can't answer the question. "Forgive me," I whisper as I put the car in reverse and turn the wheel.

I don't care if it's wrong, I fucking loved him. Even knowing he was going to kill me, I still love him and all his broken pieces.

I wipe the bastard tears from my eyes and sniffle as I speed away. I've left him. He's the only man I've ever truly loved, and I've left him. The car swerves and I fight the steering wheel in the rain to stay on the road. I try to steady my breath as a pain radiates in my chest.

In two turns, I'm out of the development and onto the busy road. It's late. It's nearly deserted, with just three cars parked at the front of the entrance.

I had to go, didn't I? I'm not safe with him. I shake my head in denial. He'd keep me safe, but he'd have to fight the world to keep me. I feel so torn and so confused. I hit the brakes and turn off the side of the road. I let the tears consume me.

I know I need to keep going. I need to run as fast as I can. He's going to find me if I stay here. The thought brings me more comfort than anything else. Maybe I'm sick. Maybe the feelings I have aren't healthy. But I hold on to them so I can calm myself. As I look in my rear-view mirror I spot the three cars from earlier driving toward me. None of the cars have their headlights on.

Something triggers inside of me and I quickly put the car into drive and hit the gas. As I speed up, so do they.

My heart beats in my chest with a fear I haven't felt in so long. They've found me. I swallow thickly and search the cars for a face. I don't know if it's the Valettis or the Cassanos, but as I make a sharp right and see them follow me, I know it's one or the other. I wish I could turn around and drive back to him. To Anthony. I wish he were here. I wish he could save me.

He would save me.

Out of instinct, I yell for Anthony. Tears fall down my face. No! I hit the gas harder and the back end of the car swerves. I try to straighten the wheel as my hands grip the leather and I pull to the right, but the car spins out, and in a blur my body smashes to the side. My head smacks against the wheel and my body falls limp. My hand touches my forehead and I look down at my fingers only to see blood. My vision spins and my breath feels hollow, but I have to run. I unbuckle the seatbelt and prepare to run. I have to run. I have to fight.

As my hand grips the handle, the door opens and I look up to see a sick smile from the last person I ever want to see.

"My little mouse came back to me." I hear his words, followed by the smash of his fist against the side of my temple. I'm vaguely aware that he's gripping my hair and pulling me out of the car, but I can't move my legs. Slowly, darkness overwhelms me, and I lose the battle to stay awake.

CHAPTER 29

ANTHONY

I push the curtain back and watch her drive away. I see her look over her shoulder with one last glance at the house, and it kills me not to run out and get her. I couldn't move as I felt her stir next to me and leave me. I knew that's what she was doing, and it took all of me to lie still and let her go free.

I knew she'd leave me. I was a fool to think I could have her. I was wrong to think she'd be safe with me.

She needs to leave me. I can't protect her. I need to let her go. She doesn't love me, and Vince will never let me keep her if she doesn't love me back.

They'll never understand.

If I could tell her anything right now, I'd tell her to run. Run far away from me.

It hurts. The pain in my chest hurts so fucking much as I watch the car disappear.

She left me. I really thought it was love in her eyes.

Mom. I thought she loved me too.

When Dad killed her in front of me to get rid of the fear and the nightmares, she cried out how much she loved me. I thought that was love, too.

Maybe I'm wrong and I just don't know what love is.

If love is what's causing this pain, I don't want it. But I still want her. Fuck me, I do. I want to lie to myself and think that we can be together in this fucked up way and that the world will leave us alone. But I can't put her in danger. I've been selfish and stupid, and I fucking hate that I ever took her the way I did. At the same time, she's all I want. If I could go back upstairs and keep her lying in bed with me, I would. If I had to lock her up and never let her out again, I would. That's only more reason that I need to stay here and let her go. She deserves so much more than a man like me.

I sit outside in the rain, letting it soak through my clothes, just thinking about how I should have let her go right from the start. I should have let her go free. I thought I made her happy though. I thought she wanted the same things I wanted. But I was wrong.

I hear a car swerve in the distance and my heart starts pounding in my chest. I run inside for the keys to my pickup truck and haul ass as fast as I can. It can't be her. I pray she's okay. It takes too fucking long to get there. I'll save her. She needs me. I'll protect her. I slow the car as I see skid marks, but there's nothing there. It looks like a car crashed, but then drove off.

I stay at the scene for a long time, thinking it wasn't her. It wasn't my kitten.

She's left me and now she's safe. She's better off without me. I wish I had a way to track her to know for sure. Again, another reason she needs to run from me.

The pain won't go away.

I can't get rid of this hurt in my chest. I just know something's wrong.

I close my eyes and shake my head. It's all in my head. I'm only hurting because she left me. I'm looking for reasons to search her out. It's my own sickness.

I need to let her go. I settle on that truth as I drive back home. But I can't sleep. When the sun filters through the curtains and

my phone pings a few hours later, I reach for it like it was meant to go off.

I expect it to be my kitten. I don't know how, but I do. All night I've waited up, hoping she'd come back to me.

I stare at the phone and I fucking hate myself. I click it off and move as quick as I can.

Cassys want a meet.

I know why. And I'm ready to end this. They're all fucking dead.

CHAPTER 30

ANTHONY

I can't stop pacing. It's not a fucking coincidence that the night she left we got a call for this meetup. We're supposed to meet at the garage in an hour. It's not right. Something's horribly wrong. She's not okay. I can feel it. My girl's not okay.

"Vince, it can't just be us two," I say. I know this is a setup. It's not just going to be Marcus there wanting to clarify the situation. There's more to this, and I know it deep down in my gut. He texted Vince to come meet with him, and later asked to bring me along. But I know this is a trap. I fucking know it.

