



BARED BETRAYAL

international bestselling author

BELLA J.

BARED
BETRAYAL

BELLA J.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book isn't about playing it safe, tiptoeing through tulips or riding off into the sunset with a cinnamon roll. In these pages, you'll meet characters with a penchant for causing a filthy kind of chaos - who, at times, are their own worst enemies.

Yes, this book contains cheating. GASP! But if you trust me and choose to continue, you'll see that nothing is as it seems.

If you prefer not to go in blind, you can find a full list of triggers on my website.

www.authorbellaj.com

Now, let's clink glasses for the boldly audacious women out there—the ones who embrace their inner sass and scandal with a wink and a smirk. You know who you are. You're fucking fabulous!

Bared Betrayal is a COMPLETE STANDALONE.

Prologue

KALLIE

Present

FROM THE SECOND I set foot in this club, the world outside these walls no longer exists. Time doesn't exist.

I've heard of this place but never thought I'd one day stroll across its white marble floors in search of something to placate my deviances.

Myth. The name alone is a paradox. This place merely exists to bring the dark to light and light to the dark. Many people think the actual existence of this place is a myth, and now I know it's far from it. A club owned by the Dark Sovereign, and ruled by sin, frequented only by the most elite. I still don't know how I managed to get here, but right now, it doesn't matter. All that matters is that I'm here, a clear sign of the heights my desperation has reached.

The sweet scent of seduction lingers in the air, desire clinging to the darkness. My body shivers as it caresses my skin with gentle strokes, breathing hot flames that ignite my senses. It's in my veins, liquid excitement coursing through my blood, growing stronger and wilder as it lures me closer.

The air around me is charged with my palpable anticipation, and I'm surprised I'm not nervous. This isn't something I ever thought I'd do, but here I am, a thrilling excitement licking down my spine.

Sex. It's everywhere. It's on everyone's minds. It's the only reason anyone would attend these midnight affairs masked, anonymous, and starved for ecstasy. I adjust my mask, running my fingers along the ribbon ties, the feel of the satin against my fingertips smooth and soft. My white lace mask with shimmering rhinestones stands out in a sea of black and dark shades of burgundy. I have no idea why I chose white or wore an ivory dress that seems to lure all the lights to its pearlescent sheen. Maybe subconsciously, I chose it because I want my inexperience to be seen through a sea of burgundy, yet I don't want to draw attention to myself. Or maybe I do. I don't know. At this moment, I don't feel like I know anything.

I'm not sure how many of us there are. Ten. Twenty. But the click of our heels on the marble can't smother the confident steps of the woman leading us through the foyer. Her black stilettos accentuate her calves, her perfect hourglass shape emphasized by her black pencil skirt and skin-tight lace bodysuit highlighting the rounds of her breasts.

I wish I were more like her. That I had her elegance. Even the sound of her heels on the tile commands respect and submission. She only has to use her tone and body language to show who she is, her status and her authority in this club. She's explaining the rules as we walk, but my mind is mostly static, catching only a few sentences here and there.

"No names and no personal information will be exchanged."

"You do not choose. They choose you."

"If you are unhappy with the one who chose you, you are free to leave. But if you do, you will never be allowed to attend again."

"Most importantly, once you walk out of here tonight, you will live like this place does not exist."

She opens the large floor-to-ceiling double doors, and we walk inside a dimly lit room. The paneled walls are a velvet red, and a French empire chandelier with black crystals dangles above a round mahogany table. The tabletop is

pristinely polished, smooth and glossy, with the delicate smell of roses wafting in the air.

The door closes behind us, and I jolt, my pulse racing at a thousand beats per second. My lungs feel too small for my breaths, and it's a wonder I don't faint from the myriad of emotions zinging through my body.

A grand double staircase with delicate black iron leads to a second floor. The entire scene before me screams wealth and decadent elegance.

Our hostess faces us, her dark hair pinned in an elegant updo. She stands there for a moment, her gaze pausing on us for a fraction of a second. The tension in the room is palpable, my skin hyperaware of everyone's presence.

Her forest green eyes narrow, her hips slanted to the side, and she finally speaks. "You've all signed the non-disclosure agreements, completed the necessary paperwork, but this is the part where you ask yourselves if you can surrender completely. If not, do us all a favor and walk out that door right now. This is not a place for doubts or insecurities. Shame or embarrassment. If you can't trust the process, then you need to leave."

There is nothing but utter silence from the group. I'm not even sure if anyone's breathing at this point. I know I'm not.

A door opens in the far corner of the room. Men dressed in black suits and masks walk in, their presence heavy and felt all the way to my bones. There's a heated pull of anticipation inside my stomach, my palms sweaty, and the back of my neck pearled with perspiration. The rules clearly state that every woman should wear her hair up and neatly tied. There's no hiding the slight wetness across my skin with my blonde locks swept back.

Movement at the top of the stairs catches my eye. Two men and a woman in a bright red dress stand against the railing, gazing down at us like they're shepherds of a flock, the kings and queen of an empire.

“As I said before, you do not choose your Elite. The Elite chooses you,” the hostess continues. “There are six Elites here tonight, and as there are so many of you, some of you will not get to go up those stairs tonight, depending on if you get chosen or not.”

My gaze keeps drifting back to the woman and two men, one man in particular. His hands grip the banister before him, his frame large and shoulders broad. Our eyes meet, and for a fraction of a second, neither of us looks away. My skin prickles with awareness, and I hold my breath while resisting the urge to squirm as our gazes remain locked.

Six men are standing around the table, which means he’s not one of them. Who is he? Moreover, who am I to want a complete stranger to notice me? My skin tingles with wanting and not having. He won’t be choosing a girl tonight from his position of dominance at the top of the stairs. A pang of disappointment whirls through my veins, and I wonder why he’s here if not to take part.

Will he just...watch?

The hostess continues to speak, but I don’t hear a word she’s saying until the woman next to me steps out front and makes her way to the table. Her burgundy dress flows around her ankles, her brown hair braided and pinned in a perfect bun.

With bated breath, I watch as she gets onto the tabletop, lying back and spreading her arms out next to her, her knees bent and pulled up. Just like the rest of us, she’s not wearing any panties, one of the rules set out for us. There’s a fleeting moment when my cheeks burn with embarrassment, a shyness creeping up my neck and leaving flushed skin in its wake.

I bite the inside of my cheek as the first Elite steps up, leans down, and yanks her knees apart before diving between her thighs. Her moans weave through the chandelier’s crystals above her as he licks her cunt. Her fingers claw at the table’s edges as she shifts restlessly, and I find myself out of breath as my core starts to throb. It’s the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen, and I am so transfixed I forget I’m in a room filled with strangers.

Her back arches off the mahogany, and I'm sure she's about to come when the man stops and steps aside for another to take his place. The air around us is laden with tension, and I reach behind my neck, gently easing my fingers across my flesh as I watch the men take turns with her, licking her, tasting her, making her whimper as her chest rises and falls with each rapid breath.

The fifth guy stills at the end of the table and just watches her, leaning his head to the side, letting his gaze rake down every inch of her body. Her lips are parted, her cheeks tinted with desire's flush. Finally, he reaches out and strokes the inside of her thigh, his fingers trailing up to her core. A gasp escapes her as he slips a finger into her pussy, and I have to clench my thighs, trying to alleviate the ache throbbing between my legs.

The air is alive with electricity as we all watch him bring his hand to his lips, licking her taste off his fingers. Every nerve ending in my body prickles with a need I've never experienced before, watching him extend his hand, choosing her to be his for the night. It's easy to see the chemistry between them flare up with a fiery heat I can feel from across the room.

My eyes dart up to the man at the top of the stairs. His gaze is pinned on me, and I wonder if he's been looking at me the entire time. A part of me hopes he has.

"You in the white dress." The hostess' voice forces me to look away from him. "Your turn."

Oh, Jesus. Oh, my God. Why did I wear the white dress? I'm not ready for this. I can't do this. I can't...can I?

For a moment, I look back up, the man's head slightly tilted as he studies me. Even behind the mask, his curiosity swims in his eyes, and it's like I can feel his gaze softly caress my skin. It seems to slide over every inch of my body. If I could choose, I would pick him.

My feet are heavy, and my legs are unsteady as I walk toward the table. No. It's not a table. It's an altar where we

offer our bodies to gods dressed in pristine Armani suits. An altar where the gods will decide if you're worthy or not.

Suddenly I'm more afraid of not being chosen rather than nervous about getting tongue-fucked by six strangers in front of everyone here tonight. Not getting chosen means I'm not good enough. Not getting chosen means I fail yet again. It means I'm too pathetic, too weak. It means what I came here to find is something I will never have.

Freedom.

This is a mistake. I can't do this. I'd rather not go through with it than risk not getting chosen, especially with him watching. But, for some reason, I don't want to disappoint him. And that is the piece I can't figure out, why I want so badly to please him.

"Um..." I fist my hands next to me, the silk of my dress feeling like sandpaper against my skin as my nerves start eating at my flesh. "I, ah...I can't—"

"Close your eyes," a voice whispers behind me. The way his authority vibrates down my spine, I know it's *him*. I can feel it. The man whose gaze has been keeping mine captive all night. My body tingles. He's so close his warm breath glides along my neck, causing me to shiver as I try to breathe. I obey instantly as if the option not to doesn't exist. It's something my mind doesn't seem to comprehend, so I close my eyes, listening to the erratic beating of my heart.

My lips part as he settles a hand on my hip, gently guiding me onto the table. I have no idea why or how, but I trust him. I want to. It comes as naturally as breathing. His presence alone gives me the confidence I need to fight my fear and embrace the moment.

The mahogany is cold against my back as I lie down, my shoulder blades pressing against the wood. I don't open my eyes when I feel his breath as he rasps in my ear, "Good girl."

Two words. Two seconds, and my body feels more alive than it ever has. I'm no longer on a table in front of a crowd at a sex club. I'm somewhere else, alone...with him. My perfect

stranger who makes my body sing for him with a single whisper.

My legs tremble when I feel the silk of my dress being brushed up and over my knees. I know what's coming. I just witnessed it with the girl in the burgundy dress. And I'm already writhing, squirming, burning to feel his tongue glide between my legs.

A gentle whimper slips from my lips as he eases my knees apart, smoothing his palms down the inside of my thighs. Smooth, soft fingers caress my skin—the hands of a man who knows what a woman's body wants, what it needs. A man who oozes confidence, his knowledge of sex and seduction seeping from his touch and into my bones. I want to open my eyes and look at him. I want to see his face. Watch his head bob while he licks my cunt. I want his eyes to meet mine while he tongue fucks me to heaven and back. But I don't open my eyes for no reason other than him not giving me permission.

Something soft touches my thighs. His hair? I don't know. But I feel the heat of his breath against my bare sex, and I arch my back with anticipation, every nerve, every cell in my body ignited and needing the ecstasy this man promises to deliver.

He presses his lips against my inner thigh, and my nipples harden against the silk of my dress. I spread my arms, gripping the table's edge, clawing at the wood with my nails, and he's barely fucking touching me. This is insane. I don't know this man. I know nothing about him, but something wild and wicked pulses between us, leaving me wanting to see if it'll incinerate us both or burn me to ash alone.

“Please,” I beg because I'm no longer in control. He is. Will he punish me for voicing my desire? I'm not sure how much of this torture I'll be able to endure before he gives me what I want. What I need. What I have to have.

“Perfection,” he murmurs, and his tongue licks with a white-hot flame through my slit, causing me to moan as I lose myself to the sensation, my body quivering with every slow, leisurely stroke of his tongue from my entrance to my clit.

I'm lost in it, my control long gone. Who am I kidding? I haven't been in control since he whispered into my ear for the first time. My hips buck as I try to press myself harder against his mouth, but his hands firmly wrap around my sides, forcing me to keep still while he tastes me with one torturously gentle brush of his tongue after the other.

I want to reach down and weave my fingers through his hair, but something tells me not to do anything unless he tells me to. My reaction to him, his presence, his touch, is to do nothing but submit. But I want to press myself against him, to actively submit until he forces me with his dominance to scream.

Warm lips wrap around my clit, and I cry out as he sucks hard once, forcing an orgasm to tear through my loins and up my core. Wave after wave of pleasure washes over me, and I come undone on that table in the middle of the room for everyone to see. It's an explosion as every sensation detonates deep inside my core, gripping every muscle, possessing every corner of my body with a pleasure powerful enough to snap me in half.

I'm still trembling, gasping for air, when a hand wraps around my throat and moves to the back of my neck, fingers biting into my flesh as I'm forced to sit up straight.

“Open your eyes.” His voice is a soft purr that resonates with loud demand, leaving me no choice but to submit and conform.

My heart is hammering inside my chest as I open my eyes and stare into his. Cobalt-blue irises take me captive the second his gaze ensnares mine, and I'm hypnotized by eyes that glow like fire and alluring lips that speak silent promises of a thousand sins within the heavy shadow of night. A black mask hides most of his face, but I don't care. It's *him*. Everything I want is in the deep-blue depths of his eyes, and everything I need is tucked away within his touch.

This is why I came to Myth tonight. For him. For this. For the possibility of finally breaking free from the chains that

have been suffocating me for so long. I've been waiting my whole life to feel this alive, this free.

I suck in a breath as he forces me to the table's edge, snaking an arm around my waist and leaning in, so his lips brush against my ear. "Mine."

One

KALLIE

Two weeks earlier

It's pitch black all around me. It's like the shadows swallowed me whole. All I feel is the cold of the concrete wall against my naked back. It makes me shiver, but at least it soothes the pattern of burning welts and broken skin. He was angry tonight. Really angry. *Good.*

I shift onto my knees and slowly crawl across the wooden floors, the planks pressing against the open wounds on my legs. But I hardly feel it anymore. Avoiding physical pain is no longer engraved into my instinct to survive. On the contrary, the pain reminds me I'm alive. My body has adjusted to it and come to understand it. When the pain stops, it's as if the breath of life stops. That's how demented this is.

My fingers touch the cold steel bars and wrap around them. I hold my breath, listening. When I hear it, relief soaks through my soul. She's sleeping. The soft, rhythmic sounds of her breathing make it all worth it. The pain. The torture. The sharp edges of his wrath. Tomorrow, I'll make sure he does it again.

Finally, I can let my guard down, knowing I've survived another day, so I sink into darkness, lying down on my side, curling my knees upward into me. I close my eyes, and my naked body becomes heavy. For a moment, I'm aware of every

ache, cut, and inch of broken skin right before I slowly drift away from this prison. Away from him.

Music starts to blast, shaking the bars, and I jolt awake. Before I can scramble onto my feet, the old wooden door is jerked open, the hinges crying as metal scrapes against metal, a burst of flashing lights slicing through the darkness. My heart instantly lodges in my throat, and I cover my eyes against the harsh, flickering white lights. All I can see is his tall, menacing frame—his shoulders broad and monstrous as evil cuts along the outline of his face. The music is so loud my chest vibrates to the rhythm of the heavy base. I know what it means. The music, the flashing lights. It means the devil wants to play. But he's not looking at me. He's looking at her. He wants to play with her.

No. No. No.

“Kallie?”

The flashing lights don't stop. It's blinding, and the music smothers my screams.

“Kallie? Are you listening to me?”

Another light flashes, and I'm staring out the window in the passenger seat.

“Kallie?”

A hand touches my shoulder, and I jerk away, snapping my gaze to the side only to see Sebastian stare at me with worry. “Are you okay?”

I swallow hard and close my eyes for a second, taking a deep breath, forcing myself out of the nightmare and back to reality. “Yeah. I'm fine.”

“You sure?”

No.

“It seemed like you were somewhere else for a moment.”

“No. I'm here,” I assure him as reality's relief brushes over my shoulders.

“You didn’t even respond to the movie script I told you about. It’s going to be a real breakthrough in crossing over to another category of film.”

The relief is fleeting. Sebastian continues to drone on about his new project, and I am reminded of the distance growing between us since he became the center of attention.

“I’m sorry,” I say, running my fingertips along my temples. “Can we just go home and order takeout?”

“We’re already here.” Sebastian straightens his tie. “Besides, we got all dressed up for tonight, so we might as well make the best of it.”

I swipe at a strand of my vanilla blonde hair, brushing it out of my face. I knew going out was a bad idea. Memories of past nightmares are strongest this time of year—when the Chicago winter is colder, more vicious and cruel, counting another year since my life got stolen from me and I was forced to take another.

I stare out the passenger side window, squinting at the frenzy of flashing lights blending together. They’re like hordes of vultures that caught the scent of dead flesh. How can he stand this? “I just don’t know how they figured out we’d be here.”

“It’s the paparazzi, Kallie. They know everything.”

“This is insane. I mean, how are we even supposed to get inside?”

“I’ll get out first. Wave a few times before opening your door. Hopefully, that will appease them.”

“I hate this,” I mutter, but he’s already out of the car, waving at everyone who flocks closer to get a glimpse of him. Sebastian Stone. The new face on the Hollywood scene. A gallery owner who caught the eye of a film director and became an overnight sensation. My boyfriend. And now a famous movie star. It sounds like the best ‘dreams-do-come-true’ story, but to me, it’s turning into a nightmare. All the attention and eyes on us make my skin crawl. I’m terrified of being in the public eye, of having so much attention on me. I

like my quiet life, obscure from the public, working on my art. Painting is the only time I feel like I can express what is inside me. The canvas for my work is the landscape for my story. The story I've hidden for so many years.

Sebastian waves to the paparazzi, and I anxiously wipe my sweaty palms down the fabric of my black dress, wanting nothing more than to get away from the media frenzy. I wish I could melt boneless into the smooth leather seats, disappear from sight and away from the obnoxious media mob.

My door opens, and Sebastian reaches for me, helping me get out of the car. The photographers are relentless, swarming around us and shoving cameras in our faces. They're shouting at us, asking a thousand questions at once, but all I hear is the fast beating of my heart that drums between my ears. It's violent, terrifying, and I'm holding my breath, hoping I don't get swallowed by the flock of vultures.

"Sebastian Stone. Sebastian, over here!" The constant screaming and yelling are deafening, the frenzy causing me to lose focus, and I feel my hand start to slip from Sebastian's.

No. No. No.

"No one is coming for you."

"No one will save you."

"You're the lost girls who will never be found."

Panic surges. Adrenaline floods my system as fear grips my bones tightly, stealing the air from my lungs. A familiar sense of hopelessness crashes down on me, and all I can do to keep myself from drowning is to try to hold on to Sebastian's hand.

"Don't let go," I whisper to myself. "Don't let go."

Abruptly, I'm yanked to the front, and Sebastian pulls me close against his side, then waves at the crowd, posing for a mob of flashing lights.

"Sebastian, tell us about your new project!"

My fingers tingle with anxiety that begins to circulate from my arms to my neck. *I hate this.* This is the part where I have

to remind myself of a time before our lives became nothing more than glass boxes. A time when what Sebastian and I had was just ours.

Sebastian is a good man. He's kind, gentle, loving. He's never pried deeply into my past or pushed me when I'm unable to answer a question. It's like he knows where to tread lightly and where not to go at all. He's the first and only man who's made me feel safe. But with cameras flashing in my face, I'm not sure for how long that'll last. We've already had more disagreements in the last few weeks than we've had during our entire time together as a couple. I tell him I'm not comfortable with the media attention. He tells me it's the price of fame. I voice my concern about the pressure it's put on our relationship, and he reminds me that the least I can do is support him. When he's feeling ramped up on his newfound fame, he becomes someone I don't know. When the high passes, he is back to being the same sweet guy I've known for so long.

"Sebastian! Sebastian!" The shouts continue as he puts his hand on the small of my back and ushers me into the restaurant.

Relieved breaths exhale quickly from my chest as we are shown to a table set with sparkling silver and candlelight, a bottle of champagne chilling on ice. A strange sense of unease skitters down my spine, the shift from chaos to romance feeling almost...unnatural.

Sebastian, ever the gentleman, pulls my chair out and helps me settle into it before seating himself. I don't notice a server take the champagne, and a yelp is caught in my throat when he pops the cork, causing me to jolt.

Sebastian reaches for my hand, his green eyes staring at me worryingly. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine." I swipe at a strand of hair brushing my cheek. "Just a little rattled from the mayhem outside."

"You'll get used to it."

"I doubt it."

“Just give it time, Kallie.” He lets go of my hand and leans back. “I promise you everything will work out in the end.”

“How do you know that?”

“Have I ever let you down? Have I ever broken a promise to you?”

I shake my head, and his hand tightens over mine, giving me a brief sense of security.

“I want to give you the world, Kal. And all this,” he gestures to the windows where the media is still huddled up on the outside, “all this is me working on doing just that.”

I look down, my stomach knotted and insides coiled. “I don’t want the world,” I whisper, but Sebastian is already distracted, flipping screens on his phone.

The server places our glasses in front of us. Light reflects off the sparkling gold of the champagne and the million tiny effervescent bubbles.

Sebastian thanks the server and clears his throat before settling his gaze on me again. “Kallie, you know how much I love you and how good we are together. You’re my best friend. My partner.”

Something heavy twists in my gut.

“And I can’t imagine my life without you.”

That something twists tighter.

“It’s like I only started living the day you bumped into me outside the gallery.” He snickers. “I remember that day like it was yesterday.”

So do I.

I was leaving the gallery after failing to sell my paintings when I bumped into him. It was storming, the sidewalk one giant puddle of rain. I still remember how my heart sank to the soles of my feet while I watched the Chicago weather ruin my paintings.

I smile at the memory. “You still owe me for the paintings.”

“I bought you dinner.”

“You call hotdogs dinner?”

“It’s the best dinner I’ve ever had.”

“Liar.” I snicker.

“It’s the truth. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Kal.”

“Stop.” I break eye contact and look down at the white silk tablecloth.

“I’m serious. The last two years with you have been the best time of my life so far. And I know it’s only going to get better.”

My heart starts to beat faster, my pulse picking up pace. He hands me the delicate flute of bubbly champagne, and the light from the crystal chandelier above us glints madly into the glass, reflecting back at me my future with Sebastian, and the past I desperately wish would disappear like the bubbles bursting once they reach the surface.

I look up and see him pull a royal-blue velvet box from his jacket pocket, sliding from his chair to get on one knee. My chest seizes tightly, and I mask the panic I feel inside by holding my breath, watching as he opens the lid of the small box, revealing a sparkling princess-cut diamond ring.

Ice spreads from the back of my neck and down my spine, sinking into the pit of my stomach. “Sebastian, what are you doing?” I ask softly, glancing at the people now staring at us.

Oh, God.

“I love you, Kal. With all my heart.” He takes my hand. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to grow old with you.”

No. No, this isn’t happening.

“Kallie Sawyer—”

Not now. Not today.

“Will you marry me?”

I stop breathing.

Green eyes stare up at me with unspoken promise, irises reflecting a version of myself I've honed to perfection for him. For me. For our lives together. But there's another me I've managed to keep chained and hidden, and she's screaming today. She always does when the time of year reminds me of what I really am. Broken. Destroyed. Hopeless and irreparable.

"Will you?" Sebastian urges, and a worried frown settles on his face.

"I...um." I can't get the words out. I can't say anything because what the hell do I say? Do I say yes while internally screaming at myself that I'm not ready and will probably never be ready? Or do I say no and risk losing the one person I've come to trust, the one person I've allowed myself to get close to?

My chest starts to ache, oxygen not reaching my lungs. I can't do this. I can't be this version of myself for the rest of my life...can I?

Lights start flashing from every angle. Dozens of paparazzi swarming by the windows taking pictures of Sebastian on his knee, proposing to me. If I say no, Sebastian Stone's girlfriend's rejection will be on all the tabloids by sunrise tomorrow. The embarrassment will damage a career that's only just started. A career he so desperately wants.

I can't do that to him. I *won't* do that to him.

"Yes," I say softly. "I will...marry...you." My smile is genuine, but I've trained it to be.

My hand shakes as he slips the ring onto my finger. It takes no more than three seconds, yet it's long enough to have my entire future flash before my eyes. A future made of deception and glass. A life of pretend that could shatter at any moment.

Panic joins the ice in my gut.

"It's perfect," he says as he puts the ring into place, looking at me as he straightens. "The perfect fit...just like us."

My heart is heavy inside my chest as he kisses me, his lips fused to mine as if it seals the promise of a future together. The real me screams behind the bars I locked her in, and I wonder how long I'll be able to silence her before this stifling perfection of a life with Sebastian kills me.

Two

GABRIEL

“NICOLI, you have got to stop worrying about this delivery. Everything has been handled,” I reassure him. Nicoli is the twin brother of Alexius Del Rossa, boss of the Dark Sovereign. A society of men who rule half the fucking world. “We’ve accounted for every detail.”

My relationship with the Dark Sovereign is nothing but business. My connection to Club Myth is pure pleasure. It’s one of the most elite adult clubs in the city, and my membership takes a big chunk out of my bank account every month.

On the business side, it’s simple. Whenever they have a shipment coming in, it comes through Sterling Shipping—a company I own, one I’ve managed to build from the ground up, and one I’m able to keep thanks to the Dark Sovereign name tied to it. There’s a lot of power tied to the Del Rossa name.

I look down from the floor-to-ceiling interior window of my office, watching one of my secretaries deal with the customs agent. Victoria Evans—the fucking pain in my ass that just won’t go away. Sauntering in here, demanding attention with every click of her heel, has become her new pastime. She wears her signature skin-tight pencil skirt the same way she carries her authority—with confidence. Beautiful, sexy, and perfectly fuckable...if she weren’t so goddamn predictable.

“Gabriel, it’s not that I don’t trust you,” Nicoli says through the receiver, “but with the lockdown on shipments and

customs practically sniffing our asses, I won't relax until we have this one signed off and the cargo situated." I can practically hear his jaw clench.

"Relax, Nicoli. I'm telling you, this is nothing to worry about. I have it all under control. Trust me. Have I ever let you down?"

"Not yet."

I smirk. "I have it all under control. Now, I have to go. I have a customs agent to appease." I hang up and slip my phone into my pocket, watching as Victoria crosses her arms, clearly unimpressed by my secretary, Denise. That makes me smile. Denise is well-trained and knows how to respond to any customs agent looking for a reason to fuck us in the ass. I know whatever she's saying to Victoria right now, her response is appropriate. Between the two of us, we'll make sure the uptight pencil skirt will leave this building without a single reason to piss on my business. And that better be soon. She's already overstayed her welcome. I've been avoiding her for the last three days, but she's still fucking hovering, making her presence known. She won't leave until she gets what she came for.

Me.

Victoria glances up to my office window, and our gazes lock for no more than two seconds before I turn my back on her, walking across the carpeted floor to my desk and taking a seat.

I don't have time to play games today. I have other shit to worry about, like the shipment Nicoli has been all up in my ass over. This shipment is special. These always are.

We have girls coming in, victims of being trafficked, rescued by the Dark Sovereign. The Del Rossa family takes a personal interest in all their girls, especially those plucked out of the black market—they make for the most loyal type. But not every rescue is welcomed into the Dark Sovereign world. This is where I come in. I have a keen eye for spotting the best candidates. I ensure every new face is hand selected, screened, and ready to prove their loyalty. The women at Myth

are more than employees. They are part of a secret society, a place where fantasies and sin rule the night. An elite adult club so exclusive and discreet most can only whisper rumors of its existence.

Membership is granted only to those who truly understand the ethos of this rarified world. Money, power, loyalty, and the utmost discretion will give you access to this hallowed place of pleasure.

Rumors tend to spread lies, like the ones that say women at Myth are held prisoner, their bodies sold to the highest bidder against their will. But the girls we bring in are more than aware of what the position entails, and they covet the opportunity to be a part of it because Dark Sovereign girls are treated like fucking royalty.

There's a knock on my office door, but it gets flung open before I can speak.

"Your secretary said you were out." Davian Stark, who I consider the closest thing I have to a best friend, and also the contract killer to the Dark Sovereign, walks in, shutting the door behind him. "I knew she was lying."

"She knew you wouldn't believe her."

"She's a real wiseass, that one. You trained her well." Davian takes a seat in front of me. "I've been trying to call you all morning."

"It's been a day," I say, leaning back in my chair.

"That's exactly why we need one of our get-togethers." And by 'get-togethers,' he means our exclusive sex parties.

Like me, Davian is one of the Elite seven—as we're called—who have the privilege of hosting a secret gathering at Myth once a month on a night when the club's doors are closed for business to other members. It's one night when we parade our filthy depravities from behind masked faces. A night where inhibitions don't exist, and boundaries are broken by our vetted tastes for the forbidden.

"I'm in desperate need of a visit to that oval table, Gabriel," he says, pulling a hand through his dark-blond hair.

“It’s been too long.”

It sure as fuck has. “Two weeks from Sunday.”

“Two weeks?” He rolls his green eyes, rubbing a hand along the back of his neck. “Right now, that seems like the equivalent of two fucking years.”

“Why so tense?” I ask, rocking on my chair as I lean back.

He exhales loudly. “Let’s just say you’re having a day. I’m having a fucking month.”

“Work?”

“Isn’t it always?”

“You don’t have to wait two weeks, Davian. Just go to Myth and participate in its day-to-day pleasures as all the other members do.”

He gives me a look that questions my suggestion. “I’d rather not be bored to death with a simple blowjob, fuck you very much.”

I shake my head and chuckle in amusement, knowing all too well that what others find erotic and exciting, Davian Stark finds uninspiring and tedious.

“Then you’ll have to wait two weeks.” I state the obvious.

“You sure they won’t cancel on us again for God knows what reason?”

“They’re the Del Rossas, Davian. They can do whatever the fuck they want.” I’ve worked with the brothers for years, enjoyed the perks of this position and the power it brings. After Vincenzo Del Rossa’s death, their father, there’s been a shift in the hierarchy. Alexius took over from his father as ruler of the Dark Sovereign dynasty—a ruthless man who will not be fucked with. But since he’s taken a wife, he has been a silent entity regarding Myth, leaving Nicoli, his twin, to oversee the club business. Yet Alexius has hinted at bringing his beautiful bride to one of our...*events*. Rumor has it they have a taste for the thrill of watching...and being watched.

“Fine,” Davian says and stands. “But if they cancel this time, I’m fucking Denise.”

“Why would you want to fuck my secretary?”

“Because I don’t know where the fuck your mother is.”

I burst out laughing, and a grin sneaks up on Davian’s cocky expression.

“You have time for lunch?” He buttons his navy-blue suit jacket just as Denise knocks on the door, peeking inside.

“Victoria would like to see you, sir.”

“Of course she would.” I let out a sigh and shake my head at Davian. “Maybe some other time.”

“I’m fucking your secretary,” Davian mouths silently before stalking out of my office.

I gesture at Denise to let Victoria in.

“Mr. King,” she greets as she sashays in, the click of her black stilettos muted by the carpet.

I stand and nod at Denise to close the door behind her.

My gaze meets Victoria’s, and I already know what’s on her mind as she flips her long hair over her shoulder. It’s all there in her hazel-colored eyes as her gaze rakes down my body—the desire to be wined, dined, and fucked. Too bad for her, I don’t do drinks, I don’t do dates. But I do fuck.

“I trust Denise has given you everything you need,” I say after she takes a seat across from me.

“Denise has been a great help.” The tone in her voice borders on sarcasm.

“That’s good to hear. So, I take it you’re done, then?”

“No. Far from it.” The way she settles back in the chair, crossing her legs with a slow, calculated move, taking up too much fucking space in my goddamn office irks the shit out of me. Contrary to what she might think, she’s not in control here. This is my domain. My fucking playground. Loss of control is unacceptable in my professional and personal life.

I hold eye contact without blinking. No expression or emotion present, the motherfucking alpha of all poker faces. “Is there something else you need from me, Victoria? I really am busy.”

She smirks, gliding her fingers down her sleek hair. “I thought you and I could have lunch. Discuss some of your latest imports.”

“I’m a busy man. I don’t have time for lunch.”

“Oh, come on. Surely you can cut an hour from your schedule. For me.” She bats her fake eyelashes while pouting her plump, cherry-red lips. This woman is a walking cliché in designer heels.

“I’m sorry, not—”

I catch a glimpse of the newspaper Denise brought over with my coffee this morning.

NEW HOLLYWOOD SENSATION, SEBASTIAN STONE, ENGAGED TO MYSTERY WOMAN!

IN THE PICTURE is a man kneeling before said mystery woman, her wispy blonde hair floating over her shoulders, shielding her face from the camera and the world.

Ignoring Victoria sitting across from me, I grab the paper and flip to the article, scanning the column. My knuckles turn white as I clutch the paper, reading about Sebastian Stone’s horrible upbringing. About a son growing up without a father. The slimy journalist paints a picture of a neglected boy, how his father wanted no part of his life. An absentee dad.

“What do you say, Gabriel? Shall we continue our business over lunch? Or is there something in that paper you find more interesting?” Her tone is sharply teasing, and I simply snarl her way.

“I’m sorry, Miss Evans.” I stand and grab my suit jacket, rounding the desk. “But I have an urgent matter to attend to.”

“Yeah, like what?” she calls after me as I stomp toward my office door.

“Like going to see my son.”

Three

“PEONIES OR TULIPS?”

I’m staring at the pictures in front of me, a knot in my stomach growing by the second while I silently count how many albums we’ve sifted through for hours. The pressure to make a decision is palpable, and with each album, the choices become more delicate.

Sebastian’s grandmother, Elenor Stone, suddenly pulls out an album and slides it toward me. “Peonies,” she says firmly, pointing to the bouquet of red blooms. “Nothing screams true love like red.”

“If I may,” Jillian, the wedding planner, says as she opens another photo album. “This will be a spring wedding, so I’d suggest maybe lavender and rich greens. We can add some darker shades of purple and bright pops of yellow to create that beautiful spring atmosphere.”

“I don’t know about yellow.” Elenor frowns, staring at the photograph with disapproval written all over her forehead. “I still think red is the best choice. It’s the classic color of love—one that is timeless and never goes out of season.”

I peek at Sebastian, typing away on his phone. He’s been on it since we arrived here. He’s been on it non-stop for the last couple of weeks. If it’s not his phone, it’s his laptop. If he’s not on any electronics, he’s off to early-morning meetings and late-night rehearsals. And when we finally manage to have some time together, all he talks about is his new career in something I never thought he’d be interested in. Fame.

God, I miss the time when it was just us and the simple days we spent at the art gallery his grandparents started, only to hand over the reins to Sebastian. Now, it's a place that has become an afterthought since he exploded onto the Hollywood scene.

I touch his elbow gently. "Sebastian, what do you think?" It's a ploy to get his attention because I don't know how much longer I'll be able to handle his grandmother alone.

Without looking up from his phone screen, he says, "Whatever you like, sweetheart."

Seriously?

"What about this, Kallie?" Elenor points to an image of a bouquet of red roses and violets intermingled with tiny baby's breath and large pieces of fern. It's big, bulky, bold, and just not my style at all, and I'm wondering how the hell I'm going to tell my future grandmother-in-law that I don't want this big, lavish wedding she's planning. And I sure as hell don't want red roses. But before I can put the words together, another picture catches my eye in one of the other albums strewn across the dining table. I reach for it.

"These are beautiful."

"Oh, those are sweet peas. A very popular wedding flower," Jillian says as she sips her tea. "Their petals are wonderfully ruffly and have a lovely fragrance. A cluster of sweet peas with a silk or lace ribbon will make for a stunning feminine bridal bouquet."

"I love it. I think I want these."

"You think?" Elenor scoffs. "My dear, this is your wedding day. You can't *think*. You have to know. You're marrying my grandson, Kallie. This wedding will be front-page news all over the world. Do you really want something as—" she pulls up her nose in disgust "—simple as sweet peas?"

"I guess not," I mutter, pushing the album away. Within the first twenty minutes of her planning party, I knew trying to reason with her was as futile as trying to predict the weather. She's determined to turn Sebastian's and my wedding into the

soiree of the season and to keep face with her so-called friends at the country club.

God, this is suffocating.

“Would you excuse me? I need some fresh air.” I stand, purposely bumping my knee against Sebastian to get his attention. When he looks up, I silently gesture for him to walk with me.

“It would be awesome if you could actually be present,” I mutter.

“What do you mean? I’m here, aren’t I?”

We step outside on the wraparound porch of his grandparents’ large and lavish home. A double-story Victorian-style house, its walls a muted yellow with white trim, and a large fountain in the center of the circled driveway. A lack of money is not a problem they struggle with.

The lawn is no longer hidden beneath a blanket of snow, but the cold weather has stunted the growth of the grass, dotted white tips set like uneven snowflakes. Yet, it’s greener than the last time we were here. A sign that winter is fast coming to an end. Too fast.

A gentle breeze rustles through the trees, and I clutch my coat tighter to ward off the chill. “Sebastian, being on your phone the entire time does not qualify as you being here. You might as well not be.”

“I have urgent emails that need my attention, Kallie. Besides, you have my grandmother helping you with the wedding plans.”

“Helping?” My eyes widen. “She’s not helping, Sebastian. She’s taking over.”

“Oh, my God. Let’s not do this today. I have too much on my plate right now to—”

“That’s an easy problem to fix,” I interrupt.

“How?”

I lick my lips and tighten my hold on my jacket collar. “By going back to how things were...before.”

“Before what?” He takes a step closer. “Before I got the biggest break of my life? Before I finally found something that I’m good at? Something I achieved on my own? Something that wasn’t handed to me by my grandparents? This makes me happy, Kallie.”

“There was a time that I made you happy,” I say, a sense of longing lodged in my chest.

“Jesus, Kallie.” He rubs the back of his neck, shifting from one leg to another. “Okay, listen. I know this adjustment isn’t coming easy for you. I understand that. Just try.”

“I am trying.”

“Try harder,” he snaps, his voice razor-sharp.

This is the part I’ve come to hate. The part where it feels like I no longer know him. I don’t know this man whose words have become caustic, whose tone is laced with impatience whenever he talks to me. This man who suddenly covets fame more than he does me.

I square my shoulders, slipping my hands in my coat pockets, clenching my jaw as I bite back tears. “I am trying, Sebastian. The fact that I’m here sitting at a table and listening to your grandmother and a stranger plan my wedding is proof of that.”

