



KING

ALLIANCE BOOK TWO

S. J. TILLY



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Alliance Series Book TWO
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Contents

Content Warning

1. [Savannah](#)
2. [King](#)
3. [Savannah](#)
4. [Savannah](#)
5. [King](#)
6. [Savannah](#)
7. [Savannah](#)
8. [King](#)
9. [Savannah](#)
10. [King](#)
11. [Savannah](#)
12. [King](#)
13. [Savannah](#)
14. [King](#)
15. [Savannah](#)
16. [King](#)
17. [Savannah](#)
18. [King](#)
19. [Savannah](#)
20. [King](#)
21. [Savannah](#)
22. [Nero](#)
23. [Savannah](#)
24. [King](#)
25. [Savannah](#)
26. [King](#)
27. [Savannah](#)
28. [Savannah](#)
29. [Savannah](#)
30. [King](#)
31. [Savannah](#)
32. [King](#)
33. [Savannah](#)
34. [King](#)
35. [Savannah](#)
36. [Savannah](#)
37. [King](#)

38. [Savannah](#)
39. [King](#)
40. [Savannah](#)
41. [King](#)
42. [Savannah](#)
43. [King](#)
44. [Savannah](#)
45. [Savannah](#)
46. [King](#)
47. [Savannah](#)
48. [King](#)
49. [Savannah](#)
50. [Savannah](#)
51. [King](#)
52. [Savannah](#)
53. [King](#)
54. [King](#)
55. [Savannah](#)
56. [King](#)
57. [Savannah](#)
58. [Savannah](#)
59. [King](#)
60. [Savannah](#)
61. [King](#)
62. [Savannah](#)
63. [King](#)
64. [Savannah](#)
65. [King](#)
66. [Savannah](#)
67. [King](#)
68. [Savannah](#)
69. [King](#)
70. [Savannah](#)
71. [King](#)
72. [Savannah](#)
73. [Savannah](#)
74. [King](#)
75. [Savannah](#)
76. [King](#)
77. [Savannah](#)
78. [King](#)
79. [Savannah](#)
80. [King](#)
81. [Savannah](#)
82. [King](#)

83. [Savannah](#)

84. [King](#)

85. [Savannah](#)

86. [King](#)

87. [Savannah](#)

88. [King](#)

89. [Savannah](#)

90. [King](#)

91. [Savannah](#)

92. [King](#)

[Epilogue One](#)

[Epilogue Two](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books By This Author](#)

As the phrase goes...

They say that we die twice. Once when they bury you in the grave. And the second time is the last time somebody mentions your name.

So this book is dedicated to my sweet Laney—and to all the dogs who took pieces of our hearts with them—because this way, so long as someone reads your name, you'll live on forever.

Content Warning

There's no need for stalking when you go straight to kidnapping...

This book contains graphic, sometimes gory, violent death. Kidnapping, blackmail and forced imprisonment. A woman getting married against her will. Some dubious consent. Discussions of human trafficking. And overall, lots of bad behavior.

Just like Nero, King is a red flag all the way to his bones. So please, as always, be well-informed and proceed with caution.

CHAPTER 1

Savannah

“ARE YOU SURE YOU DON’T JUST WANT TO DROP THAT OFF AND GO BACK TO my place?” Lee glances at me as the light turns green and he takes his foot off the brake. “It’s kinda early for dinner.”

I look down at the chilled pan of lasagna in my lap, the tin foil top crinkling under my grip. “I know it’s early, but it’s not like we’re gonna eat the second we get there.” I try not to take it personally that he doesn’t want to try my cooking. “And it hasn’t been that long since Mandi’s surgery, so she probably goes to bed pretty early.”

Lee drums his fingers on the steering wheel. “She’s not contagious or something, is she?”

My mouth pops open and it takes me a moment to reply. “She had to have back surgery because of a fall.”

I want to add *so unless you can catch clumsiness, then no, it’s not contagious*. But the look of exasperation he aims my way is enough to shut me up.

Pressing my lips together, I look out the window, letting Lee follow the voice commands of the GPS to my friend’s house.

When we met last month, his highbrow, buttoned-up personality appealed to me. He’d seemed sophisticated, and it had been a long time since a good-looking man had been outright flirtatious with me.

I’d soaked up his charm like a sock in a puddle. And he was super considerate on our first date. And still very kind on our second. But ever since he opened the door for me today, he’s been a bit of a butthole.

I figured the whole *sex on the third date* thing was just a saying. But he’s acting kind of... whiny. And I have to wonder if he’s being that way because

he thought we'd be sleeping together.

Which is stupid. Because this isn't that sort of date. And he was the one who volunteered to come with me today. Probably should have taken that as a sign—the fact he weaseled his way into today when I told him I was free tomorrow.

I use my fingers to make sure the tin foil is secure.

I hadn't planned to introduce Lee to anyone until we were serious. And now, I think it's safe to say we won't be getting serious because I have no intention of seeing him again. This behavior isn't attractive at all.

Plus, I know I told him that Mandi had surgery on two of her vertebrae.

Is she contagious?

Who asks that?

Lee turns on his blinker, slowing to take the turn onto Mandi's street.

"If you don't want to hang out, I totally understand." I tell him, hoping he'll take the out I'm offering. "You could always just drop me off."

"No," he sighs, "I said I'd come, and I'm a man of my word. How would it look to your friend if I didn't show up?"

My teeth press into my bottom lip. This is my chance to tell him I didn't mention him to Mandi because I wasn't sure he was really going to come.

But I don't want to come off rude and make the next few hours extra awkward.

I lift a hand to point. "It's the yellow house. There's a driveway around back, but I think it's okay to park on the street here."

We're in a nice middle-class neighborhood not far from Minneapolis. The mature trees cover the street in shade, guarding us against the hot July sun.

Lee parallel parks his car into one of the open street spots, and I wait until he's turned off the engine before unbuckling and opening my door.

It takes a little maneuvering to climb out of his low sports car without dumping the pasta into my lap, but I manage.

When he walks around the back of the car to join me on the sidewalk, I hold out the dish. "Can you hold this for a second?"

I'm almost surprised when he takes it without comment, so I don't waste any time straightening my clothes.

It was hard to decide on an outfit for today. Since I've only seen Lee twice, or three times if you count the night we met, I'm still in the *dress to impress* phase. But my friend just had freaking back surgery, meaning it's unlikely that she'd dress up for a stay-at-home early dinner. So, I cut the

difference with a pair of frayed jean shorts, a floral print tank top that shows off my cleavage, and gold ballet flats.

The shorts crept up way too much while sitting, so it takes some wiggles and yanks to get the material back in place. They're cute, and objectively they look good, but I've never liked my legs—they've always been *too big*— which means I can't think about wearing them because I'll overthink, and it will stress me out. But I do like that they're just long enough to keep my thighs from rubbing together. Because the only thing more painful than the company of a disappointing man, is chafing.

I shake my head at myself, as I run my hands down the front of my top. The bold pattern helps to visually flatten some of my... ripples.

You'd think after thirty-two years of being "big boned", as my family put it, I'd know how to dress myself, but I'm still trying to figure it out. Thanks to some great body-positivity accounts I found on social media earlier this year, I've been trying hard to embrace my softness by wearing tighter, more revealing clothes. It's supposedly a way for me to embrace my sexuality, rather than always trying to hide my body. And it's going okay, but it's a process. And the weird vibes for Lee have me feeling a little overexposed at the moment.

He holds out the lasagna, clearly not willing to carry it up to the house for me.

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him to leave, but a *thanks* comes out instead.

Lee sweeps an arm toward the sidewalk. "After you, m'lady."

A smile pulls at my lips as I step past him.

Okay, maybe I'm being too harsh on Lee today.

When we reach the front door, Lee reaches past me to ring the bell, then moves so we're standing side by side.

It takes a few moments—as is expected—before the door swings open revealing my friend.

"Savannah?" Mandi's face is covered with a confused smile.

"Hi!" I greet her with a grin. "Look at you walking around!"

She snorts and gives her walker a little shake. "The docs tell me I need to stay mobile."

"Well, you look amazing," I tell her.

"Thanks." I watch her eyes slide over to Lee then back to me. "I didn't know you were seeing anyone," she uses a stage-whisper, knowing the man

next to me can hear everything.

Not sure what to introduce him as, I just tell her, “This is Lee.” Tipping my head in his direction since my hands are still full.

They exchange the usual pleasantries as they shake hands before Mandi turns back to me. “Sorry, I’m getting distracted. What are…” Her eyes drop to the heavier-by-the-moment pan of lasagna in my hands. “Oh my god, was that today!?” She smacks a palm against her forehead. “I thought it was *next* Saturday that you were coming over.”

“Oh no!” Heat creeps up my neck. If she sends us away, I’ll melt from embarrassment. “It’s probably me that was wrong.” *I say it, even though I checked our text messages four times over the last four days, making sure I had the right time.* “Well, you can pop this in the freezer if you want.” I lift the food. “Save it for another day. Or next weekend.”

“No, no.” She shakes her head. “Come in, please.” She steps back. “Another one of my friends is here with her brother. We’d worked on an event together this spring and she just wanted to check in on me.”

“Well that’s nice of her.” I follow Mandi into the house. “And she brought her brother?” For some reason, that makes me snicker.

Mandi angles so only I can see her face, then widens her eyes and fans herself.

Apparently the brother is good looking.

This will probably be awkward, crashing in on guests she’s already hosting, but having some eye candy can’t hurt. Especially since, starting tomorrow, I’m giving up on men. Because Lee still hasn’t taken this pan out of my freaking hands and my arms feel like they’re gonna fall off.

Mandi sets the pace, and we make our way down a hallway, toward the living room situated at the back of the house. The length of the hallway is lined with art.

My friend manages several art galleries—which is how we met—and she splits her time between here and Chicago, so she understandably has an amazing collection.

As we near the living room, I can hear the low murmur of voices.

Slowing, I let Mandi shuffle into the room first and try to relax my shoulders.

“Hey, I hope you don’t mind if my friend Savannah and her boyfriend join us.”

It takes effort to not make a face when I hear her call Lee my boyfriend,

but it's not worth correcting.

I take that last step into the room and see Mandi's other friend sitting on the couch, and next to her, as promised, is a man.

I'm not even walking anymore and I almost trip.

Because dear god, *what a man*. Mandi's little face fanning thing was not warning enough for how hot this man is.

He's dressed way too nice for a weekend. Basically, a suit, but without the suit coat, like he tossed it aside when he got too warm. And his fitted white shirt has the top two buttons undone, with the sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. Plus the way he's lounged back, knees spread wide, stretching the material of his pants to their limit...Holy Christ, it's working for him.

And his rich brown hair—the same color as his sister's—is trimmed short on the sides, the same length as his beard, with the hair on the top of his head a little longer. I bet he usually has it slicked back perfectly, but like the rest of him, his hair is just a little disheveled.

But when my eyes move up, and lock with his, I take a step back.

There's something there.

Something wild.

"Hi," the woman next to the devilish man lifts her hand in a polite wave.

Happy for the distraction, I lift the pan in my hands a little as a greeting.

I'd almost forgotten I was still holding this. Now that I'm thinking about it, my fingers are starting to tingle.

I really need to work on my arm strength.

"Sorry we just kinda crashed," my laugh sounds as unnatural as it feels. "Calendar mix up."

The woman makes a face of understanding. "We've all done it."

I shrug a shoulder, not really believing her. She's dressed up as much as her brother, in a flashy skirt combo, not looking at all like someone who would show up at the wrong place or time.

Not that I did that.

Mandi makes her way to one of the open high back chairs, while I remain standing, shifting my weight in the uncomfortable silence.

When I finally hear Lee's footsteps approach behind me, I scoot a little to the side.

He must've gotten distracted by some of the art pieces—which I can usually appreciate—but him walking in after us just makes this all weirder.

I point using an elbow. "Everyone, this is Lee." I leave off the misplaced

title and realize I haven't gotten the siblings' names either.

"Nice to meet..." The woman starts just as Lee rounds the corner. But she stops, her head jerking back as if someone just threw a drink in her face. "Leland?"

Lee halts next to me. *Halts*, like he walked into a wall.

The woman looks at me, then back at Lee. "What the fuck is this?"

I look back and forth between them, wondering how they know each other. And why she keeps calling him Leland.

"Aspen..." Lee croaks the word. Her name?

I watch the woman clench her jaw as she shoves up to stand. "This is the work you had to do today?!" She points a red tipped finger my way.

Oh no.

Oh no oh no oh on.

"Lee, what's going on?" I ask the man standing beside me, even as dread fills my belly.

"His name is *Leland*." The woman, Aspen, bites out. "And *he* is my lying, cheating, piece of shit husband."

CHAPTER 2

King

WELL, TODAY JUST GOT A LOT MORE INTERESTING.

Abandoning my laid back position, I sit up straight.

There are few people I dislike more than I dislike Leland. He's a sleazy prick.

Unfortunately, Aspen never seemed to see it. Until recently.

"I can't fucking believe you!" Aspen spits.

Very recently.

Leland's face can't decide what emotion to display, so he's stuck in this open-mouthed flounder expression. His lips smacking in denial before he chokes out the classically tragic line, "It's not what it looks like."

Aspen tenses like she might lunge across the room, so I reach up and grip her elbow.

She doesn't need to resort to violence.

That's what I'm for.

The woman who entered the room a moment before Leland takes a step away from him, her wide, stunned gaze bouncing between everyone.

I wait for her pretty brown eyes to connect with mine, and feel pleased when she holds them a half second longer than the first time.

It's a shame she was foolish enough to get caught in Leland's oily charm. She looks too pretty, too soft, for his slimy grip. And yet here she is, her big tits covered in flowers, her shiny blonde hair styled into gentle curls and wearing jean shorts like she's the actual girl-next-door.

My sister shouts something else, and I watch the woman flinch.

"I never—" she tries to say something but Aspen cuts her off.

"I didn't ask you, skank!"

My fingers tighten around Aspen's elbow. It's obvious this other woman didn't know the fucker was married. But my sister has never been known for an easy temper.

Finally, plucking his balls off the floor, Leland opens his mouth to speak again. "Maybe if you weren't always such a frigid bitch, I wouldn't have—"

Oh, this stupid motherfucker...

I stand.

And he shuts the fuck up.

CHAPTER 3

Savannah

WHEN THE MAN STANDS, I FORGET HOW TO BREATHE.

He's big. Like really big. Taller than... I don't know. Way taller than my five and half feet. Taller than Lee- *Leland's* six-foot frame. And his muscles...

I wet my lips.

His biceps fill out the material of his sleeves, making the shirt look nearly uncomfortable.

My heart rate picks up even more when he takes one step forward.

I don't know if I'm more scared of what he might do, or of the fact that he let go of his sister's arm. Because she looks like she wants to kill Leland—and me—with her bare hands.

"Leland," the man sighs, and I feel his voice skim across every inch of my exposed skin. "You're even dumber than I thought. And that's saying a lot. I know you're not sleeping around on my sister and blaming her for it." He pauses. "With *me* standing right here."

"We..." I try to say, but trail off, because no one is listening to me.

For my own sake, I want them to know that we never slept together. But it's not like that really makes a difference here because sex or not, his wife has every reason to be furious at him.

Lee takes a step away from his brother-in-law. "This has nothing to do with you, man." Fear vibrates through his voice. "This is between me and Aspen."

The big man is shaking his head before Lee finishes. "That's where you're wrong. This has everything to do with me, because you just fucked with *my family*." His tone deepens to a growl on the last two words.

The gravity of the tone sinks into my stomach.

I don't know who these people are, but this situation suddenly feels dangerous. Like more dangerous than a divorce with an angry wife.

I shuffle another step away from Lee, glancing over at my friend Mandi, who is still sitting, stunned.

Aspen takes a step forward to stand next to her brother. "I don't know where you put your wedding ring, but you might as well leave it off. Because we're over."

"Good!" Leland tosses his hands up, moving backwards. "I don't want anything to do with your messed up family and the shit—"

"LEAVE!" The big man's bellow startles a squeak out of me. And I drop my eyes to the lasagna trembling in my grip before I can catch anyone looking at me.

I don't remember the last time I heard someone raise their voice like that, in an aggressive yell, but it made my pulse spike.

I hear Leland's feet scramble on the tiled floor as he hurries back down the hallway. My dignity and pride fleeing at the same time.

The siblings say something to each other, but the blood rushing through my veins is making my hearing fuzzy.

I want to be somewhere else.

I'd love to be anywhere else.

"I'm so sorry." Mandi's voice breaks into my bubble of self-pity.

I don't know what she has to be sorry about. Mandi's the only innocent party here.

"No, I'm sorry," Aspen's tone is falsely calm. "If my soon to be ex-husband wasn't such a piece of shit, he never would've fucked your friend in the first place."

Footsteps click across the floor, and I'm trying to muster the nerve to look up and blurt out the truth, when a shoulder roughly bumps into mine.

Even with her angry energy, I hadn't actually expected the woman to touch me, so I wasn't ready. And with my arms already shaking from exertion, I watch the pan slip from my grip, landing on the floor, an inch in front of my toes, with a loud crack. The heavy ceramic, splitting where it met the hard surface, lasagna slopping out of the broken side, spreading across the floor.

I shuffle back, as the tears that had been threatening, start to well in my eyes.

Not the food!

“Apologies for the mess.” The man’s deep voice drags my attention up. I expect him to be looking at Mandi, but he’s staring at me.

His gaze holds mine for one thunderous heartbeat, his golden, lion-like eyes drilling into me, before he dips his chin and strides past.

CHAPTER 4

Savannah

TRYING TO CALM MY NERVES, I BLOW OUT A BREATH, AND LOOK UP AT THE plain brick building.

Today was my first time coming to Lee's apartment, and even though that was only a handful of hours ago, standing here with the night sky surrounding the building, it feels like a lifetime has passed.

I thought it was a little strange that Lee didn't offer to pick me up, like he has before. But knowing what I know now, plus the weird vibes I was getting from him when I got here, it all makes sense.

Because this is his fuck pad.

"Jerk," I huff under my breath as I approach the front door.

After the disaster earlier, I decided to spend the entire evening lounging with Mandi. We ordered take out—since my meal, pan and all, went into the garbage—and shared embarrassing stories, trying to make today feel like less of a catastrophe. She did offer me wine, but since she can't drink with her pain medication, I opted to abstain out of solidarity. Though, I'm heartily regretting that now.

Mandi kept apologizing, but there was nothing for her to apologize for. It's not like any of us planned for today to happen like it did. And even if it was at my expense, at least Lee got caught for being a cheater. It's never going to be fun when that sort of shit happens, but it's better for Aspen to know. And at least she had her brother with as support.

Obviously, I asked about the brother as soon as we heard the back door slam shut after they left.

King. What a perfect name for that man. It fits his royal bearing faultlessly.

It took a moment after they left for me to realize why they went out the back, because they'd parked in the driveway. And honestly, thank god they did. I don't even want to think about what sort of weirdness would've happened if we'd pulled up and Lee saw his wife's car, or his brother-in-law's car... How would he have explained not wanting to go in? Would he have just shoved me out the door and ghosted me? Or would he have just kept on driving, without letting me get out? Which would've been terrifying. I'd have thought I was being kidnapped.

I shove that freaky thought away and let out another large exhale.

There's absolutely no reason to think about any of them ever again. As soon as I get my keys back, Lee is dead to me. Aspen looked like she'd probably try to strangle me if she ever sees me again, and King is so far out of my league I might as well forget he even exists.

I mean, sure, he was looking at me with something akin to interest, but that was probably just curiosity because he thinks I'm sleeping with his sister's husband. But even without that, men that look like literal kings don't often go for the awkward, chubby girls, with paint-stained fingertips, who drive minivans.

Speaking of... I glance down the street at my pretty blue van and groan.

It wasn't until my Uber ride over here that I realized I didn't have my keys in my purse. And since I obviously had them to get here, they must be inside Lee's apartment. I wasn't in there long, but I remember my little purse tipping over on his counter while I was preoccupied trying not to drop the lasagna—oh the irony—so they must've fallen out then.

If it was just my car key fob, I'd abandon it. I have a spare at home, and it would be worth the cost to replace it, and another Uber ride, just to avoid ever seeing that lying scheming...*liar*, ever again.

I really need to work on my insult game.

But it's not just a single key, it's my keychain with everything—my house key, storage locker, PO Box—so I can't just walk away.

I'm working up the courage to call Lee and ask him to buzz me in, when a group of teens come bouncing out the front door.

Pretending to dig through my purse, I keep my head down as I pick up my pace, catching the door just before it closes.

That was handy.

The door clicks shut behind me, blocking out the sounds of the city, but there's still the low buzz of being in a fully occupied building on a weekend

evening.

My memory is pretty crappy with directions, but I still have his text telling me his apartment number.

And again, I'm reminded of what a lying bastard he is.

Lee was always so polished, so expensive. The nice clothes, the luxury car, the watch... And it made this place feel off, because it didn't fit his style.

Now I have to wonder if he stocked the place for appearance's sake, or if the cupboards and closets are empty. If I'd have gone further into his apartment, would I have noticed there was something missing.

I try to calm down, slowing my steps, and remind myself that I have nothing to stress about. I'm just here to get my keys. I won't even step foot across the threshold.

His apartment is halfway down the hall, and I pause in front of his door, hand raised and ready to knock.

Maybe I should text him.

I lower my hand.

Is that dumb? What if he's not even here?

I think about it for a long second then raise my fist again and step closer. He can ignore a text, but he can't ignore me banging on his door.

My arm is moving forward, ready to knock, when a muffled voice stops me.

Was that Lee?

My hand drops again.

Did he see me through the peephole?

Except the door doesn't open.

Oh my god, this is ridiculous!

I raise my hand again, set on knocking for real, when a deeper voice cuts through the door.

"...bought this under your own name, you stupid piece of shit."

I freeze.

"No! Don't—" Lee starts.

But whatever he was about to say, gets cut off with a pop.

Adrenaline fires in my veins. My fight or flight triggered by a sound I don't understand, but that I instinctively know is bad.

I lower my now trembling hand as a thud sounds from the other side of the door.

My feet walk me backward, away from Lee's apartment. Away from dark

energy swirling behind that door.

He just fell. Everything is fine.

I'm sure it's fine.

My butt bumps into the wall, startling me. And the "oops" is out of my mouth before I can stop it. A stupid lifetime reaction to always feeling *in the way* or *out of place*.

I press my lips together, but it's too late. Because the door directly in front of me swings open.

My eyes land on the chest that's at my eye level, and my gaze drops to the scene on the floor inside the apartment.

Feet. Legs. The torso twisted to the side. The face turned toward me. Looking right at me. With open, unseeing eyes. The dark circle in the middle of Lee's forehead. The slowly growing pool of angry dark blood beneath him.

Fear, like I've never known before, floods my body.

He's dead.

I'm looking at a dead person.

"You." A somewhat familiar voice snaps my attention back up to the man in the doorway.

To the killer.

To King.

He opens his mouth, but I don't wait to hear what he has to say. I turn and I run.

"Fuck!" King's snapped word makes me pump my legs faster.

I just saw a dead man!

My stupid little flats slap against the industrial carpet with quiet thwacks.

I've never seen a dead body before!

A door slams shut somewhere behind me. Lee's apartment?

Maybe King went back in to...I gag through my ragged breathing...clean up the murder scene.

I pass another apartment door hiding another oblivious resident, and that's when I realize I ran the wrong way. Not toward the front, where people are coming and going. No, I'm running away from it.

A sob wraps around my throat as tears spill down my cheeks.

I can't turn around. I can't chance passing Lee's apartment again.

Ahead of me, at the end of the hall, is a thick metal door that says *exit* above it, but I don't know where it leads. It has to be the side of the building,

but I don't remember where that is.

Just get out.

Maybe he's not following you yet.

Needing to know, I crane my neck around to look behind me. And the sob already building in my throat turns into a scream.

Because King is right there. Already caught up to me. His blazing eyes inches from mine.

My lungs strain, and the moment they compress to release my scream, a huge palm closes over my mouth.

The contact is enough to make me finally lose my footing, even before King's large body crashes into my back.

The impact knocks the scream out of my chest and has me flying forward.

Not wanting to see the ground coming, I squeeze my eyes shut, and stretch my arms in front of me to brace my fall.

And then I feel...a muscular arm wrap around my waist.

My eyes pop back open.

My feet dangle above the floor as the arm around my middle supports my weight.

We hardly even slow down.

The hand over my mouth is still pressing down, making it hard to breathe.

I'm not a runner. And fright mixed with sprinting is enough to put me near hyperventilation and sucking in breaths through my nose isn't cutting it.

King jostles me, his arm loosening just a touch as he sort of bounces me, like he's trying to boost me higher.

His arm tightens again as he grunts, "Heavy."

This bastard.

Still terrified, his shitty comment is enough to spur me out of this frozen state.

I claw at the hand over my mouth. My filed short nails barely even scratching his skin.

"Knock that off." He gives me a little shake. "I like 'em heavy."

He's kidnapping me. Kidnapping me, probably to kill me, but it almost sounds like he's smirking.

And like *'em heavy*. What does that mean? Is he going to *silence of the lambs* me?

The arm surrounding me does that loosen-jostle thing again. "Legs up, Honey."

Out of reflex, I comply, lifting my legs with my dwindling strength.

King slows for one stride, and I blink at the sight ahead of me a second before my feet depress the bar across the center of the thick metal door, releasing the lock, and letting King walk us straight outside.

Did I just help kidnap myself!?

The light above the exterior door is yellow and dim, and King strides us out of the illuminated half circle in two strides, the thick summer air swallowing us with every step.

I can hear traffic behind us as King walks us down the side street.

Toward the dark.

This can't be happening.

This really can't be happening.

I start to thrash. Panic making me flail wildly, trying to make noise but it's my lungs that are screaming now.

Please ancestors, if you get me through this, I promise to work on my cardio.

King turns off the sidewalk and jogs, taking us across the street, straight for a large blacked out SUV.

Doubling my efforts, I kick my legs harder. My feet grazing his shins, but never connecting like I want them to.

Until one does.

An angry groan follows my hit, and our movement suddenly stops.

King bends at the waist, putting me face down over the concrete.

I attempt a shriek, but he doesn't let go. If anything, his hold tightens, making it easier for me to feel his agonized moan as it travels from his chest, into my back, and down through every inch of my body.

"Savannah," he growls my name, his breath against my neck, shooting tingles down my spine.

What the hell, body?

King straightens and staggers two steps until I'm sandwiched between him and the back of the black SUV. Putting even more of him against even more of me.

He's still making pained sounds, and I think I must've gotten him in the nuts with one of my kicks.

Half of me cheers but the half that was raised to always be exceedingly polite, feels guilty. Which makes the first half of my brain remind the second half that *he just killed someone* and politeness is the least of my worries.

King's forearm is shoved up against the underside of my boobs, pushing them up higher, and his weight on my back squishes them into the hard surface.

"Ow!" My cry is muffled against his suffocating palm.

"Look," he grits out, shifting his weight pressing his temple against my ear. "You can keep struggling, I can duct tape your hands and feet and mouth, shove you into the back of my Suburban, and shoot anyone that comes across us during the process. *Or* you can be a good little girl and sit in the front seat and no one has to die." He pauses. "Well, no one else."

He says it like it's nothing.

Like killing his brother-in-law is nothing.

"I'm gonna move my hand, and if you feel the urge to scream, remember the gun tucked into the back of my pants. Remember that anyone I kill will be on your hands. And if it goes loud, I'll need to leave quickly. Which means a bullet in your head too."

His casual tone makes it all so much worse, causing tears to stream down my cheeks.

He flexes his fingers. "Are we on the same page, Honey?"

I nod as best I can, and he finally drops his hand from my mouth.

I don't scream.

I can't be responsible for someone dying. So, I just hang there, in his grip, gasping for air.

"Same goes for running." The arm around my waist slackens as he lowers me until my toes touch the ground again.

Pebbles shift under my thin shoes and my knees sway.

I'm scared. Terrified. Yet I still can't help but think how impressive it is that he carried me all this way. With one arm.

He slowly pulls that arm away from me and I steady myself against the vehicle, trying to catch my breath, hoping to come up with some amazing plan.

But then he nudges me.

"Let's go." King isn't even winded, apparently that heavy breathing from a second ago was just from pain.

With no amazing plan coming to mind, I let him guide me to the passenger door.

He keeps one big palm on my back as he opens the door with the other.

I don't think for one second about the way my shorts are riding up my

ass, or how climbing into this monstrous vehicle will put my butt right in his face, because I'm too busy remembering every episode of 20/20 that reminds you to never get into the car with a stranger.

"Put your seatbelt on."

I blink at him, but tears are still blurring my vision.

Have I been crying this whole time?

"Put your seatbelt on," King demands again as his shoulders fill the open door frame.

Even if someone were to walk by right now, they wouldn't even see me.

And if they did...

I can't let someone die for me.

My hands are shaking so bad it takes me two tries to even grab the seatbelt.

My kidnapper sighs. "I'll do it."

Before I can stop him, King plucks the belt from my grip.

With one hand still on the doorframe, he leans into the vehicle, twisting his body and putting us chest to chest, as he reaches to click in my seatbelt.

Those wild golden eyes, that I thought I'd never see again, are so close. The small amounts of light from the streetlamps overhead reflect off his irises, and I don't know if it's more or less scary that I still find him so attractive.

"Stay," King whispers, then he's gone. The door slamming shut in his wake.

My chest expands. My subconscious mind having held its breath with him so close.

What feels like one second later, King is sliding into the driver's seat next to me. And a feeling of guilt swamps over me. *I didn't even try to run.*

He tosses something over his shoulder, and my eyes follow the motion, feeling a little stupefied at the sight of my purse.

When did I drop that?

When did he pick it up?

Of course, he couldn't leave it sitting in the hallway. Can't have any evidence that I was there. *Except for my car keys sitting somewhere inside that apartment.*

And of course he threw the purse too far back for me to reach.

I don't have a single thing in there that could be used as a weapon, but I do have a phone—which is great for calling the police right about now.

The engine roars to life, and I leave my dead, not-quite-boyfriend's apartment with his killer.

CHAPTER 5

King

WELL, FUCK ME. THIS IS NOT HOW I PLANNED FOR TONIGHT TO GO.

The woman in the seat next to me sounds like she's on the verge of losing it, so I steer the vehicle one handed and keep the hand nearest her loose on my lap. That way I'm ready when she eventually decides to retaliate. Because I'm sure it's coming.

We pass under a streetlamp before taking a sharp turn to circle behind Leland's building, and the thin yellow bands of light shimmer across her tear-stained cheek.

I don't hurt women. I certainly don't kill women. But I need her to keep cooperating for the time being. And fear has always proven to be a swift and thorough motivator.

I do feel bad about kidnapping her, but if she hadn't shown up on that fucker's doorstep, she wouldn't be in my car now. So, really, it's mostly her fault.

My foot is depressing the brake to make the last turn back onto the road that runs in front of Leland's building when I notice Savannah start to reach for her seat belt.

While one hand turns the wheel, I slide the other one across the center console and set my hand over the buckle. She's keeping her eyes ahead, playing at the compliant hostage, so she doesn't see the movement.

I expect her to yank away the second her fingers make contact with my skin, but she doesn't seem to realize it's me that she's touching. Her fingers spread as she tries to feel for the buckle, and that's when she freezes, with her hand gently holding mine.

It's almost comical how her head slowly turns, and how her gaze slowly

drops, before she jerks her hand away with a yelp.

Okay, so maybe I don't laugh, but I do smile.

She shouldn't be this cute, with terror in her eyes and tears on her cheeks, but she is. And I learned long ago not to fight my emotional reactions. Life is way more fun when you just let yourself feel and don't bother with psychoanalyzing every moment to death.

"Please, let me go." Her whispered plea is shaky, and she says it to her lap, where her hands are now clutched together.

Instead of replying, I stomp on the gas, and we accelerate past Leland's shitty apartment building.

When another minute of silence goes by, she tries again.

"I w-won't say anything."

I can feel her looking at me, but rather than make eye contact, I remove my hand from where it was still covering her seatbelt to tap the screen on my dashboard to make a call. "I know."

The loud ringing comes through the car speakers, and Savannah jumps in her seat.

I adjust the volume and it rings once more before the call is answered. "It's past your bedtime, old man. Why're you up?"

This jackass.

"I need cleaners sent—" I start, but my words are cut off by Savannah's frantic shouts.

"Help! Help!" She leans forward in her seat, looking at the ceiling for the mic. "Can you hear me?! I'm being kidnapped! Help!"

There's a beat of silence before Nero's laughter fills the car.

Savannah jerks away from the noise, her back pressing against the seat.

"Damn, King. You finally call me with something interesting," Nero continues to laugh. "Can't wait to hear this story."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. This isn't going to make my situation any better.

"You're not gonna help me." It's a statement, and Savannah says it quietly, but Nero still hears it.

"Sorry, lady. If my man took you, it's for your own good. Or maybe his own good." I can picture the stupid grin that's probably on his face.

Savannah lunges for her car door, jerking wildly on the handle.

But it doesn't open, and it won't until I choose to open it for her.

"Quit," I tell her.

She doesn't.

"Quit it!" I shout, trying to break through her panic.

While she keeps trying, her sobs turning to hiccups, I keep hold of the steering wheel with my left hand and lean across, snagging both her wrists in my right.

She screams, the sound nearly deafening in the enclosed space.

"Jesus, woman!" She almost dislodges my grip, so I tighten my hold. "Just fucking chill!"

Her struggle only intensifies, and I have to tug her hands toward me, pulling her half over the center console to get her contained.

Using my forearm to pin hers down, I keep her hands gripped together in my lap. I'm sure it's uncomfortable for her, but if she makes me wreck my favorite vehicle, I'm gonna be pissed.

Stomping on the gas, I fly through a yellow light and aim for the entrance to the freeway.

"Remember what I said about shooting anyone that comes to help you?" I grit out, and she finally quiets. "That goes for the first responders, too. So, if you make me crash, I'm gonna have to start picking off first responders, and you're going to be the proximate cause of death for a lot of people."

She goes limp, dropping her chin down, her forehead touching my arm.

I'll admit that it's maybe been too long since I've gotten laid, because this contact is starting to get to me. And feeling her shudder, with sobs, against me shouldn't be stirring...*things*.

Blissful silence descends inside the vehicle. Until it's broken up by a metallic hum, and soft sound of something popping.

"Are you really making fucking popcorn right now?" Nero doesn't answer, but he doesn't have to since the increased popping replies for him. I sigh. "Do we have a crew nearby that can take care of a body?"

"If you're in the city I can have guys there within thirty. Did anyone see you?"

"Other than my kidnap victim?" I deadpan. "No. No one saw me."

He makes a grunt of approval that annoys me. Nero might kill more regularly than I do, but it's not like I've forgotten how to do it.

"Do you need somewhere to take her?"

His question makes me grind my teeth. "No." I'm not bringing this little beauty queen to one of our holding cells.

"Alright, then where are you headed?" The microwave beeps alerting that

the time is up.

As I hesitate to answer, I feel Savannah tense under my hold.

“Home.”

CHAPTER 6

Savannah

HOME.

That word echoes inside my skull.

He's taking me home.

This answer feels a lot like his handsomeness... I don't know if *home* is better or worse than the alternative.

I mean if he was just going to kill me, he would've shot me in the alley and left me on the street. Right? He wouldn't be bringing me to his home.

But what reason would there be to bring me home?

I catch the tail end of him rattling off Lee's address to the man on the phone.

The caller ID just showed the letter N, but I'll never forget the sound of his voice or the way he laughed when I begged for help. And I'll never forgive him.

"I'll get it taken care of," N says through the speakers. "But I'll be calling you later for the story."

"Yeah, yeah," King answers casually, even as he has me pinned to the seat with one arm. "Mind hanging up? I sorta have my hands full over here."

There's a snicker, followed by a crunching sound, that has to be that awful man eating his stupid popcorn, before the call cuts off completely.

In the quiet that follows, I take note of the ache in my arms. The hard edge of the center console digging into my side. The way the seat belt is digging into the side of my neck.

And it's all too much.

I don't like pain. It's never been my thing.

I don't have tattoos. I got my ears pierced at sixteen because all my

friends had them, and I cried the whole time.

I like going on walks. I don't like running. I don't like the burn that comes with lifting weights. I like being calm and comfortable. I like painting. I like to pretend I'm happy. And I can't...

I can't pretend right now.

This is the furthest from happy I've ever been.

My breath catches in my lungs.

What if I'll never be happy again?

My chest tightens.

What if this is the end? What if this is how I die? Alone. Afraid. Still searching for the peace and belonging I dreamed of as a girl...

The tears that never really stopped stream from my eyes.

"I-I'm sorry. I won't say anything to anyone." My lips brush against the smooth leather that divides my seat from King's. "I hate Lee, too. This is all his fault." The sadness of that truth almost overwhelms me, causing my shoulders to shake with the weight.

I'd only ever wanted to be with someone that appreciated me for me. To have my art taken seriously. And I thought Lee was finally that person. But he wasn't. He's not even *Lee*. He's a liar. And a cheater. And his death didn't settle the score. It just made my problems worse.

"Please," I whisper. "I don't want to die."

What a pathetic way to go. *Begging*.

"Savannah." A hand smooths down the back of my head. "Just breathe, Savannah."

The hand lifts, then travels the same path.

My inhale is ragged but less loud.

"Hush." His tone matches the meaning of the word, and my body reacts. My lungs expanding smoothly. "That's it." Another pass of his hand. "You're okay."

My exhale comes out as a sad laugh. *I'm not okay*.

His hand settles on the back of my neck and he responds as though I said it out loud. "You know what I mean."

My lips pull into a reluctant smile. *At least he's honest*.

I close my eyes.

I need to calm down. I'll never get out of this if I'm not thinking straight.

As if thinking the phrase activates my brain, I realize that the hand on the back of my neck is the same hand that was holding me in place.

My fingers flex and sure enough, my wrists are free, and my hands are... resting in my kidnapper's lap.

I yank my arm back and sit up, dislodging his hold entirely.

King lets me pull away and rests his hand back on the center console. Like he's ready to restrain again. But I won't give him a reason to. Not yet, at least.

Resigning myself to the fact that I'm going to go wherever he's bringing me, I wipe the tears off my cheeks and watch the dark landscape pass outside the window.

CHAPTER 7

Savannah

I MAKE IT TEN MINUTES BEFORE I CAN'T HOLD MY TONGUE ANYMORE.
“Where are we going?”

“Home.” He gruffly repeats the single word answer he gave earlier.

My teeth press into my lower lip. *I probably shouldn't pester him.* A happy captor is a kind captor. Or so I might assume.

“But where is *home*?” I never was good at being quiet.

When he only sighs, I tear my gaze away from the scenery and look at him.

The interior of the car is too dim to show me his features well, but I don't need light to remember the spark in his eye. And the passing street lamps are enough to outline his strong jaw. His strong brow. His strong *everything*.

Honestly, it's not even fair for someone to look so good. And it's certainly not fair that my brain just can't seem to get over the fact. Every time I look at him fear should be the first thing I feel. But it's not.

Instead, I have this girlish squirmy feeling inside of me. The feeling that lets you know someone is attractive; and that that someone is too attractive for you, and that they probably know it. So when I should be focusing on the important things—like *how do I escape*—my mind grabs on to the fact that this shirt I'm wearing is kind of tight. And that the band of my jean shorts is also tight. And that sitting like this makes my stomach pooch out over the seatbelt. And my thighs—sweaty from exertion and stress—are sticking to the warm leather seat beneath me. And I *know* none of that is important. I *know* that it's all stupid trivial societal shit that I shouldn't worry about ever, let alone when I'm being *literally kidnapped by a madman*. But still, here I am, wondering what he thinks of me. And that might be the thing I hate the

most about myself right now.

He sighs again, probably sick of me staring at his profile. “We’ll be there soon enough.”

I glance out the windshield. We’re heading down the freeway, with Minneapolis growing smaller behind us. Which only tells me that he doesn’t live in the city.

“You live in a suburb?” I don’t know why that’s so unbelievable, but it is.

“Listen, you can sit there and observe, or I can blindfold you. But I’m not going to just give you my address.”

“But...” I don’t know why I can’t just shut up. “You’re taking me there. So won’t I see where you live?”

King turns his head to look at me. “Would you rather I take you to one of the warehouses? Because I promise you that my house is more comfortable. For both of us.”

He holds my gaze for a beat longer than I’d consider safe before he turns back to looking at the road ahead of us.

Clamping my lips shut, I go back to looking out the window.

I don’t have much experience with threats of violence, but going to *one of the warehouses* sounds like one.

Who even has warehouses? Plural?

“Is King your real name?” I watch my own eyes widen in the reflection of my window.

Why did I ask that!?

I don’t think I can call his reaction this time a sigh, it’s more of a long, loud exhale. “Savannah, you can’t possibly think that’s a good thing to ask me?”

His tone is more incredulous than mad, so I allow my gaze to swing back in his direction. “Because it’s not?”

“Because acting dumb is basically the number one rule of being kidnapped. And you just told me that you know my name. Why would I ever let you go now?”

“Oh.” I push my hands down further between my thighs, hunching my shoulders. “But you know my name.”

“Yeah.” The way he says the word sounds like *duh*. “But I’m the one doing the kidnapping. I’m supposed to know things about you.”

“But you already know that I know who you are. Because we met this afternoon,” I point out dumbly.

I watch him shake his head. “Do you want me to kill your friend, too?”

“What!?” My hands fly up, palms out in a stop motion. “No!”

“Then maybe talking about that connection is a bad idea.”

“Well, I’m freaking sorry,” I wave my hands around. “I’ve never been kidnapped before!”

“No shit.”

“Gee, my apologies for being a bad captive,” I snap. “If I’d have known—”

The rest of my words go unheard as King presses a button on his steering wheel, and the car is suddenly filled with loud rock music.

“Great. Fine,” I mutter to myself, crossing my arms and turning my head away from him. “Perfect victim coming right up.”



TRAFFIC THINS, AS WE HEAD WEST, GOING FURTHER AND FURTHER AWAY FROM downtown.

I grew up in what was considered a richer suburb, east of the cities, by the Wisconsin border. My parents were very insular, particular about who they spent time with, so I didn’t often get to leave their little bubble of lawyers and house parties. Certainly not to the opposite side of the Twin Cities.

And then, to my parents’ horror, I went to an art school in the heart of Minneapolis, rather than following their prestigious law school dreams. Meaning, I suddenly became broke—living off student loans and shitty, part-time, on-campus jobs, without a car to my name. To be fair, they warned me they’d cut me off if I choose art over law. And they stuck true to their word.

So, even though I’ve spent my whole life not far from where we are right now, I’m not familiar with any of it.

Sure, I have a car now, and a little house—*thank you grandma for that inheritance*— but I guess I’ve unwittingly repeated my parent’s behavior, only interacting with other people in my art world. Only moving between my home and my studio and the galleries I show at.

Do better, Savannah.

A full fifteen minutes have gone by since the last time I spoke, and I find my mouth opening when we round a corner and are confronted with the sight

of a lake. A big lake.

The moonlight shimmers across the still surface and it feels like he's driven to a whole new world.

I'm used to seeing the Mississippi River, since it slices through the heart of Minneapolis, but that's fast-moving, loud, almost violent at times. This is...something else entirely. And if I had red slippers on, I'd click my heels together. Because we're not in Kansas anymore.

CHAPTER 8

King

MY LITTLE CAPTIVE SAT STILL IN HER SEAT, FINALLY ACTING HOW SHE should, until a few moments ago. Now she's sitting forward, watching raptly, as I take the final few turns to my property.

This isn't the only home I own, but it is the one I live in. And I have zero fucking idea why I thought bringing her here would be a good idea.

Because it's the worst idea.

Quite literally bringing her anywhere else would've been a better idea.

But it's been a long day. And I wanted to go home, and I wasn't going to let some woman, with unfortunate timing and unfortunate taste in men, ruin the rest of my evening.

I follow the curve of the road, until my headlights illuminate the heavy iron gate standing tall at the end of my driveway, then I slow.

I saw how Savannah stared at the lake when I turned us away from it. And I'm sure people would think that a rich asshole, like myself, would live directly on the water. But I don't. Because I don't want any uncontrolled points of entry on my property. And a lake filled with drunk idiots on boats, and yuppies on paddleboards, isn't exactly what I consider locked down tight. So instead, I have ten acres of land a mile inland. All of it fenced. And all of it watched by a team of security guards.

I see movement behind the gate, but rather than waiting for my men to confirm my identity, I tap my remote and the gates slide open.

Savannah's hands, which had been fidgeting in her lap, get shoved back between her thighs. Her thick, jiggly thighs that I want to take a fucking nap on.

My grip tightens on the steering wheel.

I can't be thinking about her like that. This woman is my captive, for however long it takes me to figure out what to do with her. And in order to figure out what to do with her, I need to learn more about her. And I can't do that with her screaming in my ear, or running away from me, or trying to fling herself from my moving vehicle.

Which leaves me with limited options.

Literally limited to locking her up inside, while I think.

She leans forward, and I watch her look through the side mirror at the gates sliding back closed behind us.

"I have twenty men guarding the perimeter." *There are four men.* "If you try to run for the gate, or the fence, they will shoot you." *They won't.* "So, on the off chance you find yourself at an unlocked door, don't bother going through it." *They'll all be locked.*

The house looms ahead of us, with the windows ablaze, making it appear full of life.

Of course, it's not. The staff would've all retired to their residence by now, a smaller house at the back of my property, but I like to leave some lights burning, giving off that feeling of a warm welcome when I come home. Even if it's just a façade.

Sorta like wearing these suits. No one enjoys wearing a fucking suit. No one with biceps at least. But I wear it because it makes me look respectable. Civilized.

I'm sure Aspen would have fucking field day picking through the psychology behind my decisions. But therapy is a luxury of the innocent. And I have far too many skeletons in my closet, propping my baggage upright. So, fucked up, unfulfilled and secretly sad is how I'll live until the day the Grim Reaper finally steps away from my side and faces me.

I slow to a stop at the base of the steps leading up to the front door.

My house is stupidly big. Way more space than one person needs. More space than a family of ten would need. But a house this size is what's expected of me. And it's easier to hide things in. So, it's what I built. And money might not be able to buy happiness, but it can buy the best architects. And I hired the best to build me an oversized English Tudor-style mansion. And it looks perfect here, nestled in the manicured lawns, while the rest of the property is covered in privacy-giving trees.

I shift into park and turn off the engine. "Traditionally, this is the part when you undo your seatbelt."

Savannah looks at me. “Why did you bring me here?”

My head tips back against the headrest. “I couldn’t just leave you there. You have to understand that.” I’m not surprised when she doesn’t reply. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry it went down like this. But after what happened this afternoon...” I can’t keep the judgment out of my tone. “I gotta say, I wasn’t expecting you to show up. Usually when someone finds out their boyfriend is a cheating scumbag, it kinda kills the romance.”

Savannah straightens her spine, but she still doesn’t turn away from the window. “He wasn’t...” She shakes her head. “I went there to get my car keys.”

I think about her purse that I tossed into the back and wonder if I’ll find out she’s lying or telling the truth.

“Is—” She stops, and with the house lights framing her profile, I watch her press her trembling lips together before trying again. “Is there anything I can say, or promise, that will make you let me go?”

I give her the courtesy of pausing, as I think about her question. But I don’t know her. I don’t know if I can trust her word. I don’t know who she knows. I don’t know what her family is like, or if she has people that would *try to* hide her from me. And it’s not like something as trivial as an NDA would do a damn thing to stop her from reporting a murder.

I’m fairly confident I could get away with it. Even if I opened the gates right now, handed her her purse and let her go, what would she do? She could call the police, tell them her boyfriend is dead and that she saw a man in his apartment. They’d go to the address, find a clean apartment—no body, nothing suspicious—and they’d leave.

She could go to her friend’s house, the woman recovering from surgery, who is certainly on lots of pain medication, and ask her to corroborate that we met. But no one can place us together at the crime scene. It’d just be a *he said, she said* situation. Except my words would be backed by my upstanding citizen reputation, millions of dollars, and The Alliance.

So I’m fairly confident. And yet...

“No,” I tell her honestly. “There’s nothing you can say.”

It doesn’t matter that she wouldn’t succeed in taking me down, she’s seen too much already. And if the right person gets ahold of her...

I won’t let anyone use her against me. It’s as simple as that.

Well, that’s step one. I still have to decide what to do with her.

Accepting my decision, Savannah reaches down and unbuckles her

seatbelt.

Mirroring her movements, I climb out of the car, stopping briefly to open the back door and retrieve her purse.

When I circle around the back of my Suburban, I find Savannah standing next to her open door, and take it as a win that she didn't attempt to sprint to the fence.

"Come on." I step up next to her, reaching behind her to close the car door. "Let's go inside."

My hand automatically rises to press against her lower back, but I stop. She might be my type, but she's not here on a date.

Then, I remember she's my prisoner, and I can do whatever I want to her, so I continue the motion until my palm is pressed against her spine.

She jumps a little, but doesn't push me away. *Another win.*

We're nearly at the steps when a deep, ominous bark cuts through the night.

I stop and curl my fingers into the back of Savannah's shirt, stopping her with me.

The low bark sounds like more of a growl this time and it's closer.

"What's that?" Savannah takes a step closer, pressing her side against mine.

I bite down on a smile.

I don't think she realizes that she moved *to me* for protection.

"That's my dog," I tell her, as the all-black, one hundred and ten pound, Cane Corso lumbers toward us.

"That's not a dog, it's a damn monster!" She tries to move behind me, but my grip on her shirt prevents her.

I round my lips and let out a short whistle. Knowing his command, my big boy picks up the pace.

"Hold!" I command, and he does as expected, letting out another loud growl.

Savannah squeaks and presses further into me, meaning the command worked as desired.

"Stand down." He listens and the growls stop. Dark eyes flick between me and Savannah and I know he's thinking *what the fuck, man? You just told me to intimidate her in place and now you're telling me to chill? Pick a lane.* To which I nonverbally reply *we need her to be scared of you because I'm keeping her against her will.* He blinks. *Like a pet?* I blink. *Well, now that*

you mention it...

“Is he, or she, friendly?” Savannah’s question interrupts our conversation.

The real answer is a little complicated, because he’s the best goddamn dog to ever walk this earth. And he’d never ever hurt anyone that didn’t deserve it. But he’s also trained to protect me and mine, so there are times that he’s decidedly unfriendly.

“No,” I answer, and I can feel the canine outrage at my response. “He’s a highly trained security tool. He won’t attack without being provoked.” I silently beg his forgiveness as I say this next part. “But if he sees someone running, he *will* take them down. And dog teeth don’t feel great when they’re puncturing your thigh.”

The huff of air that leaves the dog sounds like indignation, but Savannah must not translate it the same way because I feel her tremble against me.

It’s the proper instinctual reaction to being growled at by a dog this size. And since she’s considerably smaller than me, the *monster*, as she calls him, stands around hip height.

“Never had a dog, I take it?” I find myself curious.

She shakes her head. “No. Well, my mom had this tiny little thing that would bite everyone and never left her side. Or lap.”

I grimace. “Not the same.”

Savannah tries to back up a step again. “Not the same.”

I keep her at my side. “This one only bites when provoked.” Before the too smart canine can ruin the story I’m weaving, I lift my free hand, pointing down the driveway. “Gate.”

I swear he rolls his eyes at me, before he turns from us and gallops toward the front gate. Following his command perfectly. I feel a little bad about sending him there for no reason, but I know the gate guards will give him attention. Once I have Savannah squared away, I’ll bring him in the house to apologize.

Flattening my hand on Savannah’s back, I guide her up the steps, to the front door.

We pause long enough for the small pad on the door handle to read my thumbprint, then I push it open, lightly pressing on Savannah’s back to make her go first.

She tries to slow as we move through the grand foyer, but I don’t let her. Part of me feels the urge to give her a real tour, to show her around. But then I remember, once again, that she’s here against her will and I need to get her

put away so I can think.

But my brain is impatient, so it doesn't stop swirling with possibilities. And as we climb the stairs, and I lead her down a hall, an idea forms.

A crazy idea.

An insane idea.

The type of idea that would make even Nero think twice.

But unhinged or not, it's the best idea I have that keeps everyone safe.

"This one," I say as we approach a closed door. Savannah stops, and I'm happy to see her cheeks are dry and her expression, though weary, doesn't look terrified anymore.

I place my thumb on the small black square above the handle and wait for the door to click unlocked.

She'll find the same sort of lock on the doors leading out to the balcony, bulletproof glass filling the panes, and no way to reach the outside world. I'm confident this room will hold her.

It might seem like a bunch of overkill, but as one of the two men who run one of the largest crime organizations in the central United States, overkill is necessary.

And if we're going for overkill...

I push the door open and Savannah steps through.

"What is..." Her voice trails off when she sees the oversized Alaska King bed situated with its headboard against the far wall.

"This is our bedroom."

She whips around, her blonde hair flying out with the movement. "*Our!*? No, no, no." She shakes her head. "I'm not sleeping with you."

I keep my hand on the doorframe. "I'll let you stay in here by yourself tonight, but starting tomorrow, you *will* be sleeping at my side."

Savannah slowly crosses her arms, putting a barrier between us. "Why? What's happening tomorrow?"

I grin. "We're getting married."

Her mouth drops open.

But before she can respond, I slam and lock the door.

CHAPTER 9

Savannah

No.

Just. No.

I stare at the door, slack jawed, waiting for him to swing it back open and say *just kidding*.

But he doesn't. Because I think that psycho was being serious.

But...married?!

My brain can't even wrap around the thought.

Why would he want that? How would that be useful to him at all?

And why would I ever agree?

I wouldn't.

I would never.

I don't even know him. I don't even know his last name.

I glance around the massive bedroom. And standing here, finally alone, it all hits me.

I've been kidnapped.

No one knows where I am. No one knows that I'm in danger.

And I saw a man kill someone tonight.

Well, technically, I didn't *see* anything. I heard two male voices. I heard something pop. And then...

Images of Lee's dead body fill my vision.

The blood.

The hole in the head.

The vacant eyes.

Nausea washes through me.

I didn't even like him, not at all after today, but still...I'd seen those eyes

up close and alive only hours before.

My stomach lurches and I dart toward a darkened doorway, thankful it's the bathroom.

Don't puke. Don't puke. Don't puke.

Some motion sensor turns on soft lighting nearby and it's enough to guide me toward the little separate room in the far corner that houses the toilet.

Stumbling, I catch my palms on the toilet seat, and squeeze my eyes shut as my body heaves.

I hate puking.

Tears stream from my closed eyes, as I cough and spit. My insides and emotions roiling in turn.

Blindly, I reach for the lever and flush away the evidence of my weakness.

My body sinks to the floor and I'm finally able to push my hair away from my face as I dry heave one more time.

I don't know if it's the fear, the sickness, or the cold tile beneath me, but I'm suddenly freezing. Colder than I've ever been before.

This isn't happening.

I hold my hair with one hand and spit once more, before flushing for a final time.

This can't be happening.

I sit on the floor, forcing in a few deep breaths.

I need to stay in control.

One more inhale, then I climb to my feet and shuffle over to one of the two sinks, and turn the water to hot.

There are large rectangular mirrors above each sink, and that gentle glow filling the room is coming from behind them, making it look like the mirrors are floating off the wall. Their bronze frames suspended in the air.

In the reflection, I can make out a giant freestanding bathtub and a shower stall, big enough for a party, surrounded by opaque frosted glass.

And it's nice. I expected it to be opulent, but warm and welcoming... The white and tan and bronze colors are not what I would've pictured.

I fill my palms with hand soap and while I'm lather furiously, I lean forward and sniff the fresh eucalyptus sitting in a vase between the sinks.

Stop admiring the killer's bathroom.

After washing my hands twice, I cup some water in my palms, sipping some so I can swish the nasty taste out of my mouth.

My eyes are red and puffy, my nose is pink, my cheeks are flushed, and I still have tears clinging to my lashes. But thankfully, I don't have puke in my hair. So that's one small win, in a sea of losses.

Hoping for another win, I open the cabinets under the counter until I come across a bottle of mouthwash.

"Thank fuck." I twist the top off, and after hesitating for only a moment, I bring the bottle to my lips. If King has a problem with me putting my mouth on this, he shouldn't have kidnapped me.

I do it twice, just to be sure, then I return the bottle to its spot and cautiously step back into the bedroom. The really, really nice bedroom.

I obviously have no idea who King is, or what he does, but he clearly has money. And lots of it.

The whole house is impressive. Huge and clean and well decorated, but somehow not pretentious. Beautiful, but not stark in that ultra-modern style most rich bachelors go for. All black, minimalist, zero personality design. But I think that makes this creepier. Because it looks *normal*.

I turn my back on the oversized bed with crisp white bedding.

Across the room is an unlit fireplace, with a comfortable looking chair and ottoman aimed towards the mantle. And covering the whole wall is a beautiful built-in bookcase.

My eyes slide over to the door.

I'm sure it won't open.

I know it won't.

But I step up to it and try anyways.

The handle doesn't so much as wiggle.

Okay.

Stay calm.

I face the room again.

There has to be a window... My brain slaps me upside the head. Straight across from me is a set of wide French doors.

I hurry over and see the balcony just on the other side. A balcony that's only one story off the ground, and there's probably a bush or something I could jump into...

I hold my breath as I try to open the door, but it doesn't budge either.

"Shit."

Grabbing the handle with both hands I lean all my weight into it, but it's like I'm trying to open a brick wall. There's literally no give.

I make a frustrated growl in the back of my throat and let go. He can't just lock me in here. This is unlawful imprisonment! My teeth grind together as I work to keep the calm I'm so desperately clinging to.