"We can't trust them," I tell him again.

"What the fuck, Anthony?" Tommy asks me for the fourth fucking time.

I just shake my head. "It's not good. It's not going to be good."

Vince has been watching me like a fucking hawk. I haven't told him yet.

We're all here and I haven't said shit, but I can't shake this feeling. I need to tell them.

"Let me go in first," I finally speak up and look back at Vince.

He doesn't answer.

"You're freaking me out, Anthony," Tommy says, grabbing my arm.

“You couldn’t fucking listen!” Vince yells out, and it gets the attention of everyone. The air is thick with tension.

“You know I wasn’t going to.” I can’t reach his eyes. I know I fucked up, but I need him right now. I can’t let them hurt her. Not her. She didn’t do anything wrong. She can’t pay for my sins.

“What the fuck is going on?” Tommy asks with a pain that breaks through his words. He’s worried. He’s worried for me and it’s all my fault.

“They have her; I know it.” I say just above a whisper.

“Catherine?” Tommy asks, confused. It breaks my heart to know I’ve betrayed him. I betrayed all of them.

“Why? Why would they do that?” Tommy asks.

“War. It’s the start of war.” I answer him with pain in my chest.

“What’d you do?” Tommy demands to know as he shakes my shoulders, and I have to look him in the eyes, but I still can’t tell him.

“Catherine’s a rat. She’s supposed to be dead.” Vince answers over my shoulder and Tommy’s grip loosens until his arms fall to his side. He looks at me like it can’t be true. But it is.

“She had no choice.” I try to defend her. They have to believe her; they have to believe me. She needs me. *She’s mine.*

“This is over Catherine?” Tommy asks with doubt.

“She’s mine,” I say with finality. A look of hurt flashes in my brother’s eyes. He doesn’t understand. They’ll never understand.

“You fucking bought her as a slave—” I understand Vince’s anger, but I don’t need it right now. I need him on my side. I need my *familia* to help me get her back. I need her. I need her right fucking now.

“I don’t care if you don’t understand. None of you ever understand me. That doesn’t make me any less family. If I say she’s mine, then she’s fucking mine,” I growl out.

“If she’s yours, then how did they get her?” Vince steps up to me like he knows. Like he already knows that she left me. But that makes no difference to me. I let her go because I love her, and I’ll save her because I love her. Even if she doesn’t love me back.

“She left me.”

Tommy grips his hair like he can’t believe this shit. I hear the men walking around us, waiting on their orders, even though they already made up their minds. No one fucks with us. They mess with one of us, they fuck with all of us. The only thing that would hold them back is if Vince told them not to.

“You didn’t let her go?” Vince asks with disbelief.

“I watched her leave me. She needed to.” I swallow the lump in my throat as I add, “But I know they have her. I know they found her.” He looks at me with doubt and then nods slightly.

Vince looks past me and addresses the *familia*. “It doesn’t matter what started it. Get your guns ready, boys, and call for the rest of ‘em.” I nod my head. Thank fuck. Thank fuck I have a real chance to save her, if they didn’t already kill her.

“Anthony,” Vince says to get my attention. I look up at him. “We’re going in first.” I put my hand on his shoulder before he has a chance to move away. I lean in and give him a quick hug. He’s shocked, and it takes him a moment, but he pats me on the back in return.

I don’t let him go. “I have to save her, Vince.” I pull back to look him in the eyes. “She can’t die. I can’t let her die.” His brow furrows with confusion and I know I’m not getting through to him. He doesn’t have to understand. He just has to give me his word.

“Don’t be stupid—” he starts to answer me, but I cut him off.

“If it’s between the two of us, save her. I can’t let her die,” I say.

That’s the moment his look changes.

He gives me a small nod, and only then do I release him.



THERE SHE IS. JUST LIKE I FUCKING KNEW SHE'D BE. FUCK! SHE couldn't run fast enough, could she? It's my fault. She's on her knees with that fucker's hand gripping her shoulder, pushing her down. She looks up at me with the saddest expression and cries out, "I'm so sorry." The man behind her whips his hand across her face and she lands on her side. My hands fist at my side and my blood boils.

Not her. He's not going to get away with it. He cocks the gun in his hand and aims it at her head. His eyes are on me though.

"Was this little bitch worth it, Anthony? Was she worth war?" I hear the words but I can't take my eyes off of her. Lorenzo is still standing behind her. And behind him are a dozen or so of his men. I know I've walked into a sentencing. Her sentencing.

"Knock it off, Lorenzo." Marcus finally speaks. He puts his hands out as if to welcome us.

"What's this?" Vince asks from behind me as he walks up to my side. It's just the two of us, for now. "It was just supposed to be us, Marcus."

Marcus gives him a twisted smirk and shrugs his shoulder as he says, "Thought I might need a few more men to make my message clear."

Vince looks at Catherine and motions to her. "Is this really necessary?" He's keeping his voice even. If you didn't know him, you'd think he was completely unaffected. But I know him, and he's fucking pissed.

"It's the fucking rat your boy didn't fucking kill like he was supposed to."

"You know that's not what the deal was," Vince says as though he's on my side, but I know he's not. All this is my fault. I brought this onto my *familia*. I put us all in danger for her. Simply because I wanted her. I wanted to break something so beautiful. And I did. And now I have to take my punishment. I hope I fucking die today. I'll never forgive myself if I see her die though. I've watched death all around me my entire life, and it's never affected me. Not since my mother. But I can't today. Not her. Not my Catherine.