“I know.” He inhales deeply, his breath an icy mist in the breeze. “I know you are.” He pulls my hands out of my pockets and clutches them tight. “My grandmother can be overbearing at times. She just wants this wedding to be perfect.”

“To whose standards?”

“Kallie, please. Just let her do this. Besides, you said it yourself. You don’t want to spend countless hours planning this wedding. So, let her do it.”

“I don’t want a big wedding, Sebastian. Your grandmother is turning this into the event of the year. Hiring a wedding

planner. Picking venue options that can host three hundred people and more. Do we even know that many people?”

“Is everything okay out here?” Elenor’s voice interrupts our conversation as she steps out on the porch, her black low-heeled shoes clicking across the deck.

“Everything’s fine, Grandma,” Sebastian replies, but then I let go of his hands and turn to face her.

“I was just telling Sebastian—”

“Kallie,” he warns, but I ignore him.

”—how much I’d prefer a small wedding. Something more intimate. Maybe a ceremony on the beach in June.” *Or July. Next year. Or even better, the year after that.*

“Darling Kallie,” she starts, but her tone is more condescending than sincere, “save your intimate moments for the wedding night. This will be the soiree of the season. We must invite family, friends, and of course, all of Sebastian’s team and colleagues. The guest list is quite large, which is why The Drake Hotel would be perfect for the occasion. The media attention will be massive. Every detail must be perfect, and I’ll ensure it is.”

Her words end with the finality of a judge’s gavel. Elenor Stone is a formidable female on the best day. Cold eyes. Stern expression. And with all the wedding planning, she has turned into a bitch on wheels whose opinion is not an opinion at all. It’s law. Sebastian has always deferred to her, constantly trying to please and gain her approval. That’s why we hardly spend any time with her because I always manage to find a reason to avoid her. Unfortunately, there’s no getting out of planning this wedding with her. I have no one else to help me fight my battles in this wedding war. I don’t have any family left. I’m alone in the world.

Oh, God, what if the media finds out about my family? About why I have no one left.

Elenor walks up to Sebastian, hooking her hand in the crook of his elbow—a blatant display of ownership. That’s

what he is to her, something she owns even though I'm the one wearing the diamond ring.

"Honey, tell your bride-to-be that she has nothing to worry about. I have it all under control. Oh, that reminds me," she says with a smile as fake as entertainment news, "we need to get started on your wedding gown. Custom-made, of course. What day are you free, darling?"

"I guess there's no use in saying I want a simple dress. Flowers in my hair instead of a veil."

"Simple?" she sputters. "You're marrying my grandson, a famous actor. Nothing about your wedding or your lives together will ever be simple."

That's the truth bomb I've been trying my best to avoid. Elenor might be dictatorial, but she's right about one thing. Our lives won't ever be simple. Not like it was.

"Grandma," Sebastian starts, clearing his throat, "at least let Kallie pick her own dress."

"Of course, she can pick her own dress, honey." She shoots me a pointed stare. "As long as it's an alabaster ballgown with a cathedral-length train. Now," she steps away from Sebastian, clasping her hands together, "if you'll excuse me, Jillian and I have to decide on the flowers."

"Unbelievable," I whisper as Elenor walks back into the house.

"Hey," Sebastian steps closer, brushing his hands over my shoulders, "if it's any consolation, I think you'll look amazing in an alabaster ballgown."

"Trying to take control of my own wedding feels like an uphill battle against your grandmother's iron will."

He snickers, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "If anyone can do it, you can."

"I don't know about that."

An old, familiar feeling starts to creep up in my bones, clawing through me. I have to clench my fingers into my palm so tight I can feel the nails pressing sharply into my skin.

Immediately, I feel more at ease as the little bites of pain in my palms soothe my anxiety. It's always this way. The pain helps me to center myself.

“I, um...”

Sebastian's phone rings, and it's like he instantly slips away from me, his focus no longer on us. Our wedding.

“Stone,” he says into the phone. “Yeah. Just hold on a sec.” He places his hand over the receiver. “I have to take this. Just go in there and try to compromise with my grandmother. My mother never got married, so this is her making up for that.” He gives me a chaste kiss on the cheek and stomps off in the other direction.

This is not what I want. This isn't me. But I no longer know who the real me is. Maybe that means I don't really know what I want, either. Perhaps I should just let Elenor plan this entire wedding how she wants to. All I'll need to do is show up.

It takes me another ten minutes of fresh air before I gather the nerve to enter the lion's den. I'm three feet from the dining room when I hear Elenor and Jillian's asinine babbling about flowers and dresses. I clench my fists tighter, my nails digging deeper into my palms. I can't do this. Not today. I have to get out of here, and I am suddenly grateful for Dr. Trudeau and her insisting I continue to see her even though it's been years.

I contemplate whether I should excuse myself from this soul-sucking wedding planning, but instead, I turn on my heel and rush out of the house. It's something I've become really good at over the years...running from my problems.

Four

KALLIE

I CAN HEAR HER SCREAMS. The sound of his malicious laughter as she begs him for mercy—something I know he won't give. There's no telling how long it's been since we woke up in this place, but I know kindness won't be something we'll get from him.

The wall is cold and wet behind my naked back. I have no idea where the water comes from. But judging by the vile stench, it's sewage. The stink of urine and feces had me gagging and vomiting for days when all this started. Now I hardly smell it anymore.

I suck in a labored breath when her screams reach their highest pitch. My imagination runs wild with nightmarish images and horrific possibilities that have now become our reality. I know he's hurting her. That's what he does. Hurt us.

I want to call out to her, break through these steel bars keeping us apart, and save her. Comfort her. Whisper that everything is going to be okay. That I'll keep her safe. That we'll both make it through this.

I want to tell her lies.

But instead, I'm trapped here, forced to listen to her pain. All I can do is keep my head down, and my knees squeezed against my chest, drown in the guilt of not being able to protect her from him, and pray she survives this night...only for him to come again tomorrow.

He always comes back to torment us like a nightmare from which there is no waking. Hopefully, tomorrow he'll take me

instead.

The floor is cold beneath my palm, the wood rough and unrelenting as my nails claw at the planks in a desperate attempt to distract myself. My pain used to drown out the sound of her, but it no longer does. It's as if my body has become immune to agony, yet my soul weakens against the screams of her torment. The grooves are stained with my blood, and I don't feel the splinters underneath my fingernails. I'm frozen in time, chained and gagged, stuck in this hell where the devil uses her cries to torture me.

I have to do more. I have to try harder. Make him look past her and see me. Hurt me so I can protect her.

A violent thud echoes off the walls, and her cries stop, followed by a sickening silence.

"No," I whisper. "God, no. Please." I'm on my knees, crawling toward the steel bars, my bloodied fingers wrapping around them. The lump in my throat stops the dank air from reaching my lungs, my tears running like acid down my cheeks, eating away at my flesh. I don't feel the bruises, the wounds, the deep throbbing ache between my legs. But I feel the teardrops. It's a kind of agony I can't describe.

The terror of his footsteps pounding against the floor reverberates like an icy chill coursing through my veins. The door to her cell opens, and my heart is torn from my chest as I watch him toss her eerily still body into the corner of her prison.

"No. No. No. No. What did you do to her?" I scream. "What the fuck did you do to her?" The steel bars rattle as I shake and pull at them, no longer a prisoner but a rabid animal.

He doesn't move. It's like he's not even breathing. Do monsters need air?

Abruptly, his head snaps in my direction, leaning to the side as he stares at me, a sickening countenance radiating off him as he takes a step.

Another.

And another.

Until he's standing right in front of me.

I don't fear him. Not right now. Not while the sight of her lifeless body fuels my hate.

"I'm going to kill you," I bite out, spit shooting from my lips. "I'm going to break out of here, and then I'm going to kill you. I fucking swear it."

Still, he says nothing. Not a single fucking word. He stares at me as if I'm a mouse in a cage. A trapped rodent he could close his fist around and squeeze until my body would burst in his palm.

"Is she...is she alive?"

Please say yes.

Please say she's still breathing.

"Tell me. Is she alive? Did you kill her?"

I can't see his face. His expression. But his silence is screaming.

"Please, please, please," I beg, my tears mixing with snot and lapping down my lips. "Tell me she's still alive."

He makes this hissing sound, and I watch with bated breath as he reaches through the bars. I know better than to wince or to try to jerk or scramble away. So I let him weave his filthy fingers through my dirty hair, my body trembling as I try to bite back tears. There is nothing he can do to me that will hurt more than the idea of her being dead. Do your worst.

I smell blood. I know it's hers. I smell cum, too. His. Vile. Disgusting. Words don't come close to describing the giant black hole this man is.

"Is she okay? Is she alive?" I ask, my lips quivering.

His grip on my hair tightens. "Yes."

Relief crushes me, and my body sinks away in it. "Thank God."

"Not God," he spits out. "Me."

My head is jerked forward so hard I'm sure my neck would snap. My face is slammed into the bars. And then...nothing.

DR. TRUDEAUX'S office smells like incense, but not the overpowering kind. It's light, pleasant.

Chamomile.

I glance at the painting on the wall. "That's new," I say, studying the light pastel pinks of a sunset over an ocean of blue, waves breaking on the sand that reflects the soft tones.

"It is. I thought it was time for a change."

"Do your patients like change?"

She smiles, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "That's why I start with one thing at a time. A painting now. A scatter cushion next week. A new coffee mug the week after that."

"Wise," I remark.

Her office is spacious, simplistic with light, powder-blue walls and minimal furniture. I like it. Comfort isn't something I find among clutter and cramped spaces.

"You seem distracted," she says, slanting her head. I've seen countless therapists, and she's the only one who doesn't make me feel like she's dissecting my soul whenever she looks at me.

I twirl the engagement ring around my finger. Of course, she notices.

"You got engaged?"

I pull the sleeve of my jersey over my hand. "Yeah."

"It's exciting news." She pauses. "Isn't it?"

"I guess." The blue grass guppies in the fishbowl on her desk seem more interesting than discussing my engagement.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. I don't know. Maybe."

“Have you started planning the wedding?”

“Me? No. Sebastian’s grandmother, yes. I’m pretty sure she’ll walk down the aisle for me if I give her a chance.”

She snickers and crosses her legs. “Mothers tend to get carried away with weddings. In your case, grandmothers.”

I glance at the painting again, studying the colors, mesmerized by how the blue and pinks bleed together. Isn’t that what love is supposed to be? Two different colors fusing and creating something perfectly beautiful?

“I’m not sure I did the right thing,” I say absentmindedly, admiring the delicate technique of every brush stroke on the canvas.

“Are you referring to—”

“Getting engaged to Sebastian, yes.”

“Then why did you?”

I shrug, not entirely sure why I did what I did. Maybe I can blame the romantic ambiance. Or the champagne. Or the flash mob outside the window that night. Perhaps it was the pressure of having all those eyes on us, watching us, waiting for me to say yes. So, I said yes.

“You don’t want to marry Sebastian?” she asks, placing her elbow on the armrest.

“I don’t know.”

“You have doubts?”

“Yes.”

“Have you spoken to Sebastian about your doubts over the engagement?”

“Oh...um.” I pull my feet underneath me on the sage-colored couch, settling back. “No. I haven’t had the chance to. He’s been...busy.” I say the word like it’s a curse. Maybe it is.

“Do you love him, Kallie?”

“That depends.” I stare at the fishbowl again.

“On what?”

“What is love?” I finally look at her. “Is it the warmth you get in your heart when you’re with that person? The longing you feel when you’re apart, and you can’t get him out of your mind?”

“I suppose.” She shrugs one shoulder.

“Is it the feeling of not being able to eat because you feel like you can live off love alone? To not be able to sleep because no dream can compare or come close to being as amazing as the reality you’re living right now?”

I walk over to the painting, crossing my arms and staring at the tiny black birds flying over the ocean. “Or is it safety? Contentment. Finding something far better than you know you deserve, so you hold on to it because you can’t go back to a world where you’re all alone?”

A tear runs down my cheek, and I quickly swipe it away then turn and face her. “I do love him. I guess.”

Dr. Trudeau presses her lips together in a sympathetic half-smile. “Okay, let’s reroute for a moment.”

I take a seat across from her.

“Last time you were here, you mentioned you’ve been having thoughts of self-harm again.”

“Cutting,” I say, calling it what it is.

“Cutting,” she repeats. “And we spoke about you trying meditation and deep breathing exercises to get you through these anxiety bouts? Has it helped?”

“Well, I haven’t been cutting myself.”

“So, it’s helping?”

I crank my neck from side to side. “I can’t say for sure since I haven’t had time to take a decent breath since the engagement, let alone breathing exercises.”

“Kallie,” she urges me to look at her, “I strongly encourage you to take some time daily to do these. Whenever you feel like succumbing to your doubts, take a deep breath and remind

yourself of your inner power. Nobody can make decisions for you but you. Take control of your life.”

“With all due respect, these breathing exercises don’t do anything but make me more anxious. Then I start to have an anxiety attack because I don’t think I’m friggin’ breathing right. It just makes it worse.”

“The most effective techniques are those that you make a daily habit of and concentrate on when anxious feelings start to outweigh rational thought. You know that self-harm isn’t going to help you. You’re simply punishing your body to distract from the inner pain. You must find a way to articulate these feelings without causing physical harm to yourself.”

“I know that, Doctor. I also know that cutting my skin open doesn’t help. I’ve tried it before, remember? Making myself bleed doesn’t silence the reminders of what happened to me.”

“Yet you still feel the need to do it sometimes.”

I shrug, toying with the hem of my sleeve. “There has always been a piece of me that feels like my control over pain would erase the madness and the memories. But in the end, it doesn’t. Nothing does.”

“Kallie, the results of sexual trauma are long-lasting. And there is a piece of you, a large piece, that isn’t really living in the present because you’re still reliving the past. Do you think that’s the reason you’re having doubts about Sebastian and this engagement?”

“What? No.”

“Kallie.” She leans forward in her seat. “It’s possible this engagement is forcing you to realize your life is moving on. And you’re finding it difficult because that would mean you have to let go of the past, and your survivor’s guilt isn’t allowing you to.”

Survivor’s guilt. The affliction that’s kept me in a prison far worse than the one I rotted in six years ago.

“It’s not your fault, Kallie,” Dr. Trudeau says, keeping her soft gaze etched on me. “And you and I both know you

would switch places with her if you could.”

“Yeah.” I struggle to keep the tears at bay and shift in my seat as discomfort crawls up my spine. “I would take her place in a heartbeat.”

“I know. But you can’t. What you can do is try to live your life. For both you...and her.”

“I want to. I really do,” I say, wiping the tears with the back of my hand. “But it’s like there’s something inside me that’s empty, a big, gaping kind of empty. Sebastian is a good man, and our relationship has been so...easy from day one. I know I should want this. I shouldn’t have any doubts at all. That would make me normal, right? If I wanted the white picket fence, the American dream. That’s normal.” I scoff. “Normal. What is fucking normal? It’s all bullshit. It’s all fucking bullshit!” I yell, swiping my palms heavily down my face. I want to scream. I want to tear out of my skin and scream until my head explodes.

“Just because it’s natural and normal for other couples doesn’t mean the same normal applies to you. You know that. We’ve discussed it often, how you have to go your own way. The way that feels true for you.” She settles back in her seat, crossing her legs again, and I’m leaning my head back, trying to fucking breathe.

“Let’s talk about intimacy for a moment,” she starts. “I know it took you a long time, understandably, to trust Sebastian when it comes to sex. Even after years of being together, it can still be challenging at times because recovering from traumatic events as you have endured is a lifelong process. How is that going?”

The crawling sensation up my spine worsens, so I stand and walk across the plush carpet barefoot since all of Dr. Trudeau’s patients have to leave their shoes by the door. Being comfortable and all that.

I pour myself some water, the decanter clinking against the glass. My throat is dry, and talking about my sex life with Sebastian will worsen it.

“We get along fine, I guess.”

“You guess?”

I shrug, and she takes off her glasses, placing them on the coffee table in front of her.

“Are you satisfied sexually?”

Her questions penetrate my thoughts, and I wonder if I know what satisfied even means. For a long time, I had to detach myself mentally from any form of physical contact. It took me a long time to trust Sebastian in that way. He was so patient with me. Every time we tried to do it, the past would intrude and slide right between my legs in the form of memories that cut off my air and killed any hope of pleasure. Sebastian never asked questions. Never pried. But he knew I had a reason.

Finally, after the first time Sebastian and I had sex, I thought I had won that battle. I had slayed at least one demon. But I was wrong. I didn't slay the monster. I simply forced him to find another way to torture me.

As if Dr. Trudeau can feel my anxiety rising, she says, “This is a safe space, Kallie. There are no rights or wrongs here. You can talk freely.”

I clear my throat then take a deep inhale, searching for the right words. “Sometimes, when Sebastian and I have sex—” I swallow hard. “I have this overwhelming urge for him to...” I can't say it.

“To what?” She urges me to continue.

How do I say this out loud? How does someone like me even think about something like this?

“Kallie?”

“Hurt me,” I blurt before taking a gulp of water. I wipe my palm over my mouth, and without looking at her, I continue, “Sometimes I want Sebastian...to hurt me.”

The silence is deafening, and for a moment, I contemplate escaping through the window of this seven-story building

because I just managed to shock my therapist into not saying a fucking word. Can I drown myself in a glass of water?

I slam the glass down on the table. “It’s crazy, right? Me. Wanting a man to hurt me.”

“It’s not crazy.”

“It sure sounds crazy.”

“You crave pain. Some part of you probably needs it.”

“That makes me crazy,” I mutter, plopping down on the couch. “What kind of person needs pain? Craves it? Especially after what I’ve been through.”

“You’ll be surprised. People with past trauma like yours either spend their time running from pain or find themselves searching for it.”

“That. Sounds. Insane.”

“Believe me, it’s more common than you think.” She purses her lips, her eyes slanted inward for a second before she shifts in her seat. “Kallie, what I’m about to suggest is completely off the record. And it most definitely does not come from a medical standpoint whatsoever.”

I cock a brow. “Sounds ominous. How exciting.”

“But I need you to promise me this stays between us.”

“O...kay.”

She leans forward like she’s about to tell me her biggest secret in a room full of people who might be able to hear what she’s about to say. “I have a friend who could help you with this. A therapy of sorts.”

“It’s the ‘of sorts’ part that’s kind of scaring me right now,” I say, grabbing a light yellow scatter cushion and putting it on my lap as I watch her walk to her desk, pulling a card from her top drawer.

She hands it to me. “I think this is worth a shot.”

“What is?” I stare questioningly at the black card with nothing more than a gold and silver logo that looks like a D

and S on the front and a phone number on the back.

“It’s a club. An adult club.”

“You mean a sex club?”

She shakes her head. “Not just a sex club. I just...I think you might find what you’re looking for here. And if not, I think it’s a great place to start looking, anyway. Send a text to the number on the back when you’re ready. Make sure you mention my name when you do. And don’t mention this to anyone.” Her eyes turn dark, her expression every shade of serious. “To the outside world, this place doesn’t exist.”



HOURS LATER, I walk up to the front door of the house I’ve shared with Sebastian for the last eighteen months. It’s the first place I was able to call home after I entered society a lost, broken girl. But, lately, there’s a new weight on my shoulders whenever I slip my key into the lock.

After leaving my therapist’s office, my mind has been a whirlpool of thoughts. Usually, I leave there with a prescription. Today I left with a referral...to a sex club.

I slip my hand in my coat pocket, sliding my fingers along the smooth edges of the business card. She’s wrong. I won’t find what I’m looking for there. I don’t even know what I’m looking for. Pain? Agony? Misery? God, what’s happening to me?

By the time I got out of the cab in front of the house, I had made up my mind. I want to be with Sebastian. I love him...or whatever my idea of love is. I’ll never be normal. I know that. But with Sebastian, I’m as normal as I will ever be. And if it’s pain I need, Sebastian is the one I trust enough to give it to me.

I walk into the apartment, the lights glowing across the vernal decor in soothing blues and whites. Adrenaline pumps through my veins as I make a straight line for the hallway.

Sebastian is leaning against the wall by the kitchen, his arms folded across his massive chest. I stop in front of him, waiting for him to say something. He gives me that crooked grin that makes me feel like I could sink into oblivion. He speaks, his voice low and steady. “Where have you been?”

“I took a walk, trying to find inspiration for my paintings.”

“You okay?” He cups my cheeks, fingers brushing hair out of my face.

“Yeah,” I say with a smile. “I’m okay.”

“I’ve been thinking about my grandmother taking over—”

I push myself up on my toes and kiss him. His lips are warm. Familiar. Comforting. My comfort zone.

He envelops me in his arms, cradling me close. I feel the strength of his body against me, and all my anxieties slip away. With Sebastian’s embrace wrapping me tightly, I feel safe and secure. There’s a fleeting thought that pops into my head. *Don’t you want to feel more?*

No.

No. This is enough.

It has to be.

I close my eyes and breathe in his scent while savoring his taste on my tongue. Warmth emanates from him, and that’s what I’m looking for, isn’t it? Safety to trust, comfort to feel home, and affection to feel cherished.

He pulls away, leaving me somewhat breathless as he winds up my skirt until it’s bunched around my hips. I have no desire to escape; I just want to melt into him. His lips curve into a gentle smile. “I take it you found the inspiration you were looking for?”

“I think I did.”

“That’s great news... for me.” He sweeps me up in his arms, and I yelp as he places me on the kitchen counter, his lips growing desperate against mine. Our kiss deepens as his hands drag my coat down my shoulders. I take his shirt

between my fingers and pull it over his head, separating our lips for no more than a second, only to lock again in a fiery kiss.

His fingers make quick work of the white buttons of my blouse, and he cups my breast, moaning against my mouth, flexing his hips as he moves between my legs.

I gasp and arch my back, loving how his skin feels against mine. I want more. I need more.

“Sebastian,” I murmur as he laces kisses down the side of my neck. “I need you.”

“I got you, baby.” He flexes, and I let out a breath, feeling his hard cock brush against my heat. I wonder what it’s like at a sex club. Is it dark and ominous inside? Does it smell like sex? Do the men and women walk around naked? Can you hear the bite of leather into flesh? Do they scream, the women who revel in being dominated?

God. The thought of it sends a new type of heat through my veins, and I moan, reaching between us as I start unbuttoning Sebastian’s pants, eager to feel him inside me. His cock is hard, throbbing against my palm as I wrap my fingers around his shaft.

“Fuck,” he breathes against my lips. “You have to slow down if you want this to last.”

“What I want is for you to fuck me.”

He grabs my hips, his eyes darkened with desire as he pulls me close to the edge of the kitchen counter. But I slip off, my heels barely hitting the ground before I turn around, brushing my naked ass against his hard cock. Leaning forward, I arch my back as his hands grab my waist. Placing a palm over his fingers, I urge him to grip me tighter, to bite into my flesh while he guides his cock to my entrance.

“Sebastian,” I pant, feeling the velvet tip of his dick against my swollen pussy. “I need it rough.”

He flexes, and with one fluid motion, he spears into me, causing me to cry out. “Harder,” I moan, slamming my palms on the cold granite counter. His thrusts become more and more

powerful as he slips in and out of me. But I need more. I need to feel alive. I need the sting of pain to make my blood sing.

“Grab my hair,” I urge, throwing my head back.

“What?”

“Just fist my hair,” I say, rearing back as he moves forward, my ass slapping against his pelvis.

Sebastian lets out a low groan, his fingers now tangled in my hair. But his grip isn't tight enough. I want my scalp to sting. I want it to fucking burn while he fucks me with no restraint.

“Pull it. Pull my hair.”

And he does, but it reminds me of a boy in kindergarten who used to tug on my ponytails every time he walked past me.

I reach back, wrapping my fingers around his hand that's fisting my hair, and I squeeze. I squeeze hard while slamming my ass back against him.

“Harder, Sebastian.” I grit my teeth and lean forward, knowing it will have him pulling my hair tighter. His grip intensifies, his thrusts growing faster, fucking me deeper with each pass. Adrenaline starts to slither through my veins. A trickle of excitement. But there has to be more.

I need more. Just once. I need it to consume me. I want the pain so that the pleasure can burst through my fucking soul.

“Hurt me,” I plead.

“Kallie—”

“Please.” I push myself up, grabbing his other hand and guiding it around my throat. “I need you to hurt me.”

His rhythm falters, but he doesn't stop. God, please don't stop.

With his fingers around my throat, I guide him to squeeze, to choke me. To just do something so I can feel fucking alive.

“Sebastian, please.”

“I’m going to come,” he groans, burying his face in my neck, his hand slipping away from my throat. “Are you close? Tell me you’re close.”

Like water on dry land, the heat dissipates. The desire evaporates. And it’s like my body just shuts down. I’m so far from close, it’s like we never even started.

“Kallie,” he grunts. “Are you close? I’m going to...Jesus. Fuck.” His thrusts are hard, uncontrolled as he comes. I can feel his cock jerk inside me while his body shudders against mine, his breath hot against the skin of my neck. “God, that was amazing,” he mutters, his dick going soft inside me. “Did you come?”

I swallow hard, a tear lapping down my cheek, disappearing among the white specks on the granite countertop. My teary gaze drops to the floor where my coat is splayed, the black card halfway out of the pocket.

My reality is as bitter as the lie I speak.

“Yes.”



IT’S MIDNIGHT, and I can’t sleep, unlike Sebastian, who passed out the moment his head hit the pillow. So, I do what I always do when my mind refuses to shut up. I paint.

I settle in my chair in front of the canvas. It’s so much easier to let the paint tell the story and let the colors express my feelings. The canvas understands every emotion I have. There’s no need for me to use words when every stroke speaks it all so loud and clear. Painting has always been my escape. It’s like there’s this secret language between me and my art—a language only I understand. It’s the only thing I don’t have to share with anyone, even if it’s displayed in the homes of people who claim to be art lovers and collectors. They can stand in front of paintings for hours and debate what it means, the message hidden behind the colors, patterns, and shapes,

but they will never know. That truth is for the artist and the artist alone.

My phone dings a new message, and my heart flips inside my chest as I glance at the black card with the silver and gold symbol on the tray with the rest of my paint. It's been an hour since I sent a text to the number, and in that hour, I wanted to send a second message to that number to cancel everything. Tell whoever is on the receiving end to delete my message, after which I'll dump my phone in the nearest drain. God, what was I thinking?

Gathering my courage, I pick up my phone and swipe the screen. It's a message with a date. Nothing else. No time. No address. No dress code. Nothing. Well, that's not ominous at all.

I guess Dr. Trudeau will have to fill in the blanks.

Shutting the phone off, I look at the blank canvas as the ideas form. As I mix the colors, the piece I have been agonizing over slips into place in my mind.

What is coming together now could be my masterpiece.

Five

GABRIEL

IT'S BEEN years since I last had Sebastian tracked. There was a time that I was obsessed with keeping an eye on him, ensuring he didn't get into trouble. I'm pretty sure the professional opinion of every therapist around town would be that I'm trying to compensate for not being able to be there for him in a way that I'd want to.

Fuck you, Elenor Stone.

After the way our last conversation went down more than three years ago, I made the conscious decision to take a step back. Unfortunately, there is no amount of money, power, influence, or desire to be a better dad that will be able to make up for lost time. But reading that headline in the tabloids about Sebastian Stone's fatherless childhood, the rage in my veins compelled me to call in a favor and find out where my son would be at lunchtime today—the same cafe I'm standing in front of right now.

I watch him through the window, standing in line. Even though we're not on speaking terms, I can't help but feel proud. He's done so much with his life; I didn't have to interfere once. I'm not sure how I feel about that, though, knowing my son never needed me in a way that would pave his future. It's sad, really. For me.

He's buying his bland black brew when I command a table outside, right within his path, just as he walks out. Sebastian stops completely, and the record speed of how his expression turns from bored to pissed off is staggering.

“What the hell are you doing here?” His distaste is as strong as the scent of coffee that escapes every time the cafe door opens.

“If I said I’m here because this place has the best coffee in town, would you believe me?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“What are you doing here?”

I glance around us. It’s a force of habit, always being alert, making sure no one is being a dick by eavesdropping. “Can we sit down for a few minutes?”

“I really don’t—”

“I won’t take up much of your time.”

There’s a moment of hesitation, a reluctance that burns on his disgusted expression. “Fine. You have two minutes.”

“That’s all I need.” We both take a seat at one of the outside tables. Winter is almost at its end, and the sun is out today, the chilly breeze dormant. But my son’s cold demeanor makes up for it.

“I saw you got engaged. Congratulations. I’m sure you’ll be very happy.” I’m not entirely sure about my assertions, but it seems like the right thing to say.

“I don’t want your well wishes, Gabriel.”

I hate it when he fucking calls me that. Especially when he spits it out like someone had just stuffed shit in his mouth. It takes me a few heartbeats to shake off the unspoken insult, and I contemplate whether now is the time to get a bout of verbal vomit and tell Sebastian everything I’ve wanted to say to him for fucking years. But it wouldn’t make a difference. Not to him, because he’ll never believe me. My part of the story, my point of view, is not something Sebastian would accept because it would prove that he had been lied to his entire life...and not by me.

“Listen,” I start, rubbing my chin and trying to pick my words carefully. The last thing I want is to start World War Three out on the fucking curb. “Be careful, you know...with the media.”

“What are you, my agent, now?” Hostility oozes from him in waves, and I’m pretty sure if it had a smell, it would be rancid.

“No,” I answer, clipped. “But I do know a thing or two about how the world works, Sebastian.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Are you here to give me a life lesson?”

“That’s not—”

“Well, you’re twenty-four years too late, I’m afraid. Maybe if you decided to actually be a fucking parent, I would be more inclined to listen to your unsolicited advice.”

For a second, I want to tell him. I want to tell him the truth. That my absence in his life wasn’t my choice. I didn’t choose not to be a part of his life. His grandparents, the family he is so fond of, did that for me. They kept him from me. But I already have a barely civil relationship with Sebastian at best. Blurting that information out will only add fuel to this fucking inferno. I didn’t tell him when he was thirteen, and I won’t tell him now. The past is best left in the past. There’s no need to relive it because nothing good ever comes of it.

“I didn’t come here to fight.” I came here to set the record straight, but like all the other times before, seeing him living an uncomplicated life made me change my mind. There’s no use spitting out truths when it’s too fucking late to make a difference. “I came here to say that I would like to pay for the wedding if you let me. It’s the least I can do.” My offer is genuine. An olive branch of sorts. Judging by how his eyes widen—eyes that reflect those of his mother—I just dug myself a deeper hole.

“Are you serious?” he blurts. “Your offer is a fucking insult.”

“Seb—”

“The least you can do? You think offering to pay for my wedding makes up for the fact that you didn’t give two shits about me or my mother? That you couldn’t be fucked to be there for me when my mother died?”

“You think you know everything. But you don’t know shit, kid.”

“I’m no fucking kid.” He seethes. “Especially not yours. And I don’t need your fucking money.”

“I didn’t say you needed it.”

“Fine. I’ll rephrase it, then. I don’t *want* your money, Gabriel.” He clenches his jaw. “I sure as fuck don’t need it. I’ve never needed anything from you, and I plan on letting it stay that way.” Venom practically drips from his lips as he glares at me.

“Nevertheless—” I square my shoulders, leaning back “—my offer stands. Take me up on it. Don’t take me up on it. Do whatever works for you.”

I stand, sliding my Ray-Bans on, ready to leave, when Sebastian straightens, blocking my way. “What works for me is for you to stay where you’ve been for the last twenty-four years.” He inches closer. “Out of my life.”

That undoubtedly hurts like a fucking bitch. Especially since I know the truth.

He steps around me and strides quickly down the street. All I can do is watch him walk away and wish it could be different. I sit back down, trying to calm my thoughts, hating the way the past just keeps on chewing away at my ass. He doesn’t know how my world came to an end all those years ago, the day I realized I got robbed of everything I cared about. I’d do anything to have the power to change the trajectory our lives have taken. But having all the money in the world and having ties to the most influential people in all the right places can’t do shit to make this right. Nothing can.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I’m thankful for the distraction because my thoughts are moments away from giving me goddamn motion sickness. I slip out my phone,

sliding my finger across the screen to see a message from Alexius confirming that everything is set for our exclusive event to take place tonight at Myth. And it seems Alexius is in a celebratory mood since he and his wife will join us tonight.

I'm looking forward to it.

I scroll through a few emails that confirm last-minute details about the event and the guest list. Fleeting, I wonder about Sebastian and his fiancée again. What is she like? Probably nothing like the ladies at Myth. More reserved, refined. The perfect fit for Sebastian and his overbearing grandmother. I hope the poor woman knows what she's getting herself into.



“GABRIEL,” Alexius greets me, and I step closer, reaching out to shake his hand. It's been a while since the Dark Sovereign Monarch joined us for one of our exclusive parties. It's always fun having a Del Rossa brother attend. They make for the most entertaining evenings.

I glance at his wife, standing tightly at his side, looking ravishing in her red dress. Her black lace mask heightens the mystery surrounding the woman who managed to tame Alexius Del Rossa.

I merely nod at her. There's a special code of conduct men in this club have to adhere to. You don't fucking speak to Leandra Del Rossa.

“We're about to start. Please follow me,” I say, refraining from small talk. Alexius and I always have matters to discuss, but this is not the place for any discussion that does not have to do with the sole reason we're all here. Pleasure.

Club Myth is the absolute epitome of perfection and wealth. The Dark Sovereign spares no expense when it comes to this place. It's a fucking paradise, a world on its own.

I inhale deeply, appreciating the scent of wicked fantasies and dirty dreams. Sin clings to its walls, desire thickening the air we breathe. As we walk through the door and into the dimly lit area with red velvet paneled walls, I can already feel the excitement ripple from the back of my neck down my spine.

We're on the top level, and I walk up to the railing feeling like the motherfucking king as I stare down at the flock of sheep on the lower level, the oval table gleaming under the black crystal chandelier, waiting for its offering.

Our hostess, who has remained loyal to our cause here for years, speaks loudly and clearly, listing the rules and informing them of how we do things around here.

“As I said before, you do not choose your Elite. The Elite chooses you,” she continues. “There are six Elites here tonight. Each of them prepared to choose one of you to accompany them this evening. Obviously, not everyone will have that privilege.”

Seven Elites if you count me. But I never join the line-up with the others. Some nights I don't even participate. It all depends on whether some poor lamb catches my eye. I don't play with just anyone. I don't simply pick a submissive for the sake of fucking. There must be an invisible pull toward a potential candidate that inspires me to walk down those stairs and claim her.

Tonight, however, my interest is piqued by the one wearing a white dress among a sea of red. Like a virgin at the altar of the pagan gods, she stands out like a light in the darkness. I can't keep my gaze away from her, my hands tightening around the railing, my fingers itching to touch her alabaster skin. She would be perfect to toy with. So petite. Even with heels, she's still shorter than the others.

Does she intimidate easily? Does she obey without hesitating? Does she beg?

God. Taking her would be a pleasure, to bend her over and make her mine whenever the mood struck me. And with her, it would strike me often. She is made for pleasure—my kind of

pleasure. Her pale skin would be gorgeously marred with red welts and pink stripes. Bruises from knotted rope around her wrists and ankles. Fuck, I want to play with her. Hard.

I stand next to Alexius and Leandra, the three of us watching silently as the women are led to the oval table. Each potential sub presents herself for pleasure, offering her body in the hope she will be picked by one of the Elite seven. It's an altar of flesh, a sacrifice laid bare for the gods to taste.

I never tire of standing on the balcony, watching the parties unfold. Witnessing the pleasure on the women's faces as the other Elites lick up and down their cunts is the most entertaining part—apart from finding a suitable candidate to accompany me for the night.

Whispers come from next to me, and I glance over at Alexius as he angles his head down, murmuring something in his wife's ear. Whatever it is, she blushes and nods. You'd have to be blind not to see the chemistry between them burn as bright as the fucking sun. No wonder Alexius has been MIA lately. I would be, too, if she were mine. It's the first time I've met the Del Rossa wife, and from our brief introduction, I already know Leandra is a fucking queen. She stands with absolute confidence next to her husband. She's Dark Sovereign royalty, and there's no mistaking it.

“What do you think of the attendees so far?” I aim my question at Alexius, adhering to the rules of not speaking to his wife.

“Let me guess, the one in white caught your attention.” Alexius smirks.

“Of course she has. You don't wear a white dress to an event like this because you're trying not to get noticed.”

The first girl lies on top of the table, her knees spread wide, the burgundy fabric of her dress bunched around her waist. I'd watch Davian tongue fuck her if I wasn't so intrigued by the woman in white. Her lips are clamped together, and her skin flushed. She looks like she might bolt at any moment.

I grip the banister in front of me as I silently will her not to leave. It's apparent to the expert eye like mine that she's a fish out of water here. This isn't her usual scene, perhaps even her first visit to an establishment like this one.

Our eyes meet, and her lips part slightly. I can see she's nervous. I don't have to touch her skin to know there's a sheen of perspiration at the nape of her neck. I'm struck with the overwhelming urge to calm her. To reassure her and make her stay. She's not even on the table yet, and already I imagine her spread open just for me, writhing under my tongue. I can practically smell her arousal. Sweet. Musky. Intoxicating.

My mouth fucking waters at the thought of tasting her, licking her until mindless pleasure is all she feels. All she cares about.

I shift focus to the table and the first woman being decided upon. The taste of her pussy is being sampled by the other Elites, and everyone waits to see who feels a sexual connection with her. While her cries of ecstasy fill the room, I look at the one in white. I take in every expression on her face, a little thrum of interest beating in my fingertips. I have been at so many of these events, I would have a hard time even describing the parade of subs who attend. But her? I could definitely describe her. I haven't been able to take my eyes off her. She appears so delicate and ethereal in that white dress. It's such a contrast to all the dark suits and dresses in the room. She's a breath of virgin air. It makes me want to get her a little dirty, and I'm sure she'll fucking enjoy it.

"You in the white dress." The hostess' voice causes her to pull her gaze from mine back toward the table. "Your turn."