Think, Savannah. How do you get through a door?

I've never picked a lock before, but it can't be that hard. It's simple mechanics. Right?

I mean sure, I don't have anything on me to pick a lock with, and I know jackshit about the mechanics of a door lock, but maybe I can figure out something. I'm a smart person.

I bend down to look at the keyhole, as though it will give me insight, and blink. Because there isn't one. No keyhole or slot of any sort.

Tipping my head, I stare at the little black touch pad thing above the handle. Same as the one King used to open the front door and the door to this room.

I roll my lips together. This is a stupid idea. Obviously, my print isn't uploaded as an approved user, or whatever it'd be called, but not trying seems just as stupid. Because *what if...*

Staying in a bend, in case there might be something to see, I gently press my thumb against the pad.

And nothing.

No sounds of it working. No lights to indicate that it's scanning.

But one and a half seconds after placing my thumb in the square, a sharp jolt of electricity zaps up my arm, scaring the shit out of me and making me fall onto my butt.

I yelp on the way down, the pain in my tailbone matched by the tingling in my thumb.

"You cannot be serious." I shake my hand to disperse the pain. "This cannot be my life."

Whatever the hell that thing is, it must've zapped my brain, because now I'm pissed.

That little shock should probably make me more scared, considering this place is wired up like a damn dinosaur pen, but I'm not. I'm furious.

Slapping my hands onto the perfectly waxed wood floor, I shove myself up.

"Don't want me to open the door with the handle? Fine. I'll find another way." I stomp to the bookcase, ignoring the titles I recognize as books I've

read and liked, and focus on the statues. I debate for a second between a finely carved mermaid made from Jade and a marble bust of Darwin. “A man got me into this, a man can get me out of it,” I grumble, hoping I don’t lose this battle of *survival of the fittest*, and yank the old dude off the shelf.

I use both hands to test its weight, confirming that it’s probably just as expensive as it looks.

Not allowing myself to overthink the possible consequences, I take two quick steps towards the French doors, aiming for one of the large pieces of glass, and throw Charles.

My momentum moves me another step closer, and I start to squint my eyes in preparation for the shattered glass. But instead of flying through the glass, the marble bust bounces off.

I yelp, again, and jump to the side, just in time to avoid getting my toes crushed in the world’s dumbest example of a Darwin Award.

The anger inside me amplifies.

“No!”

I don’t know if I’m scolding the scientist or the glass, but I can’t accept this.

I pick the bust back up, find the pointiest part of the base, and swing it like an ax.

Nothing.

Not even a chip in the glass.

Shrieking, I strike the glass again and again, only getting more furious when the marble doesn’t even scratch the *clearly-not-fucking-glass* in front of me.

“Would now be a good time to tell you that all the windows in this house are shatter proof?” The sound of King’s voice has me whirling around, to find him leaning against the doorframe. “Bulletproof too, if you happen to have a gun tucked away somewhere.”

“Let me go!” I yell, my throat hurting from all the screaming I’ve already done.

“Sorry, Honey.” He shakes his head. “No can do.”

His smirk is so aggravating, I’m throwing the bust at him before I can think twice about it.

I have a brief second to worry that maybe being violent towards him is a bad idea, but then the bastard *catches it*.

Fuck him, so much.

“I think I’ll keep this.” He hooks it under his arm like it’s a balloon and not a giant piece of stone. He nods to the floor. “This should be enough for tonight. If you need me for anything...” he cocks a handsome brow at me, “just press your thumb to that pad again.”

Embarrassment washes over me even as I lunge for the bookshelf, looking for something else to throw at him, but the door clicks shut before I reach something appropriately heavy.

CHAPTER 10

King

IT TAKES ALL MY WILLPOWER NOT TO LAUGH AS I SWING THE DOOR SHUT AND lock it. But karma for my ill placed humor strikes immediately when I almost faceplant, stumbling over my damn dog.

I bite down on a curse and glare into his unrepentant eyes. This dick always sleeps downstairs. He likes being able to patrol the indoor perimeter throughout the night. So him silently following me up here and laying down behind me in the half a minute I was occupied was clearly a targeted attack.

“See if I feed you tomorrow,” I whisper the threat at my dog before heading back down to the first floor.

The traitor stays where he is, acting as a guard to the house prisoner and ignoring me.

This time of night, I’d usually take my laptop to bed and do some work. Such is the life of a rich bachelor. But since my room is occupied, and I told her she could have tonight to herself, I’ll stay true to my word.

There’s a guest room that’s never been used, so I can try out that mattress. But first, I’ll settle into my office. Because I have a feeling that I’ll be digging into the pretty Savannah’s background for a while.

CHAPTER 11

Savannah

“THAT SON OF A BITCH.”

I usually don't swear this much. But this man, this *asshole*, just brings it out in me.

My mother would be appalled. Which is probably a good reason to keep it up. She'd also be appalled that I got myself into this situation. But that would be an incredibly unfair judgment.

With angry steps, I stomp to the door, and jerk at the handle, even though I know it won't move. And it doesn't.

“Fucker.” *Okay, that felt good.* “You fucker!” *Shouting it feels even better.*

My foot pulls back, like I'm going to kick the base of the door, but I stop myself. Breaking a toe would only make me all the more miserable.

“Fucker,” I grumble again, for good measure.

I still can't believe he caught that stupid bust.

Accepting that the door isn't going to open, I look down at what he'd left for me.

On the floor, is a fancy wood tray, like something you'd find at a cute bed and breakfast. Only instead of crackers, cheese, and a carafe of wine, it has an unopened box of Cherry Pop-Tarts, a King Size Snickers, a sealed bag of sweet and spicy beef jerky, and two bottles of water. Hardly the sort of fare I'd expect to find in a place like this. But maybe the big evil man prefers to eat like a teenage boy.

I'm tempted to stomp it all to crumbs but that would be foolish. I don't know how long he's planning to leave me in here, and other than tap water from the bathroom, this might be all the sustenance he gives me. And at least

he was smart enough to bring me packaged food. Because hungry or not, there's no way I'd so much as touch a handmade sandwich.

No, sir. Not today.

With a crouch, I lift the tray then set it on the bed.

The cap on the water bottle gives a satisfying snap when I twist it, so I bring it to my lips, and drink down half the bottle in one go.

I've done a lot of screaming and crying in the past hour—*is that all it's been?*—and it's left my eyes itchy and my throat dry.

Bottle in hand, I walk the perimeter of the room. There's no guarantee that King, or someone else, won't barge in again, but I have the feeling that I'll be left alone the rest of the night.

Upon closer inspection, everything—the furniture, bedding, knickknacks—looks even more expensive than I first thought.

I almost smirk, maybe my mother wouldn't be so disappointed in me after all. To her mind, snagging a rich husband is the pinnacle of success.

Husband.

My stomach clenches and I take another sip of water.

I don't know how King sees this all going down. It's not like I'll willingly go with him to a church, or a courthouse, and say my vows, pretending like I'm not a freaking prisoner.

And if he wanted to kill me, he would've already done it. So, it's hard to picture him using a *marry me or die* argument.

I don't want to die.

If he does give me that ultimatum, I guess I'd go through with it. Marriage isn't quite as bad as death. And I'll just keep looking for ways to escape. He can't keep me locked in a bedroom forever.

My cheeks puff out with my next exhale as exhaustion overwhelms me.

I eye the bed, feeling leery of using it.

But there's no point in trying to make a temporary bed in the closet or bathtub or whatever. This isn't one of my vigilante assassin books where they're always on the run and trying to outsmart whoever might be after them. This is me already being well and truly held captive. King knows I'm here, hiding within the room won't change that.

I press my lips together, still staring at the bed.

I bet this is his room.

I bet he's brought lots of women here.

Hopefully of their free will.

And...I bet that mattress is comfortable as hell. No way a man like King would skimp on his own bed.

But just as I think about crawling under the fluffy comforter, I become aware of just how gross and grimy I feel.

It's been a long day. Getting ready earlier, to meet up with Lee, feels like a whole different lifetime.

For him, I guess it was.

I grimace at my own dark thoughts. I'm gonna need to start going back to therapy after this.

I look down at myself.

Regardless of all the other stuff, I've been wearing a bra longer than anyone ever should, so that has to go. And these jean shorts are starting to rub in places I don't want them to rub, so something soft to wear would be nice. And my once-cute shirt is sticking to me from the panic sweat I suffered during my kidnapping, which means it needs to be washed, if not burned. And my feet...if I think too hard about how sore my feet are in these little flats I wore because they were cute, not comfortable, I'll start crying all over again.

My eyes move back and forth between the open bathroom door, the bed, and a door that must lead to the closet.

"Screw it."

I tuck the water under my arm and hold my breath as I try the unopened door, pleased when it opens without effort.

The door swings inward, and just like in the bathroom, soft light emanates from the fixtures. Only in this case, the light is glowing from underneath the shelves.

The closet is huge and well organized, but not exactly full. Which isn't to say that King doesn't have a ton of clothes—because he does—he just doesn't have enough to fill this giant walk-in closet.

The light switch looks way more complicated than a light switch should, but after a moment I figure out how to turn on the recessed lights overhead.

Ignoring the suits and fancy stuff, I head to the drawers lining the back wall.

The first drawer I randomly select is full of socks. Socks laid flat, in rows, not paired up.

"Weirdo," I whisper, closing the drawer.

The next drawer is nearly as shocking. On their own, the boxers folded

into perfect squares wouldn't be that brow-raising, but the brightly colored silks were not what I was expecting.

Unable to help myself, I reach out and rub the material between my thumb and forefinger. They're so soft and unexpected, I feel another pair.

But I definitely don't wonder what King would look like wearing them.

And I don't feel any sort of twisting low in my stomach.

Nope. Not at all. It's way too soon for Stockholm syndrome. That's just my body reminding me that I expelled everything I ate earlier.

I slam the drawer shut. I'm not wearing King's underwear to bed.

The next drawer finally proves useful, when I find a selection of athletic pants. I know they'll be way too long for me, but they're better than wearing a stranger's boxers.

When King was forcibly carrying me from Lee's building, and my body was plastered to the front of his, it didn't seem like he had much body fat. But he's a big man with a big frame, so even though I might be *heavy*, I inwardly sneer at the memory of him calling me that, the elastic waist means they should stretch over my hips.

It takes another two drawers before I find t-shirts. And another drawer before I find black ones. Because I'm not wearing a white t-shirt while braless. Not here. Not for all the Pop-Tarts.

Going back to the first drawer, I grab out a pair of black tube socks, completing my head-to-toe black look.

Just as I start to slide the drawer closed, I pause, then use my free hand to jumble the socks all together.

If I had both hands, or patience, I'd tie them all into knots. But I have a feeling there will be time for that later.

Feeling slightly better, with my bundle in hand, I turn around, and spot a very large safe. It's hidden behind the open door, so you don't see it when you first walk in, but the shiny surface makes it hard to miss.

Since I just love to be disappointed, I go over and inspect the safe, slightly surprised that there isn't a little square print reader on it. And then more surprised when I can't find anything. No dial, no hinges, no nothing.

But zap me once, shame on you, zap me twice...

I keep my fingers away from the surface and exit the closet.

CHAPTER 12

King

AGE 32.

Address—

Social security number—

Tax return—

More screens pop open on my monitors and the sheer quantity of information makes me glad I'm doing this in my office and not on my laptop. Sometimes I forget how much you can find on people who have no need to hide everything about themselves.

And not just Savannah. Her parents, cousins, past co-workers... Her family isn't big, but there's enough of them.

It's almost too easy to collect images off their social media accounts and drop them into a tablet.

A small, mostly dead part, inside of my chest twists as I compile more and more photos. Her cousin singing in a church choir. Her cousin's daughters playing on their school's playground. Savannah's dad on a golf course, with the name of their retirement community printed on the side of his golf cart. Her friend Mandi, the one who's house we met at, smiling with her arm around the shoulders of a beaming Savannah in front of the galleries that Mandi owns.

And more. So much more.

With what I've been able to find, my plan is to go with the scorched earth approach.

Personally, it's my favorite tactic and I imagine it'll work well in this situation.

I hadn't been sure which angle to take on convincing her to marry me.

Honestly, I hadn't really thought it through at all. But somewhere between capturing her in my arms, and walking through my front door, I decided it was the only option.

And I'm surprisingly settled on the idea.

From the first moment I saw her, I was attracted to her. I hated that she was with that fucker Leland. I hate that she fell into his web, the same way Aspen did. And part of me is a little disgusted knowing that she's been with him. But she's mine now. And I'll remove every memory she's ever had of that dumb bastard, one touch at a time.

And, as my wife, no one can ever force her to testify against me in the disappearance of Leland Reed. And no one can ever come after her for being a witness, because no one touches what belongs to me. No one would fucking dare.

Outing myself as one of the heads of The Alliance made my life a little more complicated, made it a little more unsafe. But it did something else too, it let people know just how dangerous I truly am.

Switching my focus away from her family and acquaintances, I dig deeper into Savannah Jane Oates.

I have enough here to compel her to marry me, letting her think I'll start disappearing people from her life until she does what I want. But I want to know more about her.

I *need* to know more about my future wife.

CHAPTER 13

Savannah

STEAM STILL SWIRLS IN THE AIR AS I DRAG A COMB THROUGH MY DAMP HAIR.

The giant tub tried calling my name, but the idea of lounging naked, waiting for someone to maybe come knock on the door, took all the appeal out of taking a bath. So, I settled for cleaning off in the giant shower stall.

I had been tempted to just pull on the comfy clothes in the privacy of the dark closet and crawl under the covers, but I felt too disgusting to sleep.

As someone who's often covered in paint, you'd think I wouldn't be such a clean freak, but I can't stand the feeling of dried sweat on my skin. So, I dragged the big armchair into the bathroom and wedged it behind the door, as an extra level of protection between my nakedness and King.

I know he'd still be able to get through if he wanted to, but it made me feel better. And the fact that there's not one of those little finger pad things, but rather a regular locking handle, on the bathroom door, made me feel a little bit better too.

Once I figured out how to turn everything on, I showered quickly but thoroughly. *Not* lingering over the fact that all his shower items smelled all sexy and masculine. Then, after I turned the water off, I quickly retrieved the towel I'd found, drying and dressing behind the privacy of the frosted glass.

It was weird to be dressed in a strange man's clothes, after using the same man's soap, but at this point, we're kinda past boundaries. So, when the first drawer next to the sink offered up a comb, I used it.

Dropping the comb on the counter, I twist a fresh towel around my hair and decide to dig through the rest of his things.

The next cabinet door reveals an electric toothbrush and toothpaste.

I bite my lip. What's worse—dirty teeth or using someone else's

toothbrush?

With no clear answer to that question, I open the next cupboard, and the next, until every door and drawer is open, like the bathroom is haunted by a poltergeist.

With a small turn of luck, I find a pack of new toothbrush heads, so I rip it open and replace the old one with a new one and brush my teeth while I catalog everything else.

More internal debate plays out before I use a piece of the torn-up cardboard from the toothbrush head packaging to scrape the top layer off of King's deodorant then reach under my borrowed shirt and rub it onto my armpits. He also has some expensive looking face creams, so I shamelessly apply those as well before untwisting my hair and massaging delicious smelling hair oil into my scalp.

If I'm going to be held prisoner, and possibly end up being murdered by the end of the weekend, I might as well enjoy the small things.

My hair has a natural wave to it and I'd love to braid it before going to bed, but I didn't come across any hair ties in my snooping. A stupid foolish corner of my brain preens at that, happy that there's no evidence of other women in this room.

Other women. As though I am his woman now.

Slamming the door on that line of thinking, I drag the big armchair away from the door and exit the bathroom.

With nothing left to do, I climb into bed.

I'm usually a blackout-blinds type of girl, but the darkness doesn't feel safe right now. So, I leave the lights on and shuffle under the covers. The second, still sealed, bottle of water tips over when I jostle the mattress, landing on the bag of jerky with a crinkle.

Reminded of the food available, I sit up and drag the tray to the head of the bed.

My mouth still has that minty taste in it, so I stare at the array of snacks, debating. But decide that the only thing worse than dying, would be dying hungry.

CHAPTER 14

King

ONLY CHILD. PARENTS STILL MARRIED AND LIVING TOGETHER IN FLORIDA, but no records of any phone calls or texts between them and Savannah in the last six months. I click back to last year's phone logs and find a five-minute call on Christmas day.

Huh. Certainly not close.

The cousin with the kids also has no phone contact with Savannah, but they're friends on Facebook, and a few clicks tells me they interact with each other's posts regularly. So not close, but not estranged.

I follow the trail from Savannah's Facebook profile to her Instagram, which has a link to another account in the bio PaintsBySavannah.

I click on it.

Twenty minutes have passed and I'm still scrolling through her posts. Pausing on each one.

I'd seen her tax return for the business, but I hadn't realized...

She's fucking amazing.

Her talent is carved into each painting. The rawness of it right there for everyone to see.

The thick oil paints act like clay on her canvas. The texture lays in stark contrast to the smooth colors. And the style...

I scroll to the next one.

The style is almost graffiti in nature. But it's not done with a spray can. So, the ones that showcase drips... It's all deliberate. Purposeful. Brilliant.

And the colors...

It seems like she works in series. A whole set of paintings all about the same subject matter. Then you scroll through the images and it changes to a

different subject matter.

The most recent collection were paintings of Michelangelo's David. A dozen variations. Some just in shades of gray. Some in nothing but neon. One in green and purple and a white so bright it almost glows. And it all works. Each one on its own. And then all of them together as a collection.

The series before that was of ladybugs. Before that was dog collars. Before that, light bulbs, then skulls...

They're beautifully unique. Simple, but I could stare at one for hours.

And they make me that much more curious about the woman currently locked in my bedroom.

CHAPTER 15

Savannah

I SHOVE THE TRAY, AND WHAT'S LEFT OF ITS CONTENTS, ONTO THE nightstand.

My belly is full, the box of processed pastries is half gone. The snickers bar is no more. And the last water bottle is half empty.

With a sigh, I haul the blankets up to my chin.

The motion wafts the scent of *male* up from beneath the covers.

It's the same collection of scents that are currently clinging to my skin after that shower, but the bedding smells—I take a deep inhale—*warmer*.

My teeth clench and I stare up at the ceiling.

Stop sniffing the bed.

You cannot find this man attractive.

Okay, so that's unreasonable, because he is, objectively, very handsome. Like super handsome. Like so fucking handsome it makes me weak in the knees. But, and this is a big one, he's also a killer. Not to mention my kidnapper and jailor.

My lungs fill on another deep inhale.

Screw it.

For tonight. For the next few hours. I'll let the scent of a big strong man comfort me, while I pretend I'm here by choice, on a date, and not because some dead asshole cheated on his wife.

CHAPTER 16

King

I HIT SPEAKER, THEN SET MY PHONE ON MY DESK AS I CONTINUE TO ADMIRE Savannah's art.

From what I've found, she started by doing small shows in local galleries right out of college. And in the decade since she's turned her work into an online sensation. She has a large following and people constantly messaging her to ask when her next sale will be.

Some of those sales have been strictly online, but she has one coming up in a few weeks that's at one of the galleries her friend Mandi owns. And according to Mandi's website, there will be an online sale the day after the gallery showing for anything that doesn't sell.

It's all very fascinating.

I can't find any evidence that she sells art prints. I'll have to talk to her about that. Her pieces are too stunning to limit to the one original piece only. More people need her work on their walls.

"What?" the groggy voice croaks through my phone.

"I need you here tomorrow."

Nero groans, "And you couldn't fucking tell me tomorrow?"

My eyes move to the time. "Oops."

"Oops my ass, you fuck."

"You know how many times you've called and woken me up? Lots." I don't feel the least bit sorry.

Nero hums, "Is this about that girl you kidnapped?"

"What'd you say?" another sleepy voice asks.

"Nothing," Nero whispers. "Go back to sleep."

I stay silent, hoping Payton will knock back out, because I don't really

want her knowing about this. Not that she won't find out eventually, but if she finds out what I have planned, she'll definitely try to interfere. And with the way she has Nero jumping to her every tune, he'll go along with whatever she says.

"Um," his voice is muffled now, like he's holding a hand over his mouth. "What are you listening to?" Too late, I remember the sound system in my office is playing the Peaceful Retreat mix. "I thought you went home?"

"I did." I find the correct button on my remote and kill the music.

"That was spa shit."

I ignore him. "Be here at one."

"Is that seriously what you listen to when you're alone?"

"Tomorrow?" I grit out, needing to know he can make it.

"Yeah, fine. But if you try to sell me some oils to center my aura, I'm gonna shoot you."

I hang up.

"Dick."

I'm guessing he'll have a few things to say when he gets here. But the shit I've witnessed him do since he first met Payton makes my kidnapping Savannah and forcing her to marry me look tame.

I press my lips together. Okay, maybe I win on the fucked-up scale of *how I met my wife*, but still, the man was basically stalking Payton. Which would normally be a bad thing. Who could've predicted she'd be just as obsessed with him?

Too wired to sleep, I think back on my history with Nero while I research what someone would need for a home art studio.

Nero is the one person in this world I can count on for anything. Sure, I have my sisters, and they're great, but they're not the ones I call if I need someone killed. Nor are they the ones I call after I kill someone, when I need help cleaning up the body because I got pulled away chasing after a curvy little goddess.

A goddess who has an impressive virtual following, but who has little daily contact with friends and family. A beautiful woman whose life could be moved from her little house—which seems to have been bought with an inheritance from her grandparents—to my mansion, without anyone the wiser.

I have a moment's guilt, thinking about the full impact of what marriage to me will mean, about what being tied to The Alliance will mean for her, but

it doesn't change my mind.

It's been more than fifteen years since Nero and I coordinated our hostile takeover, wiping out all the major players in both the Irish and Russian mafia in Minneapolis. The local Italians had already moved out, and were turning clean at that point, so with our previous employers out of the way, Nero and I formed The Alliance. We aren't good men. We don't do good things. But unlike our predecessors, our word can be trusted and we don't cross the lines that we set for ourselves. Granted, those lines are few and far between, but we live by them. And other people die by them.

Until recently, even the men in the Alliance didn't know I was a part of the organization, let alone one of the leaders. I'd kept my head down, remained an invisible partner for over a decade. I'd done it that way for a few reasons. First, to protect my family. Second, it made it easier for Nero to unite the men under one leader. And third, it's been beneficial to us to have me on the outside. As an upstanding businessman in society. It's amazing what people will share with you when they think your richness might rub off on them.

And that all worked. For a long time.

But as time went on, and I accrued more wealth and power, my public career and financial investments were starting to become almost as treacherous as running guns and laundering money. The two intersect more than anyone wants to admit. And I saw the writing on the wall. So, letting the underworld see me, letting the underworld understand who I really am, was the right call.

The risk increased, but so did the protection. And the risk was already there. Being rich as fuck makes you a target, whether you're dirty or not.

Not to mention the fact that Aspen's already inserted herself in some of the *family business*, becoming Nero's lackey, against my wishes, when he needs a feminine touch. And I've never kept what I do secret from my family. Doing that would only put them at risk. They need to know what to look for and how to protect themselves.

I drum my fingers on my desk.

And tomorrow my family grows by one.



THE LIGHT SURPRISES ME WHEN I QUIETLY OPEN MY BEDROOM DOOR. BUT then I see the body under the comforter and realize she just went to sleep with the lights on.

My bare feet don't make any noise as I step into the room.

I keep my hand on the door handle, making sure it closes just as quietly behind me.

I was just coming in here for some clean clothes.

I *am* just coming in here for clean clothes.

My hand reaches out and turns the overhead lights off.

There's a glow still coming from the bathroom. I follow the light, and the scents of a shower.

The steam is long gone, but there's still drops of water on the glass wall.

The opaque glass stops three quarters of the way across the shower space, eliminating the need for a door. With soft steps, I move around the end of the wall and turn into the shower. Pine and sandalwood cling to the air.

Savannah was in here. Naked. Scrubbing my soaps all over her body.

My own body reacts, all my blood sinking to my waist.

And then I see it. Hanging off the showerhead. Her pretty floral shirt. The quiet *drip drip drip* as it hangs there to dry.

The soles of my feet make little slapping sounds against the damp floor as I step further into the shower, ready to reach for the piece of clothing, when another item demands every ounce of my attention.

Lace.

Red. Lace. Panties.

I snag them off the temperature control lever before I can talk myself out of it. The material damp from being washed, just like the shirt.

I stare at them for a long second. Deciding how much of a twisted fuck I want to be right now. Then I shrug and bring them to my nose.

Inhaling from my chest, I fill my lungs with the scent of my own soap and...pussy.

My pretty little, soon to be wife, left her panties in here and they smell like my fucking soap and her sweet pussy.

Jesus Christ.

I take another hit of the intoxicating mix, and my cock is already hard.

Leave. It's time to fucking leave.

Another breath and my cock throbs.

I reach down with my free hand to undo my pants. But one hand doesn't

do it, so I put the panties in my mouth, biting down on the material, and get my pants down and off, then kick them away.

The elastic band of my boxers stretches easily, and I shove them down my hips.

Biting harder on the lace, I reach down and cup my balls with one hand, gripping my length with the other.

Precum is already leaking out of my tip, and I feel more turned on than I can ever remember feeling. It feels like it's been years since I've fucked, and not the handful of weeks that have actually passed.

Still too long.

Savannah's panties muffle my groan as I work my fist up and down my length.

But it's not enough.

I let go of my dick and pull the panties from my mouth, bringing them to my nose for one last inhale, before I wrap them around my straining dick.

The friction is just right. Just harsh enough on my sensitive skin.

My fingers squeeze my balls once more, then slide up to hold the base of my cock. Keeping my cock steady as I rub Savannah's scent up and down my length.

This is depraved.

Fucked up.

Disgusting.

But that doesn't stop me from closing my eyes and picturing the woman currently asleep in my bed, on her back, while I bury my face between her legs. Tasting her at the source.

She'd try to yell at me. Probably try to hit me. But she'd give in. And then she'd come all over my face, quivering under my tongue.

And that woman is going to be my fucking wife.

I throw my head back, the essence of her still filling my senses as I come all over the wall.



HANDS WASHED, PANTIES BACK HANGING IN THE SHOWER, SPUNK QUIETLY washed down the drain, I strip off my shirt and walk to the bed in nothing but

my boxers.

I told Savannah she could have this night to herself.

But I lied.

CHAPTER 17

Savannah

MY BODY FEELS SO HEAVY.

Even still half-suspended in sleep, I remember the horrors and stress of last night that lead to exhaustion I still feel in my bones.

I also remember the completely out-of-place calm that I felt falling asleep in King's ridiculously large bed.

I snuggle into the warmth, breathing in the masculine scents that filled my lungs as I fell asleep.

The warmth expands beneath me. A low rumble moving from my pillow through my head. And suddenly I'm all the way awake.

My eyes pop open and the first thing I see is the expanse of bare skin. Bare skin on a broad chest of toned muscles, with golden-brown chest hair against my cheek.

My head is on his chest.

My head is on King's chest.

His breathing stays the same, and I try not to tense as I take stock of my situation, not wanting to wake him up.

I fell asleep on my side, on the edge of the bed, facing the bathroom. But now I'm turned the other way, my back to the bathroom, my front to the wall of windows and French doors leading out onto the patio, and I'm on the other side of the mattress.

His side.

There are heavy drapes on either side of the windows and doors, but neither of us pulled them closed, so the bright sunlight is streaming through the glass. I don't know what time it is, but clearly I slept past morning. But even with the brightness, I can see that the room lights are off.

So...what? He came in here last night and found me sleeping with all the lights on like a scared child and decided to just strip down and get into bed? Like this is normal?

This is so far from normal, my brain is still catching up to the fact that I'm still in bed. With my captor!

Just breathe and think, Savannah.

My arm is strewn across his bare waist, as though we cuddle like this every night. And my leg...oh god. My leg is hiked up over his thigh. And without reaching down or lifting the blankets to look, I can only pray he's not completely naked.

I start to pull my leg back, moving as slowly as my aching body allows. *Apparently getting kidnapped uses muscles I'm not used to exercising.* But then the arm that I hadn't registered yet, tightens around my shoulders.

I'm trapped.

Panic starts to blur the edges of my sanity.

What am I doing?!

Distance.

I need distance.

Dropping the attempt at stealth, I shove against the solid body of the man who said I would have the room to myself.

He grunts, but barely moves even as I shove against him with all my strength. But it does serve to dislodge my body from his.

I scramble backwards, the blankets tangling around my body.

"Shit, Savannah, I was sleeping," King grumbles, as he drapes a forearm over his eyes.

"You weren't supposed to!" My voice is way too breathy, but I'll blame it on my panic and not the sight of his biceps.

He lifts his arm enough to squint at me. "I'm not supposed to sleep?"

"Not here!" I fling an arm wide, indicating the bed we're sharing.

He shrugs. The motherfucker shrugs.

And then it dawns on me. Maybe with him in here...

I roll over the edge of the bed, the bedding coming with me.

"Cold!" he whines. But I don't look back. I don't want to know if he's fully naked, or only in a pair of those shiny silk boxers. All I want to know is—if he left the door unlocked.

The curse he lets out when he realizes my plan fills me with hope.

My feet trip over the too-long pants, and I stumble forward, but when I

reach the handle, it turns.

It fucking turns!

I yank open the door with more force than necessary, and I swear I feel the ground shake as King leaps from the bed behind me.

I spare the split second it takes to slam the door shut behind me, hoping that it will buy me just enough time to get...anywhere, but I only make it a dozen steps before I hear the bedroom door open.

“Savannah.” His tone is more exasperation than intensity, but it shoots adrenaline through my system all the same.

He doesn't think I'll get away.

I got out of the room he trapped me in but he still doesn't think I'll get away.

I grip the waist of the pants and pull them up as high as they'll go to keep from tripping, but I have to let go of the material when I reach the top of the stairs.

My socks are slippery on the wood floor, and I dart my hand out just in time to catch the corner of the railing. My momentum swings me around and I take the first few steps at a terrifying speed.

“Dammit, woman!” King's voice is so close, it startles me and I accidentally let go.

The scream is already leaving me before my foot even slides off the edge of the step.

Falling down these stairs is going to hurt. It's going to hurt a lot more than if King had let me fall the last time he chased me. The last time he scared me and I tripped.

My arms flail, desperately hoping for another save. But my other foot follows the first, sliding out from under me.

My center of gravity takes over, and I can only be thankful I'm falling backwards and not forwards, as my ass plunges towards the hard steps below me.

King lets out a grunt, a second before my butt hits...a lap.

CHAPTER 18

King

THIS FUCKING FEMALE IS GOING TO BE THE END OF ME.

My shoulder aches from where my hold on the railing jerked me to a stop. And my glutes and hamstrings throb from where they collided with the unforgiving steps, the second impact of Savannah's weight jamming me harder into the steps is only dulled by her sweet ass smashing my balls.

I flex the arm around her waist, holding her in place, even as we bounce down another step together. The process causing a new round of hurts.

Her scream cut off as she landed on me, but my ears are still ringing from the agony in my fucking nuts.

She shifts, and I tighten my grip on her even more.

"Just. Wait," I grit out each word as the pain radiates through my body.

I sound pissed. Because I am.

"Sorry." Savannah's whisper filters through the red fuzzing the edge of my vision and I tip my head down until my forehead is pressed against her hair.

If she really wanted to fuck me up, she could slam her head backwards and break my nose. But even if she managed to break my arm while she was at it, she'd never get off my property.

My nutsack gives another throb, and I shift my weight off my left ass cheek to the right, and it's enough to relieve some of the ache.

The rib cage trapped between my body and arm, expands on a deep breath. "Thank you for catching me. Again." I inhale as I finally let go of the railing, circling that arm around her too. "I'm sorry you got hurt. But..." she cuts off, and I wait for her to continue as I enjoy the smell of my shampoo in her hair. "I'm not sorry for running." I squeeze her. "I can't just let you keep

me here.”

I sigh. “That’s where you’re wrong, Honey.” She starts to shake her head, so I lift my own. “It’s time.”

Savannah tenses. “Time for what?”

“For you to see why you’re going to cooperate.”

It takes some untangling to get us both up, and Savannah tries to shake off my grip when I grab hold of her elbow, but I don’t let up. I have no plans of watching her fall again as we descend the rest of the stairs. On our feet.

I keep my hold on her as I guide her down another hallway, to the opposite side of the house from the main bedroom, toward my home office.

To *the* office really. Since I have my own investment company which is now just me using my own money to make myself more money.

I don’t have to work anymore. I could’ve retired years ago. But running my own company is entertaining, as well as highly profitable. And Aspen always has some charity event that she needs me to throw money around at, so it’s good to keep the tap turned on.

I’ve always had a way with numbers, but the woman at my side proves that I’ve also always had a slightly off-center moral compass. So, even though I came from a *normal* upper-class family, it wasn’t that much of a surprise to anyone when I got myself tangled up in the Irish mafia. But by the time my dad found out, I was in too deep for him to buy my way free. And, truthfully, I was enjoying myself.

It wasn’t until Nero, who’d worked his way into the Bratva, and I met, and consequently uncovered a secret human trafficking plot, that things changed. On paper, Nero and I should’ve been enemies, but our hearts were never with the old families. We were there for our own reasons. So when we decided to draw new lines and enforce them, that’s exactly what we did. And I have no regrets.

To this day, we’re still working to destroy any and all human trafficking in our territory. But, like everywhere, there’s a disgustingly lot of it. So we’ll keep targeting deals and taking them down. While we’re not busy doing our own shady shit that is.

Savannah is breathing heavy at my side, and I realize I probably could’ve slowed my pace a bit. But we’re already here.

My office door is sitting open. None of my staff would dare enter on their own, but even if they did, every piece of information is behind layers upon layers of firewalls and protection. I’m plenty good with all things tech on my

own, but partnering with a man who owns his own security company definitely has its perks.

Remembering Savannah's fit as she tried to smash my unbreakable glass, after getting shocked by the lock pad, tugs at my lips. It makes me wish I'd put cameras in my bedroom, like I did every other room in this place, so I could've seen the look of outrage on her face when she got zapped. But cameras in my bedroom are a level of privacy I'm not willing to cross.

I don't bring a lot of women here, but filming unsuspecting sexual partners is fucked up, and far too close to trafficking for me to be comfortable with.

But stealing women to marry them...

I brush away that thought. Savannah will have a nice life here. I'm sure of it. And so long as she doesn't try to fingerprint her way out of a room again, she won't get hurt.

I only knew it happened to her in the first place, because I get notifications anytime a non-approved print is pressed to the pad for more than a second. And that same timeframe is how long it takes before that non-approved print gets the voltage treatment. It's not enough to really hurt, but it's enough to let the person know to stop trying.

The way she glared at me when I caught the statue she threw at me...

I clear my throat, and use my hold on her to urge her into the office ahead of me.

I'm about to blackmail Savannah into marrying me, so I can't let her see me smiling. She needs to believe the threat I'm about to present her with. And since I just saved her from physical harm, I need to lean into the bad guy persona.

"Sit." My tone is sharp.

She starts toward one of the rarely used guest chairs, but I stop her and point behind my desk.

Slowly, she makes her way around the desk and lowers herself into my chair.

The monitors are all black, and I leave them that way as I unlock the tablet that I left sitting on the desktop and hand it to her.

She takes it, looking up at me, then back down to the screen filled with thumbnail images.

Before she clicks on the first image, causing it to fill the screen, I move around so I'm standing behind her. This ensures she can't get up and run

again. But it also makes it so I don't see her expression.

Her shoulders stiffen as she looks at her parents.

I listen to her breathing hitch as she swipes, over and over, seeing image after image.

Close, far, candid, formal. Photos clearly from social media. Photos clearly not from social media, ones meant to stay private.

Photos with her.

Photos of houses she'd recognize.

Photos of cars she'd recognize.

And then, the next time she swipes, the photos change.

Burnt shells of buildings.

Scorched vehicles.

Blood stains on concrete.

Alliance hits.

When her hands start to shake so bad that she has trouble swiping to the next image I lean over her shoulder and turn my monitors on. And all at once, her personal life appears before her eyes.

Her house. Her minivan. Her income history. Her current bank statements. Her phone logs. Her dating profiles, that haven't been active for nearly a year. Her driving record. Her medical history.

The sound that leaves her is nothing short of devastated. A combination of a cry and a whimper.

I lean back over her, turning the screens off and taking the tablet from her grip.

"You'll marry me." My voice is steady, but I'm glad her head is tipped down and she can't see my face. Because I'm certain my expression shows the disgust I feel toward myself.

Savannah nods. It's slow and jerky, but it's an agreement.

It's what I wanted.

CHAPTER 19

Savannah

MY CHEST HURTS.

Is this what a heart attack feels like?

My ribcage feels tight.

Maybe I'm dying.

I try to breathe.

If I just died right now, would King let it all go?

Part of my brain hears a chime echo through the house. And part of my brain recognizes King's footsteps as he walks out of the room. But I can't move.

I should run, but I can't move.

The screens are all black. Showing nothing but my own distraught reflection. That doesn't matter though. I can't get the images out of my mind.

I'll never get those images out of my mind.

I don't really have a relationship with my family. My parents probably wouldn't know until Christmas if I went missing. And it'd take months before the one cousin I like would notice that I stopped liking her kid's pictures online.

Her kids.

My stomach rolls. The feeling of fear-nausea becoming familiar.

Even if no one would truly miss me, I can't be responsible for the death of...anyone. It doesn't matter how estranged or ignored I am by someone, it doesn't mean I want them killed.

I couldn't live with that.

I press my hands against my belly.

I don't want to be sick again, but it would serve this bastard right if I

puke all over his fancy desk.

It doesn't make sense...

King doesn't make sense.

He's so...up and down. Hot and cold.

He kept his sister from attacking me at Mandi's house.

He killed Lee. His own brother-in-law.

He kidnapped me.

He helped to calm me down when I had a panic attack.

He locked me in his bedroom but he fed me. And he didn't touch me. Not like *that*.

He hurt himself to catch me on the stairs, rather than just let me fall.

But then he...

A tear drips off my chin.

There were so many photos.

Anyone who's ever meant anything to me.

I don't know how he even found anyone. He has pictures of people I barely remember. And he didn't even need to say anything.

Because the final images...

I suck in another breath.

It wasn't the ones of my personal information. Wasn't the screen that showed the results from my last abnormal pap, and how I had to go back in. How much those tests hurt, just to tell me that everything was fine.

No, it was the images of the burned down houses. The remnants of explosions. The...blood.

The evidence that Lee wasn't the first victim of King's violence.

You'll marry me.

Another tear.

I'll do it. I'll say the right things. Sign the right papers. But I won't stay. I'll never just accept this fate and stay.

CHAPTER 20

King

THE DOORBELL RINGS AGAIN, AND I ROLL MY EYES.

“You could just open it yourself,” I say as I pull the door open.

Nero’s brows raise. “Nice outfit.”

My jaw works as I glance down.

Yep, still in nothing but my emerald green boxers.

“Just shut up and come in.” I step back and let my annoying best friend into my home.

“So...” he drags the word out. “How’s your prisoner?”

His question shouldn’t make my guts twist. Savannah reacted exactly how I expected her to react to my extensive blackmail. But...I didn’t like it. I fucking hated it.

He must see something on my face because his eyes narrow. “What did you do?” Nero’s tone is ice.

I’d be offended by his implication, but I kinda like that he’s concerned for Savannah’s well-being, even if he doesn’t come out and say it. “Nothing yet. That’s what you’re here for.”

“What does that mean?” He crosses his arms, his all-black outfit making him look like the crime lord he is. “If you think Payton will stand by while I hold your captive for you, you’re fucking nuts.”

“She really has you by the balls, doesn’t she?”

“You get a wife, then we’ll see how well you fair.” He smirks.

“Like I said, that’s what you’re here for.”

His arms drop to his sides. His mouth opens, then closes, and I can see the wheels clicking behind his eyes.

“Check your email.” I had one timed to land in his inbox when he’d

arrive.

Nero slowly pulls his phone out of his pocket, tapping the screen until he pauses. “You..” He looks up at me, with the most stunned expression I’ve ever seen on his face. “You had me ordained?”

I lift a shoulder. “Shotgun weddings don’t really call for best men, so I figured this was the next best option.”

He looks back down at his phone, then back up at me. “Ordained.” His eyes are wide. “You, what? Want me to fucking marry you?”

“To Savannah, yes.”

He stares at me for another beat, then throws his head back and laughs.

I let him have his humor for a few seconds. “You’ll do it?”

Nero shakes his head. “You’re fucking crazy. But yeah, sure. What the hell, I’ll play priest and marry you.”

CHAPTER 21

Savannah

THAT LAUGH.

Chills run up my arms and my spine straightens.

I swore I wouldn't forget that laugh. And hearing it again, in this house, frays my final nerve.

When I was at my most scared...that laugh.

I try to stand. I want to leave.

But my whole body is shaking. Shivers wracking my muscles making them useless. Coldness that wasn't there before seeping into the center of my being.

The sound of footsteps echo down the hall, and I drag my gaze up to watch the door.

Is King bringing that man here? To me?

But then the footsteps fade and time passes.

Minutes?

Where are they?

What if King sends that man in here alone?

I feel trails of warmth on my cheeks.

My hands lift to wipe at my cheeks but my hands are shaking.

Why is it so cold?

I glance to the black monitors, willing this all to be a nightmare, but then the footsteps are there, and I look back just as King appears in the doorway.

He's dressed now. In charcoal gray pants and a white button up shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows. His hair is still mussed, only serving to make him look more attractive. Like the Devil, swathed in a mirage of civility.

I had taken a few peeks at him while he walked me to the office, tempted

to thank him again for saving me from my fall, but the sight of his muscular body in nothing but shiny boxers was too much for my mind to process. And looking at him like this, knowing what's underneath those clothes...it makes me loathe his parents for giving him his attractive genes. No one this evil should be this good looking.

And then a second man walks into the office behind King. And I know. I just *know*, it's N. The man from the phone who thought it was so hilarious when I screamed for help.

His expression is unreadable. Like coming face to face with kidnapped women is an everyday thing. And I know I was right to be afraid of him.

"Savannah?" King's sounds concerned.

But that can't be true.

I don't look away from the other man. I can't. Because I hate him. I hate him so much.

"Shit," King mutters, then he turns and walks back out the door. Leaving me alone with the man in black.

CHAPTER 22

Nero

WELL, THIS IS INTERESTING.

Keeping my distance, I lean against the wall next to the door.

The woman in the chair looks...furious.

That's good.

Sure, she's shaking like a fucking leaf, but I can see the hatred burning in her eyes.

And that's really good.

Anger I can deal with. I can even deal with fear, because I know King won't hurt her.

But if she'd looked broken...My empathy rarely extends past Payton, but if this woman had looked shattered, or withdrawn...I don't think I could go through with this.

But fury?

My mouth starts to pull up at the edges.

Marrying King to this hellcat will be my fucking pleasure.

CHAPTER 23

Savannah

“YOU.” I FINALLY GET MY MOUTH TO FORM THE WORD.

But instead of flinching away from the accusation, N smiles. Full out smiles. “You remember me.”

Anger boils over inside of me, and I spring up, the chair rolling back into the wall behind me.

“You laughed!” I shout as I move toward him.

I don’t have a plan. All I know is that I want to hurt him for the way he’d made me feel.

His hands come up, palms out. “Woah, now.”

“I begged for your help!” My voice cracks, as too many emotions war within me.

My fist clenches and I pull my arm back.

I’ve never punched someone. But I’m about to try.

An amused expression crosses N’s face, and I put the rage it causes me into my swing.

Except my fist connects with a palm, that doesn’t belong to N.

The large hand closes around my own, while moving across my body, until my arm is pressed into my own chest.

I lash out with my other fist, any attempt at finesse long gone. But that fist is caught just like the first, and wrapped across my body until King is hugging me from behind, pinning my arms in place.

N laughs, a-fucking-gain, and I lose it.

I lean into King’s bear hug, and I let him take my weight as I kick out with both feet.

“Christ!” King steps back, and I thrash. My too-long-pant-legs waving in

the air in front of us.

We keep moving away from N, and even though I feel the fight leaving me, I don't stop struggling.

"I hate you!" I don't even realize I'm crying until I try to yell it. And I don't know who it's directed at, King or N. It doesn't even matter. I hate them both.

Together, King and I drop backwards, landing on the couch I'd briefly noticed was situated under the windows.

His legs come up and wrap around mine. Holding me in place. But my head is still free, so I swing my head around, hoping to hit his stupid perfect nose.

It's fruitless. I know that. He already showed me all the evidence I need, to prove I'm helpless. That I'm fully ensnared in his trap. But I can't help myself. I can't just let myself give up.

His body tightens around mine, as he shifts his head to dodge my blow.

Then we're tipping onto our sides, all of my limbs still trapped beneath his.

My head lands on the soft cushion, and before I can so much as react, his temple presses into mine, hard, securing my head between his and the couch below us.

And that's it.

I'm beat.

Defeated.

King's wild breathing matches my own as I struggle to calm my heaving lungs.

I blink away the tears still clinging to my lashes and notice a crumpled sweatshirt on the floor just inside the doorway.

Where did that come from?

I blink at it again.

Did King get that? Is that why he left me alone with the other man? When he swore and left the room, was he getting me a sweatshirt? Because I was shivering?

How am I ever supposed to make sense of this man?

"I can see why you want to marry her," N chuckles from his place still against the wall.

I glare at him.

"What's not to love?" King's tone is nonchalant. Like that's why we're

getting married. Because he loves me. Not because...

I blink some more.

I don't even know why he wants to marry me.

I mean, it's not because he wants to spend his life with me. And it certainly has nothing to do with love. So, it has to have something to do with Lee. But why?

N clears his throat. "Well, I found a script online. Do we need a witness in here before we get started? Or are you just gonna forge that too?"

"Bring Steve in. He can be a witness," King replies, his voice loud against my ear.

N dips his chin, then turns and walks out the door. Leaving us alone.

I can feel his chest fill against my back as he takes a deep breath.

I swallow, clearing the lump from my throat. "Why marriage?"

King sighs, his chest compressing. "Because you know too much."

I try to shake my head, but I can't, since he's still pressing his temple to mine. "I don't know anything."

"You know I killed Leland."

I squeeze my eyes shut. "I won't tell anyone."

"You know that's not how this works."

"No, King! I don't know that's *not how this works!*" Tears threaten again, so I pinch my eyes shut even tighter. "Believe it or not, I've never been involved in a murder before."

"I believe that, Honey. You're a good girl." His voice is so sincere, it trickles warmth into my chest before I can stop it.

"Then why?" I whisper.

"It's complicated." When I snuffle, his arms tighten around me, and he uses his legs wrapped around mine to bring all four of our legs up onto the couch. It's disgustingly comfortable, spooning on this couch, with the giant man forcing me into a marriage I don't want. "There are enough dots out there, connecting you to Leland, and Leland to me, that you would eventually get questioned. But as my wife, no one can force you to testify against me. And," he continues before I can argue, "if the cops can put those pieces together, so can my enemies." *Enemies*. "This may come as a surprise to you," his tone turns sarcastic, "but I'm involved in some not-so-good things."

I huff out a response, my tone matching his. "You don't say." I wiggle my body. "This all seemed like the behavior of a super lawful person."

His thighs flex around mine. "Might want to stop your wiggling."

My mouth opens to reply, when I notice it. *It*. A thick shaft hardening against my ass.

Is he seriously getting turned on?

Without thought, my hips shift.

Is his dick really that big?

King turns his face, his head still pressed against mine, but his lips so close to my cheek that they brush against my skin with each word. “I won’t force myself inside of you, Savannah Baby. But I am dying to come all over those pretty tits, so don’t fucking tempt me.”

Oh holy hell.

My pussy clenches at the image his words conjure.

A throat clears. “So...you ready?” N is back, with yet another big surly man at his side.

“I’m ready,” King growls, and I swear I feel him harden further.

I let my eyes close as N starts to recite words that I recognize from movies, but that I was starting to believe would never be said to me.

The recital of wedding vows that I’d basically given up on.

Just pretend it isn’t real.

Keeping my eyes shut I focus on my breathing. And I try not to think about how warm King is pressed up against me. How I’m not shivering anymore.

Raw, traitorous heat pools between my thighs. Making me feel even worse.

It’s just sweat. I tell myself. It’s not the feeling of a man’s arms around me. It has nothing to do with the aroused body part pressing into me. It certainly isn’t related to the words said against my skin.

N’s words suddenly sound louder. “Do you, King Bartholomew Vass, agree to take Savannah Jane Oates, as your reluctant wife? In sickness and in health? In rich and richer times. Do you promise to be a faithful captor, for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.” King’s words surround me.

“And do you, Savannah Jane Oates, take King Bartholomew Vass, to be your lawfully wedded husband? Do you promise to be cooperative and faithful? To be the best wife you can be? To not slit King’s throat while he sleeps?”

I let my eyes open, to glare at the man smirking from across the room.

When I don’t answer, King tightens his whole-body hold on me.

“Fine.”

“Savannah,” King chastises me quietly.

I grit my teeth, then give in. *It’s just words.* “I do.”

“Great!” N beams. “Then I, Nero, best friend of the lucky groom, pronounce you husband and wife.” He spreads his hands out. “You may kiss the bride.”

My eyes widen.

He wouldn’t...

King twists, and I’m suddenly on my back, his body crushing me into the cushions.

“Don’t you da—”

I try to say dare. But I only get to the part where my mouth opens on the *a* before his lips slam against mine.

My eyes widen, then slip closed as sparks short-circuit my brain.

His lips are warm. Firm, but soft. And mine react, matching his movements out of instinct.

I forget that I hate him.

For just one second, I forget that I’m here against my will.

I fall into the feeling of his weight on top of me, melting as his tongue sweeps across mine.

I moan when one of his hands slides up my spine to cup the back of my head.

I let myself forget.

For that one moment.

Then I remember *everything*.

And I close my teeth around his bottom lip.

King pauses, but doesn’t pull away, so I bite down harder.

I know I shouldn’t worry about hurting him. This man literally just forced me to marry him. But the thought of drawing blood and getting it in my mouth is more than I’m willing to do. Even if I had the gusto to bite his damn lip off—cue internal gag—it’s not like he’d just let me go.

The hand behind my head flexes, lightly tugging on my hair and I take it as my cue to release him.

When he lifts his face from mine, I expect to see him looking down at me with smug satisfaction. Gloating over what he accomplished. But the expression on his face... It’s something else altogether.

It’s hunger.

And I'm disgusted to have the same feeling deep in my core.

"Welp!" The man apparently named Nero, not just N, claps his hands together. "Is there a reception lunch or something? I'm famished."

King unwraps himself from around me, to stand.

I certainly don't miss the press of his body against mine. And I absolutely don't look at the oversized bulge in the front of his pants.

"Don't be a dick," King says to Nero, as he straightens his clothes.

"That's Preacher Dick." Nero grins.

They seem almost playful toward one another, and I remember Nero's comment about him being King's best friend and wonder if that's true. And wonder what it means that King's best friend would be someone so scary.

I use the moment when no one's attention is on me to push up into a sitting position, only to find that third man staring at me.

I'd forgotten all about him. *The witness.*

I'm wearing a bunch of oversized, borrowed clothes, but the way the man is looking at me crawls under my skin.

King's large body moves between me and the man.

"When the certificate is ready for you to sign, I'll have someone bring it out to you." King tells him, sounding calm. "But if you ever look at my wife like that again, I'll remove your eyeballs from your skull." He pauses. "Understand?"

The noise of my blood rushing through my veins drowns out whatever response the other man gives.

He's crazy.

I'm married to a crazy man.

"Put this on."

I startle, finding King crouching in front of me, holding out the well-worn maroon college sweatshirt.

I don't know if he's giving it to me to complete his task from earlier, or if he wants me to cover up the fact that I'm wearing a t-shirt with no bra. Either way, I take it and pull it on over my head because the cold from before is resettling into my bones.

"Are you hungry?"

I shake my head.

"You have to eat."

I shake my head again, pressing my lips together.

I want to scream at him. Yell at him about how unfair this all is. But I

know if I open my mouth now, nothing but sobs will come out.

King sighs, “Do you want to go back to the room?”

The room.

The bedroom I now have to share with this stranger before me.

I nod my head. It’s the best of my bad options.

“Alright.” He grips my wrists and stands, bringing me up with him.

Once I’m steady, he lets go of one hand, sliding the other down until his fingers are entwined with mine.

I don’t grip his fingers back, but I don’t bother trying to shake them off.

As King leads me toward the office door, Nero tips his head in my direction. “Welcome to The Alliance, Mrs. Vass.”

CHAPTER 24

King

SAVANNAH DOESN'T TURN TO LOOK AT ME. SHE JUST WALKS SILENTLY ACROSS the room and climbs into bed.

Something that sounds an awful lot like my conscience whispers in the back of my mind. But I've gotten really good at blocking him out, so I let the warning slip away, unheeded.

I wait, standing in the open doorway, hoping that she'll rail at me again. Try to run. Scream. Anything.

But she just curls up on her side, facing away from me, not even bothering with the blankets.

My tongue runs along the front of my teeth, the memory of her kiss too fucking recent. The feeling of her soft body under mine still too fresh in my mind.

But this Savannah, this defeated version, she makes my chest ache.

And when her shoulders shudder, I cross the room.

I want to get into bed with her. Wrap her back in my arms. Give her my warmth.

But as dumb as I am, I'm not dumb enough to think that's what she wants. So instead, I grab the comforter from its bunched-up place at the foot of the bed and drag it up over her body.

She doesn't react.

There are so many things I want to say.

This is more for your protection than it is for mine.

It won't be that bad.

I'll be a decent husband.

You can still have a good life here.

But I know she won't believe anything I say. Not right now.

So instead of voicing my promises, I turn away from our bed, and walk out of the room. Leaving the door ajar behind me.

CHAPTER 25

Savannah

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I LAID THERE CRYING BEFORE I FELL ASLEEP. AND I don't know how long I slept for. But I know my grumbling stomach is what woke me up.

Rolling onto my back, I rub at my salt-crusted eyes.

It's stupid, to feel so sad over something that was probably never going to happen anyway, but I couldn't help it. Ever since I was a little girl, I daydreamed about my perfect wedding. Some of the details changed, as the decades passed, but it was always on the beach. Somewhere exotic and warm, with waving palm trees before me and the ocean behind me. A soft dress flowing around my bare feet, my toes buried in the sand. And my hands clutching a bouquet of tropical flowers. The vibrant colors reflected back in the setting sun.

I never thought I'd have a lot of guests. Even as a child I knew we weren't that type of family. But in my fantasy, I had a few good friends there, witness to my big day, as I said personally written vows to the man that loved me more than he loved life itself.

My eyes stare unblinkingly at the ceiling.

Instead, I said *I do* while being physically restrained on a couch, wearing oversized, men's black loungewear. No bra. No makeup. Hair a wild mess. Agreeing to twisted vows that were recited to us by the devil.

Not slit his throat while he sleeps indeed.

A laugh builds in my throat.

I'm married.

I'm actually fucking married, to a man I met yesterday.

I slap a hand over my mouth, trapping the sound inside.

You cannot be laughing right now.

I need to keep my head.

It's just words.

I can still find a way out of this.

But if you ever look at my wife like that again, I'll remove your eyeballs from your skull. Understand?

Him calling me his wife shouldn't mean anything.

And him threatening to blind a man, painfully, shouldn't be endearing.

I take a deep breath.

What was in that nap?

Exhaling, I sit up. And see the door. Open.

I rub at my eyes again.

He didn't lock me in?

Because he knows you won't be able to leave.

My lips purse. It's probably true. I saw the guards outside. I saw the lock on the front door, and I think he said all the windows are made out of this same magically non-breakable bullshit. And even if I got outside, I'd have to climb over a tall as hell fence, and walk...somewhere.

But still. Open door.

Correction, *opening* door.

The shadows stretching across the room telling me that the sun is setting, meaning I slept most of the day.

The door keeps opening and I have to squint to see who's entering.

But no one—

A shadow closer to the ground draws my attention down, as the same huge black dog from last night lumbers into the room.

My heart instantly flies into my throat as I shuffle back on the mattress, not stopping until I hit the headboard.

"G-good boy," I choke out.

His head cocks at my words.

"Okay," I whisper. "This is your home, I get it."

His smooth steps bring him closer to the bed, between me and the bathroom door.

I carefully scoot toward the other side of the bed. "We're good. You're a good dog. A nice dog." I try to remember the commands that King used last night. But I can't. I was too terrified to pay attention.

The dog gets closer, and when he sinks onto his haunches, like he's about

to jump onto the bed, I throw my hands out. “SIT!”

I shout the word, closing my eyes at the same time, bracing myself to be mauled.

But nothing happens.

Opening one eye, I see the giant dog sitting next to the bed. His chin resting on the mattress.

“O-kay...” I lick my lips looking around the room. “Okay.” I don’t need to make it out of the room, I just need to make it to the closet. I know dogs are fast, but the bed is between him and the open closet door. I can do this. “Sit,” I repeat, sliding closer to the far edge. “Stay.” I keep the hand closest to the dog up in the universal symbol of *stop*. “Stay...”

When I reach the edge, I drop my hands and leap for the floor.

It’s only a few steps. Just a handful of strides.

I think I’m screaming, and I vaguely remember King saying something about *not running* away from this dog, but it’s too fucking late for that now!

My feet skid on these accursed slippery floors, but I keep my balance and slide into the closet.

My toes catch on the rug that I forgot was in the center of the massive closet, but before I can fall, I reach back and swing the door shut.

I awkwardly land on my right arm as I hear the door slam closed behind me.