I walk toward the men and a few take a step back, but Marcus and Lorenzo hold their ground. “I bought her fair and square.” I say the words like I’m not ready to rip them apart. Like this isn’t war. Like this is just a business meeting over terms.

I hear the rest of my *familia* walk in behind us. A few guns cock. The clicks fill the air. Marcus’ eyes turn hard. He tried to set us up, but the dumb fuck wasn’t ready for an even match. The doors behind the Cassanos open and more of our crew walk in, guns loaded and ready. We have on our vests; I’m sure the Cassanos do as well, but this is nowhere near an even match. They’re fucking dead.

“You really wanna do this, Vince?” Marcus sneers at my boss behind me. My eyes are locked on Lorenzo’s. My hand’s on my gun.

“You brought this on yourself. You wanted to put on a show,” Vince says as he reaches for his gun, but keeps it pointed at the ground.

“What’d you think was gonna happen?” he asks. Silence fills the air and the men line up on both sides. We’re in the middle. Vince is by my side, and my kitten on the floor just a few feet away from me. Everyone’s armed but her. My eyes dart to hers and I can see she’s already accepted it. She’s gonna be the first to die.

I can’t let it happen. I can’t.

A few men start moving around. They’re lining up. Some of the Cassanos start looking behind them, but most are going to be gunning for us. It doesn’t matter either way, they’re all going to die. The only thing they can do is try to take out a few of us first. I can’t let that happen. I have to do something. She can’t die, and our men can’t go down because of my mistakes.

“Give her back, and we’ll go away.” I say the words and hate the weakness in my voice. I also hate that Vince is looking at me like I’ve lost my damn mind. He’s ready for a fight. No one takes us on like this and makes fools of us. I know he won’t stand for it. But I have to try. I’d beg them for her. I’d trade places with her if I could.

“It’s not happening, Anthony. Not after you betrayed us.” Marcus’ voice rings out with clarity. He’s firm in his decision.

“Take me instead then. Take me and it’s over.” Vince still hasn’t said anything. I hear Tommy yell out from behind me. But Vince holds up his hand and silences him.

“Your gun,” Marcus says loud enough for everyone to hear. I don’t hesitate to lower myself, place my gun on the ground, and kick it away.

As I stand up, the fucking prick in front of me, Lorenzo, shrugs his shoulders and raises his gun at me. Every man in the room raises their weapon but me. I’ll make the trade. I’ll do it for her.

Catherine looks up with wide eyes and shakes her head. As the reality presses down on her, she does the stupidest fucking thing I can think of. She jolts upright and grabs the gun. She yanks it out of Lorenzo’s hand. It falls to the floor with a loud clack and goes off. The room fills with the sounds of bullets.

“Fucking bitch,” Lorenzo yells out and reaches for the gun. A bullet flies past me, but my eyes are on his gun. He’s going to get it first. I see it happening in slow motion. I run to her and cover her small body as the sounds of bullets firing and men yelling ring out and ricochet off the wall.

She screams and cries. She tries to push away from me to fight. But I can’t move, or she’ll be in danger. She’ll die. I have to protect her. I can’t let her die. *Not her*. If I do anything good with my life, it’ll be keeping her safe and alive. I need to get her through this. Even if I die, at least she’ll know what I felt for her.

My body flinches with impact of a bullet, this one at close range. I feel a radiating pain throughout my shoulder as the bullet comes out the other side. The vest can only cover so much. I duck my head and tell her to stay down. I hear her crying and the thud of bodies hitting the floor. I lift my head for only a moment to look into her eyes and she looks wretched with guilt. I push my lips to hers to try to take the pain away. And as another bullet rips into my back, I do everything I can not to let her know.

I just want one more moment with her. One real moment where she can see the real me and what we really had.

The pain expands inside of me. I've been shot before, and more than once, but fuck it hurts. My body loses its strength and I fall onto her body, unable to brace myself any longer. I hear a few more shots and then silence. I don't look. I can't move. I can't risk her. It hurts. Fuck, it hurts. I cough and blood spills from my mouth. Men yell, "Take those three." Fists are smashing against flesh. I recognize the voices. We won. It's over.

"Anthony!" Vince calls out.

"Anthony," she cries out. Her grip on me is strong. She's okay. She's safe.

Vince pulls my body off of her and I lie flat on the ground. A pounding ache in my chest makes it hard to breathe.

"Anthony," she says as she holds on to me as she frantically searches my chest for the wounds. She's okay. She's on her knees, hovering over my body. Tommy comes up behind her.

"Take her away!" Vince yells.

I use the last of my strength and grip onto his shirt, pulling him close to me.

"Promise me she'll be safe, Vince." I hold his stare and make him promise me. "Promise me."

"I swear on my life, Anthony. But I don't need to tell you shit." He's bullshitting me. I know he is. Blood fills my mouth and it's hard to breathe. I should've died a long time ago. It's alright with me, as long as she's safe.

"You're gonna be fine. You'll make it through this," he says. I shake my head and let my head fall back.

"I love her, Vince. I don't deserve her, but I love her." I have to tell him. He has to believe me and take care of her when I'm gone.

"You can tell her yourself." Vince looks down at me as my vision starts to spin and darkness fades. "I promise I'll keep her safe for you."

The last words I hear come from her mouth as she pushes Tommy away and runs for me. “Anthony,” she cries out. But I can’t answer her. My world fades and I dream of her touch. Of her love.

CHAPTER 31

CATHERINE

“*N*o!” I scream while shaking my head in denial. They try to pry me away from Anthony. My hands grip onto his shoulders and my tears fall onto his chest. I feel numb everywhere, but my heart is aching.