A myriad of expressions flits across her face as she is summoned. Even with a mask covering half her face, it's evident that she's unsure. Panicked. Her lips part and her shoulders straighten like she's on the verge of backing out. I hope she doesn't.

Don't back out now, beautiful. The fun is only about to start.

Curiosity flows through me, wondering if her hesitant footsteps would turn into a sprint straight out the door, leaving me with nothing more than a fantasy of the girl in white.

Don't run, little lamb. Don't run.

I tighten my grip on the iron rail, watching her slowly move toward the table. Will the unknown win the battle? I sure as fuck hope so.

I hold my breath. Watching. Waiting. The anticipation reaching boiling point. She glances up as she nears the table. The connection crackling. There's a jolt of possession in my chest, and it's something entirely new for me. Instantly, I know that no one else will touch her. No one else will taste the sweetness between her innocent thighs. No one else will sample her, make her scream. And sure as fuck, no one else will choose her because tonight, this baby girl is mine.

She looks away, staring out in front of her, and I can feel her slipping away. The connection is wavering, soon to be severed if I don't fucking do something.

You're not getting away from me, little lamb. Not tonight.

I'm taking two stairs at a time as I make my way down, my gaze fixed on her. With her back turned toward me, the sight of her slender neck and ivory skin under the crystal chandelier is fucking perfection.

"Um..." she starts, fisting her hands next to her. "I, ah...I can't—"

I reach her, moving as close as I can without touching her. "Close your eyes," I whisper, and her breath hitches. She doesn't move. We're so fucking close, I can smell her. She smells of jasmine and amber patchouli wrapped in the seduction of white musk. I can practically taste her, that sweet innocence rolling off the uncertainty she's desperate to fight.

She obeys instantly, closing her eyes as if she was born to submit, and it fucking thrills me, my cock hard and ready to fill her cunt. I reach out, settling a hand on her hip and guiding her onto the table. The way she responds to me is incredible,

how her body so easily complies with a simple nudge of my fingers.

My girl in white is a fucking vision as she lies down on the mahogany, her vanilla hair such a stark contrast splayed on the dark wood. “Good girl,” I praise in her ear, and her lips part, releasing a heavy breath. She likes it. She likes being a good girl. For me.

My excitement is fucking palpable.

The silk of her dress is smooth against my fingertips as I gently brush it up and over her knees, exposing more of her flawless skin, my fingers tracing a pattern on her thigh. She trembles under my touch, her back arching slightly off the table, and I revel in the power, the ownership her submission empowers me with. I haven’t even begun to touch her the way I want to, and already she’s possessed with desire. Placing a hand on her knee, she lets out a whimper as I ease her legs apart, gliding my palm down the inside of her thigh, exposing her bare pussy.

So wet. So fucking inviting.

Yes. My girl in white is all too willing for me to claim her. To taste her. And I’m eager to oblige. I dip my head down, desire erupting as I smell her arousal, my cock hard and throbbing. With a simple kiss of my lips against her pussy, she moans, her back arching as she spreads her arms out next to her, gripping the table. Her delicate gasps fill the air as I drag my tongue through her sensitive folds, tasting her desire that ignites an inferno in my groin.

“Please,” she begs, and I all but come in my pants as the word rolls from her lips as I lap at her drenched cunt.

“Perfection,” I murmur, her hips bucking as she searches for more, her mind no longer controlling her body. But I reach out and firmly place my hands on her sides, keeping her still. She’ll come when I want her to and not a second before. She needs to learn that. She needs to know her place. Know who is in control here.

Me.

Her entire body is rigid, and I know she's desperate to come. I can taste it on her sweet pussy, how her slick arousal starts coating the insides of her thighs. I could do this all night, feast on her like she's the last goddamn supper. But my instincts say she needs easing into it. She needs a release, or her body will fucking break.

I take her clit in my mouth, and she cries out as I suck hard, my tongue pressing and stroking against the sensitive bud. Every sound she makes echoes her pleasure, and it's crashing in waves, rolling from her body and slamming against my goddamn balls as she comes on my tongue. Her taste is better than I ever could have imagined. I don't think I've ever had pussy taste this good.

She trembles, gasping, and I wrap a hand around her throat, sliding it to the back of her neck, guiding her up.

"Open your eyes," I demand, and like the perfect angel, she does as I say. Her irises are jade and emeralds, a forest of secrets I want to uncover. The moment is crystal clear, her lips parted and breaths desperate. This is what she came here for. For me. For this.

For a freedom only I can give.

I wind my arm around her waist and pull her to the edge, earning a gasp from her lush lips.

She quivers as I lean into her, entranced by my goddess in white as I rasp against her ear, "Mine."

Six

KALLIE

I OPEN my eyes as lightning bolts of pleasure race across my skin. I feel like I can barely breathe, heat pooling between my legs. I've never experienced anything like that. How my body responded to him was so fucking intense, I can still hear my heart thud in my ears.

Realization washes over me as fiercely as my orgasm did. The voices are gone. Not once have I heard them since I walked into Myth. There's no war waging between the past and the present. It's as if the war was won the moment I heard him say, "Close your eyes."

His voice ignited something in my belly, turning me inside out with three simple words. My skin is hot and tingling, the wetness between my legs slick against my thighs. I'm still fucking spinning from the onslaught of his tongue, my muscles simultaneously rigid and numb. Everything feels surreal, and I can't believe I just got tongue fucked on a table in front of people I don't know, and I am so turned on by that fact that my pussy quivers, aftershocks flowing through me.

My gaze falls on him, and I must bite my lip to suppress a gasp. His eyes, I've never seen anything so vibrant. Sapphires that reflect so much life, so much intensity, it's like staring into the depths of the ocean I want to drown in. All I want to do is reach out and take off his mask so I can see him. I want to see his face. His expression. Kiss the lips that glisten with my cum.

He gently takes my arm and guides me away from the small crowd of women waiting to be tried and men waiting to

try them. I still can't believe this place. It's like nothing I've ever experienced. And it seems so unreal that I'm here, being led up a staircase by a masked stranger who can probably still taste my pussy on his tongue. My body tingles from head to toe as if I'm touching electricity, charged with every step I take. But it's not electricity. It's him. He's like a live wire, and there is nothing to ground me.

We stop at the top of the stairs, and my heart is beating so fast, I'm sure it'll rip out of my chest at any moment. As he turns to face me, I'm once again floored by how his eyes gleam under the lights, glimmers of sapphires and diamonds that captivate me and make me forget that we're not alone in this world.

My breathing quickens as he moves closer, and I swallow hard. His fingertips brush my cheek, burning like embers, and everything around us fades into the background. I'm entranced by him—how his presence wraps around me, his scent intoxicating with the spicy notes of pink pepper, tobacco, and rum. I never want to unburden myself from my masked stranger's presence, something I want to wrap myself in and never escape.

He cups my chin in his hand, and I close my eyes, my lips parting with anticipation fluttering in my belly as his fingers hover over my face, waiting for something—for what? I'm not sure.

“What brought you here, baby girl?” Oh, my God, his voice. I can feel the warmth of his tone as if it were physically touching every inch of me. Fuck, if I fall to pieces from small talk, God help me if he ever started talking dirty.

“I...um.” Embarrassment flushes over me—not because I'm here, but because I don't have the smooth sophistication and elegance the others seem to have so effortlessly. I want to be like them. I want to be able to feel at ease within my body. To know my hard limits and to push until I hit them. I want to be fucked, sucked, spanked, tied up, held down, and the list keeps growing as I look at him. I want all those things—tonight, with him.

“You’re safe here,” he says, clutching my chin between his fingers. “Myth is a place for fantasies, where dark desires are brought to light.” He tips my head back a little, leaning closer so I feel his hot breath against my jaw. “Now, tell me, little lamb, what brought you to the lion’s den?”

There’s a knot in my throat, but I can’t swallow. I’m too enthralled by him, how my body seems to hum to a rhythm he demands simply by standing so close.

I have no idea how to answer him. What can I even say that would make sense?

“I...uh. I’ve always wanted to experience something like this.”

He tilts his head and stares intently at me from behind his mask. “Sweetheart, you could go anywhere for that. Any man alive would love to give you the experience.” He slides his thumb across my cheek, his eyes an inferno of blue, blazing with indecent promises. The heat of them is inescapable. I can’t explain how I feel when he looks at me when our eyes meet. Like the air sizzles between us, and all I can do is melt into his gaze. It’s the most unusual feeling I’ve ever known.

“Tell me the truth. Why are you really here? What brought you here to me?” His fingers tighten slightly on my skin, and I feel the zing straight to my core, and it’s impossible not to answer with the truth.

“I want someone to hurt me,” I reply, my voice shaking with uncertainty, and I close my eyes because I don’t want to see the look on his.

“Open your eyes.” His voice rolls over me like honey, delicious and so decadent. “Do not ever be ashamed of who you are. This is new to you?”

I nod slowly.

“I need you to use words,” he demands, his voice a low tenor. “There’s no room for misunderstandings here.”

“Pain isn’t new to me. But asking for it is.”

He stiffens, a subtle groan vibrating in his throat. “Good girl.” Gently, his lips touch my jaw, and my chest expands. “Very good.”

I feel so small in comparison to him. He makes me feel secure. Secure in myself. How is that even possible with a complete stranger?

“Come.” He guides me down the hall to what looks like a master suite. I’m holding my breath as I glance around, taking it all in. There’s a large bed draped with black silk sheets, a red tufted couch across from it. I can imagine him sitting on it with his gaze etched on my naked body tied to the bed, writhing and begging for his touch. God, the thought thrills me.

The lights are dimmed, and the scent of sex wafts through the air, the anticipation mounting. A shiver runs over me from my head to my toes as I stare at the instruments lined up on the wall, and the realization of how fucking real this all is creeps up inside me. Doubts slither in, a prickle of warning dancing along the back of my neck.

“This is the part where I ask you if you want this.”

“I do,” I respond, my voice softer than intended.

“You have doubts.”

I cut my gaze to him. “I don’t.”

“Let’s be clear about one thing.” He moves closer, his eyes pinning me. “Don’t. Lie to me. Understood?”

His authority is everywhere in this room—especially in the tiny space I’m taking up. “I’m not lying.”

“Do you know how many women have walked up those stairs with me thinking this is what they want? Thinking they want pain, but as soon as shit gets real, they spit out their safe word before I’ve even fucking started?” There’s a darkness about him, something seductively malevolent as he towers over me, his black mask enhancing the color of his eyes.

“Don’t waste my time, little girl.”

“I’m not...wasting your time.”

He slants his head to the side. “This isn’t a movie, or a goddamn romance novel. There aren’t contracts, or a goddamn sit-down where we discuss all your hard limits, what I can and cannot do with you.” He takes my chin and tilts it up, forcing me to look him in the eye. “If you say yes to me, you have no hard limits. And I can do whatever the fuck I want with you.” He grips my chin, fingers biting into my jaw. “I’m going to ask you one more time. Do you...want this?”

My mind is reeling, but there is only one answer I want to give him. “Yes.”

His lips curve at the edges. “Good girl. Now.” He takes a step back and starts rolling up the sleeves of his black dress-shirt. “What shall I do with you?”

I turn away, and my gaze sweeps across the array of whips hooked to the wall. Different sizes and lengths, ranging from hard leather to soft suede. They look...*interesting*, but my eyes are immediately drawn to the collection of wooden canes. They’re all different lengths and widths, some featuring exquisite designs carved into the wood.

That. I want that, and I want him to be the one to give it to me.

He accurately guesses what has captured my attention, the corners of his lips lightly curling. “Are you sure?”

I nod, sucking my bottom lip into my mouth as he steps close, his eyes pinning me to the spot as he leisurely starts to slide my dress from my shoulders, letting it pool around my feet.

I swallow hard.

“The words don’t, no, and stop are not options for safe words.”

“Why not?”

He looks down at the swell of my breasts, easing a fingertip down the middle. “Because those words make me hard. And since my cock is already aching to be inside you, if you use those words, there’s not a chance in hell I’ll stop.”

His fingers tease down my waist and along the curve of my hip. His touch is slow, sensual, and I'm holding my breath as he crouches in front of me, trailing a fingertip along my lower abdomen—*my scar*—then softly kisses my sex. My legs go weak, and I latch on to his shoulders, my eyes rolling closed.

“I can smell it on you. How badly you want this.” He drags his palms up my sides as he straightens, his eyes raking along my naked body. My shoulders tense as he reaches up and I hear the sound of chains. “Lift your arms,” he demands, and I don't hesitate. I'm not scared of him. On the contrary, for some unexplainable reason, I trust him. It's me I'm afraid of, the raw desire that's coursing through me at the thought of what's about to happen.

I expect cold steel to wrap around my wrists, but instead, it's soft, gentle, like velvet against my skin. A memory starts to slither into my head. Tied hands and searing pain. It takes every ounce of self-control I have not to let it in or let the memory take me.

“Relax,” he coos, brushing his warm palms down my arms. “You're safe.”

I let out a breath as I watch him select one of the canes from the wall. Am I insane for wanting this? Is it madness for my body to crave this?

He steps up behind me. “Your safe word is shadow.”

“I thought you said if I say yes, you can do whatever you want with me. So why do I need a safe word?”

He grabs my hair and yanks my head back. “Your sass might be sexy to the outside world. But in here it won't be tolerated. You will address me as sir, and the only words I want to hear come out of your mouth are yes, sir. No, sir. Please give me your cock, sir. Understand? Now, what is your safe word?”

“Shadow.”

He tightens his grip. “Louder.”

“My safe word is shadow, sir,” I say louder this time, and with more conviction.

“Good girl.”

There’s a gush of heat between my legs when he says those words, and I try to squeeze my thighs together.

“Why shadow, sir?” I’m already out of breath, and we haven’t even started yet.

He runs the cane down the length of my spine, and I arch my back. “Because you are light, and there is no light without shadow. One cannot exist without the other. And that’s why you’re here, aren’t you? To find your shadow.”

My chest rises and falls, the cane smooth against my skin. “Sir, what if I’m the shadow? What if I’m searching for the light?”

He presses his lips against my naked shoulder, his hair soft against my neck. “Then you’ve come to the wrong place.”

I can hear him behind me, and I tense. I know what’s coming, but I don’t know how I’ll react to it. My reaction is my complete undoing. The cane snaps smartly against my ass cheek, and I moan in surrender. Saying my safe word doesn’t cross my mind. I feel safer than I have in six years, maybe ever.

As the sting of the cane dissipates, a rush of adrenaline surges through my body with a burst of white-hot pleasure.

“Does this feel good?” The words have a double meaning for me. He’s making sure I’m okay with this, but he’s also taunting me. And I love it.

Euphoria settles over me as the cane slaps my ass once more. “Yes, sir.” My response comes as naturally as breathing, and I hear him curse, and the cane lashes across my ass again.

“Fuck,” he groans, and I glance to the side. He’s gripping the cane in one hand and adjusting his cock with the other while his gaze drinks me in. “If only you could see how beautiful your skin is stained with pink.”

The pain is sweet; the burn searing my skin reminds me that I’m alive. Is this what I’m after? Is this what I’ve been

searching for all these years? To feel alive? To feel like I'm not fucking dead inside?

“More, please, sir,” I say, needing to feel that sting again. And he obliges with two more lashes, my thoughts racing, yet my mind simultaneously empty.

I gasp when he presses his naked chest against my back, the heat of his skin like silk to the abrasive desire that's consuming me. He reaches for my breasts, rolling my nipples between his expert fingers as he flexes his hips, his hard cock sliding up and down my ass. I don't know when he took his clothes off, but I know I want to feel more of his body all over mine, his skin gently caressing me while my ass stings and burns.

“Sir, please,” I plead as he dips one hand down to between my legs, his fingers prodding at my wet slit. I stifle a desperate whimper by biting my bottom lip as he rolls his fingertip over my clit, sending bolts of electricity up my insides. I'm sure I'm about to come when he steps back, robbing me of his touch. His heat. His intoxicating scent.

Hunger grows.

Desire rages.

And my body burns for him.

He moves in front of me. His naked body is contoured with sculpted ropes of muscle, his shoulders threaded with power, and limbs thick with strength. It's as if God Himself carved every inch of this man with precise detail. As if he was born for pleasure. My pleasure.

The prominent V branching from his hips leads to his hard cock glistening with precum, daring me for a taste.

He's so close, his breath brushes along my hyper-sensitive skin. My legs start to shake as he slips the cane between my legs, the tip of it stroking my swollen pussy. “You want more, little one?” he says, now dragging the cane down my inner thigh. His voice is low, husky, yet cocky because he knows I want more. This is part of the game we're both here to play.

A moan escapes my lips as he takes a nipple in his mouth, teasing his tongue along the beaded flesh. I'm nothing but sensation, trembling with need. "Do you..." he flicks his tongue against my nipple, "want..." and again, "more?"

"Yes...sir." A tear escapes. I have no idea why it's there. Desperation? Desire? Respite?

He leans in, sliding his tongue along my cheek, and laps up my tear. "Your sadness tastes fucking beautiful." His lips slam against mine, consuming me with a fiery kiss that robs me of air, and I moan into his mouth as he cups my pussy, slipping a finger inside me. The pressure between my legs builds, his thumb finding my clit, forcing desperate gasps from my lungs. I'm about to come. I'm about to fucking explode. But he steps away, leaving me panting and aching.

"You come when I tell you to. Do you understand?" The growl in his voice leaves no place for debating. It's not a request. It's a rule.

I nod, craning my neck as I try to regain control. A lash lands loudly on my skin.

Another follows.

And another.

And another.

The cane continues to sing through the air, landing against my thighs and ass over and over again.

"You know your safe word," he urges.

"Yes, sir." But I'm nowhere close to using it. I want more. I want so much more. I want to keep feeling the life burst from where the cane hits my skin. I'm alive. Breathing. Feeling. The lashes make me feel the splinters underneath my nails, the open wounds on my knees, the gaping cuts in my skin. My burning flesh reminds me that I didn't die in that prison cell. I didn't rot there like he said I would.

I am...alive.

Flashes of darkness and flickering lights. Images of a monster. The sound of screams. The stench of blood. It's

everywhere. But I'm not scared. There's no fear because somewhere there's a presence that's taking the place of the darkness.

Him.

Tears roll down my cheeks.

"Look at me."

I open my eyes, and my masked stranger is carrying me across the room, gently placing me on the bed. The silk sheets feel comforting against my stinging skin, and he's brushing the hair from my face as he slips on top of me. I let out a breath at the exquisite feel of his weight as he settles between my legs. "You did good, baby girl. You've earned the privilege of experiencing my cock." He moves, and I crane my neck as his cock enters me with a slow, deep thrust. I'm melting beneath him, arching my back off the sheets as he fills me completely. His movements are slow and deliberate like he wants me to relish them while my body sings for him, an enchanting melody that stems from the lashes he inflicted. The pain that sears my blood.

Faster, his rhythm picks up speed, his thrusts forcing his cock deeper inside me, my hips rising to meet his. I feel everything. Every inch of him. All the heat. The pleasure. It's all rolling together, building and building, his hands gripping my waist tightly as he pumps into me. This is ecstasy. It's rapture. It's fucking oblivion as his leisurely thrusts turn into desperate fucking.

Harder.

Deeper.

Faster.

"Come for me." His voice is low, strained, and he grabs my knee, forcing it up between us, his cock inching in even farther with an indescribable pressure.

"Hurt me, sir," I beg breathlessly, and he doesn't hesitate. His hand is around my throat, squeezing hard, his fingers biting into my skin. The sound of his hips slapping against mine fills the room, the sheets bunching up beneath me.

I'm gasping, and he squeezes even tighter until no more air reaches my lungs. "You better fucking come," he demands. "Cream my cock with that slick fucking cunt."

Pleasure rips through my body, every sensation intensifying until I scream from his choking grip. It's like he's tearing me apart and putting me back together again, only to have me shatter beneath him.

"Fuck, you're beautiful when you come. Jesus," he curses, the veins in his neck throbbing from exertion as he fucks me with grueling thrusts, his cock slick inside me from how I came around him.

My shoulders lift off the mattress as he slides an arm underneath me, pushing me impossibly hard against his chest, his cock jerking inside me as he comes, and we both collapse.

I can't catch my breath, and by the sound of his labored breathing, neither can he. For the longest time, we just lie there in silence, not saying a word. My thoughts are racing. My heart is pounding, and my body is exhausted.

He lifts himself and hovers over me, staring at me from behind his mask. "Where did you come from, little lamb?"

Hell. I came straight from hell.

SEVEN

KALLIE

I HAVEN'T BEEN able to stop painting since the night at Myth. It's like my creativity switch was flipped to the highest setting. The paint is practically throwing itself on the canvas. Reds. All bright, beautiful, deep, sensual reds. I see everything in red. Red like the tufted couch in the room where pain and pleasure mingled under his firm hand, the utter torment of every day numbed.

The silence. It's beautiful.

I feel free. Free from the death that had a stranglehold on my life.

He gave it to me. My stranger behind the mask. The man who gave me pain so I could experience pleasure without feeling dead inside.

“Wow, that painting is like nothing you've ever done before.” Sebastian leans against the doorframe, his arms crossed in front of his muscular chest. “This wedding must be bringing out a new side of you, artistically.” He tilts his head and assesses the canvas.

I inhale deeply, shifting from one leg to another, trying to breathe. I'm overwhelmed with guilt. It attacks me like thousands of little mosquitoes. I want to beat it back, slap it away, but it doesn't move. It's like he can see everything I experienced at Myth playing out on the canvas. The canvases have been coming to life faster than I can paint them, but so have I. I feel more alive than I ever have. After my experience

at Myth, my innermost thoughts and feelings seem to make sense.

I didn't think I could go through with it, afraid the past might take control and break me down for good. But it wasn't like that at all. The entire time, I knew I had the choice. I could have said no whenever I wanted, and it would have stopped. But I didn't. I didn't want to say no. The pain was too delicious. Freeing. The decadence of the cane on my skin. The way he hurt me and soothed me, and fucking bewitched me was mind-blowing. I'm still reeling, and it's been days. And now I find myself wanting more. More pain. More pleasure. More of being submissive. More of being dominated. More of finally feeling alive.

Can I hold on to this feeling? But, more importantly, will it be enough to give me what I need to grab hold of a future with Sebastian? That's, after all, why I did it. To see if it'll fix me enough to be the kind of wife my fiancé deserves.

Sebastian might have been acting like an asshole the past few weeks, but it's probably the wedding, the engagement, his movie. His entire life has changed. He hasn't changed. He's the same Sebastian I've clung to, my best friend. My safe haven. My comfort zone. But while I've been secretly walking on air the last few days, I've been consciously avoiding him, pretending to be buried in wedding arrangements. Luckily, he's been swamped, too, hopping from one meeting to the next, making it virtually impossible to be in each other's company for more than ten minutes.

He walks up, wrapping an arm around my waist and kissing my cheek. I involuntarily lean away. "I'll get paint all over you," I say, and he grins.

"Won't be the first time. You going to be okay without me?"

I glance at his bag, stuffed and packed for his trip. "Won't be the first time," I chirp back at him, and he chuckles, hugging me close.

"I'll be back in time for the party this weekend. I promise."

Oh, God. The party. My throat closes just thinking about it. “Maybe we should reschedule,” I say, placing the paintbrush down. “Just in case you’re held up longer than planned. The last thing I want is to show up at our engagement party alone.”

“Wouldn’t that be fun?” he teases, reaching for my waist and pulling me close.

“Sebastian, I’m serious.” I maneuver out of his hold. “If you’re not back by the time I’m dressed for the party, I’m not going. And I don’t care how many fits your grandmother has.”

It’s already bad enough that I’ll be in the public eye at this party, surrounded by strangers and Sebastian’s grandmother. To be at the party without Sebastian, now, that would be a fucking tragedy.

God, I feel nauseated. Anxiety begins to nip at the edges of my mind. It’s slowly invading the space that just a few sweet moments ago was home to the most amazing, unself-conscious freedom I’ve ever experienced.

“Babe. Relax.”

Relax...you’re safe.

“I’ll be back. I swear. Gram worked hard on this party. I would never disappoint her by missing it.”

Of course, it’s about her. It’s always about her. He wouldn’t disappoint his grandmother. Disappointing his fiancée, now, that’s probably something he’d be able to live with.

Fuck. I have to stop, but I can’t help thinking that maybe this isn’t about us anymore. About me. About how he can keep his grandmother happy with buckets full of fame. Perhaps a few days apart is what we need.

“I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Thank you,” I mutter, kissing him softly as he wraps his arms around me.

“I love you, Kallie.” He leans his forehead against mine. “And I know you’re having a hard time with this, but thank you for trying.”

There's a sharp pang in my chest. A longing. "Sometimes I wish we never said yes to that stupid movie scene being taken at the gallery."

"Then I would never have been discovered by the director, and Hollywood would have been robbed of my awesomeness." He shoots me a cocky but cute grin.

"That's the point." I lift a brow, and he gently nudges me for a tender, lingering kiss that reminds me of the time when we were uncomplicated, which wasn't that long ago. It's like the universe snapped its fingers and changed the trajectory of our life together in an instant.

I hate it.

Sebastian steps back and grabs his bag. "Oh, babe, before I forget. You should let the machine take our calls until I'm back. My agent doesn't want you speaking to anyone before an official statement is released about our wedding plans." He shrugs. "It's good PR to keep them all guessing."

Yeah, because our wedding is ultimately a PR stunt.

"Sure," I agree, crossing my arms. He's starting to look less and less like the person I fell in love with. His career, his goals, his future have now taken the front seat while I seem lost in the background, looking on. I'm watching my life move around me like a tornado, yet it doesn't include me even though I'm caught in the eye of its storm.

He pulls me closer and brushes his lips across mine one last time. I fight the urge to compare his touch to the masked man at Myth. I try to push crystal blue eyes out of my mind to respond to Sebastian's kiss. I try to feel it. But my masked stranger is all I can think of.

Sebastian's lips move over mine, and I make every effort to kiss him back. But I feel nothing, like something is missing.

Blue eyes. Deep voice. Wicked touch.

Immediately, the guilt claws at my insides, and I want to scream in agony. It's tearing me open, shredding me to pieces. I can't get Myth off my mind. That place, that experience, him

—it all opened a door, and I have no idea how to shut it. But I have to try. I have to.

Sebastian pulls back. He has no idea that I was just a million miles away from his kiss. “I love you. I’ll be back this weekend.”

“Love you, too.” The words barely leave my mouth before he disappears, and the closing of the front door echoes with the sound of me being utterly alone. With my thoughts. With my memories.

I never thought of myself as the cheating type. I never imagined I’d do what I did. I’ve been faithful to Sebastian since the day we met. Hurting him has never once crossed my mind.

I’m not a cheater.

I touch my finger to my lips, replaying every second, every moment, every detail of that night. I can’t get it out of my head. I don’t want to. I’m afraid if I forget, life will start to wither inside me again. My memory is all I have because I can never go back there. It was only for one night. One experience. And it’s over now.

I’m not a cheater.

I keep repeating it as if saying it over and over again makes it true. Makes me believe that it wasn’t me the other night at Myth with the blue-eyed stranger. Not me gasping in pleasure under the sting of pain. Or me writhing on black silk sheets with a man I don’t even know the name of choking me, fucking me until I see nothing but stars.

That wasn’t me at all.

God, who am I? I shake my head. I don’t feel like I know. Two sides of a coin. It flips, and the other side emerges. Will there always be two of me?

Overwhelmed with too many emotions, unable to distinguish between them, I pick up my phone and dial a number—one I haven’t phoned in a while. I bite my lip as I listen to it ringing, inhaling deeply when it’s finally answered.

“Hi. This is Kallie Sawyer.” I pull my hand through my messy hair. “I would like to check in on a patient. Pearson.” I walk up to the window, glancing down the street, the asphalt a dark, dreary gray from the rain. “Yeah. Is she...has there been any change? She hasn’t gotten worse? Okay...That’s great. Thank you.” I hang up, leaning back against the windowsill, allowing myself one single moment to wish my life was different.

My phone vibrates in my hand, signaling a text. Sighing in frustration, I pick it up, swipe the screen...and feel the world drop right from under me. “Oh, my God.” I sink back against the wall, slipping down until I’m flat on my ass, staring at my phone’s screen. “No,” I whisper. “No.”

It’s a photograph of a headstone, a single white rose placed upon it. And the name on it is one I know all too well.

“Jesus, no.” I’m lightheaded, my stomach turning inside as I stare at the image, feeling like my entire life just landed in someone else’s palms. Who sent me this? Who knows about me?

My eyes well with tears and the familiar ache in my chest settles in as I stare in dread at the screen. I’ve spent years hiding who I really am, becoming someone else. But someone has dug up my secrets, leaving my past exposed. Accepting Sebastian’s proposal, paired with the fame he basks in, opened the box to my past, and I don’t know if I can close it.

Another text appears. I stop fucking breathing altogether, black spots swimming in front of my eyes as I read it.

Don’t you want to tell your story?

The words pierce my chest, and all time seems to stop, tears burning the back of my eyes. With shaky hands, I type a text back.

Who is this?

Someone who wants you to tell your story in your own words.

I don't have a story.

My heart beats wildly as I wait, holding my breath and wiping tears from my cheeks. When my phone signals a new message, my chest breaks open as the words appear.

Yes, you do...Miss Pearson.

No.

Eight

JUST BREATHE.

In and out.

Slow, deep breaths.

My palms are sweaty, nerves gnawing away at my bones. I hate every minute of this. I stare around the huge Tower room at all these people I don't know. I can feel their eyes on me. Studying me. Scrutinizing me. Judging the bride-to-be. I've never even seen most of them, and they're here at *my* engagement party. This entire charade is ridiculous. All of it. So ostentatious and over the top. Too many flowers, too much crystal, too many glasses of champagne and hors d'oeuvres. Too much of everything. And nothing of me.

The more plans that are made, the more I feel as if this wedding isn't mine at all. It's Sebastian's and the media's, put together by Jillian, the perfect planner, and Elenor. Sometimes I wonder if Sebastian really wants to marry me or if he's looking to find ways to stay in the headlines, something to boost his approval and popularity in perfect timing for his new movie.

"This is all so much," I say to Sebastian as I continue to take it all in. "This entire party has your grandmother written all over it. She even went ahead and had red flower centerpieces made despite me wanting pink."

"Calm down," he hushes. "Everything looks great. You should thank her."

"Are you kidding me?"

“Kallie, I told you. She didn’t get to do it for my mom, and this is her way of making up for it. So just let her do whatever the hell she wants.” He wraps his arm around my waist, smiling at me like we’re the happiest goddamn couple on the planet.

I smile back, playing my part and pretending to pick at imaginary lint off his suit jacket. “This is our life. Not hers. It’s our wedding—”

“You’re right,” he cuts me off. “It is *our* wedding and about what we both want. Not just you, Kallie. I know you want this wedding to be just about us, but unfortunately, that’s not how it is. As much as it sucks for you to hear it, it’s also about my career. I’m a public figure now, and that means the world gets to have a glimpse into my life. That means you, too. Besides, I want a huge wedding. I love this. It’s amazing. I want everyone to know I’m marrying the love of my life. I want to flaunt you in front of the entire world.”

His eyes are bright, like a child’s, looking at everything under the tree on Christmas morning. A tinge of wildness in his expression makes me nervous, though, but I try to sweep it away. I can’t add suspicion to the whirlpool of feelings and emotions I’ve been dealing with over the last couple of weeks.

Uncertainty. Confusion. Fear. Anxiety. Excitement.

Guilt.

It’s too much, and I have to close the lid and stop letting it all in, or I’ll explode. I’ll break. Again.

I need to take a moment to regroup. My mind is pinging like a pinball machine. “Excuse me. I need some air.”

“Kal—” But I’m out of reach before he manages to pull me back. My nude heels click across the deck, and I grab a glass of champagne off one of the many trays circulating the party. It’s the most expensive champagne, I’m sure. Not that I’d be able to taste the difference, because tonight, everything tastes bitter.

I drain the glass, not caring what the guests might think. They're not my guests. I didn't invite them. I don't even know them. So why should I care what they think?

Breathe, Kallie.

Just breathe.

I close my eyes, envisioning the air flowing in and out of my lungs, trying to quell the anxiety clawing at my chest all night. It's tight. Smothering. Sucking the life from my fucking soul. This is not the night for breathing exercises and meditation. This is the night for drowning in fucking champagne.

I glance around. The tables are dressed with white linens. White tapered candles in vintage candlesticks line the center of the table, with tall glass Eiffel tower vases displaying floral arrangements of red, white, and a touch of fern. Elenor sure went all out, transforming her roofed deck into a romantic fairytale wonderland...just like she wanted. Not me. Her. It's all her.

Elenor is flitting around like the perfect hostess, her blood-red lips smiling and her heavily ringed fingers waving. It's funny because she looks more like the bride with her red outfit matching the decor, while my pale-blush dress does nothing but let me fade into the background. Good. I prefer it that way.

A waiter with another tray of drinks passes by, and I don't think twice about grabbing myself another one. I need liquid courage to get through this night.

Sebastian is inside talking to a man I don't recognize—which isn't surprising since I know no one here. But it's the look on Sebastian's face that has me intrigued, thinking that whatever conversation is taking place between them, my fiancé is not having a good time, and I should probably go save him. Should I, though?

Get a grip, Kallie.

Squaring my shoulders and swallowing the urge to run the fuck away from this party, I saunter through the groups of

guests, making my way to Sebastian. The music is just the right volume for me to catch the tail side of their conversation.

“I didn’t invite you.”

“Well, someone did.”

Sebastian’s expression is stern, his jaw clenched. “This is me uninviting—”

“There you are,” I say, leaping to his side, smiling and hoping a friendly gesture will snuff out the apparent hostility. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Kallie,” Sebastian says, placing a hand around my waist. “You’re just in time. I’d like you to meet Gabriel King. My father.”

His father?

I look at the man standing in front of us. Tall. Handsome. Dark with salt and pepper on the sides. His broad shoulders fill out his black suit perfectly, his presence taking up all the space around him. And then there are his eyes. Cobalt blue, piercing sapphire eyes that send a jolt of familiarity down to my stomach, and I’m taken aback by the way my body reacts to him. My stomach clenched, spine tingling, the ache between my thighs.

“Gabriel, meet my fiancée, Kallie Sawyer.”

His gaze is primal and suggestive as his hand engulfs mine, blue irises staring through me. My skin erupts with chills from his touch, yet heat rolls through me and I can’t take my eyes from his.

“It’s nice to meet you, Kallie,” he says, his voice deep and velvety, sending shivers down my spine, and I’m momentarily stunned. He sounds like...His voice. It’s like I can hear him, the masked man at Myth. Oh, God. I’m losing my fucking mind.

“The pleasure is mine, Mr. King,” I say, easing my hand from his. We stand like that for what feels like eons, his eyes seemingly drinking me in while I can’t shake the feeling that I know this man. I have a familiar flutter of awareness in my

lower belly, and my knees have turned to Jell-O. Maybe it's the similarities I see between him and Sebastian. Gabriel is just a more polished, sophisticated version of his son, anyway. That must be it.

"I think, at this point, you should call me Gabriel. Don't you?" There's an edge to his tone like it's taunting me, his jaw clenched and brows furrowed.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Sebastian interrupts, pulling me closer. "My father was just leaving."

"On second thought," Gabriel grabs a glass of champagne then cuts his gaze to mine, "I think I'll stick around a little longer. There's someone here I need to talk to."

"Like who?" Sebastian snaps.

Gabriel brings the edge of the glass to his lips, his eyes not leaving mine. "A mutual acquaintance, it seems."



GABRIEL

WELL, at least the kid never lacked anything growing up. Except for having his father in his life, of course. Sebastian's mother and her family did not play fair, and the shit that went down back then really fucked things up. The best weapon in the Stones' arsenal? 'You're not good enough to be a father.' So, I kept my distance, obviously, but I also kept an eye on my boy the best I could.

Clearly, Sebastian doesn't suffer from the 'not good enough' syndrome. He's totally in his element among a crowd of hundreds, everyone wanting a piece of him while cameras flash in his face. He sure as fuck didn't get that from me.

I'd rather get my balls turned inside out than participate in this fake society bullshit. This proves that parents would do anything for their child because here I am at some fake society bullshit party. AKA, my son's engagement party.

Speaking of fake. I lift a brow at Elenor fucking Stone floating around like a wasp pretending to be a butterfly. Now, that's an insect I'd love to squash in my palm and watch her wings shatter under my thumb. That woman has caused me more suffering than any other person alive—mainly because every other fucker who has wronged me is now either buried or burned to ash. But, unfortunately, Elenor is still breathing, and she has Sebastian to thank for that.

“Are you a friend of the bride or groom?”

I sip my bourbon and eye the little shit who stepped in front of me. Middle-aged. Sharp widow's peak. Thick, framed glasses. A neatly pressed suit. A run-of-the mill guy. Except... he just seems wrong. He's twitchy like he's coming down from something. Of course, he is. He has to be high to think he can approach me like I'm the friendly and caring pastor of this shitty community.

“Father of the groom.” My tone echoes my lack of desire to continue this conversation.

“Oh, it's nice to meet you. Stone never talks about his dad. I'm directing his debut film. It's going to be a hit. Huge.” His eyes shift from left to right rapidly as he eyes the room. God knows what he's looking for. Drugs? Another drink, which he clearly doesn't need? What a fuckhead.

“I'm sure it will be a smash.” My sarcasm is lost on him.

“Huge. Blockbuster, man. Just need a little bigger budget. But you know how it goes. These studios always want to put a lid on the creativity.” He makes a sound between a cough and a laugh, and my fingers tighten around my glass. Fucking junkie. Director, my ass. The only thing he seems capable of directing is a drug deal.

“Excuse me,” I say, brushing past him, needing to get the fuck away from this asshole. I'm also making a mental note to question Sebastian on his decision for wanting to work with this douchebag.

I've only been here ten minutes, and I already know I'd rather be at a sex-offender convention because slitting their

throats wouldn't be considered bad social etiquette.