I flop onto my back. “Oh, thank fuck.” Relief almost makes me laugh again.

Until the dim light is blocked out by the giant furry face lowering to mine.

I freeze, too scared to even react, and the beast lowers his face to...lick me.

His gross tongue slides from my chin to my eyebrow, and I shriek, for a whole new reason.

“Ahh!” I shove at his neck. The short fur so much softer than I expected.

He barks, just once. And it sounded...playful?

The dog backs up one step, lowering his front half to the ground, butt still in the air, stubby wagging tail on display.

“Oh my god,” I groan, lifting my head, then letting it drop back onto the rug. “You’re not mean, are you?”

As though he understood me, the dog gives another bark before bouncing up and trying to lick my face again.

He gets one more sloppy lick in, before I'm able to shove him back. "Alright, alright! You win." I make enough room to sit up.

"Sit."

He sits.

Curious, I hold out my palm. "Shake."

The big boy slaps his big paw into my hand, and I can't help but smile as I close my fingers around his furry digits and give it two firm shakes.

I let go of his paw and he lowers his head to nudge my hand. Taking the cue, I reach up and pat the top of his head.

I don't know how he went from terrifying to cute, but he did. And that's good, since sitting like this, the damn creature is taller than I am.

"Pretty sneaky that you made it in here before I shut that door," I tell him, rubbing behind his short pointy ears while my other hand presses against my chest, my heart still beating wildly. I swear, next time I'm forced to run for my life, I'll just sit on the ground instead. Whatever happens, happens. "It's a good thing you don't have a long tail, huh. It probably would've gotten smashed in the door and that would've hurt."

The dog snuffles his reply at the same time I hear heavy footfalls enter the bedroom.

"Savannah!" King's voice booms through the space.

I press my lips together, staying quiet.

Let him worry that his monster dog ate me.

His stomping moves across the bedroom, and I picture him checking the bathroom.

"Savannah!"

The dog turns, like he's gonna go scratch at the door. So, I lean forward and throw my arms around his neck, holding him in place.

Another round of stomps, and what I assume is the sound of the patio doors opening, before he shouts again.

The temptation to greet his master becomes too much for the demon dog in my arms because he lets out a deep woof.

This time I'm busy shushing the dog, so I don't hear the steps until the closet door is slamming open.

I yelp, embarrassing myself, and the dog—if the look he gives me is any indication.

"What..." King's gaze bounces between me and the dog. "Duke, what the hell are you doing in here?"

My mouth pops open. “I’m sorry, is that the dog’s name?”

King crosses his arms, his bulk blocking the entire doorway. “What happened?”

If he can ignore my question, I can ignore his. “Did you honestly name your dog Duke?”

Hearing his name, the dog turns his head in my direction. But I manage to avoid his attempted kiss when I fall back onto the rug, letting loose the laugh that’s been boiling inside me since waking up.

I sound insane. Completely unhinged. But I just *can’t*.

The full belly laugh shakes my body.

The conceited level of pretentiousness is too much.

“Duke!” I choke out, dropping my hands to cover my eyes.

The dog barks and I only laugh harder.

“Yeah, alright, buddy. Your new mom is clearly having a mental breakdown right now. Let’s leave her be.”

Duke barks again.

I spread my fingers so I can see King. The expression on his face lands somewhere between annoyed and entertained.

“Any other esteemed pets around? Maybe a cat named Earl.”

King eyes me. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m allergic to cats.”

My smile widens before I can stop myself, hating that I find him funny.

King rounds his lips, blowing a quick sharp whistle, and Duke jumps to all fours, standing at attention in front of his *dad*. “When you get yourself under control, come downstairs. I’m hungry.”

I drop my hands. “I’m not cooking for you.”

The man rolls his eyes at me. “I have a cook. And pretty sure I’m smart enough not to eat anything you make me.” He takes a step back, Duke moving with his steps. “The vows only covered slit throats, not poisoning.”

CHAPTER 26

King

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, SAVANNAH COMES DOWN THE STAIRS. AND SHE'S clearly raided my closet again, which, considering that's where I left her, isn't a surprise.

This time she's wearing a pair of thick dark gray sweatpants, with elastic around the bottom, so they're bunched at her ankles, and not trying to kill her by flopping past her toes. On the top, she's back to wearing her form-fitting floral tank. And—dammit—her bra.

Though it's hard to be mad about the bra, because if I can't admire her nipples poking through her shirt, at least I can appreciate the function of the push-up bra. Because those tits look like fucking heaven right now. And if she'd let me lay my head on that cleavage, I bet I'd sleep like a damn baby.

A memory from last night, of that shirt hanging in the shower to dry, pops into my mind. And my eyes move back down her body, like I can see through her pants, wondering if she's wearing those lacy red panties. If the panties I wrapped around my dick last night are currently snug against her hot little...

I shift my weight, as my cock wakes up.

Savannah side-eyes me. "You said something about a cook?"

"Y—" I clear my throat and shift again. "Yeah." She eyes me more. And I nod toward the back of the house. "After you."

I follow her, keeping my eyes above her waist —because that plump ass is not helping my half chub situation.

You're forty-five years old. Get a grip.

The scent of well-made food fills the air, and Savannah is able to follow her nose to the expansive kitchen that overlooks the backyard.

Cici, my cook, turns at our arrival.

Usually she's gone by this time of day, retired to the staff house, on the far side of the manicured lawns, where she lives there with her sister Ginger, my housekeeper, and Jamie, Ginger's husband, the gardener and all around handyman.

But instead of leaving me dinner in the fridge and relaxing with her family, she's been in here preparing an elaborate meal of beef wellington, mashed potatoes with gravy, and my favorite sauteed green beans with garlic and lemon zest. All because some fucking loud-mouth *Preacher* had to tell her that I got married today.

Savannah stops at the island, opposite from Cici, and I watch as she takes her in. Cici, and the staff, are all mid to late thirties, and have been working for me going on a decade.

From the surprise on Savannah's face, I'm guessing she was expecting someone older, maybe a Mrs. Doubtfire situation.

I step up next to Savannah, lightly gripping the back of her neck. "Cici, this is my wife, Savannah. Savannah, this is Cici."

Cici, always quiet around new people, gives a small smile. "Pleased to meet you."

Savannah looks up at me before addressing Cici. "Hi Cici, I'm a prisoner here."

I shake my head and address my cook, "We'll take our meal in the dining room."

Cici's eyes flit back and forth between me and my troublesome wife. "Oh. Um, okay."

Savannah tosses her hands up, and I flex my fingers on the back of her neck. "My staff will treat you with the respect you deserve as my wife. But they won't cross me for you." Savannah glares up at me. "It's not personal, Honey. I just pay really well."

She scowls up at me, and I can't help myself. With my grip on her neck I drag her closer and press a kiss to her furrowed forehead.



I WATCH AS SHE SLIDES ANOTHER MOUTHFUL OF PERFECTLY COOKED STEAK, surrounded with buttery pastry, into her mouth.

And when she finally breaks her silence with a moan of pleasure, I break my own. “Knew you’d like it.”

She slowly raises her eyes from her plate to look at me. “It’s fine.”

I scoff, “It’s more than fine.”

She picks up her steak knife and slices off another piece before lifting the knife, letting the light glint off the blade. “Aren’t you worried about giving me a weapon? Or is that why you seated us so far from each other?”

The thought of her trying to come at me with a knife makes me laugh. She’s a runner, sure, but she’d never draw blood. Not on purpose.

“I don’t see how this is funny.”

Instead of answering, I pick up my plate and utensils in one hand, and my heavy crystal water glass in the other and carry it all down to her end of the table.

When I’d told Cici we’d eat in the dining room, I hadn’t meant for her to set us up at opposite ends of the large rectangular table with seating for fourteen. But since Savannah looked like she could use some space, I gave it to her.

But time for space is over.

I set my things down at the spot closest to her knife hand. “You won’t try to kill me.” She doesn’t answer me, just rolls her lips before forcefully shoving a forkful of potatoes into her mouth.

Watching her eat is fucking adorable. I’m so used to being at fancy dinners and shit like that, where the women, big or small, always seem to pick at their meals. As though females aren’t allowed to eat. But watching Savannah destroy that steak has my cock perking up. Again.

I should probably leave her alone.

But that’s not my style.

“Cat got your tongue?” I smirk.

She stabs a pile of green beans, muttering something about lion eyes.

“I didn’t quite catch that.”

Savannah ignores me, and I watch her every move as she meticulously works her way through the plate.

Already done, I’m relaxed back in my chair when she sets her fork down, wiping her mouth with the white linen napkin. Neither of us leaving so much as a scrap behind.

“Would you like more?” I ask, knowing it’s the first time she’s eaten all day.

Savannah slides her chair out, angling her body to mine. “What’s the Alliance?”

I drop my head back and groan. “Fucking Nero.”

She scoffs. “Yeah, what a surprise that the man who laughed when I screamed for help said something you didn’t like.”

My mouth pulls into a grimace. “Remember that, do you?”

The tiny bit of humor drops from her face. “I’ll never forget it.”

That guilty feeling crawls across my ribcage, and I adjust my seat to face hers. “Nero is a complicated man.”

She lets out an incredulous laugh. “Complicated. Sure.”

I want to tell her that she can trust Nero. That he would never hurt her. That we might be bad men, but we aren’t bad like that.

But—and here’s the complicated part—I need her to keep believing that I’m willing to kill all her family and friends if she crosses me.

Not exactly the foundation for a trusting marriage.

“So, what is it?” she asks. “A gang or something?”

I sigh. “Or something.” I uncross my arms and drag a hand down my face. How do I explain this? “The Alliance is a, well, for lack of a better term, it’s a criminal organization.”

“Criminal organization,” she repeats slowly. “Like the mafia?”

I let my head tip back and forth. “More or less.”

“More or less?” her brows raise in challenge.

“Yeah, Honey. More or less.”

“Stop calling me that.”

I smile at her defiance. “No.”

She crosses her arms to show her displeasure with me, but it just pushes her tits up even higher and I can’t help but drop my eyes to the temptation.

She drops her hands to her lap with a huff. “How is something *more or less* like the mafia?”

“I don’t suppose you’d settle for me telling you that you’re better off not knowing?”

“Not a fucking chance.”

“Fine.” I take a breath, deciding to just lay it out. She’s stuck with me now, so what’s the harm in her knowing? “Nero and I started The Alliance about fifteen years ago when we took out the two major mafia families in the area.”

“Took out...” she interrupts.

“Killed,” I say simply. “I wiped out the Irish, Nero brought down the Russians, and we combined the men that we left alive to create The Alliance. Where loyalty and trust means more than contaminated bloodlines.”

Her lips pull to the side, I watch her eyes as she takes in this information. “But, what do you do?”

“Bad things, Savannah. We aren’t good men.”

“But like what? Some of us aren’t familiar with *mafia shit*. Does that mean you sell cocaine and Tommy guns?”

My brow lifts. “You watch too many movies.”

She lifts her hands in a *well* gesture.

“We have different facets of men that do different things. And yes, some of those things include illegal substances and firearms. But most of it revolves around money. Around influence. Keeping our territory under our control and keeping other people out.”

I watch her swallow. “So, earlier, when you mentioned enemies...”

I nod. “There are a lot of people that want what we have. There are a lot of people that want what *I* have.” No use holding back now. “I’m a wealthy man. I have my own investment company that I started around the same time as the Alliance, and I’ve done well for myself.” I bite back a smile when she rolls her eyes. “For a long time, everyone thought that Nero ran The Alliance by himself. No one, outside of the original crew that went to war with me, even knew that Nero and I knew each other. Let alone that we were friends. It was easier to organize the men with just one person to answer to. And I had family to consider. You’ve met my sister Aspen already.” I don’t miss her slight flinch. “My mom was also still living with me back then. And I have another, well half-sister, Val, who we’d found out about around that same time.” I shake my head. “All that to say, I had people I needed to protect from that life.”

“But not anymore?”

“Some things happened last fall, and I decided it was time to show my hand.” I think back to the look on Nero’s face when I showed up outside of Mikhail’s house, and I know I did the right thing. “My time in the background served its purpose, but it had run its course. Making my ties to The Alliance *public* has brought some new dangers, but it also tells people who I really am.”

“And who are you?” Savannah’s voice is quiet.

“I’m a dangerous man to fuck with.” I let that sink in for a moment,

before I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees, putting us at eye level. “I know you don’t want to be here, Savannah. But you are. And you’re mine now. So, my protection extends to you. Anyone that crosses you will die. I mean that. Literally. You won’t be locked in the house forever. Once we learn to trust each other, you’ll be able to go out and do whatever it is you want to do during the day. But you’ll never be alone, because the protection of my name also comes with a target. Which is the other reason why you’re here.” She blinks, a mix of emotions filling her eyes. “Even if I could believe that you’d lie to the police, the breadcrumbs between us are too thick to brush aside, and someone else could’ve followed them. Someone who would hurt you, just to bring heat down on me and my family.” I see her starting to form an argument, but I don’t let her get it out. “It’s not far-fetched. It’s the world I live in, the world *you* live in now. And before you get any ideas to call the police and ask for their help, know that most of them are in our pockets. And the ones that aren’t are in the pockets of others. So either way, it wouldn’t do you any good to run to them. And I’m not telling you this to scare you. I’m telling you so you’re informed. You and I are a team now. And I know it’s a lot to take in, but the sooner you can accept that, the sooner you can find a new normal.” When she doesn’t say anything, I prompt her. “Do you understand?”

She searches my eyes. “You’ll let me paint?”

The question sends a spear of lightning through my chest. She doesn’t even ask about the other stuff. Doesn’t protest or try to convince me to let her go. She just asks if I’ll let her paint.

I stand, holding my hand out for her to take. “Yeah, Honey. You can still paint.”

She eyes my palm for a long second before taking it.

I lead her out of the dining room, through the kitchen, and down the back hallway.

The house looks like a normal two-story mansion from the front, but from above, it looks like a U, the lower level jutting out on either side to create a sort of courtyard in the back. Each leg of the U consists of a large window-laden sunroom. Neither is used much, and I was tempted to put her on the other side of the house, near my office. But I decided on this one, below our bedroom, thinking she’ll feel more comfortable if my office wasn’t next door.

I just won’t mention that if I stand at just the right spot in my office, I can see across the courtyard, and through the windows, into this room. Where I’ll

hopefully be able to watch her work.

Savannah has been walking subdued at my side, not asking me where I'm taking her.

So when I swing open the door leading into the sunroom—her new home studio—her gasp fills me with satisfaction.

I step to the side and let her walk ahead of me.

I had all of the original furniture removed from the room and had the walls painted a bright white. I don't know if it was the right call, but from my online research it sounded like white walls were the best for art studios because of the way they reflect light.

Savannah walks the perimeter of the room, her bare feet quiet on the tile floor, as she runs her hands all over everything. Touching the edges of the stack of blank canvases I ordered. Tracing the wooden frames of the half dozen easels scattered around the room. Running her fingers over the tables laden with tubes of oil paint, the same brand I spotted in the background of one of the photos she shared online.

Because of the way the room sticks out from the rest of the house, three of the walls are windows, with a set of French doors—identical to the ones in the bedroom—leading out into the courtyard. And there's a trio of skylights in the ceiling that I had fitted with remote control blinds if she needs to block out the sun.

It's currently growing dark outside, but I had adjustable lamps put in each corner, and the overhead lights are set on low, so it's easy for me to see Savannah's face when she stops at the far side of the room and slowly turns to face me.

After inspecting every inch in silence, I'm almost surprised to hear her ask, "When?"

"Last night."

Her eyes move around the room. "How?"

The side of my mouth pulls up. "Disgustingly rich, remember?"

"Why?" Her voice catches, and I'm already striding across the room, capturing her face in my hands.

"Because I can. And because the world needs your art."

A single tear spills down her soft cheek, and I use the pad of my thumb to wipe it away.

"Do you mean that?" she whispers, her eyes searching mine.

"Yeah, Savannah Baby. I mean that."

With my hands on her face, I feel her intentions, feel her lifting onto her toes. And whether she knows what she's doing or not, I don't hesitate to meet her movement. Leaning down, placing my lips against hers.

I watch as she squeezes her eyes shut, setting another tear loose. But she doesn't pull away, and she doesn't tense.

Her mouth is soft against mine. And I let myself linger for one breath. One movement of my lips against hers before I pull back.

"No more crying." I wipe away the next tear. "I know it's hard to see right now, but you can be happy here."

CHAPTER 27

Savannah

YOU CAN BE HAPPY HERE.

King's words have been on repeat in my brain since we left my new studio.

My studio.

I stare at my reflection as I continue to brush my teeth, well past the suggested two minutes.

I kissed him.

My inner voice won't stop reminding me of the fact that I kissed the man who ruined my life. All because he bought me some art supplies.

But that's not precisely accurate. He did more than that.

The world needs your art.

When my vision blurs, I tip my head forward and spit my over-frothed toothpaste into the sink.

I'm pretty sure he used this same toothbrush when he got ready for bed. But I don't even care. *I mean, I've already kissed him, twice. So, what does it matter?*

I'd purposefully kept my gaze lowered when he came out of the bathroom—fairly certain that he only sleeps in his boxers— not wanting to witness his fantastic body walk across the room on full display. Which is why I've spent the last twenty minutes in here, washing my face, switching my shirt for another one of King's t-shirts, delaying the inevitable.

The sooner you go to sleep, the sooner you can put this day behind you.

Squaring my shoulders, I turn off the lights and open the bathroom door.

I make it one step into the bedroom, before I stop. "Seriously?"

King doesn't move, except to lift his gaze, looking at me over the rim of

his glasses.

Fucking. Glasses.

“What?” he sounds truly perplexed, and I want to punch him now, more than ever. Because how dare he.

How. Dare. He.

King is sitting up, back propped against the padded headboard, pillow behind his lower back, legs thankfully hidden under the bedspread, but bare chest on display, as he types away on the laptop resting in his lap. With motherfucking black-rimmed glasses perched on his obnoxious sculpted-from-marble nose.

I refuse to compare myself to him. I know that I look like a frumpy potato in borrowed clothes. And after freedom, my first wish would be for a hair binder, because I am so incredibly sick of having it down and in my face.

“Is there a problem?” His tone has changed and the smugness tells me he knows exactly how hot he looks.

I’ve already considered and discarded the idea of sleeping on the floor. It might give me a few extra feet of distance, but this over-thirty body isn’t built for rough sleeping.

“Yeah, there’s a problem,” I mutter. “Big dumb hairy problem.”

“Which is?”

“Oh, shut up,” I snap at him, as I turn off the light on my side of the bed.

He has the decency to hold his tongue, until I climb onto the mattress and use all the spare pillows to create a barrier between our sides.

“Never took you for a pro-wall type.”

Still refusing to find him funny, I pat the last pillow into place and lay on my side, facing away from him. “With a bed this size, I’m assuming you’ll have no problem staying on your side.”

“Cross my heart.” He’s quiet for a moment. “Is the typing gonna keep you up?”

I shrug because I don’t know.

A few more moments go by before he says, “Goodnight, Savannah.”

And as his fingers tap against his keyboard, I let exhaustion pull me into oblivion.

CHAPTER 28

Savannah

“RISE AND SHINE, SLEEPYHEAD.” THE VOICE RUMBLES AGAINST MY EAR, AND I turn my head into the sound.

A disturbingly familiar weight increases around my back, and I groan as my situation becomes clear. “Son of a bitch.”

The chest under my face shakes with a chuckle. “Don’t get mad at me, I’m not the one that broke down your well-constructed partition.”

I grumble more curses, his chest hair tickling my lips, but I have a feeling he’s telling the truth. Because this is not the position I fell asleep in.

At least my leg isn’t thrown over his this morning. Instead, I’ve just burrowed into his side.

“I’d love to stay here, trust me.” His exhale ruffles my hair. “But I have the movers meeting us in just over an hour. So, we gotta get going.”

I roll my face enough so I’m not speaking directly into his body. “Movers for what?”

“For your house.”

That response has me opening my eyes, tilting my head back enough to look at him. “What do you mean, my house?”

“I’m warm and comfortable right now, so try to not freak, when I remind you that you live here now.”

I roll my eyes. “God, you’re annoying in the morning.”

He grins, “Just the morning?”

With the hand I have draped across his waist, I grip the blankets, then yank them back in one quick motion. The movement snaps them to my side of the bed, exposing all of King’s previously covered skin to the air-conditioned air.

I almost laugh at the yelp he lets out, but as I try to scoot away, he rolls on top of me.

“You’re a damn menace.”

“That’s rich, coming from my blackmailer.” I try to act unaffected at having his body over mine. Just like I try to pretend I don’t feel his morning wood against my belly, all while reminding myself that I hate this man.

His sleepy smile tells me my barb didn’t bother him. “I’ll get ready in the guest room, since I don’t think you’re quite ready to share a shower.” Heat shoots down my spine, picturing what it might be like to have him with me, in the steam filled shower, covered in suds. “But if you’re not ready in an hour, I’m coming in.”

His hips flex while he says the last three words, and I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from moaning. The innuendo received.

And then I continue to lay there, staring at the ceiling, as he rolls off me, and strides his fine ass out of the room.



IT’S WEIRD. BEING HERE, WITH *HIM*.

This whole morning has felt surreal. Starting with waking up together, then seeing my minivan in King’s garage. I’d pressed my hand against his passenger side window when I saw it, hardly believing my eyes.

Seeing where I was looking, King told me that *the cleaners* found my keys on Lee’s—or as he said *Leland’s*—counter and drove it over.

King practically spit the man’s name out, so I didn’t ask questions.

Of course, I didn’t get my keys back. King had them, using them to open my front door moments ago, before pocketing them again.

Standing here, in the living room of my small house, I wonder how it’s only been two days since I’ve been here, when it feels like forever.

When I last left home, I was wearing this same exact outfit, on my way to have my third date with Lee. A date that I’d pretty much decided would be our last, without realizing just how true that last part would become.

“The moving crew will do all the packing, I just need you to decide what comes to the house, what goes.”

I slowly turn to look at King, but he’s already busied himself looking

around the place.

His words shouldn't come as a shock to me, but I hadn't really thought it through when he said we were meeting the movers here. I mean, yeah, when I think about it, obviously Mr. Controlling wasn't just going to let me keep my house. I knew that. But still...

"What?" King's looking at me now.

I widen my eyes at him, "You do realize this is kind of a big deal?"

He arches a brow, "Honey, this house sucks."

My jaw drops. "It does not!"

"Uh," he gestures around, "yeah, it does. And you know it."

I stomp my foot. The tantrum not lost on either of us.

"Savannah," he sighs, "you didn't live here." Before I can argue that—yes, this is my house and I definitely lived here—he crosses the room and grips my elbow, dragging me out of the main living area down the tiny hall, past the one bathroom, into my bedroom. "Show me where you are?"

"What are you talking about? This is *my house!* I've lived here for..." it takes me a moment to remember.

"Nine years," he finishes for me. "And there's not a single one of your paintings on the walls."

The statement stuns me. "Well, no. But..."

"You never even painted the walls."

I look at the somewhat dingy white surfaces. "How would you..."

He walks over to my non-walk-in closet and yanks the door open. "Wow, shocker, you never even updated the storage." The original single bar below the long shelf proves him right. "The only proof you've ever stepped foot in here are the smudges."

I press my lips together, and I give up on my protest. I know what smudges he's talking about. The small smears of paint near door handles. On door frames. Places I might have touched or leaned on when I came home from the small space I rented as a studio. The place I've really lived at for the past nine years. More really, since I found that place while I was still in college.

And I hate to admit it, but he's right.

King is right about all of it.

This house has been mine for nearly a decade, but the sadness I feel over losing it is entirely for me, for my lack of connection to it.

These walls deserve better than what I gave them.

“What will you do with it?” I ask, not allowing this sadness to convert into tears.

King lifts a shoulder. “Sell it. The bones are fine. It’ll be a fun flip for someone, but I’m not interested in that small of a return on investment a place like this would net.”

“Spoken like a true finance bro.”

King chuckles, “I could tear it down, build a three-story home, sell it for six figures and fuck with the neighborhood housing costs, if that’s more to your liking.”

I block out his hollow threat, taking in the room with new eyes and feeling embarrassed. It’s just a white box, no personality, no intention, no love.

I take a deep breath. “I want all my clothes. And the stuff in the bathroom.”

There’s no point in fighting this. Even if I wanted to keep this place, King wouldn’t let me stay here.

“Anything else? We can put things in storage if you want,” he offers.

I appreciate his attempt at civility, but I shake my head. “The furniture was all cheap, and since you have a live-in chef, I’m guessing you don’t need my Target-bought kitchenware.”

“Fair.” He slides his hands into his pants pockets. “Where would you like me to start?”

I eye him in his grayish blue suit. The white shirt beneath making his tanned skin glow. “You want to help pack?”

“I’m good at folding underwear,” he grins.

I shake my head and point out the door. “You can do the bathroom.”

Thankfully, King complies, and I get to work.

I have two suitcases wedged onto the one shelf in the closet, so I drag them down and open them on the bed.

I’ve been meaning to donate some of my old clothes, the ones that no longer fit, so I sort those out into a pile on top of the dresser, folding the ones I want to keep before placing them in the suitcases.

Only a handful of minutes have gone by when I hear King’s heavy steps enter the bedroom.

“No way you’re done already,” I say, reaching for a hanger.

King doesn’t reply, and I’m just turning to look over my shoulder when his arms encircle me, yanking me back roughly against his chest, knocking

the breath out of mine.

“You get one answer. And I’ll know if you’re lying.” His low voice lifts the tiny hairs on the back of my neck. “Did you use this with *him*?”

I open my mouth to ask what he’s talking about, when he raises a hand in front of me. And the color drains from my face.

“Answer me,” he growls.

I stare at the neon green, vibrating, silicone cock ring, pinched between his fingers.

“K-King...” The mortification is unending. How could I forget that I had that in the bathroom.

“So help me god, if you—”

“No!” I blurt out. “I’ve never used that with anyone!”

“Don’t lie to me.”

I jab my elbow back into his side, not that he reacts. “Thought you could tell if someone was lying,” I snap. “Because I’m telling you the truth, you jerk.”

“If you haven’t used it Sweet Savannah,” his mouth presses against my ear. “Then where’s the packaging?”

“I...I never said I didn’t use it.” I can’t stop staring. “I just...I used it alone, okay?”

His breath heaves. “How does a woman use this alone?”

His change in tone is like a match to my libido.

My body starts to ache, and my nipples pebble. Dying for attention.

“How, Savannah?”

I squeeze my thighs together, not believing what I’m about to admit. “I’d put it on a, um, dildo and pretend.”

“Fuuuck.” King groans deep in his chest, his open mouth dropping to the bare part of my shoulder.

My entire body is lit up, practically vibrating.

The hand holding the ring lowers, flattening over my stomach, and I can’t even be bothered to worry about how my much softer body feels to him, because right now, all I want is to have him closer.

My back arches.

“Baby, you—” his words are cut off by a loud knocking on the door. “Goddammit.” He pulls me tighter against his body, letting me feel that he’s just as affected as I am. “Fuck. We’ll talk about this later.” Then he’s letting me go.

And for the second time today, I don't stare at his ass as he walks out of the room.

"And leave clothes out for dinner." He calls over his shoulder. "We're going out after this."

CHAPTER 29

Savannah

KING SLOWS THE VEHICLE, LIFTING A HAND IN A LAZY WAVE TO A SECURITY guard, as he drives through the open gate into a fancy neighborhood.

“Um, I thought you said we were going out for dinner?” I ask.

We pass more and more houses and when he doesn’t reply, I start to get nervous. “King?”

His head jerks toward me, an intense expression on his face.

“What?” I can’t read his expression.

“I like hearing you say my name.”

My mouth pops open. “I’ve said your name before...”

He shakes his head, turning his attention back to the street ahead of us.

I try to think back. That can’t be true. Is it?

As I scrub my memory, I look out the window, watching more residences pass.

I’m guessing we’re going to Nero’s house, because I can’t imagine anywhere else he’d take me.

I’d already been wondering if there’d be a way for me to escape at a restaurant. But no matter how I cut it, it just didn’t seem possible. I mean, there’s always the possibility that he’s lying about the cops being in his pocket, or that his enemies would try to get me. *The whole enemy talk still blows my mind, though I did see him kill a guy...* But on the off chance I did find a way out, I decided to dress practically. So, for our dinner out, I put on my shimmery gold palazzo pants, with a black, low-cut, ruffle-sleeved tank. Paired with a pair of cute all black tennis shoes, good for running. And since it was the first time in two days that I was able to, I did my make up and put my hair up into a high ponytail.

I might have a small enough wardrobe that it all fits into two suitcases, but my experience with showings art galleries means I have some nice pieces to wear. Which is good, because King—my freaking husband—always looks like a million bucks.

Probably because he is a millionaire.

My eyes slide over to him as I think about the things he's told me.

Maybe he's more than a millionaire.

The tires bump as King pulls into a driveway. In a normal situation I'd feel a little over-dressed for a dinner at a friend's house, but based on the house we just pulled up to, I probably should've worn high heels.

King doesn't say anything, just parks and turns off the engine, before climbing out.

Following his lead, I unbuckle and open the door.

King's already at my side when I climb out, and as we walk up the brick sidewalk, leading to the front door, King places his hand on my back.

"I think it's important for you to know that Aspen knows Leland is dead." King's words fill me with unease, and I try to slow, but his hand keeps propelling me along. "After we left your friend Mandi's house, I dug into his life, at Aspen's request, which is how I found his apartment. But I also found that he'd been compiling what he thought was evidence against me, and against The Alliance. I don't know what he planned to do with his shitty information, he didn't have any contacts anywhere that I can find, but that, combined with the cheating, meant he had to go."

My mouth has gone completely dry.

We stop at the front door, and King leans forward to ring the doorbell. "I'm telling you this because, for the sake of the other guests, Aspen is going to pretend that Leland is out of town on business. And I want you to know that she's aware of the truth."

I can hardly hear him over the beating of my own heart. Adrenaline spiking in my veins.

"Whose house is this?" I whisper.

But before he can reply, the front door opens.

"Hello, sister." King greets Aspen.

Her smile, which was brittle to start with, shatters when she sees me. "What," she drops her volume and steps through the doorway. "What is *she* doing here?"

I try to back up, not wanting to get sprayed by her venom, but King

doesn't let me go. Sliding his hand further around to my side.

"Sorry," King doesn't sound sorry at all. "I assumed the dinner invite included my wife."

"Wife?!" Aspen screeches, then slams her lips shut, looking over her shoulder.

Oh, sweet baby Jesus, he didn't tell her we got married.

"Did I forget to mention that?"

I want to hit him.

I want to hit him so hard.

But I also want to throw up. Throwing up might be my new thing.

"Everything okay out there, dear?" a woman's voice calls from within.

With murder in her eyes, Aspen's tone flips to pleasant as she calls back, "Of course! Just my brother and his new bride." She changes back to a whisper, this time aiming her daggers at King. "I'm going to fucking kill you."

I glance up to see him smirk. "How? I'm the one you call when you want that particular task done."

Her lips thin before she snaps, "I'll get Nero to do it."

King laughs, "Good luck with that."

The whole exchange has me chewing on my lip so hard, I'm surprised it's still attached.

Aspen turns her glare back to me, her nostrils flaring. "The people here are major donors of mine, try not to be a total whore around them."

I drop my eyes before she finishes speaking, but it doesn't lessen the disgusting feeling in my gut. I never slept with her husband, but I did go out with him.

"Aspen." King's tone is pure warning. "Watch your mouth."

Her chest heaves, twice, then she plasters a Stepford smile on her face and spins away, leaving the door open for us to follow.

King taps his fingers against my side. "Well, that went better than expected."

"Better?" I hiss, even as he guides me inside. "I'm going to help her kill you." I keep my voice down, aware that these grand entryways echo like crazy. "I can't believe you didn't—"

I don't get to finish because a gray-haired woman appears around the corner ahead of us waving her hands in a *come here* motion. "King! What a lovely surprise!"

“Mrs. Lucking, how nice to see you.” King sounds completely normal, and I wonder if he’s just as unhinged as his sister.

Thinking about the way Aspen can turn her smiles on and off gives me the creeps.

The woman reaches us, and King leans down to kiss her cheek.

She’s probably old enough to be his mother but she still blushes. And I get it.

“Now what’s this I hear about a wife?” Her gaze moves to me, and her smile only grows. “Oh, aren’t you stunning!”

Now I’m blushing, which is probably better than the *I’m going to be ill* look I’m sure I was sporting a few seconds ago.

“This is Savannah,” King put his arm back around my shoulders and presses a kiss to the top of my head.

His action is followed by a shatter, and I glance past the woman, into the lounge looking room behind her, where Aspen is standing over a dropped martini glass.

“Oh my,” another woman hurries over, waving her hands. “Are you alright?”

Aspens waves her off with a smile. “Just being clumsy today.”

Mrs. Lucking is looking at me, and I realize I’m probably pale again, since I’m picturing Aspen picking up one of those shards and jabbing it into my heart.

I try to smile and say *I’m fine* at the same time. But just end up opening my mouth and a garbled *Eine* is all that comes out.

King clears his throat—and I swear to god, if he’s smothering a laugh, I’m going to smother him while he sleeps.

“Let’s take this as a sign and move into the dining room,” Aspen chuckles, and the two women nod their agreement before calling their husbands over. I hadn’t noticed the pair standing together on the far side of the room, but they stroll over amiably enough.

“Come, come.” Mrs. Lucking grips my arm and starts hauling me back across the main hallways and into an impressive room.

The evening sun rays are filtered through gauzy curtains, and the shades of white and taupe covering the room give the space a museum quality. It’s lovely.

A woman in a catering uniform hurries past us, to set another place at the table. *Since no one was expecting me.*

The two older couples take seats facing each other. And when Mrs. Lucking insists King sit next to her, he pulls me down into the open seat next to him.

Aspen strides into the room, new drink in hand, and takes the last open place setting across from King.

Me being here makes it an odd number, so I'm the only one staring at an empty chair. It might be rude, by polite standards, for King to put me on the end like this. But I will be forever grateful, hoping I can just melt into obscurity for the next hour.

Servers fan into the room, setting salads in front of each of us, and filling the glasses with red wine.

I debate the merits of getting drunk, as I bring the glass to my lips. Maybe it would be a good thing? Then again, maybe if I'm drunk, I'll say something I absolutely shouldn't. Like about how the host's husband is dead and probably buried in the woods, or at the bottom of a lake. Or how I'm here against my will...

But these people don't know me. They won't help me. Not to mention they'd never believe me.

The sweet red liquid hits my tongue, and it tastes so good, I want to roll my eyes. But I only get through half the roll, when my body stops functioning. Because there, right fucking there, on the wall behind Aspen, is *my painting*.

He didn't.

Rather than try to swallow the wine—positive I'd choke instead—I tip my head down, letting the wine pour from my mouth and back into the glass.

I glance to the side, making sure no one saw me. But since my luck is nonexistent, I lock eyes with Aspen.

“How's your wine, Savannah?” Her knife scrapes against her plate as she says it, cutting through a piece of endive.

“G—” I clear my throat. “It's good. Thank you.” I hurry to set the glass down, dropping my eyes to my salad.

I can feel King turn to look at me, probably wondering why Aspen would voluntarily speak to me, but I can't look at him. Not now.

Seeing that painting... It's too much.

Every day I feel like I'm encountering a whole new level of *too much*.

My chest starts to restrict, making it hard to inhale.

That damn painting, it started all of this.

My all-white rendition of Michelangelo's David. It's just his bust. Shoulders, neck and head. But the statue is so famous, that's all you need. And it was my first time playing with a monochromatic palette in whites.

I pick up my fork and push the vegetables around on my plate.

It was my last show. I was nervous—because I'm always nervous—and this friendly, nice-looking gentleman, sought me out. Wanting to speak to the artist.

He said all the right things. Told me how the palette choices spoke to him. How his mother was such a fan of Michelangelo, how he was raised hearing all about art, all the time. So, when he asked to purchase the all-white piece, the one Mandi had convinced me to list for twice as much as the others, I swooned. And when he asked me for my number, I gave it to him.

Then, three dates later, his wife's brother murders him, I'm kidnapped, and now I'm sitting here, married to his killer, and staring at my painting, as it hangs on the wall behind his widow.

Conversation continues around me, but my brain is too overwhelmed to make sense of any of it.

How do these people act like everything is fine?

A hand enters my vision, startling me so much I drop my fork onto the small china plate.

"Pardon, ma'am," the server dips their head, before picking up my untouched first course and replacing it with a steaming plate of risotto and roasted chicken.

It smells amazing, and my stomach wars with itself between feeling sick and starving.

Cici made us breakfast sandwiches this morning, which I carefully ate in King's vehicle, but that was a long time ago.

I scoop up some of the creamy rice and place it in my mouth right as Mrs. Lucking leans against the table to look around King at me. "So how did you and your new hubby meet?"

The food turns to ash in my mouth, and I want to spit it out. But that would draw even more attention to me, and I want nothing more than to be left alone.

I hold up a hand, indicating that I need a moment to finish what's in my mouth before I answer.

King takes that moment to lean back and rest his arm on the back of my chair. "Through a mutual friend actually. A dinner party." He grins. "Kinda

like this.”

“Isn’t that nice,” the woman coos. “And you said it was recent?”

King’s hand slides to my shoulder, and I finally swallow my risotto. “Yesterday,” I choke out.

“Yesterday!?” the other woman nearly shouts. “And you’re not on your honeymoon. Shame on you.” She directs that last sentence at King.

“Soon,” he promises. “Just need to find the perfect place.”

The subject changes to favorite vacation destinations and King thankfully sits forward, blocking me from the rest of the guests, as he talks about his last trip to Italy.

I chance a glance at Aspen, and for once, she’s not looking at me. But there’s a muscle jumping in her cheek, hinting at continued annoyance.

I manage to get another few bites of risotto down before another disaster of a question is asked.

“It looks different in here,” the man at the far corner of the table notices. “Have you redecorated since we were over last?”

This time I don’t drop my fork, I just lower it.

“We did,” Aspen replies, and I try not to flinch at her using the word *we*. “It felt like time for a little refresh.”

“Well, you did a wonderful job. The monochromatic look is really in right now.”

The man’s wife looks at me, “He’s an interior designer.” As if it needs explaining that he knows about color.

“Oh,” is my brilliant response.

My eyes dart back up to my painting, and I slide my chair back.

“You alright, Honey?” King’s palm lands on my thigh.

“Yep,” I squeak out. “I just need to use the restroom.” I pause before rising. “Could you tell me where?”

“I’ll show you.”

“No, not necess—” I start.

“Excuse us for just a moment,” King says to the group. “I’ve neglected to properly show my wife where everything is here.”

Even though everyone is dressed to the nines, the atmosphere is fairly casual, so no one seems bothered by the interruption.

I hurry out of my chair, and out of the room, ahead of King.

His long strides catch him up to me, and the palm I’m getting way too used to, presses into the small of my back.

“This way,” he guides me to the left.

He doesn't say more, and neither do I, as he shows me to an elegant powder room.

I'm pissed at him right now. For bringing me here. For not warning me. For not warning Aspen. But still...his presence is comforting. Though that's probably just because he's the only person I know here. And I'm not counting Aspen. Because the way we know each other is definitely a detriment, not a comfort.

“Thank you,” I say, my manners getting the best of me, as I step into the bathroom and close the door behind me.

I don't really have to pee, but I go anyway. Not wanting the urge to sneak up on me and have to get up again in twenty minutes. But at this point, I guess who cares if everyone ends up thinking I have a UTI.

I take my time washing my hands, turning the water all the way cold, hoping it will shock some life into me.

When I finally open the door, I jump.

“Oh my god,” I slap a hand to my chest, the skin-on-skin noise louder than I expected, drawing King's gaze down.

“If you end up with a handprint across the top of your tits, we're gonna have some explaining to do.” The edge of his mouth tips up, then he steps toward me.

“What are you doing?”

He lifts a brow, “When in Rome.”

“Huh?” Then I get it. “Oh.” I move out of the way, and King steps into the bathroom.

When the door shuts, I debate my options. Stand here in silence or go back into the viper's den by myself.

I stay. Obviously.

The bathroom door clicks open a minute later, and I've used the time to practice slow breathing. Not that it's helped to calm me any.

King stops in front of me, looking down at me with those beautiful gold eyes, and I ball my hand into a fist and punch him in the chest.

He catches the back of my hand before I pull it away, keeping it pressed to his body. “Now, what was that for?”

“I'll give you one guess?” I snap at him, trying to keep my voice down.

His free hand darts out, gripping the base of my ponytail, tipping my head back until I'm looking him in the eye. “I know this doesn't seem ideal—”

“Ideal?!”

He gives me a patronizing look, that makes me want to punch him again. “I know this doesn’t seem ideal, but you two need to learn how to get along.” When I open my mouth to retort, he tugs the tiniest amount on my hair. It doesn’t hurt, not at all. But it does work to shut me up. “Think about it, Honey. Without appearances to keep her in-check, Aspen would throw a righteous fit at seeing you. And you,” he smirks, “well, you’d eventually get fed up and probably throw a statue at her.”

“I would not,” I grumble.

He leans in closer. “I don’t believe you.”

“King, it’s not just her.” I try to get him to understand with my eyes, but his harden instead.

“If you’re about to tell me that you still love him, we’re going to have a problem.”

“Love him!?” I splutter, then swing out with my free hand, aiming for where I hope his nipple is. King doesn’t so much as grunt at the contact. “That’s not what... The jerk bought—”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt,” one of the husband’s, not the designer, appears in the hallway.

Oh, goodie.

Of course, King just grins. Pretending this isn’t a super awkward position to be caught in. “You know how it is.”

I swear the older man blushes as he chuckles. “It’s been a bit since the missus and I were newlyweds, but maybe that honeymoon ain’t such a bad idea.”

King finally releases my ponytail, smoothing his hand down the back of my head until it’s on my neck. “Not a bad idea at all.”

Accepting that as our cue to go, we move to the side of the hall and let the man pass, before heading back to the dining room.

I was trying to tell King about the painting, but now it seems like maybe the best course of action is denial. Pure, complete denial.

Love him?

What a ridiculous question.

But even so, why did the idea bother King so much?

Aspen shoots a glare our way as we enter, but I look away before I can be burned by it.

Sliding back into my seat, I focus my attention on slicing the now cold

chicken into little bits.

“Brother?”

I glance up at Aspen’s question, to find King still standing. Standing in front of his chair, like he was about to sit. And he’s staring straight ahead, at the painting hanging on the opposite wall, right at his eye-level.

Oh, fuck me.

“That’s quite the work of art.”

At his comment, all eyes in the room turn to look. And my soul withers and dies.

I was so proud of that piece. I loved it so damn much.

But now... I don’t love it anymore. And it breaks my heart.

“Thank you,” Aspen’s tone is wary. “Leland bought me that for our anniversary last month. It’s what inspired the remodel.”

I dare a glance at King, but not a scrap of humor is visible. All that’s left is the terrifying coldness of a killer.

But maybe I’m the only one who notices it, because the rest of the table starts discussing the painting, *my painting*, paying King’s behavior no mind.

“Where is that husband of yours, anyway?” someone asks.

And my ears are ringing so loudly, I almost miss Aspen’s answer. “Oh, he’s out of town for work. Couldn’t drag him home if I tried.”

The woman tuts, as the designer stands up to inspect my piece.

He makes comments about composition. Texture. The juxtaposition of style and subject.

My poor heart sinks.

To hear someone talk so positively about my work, completely unguarded... That’s something special.

But right now, it just feels like a whole new brand of torture.

King slowly lowers himself into his seat.

His head turns in my direction, and I brace myself. But he doesn’t meet my eyes, he just slides my plate closer to me and says, “Eat your food.”

I don’t want to. I really don’t want to. But I also don’t want to be told twice. So, while the rest of the room discusses art, I clear my plate. Only barely stifling a groan when the servers come back and replace the entrée plates with small dishes of peach cobbler, topped with ice cream. It’s one of my favorite desserts, and I swear, if tonight ruins one more thing for me, I’m going to just start screaming.

“Coffee?” a server asks.

“Oh god no.” I reply, before I can think better of it. “Sorry,” I grimace, when I realize everyone has stopped to look at me. “I’d be up all night.”

It’s mostly true. But it’s more the fact that I don’t want to be awake for this day a single second longer than I have to.

The final course passes with King and I eating in silence while Aspen talks about some upcoming charity event with her guests. It seems weird, Aspen being charitable, but I suppose people with this much money need hobbies.

When the chatter of *we should probably head home* starts, I could weep with joy.

Rising at the same time as King, I do my best to act like a happy new wife, promising to come to whatever event it is they’re talking about.

With his palm against my spine, we follow the group to the front door. And I think we’re finally ready to escape. I think that we’re about to get out, without any more drama. Without Aspen knowing the dark history behind her anniversary gift. But, as I’m about to step through the threshold, King grips the material of my shirt stopping me.

“I’ll be just one moment.”

I spin around, away from the door I want to sprint through. “King. Don’t.”

But he doesn’t listen, he just strides back through the house.

“What have you done?” Aspen hisses, scaring the shit out of me.

“Christ!” I take a step backwards, clutching my hands to my chest. I thought she was still outside saying goodbye to people. “I haven’t done anything!”

Maybe now is when I should scream *I never fucked your husband*. But somehow, I don’t think she’ll believe me. No matter what I say. No matter what the truth is.

Aspen continues to glare at me, until her attention snaps to King, who’s striding back down the hall toward us, with my painting tucked under his arm.

“What the hell are you...” Aspen starts, before turning wide eyes on me. “SJO.” She breathes out the initials I sign all my paintings with, proving that she liked it enough to memorize the signature. “You put your fucking art in my home.”

The anger in her tone is laced with hurt. And I want to apologize. Or cry. Or do anything. But I don’t. I just stand there.

“Savannah didn’t do shit,” King growls. “But this is mine now.”

Stomping past his sister, King grabs my arm and drags me away from the woman who looks like she’d love to turn me into a corpse.

CHAPTER 30

King

I KEEP MY TEETH CLENCHED TOGETHER, DRIVING AT A SEDATE PACE OUT OF MY sister's neighborhood.

That fucking painting.

It's one thing to know Savannah and Lee were together. I saw them on a date, with my own damn eyes. But this... That painting... It's different.

I don't know *why*. it's just fucking different.

Maybe it's because before, I could pretend that it was nothing. A fling. Unimportant.

But...*that fucking painting.*

It's a piece of her. A piece of *my wife*. And some other man had it.

Not to mention the fact that the slimy piece of shit gave it to *his wife* as a fucking anniversary gift.

If I had godlike powers, I'd bring Leland back to life just so I could kill him all over again. Only this time, I'd make it slow. And I'd let Aspen and Savannah watch.

My jaw flexes.

Maybe I'd even fuck Savannah in front of him first. Just to prove she belongs to me now.

The annoying voice niggles in the back of my mind, asking me why I care. Why I'm so jealous over a dead man.

But why do I need to justify myself? Savannah *is* mine, she's my wife. Whether she wants to be or not.

And it's not like it's crazy to be jealous over my wife. Even if her dead ex wasn't entwined with my family, I'd still want to wipe him from existence.

My hands squeeze the steering wheel.

Maybe I can still do that. She's got to have some living ex-boyfriends. If I can remove them from the playing board I might feel better.

Next to me, Savannah shifts in the passenger seat.

I know I'm being a dick. She hasn't done anything to deserve this silent treatment.

She could've told me about the painting.

When though? It's not like I've given her a lot of opportunities to talk to me. Not like I've given her a lot of reasons to share her secrets.

I glance at her profile.

Tonight. I'll cool down in my office for a bit, then we'll talk.

CHAPTER 31

Savannah

I MAKE SURE TO CLIMB OUT OF THE BIG SUV BEFORE KING CAN CIRCLE around to my side. He's been in a dark mood since he laid eyes on that cursed painting, and I'd prefer to avoid any sort of interaction with him for the rest of the night.

The garage door is still open, and he waves over a man who must be a part of the security team.

King opens the rear door of the Suburban, showing my suitcases and the few other bags of items. "This all goes inside." I watch him hesitate, like he's going to grab the painting himself, but instead, he turns on his heels and stomps into the house.

Feeling awkward, I step forward to take one of the bags, but the security guy stops me with a raised hand. "Don't worry, Mrs. Vass, I got it."

I bite my lip, but step back.

Mrs. Vass.

So, the staff, or whatever they're called, knows about the wedding.

Duh, one of them was our freaking witness.

That memory has me turning and hightailing it back into the house.

It seems dumb to run up to the room I spent so much time locked in, so I just kinda linger in the main entryway, watching the security guy go up and down the stairs with all my worldly goods.

When he comes in for the last time, carrying *the painting*, I stop him.

"Oh, um, can I have that?"

I almost expect him to deny me, but he doesn't so much as shrug. He just hands it over.

Then he's gone, and I'm alone.

I stare at the canvas in my grip. And I know what I need to do. I need to destroy it.



“OH, COME ON!” I FLING OPEN ANOTHER KITCHEN DRAWER, BUT I CAN’T FIND so much as a single match. “Who doesn’t keep a lighter in their kitchen?”

Rich people, whose expensive gas stovetops light on the first try, that’s who.

Tapping my fingertips on the countertop, I remember the firepit I saw in the backyard.

Maybe there’s a lighter out there?

The sun has officially set, but there’s enough outdoor lighting around the house that I don’t feel like I need a flashlight. Not that I’ve found one of those either.

I hold my breath as I reach for the handle on the doors that lead from the kitchen to the backyard. Exhaling when it opens.

Slipping outside, I shut the door quietly behind me.

I take a few steps before I stop, looking along the back of the house to where I think King’s office is.

I’m not trying to run away. But I still don’t want him to see me. I’d give it a fifty-fifty chance that he wants to keep this damn painting, and I’m not taking that chance.

It needs to go.

I watch for movement in windows, as I slink to the firepit.

The edges are built up with stonework that matches the outside of the house and it’s surrounded with seating and planters filled with blooming flowers. But when I get close enough to look into the pit, I see a pile of fake logs on top of sparkling glass.

Okay, so it’s a gas fireplace. Fine. I’ll just hold the painting over the flames.

Except... *Fucking hell*, you can’t be serious! There’s no switch. No button. No remote. No way to turn it on.

Groaning, I look back to the house. The control has got to be somewhere inside. But what am I gonna do? Flip every switch I can find then come back

out to see if it worked?

Turning away from the house, I bite back the urge to scream and consider my options.

If burning is off the table that really only leaves me with one. Burying it.

The three foot by three foot frame is a bit big for burying by hand, but I can bust it up first.

The idea of bashing it against a tree has merit, and I feel a little touch of hope as I pick my way through the carefully trimmed bushes.

The air is scented with summer flowers, and I make a mental note to hunt down some coffee tomorrow morning and drink it out here.

I've been so traumatized these last few days I haven't even been able to feed my caffeine addiction.

I pass another flower bed, noticing the mulch circling the stems. If worse turns to desperate, the gardens should have dirt that's easy to dig. But I decide to go out further, past the gardens, past the lawn, and into the woods.

The further I go, the darker it gets, the dramatic lighting that shoots up the side of the house not reaching this far.

I have a moment to wonder if this is a bad idea, not knowing if the security team has a *shoot first, ask questions later* policy.

A low bark scares a little scream out of me, and I whirl around, canvas in front of me like a shield.

"Damnit, Duke!" I let the painting fall to my side and slap my empty hand over my chest. "Heart attacks, remember?!"

He just woofs again, then trots the rest of the way to me, demanding a head scratch.

"Yeah, yeah. You're a good boy, aren't you?"

Duke bumps his big head against my leg, like he's agreeing.

I eye him for a second, "You're a clever boy. Any chance you know how to start a fire?"

His tiny tail wags, and his tongue lolls out of his mouth, but he doesn't supply me with a lighter.

"Alright," I sigh, then perk up. "I bet you can dig a good hole though."

We stare at each other for another moment, and I'm glad we had our *we're friends now meeting* in the house, because out here, in the dark, he looks like a damn monster.

"Any thoughts on where we should bury this thing?" I lift the frame that's starting to get a bit too heavy.

Duke chuffs, bonks his head against my hip again, and then trots off, diagonally from where I'd been heading.

I start to jog after him, then remember that I don't jog. "Slow down!"

Duke slows, and I once again wonder just how smart he is.

With the dog at my side, I rest my hand on the top of his head as we walk, lazily scratching him behind the ears.

We talk about dinner. About how I still love peach cobbler. And how I'll sneak him some ice cream next time I have some. And then, like a mirage in the desert, I see fire.

Not like a scary amount, but like a firepit amount. Like the exact freaking thing I was trying to find.

"Did you..." I look down at Duke. "Did you find me fire?"

He doesn't answer, just picks up the pace.

As we get closer, the details get clearer.

Glancing behind me, I can still see the main house, but back here at the far corner of the mowed lawn, is a cute, not so little, house that I hadn't known existed.

There's a back patio with a string of lights suspended around the perimeter, and just outside of that is a raised fire pit, with real fire, surrounded by a circle of wooden chairs.

We're only a few yards away, and now that I can hear voices, I'm second-guessing if I should be here.

But Duke takes the choice away when he barks, and all three heads turn to look at me.

I'm standing in the shadows but I still lift a hand. "Um, hi."

Silence greets me, and I take a step back, before someone stands, raising her own hand in a wave. "Savannah?"

"Cici?" I ask back, even though I can tell it's her.

She looks at the two other people, widening her eyes, until they stand too. "This is my sister, Ginger." She points at a woman who looks just like her. "And that's Jamie, her husband." She points to the guy. "They work here, too."

I take a few steps closer, so we can all see each other. "Nice to meet you," I say, feeling like a giant intruder. "Sorry, I didn't mean to just barge in on you guys. I asked Duke if he could light a fire," I aim a glare at the beast standing next to me, "and he thought he was being super funny bringing me here."

The man snickers, "That dog is too clever for his own good."

That one sentence is enough to make me like the guy. And Cici may not have helped me when I told her I was a prisoner, but she has made me some damn good food.

Ginger, the only one I don't have an opinion about, nods to my hand. "Looking for a fire while carrying around something flammable. Shall I assume...?"

Alright, I like Ginger, too.

I only hesitate for a moment before stepping all the way up to the circle of chairs. "If you're assuming that I'm looking for a way to burn this painting, then yes, you are correct."

"What'd it do to you?" Ginger smirks.

The question hits in a tender spot between my ribs, but I ignore it, and answer honestly. "It ruined my life."

Three sets of eyes blink at me. And a tiny whisper in the back of my mind asks, *did it though?*

"I'm sorry!" Cici blurts.

I have to look around, to check that she's talking to me.

She wrings her hands together. "I'm sorry that I couldn't...well, do anything. Yesterday, when you came down for dinner."

"Oh, um..." What am I supposed to say to that? *No worries* seems a little weird, but I don't want her to feel bad. "It's okay," I shrug. "It's not like King would've let you just open the front door for me."

"It's just that he's actually a really good boss. And I know..." she presses her lips together. "We know that *other stuff* goes on, but I've never seen him treat a woman poorly. So..." it's her turn to shrug.

"Look," I move between the two empty chairs. "If you help me torch this bitch," I hold the monochromatic David up. "Then we'll be even."

I turn the painting toward me and look at it one last time. I'll need to do another image in white to reclaim my love for the style. But this one. This piece...

Heaving out a breath, I reach forward and set it flat on top of the fire. Paint side up.

For a moment, the image is backlit, illuminating each stroke of my brush, but soon enough, the flames eat through the canvas.

"Pity," the guy says. "That was cool."

"You painted that, didn't you?" Ginger asks, and my gaze jumps up to

hers. "I'm the housekeeper, so I've seen the new art studio Boss set up."

I nod. "Yeah, I painted it." The corners of the frame reach the edges of the firepit so even as the canvas turns to ash, the frame holds its shape. "Do you guys know Aspen?" I ask, before I can stop myself.

They all nod and Jamie mutters *intense* under his breath.

I laugh, and drop into one of the chairs. "Her husband bought that from me." I gesture to the fire. "And then he asked me out." Ginger gives a low whistle. "So, imagine my surprise, when I brought him with me to a friend's house, but Aspen and King were already there."

"No!" Cici gasps.

"Yep."

"That why the boss kidnapped and married you?" Jamie asks with a furrowed brow, proving that the whole property knows what's happened.

Fuck it.

"No, he kidnapped me because I saw him kill Leland." *Saw* is a close enough description.

"Damnnn!" Ginger sounds more impressed than shocked.

"It was after that, that King came up with a list of reasons that only make sense to him, for me to marry him."

The edge of Ginger's mouth pulls up. "At least he's nice to look at."

"Hey!" Jamie fakes indignation. Sounding like they've had this conversation before.

"I heard the kiss was really hot." Cici chimes in.

My mouth drops as I turn to the cook.

"What kiss?" Ginger asks.

I slap a hand over my eyes and groan. "How do you even know about that?"

She laughs. "I heard it from one of the guys, who heard it from Steve."

"Of course you did." I drop my hand. "Do you guys have any booze or anything?"

Ginger lifts a hand-rolled joint that I hadn't noticed from the arm of her chair. "Or something."

My brows raise and I sit forward. "I haven't gotten high since college."

She grins. "Fancy breaking your streak?"

Block out my current situation and pretend everything is fine?

"Yes, please."



“THAT’S NOT HOW IT GOES!” GINGER SNAPS AT JAMIE, MAKING ALL THREE OF us laugh. They got on a debate about song lyrics ten minutes ago, and each disagreement is funnier than the last.

Duke groans, and I reach above my head to pat his neck.