Blood soaks into Anthony’s shirt and pools around his back as he lies still on the ground. “Help him!” I frantically scream out. They need to do something. He can’t die. No! He can’t leave me like this. He can’t die because of me. *Please, God, save him.* I pray as I watch Vince rip off his shirt. Anthony doesn’t move. His limp body sways as Vince looks over the bullet wound in his back.

I vaguely hear the grunting of men as they haul off dead and limp bodies. I hear the smash of a fist pounding into tender flesh and threats being made. They took prisoners, but most of the men are surrounding their own man, the only Valetti to fall. My Anthony.

“Get her out of here,” Vince yells back. He looks directly past my shoulder at Tommy who’s holding me back.

“I can’t leave him,” I say. I search for understanding in Tommy’s eyes, but he’s not looking at me. He looks like he’s carrying the pain that Anthony must be feeling. His eyes are full of anguish. He grips me closer to him as I try to push away and go back to Anthony. I can’t let him die. He can’t die.

“Right now you need to,” Vince says as he looks at me, but it’s not said with hate or anything other than sympathy.

“The cops are going to come and you can’t be here. You shouldn’t be anywhere around them.” He motions to our left, where the Cassanos are all lined up execution style. My heart twists. I don’t care about them. I don’t care about any of this.

“I can’t leave him,” I cry out to Vince as Tommy drags me back.

“I won’t tell you again.” Vince looks me dead in the eyes. “If you never want to see him again, go ahead and stay. Have him try to explain it to the cops.”

“You can’t stay. Just listen to Vince. He’ll take care of Anthony,” Tommy whispers into my ear. I know he’s hurting, too. I turn around in his arms and close my eyes tight, willing Anthony to be alright.

From my left, I hear a grunt of a laugh and someone spit. My eyes open and I see that prick. The bastard who started all of this. His hands are tied behind his back and he’s on his knees. He’s lined up like the others. Two of them are getting the shit beat out of them. But not Lorenzo. He looks at me with one black eye and gives me a bloody smile, and I’ve never wanted to hurt him more. I’ve never felt such a strong need for vengeance. It’s his fault. All of this is his fault.

I don’t think about it, and I don’t consider the consequences. I just reach for Tommy’s gun tucked in his waistband.

I hear his scream as I pull out of his grasp for just enough time to pull the trigger. I fire once, and it hits the fucker in his shoulder. I take a single step and scream with all the rage and pain I’m feeling. He falls backward with a cuss ringing in my ears. My second shot hits him square in the chest. Tommy’s arms wrap around mine. Several men yell. I don’t care. I stare at the man who made my life hell. The man who laughed at my pain. And I watch the life leave his eyes.

A strong hand rips the gun from my hand and I look up to see Vince scowling at me. He looks between me and Lorenzo. I can’t look him in the eyes. I swallow the lump in my throat and stop fighting against Tommy. His hold on me loosens, and I instinctively try to go to Anthony. But Vince is blocking me, and Tommy’s still gripping my wrist.

“Your ex?” Vince asks.

I nod my head as tears fall down my cheeks. I look back at him. That piece of shit should have died long ago.

“You snitched ‘cause of him?” he asks me. I fucking hate that he brings it up. I want to cower, but I don’t. I nod my head in response. Vince looks me in the eyes and gives me a small smile as he says, “He fucking had it coming.” He pats my shoulder and leans into my ear as he reassures me, “You did good.”

He pulls away from me and I feel the faintest bit of relief. But it’s not okay. Nothing can change what’s happened. Lorenzo being gone won’t bring Anthony back. He can’t die on me.

“But don’t do that shit again,” Vince says to me, handing Tommy back his gun. “Get your shit together, Tommy.”

“Let’s go,” Tommy says, pulling me away from the scene.

I hear someone ask Vince a question. I don’t know what the question was, but I hear Vince’s response clear as day.

“All of them. They’re fucking done.” Bullets ring out in an instant. I look over my shoulder to see the Cassanos falling to the ground, blood splattered on the ground in front of them. I should feel a sense of shock. But I feel nothing. I turn back around and let Tommy take me away before I give in to the urge to run back to Anthony.

I walk, but not by my own free will. I keep looking back, but they’re surrounding Anthony. I can’t see him. It hurts. It hurts too much. I feel like I’m dying. I get in the car, but I don’t know how. All I can see is the look in Anthony’s eyes as the bullets hit his back. I cover my face with my hands and let all the pain out as I sob.

“Catherine?” Tommy asks me after a long time. I look up and see that we’re driving, but I don’t know where we’re going. He pulls over and holds me against him as I cry. His hand rubs gently on my back and for a moment I pretend it’s Anthony. I pretend it’s okay. “I know Anthony has problems. It’s not his fault.” He chokes on his words and refuses to look me in the

eyes, "I'm sorry." I don't know how to respond, so I say nothing.

"Did he hurt you?" I hear the pain in Tommy's question and I look up at him with confusion. Did *Anthony* hurt me? It takes me a long time to gather the strength to answer. "No. Never." My heart twists with a pain I've never felt before.

"I didn't know he was keeping you against your will. I'm sorry," he whispers. "I'll take you anywhere you want, Catherine. You'll be safe. I'll make sure of it. He'll never find you if you don't want him to."

I shake my head frantically. "You don't understand. It's not like that. I want to go to Anthony," I insist. I hold onto Tommy's arm with an unrelenting grasp. My heart stammers in my chest and anxiety races through my blood. They can't send me away. I need to know he's okay.

"Do you love him?" Tommy asks.

"I do; I don't care if it's wrong." It's the truth, and I pray Tommy knows that. But he doesn't respond.

"He can't die for me; tell me he'll be okay." He has to be okay.