I finally glimpse my son, his petite fiancée's back turned toward me. Sebastian is leaning close, smiling as he whispers something to her. But judging by her rigid shoulders, my money is on them having a slight disagreement.

Weaving through the groups of people, I call out to Sebastian as his fiancée walks in the other direction.

Sebastian looks my way, and I'm pretty sure he's shooting daggers through my skull.

His relaxed demeanor turns hostile. "What the fuck?" he grits out.

"It's nice to see you, too, son." I'm married to sarcasm.

"I'm not your son."

"Go take a good look in the mirror. You're my spitting fucking image. Except for your eyes. They're your mother's."

"Don't." He leans in, eyes glaring like the pits of hell. "Don't you fucking talk about my mother."

"Relax. I won't stay long. Just thought it would be nice to meet the woman my son's about to marry before the wedding."

"How did you even get in here without an invitation?"

"Okay, so, firstly, I really don't need an invitation to get in anywhere because I can make that happen with the mere snap of my fingers." I slip my hands into my pants pockets.

"Secondly, I have an invitation."

"What?" Confusion forms grooves on his forehead. "Who invited you?"

I shrug. "You did."

"Are you insane?" He inches closer, glancing around and spreading a fake smile to the guests. "I did no such thing."

"The invite that dropped in my inbox two days ago says otherwise."

"I did not invite you."

"Well, someone did."

His jaw clenches, his eyes big, green orbs of hostility.
“This is me uninviting—”

“There you are,” a voice slices through the tension boiling between Sebastian and me. “I’ve been looking all over for you?”

Sebastian rolls his shoulders then straightens, plastering the fake smile he clearly learned how to do from Elenor on his face. “Kallie, you’re just in time.”

My world comes to a complete, screeching fucking halt.

“I’d like you to meet Gabriel King. My father.”

I stop breathing. All the noise around me fades. The blood in my veins freezes instantly. Jesus fucking Christ.

Blonde hair.

Green eyes.

Petite frame.

A shimmering rhinestone mask and luminescent ivory dress.

It’s her. The little lamb who entered the lion’s den. My den.

The woman whose face has haunted me ever since that night at Myth. The girl I’ve kissed, touched, caned...fucked. My goddamn wet dream personified.

God, I can still taste her cunt, still see images of her ass decorated with lashes of red. The woman I haven’t been able to get out of my fucking mind.

My son’s fiancée.

My future daughter-in-law.

Fuck me.

Nine

WELL, fuck. That's definitely on my list of the top ten most awkward conversations ever.

Gabriel King. My future father-in-law.

The man makes me nervous. His aloof, condescending manner isn't exactly inviting, and he sure as hell knows how to make you squirm within five minutes of being in his presence. Two seconds under his pensive stare makes you feel like he's reading you, sizing you up, contemplating whether he should chew you up or swallow you whole.

I wait until he's out of earshot. "Why didn't you tell me you invited your dad?"

Sebastian throws back a glass of red wine in one gulp, a drop of crimson clinging to the corner of his lips. "I didn't invite him."

"Did Elenor invite him?"

"I don't know." Sebastian is still glaring a hole in the back of his father's head. "Probably."

"Wish I could say I'm surprised. But when it comes to your grandmother, nothing surprises me anymore."

"I need to clear my head." Sebastian's voice still drips with venom, and there's this pang of sympathy in my chest.

"Seb—"

I sigh, watching helplessly as my fiancé storms away, leaving me with the chaotic energy he and his father just

stirred up. I've always wondered about his father, someone Sebastian never talked much about. But after what just happened, I doubt I want to know more. They're like two gladiators rolling around in blood and waiting to tear each other's heads off.

"Care to walk with me, Miss Sawyer?"

A sharp bolt of heat bursts from where he has grabbed me. I inhale sharply, a shiver rippling down my spine as Gabriel King steps in next to me, his hand locked in an ironclad grip on my arm.

"Excuse me?" I glare at him as he's practically dragging me through the crowd. "Get your hands off me."

He doesn't. In fact, he doesn't even bat a fucking eyelash, and it's like the groups of guests magically make way for us like this man is Moses and they're the Red Sea. It's fitting, really, since Elenor does want a red wedding.

Not the time, Kallie.

"Let go of me." I jerk my arm, but it only makes him tighten his fingers even more, and I know I'm currently in an inescapable situation with a seemingly mad Gabriel.

My heels scrape along the polished floors as Gabriel tows me down the hall. He scans around us, then grips my dress around my waist and tosses my ass inside the first room he can find, shutting the door behind him.

"Jesus. No wonder your son doesn't like you." I wrench the fabric of my dress back into place and realize that we're in Elenor's study. It reeks of her perfume. "What the hell do you think you're doing, you fucking Neanderthal?"

"Watch that dirty mouth, Kallie."

"I'm going to walk out of this room and pretend like this didn't happen." I march toward the door, my fists clenched. "The last thing Sebastian needs is a reason to hate you more."

Gabriel's fingers clamp down on my arm, this time squeezing hard, causing me to wince. "How long have you been cheating on my son?"

Blood completely drains from my body and my heart is thumping loudly in my ears. “Excuse me?”

He yanks me close, and his jaw tics as he glares down at me with eyes that now seem more deadly than mesmerizing. “How long. Have you. Been cheating...on my son?”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. Let go of me.”

Fury explodes in the blue of his irises, his face nothing but lines of animosity and rage as he spins me around, slamming my back against the wall, my breath whooshing from my lungs. “Stop lying!”

“I’m not lying,” I hiss, flailing to get him the fuck off me.

“Where were you last Sunday night?” He leans forward into my space, inches from my face, towering over me like a shadow wanting to devour me.

Shadow.

Fuck.

I lean my head back against the wall, taking him in—no, drinking him in, an image as clear as day forming in my mind. Cobalt blue eyes. Sharp jawline. A voice like molten lava. A presence that both excites and suffocates me at the same time.

Oh, no.

“No,” I whisper shakily in disbelief. “No. No. No. It can’t be...you?”

“I’m afraid so, baby girl.”

“Oh, God.” I gasp, swallowing air that doesn’t reach my lungs. “How...How do you...We wore—”

“Masks? Yeah. I followed you out, watched you get into your car and take off your mask. You sat there crying behind the steering wheel for twenty goddamn minutes.”

Panic slithers around my lungs. “Jesus. This isn’t happening.”

“Oh, this giant clusterfuck already happened.”

“It’s not what you think.” I have no idea why those words fly out of my mouth faster than yesterday’s news.

“Oh, it’s not?” He cocks a dark brow. “So, you weren’t at a sex club getting caned and fucked while engaged to my son?”

I shake my head, shuddering as fear and guilt and regret and everything just bursts through me. “It’s not that simple.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“I…” Tears stream down my face in a cascade of guilt. “I can’t.”

“Say it!” He slams his fists into the wall, snarling like a rabid animal as he leans in, a hulking beast looming over me. “Fucking say it out loud.”

“Say what?”

“That you’re a fucking liar and a cheat!”

“No! No, I’m not. It’s not as black and white as you think.” I swallow the shame that tastes like bile at the back of my throat because the truth is, I am a cheater. I am a liar for keeping the secret. And I might have my own personal reasons for doing what I did, but it still doesn’t justify any of it.

Cold sweat clings to my forehead as nerves eat away at me like flesh-eating insects.

I can’t breathe. I can’t fucking breathe with him this close. My hands start flailing, nails clawing as I try to fight him off me. “Get your fucking hands off me.”

“Say it!” He grabs my face with both hands, razor-sharp claws digging into my skin as he forces me to look him in the eye.

“You’re hurting me!”

“Isn’t that what you want? Pain?”

My lips quiver in response, my breath coming faster, every limb trembling from the icy chill splintering my bones.

“Stop!”

“You know the word stop only makes my dick hard.”

“Goddammit. Stop, please,” I beg, tears now freely streaming down my face.

He grips my face tightly, stilling me as he leans close, tracing his lips down my jaw. “Some would call this... serendipity.” He hooks his thumb into my mouth, and I can taste tobacco on his skin. “But I call it a complete and utter royal...fuck-up.”

“Let me go or I’ll scream.”

“I dare you to fucking scream for me. It won’t be the first time.” The words pour from his mouth like a torrent, the lines in his face a maddened maze. His intensity is crushing, his eyes wild as if he’s about to lunge and tear me the hell apart. It’s fucking petrifying. Intimidating. Primal.

Sexual.

Oh, God. What is happening right now?

It’s like the air went from arctic to scorching in zero-point-five seconds, and now I’m torn between defending myself against his horrible accusations and begging him to...

To what? To hate me more? To hurt me? *Maybe. Fuck.*

It’s not just anger emanating from him. There’s something else there hidden underneath the fury. A blazing heat. A sinister possession. And I’m suddenly overcome with a need to keep on digging until it unleashes.

His hand encloses my throat, and I’m now hyperaware of how good his hatred feels against my skin. The bite of his fingers. The darkness in his eyes. His unbridled rage.

This is madness.

“Why are you marrying my son?”

“Because I love him.”

The sound of his malicious laughter hits the walls. “Love? What the fuck do you know about love?”

“Apparently, more than you. Now, let me go.” I struggle against his crushing hold, but it’s futile as he uses his body to trap mine, wedging his thick, muscular thigh between my legs,

forcing the memory of his hard body settling on top of mine into my head.

A strangled gasp rushes from my lips, and his gaze drops to my mouth. It's a moment of pure heat, charged with something I can't put into words. But whatever it is, it's fucking with my head because my mind is still screaming at me to fight him while my body pleads for me to surrender. It's electrifying, and by the way his gaze burns while focused on my lips, I'm wondering if he's feeling it, too.

But the insanity is fleeting, and I wince as he presses his fingers against the throbbing vein in my neck.

"This is what's going to happen," he starts. "You're going to break off this engagement—"

"Are you insane?"

"—and you are going to leave this fucking city. This country. This goddamn continent, and get as much distance between you and my son as humanly possible."

"I'll do no such thing." I thrash against him, an invasion of my salty tears exploding on my tongue. He pushes his thigh harder against my sex, pinning me in place. He leans down and leisurely glides his tongue across my cheek, licking at my tears.

He buries his face in my neck and rasps in my ear, "Oh, yes, you will...little lamb."

Abruptly, he lets go of me, steps away, and I sink to the floor.

"Because if you don't, I swear to God I will fucking destroy you."

He walks out, slamming the door shut, and I'm left on the floor—wrecked and drenched in more shame than I've ever felt.

I allow the guilt and shame to consume me as I lie there on the floor of the study.

What have I done?

Sebastian's father. Gabriel King.

I cheated on my fiancé...with my future father-in-law.

Ten

HOW FUCKED AM I?

My masked stranger is my future father-in-law. My future father-in-law is my masked stranger.

My money is on *'I'm completely fucked.'* And the odds of unfucking myself out of this situation seem as black as the coffee I'm holding.

I have no idea how long I cried on Elenor's damn study floor last night. But after Gabriel left, I couldn't gather the strength to get up. My mind kept toppling over the same question.

How could I be so stupid?

That night wasn't supposed to be anything more than me trying to silence the goddamn screams in my head, to stop the constant crawling under my skin that never seemed to go away. It wasn't supposed to be anything other than one night. Just one fucking night. But now it's a cluster.

Sebastian found me in his grandmother's study. I used the excuse of having too much champagne, which he believed because he was nowhere near sober. Turns out his father ruined the night for both of us, leaving one drunk out of his mind and the other crying on the goddamn floor.

"Shit, Kal, what time is it?" Sebastian's standing in the doorway, one eye open, hair a mess, and clutching the side of his head as if it'll fly off if he lets go.

Oh, God, he looks like him. He looks like his father. Shit. Now I can't unsee it. Not even a hangover can make Sebastian look any less like Gabriel now.

"Ten-thirty." I pour him a cup of coffee. "Here, this will help. My guess is you're feeling as shitty as you look."

"I look that bad?"

"Well..."

"I need aspirin."

"I think you need more than aspirin."

"You have any horse tranquilizers lying around?"

"I might," I tease while slowly dying inside. I can't even look at my fiancé without seeing the man who had me pinned against a wall last night, our connection crackling even though he spat threats at me.

"It was great," Sebastian says, popping two pain pills. "My grandmother did an amazing job pulling it all together. Pity Gabriel ruined it."

There's that horrible pang of guilt again, poisoning my soul little by little.

I clear my throat. "Did you ask your grandmother if she invited him?"

"No." He drags a palm down his face. "I was too busy having a conversation with my friend bourbon. Shit, I have to pack, or I'll be late."

Another trip. Another week apart. Or is it two this time? I'm losing count because it's been impossible to keep up with his schedule lately. Maybe I should just tell him I'll see him at the wedding...if there'll be one. Gabriel made it clear how he felt about me marrying his son and that he'll destroy me if I do.

I follow Sebastian to our room, then lean against the doorframe while I watch him pack. "Tell me about him," I say before I get a chance to stop myself. I take a seat at the counter

next to him. “I know Gabriel wasn’t a part of your life while growing up. Do you know why?”

“Because he couldn’t give two shits about me or my mother. My mom was his shiny new toy with a rich family while he was nothing but trash from the wrong side of the tracks.”

“He doesn’t look like he comes from the wrong side of the tracks.” He wears Armani suits, for crying out loud. *And has a private suite at Club Myth.*

Sebastian shoves a pair of sneakers into his suitcase. “Right place at the right time, I guess. He got lucky, and now he owns his own shipping company.”

“I doubt that it’s luck.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sebastian snaps. “What matters is that he bailed on my mom the second he found out she was pregnant. Then has the balls to show up at her funeral, pretending to fucking care, and now,” he scoffs, “now he shows up again right when my career is taking off. Coincidence? I think not.”

I narrow my eyes. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I don’t believe in coincidences, Kallie. He didn’t just wake up one morning and decide he suddenly wants to be a part of my life. I’m fucking famous, and Gabriel wants to take advantage of it.”

I choke on a laugh. “Are you serious? You think Gabriel wants a piece of your *fame*?”

“It sure will get more eyes on Sterling Shipping.”

I’m flabbergasted. When did Sebastian turn into this pretentious, egotistical asshole? “I’m sorry, but I don’t believe that.”

“Don’t believe what?” He zips up his bag and slips on his jacket.

“That your dad wants a piece of your fame. If that were true, he would have been in front of all the flashing cameras

last night. But as far as I remember, the only two people who enjoyed the attention were you and your grandmother.”

“Are you defending him?”

I straighten. “What? No. Of course not.”

Sebastian picks up his suitcase and drops it by the door. “Stay away from him, Kallie.” *Too late.* “He’s a smooth-talking fraud who is way too charming for his own good. And the last thing I need right now is for drama featuring Gabriel King to upstage this wedding.”

There it is. The mention of *‘the’* wedding like it’s nothing more than a PR gig. Like it’s more about the press than it is about us. I’m convincing myself more and more that he’s only marrying me so he and the press stay engaged.

A car horn blares outside, and Sebastian checks his wristwatch. “That’s probably my cab. I have to go.” He presses his lips to mine in a chaste kiss. “I love you. I’ll call you as soon as I land in New York.”

“Okay, but—”

He rushes down the hall, and I don’t even get a chance to ask him when he’ll be back. But relief drapes over me when the door clicks shut behind him, and I have no idea why. I don’t know what’s happening between us, but this wedding is not bringing us closer together. In fact, it’s pushing us farther apart. There’s been this weight on my shoulders ever since he slipped a ring on my finger. Our lives changed direction that day, and we’re in a tailspin. Add Gabriel King to the mix, and I’m certain I’m headed to hell.

Despite knowing I shouldn’t, I type Gabriel King in the Google search bar. There’s not a ton of information on him, apart from him being the CEO and founder of Sterling Shipping, a multi-billion-dollar company.

And Sebastian thinks Gabriel wants a slice of the fame pie? I snort.

Sterling Shipping operates from all the major ports in North America. New York. New Jersey. Norfolk Port. Baltimore. Charleston. This company is just about

everywhere, but the office is right here in Chicago, no more than an hour's drive.

I let the cursor hover over the address on the screen. There's this itch along my spine—more like Satan's tickle urging me to do something really fucking stupid.

If I see him, I might be able to make him understand why I went to Myth that night. Make him see that I'm not this slimy cheat he thinks I am. That the night at Myth was the first time in my life I had ever done something like that, and that it was only this one-time effort to quiet my demons. I never plan on going back there or doing something like that again. Hurting Sebastian is not a motivator here. This isn't even about Sebastian at all. It's about me. About my baggage. Baggage I don't want to saddle on Sebastian's back for the rest of his life, so I did what I did to hopefully get rid of it.

Somehow, I have to make Gabriel understand I am not a bad person.

Armed with bravado, I slip on a pair of black skinny jeans, a gray sweater, and matching flats. I grab my coat and black scarf and hurry out the door before I get a chance to lose my last nerve.

I'll probably regret this. But it seems like doing shit I regret is becoming part of my daily routine. Like brushing my teeth.

What was supposed to be an hour's drive turned into two since I backed out and had the cab driver turn around and head back to my place twice, only to tell him to turn around again and go to the address I gave him.

I crane my neck and look at the building in front of me. It's large. Tall. Intimidating. And after several deep breaths and three pep talks, I brave the revolving door, entering what my mind now refers to as the foyer of hell.

The interior looks just like I imagined it would. Sleek, sophisticated, all modern angles and curves, chiseled steel. It's all him put together in one office building.

Light reflects off the glass panes in the lobby, scattering across the white-tiled floors. Two women are seated at the reception desk, eyeing me as I walk up. I don't like how they look at me as if I'm competition they have to fight to keep their domain.

I step up and muster up the sincerest smile. "Hi. My name is—"

"Kallie Sawyer," a voice booms behind me, and my stomach does twenty somersaults in two heartbeats.

I lick my lips as I turn, feeling my confidence drain out of me. Gabriel is standing a few feet away. Handsome. Imposing. A mountain of power. You don't have to know him to know he's the boss. He dominates the room by demanding respect and instilling fear simply by breathing.

"Mr. King," I start, but he stomps toward me and pretends to lightly touch my elbow when he's actually burying his fingers in my flesh. At least he's not dragging me like he did last night. I'd say that's progress.

The elevator opens as we approach, and we don't even have to slow down our pace to get in it. It's like it knows.

The steel door closes, trapping me inside a small space with a man whose confidence and authority are visible and tangible. I can practically hear it ripple around us.

"You should have been halfway to China by now." His tone is as firm as his grip on my arm.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"That wasn't the deal."

"What deal?" I say, snapping my gaze up to him. "There was no deal. Only you throwing threats around like I'm the villain here."

"Aren't you?"

"No. I'm not."

The elevator dings, and the door opens to a vast, luxury office space. So, the man has his own private elevator. Why

does that not surprise me?

Expensive oil paintings are on the walls. Leather couches, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city, and big television screens displaying the daily stock markets. It's all high-end, high-life poshness.

It even smells like him. A scent I haven't been able to get out of my mind. The masculine scent of pepper, tobacco, rum, and something uniquely him.

Sex and sin.

Gabriel watches me in silence.

“Why the fuck are you here?”

I turn to face him. Our eyes meet, and the air thickens around us. For a second, I allow myself to see my masked stranger. The man who knew my body before he touched it. The man who fused pleasure and pain so beautifully, making my blood sing for him while entirely at his mercy. He made me forget. He charged me with life with every strike of his cane and stroke of his hand. His eyes. His voice. His touch. His mouth. It's all turning a one-night affair into an all-consuming urge for the forbidden.

I clear my throat. It's the first thing I can think of doing to break the uncomfortable silence. “I think we got off on the wrong foot.”

“Oh, sweetheart, it's more like you got off on the wrong dick.” His eyes glint, but I'm not amused.

“I'm not here to spar with you, Gabriel. I'm here to say—”

“What?” he interrupts, his eyes blue flames of animosity as he stalks closer. “Are you here to say you're sorry? Sorry that you cheated on my son?”

“That's not—”

“Are you sorry I smacked your sweet ass, then fucked you afterward?”

I stare at him in shock as he forces me to step back.

“Does my boy not know how to fuck you, Miss Sawyer?”

My back hits the wall, and I suck in a breath.

“Or is it no fun playing with someone your own age?”

“Fuck you, Gabriel.”

A cocky smirk tugs at his lips. “Been there. Done that.”

“Would you stop!” I yell at him. “Just stop for one goddamn minute and let me explain.”

“There is nothing to explain.”

He’s too close. He’s taking up too much space, and it’s making my head spin, drifting into the fantasy he dominates.

“Yes, there is. Now, if you can just shut up for two fucking minutes and let me breathe. Please.”

He doesn’t back away. He merely lifts his arms, planting his palms on either side of my head against the wall, as if my plea for breath motivates him to take it away.

I breathe in deeply and try to compose myself. “There’s a reason I went to Myth.”

“What reason could you possibly have for fucking another man besides your fiancé? And at a sex party, for that matter?”

“I did not go there to fulfill some sordid fantasy, Gabriel.”

“What, then?” he demands, his voice slicing like blades through my chest.

I press my lips in a thin line, glancing anywhere except at him. “I have my reasons, but it’s not the obvious, I assure you.”

A wave of fear mixed with anticipation runs through me. The fear because I don’t know what he’s going to do. The anticipation because...I don’t know what he’s going to do.

Hi. My name is Kallie, and I lost my fucking mind.

“So, you’re saying you didn’t go to Myth to get your ass caned and cunt fucked?” It’s like God took his voice and dipped it in liquid sex. What he says is rude and offensive, and apparently, my pussy likes it because there’s a familiar tingle that belongs to his presence alone, slicking up my sex.

I have no idea how to respond. Gabriel is a force that demands every ounce of energy whenever I'm close to him. It's taking all my strength just to breathe around him.

His gaze drops to my lips. It's a simple act, one no one else can see but me. His eyes seem to turn from hard to...hunger, and I'm compelled to part my lips while I drown in the blue depths of his irises.

I can't explain it. It's like someone pushed the pause button, and time is standing still. Like the whole world around us came to a halt. The warmth of his breath touches my cheek, his scent enveloping me, igniting the same flame that exploded into a wildfire the night at Myth. If that same flame should detonate now, we'd both burn to ash and spend eternity in hell.

Gabriel leans closer, and I'm sure he's about to kiss me. Do I want him to? Would I allow it?

His lips part, and my thighs clench. But then something changes. The electricity is gone. The heat is gone, and now it's fucking arctic.

He cocks his head, lifting a brow. "What's your story, huh, Kallie? How the fuck were you wronged? Did your uncle touch you in a way he wasn't supposed to? Did daddy make you watch while he hurt mommy?"

Anger erupts inside me, and I fist my hands, pushing him away from me as hard as I can. "Fuck you, Gabriel King!" I spit out. "Fuck you and your conceited, pompous, arrogant fucking ass. You are the last person to point fingers because when it comes to failing Sebastian, you're standing first in line."

"I would caution you to think twice about what comes out of your mouth next, little lamb."

"Do not call me that," I grit out. "I am not your little lamb or your baby girl. I'm nothing to you."

He crosses his arms. "Just my future daughter-in-law."

"Something you'll put a stop to, I'm sure."

“Oh, you bet your caned fucking ass I will. You’ll stay the fuck away from my son, or I’ll make sure you’re on the next boat to Mexico with nothing but a collar around your goddamn neck. Do I make myself clear?”

Tears are hot on my cheeks, my heart thumping in the soles of my feet as silent rage sears my veins. I walk up to him, craning my neck as I look him in the eye. “Yes... sir.”

Eleven

GABRIEL

I LOSE my shit and swipe everything off my fucking desk. Not only did I screw my son's fiancée, but I almost tore her goddamn clothes off right here in my office and fucked her against that frosted window when she said the words 'yes' and 'sir.'

Jesus. It's like that woman has a direct line to my dick. I swear if she just breathes a certain way, I want to cane her ass before I fuck it.

This is wrong on so many levels, there's not a priest in this world who can save my soul from going to hell. I'm pretty sure the devil is preparing my own little corner down there right fucking now.

If Sebastian finds out about this, I'll lose every chance I've ever had with him. It'll destroy him, and I'll never forgive myself if that happens.

What kind of sick shit is the universe playing at?

She knew. She fucking knew she was engaged when she went on her journey to play submissive slut. It might take two to tango, but at least I'm not the one who cheated.

I will ruin her. I will destroy her, no matter how many times I've pumped my dick fantasizing about my girl in white or how much I want to sink into that tight pussy of hers again.

Sweet. Innocent. Broken girl.

Goddammit!

I pick up the crystal paperweight on my desk and fling it at the wall. 'Yes, sir.' Two words triggered a black hole of filthy thoughts, making me think of a punishment she'll enjoy rather than one she'd hate.

First, I'll rip her clothes off and force her to her knees. Bend her over and bind her wrists. I'll show her who is in control here while I cane her ass until it's blood red with angry welts. Then I'll slide my dick into her sweet pussy and fuck her until she forgets who the hell she is engaged to. Pound into her until she forgets Sebastian exists. And I'll keep desecrating her cunt until the only name she knows is mine.

And once I'm done with her, she'll be boneless with pleasure. Simpering with regret and crying those beautiful tears I love to taste. Tears of remorse, guilt, and the realization that there is no redemption for her.

Jesus fucking Christ. I can't even think of her without wanting to fuck her.

I sit at my desk and sharply jab the keyboard. I want to know who Kallie Sawyer is. I want to know where she eats, where she sleeps, and how long she sleeps. I want to know her preferred brand of toothpaste. What's her blood type. Her birth weight. Are all her vaccinations up to date. The last fucking movie she watched. I want to know *everything*.

I send an email to Davian. He has a way of getting information from undisclosed places, information that even the government can't trace. I will find out who Kallie Sawyer is if it's the last fucking thing I do.

I fling my keyboard to the ground after sending the email, rubbing my fist in front of my face. I might not know her blood type, but I know exactly how tight her cunt is. How her body comes alive under my touch. How she was born to submit. And I know how to make her body sing with pleasure. With pain. With every emotion in between with the music of our complete fucking chaos.

The thoughts are running together in a red haze. I hate her. I hate her for this. I hate her for being in my head twenty-four-fucking-seven. I hate her for being so goddamn perfect while

chained and naked. But, most of all, I hate her for being the woman my son loves.

I clench my fists so hard my knuckles ache. The more I think of her, the more my hatred turns into something stronger. More powerful. Something I'm struggling to control.

I have to get the fuck out of here. I grab my jacket and pick up the phone, dialing Denise.

“Sir?”

Fuck that word.

“I won't be back today,” I bark. “If Victoria comes around, tell her it will have to wait.” I hang up before Denise even gets a chance to say a word. Right now, I don't give a shit about anything. This goddamn building can burn to the fucking ground today.

The elevator chimes, and the doors slide open. My steps eat up the underground pavement to the gleaming black of my Maserati. It roars to life under my hand, and I burn rubber out of the lot. Only one thing will take care of this unrestrained wrath currently infecting me.

Myth, and a wet pussy with a taste for pain.

I call ahead, telling Nicoli I'm on my way. Apart from having three of their best girls line up for me when I get there, security needs to know to put everything in place so I can enter through the back door. Nicoli knows I hate going through the front, risking having people I know recognize me. My fuck-life is none of anyone's business, and the last thing I want is a Mr. Abenante or Mr. Presutti to ask me how I prefer to get my dick wet over lunch.

The lot is packed with Ferraris, Lamborghinis, Rolls Royce, and Mercedes Benz luxury cars. It's three in the afternoon. Do these people have nothing better to do than fuck around? Pun intended.

Three girls are lined up outside my quarters—the room I pay a fuckton of money for to be mine exclusively. I don't even take the time to fully appreciate my options by sizing up their tits and testing their cunts by sliding a finger through

each one. There's one blonde woman, and she's the lucky goddamn winner.

"You," I snap at her, and her dark chocolate eyes widen. Now if they were green, she'd be perfect. "Come with me." I loosen my tie, unlock the door, and roll up my sleeves as I stomp inside. I grab her hand and pull her to stand in front of me. I tear the delicate strap of her lace chemise and begin tugging at it roughly until it's a tattered mess hanging from her shoulders.

"On your knees," I demand, my cock already hard.

She obeys immediately, wisps of blonde hair falling around her face. She's beautiful, this one. She's damn well near perfect.

She's not her.

I take her chin between my fingers and tilt her head, so she looks at me. "Is your pussy wet, little one?"

"Yes, sir."

I snarl, hating how those words sound coming from her mouth, so I pull my cock out and grip her head tight, guiding my dick past her lips and pushing all the way to the back of her throat.

She moans around my shaft, wrapping her fingers around the base. Spit drips from her mouth, her tits bouncing as she sucks me like I dipped my dick in her favorite flavored iced tea. Peach. She looks like the peach type. Some women seem to think peach is sexy. Peach lip-gloss. Peach-flavored gum. Peach dessert. It's even used as a motherfucking emoji when they chat with their BFFs about getting fucked outside in some lame parking lot. And don't forget the goddamn eggplant. What kind of dick looks like an eggplant, anyway? Not mine. Mine sure as fuck doesn't look like a goddamn vegetable.

Peaches here groans as she tries to swallow my cock. She's pumping her mouth over my dick so damn fast, she's two gags away from a concussion.

She's too easy. Too eager. She's too seasoned.

I sigh, my dick going soft in her mouth, clearly as unimpressed by her practiced sounds of pleasure as I am. I could let one of the other girls take her place or, better yet, join us. But Nicoli can have all the Myth girls stroll in here naked with glistening pussies, orchestrating the world's biggest gangbang ever, and my dick still won't play.

Why? Because it's not. Her.

I pull out of her mouth and wipe her spit off my dick with her torn chemise. "Get up and get out."

Obedience has been engraved into this one as she gets on her feet and softly walks out of the room.

The door shuts, and I start to pace, pulling my fingers through my hair. "Fuck!"

I can't get that woman out of my head; evidently, neither can my dick. I yank one of the canes from the wall and throw it across the room. Kallie is all I see whenever I close my eyes. She's the one I want to fuck when I wake up with wood. I want to hear her screams while I pump my jizz deep inside her motherfucking womb. I want to watch my cum drip from her delicious cunt after I've fucked it raw.

She's the one.

She's the fucking one...and I hate her for it.



MY KNUCKLES RAP the door in a frantic rhythm, my fist coming down in quick, unforgiving strikes against the wood.

There's a loud click of the lock being undone, the door opening a crack. Kallie's forest green eyes peer around the edge.

"Let me in," I demand, and she quickly tries to close the door, but I wedge my foot in the opening.

"Go away, Gabriel."

“We have to talk.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

I grab the doorknob and use my shoulder to force it open. Kallie stumbles back, her porcelain skin flushed and eyes wide. “Get out of my house.”

My response to her demand is to shut the door behind me.

“I said get out.”

I lift a brow, amused by the fierceness resonating in her voice. There’s a smear of red paint on her cheek, her hair tied in a messy bun with tufts of blonde locks framing her face. The only thing she’s wearing is a white shirt four sizes too big for her tiny frame, covered in different shades of dried paint. She looks a mess. A sexy as fuck goddamn mess.

“What do you want, Gabriel?”

I glance around. It’s a quaint little place compared to my luxury penthouse apartment. The open-plan kitchen and living area are trimmed with the same avocado, beige, and copper shades. There’s a single three-seater micro-suede couch and glass-top coffee table in the living room, the walls empty apart from the curtains draped over the windows. There’s a warm feeling to it, homey. I bet it’s all her. It smells like her, too. Inviting. Sweet. Sensual.

“Why?” It’s the only word I can come up with.

“Why what?”

“Why the fuck did you have to go to Myth?” I take a step closer, and she moves back.

“I told you. I have my reasons.”

“I need to know.”

She bites her lip, crossing her arms as if protecting herself. “It’s none of your business.”

“Are you kidding me?” I snap. “You made it my fucking business when you welcomed my cock between your legs.”

“That was a mistake. We didn’t know.”

“You knew,” I bite out. “You fucking knew you were engaged to my goddamn son.” I stab a finger against my chest. “And you still went there, Kallie. You still fucking went there, to that place for God knows what reason, and here we are caught up in this enormous magnitude of a clusterfuck, and yet you don’t think it’s any of my business.”

“Why?” she blurts. “Why the hell do you need to know?”

“Because I need something to fucking justify what we did. Something that will make this situation less of a complete fuckup, but I’m coming up short. I can’t think of a single goddamn reason that can justify why I had my cock buried inside you two weeks ago, and why I can’t stop thinking about it.”

She stares at me with those beautiful green eyes framed with dark lashes and holds my gaze without blinking. A sudden surge of desire seeps into my veins, and my dick jerks just as my heart clenches in my chest. She’s so close that all I want to do is kiss her. Rip that shirt off her body and sink into her.

She licks her lips, moving her head in a slow motion. “Don’t say shit like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s wrong.”

“It can’t get more wrong than it already is.”

“Still.”

I’ve never seen a more delicious sight. Her green eyes stare back at me with both shock and bewilderment. I take a step forward, and she instinctively steps back, biting her lower lip, fury burning in her gaze.

I step forward, she moves back, and I simply lift a brow. “Are you saying you haven’t thought about it?” Her throat bobs as she swallows. “That you haven’t touched yourself once thinking of me? Made yourself come thinking of how good my cock felt inside you?”

“You son of a bitch.”

“So, that’s a yes, then?”

“Gabriel, stop.”

“Pity you didn’t say stop two weeks ago when you were dangling from my goddamn ceiling.”

“As you said, the word stop only makes your dick hard.”

I grab her throat and pull her closer, both her hands wrapping around my wrists, nails clawing at my skin. She snarls, her eyes a whirlpool of anger and desire. She’s fucking beautiful, and I love the way she fights me. I want her to fight me as much as I want to fuck her. I invade her space, leaning down so our mouths are only inches apart. “You better watch what you say to me.”

She smiles slightly. “Yes...Daddy.” Her voice drips with sarcasm, and my muscles tighten, my jaw set.

“I’m not your fucking daddy,” I growl.

“Oh, that’s right. You’re my future husband’s daddy.”

The tenuous thread of my control snaps, and I grab her hair, yanking her head back roughly, her neck craned and delicate throat exposed. She moans in pain, digging her claws deeper into my wrists, but she doesn’t try to pull away.

“Do you really want to fuck with me, baby girl?” My voice is low, swimming with a poisoned threat.

“What’s that you said? Been there...done that.”

My control detonates, and my restraint erupts, leaving nothing but chaos.

I slam my mouth against hers, a thunderous kiss of anger, frustration, and red-hot passion that explodes as our tongues duel. She bites at my lip, and I taste the blood in my mouth. But it only makes me ravage her more. Harder. Deeper. Un-fucking-stoppable.

I squeeze her throat, pulling her up closer to me, my tongue sweeping and claiming every corner of her mouth, feeding this insatiable frenzy raging through my veins.

I'm moving, forcing her back as I work my belt open with one hand, snapping it through the loops of my pants. She moans breathlessly against my mouth, her body writhing.

A fierce growl rips from my chest, and I pull my lips from hers, yanking her around and roughly shoving her against the back of the couch. I'm all labored breaths and panting exhales, wrenching her shirt and tearing through her black panties.

She's moving her hips, pushing her ass toward me, gasping. "Maybe it does turn me on. Daddy."

My hand encloses the back of her neck, and I force her face down, muffling her moans in the motherfucking magnolia pillows.

Daddy. It's a double-edged sword. It's half sarcasm, half delicious submission that makes my cock jerk in response.

"You can call me whatever you want," I say as I gather both her wrists, pinning them behind her back with one hand. "As long as you take what I give you and say thank you no matter how bad it hurts."

I straighten, and the slice of my belt whipping through the air is a harsh crackle as I lay a testing stripe across her ass. She moans, and I know she's as into being whipped as I am into giving her the lashes.

I repeat the motions in long, hard strikes that brand her soft skin with blooming pinks and vibrant reds. Her hips move as she lifts her sweet ass more, inviting the strokes of the leather, moaning out loud with every lash.

"Your safe word," I remind her.

She arches her back, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "I don't need it."

The leather strikes her one more time, and I let go of it and slide a hand between her legs and over her cunt, my fingers sopping wet.

"Do you need my cock?" I slip a finger inside her pussy, and she inches back, pushing her cunt against my palm.

"Yes, sir," she replies, her words a breathless plea.

“Then thank me for the beautiful marks on your ass,” I rasp as I pull my cock out, stroking it a few times to alleviate the throbbing.

“Thank you, sir,” she pants, and I drag the tip of my cock up and down her ass.

God, her obedience is exquisite. It’s not forced or practiced. It’s not a textbook display of submission. For her, it’s as natural as breathing, like it’s written in her blood. In all my years playing out my filthiest, dirtiest desires, I’ve never experienced someone like her. I’ve never had someone’s moans and pleas entrance me like sweet music, flowing through my veins and igniting a passion I can’t control.

I nudge my cock at her entrance. “Say it again.”

“Gabriel, please.”

“Say it—” I slip the head inside her, clenching my jaw as I hold on to restraint “—again.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Good girl.” I flex forward and impale her pussy with one stroke, pushing in so fucking deep she cries out, throwing her head back. She’s so slick and tight around my cock, I start jackhammering into her with a force that screeches the couch across the floor. “He doesn’t fuck you like this, does he?”

She shakes her head, and I yank at her hair, pulling her up, her lips parted as frantic breaths leave her mouth. She’s fucking mindless with pleasure.

“Say it,” I growl.

“He doesn’t...” She swallows, and I jab into her, lifting her feet off the fucking ground.

“Say it!”

“Your son doesn’t fuck me like you do, sir.” Her words are broken pieces of pleasure, her body jerking as I fuck her madly. Her wetness coats my balls as I slam into her one frenzied thrust at a time.

“Come for me, baby girl.” I slap her ass hard with my palm before snaking my arm around her waist, finding her clit, rubbing that nub of nerves with a relentless rhythm.

She screams, her body shuddering in pleasure as her orgasm detonates, and she reaches behind her, weaving her fingers through my hair as she tries to pull me closer.