After sitting around the fire for...a while...Duke started trying to climb into my chair with me. But he didn’t really fit. Not to mention he weighs a literal ton. So, we compromised, by lying in the grass, me using him as a pillow, watching the stars twinkle above us like a bunch of polished jewels.

I fill my lungs with the fire-tinged air, appreciating the outdoors for the first time in a long time.

I need to do this more.

My eyes do a slow blink.

It’d be nice if King was here.

Wait...no.

I don’t want that.

Even if he is so handsome. And that body...

He’s everything that turns me on. And it’s annoying. He should be hotter and richer and badder than everyone I’ve ever met.

Badder?

Is that a word?

He’s bad.

A bad man.

A big bad handsome man who makes me tingle from the inside out.

“She’s thinking about that rich as fuck husband.” Ginger’s comment slips into my consciousness, and I grin.

CHAPTER 32

King

TEMPER FLARING, I STRIDE ACROSS THE LAWN.

I was in the office longer than I'd planned, working on my little project, but it worked to calm me down.

Until I found the bedroom fucking empty.

I glance at my phone screen, making sure the dot hasn't moved, then shove it into my pocket.

Savannah hasn't left the property. I know that much. The alarms would go off if anyone climbed the fence. So I'm going with my first guess. She's with the dog.

My traitor, turncoat dog.

Before I bothered to check security footage, I decided to pull up his tracking chip. And finding him stationary at the staff house makes me think that he's up to something.

I could whistle, get him to come to me from a mile away. But I'd prefer to arrive undetected.

Flickering firelight glows before me, and as I get closer, I can hear voices.

"What? No, ew." Savannah's laugh slows my steps. "It's gotta be German chocolate cake."

"Boo!" a male that sounds a lot like my gardener complains. "No way something with coconut can even qualify for the best."

"You can't like, make up the rules after we start." Savannah's reply is a little slow.

Did these idiots get my wife drunk?

And where the fuck is Duke?

“Sure I can,” Jamie replies. “And some stodgy old cake is not going to be the last course in my final meal.”

“Well, no duh, Sherlock” Savannah replies, making the women snicker. “I’m not gonna have some amateur cooking for me when the meteor hits the earth. It’s gonna be Chef Kesso, or that one guy that yells at everyone.”

“You’re both dumb.” I hear Ginger chime into the ridiculous conversation. “It’s ice cream.”

Silence reigns, as Ginger apparently wins the discussion, and I finally spot Savannah. She’s sprawled in the grass, arms wide, using my highly trained, very expensive guard dog as a pillow.

The other three are still sitting in chairs around the fire, and I’m annoyed at how close I was about to get before Cici lets out a sound of surprise, finally spotting me.

“What—” Jamie starts, then sees me.

I narrow my eyes at them, well aware of how menacing I must look appearing out of the dark.

Savannah’s not even aware of the disturbance, as I cut across the grass to her.

She’s staring up at the sky, not a damn worry in the world.

I should probably feel bad about ruining this for her, but that split second when I thought she might actually be gone...I need her to pay for that.

I step up to her side, leaning over so my face is above hers, blocking out the stars.

I expect her to startle. Maybe flinch. But instead, she does something unexpected.

She smiles.

And it’s so much more than I ever thought to hope for.

“Hi,” she breathes.

“Hello, wife.”

“You’re handsome.”

Three people behind me try, and fail, to muffle their laughter.

I lean a little closer, trying to see her features in the dim light. “Are you drunk?”

She shakes her head. “High.”

I sigh, “Hi, Savannah. Have you been drinking?”

She snickers and puts a hand next to her mouth, like she wants to tell me a secret.

Obliging the intoxicated beauty, I drop into a crouch, which is apparently close enough to put me in secret-sharing distance. “We smoked weed.”

I let my head drop back. “You got my wife high?”

“Umm...” Jamie starts, but no one finishes the sentence.

I look back down at Savannah, “Are you okay?”

She’s still smiling as she nods, making Duke lift his head, finally acknowledging me.

Savannah reaches up to brush her fingers across my cheek. “Don’t be mad at Duke. I told him I needed a fire and he found me one.”

The feeling of her skin against mine delays my brain. “Fire?”

“Yeah, I...” her eyes go wide, and she pulls her hand away from my face to drop it over her mouth.

Suspicion makes me stand and turn toward the fire. There’s still a small flame in the center of the pit giving off enough light for me to spot the charred square frame resting along the top of the pit.

I slowly turn back to Savannah, only this time I step across her form. Once I’m straddling her, one foot planted on either side of her hips, I lower back into a crouch. “Honey, did you burn my painting?”

“Well, technically,” she hedges, “it’s...”

Before she can finish, I drop my weight forward, my knees sinking into the thick grass as I snap my hand out to grip her chin.

“If you say his name right now, so help me god, I will be forced to teach you a lesson.”

I hear someone behind me mutter *Jesus* but I keep my eyes focused on Savannah.

Only she’s too stoned to be intimidated. Instead, she just blinks up at me with a dazed look on her face. “How’d you find me?”

“Duke.”

Savannah reaches a hand up, rubbing at the dog’s neck. “He’s a girl’s best friend.”

Since she’s not even paying attention.

I let go of her chin, and trail my thumb down the front of her neck. “Let’s get you to bed, Savannah Baby.”

She takes a slow breath, her head tilting to the side. “Why do you call me that?”

Because I’ve always wanted to call someone Baby.

Because your pretty eyes call to something inside of me.

Because you fucking belong to me, and I'll call you whatever the hell I want.

“Because I want to.”

She nods, like I gave her a real answer.

“Come on,” I move to hook my hands under her armpits, but she shrieks and slams her elbows to her side.

“Don't tickle me!”

Snickers sound around the fire.

“I'm not going to tickle you. I'm going to help you up.” Though now I am thinking about tickling her. And it has its merits.

Tickles already forgotten, Savannah blinks up at me. “Can Duke come with us?”

I don't know if I want to pinch the bridge of my nose or laugh. “Yeah, Duke is coming with us.”

“But I mean, like all the way to bed. Can he sleep with us?”

I swear Duke is giving me the side-eye, and I'm certain my stoner staff are all eavesdropping.

“We'll see,” I lie. I have zero intentions of letting anyone, or anything, come between me and a cuddly Savannah. “Now come on, let's go.”

This time she lets me tuck my hands under her arms, so as I stand, she does too.

“Good?” I ask. I don't want to let go and have her fall over.

“Good,” she parrots.

There's a loose piece of grass in her ponytail, so I let go of her with one hand and carefully pluck it free.

“Can you walk?” I know high people can walk, but I don't know just how high she is.

Savannah turns her head, looking toward the illuminated outline of the house. Probably measuring how far away it is. “Can you give me a piggyback ride?”

More poorly covered snickers.

When she turns back to me, she has such a pleading look on her face I just sigh, “Fine.”

Her smile is pure. And it makes me feel like an absolute asshole.

She's so lovely. Pretty. Friendly. Kind. And I basically stole her. Literally kidnapped her. Forced her to marry me.

I don't deserve her smiles.

Unaware of my growing self-hatred, Savannah reaches out, placing her palm on my chest.

With her wide eyes gazing up at me, she breathes, “Awesome.”

I roll my eyes and shake my head, not missing the practically constant chuckles across the fire.

“Step up here,” I gesture to a sturdy wooden chair, then help Savannah climb on. “Put your hands on my shoulders.” She does. “Don’t let go. I’m gonna turn around.” Her hands trail across my shoulders as I turn.

I bend my knees, lowering myself, then reach back to grip one of her thighs and pull it around my waist. “Get on.”

Her arms go around my neck next, then I reach back and pull her other leg around me.

Savannah squeaks when I stand to my full height. And with my hands still reached back around her thighs, I boost her up, and she tightens her legs around me.

I’m facing the fire, and the trio sitting around it, the humor slipping off their faces. “I’d appreciate a heads up before you decide to get my wife high again.”

They nod and I turn away, cargo secured on my back.

“Party pooper,” Savannah’s head lolls forward until she’s resting her chin on my shoulder.

I gently tap my temple to hers. “Don’t fall asleep back there, I need you holding on.”

She shifts her grip, her arms looped around my neck in a hug, and I start walking back to the house.

With the dog trotting next to us, we cross the yard in near silence, and it takes all I have to focus on my steps.

The way her legs are spread around my back... It’s fucking killing me.

The thin, soft pants she’s wearing, that I’ve wanted to touch all night, are doing nothing to mask the heat of her cunt on my lower back. And my cotton shirt is hardly any better.

My thickening dick is making my pants uncomfortable.

What I wouldn’t give to throw her into the grass right now and bury my face in her pussy.

I bet with my mouth on her, she’d get soaking wet.

I bet she’s noisy.

I bet she tastes like lust.

“Why haven’t I heard of The Alliance?” Savannah’s question tears my mind away from my cock.

“It’s not exactly common knowledge.”

“But you said people know about you now.” Her big tits push against my back with every inhale, and feeling the vibrations of her voice through her chest is extremely distracting.

“I meant people in the underground.”

“The underground?”

“Bad men, Savannah,” I clarify, though I’m not sure she’ll remember this conversation.

“Bad men, like you.” She doesn’t really say it like a question, but there’s something in her tone that hints at disbelief. Like maybe she’s starting to question if I’m a bad man.

Even though she caught me standing over my brother-in-law’s corpse.

“Like me,” I repeat back.

CHAPTER 33

Savannah

I'VE BEEN STANDING AT THE SINK FOR TOO LONG, TRYING TO REMEMBER HOW to brush my teeth.

This is not the pot I tried in college.

Finally, I jam the brush in my mouth and give it my best effort before rinsing and turning off the lights.

King carried me all the way to our room.

All. The. Way.

He might have been breathing hard, but I was too busy trying to not pass out and fall off to notice.

Luckily, I woke up enough to collect pajamas while he used the bathroom. Then we switched.

I flip the light off too early, and struggle for a moment with the door handle.

The door pops open. "Ope!" I hop back, almost opening it into my face.

Focusing on acting normal, I step out of the bathroom.

Instead of being in bed, King is standing next to it, about to get in.

He really is handsome.

King pauses, and his eyes narrow. "What the fuck are you wearing?"

I look down, tugging at the front of my 3xl men's t-shirt, that goes to my knees, to make sure I grabbed the right thing. I did.

"My pajamas," I say, as my eyes glance around the room.

Yeah, this is the bedroom. It's the right place to wear pajamas.

"Savannah." King sounds like he's talking through his teeth.

I bite my teeth together. Testing the feel of it.

I don't like it.

Remembering how tired I am, I hurry to the bed and scramble onto the mattress. Burrowing under the blankets quickly.

“Savannah.” The way King says my name makes me roll onto my side to face him.

“Yeah?” I pull the comforter up to my chin.

“Whose shirt is that?”

I think about the faded logo for the local football team plastered across my chest. “It’s mine.”

King leans down, placing his palms on the mattress. “If that shirt belonged to another man, I’m going to rip it off your fucking body.”

“Rip,” I repeat the word, popping the P.

My husband’s face makes a funny expression, and I make the popping sound again.

“Sav—”

“Has anyone ever told you, you look like a lion?” Hands still on the bed, King hangs his head forward, his shoulders hunching, making him look even more like a big cat. “Your eyes,” I clarify, in case he’s frustrated about not understanding.

His head lifts, those cat-like eyes boring into mine. “Where did you get that man’s t-shirt?”

Oh, we’re back to this. “Target.”

“You bought it?” He looks skeptical.

I nod.

“For yourself?”

I nod again. “It’s soft.”

“Why wouldn’t you buy women’s pajamas? I’m sure they have soft ones.”

“Because...” Emotions crash into me out of nowhere, and my throat feels alarmingly tight. “Because I like to pretend it belongs to someone else.”

Why am I admitting this? I shouldn’t be admitting this.

“Why?”

I hold the blanket tighter, bringing it higher, so it’s covering half my mouth. “Does it matter?”

“Yes. Answer the question.”

I keep the blanket where it is. “Because it makes me feel like I have someone.”

His jaw works, before he pulls back, stretching up and up until he’s

standing straight. “What about Dip Shit?”

“Who?” My eyes are locked on his chest muscles.

Chest. That sounds like a fake word.

“Leland.”

“Hmm? What about him?” I visually trace the pattern of his body hair as it goes down, and down, disappearing beneath the band of shiny blue boxers.

“Didn’t you have any of his clothes?”

“Have his clothes?” I shake my head against the pillow. “Why would I have his clothes?”

“Jesus Christ,” King mutters, and I finally bring my gaze back up to his. He points a finger to the closet. “If I go in there, and dig through your shit, am I going to find any of Leland’s clothes?”

I scrunch my nose, earlier sad emotions already forgotten. “That would be weird.”

“Why... You know what, never mind.” King heaves out a breath and I feel bad for making him upset.

“I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry about, Savannah?” he asks, resigned.

“Um, for...” I try to remember. “Making you mad?” I finish as a question.

“Alright, Honey.” King flips off his bedside lamp and in the following darkness, I feel his movements through the mattress.

Quiet follows, and I wait somewhere between a moment and forever before scooting over to his side of the bed.

Part of me knows it’s always been me, that I’m the one who moves every night, forcing him into cuddling with me. But I like it.

I shouldn’t.

Not with him.

But I do.

My nose bumps into his shoulder, and, without prompting, King lifts his arm.

With a satisfied exhale, I press my cheek against my favorite spot on his chest.

CHAPTER 34

King

FUCK. ME.

Savannah tucks one of her little hands between herself and my side, but the other one splays across my chest, her fingers idly playing with the hair there.

I don't know what's worse, the sexual frustration or the regular frustration of trying to have a conversation with an intoxicated person.

Her hand slides lower, her fingertips tracing the outline of my abs, and I'm reminded of the outline of her nipples in that damn t-shirt.

The memory of those fat titties hanging free makes my cock pulse.

The hand resting on her side flexes but I leave it where it is. Even though I'm tempted to tug up the hem of her oversized shirt, because I'm pretty sure she's wearing nothing but a pair of panties under there.

Savannah slides her hand on my stomach lower, like she's aiming for my goddamn dick.

"Baby, if you don't stop that right now, I'm going to fuck you. High or not. And then you'll really hate me."

Her hand stills but doesn't pull away.

"I already hate you." Her words are a murmur and I have to smile.

"No, you don't."

She's silent for a second, and I think she's fallen asleep, until she says, "I want to touch it."

My body jumps to full attention.

"Touch what, Savannah."

"Your..." her fingers inch lower, "thing."

Thing.

That word should make my *thing* shrivel up, but it just gets harder.

“Can I?”

Instead of answering her whispered question, I reach down and grip her wrist. To push her away.

My hand lowers hers.

Not stopping until her warm little palm settles over my hard length. Searing me through the silk.

“It’s so big.” Her voice sounds awed, and I have to squeeze my eyes shut, because I’m nearly ready to blow.

I don’t reply. Because what possible reply could I have?

My cock is straining against her hand, and when her fingers try to wrap around my girth, I let out a groan.

With her grip still mostly around me, she pulls her hand up to the head, and I break out into a fucking sweat.

“It’s so long,” her lips are practically touching my nipple and I’ve never had a woman suck on my nipples before, but I’m wondering if I should ask her to.

Then, slowly, so motherfucking slowly, she slides her hand down to the base. When she reaches the root, her fingers loosen, and she settles her hand on top of my balls.

And then her breathing evens out. And she stops moving.

Because she just passed out. Cradling my nut sack.

This is my penance for every bad thing I’ve ever done.

“Fuck me.”

CHAPTER 35

Savannah

SUNLIGHT PENETRATES THROUGH MY EYELIDS, AND I FORCE MY PUTTY-LIKE muscles to roll over. Blessedly, the blinding lights dim with the motion, and I fall back asleep.



I STEP OFF THE LEDGE OF A FIREPIT...AND JERK AWAKE.

“Shit,” I groan, flopping onto my back.

I need to pee so bad my stomach aches.

Making myself get out of bed, I feel the aches of being a thirty-something who slept too long as I go through the process of getting ready for the day.

Note to self, only hang out with those three when I want to be blitzed for the rest of the night.

It’s when I’m in the closet, tugging on a pair of leggings under my big sleep shirt, that I start to remember all the details.

King giving me a piggyback.

King acting all snappy when he thought I was wearing another man’s shirt.

King’s...oh god, did I touch his dick after calling it a thing?

Still standing in the closet, I drop my forehead against the doorframe.

Nicely done, Savannah.

I should probably go apologize to him. And I should definitely shower since I spent half of last night laying in the grass, soaking up the campfire

smell. But first, I need coffee.

So, I'll head to the kitchen first, to wake myself up, then I'll find my way back to King's office.

It's not until I'm walking down the hallway that I realize how easily I've forgotten about the whole kidnapping thing.

There's a part of me that can't stop wondering how bad King really is. He says he's bad. Told me he helps run some criminal organization. *Whatever that means*. And I know he killed Lee. But Lee, sorry, *Leland*, was also bad. So, does that make what King did less bad? Though King did basically threaten everyone I've ever known. Except...he never actually did threaten them, did he? He just showed me photos, which is fucked up and creepy. But he never specifically said *if you don't marry me, I'll kill your cousin*. Because I'm sort of doubting that he would.

He did make me give up my house, but in exchange I'm now living in a mansion with the most glorious art studio I've ever seen.

So, basically, I'm fucked. Because I'm starting to like my husband.

A yawn comes on so hard I have to stop walking. And while I'm stopped, I hear the approaching steps down below.

I'm near the top of the main stairs, but happened to stop just short of the end of the hallway. So, I'm hidden behind the edge of the wall.

It was unintentional, and I'm opening my mouth to call out to King, assuming it's him, when his voice bounces up the stairs.

"What?" King's voice sounds annoyed as his footsteps come to a halt. "I thought the shipment of girls wasn't supposed to come in until next week?"

Girls?

What does he mean girls?

King's quiet, and I picture him pressing his phone to his ear.

My breaths start coming faster, and I press a hand over my mouth.

"Do we have the men ready?"

I'm a bad man. Who does bad things.

That's what he said. *Bad. Things.*

I take a few steps back, the blood rushing through my ears is too loud. Like he'll be able to hear it.

He couldn't. Could he?

Have I really been so blinded by what I wanted to see?

Panic, true panic, starts to build in my chest.

Why am I having such a hard time believing this?

He told me he was bad!

Shame fills me.

Shame at being so goddamn stupid.

“No, I’ll be there for the tradeoff.” His voice is louder now, closer.

Slamming my lips shut, holding my breath, I listen. And my heart stops when I hear his shoes on the stairs.

As quietly as I possibly can, I spin around and sprint to the bedroom. His next words are unintelligible underneath my alarm, but I make it inside the room just before his voice echoes down the hall.

Skidding to a stop, I push the door so it’s mostly closed then stand, stuck in indecision. Fake being asleep or hide in the bathroom?

Since I’m basically hyperventilating, I run to the bathroom, doing the same thing with the main door before throwing myself into the little toilet stall at the far end of the room.

I depress the handle as I close the door so the click is nearly inaudible, just as I hear King call out my name in the bedroom.

I reach back and depress the handle, flushing the toilet, and use the sound to mask the soft click of me turning the tiny lock on the door handle.

“Savannah?” King’s voice is in the bathroom now, and I once again realize that I acted in haste. Because flushing the toilet would usually suggest that I was done and that I would be coming out. But my cheeks are hot, my heart is still flipping around like it’s dying, and there’s no way I can look him in the eye without vomiting all over the floor.

Shipment of girls.

“I’m busy!” My voice sounds strained, so that, matched with the early flush, he probably thinks I’m in here taking a poop.

Whatever. That’s fine. Everyone poops. Murderers and kidnap victims alike.

“You alright?” I see a shadow move under the door and I know he’s standing just on the other side.

I gingerly step back and sit down on the toilet seat, just in case he’ll be able to tell if I was standing from how my voice sounded.

“Fine.” *Act how you normally would, Savannah.* I aim for an annoyed tone. “Do you mind? A little privacy, please.”

It sounds like he’s tapping his foot before he sighs. “I’m heading out to do some work. I don’t know how late I’ll be, so let Cici make you dinner if I’m not back by...” he pauses to think, “eight.”

“Oh, okay.” I bite my lip, then decide to go for it. “Any chance I can have my phone back?”

“No.”

I knew it was a long shot but I’m still angry with his answer. “I need to post on my socials. My business is very customer facing.” I have to stop myself from patting my own back at that last minute idea.

“Nice try, Honey. I saw you posted last week letting everyone know you’d be absent while you work on your next series.”

Damn me and my desire to communicate.

“Can I have it anyway?” I’m really gonna need a phone if I want to run away.

“No.”

Though the more I think about it, he could probably track it in a heartbeat. “Fine. Now will you go away, so I can...finish?”

I can hear him snort through the door. “Everyone shits, Savannah.”

“Oh my god, get out!” My irritation isn’t faked, as I shout at him. And finally, *finally*, I listen to his footsteps as they leave.

CHAPTER 36

Savannah

I WAITED FOR NEARLY AN HOUR BEFORE I CAME OUT OF THAT TOILET STALL. And then I took another hour with the main bathroom door locked, to shower and get ready. Then, only when I was as certain as I could be that the coast was clear, did I make my move.

When we'd cleared out my house, I picked my bedroom to pack up for two reasons. One, because I didn't need King pawing through my underwear. And two, because I had a stash of cash hidden in my closet, along with my spare key fob for my minivan. A minivan that now happens to be parked in King's garage.

One of my thin hoodies has zippered pockets, so I hid the money and key in those pockets and hung it up with the rest of my clothes, hoping the *hide in plain sight* trick would work. And as I shove my arms through the sleeves, I applaud myself for doing at least one thing right.

I can't walk out of here with a bag slung over my shoulder, so I have to be clever about how I dress. Because what I wear out of this house will be the sum of all I own in the world. Which means *layers*. I'll overheat in ten seconds flat, but I only need to get off the property, then I can start to strip down.

I have on two pairs of socks inside my tennis shoes. Undies of course, leggings, and then a pair of baggy sweats over that. *Day wear and pajamas*. Then I have on a comfortable wireless bralette—that I won't mind wearing every day—and stuffed between my boobs are three more pairs of underwear. Over that is a tank top, then a t-shirt, and a cardigan that you can't see once I put on my hoodie.

I look pudgy on my own, so with all these layers I look like I've tacked

on 20 pounds overnight, but hopefully no one will be looking that closely. And I need the seven hundred dollars I squirreled away to stretch, so I can't be using it to buy clothes.

Hopefully, not too long from now, I can get my hands on a phone, or find a library with email. Then I can send a message to Mandi to have her sell the handful of paintings that I've kept in her warehouse and wire me the cash.

Feeling as confident as I possibly can, I let the key fob dangle from my fingers and I walk, shoulders back, all the way through the house, down the stairs, and into the garage.

Act like you belong.

Act like nothing is wrong.

I slap my hand against the far button on the wall, hoping it's for the door at the far end of the garage where my van is parked, and nearly shout with joy as the right overhead garage door rumbles open.

Act normal.

Eyes forward, I make my way across the garage, and click the fob to unlock my van doors.

As I climb in, I see that everything is still how I left it. My reusable, and paint-stained, water bottle in one cupholder, random trash in the other, a variety of painting supplies tucked into pockets in the back seat, and my sunglasses clipped to the visor.

Movement up ahead draws my attention, and I force my hand up to wave at the man walking across the driveway with his head turned in my direction.

Not waiting for him to think twice, I slip my sunglasses on, start the van, then pull forward.

Someone else can shut the garage door.

The man nods a greeting as I pass, then continues on his way.

Am I actually going to make it?

I drive down the long ass driveway and no alarms sound, no guns are raised.

I think I'm gonna make it.

Then the driveway crests and I see two men standing at the closed gate, guarding the way on, *and off*, the property.

Normal. Normal. Normal.

Inside, I'm freaking out, but the sunglasses help to obscure the terror in my eyes as I slow to a stop a few feet from the gate.

A man I don't recognize circles around to my window, so, with shaky

hands, I press the control to lower it.

I don't wait for him to speak. "Hey there! I'm just headed out to pick up some paintings." I smile and use a thumb to point to the empty back of the van. The missing seats making it the perfect vehicle for transporting large canvases.

The man inclines his head. "For the Mrs., right? Heard she was an artist."
Heard she was...

This man doesn't know it's me. Doesn't know that *I'm the Mrs.*

"Yep!" My octave hits an all new high, but he just grins.

"Well, hurry back. I heard there's gonna be some thunderstorms later tonight. You won't want to be driving in that."

I don't have to fake my grimace. "Yeah, sure don't."

Then the man, my new favorite person, taps the hood of the car twice and gestures to the other man still stationed by the gate.

"See ya!" I call out, as I roll up my window and pull out of the driveway, careful not to stomp on the gas and give myself away.

Stress sweat is already soaking through my many layers of clothes, but I made it.

I fucking made it!

CHAPTER 37

King

NERO TAPS HIS FINGERS ON MY DASHBOARD.

“Do that again and I’m cutting them off,” I snap.

His fingers still in their tapping, and his head slowly turns to face me. “You want to talk about it?”

My brows furrow. “Talk about what?”

“Whatever’s crawled up your ass.” Nero lifts his hands when I glare at him. “Fine, keep being a wound-up dickhead. But I didn’t make you come out tonight.”

“I’d like to see you make me do anything,” I grumble.

He snorts. “Whatever she’s done to you, I don’t even feel bad.”

“She hasn’t done anything to me.”

“Oh,” Nero says knowingly. “You’re hard up for some. I get it.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Would you just shut the fuck up?”

“No.” *God, he’s a dick.* “You kidnapped that woman. You can’t really expect her to want to fuck you.” He lifts a shoulder. “At least not right away.”

“Oh, she wants to fuck me.” I let out a humorless chuckle. “She just won’t act on it.”

I surprised myself last night, with the self-restraint it took to lay there, waiting for my dick to shrink, rather than jerking off, lying next to her, while she slept.

“Hmm.” Nero nods. “Blue balls would make me ornery too.”

I drag the back of my hand over my forehead, wiping the sweat away.

The storm that’s rolling through has cooled things off a bit, but it’s still hot, sitting here in a vehicle that’s not running.

“How’d you get Payton to sleep with you?” I ask, not caring how stupid it sounds.

He goes back to drumming his fucking fingers on my dashboard, probably leaving his grubby fingerprints behind. “Well, for starters, I didn’t kidnap her.”

“I’m being serious.”

“So am I,” he replies, and I swear I hear the unsaid *dumbass* at the end of his sentence.

We stare out the windshield. Night isn’t quite upon us, but the skies are made darker with storm clouds, and our view of the warehouse is obstructed by raindrops clinging to the glass.

For the past several months we’ve been trying to sniff out the prick who’s been trying to sell women inside our territory, and today of all days, one of our foot soldiers intercepted a piece of information tipping us off about a sale.

That tip led us here and if...

Headlights cut through the rain, as a semi-truck rolls into the abandoned parking lot.

They’re here.

The truck pulls to a stop near the central warehouse, just like we knew it would.

“So, what do I do?” I know I shouldn’t be thinking of getting laid right now, but Savannah’s soft little body has been tempting me for days. And I’m ready to fucking snap.

“You could try being nice to her.”

“I am nice to her.”

“Brother,” him calling me *brother* means I already know I won’t like what he’s about to say. “You had her bodily pinned her to a couch while you made me marry her to you against her will. I don’t think that’s exactly *nice*.”

“I didn’t make you do shit.” It’s really the only retort I have to that. Because getting lectured about *being nice* from Satan himself is about as low as a man can get.

Nero leans forward, trying to get a better view. “Or you can just tell her that you’re married now and it’s time.” He shrugs a shoulder. “What do I know?”

Him and Payton are the happiest couple I know, but they’re also both completely insane about each other, so maybe I shouldn’t be listening to his

advice.

Three blacked out vans pull into the massive parking lot from the other side, lights off, as they park in a row behind the semi.

And just like that, the deal is underway.

We watch the drivers from both groups get out and greet each other, before they walk into the warehouse through an open door.

Even without seeing inside the building, we know what they're doing. Exchanging money going over the plan for which girls go into which vans.

The men are always different, but the steps are always the same. And we'll keep doing this until we're able to cut it off at the source.

"Your guy is coming, right?" I ask, knowing that time is running out. Because as soon as the men come back out, it's gonna get a lot trickier and a lot more dangerous for the captives.

"He's a Fed, but I trust him." Just as Nero finishes his sentence, a swarm of men in black, crouched low, run from behind a building on the left across the expanse of cracked concrete to the warehouse that the men just entered.

I've never questioned how Nero knows his man in the FBI, just that there's something about always owing each other a favor. But I'm grateful for his set up now, more than ever. Because we've broken up these deals on our own before, and trying to figure out what to do with a bunch of terrified humans is not fun.

The shitheads in the warehouse are outnumbered four to one, but I'm not surprised to hear gunfire. "Idiots."

"They'll keep one alive," Nero sits back in his seat, signaling he's ready to go.

I'm reaching for the ignition to start my vehicle, when a side door flies open and one of the van drivers darts out. "Goddammit."

We both watch as the man starts to run away from us, and from the gunfight in the warehouse.

"We could run him over." Nero offers.

I shake my head. "I'm not denting my Suburban."

"Well, I'm not chasing after him." Nero crosses his arms. "And he's getting away."

My lungs heave out a groan as I shove my door open and climb out.

With measured paces, I circle around to the back door. With it open, I lift a piece of the flooring, exposing a storage compartment, and haul out my long-range rifle.

Lifting it so the stock is against my shoulder, I move around to the passenger side of the vehicle.

As I lower my eye to the scope, I hear Nero's door open next to me.

"How many of those do you have back there?"

I close my left eye. "Only need the one."

With the crosshairs lined up, I let out half my breath, and squeeze the trigger.

I can feel Nero watching from beside me, and as a red mist outlines what's left of the man's head, I exhale the rest of my breath.

"With all those bullets flying..." Nero quips, "you never can tell who's shot who."

My sights move to the side door, but when no one else runs out, I lower my rifle.

"Feel better?" Nero asks with a smirk.

"A little."

"Good. Now let's get out of here so you can go home and try to get your dick wet."

CHAPTER 38

Savannah

MY FOOT DEPRESSES THE BRAKE AS I PULL INTO A SPOT IN A MOSTLY EMPTY motel parking lot.

The place is exactly what I was looking for. Off the beaten path. Low profile. Cheap.

I swallow. Because it's also scary.

Now is not the time to start being a chicken.

I remind myself to be brave once more, then I reach forward and turn the key to shut off the engine of my brand new, super old, Toyota something.

Maybe I would've been better off keeping my van, and sleeping in the back like one of those YouTube campers. They always make it look so cute.

But that's not me. I'm completely unprepared, and sleeping in the back of my van would not have been cute. Not that it matters now anyways, because as soon as I left King's house I drove straight to St. Paul, to a sketchy-looking used car dealership I'd driven past before.

It was surprisingly easy to just swap one set of keys for another, and I'm fairly certain my new car is stolen, but that's not my problem. Or at least it's not my biggest problem. My biggest problem is the fact that I just pulled up to a lodgings that, from the look of it, should be named Murder Motel, on the outskirts of Chicago. And I still don't have a phone, or a plan, or a giant guard dog.

My lips press together, but my chin still trembles.

It's just a dog I try to tell myself for the hundredth time. But it still doesn't work. I'm not kidding anyone. Duke was the only real friend I had over the last few days, and I've fallen in love with that damn beast.

"Just go inside," I urge myself.

I eye the little bundle of clothes in the seat next to me, and decide to leave them here, and get my room key first. Not that I really think someone who works here would bat an eye at me carrying around an armful of clothes. But it would make me feel uncomfortable.

Then I start to wonder if I should ask for a room on the first or the second floor.

First floor seems more unsafe...but it's not like the second story of a motel is any safer, since all the room doors open to the outdoors. And at least in a first-floor room I can crawl out a window if necessary.

My fingers close around the door handle, but I can't quite bring myself to open it. Because I can't shake the worry that I'm making all the wrong choices.

I might be free now, but fear is its own sort of prison. And it's far more uncomfortable than being locked in a bedroom.

I had to leave.

I had to.

I've never really considered the lines of my morals before. Never really thought how I'd feel if someone I knew broke the law. But it only took a few hours with a kidnapping crime lord to realize that I don't have many morals to worry about, because him being into *bad things* didn't faze me.

Maybe I'm this way because of my jaded view of society. Or maybe it's from growing up with shitty parents. Or maybe it's because I was thinking solely with my neglected vagina. But I do know that human trafficking is a step too far.

Where I am now doesn't feel safe, but it was the best idea I could come up with.

Because I knew I needed a big metropolitan area to get lost in, and because I knew I could get on Highway 94 and just follow the signs to Chicago, since I didn't have a phone with GPS. Unfortunately, my budget doesn't call for downtown hotels, so shitty motels I find by taking frontage roads off the highway will have to do.

Sighing, I start to pull the door handle when a beam of light shoots across the upper-level walkway of the motel.

I freeze as though I'm doing something wrong, not moving a muscle.

The door shuts, snuffing out the bright light, draping the little walkway back in shadows. And I have to squint, to make out what I think is a man, striding towards the stairs.

His legs are long, and he takes the steps down, two at a time.

It's just a man leaving his room. Totally normal.

But I stay frozen, not wanting to draw attention to myself, when the man reaches the bottom of the steps.

I strain to see his features, but his long blond hair sweeps across his face, cutting off my view. Then, instead of turning toward me, toward the parking lot, he turns the opposite way, walking around to the back of the building. To the emptiness behind the motel. To nowhere.

Well, that's terrifying.

There are two overhead lights in this parking lot. And the other one, not the one I parked under, just started flickering.

Just like in a horror movie.

This isn't a movie, it's your life. And you need to take control of it.

My head swivels, checking for anyone in the parking lot, but there's no movement.

When my eyes lift to the rearview mirror, I notice a row of cars parked along the back.

Were those cars there when I got here?

I blink, but it's still just a row of cars, parked in the dark.

My hands lift to rub my eyes. Six hours of driving has my brain playing tricks on me.

I pat my thigh, to make sure the cash I stuffed in my leggings pocket is still there. The rest is stuffed between my boobs, since I don't want to thumb through all my money to pay for the room, and I'm too warm to put my hoodie with the pockets back on.

“Just walk up and ask for a room.” My hands close back around the handle. “It's a motel. This is normal. So just act normal.”

With a heavy exhale, I open my car door and climb out.

The rain stopped about an hour ago, after it traveled across the Midwest with me, but everything is still damp. The air thick with humidity, muting the usual nighttime soundtrack of noisy crickets.

I take a slow inhale through my nose, and press the button to lock the car before slamming the door shut.

Just twenty steps to the office door.

Open the door, act normal, get a room.

Then get to your room, wash your hands, and have a mental breakdown.

Fifteen steps to the office door.

“Mrs. Vass?”

All of the oxygen evaporates from my lungs.

I didn't hear him coming.

Didn't see him.

A man nearly as tall as King, and maybe a little wider, stops next to me, forcing me to turn and face him. “Sorry, ma’am. Didn’t mean to scare you.” His smile drains the last of the color from my face.

He’s not doing anything particularly scary, other than approaching me in a parking lot, in the dark, and knowing my name. Or, I should say, my married name.

No, it’s not what he’s doing. It’s just him. His energy.

The man is not in a suit, like I’ve become used to. He’s in a plain t-shirt and jeans. And every inch of skin from his jawline to his fingertips is covered in tattoos. With his buzzed hair, and thick facial hair he might be considered handsome, but he looks like he just stepped out of prison.

“The name’s Dominic, but you can call me Dom.” He extends his hand and habit has me taking it. “Your husband sent me.”

My poor heart is beating wildly. “King?” I whisper his name, barely noticing the way he gently shakes my hand, like he’s being careful not to squeeze my fingers too hard.

The man, Dom, smirks. “You got any other husbands?”

I shake my head.

“That’s probably a good thing.” He releases my hand, and I don’t have a chance to reply before he’s at my side, pressing that same hand into the middle of my back. “Come on, I’ll drive you.”

“No,” my feet stumble on the jagged blacktop, “I’m okay here.”

When I start to pitch forward, Dom grips me by the shoulders and steers me towards the cars in the last row. The ones I had looked at in the rearview mirror.

There are four of them, and they all look like those big blocky cop cars, only these are all black, with not an inch of silver on them. And even in the dark I can tell the windows are tinted.

We’re headed to one of the middle cars when I notice that the other driver’s windows are down, men behind each wheel.

Did all of these cars pull in after me and I didn’t notice?

I’m guided all the way to the passenger door where Dom reaches around me to open the door.

When I don't move to get in, I hear him sigh behind me. "Look, I get it. This isn't the best way to meet someone, but King asked me to keep an eye on you until he got here. And as much as I feel for your situation, I don't really feel like getting on the bad side of The Alliance tonight. So, you can either come with me now and we can wait in the comfort of my home, or we can stand in this parking lot, hoping it doesn't start raining again."

There's no dome light on inside of the car, the pitch-black interior daring me to climb in.

"I promise you're safe with me, Savannah."

I wet my lips and turn back to the man behind me. "Because you don't want to cross King?"

He keeps his eyes on mine as he dips his chin down in confirmation.

King might be a monster, but I'm the monster's wife. And that might be enough to save me right now.

"I need the clothes that are in my car."

Dom lifts a hand and I hear a car door open. He hands my keys off to the man that walks up to us, and I look down at my empty hands.

When did he take my keys.

"Anything else?" Dom asks.

There is nothing else, so I shake my head.

"Alright, then."

A moment later the other man jogs back, all of my clothes wrapped into my hoodie.

Dom hands it to me. And then, with my heart pounding behind my ribs, I get into the stranger's car.

CHAPTER 39

King

“WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU SAY?” I SNAP INTO THE PHONE AS WE TOUCH down.

“I’ll text you the address,” Dom answers, then hangs up.

Nero looks over as he slows the plane. “Where are they?”

My fist clenches around my phone. “He brought her to his place.”

Nero’s brows raise. “Interesting.”



I POUND ON THE DOOR UNTIL IT SWINGS OPEN AND THEN I STEP RIGHT INTO Dominic’s face. “Where the fuck is she?”

He lifts an arm, gesturing us into his penthouse.

Nero strolls past us, but I keep my chest inches from Dom’s.

“I told you to keep an eye on her. I didn’t tell you to fucking take her.”

Dom shakes his head. “If you saw where I found her, you’d be thanking me.”

“Thanking you?” I grit out. “I should end you.”

There’s the distinctive sound of palms slapping down on handgun grips as men positioned around the massive two-story condo shift closer.

Dom signals to them, making the men shift back.

“I understand you’re upset. With a babe like that, I’d be upset if she ran away, too.”

Nero tsks as he wanders around the living space and my jaw clenches.

“Make one more comment about my wife’s appearance and—”

“Hans was there.”

Dom’s words stop my threat dead.

“Say that again?”

Dom even has Nero’s attention. “We pulled into the motel lot right behind your lady. She sat in her car for a few minutes before getting out, and right before she did, Hans exited one of the top floor rooms, and hopped down the steps right in front of her fucking car.”

“Hans?” I feel sick. “Did he see her?”

Dom shakes his head. “He turned the other way, and left on foot, moving behind the building.”

“Address,” Nero snaps.

Dom repeats the name of the motel. “Upper level, second room from the left. We weren’t really in a position to go check it out, otherwise we would have.”

I toss Nero the keys for the car and then he’s out the door.

Dom and I stare at each other.

We put up with Dom because Chicago is close and he’s better than some of the alternatives. A real *Devil you know* situation.

We don’t have enough history together for me to really trust him, but I know Savannah ran away from me because she was scared.

I know, from watching my home security cameras, that she overheard part of a phone conversation and jumped to some incorrect conclusions. I know that she drove all the way here to get away from me, putting herself in danger. And I know that if someone like Hans ever got his hands on her, I’d tear the entire fucking world apart to get her back.

If she’d gotten out of her car sooner, and if Dom hadn’t been there...

I hold my hand out for the head of the Chicago mafia and he shakes it. “I owe you one. Now tell me where she is.”

He points to the exposed staircase at the far end of the great room, and my lungs expand on a deep inhale.

Play time is over, Wife.

CHAPTER 40

Savannah

A POUNDING ON THE FRONT DOOR IS THE FIRST SIGN THAT KING IS HERE.

I press my hands to the slab of wood in front of me.

Raised voices are the second.

Raised *voice*. King's.

I press my ear to my door.

I knew King was coming. Dom told me he was. But knowing he's out there...

My pulse skips into triple time, because I want to see him.

I want to see him, even though he's the reason I left. And nothing has changed.

Leaning closer, I try to make out the words, but I can't.

The car ride over from the motel was silent and stressful, and when we got here, Dom showed me to this room, saying that I could rest.

But I didn't rest. I couldn't.

It looks like an unused guest bedroom. And Dom didn't lock me in, but he didn't have to. I don't know him, or any of the men I saw watching me as I walked through the massive apartment.

So, I've just been standing here pacing the floor, for I don't know how long, but it feels like forever.

Feels like forever since I overheard the conversation this morning.

Feels like forever since I've laid eyes on King.

Feels like forever since I've known who I can trust.

The voices stop. And I press my ear to the door, straining to hear something, anything.

Nothing.

Silence.

A new sort of panic swells in my chest.

Would he leave? Would he come all the way here just to leave me?

And why does that make my heart ache? I literally ran away from the man. Today.

But what do I do if he leaves me with this even scarier man?

My ear is still pressed to the wood, when I suddenly register the sound of footsteps on the other side of the door.

I jump back, a startled scream stuck in my throat, when the door flies open.

It's shoved so hard it bounces off the wall, but King snaps his hand out and catches the edge of the door, stopping it from swinging back into him.

His gaze is locked on me as he steps across the threshold and slams the door shut behind him.

I'm backing away.

My head and heart are at war over what's the biggest danger in my life right now, but my feet don't care. They just keep moving me away from the closest threat.

We move in tandem, me backward, him forward.

His eyes...

My chest squeezes.

His eyes look *hurt*.

He looks disappointed.

In me.

"I h-heard." My voice is hardly audible.

King steps toward me as he rolls his shoulders, looking like a fighter about to enter the ring. "I know what you heard." His steps stop and he starts to pull off his suit jacket, toying off his shoes at the same time. "And you have until I'm naked to ask your questions."

He tosses the jacket down, revealing two guns holstered at his sides.

I take another step back, bumping into the wall.

His large hands pull the guns free—like it's a movement he does every day—and he sets them on the foot of the bed.

I wet my lips, trying to remember what he said as his fingers move to the buttons on his shirt.

"Do you sell girls?" My throat aches for him as I ask the question, because I can already see the answer on his face.

“I don’t sell anyone.” He yanks his shirt off and tosses it to the floor. “I don’t traffic people.” He undoes his belt, ripping it free with a snap. “I don’t hurt women.” He unzips his pants, letting them drop to the floor. “But I am going to fuck you now.” He shoves his boxers off. “Because you’re my wife. And it’s about fucking time you started acting like it.”

A whimper crawls up my throat, but King catches it, taking the last step between us and slamming his lips to mine.

He’s already hard. I only saw a glance, but I can feel his length pressing into me. Trapped between his huge, strong body and my own smaller, more fragile one.

I open my mouth, and he invades it. His tongue lashing against mine.

And I feel everything.

I feel the way I hurt him.

I feel the way I scared him.

Hands tangle in my hair, and he yanks my head back, making my neck arch.

“Tell me you’re sorry,” he growls against my mouth.

“I’m sorry!” I cry.

He hasn’t given me any proof. Hasn’t given me anything but his word. But I believe him. And the guilt I feel over not trusting him claws at my insides. Even after everything he’s put me through, I hate that I thought the worst of him.

“Tell me you’re sorry for leaving me.” King sounds so mad.

My hands reach out for him. My fingertips digging into the bare skin at his sides.

His hands slide down to my waist and he lifts me.

“Tell me,” he growls.

“I’m sorry,” My apology turns into a moan when my legs wrap around his waist and I can feel him *there*.

“No more running,” he shoves his hips against mine, his cock almost painfully hard against my sensitive center.

One hand leaves my waist to roughly cup my breast. My unpadded bralette and tank top doing nothing to hide the way my nipples are straining for his touch.

Another moan wraps around me.

My body is so primed for him. So ready to take him. And I want to hate myself for it. I know I should hate myself for it. But he came for me.

I ran. And he came for me.

King hooks a finger in the front of my shirt, catching the edge of my bra at the same time, and yanks them both down. He pauses for a second, as the cash I forgot about tumbles free, but then he hikes me higher against the wall and wraps his lips around my nipple.

I practically sob at the sensation.

His hot mouth. The way his tongue licks at my nipple while his teeth press into my soft flesh.

A groan rumbles from King's mouth to my skin, and I can't stop my hips from rocking.

It feels so damn good.

When King pulls down the other side of my shirt, hard enough to snap the strap of my tank top, I move my hands up to cling to his shoulders. Feeling his muscles flex and bulge while he suckles on the other peek.

"Jesus." He laps at my flesh. "Fuck." His teeth graze over my breast. "Hold on." When I don't react, he lifts his head to snap at me, "Hold on to me."

I circle my arms around his neck and hold him close as he presses his chest against mine, pinning me against the wall with his weight.

Then I feel it.

His hands between my legs. Grabbing at the material.

A tear rips through the air a second before fingers touch my panties.

King ripped my leggings.

He ripped my freaking leggings.

A pair of demanding fingers run up and down my entrance, the soaked through cotton giving me away.

King groans again as he hooks his fingers around the edge of my panties and pulls them to the side. His thumb swipes up my slit and across my slippery bud, making me hold him tighter.

"So fucking wet." His thumb is replaced with something bigger. Blunter. "And so fucking mine."

King shoves his hips forward.

The invasion is immediate.

His thickness more than I've ever had. My pussy stretching around him.

And the sound that leaves me is half scream, half ecstasy.

He's so deep. So damn deep.

And I'm so fucking full.

“That’s it wife.” King pulls out, then slams back in. “Take all of me.”

Him calling me *wife*, while he’s buried inside of me, sends shivers dancing across my skin.

King grabs my hips and yanks me further onto his dick.

“You were fucking built for me,” he grunts. “So snug. So perfect.”

I can’t stop moaning. Can’t stop the sounds that are being fucked out of my chest.

I turn my face into him and press my lips against his neck, breathing him in. Inhaling his familiar scent.

“So hot for it.” His pace is picking up. His hips slapping forward into mine. The hole in my leggings tearing further with each movement. And all I can do is hold on.

The next time he shoves inside me, a jolt shoots up my spine, and I cry out. Swearing he bottomed out. My noise bouncing off the walls around us.

“Better keep quiet, Baby. You wouldn’t want all those men out there hearing you.”

My body reacts on its own. My pussy clenching hard around his length.

Oh god, why do I want that?

“Fuuuuck.” King lifts his head, and rocks his hips. “You like that, Savannah?” He raises the volume of his voice just a little bit louder. “You want someone to walk in here. To see you like this.” He uses his grip on my hips to bounce me on his cock. “You want someone to watch me fuck you with this big dick?”

CHAPTER 41

King

MY WIFE IS A FREAK AND IT'S ABOUT TO MAKE ME COME.

Wrapping my arms around her, I pull us away from the wall.

Still inside her, with her body tight against mine, her legs around my waist, I can feel every shudder, every tensing muscle.

“I can feel you dripping down my dick.” I tell her, with my lips against her ear, turning toward the bed. “I ask you if you want someone to watch me fuck you and your whole pussy flutters around my cock.” Savannah moans into my shoulder. “I’d do that for you, Honey. If it makes you this fucking hot, I’d do it for you.”

I let go of my wife, and she drops back onto the mattress.

“But then I’d have to kill any motherfucker that saw you like this.”

Savannah blinks up at me, and she’s a mess.

Tits hanging out over her ripped shirt.

Leggings torn to hell, puffy pink slit on display.

But she looks perfect. The most beautiful tableau I’ve ever witnessed.

“Delicious,” I growl as I grip her thighs and wrench them further apart.

Her hands start to reach down, like she’s going to try and cover herself. But before she can, I lean down and flatten my tongue against her opening.

The sound that leaves her is choked, and instead of pushing me away, she buries her hands in my hair.

I let my tongue drag up over her clit. Just once.

I want to stay right here. I want to make her come all over my face. Have her crying out my name all fucking night.

But I can do that at home.

As I start to pull away, her hands shove at my head, trying to keep me

there. But she's too weak from lust to stop me.

"Coming on my tongue is for good girls." I crawl over her body. "Have you been good, Savannah?"

I swear she might cry, but she still shakes her head. "N-no."

"No," I repeat, lining my cock back up with her greedy pussy. "No, you've been a bad girl." I start to inch back inside of her.

"I was scared," she finally admits.

And I hate it. I hate that she felt that way.

"You don't ever need to be scared of me." I slide another inch in.

She's so fucking wet I hardly have to push.

"I'm sorry." Her voice is a whisper, and I know she means it.

"I know." Another inch. "And that's the only reason I'm letting you come."

Her hands grapple for a hold on my back as her tits rub against my chest.

Her eagerness, her willingness is going to send me over the edge.

But I need to get her there first.

"You want to come on this cock, Wife?"

"Please," she begs, and I feel the plea in my balls.

Next time she begs me, it's gonna be from her knees.

I move my mouth until my lips are just brushing against hers.

"Please, who?" I demand. "Who am I?"

She tries to pull me closer. "You're my King."

Thunder rolls through my body as I swallow her words.

You're my King.

"Fuck," I growl the word and drop my full weight onto her. Burying myself as deep as I can go. Forcing her mouth open with my tongue.

You're my King.

My hips piston, filling her over and over as she kisses me back with just as much fervor.

I wanted her to call me *husband*. But...fuck.

"That's right, Baby," I grunt. "I'm your fucking King."

I shove a hand under her ass, tipping her hips up. The panties she's still wearing drag along the side of my length, and when she cries out, I know the elastic is tugging against her clit.

And I know she's close.

"You gonna come for me, Savannah?"

She's panting against my temple.

“Tell me.” I roll my hips, and she tenses. The motion stretching the material right where I need it. Right where *she* needs it. “Say it.”

I roll my hips again and again. And her pussy gets wetter and wetter.

“Say it, Wife.”

“I-I’m coming!”

Her words, paired with her vibrating body, shoves me over the edge.

Her cunt clamps down around me, her orgasm intensifying my own, as my cock erupts and I send every bit of my release inside of her. Inside of my wife.

CHAPTER 42

Savannah

HOLY. SHIT.

King's weight pins me to the mattress, and the feeling reminds me of him kissing me after our wedding, when I was trapped beneath him on that couch.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

I just had sex with King.

I didn't just enjoy it. I loved it.

He's...

God, he's everything I imagined he would be.

So powerful and demanding.

And he ripped my legging like they were paper.

My pussy clenches at the memory, sending a shock through my body as I'm reminded of the fact that King is still buried inside of me.

"Not uh," King mumbles against my temple. "One is all you get right now. I'm still mad at you."

My mouth pops open.

Sure, I ran away. But he kidnapped me first.

"Don't make that face."

My mouth snaps shut. "I wasn't..."

King lifts his head to look at me. "You were. And we don't have time for me to fuck you back into submission."

"You did not—"

King stops my rant, by smothering my mouth with his.

I shouldn't like this.

Tingles wind their way to my core, and I squeeze my muscles around him, feeling his still hard cock jump within me.

King shoves his hips forward, sinking in deeper, and I break the kiss to tip my head back.

“Knock it off,” I groan.

So many warring emotions, already inside of me, getting more and more confused from pleasure.

“Knock what off?” He thrusts his hips again, and my traitorous underwear drags across my overly sensitive bundle of nerves again. “Stop making you feel good?” He thrusts again. “Stop making you squirm?”

“King!” I try to scold him, but he keeps moving. Keeps pulling me back closer to that edge.

I can’t let him make me come again.

I need to think straight.

“What, Wife?” He shifts, and then his hand is there. Between us. And he’s pressing his thumb against my clit. “Don’t lie to me, Honey. You can’t tell me you don’t like this.”

“I don’t...” *Oh hell. I’m so close.*

Blindly, I reach down and try to shove his hand away.

But he’s too strong.

Or I’m too weak.

Or I don’t really want to stop him.

“You want this.” My eyes lift to meet his gaze. “You want me.” His thumb starts to move, swiping back and forth. “You want me to make you feel good.” His thumb moves quicker. “Just admit it. Accept it.”

“I don’t want to,” I sob.

He presses harder. “Accept me.” His hips are rocking now, and his cock is just as hard as it was before. “Believe me.”

I want to believe him.

I *do* believe him.

But what does that mean? Do I just go along with this life? Do I just accept him as my husband?

“Trust me.” King’s voice is as ragged as my breathing.

I press my heels into the mattress, lifting my hips to give him more. To let him take more. And as the first tremors of another orgasm vibrates through me, I realize one thing. My body trusts him even if my mind isn’t sure.

My hands are no longer pushing him away, and instead I hold on tight as I tell him what he needs to hear.

“I do.”

The wet sounds between us are lewd as he plows into me over and over. His fingers never stopping their work on my clit.

And just like the first time, as soon as my orgasm takes over, King follows me over the edge. His pulsing cock inside of me, amplifying my release.

When King pulls out of me, I feel the mess of his double load leaking out of me and soaking into my ruined leggings.

He looks down at me with a smirk. “Til death do we part, Savannah Baby.”

CHAPTER 43

King

I WAIT UNTIL MY WIFE HAS SHUFFLED INTO THE ATTACHED BATHROOM BEFORE I open the door.

Dom is leaned against the wall across the hallway. He lifts his hands for a slow clap. “Impressive.”

I don’t know if he’s talking about coming twice in a row or about fucking my runaway wife in general, but either way, I feel myself bristle.

Not rising to the bait, I close the door behind me with a click and cross my arms. Because there’s no way I’m walking away first to leave this man between me and Savannah while she’s changing.

Dom smirks, but doesn’t say more as he pushes off the wall and walks ahead of me toward the main level.

I follow him down to the kitchen, waiting to speak until we’re standing at the large concrete island. “Nero check in?”

I’m still not sure if I should tell Savannah about Hans being spotted at the motel she picked. I don’t know if I want to tell her about Hans at all.

I want her to be informed, but I don’t want her terrified. Plus, what we actually do know about the man is so minimal it’d be funny if it wasn’t so infuriating. He’s a fucking ghost, whose name always comes up when we hear about new trafficking rings, and knowing he was only feet away from my woman...

I don’t want her to live with that.

I may not know everything there is to know about my wife, but I know she has a gentle heart. One way too soft to be entrusted in my grip. And I don’t want to blacken it any more than is necessary.

“He called a few minutes ago.” Dom picks up an open bottle of beer.

“Said he found three dead men, stab wounds, but that’s it. No money. No girls.”

Dominic has been good about keeping his business details hidden from prying eyes, but he has the same lines as us. And we know he wants to catch Hans just as much as we do.

I blow out a breath. “Suppose it was too much to ask for him to leave a business card behind.”

The tattooed man lets out a bark of laughter. “Sorry, no return address just yet.” He takes a drag of his beer. “Nero said he’d come back to pick you and the old lady up. But it’ll still be a few minutes.” Dom tips the bottle toward me. “Want one?”

We both hear the door being opened from across the apartment and turn that way.

A few seconds later, Savannah appears at the top of the stairs.

Even from across the large room, I can tell how sexy, how *fucked*, she looks. Her torn and soiled leggings replaced with black sweatpants. Her tank top replaced with a pale blue t-shirt. And her hair pulled up into a messy golden bun at the top of her head.

“I’ll take that beer,” I say, holding my hand out.

The request is two-fold. One to force Dom to turn away from Savannah, and another to calm my nerves with alcohol. Because right now I’m just about wired enough to start a turf war over someone ogling my wife.

CHAPTER 44

Savannah

I CROSS MY ARMS OVER MY CHEST AS I LOOK OUT THE REAR PASSENGER window.

I don't really know how to feel right now.

We're headed back to the home I fled from only eight hours ago.

A place that, when I'd left, I was prepared to never see again.

But now... Now, I'm just willingly going back.

Is this insanity?

Or is it me making the best of my situation?

Or is it some blend of Stockholm Syndrome and the desire to belong to a man like King?

If I try to look at my situation from the outside, if I was reading this story in the news, I'd be screaming at myself to run and to never look back.

But I'm not on the outside and this isn't just some story. It's real. And the more I try to piece it apart to make sense of it, the more I end up with the same question.

What am I really losing?

And it's not as simple as it seems.

Of course, the obvious big one is *freedom*.

I was kidnapped and forced into marriage. There's no two ways about that.

But, when he's not being a complete piece of shit, King has treated me well.

I lost my house, but then I got a better one. Plus a huge private studio.

And the studio isn't about the money. I didn't ask him to do it. I didn't give him a list of things that would be in my dream painter's life. He did it all

on his own. Yes, he found my art by digging into my personal life, but my career isn't private. And he didn't just hand me a credit card. And...

The world needs your art.

When the urge to cry hits me again, I let my head drop back against the seat and close my eyes.

Ethical dilemmas shouldn't be dealt with on an empty stomach.

Tuning out King and Nero, as they discuss stuff I'm not paying attention to, I decide to rest as we make our way to the airport. Though how they plan on getting me through TSA without an ID—since King never gave me my wallet back either—I have no idea.



“UH, NO.” I SHAKE MY HEAD. “I’M NOT GETTING IN THAT DEATH-TRAP.” I point at the little airplane.

“It’s not a death-trap,” Nero mutters as he moves past us and up the stairs.

But I’m ignoring him, because I still don’t like him, so I turn to King. “You can’t be serious. I thought we were going to the *real* airport.”