"I wish you'd ask me for something I can give you, Catherine, but I can't give you that."

CHAPTER 32

CATHERINE

The faint humming of the machines and the steady beeping of the monitors are the only sounds in the room, but I need to keep hearing them. They tell me he's alive. They removed the breathing tube from his throat today. It's been three days and they keep telling me he's going to wake up soon since now he can breathe on his own. They're just waiting on him now.

I'm waiting on him, too.

Tommy comes back into the room and hands me a styrofoam cup with a lid on it and the string from the teabag draped over the side. I give him a small smile and say thank you. I haven't slept at all. I didn't realize I haven't had to drink my tea or take my pills to sleep until I found myself curled up in the hospital chair, wide-awake and watching Anthony.

My voice is hoarse as I thank him.

"You can go if you want," Vince says from across the room as Tommy sags in the seat next to him. He keeps telling me that, and I give him the same response I did last time.

"I want to stay." He nods his head and looks down at his phone then back up at Tommy. They start talking in hushed tones. I don't mind. I don't listen. I just keep my eyes on Anthony's chest as it slowly rises and falls.

I put my cup down and scoot my chair closer to Anthony's bed. The clink of the metal is the only sound in the room. I

take his hand in mine and rub my thumb along the palm of his hand and wait. I need him to hold me back. I just need a sign that he'll be alright.

I look up and my heart stops beating as Anthony clears his throat and his head turns to the side. He's waking up. My eyes widen and I do what I've been trained to do. I get onto my knees in the chair and kneel as best as I can. I watch my dom, my master, my love, and my life as I wait for him to wake and acknowledge me.

I see Vincent and Tommy rise from their seats from my periphery. I don't look at them though. I don't care what they think. I need Anthony to see me waiting for him like this. I need him to know I was waiting for him, that I would always be here for him.

His eyes slowly open and he looks down at me with confusion as he takes in a heavy breath and winces. My heart hurts for him. I know he's in pain.

"Kitten," he barely manages to get out.

"Anthony," I say as I look up at him and move my hands to his bed, crawling to get close to him.

"Can I get in with you?" I ask him. I know he's in pain, but I need to feel him. I need to be next to him and be by his side.

"Please," I beg him. "I need to feel you." He gives me a nod and watches as I quickly move to him. I never want to leave his side again.

I climb onto the small bed and hold him close to me. Tommy and Vince stand and talk to Anthony, but I don't listen. I can't do anything but hold him.

Once they're quiet I finally speak.

"I'm so sorry, Anthony," I say as I bury my head into his chest.

"Nothing to be sorry about." He kisses my hair and rubs my back. He's consoling me when he's the one who's so badly hurt. I pull away and brush the tears from my eyes while I shake my head.

“I never should’ve left you.” I push down the sob threatening to choke me.

I look over to the left and see Vince and Tommy watching us. Both look confused and are obviously judging us, but I don’t care. I need him to know how much I want him, how much I need him. I can’t go back to a life without him. Never.

“I’ll go to the cell. I deserve to be punished.” I speak clearly and I know the other men heard, but I don’t care if they know. It’s none of their fucking business, and what they think of me is none of my business. I’ve never felt more safe and complete as I do with Anthony. I’m not letting that go.

“No, you need to go. Now,” Anthony says dully as he stares at the back wall.

“You’re throwing me away?” I ask him as my heart shatters in my chest. I shake my head in complete denial. I feel so broken. Every part of me hurts all the way to my soul.

“Please, Anthony,” I beg him. “Please don’t throw me away.”

He closes his eyes and refuses to look at me. “You don’t understand, Catherine. You’re free now. No one will come for you. You can live your life in peace.”

“We’ll make sure you’re safe and settled in.” Vince interrupts us and motions for Tommy to follow him. He holds the door open and they both look back at us. “Whatever you two decide, we’ll make sure you’re safe, Catherine.” He locks eyes with Anthony for a moment before leaving and closing the door behind him.

“But I don’t want to go.” My shoulders shake and my voice cracks. I try to scoot closer to him and he lets me. Thank God he lets me. “Please, Anthony. I can’t live without you.”

“You can.” His hand cups my chin and his thumb strokes against my jaw. I lean into his warmth and kiss his palm.

“You’ll find a man who can love you.” It breaks my heart that he’s willing to let me go. That he’s shoving me away. “I don’t deserve you.” He says the words with finality.

“Just the fact that you’re saying that means you do.” I breathe out the words, my hands clutching his. I need him to take me back.

“I’ll do anything.” I will. I’ll do anything he wants for him to take me back.

“Then leave me,” he says.

“I won’t.” I almost yell the words, but somehow, saying it in a calm voice and locking my eyes on his, it comes out with force.

His eyes heat with anger and a dark lust that I’ve missed. “Are you disobeying me, kitten?” he asks. His chest rises and falls with a sharp intake of air.

“Yes. I am.” I stare back at him defiantly, hoping it’s enough. That his need to punish me is enough that he’ll keep me. Even if he doesn’t realize it, I know he loves me. And I love him.

I close my eyes and gather up the courage to spill my truth to him. “I love you, Anthony.” I wipe the tears away angrily. “You’d better not throw me out. I’d rather die.”

“You wouldn’t,” he says as though he knows it to be true.

“I would. I can’t live without you.” The pain in my chest is unbearable. I know I won’t be okay without him. Never.

“I did that to you,” he says with regret.

“You did what I wanted, Anthony. You always did what I wanted.” I take his hand in mine and press his palm to my cheek. “I need you now more than I ever did. I’ll beg until you cave. I swear I will.”

He looks at me for a long time and I remain still, waiting for his verdict. My heart pumps slowly in my chest as though it’s prepared to stop beating if he denies me.