I come with a violent force, my cock jerking as I spill my load inside her tight walls. She’s moving her hips, meeting my thrusts, and the ecstasy is indescribable as our bodies dance in lust.

I collapse against her, breathing in the sweet smell of her hair, the rich amber patchouli fragrance she wears, and the dizzying scent of us. It’s fucking delicious.

I look down at her ass and trace a gentle finger along a red and angry welt. “Tell me your story, beautiful, broken doll. Why do you need this?”

There’s a moment of aching silence before the weight of her answer crushes me.

“Because I deserve it.”

The rebuttal sticks in my throat. “Why?”

She thinks she deserves the pain, and I get off on inflicting it. She comes to life under my hands. I have never felt more alive than when I crack the whip and absorb her pain into my veins. This thing between us is so strong that it is practically a presence in the room.

“Why do you need it?” she murmurs. “The control?”

I lean back, dragging my fingers down her elegant spine. “Because I promised myself that I’ll never again feel like I don’t have control.”

She glances at me from over her shoulder. “Again?”

My throat goes dry, and I swallow. “The day I lost Sebastian and his mother was the last day I felt like I didn’t control my own life.”

There's a sting of regret that cuts through my chest. It's a memory I've buried in the farthest corner of my mind, and that's where it should stay because if I let it out, it would ruin me. Especially now.

"This is so fucked-up, Gabriel," she whispers. "What do we do now?"

I press a kiss against her head, pinching my eyes closed as our connection soars. "We stop."

Twelve

THREE DAYS. That's how long it's been since Gabriel showed up at my door. Three days since he left me a wreck, torn between the guilt of what we did and the desire to do it again. I can still feel the leather of his belt biting into my skin. The marks are still there, a reminder of how far I've fallen down this pit.

"Tell me your story, baby girl. Why do you need this?"

"Because I deserve it."

That's my entire existence summed up in four words. Four words that have become the poison I breathe every day of my life.

"I got myself in some trouble again." I pick at the grass. "It's big. I don't think I will get myself out of this one." I throw the grass leaves in the air, but there's no breeze, so it just flops back down. "I don't know what to do. Well, I know the right thing to do, but it's hard. It means change, and we both know how I handle change." Leaning back, I crane my neck, welcoming the sun's warmth that seeps through my pores. "The seasons are changing. Lucky for me that's one change that doesn't screw with my head."

I close my eyes and allow the silence to encircle me. It's so peaceful here. Calm. It's the one place where the quiet doesn't trigger a bombardment of racing thoughts.

I inhale deeply, envisioning the crisp air filling my lungs. But even in this tranquility, my mind can't stay away from Gabriel for long. His intense blue eyes staring at me. His

smooth hands and rough touch on my skin. The weight of his body on top of mine. His low, dangerous voice rasping in my ear.

“I’m so screwed,” I mutter, opening my eyes and sitting up straight. “I should call off the wedding. Break up with Sebastian. Leave town. But that means I’ll have to leave you, and we both know I can’t do that.”

Leaves start to rustle as a breeze picks up, carrying the earthy aroma of cut grass and wet dirt. “Things could have been so different.”

HER SCREAMS PENETRATE MY BONES. I jolt up from the floor and grab her trembling body, wrapping my arms around her. “Maya, wake up. Wake up. I’m here,” I say, holding her tight. “It’s just a dream, okay? You’re safe.”

Her screams turn into whimpers which turn into sobs.

“Shhh, it’s okay. No one can hurt you.” I rock her back and forth, running my hand along her naked arms and feeling the jagged scars, my heart breaking at the story they tell.

Maya clings to me like she’s afraid she’ll fall. Her sobs puncture my heart repeatedly, and there’s nothing else I can do but hold her. It’s been two months, and not a single night has gone by without her waking up screaming, crying, her body quivering with fear. She hasn’t spoken a word either. Not a single word. Not to our parents. Not to the police. Not to me.

She hardly eats. She hardly fucking breathes. It’s like her body was rescued, but her mind is still trapped down there.

“It’s okay, Maya,” I coo, soothingly stroking her blonde hair. “We’re safe. We’re not down there anymore. He can’t hurt us.” My heart aches with every breath, every word. But she doesn’t stop. Her cries don’t stop. No matter how hard I try, I can’t get her out of that hole. I can’t get through those steel bars that are keeping her prisoner.

I squeeze her a little tighter, wishing I could take it all away. Wishing I was strong enough to keep her safe. Wishing I

had fought a little harder to keep her away from him. If only he had picked me. If only he hurt me the way he hurt her. If only I didn't wake her that morning to play outside while we waited for the sunrise, then none of this would have happened. We wouldn't have been taken. We wouldn't have ended up in hell. And my little sister wouldn't be broken.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, using all my strength not to break down and cry. "I'm so sorry I couldn't protect you. I should have, but I didn't."

She doesn't hear me. She's still trapped in the nightmare, unable to grab on to reality.

"I'm so sorry, Maya." I close my eyes and bury my face in her hair as I continue to rock her. Eventually, her cries start to subside, her body slowly easing into me. But I don't loosen my hold around her, keeping her tucked against my chest. "I won't let go. I promise."

MY MOM'S screams woke me the following day, and the moment I realized Maya wasn't next to me, I knew. I knew what my mom's screams meant.

It meant I failed...and Maya was gone.

I place a white lily on the gravestone and trace my fingertips along the engraved name.

Maya Lily Pearson.

Peace...beautiful peace.



THE MINUTE I walk in the door, I want to turn around and walk out. Sebastian's sitting on the couch, scrolling on his phone, and my heart is now racing at a thousand miles a minute. And while I'm trying to calm the nerves crawling along my bones,

guilt is gnawing at my chest. All I can think about is what Gabriel and I did. And the worst part, I want to do it again. Again and again. Just this morning, I had the showerhead between my legs, fantasizing about him, thinking of how good it feels to have him inside me. How alive I feel when his touch burns my skin.

I clear my throat, and Sebastian finally tears his focus away from his phone.

“You’re home early,” I say, slipping my coat off.

“One of the actors had a family emergency, so we’re taking a break for a day or two.”

“So, you’re going back?” I want to sit next to him, but images of me getting fucked by his father on that same couch have me reaching for a bottle of red instead.

“Where have you been?” Sebastian turns in his seat, watching me pour two glasses of wine.

“Oh, I was at a fitting,” I lie. My life before him belongs to me. Every detail, every piece, every moment is my burden and mine alone. Sebastian doesn’t know anything about Maya. He doesn’t know who I really am.

I force a stiff smile. “You know those appointments last for hours.”

“That’s odd.” He frowns as I hand him a glass. “I just talked to my grandmother earlier. She called to let me know you hadn’t even contacted the designer yet. What’s going on, Kal?”

There’s no accusation in his tone. There should be. I just lied to him, and I let his father fuck me. Twice.

“What is the matter with you, babe? Don’t you want to get married?”

“Of course, I want to marry you,” I blurt, way too eager and fast. I’m pretty sure my guilt is written all over my goddamn face right now.

Sebastian gets up and rounds the couch. My gaze drops to the edge, and I can practically hear the lashes of Gabriel’s belt

as leather peppers angered welts on my ass.

“Kal, what’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I lie again.

“So, you still want to marry me?”

“Of course I do.” Another lie. It’s just lie upon lie upon lie.
“I love you. You’re my best friend.” I reach out to hug him.
“You know that.”

Sebastian barely encloses his arms around me before leaning back, scowling at me. “Then why aren’t you taking any of this seriously?”

“What do you mean?”

“My grandmother went to great lengths to get you on this designer’s client list, Kallie. So the least you can do is make an appointment and show up. We’re on a timeline. The wedding is in a few weeks, and you’re out taking walks.” He’s talking to me like I’m a small child who can’t understand simple thoughts.

“Why don’t you ask your grandmother to go for the fitting? She’s doing everything else. She might as well pick the dress and wear it herself. Hell, let her stand in front of the priest and marry you. This is turning into her wedding, anyway.”

“Jesus.” Sebastian all but slams his wine glass on the kitchen counter. “This is not what I expected when I decided to surprise you by coming home for a few days.”

“Did you come home because you wanted to surprise me or to force more wedding plans I don’t want down my throat? Wedding plans that aren’t even mine, yet I’m the goddamn bride.”

“Of course not. Okay, listen. I don’t want to fight. I hate it when we fight.” He takes a step closer, resting his hands on my shoulders. “Let’s take a second and try to calm down. There’ve been a lot of changes happening, a lot of pressure with the wedding coming up.” He tucks a hair strand behind my ear. “I’m going to take a quick shower. Then let’s have a

glass of wine, order takeout, and talk about the guest list and location.”

Is he fucking for real right now?

“Okay?” he pushes, his eyes never leaving mine. It’s mind-boggling how Sebastian has light green eyes, yet they still remind me of his father’s. This is so fucking twisted. I can’t even look at Sebastian without thinking about Gabriel.

“Okay,” I concede. I just don’t have the energy to bicker or fight.

Sebastian starts unbuttoning his shirt as he moves toward the bathroom. “Oh, by the way, an envelope came for you earlier. It’s on the coffee table counter. Weird. There was no return address.”

Icy fingers of fear slide down my back when I see the nondescript envelope on top of a pile of junk mail. My name is written on the front with perfect cursive handwriting, and I instinctively know that whatever’s inside it is not something I want to see.

The minute the door clicks closed behind Sebastian, I dart around the couch to the white envelope. My heart thumps hard in my chest as I slice it open. It nearly stops altogether when I see what’s inside.

It’s an old, yellowed clipping from the local paper. The headline reads, “*Missing sisters found alive.*”

I read the article like it’s a story I don’t know. As if it’s the first time I learn of the two girls who got snatched from their parents’ front yard one winter night in January, only to be found weeks later, battered and bruised, malnourished and dirty. Two girls who got stolen as children saved and returned as victims only. Not survivors. Just victims. Because the truth is, they didn’t survive. They might have been found alive, and their wounds might have healed, and their parents might have welcomed them back with tears and love. But they didn’t survive. This is not surviving.

There’s a note stuck to the back of the newspaper clipping, and I hold my breath.

“ -

”

"Does he know who you really are!"

My hand starts to shake, and the article slips from my fingers, whirling down to the floor and landing by my feet. Someone knows. Someone knows my secret, and they know where I live. They know who I really am, and now they want Sebastian to know, too.

Oh, God. What if Sebastian had opened it? What if he had seen it? What kind of fucking game is this? Who would do this?

My spine goes cold, icy tentacles of fear wrapping around my lungs. Only one person comes to mind. One person who has the resources to dig this deep. To find a secret I've done everything to bury and keep it buried. Someone who has the motive for wanting me gone.

Gabriel.

Thirteen

GABRIEL

I STOP SHORT the minute I walk into my office. Victoria is sitting in my chair flipping through papers. God, I don't have time for her today.

"Victoria," I greet sternly, stalking to the window and turning my back on her. "Whatever it is, it will have to wait."

"Oh, come now, King. I won't need much of your time."

I grit my teeth. "Why don't we meet for dinner tomorrow night?" Women like her are so shallow. Throw a dinner their way and they'll do anything.

She raises a brow in surprise, gets up from my chair and stalks toward me. "Dinner? Are you asking me out on a date?"

"Not at all. I'm simply being...polite."

Her blood-red nails trail down my tie, and she's biting her bottom lip while batting her eyelashes. It's a paltry attempt at seducing me. Futile at best.

"Last time I suggested lunch, you ran out of your office like you had the devil on your heels."

"I had important shit to deal with."

"Your son?" She twirls my tie around her finger, and I yank it away from her.

"I'd caution you to leave my son out of any of our future conversations."

"Fine." She smacks her lips, and I swear to God the sound cracks down my fucking spine. "Dinner tomorrow night. I'll

text you.”

“Of course you will.”

She quickly gathers her files and smooths out her skirt.
“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Me too.” This will be our first and last dinner date.
Victoria has worn out her welcome. But she doesn’t know that yet. “I’ll see you tomorrow—”

The slam of the door hitting the wall jerks my attention to the doorway. Kallie comes rushing in, evidently fuming, with Denise shortly on her heel. “I’m sorry, Mr. King. She wouldn’t listen to me. Should I call security?”

I hold up my hand to her while studying Kallie. “No need. I got this.”

“You bastard,” Kallie spits out.

“Victoria, if you don’t mind.” I dismiss her without looking in her direction.

The second the door closes, Kallie is pacing back and forth in my office like a pent-up jungle cat, all sexy curves and rage. I can’t stop myself from watching the way her hips sway and her full breasts bounce with each step. The way she’s pacing fills my office with her scent, and it’s fucking intoxicating.

“Why?” she demands, her eyes fiery orbs of anger.

I lean back against my desk, crossing my arms. “I’m going to pretend for a minute and play along. Why what, Miss Sawyer?”

“I know you want me gone, but you’re taking it too far.”

“Why are you still here, Kallie? You need to leave this city. Leave my son.”

“I don’t have to do shit. Last time I checked, your son wants nothing to do with you. You have no say when it comes to Sebastian’s life, and you have zero control over mine.”

“Funny. That’s not how it seemed when I had my cock buried inside your cunt. I remember you loving me taking control over you.”

“Stop it.”

“Why? You feeling guilty?” I taunt.

“And you don’t?” She raises her brows, her sultry lips slightly parted as she stares at me. I’m suddenly reminded of how she tastes, and the sound of her gentle moans that turn into screams of ecstasy when I sink my cock into her perfect fucking body. But I can’t think of that now.

I shift and straighten my shoulders. “I don’t have time for this bullshit. What is it that you came in here to accuse me of, Miss Sawyer?”

“Stay the hell out of my past, Gabriel.”

“Why? You have something to hide?”

Her gaze is etched on mine, her chest rising and falling beneath the ivory blouse she’s wearing. The color highlights her soft skin, and my fingers ache to touch her flesh, to wrap my hand around her throat, squeezing so her lips would form the perfect O. God, I want her. I want her naked and ready to take her punishment, whether by caning, whipping, or fucking. This woman is the perfect sub for a man like me. Her submission is natural, easy, flowing out of her like a simple exhale of breath. It’s something that can’t be trained. Something you can’t force.

My cock is instantly hard thinking about all the painful and pleasurable things I’ve done to her, and the things I still want to do to her.

She crosses her arms, and it causes the fabric of her blouse to gape, giving me a glimpse of the swell of her breast. “I’m *not* the only one at fault here. Maybe the first time, sure, you didn’t know who I was. But you knew who I was when you bent me over your son’s couch.”

My hard cock jerks at the reminder of what we did in her apartment—how I fucked her, not feeling an ounce of guilt while her pussy slicked around my dick. In that moment, I didn’t give a flying fuck about the fact that she was wearing my son’s engagement ring. All I cared about was getting my fill of her...just like I’m doing right now.

I brush past her, the air suddenly thick with the intoxicating energy we seem to create whenever we're close. I turn on the privacy screen, frosting the glass walls of my office, and lock the door.

"What are you doing?" she breathes out, and there's a slight tremor in her voice.

"Why are you here, Kallie?" I don't bother trying to hide the way my cock is tenting my pants.

"Stay out of my life."

"I think it's a bit late for that, don't you?"

"Gabriel—"

"I don't appreciate you coming here, stomping into my office like you have the right to." I stalk closer, slowly closing the distance between us. "What I do appreciate is the way your cunt gets wet when you give up control. Is that why you're here? Do you need someone to control you, little lamb?"

"Fuck you," she bites out. "I told you never to call me that again."

"And I told you to leave and get the hell out of my son's life. He deserves better."

"I doubt he deserves a father who fucks his fiancée either, but here we are." She looks directly at me, challenging me—one I'll gladly accept. My head is screaming for me to kick her out, to up my threats and leave her no choice but to run as far away from me and Sebastian as humanly possible. But this woman makes my blood simmer with a desire that smothers every rational thought.

"Get on your knees," I order.

"What?" She looks at me like I lost my mind. Maybe I have.

"Get on. Your fucking. Knees." I take a step toward her, and she doesn't move back. Instead, she says the magic words that make the tether of my restraint snap.

"Make me."

Abruptly, I reach out, grab her wrist, and twist her around, fisting her hair as I shove her against my desk. She whimpers as I sweep everything to the floor with one hand before bending her over and pressing her face to the cool wood. With her silky hair wrapped in my fingers, I grip it harder until a desperate moan tears from her lips. I press my cock to her core over her jeans, making sure she can feel how hard I am as I lean over her.

“Is this what you came here for, pet? You needed to be used again, spanked for being such a fucking brat before getting brutally fucked.”

“No. That’s not what I want.”

“My pretty little liar.” I click my tongue.

She squirms under me, and her ass presses harder against my cock. “I’m not a liar.”

“Really? I bet if I pull down your pants right now, I’ll find your pussy swollen and wet for me.”

She stills beneath me, not saying anything.

“Tell me why you’re here,” I growl against her ear, but her only response is to bite her bottom lip. I hook a finger into the side of her jeans, threatening to pull them down. “Last chance, baby girl.”

“I’m here to get you to stop.”

“Liar,” I say as I yank her pants down and over her ass, letting them pool at her ankles. Her perfectly round ass is covered in white lace, and the red welts from my belt are still visible. I have never seen anything so beautiful in my life. My cock is throbbing, and I need to make her pay for making me feel like this with the one woman I can’t have. The one woman I can’t own.

I cover her ass with my palm, feeling the slightly raised skin, then I press my thumb against a welt, loving the sound of her moans as she squirms under the slight pain. “Tell me the truth.”

“This isn’t why I came here.” Her voice shakes with each word.

“What is it about you? Even your lies turn me the fuck on.” I slide my hand from her ass to her pussy, I don’t even have to move under her panties to tell her cunt is weeping for me, the lace soaked through. “Your mouth says one thing, but your body says another. Never lie to me, little lamb.”

“I didn’t come here for this. This is not what—”

I cut off her sentence with a hard, open-handed slap to her ass. She goes silent and presses her forehead to my desk, hiding her face from me. “Please, don’t.”

“Don’t what? Don’t punish you for your lies?” I taunt, my palm coming down hard on her flesh. “Don’t give you what you came here for?”

“Gabriel, we can’t do this again,” she says, but the way she arches her back, pushing her ass out farther tells me this is going to fucking happen again. Right here, right now. It’s unstoppable.

I tighten my grip in her hair as I unbuckle my belt. “This is what’s going to happen. You are going to take your punishment for lying to me, and then you’re going to be the good little girl we both know you need to be by coming all over my five-thousand-dollar desk. Isn’t that right?”

She nods but doesn’t say anything, so I pull her head back as I lean over her. “Isn’t that. Right?”

Her throat bobs as she swallows, and I’m biting my bottom lip, waiting for the two little words I crave to hear come out of her mouth.

“Yes...sir.”

Jesus fucking Christ, its beautiful. She’s beautiful.

I yank her panties down, tearing through the lace. “Count,” I demand, striking her ass hard with my hand. I could use my belt again, but I like the feeling of her raw flesh against my palm.

“One,” she breathes out with a desperate tenor. With every strike, her breathing hitches and her legs inch farther apart until I can see her wet pussy blooming for me.

She’s shaking by the time we get to ten, but she still counts, not missing a beat. *Perfection.*

I trail my fingers down and slide them effortlessly into her tight cunt, biting back a groan. I circle her clit with my thumb, and it only takes a moment for her to be on the edge.

“Do you want my cock, baby girl?”

“Yes, sir.” Her words are a desperate plea, and I want to give in because as much as she wants it, I want it more—to feel her heat as I slide into her, filling her greedy pussy until she comes around my dick. But not only did she act like a brat when she stomped into my office, she’s making me lose control, and that’s out of the fucking question. She needs to be reminded who is in control here, and it sure as fuck ain’t her.

“Move, and I won’t fuck you,” I warn, then take a long, deep inhale before letting go of her and stepping back. The moan that tears from her throat is that of agony. Longing. Lust.

I round the desk and take a seat, leaning back. Her eyes are on me, and they are stunning, wide and tearstained. “Do you think you have earned my cock?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How so?”

“I did what you said. I counted.”

I smirk. “Just like a good little girl, you took your punishment for lying. Now, if you want my cock, get on your knees and beg for it.”

Her green irises gleam and sparkle under the bright lights of my office. As she slowly straightens, she wipes at a lingering tear on her cheek. “I hate you.”

Fuck, she’s beautiful like this, staring at me with both loathing and desire. Every line on her exquisite face shows just how conflicted she truly is.

“Be that as it may,” I start, “if you want my cock, you’ll do exactly as I say.” I lick my lips as I allow my gaze to travel appreciatively down her body before latching on to her gaze. “Strip. Get on your knees...and beg.”

Seconds feel like eons while she stands in front of me, silent and unmoving. My guess is there’s a brutal battle going on inside her head right now, hating the fact that she wants to obey me. But just like me, she knows it’s in her blood. It’s in her fucking DNA to submit. But she’s fighting it, and unfortunately for her, I don’t have the time or the patience to wait for her while she figures it out.

“Get out,” I snap, and her cheeks flush instantly. “Close the door behind you.”

She doesn’t move, the air between us heavy with so much anticipation I can practically feel it pulse in my veins. Her jaw is clenched, and my desire flares as she starts to take off her shirt before stepping out of her pants and now ruined panties. Her bra quickly follows, and I take a moment to admire her every curve—the erotic swell of her breasts, her rosy nipples, and bare pussy. But it’s the scar across her abdomen that keeps my attention. The line of whitened flesh stretches from one side of her pelvis to the other, and I have no idea why, but it makes me want to not only get inside her body, but to get inside her head. I want to know her secrets, her past, everything that makes her who she is...this perfect little lamb who somehow has the power to make me...*desperate* for her.

She takes a step toward me, but I hold up my hand, silently telling her to stop. I’m not done playing with her yet.

“Crawl,” I demand, unable to take my eyes off her. She bites her lip, the color of her eyes darkening as her brows curve into a frown. But just when I think I pushed too far, she lowers to her knees. The sight alone is enough to make me cream my pants. Kallie’s perfect, naked body in submission, about to crawl to me like I own her. God, to own her.

My cock is throbbing as she starts to crawl, her shoulder blades moving as if she’s the predator about to strike. Only,

she's not. She's the prey, and she's willingly surrendering to the slaughter.

I suck in a breath as she stills in front of me, kneeling so prettily between my thighs.

"Please," she whispers.

"Please what?"

"I need you."

"How?"

Her tongue flicks across her lips, leaving a tempting sheen behind. "I need you to...I need—"

"You have to say it, Kallie."

"I need you to...fuck me."

I reach out and gently take her chin between my fingers.
"And?"

Her delicate throat bobs as she swallows.

"What else?"

"I need it to hurt. I need you to make the pain feel good."

A shiver travels down my spine, and my balls tighten.
"Take out my cock and prove to me you deserve it."

Her hands shake as she unbuttons my fly and pulls it down. As soon as my hard cock is in her hand she leans up and flicks the tip of her tongue over the head, lapping up the precum. I let her explore my shaft with her mouth for a few more moments, watching her run her tongue from the base to the tip, and it's like electricity is zapping across every inch of my skin.

God, we're a trainwreck waiting to happen, but I have no desire to stop it. I'll be picturing her wide green eyes looking up at me with her tongue out and on my cock every night for the rest of my life. Every night, I'll be fantasizing about the woman my son loves licking my shaft.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Jesus, I can't take it anymore.

Abruptly, I grab her by the hair again, yanking her off my cock. “Do you know how to use a safety signal?”

“I don’t need it.” The way she says it, I believe her.

“That’s not what I asked.” I pull her hair harder and watch as she winces then smiles. My depraved, broken doll.

“I can snap.” She demonstrates snapping two fingers together. “But I won’t.”

“Good.” I can’t wait any longer. Using her hair to guide her mouth back to my cock, I let her suck the tip for a moment, and then I thrust all the way to the back of her throat and hold her there. She is fighting her gag reflex and I’m sure her lungs are burning, frantically begging for air. I let her struggle, her throat massaging my cock, her eyes watering as she fights to take it all as my balls rest against her chin.

I suck air through my teeth as a whirlpool of sensations crash through me. The hot, slick feeling of her throat is fucking exquisite, but it’s pulling me dangerously close to the edge, and I’m not quite done with her yet.

I yank her head back, my cock slipping from her warm mouth. She’s gasping for breath, spit dripping down the sides of her mouth. I drag my thumb along her bottom lip. “I’m going to ruin you, baby girl.”

“You can’t ruin something that’s already broken.”

“Hmm. So, you’re a broken doll, are you? Tell me why you came here.”

“To make you stop digging into my past.”

It’s another lie, so I push my cock back down her throat. I hold her head in my hands, not letting her move as I thrust all the way in and out a few times. When I push her off my cock again, she falls to all fours and coughs as she gasps for air. As she tries to sit back up, I grab her again.

“Tell me why you came here.”

She’s out of breath when she says, “I got an envelope—”

Whatever lie she is about to tell me is not worth listening to, so I fill her mouth and throat again, pushing even farther down her throat and craning her head back so she can see my face.

“I want the truth. Tell me why you are in my office with your mouth around my cock and your cunt begging for my abuse. Say the words, and I will reward you. Lie again, and I am going to paint this pretty little face with my cum and leave your pussy aching.”

Emotions swirl in her eyes, loathing, desperation, need. I slide out of her mouth.

“I already told you I need you to hurt me, fuck me.”

“Why?”

“Because he doesn’t give me what you do,” she snaps. “He doesn’t give me what I need. What you give me.” She doesn’t look away in shame, nor flinch from the truth.

“Good girl. Stand up.” I offer her a hand and pull her to her feet. “Get on my desk. All fours with your face on the wood, your knees spread wide and ass in the air.”

She does as she’s told; obedience comes so easily for her. If this is going to be the only time I have her in my office, I am going to make it count. Fuck her like it’s the last time I’ll ever get the chance.

It better be the last time.

The position she’s in puts her at the perfect height for me to slide my chair back into my desk and lick and kiss her pretty little pussy to my heart’s content. I lap up her juices while teasing her clit before fucking her with my tongue getting her closer to the edge but not letting her come.

She will come when I am ready, and not a moment before.

“Please,” Kallie whimpers, and I pinch one of the welts on her ass, making her hiss in pain. Her body shudders as I spank her swollen pussy. Once. Twice. With each whimper from her, my control is tested until I can no longer take it.

I grab her hips and pull her down, her hips slamming into the edge of the desk. It's going to leave such beautiful marks on her body—marks I'll want to appreciate tomorrow morning. Only...there won't be a tomorrow morning for us.

I position myself behind her and slot my cock at her entrance, giving her just an inch. "Beg."

"Please, Gabriel," she chokes out. "Please...sir."

"That's my good girl." I thrust deep inside her, the tip of my dick hitting her core while her heat envelops me. I want to savor it, drag it out, because once it's over, this can't happen again. But it's impossible as desire and something feral runs wild in my veins, fueling me as I fuck her hard and fast.

"Come," I order as I slap her ass again, aiming for one of the darker welts.

She pants and moans under me as I pound into her, the feet of my desk screeching across the floor. Frantic with a need to own her, possess her, I reach for her hair and pull her up, her back against my chest. I snake my fingers around her throat, squeezing tight as I fuck her with one relentless thrust after the other.

"Tell me you need it," I growl in her ear.

She gasps for air, but it only makes me tighten the hold around her throat.

"Tell me I am the only man who can punish you, the only man who can give you what you need, what you deserve. Tell me my son doesn't have what it takes to wreck your pussy the way I can."

Her hand slaps against mine still clutched around her throat. But, instead of trying to loosen my grip, she presses down, urging me to squeeze more. "Sebastian..." she starts, trying to choke out the words, "he doesn't fuck me like his father does."

A groan vibrates up my throat as I lose control. This is no longer a game between predator and prey, sadist and masochist. This is two people untethered and possessed, ready

to be consumed by whatever the fuck it is that seems to grow stronger by the second.

“Can I...” Her throat moves beneath my hand as she struggles to speak. “Can I...come?” Her voice shakes, her body trembling against mine. “I need to come.”

“Fuck!” I roar, pushing so deep into her, her feet lift off the floor. “Yes. Come for me.”

This time I squeeze hard enough to restrict the tiniest amount of airflow, and it’s like her body breaks. There’s nothing but choking gags coming from her mouth as she comes so hard she squirts her juices all over my cock and desk.

I follow right after, filling her with my cum, grunting with every thrust, overwhelmed with the need to force my cum so deep inside her, it’ll fucking stay there forever so I can claim her as mine even though she belongs to my son.

I let go of her throat, and she collapses on my desk, gasping as she tries to come down from the high. Her back arches as she heaves for breath. I fall back in my office chair. My heart is pounding, and my head is spinning. What is it about her? How can her heady mix of depravity and innocence make me lose myself? But the better question...why does she have to belong to my son?

“I think you’re right.” She pushes herself up and turns to face me, her hair and makeup a beautiful mess, but she is still the most captivating thing in this entire fucking world. “Maybe I did come here for this.” A tear slips down her cheek, and I fight the urge to lick it up. “This is too fucked-up, Gabriel.”

I stand, loosening my tie and the first few buttons of my shirt before pulling it over my head.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Stay still.”

I gently ease my shirt between her legs, cleaning the mess we made that now drips down her inner thighs. Our eyes remain locked the entire time, and for a moment I’m lost

within the forest of her green irises. I can see it, the pain, the torment, the haunting. And I'm taken aback by the sudden need to somehow make it go away.

I don't like what I'm feeling. How everything inside me screams that this woman is mine. She's not mine, no matter how my soul screams that she is.

Crouching in front of her, I gently ease her pants back up, and I straighten just as another tear rolls down her face.

"This can't happen again, Gabriel."

"That's what we said the last time this happened."

"This time we have to mean it." There's no conviction in her words. There's no determination in her eyes as she speaks it.

"Why did you send me the articles?" she asks while studying me. "What gave you the right to dig into my past?"

"Kallie, I don't know what the fuck you are talking about."

Fourteen

THERE'S another stupid dinner party—one of the many events leading up to the wedding Sebastian's grandmother has planned. I'm sure it's everything she deems appropriate and to her taste. I've been dreading it since I was informed the bride's attendance is mandatory, and people would notice if I weren't there.

I, on the other hand, doubt I would be missed, but Sebastian is home for this event, and he might notice if I decided not to attend—that's if his phone died, or a co-star asked about me.

Still, I have been a terrible fiancée, lusting after someone else, fucking another man—his father, of all people. That shame would burn my soul for the rest of my life, but really, what is another hole in my darkened existence? For him and out of guilt, I'll do my best to kowtow to as many of his grandmother's wishes as possible.

The grand dining room at some event hall is exquisitely decorated in dark reds and brilliant shades of gold. It is stunning, if not dated, and not to my personal tastes. I'm wearing a pale pink strapless dress with layers of soft blush tulle for the skirt. It's elegant, flowing, and delicately feminine. It reminds me of graceful ballerinas and how they look so soft but are so unbelievably strong. I want to channel that strength, so I pulled my hair into an updo to highlight my neck and shoulders and take the focus off my curves and chest. I wanted to look polished and elegant. Like a sophisticated woman worthy of being on Sebastian Stone's arm.

I thought I had achieved the perfect look for the night until I walked into this room, and I suddenly feel out of place, like a little girl playing dress-up. My blush pink dress just seems to fade into the background with all these bold colors and harsh lines.

“Kallie, darling, there you are.” Elenor’s shrill voice sends shivers of anxiety down my spine. I resist the urge to run in the other direction, and instead give her what I hope is a gracious smile as she greets me.

She’s wearing a stunning dark red dress that is far too revealing and extremely inappropriate for the grandmother of the groom. It would be inappropriate for the mother of the groom, or even the sister of the groom. But if her goal was to match the décor, she succeeded.

“I’ve been searching for you everywhere,” she says, and I’m silently praying for the walls to swallow me.

She does a quick up and down scan of my dress, and her lip curls in disgust. The expression is gone as quickly as it appeared, but it’s enough for me to know I’ve failed to meet her expectations yet again.

“Don’t you look pretty,” she says, her cloyingly sweet and condescending tone making my back stiffen. “I took the liberty and invited all your bridesmaids tonight. I figured it would be fitting since Sebastian’s groomsmen are here. It’s a chance for everyone to mingle and such.” She takes my arm, her nails digging into my flesh as she drags me toward a group of women I’ve never even seen before.

“I wasn’t planning on having bridesmaids,” I say as I wiggle my arm out of her grip. Her talons leave little stinging red lines on my arm. I just hope they fade quickly, or better yet, I fade away.

Elenor snickers. “Don’t be ridiculous. What bride doesn’t have bridesmaids?”

The bride who doesn’t have friends because the idea of being social is the equivalent of a root canal.

“The ladies I picked are perfectly suited for the event,” she says with a pursed and very patronizing smile.

Suited for the event, a phrase that reminds me that this wedding and everything leading up to it has nothing to do with me or Sebastian. It’s about his new career and the fame and her chance to... I have no idea what. I really don’t know what Elenor’s goal is with all of this, but I have been biting my tongue for days, and I don’t want to anymore. The plan was to just let her run with it, make Sebastian happy by pleasing his grandmother, but the way she makes me feel small and insignificant with so little effort, it’s like I’m just a footnote in her grandson’s life. It infuriates me in a way that has me grinding my teeth and clenching my fists. I tell myself that if she knew my past, if she understood my trauma, then she wouldn’t be doing this. But the truth is, if she knew about my trauma, she would never let me marry Sebastian in the first place. She would see me for the broken woman I am, and not the artist I pretend to be.

I’m about to say something, to tell her off when some poor waiter drops a tray of champagne glasses, causing a loud crashing sound to echo through the room. Elenor mutters something under her breath as she runs off to behead the poor man. Poor waiter, but lucky me for getting a little reprieve from Elenor’s suffocating presence.

I snag a glass of champagne from a waiter’s tray and down half of it before a pair of warm arms circle me from behind, pulling me into a warm chest. *Gabriel*.

“Please don’t,” I beg softly as his warm breath grazes across the sensitive skin of my exposed neck. I want to turn in Gabriel’s arms, melt in his embrace, tell him how I was still sore in the most delicious of places because of him.

“Didn’t you miss me, sweetheart?”

It’s like someone threw a bucket of ice-cold water over me when I hear Sebastian’s voice.

He places a sweet kiss just below my ear. “I missed you.”

“Sebastian.” I spin in his arms, giving him a too-bright smile, trying to hide the disappointment sitting in my stomach like hot lead. “I missed you, too.” How have I never noticed that he and his father smell the same? Do they wear the same cologne? Or is it a genetic scent that seeps from their pores whenever I’m around?

The smile falls from his lips, and his lips curl in the same look of disgust his grandmother had when she saw me.

“Oh, fuck. Who invited him?” Sebastian glares over my shoulder, and I turn to see who he is talking about.

Gabriel.

The second our eyes meet, I am reminded of what it was like when he had me on my knees, suffocating on his cock. The peace he brought with pain while it was just me, him, and his demands. He made everything else go away. The voices, the overwhelming guilt, quieting the oppressive need to never let anyone know who I really am. He makes it all melt away. He gave me a taste of freedom I had long ago given up hoping for.

“I can’t believe he has the nerve to show up here,” Sebastian says under his breath, pulling me from my memories.

“I don’t know why he’s here, but there is no rule saying you have to speak to everyone,” I point out.

“You’re right.” He squeezes my hip again, leaning down and giving me a gentle kiss. “Tonight is about us, so let’s drink champagne and laugh the night away with our friends.” He smiles, and I don’t bother pointing out that none of the guests are my friends. I don’t even know the names of half of them.

“Oh, God, he’s coming this way,” Sebastian says, swallowing the rest of his champagne, and for a second I’m convinced I’m about to vomit.

“Sebastian,” Gabriel greets, his voice as smooth as silk. His eyes capture mine. “Kallie. You look absolutely stunning tonight.”

If I didn't know better, I'd say he's toying with me. "Thank you, s...Mr. King."

There's a slight tug at the corner of his lips, and I'm ready to melt into the goddamn tiles.

Sebastian takes a step toward his father. "What are you doing here?"

"Joining the celebrations, of course."

"You weren't invited."

"The envelope I found on my desk this morning proves otherwise."

"I think it's best you leave," Sebastian seethes.

"I'm not here to cause waves, son."

"I am not your son."

Gabriel doesn't flinch, but his stare cuts from Sebastian to me, his eyes lingering on me for a second too long, causing me to shift from one leg to the other.

He clears his throat, slipping one hand in his pants pocket as he looks at Sebastian again. "I'll stay out of your way. But just know, you can expect to see more of me, as I will be accepting each and every invitation I get."

"Lucky me," Sebastian sneers, and Gabriel simply smirks.

"Indeed." His gaze moves to me. "Lucky you."

He turns and walks off into the crowd, and I let out a breath, not realizing I've been holding it the entire time.

"You okay?" I ask, placing my hand on Sebastian's back.

"I'm fine. But I'll have to speak to my grandmother about the goddamn guestlist." He rakes a hand through his hair and turns to face me. "I'm going to mingle. You good?"

"I am." *Not.*

His arm snakes around my waist, pulling me up against him, and kisses me deeply, his tongue breaking past the barrier of my lips. With everything in me I try to lose myself in his

embrace, to relish his taste, but it's bland compared the passion that bursts with his father's mouth.

His hand drops to my ass, and he squeezes it lightly at he breaks our kiss. "Tonight," he whispers with promise, and my insides twist into a thousand knots. The idea of having sex with my fiancé should excite me, but instead I'm nothing but ice-cold nerves.

Someone calls his name, and he kisses my cheek before walking off into the crowd of guests. I stare after him, feeling lost and abandoned. *Jesus, Kallie. You're not a little child. Pull your shit together.*

Everything is happening too fast. It's too much, and I can't stop any of it. How did everything change so much? I was in love with Sebastian, or at least I thought I was. Now, looking at him in a three-piece suit, his hair perfectly styled, standing with other men in expensive suits, I realize I don't recognize him anymore. Maybe I never knew him to begin with. The real him. Maybe both of us have been playing this game of pretend.