Back in his suit and looking obnoxiously good standing next to me in my pajamas, King lifts a brow. “TSA kinda frowns upon guns in your carry-on.”

I throw my hands up. “That’s a *you* problem.”

“It’s an *us* problem, Honey. Now get on the plane.”

I push against his hand on my back when he tries to guide me to the stairs. “Can’t we just drive? I drove.”

“Don’t remind me,” he growls next to my ear.

“I said I was sorry,” I try for a reasoning tone. “Can’t we just—”

“No. And I fly in this all the time.” He hooks his arm around my side, bodily moving me a few steps forward. “Don’t tell him I said it, but Nero’s a great pilot.”

“No.” I dig my heels into the ground. “No, no, no. That man is not a pilot.”

“Certified and everything,” King tells me as he keeps pushing me forward. “Not even forged.”

“Is that supposed to be comforting?” I can hear my voice getting shrill.

I know Nero drove us here, but having him *fly* us home is a whole

different ball game.

King stops and I tip my head back to find him looking down on me. “Are you afraid of flying?”

My eyes drop to his mouth as he speaks. “Not in general, no.”

Belatedly, I realize I should’ve said yes. But I’ve been so sex deprived, for so long, that having him this close after what we just did is shorting-out my brain.

“You’ll be fine. We brought the big one.”

The big one.

My gaze lowers to look at the front of his pants.

“The plane, Baby.” King’s hand slides up my shoulder to gently tug on my ear. “Though I like that your reaction to the word *big* is to look at my dick.”

I can’t believe I did that.

When I refuse to look back up at him, he chuckles. “I promise it’s safe. And the sooner we get on that plane, the sooner you can go to sleep in our bed.”

Our bed.

Just the thought of curling up into his side amplifies my exhaustion.

I eye the aircraft. *Fuck it.* My life is nothing but chaos now. What’s a little plane crash to add to the mix.

CHAPTER 45

Savannah

I CLEAR MY THROAT, “UM, GOOD MORNING.”

Cici whirls around from her spot at the stove, “Oh!” She slaps a hand to her chest. “I didn’t hear you.”

“Sorry,” I grimace.

She waves my apology away, “The boss said you’d be sleeping in late so I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

I lift my shoulder. Not sure how to say that when I woke up alone, and I couldn’t go back to sleep. “Is he...here?”

She shakes her head. “He said to tell you that he’d be back tonight. And that he had your art stuff delivered to your studio.”

Art stuff. I mumble the words before I realize what he means. “Oh!”

He must’ve sent someone to my rental studio to collect all my pieces.

Cici holds out a coffee mug, and I take it with a grateful smile. “Thanks.”

She bites her lip. “Hey, we’re sorry if we got you in trouble the other night. With the, *ya know.*” Cici widens her eyes.

It’s my turn to refuse an apology. “King wasn’t mad about that. And even if he had been, I think running away pissed him off more.”

Cici’s snickers follow me down the hallway as I head to the studio. If King’s gonna be gone all day, I might as well get things organized.



I’M SITTING ON THE FLOOR, BACK AGAINST A WALL OF WINDOWS, SOAKING IN

some afternoon sun, when someone knocks on the studio door.

“Come in!” I holler from the far corner, assuming it’s Cici again with yet more food.

Seriously, that woman’s snack game is on point.

I stretch my neck out as her shoes tap across the tiled floor.

I spent the past several hours arranging every piece of furniture to maximize the lighting and functionality of the space. And I’m beat.

Most of my pieces for the next show are already done, but I have a few left to work on, and those are currently taking up space on each of the easels.

It’s not until I can see the feet approaching from under one of the easels that I realize it isn’t Cici approaching.

No, this person is wearing strappy wedge sandals, and I can see a bright red skirt flitting around her calves.

Who is...

The woman starts to round the large canvas, and the second I spot the tell-tale Vass hair color I start to scramble to my feet.

My bare thighs peel off the floor with a wince.

I’m burning these damn jean shorts the first chance I get. They’re cursed!

My hand slips as I use the wall to push myself the rest of the way up and I almost fall, but I catch myself at the last possible second.

My new bestie, panic, settles behind my ribcage as I dart in the opposite direction of the intruder, ducking low to try and hide myself behind the big table in the center of the room where I put all my paints.

At least last time, when I encountered my biggest hater, I had King at my side and I looked somewhat put together. This time I’ll just end up dying in a stained t-shirt and no makeup. *Goodie.*

“Oh, um, hi there!” A sweet voice, that’s definitely not Aspen, calls after my fleeing form.

I stop, hunched over, then slowly straighten and turn to find a pretty girl, probably in her twenties, smiling at me.

“Hello.” I lift my hand in a weird wave then shrug a shoulder. “Sorry, I uh, saw your hair and thought you were someone else.”

The girl’s face shows delighted surprise. “Aspen?” she laughs. “Sure, I can see the similarities. If she gained forty pounds and took about a thousand chill pills.”

I can’t help but smile at that description. I think the girl might be exaggerating the weight difference for dramatics, but she is a shorter, curvier

version of my current worst nightmare.

“I’m Val, King’s and Aspen’s half-sister.” The girl lifts her shoulder, drawing my eye to the canvas bag hanging there. “And I brought margaritas.”

My eyebrows raise. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Val. I’m Savannah, your new sister-in-law.” I pretend to hold the edges of a skirt as I give her a little curtsey. “And I think tequila sounds wonderful.”

She grins. “Good. I was hoping you wouldn’t be one of those anti-margarita types.”

I lift three fingers. “Scouts honor, have never, would never.”

Val sets her bag on the empty corner of the large table between us and starts to pluck things out.

I watch as she sets down a bottle of tequila, two insulated metal cups, a bottle of mixer, a Tupperware with lime wedges, a round metal container of rimming salt, and lastly, a thermos that sounds like it’s full of ice.

“Wow, you don’t mess around.” I’m instantly impressed with this woman.

Val snickers. “When I heard what happened, I figured I should bring the full spread.”

I scoff, “Which part are you even referring to?”

She pauses using an ice cube to dampen the rim of the glass. “I guess I was talking about the whole dinner party thing, but I suppose there’s probably a few moments to choose from.”

I can’t help my snort. “Are there ever.”

“Care to fill me in while we imbibe?” Val asks as she expertly twirls the top of the glass in the container of salt.

Just then, Duke walks past one of the floor-to-ceiling windows leading into the backyard, and I don’t miss how he turns his head away from me.

“Never thought I’d get the cold shoulder from a dog.” I shake my head.

Val laughs, “Duke?”

“Yeah. I think he’s pissy about me running away yesterday.”

Val clunks ice into the cups. “You ran away?!”



“HE’S NOT ALL BAD.” VAL’S GRIMACE AS SHE SAYS IT MAKES ME LAUGH. “I

mean, I get it. That's pretty bad. But, like, in general, he's pretty alright."

"Pretty alright," I repeat.

We're on our third round of margaritas with partially full Chinese takeout containers littering the space around us.

I started the storytelling from the very first meeting at Mandi's house, and our drinking has steadily increased since then. She knew there was something about Lee cheating and King and I getting married, but she'd apparently missed most of the gruesome details.

Val shared just a few bits of her own information, enough that I know she shares the same father as Aspen and King, and it's clear they must take after him. I seem to remember King saying something about how they *found out about Val* back when all the Alliance stuff went down. And I'm not sure what he meant by that, but even with all the stuff I'm sharing, it didn't feel right to ask.

But I did find out that Val is twenty-five, *twenty years younger than King*, which made me realize I hadn't known how old my husband was. But now I do.

When I got to the part in the story where I ran away, I decided to stay vague. I don't know how much she knows about what King really does, so I just said that I *overheard something* and ran before I found out that I'd misunderstood. And that King brought me back home.

Home.

I also left out the part about Dom and his apartment and the sex, because that might be a little too much information.

"You gotta know that none of it was your fault." Val's head lolls to the side, so she's looking at me. "You couldn't have known that Leland was married." We pulled a pair of the Adirondack chairs inside, that had been around the firepit, and situated them in front of the big windows. This way we could enjoy the sunset in the comfort of the air-conditioned room and not worry about bugs.

Val waves a hand around as she continues. "And Aspen will get over it eventually. She doesn't really hate you. She just needs time to accept that you didn't know, when you, *you know...*"

I roll my lips together, then give in to the urge to tell someone.

"I never slept with him," I blurt out.

Val's brows furrow. "King? I wouldn't expect you—"

I cut her off. "Lee, er, Leland." I don't feel like explaining that yes, I have

already slept with King. “I never slept with Leland.”

Her mouth drops open. “But, I thought... Hadn’t you guys been dating for a while?” She shakes her head. “I don’t mean that there’s like a time limit. And don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t want to bang Leland either...” She fakes a gag.

I want to gag, too.

After having King between my legs... I can’t even imagine having sex with a man like *Leland*.

“We’d only gone out three times.” I did let him kiss me after the second date, and even though there was no tongue, I decide that’s a detail I’ll take to my grave. “He was starting to get kinda pushy about it, honestly, and I was planning to break it off with him that day.”

“I hate pushy men,” Val murmurs. “But wait, if you didn’t sleep with him, then why is Aspen so riled up? I mean, obviously, fuck her husband for cheating, sex or no sex, because I kinda doubt this was his first *indiscretion*. But she shouldn’t be *this* riled up.”

“Because no one would listen!” I toss up my hands, forgetting about the glass in my hand and sloshing margarita onto my wrist. “I tried to say something when it was all blowing up, but no one would listen to me. And I tried to tell King, but he was being a dummy...” I trail off, thinking that I’ve probably had ample opportunity to tell him but I’ve had a few other things on my mind.

“King doesn’t know?!” Val leans too far over the armrest, making her chair start to tip.

She shrieks and leans back, dropping all four feet back to the floor.

We both snicker. “I tried to tell him,” I repeat with a shrug. “But if he wants to make dumb assumptions, then he can live with dumb consequences.”

“That’s so typical of King,” Val cackles. “And so very fucked up.”

I roll my eyes, “Understatement.”

Her face turns serious. “I know this is all super unfair, and I don’t like that King just, well, took you. But I really like you. And I’m happy to have you as a part of the family.”

“Thanks, Val.” I swear she’s the only normal person I’ve met since this all started and the thought of her being family makes something calm inside of me.

“So...” Val smiles over at me. “Do you think you’ll stay?”

I take a big gulp of margarita and turn to look out at the final rays of sun.
“I know I shouldn’t.”

“But...”

“But... I like Duke.” I lift my glass and drain the rest of the drink. “And I’m starting to like your stupid brother, too.”

CHAPTER 46

King

WHEN I WALK INTO THE HOUSE, I EXPECT TO HEAR... SOMETHING. LAUGHTER, talking, maybe crying. Whatever it is that women do when they get together.

But I hear nothing.

I pause my steps to listen, but still, nothing.

My man at the gate told me Val got here three hours and twenty-five minutes ago.

They're all a little jumpy after yesterday's gate guards disappeared, probably thinking I had them killed.

Really, I just had them transferred to Texas. Summer in the south felt like a good punishment, since technically, I was at least partially to blame for Savannah getting away yesterday. I'd been too preoccupied to give every employee a photo of Savannah and explicit instructions to keep her on the grounds. But I'd figured no one would be stupid enough to let some random woman leave, in a vehicle that clearly doesn't belong to me, when they knew I had a kidnap victim on the premises.

So let the men think death is the punishment. Because if anything had happened to Savannah it would've been.

Duke lifts his head from his spot on the living room couch, but he doesn't bother to get up to greet me. He always acts put out when I work late.

"You gonna run away from me, too?"

I swear he rolls his eyes before closing them and dropping his head back down on the cushion.

My emotions have been all over the fucking place today and I can't figure out why I feel so...out of sorts.

I finally got my sexy little wife under me last night.

Finally got my dick buried in that sweet little pussy.
And she was a full, enthusiastic participant.
I hadn't gone to Chicago with the intention to fuck her before bringing her home, but when I saw her...
When I found her waiting for me in that room...
All the dangers of my world crashed onto my shoulders.
I had done this.
I had put her in this situation.
My steps take me into the kitchen, and I grab a beer out of the fridge.
I don't usually drink very often but drinking sounds like a great idea right about now.

Dropping the cap on the counter I lift the bottle to my lips and the taste brings me back to last night. When Savannah came out of that room, looking thoroughly used. Looking perfect.

She looked like mine.

I want to argue with myself that I'm only being territorial, only acting jealous, because she's my wife. That I respect vows made between two people. And that's what makes her mine.

That's not all of it though, is it?

I tip the bottle further and gulp down the rest.

I like her.

I like my wife, and liking her makes me feel guilty about what I've done to her.

Liking her also means I want to keep her.

I am going to keep her.

I also want her to like me back.

My eyes squeeze shut.

How the fuck am I supposed to make her like me back?

I set the bottle down and grab another.

Another mouthful of beer and I remind myself, *I'm King Fucking Vass*. I know how to make women fall for me.

No. That stupid inner voice argues. *You only know how to make women fall for your dick.*

I shrug at myself and finish the bottle.

Seems like a good enough place to start.

Because if she falls for my body, I can make her fall for me.

And if she falls for me, she won't run away again.

And if she doesn't run from me, then I can keep her safe.
Because that's what I do. I keep my family safe.
And my goddamn wife is part of this family. Willingly or not.

CHAPTER 47

Savannah

“THIS IS COZY.”

King’s voice sinks into my senses and I turn my head to watch him approach. Noticing that Val does the same.

The room is mostly in shadows, so his big form looks sinister walking through the dark.

Val knew where the switch was to turn on the outdoor fireplace, so we dimmed the lights in this room, turned the fire on outside, and have been watching the flames while eating our way through a bag of gummy bears Val pulled from her bag, talking about...

I try to concentrate, but I can’t remember what we were talking about before King came in.

He comes to a stop, standing behind our chairs, and I have to tip my head all the way back to see him.

“Sister,” He nods to Val, before he turns to me. “Wife.”

My stomach swirls, but it’s not the alcohol, it’s him.

“Husband,” I whisper the greeting.

His lids lower, and I watch his jaw flex before he bends down.

I start to close my eyes, thinking that he’s bending down to kiss me.

God, I really want him to kiss me.

Val’s snicker causes my eyes to slide back open.

Oh.

King wasn’t trying to kiss me. He was reaching for the half-eaten container of noodles I set next to my chair.

I should probably feel embarrassed, but watching him wield those chopsticks with skill, all I feel is lust.

I take a second to look him over, head to toe.

Arguably, completely naked has got to be my favorite version of King. I'm surprised my leggings didn't rip themselves when he stripped down to nothing in front of me last night.

But this—the dark pants, white shirt, top buttons undone—it should be illegal.

His lips open and close around a mouthful of noodles, the smooth chopsticks sliding out of his closed mouth.

Even the way he chews is hot. His jaw muscles working, flexing with each motion.

I can see Val moving in my periphery, her head moving back and forth to look between me and her handsome-as-hell brother.

“Want a margarita?” she asks.

King swallows his next bite. “That what you two have been drinking?”

I try to nod, but looking up so high makes it hard.

King shovels in another huge mouthful, before he moves over to the little end table where all our drink stuff is sitting.

“We're out of ice,” Val says, but King just grunts as he lifts the bottle of tequila.

I think my mouth might drop open when King lifts the whole bottle to his lips and tips his head back. His throat works twice, swallowing two mouthfuls. And I think I might've drooled watching the action.

I wouldn't want to drink tequila straight like that, but watching him do it was hot as fuck.

“Everything okay?” Val asks her brother, hinting that this isn't his usual behavior.

King drags the back of his hand over his mouth, eyes on me, before nodding. “Fine.” Then he looks at Val. “You staying over?”

She shakes her head. “No, I was gonna order a ride.” I finally pull my gaze away from King to watch her check her phone for the time. “Should probably do that now.”

“No.” King lifts his own phone from his pocket and presses it to his ear. We all wait as he starts speaking. “Bring a car around. You're driving my sister home. Now.” Then he ends the call.

Val and I look at each other, and she rolls her eyes at his heavy-handedness. But I feel a surge of indignance, we didn't say we were done.

“We—” I start to argue but King snaps his fingers.

Snaps. His. Fingers.

My lungs heave.

Holy hell, I felt that snap in my core.

I think Val laughs, but my ears are too full of buzzing desire to hear anything.

Val rises from her chair, and my balance wavers but I manage to get up and give her a quick hug goodbye.

“I’ll call ya later,” she says, even though we haven’t exchanged numbers. And I don’t have a phone.

King follows her across the studio, and I expect him to walk her all the way out of the house, but he stops there. And when Val steps through the door, King closes it behind her.

Trapping us in here alone.

He turns back to face me. And standing like this, a room apart, it doesn’t dull the pull I feel toward him. I can feel the crackle of desire like a lightning bolt between us. Like there’s something connecting my chest to his. A tangible string I swear I could touch if I tried.

King reaches out to the side and flips off the final light switch. Snuffing out the last source of the light from within the room.

I can still see him, the glow coming through the windows from outside, enough for me to see him stalking toward me.

My chest is heaving.

I want this.

I want this so bad.

King stops a foot away. Staring down at me. Eyes molten in the low light.

I’m too busy staring back to see his hands move. But then they’re gripping the hem of my t-shirt, pulling it up over my head.

My arms lift, and I let him take it off.

A calloused hand presses against my chest, dragging down, between my breasts, over my bra, down my stomach, to the top band of my jean shorts.

His fingers curl around the denim, making his knuckles press into the softness of my belly.

“I’m gonna keep coming inside of you. So if you don’t want a herd of kids just yet, you better find some birth control.”

The breath leaves my lungs.

That should probably make me mad.

And if he’d asked before our first time, I’d have told him I’m set for the

next two and a half years.

But he didn't ask. And when his fingers start to work on the button and fly of my shorts, the last thing I'm feeling is talkative.

CHAPTER 48

King

I LOWER MYSELF, DRAGGING HER SHORTS AND PANTIES DOWN HER LEGS, leaving her bare.

I swear I can smell her slickness as she steps out of the clothing.

I drop the shorts. I'm tempted to shove her panties into my mouth but let them drop too.

"Turn around."

Savannah does as I ask, and I lick a trail up one of her perfect ass cheeks, before I stand and unclip her bra.

With the band undone, I push the straps off her shoulders, and she lets it fall away to join the rest of her clothes on the floor.

I wrap an arm around her front, forearm between her soft tits, and I pull her back against me.

I know she can feel my cock pressing into the top of her ass, because I feel her body tremble against mine. "I can't wait to fuck you like this. Your tits bouncing free, as my hips slam into this ass." I grip her hip with my free hand and hold her steady as I press into her. "But not tonight."

"W-why not?" Savannah whines, and a smile of pure victory pulls across my mouth.

"Because I said so." My teeth sink into the soft curve between her shoulder and her neck.

The taste of her skin makes me groan.

Enough waiting.

I lick across the bite before I step back, eyes on Savannah as she turns to face me, totally nude, while I remove my shirt.

Savannah watches me step past her, up to the heavy wood table in the

middle of the room where I shove paints to the sides, until there's an empty spot in the middle.

After I lay my shirt out, I grip Savannah's waist, and hoist her onto the table, legs dangling over the edge.

Most of the furniture in here was picked out just for her. But I knew I'd want to fuck her in this room, so I found this table at just the right height. Meaning, when I step up between her spread knees, my cock—if it was free—is at the perfect height to slide right into her waiting cunt.

Her hands press against my chest. "Will you kiss me?"

Savannah's question forces my eyes off her perfectly soft body and up to her eyes.

They're needy. Glassy. Pretty.

And I will kiss her.

I lean in, our lips nearly touching. "Take out my cock."

But not quite yet.

My command makes her blink. And swallow. But she still slides her fingertips down my body, ghosting over my abs, stopping to work on my pants.

I lean back enough so we can both watch as she gets the button open and pulls the zipper down, brushing against my length as she goes.

I widen my stance, so my pants settle low on my hips when she pushes them out of the way.

My boxers are strained, and I nearly hold my breath as Savannah rubs along the underside of my dick.

The sensation makes me stand to my full height. "I said take it out, Savannah."

I can't decide what to watch—the expressions on her face, or her hands—as she pulls the band of my boxers down until my cock is finally free.

"Grab it."

She does, her fingers struggling to circle me.

I shift closer.

"Put me at your entrance."

I take the final half-step forward, bumping the head of my cock against her heat.

"You're fucking soaked already, aren't you?"

She doesn't need to answer, I can feel the evidence all over my cock.

"Rub me up and down your slit."

Savannah braces one hand on my chest as she uses the other to do as I said.

And the sound of her wetness fills the room.

“Rub me on your clit.”

She pauses for a moment, but then she does it. Using the head of my cock to stimulate her little bud.

Unable to resist any longer, I reach out with both hands and close my fingers around her nipples.

She moans, squeezing me harder in her grip.

My fingers spread to palm her tits.

“That’s it, Honey,” I moan back. “Such a good girl following directions.” I press her tits together and feel precum leak from my tip as I imagine titty-fucking my wife. “Now notch me inside that hungry pussy.”

We’re both practically panting.

I wait for her to line me up, then I shift my hips forward until just the head of my dick is inside her.

The hand she has on my chest curls.

I let go of one glorious tit and grip her chin.

“I want your eyes on those windows.” She darts her gaze over my shoulder, as if she’s only now remembering how exposed this room is.

I tighten my grip on her chin. “Now kiss me.”

I lower my mouth to hers and Savannah parts her lips, allowing me in.

My hand slides from her chin, around to cup the back of her neck, and I shift the hand on her hip to her lower back.

Holding her in place, I plunge my tongue into her mouth as I shove my dick all the way into her hot wet cunt.

CHAPTER 49

Savannah

KING SWALLOWS MY CRY.

I'm still sore from the last time, from last night, but...he pulls out, the drag draws a moan from my throat.

It's a good sore. An ache I'm afraid I'm going to start to crave.

When King slams his hips forward again, the room spins.

I break our kiss to throw my head back.

I feel like I'm floating. Like I'm in a magical half-aware state where everything feels... *more*. And I don't know if it's the tequila or the man between my thighs, but I've decided I don't care.

Not right now.

Not tonight.

The hand on my lower back slides along my bare skin to my side, and King moves even closer, hugging me to him.

Comfort, like I've never known, blossoms inside me.

"My King," I whisper, wrapping my arms around his neck.

He grunts, deep in his chest, and it's the hottest sound I've ever heard.

"That's right, Baby. Never forget it." His hips don't stop. His hand on the back of my head holds me tight. "Say it again."

My legs tighten around his hips. "I'll say it," I pant, "when you make that sound again."

His fingers tangle into my hair, tipping my head back. "What sound?"

His cock is relentless.

I don't know how he does so many things at once. Thrusting deep, touching me, tugging my hair, forming sentences...

"What sound, Savannah?"

“The-the...” I don’t know how to describe it. I blink to clear the stars from my vision and look into his eyes. “That sound you make when I call you *my King*.” When I say his name, I clench my core muscles around him.

And the sound he makes is pure alpha male lust. Deep and growly. The sound of a man ready to blow.

“Fuck.” He pauses, his hips smashed against me. “Who knew my pretty little wife would be such a dirty little slut.”

I gasp but he doesn’t let me protest, he just slams his mouth down on mine.

Time slips away from me, as our bodies writhe together, as the darkness swirls around us.

Then a hand is between us, and his fingers are on my clit.

His other hand is still on the back of my head and he uses it to pull me away from the kiss and turn my head to the side.

King presses his lips against my ear, his hips working shallow thrusts, his fingertips still strumming me higher. “Someone’s coming.”

My body goes on alert at his words and, with wide eyes, I watch a flashlight beam approach from across the courtyard.

My breathing hitches.

If he shines that light through the glass...

“Does that make you hot, Baby?” He thrusts into me harder. “Do you want him to see you like this? Naked. Pussy stretched around my dick?”

My entire body flushes with heat.

“You want to make another man hard, letting him see how good you are at taking cock.”

I hug King to my body.

His big body. His length inside me. His dirty, filthy words.

I’ve never felt like this before.

Because I do. I do want all those things.

My eyes watch the man with the flashlight pass by the window, heading to circle around to the front of the house.

“Yes,” I whisper into the dark. “Yes, King.”

King’s fingers apply more pressure on my clit.

“Come for me, Wife.” His voice is so deep it’s almost unrecognizable. “Before he leaves, come for me.”

The flashlight beam bounces past the window behind me, and now I can’t see him. Can’t know for sure if he’s looking away, or if he’s watching. And

that's the last thread.

My control shreds, and I wrap myself around King as I come apart at the seams.

"That's right," he grunts. "Fuck, Baby. That's it."

His cock is hitting me deep, his fingers still strumming me, and I keep coming.

"King!" I say his name louder than I meant to, and my eyes that had slid shut, snap open.

He groans, his hand sliding out from between us to hold me as close as he can, as he comes inside of me.

And that's when I see it. The movement in the shadows beyond the fire.

A man steps away from the side of the house opposite my room, and even though he's far away, I swear he's looking right at us.

It's not until he's out of sight that I realize he wasn't carrying a flashlight, like the other guards.

CHAPTER 50

Savannah

THE BED CREAKS, AND THE NOISE SCRAPES ACROSS MY BRAIN.

“Shhh!” I hiss as I roll away for the sound, dragging the blanket over my head.

There’s a masculine chuckle, followed by a groan. “Why did it have to be tequila?”

“Don’t say *tequila*,” I moan.

I try not to listen to King as he walks across the room, the noise of the door clicking open enough to make me want to cry.

When blissful silence falls over me, I lay as still as possible. Hoping that the hangover can only see you if you move.

Last night was...hot. It was so super hot.

It’s a little bit blurry, but I remember being wildly turned on, and clinging to King like my life depended on it as he fucked me into oblivion.

I should probably stop happily fucking my jailor.

The details after that are a little fuzzier. But I know we stumbled upstairs together, and...did we brush our teeth together?

Why does that seem like a big thing?

I lift the blanket and glance down at my...naked body.

Okay. So, I slept in the nude.

I hope we didn’t walk through the whole house like that.

The sound of footsteps in the room has me dropping the blanket. And the small amount of sun creeping in from behind the curtains has me slapping my hands over my eyes.

Something gets set down on the nightstand next to my side of the bed, and I part my fingers to peek out.

“Drink this.” King nods to the glass of murky water. “And take these, before you go back to sleep.” He sets some pills down next to the glass. “It’ll help.”

I eye him for a moment, recognizing the signs of an equally hungover person. “Are you coming back to bed?”

He gently shakes his head. “I have a couple calls I need to take.”

I close one eye. “For your finance business or your nefarious business?”

King smirks. “Finance. But since I enjoy being nefarious...”

Before I can guess what he’s about to do, King yanks the blanket off me.

Cold air rushes in, chilling every inch of my naked body.

“Ahh!” I dart my hand out, managing to catch the edge. King lets go and I glare at him as I roll, cocooning myself back into the warmth. “You’re a dick,” I snap at him, lacking heat.

He saunters to the closet, laughing. “It’s always about the dick with you.”

My gaze snags on his perfect ass in gold silk boxers, and my eyes narrow. “Did you go downstairs like that?”

There’s a moment before he reappears, pulling on a pair of sweatpants. “Yeah. Why?”

A glance at the clock tells me that Cici would already be in the kitchen making food for the day.

“Well, don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

He’s being obstinate on purpose; I just know it. “Don’t walk around the house in your underwear like a five-year-old. It’s tacky.”

“Tacky,” he repeats, and I want to slap the smug look off his face.

I know it’s ridiculous to be annoyed over this, considering we had sex in a room of windows last night, but I don’t like the idea of other women seeing him like that. Not out of the moment.

But if he wants to play hardball...

I shove the blankets off, and force my queasy stomach to chill as I stand. “Fine, if we’re just walking around naked...” I trail off and make for the door.

Not wanting to actually walk around naked—and not willing to look deeper into why I’m feeling so jealous and territorial over this stupid man—I’m thankful when I only make it three steps before a hand grips my arm. “Just try it, Wife.” All the humor has left King’s voice. “I’ll agree to wear pants when I leave this room—”

“And a shirt,” I interrupt him, not turning to make eye contact.

His fingers flex, and his bare chest presses into my side. “But if you ever walk out of this room bare, showing off the pussy that belongs to me...” his breath tickles my neck as he leans closer. “I wasn’t lying about killing any man who sees what’s mine.” His hand releases my arm. “Deal?”

I have to wet my lips to reply, “Deal.”

“Good,” a hand swats my ass and I yelp. “Now quit distracting me, I have to work.”

I purposefully don’t think about what he sees as I hurry my bare self to the bathroom.

But before I close the door, I leave it cracked open so I can watch King pull a plain white t-shirt on.

It stretches over his broad chest, and I think this is the first time I’ve seen him dressed like a regular everyday person. Up until this moment it’s only been suits, boxers, or naked.

And I want to hate that he looks so goddamn good in this too, because it’s simply not fair. But since I get to appreciate the view, I guess I won’t complain.

“Don’t forget your drink, Savannah.”

Caught.

“kay,” I mumble my agreement. Then wait until he’s out of the bedroom, and the door is shut, before I dart back to the nightstand and grab the glass and pills.



I SPOT SOME GREEN PAINT ON THE SIDE OF MY POINTER FINGER, SO I RUB IT off onto my flannel before pressing the button that will grind the espresso beans.

I made Cici show me how to use this fancy machine after having one of her lattes this morning.

The drink—that tasted like cherries—that King gave me this morning, plus painkillers and a hot shower, went a long way to making me feel human. But now, after spending a few hours working on a new canvas, I’m in need of an afternoon caffeine boost.

The grinder rumbles to life and the scent of freshly ground beans fills the air.

“It’s shit like this...” I murmur to myself with a wry smile.

Because *it’s shit like this* that could make a girl give up the fight entirely.

I mean honestly, what would I even do with my old life after all of this.

Just as I’m thinking that, the doorbell rings and my mind immediately jumps to Aspen.

Ah, yes, the downside of this new life—a sister-in-law that wants to murder me.

I stand still for a moment.

Is someone else going to get that?

Am I supposed to be answering the door?

But I know King said he’d be busy today. And I haven’t seen any of the staff in a while...

With a groan, I trudge through the house.

“Don’t worry, I got it,” I say to no one.

With King dressed down, I didn’t feel weird putting on my usual painting clothes—leggings, bare feet—because it makes me feel grounded, a tank top with a built in support layer. I can’t be artistic while wearing a bra and an oversized black and white flannel buttoned most of the way up. I don’t like wearing aprons and I’ve found it’s just easier to have one shirt I can constantly wipe my paint-hands on, rather than ruining half my wardrobe. But now, as I approach the front door, I’m wishing I’d worn something else. Because it’s one thing to be hated. It’s another thing to be hated while looking like a slob.

Bracing myself, I unlock the deadbolt on the front door and swing it open.

And come face to boobs with...not Aspen.

I really gotta stop assuming it’s her. I’m zero for two.

“Um, hi,” I greet the woman.

“Hello,” she smiles, and I can’t help smiling back.

She looks like a politician, wearing a navy-blue skirt suit that hugs all her curves. And there’s a lot of them. Honestly, she’s built like me, only six feet tall.

I step back and hold an arm out to welcome her in. With a gated driveway and a crew of armed security, I figure she has to be a known person around here or else they wouldn’t have let her just come to the door by herself.

And with the professional way she’s dressed, I’m guessing it’s some sort

of business meeting.

Hopefully King went up and changed while I was in the studio, or else this is going to be awkward for him.

But since I think King is still in his office, and I don't know the protocol of bringing people to him or making them wait, I figure I can do my *wifely duty* and entertain her.

"I think King is still on a call, but I was just about to make a coffee, if you'd like one?"

"That'd be great, thank you."

I admire her nice manners as I admire her walking before me.

This lady struts like the plus-size runway models I follow online.

What I would give to be able to walk like that in heels that high.

I follow her to the kitchen, proving that this isn't her first time here.

When I circle around the large island to remove the fresh espresso, I notice the little clutch purse she sets down on the counter, and suddenly I have my first doubt.

On the surface, a clutch purse is normal. Even one that looks like a real Prada. But would you really only bring a clutch to a business meeting?

I mean, I know I'm from the art world, not corporate whatnot, but even I would bring a notebook with me when I'd meet with a potential new gallery.

The woman—and I realize now we never exchanged names—pulls her phone out of the clutch and starts tapping on the screen. Clearly planning to entertain herself while I make her a coffee.

A knot forms in my stomach.

I shouldn't have let her into my house.

There's a loud clatter when I drop the metal espresso thing on the marble counter, spilling ground coffee everywhere.

My house?

Did I really just think of this place as my house?

"Oh, dear, are you okay?"

"Yep!" Embarrassment floods my cheeks.

I don't really know what's going on, but it's nothing good.

And now I look clumsy, on top of looking like a clueless slob.

I'm brushing the espresso grinds off the counter into my palm when I sense movement at the entrance to the kitchen.

"Everything okay in here?" King's eyes are on me, and there's a soft smile on his lips I don't know what to do with.

But before I have time to overthink his expression, it changes.
I don't think I've seen King surprised before, but I'm seeing it now.
His steps slow and his eyes widen slightly as his gaze snaps over to the movement on the other side of the island. On the side nearest him.

"Hey, Baby," the bombshell greets him.

My fist closes around the grinds. *Baby?*

King is still frozen. "Andrea, how did you get in here?"

Andrea lets out a throaty chuckle, like he's being playful.

But I can hear the warning in his tone, even if she can't.

"I wanted to stop in to surprise you." She waves one manicured hand in my direction as she closes the distance to him, "Your new housekeeper let me in."

This bitch.

I shove my hands onto my hips, forgetting my palm was full of finely ground coffee, and it falls to the floor around me, landing on top of my bare feet and getting between my toes.

Well, isn't that just perfect.

As I stand here, seething, I can't help but remember the comment King made while he was kidnapping me, about *liking 'em heavy*. If this is one of his *fuck buddies* then I guess he was telling the truth, and I can stop worrying if I'm actually his type or not.

Not that he's given me any reason to doubt the way he feels about my body.

Andrea stops right in front of him, and with her heels she's only an inch or two shorter than King.

But, even with their similar statures, they don't match. Because King is still in sweats and a white t-shirt, so no matter how glam this cunt is, right now, he looks like he belongs with me.

Apparently, she's thinking the same thing, because she gives him a once over. "I don't think I've ever seen you looking so relaxed."

When she lifts her hand, like she's going to press it against his chest, I reach back and wrap my fingers around the heavy, metal espresso thing from where I dropped it on the counter, ready to chuck it. Not caring which one of them it hits.

But King's not looking at her, he's looking at me.

And the fucker is smiling.

I lift it higher, only stopping myself when he sidesteps her touch.

Andrea's fingertips barely brush against his shoulder as he strides toward me.

"Not my housekeeper," he states.

I lower the weapon to my side, just as Andrea whirls around to follow his steps.

"This isn't my housekeeper," King repeats, not stopping until he's at my side, where he drapes his warm arm across my shoulders. "This is my wife."

Andrea laughs, but it sounds forced. "Wife? You're joking." She spares me a glance, "No offense."

Lots taken, hoebag.

She's back to where she started, on the other side of the island. But when she moves like she's going to circle around to our side, I tighten my grip on the coffee thing.

King's fingers spread across my shoulder, like he knows what I'm thinking and is ready to hold my arm down. "Not joking."

Her mouth moves, her expression changing between hurt and anger. "But you said you weren't interested in marriage."

"I wasn't." I feel King shrug next to me and I feel the smallest twinge of sympathy for the woman across the counter.

I've been on her side of things; the *I'm not looking for a relationship only to be dumped for someone else* side. So, I get it. It sucks. And King and I... Well, it's not like this was a whirlwind love match. It was a whirlwind murder/kidnapping/blackmail match.

The woman scoffs, looking me up and down. "For her?"

Okay, sympathy gone. Get fucked, Andrea.

"That's enough," King growls.

"But—" Andrea starts.

"No," he cuts her off. "What we had was nothing. Nothing to get upset over. Nothing worth mentioning. And if you insult my wife again, I won't stop her from throwing that at you." He nods down to my hand. "And I can tell you from personal experience that her aim is solid."

CHAPTER 51

King

ANDREA INHALES SHARPLY, AND I CAN SEE AN ANGRY RETORT TREMBLING ON her tongue, but she just clenches her jaw, picks up her little purse and nods once before she spins on her heels and strides toward the front of the house.

Thank fuck.

I heave out a breath, but when Savannah tries to step away from me, I tighten my grip on her.

“King.”

I know she’s trying to snap at me, but she so rarely says my name, I don’t care how she says it. I’ll always like it.

“Hush.” I use my free hand to pull out my phone.

“Hush?!”

I dial Benedict, knowing he’s lead for the security team today.

My eyes are still on the hallway, waiting to hear the front door open and slam closed, but out of the corner of my eye, I see something coming towards me.

Savannah’s hand, still holding the portafilter, is swinging across her body, like she’s hoping to nail me in the chest.

Keeping my phone against my ear, I dart my hand off her shoulder, to catch her forearm as it passes in front of her body.

Using her own momentum, I curl my arm, turning her body into mine.

It’s a twisted sort of hug, but the weapon is now rendered useless, pressed against my stomach, and she’s snug against my side, where she belongs.

“Here,” Benedict answers the phone as he’s always done. Nothing but business.

Savannah struggles in my hold, so I squeeze her tighter.

“Please make sure Andrea leaves the property, then send whoever let her onto the property into my office.” Savannah finally stops struggling when she hears my demand.

“Copy that.”

I hang up and look down at my wife. “Want to tell me what you did wrong?”

Her eyes narrow. “What *I* did wrong?”

“Yeah, Honey. What *you* did wrong.”

Savannah’s hand moves and I flex my fingers around her arm, but I realize her plan too late. And the heavy item drops from her hand, right onto my foot.

“Fuck!” I laugh the word even as pain radiates across my toes. “Such a clever little girl.” I spin her in my grip, so her back is to my front, making sure she can’t try to knee me in the junk.

“You are such a beast!”

I step us both forward until she’s trapped between me and the counter. “I’m *your* beast.” I hear the front door open again, and I know Benedict has followed through. “But never,” I give her a tiny shake, “ever, answer the door.”

She huffs, “Don’t want me running into any more of your fuck friends?”

I spin her once again, this time so she’s facing me.

Gripping her chin, I make sure she’s looking at me. “Because it’s not safe. Because I can’t protect you if you do reckless things.” She opens her mouth, but I shut it for her, pushing up with my grip. “No, don’t argue with me on this. There are some bad fucking players out there and I will not have you putting yourself in danger.”

She reaches up to shove my hand away, and I let her. “And what about women?”

“What about them?”

“If you think I’m going to remain prisoner here and just accept...” Savannah presses her lips together and I see the hurt in her gaze.

I bend down, so we’re eye to eye. “You’re not my prisoner. You’re my Queen.” Her throat works on a swallow, and I run my thumb up the side of her neck. “And what part of me killing my sister’s cheating husband makes you think I’m okay with infidelity?” Her eyes bounce back and forth between mine. “Love me or hate me, Honey, but neither of us is ever touching anyone else again.”

“You’re still a beast,” the heat is gone from her tone.

“Never claimed different.” And because she’s so close, and because I can, I close the inches between us and press my lips to hers. “Now go back to work.”

She stares up at me for a long moment. “Work?”

I tip my head toward the back hall. “You do make your living off your paintings, right?” She nods. “So... work.”

She just stares at me.

“What?”

Savannah gives her head a slight shake. “Nothing. You’re right. I need to work.”

CHAPTER 52

Savannah

GO BACK TO WORK.

I quicken my stride as I hurry down the hall to my studio.

He called it work.

I'm mortified when my vision becomes blurry, and I have to blink away the tears threatening to spill.

It's such a little thing. Such a stupid little thing. But no one in my family has ever referred to my painting as work before. It's always been viewed as a hobby. An immature whim. A *phase*.

It's never mattered to anyone that I was able to support myself with it.

I know my parents think I was only able to survive without them because of the money my grandma left me. But that money just meant that I got to purchase a tiny, somewhat crappy house, rather than rent a tinier, crappier apartment. It gave me breathing room, but I've been paying my bills from selling paintings. And budgeting. Neither of which are skills I got from my parents.

Just as I'm shoving the door to my studio open, I hear a vacuum turn on, reminding me of the mess I left on the kitchen floor.

King is vacuuming the floor. *King.*

Feeling off kilter, and feeling the coffee grounds stuck between my toes, I make my way over to the chairs Val and I sat in last night.

Plopping down into the same seat I'd gotten drunk in, I stare out at the sun filled yard and contemplate what is going on with my life.

Groaning, I drop my hands onto the armrests, then jerk my right hand back when I feel something touch my wrist. Then I shake my head at myself, because it's a gummy bear. A single sticky gummy bear standing like a

sentry on the edge of the armrest.

“Well, which is it?” I say to the candy. “Are you on guard, or are you just squishy sweetness?”

He doesn't answer.

I pluck him from his perch and stand back up, carrying him to the window and holding him up to the light.

A combination of simple and complex. Intimidating and cuddly.

Standing in front of the window, movement across the way catches my attention.

And I'm suddenly reminded of last night. Of the man I saw, who I think saw us.

I stare at the spot where I remember him being. But it was so dark, I couldn't see...

Flashlights.

The other guards had flashlights, and he didn't.

My pulse doubles.

What if he wasn't...

More movement, and my eyes drag to a pair of large windows along the back of the house.

I lean closer to the glass, and I realize it's King's office.

He's in there. I can see just the front edge of his chest, him in that damn white shirt, and he's talking to a man who's standing in plain view, in front of the window.

The man lifts his shoulders in a shrug.

I think this is the man that King ordered to his office, the one that let *that bitch* through the gates. I wonder what King will...

In one move, King steps into full view, and then, quicker than I can track, his fist flies out, striking the other man in the face.

The man stumbles back, falling down below the bottom frame of the window, and I watch, stunned, as King steps forward, probably standing directly over the man, as he shouts at him. Rage covering his features.

My eyes drop to the gummy bear still clutched in my fingers and we share a look.

King might be a lunatic, but he seems to take our marriage very seriously.

And I must be just as mentally unwell, because instead of feeling scared, I feel a twisting low in my stomach that has nothing to do with tequila and everything to do with the power inside my husband's body.

CHAPTER 53

King

“YOU KNOW,” NERO STARTS, THE SECOND I STEP OUT OF MY SUBURBAN. “WE could’ve done this over the phone.”

“I heard you the first two times you said that.”

He cocks a brow, “And yet, here you are.”

“Would you shut the fuck up and let me in?” I don’t slow my stride as I approach Nero’s front door, where he’s leaned against the door frame.

“By all means,” Nero steps back. “Come on in, bring your shitty mood with you, ruin everyone’s night.”

“Sounds great, will do.” I stomp past him.

When Nero shuts the door behind us, a bark echoes through his house, and then his goofball dog comes skidding around the corner. The dog barks again, and when his paws get purchase on the smooth floor he barrels toward us.

“Hey, Toto,” I greet the mutt that Nero and Payton rescued last fall.

Nero claps his hands as he crouches down, and the thirty-pound dog bounces in response to his owner riling him up.

I shake my head. Toto’s a nice dog, but he’s no guard dog. And compared to my Duke, he’s as intimidating as a bunny

Before I left the house to come here, I went to the studio to tell Savannah that I was leaving, but through the glass in the door I saw that she was completely zeroed in on a painting, and Duke was passed out on the floor by her feet. So, I decided to leave a note for her on the kitchen counter, rather than interrupt her, saying I had some *nefarious work* to do and that I’d be back late.

I’d already transferred two of my security team members across the

country and punched a third in the face over her. So, I knew I needed the space to calm down.

“Who’s a good boy?” Nero baby-talks to his dog and it makes me want to shove him over.

“I thought you guys were gonna start training classes with him?” I ask.

“We did.” Nero says.

“We went to *one*,” a female voice replies.

Nero, the dog and I all look up to see Payton as she climbs down the stairs toward us.

“Still counts as going,” is Nero’s retort.

Payton rolls her eyes, “One of the other dog dads said hello to me, and Nero decided we would never go again.” She stops next to her husband and smiles at me. “Hey, King.”

“Hey, Coconut.”

Nero punches me in the shoulder, hard. “How many fucking times do I have to tell you to stop calling her that?”

“At least once more, apparently.” I rub at the spot even as Payton smacks his chest. “Or you could quit being such a little bitch, and let it go.”

A few months ago, I was over for a dinner and Payton mentioned that she never had a nickname growing up, and since it’s a well-known fact that Payton’s favorite drink is a coconut honey latte, her nickname was born.

It’s stupid but Payton thought it was funny, and it helped her to stop being so scared of me.

Plus, it’s a fun little bonus that it gives Nero an aneurysm every time I say it.

“How about I give your wife a cute little nickname,” Nero growls. “See how you like it.”

“Wife?” Payton’s eyes widen.

And mine do too when I realize he hasn’t told her yet.

“How about something like…” Nero taps his finger against his lower lip.

“What do you mean wife?” Payton’s looking between us.

Nero holds his finger up. “Motel.”

“Motel?” I step into him. “If you call Savannah—”

“See?” He shoves a finger into my chest. “You don’t like it either.”

I slap his hand away. “Motel isn’t a *cute little nickname*. It sounds like you’re calling my wife a whore.” I jab my own finger into his chest. “I already punched one man today for disrespecting her. Wanna make it two?”

I was already spoiling for a fight, and I came over here to calm down. But if he tries to push any more of my buttons, I'm gonna deck him.

"Would love to see you try," he taunts, and I'm about to do it, when I'm stopped by pebbles.

A handful of multicolored glass pebbles striking us both.

As I'm sure was the purpose, we stop arguing and turn toward Nero's annoyed wife.

"Alright," Payton says, one hand propping Toto up on her hip, like a toddler, the other hand in a clear vase filled with the colorful pebbles. "Will you two stop bickering for two minutes and tell me what exactly you mean when you say *King's wife*?"

"King got married," Nero states it like he's getting one up on me.

Payton gasps, turning to me. "What? When?"

I cross my arms. "Ask your husband. He officiated."

Nero glares at me as Payton whirls on him.

"You're ordained?" Her voice is higher than usual when she asks this, and I'm almost tempted to laugh.

Nero sighs. "So, technically, yes. But that's only because this dickhead," he gestures to me, "forged the paperwork."

"When?"

"Four days ago," Nero answers.

And while he tries to explain how he forgot to tell her, I'm stunned silent over the answer.

Has it really only been four days? Or was it five? No, we *met* five days ago. The wedding was the day after that.

I think.

How is that possible? I feel like I've known her for...so much longer.

"What's her name?"

"Savannah," I answer, the same time Nero says, "Motel."

My teeth grind, but Payton beats me to the punch, so to speak, by throwing another handful of pebbles at Nero.

When did women start throwing things?

Nero moves to Payton and takes Toto off her hands. "Might as well do this over dinner," Nero grumbles, walking away from us, still carrying the dog so he doesn't have to walk on the pebbles, even though they're rounded and not sharp.

Payton and I fall into step behind him.

“So, how’d you meet?” Payton asks me.

I open my mouth, but Nero opens his faster. “He kidnapped her from a murder scene.”

Payton makes a sound of disbelief, before a single blue pebble bounces off my temple.



TRYING TO BE AS QUIET AS POSSIBLE, I PULL THE BLANKETS BACK ON MY SIDE of the bed and crawl in, next to a sleeping Savannah.

I didn’t mean to stay at Nero’s so late but it actually felt good to talk it all over with him and Payton. They haven’t been together long, practically just got home from their honeymoon, but they’re solid. Insane, but solid.

And the more time I spend with Savannah, the more I suspect she might be almost as twisted as I am. So insane people’s advice might just work.

And the advice basically boiled down to, forget about the kidnapping stuff and show her how good of a husband you can be.

This was, of course, after an hour of Payton grilling me, asking why I forced her into marriage in the first place. And the more she dissected it, the more she made me start to believe that maybe I just wanted an excuse to keep Savannah.

I’m not sure if that’s true, but what’s done is done. And no matter how valid or not my reasons were, Savannah is my wife now and keeping her is exactly what I plan to do.

My wife makes a sleepy sound and so, like a moth to a flame, I scoot over toward her warmth.

And like her subconscious recognizes me, when I lift my arm, she automatically snuggles into my side.

Today was...a lot. And I feel like a piece of shit that she had to come face to face with one of my past hookups.

That wasn’t fair, not in her home.

But then I’m reminded that I’ve also come face to face with one of her past conquests. And yeah, we weren’t married yet, but the memory of her walking into that fucking house with Leland, is enough to make me want to dig up his corpse and send it through a wood chipper.

Her left hand flexes against my chest, like she's trying to comfort me in my sleep.

She likes me. I'm sure of it.

I gently lay my hand over hers, craving the extra connection, and for the first time think about the fact that her hand, specifically her ring finger, is bare.

Closing my eyes, I decide I'll start tomorrow with a little shopping.

CHAPTER 54

King

“MORNING, MR. VASS.” THE MAN AT THE FRONT DESK LOOKS DOWN AT HIS screen, then back up at me. “I don’t think Nero is in today.”

“Vernon,” I nod my head. “I know he’s not. I just need to use my office for a few hours.”

“Gotcha.” He taps a button under the desk and the bulletproof, glass doors to my right unlock.

Before I step away, I pull up a photo of Val on my phone and show it to him. “I told my sister to stop by later. Please have someone show her up when she arrives.”

Vernon takes the proper amount of time to study the photo before nodding. “You got it.”

Nero Security is all Nero’s, and not officially affiliated with The Alliance. But we recruit soldiers from the men here all the time, and since I don’t have an actual office for my *legit business*, Nero hooked me up with a private office next to his here. Neither offices are used much, since Nero mostly delegates now and I rarely feel the need to leave home, but they’re private.

As I pass through the multiple layers of security on the way to the top floor, I admire the set up.

From the outside, this three-story brick building is unassuming, plain. But on the inside, it’s state of the art. Because it has to be. Wouldn’t do much good if you had a security company that wasn’t secure.

When I make it to my office, I unlock the door, using the same fingerprint readers I have at my house and step inside.

Hmm, I bet adding Savannah’s prints to the lock system would go a long way to building her trust. Especially since she got zapped by one.

I blow out a breath and make a mental note to have her added. That, along with the diamond burning a hole in my pocket, might be enough to make her smile at me.



A MESSAGE POPS UP ON MY MONITOR, ALERTING ME THAT VAL IS ON HER WAY up.

I take my glasses off and rub my eyes—glad I leave a pair here in the desk—and roll out my neck.

A minute later, after I’ve groaned my way through a back stretch, there’s a knock at the door.

I tap the control panel for the door, first turning the glass from opaque to clear, so I can verify it’s Val on the other side, while apparently startling her at the same time. Then I press the key that unlocks the door and the man who escorted her holds it open until she passes, then pulls it shut.

Her brows are raised. “Well, this place is intense.”

I nod. “A bit.”

I hate that she looks nervous about being here.

“Want something to drink?” I offer as I stand.

Moving around to a plain wall panel, I press a hidden key and it swings open to reveal a mini fridge, a coffee maker, and a row of liquor bottles.

“Well, that’s impressive.” When she steps up to my side to look at the selection, I relax a little.

Val and I, well, Val and the rest of my family, had a rocky start. Considering she was the product of one of my father’s many affairs, it’s probably understandable. But none of that was on her. My mom tried to forbid Aspen and I from meeting her, but of course we didn’t listen. And then when dad died, and we found out he left a chunk of his money directly to Val, it only made things more tense.

But that was a long time ago, and I like to think we’ve moved past it, but when I see her hesitate around me, it reminds me that I should do more.

Which is why she’s here.

I open the little fridge door, showing her what’s inside. “Anything look good?”

“Um, I’ll take a root beer. Please.”

I grab two glass bottles out of the fridge, handing her one.

I carry my drink over to the small round table in the back corner of the office and sit down, figuring this is better than me sitting behind the desk.

But when she sits down across from me, her shoulders back, and spine straight, I realize it’s not much better.

She winces when she tries to twist the metal top off the bottle, so I reach across the table and open it for her. “Sorry, I should’ve thought this through and met you somewhere else. I just wanted to talk to you about some stuff, and thought it’d be easy to do here, but I didn’t mean for it to feel like an interrogation.”

Val blows out a breath “No, it’s okay. It’s just the whole armed guard thing is a little intimidating.”

I grimace. “Okay, well, you’re gonna have to get used to those.”

Her eyes widen. “You’re putting me under guard?!”

“No.” When she starts to pull away from the table, I reach across and place my hand on hers. “No. They’re to protect you.”

“Protect me from who?”

“I’m getting ahead of myself.” I let go of her hand and run my palm over my face. “It’s just a precaution. But there’s been some extra...*bad activity* recently. And you’re connected to me, so I need you to let me do this.”

She rolls her lips. “Is this because I talked to Savannah? Because I only came over after I heard about Aspen being mean to her. I hadn’t known...”

She trails off, and that tells me everything I need to know.

She *hadn’t known* that I stole my new bride. But she knows now.

And even though Val knows the broad strokes about my life in the underworld, I’m sure it was still a lot to take in.

I clear my throat. “Let me just say that I’m well aware of the fact that what I did was fucked up.”

Val snorts, then slaps her hand over her mouth. “Sorry.”

It’s enough to break the tension. “Don’t apologize, *fucked up* is probably an understatement,” I shrug.

“So, you’re not mad about me coming over?”

I think about the hot as fuck drunken sex I had with Savannah on that paint table and have to tamp down the urge to thank her for plying my wife with tequila.

“No, I’m not mad. You can come over any time you want.” I tap a finger

on the tabletop. “Which is where the guard comes in. It won’t be intrusive, but there will be a car parked outside your building. And anytime you need to go somewhere, they’ll drive you.” When she looks like she might argue, I shake my head. “This isn’t up for debate. It’s for your safety.”

“For how long?”

“A while. Until I can find a crime lord to marry you off to.”

“What?!”

A full-throated laugh leaves me at the look on her face. “I’m kidding.”

She narrows her eyes at me, and recent experience has me half expecting her to throw her bottle of root beer at me. “Not funny.”

I’m still smiling. “It was a little funny.”

She lifts her drink grumbling something about *liking you*.

“What was that?”

She takes a sip before setting the bottle down. “I said, I don’t know how you convinced her to like you.”

The words hit me on a delay.

One after another.

“She likes me? Savannah?”

Val gives me a look. “Who else?”

“She said that though? That she likes me?” I don’t care that I sound like a little boy with a crush.

“I believe her words were something along the lines of *I’m starting to like your stupid brother*.”

I grin. “That does sound like something she would say.”

When she purses her lips, I feel like she might have more to say, so I stay quiet.

Guess we are using interrogation techniques.

Finally, she sighs. “I probably shouldn’t tell you this, since you and Aspen were too bullheaded to listen when Savannah tried to tell you herself, but I think it might be helpful if you knew...”

I lean forward. “Knew what?”

Val lifts her gaze from the table to meet mine. “Savannah never slept with Leland.”

Time creaks to a stop.

“Say that again.”

“Savannah never slept with Leland.”

“She told you that?”

Val nods.

A staggering wave of relief crashes into me and I slump back in my seat.

Savannah never slept with Leland.

I hadn't realized how much that had been bothering me until right now.

And it won't bother me anymore, because *Savannah never slept with Leland.*

Something that feels like victory fills my chest and I stand from my chair.

"Your guard is waiting for you by your car. He'll follow you home."

Val blinks at me. "Where are you going?"

"Home," I answer as I stride to the door.

Because Savannah never slept with Leland.

CHAPTER 55

Savannah

I CLOSE MY EYES AND TAKE A BIG GULP OF WATER.

If this was my old life, I'd head over to Trader Joe's for my usual celebration fare of cheap wine and a treat from their bakery because I just put the final touches on the final painting for my next show.

I should've finished last night, but I'd been inspired to start a piece for a whole new collection. But finishing today is fine, since my show isn't for another couple of weeks.

I'm taking another drink of water, thinking about how I need to figure out a way to get some music in my studio, when my name is bellowed so loud I jump, spilling water all down my front.

I'm still trying to brush beads of water off my shirt when King comes storming into the kitchen.

I didn't even know he'd gotten home.

"Upstairs," he demands.

"You made me spill—"

King snaps his fingers. That same stupid snap he did the other night, and I hate it. Even as I feel it in my core.

"But—" I'm breathing heavy.

When did I start breathing heavy?

King circles the island to where I'm standing, yanks the glass from my hand, slamming it on the counter so forcefully, I'm surprised it doesn't break. "I said upstairs," he growls, but doesn't even give me time to move on my own, he just grabs my arm and starts to pull me through the house.

I can't tell if he's angry, or what's going on, but he's being intense as hell and I don't know why.

“I didn’t do anything!” I try to tug my arm away, but instead of letting go, he chuckles darkly.

“Oh, I know you didn’t, Little Wife.”

My mind spins as he drags me up the stairs.

“King, what’s wrong?”

His fingers flex when I say his name but he doesn’t answer, just drags me all the way to our room.

I cross the threshold before him and he kicks the door shut behind us, finally releasing my arm. “Take off your clothes.”

I whirl around. “What is going on?”

King’s jaw flexes as he steps forward, grips my buttoned-up flannel, and rips the front open.

“Hey!” I shout, but he ignores my struggle to push him away and shoves the shirt off my shoulders.

When he reaches for my tank top, I grab it first.

I don’t know what the hell has him so riled up, but I don’t want him to rip this too.

My face is hidden behind my tank top as I pull it over my head, when King starts yanking my leggings and underwear off.