“Come here, kitten.” I crawl up to him, loving my pet name. I nestle into his side, careful not to hurt him. “You’ve been very disrespectful,” he says, staring into my eyes. “And you disobeyed me. You left me, and then disobeyed me again. You put yourself in danger.” His admonishment makes my shoulders droop in shame. What’s worse is that it’s all true.

“I’m sorry, Anthony.”

“Don’t be,” he says, taking my chin in his hand and tracing my lower lip with his thumb. “If you come back to me now,” he says, “I’ll never let you go.”

My heart swells in my chest and I push my lips to his. My tear-stained cheeks heat as he kisses me back with the passion I know he has for me. I break our kiss and finally breathe.

“Never let me go, Anthony.” I look into his tortured eyes and I hurt so much for him. For everything he’s been through, but also because I know leaving the way I did hurt him, and I fucking hate that. “I love you.” I’ll say it every day until he believes me, although I’m not sure he ever will.

His forehead scrunches and he takes in a deep breath. He swallows thickly and looks out of the hospital window. Finally, he looks back to me and says the words I want to hear every day for the rest of my life. “I love you, too. But that’s not even close enough to describing what I feel for you. I want you to remember that. Always.”

CHAPTER 33

ANTHONY - MONTHS LATER

I've been looking for Catherine everywhere and I'm trying to push away the feeling that something's wrong. I keep waiting for her to leave me again, no matter how many times she says she loves me. She says I just need time to accept it, and maybe that's true. I don't care what holds us together, so long as she never leaves me.

I almost pass by the pile of two-by-fours and cans of paint, but then I catch sight of her out of the corner of my eye. She's curled up in a ball on the reading nook I built for her. Each wall is a shelf for her books and there's a giant window with a bench that I plan on padding for her. She's curled up on the wood, napping.

"I gave you a fitting pet name, kitten," I say as I pet her hair. She blinks a few times and yawns. She's been tired from the move and from all the changes, but the one thing that stays the same is the look of devotion I get from her every waking moment. The move's been good for her. She said she needed to be close to family. My *familia*. Our *familia*.

I have to admit it's been good for her. For me, too. Which is surprising. Even Vince seems to be as happy as a pig in shit. And Catherine and Elle are thick as thieves when it comes to planning these fucking get-togethers she forces me to attend. Apparently having a girl that gets along well with everyone looks good for me and makes me more approachable. I'm still on my own when it comes to work, but that's the way I want it.

I'm about to whip her ass though and she should know it. "You were supposed to be upstairs twenty minutes ago," I tell her with a hard voice. She knows it's play though. There's a time for that side of me to come out, and right now, it's time. She wanted to play, and so did I. She should've been there to greet me on her knees.

Her eyes go wide and she's quick to pick up her phone. She checks it and shakes her head as she taps the screen and looks at her alarms. She winces and holds the phone up for me to see. She never turned the alarm on.

"I really hate to have to do this," I say even though I fucking don't hate it at all. She looks up with a bit of apprehension, but her eyes are full of lust and her legs subconsciously fall open. She knows she's going to be cumming soon. She's a spoiled pet. But I fucking love it.

I sit next to her on the bench and she quickly sits up and waits.

Since moving I've punished her ass at least a dozen times. Not for disobeying me, since she knows better than that. She deliberately disobeyed me once before we moved. She sought out Vince after I told her not to. I told her to leave it alone and let us break off from the *familia*. I thought it was best, but she defied me. My hand twitches remembering how I spanked her. I got her on edge and left her there, alone and crying. She took her punishment and waited for me to go back to her. It couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes. I'm not a man who makes love to a woman, but if I ever have, it was with her that night. And then of course I gave her what she wanted.

"What's my punishment, Anthony?" she asks as she looks up at me with big doe eyes. She's an awful actress. There's nothing but excitement on her face.

"I set the bench up in the dungeon." I can't help but smile at her name for the basement. She bought a whip and a riding crop, stuck them in the corner on top of a bed and called it the dungeon. My little kitten is fucking adorable.

Her eyes glaze over with longing and she speaks in a breathy voice. "Yes, Anthony." She loves that bench. I had to reinforce it because I almost broke it the last time I fucked her on it.

My brow furrows as she waits for me to lead her to the basement so she can take her punishment.

“Do you still want to play, kitten?” I ask her. After everything we’ve been through, I keep thinking one day she won’t want this. One day she’ll decide she doesn’t want this anymore.

“Always,” she answers. “I’ll always be your kitten, and you can be my bad boy.” She tells me like it’s a fact.

“Boy? No, kitten. I’m a bad man.” It’s the truth, and I wish she’d just accept it, but I don’t think she ever will.

Her eyes go soft and fill with sadness.

“You aren’t a bad man.” She shakes her head and it breaks my heart. I wish I’d never burdened her with my shit. None of that matters; it’s in the past where it belongs. And my sweet love is my future. It’s all for her.

“Bad boy?” I ask her. She’s gotta be fucking kidding me.

“It’s a genre of romance,” she explains.

Jesus Christ.

“Call me whatever you want, kitten, when we’re home. But please don’t call me your romantic bad boy in front of another human being ever.” That has her eyes filling with laughter and a silent giggle shaking her shoulders. That’s my girl.

I finger the ring in my pocket nervously. I just got it back from the jeweler. I had it custom designed for her to match her owl earrings. It took a little convincing, but now that she doesn’t fear losing them, she never wears anything else. I thought rubies in her engagement ring would be a nice touch. It’s the entire reason I wanted to play today. I need her to do this for me. We need this.