A sense of awareness trickles down my spine. I'm being watched, and it's like a warm touch ghosting against my skin. I look over my shoulder and, sure enough, Gabriel is there, talking to someone I don't know, but his eyes are on me, and they speak of dark promises and sin. All it takes is one glance, and he entrances me. From across the room his presence wraps around me, and I have to force myself to remember we're not alone. This grand hall is not Club Myth, and I am not his to take. To punish. To fuck.

"There you are." Elenor appears out of nowhere. "Why do I constantly find myself searching for you? Come." She pulls me along. "You have to engage with the guests as much as possible."

"Can I at least get drunk first?"

"Excuse me?"

"I said can I at least get a drink first."

Her eyes narrow into two slits of distrust, but I simply smile her way before she starts parading me around like I'm cattle up for auction. I'm being introduced to people whose names I'll never remember while trying to ignore this pull I have toward Gabriel, who is openly watching me. Even when he isn't in my line of sight, I can feel his eyes on me.

The way he stares at me makes me feel like prey that's about to be hunted. I hate how the thought excites me, and how having him in the same room makes it easier to deal with Elenor and her bullshit.

While I'm being led around with an invisible rope around my neck, I'm trying my best to fade away into the background. When the paparazzi sneak in to grab photos, I hide my face with a glass or turn my head away from the flashing lights.

"Kallie, you need to let them get a good look at you," Elenor mutters close to my ear while continuing to smile. "Sebastian's fans want to see his bride."

"No," I say a little too firmly, and the people around us turn to look.

"Oh, she is just a little camera shy," Elenor says with a laugh, dispelling the sudden tension. As the others laugh along, she leans in close. "The sooner you realize this isn't about you, the better. It's about my grandson, and you better start playing your part and stop being a spoiled little girl." She stands straight again, a fake smile plastered on her face as she waves to someone else and disappears into the crowd.

Tears prickle behind my eyes as I start to feel dizzy. Anxiety is clawing at my chest, causing a cold sweat to break out over my skin as it becomes harder to breathe.

I need a moment to myself, just a moment to gather my thoughts and get control again. The panic will stop. I know I can make it stop. I just need a minute alone to breathe.

There's a staircase off to the side of the entrance. As quickly as I can, without drawing attention, I head toward it and go upstairs, hoping to find a quiet room to hide in, but instead it leads me to an empty balcony draped in darkness.

Clearly, there's no intent of having guests up here tonight, and that now makes this the perfect place for me to gather myself.

The cool night air washes over me, calming my senses and slowing my breathing. The moon is full tonight, its glow touching the highest trees in the distance. I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with the fresh air that slowly melts away the panic.

The laughter and chatter of guests below seem distant, as if I'm observing them from behind a glass wall. With my hands braced on the rail, I close my eyes, trying to clear my thoughts as I do the breathing exercises my therapist swears by.

Breathe in...one, two, three.

Breathe out...four, five, six, seven, eight, nine.

In...one, two, three

“Still going through with the wedding, I see.”

My breath hitches when I hear his voice behind me.

I sigh. “I don't have the strength tonight, Gabriel. Please leave me alone.”

“You know, for the person who threw this little shindig, you sure don't seem to be enjoying it.”

“I didn't throw it.” I keep my gaze on the people below. “This is all Elenor.”

“That makes sense.” His voice is much closer to me now. “The gaudiness screams Elenor Stone.”

“She is planning it all. I have been booted from my own wedding plans.” I scoff out a laugh.

“Why are you allowing it?”

“Because she's Elenor Stone.”

“Why are you out here, Kallie?” He is right behind me now. I can feel his heat through the thin fabric of my dress.

“Because I'm suffocating down there.” I inhale deeply. “I need to be alone, Gabriel. Why did you follow me?”

“Brides-to-be who shy away from guests and run upstairs pique my interest.”

“Love the sarcasm,” I say, unamused.

“I saw you come up here and wanted to check on you.” His breath brushes along my neck, his lips just behind my ear as he rests his hands on the rail on either side of me, caging me in.

“So, you came to check on your future daughter-in-law? How sweet.”

“It should be my son up here with you, but it seems he is otherwise...engaged.” His voice carries a hint of sarcasm, and as if right on cue, I hear Sebastian’s laugh from below, and I look down. Surrounded by his new ‘friends,’ all Hollywood up-and-comers, actors, directors, and the like, Sebastian beams with pride. Happiness. Enjoying every minute. I can’t help but feel sick to my stomach as I watch him bask in the attention of people who only came here to see and be seen. People who hide their true intentions behind fake laughter and counterfeit compliments.

I tighten my arms in front of my chest, the black tentacles of anxiety slowly tightening around my throat.

Although it pains me, I can’t ignore the screams inside my head saying things haven’t been as they seem between Sebastian and me. Watching him interact with all these people he’s just met, I wonder if who I thought I knew was ever really there at all. I had so much faith in the person I thought he was, faith I never gave anyone else. Now it seems like a foolish decision.

Look at me, being a class A fucking hypocrite, feeling sorry for myself because I suspect I don’t know my fiancé at all when I know for a fact that Sebastian doesn’t have a clue who I am.

Maybe I deserve this. I deserve the bite of uncertainty and the sting of doubt. I deserve agony and torment. My misery is justified by my past and inability to save my little sister. Maya.

I try to shake off the thoughts of her before it consumes me, but the memories have sharp talons that refuse to let go.

Her pale face and glassy eyes flash in front of me, and it's as real as it was that day I watched as they cut her lifeless body down from the spiral staircase. The day she ended her life.

Tears prick at my eyes, the voices and screaming in my head growing louder, angrier.

Abruptly, Gabriel grabs my waist and forces me to turn and face him. His blue eyes are like burning stars in the blackest of nights—beautiful and chaotic all at once. There's a different world in his eyes, one I'm desperate to escape in.

“Where are you?” he asks, dragging the back of his hand down my cheek.

“I'm here.”

His eyes narrow, and he leans closer. “What happened last time you lied to me?”

“Are you going to spank me on this balcony with your son right there?” I challenge.

“Would that calm you?” He gently wipes a wisp of hair from my face. “Would my belt bring you the peace you're searching for up here on this balcony, alone in the dark?”

I break eye contact and look down, afraid he might see the truth in my eyes.

“Look at me, Kallie.”

I don't obey. This isn't Myth, and we aren't playing. At least I'm not.

“I said look at me.” He takes my chin between his fingers, forcing my gaze to meet his. “Should I make you show me how much you need me right now?”

He lowers his hand, and I whimper as he starts to trace the outline of my breasts with his finger—slow, delicate circles.

“Would it appease you if I force you to come right now without making a sound?”

Raw desire flares between my legs, slick and wet. “No.”

“You know what that word does to me,” he rasps, and I clench my thighs, thinking of his cock swollen with need, how he can shatter me into a million pieces while he’s inside me.

He takes my wrist and places my hand on his cock, squeezing my palm against his hard length. “You feel what you do to me whenever you’re near?”

My pussy clenches as fire and passion begin to consume me, my body slowly being wrapped in a heat that can’t be stopped—not until it gets what it wants. Him. Us. Complete submission.

With slow, leisurely movements, he starts to gather the skirt of my dress in his hand, rolling it upward, fingers brushing against the skin of my thighs, leaving a trail of flames in its wake.

I bite my lower lip when he gently presses against my clit through my panties. Our gazes are locked, our breathing heavy and in tandem now as I stroke him, and he strokes me, a volcano of wrongs threatening to erupt.

“Gabriel, we can’t do this here.”

“You think I don’t know that?” he growls and yanks my panties, twisting them, pulling the fabric as if it’s made of paper, ripping them away with ease. “You think this is a game to me? That I like lusting after my son’s fiancée?” He slides a single digit through my slit, both of us aware of how wet I am. “I watched him kiss you,” he murmurs and pushes a finger inside me, causing me to whimper. “I watched you kiss him back, and the whole time I kept asking myself, does she like kissing my son?”

My breathing becomes labored, my chest rising and falling.

“Does she like being touched by him? Fucked by him?”

“Gabriel—”

With a snarl, he grabs my throat with his other hand. “What do you call me?”

I swallow hard, my body climbing fast as his fingers work my pussy.

“What do you—” he squeezes hard “—call me?”

“Sir,” I whisper.

“Good girl.”

He easily slides a second finger inside me and pushes it in so deep it hurts—a pain so fucking beautiful it consumes me. Lowering his head, he nestles his face into my neck as if he, too, is in agony. “Tell me you’ve never been this wet for him,” he breathes against my skin. “Tell me this tight pussy is mine, that it weeps just for me.”

I reach to the side, wrapping my fingers around the rail, my body moving in the rhythm of his fingers fucking me.

“Say it, Kallie. Admit my touch is what you crave. That your flesh burns for my whip.”

“Oh, God,” I whimper, thinking of the exquisite pain he can give me.

“I want to make you come.” His lips brush across my skin, his velvet tongue lapping my flesh. “I need to see your face when you come for me.”

“No,” I breathe out, this time because I mean it. I think I do. I don’t know. I want to come, but it can’t be him. Not again. It’s too much. Too strong. Too wrong.

“Come for me, baby girl.”

“No.” This time I say it louder, and a low growl tears from his throat as he flexes hard against me, pressing his cock against my hip, tightening his hand around my throat and forcing my face up with his thumb below my jaw, and all I see are the stars above us. Bright, beautiful, unending.

“I said come, goddamn you, woman.” His teeth sink into my shoulder, causing a blissful burst of pain that annihilates my self-control and forces pleasure through my blood. My lips part, and I know I’m about to cry out. I can’t stop it. I don’t know how. People will hear. *Oh, God.*

“Oh—”

Gabriel’s lips claim mine, hard and heady, his tongue stealing my moans of pleasure. His kiss is deep, fierce, as if I’m the heroin he’s addicted to, feeding off the ecstasy that’s tearing through my body. It’s both painful and euphoric, his lips moving against mine with a desperation that’s deafening. Unsettling. Freeing.

My climax ripples through me as he continues to finger me until he’s sure he’s forced every last drop of pleasure from my body.

I’m out of breath, barely standing, when his fingers leave me slowly, releasing me until the only thing left is something between us that remains unresolved. A power neither of us understands, but now realize it’s unstoppable.

Tearing his lips from mine, he wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me so close I can hear his heartbeat inside his chest as he weaves his fingers through my hair, tugging hard—the entire moment screaming of desperation and agony.

“Leave this place, Kallie,” he whispers, and my heart constricts. “Go. Run as far away from me and my son as you can before we destroy each other. Before we destroy him.”

He lets go of me abruptly, gripping my chin, and slams his mouth against mine one last time, and a mutual understanding tears through our kiss—an understanding that some things are too toxic, too dangerous, no matter how desperately we want it not to be.

“Leave. Please.” And with those words, he lets go of me, turns, and walks away, leaving me alone in the dark for the voices to take.

Why does it feel as if he just took everything from me? And why do I want to run after him and say...no?

Fifteen

IT'S BEEN days since the party. I haven't heard from Gabriel, and even though I tell myself it's a good thing, a part of me wants to see my phone light up with a message from him.

He told me to leave town. I know it would be the best thing if I did, but I can't get myself to do it. My life is here—at least, a resemblance of a life. It's familiar here, and familiarity gives me comfort. I gravitate toward it. Maybe, in a sick and twisted way, that's the reason I'm drawn to Gabriel. He's Sebastian's father. *Familiar.*

No. That can't be it. I didn't know who he was that first night at Myth, and our connection was instant, even behind masked faces.

Nevertheless, I should leave. But I can't. I don't think I ever will...because she's here. Maya.

I grab my phone off the nightstand, half expecting a message from Sebastian, but there are none. He left last night for LA. Was it for rehearsals? Or meeting with the scriptwriters? Fuck, I don't know. My brain short-circuits when he says the words, 'I have to go out of town.' I don't hear much after that.

I rub my eyes as I get out of bed, my bare feet sinking into the plush carpet, one of Sebastian's t-shirts hanging loosely down my body. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, a bruise peeking from under my panties. It's no longer a purple-blue, but has yellowed around the edges, the center a blue-green. It should bother me that my betrayal taints my skin, but

at least Sebastian and I haven't been having sex because he's just never here, so there's been no need for explanations or made-up lies of me falling down the stairs and bumping into shopping carts at the grocery store.

I trace the healing bruise with a single finger and suck in a breath, my body reacting to the memory. I close my eyes, thinking of him, his touch, his kiss, his cock—things I desperately crave.

Just as I'm about to slip my hand inside my panties, I stop. "Get a grip," I tell myself. "All you've been doing is fucking masturbating."

The couch.

The kitchen counter.

The shower.

It's pathetic...and probably high-time for an appointment with Dr. Theroux again.

Needing to get my day started, I head to the kitchen for some much-needed coffee while I rub my thighs together extra hard with every step I take.

There's a card stuck to the refrigerator, and I still, staring at it, trying to remember if it was there last night. I don't remember seeing it.

I open it, the card stock heavy, and there's only one line printed in block letters.

YOU NEED TO TELL HIM WHO YOU REALLY ARE.

CONFUSED, I take it off the refrigerator, and a newspaper clipping flutters to the ground. I don't have to pick it up to read it. I know what it says the second I see the headline.

**PEARSON SISTERS SAVED FROM SERIAL
KIDNAPPER AND RAPIST.**

MY BLOOD instantly drains from my body, and the cloying scent of fear fills my nose as I read those words again and again. My heart pounds in my ears, my mouth instantly dry. Every forced swallow sends jolts of panic through my chest.

I'm frozen, scared out of my fucking mind when the realization hits me. Someone was in here. Someone was in the house last night while I slept.

"Jesus." I exhale, taking a step back, nothing but ice coursing through my veins.

I glance around, feeling a sense of vulnerability I haven't experienced in years. The curtains in the living room dance with the gentle breeze from outside, casting eerie shadows on every object. The stillness is suffocating, the hairs on the back of my neck raised as unease crawls across my skin.

A sudden creaking noise comes from the entrance, and I sprint back into my room shutting the door behind me. I can't breathe, I can't think. Sweat breaks out all over my body, fear squeezing at my lungs, and I move quickly but quietly to the back of the closet, covering myself with garment bags and curling into a tight ball, pressing my face against my knees. My entire body is shaking, and a sickening feeling burns my stomach. I want to throw up.

This can't be happening. Not again. Please, not again.

My phone is clenched in my hand, my fingers shaking as it moves across the screen, dialing.

"Kallie?"

"Gabriel." I choke on a sob.

"Kallie, what's wrong?"

With my hand over my mouth, I pinch my eyes closed, fear running rampant, seizing control over my mind, my body, every fucking muscle. "Someone...someone's in the house."

"Jesus Christ. Stay there. I'm on my way."

The phone drops from my hand, and I wrap myself in a tighter ball. I tremble as I wait for something to happen. I keep

waiting for the closet to be ripped open and someone to drag me out. He will take me again. I'll be back there.

No. I can't go back. I can never go back.

Fingers wrap around my ankle and pull hard, dragging me out of the closet. I scream as I try to claw my way back in, kicking out with my other foot. A strong hand catches it and yanks me out even farther, turning me around, his hands all over me while I refuse to open my eyes.

"Don't take her! Leave her alone!" I scream.

"Kallie. Jesus fucking Christ. Open your eyes."

"Let go of me!"

"Kallie!"

My eyes shoot open. "Gabriel?"

"Yes. It's me."

"Gabriel," I let out as relief floods over me in waves as I stare into those familiar blue eyes, and all I can do is cry—soft whimpers quickly turning into heavy sobs I can't control.

"Jesus, Kallie." He pulls me up and into his lap, wrapping his arms tightly around me. "What the hell is going on?"

My only response is uncontrollable sobbing, tears ripping from the fear that had me shackled to the past a few seconds ago.

"It's okay, baby girl. You're okay," he murmurs while stroking his hand softly up and down my arm.

It's like every broken, painful moment of my life comes pouring out of me in torrents of fear and sobs, my tears soaking through Gabriel's white dress-shirt. And all I can think about while I desperately try to get a handle on my emotions is how fucking glad I am it's him. That he's the one comforting me, consoling me. It's unlike anything I've ever experienced. I never knew so much calm could come from anyone. It's indescribable, the way it flows through me, chasing away the cold that seems like it's been possessing me my entire life. Just by the way his scent soothes me, his

presence filling the empty spaces in my soul, is enough for me to wish he'd never leave.

After what seems like hours, I finally stop crying, my cheeks burning from lingering tears. Gabriel doesn't say anything as he picks me up, cradling me against his chest, and carries me into the living room, setting me down on the couch.

But I don't want him to let me go, so I grab the lapels of his jacket, pulling him close. "Don't leave." I nestle deeper into his chest. "Don't leave me," I beg shakily. I don't want the heat to go away.

"I'll be right back." He grabs my chin and tilts it up so I'm looking into his eyes. "I'm going to get you some water. I'm not leaving, understand?"

I nod.

"Good girl." He brushes his thumb along my jaw, and I could so easily get addicted to the way his touch spreads life through my veins. When I'm with him, I don't feel numb.

I watch as he walks to the kitchen, slipping off his suit jacket and tossing it on the counter. His white shirt hugs his broad shoulders, his black pants hanging low around his waist. There is nothing simple or mundane about Gabriel King. His mere presence carries a weight of authority whenever he's in a room. Without saying a single word, he dominates the space around him, and everyone takes note.

My head is throbbing, so I press my finger against my temple. My guess is I look like death warmed over and should probably attempt to clean up, but I can't make myself move.

Gabriel is back with a bottle of water. "Drink this. All of it," he says, opening the bottle before handing it to me. I do as he says—not because he's Gabriel who just barked out an order, but rather because I'm parched, and my throat feels like sandpaper.

Once the bottle is empty, he hands me another bottle. "You can sip on that one."

"Thanks," I say as he takes a seat on the coffee table in front of me, resting his elbows on his knees while staring at

me as if he can find the answers he's looking for in the depths of my eyes.

"Mind telling me what happened?"

I shift on the couch, diverting my gaze away from him. "I just...I thought I heard someone in the house. That's all."

"That's all?" He raises a brow.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you."

"Worry me? My God, Kallie. You sounded so scared. I almost had a fucking heart attack on my way here."

"I'm really sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just tell me what the hell happened."

"Nothing." I divert my gaze. "I just thought I heard voices when I woke up."

"You're lying to me." He shows me the note I found on my refrigerator earlier, and my heart sinks to the soles of my feet. "What is this?"

The article. Shit. He can't see that article. No one can know. The media will eat me alive while they chew and spit out Sebastian's career before it even has a chance to take full flight.

I square my shoulders and get to my feet, grabbing the note out of his hand. "It's nothing."

"You're lying...again."

I stomp to the kitchen, quickly scanning the floor, but don't find the article. Gabriel is suddenly behind me, and I turn to face him. "I'm not lying."

"You're not telling the truth either. Whatever happened here today had you scared enough to hide in your goddamn closet, Kallie. And when I found you, you were screaming like I was trying to murder you."

I swallow as my heart continues to pound heavily against my ribs.

Gabriel takes a step closer, and I'm overwhelmed with the need to feel his arms around me as he takes my chin between his fingers, forcing me to look at him.

"You don't have to tell me. But I'm not letting you stay here alone." He lets go of me and steps back. "Pack your stuff. You're coming with me."

"No. I'm not."

"It's not up for discussion."

"Gabriel, listen," I say as I follow him to the living room where he grabs his suit jacket, "I'm sorry I called you. I'm sorry you had to come here for nothing."

"For nothing?" He pivots to face me. "You being scared to death isn't nothing." He slips on his jacket. "You'll stay with me until Sebastian comes back."

"Oh, my God, are you even listening to me?"

"Are you listening to me?" He snaps, his jaw clenched and brows furrowed. "I'm not leaving you here like this alone. Especially since you're not telling me what the fuck happened that had you scared enough to hide in the motherfucking closet. So, pack your bags, or I swear to God I will haul your ass out of here with nothing but the clothes on your back."

"Gabriel—"

"Test me, Kallie. I fucking dare you."

His tone slices through me like a knife. If this was his room back at Myth, I'd be pleading for punishment right now because I angered him. But this is not Myth. This is not his room. This is my fucking life that's been spinning out of control ever since the first time he touched me.

I place my palm on my forehead, closing my eyes and taking a breath. "Gabriel," I start, "you know as well as I do it's not a good idea."

"You think my cock is less likely to find his way inside you when you're here, and I'm across town?"

I don't respond, and he steps closer, sucking all the oxygen from around me.

"If I want to fuck you, Kallie, I would fly half way across the world to bury my cock inside you. You think a few miles will stop me?"

"It's wrong."

"Yet you didn't leave like I asked you to."

Heat pools between my legs, my body becoming liquid with his every word, and I suck my bottom lip between my teeth. "Sebastian," is all I can say while squirming under his intense gaze.

"I live in a high-rise that's being used as a hotel and own the goddamn building. All he needs to know is that you were scared, I set you up in a suite, and that's that. Will that set you at ease?"

"Maybe."

"Good. So let me say this one more time." He steps up close. "Grab your stuff. Pack a bag. Pack ten bags if you want to. But it will be a cold day in hell before I leave you here alone after what happened today."

"No. No, I can't." I inhale deeply, my pulse still racing. "I can't be around you when I'm like this, Gabriel."

"Like how?"

I wrap my arms around me, glancing around me, searching for the words.

"Like how, Kallie?"

My gaze cuts to his, and I clench my jaw while fighting the tears threatening to escape. "When my thoughts run at ten thousand miles a second and I need you to silence them."

Something flashes in his eyes, and I know he understands. I know he knows me even though...he doesn't. He licks his lips, his blue eyes focused intently on me, his entire demeanor screaming with a primal instinct that instantly dries my throat.

"You need pain." It's not a question.

I nod, and our gazes remain locked.

With a single step, he's so close I can feel his warm breath on my cheek, electricity crackling around us, the air thick with a need I've only ever felt with one man. Him.

"I'm going to ask you this once," he says, his eyes holding mine captive. "And if you lie to me, so help me God, I will walk out that fucking door and you will never see me again."

I swallow hard, my stomach twisted into a million knots.

"Do you need me, Kallie?"

I bite down on my lower lip. I want to say no. I want to deny it. But I can't. There's no use in denying it when this man can clearly see into the deepest parts of my soul—parts I've never shown anyone. Call me stupid. Call me crazy. Call me a naïve girl who goes looking for trouble. I don't care. All I care about is getting rid of the fear. The panic. The memories of a monster who took everything from me. And right now, Gabriel is the only one who can do that. And it's what I need right now, especially since vivid memories knocked me on my ass today.

"Yes." I lift my chin, trying my best not to hide. "Yes...I need you."

"How?"

"I need you to take me back to Myth." I lick my lips, feeling my cheeks flush. "I need you to hurt me."

Sixteen

GABRIEL

WHEN WE GET to the club, I flag down one of the women who work here—the one who knows how to prep a girl for any type of scene.

“Catrina,” I say as I greet her, “this is my guest for today, and she needs to be prepared for the glass room. Make it happen,” I order, and the woman nods, smiles at Kallie, and takes her by the hand. Her eyes are wide, and I give her a reassuring nod and tell her I’ll be waiting for her, placing a chaste kiss to her temple.

Wordlessly, she leaves with the woman, and I head to the bar. I need a drink, but I can’t. I can’t be impaired at all for what I have planned, so I order a tonic and lime and wait. Even without knowing the specifics about what happened, I know I need to give her the pain she begged for and let it heal her however she needs it to.

Tonight, I’ll take care of her, then I’ll find out more. I need to know who wrote that note, and what it means.

“Mr. King,” the barman says as he places my drink in front of me.

I thank him then pull out my phone and send Alexius a text saying I need a favor, a big one, and ask for a meeting tomorrow. Without waiting for a reply, I turn my phone off. Under normal circumstances, I would never turn off my phone when waiting on a response from Alexius, but this isn’t a normal circumstance.

Tonight, my attention will be on her. Only Kallie.

Watching the people around me, ignoring the women who come up trying to entice me, I wait. It doesn't take long before I see her. Kallie is walking out onto the floor, my broken little doll dressed in white lace, her blonde hair loose around her shoulders like a ray of light.

She looks so pure, so innocent, until her green eyes find me. Something I can't quite put my finger on flickers across those beautiful eyes. A little panic, maybe? A little hesitation mixed with need. She needs me to take her, to control her, to give her physical pain so great it will block out everything else and have that beautiful mind of hers break into a dark pleasure.

Catrina leads her into the glass room, and I take another sip of my drink before following them.

As I walk inside, I'm fucking floored when I see her. The perfect little pet, on her knees and eyes downcast. Kallie is so beautiful like this, submitting to me. I want to collar her, have her on a leash, chain her to my desk, and have her body at my disposal twenty-four-fucking-seven.

I reach out and place my hand behind her head, staring down at her. "I see my friend has prepped you well." I glance up at Katrina, nodding my thanks before focusing back on Kallie. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes, sir." Her answer is immediate.

"Good girl." I brush a lock of hair from her face. "Stand."

Kallie gets to her feet, her eyes still cast down.

"Look," I say, and she glances up at the glass walls, people already gathered around. "I want them to watch. But I need to know that's okay with you."

I can see the vein in her neck go apeshit as she stares at the crowd looking on. But her cheeks flush the prettiest pink, and I already know she's into it before she answers, "I'm okay with it."

My cock is instantly hard, straining against my pants. It's been a long time since I have allowed others to watch me fuck. But this isn't about me.

I touch her cheek, and she leans into it. “I want you to know that people see you, they see me, they know what is happening, and they are getting pleasure from your pain just like you are.”

“Why?” she asks, licking her lips, leaving behind a tempting sheen.

“Because you need to know you’re not fucked-up by needing this. And even if you are, then all of them are fucked-up, too.”

The door closes behind us, and I point to a spot on the floor. Wordlessly, she moves to that spot and kneels. With a flick of a switch, I turn the lights off, plunging the room into complete darkness, then turn the dial to light a single spotlight in the middle of the floor.

“The rules for tonight are the same as before. You will not speak. And when spoken to, all you can say is ‘Yes, sir,’ ‘No, sir,’ and your safe word. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What is your safe word?”

“Shadow.”

“Good girl. If you use your safe word, I will not be disappointed in you. I won’t be mad at you. However, I will be mad if you need to use your safe word and you don’t. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Every fucking time those words come from her sweet lips, my cock throbs.

“We are going to play hard tonight. Are you okay with that?”

“Yes, sir.”

In the back of the room is a Saint Andrew’s cross. The large frame in the shape of an ‘x’ has leather restraints, and just the thought of seeing her on it has me teetering on the edge of losing control.

I help her up and lead her to the cross, her eyes wide as she looks it over.

“God, you’re stunning.” I run my fingers down the soft lace that covers her back and place a gentle kiss on her shoulder, feeling her shiver. “If I were to have you in my bed, or serving me on the floor, this is what I would want you to wear. But it doesn’t belong in this room.” I pull at the lace, and it comes undone, and I watch as Kallie steps out of it. Her naked body is fucking perfect, one of God’s masterpieces sent to Earth to torture me.

I grab her by her hair and pull her to my lips, claiming her mouth in a brutal kiss before securing her to the cross with her chest pressed to the cold steel.

Next time—if there is a next time—I’ll be sure to tie her with her back to the cross. Her breasts would look amazing with her nipples clamped and red lines running across them. I can just picture her now, stripes of swollen flesh across her breasts, weights dangling from her nipples, maybe one from her clit. She would suffer for me and love every moment of it. Completely naked, wearing only my collar around her throat and my lashes over her body.

“Are you comfortable?” I drag a finger down her spine.

“Yes, sir.”

I move toward the back wall where floggers, paddles, cat-o’-nine-tails, belts, and one large bullwhip are displayed.

I grab a flogger to start. Nothing too hard. I am just getting started. I want to make this last for her.

“You are getting ten lashes. Count them.”

“Yes, sir.”

I unbutton my shirt and yank it off, my skin already covered with a sheen of sweat. My entire body is primed for this, ready to indulge and sin like only sinners do.

With the flick of my wrist, the tresses of the flogger strike her naked back, leaving the most exquisite blushing flesh in its wake.

“One,” she counts, and I adjust my cock that’s aching like a motherfucker. I’m starting to think this is going to be harder for me than for her. This woman tests my control, challenges it without even fucking trying.

She takes each strike beautifully, her skin blooming under each hit. When we get to ten, she’s panting, hardly able to keep count.

I drop the flogger, grab her hair, and pull her head back so I can look into those beautiful green eyes. “Are you ready for more?”

She licks her lips, green eyes hooded and cheeks flushed. “Yes, sir.”

“That’s my good girl.”

On the other side of the window, we seem to have drawn an even bigger audience. Several members are there watching, some with women sucking their cocks, some men on their knees fingering their mistresses.

I slip my hand between her legs, spreading her wetness with two fingers sliding between her pussy lips. Her entire body shakes and her eyes roll closed as I barely touch her clit with every stroke.

“Do you want to come?”

“Yes, sir.”

I sink a finger inside her, her arousal making those sweet fucking sounds that drives me insane. Her pussy clenches and her head rolls to the side, but just when she’s about to come, I remove my hand and leave her empty. Desperate. Panting.

“I think your body needs more.” I grab a single-tail whip, and a shiver of excitement moves down my spine. It’s been some time since I had a sub willing to take this level of punishment. I crack it a few times, testing its weight and my accuracy.

“You may cry out, but the only words I should hear from you are ‘yes, sir, no, sir,’ or your safe word. Understood?”

“Yes—” The *sir* is cut off by the first strike, hitting her across her ass, leaving a red welt on her flesh. Her scream is instant, raw...and fucking beautiful.

“Do you want to keep going?”

“Yes, sir.” She gasps, squirming as much as her restraints will allow.

I strike her again, and this time she stifles the scream as I place another welt going across the first in a perfect x. I move up and leave lashes across her lower back, careful not to go too high or let the whip wrap around her body. At least, not yet.

After four strikes, her body is shaking, tears slipping down her cheeks, and I’m sure her safe word is teetering on the tip of her tongue.

I step closer to her, whispering in her ear, “Do you want to stop?”

She looks at me to the side, and her eyes are the brightest I’ve ever seen them be. It’s like she’s alive for the first fucking time. “No, sir.”

I slide my hand between her legs again, and her thighs are drenched, her pussy soaked. A low growl vibrates from my throat, and as much as I’m enjoying this, my cock is ready to be inside her.

“I can give you my cock right now. Or do you need more?”

“More,” she murmurs.

I must admit I’m slightly disappointed because I’m ready to fuck her hard, but this isn’t about me. It’s about her, and what she wants, what she needs. I rub a small circle over her clit before stepping back and working her body over with the whip, this time landing five strikes on her body. Her back is a beautiful map of red lines over milky curves. It may be the most stunning thing I have ever seen.

“You should see our audience. Every single one of them is turned the fuck on by you.” My hand slides in between her parted thighs. Her cunt is dripping now. It’s going to be so hot

and tight and soaking wet when I finally take her. “The women are out there wishing they were as strong and beautiful as you, and the men hate me for being the one to own this perfect little pet. Men of power, wealth, gods in their respective industries, and they all wish you belong to them.” I rub her clit as I speak, working her up.

Needing to taste her, I pull her head back again and devour her lips before dragging my tongue over her cheeks, drinking her pain, getting high on it. I tear my lips from hers, grab the cross she’s tied to, and move it so she can finally see the crowd.

“Do you see how much these women wish they were you?” I growl in her ear.

“Yes, sir.”

I take the smooth handle of the whip and run it over her pussy lips, getting it nice and wet.

“Do you see how badly those men want to fuck you right now?” I bite into her shoulder, and she cries out in agony and ecstasy all rolled into one perfect fucking moan.

“Will they ever get to fuck you?” I rub the metal handle over her sensitive clit.

“No, sir.”

“Do you know why?” I nudge with the handle at her entrance. “Because in this club, you’re mine.” I push the metal deep inside her tight little channel, and it earns me the most exquisite moan dripping from her lips. Harder, deeper, I continue to fuck her with the handle and she screams in ecstasy. I’m ruthless, not letting up as she cries out. She says no, I push harder. She says stop, I go faster. Those are not her safe words; she knows what to say to make it all stop.

“Come for me, Kallie,” I rasp behind her, and she obeys, letting me hear her perfect moans of ecstasy as she comes.

Her juices start to gush out of her and coat my hand, her screams slamming against the ceiling, pleasure ripping through her. I work her pussy with the metal handle until I’m sure I milked all her pleasure from her fragile little body.

The second she's down from her high, I unhook her from the cross, letting her fall back in my arms. I cradle her tightly, but careful not to hurt her more than I already have.

Kallie is whimpering in my arms, her warm tears seeping through my naked skin. I nod at Catrina and the glass walls frost, cutting us off from prying eyes. Kallie needs me to take care of her, and this part isn't something I'm willing to share with anyone.

I carry her over to the bed, and as I try to lay her down on the red silk sheets, her nails dig into my shoulder.

"Please, don't leave me," she whimpers.

"I'm not going to leave you. I just need to take care of you."

Thankfully, the suite has a large soaking tub hidden behind a four-paneled solid wood room divider, so I fill it with lukewarm water. I want it to be warm enough to soothe her muscles but not so hot as to irritate her welts. I need to relieve the pain I caused.

I open the bottle of water set on the side table next to a bottle of aspirin. I shake out two tablets and crouch next to her. "Open."

She obeys, and I place the tablets on her tongue before I lift the water bottle to her lips and she greedily drinks. Once I am sure she has her fill, I pick her up and carry her to the bath and slowly ease her into the water.

She grimaces, soft moans slipping from her lips as she settles in. "If you need to leave, I understand," she says, and I groan my disapproval before tearing out of my pants and getting inside the tub with her.

"If you think I would leave you alone after what just happened, then you don't understand anything." I pull her back to lie against me, the soapy suds of the bubble bath edging around her shoulders.

"Thank you," she says softly.

"For what?"

“For doing what you did. I needed it.” She breathes in deep. “I deserve it.”

“Why? Why do you deserve it?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. Not now. I don’t want to talk about anything outside this room.”

Normally, I would press for answers, demand explanations until I’m satisfied I know everything I need to know. But not now. Not today.

“Is it okay if I want something right now?”

“Anything. You’ve earned it.”

She sits up and looks at me for a moment, then leans forward and kisses me. Her lips are soft, warm, and so fucking sweet. I melt into her kiss, and when she tries to deepen it, her fingers brushing against my cock, I pull back. “You need to rest, Kallie. I took a lot out of you just now.”

She shakes her head lightly, the tips of her blonde hair wet and clinging to her shoulders. “I need...” She bites her bottom lip shyly.

I take her chin between my fingers. “What do you need?”

“Your cock.” Her eyes are cast down as she faces me. “Please. I want to come again with you inside me. I need to know I pleased you.”

“You did please me.”

“I need to feel it.”

My cock jerks. There was no way I can have this beautiful girl naked in my arms without being as hard as steel. Her hand slides down my chest to grasp my shaft. “Let me ride your cock, let me make you come deep inside my aching pussy. I need it, please.”

A stronger man would have said no. A better man would have never been in this situation in the first place. But I’m not a better man. And it sure as fuck seems like I’m not a strong one either, not when it comes to her.

“Straddle me, then put your hands on the wall behind me,” I order.

She moves, sliding her legs on both sides of me, putting her perfect tits in my face. I lick one rosy nipple, taking it into my mouth, sucking it gently as I place my hands on her hips. My cock brushes against her pussy. “You ready for me?”

She nods, and I thrust my cock into her fast and hard. Her cry of pleasure is a melody to my ears, and I groan out loud as her warmth wraps around my length, her tight walls squeezing my dick in a way that makes my toes curl with pleasure.

“Ride me,” I say and still beneath her, giving her the reins, the control, something I haven’t done before. She steadies herself, palms flush against the wall behind me, and starts to rock.

Her breath picks up, and she arches her back, taking her hands off the wall and pressing them against my chest. I’ve never seen a more beautiful sight. Jesus Christ, it seems that every time I look at this woman, she’s even more perfect than she was a moment before.

Wisps of blonde hair cling to her cheeks as she throws her head back, rocking back and forth, moving her pussy up and down my cock. Water splashes over the edges, bubbles flowing over the tiled floor.

A growl comes from somewhere deep inside me as I suck her nipple into my mouth again, then use one hand to steady her while the other sneaks around to play with her ass.

The second my finger touches that little rosebud and pushes in just an inch, her mouth forms the perfect O as she moans.

“Baby, you keep responding to me like that and I am going to have to fuck this ass, too.”

“God, yes. Please,” she whines, and I don’t know how much more I can take. My balls are tightening, ready to release into her, but she needs to come first. Always her first.

“Tell me you want me to fuck this virgin ass,” I bite out, clenching my abs so I don’t come too soon.

“I want you to fuck all of me.” She opens her eyes, and it’s like her green eyes stare straight through me, reaching for parts of my soul that remain untouched. Unclaimed.

I force my finger inside her tight ass a little more, sucking air through my teeth as I watch her expression light up with pleasure. “What else do you want? I want to know every last fucking thing you want from me, Kallie.”

“I want you to use me, punish me.” She rocks faster. “I want you to take me hard and often and not ask permission.”

My cock stretches her some more, my length impossibly fucking hard inside her.

“No one else has given me what I need, and I want to be your perfect little slut, mouth open, cunt wet, and ass ready for your cock at all times.”

“Jesus, fuck!” I launch up, wrap an arm around her back and grip her shoulder, forcing her down so my cock goes deeper into her than it’s ever gone before, my fingers biting in her flesh, as I come inside her. It’s hard, violent, brutal fucking ecstasy.

“Oh, God, Gabriel,” she cries out, and I know my name on her lips is something I want to hear every motherfucking day. Her back arches as she comes hard on my cock while I cream her cunt, giving her every last drop of my cum.

That’s the moment everything changes. The moment my world explodes, and my life is turned on its axis.

That’s the moment I realize this woman can never be my son’s wife.

Because she’s mine.