“Step out,” he snaps the command.

“Fine, geez.” I brace myself on his shoulders as he crouches before me as I lift one foot at a time.

Tossing them aside, King stands in front of me, fully dressed, chest heaving, looking like a hungry predator.

“What...” I don’t even know what to ask him.

But King doesn’t seem interested in talking.

Placing his big palm against the center of my chest, he makes me walk backward, until the back of my legs hit the end of the bed.

Trapped between him and the mattress, I have no choice but to sit when he presses his hand into me more firmly.

King lifts a knee and pushes it between my own, spreading my thighs until they’re framing both of his. His eyes are on fire as they look down at me, and I don’t think he’s mad. But he’s definitely *something*.

But he doesn’t make any more moves to touch me. He just stands there, staring down at my nakedness—and, god help me—he starts to roll up his sleeves.

“King...”

He shakes his head. "It's either *my King* or husband."

Air leaves my lungs, but no sound comes out.

He can't be for real.

But then, when he reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a small black box, I forget how to breathe.

Because it looks like a ring box.

Is he really...?

King doesn't say a word as he opens it, and pulls out the most extravagantly huge diamond ring I've ever seen in my life.

It's...it's absurd.

Just straight up absurd.

And the thin band is shimmering with diamonds all the way around. Making the whole thing sparkle like it's on fire.

King uses his free hand to grab my left, and with his other, the one holding the ridiculous ring, he shoves the diamond onto my finger.

My mouth opens, but I don't know what to say as I stare down at it.

It's a rectangular emerald cut that basically covers the whole of my finger between the bottom and first knuckle. Never mind the fact that it fits perfectly.

I...

Why did I have to be naked for this?

I lift my gaze to meet King's, but he's lowering, to his knees. And for one stupid moment I think he's about to propose to me. But then he's dragging my thighs open and pulling me to the edge of the bed. To...

His tongue meets my core in an open-mouthed kiss and electricity jolts through my body.

King moans at the same time that I do, and his hands grip my hips tighter as he shoves his face fully into my pussy.

And I just know he's feeling proud of himself for how turned on I am.

I'd scold my traitorous vagina for getting so wet for this lunatic, but when his lips seal around my clit, and one of his big fingers shoves into my entrance, I praise her for being so prepared.

Rapidly building pleasure makes me sway, so I reach out and grab handfuls of King's hair to keep upright. Then cry out when he shoves another finger inside me.

King might have his flaws, but pussy eating skills aren't one of them.

His fingers pull all the way out then slowly push all the way in, while his

tongue dances back and forth over my clit.

“K-king.”

He sucks my clit almost painfully hard into his mouth, and I remember his words.

“Husband,” I pant. And King groans his approval.

I watch as he lowers the hand not touching my pussy down to his lap. It’s out of view, but I manage to hear the sound of a zipper, over the sound of him lapping at my core.

His shoulder starts to move as he starts to stroke himself, and just knowing that he’s turned on from eating me out has me that much closer to the edge.

“Say it again,” he grunts against my flesh.

“Husband,” I breathe the word. “Husband.”

King pulls back just long enough to let go of his cock, swipe his whole hand down my slit, gathering the wetness on his palm, then wrapping his hand back around his length.

“Holy fuck,” I groan, the sight of that burned into my memory forever.

My pussy clenches around nothing until he starts to shove his fingers back inside me, and it feels so good. It all feels so goddamn good.

“Again, Wife.” King’s eyes bore into mine. “Tell me who I am.”

We stare at each other, as he strokes his hard cock, with his fingers sliding in and out of me. And I tell him who he is.

“My King,” I whisper. “My husband,” I promise.

CHAPTER 56

King

“*MY HUSBAND.*”

I pull my fingers from her depth, sliding them up to rub at her clit, even as I stand.

“Grab those tits.”

Savannah doesn't hesitate, too far gone to argue, she reaches up and pushes her big tits together.

“Pinch those nipples,” I tell her, feeling her pussy start to spasm against my fingertips.

She moans and her fingers do as I say, rolling the little peaks.

“Are you gonna come, Baby? You gonna come for your husband?” She nods. “Say it,” I growl, tightening my grip on my cock.

“I'm...” her eyes close and her head tips back. “Oh fuck, my husband is making me come.”

Then she does. Her mouth opening, her body shaking.

But it's the light glinting off her new shiny ring as her fingers squeeze her nipples that's my final straw.

With a loud groan, I shoot ropes of my release across her jiggling tits, marking her as mine.

CHAPTER 57

Savannah

I DROP BACK ONTO THE COMFORTER WHEN KING STEPS INTO THE BATHROOM.

I'm panting like I just ran for my life, which I have some experience with now. But this...

A shiver, not of cold, rolls over my skin.

It might be the intensity of the man himself, or the intensity of all our sexual interactions, but there's something forming between us.

And ours might be a bond that started in trauma, but it doesn't feel like that anymore.

King steps back into the room, holding a wet cloth.

Sapped of all energy, I let him clean his mess off me without offering to help.

Instead, I lift my hand to look at the ginormous ring.

"You like it?"

His question is so absurd I laugh.

He pauses his ministrations and I look up to see him frowning.

"Do I like it?" Turning my hand over so he can see the ring, I lift my brows. "Are we looking at the same ring? Because this thing is gorgeous. It's utterly ridiculous, but it's gorgeous."

"Glad you think so. It'll never leave your finger."

Ah, yep, there's the asshole.

"Husband," I say the name slowly to placate him. "This thing probably costs more than my van did. When it was new," I clarify, since the price I got for my van at that shady dealer a few days ago wouldn't even pay for the platinum band the diamonds are attached to.

"So what?" King doesn't even pretend like the ring wasn't stupid

expensive.

“So, I will take it off while I paint.” I raise my voice on the last three words to drown out his immediate complaint. “You can use your piles of money to put a safe in my studio, right next to the door, then I can put it back on every night when I’m done.”

I feel like I’m bargaining with a child, but it must work because he dips his chin.

Well, since I’m on a roll...

“I also need a way to listen to music while I paint. I have headphones, but since you took my phone, I don’t have anything to pair them with.”

He swipes the cloth once more over my chest, “I’ll have it for you tomorrow.”

I don’t know what *it* is, but I decide not to ask and just take it as a win.

King walks to the wall of windows and drags the curtains shut.

“What’re you doing?” I ask.

“We’re taking a nap.” He says it like I already agreed.

But when he pulls the blankets down, I get up from my spot at the foot of the bed and climb onto the mattress. A nap does sound kind of nice.

I wait as he strips to his boxers, then joins me under the covers.

I settle against *my spot* on his chest, placing my left hand on his stomach, watching how the diamonds sparkle even in the low light.

“You’re my wife, Savannah. And that’s never going to change.” His words rumble against my ear. “But I won’t fuck you again until you ask me to.”

CHAPTER 58

Savannah

AN ELECTRIC DING WAKES ME, AND I FEEL COMPLETELY OUT OF SORTS, flailing around, trying to find what's making the noise.

My hand slaps down on the nightstand, since that's where the sound was coming from, and my hand connects with something. Multiple somethings, as a clatter of items hitting the floor follows my movement.

Squinting, the first thing I see is a laptop and tablet stacked on the nightstand.

Then I roll and look over the side of the bed, finding a brand new phone—thankfully already in a case,—and a little case for earbuds on the floor. The phone's screen is facing up, showing a missed text.

Bracing a hand on the nightstand so I don't faceplant, I stretch down to pick up the items from the floor. Setting the earbuds on the stack of other electronics before looking at the phone.

I'm wondering what the code is, when the phone automatically unlocks with facial recognition.

Huh.

Programming this is hardly the most invasive thing King has done, so I decide not to dwell on it. Instead, I open my text from *Husband*.

Husband: Good morning, Wife. I have some meetings today, so I won't be home until later. But we need to leave by seven for a charity function. It's black tie. I have a dress being delivered this afternoon. If it needs alterations, call me. Be ready.

I drop the phone onto the bed and groan.

He's such a bossy bitch.



I'VE FELT KING'S HEATED GAZE ON ME EVER SINCE WE LEFT THE HOUSE. AND even now, as we walk up the steps of some fancy place called The Syndicate Hotel, I can still feel his eyes on me.

Well, the feeling is mutual, buddy.

A doorman in a suit, holds the door open for us when we approach, dipping his chin to King. "Good evening, Mr. Vass."

King places a hand on my back for me to step ahead, and I use that opportunity to catch another glimpse of him. Because *goddamn*, I'm married to a fine ass man.

Hair styled back, beard trimmed to show his jawline to perfection, and wrapped in a black tux... I mean, seriously. He's the hottest human I've ever met.

King clears his throat.

My gaze snaps up, but I find him staring at my cleavage.

Focusing back on my steps, I move through the door, careful not to break my ankle in these ice pick shoes King picked out for tonight.

The dress King sent to the house fit like a glove... after I pulled on my pair of shapewear shorts. And though it's not a style I would've ever picked to try on, I must admit that I look pretty good in it.

The material is a shimmery black. The V-neck is deep, held up by two small spaghetti straps, but then there's also a drapery off-the-shoulder cap sleeve. I always worried this style would make my shoulders look huge, but with the pushup strapless bra I'm wearing, no one is paying attention to anything other than my boobs. The material gathers below the bust then it's loose fitting to the floor, with a slit that goes halfway up one thigh.

It's more provocative than I expected, but if King is gonna get worked up about how much skin I have on display, he only has himself to blame.

"Where is everyone?" I ask as King guides us through a fancy lobby and down a side hall, with no one in sight. "When does this thing start?"

"An hour ago."

I almost trip. "An hour ago! Why didn't we leave sooner? I could've been ready."

Stress builds behind my eyes. I hate being late.

“Because that’s the agreement I have with Aspen.”

“Aspen’s here?!” I squeak.

“It’s her event,” he states, like this is all fine. “She lets me skip the first hour with the boring ass speaker bullshit, and I write her a five-figure check to support whatever fucking cause she’s going on about. It’s a win-win.”

I want to stop walking, but if I do that, and he pushes on my back, I’ll fall right out of these stupid heels.

“King.” He grunts, and I roll my eyes. “*Husband*, I don’t want to see Aspen.”

“She’s my sister.”

“Yeah, and last time I saw her, she called me a whore.”

“She won’t do that again.”

We’re approaching a pair of open doors and the noise of a fancy event happening inside spills out into the hall.

“Oh?” I make sure he can hear my doubt. “And how do you know that?”

We step around the corner and into the ballroom just as King replies. “Because I told her you never fucked Leland.”

“You...” I blink up at him. “What?”

King looks down at me. “You should’ve told me.”

Anger boils up inside of me. “You should’ve asked. Or not jumped to conclusions like a giant...dumbass.”

He clicks his tongue. “Now, now, Honey. We’re newlyweds, remember? Try to look happy.”

“How did you even...? Val.” I answer my own question, and then my jaw clenches on a suspicion. “Is this what that whole,” I lower my voice, “*not gonna fuck you until you ask* thing is about?”

When his nostrils flare, I know I nailed it.

This prick.

“King!” Someone hails him but we keep staring at each other.

“What’s the charity for?” I ask.

“No clue. Why?”

I bat my eyes up at him, “Because I’m going to go write your name on every auction item I can find.”

The side of his mouth pulls up. “Save me a dance.”

“Fat chance.” Then, before anyone reaches us, and I have to stand through being introduced as *King’s new wife*, I turn and walk away. Carefully picking my way through the crowd.

I went to enough events like this with my parents growing up, so I know how they go. The obligatory speeches that we've apparently missed. The tables of food. The live band in the corner and a dance floor that will only be used for mingling and not dancing. And then of course, the arrayment of auction items along one wall.

I spot Aspen heading toward the entrance, toward King, so I adjust my trajectory and head in the opposite direction, toward the buffet tables first.

Because you never fucked Leland.

I don't even know why I'm so annoyed. I'm not mad at Val for telling him. But like, what does it really have to do with anything? We've already had sex, King and I, so why would this make any difference?

I guess I'd be even more pissed if he *hadn't* had sex with me until he found out. Like as though having some other dick in me made me bad.

I accept a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and decide there's no point in trying to figure out the reasons of a madman.

Stopping in the back of the line for food, I see the tactical error in grabbing this glass of champagne. *I'm going to need two hands.*

Before it's my turn, I down the bubbly and hand the empty glass off to another passing waiter, waving off his offer of an immediate refill.

With two free hands, I load up one of the little plates and bite down on a smile as I think of one of my favorite movie lines: *I'm only here for the food.*

Plate in hand, I make my way to one of the many tall round cocktail tables and set up shop, refusing to look for *my King*.

I scoff as I dunk a cold shrimp into the dab of cocktail sauce on my plate.

My King or Husband, blah blah blah. What an idiot.

I have a shrimp half-in, half-out of my mouth when someone says my name.

My eyes snap up and I find a pretty brunette with bangs standing across the little table from me. I hadn't noticed her approach, and now I have to decide if I pull the shrimp out of my mouth, or bite it off at the tail, like I was planning. Which would mean she'd have to wait for me to chew and swallow before I greet her.

So, instead of doing either of those things, I just stand in indecision, with a sea creature protruding from my lips.

"Sorry!" she holds her hands up. "My timing is terrible." I watch her cheeks turn red. "But my husband pointed you out and I thought I'd come say hi."

Breaking out of my stupor, I finally bite through and drop the shrimp tail onto my plate.

I hold a hand over my mouth while I chew and ask, “Husband?”

Her features soften, “Yeah, I’m married to Nero.”

And then my problems are over because I choke to death right then and there.

“Oh, um...” the woman’s eyes widen as she snags a new glass of champagne off a passing tray handing it to me.

Good thing these waiters are trying to get everyone drunk.

Taking it from her, I sip and blink away the watery eyes that come with near-death experiences, coughing the last piece of shellfish out of my lungs.

When I catch my breath, it’s my turn to apologize. “Sorry, I didn’t mean...” I shake my head. “I didn’t know he was married.”

What I want to say is *who in their right fucking mind would marry that man*. But that seems rude for a first meeting.

She holds her hand out. “I’m Payton.”

I wipe my fingers on the little napkin then take her hand. “Savannah.”

After shaking, we stand in awkward silence. Because I don’t know how much she knows about my *situation*. And I don’t know how to talk to the woman who married the man that I still basically hate.

“Nero told me everything,” she blurts out, hands pressed together in front of her chest. “And even though I know he believed he was doing the right thing, I told him he needs to apologize to you.” Payton looks so earnest as she says it that I have no idea how to reply. “He’s really...”

We both know she was about to say *a good guy*, but we both know that neither of us can say that about our husbands.

She tries again. “Him and King have been best friends for forever, and those two would do anything for each other.” *Interest piqued*. “And to be perfectly honest, I used to be terrified of King. But then he helped save my life, and well, now I’m not really scared of him anymore. I’m sure it will be the same for you and Nero.”

When my brows raise, she lifts her hands and presses them to her cheeks.

“I didn’t mean... Not that your life will need saving.”

“It’s alright, I know what you meant.” I take pity on the poor woman; she is married to Nero after all.

“Thanks...sorry.” She pats her cheeks again. “I was trying to make things better not worse.”

“It’s all weird, so it’s okay.”

Payton smiles and nods, agreeing.

She seems really nice, which makes me wonder how she ended up married into this shitshow.

“How did you and Nero meet?” I pick up another shrimp.

“Well,” she gives me a sheepish look, “he sorta broke into my house one day.”

I put my shrimp down.

Clearly if I eat here, I’ll just end up dying.

“Are you okay?” I whisper across the table.

Her eyes widen before a small laugh bubbles out of her. “Yes. I promise you that marrying Nero was my choice, and one I’d make over and over again.”

I eye her skeptically. *Okay, sure.*

“Well, it was nice meeting you.” I tell her, unsure if it was or not. “I’m gonna go spend some of King’s money.” I aim a thumb over to the auction tables.

I’m sure I’m being rude by cutting our conversation off and ditching my still full plate of food, but I honestly don’t know what I can, or should, say to this person.

But she takes my departure smoothly with a smile, “Have fun!”

“*Have fun.*” I mutter to myself as I start to eyeball the items.

There’s a whole container of pens next to the first item, so I pluck one up and slowly make my way down the row of tables, writing King’s name for the next open bid on every single item.

When I come to one that’s a weekend getaway in a private ski chalet, I up the current bid from ten thousand to thirty thousand, making sure to carefully print out King’s name.

I’ve never skied in my life. And I have no intention of learning. But I’d love to cost that fucker thirty grand just to sit on a couch and sip hot chocolate.

I’m straightening up from writing, when an arm passes in front of my view and a hand rubs across my exposed cleavage.

The touch is so unexpected and so unwelcome, I stumble back.

“Sorry, Miss, didn’t mean to bump you.” The smarmy jerk smiles at me as his eyes drop to my chest.

Any fun I was having evaporates.

That was no accident.

Like I said, I've been to events like this before. And just like my experiences growing up, I know there's no point in yelling at him. He'd claim it was just an accident. I'd say otherwise. And the crowd—like my parents—will always believe the stupid man. Because everyone always believes the stupid man.

Hot angry tears fill my eyes as I turn away from the table.

I hate it here.

This ballroom.

This unfair sexist world.

I fight the urge to sniffle, pressing my lips together and blinking the moisture from my eyes.

And then I see King. Standing across the room. His head cocked, and his lion-gaze locked on me.

I'm still mad at him, but I don't have anyone else to go to. And that moment, what just happened, just flung me so far back into my memories that I don't even care that he's standing next to Aspen.

I need him.

CHAPTER 59

King

FURY VIBRATES DOWN MY SPINE.

“What’s wrong?” Aspen turns to face the crowd.

“Who is that?” I grit the question between clenched teeth.

She follows my line of sight to the man watching Savannah’s ass as she walks away from the auction tables.

“That’s the mayor’s younger brother. I heard he just moved back to town.”

My knuckles pop as I clench my fists.

“Please don’t kill him here.” Aspen knows me too well. Though it’s not like it’s hard to read the distraught look on Savannah’s face. “Please, King,” she repeats.

Savannah’s eyes catch mine as she hurries toward me.

“I won’t kill him here,” is all I promise.

Savannah is just a few steps away now, and she spares a weary glance at Aspen.

Neither of them say anything, and I watch Savannah work to keep her emotions in check.

I reach out and wrap my hand around the back of Savannah’s neck, my hold on her gentle, even though rage fills my blood as I pull her to me.

Her lips are still set into a hard line when I lean down and softly press my own against her temple.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

I promised her safety, and at the first test of my power, I failed.

Blackness edges in on my vision and I kiss her once more.

I shouldn’t have let her walk through this place alone. I should’ve made a

big fucking scene the moment we walked in, so everyone knew exactly who she was. Exactly who she belonged to.

My eyes scan the room.

I should just slit the throat of every man here and save myself the future hassle. I'm sure most of them deserve it.

When I pull back, Savannah's blinking even more rapidly. And I feel like an even bigger failure since my attempt at comfort seemed to have the opposite effect.

Aspen taps my arm and I look up to see the man walking toward the hallway that leads to the bathroom.

"Stay with Aspen," I tell Savannah, before I press my lips to her temple once more.

I give her neck a light squeeze, looking for a response.

"Okay, Husband," she whispers.

Husband.

I force myself to let go of her, just as Nero and Payton walk up.

"With me," I tell Nero, and he peels away from his wife, stepping into stride with me.

"Who're we killing?" His tone is casual.

"I promised Aspen I wouldn't."

He makes a humming sound. "Still leaves a lot of wiggle room."

We make it to the back hall in time to see the man enter the bathroom about ten paces before us.

Silently, we follow him in.

It's a classy bathroom with four well-built stalls, with wooden walls and doors that go to the floor.

Two of them are occupied, and there's one guy washing up at the sink.

We peel off, Nero going to the sink to wash his hands, and I go into the open stall between the two in use.

The water shuts off, and I hear Nero start to whistle, which I assume is to cover the sound of him locking the bathroom door, preventing anyone else from coming in.

With sink guy gone, I flush the toilet and step out of the stall, standing against the wall opposite, waiting to see who comes out first.

Nero keeps whistling when the farthest stall door opens, and my target starts to step out.

I rush him.

He's smaller than me. Weak. The type who feels strong by intimidating women. The type of disgusting piece of shit I'd happily put bullets in all day long.

Nero's whistling gets louder—is that *somewhere over the rainbow?*—and I hear him turn the water back on as I crowd the man back into the stall.

The man opens his mouth to protest, but before he can so much as squeak, I grip his throat and squeeze, cutting off all his air.

The struggle that follows is typical. It's the body's natural response to being choked. But this isn't the first time I've strangled a man, so it's hardly a fair fight.

But I didn't make it to where I am by fighting fair.

I stomp down on both his feet with mine, pinning them in place with my greater weight, hopefully crunching some of those fragile toe bones.

His hands grapple with my arm, trying to free my grip, but I just lean into him, crushing him against the sturdy stall wall with my larger size.

I put my face close to his. "If you rip my suit, I will break your neck."

His hands switch from clawing at me, to just trying to push me away.

Useless.

The toilet flushes in the other stall, and then we listen as Nero starts up a conversation with the man ending with, "Let me get that." And I know he's using slight of hand to unlock the main door as he opens it.

When the door shuts, silence descends in on the bathroom.

I let go of the man's throat as Nero uses his foot to swing the stall door open, before leaning against it.

"What'd he do?" Nero slides his hands into his pockets.

The man's gasps turn into coughing. Loud coughing.

Nero starts whistling again to cover the sound.

"He touched my wife."

Savannah's back was to me when she was at the auction table, but her reaction to that man's closeness could only mean one thing. And the way his eyes bug out when he looks up at me confirms I'm correct.

Nero's hands slide out of their pockets, and I see he's got a switch blade in one, the tempo of his song slowing to a sinister soundtrack.

"No killing him, remember," I remind him.

The man tries to speak at this, but he's still struggling to breathe properly.

If he just moved here, he might not know who we are. But he can *feel* who we are. He can feel the danger he's in.

I make sure he can see the anger I'm feeling. "If I ever see your face again, I will cut your throat so deep your head will beat your body to the floor."

Leaning against the wall, he nods frantically, while rubbing at his throat.

Looking like he understands.

But he doesn't. Not yet.

"So," I roll my neck out. "When you can use your arms again, you're going to pack up and leave the state. Because if you don't, I will see you. And I will kill you."

I watch him mouth the word *arms* before I dart my hands out.

Grabbing his wrist in one hand, I grip behind the elbow of the same arm with my other hand. He starts to struggle, but holding tight, I forcefully jerk his elbow the wrong way, forcing it through the body's natural resistance.

The sounds of snapping as it gives way is the perfect percussion to Nero's tune.

The man, whose name I still don't know, starts to scream in pain, but Nero moves closer, crowding into the stall, and clamps his non-knife hand around the man's throat, once again cutting off his air and stifling his sounds.

Eyes rolling, the man tries to reach for his damaged arm with his good one. Accepting the offered limb, I grab that wrist too.

He tries to shake his head, because he knows what's coming next, but no amount of pleading or begging would stop me.

I force his arm straight and grip his elbow, his other arm worthless in the fight against me. "You deserve to die for touching what's mine. Consider this a kindness."

Then, with faster movement than he deserves, I snap his second elbow backwards.

The cracking vibrates up my arms, filling me with satisfaction.

Nero's whistling drops to a low note before he drops his hand and fakes a shiver. "Man, I felt that crack though his neck."

"Makes us even for that pinky finger," I tell Nero, who only snorts in response.

Then, because the fucker deserves it, I knee the man as hard as I can in the balls.

As he gasps for air, I shove his hunched over form onto the toilet.

To make sure he hears what I say next, I bend down until I'm right in his face. "I know you're going to want revenge. And I know you think your

brother will be able to help you. But he can't. Because we are The Alliance. And we own this fucking city.”



WHEN WE STEP OUT OF THE BATHROOM, I NOTICE NERO'S HUNG AN *OUT OF order* sign on the door, but I don't have the patience to ask him where the fuck he found it.

I need to get back to Savannah.

I need my wife.

CHAPTER 60

Savannah

“HERE WE GO!” PAYTON HURRIES BACK TO THE TABLE, WHERE ASPEN AND I have been standing in silence, with a trio of tall shot glasses filled to the brim with a red liquid.

My sister-in-law takes one and I tentatively take the other.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I think she called it a Red Snapper.” Payton shrugs. “I just asked for something strong we could slam that tasted good.”

I glance in the direction that King and Nero went, but they only disappeared a minute ago and there’s been no sign of them since.

I really don’t know why I got so emotional. It’s not like it was the first time I’ve been groped by a man—The time at that wedding. The time at the house party. The twenty times in a bar. The time working at the campus bookstore in college—but this one, it just made me think of every time. And how every time I’ve just had to grin and bear it. Because I never had someone to go to for comfort. Even past boyfriends, I’d never tell them. Because what would be the point? What would they do about it?

The image of King staring at me, head tipped to the side, eyes filled with vengeance, will forever be seared into my heart.

I don’t know what he’s going to do, but he’s not doing nothing.

King would never just do nothing.

A shot glass moves in my periphery, and I find Aspen holding hers out towards me.

The fact that I didn’t even need to explain the situation says so much. And it makes me so mad. That even us, this trio of unlikelies, we all have this in common.

Because all women have this in common.

Aspen holds my gaze, “To having dangerous men on our side.”

Emotion fills my throat, but I swallow it down and clink my glass to hers.

Payton taps hers against ours as well before we all tip our shots back.

CHAPTER 61

King

SAVANNAH IS STILL STANDING WHERE I LEFT HER, CHEWING HER LIP AS ASPEN and Payton have a conversation next to her. She still looks upset, but her shoulders are less tense.

Which might have something to do with the six empty shot glasses on their table.

Despite everything, as I get closer, I can't help but admire how mouth-watering she looks.

My housekeeper Ginger has a thing for fashion, so I used her help in selecting a gown for tonight. And now I think I owe her a raise.

And I'm regretting telling Savannah that I'll wait to fuck her again, because nothing would settle my stormy mood more than being between her thighs.

I see Aspen say something directly to Savannah, who nods in response, and it helps to ease a tiny bit more of my burden.

My wife clearly wasn't thrilled about me telling Aspen that she never slept with Leland, but I knew I had to. I know it shouldn't have made a difference. Savannah was always the innocent party in everything. But it does. And I'll do anything to help make Savannah's life easier.

The ladies spot us when we're a few steps away, and I revel in the look of relief on Savannah's face when she sees me.

And feeling it gives me, the one deep in my chest, it's addicting. And I want to see it more.

I stop against Savannah's back, wrapping my arms around her shoulders and holding her to my body. And my inner self preens when I feel her loosen against me.

Aspen looks between me and Nero, who's standing with his arm around Payton's waist. "Should I let security know they need to discreetly remove a drunk man from the bathroom?"

I nod. "That would be a good idea."

Savannah sways a little in my hold and I look back at the empty shot glasses. "Should we get some food to go with that booze?"

Aspen takes a step away from the table. "I'll have the servers bring over a tray."

Nero lifts a finger. "No crab legs, please."

His wife gives him a funny look, but I ignore him and press my nose to the top of Savannah's head, inhaling the scent of my wife.

CHAPTER 62

Savannah

CRAWLING INTO BED NEXT TO KING, I WANT NOTHING MORE THAN TO CLIMB on top of him. To tell him to make me feel good. To make him feel good as a thank you for...whatever he did to that man.

But I'm not going to.

Because I can't cave on the first day.

I might be accepting this thing between us. Might be accepting that this is my life. But I owe it to myself to hold out. To see what life with King can be like, without sex clouding my vision.

CHAPTER 63

King

TWO. WEEKS.

It's been two motherfucking weeks since I've had sex with Savannah and if she tries to make it three, I'm going to tie her to the bed and change her fucking mind.

I'm turning onto my street, wondering if I have the right type of rope at the house, when my phone starts to ring.

The screen in my dashboard shows Mayor Devon calling, and I shake my head.

Thought little brother Devon might actually take my threat to heart and leave town without involving his brother.

But apparently not.

Since I've had a lot of sexually frustrated time on my hands these past few weeks, I've been keeping myself busy by fucking up the lives of men I don't like.

First, I hunted down all the information I could on Christopher Devon, my caller's baby brother. I saw that he spent one night in the hospital having surgery done on both of his elbows after he *fell down some stairs*. And I made sure to recode the surgery before billing sent it to insurance, ensuring that insurance will deny the claim and Christopher will be on the hook for an awfully large medical bill.

After that, when I saw he was discharged but didn't use his credit card anywhere indicating where he'd gone, I dug around and found all his 401k information. And our boy has some sense because he'd put away a decent amount. A decent amount that I siphoned straight into a trust fund, which will automatically disperse to his son when he turns eighteen, in six years.

Considering good old Christopher hasn't been paying child support, for a kid he never visits, it's the least he could do.

Sure, Christopher will figure it out when his accounts are empty the next time one of those quarterly statements gets mailed out to him. But then again, I did change his address to a PO Box in Alabama, so it might be a bit before he gets around to picking up his mail.

I also dropped his credit score by one hundred points. Because I could.

I mean really, what's the point in being a good hacker if you're not going to use it for good?

Then, since that only took the better part of the day, I've entertained myself by purchasing a pile of companies. Companies that just so happen to employ all of Savannah's exes.

After that dinner party at Aspen's, when Savannah was busy burning that painting and getting high, I was busy digging through every last phone and social media record, hunting down her ex-boyfriends. They all seem like decent, upstanding citizens, with no history of violence and no bad blood between them and Savannah, but I couldn't just let them carry on living in my state.

Hence, finding where they worked and purchasing the companies.

A couple of the businesses were already for sale. And some, well, everyone has a price.

And, of course, as is common with new ownership, each company experienced a bit of a downsize.

By exactly one position.

But since, contrary to popular belief, I'm not a complete monster, I offered them all new jobs. At a company I purchased in Alaska.

The offers were all more than fair, quite literally an offer they couldn't turn down. So, by the end of next week, every man that's ever been intimate with my wife will be moving over three thousand miles away.

My phone keeps ringing.

And if the Minneapolis mayor was smart, he'd have sent his brother to Alaska, too.

But instead, he's calling me. Proving just how not smart he is.

"What?" I demand, when the line connects.

"Uh, yes, well, King," Mayor Devon stumbles over his words.

"Mr. Vass," I correct him.

I can hear his annoyance even though he's trying to hide it. "Mr. Vass."

I slow my vehicle as I reach my property and the gate slides open. “I hope you’re not calling about your brother.”

I’ve had a handful of interactions with the mayor during his tenure, but he’d have to be a special sort of delusional if he thinks being a fucking city official gives him any sort of protection against me.

“Well, in fact, I am.” He tries for a self-righteous tone.

I let him hear my sigh before using his first name. “Oscar.”

He pauses, probably wanting to insist I call him Mr. Devon, but he doesn’t.

Next election I’m giving a million dollars to whoever runs against this tool.

“Christopher didn’t know she was…” He starts rambling some bullshit excuses, but I stop listening. Because I’m pulling up my driveway, and parked in front of my house is a douchey bright white G Wagon that I don’t recognize.

“Shut up!” I shout, and the mayor wisely stops speaking. I stomp on the gas and race the rest of the way to my house. “The only reason I didn’t make your pig of a brother a missing person *that night* is because my sister didn’t want me to ruin her party. But the event is done. And so is my patience.” I slam the car into park. “I told him exactly what would happen if I saw him again. And I don’t fucking exaggerate.”

I cut the call and exit my SUV, crossing the distance to the front door in three strides.

I don’t know if I need to stop firing my security guards, or if I need to fire all of them, because I’m supposed to be alerted about every fucking visitor. And no one said a fucking word to me about someone being here.

Clenching my jaw, I fling the door open and head straight to the center of the house.

This person isn’t here for me, so that leaves only a few options on where they’d be.

When I storm into the kitchen, there’s no one.

Studio.

I’m not even halfway down the hall to Savannah’s studio when I hear the voices. Hers. And a man’s voice.

I take two running steps before I realize what I’m doing.

I can hear Savannah talking in an upbeat rhythm, her voice light and happy, so it’s not like the man is hurting her.

The man that I don't know, who's in her private home studio.

The door's been left wide open, which saves me from breaking it down.

When I step into the room, my gaze zeroes in on Savannah's back as she lifts one of her completed canvases off an easel and replaces it with a different painting.

I'm not sure what they're doing, but she's wearing loose black pants and a fitted shirt, not her usual painting clothes.

Duke is lounging on the floor near her, but his lifted head is aimed at me.

At least someone is aware of their surroundings.

"I think the cluster idea is best." Savannah lifts another painting, holding it up next to the first. "All the tones grouped together by family."

"Agreed," the male voice jerks my attention over to the man, whose back is also to me, while he drags two easels closer together. "Then we can alternate the groupings in contrasting—Gah!"

I'm already moving towards him, when the man turns mid-sentence and spots me.

Picking up on my body language, Duke is at my side before I even make it three strides, growling low in his throat.

"What are you..." Savannah starts to laugh, but then she turns and must see me because she shouts my name.

When I don't stop, she tries again. "Husband!"

"Husband?!" The man—who is about my height, closer to Savannah's age, and better looking than I care for a man to be around my wife—stumbles back into one of the easels.

"Who the fuck are you?" My voice is louder than strictly necessary and Duke echoes it by barking twice before he goes back to growling.

Duke won't do more than make noise unless I tell him to. And right now, I'm tempted to tell him to.

The man catches Savannah's painting before it can fall.

"Orlando!" He holds the painting in front of himself like a shield. "I'm Orlando!"

I'm less than ten feet away from the man named Orlando when Savannah slides into my path on sock-covered feet.

"Jesus Christ, King! He's here for—"

She's looking at me like I'm crazy, but her actions just changed the direction of my anger.

Instinct makes me snap my fingers, once, and the loud sound is enough

to stop Savannah's tirade.

Her mouth shuts and I prowl toward her. "Don't you *ever* put yourself between me and another man again."

"That's not..." Savannah's breath hitches and I watch her eyes drop to my mouth, then lower.

Oh, this sneaky brat. She's been keeping me on ice, acting unaffected by our lack of touch over these last two weeks, but she's just as fucking hot for it as I am.

Savannah takes a slow breath. "I'm not *getting between you.*"

I lift a hand, gesturing to the fact that she is *literally* between us.

Savannah huffs, "I was just trying to stop you from going all psychopath on him, since I'm pretty sure just yelling from the sidelines wasn't going to stop you." She spares Duke a narrowed eye look. "Or you."

I don't respond to her reasoning, because it's probably correct. "You don't have men over when I'm not home."

She shoves her little fists onto her hips. "This is work, not me *having men over.* It's not my fault that you just disappear randomly during the day."

"Randomly?" I lean in closer. "I have never left this house without leaving you a note telling you where I've gone. Can you say the same?"

Her cheeks tinge red. "That was different," she hisses.

"And this," I point over her shoulder at the man still hiding behind a painting, "is unacceptable."

"It's just Orlando."

"I don't know *Orlando.* So, I don't trust *Orlando.*" I make sure to emphasize his stupid name.

"Promise I'm trustworthy," Orlando tries to smile when I raise my gaze to him.

I keep my eyes on his. "I broke the arms of the last man who touched my wife."

Orlando's eyes widen as his smile falters. And I think he believes me. As he should.

"My King." Savannah's voice is quiet, just for me.

Her hand presses against my chest.

That point of contact is what I need. What I've been needing.

I lay my hand over hers, holding it in place, and the connection allows the tension to flow out of me.

Calmer, I ask her, "Is he here because of your show tomorrow?"

She blinks, like maybe she thought I forgot she had an art showing tomorrow night. “Yes. We’re picking the final layout and prices. Did you really break his arms?”

“Yes,” I answer as simply as she did. “Do you need help bringing these to the gallery?”

She shakes her head. “Orlando will bring them over tonight, after we finalize the order.”

“Are you done?”

Her head shakes again. “We just started.”

I take a long slow inhale. “Alright.”

“Alright?”

Letting go of her hand, I pat my thigh and Duke to step to my side. “Alright, do your thing.”

I imagine Savannah’s changing expression, when instead of heading to the door, I head to one of the lounge chairs she still has in here.

It’s facing the window, so I grip the back and noisily drag it so it’s facing the room. So I can watch *Orlando*.

Savannah is standing where I left her, one brow raised, looking deliciously annoyed. “Seriously? Don’t you have something better to do?”

“Certainly.” I make sure she can feel my eyes dragging down her body as I lower my frame into the chair. “But I’ll do that later.”

CHAPTER 64

Savannah

“I’LL DO THAT LATER,” I MOUTH TO MYSELF AS I WASH MY FACE IN THE bathroom sink.

Organizing the show took twice as long as usual, since my beast of a husband wouldn’t leave the room. And, because my panties had been wet ever since he snapped at me again.

Why do I like that?!

And okay, if I’m being honest, even though I was a little terrified for Orlando, the second I turned and saw King storming across the room, my core started tingling.

I didn’t need his protection at that moment, but I love that he so willingly gives it.

And breaking a man’s arms?

That should bother me.

I’m sure it should.

But I can’t decide if I’ve always had this twisted part inside of me that enjoys violent vengeance, and King just unlocked it, or if I’ve spent too much time, too close to the devil, and his darkness is just seeping into my soul.

I pat my face dry and think about how King looked, leaned back, manspreading in that chair, watching me work.

God, I wanted to climb onto his lap and beg him to just fuck me already.

My body pulses.

I need to give in.

I need some dick.

CHAPTER 65

King

WHEN SAVANNAH COMES OUT OF THAT BATHROOM, I'M GOING TO TELL HER that her time is up. That I'm done waiting. And that if she can't ask for my dick all on her own, I'll find a way to make her beg for it.

I'm reclined on the bed, one hand behind my head, one hand pressing down on my growing length, when the bathroom door finally opens.

Backlit, Savannah stands there, hair around her shoulders, body hidden under a robe she took from me, that's far too big for her, with her hands shoved into the pockets.

I open my mouth to demand she come here, but she speaks first.

"Do you remember that little vibrator you found in my bathroom?"

Her question is not what I expected, and it takes me a moment to answer, my cock hardening even more at the reminder. "I remember."

"Can I have it back?"

My mouth pulls into a smile. "No, you can't have it back. But I'm happy to help you out myself."

Her shoulders lift. "Not necessary." Then she pulls one hand out of her pocket, holding a slender pale pink vibrator. "Oh, and also, just so you know," her other hand releases the knot holding her robe shut. "I'm already on birth control. Since you brought it up last time." Then the robe drops, and she stands before me, gloriously naked.

I shove up and start to scramble across the bed, but she steps back into the bathroom and slams the door shut. The lock clicking just as I close my fingers around the handle.

CHAPTER 66

Savannah

MY HEART IS BEATING SO FAST I CAN HARDLY CATCH MY BREATH.

I can't believe I just did that.

King pounds a fist on the other side of the door. "You little witch, you better let me in."

Instead of answering, I reach up and pinch at one nipple.

I moan.

I've been primed all day, but seeing him sprawled in our bed, erection obvious under his big palm, was the perfect eye candy for what I'm about to do.

I squeeze my breast, imagining it's his hand and moan again.

"Fuck." King's word is low through the door. There's a thud and I picture him dropping his forehead to the wood. "Turn it on, Baby. Turn that little toy on and rub it up and down your slit."

I back away from the door, moving to the plush mat in front of the giant tub before I lower myself to my knees.

Sitting back on my heels, my fingers keep working my nipple, as I hold down the hidden button on my vibrator and turn it on. It's an older one, that's kind of loud, and I know King can hear the sound through the door because he lets out a loud groan.

When we cleared out my house, King assumed he found my whole stash of sex toys, but I had a few more tucked into my nightstand. Because a girl can never have too many friends.

"Are you already wet?"

I slide the vibrator down between my pussy lips, the slickness that's pooling there easing the way.

“Answer me, Wife,” King raises his voice.

I fortify myself with a gasping breath as the vibrator hits my clit. “So wet.”

“Put it inside you.” Another thud hits the door. “Shove it inside that greedy little hole.”

I rub it over my clit once more, then do as he says and push it up into my pussy.

The sensation, after two weeks of having nothing in me, makes me whimper.

“Jesus. Talk to me, Baby. Tell me what you’re doing.” King sounds so desperate, it just makes me even wetter.

“I-I’m sliding it in and out,” I tell him. “And, oh god,” I roll my fingers together, pinching my nipple harder. “I’m...I’m playing with my tits.”

There’s a rattling sound, then the door swings open and King comes bursting through, cock already in hand, boxers gone.

He tosses something to the counter. “You think I didn’t have a key?”

My eyes can’t tear away from him, his magnificent form on full display.

So, I stare at him, one hand squeezing my chest, the other gripping the end of my vibrator while the rest is buried inside me.

His own gaze flies over every inch of me. “You think you can tease me, tempt me like this and not suffer the consequences?”

He keeps walking towards me, stopping just a foot away, his cock right at eye level from my kneeling position.

“You said you wouldn’t fuck me until I asked you to.”

He reaches down with the hand not stroking his length and grips my hair. “I said I wouldn’t fuck you. I never said I wouldn’t feed you my dick.”

My mouth is already watering when he shoves his hips forward and pushes the fat head of his cock between my lips.

We both moan, and I use my tongue to trace the underside, tasting him for the first time.

“Savannah. Fuck,” he groans. “You’re fucking perfect.” I open my mouth wider and take more of him. Wanting more of him. “That’s it.” He pushes in deeper. “That’s it. Take it, Honey.” He slides out, nearly popping free, and I lap at the length of him.

“You look so good with my cock in your mouth.”

His praise is too much. I need to come.

I pull the vibrator out and drag it up my slit until it’s pressing against my

clit.

My chest constricts just as King pushes his cock back into my mouth. I'm so close. Seconds away.

King yanks his cock free from my mouth and in a blur of movement, he has slapped the vibrator out of my hand.

I try to stop him, but then he's hauling me up and over his shoulder.

"King!"

He slaps my ass, hard, and I yelp. "You were about to come."

"No shit!" I snap at him, then slap his ass since it's right in my face.

I almost laugh at the way his body jolts, clearly not expecting the retaliation, but then I'm being flung down onto the mattress.

"You'll come on my cock." King is crawling over me, pushing my thighs apart. "Or you won't come at all." He lines up his tip at my entrance, one hand next to my head, holding his weight off me. "Now ask me."

His eyes are blazing into mine and there's nothing I want more in this world than to be connected with him.

Grabbing at his sides, I stare into his intense eyes. "Will you please fuck me, Husband? I want to come on my King's cock."

King drops his hips and his weight, impaling me in one motion.

I cry out, a combination of pleasure and pain from the intrusion.

But then he's kissing me, and all I can feel is him.

All I can sense is King.

Our mouths. Our bodies.

The way we catch each other's exhalations.

King ruts into me. Grunting and groaning as I moan into his mouth. As my nails scrape at his back. Trying to hold him closer. Trying to pull him tighter.

"Tell me you won't ice me out again." He slides a hand between us. "Promise me I can have this sweet pussy anytime I want it." His fingers brush against my clit. "Any time I need it."

"Yes," I pant.

"Tell me you're mine, and I'll make you come all over this cock."

"I'm yours, King." My hips lift to meet his thrusts. "You can have me any way you want."

It must be the right thing to say because his mouth slams into mine as his fingers pinch my clit.

And I'm done. My body shatters into a million tiny pieces as King fucks

my mouth with his tongue and my pussy with his big cock.

Every inch of my body is on fire, and I can't tell where I end and he starts.

Just as my clit starts to protest, King pulls his hands away to grip my ass and his mouth drops to my shoulder.

His body tenses against mine and he pulls my hips up, so he's as deep as he can go, when he starts pulsing inside me.

Filling me completely.

CHAPTER 67

King

“SOMETIMES I WONDER IF YOU’RE TRYING TO KILL ME.” I MUMBLE INTO HER hair after I shift my weight so I’m not crushing her completely.

“Promise I’m not.” A small hand pats my back. “It’s just that you’re so old.”

With my cock still hard I give my hips a sharp thrust, causing Savannah to cry out.

I laugh. “Well, if this old man dies between your thighs, it’ll be a life well lived.”

“You’re such a dummy.” There’s a softness in her voice, and I feel more content than I have in a long time.

We’re both silent for a minute, while we catch our breaths. And that’s when I notice the buzzing sound coming from the bathroom.

I roll my head to the side so my ear is up. “Is that...the vibrator?”

Savannah lifts her head like she’s trying to listen, but then drops back down onto the mattress. “I don’t recall you turning it off before you knocked it out of my hand, so probably.”

I shake my head, a smile pulling across my mouth.

This girl really is going to kill me.



REACHING UP, I TURN OFF MY BEDSIDE LAMP, COVERING THE ROOM IN darkness.

“Come here.”

The blankets rustle and, doing as I say, Savannah snuggles up against my side.

We both know she'll end up like this anyway, so we might as well start with it.

With her cheek against my bare chest, I feel her mouth stretch in a yawn.

I run my fingers through her hair. “I’m assuming you need to go to the gallery early to get ready, but I’ll be there by six when the show starts.”

Savannah’s hand slides across my stomach to my side, in a partial hug. “You don’t have to come if you don’t want to.”

My brows furrow as I try to dissect why she’d say that, but still tell her the truth. “I want to.”

“Oh, okay.” Her response is quiet.

I run my fingers through her hair again. *Maybe she’s nervous.*

“Your new van is in the garage, but since you don’t need to haul your paintings with you, I’m having one of my men drive you. He’ll stay outside the gallery until I get there.” She starts to lift her head, but I use the hand that had been stroking her hair to keep her head where it is. “It’s not a prisoner thing,” I feel I need to clarify. “It’s a safety thing. I don’t want you in public alone. Ever.” When she doesn’t reply, I give her hair the softest tug. “Understand.”

“Yeah, fine.” She’s clearly resigned to my heavy-handedness. “But what do you mean new van? Did you buy my van back?”

I scoff, “No, I didn’t buy your old ass van back. And I didn’t bother retrieving that shitty car you got in exchange for it either.”

I swear I can hear her eye roll. “Okay, so what’s in the garage then?”

“The worst thing I’ve ever spent money on.”

She snorts. “I hardly doubt that.”

“Baby, do you understand that I have a reputation to uphold? I can’t be seen buying a fucking minivan. I sent Benedict with cash to buy it.”

“If you’re so against it, why’d you get one?”

“Because, as much as I loathe having to admit it, all the reviews were solid and the internet seems to agree that they’re very practical for hauling large paintings.”

She tries to lift her head again, but I stop her. “That’s very thorough of you.”

“I’m nothing if not thorough.” I think of her exes on their way to Alaska

and grin into the dark. Wondering if they'll ever put it together that they all dated the same woman.

"Well, thank you. I appreciate the sacrifice it must've taken to do that."

I keep grinning. "While you're at it, you can thank me for our thirty-thousand dollar weekend getaway in Colorado this winter."

The hand that had been hugging my side moves to cover her mouth as she lets out a laugh. "I forgot about that."

"Yeah, well, surprise."

"Sorry." The way she snickers through the apology lets me know she doesn't mean it.

I shrug. I'm not gonna miss thirty grand.

"All for a good cause," I yawn.

Her hand slides back around my side. "Did you find out what the charity was?"

"No idea."

Savannah's head shakes against me.

"Oh, and," I pause to yawn again. "I'll leave your new license and credit cards on the kitchen island before I leave for my meeting in the morning."

"New license?" Savannah questions, also yawning.

I nod, closing my eyes. "I had your name changed, Mrs. Vass. Didn't I mention it?"

"What?! You can't..." I slide my hand over her mouth.

"Shh, Baby. We've got a big day tomorrow."

CHAPTER 68

Savannah

ORLANDO STEPS BACK, DUSTING HIS HANDS TOGETHER. “I THINK WE’RE ready.”

Butterflies are going wild in my stomach. This is far from my first show, but I feel like a student again, presenting my work for the first time.

Orlando did a great job, placing the pieces just right. Not that it’s a surprise, he’s co-owned a handful of galleries with my friend Mandi for years, so we’ve worked together before and he knows what he’s doing.

And as much as I’d love to see Mandi, I’m glad she decided to stay home tonight.

Last time we saw each other, I was leaving her house to get my car from Lee’s after the whole *he’s married* thing. And now... I glance down at my still wildly sparkly ring. Well, now, I’m married to the man who was sitting on her couch during that whole altercation. And no matter how you cut it, three weeks is awfully quick to go from being strangers to being spouses.

I blow out a breath and try to focus on today.

This gallery is mostly just one white-washed room, with high ceilings and two movable, partition walls that are currently set up at opposing angles in the center of the room, each side showing off one of my four largest paintings.

It’s clean, contemporary, and even though I can’t stop feeling like I’m gonna gag from nerves, I know it’s the perfect way to showcase this collection.

“Would you like a glass of wine while we wait for the doors to open?”

I’m shaking my head before Orlando even finishes his question. “I think I’ll just go to run cold water over my wrists, and maybe throw up.”

He laughs, and I don't miss him lifting a hand, like he's going to pat my shoulder, only to drop it again. "I'll make sure to yell for you when it's time."

And I have to wonder if he was remembering what King said about breaking arms.



MY HANDS ARE SWEATING SO BAD, I'M SURPRISED THEY'RE NOT DRIPPING when Orlando unlocks the door, allowing the line of people inside.

It still blows my mind that anyone cares enough about my art to come to a live showing, let alone to come early and get in line. But a lot of that credit goes to Mandi and Orlando, since they're out in the world working hard to build hype.

I stand in my usual spot in the middle of the room, next to one of the partial walls, so people can choose to either come talk to me, or wander through the room.

And when the nerves kick up a notch, and I have nowhere to put my hands, I curse myself for picking pants without pockets. I choose these bright red, high-waisted and wide-legged pants for the drama, but I didn't consider the panic attack it'd be having while wearing them. But at least my white lacy top shouldn't show any of the stress sweat I'm sure I'll be covered with in no time.

Orlando's offer of wine is sounding more and more like a good idea...but if I start drinking now, I'll end up drunk.

Voices start to fill the room as people stream in. And finally, as I look for King in the crowd, I admit that he's the reason I'm so nervous.

I mean, I'm always a little nervous, but this...

This is... different.

Because I really want him to like everything.

Because I want him to be impressed.

Because he's told me that the world needs my art.

People are still entering the door, when Orlando checks his phone, then walks over to one of the six foot paintings and places a round sticker on the tag next to the frame designating the price. He gives me a wink, then goes back to greeting the newcomers.

Mandi had convinced me to do a set on an extra-large scale, and Orlando convinced me to price them five-figures.

I swallow.

I can't believe I sold one.

When I decided to paint a whole collection of lions' heads, I did it because it was fun. Because it gave me a little freedom to decide if they'd have their eyes open or closed, mouths open or closed. Manes flowing in the wind or laying flat.

But now when I look at them, all I can think about is King.

"Wow!" a voice next to me exclaims.

And it takes me a second to realize it's a voice I recognize. "Ginger?"

She waves at me with one hand, as she uses the other to take a sip of red wine.

"What are you doing here?" It's probably rude to ask it like that, but...*what the hell is she doing here!?*

Ginger smiles, "I love a good art show."

A low whistle draws our attention as her husband walks up to stand beside her. "Damn, Boss Lady can paint!"

I think my jaw comes unhinged. "J-Jamie?"

He does a little bow. "I didn't really get a good look at that one painting before you torched it. If I'd've known how fire they were, well, I would've saved it from the fire."

Ginger smacks his chest. "Where's Cici?"

"Cici's here?!" I ask, my throat feeling tight.

"She spotted the charcuterie table and told me to fuck off," Jamie shrugs.

They continue to talk, but I'm too busy trying to breathe to listen.

What is this?

Did King tell the house staff about my show?

Why would he do that?

Why would they come?

Did he tell them they had to?

"Ooo, this one is perfect!" Another familiar voice comes from the other side of the partial wall.

Slowly I step away from Ginger and Jamie, who have moved on to discussing the hunting patterns of lions, and make my way around to the other side of the wall.

"Payton?"

She smiles so big when she sees me, there's no doubting that it's real. "Savannah!" She attempts to pull her arm free from where it was entwined with her husband's, but he doesn't let her go. She rolls her eyes at Nero but gestures with her free hand to the giant all-gold painting of a lion before them. "This is for sale, right? Like we can buy it?"

My head is nodding, but my brain is glitching.

"Okay, good! Nero," she nudges her husband, "get Orlando. I think he's the one we talk to for this."

"You know Orlando?" My voice is getting higher with each question I ask.

Honestly, what the fuck is happening?

Payton smirks. "No, but I heard about him."

My eyes move to Nero, but his focus is elsewhere, his arm lifted to draw attention.

Does that mean King told Nero about Orlando?

I clear my throat so I can try and speak normally. "Did King make you guys come?"

I hate the question even as I ask it, but I have to.

Payton looks genuinely shocked. "What? No. But after the Orlando story I made Nero find out about the show." She glances around the space. "And I'm so glad we did. You're amazing."

I press my fingers against my cheeks and accept that my face is just gonna be flushed red all night. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Payton grins at my reaction. "And for real, this one is perfect for the living room remodel we're doing."

She turns to Nero, who's just finished telling Orlando to *sticker this one*. "Let's go look at the smaller ones before they're all taken. I'd love one of the multi-colored ones for my office."

"I already told you, we can keep sharing an office." Nero's voice is gruff, but Payton isn't even the tiniest bit fazed.

They share an office? Weird.

The noise in the gallery swells and I try my best to nod and smile like a normal person as I move through the crowd accepting compliments.

I spot Val across the room, talking to some other guest, and a weight presses down on my chest.

I've never...

Movement at the front door draws my attention.

It's him.

My King.

Standing there, broad body wrapped in a flawless black suit, he looks like Lucifer in the flesh.

And his eyes are only for me.

And I'm frozen. Totally immobile.

I knew he would come.

He said he would, and he always follows through. But telling everyone else. Having his friends come. Having my friends from the house come...

The weight on my chest shifts, until it's wrapped around my heart, and I have to press my lips together to stop them from trembling.

Orlando says something to King as he walks by, but King just glares at him as he keeps walking.

And he just keeps walking.

Just keeps coming.

Closing the distance between us, ignoring multiple people that try to greet him.

Because he's coming to me.

Because I'm his.

King comes to a stop in front of me, his gaze roving across my face. "You okay?"

I nod.

He reaches up, brushing a thumb over my heated cheek, "Then why does it look like you might puke on me?"

I laugh a tiny bit, like I'm sure he intended. "You told so many people."

"Of course, I did."

Of course, I did.

"Why?" I whisper the question, even though it causes tears to gather in my eyes.

Not once, not ever, have I had family at a showing.

Not once has anyone outside the art world come to see my paintings.

Not once has anyone from my personal life bought one of my paintings.

"Why would I tell people about your show?"

I nod.

"Honey," he cups my chin, keeping my eyes on his. "I'll tell everyone about your art because I'm fucking proud of you."

It's like a lantern drops inside my chest.

The casing cracking open, and the light scattering into all the dark corners I hadn't even known were there.

I'm fucking proud of you.

A tear drips down my cheek, and King wipes it away.

His chest lifts and falls with a deep breath, as he reads me like an open book. "You're breaking my damn heart, Savannah Baby."

His free hand closes over both of mine, as they twist together in front of my heart, and he pulls them to his chest. Trapping them there.

The look in his eyes.

The way he's holding me.

It's more comfort than anyone has ever offered me.

It's more comfort than I've allowed myself to hope for.

This man. This husband of mine.

The one who stole me. The one who took away my choice.

He's the one...

"I'm so proud of you," he repeats. And I feel his words in the center of my heart. "Look around us. Look at all this beauty you add to the world. All of the goodness you share." He gently squeezes my hands. "I wasn't lying when I told you that the world needed your art. But that wasn't all of it. I need it too. I need your joy. I need you to even out the bad things I do. Because with this," he turns his head, taking in my paintings. "The world doesn't feel quite so awful. So, yeah, Baby, I'm proud of you. And if no one has ever said that to you before, it's not because you weren't good enough. It's because they weren't."

King swipes his thumb across my cheek, catching another tear.

I don't want to cry here.

I don't want to cry at all.

But I don't know what to do with this overwhelming feeling of acceptance. With the heat building inside of me. Because it feels...

My heart aches as it swells.

It feels a lot like love.

But I don't know if I'm supposed to love my husband.

Holding my chin in place, King leans down and presses a chaste kiss to my lips. "Now," he gives me a soft smile, "do you want me to stay out here and schmooze with the mouth breathers while you take a moment? Or do you want me to ignore Orlando's demand that I not buy anything, and *buy everything*, so we can kick everyone out?"

I wet my lips and whisper. “Option one please.”

“Alright,” King lowers my still clasped hand as he lets go of my chin.

I use my fingertips to dab at the corner of my eyes, forcing a smile onto my face. “But I do expect you to buy anything that doesn’t sell.”

CHAPTER 69

King

MY DAMN CHEST ACHES AS I WATCH MY WIFE WALK AWAY FROM ME.

Her fucking tears.

I reach up and rub at the spot over my heart. An unsettling feeling building behind my ribs.

How has no one...

Anger mixes with the other softer emotions swirling inside me.

Why did Savannah even agree to marry me? If the people in her life were so fucking horrible that they never ever told her...

I take one step.

Wanting to go to her.

Wanting to hold her.

I force myself to stop.

This is her night.

My hands ball into fists.

She shouldn't have bargained away her freedom for them.

Family is meant to support each other. Help each other. Not do whatever it is they did to Savannah.

Me inviting the people close to me, to my wife's art show, shouldn't be life changing. It shouldn't have been enough to put that look in her eyes. The look that said she was grateful to me. *For me.*

I don't deserve her adoration.