“You know you love it,” she teases me. As she says the words I slip the ring on her finger. She pulls back with a gasp and stares down at the diamond. She covers her mouth with her other hand.

“Marry me, Catherine.” I tell her simply. I want everyone everywhere to instantly know she’s mine. Always.

She nods her head as tears slip down her cheeks. She rises from her chair and wraps her arms around my neck as she says, "Yes, Anthony."

"I love you, Catherine," I whisper as I lean down for a kiss.

"I love you too, Anthony."

EPILOGUE

CATHERINE

I type away and continue hitting the keys even though I hear him coming. I just have to get this thought out before I forget. I was hit with a wave of inspiration for this scene and I don't want to lose it. I've been writing steadily ever since we moved into the new house. My office has a huge window, just like it did at our old place. Well, this one's even bigger, but the feeling is the same.

He walks up behind me at the back of my desk and rests his hands on my shoulders, but other than that, he doesn't interrupt. It only takes a minute for me to finish my thought and when I do, I'm quick to look up at him and give him a small smile. I reach my hand behind his neck and pull him down to me for a kiss.

"Mmm." He hums against my lips. "What is my naughty girl up to?" I blush at his low tone and rest my head against his chest.

"I wanted to write our story." I feel him stiffen behind me, but I keep going and decide to spill it all. "All of our stories."

"Kitten," Anthony says in an admonishing tone.

"No, no. It's fiction. Under a pen name. No one will ever know." I look up at him searching for approval. I love romance novels, and I just have to write all these love stories I've heard. The whole family is filled with fairytales, albeit dirty smutty fairytales, that have to be told. I've never felt compelled so much in my life to write them down. Ours will

be last, because in my completely unbiased opinion, it's the best.

He smirks at me and places a hand on the nape of my neck, massaging slightly. "Can I read them?"

"If you want to." I wouldn't be shocked if he did. He reads over my work from time to time. I used to think he was making sure that I wasn't trying to put clues or hints out there for someone to come rescue me from him. *As if*. But then he started doing things in bed that were incredibly familiar from my blogs and columns.

"Well, I definitely want to read ours. I wanna know what my kitten was thinking when I brought her home." He smiles warmly at me with love in his eyes before leaning down to give me a sweet kiss. My chest warms with his affection.

"I have a question I need to know... for the story." I don't know what he'll answer. But I really do want to know. "Why didn't you have me call you master?" I ask him.

It takes him a moment to answer. "I knew from the second I saw you that I would be just as much a slave to you as you would ever be to me. If not more." Tears prick my eyes. I fucking love his answer. "Doesn't matter what you call me, babe," he says as he tips my chin up so I have to look at him, "You'll always be my kitten."

"You'll always be my *bad boy*." That earns me a chuckle as I lean into his chest savoring how happy we both are.

It might not be ideal or perfect, but I'm more than satisfied with my happily ever after.

OWNED: HIGHEST BIDDER

BY LAUREN LANDISH & WILLOW WINTERS

Sneak Peek of Book 3

Highest Bidder Series

Owned

Joe Levi

“KIERSTEN,” I CALL OUT TO MY DEAR CLOSE FRIEND AS SHE WALKS through the main hall of Club X. I have to admit, this place is alluring and intoxicating with sinful pleasure at my fingertips, but I have yet to give in to my desires.

“Joseph!” she snaps in a hushed voice, scowling at me and gripping my arm to pull me aside to a darkened corner. It’s comical that the sweet little woman thinks she can pull me around, but I let her. After all, she’s been a close friend of mine for a lifetime, and at this point, she’s the only person I trust.

“That’s not my name here.” Her voice is low and her eyes dart down the hall, but it’s empty. The theme night has nearly everyone in the dining hall.

A chill goes through my blood. I forget sometimes. “I’m sorry... *Madam Lynn*,” I give her a small smile and she purses her lips, but I know she’s not angry with me. She never stays angry.

“What is it you want?” she asks, crossing her arms and cocking a brow.

“I wanted to make a Submissive an offer, outside of the auction.”

“Oh!” she says and her posture relaxes slightly, although she remains skeptical. “And what offer is that?”

“A monthly contract outside of the club. I’m willing to split the fees of course. I’m simply not interested in the charade of the auction.”

Kiersten raises her brow and I’m quick to add, “No offense.” I don’t mind giving the Submissive whatever amount she desires, and same for the club. The money goes toward women’s shelters. It’s a good cause I already donate to.

It’s not about the money. It’s about ensuring that I’ll get exactly what I want.

I’ve been wanting to take her away from here. I don’t have an interest in engaging in activities here, but I want her. I want to break her. That sweetness about her, I crave it. But I desire her tears more. I see the way her back arches as the braided tails of the whip smack against her skin. The way she touches the marks with a reverence after being lashed.

It’s all clear in training. I see how she’s taking things slowly and going under the radar. I need to take her away now. I hadn’t even seen her until I ran from the last auction, pissed off and not understanding how Isaac could let his Slave walk up onto that stage. I nearly ran her over, my delicate flower. Her sweet voice cut through my anger. She apologized to me, submitting into a kneel that was far less than perfect. But she was trying. I’ve been watching her ever since.

“May I ask who?” Kiersten asks.

“Lilly.” My flower. The men in this club don’t know how special she is yet. But I do. She has a sweet innocence about her for a reason. She’s yet to take a Dom.

I want her. And I’ll have her.

“I’m sorry Joseph, but the rules are in place for a reason, and Lilly is still finding her limits.”

I know she is; I watch her constantly. She enjoys the pain and pleasure. She can handle everything I want to give her. She’s perfect.

And the other men here will want her only because she’s a virgin. I want her because I can give her what she really needs.
A Master.