Seventeen

I'M STILL FLOATING on the remnants of pleasure when Gabriel takes us out of the bath and lays me on the bed. He takes his time to rub some lotion on my back, and it feels amazing. He says the cream will make it fade faster. How do I tell him I don't want his marks to fade? I want to be able to push against them and feel a fresh wave of pain every time the voices come back. I want my marks, welts, and bruises to stay fresh and remind me I'm still alive.

Without a word, he dresses me in the clothing I wore to come here, and we leave Club Myth, climbing back into his ridiculously expensive car.

"I...uh..." I press my lips together, trying to pick my words.

"What is it?"

"Can I...stay with you tonight? You know, in your place and not a separate suite?"

I notice him tightening his grip on the steering wheel.

"I just...I don't want to be alone." It's not that I don't want to be alone, it's that I'm not ready to be apart from Gabriel yet. The second we leave each other's company, this strange place we are in right now will disappear. He makes my heart stop and my senses sharpen by just being in the room. He makes me feel alive in a way I didn't know I was capable of.

"Okay," he says and reaches for my hand, weaving his fingers through mine as if he knows I need reassurance.

Leaning my head against the window, I let my mind wander. I think about my paintings and wonder if I could recreate the sweet agony I felt on the cross and put that on the canvas—emotions swirled with the physical pain. Torture and bliss rolled into a single brush stroke. I want to color the tension and anticipation mixed with relief and gratitude. I've never felt anything like it, and I know that without Gabriel I never will again.

“This is your building?” I ask when we pull up to a large hotel in Streeterville, practically on top of the lake.

“Yeah.”

“Whoa, talk about a great location. You must go to the art museum all the time. It's one of my happy places.”

“That was supposed to be one of the benefits of living so close, but I'm always working.” He shrugs as he pulls into a parking spot and turns off his car.

The elevator is already waiting for us when we get to it, and he hits the button for the top floor. I don't even really feel the elevator move, but seconds later, the door is opening to an entranceway. He punches in a code, and the door opens to the most stunning living room I have ever seen.

“Holy shit!” I exclaim.

“What's wrong?” he says behind me. “Is it your back? Are you sore? I can get you—”

“Shhh.” I wave him off as I walk to the massive floor-to-ceiling windows and look at the whole of Chicago at my feet. It's getting dark, and I can see the lights start turning on in the buildings below to the left, and to the right, the inky darkness that is Lake Michigan. “This view is amazing.”

“Oh, yeah. It's something.”

“It's something.” I mimic him like it isn't the most incredible view of the city. “Navy Pier is right there. Do you get to watch the fireworks?”

“I'm usually not home, but yes, you can see them from here.”

“This apartment is amazing,” I say, not looking away from the window.

“Sure. Would you like some dinner? I am starving.”

“Yeah,” I call over my shoulder, still looking at the world below me.

“We are close enough that Giordano’s delivers,” he says. “I’m going to change, then we can order.” He walks down the hall, and I look around at the wooden floor, the leather couches, and electric fireplace. Every priceless piece of art, all the expensive furniture, and top of the range electronics paints a clear picture. Gabriel King wants for nothing.

I move around the apartment, taking it all in, then walk down the hall, peeking inside every room until I find the master bedroom that has the same breathtaking view over more of the city. The bed in the middle of the room is made, but something about this room feels different from the others. It doesn’t feel as empty or formal. This room feels lived in, and it strikes me how tragic that must be for him—to have this massive apartment and only need one single room.

“What do you want on your pizza?” Gabriel saunters out of his walk-in closet wearing a pair of low-rise jeans and a button-down shirt he left open.

“That isn’t fair,” I say, looking him up and down, loving the way his abs flex as he walks.

“Just because you earned a pizza doesn’t mean I’m going to start playing fair. But what specifically are you talking about now?”

I motion to all of him, and he just raises an eyebrow.

“You have seen me in Italian suits tailored to my body, and you have seen me naked. But it’s an old pair of jeans and a random shirt that has my baby girl looking like a deer in headlights?”

I nod, and he laughs at me, a full-bodied lighthearted laugh, and I get the feeling that seeing him like this is a rare privilege.

“Come on. Let’s get out of my bedroom before I have you bent over.” He grabs me by the waist and pulls me in for a kiss, then leads me back to the living room.

He places the order, and we spend the rest of the evening talking about nothing, really. Likes and dislikes, art, history, even TV shows. It’s calm and casual. Right now, he isn’t my fiancé’s father or even the man I want to have hurt me. For a brief moment, I allow myself to wonder if things would have been different if I had found Club Myth sooner—if I had found Gabriel before Sebastian. It’s a depressing ‘what-if,’ and I force it from my mind to stop it from festering.

After dinner, he has me lie on the couch with my top off, so he can massage some aloe into my back. The gel is cool and feels good on my bruised back. Each touch hurts and turns me on. I don’t know if it’s the pain, or because it’s reminding me of how I got them, but I know by the time he is done I am panting and my core is soaked.

“Do you need me again, Angel?” He places tender kisses on my shoulders, his hands sliding down my sides.

“Please,” I whimper as I arch up just enough that our lips meet in a sweet kiss that deepens slowly, naturally.

He stands and offers a hand to me and then takes me to his bedroom. His touch is gentle. There is no choking, spanking, or mind games. It’s just me and Gabriel exploring each other’s bodies. I don’t have to call him ‘sir,’ and he doesn’t make me ask for permission to come, but even then, I come apart for him in ways I never have with Sebastian.

As I fall asleep in his arm, satisfied, safe, and cherished, and without memories that slither through the silence. The voices are quiet, and for the first time in years I fall asleep without a giant knot in my stomach.

In the morning, I wake just in time to watch the sunrise over Lake Michigan. The way the soft colors dance over the sky in oranges, pinks, and baby blues is stunning.

I stretch my arm out next to me to find the space empty, the silk sheets soft against my skin. When I push myself up,

Gabriel is sitting on the couch across from me.

“Why?” he asks simply.

“Good morning to you, too,” I say, stretching my legs.

“Why him? Why are you marrying him?”

“Because I love him,” I say the line just like I have said it million times to myself.

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not.”

“I run an international shipping company. I work with shady people every day, Kallie. It’s my job to know when people are lying to me, and you are lying.”

He’s right, and if he wants the truth, fine. It doesn’t change a thing.

I pull the sheets up, trying to cover myself as much as I can. “Sebastian is...safe.”

“You’re marrying him because he’s safe?” He frowns.

“Yes.”

“Are we talking financially safe, or...”

“No, Gabriel. It’s not about the money. He’s just...safe.” I drag a hand through my hair. “I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“Try.”

“I dunno. He doesn’t ask questions. He doesn’t pry. He doesn’t want to get into emotions and shit.”

He gets up, his cock hard and bobbing as he walks closer, every muscle taut and roped across his naked body. The look in his eyes takes my breath away, and I gasp when he rips the sheet off me, tossing it to the floor.

“What are you doing?” My voice is a whisper, desire gripping my lungs and making it almost impossible to talk as he grabs my legs and pulls me toward him.

He leans over me and grips my wrists, pinning them above my head while lowering himself on top of me, his hard length pressing against my naked pussy.

“How does he fuck you?”

“Excuse me?” I fight to get out of his grip, but I can’t move.

“How does my son fuck you?”

“That is none of your business.”

“Does he fuck you like you need to be fucked? Does he fuck you like I do?” He snarls again and then flips me over so I am lying on my stomach. His hand trails down the fresh marks, sending a wave of hot pain through my back. “Does he know how to break you and put you back together?”

“I said it’s none of your business.” I struggle to get out of his grasp, but he has both of my wrists in one hand, and he slaps my ass. With all the welts, it’s like fire erupted where he hits me, and I scream into the mattress.

He ties my wrists together with a silk tie and holds me down.

“Tell me the truth, Kallie. Every single lie you tell, I will punish you.”

I am so fucking turned on I can’t think clearly.

“I know you are holding something back. I can practically smell the secrets on you. What is it? What has you coming back for my whip?”

“Go fuck yourself,” I spit out.

“Oh, baby girl, I’m not the one about to get fucked.”

I feel something cold drip onto my ass crack, followed by his fingers sliding between my cheeks and spreading it around my hole. I struggle harder, trying to get away from him.

“Please,” I beg. “I’ve never—”

“Don’t worry, pet. I’m not going to fuck this tight little virgin ass yet.” He slaps my ass again. The sharp pain sends a

shock of need to my core and makes it pulse. “I need to get it ready for me, but make no mistake, this ass will be mine. Soon.” He pushes another finger in, and it burns, yet feels good at the same time. I cry out as he twists his fingers inside me, adding more lube.

“You keep making those sweet little noises and I won’t be able to resist. Your ass is going to look so good stretched around my cock, with these stripes glowing bright red.”

I start to pant, my skin prickling with anticipation.

“You know your safe word. Use it.” He slaps my ass again, and I have to bite back a scream.

I know I can use my safe word, but I don’t want to. It hurts, the way he hits my bruises, the way his fingers are stretching out my ass, but it fuels this dark pleasure in my core. The pain is making my clit pulse and my cunt wet. I want him to push my boundaries. I want him to abuse my body and take me to new heights that only he can.

Something hard and cold presses against my ass, and I squirm. I try to turn my head to look, but he holds my shoulders down with his forearm, pinning me in place.

“Keep still,” he urges. “It’ll feel good, I promise.”

I bite back another cry of pain as he pushes it into my ass. Whatever it is, it’s tapered. The farther he pushes it in, the more my hole is stretched—feeling good and uncomfortable at the same damn time.

Gabriel doesn’t say anything, just a groan of appreciation that makes me feel beautiful as he caresses my ass cheek and then presses on the plug.

“Be my good girl, and I’ll reward you. Be a bad girl, and I’ll punish you.” He gets off the bed.

“Yes, sir,” I say as I silently pray he does both. Something smooth and cool is tied around my ankle then pulled tight before he moves to secure the other one.

“Do you know what this is?”

“A spreader bar.”

“Good girl. Does the plug feel good?”

“Yes, sir.” It’s not a complete lie. It feels strange, but not unpleasant.

“It’s going to feel a whole lot better soon, but I want to see your pretty face.” My legs are forced to spread farther apart, stretching wide, and with a hard tug I’m spun around, and my entire body flips over as I yelp.

A cry of pleasure and pain rips from my lips as I land on my back. The impact hurts. Then the cool silk of the sheets soothes the sting.

“That’s better,” he says, looking down at me.

Just looking at him is enough to take my breath away. He stands at the edge of the bed completely naked, his golden skin bathed in the soft light of the sunrise. His cock is hard and standing up, leaving a trail of precum against his lower abs. I want to reach out and touch him; I want to get on my knees and taste him in my mouth.

He grabs my wrists, pulls the spreader bar upward, folding me in half, knees bent as he secures my wrists to the bar as well, making sure I can’t fucking move.

“This is perfect,” he says, looking down at my body. “I can see your face with your big, beautiful eyes as they fill with tears. I can watch your tits bounce, my marks on your ass. Best of all, I can even see the jeweled plug stretching you for me, and your cunt as it weeps for my cock.”

Heat rises to my face, and I don’t know if it’s shame because I’m so exposed or if I’m completely possessed with desire.

“Do you have any idea how beautiful you look right now?” The way he stares at me, his eyes gleaming with sin and darkness, a lethal mix to someone like me.

“Answer me,” he says, and he grabs my chin and turns my head to face him. “Do you know how beautiful you are?”

I don’t say anything, pulling my chin from his grip, and look away with defiance. He slaps my thigh, and I bite back a

cry.

“Eyes on me, baby girl.” He leans down farther, his cock pressing against my wet cunt, giving me just a taste of friction on my exposed clit. “You have to look at me if you want me to fuck you.”

My hips roll against him as much as they can, looking for more friction. My body wants more. I need the release that’s winding up tight inside me. I move beneath him again, and he smirks.

“Greedy little slut, aren’t you?”

Gabriel stands from the bed and walks to a side table. I stretch my neck up to try to see what he is doing, but it’s no use.

He comes back holding a little black box in one hand, and a flogger in the other. My pussy throbs with excitement, the anticipation rolling through me in waves of desire.

“I see that smile, little girl, and you are going to regret it.” He smirks as he gets back on the bed, kneeling next to my head, his hard cock inches from my face. I want to reach up and take him in my mouth. I want to taste the salty-sweet flavor of his precum on my tongue.

He wraps his fingers around the base of his cock, holding it close to my lips while he studies me with hooded eyes. “Beg.”

I lick my lips. “Please, sir. I need it.”

He clicks his tongue at me, then with a switch of his wrist, the flogger slaps my pussy. The sting is immediate and so intense it steals the breath from my lungs.

“I don’t recall permitting you to say the words ‘I,’ ‘need,’ and ‘it.’ You disobeyed me.”

I press my lips together in a thin line, trying so hard to steady my breathing.

“Do you deserve to be punished?”

“Yes, sir.” I want him to strike me with the flogger again. I need to feel that delicious sting on my most sensitive flesh spread wide open just for him.

“Beg me again.”

“Please, sir,” I beg. “Please.”

“Stick out your tongue.”

I do as he says, and he rests the head of his cock on my tongue.

“Do not move.”

It’s sweet, sweet fucking torture.

“Do want to suck my cock down your throat? Feel it cut off your air as I fuck your mouth?”

I only manage a simple nod, too focused on the tease of a taste he’s giving me. I don’t see him raise the flogger again, this time hitting my nipples in quick succession. I jerk and do my best not to let his cock move from my tongue, keeping it as still as possible.

He keeps whipping my breasts—pain and pleasure laced across my skin until I’m shaking, panting, and feel my arousal drip from my pussy.

Lying there, bound, with his cock on my tongue as I pant, sweat covering my body, my thighs trembling, I’m already teetering on the ledge of euphoria. Just a little more. It’s all I need. I’m right fucking there.

One last strike directly to my clit, and my back arches as I come, letting out a scream he chokes off by grabbing my hair and twisting my head so he can shove his cock down my throat.

I’m a gagging mess as he brutally fucks my face, using me as his little slut, shoving his cock down my throat, holding me down as I struggle. My lungs burn. My jaw aches. And tears stream down the sides of my face.

Abruptly, he pulls out, and I desperately suck air until it fills my lungs. I’m still trying to catch my breath when he

moves and pushes his hard length into my pussy. I don't know if it's the position I'm in, the plug, or a toxic mix of everything, but he's stretching me more than he has before, and I can feel every inch of him slide against my inner walls as he fucks me so fast, so hard.

Without messing up his rhythm, he reaches for the little black box, and with a wicked grin, he flips a little switch on the side and the plug in my ass comes to life, causing me to cry out loudly. It sends vibrations through my overstimulated body. Even his cock seems to make the vibrations stronger, dragging them over the most sensitive spots inside me.

“Please, sir.”

“Beg me to fuck your ass.” He turns the plug up a little more. It's too much and not enough at the same time.

“Beg me to fuck your ass,” he repeats and turns up the dial again.

I open my mouth, and nothing comes out but a low groan.

“I will make you come when I fill your perfect little ass. All you have to do is beg.” He's taunting me now, and I fucking love it.

“Please, sir.”

I groan in agony when he pulls out of my pussy, leaving me empty, then yanks the plug out, replacing it with his cock, slowly sliding it in inch by exquisitely painful inch. It hurts, it feels wrong, but I love it. I love the control he is taking. I love how I don't have options. There is nothing for me to think about, no choices to make. He's in control. The risk, the responsibility, the choices are all his, and I trust him to take care of me and give me the sweet agony I crave.

Gabriel presses his thumb to my clit and rubs in slow circles, his shaft sliding in and out of my ass with the help of the lube he used mixed with my own arousal coating his cock.

“When I tell you to come, you better come hard. Let me hear the pleasure I'm fucking into you.”

“Yes, sir.” My words are barely audible. I’m panting so hard my breaths are shallow because of the way I’m still bent. He fucks into me harder but keeps the pressure on my clit, working my body, using my body.

“You look so fucking beautiful with my marks covering your breasts and ass. Jesus Christ, you’re so fucking tight,” he growls. “Now, come for me.”

My body releases before I even process his command, and I scream out his name as my orgasm tears me in fucking half.

He roars with his release, his fingers digging into my thighs. Sweat covers his brow and chest, and his jaw is slack as he rides out his high.

Still buried to the hilt inside me, he reaches up and releases my wrists from the spreader bar, and then my ankles, one by one, gently easing my legs down straight.

I groan out the last stretch, my body aching in places I never knew I had.

He pulls me up so I am sitting on the edge of the bed, and I notice the sheet is soaked. I look up at him, a little confused.

“You know, not every woman can squirt when she comes, so to find one who can squirt during anal sex must be an even rarer gift. It makes me want to find out how many other surprises this sweet little body holds. Come on.” He takes my hand. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

“Wait.” I inch back.

He studies me with those brilliant blues. “What is it?”

“Do you always do this with your...you know, other women?”

“Do what?”

“Clean them up. Take care of them afterward?”

He roughs a hand through his disheveled hair. “It’s been a long time.” It’s the only response he gives me, clearly not wanting to go into detail. It’s probably for the best, anyway. I’m sure a man like Gabriel has a colorful past with the

women, and I don't think I can stomach that kind of knowledge right now. The idea of him being with other women tightens my chest, and I don't like the way it makes me feel. Possessive. Jealous. Stupid.

"Kallie," he starts as if he can read my thoughts, "I don't know what this is, but all I know is I want more of it."

"So do I." I grab a sheet and wrap it around me, hating how vulnerable I feel.

Gabriel sighs and places a kiss on my temple before resting his forehead on mine. "I'll draw you a bath. When you're done, I'm going to check you in to one of the other apartments. I have somewhere I need to be."

"I could stay here."

"I'm afraid that would stir questions neither of us has answers to right now."

"You're right," I concede.

"I'll only be gone a few hours. You can order whatever you like from room service or use the in-room spa if you like. The concierge is under orders to get anything you want, but do not leave the room. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll text you when I'm on my way back. And I expect to find you naked and on your knees in your room."

He winks playfully, and even though I smile back at him, there's this clawing feeling in my gut that whatever this is, whatever has Gabriel and me so wrapped up in one another—it will only end with someone getting hurt.

Eighteen

GABRIEL

IT'S BEEN a long time since I felt this on edge. I don't like it. Nothing fucking rattles me. I've stared down the barrel of a gun more than once, and not even a life-or-death situation could agitate me to the point where I lose my cool. This industry I'm in demands confidence and a fuck-you attitude that a bullet to the brain can't break. You cower, you lose. You lose, you die. That's the way of life for men like me.

But today, I feel...uneasy, and it's because of her. It's her I think about when my muscles tense, when this crawling sensation flutters inside my gut, causing me to—I look down at my hand, my fingers tapping impatiently on my leg, then flick my thumb. Since when do I fucking fidget? *Jesus Christ. Get a grip, Gabriel.*

The second I arrive at the Del Rossa estate, I have this overwhelming urge to turn my damn car around and go back to Kallie. My instincts are going apeshit, leaving a prickle of warning in the back of my skull. There's more to her freaking out yesterday, hiding in the closet like a scared child. There's more to the note I found on her kitchen floor. She's hiding something from me, and I can't protect her if I don't know what the hell is going on. And I want to protect her. I *need* to protect her. Something about that girl drives me mad. She speaks to something inside me, something I thought died when I lost Sebastian's mother to lies and deception.

I want to keep Kallie locked in that gleaming tower. I want to be the dragon that hoards her from the world. Keeping her little mewls of pleasure and her tears of pain all for myself.

And feeling this way over a woman who isn't mine—who can't be mine—it's fucking with my head, making me reckless, and God knows I'm not a reckless man. But I am for her, it seems. This is why I need answers, answers only the influence and reach of the Dark Sovereign can get me.

“Gabriel, how are you, my friend?” Alexius says as I walk into his office.

“Good, and you? How's your wife?”

“Good. We're all good. Thanks for asking.” He motions to a leather seat in front of his massive mahogany desk.

I raise a brow when I sit, placing my hands on the armrest. “The Dark Sovereign Boss can't afford decent chairs?”

Alexius smirks. “It discourages people from overstaying their welcome and wasting my time.”

“Neat trick. I need to find one of these for my office. I have this annoyingly persistent customs agent who seems to like being up my ass twenty-four-seven.”

Alexius snickers, then hands me a glass of bourbon before taking his seat. “Talking about annoying customs agents, is she going to cause trouble for us?”

“I can handle her.”

“Good. We have a rather large shipment coming in, as you well know.”

“I do.”

He sits back and crosses one leg over the other. “You think she's hovering around your offices because she suspects something?”

“I don't think she's looking for something in my warehouses.”

“Then what does she want?”

“I'm pretty sure she just wants my cock.” I shrug. “There is no other reason for her to still be around. She doesn't even pretend to look at shipments anymore. She just harasses my staff and throws herself at me like a bitch in heat.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Me either,” I admit. “She should have been gone ages ago.”

“No, I don’t understand why you haven’t just fucked her already and be rid of her.”

“She’s not my type.”

“Look, Gabriel—” he leans over his desk “—I know you’re a man with specific tastes, but if fucking this woman is all it’s going to take to get her off our asses, I’d say it’s an easy problem to resolve.”

I shift in my seat. The thought of fucking Victoria makes my dick want to shrivel up and die. “I had dinner scheduled with her and was going to let her down hard. Publicly shame her into fucking off, but I didn’t make it there.”

“Last night?” He looks at me, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes. Last night.”

“Last night, when you put on a very public show at the club?”

Fuck.

A smug grin tugs at the corner of his lips. “I might not be around the club as often as I used to, but I still know every little thing that goes on there.”

“There is more to this than you—”

“You and I have worked together for a very long time. I respect you, but if you jeopardize this shipment, our relationship will be strained. Neither of us wants that to happen.” The old Alexius is back. Getting married may have made him more agreeable, but that doesn’t mean he is weak or will tolerate anything less than perfection.

“The shipment will be safe,” I say, getting to my feet and meeting his eye. “I had something to handle last night. It was important, more important than some entitled little bitch with a badge. I will handle her, and the shipment will get to its destination safe and sound. In the twenty years we have been

working together, I have never had a shipment not get delivered without a hitch.”

Most men who stood up to Alexius like this would be dead before they left the building. I am not most men. I have a relationship with the Dark Sovereign, and as one of the Elite, I need to be a boss in my own right.

“There he is.” Alexius grins. “The fucking beast I know and trust. Now,” he takes a sip of his bourbon, “about that favor you asked for. It’s done, but I believe you have another request regarding her?” He reaches into his desk and pulls out a cigar cutter.

“The girl I told you about—”

“Your future daughter-in-law?”

I bite my lip. “Yes.”

“I’m not even going to ask why you’re fucking your son’s fiancée at a sex club. Jesus.”

“Let’s not lose focus here,” I say, trying to avoid that conversation with him. “I think someone is threatening her, and I need to know who and why.”

“Usually, blackmail comes from those closest to someone. Does she have any ideas about who it could be?” He pulls a cigar from the wooden box on his desk and offers me one. I hold up my hand, passing on the offer. It’s not the cigars I object to. It’s his antique gold cutter. I have seen that cut more than just a cigar, and I have no intention of smoking aged tobacco with a hint of finger.

“I don’t think so. She’s not speaking to me.” I sit back in the chair, staring out his office window. “For some reason, I think my son’s grandmother might have something to do with it.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I don’t trust her.”

“Why would your son’s grandmother blackmail his fiancée?”

“She is an evil, vindictive cunt who hates anyone she deems lower than herself, and only uses those she deems better to pull herself up the social ladder.”

Alexius laughs at my description, but that’s only because he has never met the woman. He doesn’t know what it’s like to be an eighteen-year-old kid and have her threatening you. To have a rich woman promise to have you arrested for statutory rape because you got your girlfriend—her daughter—pregnant. He doesn’t know how that woman can spin lies and bullshit to make the people who you love hate you.

“I don’t trust her, Alexius. But every gut instinct I have is pointing at her.”

“Isn’t that good news, though?” he asks. “If it’s her, we know there’s no bite behind the threat, right? What is she going to do? Hire Davian or some other assassin to kill her?” He shrugs. “A simple no-kill order on the girl can solve that problem.” He waves his hand like it’s no big deal. I suppose, from his perspective, it might not be.

“All I have is a hunch. I’m not one hundred percent sure if it even is her. What if it’s not? What if this is worse than just an old hag wanting to mindfuck Kallie?”

“And you think digging into her past can help you figure it out.”

“Yes,” I answer bluntly. “Kallie is hiding something, and whatever it is might help me connect the dots.”

“What if you don’t like the picture those dots reveal?”

“I don’t care. This woman is scared, and I need to know why. Yesterday, I found her huddled in a ball in the back of the closet because she thought there was someone in her house. And then I find a note about her having a story to tell, but when I ask her about it, she refuses to give me answers.” I take a deep breath and put my head in my hands for a moment to gather myself. “Alexius, when I found her in that closet, she wasn’t just scared. She was terrified and freaked the fuck out, like she was somewhere else completely.”

Alexius leans his head to the side, studying me. “How does finding a girl, your son’s fiancée, in a closet terrified beyond reason lead to taking her to Club Myth? Then putting on what many people have described as the most intense and erotic whip demonstration they have ever seen?”

“She asked for it.”

“Crying on your shoulder is asking to be whipped now?”

“No, she literally asked me to take her back to the club. For her, the pain isn’t a run-of-the-mill kink, it’s like...I dunno...cleansing or some shit. I don’t understand it, but I know that something happened to her, and I need to know what it is.”

Alexius raises a dark brow. “Why you?”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s your son’s fiancée. Why isn’t he the one helping her?”

“I don’t know. He’s too wrapped up in his newfound fame to even realize something is up with her. She attended our last Elite event at Myth searching for...something.”

“Is she the one in white, the one you—”

“Yes, but I didn’t know who she was when I chose her that night.”

Alexius lets out an amused snicker. “You, my friend, are well and truly fucked.”

“Tell me about it,” I sigh, knowing all too well what level of fucked I really am. There is no version of this situation with Kallie that will end well for everyone. Someone is bound to get hurt.

“So,” Alexius starts, “the favor you asked, are you sure this is the right move?”

“Yes.” I don’t hesitate. I can’t. I need to know.

“You know this crosses lines you can’t come back from? She may not appreciate your efforts here.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say.

“It does. Trust me, one of the first things you learn when you’re married is everything fucking matters.”

“I’m not the one marrying her,” I point out, my stomach twisting as soon as I say it.

“That doesn’t mean it’s not an invasion. You are crossing not only arbitrary legal lines but ethical ones.”

“Lines we cross on a daily basis.”

“But this is personal.”

“Alexius, I don’t need the lecture. I need her secrets. It’s the only way I can help her.”

A moment passes, and as if he can sense just how fucking desperate I am, he nods, stands, and walks over to open his office door.

“Dr. Trudeau, thank you for joining us.”

A slender woman in a professional yet stylish suit walks in with her lips pursed, glasses high up on the bridge of her nose.

I get up from my seat and walk over, extending a hand.
“Doctor, my name is Gabriel King.”

“Why am I here with you, Mr. King?”

“Kallie Sawyer is one of your patients.” It’s not a question, and she doesn’t answer it as such. In fact, she doesn’t respond at all.

Oh, this is going to be fun.

I slip my hands into my pants pockets. “I need to know what happened to her, and you’re going to tell me.”

Nineteen

GABRIEL WAS RIGHT. The concierge was happy to get whatever I needed and charge it to his expense account. And turns out, the concierge is an artist at heart just like I am and practically beamed when I asked him if he could order some paint and canvas. I'll pay Gabriel back, of course, but once he left me in this massive suite, I felt so inspired and couldn't let the moment pass.

The suite Gabriel arranged for me is lovely. The walls are adorned with fancy gilded mirrors and the windows draped in ivory curtains. Patterned rugs lay across the floor and feel like plush cushions beneath my feet. The bedroom has two mirrored doors that open to a grand bathroom where towels and robes lay waiting for me by the white marble bathtub. Carved furniture completes the look of elegance in the sitting area. Though this suite isn't as large or extravagant as Gabriel's own, it's far more than one person needs.

When I find the study, I already know I'm going to turn it into a makeshift studio.

The natural light coming through the window is absolutely perfect, and after rearranging a few things, I set up the new easel. I'm also definitely keeping the supplies they bought since it's so much better than what I have at home, even nicer than the ones Sebastian bought me for my birthday.

I spend most of the day painting, my brush darting across the canvas like a hummingbird. The work is some of the best I have ever done. The strokes of the brush flow out and create a scene that is unlike anything I have created before - a

patchwork of shimmers and shadows, dappled with vibrant hues that swirl like leaves in a whirlwind. I lose myself in my art, not noticing several hours have passed until I look up at the muted sunset creeping over the skyline through the window. The horizon is painted with brilliant oranges, pinks, and purples like fire licking at the sky. My fingertips ache from gripping the brush for so long, but the pain is nothing compared to the satisfaction and joy I feel seeing my creation come to life right before my eyes.

After turning on the lights in the room, I stand back and look at my work, wondering why it feels so different.

I'm pulled out of my thoughts when I hear the lock on the hotel door beep and the door opens. My stomach flips, electricity dancing across my skin, knowing it's Gabriel. It's when I reach the bedroom door that I realize I've never felt this way about Sebastian, never experienced these currents of excitement whenever I'm about to see him. It's cold, but it's true. Everything I feel when I'm with Gabriel is foreign to me, yet it feels...right.

I rush with my bare feet across the floor, my body already anticipating the thrill only he can give me.

"I thought you weren't coming back," I say as I round the corner and into the foyer but come to a complete stop when I see him. He looks different, his sleeves rolled up mid-arm, his collar open and tie hanging loosely down his shoulders. And his hair, it's disheveled as if he's dragged his fingers through it a hundred times. But it's when I look into his eyes, his expression pained, that my world stops. "No," I breathe.

He moves toward me. "Kallie."

"Don't," I snap, taking a step back.

"I'm sorry."

"No!" I cry out, my insides filled with concrete. "No. You don't get to be sorry."

He paces a few steps, rubbing the back of the neck, and all I can think about is...he knows. Gabriel knows everything. "How?" My voice shakes.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters.”

“Kallie, listen to me—”

“No! You had no right, Gabriel. You had no fucking right!” My screams slam against the ceiling, my anger, my shame, my fucking guilt ricocheting off the walls.

“Baby.” He tries reaching for me, but I step away.

“This is why I didn’t want you to know. The way you’re looking at me right now with...with pity in your eyes.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to look at you, Kallie? Huh? After what you’ve been through, you expect me to look at you and feel, what—nothing?”

“I don’t deserve your fucking pity, Gabriel. I don’t deserve anyone’s pity!”

“Of course, you do.”

“Stop,” I warn him, stepping backward, anger rising in my veins. “Just. Stop.” My heart is beating so fast, every beat is an ache that drums against my bones.

“You could have told me.”

“Told you what? That my sister and I got kidnapped by a serial rapist and a motherfucking psychopath?”

He wipes a palm down his face.

“That I couldn’t keep my little sister safe and was forced to watch him rape her, forced to listen to her screams?”

“Jesus,” he mutters, turning away from me as he roughs a hand through his hair.

“What else, Gabriel, huh? What else do you want to know? How about how I let that monster rape me without even trying to fight back?” More hot tears start streaming down my face. “How I begged him to hurt me, to take me, and when he couldn’t get hard for me, I would suck his filthy dick and pretend to love it because if I made him come, that meant my sister was safe for at least a short fucking while.”

“Kallie. Fuck!” Gabriel slams his fist into the wall, and I suck in a breath, closing my eyes as my heart pounded in my throat.

“But no matter what I did, how I obeyed him, did everything he asked of me, behaved like his perfect goddamn pet, he wanted her. He would always come back for her, and after...” I choke on my words as salty tears explode onto my tongue. “After a while, he just stopped hurting me. Stopped taking me to his fucking torture chamber because he—” I slam my palm over my mouth, sobbing into it. “Because he wanted her. He wanted to hurt her. Rape her over and fucking over again.”

Gabriel leans against the wall and slips down until he’s flat on his ass, knees pulled up, arms hanging over them.

I walk closer, anger and rage, pain and grief flooding me to a point where I can’t even breathe right. “I couldn’t keep my little sister safe from that monster. I couldn’t protect her. I had to listen to her screams, her pleas, her cries. But the worst part...” I say, a mix of snot and tears dripping over my lips. “The worst part was the silences. The times her screams would stop, because I didn’t know if those silences meant he finally killed her.”

“Stop!” Gabriel launches to his feet, his blue eyes blazing, yet shimmering with I can only guess is unshed tears of his own. “What about your cries? Your screams? Your pain?”

I stumble back, and he presses forward.

“What about your pleas, huh? All you’re talking about is her, what she went through. What about what you fucking went through?”

“I got saved!” I scream back at him. “She didn’t.”

“She got saved that day, too, Kallie.”

I let out a mocking laugh. “You think because they pulled Maya out of that hellhole with me, she was saved?” I scoff. “It shows you know nothing.”

“Then tell me.”

“No.” I press my palm against my temple. It hurts too much. Everything. The memories. “I can’t. No.”

“Kallie.” He grabs my shoulders, but I jerk free, my mind in chaos. Flashes. Screams. Dogs barking.

“The dogs,” I mumble, closing my eyes.

“What dogs? Kallie?”

My head starts to spin. My mind contorted. “The dogs... barking.”

“Kallie!”

Dogs. Is that dogs barking? I don't remember hearing dogs ever since I woke up in this hellhole. Maybe it's the TV playing. Maybe the monster is in a mood for a different type of entertainment today.

More barking resounds from outside, and for a single moment it sounds...real. Is there someone out there? No. That can't be. There is no one out there, and there is no hope. I can't allow myself to feel hope only to have to cracked open like a delicate eggshell.

Faraway voices start to trickle through, and I try to sit up straight, every bone in my body aching, shivering.

Is that...do I hear...is that my name?

My heart explodes inside my chest as I try to yell, “Here!” But it's barely a whisper. My lips are dry and cracked, my throat painfully raw from screaming when the monster had Maya in the room next door and I was forced to listen to her cries.

“We're here,” I try again, my voice getting a little stronger. I move to the bars, grabbing the chain shackled around my ankle. If they can't hear me, maybe they can hear if I bang the chains against the bars.

With every last ounce of strength, I raise my chains to hit the bars when the door bursts open, and for the briefest second, I think we're saved. Our hell has finally come to an

end. No more pain. No more fear. But that sliver of hope is short-lived when his broad frame fills the doorway, his menacing shadow falling over me.

“No,” I croak as I watch him grab my little sister. “Not her, please, not her. Take me.” He ignores my pleas, and I can hear her whimpers. “Please take me instead. I beg you.” I’m on my knees now, crawling to the door of my prison. “Don’t hurt her. Hurt me. Kill me! Motherfucker!”

He slams his fist into the bars, and my spine reverberates with it. “Shut up!”

“Please don’t hurt her.”

“We need to leave,” he growls as he holds her up, her dirty hair covering most of her face. Her body is weak, her limbs lifeless as he moves her around like a ragdoll.

“I can only take one of you with me.”

“Take me!” I plead, and he shakes his head.

There’s the barking again. The dogs. Voices coming closer, shouting our names.

Panic soars, and adrenaline floods my system as I lift the chain high above my head and hit it against the bar.

“Stop!” he demands through clenched teeth.

I hit again, each strike giving me more strength.

“Do that again, and she dies, I swear to God.” He jerks her against him and wraps his hand around her throat, her eyes meeting mine as she mouths, ‘Do it.’ She isn’t afraid, not anymore. She just wants it all to be over.

I hit the bars again and again. The barking gets louder, my need to be saved more desperate.

A loud bang echoes through the air, and light bursts through the dungeon. There is so much noise, shouting, banging, and barking. The lights are so bright, they hurt. It’s too much after what feels like an eternity of mostly nothing but silence between long bouts of pain. The monster thrusts my sister in front of him, using a child as a human shield. There

are more beams of light coming from the entrance and shouts I can't make out. I have no idea what's happening through the eruption of chaos that surrounds us.

I watch in horror as the monster doesn't realize how weak Maya is. He tries to hold her up with one hand so he can get a weapon with the other, but she crumples to the ground in a heap. I scream as shots echo in the concrete room, and I fall to the ground, trying to crawl my way to her.

"Help her," I whisper through the chaos while my sister just lies there, unmoving, her body frail and broken. "Help her."

"KALLIE!" Gabriel's voice rips me from the memory, and my legs give way beneath me. He catches me and tries to swoop me up, but I find my footing and press my palm against his chest.

"I'm fine."

"You sure?" he asks, studying me.

"Yeah. I'm just dizzy."

"You need to lie down."

"You can't tell Sebastian," I blurt, and Gabriel stills in front of me.

"He doesn't know?"

"Of course he doesn't."

"And you don't think it's a good idea to tell him?"

"Have you been paying attention?" I carefully put one foot in front of the other, walking across the carpet to the living room, and take a seat on the couch with Gabriel now towering over me. "Your son is a Hollywood star, Gabriel. The last thing he needs is my past to overshadow everything he's worked for."

"You're kidding me, right?" He slants his brows, placing his hands on his hips. "You think he'll care about his goddamn career when he finds out what happened to you?"

I merely glance up at him, his eyes going wide.

“Well, then, my son is a fucking schmuck.”

“It will ruin his career.”

“I fail to see that.”

I sit up straight, staring down at the expensive Persian carpet. “The day we got rescued, a frenzy followed. The case shook our little town, and they printed our names and photos in every newspaper, magazine, and street flyer.” I swallow hard, recalling it all. “Reporters called our house constantly. My parents had to have the number changed, but it didn’t take long for them to find the new one. We just...we couldn’t leave the house without being hounded and followed by reporters. It was a complete shit show, Gabriel.” I look up at him, more tears escaping. “Our therapist back then had to come to our house. Maya and I both hated it.” I scoff. “We were forced to relive it by telling him every horrible little detail of what we went through because they thought it would help us deal with the trauma.” I wipe at my nose. “But some days when I looked at my little sister, I thought I was the only one reliving it all in our therapy sessions. Maya wasn’t.” I glance back up at Gabriel. “She wasn’t reliving the nightmare. She was still trapped in it. She was never saved.”