Hell, I don't deserve a single fucking piece of her happiness.

But I think she's going to give it to me anyway.

Filling my lungs with air, I purposefully turn so my back is toward the back hall where Savannah went. Because if I'm facing it, I'll be too tempted

to go to her. And I need to let her shine on her own. Bask in her accomplishment without me making her cry.

I have the rest of our lives to show her how important she is.

I rub that spot over my heart harder.

The rest of our lives.

CHAPTER 70

Savannah

KING IS JUST STANDING THERE. HIS BACK IS TO ME BUT I CAN SEE HIS posture, read his body, like this is the most normal thing for him to do. Like he does this all the time. Hanging out in art galleries, talking to strangers about textures and colors.

I press my fingertips to my chest, feeling the pounding beneath my skin.

Why do I have to fight it?

Why do I have to push him away?

I know this all started out so messed up. So *wrong*. But we're here now. And is it really so bad for me to just hold on?

Can't I claim this one goddamn thing for myself.

Can't I just take it.

I purse my lips and force myself to exhale slowly.

This is my life. Whether I choose it or not, it's my life now.

And he's already given me his name.

With one step, and then another, I walk to my husband.

And it's like he can sense me, because even though I'm approaching him from behind, he slides his hand out of his pocket, and holds his fingers spread at his side. Waiting for me to take his hand.

So I do.

And I keep standing there, at his side, introducing him as my husband, for the rest of the evening. And he's still at my side as we watch Orlando put those little stickers next to each piece, designating them as sold. And when the final piece gets a sticker, when every last one has been marked, and when King bends down and presses a kiss to the top of my head, I admit to myself that this was the best night of my life.

CHAPTER 71

King

SWITCHING MY PHONE SO IT'S ON SPEAKER, I DROP ONTO THE COUCH IN MY office and set it on the armrest.

I've been sitting in my desk chair for too fucking long and my back is starting to kill me.

While I listen to Nero and Abdul, our realtor, talk through a list of properties, I put my hands behind my head and stretch my spine.

We've been tracking the patterns of these trafficking deals and buying up strategic buildings that we can use for interception.

It sounds altruistic, and a part of it is. We don't stand for that shit. But it's not just the fact that selling people is fucking disgusting, it's the fact that someone thinks they can do it on our turf and get away with it.

"King," Nero snags my attention back to the phone. "I haven't gone through that email you sent yesterday yet. What were your predictions for the next few quarters?"

I roll my eyes. "Want us to just wait while you read it?"

"No, that email was fucking long. I'd rather you just tell me."

"You're such a child," I sigh. "Alright..."

I've only just started going through the list of exchanges I'm planning when my office door silently pushes open.

The door wasn't shut all the way, since there's no reason, but I wasn't expecting a visitor.

Savannah steps into my office, and presses her lips together as she quietly shuts the door behind her.

I'm still talking, reciting facts I could share in my sleep, but my attention is all for my pretty little wife.

She's back in those little jean shorts, one of those skimpy tank tops she wears while she's painting, and... I narrow my eyes. Is that one of my button ups? It's not buttoned, just tied at the waist, the deep V drawing my eyes down.

She pauses, looking like she's second-guessing herself, but then she squares her shoulders and walks toward me.

I haven't seen much of Savannah over the last few days.

The night of the show, we came home, and she curled up into my side before dropping straight into sleep. And since then, she's been busying herself in her studio morning to night.

Even when I try to go to bed at the same time, she's fast asleep by the time I get so much as my shirt off.

So when she stops right in front of me, I feel the blood heat in my veins

And when she bends down, places her hands on my thighs, and lowers to her knees between my spread legs, my pulse doubles.

"Did you buy the Helmerson Corporation? I saw the owner of their office building changed to you?" Abdul asks.

Savannah's fingers tug at my belt buckle.

"Yes." The word comes out more husky than I intended. But Savannah is working my zipper down and I'm having a hard time focusing.

"Helmerson?" Nero sounds confused. "Isn't the company that makes chairs and shit?"

"Yeah." I sink lower into the couch, sliding my hips closer to the edge, and my straining cock closer to Savannah.

My feisty little wife strokes her hand up my length, over my boxers.

"Why?"

Savannah's fingers spread and she squeezes my dick.

When I draw my eyes away from her hand and up to her face, she nods to the phone.

"Why what?" I ask, forgetting what the fuck we were talking about.

"Helmerson." When Nero starts, Savannah pulls the band of my boxers down. "Why the fuck would you buy a chair company?"

I watch Savannah as she wraps her little hand around the base of my dick, pointing it straight in the air.

"It was a good investment," I grunt.

She licks her lips, and my hips buck up.

"How? I just pulled up their public profits. They barely broke even last

year.”

I don't know why Nero gives a shit about this. And I don't have a single good reason. Helmerson is the company Savannah's last boyfriend worked at. He was working there while they dated, so I know she's heard the name before and I have one second to wonder if she'll recognize it.

But then Savannah's lips part, and she sticks her tongue out, like a fucking lit up runway.

My own mouth goes dry as she presses her warm tongue to the underside, licking up.

“Personal reasons,” I try to say.

Savannah leans forward a little more, sliding my tip into her mouth and closing her lips around me.

“You bought a chair-making company for personal reasons?” Nero repeats, and I've never hated the sound of his voice more.

“That's right,” I say to both of them.

My biceps flex by my ears, as I fight the urge to drop my hands and push her deeper onto my dick.

But I don't have to, because Savannah goes deeper all on her own.

It feels so good.

She feels so good.

“They a front?” Abdul chimes in, still talking about the goddamn chairs. “I hadn't taken Helmerson for one.”

And right then, when the company name gets said for like the fourth fucking time by these idiots, I see her connect the dots.

She starts to pull off, probably to ask questions, but she can't. Because I drop my hands, palming the back of her head, keeping her where she is.

Instead of her eyes widening in alarm or anger, they roll back. And she sinks lower.

She fucking likes it.

“Not a front.” I drop my head back. If I watch her do this, I'll blow in three seconds. “Like I said, personal reasons. Now fuck off about it.”

I don't press down on Savannah's head. I don't have to. I just keep my hands buried in her hair, feeling her head rise and fall over my lap. Feeling the wet heat of her throat work around my dick.

Abdul clears his throat. “I also saw you bought KSGD.”

Savannah makes a quiet squeak at the same time Nero asks, “What the hell is that?”

I lift my head and narrow my eyes down at Savannah. The ex that worked at that company started there after they broke up. She shouldn't recognize that name.

"I think it's a latex company?" Abdul sounds unsure.

"Latex?" Nero repeats, like he's never heard the word before.

I apply the smallest amount of pressure on the back of my wife's head, and she starts to bob again. Stroking her hand up and down my length, mirroring the movement with her lips. While her other hand is on my thigh for balance, her fingertips digging into my muscle.

"Like they make condoms?" Nero asks.

"Yeah, maybe," I answer.

"Maybe?" Nero snaps.

"Yeah, maybe. I don't fucking care, man!" Savannah keeps her eyes on me as she sucks, her cheeks hollowing around my cock.

I can already feel my balls tightening. *This is too fucking good.*

Then Savannah reaches up, puts her hand over mine on the back of her head, and she pushes.

She. Fucking. Pushes.

My eyes are locked on hers when I start to press down, with the question in my gaze.

Is this what you want?

And she answers with a tiny nod.

Pushing harder, I shove myself into her throat, and I feel her muscles convulse around me.

"You...don't care what the company you bought does?" Nero is still talking.

Why is Nero still talking?

Gripping her hair, I pull Savannah off my dick, so she can quietly catch her breath.

She still has a hand on my cock and she doesn't sit idle, running her grip up and down.

"You ready?" I ask her.

Savannah nods, opening her mouth and I force her back onto my cock.

"Ready for what?" Nero, god of the underworld, still won't shut up, because he hasn't figured out that I'm getting my dick sucked.

"There are seven companies." I tell the phone, and my wife. She blinks up at me, tears on the edges of her smiling eyes. "I bought six of them for

personal reasons. And I fired one person from each company.” Savannah eyes flutter, and I force her a little deeper.

“And the seventh?” Abdul asks.

“In Alaska.” I’m gritting the words out now. My brain power fizzling as every ounce of blood travels to my dick.

“Alaska,” Nero repeats, I can hear him put it together. “Rehoming your lost personnel?”

“That’s right,” I agree and praise my wife at the same time.

I pull Savannah’s head back so just the tip of my dick is in her mouth.

“Couldn’t just kill them?” Nero sounds truly confused. And if his girl had any exes, I’m sure he’d have murdered each and every one.

Savannah swirls her tongue around the head of my cock.

“She wouldn’t have liked that.” I smile down at the pretty woman with her face buried in my lap.

My wife hums around my cock and I can’t take it anymore.

I reach over to my phone and end the call.

“Fuck, Baby. You’re such a dirty girl, aren’t you?” My abs bunch. “Just strolling in here and putting my dick down your throat.”

Now that the phone is off, Savannah starts to make noise. Lots of noise, moaning around my length. Slurping my fucking cock.

Gripping her head, I pump her up and down, pushing myself into her throat.

“You like this, Wife? You like when I control you like this? You want me to fuck your throat like this?”

She moans louder and her hand lets go of my dick as I shove myself deeper.

Savannah’s hands grip at my thighs.

“Are you gonna swallow me down? Are you gonna make me feel good and take it all, Baby?”

She blinks at me, trying to nod her head.

She’s perfect. Absolutely perfect.

Sitting there with my dick in her mouth while she listens to what I’ve done.

Every time I think she can’t possibly get any sexier...

“Breathe through your nose, Honey. Relax for me.”

Savannah’s eyes slide half-closed and she does as I say. Relaxing her throat, letting me slide even deeper.

And that's all I can handle.

Her throat constricts around me, her moan vibrating down my length.
And my cock erupts, pouring my release into her belly.

CHAPTER 72

Savannah

KING PULLS HIS COCK FREE FROM MY MOUTH.

“Jesus, Savannah.” King drops his head back against the couch as his hands slide free from my hair. “You sucked the life out of me.”

My body tries to laugh, but I’m still a little breathless.

“That was…” King starts to say but his phone rings.

We both look over to where it’s sitting next to him.

King rubs a hand down his face. “Shit, I forgot about this call.”

“Answer it.”

He shakes his head. “Not until I get you off.”

I use his thighs to push myself back to standing. “You can owe me.”

Before he can argue, I lean down and press my lips to his.

Instead of minding where my mouth just was, King’s tongue delves between my lips.

He starts to slide his hands around my waist, like he might pull me down onto his lap, so I reach my hand out and tap the phone screen, answering the call.

“Hello?” an older man’s voice sounds through the speaker.

King’s lips smile against mine. “Brat,” he whispers, before letting me go and picking up the phone.

I don’t fight my smile, because the one still on King’s face has my chest feeling lighter.

Before I leave the office, I detour to his desk.

Finding a pen and a scrap of paper, I scrawl *the price doubles after four hours*. Then leave it on his desk for him to read later.

I can feel his eyes on me as I walk out, but I don’t look back.

When I came in here, I was just planning to talk to King. Maybe slice my heart open and tell him about all the feelings I've been having for him. Explain why I've been avoiding him, throwing myself into work, since the night of my show.

He was just *so much* that night.

He was everything.

He was the family I've always wanted.

And when I still wanted him just as much the next morning, it freaked me out.

Freaked me out because, apparently, I'm okay knowing that he's killed a man.

Knowing that it doesn't just *not* bother me. I truly don't care.

I should care that the man I'm living with has murdered people. Probably lots of people. And yet, when I walked into his office, and saw him sprawled out on that couch, all intentions of talking went out the window. Because he looked like an overworked CEO in some magazine spread. And it was hot as absolute hell.

My eyes were automatically drawn to the front of his pants, and it reminded me of our last time together, and how good he'd felt in my mouth.

I was ready to enjoy it. Knew I would like it. But I hadn't been ready to be that turned on by the act.

My King.

Canine footsteps trot up from behind me.

"Hey, Duke," I greet the dog that I've come to adore just as much as his owner. "Shall we go back to work?"

Duke knocks his big head into my hand and we head through the house to my studio. Where I plan to occupy myself until King can pay me back.

CHAPTER 73

Savannah

“BABY, WAKE UP.”

Some sort of light penetrates my eyelids, so I squeeze my eyes shut harder.

“Come on, we gotta go.” King shakes my shoulder.

“What?” I press a hand over my eyes. “Go where?”

“You’ll see.”

I part my fingers and squint at him. “What time is it?”

He glances at the bedside clock. “Just after two.”

King doesn’t look upset, or worried. So, we’re not under attack, and the house isn’t burning down around us.

I drop my hand, annoyed. “What possible reason could you have for waking me up at two in the morning?”

“I owe you one.”

Sex?

“What are you—”

“Up.” King cuts me off.

“Fine.” I shove the covers off.

“You got five minutes.”

I stand next to the bed, narrowing my eyes at King who’s still in his black dress pants and black button up. “Have you not gone to bed?”

“Not yet.”

“Is something wrong?” I yawn through the question.

King bends down, putting his face near mine. “Four minutes, Savannah.”

I roll my eyes. “So bossy.” I shuffle toward the bathroom but stop. “What am I supposed to wear?”

We both look down at my skimpy pajama set. And I watch King's tongue slide along his upper lip. "I'll pick something out."

I'm going to ask him what he means, but he turns away, heading into the closet.

Still half asleep, I quickly use the bathroom, and my toothbrush is still in my mouth when King steps into the bathroom.

I finish with my teeth, then hold out my hands for the clothes he picked.

He gives me a black knee-length jersey dress, but makes no moves to give me any more privacy.

"No bra?" I ask.

King shakes his head.

I yank off my sleep shirt and pull the dress on, then pull my sleep shorts down my legs.

I'd gotten dressed for bed hoping to get lucky, so I wore a pair of cute lacy panties under my shorts, rather than nothing. Which I'm extra glad about now because King didn't bring me any underwear.

King uses both hands to hold his shirt open, and taking the cue, I slip my arms through the sleeves and let King do up the center buttons, covering my braless cleavage.

The side of his mouth curls up. "Let's go."



"UMM..."

Trepidation builds as King turns off the road we've been traveling on for the last several minutes.

It's dark. Like really dark. No street lights. No signs of life.

I don't know what I was expecting, but when King woke me up in the middle of the night to *pay me back* I assumed maybe we were going somewhere sexy.

Like a hotel. Or a rave or something.

Our headlights bump around on the narrow gravel road before landing on a closed chain-link gate.

This is not a rave.

King flashes the high beams twice, and a man I hadn't noticed steps

forward, unlocking the gate from the inside.

“King?”

He still doesn't answer, just takes his foot off the brake and we roll forward.

Panic starts to creep up my spine.

He wouldn't be taking me out here to kill me.

We're past that. Right?

Crushed cars come into view, lining both sides of what must be some sort of driveway.

Oh fun, we're in a junkyard.

“Husband,” I try to keep my voice calm. “If you don't tell me where we're going, I'm gonna jump out of this moving vehicle and sprint into the darkness.”

“You won't do that.”

“Oh, won't I?”

He shakes his head. “First, the doors are locked.”

My hand immediately closes around the handle, and, true to his word, the door doesn't open.

“Second, you promised you wouldn't run away again.”

He sounds so unconcerned, and I have no idea what he's thinking.

“And third, we're here.”

My eyes jump to the windshield, and the single story building in front of us.

It looks like it's made out of that cheap corrugated metal you sometimes see on barns. Only this isn't a barn. But it's not a business either. It's nothing. It's a blank building, in the middle of a huge junk yard, in the middle of nowhere.

A big hand lands on my thigh, making me jump.

“Relax,” King's tone is gentle, a complete contradiction to our surroundings.

“Are you—”

King's fingers tighten on my leg. “I hope you're not about to ask if I brought you here to kill you, because that would really hurt my feelings.”

I snap my mouth shut, because yeah, this seems like the kind of place you'd take someone to kill them, and that is what I was going to ask.

In the dark, I can barely make out King's eyes, but I don't have to see them to know the color.

He leans closer. "Trust me."

This feels like a test. But I'm going to pass it, because I do trust him.

"Okay," I nod my head.

Ahead of us, the solid metal door on the front of the building swings open. And Nero steps out, backlit with a dim, yellowish light

King gives my leg a final squeeze before he shoves his door open and climbs out.

I try to follow him, but my door doesn't open, reminding me I'm still locked in.

When King circles around the front of the vehicle, I see Nero make a hand motion, which King responds to by holding one finger up, in a *hold on* gesture.

Then he takes the final steps and pulls open my door.

Trust.

I place my hand in his offered one and let him help me down, keeping his hand in mine as we approach the building.

The same ballet flats I wore the night we met crunch over the gravel, the noise mixing with King's much larger footprints, and filling the silence of the night.

With the light behind him, I can't make out Nero's expression until we're a couple of feet away. And to say he looks surprised would be an understatement.

Okay, so definitely not some sort of Kill Savannah plan.

Nero's brows are as high as they can go. "Uh..."

"Is it ready?" King asks, ignoring the look on his friend's face.

"Yeah, *it's* ready." Nero's eyes slide over to me, then back to King. "What the hell—"

King pulls me forward with him, interrupting Nero. "Good."

Nero puts his hands up, stepping backward through the doorway. "I'm not gonna ask."

Okay, so not murder, but whatever is about to happen is enough to stun Nero.

That can't be a good sign.

It takes my eyes a moment to adjust when we enter the building, but when they do, I can see that the interior matches the exterior. Dingy. And it's full of random crap. A pile of buckets. A stack of pallets. A cracked counter with an old cash register.

Everything looks frozen in time, like it hasn't been touched in years. Maybe a decade.

Except for the path of footsteps worn into the dust, leading from the front door to—I swallow—the pair of cellar doors that have been left open in the center of the room.

Nero walks to the edge of the hole in the floor and lets out a quick whistle.

I grip King's hand harder when footsteps echo from the cement stairs leading up from below ground.

King's thumb strokes against the back of my hand.

First one, then three more men I don't recognize, file up the steps.

I feel like we're standing in their way, but King doesn't move. He holds his ground, making the men walk around us.

As they step past, I notice they all dip their heads to King, but purposefully keep their eyes off of me.

"It's all yours." The way Nero keeps saying *it's* makes the hair on my arms stand up.

King slides his hand up from my hand to my wrist and moves my hand behind him, until my palm is on his back. "The stairs are narrow and steep, so I'll go first. But keep your hand on my back for balance."

I open my mouth to respond, but my throat has gone so dry I can't speak, so I just nod.

My fingers tremble as I keep my hand pressed to his back, listening to the sound of everyone exiting the building, as King starts to descend.

My heart is pounding so hard, I'm afraid it might just stop.

The stairs are steep, like King said, so my hand slides up between his shoulders. And I clutch the fabric of his shirt as I begin to follow him down.

CHAPTER 74

King

I KEEP MY STEPS SLOW AS WE GO LOWER UNDERGROUND.

This might be a mistake.

But it might be amazing.

I just can't give Savannah any time to overthink it.

CHAPTER 75

Savannah

IT GETS DARKER THE FURTHER WE GO, THE LIGHT AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS fading.

But after a few more steps, I notice a new glow, one coming from below.

“Last two steps,” King tells me over his shoulder as he hits the bottom.

There’s a small landing, maybe four feet long, at the bottom of the steps. Beyond that is an open door and another dimly lit room.

King turns to face me, his bulk blocking the room beyond.

His fingers lift and he starts to undo the buttons. “Have I ever told you how sexy you are?”

King’s voice is husky and my nipples practically spring to life.

I shake my head. “I don’t think you have.”

“Then shame on me.” He pushes the shirt off my shoulders. “Because you, little wife, are what wet dreams are made of.” King reaches behind him and drapes the shirt over the door handle.

I want to touch him. Want to undo his shirt like he just did mine, but a muffled sound from the creepy basement room reminds me where we are.

“What was that?” I don’t know if I’m breathless from fear or lust. My brain, my body, has no idea what to focus on.

King leans in close. “A fantasy I didn’t know I had until I met you.”

His lips brush mine. Once. Twice. And on the third time, he presses his to mine. Hard.

And I cave. Opening my mouth to kiss him back.

King groans at my submission, and his hands slide down from my shoulders to my breasts, cupping and squeezing them through the thin fabric of my dress.

My hands go back to their original goal, and start working on King's shirt, until it's unbuttoned all the way.

I press my palms against King's stomach, feeling the muscles beneath his skin flexing at my touch.

"Grab my dick, Baby." King rolls his hips forward and I drop my hands to comply, palming him over the material of his pants.

He's so thick. So hard.

King releases his grip on my chest to rip off his belt and shove a hand down the front of his pants. He leaves them on but adjusts himself so that his cock is pointing up, the tip sticking out of the waistband, a bead of precum glistening in the faint light.

He swipes his thumb across the tip, gathering his essence, and brings the drop up to my mouth.

"You're gonna come twice tonight." He drags his thumb across my lips. "Once before I get inside of you. And once while I'm pumping you full of my seed."

Sweet mother of god, I'm about to come now.

I lick my lips, tasting him. Flooding my panties.

"Can you do that for me, Savannah? Can you be my good girl and come twice?"

I nod.

"I want your words."

"Yes, My King."

King's grin slithers across my skin.

"Fucking perfect." King dips down, gripping me by my ass, and lifting me into his arms. "You are fucking perfect."

His mouth fuses to mine and warmth swamps me when he hugs me tight against his body, and I can feel his length against my core.

I'm soaked. And the pressure on my clit pushes a moan out of my throat.

With his big hands spread across my ass, his fingers work their way under the edges of my underwear, until his hands are against my bare skin.

His tongue is still invading my mouth and the constant rumble in his chest feels like heaven against my nipples.

Gripping my ass, his fingertips spread me, making me squirm in his grip, as the fabric of my underwear rubs against my back entrance.

Through all of this, King keeps rocking me against his length and I'm embarrassingly close to coming already.

“King!” I pull my mouth from his to gasp for breath.

Up here, at his height, I can see over King’s shoulder into the room behind him. And the man within.

My body tries to stiffen, but I’m still wrapped around King, and he just hugs me closer. Still rocking me on his length.

The man is sitting in the middle of the room, tied up and gagged, with a taut chain wrapped around his neck and suspended from the ceiling.

“Trust me,” King whispers against my ear.

But there’s a man. Tied up in a basement.

King keeps hold of me as he backs into the room.

My lungs are struggling to pull in breath as my eyes hurry to take in the rest of the details.

The room is a concrete block, not much bigger than a standard bedroom, with a few bare bulbs suspended from the ceiling.

It’s clean, and might look plain, if not for the captive and giant tool chest along the side wall.

Once we’re inside the room, King turns so he’s facing the man, and I’m facing the wall. But the way I’m wrapped around King, and the way he’s gripping my ass, means that my dress is riding up and giving the other man a view of King’s hands as they fondle me.

One of King’s fingers strokes over my back entrance and my vision blurs.

King nuzzles his cheek against mine. “He’s a horrible man. And he’s going to die tonight. But I’m going to fuck you in front of him first.”

Holy fuck holy fuck holy fuck.

He rocks his hips forward, the pressure of his hard cock almost painful against my clit. “I wasn’t lying about killing anyone who sees you like this. So, this is the only way.”

This is so fucked up.

King slides me down his body until my feet hit the floor, then he spins me, so my back is to his front, and we’re both facing the prisoner.

One strong arm wraps around my body, holding me in place. “He doesn’t deserve to see you.” King’s other hand starts to bunch up my dress. “He doesn’t deserve this piece of heaven before I send him to Hell.” He doesn’t stop until my underwear is exposed. Until I’m exposed to this stranger.

So incredibly fucked up.

King slides his hand down my belly into my panties, and instantly groans, dropping his mouth to my shoulder. “Christ, you’re fucking dripping.”

I am. And I can't stop my body from arching into his touch, even as I want to shout at him that my body was primed *before* he showed me what was waiting for us.

But you're getting wetter by the second.

He rubs against my slit, making his fingers slick. "This is how you come the first time."

"King..." My hands reach up to clutch at the arm holding me in place. "We can't..."

"We can." He curls his fingers, sliding them inside of me. "And we will." He drags his fingers out, slips them over my clit. "But I need you to come quick, because I need to be inside this sweet pussy."

"I don't..."

I was going to say *I don't think I can*. But then King fucking vibrates his fingers against my clit. *Vibrates*. And I can't do anything other than cling to him.

"That's it, Honey." King presses the side of his mouth to my ear. So we're nearly cheek to cheek. Both facing forward. Both looking at the man who's staring wide-eyed back at us. "He can look all he wants. Because when we're done, I'm going to cut the eyeballs out of his head."

I start to whimper. Crying incoherently, because god help me, I'm enjoying this.

His fingers press harder and I can't tear my eyes away. Watching the man as he watches King's hand inside my panties.

"Come on, Baby." The hand pressed between my breasts shifts, and I feel him tugging down the front of my dress.

I pull on his arm, but I don't know if I'm trying to make him stop, or go faster.

But my confusion is beaten out by need, because as my tits spill free, and I can feel the man's attention in my core.

Knowing he likes what he sees.

Knowing he can't touch me.

Knowing King won't ever let him touch me.

Knowing I belong to King and no one else.

King pinches my nipple, his fingers between my thighs never stopping, and I moan. Loudly.

Everything clenches as I try to stave it off for just another moment.

"Yeah, Wife, that's it. Soak my fucking fingers. Make him watch as you

come all over my hand.”

The man’s eyes drop from my chest, back to where King’s hand is playing with my pussy, blocked only by a thin layer of lace. And that’s the final straw.

King’s heavy breathing fills my ears as I explode. “Keep going.” His fingers keep flying over my clit. “Make that pussy ready for me.”

My fingers start to claw at his arm. “I am,” I pant. “I’m ready.”

King’s arms wrap around me, and he lifts, until he’s carrying me a few strides across the room.

He sets me down a couple feet in front of the tool chest.

“Bend over. Hands on the counter.”

I do as he says, stretching my arms out in front of me to reach the surface.

A large hand slides from the base of my neck, down to my lower back. “Arch for me, Wife.”

I do.

King flips up the back of my dress, so it’s bunched around my waist.

I turn my head to the side, so I can see the man in the chair. He’s a little behind us now. But just as I think it, King grips my hips and angles us, so the man gets more of a profile view.

“Got to make sure he can see those tits.” King shakes my hips and I can feel my tits sway with the movement. “And,” he starts to pull my panties down my legs, “gotta make sure he can see me sliding in and out of your hot little slit.” King lets them drop around my ankles, and I watch over my shoulder as he stands behind me.

There’s the sound of a zipper, followed by the slap of King letting his cock smack against the top of my ass.

King bends his knees, aligning our heights, and I slide up onto my tippy toes.

“My greedy Baby.” King groans, his cock sliding easily against my drenched lips.

His tip starts to press against my entrance and the man in the chair makes a groaning sound.

“He can watch.” King pushes forward, slowly filling me. Steadily filling me. “He can dream about sucking those tits.” He bottoms out, and we both moan. Then he starts to pull back out. “He can see how much my dick glistens when I pull out of you.” King gives a few shallow thrusts, just the head of his cock moving in and out of me, as he grips my ass, spreading me

so he can look straight down at what he's doing. "But no one sees your holes." A finger slick with my own release rubs over my back entrance.

My back arches further, of its own volition, and King lets out a chuckle.

"Who would've guessed my wife would be so fucking filthy." He circles his thumb around the tight ring of muscle. "Down for fucking anything." He starts pushing his cock all the way back in. "Ready to take me any way I can give it to her."

I can't stop myself from looking over at the man.

He's watching where King is entering me. Looking at my husband's length, and... I bite back a moan. He's hard. There's a bulge in the front of his pants, and I know he's smaller than King, but something about seeing another man physically turned on from watching us sends a shudder through my body.

The watching. The slow thrusts. The way King is making me feel *back there*. It has me right back on the edge.

"Please," I beg.

King's hips meet mine, his hands moving back to my waist, gripping me tight.

"Please, what?"

I swear his cock pulses inside of me.

"Please, My King. I need you to fuck me!"

His rumble sounds like a purr, "Anything for my Queen."

CHAPTER 76

King

I POUND MY COCK INTO MY WIFE, GIVING HER WHAT SHE WANTS. BUT MY EYES don't know where to focus. On her ass bouncing. Or the sliver of a profile I can see, showing her raptured expression. Or on the man in the chair, wanting to see what he focuses on. Which parts he likes most.

He knows he's a dead man, but he still has a boner, because no one could watch Savannah in the throes of passion and not get a fucking hard-on.

And knowing she's mine. All fucking mine.

I drop the last threads of control, and I just let go.

I thrust into my woman and feel her clench around me.

I hold her waist tight. Keep her in place as I bury myself as deep as I can go.

Pound into her. Make her tits and her ass and her everything jiggle with each thrust.

And when I feel her start to squeeze me, I bend forward, placing my chest against her back, so I can reach underneath us. Rubbing that spot where we meet.

"Husband," Savannah moans.

"What do you need?"

"I need... I need to come."

"Right now?" I ask, already closing my fingers around her clit.

"Please."

"Watch him," I grit the command out as I start to rub her swollen bundle of nerves. "Watch him watching you fall apart." I keep rubbing, keep pumping my hips. "Go on, Baby. Come for both of us. Show him what you can do."

Savannah turns her head to watch the man and I immediately feel her clamp down on my cock. And I start to come.

I hear the man groan, and I hear the chain around his neck clank, but I'm too busy to look away. Because my cock jerking inside of her is apparently all my wife needs to send her over the edge with me.

Savannah cries out, her head dropping down as her shoulders curl forward, the orgasm taking over her body.

My balls constrict and I groan as I pump out the rest of my cum. And I keep playing with her clit, keep making her convulse, as I pull out.

I lean back so I can look down between us and see my release dripping onto the floor.

"That's right, Honey. Push it out." Savannah's knees start to bend, so I drag my hand away from her core and hook my arm around her waist. Pulling her against my chest, I support her weight and press my lips to her hair.

"You did so good."

I reach my other arm around and pull up the front of her dress, tucking her glorious tits away now that we're done.

"You're so fucking perfect, Savannah Baby."

I adjust the skirt of her dress, so she's completely covered. Then I tuck my dick back into my pants, before I wrap both arms around her.

Her heart is pounding beneath her ribs, and her breath is still coming out choppy. And even though she came so prettily, a fission of doubt creeps into my thoughts.

I lower my face so our cheeks are touching, putting my face between her and the man in the chair. "You okay, Wife?"

A small, strangled laugh leaves her throat. "Jesus, King." She gives her head a slight shake. "That was..." She trails off and tries to turn to look at the man, but I keep my cheek against hers, not letting her.

"Hot as fuck," I finish.

Still wrapped around her, I turn Savannah towards the front wall and then walk her toward the door.

She doesn't resist, and she doesn't try to look at the man again.

When we make it through the threshold, I pull the door mostly closed behind us.

Stopping on the little landing at the base of the stairs, I pull Savannah's panties out of my pocket.

She tries to take them from me, but I crouch in front of her. "Let me."

Savannah braces herself on my shoulders, then lifts her feet in her cute little shoes, as I slide her lacy panties up her legs.

She's still messy, and I know it's probably uncomfortable for her, but the vision of her like this is going to be burned into my memory forever.

Standing, I reach back and grab the shirt off the door handle and help Savannah into it. Only this time I fasten more buttons, covering her to her throat.

Hands on the shirt collar, holding her in place, I press a kiss to her forehead. "Go up to the car and wait for me. Okay?"

"Okay."

Letting go with one hand, I take the key fob out of my pocket and hold it out for her. She takes it, but before I let go of her collar, I lower my face to hers. "Do one more thing for me, alright?" She gives me a little nod. "Don't overthink it, Baby."

Savannah nods once more, before I let her go, and she climbs the stairs.



I WAIT UNTIL I HEAR THE FRONT DOOR OF THE BUILDING OPEN AND CLOSE, then I head back into the room.

My shirt is still unbuttoned all the way to my waist, but I don't intend for this to get messy, so I leave it.

The man, Pony, is still right where we left him.

The Alliance has been following him for a while. Tracking his movements, hoping he'll lead us to someone in charge, because we know he's involved. He's always been just a go-between, but he's involved.

But some of our guys were watching him tonight, when Pony decided it would be a good idea to try and snatch a woman walking home from the bar.

But lucky for her, unlucky for Pony, our men got him in their van before he could get her in his. Which all just means that his usefulness to us is over. Because loose cannons can't be trusted. And rapists can't be left alive.

I put my hands on my hips and look down at the slimy fucker. "I had some big plans for you. But I'm feeling pretty good right now, and I'd prefer to keep smelling like my sexy wife's pussy, and not your bloody carcass, so I think I'd rather just get this over with."

His eyes widen, and he tries to speak, but the cloth jammed into his mouth, along with the tape circling his head holding it in place, prevent words from forming.

I click my tongue. “The time for talking is over.”

The chair Pony’s sitting on is secured to the floor, but Pony himself isn’t strapped to the chair. He still can’t get away. But we’ve learned how annoying it is to untie a corpse from a chair, so we found a better way.

First we cross the captive’s ankles, so they resemble an X, then we use high strength rope in a figure eight pattern to secure them together. This leaves their knees spread apart and their feet at an angle to the floor. So even if they tried to stand up, they wouldn’t be able to walk.

The hands are simply cuffed behind their back. A tried-and-true method.

And without looking, I know Pony is missing most of his fingernails. Which is how I know he has no more information to share. And why there’s no point in removing his gag.

And then the chain...

One end is padlocked around Pony’s neck, and my eyes trail up the length, to the ceiling where it runs through a series of simple pulleys, before hanging back down to the floor, where it’s secured with a hook.

Again, in theory, he *could* try to get up. But his feet wouldn’t work properly, and he’d fall. And since his arms are of no help, he’d most likely just flop around until he hung himself.

It’s happened before.

I clap my hands together. “Alrighty then.”

I stride across the room, to the tool chest, and open the second drawer down.

I want to make this quick. But not too quick.

My fingers hover over the selection, and I grin when I see the Bowie knife.

That’ll do.

I spin the blade on my palm as I turn. It’s a pointless skill I learned in my twenties, when I first got my hands dirty. It’s showy and foolish, but effective.

Case in point, Pony starts trying to shout.

“I’m not going to cut your eyes out, so you can just chill,” I keep my tone conversational.

I let the knife twirl once more as I come to a stop before him.

“But...you do need to be punished. And I can only think of one appropriate course of action.” I grip the knife so it’s pointed up. “Just know that this is gonna be unpleasant for me too.” I let the knife twist, so it’s pointed down, as I thrust my arm downward.

Pony leans away from me, giving me the perfect path.

The tip of my razor-sharp knife cuts through the front of his pants, and through the base of his still half-hard cock, until it meets the resistance of the chair below him.

It’s not the sound, it all went too quickly for there to be much of a squelching sound. It’s that little bit of friction. The way the blade sliced so easily through his dick with only a small amount of resistance.

I quickly release my grip on the knife, leaving it where it is.

Pony screams for real this time. High pitched and agonized.

While I press a fist to my chest, fighting down a gag.

“I know, man.” My shoulders shake in a shiver. “Like I said, unpleasant. But, live a shitty life, die a shitty death.”

Pony is choking on his own inhales. And I’m sure the snot running from his nose has something to do with that. But it’s the blood pooling in his lap that makes me fight off another round of gags.

Usually, we leave the dick and balls alone, but this fucker had it coming.

I take a few steps away, to where the chain is secured to the floor. I grab the length, then kick the bottom free from the hook, tightening my hold so the chain doesn’t roll back through the pulleys. Because loosening the chain around Pony’s neck is the opposite of what I’m about to do.

“You still with me?” I give the chain a little jerk and it jostles his neck. Pony groans and looks up at me through tear-streaked eyes. My fingers tighten on the chain, and my tone darkens. “How many women have cried because of you?” I pull down on the chain, increasing the tension, and pulling up on Pony’s neck. “How many of them did you show mercy to?” I pull harder. His neck stretching further. “My guess is zero.”

I put more weight into it.

Pony’s wailing, but he stays seated, not rising to his wobbly feet like I’d envisioned.

“The fuck?” I mutter. “Can’t you even die like a fucking man?”

I’ve got probably a hundred pounds on Pony, so he should be in the goddamn air by now.

I yank harder on the chain, throwing my weight into it.

And I see the issue, the second before it resolves itself.

The tip of the blade was buried further into the chair than I'd realized, pinning his body to the seat, by his dick. And as the chain finally pulls him up, the knife stays stuck, slicing his pants open as he rises, and slicing off the shriveled end of his appendage. Which falls out of the hole in his pants...and onto the floor.

My body recoils, jerking away from the little thing. But I'm still holding the chain, and I jerk the chain too hard. Or just hard enough. Because the motion is accompanied by a snap, Pony's neck giving way, that I feel all the way through the chain.

I let go of the chain, standing with my hands out at my sides, like I might get some of it me if I move as Pony's body crashes forward to the floor, the length of the chain following his weight, unthreading itself from the pulleys and pooling over his body in a noisy clatter.

I'm frozen between revulsion and humor as I take in the corpse in front of me. Face down, ass up, severed dick only inches away from his open eyes.

Revulsion wins out, and I wipe my hands repeatedly down my chest. Trying to brush away the grossness of it all.

A sound, like the start of my name, draws my attention to the doorway.

Nero is standing there, hand on the door handle, mouth open in a disgusted frown, eyes narrowed on Pony's form in disbelief.

I straighten my shoulders, pretending like I'm fine with it all. "Shut your mouth, you look like a Muppet."

Nero slowly moves his gaze over to meet mine. "You cut his dick off."

My head tips side to side. "Technically, that's true. But it wasn't the plan."

Nero scrunches his nose. "And it smells like sex in here because...?"

"Because my wife is cooler than yours."

Nero's eyes move back to Pony. "I don't think I want to know."

"Uh, ew." I gesture to the body and growing pool of blood beneath it. "This was after."

Nero turns to head up the stairs. "I don't want to know."

"Dude," I follow him up. "It's not like we fucked on top of Pony."

"I said I don't—"

"We just fucked in front of him."

Nero throws his hands up. "I don't want to know!"

CHAPTER 77

Savannah

I PRESS MY LIPS TOGETHER AS I WATCH KING STOP HALFWAY BETWEEN WHERE I am in his SUV and the front door of the junkyard building.

He'd been striding toward me, ready to take me home, but one of the guys standing with Nero next to the building just called him back.

I watch King's chest expand with an inhale, before he turns back to the man who has a phone pressed to his ear.

King told me not to overthink what happened. So, I haven't.

Because if I do... Nope. See? Not even going there.

And I'm also not going to wonder what he was doing in there while I was out here waiting.

You know what he was doing. He was killing that man.

But King asked me to do something else. He asked me to trust him.

And I do.

So I will.

Which is why I'm sitting here, with my hands in my lap, while I watch the group of men talk in the dark.

Nero says something, but King shakes his head, pointing at one of the guys I don't know.

Something is wrong.

King breaks away, but instead of heading to the driver's door, he comes to mine.

I locked the doors once I got in, so I hit the control to unlock them now. And as soon as King pulls the door open, I reach out for him, grabbing the open front of his shirt.

"What's wrong."

He shakes his head. “Nothing.”

I pull a little on his shirt. “It’s not nothing.”

He stands there, watching me, and I can see the moment he decides to share. And watching him choose to trust me back feels even bigger than what we just did together.

His hands close over mine. “Someone set the gallery on fire.”

My brows furrow. “The gallery? You mean Mandi and Orlando’s gallery?”

He nods. “No one was there, so no one was hurt. But I want to go check it out.”

“Why?”

“Because it feels personal, and I want to see it.”

I swallow. *What if we’re the reason that happened?*

“I’m coming with you,” I tell King, but he’s already shaking his head.

“No.”

“But—”

“No, Savannah.” He grabs my chin, which seems to be his new favorite move. “You are not coming. You’re going to the house.” I try to argue, but he pushes my chin up, closing my mouth. “This is part of trusting me. You’re in it with me now, Baby. And there’s no going back. But you need to do what I say when it comes to your safety. You can bitch at me any other time, and we can argue, and sometimes you’ll win. But not when it comes to keeping you safe.” His grip loosens. “Tell me you’ll listen.”

“I’ll listen.”

“Good.” King lets go of me completely and steps back, my hands finally dropping from his shirt. “Rocco will drive you home.” Just as he says it, another black SUV pulls up next to us.

King moves to the rear door and opens it for me.

I hesitate, glancing at the driver’s profile.

“He’s Nero’s second. He’s solid. And he knows that he, and everyone he’s ever met, would die a horrible, painful death if anything happened to you while he’s in charge.”

I swear I see the guy shake his head, like this isn’t the first time he’s been threatened by his bosses, and it makes me feel a little more comfortable.

“So, is the whole *kill everyone you know* threat just your usual go-to? I thought I was special.” I try not to smile as I tease my husband.

King narrows his eyes, “Get in the other vehicle, Savannah.”



HE SAID HE'D BE RIGHT BEHIND ME. BUT BASED ON HOW FAR AWAY THE gallery is from here, he's gonna be at least another thirty minutes.

Covering another yawn, I decide to stop fighting sleep.

I've already changed back into my pajamas I took off when King woke me up a few hours ago. And I don't care if the sun is going to rise in an hour. I pulled the blackout curtains shut in preparation for my plan to sleep through most of the day.

Leaving the side lamp on for King, I pull back the covers and climb into bed.

My body is aching in all the right ways, and I settle onto the mattress with thoughts of my husband floating through my mind.

CHAPTER 78

King

EVEN IN THE DARK, I CAN SEE THAT SMOKE IS STILL RISING FROM THE ROOF OF the small building.

With a sigh, I slow to a stop and park along the curb at the end of the block. It's not like I thought our guy was lying, but part of me was hoping that maybe it was just a little fire. Some outlet catching.

A pair of firetrucks are still parked outside the building, along with other emergency vehicles, but all the lights are off, and the fire is out, so clearly the main event is over.

I take the time to finally button up my shirt as I exit my Suburban and do a quick glance at my hands for blood.

Pony's pants kept the initial blood spray pretty under wraps, and I don't see anything on me, so I'm calling it good.

I head toward two firefighters who are leaning against the back of one of the trucks chatting.

The taller one spots me first, and he stands up straight. "You can't go in there."

I glance at the brick building covered in char marks, with all the windows broken out, and an interior that's unrecognizable from a few days ago, and lift a brow. "No, shit." I don't stop until I'm right in front of them, then I hold out my hand. "King Vass."

I don't often name drop, but most people in this city have at least heard of me, and it opens mouths.

"Oh, hey." They both shake my hand. "Did you own the place?"

I debate saying yes, just to speed it along, but it'd be a stupid lie to get caught up in.

“No,” I slide my hands into my pockets, staying casual. “But my wife just had an art show here and she’s friends with the owners. Told me to come make sure everything is okay. You know how wives are.”

When Guy Two rolls his eyes, followed by a derogatory muttering of *women*, I have to remind myself that it won’t be worth it to punch a firefighter in the face.

“Mine’s the same way,” Guy One says with a nod. “But there was no one here, so no one got hurt. And, as far as we can tell, the place was empty. No signs of art, or whatever, in the place. Which is good for the insurance companies.”

I grunt, “That’s good. Any clue how it started?”

“Arson.” Guy Two rocks back on his heels.

“You can tell already?”

“Yeah. Whoever did it, didn’t try to make it look like anything other than arson.” When I lift my brows, he continues. “Best we can tell so far, the guy, or whoever, poured gasoline around the exterior of the building, flooded the floor inside with it, and even splashed it around the doorways. Then,” he points to the building adjacent to the gallery, “he pours a line of gasoline all the way to the far side over there. Presumably that’s where he was when he lit the trail. Probably trying to protect himself behind the other building in case the ignition blew something up. But everything was electric in the place, no natural gas appliances or anything like that. So it would’ve been intense, and hot, but no *explosions*.”

Something...

Something he’s saying...

I take a step back.

“Yo, you alright?”

I nod, even as I take another step away. “Yeah. Thanks for the info.”

Gasoline around the doorway.

Why is that fucking familiar?

A dark feeling swirls in my gut and I turn and stride back to my vehicle, climbing in and starting it before I’ve even shut the door.

I pull a U-turn and head toward home as I dial Nero.

“What’d you find?” he answers.

“Do you remember a guy that would torch buildings by lining the perimeter and doorways with gasoline?”

“Shit, that sounds...” Nero is quiet for a long second. “Are you talking

about The Hand?”

The Hand.

Donnie O'Reilly.

Nicknamed for his preference of strangling.

It all slams back into my memory. The Irish piece of shit that worked for the same family as I did, before Nero and I wiped them out, along with the Russians, to form The Alliance.

He was a psychotic bastard. About my age, grandson of the Boss, and second in line for taking over as head of the family. He was full of entitlement and evil as they come.

“Did we not kill him?” Nero questions.

I shake my head as I accelerate down the road. “Asshole was arrested two days before our hit, for killing a family of four. And I think he burned their house down, just like this. Which is why it felt familiar. But he’s in prison. He got a fucking life sentence, no parole.”

“Hold on,” Nero starts typing on something.

“He’s in prison,” I repeat.

“Fuck,” Nero’s curse chills my blood and dread fills me, because I know what he’s going to say. “He’s out.”

I press the gas pedal all the way to floor. “How?!”

Nero is moving too, filling the line with noise. “Technicality. Evidence thrown out.”

“I didn’t put any alerts on his name because he was supposed to be in prison until he died. Fucking stupid! And why the hell would he torch...”

I trail off, the weight of the world pressing against my chest.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Nero says through the line.

Volcanic rage flows through my veins, pushed through by fear.

“Savannah.” I can hardly get her name out. Can hardly make myself say it.

He’s going after Savannah.

This madman is going after my family, because I murdered his.

“Right behind you.” Nero’s words remind me that I’m the closest.

That I’m the one who needs to save her.

CHAPTER 79

Savannah

THE FLOOR CREAKS AND I LET OUT A SLEEPY MOAN.

I can hear King on his side of the bed, finally home.

I turn my head, and slit my eyes open, but he's already turned off the lamp I left on for him.

Good, he plans to sleep for a while too.

There's a faint smell of gasoline, and I remember he went to the gallery to find out what happened with the fire.

I blink into the dark, trying to wake myself up. "Was everything okay?"

King doesn't answer, but I feel the mattress shift as he climbs into bed.

And that's when I hear it.

Duke's frantic barking from outside.

CHAPTER 80

King

“OPEN THE FUCKING GATE!”

They can't hear me.

They can't hear fucking anything, because none of the phones are fucking working!

I lay on the horn, flashing my lights as I race toward the end of my driveway.

I've been trying to call everyone. Savannah, Benedict, the gate house, the staff house, and nothing has gone through. I had Nero try too but it's jammed. The fucker found a way to jam the cell service on my property.

Because he's here.

I roll my window down and wave my arm out. Shouting the whole time.

They finally recognize my SUV, and the gate starts rolling open.

I barely slow. Barely make the turn into the driveway.

When the house comes into view, I see men running toward a panicked Duke.

And fear, like I've never known before, stabs me right in the heart.

If I'm too late...

Please don't let me be too late.

CHAPTER 81

Savannah

MY EYES ARE STARTING TO ADJUST, SO I SEE THE SHADOW OF KING'S HAND as he reaches out for me.

But when he touches my bare arm, something doesn't feel right.

"King?"

The touch is searching, like he's trying to figure out what part of my arm he's grabbing.

And then I notice it. The texture. The leather. The glove.

"What..."

The hand locks down on my arm, hard.

Before I can scream, I'm being dragged across the mattress.

I struggle.

I try to shove the man away, but it's still too dark. And I can't...

Something slams into my cheek and my head blooms with pain.

"Don't worry, pretty girl," a male voice I don't recognize laughs, "I'm only here to kill you."

I thought King taught me the meaning of fear.

I thought I knew what it meant to be afraid.

But I was wrong.

Because terror swallows me, and it's not like anything I've ever felt before.

I'm going to die.

A second gloved hand grabs at my neck.

This man is going to kill me.

He starts to squeeze and my eyes widen.

"No!" I choke on the word as he lets go of my arm to put his second hand

around my neck.

All sense leaves me, and I claw at his arms as I try to push them away.

But he's too strong.

His leverage is too great.

I blink through the tears that are streaming from my eyes.

I don't want to cry anymore.

HE'S GOING TO KILL YOU, SAVANNAH! FOCUS!

I blink again, trying to figure out how he's so tall.

Black spots start to form in my vision.

My throat hurts so bad.

He's over me.

You're running out of time.

I'm on my back. My legs are kicking, but there's nothing there. The man's not down there.

Hurry!

I kick my leg out to the side and find that the edge of the mattress is just inches away.

He pulled me to the edge and he's kneeling over me.

HURRY!

Squeezing my eyes shut, I press my feet flat to the mattress, and slide them up, as close to my butt as I can get.

My lungs are crying.

My neck feels like it's breaking.

My soul is screaming.

"It'll be over in a second," the voice whispers into the dark.

But I won't accept that.

Not now when I have everything I've ever wanted.

Not now that I have King.

With all my might, I push up with my thighs, using all of my strength.

My lower body lifts, and I twist, rolling toward the edge of the bed.

My weight pushes against the man's knees and he's forced to let go of my neck to windmill his arms. But it's not enough to stop what I've started.

My vision is fighting to come back as we both topple over the edge of the bed.

He lands first, on his back, and I fall, half on top of him.

Nausea fills me, from the lack of oxygen and from being this close to his body, but I don't have time to feel sick.

I don't have time for anything.

Shoving myself up, I elbow him, as hard as I can, in his stomach. It might not be the most effective body part to hit, but it's right there.

He grunts, and I buy myself a split second to roll away from him.

But my legs are tangled in the blanket.

"Fucking bitch," he hisses, and I feel the blanket being pulled back towards him, dragging me with.

I want to scream, but I'm still struggling to breathe.

My throat feels like it's full of broken glass.

My palms find purchase on the hard floor, and as he tugs harder on the blanket, trying to draw me closer, he unwittingly frees me.

Hands on the floor, I scramble until I can get my feet underneath me.

Then I'm running.

I'm running as fast as I can out of my bedroom. Using memory to guide me through the dark house.

I can hear Duke outside.

Why is Duke outside?

Heavy footsteps land in the hallway behind me.

Sadness swamps me.

It's so much like that first morning, when I ran from King. Except it's nothing like that at all.

Because King caught me when I fell.

Because King promised to keep me safe.

But he's not here.

King's not here to save me.

"You're going to regret that!" The man's voice is so close.

My bare feet slap against the floor as I push to run faster and I have a fleeting moment to realize that if I was wearing socks, I'd be dead by now.

The stairs are there, they're right there.

I have to make it.

I reach out and grab the banister, swinging myself around.

There's noise outside. *People.*

The stairs end in the main entryway. I just need to get down the flight, cross the room, and rip the door open.

I'm going to make it.

My feet fly down the first few stairs.

And then something hits my back.

Something hard and unforgiving.
And I lose my footing.
I reach for the railing. But I miss.
The sharp edges of the stairs stare up at me as I crash towards them.
Grief fills me as my arms extend to brace my fall.
If I die, King will never forgive himself.
My left wrist connects with a crunch.
The scream I've been trying to shove out of my lungs finally lets loose,
and it's filled with pain.
It wasn't supposed to be like this.
Right before my temple hits the next step, the front door swings open, and
light floods the room.

CHAPTER 82

King

SAVANNAH'S SCREAM SCRAPES ACROSS MY BONES.

In front of me, only yards away, I watch my wife crash onto the unforgiving hardwood stairs.

Her head bounces off a step, and my heart stops when I see her body go limp.

It all happens in a second. Less than a second.

I don't stop moving.

I run, as hard as I can, trying to get to her before she rolls the rest of the way down the stairs, even knowing that I won't make it.

I can't even give her that much.

Because I don't have time.

Because I'm too fucking late.

Savannah's slumped form slides off the last step. One arm trapped between her chest and the floor, her head turned to the side, eyes shut.

I can't even call for her as I run.

Can't even yell her name.

Because my throat is wrapped in desperation.

A manic cry drags my eyes up, and I see Donnie O'Reilly racing down the stairs toward Savannah. Trying to get to her before I can. Trying to kill her, if she isn't already...

The thought that my sweet Savannah Baby could be gone rips a roar from my chest.

The sound echoes through the house, and I'm nearly there, when Duke beats me to it.

Snarling, my dog flies through the air, colliding with Donnie just as he's

about to jump down the last few steps.

Donnie screams as he lands on his back on the steps, over a hundred pounds of furious animal on top of him. Snapping his teeth in his face.

With Donnie pinned, I drop to my knees and slide the last few feet to Savannah.

“Baby.” My voice breaks. “Honey.” I lean closer and I watch my hands shake as I lightly press my fingers to her throat, checking for a pulse.

Checking for a pulse.

“Savannah...” I’m whispering now. “Please...”

She can’t be gone.

I won’t be able to live with myself if she’s gone.

I put my cheek to the floor, so I’m looking at her beautiful face.

“Please, Baby.”

When I see her back rise as her lungs fill with breath, I feel a hot tear slide from the corner of my eye.

She’s still alive.

Gently, so gently, I stroke her hair.

“Wife.”

Her lids flutter.

“Call an ambulance!” I shout.

“On it.” Nero’s voice surprises me and I look up to see him entering the house. “Go secure the property.” He tells the men gathered by the door, and I see that he brought a fleet with him.

Nero’s phone is in his hand when he comes to kneel next to Savannah.

His hand touches my shoulder. “I’ve got her. Now go finish it before your dog’s forced to.”

Donnie.

Trusting Savannah to Nero, I stand.

Even with Duke on top of him, snapping at his hands when he tries to push him away, Donnie tries to crabwalk back up the stairs.

Maybe it was the sight of Nero that finally scared him enough to try and flee.

But he shouldn’t be scared of Nero. He should be scared of me. Because I’m the one who’s about to kill him.

“Release!” I call out the command to Duke, as I’m already closing the distance on my prey. Duke jumps off of Donnie, but before he can so much as move, I take Duke’s place, leaping up the final steps and straddling

Donnie's chest.

"You killed my entire family!" he screams up at me.

"Not yet."

Then I strike him.

With all of my fucking strength, and rage, I punch him.

Over and over. I hit him.

As hard as I fucking can, I strike him for daring to come after me.

For daring to touch my wife.

For hurting my wife.

For causing her to scream and cry in her own home.

I hit him.

I switch hands. Throwing a left hook into his already dislocated jaw.

I punish him for what he's done. For what he was going to do. For making me a failure.

Blood soaks my hands.

Bones give.

And I don't stop.

I don't stop until he's unrecognizable.

Unrecognizable as Donnie *The Hand* O'Reilly.

Unrecognizable as a man.

I don't stop until my chest is heaving and my hands ache as much as my heart does.

Through the open front door, I can hear the sound of distant sirens.

"Would you shut the fuck up for a second, Enno?" I hear Nero snap into his phone.

And I finally sit back, looking down at what's left of Donnie's skull.

"I don't want Donnie to disappear." Nero explains with little patience. "And I sure as shit wouldn't call you for that. What I want is his identity known. I want to use him for a message." There's a pause. "That if anyone tries to fuck with our women, King will beat them to death with his bare fucking hands."

I flex my fists. *He's not wrong.*

The sirens are growing louder.

I notice Duke's low growls and finally tell him to "Settle." I croak the word, but he still hears me, and falls silent. I reach out and pat him on the back. "You're a good boy."

He lets out a chuff, then bounds past me back down the stairs.

Savannah.

A small feminine moan has me moving, climbing off of the last O'Reilly corpse.

When I turn, I find Savannah rolling onto her back, as she lets out a pained sound.

"No," I skip three steps on my way down to get to her. "Baby, don't move."

Her arm is partially lifted, and I don't know if she's trying to sit up, but if she is, I want to stop her. So I reach for her.

And she flinches.

I freeze and our eyes lock.

And all I can see in hers is fear.

Her lips move, making no sound, and then her lids close and her arm drops to her chest as she loses consciousness.

The feeling I'm left with is...nothing.

An emptiness. Like everything that was once inside me is now gone.

Just like that.

Slowly. So slowly. I lower myself to the ground beside her, the stairs at my back, so I'm between her and Donnie.

Duke lays down at her other side, letting out small whines.

I want to touch her.

Need to feel her body filling with breath.

But she... She doesn't want me to touch her.

She's...

I rest my forearms on my thighs, letting my hands hang.

Savannah is afraid of me.

And why shouldn't she be?

All of this. All of it happened because of me.

I kidnapped her from her life and thrust her into mine.

How many times did she try to run from me?

She ran from me down these same stairs.

My head drops and I stare down at my hands.

They're covered in death. Literally stained red.

Her perfect little body running down the hall. The unexpected worry that slammed into me when she slipped on the stairs. The pain of landing ass first on the steps to catch her. The feeling of her in my lap, submitting. Curves pressing into me everywhere we touched.

*But you didn't catch her this time.
Because this time you weren't there.
And this time, she flinched.*

Red and blue flashing lights reflect off the walls.

"She's gonna be alright." Nero using a reassuring tone does absolutely nothing to reassure me. "She will." He tells me again then gestures toward the driveway that's quickly filling up. "I'll head that off."

*But she's not gonna be alright.
Not while she's with me.*

That emptiness inside me expands and it's too much for me to deal with. She's not awake, so she doesn't have to know...

I reach out, resting my hand lightly on her thigh. Her sleep shorts soft under my sticky palm.

"I'll make it right, Savannah," I promise in words just for her. Her chest keeps filling with breath, but her eyes stay closed.