I clench my fists, hating that I’m living by these sets of rules.

Since when did my life revolve around the commands of others?

I’ve lived my life making demands and seeing that they’re met. I’ve murdered, committed crime after crime and lived a life without consequence. I have more power than any man in this room. More wealth.

I do whatever the fuck I want, when I want it.

But in the last year, I’ve simply been biding my time in this empty world I’m living in.

It’s time for a distraction. And Lilly is the perfect candidate.

“Don’t give me that look,” I hear Kiersten’s soft voice, laced with sympathy. “I know you’re hurting Joseph,” she says just beneath her breath.

I scoff at her. “This has nothing to do with that.”

“If you want Lilly, you can approach her and ask to be her Master, although I’m not sure she’s ready. If she goes up for auction, you may claim her that way as well. But there will be no deals outside of that.” Her voice is strong, although her face is an expression of compassion. I hate it. I hate that she knows me better than I know myself.

A couple’s footsteps echo in the hall as she speaks. I concentrate on the patter of bare feet and clacking of the shoes. I’m sick of being here. I want Lilly where she belongs. In my home, in my bed, *in her cage.*

“Joseph?”

My eyes snap to Kiersten's and bring me back to the moment.

“Are you sure you should be taking a Slave? Outside of the club, that is?”

My heart sputters in my chest, and my blood runs cold. I know why she's asking. But I'm tired of waiting and living in this limbo. I'm done living by their rules.

“I'm certain.” My words don't convince her, and I know she's unhappy, but I don't care.

I want Lilly.

And I'm going to take her.

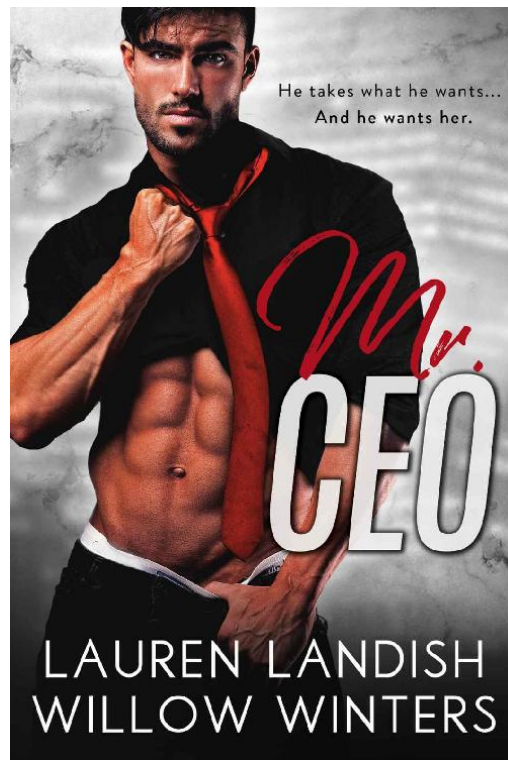
I'm going to *own* her.

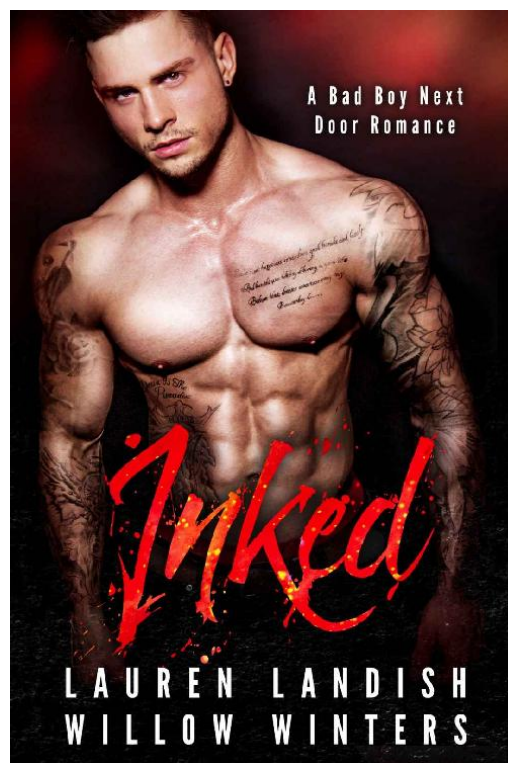
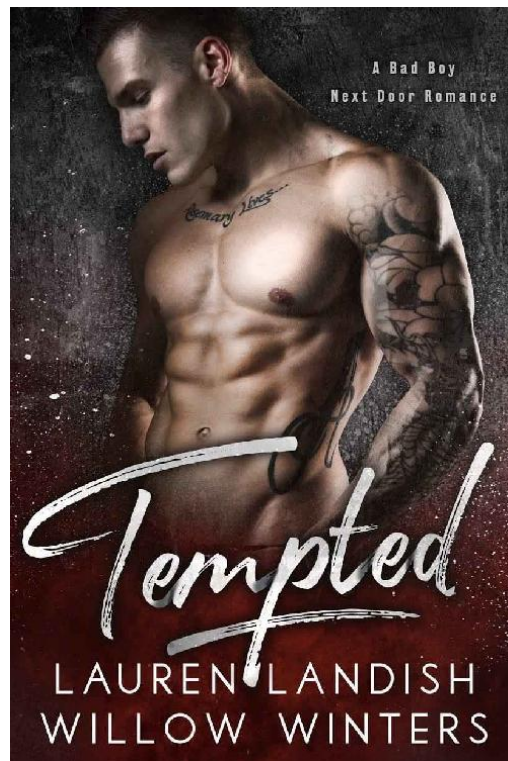
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