"Bedroom," I tell Duke. He lifts his head, but doesn't move. "Bedroom," I say it firmer this time.

I can tell he doesn't want to leave her, but he follows his command, disappearing up the stairs as Nero comes back inside, with a couple of paramedics at his back.

I can't have anyone saying my dog is dangerous. I can't lose him, too.

"Over here," I call out, my voice sounding weak.

The two medics start in my direction. "Can we get some more light in here?" one of them asks.

I hadn't even noticed the thick darkness still around us. The only light currently coming in is from outside.

"I got it," Nero says before flipping on the main lights.

And I hate it, because Savannah looks so pale in the bright lights.

She looks too broken.

She's okay.

She's not broken, she's alive.

One set of footsteps falter. "Um, what about that other guy?"

"That guy is past saving," Nero responds.

The paramedics crouch down on the other side of Savannah. "Can you tell us what happened?"

I can feel them looking at me, but I keep my eyes on my wife. "He pushed her down the stairs. I only got here in time to see her hit her head on a

step.”

“He who?”

I lift my gaze. “The one past saving.” My tone is dark and neither of them make eye contact with me.

One clears his throat, “Is that when she lost consciousness?”

“Yes.” I force myself past the memory of her head hitting the floor. “She woke up a few minutes ago and rolled herself over, then”—I’m forced to swallow—“then she passed back out.”

“Alright. Is there anything else we should know?”

“I don’t...” I shake my head. “She was running when I got here. I don’t know if...” *Fuck. I can’t even get the sentence out.* I grit my teeth and do it for Savannah. “I don’t know if he hurt her before that.”

“Okay. We’ll take good care of her, sir, but I need to ask you to move back a little, so we can get her ready for transport.”

Knowing it’s what’s best for her, I pull my hand back and stand.

Seeing my bloody handprint on her shorts makes my stomach roil.

I never meant for it to be like this.

I take enough steps back, that they have room to work, but I stay close enough to see her.

She looks so small like this.

The thud of shutting car doors signals the arrival of the cops.

Normally we don’t involve law enforcement in our business. But Nero was right about what he said earlier. People need to remember that no one fucks with us.

And the dead man on the stairs behind me is a convicted felon home invader, here to murder my beautiful wife. When the public gets word of me killing him in an act of self-defense, they’ll make me a hero.

But I’m no hero.

I never have been. And I never pretended to be.

My fists clench, the skin pulling tight across my knuckles, reminding me who I am.

What I am.

Another set of headlights flash across the entryway before the new car stops and a man jumps out.

From where I’m standing, I can see out the front door to where the three police officers stopped ten feet from the front door to look at the newcomer.

The man comes into view, jogging up the sidewalk.

“Hey, boys,” he lifts a hand.

The cops all look at each other, then one finally asks. “What’s the FBI doing here?”

“Just give me a second,” the man replies. “I’m a friend.”

Nero and I glance at each other as the federal agent vaults up the front steps, enters my home, then swings the door shut behind him.

“Friend?” Nero repeats the word like he’s never heard it before.

“Figured I could get that message moving quicker if I happened upon the scene. Driving home, ya know.” He nods to me. “King.”

“Tye.” I spare him a glance as I watch the paramedics slide a thin cot under Savannah.

Nero and Tye keep talking, but I can’t do anything except watch two strangers lift my wife onto a gurney.

When they move her, I follow.

And when the cops try to stop me, I tell them there isn’t a force in this world that would keep me from riding in that ambulance with my wife.

CHAPTER 83

Savannah

KING.

I try to say his name, but I don't think I do.

I don't think I can.

My King.

I want him so much.

I want him to hold me.

There's so much noise.

I struggle to find myself.

I feel lost inside my own body.

Why is there so much pain?

Someone touches my arm, and I finally find my voice. To scream.

“You're hurting her!” King's furious voice fills my head. And it's too loud, but it's what I need.

King.

I still can't say it, but I let myself think it over and over.



MY EYES FEEL SCRATCHY AS I FORCE THEM OPEN.

The room I'm in is blessedly dark with just a small amount of light filtering in through the slotted window curtains, so I work to open them further.

My brain feels fuzzy, and my head aches, but I can remember bits and

pieces.

I remember getting the X-ray and the tight brace being fitted to my broken wrist.

I remember being examined.

I remember King bellowing when a male nurse tried to undress me.

I can remember waking up in the ambulance, and reaching out for King's hand. And I remember looking down at his own when he wouldn't take mine, and seeing his covered in blood.

And... *I let the relief of being alive wash through me...* I remember King getting there just in time.

I remember seeing him just before my world went black. And I know. *I know* that if King hadn't shown up, that man would've killed me.

My head is pounding, but I roll it to the side, trying to take in my surroundings.

I must still be in the hospital room, but I don't know how much time has passed.

The sound of a chair creaking pulls my attention to the far corner, and sitting there, in the dark, is my husband. Leaned forward, elbows on his knees, head hanging down, he looks...defeated.

"King." My throat is so sore, only the K sound comes out. But it's enough to have his head snapping up.

The look on his face causes tears to fill my eyes.

Why does he look so sad?

He stares at me, his eyes moving over every inch of me that isn't covered by this starchy sheet.

I can feel pressure on the side of my head, where it hit the stairs, and I'm sure there's a lump. And when I opened my mouth to speak, I could feel the bruise on my cheek, from where that man struck me.

I try to swallow and I feel the pain circling my neck, from when that man tried to choke me.

The tears spill over my lids and King staggers to his feet.

He takes one step toward me, but that's it. He doesn't close the distance.

He doesn't come to me.

"I'm so sorry." King's voice cracks, and it's the worst thing I've ever heard.

I try to shake my head. He has nothing to be sorry about.

But the movement hurts too much, and I'm forced to close my eyes.

The click of the door handle turning keeps my eyes shut as more light streams in from the hallway.

When the door closes, I crack them back open.

King has moved so his back is to the far wall and standing at my bedside is the woman who I think has been treating me.

“Hi, Savannah.” I watch her take in the tears on my cheeks. “How are you feeling?”

My lip quivers and I fight to get out the words. “I want to go home.”

She nods slowly. “Normally I’d argue to keep you here for a full twenty-four hours, but I understand that you’ll rest better in your own bed.” She turns her attention to King. “She needs to stay inactive, mind and body, for at least a week. Her bumps and bruises will heal fine, but the concussion is serious, so she needs to stay in bed. No tv, no phone. Just rest.”

I watch King as she’s talks to him, watch how his hands clench and unclench. He doesn’t say anything, but he tips his chin down, confirming that he’ll do as she asks.

The doctor turns back to me. “I’ll schedule you to come back in four weeks to check on your wrist. But plan to wear the brace for at least six.”

“Okay,” I whisper, vaguely recalling her telling me about the brace already.

She looks to King. “Did you have comfortable clothes brought in?” He bends and picks up a bag from next to his chair. “Good.” The doctor seems to be used to his overwhelming silence in the room. But I’m not. It’s oppressive. Stifling. “Would you like me to send in a nurse to help—”

“No.” King cuts her off, sounding a little more like himself.

The doctor nods. “Alright. I’ll get the paperwork taken care of and have a wheelchair sent to the room.”

When she leaves, King stays where he is. Standing at the far side of the room. Bag in hand.

After a long moment, he clears his throat. “Are you okay with me helping you dress?”

His question stabs into my chest.

Why wouldn’t I be okay with that?

Feeling like he needs me to say it, I wet my lips. “Yes.”

It comes out scratchy, but it’s audible.

King’s chest expands with an inhale, then he comes around to the side of my bed.

His big hands are so careful. So damn careful when he helps me up, that I can't stop the tears from starting again. And his palms are so gentle, as they steady my shoulders when I'm sitting up, with my legs over the edge of the bed.

Seeing the tears, King crouches before me. "Am I hurting you?"

My vision swims, being upright taking its toll on me, so I close my eyes as I answer, "No. It's..."

"Here." I slide one eye open to see him holding a cup with a straw to my lips.

Grateful, I take a sip. The cool water soothing my aching throat.

I open my mouth to say more, to ask him why he's acting like I've died, but he stops me. "Save your energy, Savannah."

Just Savannah.

To undo the ties of the hospital gown, King has to let go of my shoulders.

The loss makes me feel unsteady, so I reach out with my good hand and place my palm against his chest.

He freezes at my touch, and I don't know why. I just know that I hate it.

With my gown off, King pulls a loose t-shirt over my head, one I recognize as his.

Then, he kneels before me, a pair of his sweatpants in hand, and he slides them up my legs, pulling the elastic bottoms up over my feet, so the extra material bunches at my ankles, and I realize these must be the pair I took from him before.

He gets halfway up my thighs, as far as he can get with me still sitting, then he pulls out a pair of his socks and slides them on.

My crying seems to bother him, so I bite down on my lip, trying my hardest to hold the tears back. But watching him dress me in his clothes, when it would've been just as easy to bring my own...it's tying my heart in knots.

As he rises, he pulls another two items out of the bag that I hadn't expected.

He undoes the fastening at the back of the baseball hat, making it as loose as possible, before gently setting it on my head. The worn material resting lightly on my hair, not bothering my injury, but blocking out light from above.

Then he leans down, so he can slide a pair of expensive looking sunglasses onto my face.

They're clearly his, since they're big, and aren't tight against my temples. I can't stop my snuffle, and staring straight ahead of me, I watch his throat work on a swallow.

"Let's get you up, okay?" His words are soft and I want to know why he's acting like this.

Together, we get me on my feet, and with a hand around my waist holding me steady, King pulls the sweatpants up the rest of the way.

It's so close to an embrace, that I close my eyes and pretend it is.

CHAPTER 84

King

I STAND IN THE DOORWAY, WATCHING SAVANNAH SLEEP ON OUR BED, AND I want to go to her. I want to hold her in my arms and tell her everything is going to be okay.

I want to hold her like I did when I carried her up here. But she only let me do that because she was asleep. Because there was no other choice.

“Rest, Baby,” I whisper into the dark room, then shut the door.

CHAPTER 85

Savannah

IT'S MOSTLY DARK WHEN I OPEN MY EYES, BUT I CAN TELL THAT THE bathroom light has been left on and the door part way open.

I'm in bed. My bed. And the sheets feel so good against my aching body.

But instead of seeing King lying next to me, it's a dog.

A giant, sweet, protective dog that will keep me safe.

"Hi, Duke," I mostly mouth it, since my throat still hurts like a bitch, but he still blinks open his eyes at me.

Shifting closer, I hold one of his paws in my hand and fall back asleep.

CHAPTER 86

King

DUKE CIRCLES AROUND, TWICE, BEFORE CURLING UP AT SAVANNAH'S SIDE.

I should go.

My hand grips the doorframe as I sway.

It's been five nights. Five nights sleeping in another room. Five nights of drinking. Five nights of feeling like absolute shit.

Because I miss her.

Because I crave her company as much as I crave her.

Duke keeps his head up, staring at me. Like *close the door, dickhead*.

This has become our routine. When it gets dark out, I bring Duke to the room. Keeping him in here, with her, until the sun rises again. And while he gets comfortable, I stand here, wanting to go to my wife, but not sure how.

And then, when this part is done, and I leave, I drown my sorrows. Only every day it takes more to numb the pain.

Savannah shifts under the covers, and I step back, out of the room. Pulling the door quietly closed as I go, before she can see me.

In the hall, I take a second to just breathe.

But it doesn't help.

So I do what I always do, I walk away from my sleeping wife and head down to my office.

I won't sleep. Not for a while yet, so I might as well work.

I'm sitting down at my desk when my phone rings.

I debate for a moment not answering, but hit accept anyway, putting it on speaker so I can use both hands to pour some whiskey into a glass.

"Since I'm hoping you wouldn't answer a call mid-stream, I'm going to assume you're drinking." Nero's voice projects into the room.

“Such a detective,” I reply, swallowing a mouthful.

“Let me guess”—before Nero even starts, I know it’s time for a new best friend—“You’re over there, beating yourself up over what happened. And instead of facing the facts head on and getting the fuck over it, you’re being a drunk dumbass.” He makes a humming sound. “I’m also guessing you’re pulling some weird martyr shit and sleeping on the couch.”

“I hate you.”

Nero huffs, “So, I’m right.”

“I’m sleeping in a guestroom.” I correct him, like that makes it any better.

“You do realize you’re doing it all wrong.”

“Oh, do I?” I snap.

“Well, I wouldn’t entrust my life to a fucking moron, so yeah, I think you do realize.”

“Thanks,” I deadpan.

“Seriously, what the fuck are you doing? Quit falling on your nonexistent sword, and just tell your wife you love her. It’s not that scary.”

Love. He had to fucking say the word.

I tip back the glass, downing the rest of the booze.

I know I love her. Because I’m *not* a fucking moron.

I’ve loved her for a while.

I think I started falling in love with her when she kicked me in the balls while I was kidnapping her.

But I also know... “I don’t deserve her.”

Nero laughs. Like the bastard he is, he laughs. “No shit you don’t deserve her. King, she’s a woman. We don’t deserve any of them.”

“Exactly.”

“But that doesn’t stop us from keeping them.” Nero believes this statement with his whole heart.

“I can’t just keep her!” As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I know they’re a lie.

“Of course you can. And you will.”

I pour another glass of whiskey, but just stare at it.

“Don’t you ever feel bad about dragging Payton into the dark side of life?” I ask Nero the question that’s been burning through my heart.

“No.”

I wait for further explanation, but Nero doesn’t expand. “No?”

“No,” he repeats. “She belongs with me. And I live in the dark. So that’s

where she belongs too.”

“But...” *That’s just his crazy talking. Right?*

“Also...” I swear I can see the smug look on his stupid face when he starts with that tone. “That wife of yours let you fuck her in front of a dead man, so don’t pretend like you’re ripping the wings off an angel.”

“He wasn’t dead yet,” I grumble.

“Good argument,” Nero deadpans. “Now be fucking straight with me. What’s the actual problem?”

“That’s not enough of a problem?”

“You were there.” He reminds me. “You were there when my wife got kidnapped and held at gunpoint because of me. I know what it feels like to fail the person you love. But what I don’t understand is why you’re getting drunk and sleeping alone. After what happened to Payton, you couldn’t pry me from her side.”

“You still can’t,” I grumble.

“King.” Nero says my name like he knows I’m hiding something.

I drop my head, the shame of it all weighing me down. “She flinched away from me.”

And Goddamn, does that hurt to say out loud.

“When?”

“When she first woke up...” I take a breath, reliving the moment for the hundredth time. “She was rolling over at the base of the stairs, and I reached for her. Because I didn’t think she should move. And she flinched.”

“What does that mean?”

“She’s scared of me!” I shout the admission.

Nero is silent for a second, “She’s not scared of you.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“Easy,” he replies. “Savannah is your match.”

My match.

Heavy emotion wraps around my heart.

If only that were true.

“And I mean,” Nero continues, “I’m sure there’s all sorts of other weird shit you guys do that I don’t want to know about.”

“Fuck off.” I reach out and end the call.

CHAPTER 87

Savannah

MY BARE FEET PAD SLOWLY DOWN THE HALL.

Today is the first time in the week since the attack that I've stepped foot outside of my bedroom and not found Ginger sitting in a chair, in the middle of the hall, telling me to go back to bed.

Taking that as a sign that I'm recovered enough to finally wander, I continue to the stairs.

Between long bouts of sleeping, I've been walking laps around the bedroom, so I'm not too unsteady on my feet. But the stairs...

I shove away the urge to be sick at the thought of the stairs.

If I can sleep in that bed alone for a week, I can walk down these stairs.

Except I wasn't completely alone.

King never came to bed. King never came to see me at all.

But every night someone would come to the room and put Duke inside. Shutting the door behind him. Giving me a protector.

It had to be King.

I don't know why he's been avoiding me. Since he won't talk to me, or even get close enough to look at me, I can't ask him.

But if there's one thing I know about King, it's that he takes safety seriously. And since I've had a week to dwell on it, I'd bet all my worldly goods that he's staying away because of guilt. Out of some misplaced sense of failure. And he's probably twisted that around until he's convinced himself that I hate him.

But that's stupid.

He's stupid.

I could never hate—

The air leaves my lungs because I'm at the top of the stairs, and...
I have to clutch the railing.
They're carpeted.
Tears...so many damn tears stream down my cheeks.
Carefully, I place one foot on the first carpeted step, and the material is so soft and plush it almost feels springy.
I choke out a sob.
He's so fucking stupid.

I hold the railing the whole way down, and I don't experience any of the fear I expected to. I don't relive any of the horrible memories of the last time I came down these same steps. Because they aren't the same steps. Because King did this. For me.

When I reach the bottom, I feel shaky from exhaustion and emotion, but I stay focused and make my way to the kitchen.

I woke up an hour before Cici usually delivers the first of too many meals, so I thought I would try to beat her, and eat down here.

"Oh my god, Savannah!" Cici rushes around the counter the second she spots me. "You fool, what are you doing?!"

Even though I can feel sweat on my forehead, I smile at her calling me a fool. "Needed a change of scenery."

I think she says something about me being *just as dumb as him* but I'm too busy being herded to the living room and deposited on the couch to pay attention.



BLINKING, I SEE A PLATE FILLED WITH SCRAMBLED EGGS AND FRIED POTATOES on the coffee table in front of me. And next to that, a plate with a sandwich that looks like a BLT. And two different flavors of bottled electrolyte drinks.

"I'd recommend skipping the breakfast," Ginger's voice startles me from across the room and I jump.

"Jesus." She's just sitting in one of the armchairs, phone in her lap. "Were you watching me sleep?"

She lifts a shoulder. "Basically. King lost his shit when he found you sleeping on the couch."

That makes me sit up. “King was out here?”

“Yeah, and I happened to be in the kitchen grabbing lunch when he saw you. So I get to *sit right the fuck here until she goes to bed.*” She deepens her voice on the last part. “So looks like I’m back on Savannah Duty.”

I don’t know how to feel.

Him worrying about me means... Well, it means *something*. That he cares about me. At least a little. But him not willing to sit out here with me himself...

“Why didn’t he just sit out here?” I can’t stop myself from asking.

Ginger lifts a brow at me. “Because he’s avoiding you.” Her tone says *duh* without her having to actually say it.

“I don’t understand,” I admit.

Ginger looks toward the kitchen, and I turn too, but no one is there.

“Okay, here’s how it is.” Ginger lowers her voice, so I lean forward to hear her. “Cici told me that we shouldn’t get involved. Because King is the boss and we owe him our loyalty. But the way I see it, you’re our boss too. And women should stick together.” She smirks on that last one. “So, a few things that have happened since, well, *the incident.*” She widens her eyes when she says it. “I’m assuming you noticed the carpet already.” I nod, pressing my lips together at the memory. “Well, he’s also had the entire property swept for some jammer thing, and then had anti-jammer things installed all around both houses.” At my confused look, she rolls her eyes. “Something about cell phone signals not working. I don’t really know. Jamie wasn’t making a lot of sense when he was telling me. And then...” she snorts, “King had *those* installed all over the house.” She points to the wall, and it takes me a second to find what she’s looking at.

“Is that a wall phone?” The black plastic looks new, mounted to the wall, but the corded style is straight out of the eighties.

“I know, right?” Ginger confirms. “Those are in case the cell phone non-jammer thingys don’t work, so there’s still a way to reach people in the house. There’s one in your bedroom, too.”

I blink at her. “How?”

“I had to sit against the bathroom door to let King know when you were getting out of the shower, so he could drill the holes and run the wires. Good thing you take forever in the shower.” I ignore the dig, since it’s not like I’ve had anything better to do with my time. “Didn’t know the boss had it in him to wire stuff.”

“But...a landline?” I still can’t believe it.

“You’ve missed a lot of Jamie’s *kids these days* jokes, so consider yourself lucky.” I smile, thinking of her goofy husband and can just imagine. “But that’s not even the craziest thing he did.” I’m almost afraid to ask, but Ginger doesn’t make me. “He got two more dogs, too.”

My jaw drops. “What?”

“Yep. Same breed as Duke, but younger.”

“What...” my chest tightens. “What are their names?”

She rolls her eyes. “Earl and Baron.”

It’s so stupid. And funny. And I don’t know why I’m all of a sudden crying.

“Aww, girl, don’t do that!” Ginger hurries out of her chair and comes to sit next to me on the couch.

“Sorry,” I brush the tears away. “It’s just... In the closet...” I sniffle. “I don’t get it. He’s doing all of this,” I gesture in front of me, meaning the whole property, “but he won’t come near me. Or come check on me.”

“Well, first...” Ginger hands me a tissue. “He’s the one that’s been putting that dog in your room every night. And if I was a betting woman, I’d put all my chips on the *he stands there and watches you bet*.”

I’d already assumed it was him doing it. But it’s nice to have it confirmed.

I take a second to blow my nose. “I mean, I know men are weird.” Ginger scoffs. “But even if he feels bad about me getting hurt, I still don’t understand why he’s avoiding me. Like why wouldn’t he at least sleep with me at night?”

Ginger blows out a breath. “Okay, so here’s the part that *ethically* I probably shouldn’t tell you.”

I turn to face her. “But you’re going to anyway?”

“Obviously. Okay, so, like two nights ago I was working late, because I took the afternoon to babysit my nieces. Anywho, I may have seen King coming down the stairs, after what I assumed was him putting Duke in your room. And I may have been cleaning the picture frames in the hallway outside of his office door, and he may have been on the phone...”

“You were eavesdropping?”

She gives me a look. “Do you want the story, or do you want to judge me?”

I fold my hands together on my lap. “Story please.”

“Well, as I was saying, he was on the phone with someone. I can probably guess who, but these doors are too solid to really hear much, so it was mostly just muffled noises. But, I nearly knocked one of the frames off the wall when King suddenly shouted *she’s scared of me.*”

“Scared of him? Me?”

She lifts a shoulder. “After that it was back to muffled nonsense, and I figured I’d lingered long enough.”

“How could he think that I’m scared of him?” I toss my hands up, forgetting about the crumpled tissue clutched in my palm, and we watch as it lands on my cold plate of breakfast.

I stare at the brace secured around my wrist, while I try to figure out his reasoning. And only come to one conclusion.

“Men are idiots.”

Ginger lifts a brow. “Took a concussion for you to figure that out?”

An awkward laugh bubbles out of me.

It feels like it’s been so long since I’ve laughed.

“Well,” Ginger slaps her hands on her thighs. “Now that you’re awake do you want me to help you upstairs?”

So I can sit in solitary silence for another week? No thank you.

My stomach growls, so I lean forward and pull the sandwich plate toward me. “I would like two things.”

“Okay...”

“First, I want to meet the new dogs.” I take a bite of the bacon goodness.

“And second?”

“I need a mattress.”

“Uh...” Ginger looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“If my husband isn’t going to sleep in our room, then neither am I.”

“And just where do you want this mattress?”

“My studio.” I stand, taking the plate with me. “I have work to do.”

CHAPTER 88

King

“WHAT?” MY WHISKEY BREATH FOGS THE GLASS, AS MY FOREHEAD REMAINS pressed to the window.

I don't know why anyone would be knocking on my door. The whole point of staying in this guest room is to stay out of sight, but my household seems to be overrun with people doing whatever the fuck they want.

This room is on the second floor, opposite end of the house from the master bedroom, and over my office, meaning I have a partial view down into Savannah's studio.

And even though she's pulled the sheer curtains closed over all the windows, I can see the shadow of her as she moves through the space. I can watch her outline as she paints, even if I can't make out the strokes of her brush.

She's working too hard. In there all hours of the day and night. Pushing herself too far after what she's been through.

Like now, it's after midnight and the light is still on in her studio. I don't have a view of the whole space, so I can't be sure what she's doing, but she's awake. Because she always turns the lights off to sleep.

And that's the worst part...

I take a deep breath, my exhale fogging my view all over again.

The worst part is that she's no longer sleeping in our bed. She's abandoned it just like I have. And that means I don't get to have those few private moments with her anymore. The only moments I had where I was close enough to see her fading bruises. The only moments where I was able to feel the smallest lingering connection with her.

And it's been nearly a week of this torment.

Not that I deserved better.

I don't deserve any part of her.

I tried to get the staff to remove the bed she had made up in the corner of her studio, but they've taken to straight up defying my demands. Telling me to do it myself.

My fists clench on the windowsill.

Why can no one respect my decision here?

Why can no one understand that I'm doing this for her?

Another, slightly louder knock sounds at the door.

"What?!" I storm across the room. "What do you want?" I bellow, ripping the door open.

And then I freeze.

Because it's her.

My Savannah.

The sight of her, this close, it pulls all the air out of my lungs.

She's right there.

She's too close.

"King." Her voice is so quiet and tentative, it claws at my heart.

She's still afraid of me.

Everything I've done to her flashes between us.

The broken lasagna pan at her feet.

"Knock that off." I tighten my grip as I carry her away from Leland's apartment. "I like 'em heavy."

"Remember what I said about shooting anyone that comes to help you?"

Making her fear Duke.

Her scream when she slipped down the steps, running away from me.

Showing her all those photos of her loved ones.

"You'll marry me."

Her scream before her head hit the steps, as she ran from one of my enemies.

The way she flinched.

The way I fucking hate myself.

"Can we talk?" Her voice trembles, and I force myself to look her in the eye.

Her bruises are mostly gone, only her arm brace remaining to tell of what she went through.

But she looks tired. Weary.

“Go to bed, Savannah.” I amaze myself that I even get the words out.

And before she can say more. Ask more of me. I push the door shut. And lock it.

It’s fucking childish. But I need the barrier. Because my own are failing. And if she came any closer, I’d pull her into my arms, no matter how much she fought me. And then I’d more than hate myself.

Mimicking my stance from the window, I drop my forehead against the door.

“Why won’t you come to our room?” Her question is a soft vibration in the wood.

And with the door between us, and with the image of her so fresh in my mind, I answer. “Because I get it now.” A fist tightens around my heart. “I thought...I thought I could make you...” I close my eyes. “I’ll never be able to let you go, Savannah. By letting people know you were mine, I ruined any chance you had at a normal life. And I’m sorry I can’t fix that. But I’ll leave you alone.”

“Were?” Her voice cracks, and I don’t know what emotion she’s feeling. And I’m grateful for the door, because if it’s relief... I couldn’t handle seeing that.

“You’ll always need a guard. But you’re free to do what you want. I can give you that much.”

A soft thud hits the other side of the wood, and I imagine she’s standing just how I am.

“I don’t understand.” Her words are softer, almost inaudible.

I slide my head lower, so it’d be even with hers. “Maybe you never meant for me to see it. But I did.” I squeeze my eyes tighter. “You flinched away from me.” *Fuck, my heart hurts.* “And it’s okay, Baby. I don’t blame you for being afraid of me.”

The pause that follows says it all.

“Good to bed, Savannah.”

I step away from the door, and flip on the stereo. Filling the room with noise, so I don’t have to listen to her silence.

CHAPTER 89

Savannah

“YOU FLINCHED AWAY FROM ME.” *HE SOUNDS SO HURT. AS HURT AS HE looked.* “And it’s okay, Baby. I don’t blame you for being afraid of me.”

I pause, trying to think what the hell he’s talking about.

He can’t mean...

“Good to bed, Savannah.”

My mouth opens to reply, to tell him he’s a fucking idiot, but loud music vibrates through the door.

“Fucking idiot.” I say it anyway.

It all makes sense now.

It’s stupid. But it all suddenly makes perfect sense.

I was too out of it when I woke up in the hospital to remember, but I had a week alone in my bedroom to relive every moment of that night. The good and the bad.

And I remember waking up on the floor, hearing growls and flesh hitting flesh. And I was terrified that something might have happened to King. So I rolled over. But as soon as I did, my wrist started throbbing. The pain was unbelievable. So much worse than anything else on my body, and it was all I could focus on.

Until King was there, right there and reaching for me. *Reaching for my broken arm.*

And I did flinch.

But not because I was scared of him.

Because I was hurt. And I knew if he grabbed my hand and I screamed out in pain, he’d freak out.

I let my forehead thud against the wood again. “Stupid fucking idiot,” I

whisper it this time.

He's in there tearing himself apart over something that's not even true.

I push away from the door.

Good thing I'm not as fragile as he thinks I am.



THE PHONE RINGS TWICE BEFORE IT'S ANSWERED.

"Hello, Savannah."

"Nero." I take a breath. "I need a favor."

The chuckle he lets out is less terrifying than I remember. "I thought you'd never ask."

CHAPTER 90

King

WARMTH SEEPS INTO MY CENTER AND MY SUBCONSCIOUS RELISHES THE feeling.

I'm still in that place between sleep and wakefulness, in that place where reality can't hurt me, and yet I know this is the most comfortable I've been since...

My mind shoves against me, telling me not to think about that.

Wanting to keep this happiness, fake or not, I let my mind win. Pushing out the bad thoughts as I settle into the calm. Tightening my hold on Savannah.

My hold...

Slowly, like swimming through honey, I piece it together.

The warmth is real.

The feeling of belonging is real.

Savannah in my arms is real.

My eyes snap open. And there, spread out over my chest, is golden hair.

I should push her away. Or pull away, slip out of bed and leave.

I should hold her tighter.

And that's what I do.

I hold her as close as I can.

I hug her against my side and keep her right where she is.

I breathe her in. Let her soft scent fill my lungs.

Because *she's here.*

With me.

She's here and I don't even know how.

I made sure, double checked, that I was the only one with access to this

room.

Nero. Of course it was Nero.

But even if this is just a passing moment. A fleeting moment where Savannah felt bad enough for me to offer me comfort, I'll take it.

I'll take it greedily.

Her left arm is draped over my chest, her brace resting on top of me.

With my free hand, I ghost my fingers over the outline of the uncomfortable hard material.

I'd left the windows uncovered, and the room is filling with early morning light.

I don't know how long she's been here, but I feel like I've finally slept for the first time in forever.

I trace one of the thick Velcro straps.

I can't stand the fact that she's still hurt. That she'll carry this injury for several more weeks. If I could switch with her, exchange bodies, take all her pains, I would. But since I can't, I'm just thankful it wasn't her other hand. I'm not happy with how much she's been taxing herself in the studio, but I am glad she still has that outlet. Because if she couldn't paint...she wouldn't be Savannah.

"The sound was the worst part." Her quiet voice makes me freeze. It's soft, but not groggy. Like maybe she's been awake this whole time. "Right before you got there." Her fingertips press into my skin. "Right before you got there and stopped him, my wrist connected with the stairs, and I heard it before I felt it. It was this awful crunch sound, and I knew it was broken."

I swallow, and lower my hand to the mattress, not wanting to accidentally hurt her more.

She continues. "When you reached for me..." My body tenses at her words. "Stop that," she reprimands me gently, rubbing her hand in a small circle. "When you reached for me, it was my broken arm that was raised. I wasn't scared of you, King. Even when we met, when I probably should've been scared of you, I don't think I was." My eyes stay on the top of her head. Wanting to see more of her, but grateful that she can't see me. "And the part of me that wasn't in the process of passing back out, thought that you'd probably lose your mind if you touched me, and I screamed in pain. So, I pulled away. In hindsight, I should've just let you feel bad for hurting me, rather than...all of this."

Her words make sense.

And I want to believe her.

But... I don't know if I do.

"Will you let me show you something?" Her question is quiet, and I can feel her bracing for my rejection.

I nod, and even though she can't see me, she must feel my agreement.

My hands automatically go to her shoulders to help her sit up, so she doesn't use her hand. And I realize that she's wearing...my clothes.

The same outfit I dressed her in when I took her home from the hospital.

The rotten organ inside my chest squeezes.

I've spent two weeks convincing myself she hates me.

Is it possible...

Without further explanation, Savannah walks across the room, pressing her thumb to the lock pad. The door opens, and she leaves it that way as she walks out into the hall.

Whatever she wants to show me must be somewhere else.

I don't know why my first thought was that she wanted to show me another injury. It's not like I didn't catalog every single scrape on her body when we were at the hospital.

Snatching a pair of sweatpants, matching the ones Savannah's wearing, I hurry to drag them up my legs because whatever conversation we're about to have feels like I should be wearing more than red silk boxers.

But since I feel like I've already taken too long, I don't bother with a shirt.

By the time I make it into the hall, Savannah is already rounding the top of the stairs.

And my throat closes.

I sprint to catch up.

She shouldn't be on the stairs by herself.

At the sound of my footsteps thundering behind her, Savannah stops halfway down the flight and turns to look up at me.

She's standing in the middle of a step, twisted around.

"Dammit, Savannah!" I'm taking the steps three at a time to get to her, the thick carpet muffling the noise. "Hold the railing!"

She widens her eyes at me, like I'm being crazy.

"I mean it," I snap. And when she smiles, I narrow my eyes. "I will tear the whole staircase out and replace it with an elevator. Don't test me."

Savannah rolls her eyes, "This carpet is so thick, I could fling myself off

the top and land at the bottom without a bump.”

Then, she does a little hop. Just enough to get an inch of air under her feet before they connect again with the step, but it’s enough to take ten years off my life.

My arm darts out, and I circle her waist, pulling her back to my front.

I can’t even string together words. It’s just curses, as I haul her down the rest of the stairs, her feet dangling above the treads.

It’s not lost on me that this is how we started. That I carried her just like this when I stole her. But I’m too stressed to focus on it. Too close to a fucking heart attack to think about anything but getting her feet safely on the ground.

When we reach the bottom, I hesitate for a moment before putting her down. Enjoying the feeling of her against me too much.

But when my body starts to react, I lower her to the floor.

The last thing she needs is me pawing at her right now.

She looks up at me, unspoken words swirling behind her eyes. But instead of voicing them, she grabs my hand with her good one. “Come on.”

My fingers tighten around hers.

I feel like such an idiot as I follow her through the house. Like I should be more caught up to whatever this situation is that I’m in. And maybe it’s the amount of alcohol I’ve consumed over the past several days, or maybe I just am a fucking idiot. But I’m lost.

Lost as to why she’s being nice to me.

As to why she’s holding my hand.

We turn to head through the kitchen and that’s when my idiot brain puts it together that we’re going to her studio.

Cici is standing at the island, making some type of pastry dough. And as we pass, she looks up. Her eyes going from me to Savannah, then back to me, and dropping lower.

“Eyes off my husband, please.” Savannah says casually, as she continues to pull me in her wake.

Is she...was that jealousy?

I stay quiet as we close in on the studio.

I’ve been tempted to come in here at night, to check on her. To watch her sleep. But I knew she brought Duke in here each night on her own, and I didn’t want him to alert her to my presence. So, I haven’t been in here. Not since her lion collection filled the room.

Savannah opens the door and drops my hand so she can walk through first.

But she just steps to the side, not actually showing me anything.

“What...” My eyes catch on a bright red canvas.

I step further into the room.

The large canvas is covered corner to corner in shades of red. And the object in the center of the painting...

Unspoken words wrap around my throat.

It's a crown.

A crown, perfectly sculpted out of paint. The slashes of burgundy looking like streaks of blood dripping from the shiny surface.

It's harsh. And bold. And violent.

But also somehow warm.

Is this what she...

My eyes slip past the red, and lock onto the next canvas.

I step forward.

This one is a multicolored sunset background, with a crown so perfect and gold, it looks like it's floating. Like I could pluck it out of the air.

I turn, slowly moving in a circle, taking in the complete collection.

There are so many.

A crown that looks to be made of smoke, lying in the grass.

A crown tipped on the edge of a *motel vacancy* sign.

A crown sitting on top of a giant diamond ring.

My breath is choppy.

It's our moments.

All of our moments together.

There's a smaller one, and I have to step closer to see what it is.

A gummy bear. A ridiculously realistic pink gummy bear with a crown on his head.

I don't...

I don't understand.

There's one more, over in the corner. And it's different.

All of Savannah's paintings are unframed. The canvas stretched around the wooden structure, so she can paint all the way around the edges, so there's no visible frame.

Except for this one.

This one is all white. A simple image of a crown in shades of white on a

white background, just like the one...

I step forward and touch the dark wood that's been attached to the outside of the canvas. My fingers coming back tinged black. Because the wood is charred.

Because it's the frame from the painting she burned.

The frame of the painting that started it all.

And now it's here.

I turn to face Savannah, who's only a few strides away.

There's a torrent of emotions crashing inside my chest, so I say the only word I can manage. "Why?"

She lifts one shoulder, "Because I fell in love with you."

CHAPTER 91

Savannah

KING STARES AT ME LIKE HE CAN'T BELIEVE ME.

Like he *won't* believe me.

I watch his throat work. "How?"

"Because you gave me no choice," I tell him honestly. "I tried to hate you. I really did. But I couldn't." I want to move closer to him. Want him to hold me. But I don't dare. Not yet. "And I was never scared of you, King. Just hurt."

"Because of me." King's voice scratches through the room.

I nod. "Yeah, he came after me because of you. But you stopped him. And if anyone ever comes after me again, you'll stop them too."

"I won't ever let you get hurt again."

"You're hurting me now." My voice finally cracks, all the pain and love and anguish breaking through. "You took me. And made me yours. I got used to your warmth. But then you took it away." A tear escapes down my cheek. "I don't want to be cold anymore."

"Savannah." He takes one halting step toward me.

"You made me love you," I accuse him. "You told me you were proud of me."

"I am proud of you," he takes another step closer.

"You've always saved me when I needed you most."

"Honey..." he's only a step away now.

"Please stop pushing me away. It's okay if you don't love me yet, just don't..."

King closes the distance, his big palms cupping my face. "There is no *yet*, Savannah Baby." His thumbs brush across my cheeks. "Please stop crying. I

love you too fucking much to watch you cry.”

I love you too fucking much...

They aren't the words I expected to hear, but they're the ones I wanted to hear.

And maybe it's too good to be true.

“King,” I reach up and grab his forearms. “You don't have to say it just—”

“Stop talking,” he steps closer, our chests are touching, and uses his hold on me to tip my head back so my eyes stay on his. His voice sounds just as choked as mine does. “I won't ever lie to you. You're my wife. My fucking Queen. And I love you with my entire disgusting heart.” He brushes away more tears. “I don't deserve you. Or...” I watch his throat work as he nods towards the paintings around us. “I don't deserve your art. Or your smiles. Or your joy. After everything I've done to you... Baby, the last thing I deserve is your love. But if you mean it. If you've found a way to let me inside your beautiful soul, then I'm going to stay there.”

I nod my head as best I can. “I mean it.”

His broad chest expands on the largest inhale. And when he lets his breath out, he lowers his forehead to mine.

“I'm sorry I pushed you away.” His apology is so soft. “I'm so sorry I failed you, so many times.”

“You didn't,” I whisper.

“I did,” he whispers back. “But I'll never fail you again. So long as there is breath in my body, I'll never fail you again.”

He hasn't.

And he won't.

The feeling of being cherished fills my heart and I tip my face up, pressing my lips to his.

He's so gentle. So tender in the way he kisses me back that I don't need him to say the words again.

But he does anyway.

“I love you, Savannah.”

I slide one hand up his arm until my palm is over his heart. “I believe you. I can feel it.”

The sound he makes keeps the tears streaming from my eyes.

“My King,” I tell him. “My love.” I tell him.

His mouth presses against my neck as he bends, slipping his hands down

until he's gripping my ass and lifting me into the air. "I need all of you. Right now, I need all of you."

CHAPTER 92

King

LOWERING MY WIFE ONTO THE BED SHE HAD PLACED IN THE CORNER OF THE studio, I can't tell if I feel more alive than I ever have, or if I've already died, and somehow, somehow, I made it into heaven.

"I missed you," her lips never leave mine as she says it.

I lean back just long enough to pull the shirt off her body. "I'm sorry." I apologize, kissing her again. "I missed you, too. So much."

"Stop apologizing," Savannah pushes at my pants.

I break our kiss again to yank the pair she's wearing down her legs. "I'll be apologizing to you for the rest of our lives."

I shift to fall back on top of her, but she slaps her hand to my chest. "Naked." She can't reach my pants so she's using her feet to try and push them off. "You can apologize by getting naked."

A small smile pulls at the edge of my mouth, and it feels so fucking good.

"I have such a bossy wife." I tell her, even as I comply.

Our bodies reach for each other.

Her arms wrap around my neck, pulling me close, and I brace myself over her.

Her tongue slides into my mouth as I hook an arm under her knee to spread her open.

"I should—" I try to pull back, but Savannah pulls me closer.

"I'm ready."

And when the tip of my cock touches her core, I know she's telling me the truth.

"I don't deserve you," I whisper into her mouth, as I slide forward, filling her heat with my length.

We both moan. The sound reverberating between our chests.
“But I’m keeping you.”

Epilogue One

SAVANNAH

“OH MY GOD!” I ARCH AGAINST THE MATTRESS.

“Not your god.” My husband thrusts into me with a groan.

My open mouth pulls into a smile. “My King.”

“That’s right, Baby.” King drops his weight onto me. “I’m your fucking King.”

The windows of the little overwater bungalow we’re staying in are open, and the warm early morning air flows over our naked bodies making the setting feel almost magical. Such a nice change from the cooling weather back home. And I don’t care if it’s a couple months late, this is the perfect honeymoon.

Or maybe it was waking up with my husband’s face between my thighs.

King’s length drags out of me, and I claw at his back, trying to hold him close.

King slides a hand under my ass, lifting my hips to meet his.

His cock hits an extra deep spot inside me, and I cry out.

“You gotta be quiet, Honey.” King’s mouth drags across my shoulder.

I hook my feet around his back. “You never tell me to be quiet.”

He keeps moving. Each thrust driving me closer to my peak.

“I figured you wouldn’t want Nero and Payton to hear you.”

We’re both panting, so it takes me a moment to register his words.

“What are you talking about?” My hands slide around from his back to his shoulders.

King tightens his grip on my ass cheek. “They checked in next door last night.”

“What?!” I shove at his shoulders.

King lets me push him away, but only his top half.

He sits back on his heels and grips my waist as he yanks me further onto his dick.

“King!” My reprimand doesn’t sound like a reprimand. “Why didn’t you tell me they were coming?”

A hand closes over my breast, his fingers pinching my nipple. “It wouldn’t have been a surprise if I told you before.”

I try to bat his hand away, but he grips my fully healed wrist.

“You’re joking.” I try to keep my eyes open as sensations zip through my body.

“Not joking.” King uses his hold of my wrist to lower my hand between us. “Now I need you to hurry up and rub that little clit for me. Because we don’t have much time.”

This isn’t the first time he’s told me to touch myself in front of him, so my body responds on autopilot even if my mind is whirling.

My fingers connect with my slick bud, and I gasp in a breath. “Time for what?”

King reaches out, now using both hands to roll my nipples between his fingers. “Time for me to play with these glorious tits, because we gotta be on the beach in an hour.”

“Hour?” It’s so hard to focus on this conversation, as I continue to play with my clit, getting so close to the edge. “What’s happening in an hour?”

King slides his hands off my chest and braces himself over me again. “In one hour,” he rolls his hips into me, “we’re renewing our vows.”

My fingers freeze as I stare up at him. “What?”

He gives me that smile, the one I love so much, the one that says he’s proud of himself.

“Our vows?” I ask.

“We’re doing it how we should’ve done it the first time.”

“On the beach?” My eyes start filling with tears.

“On the beach.” He leans in, pressing his mouth to mine, in a deep kiss.

It’s my dream. The wedding I always wanted to have.

“How’d you know?” I ask, his hips still rocking.

King smirks, “Last time Val was over...”

It’s hard to think back, when his hand slides down to replace my unmoving one, strumming at my clit.

“You were eavesdropping?”

His huffed laugh sounds strained. “Baby, you’re loud when you’re drunk.”

I pinch his side, but he pays me back by pinching my clit.

“So,” I pant, “you’re just recreating my dream wedding? Just like that?”

“Just like that,” he lowers his lips, brushing them against mine. “Except, since this is our new beginning, we’re saying our vows at sunrise.”

Love wraps itself around my heart.

He’d heard me drunkenly talk about a sunset wedding, and he made it so much better.

He made it real.

“I love you,” I tell him.

“I love you, too. Now be a good little wife and come on this cock.”

When he seals his lips to mine, while touching me in just the right way, I do exactly as My King commands.

Epilogue Two

KING

MY PHONE IS PRESSED TO MY EAR, AS I LISTEN TO NERO TALK FOREVER about his stupid dog. Like that little mutt will ever be impressive compared to Duke.

“I keep telling you,” I roll my eyes, “take that little turd to training classes.”

“He’s not a little turd,” Nero snaps back, making me laugh.

“One large black coffee and a large coconut honey latte,” a kid with suspenders calls out from the end of the counter.

I use my shoulder to pin my phone against my ear and pick up the drinks. The thin cardboard sleeve makes the cups warm, but not too hot to carry. And considering the chilly October air, it’ll be nice. Not as nice as the tropical vacation we all got back from last week, but I gotta be honest, I’m looking forward to spending the holidays with Savannah. Cold ass weather or not.

“That mean you’re on your way?” Nero’s earlier annoyance gone, hearing I have his latte in hand.

“Yeah.” I promised I’d bring coffee to his office since we’re gonna go over the latest Hans sighting.

I use my elbow to push the door open. “I’ll be there in fifteen.”

Nero starts talking about something else, but I don’t hear him. Because standing in front of me, on the sidewalk, ready to enter the coffee shop I just stepped out of, is the mayor.

And his brother.

They both look startled to see me.

But they shouldn’t be. Because he might be the mayor, but this is *my* city. And I gave Christopher Denton the only warning he was ever gonna get.

With my eyes locked on the little brother, I cut Nero off. “Sorry, but I’m gonna have to take a rain check.”

“What? You already have my latte you prick.”

“Something literally just came up.”

Both men turn and hurry to the mayor’s car parked on the street.

I watch them drive away, letting them enjoy their short-lived sense of victory.



“WE’VE GOTTA STOP MEETING LIKE THIS.”

Christopher’s head jerks up at my words, his hands still covered in soap.

He sees my reflection in the Wisconsin highway rest stop bathroom. The dim lighting doing nothing to hide my identity because I’m close.

Very close.

Before he can try to run, I step into his back, forcing him forward and pressing his thighs into the ceramic edge of the sink. And at the same time, my right arm swings around, like I’m going to hug him.

But the blade in my hand hits his chest first, the tip burying between his ribs, and piercing right into his heart.

The man who touched my wife opens his mouth, but nothing comes out.

“I told you what would happen if I ever saw you again.” He’s still alive enough to see me lift my other hand.

So deep, your head will hit the ground first.

And then I do as I had promised. I slice the sharpened steel across his throat, cutting through to the spine.

So, when I step away, he crumples into a backbend. His head hits the dirty tile floor before his torso does.



DOM

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank the photo used for this cover. Dear Lord.

And also, I need to thank all of the amazing people on my ARC team, in my BeanBag group, the bookies sharing and making posts on IG and facebook and TikTok...the hype y'all have brought to this release is unreal. And I'm writing this when we're still a few weeks away from release, but I couldn't be more excited.

You know I'm thanking my mom. For those of you who don't know, my mom reads each book as I write it. From Sleet Kitten to King, every night when I finish writing I send her what's new and she reads it in the morning, providing edits and feedback with her coffee. And yes, she reads all the dirty parts. And yes, she read "that scene" in this book and replied with "that's some fucked up fuckery" after she finished. But we all know she loves it. So, thank you mom for all the hard work you put into my smutty smuttery.

Thank you, G. Marie, for being my dark romance sounding board and for just *Getting Me*. It helps to feel like less of a dirty freak when you have a friend cheering on your twisted ideas. (Now you just gotta finish your dark romance so I can hype it!)

Thank you, Kerissa, for being the best damn friend and PA a girl could ask for. I love you and your brain so much.

Thank you, S.L. and Elaine, for all of your support and for listening to me ramble, at length, about my plotlines.

This book was a whirlwind, and my self imposed timeline was truly mad. I spent a ridiculous number of hours in April completely submerged in the world of King and Savannah, and I still feel like I'm there. So my brain won't let me go through all of the very important names that I want to name, but please, know that I appreciate you. I appreciate the time and the dedication that you give me and my books, while getting absolutely nothing in return.

Thank you, to my husband, for understanding that sometimes book boyfriends will just take over my life.

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is my entire personality now.

Thank you, Brittini, for always putting up with my shit and for being an amazing editor and friend. And thank you, Beth, for taking a chance on me and wedging me into your tight schedule.

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And a special thank you to all of the furry babies in our lives. My sweet Laney passed away on the night Nero released. She had a heart condition, and we knew sudden death was a possibility, but we still hadn't expected it. I'd written 50 pages of King before that happened, and it's been almost 2 months, and I'm still not okay. I still cry every time I think of her. My emotions were high while I wrote the rest of King's story, and I'm sure she played a role in how I wrote Duke, because Laney was a smart girl, even if she didn't listen for shit. So, if you have a pet at home, go hug them. If you have some spare money burning a hole in your pocket, go spoil them. And if you need some other place to spend that money, find a local rescue to support. Because rescue dogs are the best dogs. And if you prefer to be led directly to a place to donate, the Minnesota Boxer Rescue is a great organization: <https://mnboxerrescue.rescuegroups.org/>. Two months before Laney passed, we had to say goodbye to Coleman, a senior boxer we adopted from MN Boxer Rescue, and the year and half we had him was too short. Life is fickle. And short. So spend as much of it doing what you love. And reading good books.

About the Author

Like all her books, S.J. Tilly resides in the glorious state of Minnesota, where she was born and raised. To avoid the freezing cold winters, S.J. enjoys burying her head in books, whether to read them or write them or listen to them.

When she's not busy writing her contemporary smut, she can be found lounging with her husband and their herd of rescue boxers. And when the weather permits, she loves putting her compost to use in the garden, pretending to know what she's doing. The neighbors may not like the flowery mayhem of her yard but the bees sure do. And really, that's more important.

To stay up to date on all things Tilly, make sure to follow her on her socials, and interact whenever you feel like it!

Don't forget to sign up for the newsletter <https://sjtilly.com/newsletter>

Links to everything on her website www.sjtilly.com



Books By This Author

Alliance Series Dark Mafia Romance

NERO

Payton

Running away from home at 17 wasn't easy. Let's face it though, nothing before, or in the ten years since, has ever been easy for me.

And I'm doing okay. Sorta. I just need to keep scraping by, living under the radar. Staying out of people's way, off people's minds.

So when a man walks through my open patio door, stepping boldly into my home and my life, I should be scared. Frightened. Terrified.

But I must be more broken than I realized, because I'm none of those things.

I'm intrigued.

And I'm wondering if the way to take control of my life is by giving in to him.

Nero

The first time I took a man's life, I knew there'd be no going back. No normal existence in the cards for me.

So instead of walking away, I climbed a mountain of bodies and created my own destiny. By forming The Alliance.

And I was fine with that. Content enough to carry on.

Until I stepped through those open doors and into her life.

I should've walked away. Should've gone right back out the door I came

through. But I didn't.

And now her life is in danger.

But that's the thing about being a bad man. I'll happily paint the streets red to protect what's mine.

And Payton is mine. Whether she knows it or not.

KING

Okay, so, my bad for assuming the guy I was going on a date with *wasn't* married. And my bad for taking him to a friend's house for dinner, only to find out my friend is also friends with *his* wife. Because, in fact, he *is* married. And she happens to be at my friend's house because her husband was *busy working*.

Confused? So am I.

Unsurprisingly, my date's wife is super angry about finding out that her husband is a cheating asshole.

Girl, I get it.

Then, to make matters more convoluted, there is the man sitting next to my date's wife. A man named

King, who is apparently her brother, and who lives up to his name.

And since my *date*

is a two-timing prick, I'm not going to feel bad about drooling over King, especially since I'll never see him again.

Or at least I don't plan to.

I plan to take an Uber to the cheater's apartment to get my car keys.

I plan for it to be quick.

And if I had to list a thousand possible outcomes... witnessing my date's murder, being kidnapped by his

killer, and then being forced to marry the super attractive but clearly deranged crime lord, would not have been on my Bingo card.

But alas, here I am.

Sin Series

Romantic Suspense

Mr. Sin

I should have run the other way. Paid my tab and gone back to my room. But he was there. And he was... everything. I figured what's the harm in letting passion rule my decisions for one night? So what if he looks like the Devil in a suit. I'd be leaving in the morning. Flying home, back to my pleasant but predictable life. I'd never see him again.

Except I do. In the last place I expected. And now everything I've worked so hard for is in jeopardy.

We can't stop what we've started, but this is bigger than the two of us.

And when his past comes back to haunt him, love might not be enough to save me.

Sin Too

Beth

It started with tragedy.

And secrets.

Hidden truths that refused to stay buried have come out to chase me. Now I'm on the run, living under a blanket of constant fear, pretending to be someone I'm not. And if I'm not really me, how am I supposed to know what's real?

Angelo

Watch the girl.

It was supposed to be a simple assignment. But like everything else in this family, there's nothing simple about it. Not my task. Not her fake name. And not my feelings for her.

But Beth is mine now.

So when the monsters from her past come out to play, they'll have to get through me first.

Miss Sin

I'm so sick of watching the world spin by. Of letting people think I'm plain and boring, too afraid to just be myself.

Then I see *him*.

John.

He's strength and fury, and unapologetic.

He's everything I want. And everything I wish I was.

He won't want me, but that doesn't matter. The sight of him is all the inspiration I need to finally shatter this glass house I've built around myself.

Only he does want me. And when our worlds collide, details we can't see become tangled, twisting together, ensnaring us in an invisible trap.

When it all goes wrong, I don't know if I'll be able to break free of the chains binding us, or if I'll suffocate in the process.

Sleet Series **Hockey Romantic Comedy**

Sleet Kitten

There are a few things that life doesn't prepare you for. Like what to do when a super-hot guy catches you sneaking around in his basement. Or what to do when a mysterious package shows up with tickets to a hockey game, because apparently, he's a professional athlete. Or how to handle it when you get to the game and realize he's freaking famous since half of the 20,000 people in the stands are wearing his jersey.

I thought I was a well-adjusted adult, reasonably prepared for life. But one date with Jackson Wilder, a viral video, and a "I didn't know she was your mom" incident, and I'm suddenly questioning everything I thought I knew.

But he's fun. And great. And I think I might be falling for him. But I don't know if he's falling for me too, or if he's as much of a player off the ice as on.

Sleet Sugar

My friends have convinced me. No more hockey players.

With a dad who is the head coach for the Minnesota Sleet, it seemed like an easy decision.

My friends have also convinced me that the best way to boost my fragile self-esteem is through a one-night stand.

A dating app. A hotel bar. A sexy-as-hell man, who's sweet, and funny, and did I mention, sexy-as-hell... I fortified my courage and invited myself up to his room.

Assumptions. There's a rule about them.

I assumed he was passing through town. I assumed he was a businessman, or maybe an investor, or accountant, or literally anything other than a professional hockey player. I assumed I'd never see him again.

I assumed wrong.

Sleet Banshee

Mother-freaking hockey players. My friends found their happily-ever-afters with a couple of sweet, doting, over-the-top in-love athletes. They got nicknames like *Kitten* and *Sugar*. But me? I got stuck with a dickhead who riles me up on purpose and calls me *Banshee*. Yeah, he might have a voice made specifically for wet dreams. And he might have a body and face carved by the gods. And he might have a level of Alpha-hole that gets me all hot and bothered.

But when he presses my buttons, he presses ALL of my buttons. And I'm not the type of girl who takes things sitting down. And I only got caught on my knees that one time. In the museum.

But when one of my decisions gets one of my friends hurt... I can't stop blaming myself. And him.

Except he can't take a hint. And I can't keep my panties on.

Darling Series **Contemporary Small Town Romance**

Smoky Darling

Elouise

I fell in love with Beckett when I was seven.

He broke my heart when I was fifteen.

When I was eighteen, I promised myself I'd forget about him.

And I did. For a dozen years.

But now he's back home. Here. In Darling Lake. And I don't know if I should give in to the temptation swirling between us or run the other way.

Beckett

She had a crush on me when she was a kid. But she was my brother's best friend's little sister. I didn't see her like that. And even if I had, she was too young. Our age difference was too great.

But now I'm back home. And she's here. And she's all the way grown up.

It wouldn't have worked back then. But I'll be damned if I won't get a taste of her now.

Latte Darling

I have a nice life—living in my hometown, owning the coffee shop I've worked at since I was 16.

It's comfortable.

On paper.

But I'm tired of doing everything by myself. Tired of being in charge of every decision in my life.

I want someone to lean on. Someone to spend time with. Sit with. Hug.

And I really don't want to go to my best friend's wedding alone.

So, I signed up for a dating app and agreed to meet with the first guy that messaged me.

And now here I am, at the bar.

Only it's not my date that just sat down in the chair across from me. It's his dad.

And holy hell, he's the definition of Silver Fox. If a Silver Fox can be thick as a house, have piercing blue eyes and tattoos from his neck down to his fingertips.

He's giving me Big Bad Wolf vibes. Only instead of running, I'm blushing. And he looks like he might just want to eat me whole.

Tilly World Holiday Novellas

Second Bite

When a holiday baking competition goes incredibly wrong. Or right...

Michael -

I'm starting to think I've been doing this for too long. The screaming fans. The constant media attention. The fat paychecks. None of it brings me the happiness I yearn for.

Yet here I am. Another year. Another holiday special. Another Christmas

spent alone in a hotel room.

But then the lights go up. And I see *her*.

Alice -

It's an honor to be a contestant, I know that. But right now, it feels a little like punishment. Because any second, Chef Michael Kesso, the man I've been in love with for years, the man who doesn't even know I exist, is going to walk onto the set, and it will be a miracle if I don't pass out at the sight of him.

But the time for doubts is over. Because Second Bite is about to start - "in three... two... one..."