Gabriel sits on the coffee table in front of me, and I lightly shake my head. “Maya’s body died two months after they found us, but her soul...her soul died in that prison the day that monster first laid a hand on her.”

“I’m sorry, Kallie,” he murmurs and reaches for my hand, but I pull away and lean back into the couch.

“Reporters couldn’t even stay away from her funeral. They just wouldn’t stop. I couldn’t even grieve my sister in peace. So, as they lowered Maya’s body into the earth that day, I decided to bury the real me alongside her.” I meet his gaze, those potent blue eyes of his swimming with pity. “Kalliana Pearson died the day we buried my sister.”

He hangs his head, and I hear him inhale deeply.

“Now you know,” I say. “Now you know where my deeply-rooted need for pain comes from.”

His gaze shoots up to meet mine, and I smile sardonically.

“That’s what started all this, isn’t it? You needing to know why I’m so fucked, why I need to be whipped and caned, tied to crosses and have my skin torn just to get off.” Abruptly, I get to my feet, pulling my shirt over my head and dropping my skirt and panties to the floor.

“What the fuck are you doing, Kallie?”

I point at the scar on my pelvis, stretching between my hips. “You know how I got this?”

He doesn’t respond.

“I got a backstreet hysterectomy because I wanted to make sure I never have children. Want to know why?”

“Kallie, you don’t have to—”

“Because I ruin lives, Gabriel. I couldn’t even take care of my sister. Imagine what a shitty mom I’d be.”

“Stop,” he warns, and I scoff.

“I told Sebastian I had to get it done because of endo, not that I chose to have my womb cut from my body. You see it now, don’t you?” I stand in front of him, bare and exposed. “You see I’m too fucked-up to deserve your son’s love.” I swallow hard. “To deserve yours.”

“Kallie, stop.”

“I’m not worth anything but the whip on a goddamn cross.”

He grabs my wrist, launching himself up, pulling me close. But I fight him. I’m slamming my fists against his chest, screaming, crying, taking out every ounce of pain and hurt that’s flooding my goddamn system so hard, I can’t think straight. “I deserve to be punished,” I cry. “I couldn’t save her. I couldn’t fucking save her!”

“Shhh. It’s okay.” He takes my beating. He doesn’t stop me or let go of me while I’m thrashing and screaming against

him.

“I shouldn’t have survived.” I sob violently. “I should be the one buried in that motherfucking cemetery. Not her. Not Maya.”

“I got you, baby girl,” he says while I’m completely lost, unable to control the emotions destroying me from the inside. Tears come fast, and I can’t stop them. I don’t want to stop them. I don’t want to let go of the pain from my past. It’s all I have left. The only reminder I have of how profoundly I failed my little sister. “It was all my fault. Everything. Everything was my fault.”

“HE’S NOT SUPPOSED to be here.”

I shut the door behind Thomas and turn to face my sister. “Shut up.”

“I’m telling Mom and Dad you’re having your boyfriend over every time they go out on date night.”

“And I’ll tell them that you’ve been smoking behind the bleachers after school.”

“That’s a lie.”

I cross my arms in front of my chest. “They’ll believe me.”

Maya scrunches up her nose, disgust bleeding from her eyes. “You won’t dare.”

“Try me, creep. Now, go lock the back door.”

“You go lock it,” she spits out before stomping up the stairs and slamming her bedroom door so hard, I’m sure the plaster will crack off the walls.

Thomas lifts his dark brows. “Well, your sister is a bitch.”

“I know. It’s hard to believe she’s fourteen when she’s always acting like a six-year-old.”

Thomas grabs my arm and pulls me in for a kiss, his lips wet and warm against mine. I don’t like the way he uses his

tongue, though. It's like he's kissing an ice cream cone and trying to lick it all up before it melts.

I step back, and he smiles as he reaches into his jacket pocket, pulling out a joint. "I thought we could go to your room and get the party started up there."

I lean my head to the side. "I'm not having sex with you, Thomas."

"Who says I want to have sex?"

"You've been trying to get me to sleep with you for the past two months," I say as I start up the stairs, Thomas following me.

"Everyone's doing it."

"I don't care if everyone's doing it. I'm not ready."

We walk into my bedroom, and Thomas plops down on my bed, rolling the joint between his fingers, his light-brown hair hanging over his eyes. "Do you maybe know when you'll be ready?"

I cross my arms and smile. "No. But I promise you'll be the first to know." I gesture to the joint in his hand. "You can't smoke that in here. My parents will have a fit when they smell weed in my room."

He gets up and goes over to crack a window. "Problem solved."

"Don't look so smug," I tease, grabbing the joint from him and taking a seat on the windowsill. It's not the first time I'm smoking weed. Thomas had me smoking it on our second date—peer pressure and all. I can probably argue that he's not a good influence on me, but he's hot. Captain of the football team. Most popular guy in school. It's a win-win. Plus, the weed doesn't really affect me for some weird reason. Other kids will laugh and be tripping off their asses while all I get is sleepy.

I light the weed and take a deep inhale before handing it to him. "You think your sister will tell your parents I was here?"

“No,” I say, pulling my legs up to my chest. “She knows I’ll tell them she smokes.”

“She doesn’t really smoke, though.”

I shrug. “But they don’t know that. And even if she denies it, I would have planted the seed and they will be watching her like a hawk.”

Thomas laughs. “You’re a horrible big sister.”

“Hey. It’s not like she gets the reward for the world’s greatest little sister.” I pull up my shoulders. “We’ve just never really gotten along. We’re too different. Always bickering and fighting and making snide remarks to one another.”

“You know,” he starts, blowing out a plume of smoke, “girls are weird, being all catty and shit. Us guys, we fight, beat the shit out of each other, and move the fuck on. And tomorrow we’re all jokes and farts at the lunch table again.”

I burst out laughing. “And they say men are the superior sex.”

“Just because we’re the superior sex doesn’t mean we can’t act like dumbasses every once in a while.”

The stairs creak, and I sit upright. Mom and Dad aren’t supposed to be back yet from their anniversary dinner.

“Who is it?” Thomas asks as I walk to my bedroom door.

“Jesus. It’s Maya.” I rush out and down the stairs. “Maya, where do you think you’re going?” I yell at she unlocks the front door.

“I’m not staying in this house while you and your boyfriend are in your room having sex and smoking weed.”

“We’re not having sex. Jesus. Calm the fuck down.”

She crosses her arms. “You’re smoking weed. I can smell it all the way to my room.”

“So what? It’s a little weed. We’re not hurting anyone.”

“Mom and Dad trusted us enough to leave us alone at home, and you are being the classic cliched teenager by doing

everything you're not supposed to." She wraps her scarf around her neck. "And I, for one, am not staying here while you break our parents' trust."

"Break our parents' trust?" I repeat mockingly. "Who the hell are you? Mother Teresa? You're such a damn goody-two-shoes."

"I don't care what you think of me, Kal." She pulls her blonde ponytail out of the wrapped scarf behind her neck. "I'm nothing like you."

"No shit. Imagine how easy my life would be if you were."

"Screw you." She turns on her heel and stomps outside, leading me to go after her.

"Why are you like this?"

"Like what? A daughter who likes to listen to her parents?"

"Stop!" I grab her elbow, and she jerks free, spinning to face me.

"You think I don't know you hate me?"

"I don't hate you, Maya."

"Well, you sure don't like me."

"It's kind of hard to like you when everything in this house revolves around you."

"What?"

I step closer, anger flooding my head with words I know I shouldn't say, but I can't stop myself. "Ever since you were born, Mom and Dad forgot I fucking existed. You were this 'miracle child,'" I mock as I make quotation marks with my fingers. "The little girl God gave them after so many doctors told Mom she'll never have another baby."

Maya furrows her brows, staring at me in disbelief. "How is that my fault? I never asked to be here."

"But you are here," I spit out with venom. "And it's because of you that I'm practically invisible in this house. The

only time I get noticed is when they need me to take care of you. Walk your sister to school, Kalliana. Push your sister on the swing, Kalliana. Help your sister with her homework, Kalliana. Make sure your sister doesn't get into trouble, Kalliana. It's always all about you!"

She presses her lips into a thin line, her eyes shimmering as she bites back tears. "So, you meant it?"

"Meant what?"

She purses her lips. "Remember your eighth birthday party?"

"What about it?" I ask.

"I knocked over your soda by accident, spilling it on your dress."

I cross my arms. "Yet another day you ruined for me. Yes, I remember."

"You were in the bathroom with two of your friends, cleaning your dress when you said—and I quote—'My life would be so much better without my sister. I even heard my mom tell my dad that she wishes Maya was never born.'" A tear falls down her cheek, and out of nowhere, regret slams into me harder than a ten-ton truck.

"Maya," I say softly, feeling like complete and utter shit. "What you heard, that wasn't...it wasn't true. Mom never—"

"Oh, shut up, Kal." A single tear dripped down her cheek. "You hate me. Always have. I don't expect you to act otherwise." With that, she turns around and starts to run toward the street.

I chase after her. "Maya, stop!"

"Leave me alone."

"Maya, please stop." I manage to grab her wrist, yanking her around. But my grip slips, and she falls. It happens in eery slow-motion, the way her body twists, her legs giving way beneath her, her head hitting the curb. It's when I see the blood that everything starts happening in a blur.

“Maya!” I scream, crouching beside her. She’s not moving. She’s not...shit. “Maya! Maya, wake up. Thomas!”

“What the hell is going on?” He comes to a complete standstill when he sees Maya. “Oh, shit.”

“Get help. Get help, please,” I beg.

“Oh, shit. Is she dead?”

“Thomas!” I cry. “Get help!”

“I can’t...” He steps back, and I look up at him. “I can’t...”

“Thomas!”

“I’m sorry, Kal. I just...I can’t be here.” He runs in the other direction, his heavy footfalls pounding and fading into the dark.

“Maya, please,” I plead, tears streaming down my face. She’s still not moving, and there’s blood on my hands now, red, crimson coating my fingers. “Oh, God, please.”

“Miss, is everyone okay here?”

Only then do I notice the man getting out of his van.

“No. Please, my sister needs help.”

He crouches beside her, his hands hovering over her head. “Oh, shit, this is bad. She needs to get to a hospital. I’ll take you.”

“Thank you! Thank you so much.”

I watch as he gently picks her up.

“Careful,” I urge as I get into the back of his van first, letting him put her on the back seat, her head resting on my lap. “It’s okay,” I say, wiping bloodied hair from her forehead. “You’ll be fine. We’re getting you to a hospital, okay? Just hold on.”

We never got to the hospital.

“THERE IS no one else to blame,” I say, my cheek pressed against Gabriel’s chest. “I know it. Back then, everyone knew it. You should have seen the way my parents looked at me.” He tightens his arms around me. “My father could barely look at me after Maya killed herself. That’s why he left us—my mom and me. You know what the last thing was he said to me before he left?”

Gabriel kisses the top of my head softly.

“I wish it was you instead of her.” Every bone in my body cracks. It’s like I’m hearing him say it for the very first time, breaking my heart into a million pieces, shattering my entire existence with just a few words.

“Motherfucker,” Gabriel curses, and I lift my head to look at him.

“Everyone I love, I hurt.”

“That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it? Look at us. Look at what I’m doing to your son. Sleeping with his father? That’s a special kind of fucked-up, Gabriel.”

“This isn’t all just you.” He grabs a throw-blanket draped over the couch and eases it over my shoulders. “I have my part in this, too.”

I tighten the blanket around me. “You’re not the one who went to a sex club searching for some twisted sense of freedom, hoping it could turn me into someone worthy of being a wife.”

“We all have our demons to fight.”

“Stop doing that,” I say, shaking my head. “Stop trying to justify what I did.”

“That’s not what I’m doing. I’m trying to make you see that you’re not to blame for everything that went wrong in your life, Kallie.”

I stare at the floor. “I should have listened to you.” My eyes meet his. “I should have left town, left Sebastian the moment we realized what we had done. It should have been

my first clue that I'm on yet another road to destroying the ones I care for." I breathe in deeply, letting the air fill my lungs as my resolve starts to build little by little, realization finally setting in.

I step away from Gabriel, pulling a hand through my messy hair. "Someone is out there. Someone who knows who I really am, who knows my story, threatening to use it against me, and destroy Sebastian."

"I fail to see how this will destroy Sebastian."

"Don't you get it? The media twists everything. They contort the truth, bend it, shape it, manipulate it in a way that gives them power—a way that makes them powerful enough to control the minds and perspectives of people."

"A conspiracy?"

"A reality," I state simply. "I lived through it. Maya and I were caught in the middle of it. And with every article, every news show, talk show, documentary, they just kept adding to it. One day, I'm painted as the brave older sister who jumped into a stranger's van trying to save her sister. And the next day I'm the drug addict piece of shit whose addiction got her and her sister kidnapped, raped, and tortured." I scoff. "They even went as far as saying that I was trying to pimp my sister to pay off a drug debt."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Gabriel mutters under his breath.

"If this comes out, if Kalliana Pearson is tied to Sebastian Stone in any way, they will bend it, break it, exploit it, and engineer it into something they can control."

"This is insane," Gabriel says as he starts to pace, rubbing his hand behind his neck.

"Sebastian Stone will go from being the new Hollywood A-lister, to being Sebastian Stone, the idiot who didn't know his fiancée is one of the Pearson sisters—sisters whose faces once appeared on every newspaper, every milk carton, and every goddamn television set in the entire US."

"We'll deal with it. *I'll* deal with it."

“No. You can’t clean my mess. I need to leave. Make sure my fucked-up past doesn’t blow back on Sebastian and ruin his new career. I’ll pull my work from his gallery. Give me a week. I will be gone before he gets back. He can find someone who isn’t so broken, who won’t crave things he can’t give.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” he says sternly.

“Sebastian is good man. He deserves better.” I meet his gaze. “And so do you, Gabriel.”

He wipes the corner of his lips with his thumb. “If you think I’m going to let you walk out of here, you are sorely mistaken.”

“Gabriel, please,” I say, pinching my eyes closed, feeling my heart constrict in my chest.

“I’m not letting you run again, Kallie.”

I place my palm in front of my mouth, trying to smother my whimpers.

“You’re done running,” he says, placing his arms on my shoulders. “Do you understand me? You need to stop punishing yourself. You were a child, and you tried everything you could to help your sister.”

“I didn’t do enough,” I cry.

“Of course you did enough!”

I shake my head, unable to say a word through the sobs.

He pulls me close again, squeezing so tight it hurts, but I want it to. “You can’t be blamed for living in a world full of sick, perverted fuckers.” He takes my face in his palms, forcing me to look at him. “Do you understand me?”

He forces my face up more when I don’t respond.

“Do you understand me?”

And all I can do is nod...a weak little nod. But deep down, I know the truth, and there’s nothing Gabriel can say to change it.

Twenty

GABRIEL

KALLIE HAS BEEN asleep for hours now, and I can't do anything but lie next to her with my thoughts going into overdrive. I consider, for a moment, leaving her to sleep alone, but I just can't let her out of my sight. When she wakes up, I need to be here. I need to be the one to provide whatever she needs. When she is asleep like this, emotionally drained and naked, she is vulnerable in a way I never want anyone else to see.

Ever.

The world is full of evil men, and I'm one of them, but no one is ever going to hurt her like that again. Some monster fucking broke her in the worst ways imaginable. But even after everything she's been through, she's still surviving—barely, maybe, but surviving, nonetheless. She has no idea how fucking strong she is. Her cracks and scars add layer after layer of delicate spider webs on her soul. I want to fill each one with molten gold and watch as she fuses back together, whole but not the same. Made more beautiful by the damage she endured. Forged stronger, like steel.

A white-hot surge of rage courses through my body. That fucker should thank God all he got on his way to hell was a few bullets to the chest. If he was still alive, breathing the same air as Kallie, I would hunt him down, cut out his heart, and lay it at her feet. A man like that doesn't deserve to die quickly. He should suffer until he begs for death, and then suffer some more.

Kallie rolls over to her side and into me. Her head just finds my shoulder and her arm wraps around my waist, holding me to her. It feels good. Too fucking good. And while I watch her sleep, wisps of golden hair framing her face, her features delicate, soft, and so fucking beautiful, I find myself wishing she was mine. This girl, this perfect woman, needs a man to protect her. No, she doesn't need a man. She needs me. I will burn this world to the ground to keep her safe. I could do it, too. The people I know will help me protect her. I have powerful friends, and a few sick fucks who owe me favors. There isn't a single favor I wouldn't cash in for this beautifully broken bird.

I reach for my phone and send Davian a text.

Look up the name Kalliana Pearson. I need to find out where her parents are.

Not even a full minute goes by, and I get a message back.

Mom's in a clinic, can't remember shit. Dad lives in Naperville.

Fucker abandoned his family.

Sooooo... do you want him dead... or...

Not yet... probably... but not yet.

I have never felt this overwhelming sense to protect someone. Not even Sebastian's mother had me feeling like this. It's like Kallie woke a side to me I never knew existed. Like I was fucking born to protect her, keep her safe, and take care of her in every goddamn way possible. It's like my need for perfection is drawn to her brokenness—my craving for control gravitating to her chaos. Two opposite colors of the spectrum, yet put together, they create the strongest contrast.

I reach out and gently brush a strand of hair from her face. My broken little doll. Now that I know she craves pain because she feels she deserves it, I want to let her see she's wrong. How do I teach her to crave the pain because it makes

her pleasure more intense? Not because it's some kind of cosmic retribution. When she's on my cross, feeling the bite of the whip, or strapped to my bed, feeling my cock punish her little ass or my fingers around her throat, I want it to be because she likes it.

My phone vibrates on the nightstand. It's a text from the guy I have tailing my son. If someone is threatening Kallie, I'm assuming it's a threat to Sebastian as well.

Sebastian is heading home in the morning. Flight scheduled to land at 10 a.m.

HE'S NOT SUPPOSED to be home for another week.

As carefully as I can, I get up and replace my body with a pillow. She moans, a little line appearing between her brows. For a moment, I'm worried I woke her, but she wraps herself around the pillow and settles.

I step out of the room and close the door behind me and make the call.

"Mr. King," he answers.

"Sebastian's not supposed to come back for another week."
Why is this bothering me so fucking much?

"He got a call today. Something about a family emergency."

"What emergency?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You don't know?" I snap. "Then what the fuck am I paying you for?"

"Sir, honestly, I don't even know why he's here, because he's not filming anything. It's just a bunch of parties, one after the other."

"Stay on him, and for the love of God, find out what the emergency is."

I hang up and massage my temples. There's a heaviness in my gut I don't like. This fucking feeling of foreboding and gnawing disappointment that my son is heading home early, because that means...that means she's going back to him.

Fuck.

My phone vibrates in my palm, and I curse when I see the name flashing on the screen. Fuck my life. "Davian."

"Has anyone ever told you that you sound like a dick when you answer your phone?"

"No one's ever had the balls to."

"I do. I have balls."

"What do you want, Davian?"

"The shipment is coming in less than a week. You need to handle that agent bitch. If you don't, I have orders."

Fuck.

"Okay, give me a second to think." If I let Davian handle it, she dies. Which would be convenient for this shipment, but her going missing while investigating my warehouses is suspicious and potentially problematic. The last thing I need is FBI crawling all over the place.

"I'll deal with her."

"I don't get why you don't just nail and bail. In my experience, that usually gets a girl to hate you enough to never talk to you. Or you could just fuck her and be really bad at it."

"I don't hand out mediocre fucks, Davian."

"I heard your pussy-licking skills need a little tune-up."

"And yet it's still better than yours."

"Ooh. Ouch."

"Give me time until tomorrow."

"Tick tock."

"Is there anything else?"

“Nah. Oh, wait. My finger’s itching, so if you ever change your mind about that low-life father and want him dead, it will only take a few clicks to find him.”

“Okay, thanks. I owe you one.”

“I’ll add it to your tab,” he says as I hang up the phone. Going after Kallie’s father for being a terrible parent seems a bit hypocritical right now, since I’m definitely not winning the dad of the year award. But I like the idea that the option is open for later. Maybe, when I convince her to call off the wedding, and stay as my little pet, I’ll give her his head as an anniversary gift or something. She doesn’t really strike me as a flowers and jewelry kind of girl.

I walk into the bedroom. Kallie is fast asleep, the silk sheet draped over her, hugging the curve of her waist. I am so fucked. This broken doll is going to cost me the last chance I’ll ever have at having a relationship with my son. I love Sebastian. I do. But God knows I can’t stop myself from wanting Kallie—the one woman I can’t fucking have.

I have never pretended to be a good man. I have lied, stolen, threatened, and killed to make my living. My entire life, I did what I thought I had to, telling myself it’s for him, so when I die I would leave something for my son. Now I am claiming the woman he loves as my own. What kind of man does that make me?

She isn’t mine. I keep repeating those words over and over in my head. *She isn’t mine.*

I almost have myself convinced when she rolls over to her back and kicks the sheet off, and I’m left standing there staring at her firm tits. The right thing to do is to look away. To go sit in the living room and wait for her to wake up. Then we can talk. I can order her some room service and tell her Sebastian is on his way home and he will take care of her in the way she needs. Am I known as a man who likes to do the right thing? No, I sure as fuck ain’t. But maybe...maybe I should try, just once.

I’m about to turn around when she lets out a soft moan, and I swear my cock almost tears off my fucking body.

My gaze drops to her breasts, her nipples forming little pink peaks, and my mouth waters.

It's not an invitation.

She's asleep. I need to leave her alone.

She's not mine.

As if the universe can smell my bullshit, Kallie moves and kicks off the last of the sheet, and her bare pussy might as well have my name tattooed on it.

My cock is painfully hard. Palming it doesn't help relieve the pressure at all. I don't make the conscious decision to walk over to the bed. It's just where I end up, towering over her, allowing my fingertips to trace down between her breasts. I lean down and take one perfect nipple into my mouth, gently licking and sucking. She doesn't wake, but her back arches, pushing her breast into my mouth, her legs spread for me, and I wonder how close I can get her to coming for me before she wakes up.

I keep my touch light, ghosting over her other nipple while I lick. I let my hand trail down her soft flat stomach to her perfect bare mound. I have to suppress a groan when I feel how wet she is. Even in her sleep, my broken doll is ready to be ravaged.

Gently, I part her pussy lips and circle my finger over her clit so fucking lightly. Her breath hitches, and I still, carefully watching her face. She doesn't open her eyes, so I keep going, licking her tits, making her nipples tight little peaks. Her breath quickens, a slight pink flush tinting the tops of her cheeks as her lips part, but her eyes remain closed while my finger draws tiny circles over her clit.

Her cunt is drenched, and my cock is aching to slide into her tight little body and make her scream for me. I need to hear her moan. I need to hear her call my name when she comes apart.

Fuck this better man bullshit. I am a selfish asshole. There's no use in me trying to be anything else.

I move to the end of the bed and carefully get on, gently urging her legs farther apart, giving me the perfect view of her pussy and leaving me starved for a taste. I can't stop myself from sliding my tongue between her folds, unhurried, searching for her clit. Her taste is divine, sweet, and so uniquely her, I could stroke my tongue up and down her pussy all fucking day.

In the back of my head, I know she has to be sore. Between the spanking, the whipping, and how brutally I have taken her over and over, it's to be expected.

I should leave her alone, let her recover before her fiancé gets home.

Jesus Christ, that thought only makes me want to fuck her hard and wreck her body so there's nothing left for him to touch. To taste. To claim. I want to take it all—steal it from him and keep it for myself—keep *her* for myself.

For a second, I lose control, pressing my tongue hard against her clit, and her back arches, her legs gently squirming over the sheets. I pause and stare up at her from between her legs, wanting those pretty eyes of her to stay closed. My cock loves this game.

With a leisurely stroke, I lick her pussy from entrance to clit, and back down her slit. I've never eaten a pussy this slowly before in my life, but I want the pressure to build inside her petite body while she dreams of riding my cock.

The flush of pink that started on her cheeks moves down her neck, her chest, her breasts. Her breathing is coming out in little whimpers, and I can feel as her thighs tremble around me.

She's close. My cock is aching, demanding to slide inside her, and I reach down and give myself a few strokes to ease the pressure. It only makes the need worse.

I keep tonguing her clit, spreading her wetness all around her pussy lips, slicking her up.

I can't do this for much longer. She needs to come, and I need to be inside her.

Replacing my tongue with my thumb on her clit, I sit up and pull out my cock, stroking it hard and rough, feeling my balls tighten as I stare down at her, taking in every exquisite inch of her.

I add a little more pressure on her sensitive nub, her back arches, and I push into her. Her emerald eyes snap open, her mouth forming the perfect O as I stretch her cunt around my cock. “Gabriel,” she whimpers, reaching for the pillow and sinking her nails into the silk.

“You’re insatiable even in your sleep,” I say, thrusting in deep. “I want to be the man next to you when you wake up with an ache between your legs.” I rock again, and she sucks her lower lip into her mouth. “I want to be the man whose cock you crave in the middle of the fucking night. The man who gets to fuck you while you sleep.”

“Gabriel, please.”

“Not him,” I bite out, and start pounding into her. “Not.” *Thrust.* “Fucking.” *Thrust.* “Him.”

My thumb presses down on her clit, and she breaks apart beneath me, a shivering, quaking mess of pleasure, and I growl loudly as my orgasm rips from my body, pumping my cum into her.

I collapse on top of her, and my mouth is on hers, kissing her hard and desperate, unable to breathe as I pour everything I feel for this woman into this one fucking kiss.

I tear my lips from hers and lean my forehead against hers, breathless. “Not him, Kallie. Not my son.”

Twenty-One

GABRIEL

I WAKE up to this annoying bright morning light that instantly gives me a migraine. Why the fuck aren't my blackout curtains closed?

I sit up and look around. Because this isn't your room, dumbass. I'm in Kallie's hotel room where I woke her with my dick slipping inside her. And after we both came apart, I let her—I *allowed her*—to roll us over, so I was flat on my back so she can straddle me and ride my cock. She rocked her hips back and forth slowly, making sure I felt every single inch of her tight, hot, wet little cunt gripping me. Giving up complete control isn't in my nature, so I made her come for me again... and again, and then one more time before I filled her. Again.

I reach over to grab Kallie and start getting her pussy ready to take me again when all I find is an empty bed with cold sheets. Panicking, I sit up and start looking for her, not even bothering putting clothes on.

My phone vibrates, and I curse as I grab it before stomping out of the bedroom.

"Mr. King," Denise says the second I answer my phone.

"Denise, now is not a—?"

"Agent Evans is here again. She is fuming and demanding to see you in person." The second Denise says her name, my erection shrivels. Something about that woman, while visually stunning, is just unappealing at a base level.

"That's unfortunate for her because I suddenly remember I'm going to be stuck in traffic this morning and be really,

really fucking late,” I say, and Denise snorts.

“Um...Mr. King. She is standing at my desk, requesting the phone to speak to you.”

“Give her the phone, and I will give your bonus check to Victor.”

“Victor the mail guy?”

“Victor the mail guy.”

“What do you want me to tell her, sir?”

I place a hand on my naked waist, leaning by head back.
“Inform Agent Evans that I will only be in later this afternoon. If she would like to wait for me, suggest her car.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Denise, do not let that woman into my office. Call security and have her removed if she tries. I’ll deal with the fallout personally.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you.” I hang up the phone. Victoria is turning into a giant pain in my fucking ass, and I don’t like to walk around in a five-thousand-dollar suit with a pain in my ass. I need to deal with her, the sooner the better.

Stepping into the living room, I instantly relax when I hear her humming. Kallie is in her makeshift studio painting, and just like me, she didn’t bother with clothes. I lean against the doorframe. She’s a vision standing naked in front of her canvas. From this vantagepoint, I can see her side profile, the graceful curve of her back, and the delicious curve of her ass, the faint lines from my whip. Just seeing those bruises fading on her skin is making my palms itch to add more.

The morning light catches her in a way that makes her blonde hair glow like strands of gold. Her head is leaning to the side, her brows curved and lips pursed as she hums. It looks...calm. Serene. Free. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her look this beautiful, and while I admire her in silence, there’s this ache inside my chest that’s making it hard to breathe right. I don’t know what the fuck is happening.

I stalk into the room and wrap my arms around her from behind.

“Oh.” She stops painting. “Good morning, Mr. King.”

I place my chin on her shoulder studying her painting.
“You seem inspired this morning.”

“I am.”

“Is it fair to say that you got some inspiration pounded into you?”

She lets out a laugh, and it’s instantly my favorite sound in the world.

“One can say that.” She turns to face me, her breasts pressing against my chest, her hair hanging to the side.

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

She feigns a look of thought, glancing up at the ceiling.
“Sore. Achy. Tired.”

“You’re welcome.”

Her laughter fills my ears.

“Seriously, though,” I say, placing my palms on her waist.
“You feeling okay?”

Her smile fades a little. “Yeah. I’m okay.”

“You sure?” I study her expression, searching for anything that can give me a clue as to what’s going on inside her pretty head.

There’s a glimmer of sadness in her eyes for just a second before she shrugs it off. “You know,” she grins, “since you know everything about me, I think it’s only fair I get to know some of your secrets.”

“That’s true,” I say, holding her close. “It depends on what you want to know.”

I should have seen her question coming.

“Tell me what happened between you and Sebastian’s mother.”

I take a deep breath, searching for the right words. It's only fair she asks me something personal since she exposed her entire being to me last night. Her past. Her trauma. Her damage.

I glance down between us, my thumb touching the edge of her scar. It's so fucking wrong how she got robbed of everything beautiful in her life. And there's not a single part of me that doubts she'll be a good mother. It pains me that she'll never know that.

I clear my throat. "Well, we were young. I was just some cocky little shit from the wrong side of town, and she was a gold coast debutante. I guess she was going through a rebellious phase and caught my attention in the process."

"Sounds like the start of a true love story."

"A tragic one," I say, pulling her back with me as I take a seat on the couch, letting her sit on my lap as I brush a hand up and down her arm. "We fell in love, but she kept me a secret from her parents. Elenor had no idea her perfect little girl was spending her time in the back of my beat-up Honda until she got knocked up with Sebastian."

I took another breath. I don't think I have ever told anyone the full truth, but for some reason, I want to tell her.

"I, uh...I wanted to marry her. Do right by her." I lick my lips. "But one morning I showed up at her house after I hadn't seen or heard from her in a week. Elenor told me she took her daughter somewhere safe from the likes of me, and if she ever saw me again she would have me arrested for statutory rape."

"My God," Kallie mutters.

An ache burns inside my chest. It always does whenever I take a stroll down miserable memory lane.

"It took me thirteen years to make something of myself and track them down. By the time I did, Sebastian's mom was already dead. I wanted to take him and had lawyers at the ready to sue for custody if I had to. But Sebastian hated me. He was fed lies about me all his life, and led to believe I abandoned him and his mother. I wanted to tell him the truth,

but when I saw how close he was to his grandpa, the relationship they had, I just couldn't take that away from him. The damage had already been done, and if I took him, he would hate me more and he would lose the only father figure he had in his life."

"You sacrificed your relationship to keep him happy."

I stare over her shoulder. "I thought it was the right thing to do."

"I'm sorry." She kisses my chest. "I'm sorry Elenor took Sebastian from you."

"Yeah, she's a special kind of bitch, that one."

"I cannot agree with you more."

I touch her chin, bringing her lips close to mine, kissing her softly. Somehow, she calms the ache. Kissing her, holding her, touching her now makes the pain of my past seem to fade into the background. We're like two broken pieces that somehow...make a whole.

She deepens the kiss, palming my face in her soft hands, her naked body like silk against mine. I can so easily lose myself in this woman. I *want* to lose myself in her. But reality is knocking at my skull like a jackhammer on the goddamn sidewalk. Sebastian will be home soon. She should know. I should tell her.

Should've. Could've. Not going to.

I brush my lips across her jaw. "You feel like playing, baby girl?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get up."

She obeys without hesitation, and I grab her waist as I get to my feet and pivot her around, pulling her back against my chest. "You know what I want to do to you?" I bring one hand up, wrapping my fingers around her throat. "I want to strap you to a canvas, dip the flogger and whip into different colors, and strike your perfect fucking body." She moans, and I suck air through my teeth as I reach down to her pussy, finding her

so fucking wet. “I want to see the paint splash onto the canvas with each strike and keep going until there’s a perfect outline of you in an explosion of color.”

She’s practically panting for me, her eyes closed and mouth open.

“You want that, don’t you?”

She sways her hips, her naked ass brushing against my cock. “Yes, sir.”

“Soon,” I promise, dragging my tongue up the side of her neck. “Right now, I want to put another plug into you. You came so beautifully for me when I fucked your ass, and you are going to do it again. But I am going to give you a choice,” I rasp just below her ear, sliding a finger through her wet slit. “While the plug is inside you, priming your ass for me, do you want to keep my cock warm with this tight little cunt while I give these tits the attention they deserve? I bet your pussy will get my cock wet enough I will just glide into your perfect ass.”

She lets out a breathy moan that is almost enough to have me bending her over right here.

“Or do you want me to clamp these perfect nipples and put you against that window, letting all of Chicago watch as I cane you?”

“Hmm,” she moans, leaning her head back against my shoulder.

“You like that?”

Truth be told, I want to cane her, to add more marks to the ones that were already fading. But after last night, I need her to know she has a choice. She always has a choice, and by letting her choose, it’s fun for me, too—the idea of her deciding in which manner I’ll break her body apart is fucking thrilling.

She lets out a whimper when I touch her clit. “Which is it, little girl? Do you want to keep my cock warm while I suck on your tits, or do you want the world to see you being caned?” I tighten my grip around her throat. “Do you pick pleasure and

being treated like my little princess, or pain and getting fucked like my whore. Choice is yours.”

Twenty-Two

“GET ON YOUR KNEES,” he demands with a swift slap to my ass.

I immediately drop to my hands and knees, my pulse racing and insides coiled tight. He grabs the back of my neck and presses my face down to the plush carpet, with my ass high in the air.

“I need to go get a few things from my apartment,” he says. “You will stay right here like this. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” I answer.

“Do. Not. Move.” His hand comes down hard on my ass, spanking me twice, then after a moment adding another smack to my pussy. I press my head down farther and try to suppress a whimper.

“Good girl.”

The second he leaves, the thought of disobeying him crosses my mind. I’m feeling rebellious, or maybe more curious, wondering exactly how he’d punish me.

I consider the risk for a moment, wiggling my toes as the carpet threads start to press into my knees. What could he do to me if I disobey? It won’t be physical pain. He knows I crave it. So how would he discipline someone who gets off on being tortured with a whip and cane?

He won’t let you come.

Shit.

Of course that's what he'd do. He'd edge me, and I would surely fucking die. Death by not-coming. How's that for a headline?

It feels like forever before I finally hear footsteps coming down the hall. *It better not be housekeeping.*

"Good girl," Gabriel says, walking into the room, and I let out a sigh of relief. "Stand up."

I follow his order and lift a brow when I notice he's dressed—his jeans hanging low on his hips and black tee hugging the defined contour of his chest.

He grabs me by my hair and kisses me, his mouth tasting like mint, his tongue sweeping through my mouth. I gasp when he grabs my wrist, twists me around, and forces me to bend over the light oak desk.

"Keep your feet flat on the floor and spread these legs as wide as you can."

I inch my legs apart.

"Wider," he snaps, and I press my heels into the carpet.

He slips his knee between my legs and forces them apart even more. "That's better." He lets out an appreciative moan. "God, I want to fuck this ass of yours again."

I'm already a whimpering mess when he leans over me, peppering kisses all along my spine, then starts to drag something hard and cold through my slit—forward, backward, and...*Oh, God...*inside me.

"No lube required today, I see." He licks across my lower back. "Your pussy is getting this plug all slicked up and ready to be buried in your tight hole. You want that, baby girl?"

I'm so close. I'm so fucking close, my core is already twitching with the need to come, and his dirty mouth isn't helping me to control it.

I fist my hands, turning my face and pressing my forehead against the hard wood, pinching my eyes closed and panting, desperately trying not to come.

His finger reaches my clit. My legs are shaking and I'm calling out, but he doesn't relent, he doesn't stop. The pressure is building in my core, and I am doing all I can not to let it force me into being bad.

There's a light clicking sound behind me, and the plug in my pussy comes to life, vibrating against my inner walls, and I can't stop it. I come so hard, I scream out his name, cursing as my body quivers with pleasure.

"Did I give you permission to come?"

I can't speak.

"I asked you a question," he bites out. "Did I give you permission to come?"

"No, sir," I say, gasping for breath.

"But you came anyway?"

"I'm sorry."

"What is your safe word, Kallie?"

"Shadow."

"Did you use it to make me stop?"

"No."

"Did you want to?" he asks with a dark laugh, and my eyelids slide closed.

"No."

"Good." He takes the still vibrating plug out of my pussy and places it against my asshole. "Take a deep breath in for me, baby."

I do as he says, and he slips the plug into me. It aches as it stretches me but feels so good.

"Stand up," he orders with another slap to my ass, and as I stand, he grabs my ass and turns me to face him. "You were a bad girl."

"I'm sorry."

“I am going to give you one more chance to be a good girl for me. You are going to do as I say, and you will not come.”

I can do this. I just came thirty seconds ago; my body can totally do this without coming.

“Go stand in front of that window and place your palms on the glass.”

My legs shake as I move toward the floor-to-ceiling window, the sun casting the most beautiful shades of pinks and yellows over the city skyline.

With my forehead against the glass, I can't see his reflection, but I can sense him moving. My mind is reeling with the possibility of someone watching us even though I know we're probably too high up. But there's always a chance, and the idea has me clenching my thighs.

A buzzing starts behind me, and my insides twist with anticipation.

He presses a vibrating tip against the small of my back. “You love the idea of others watching you.” It's not a question. He knows me. He knows what I like. The idea of being on display as a nameless woman, strong and desirable, it thrills me.

“Maybe next time we're at the club, I'll chain you to the spanking horse and let one of the other Elites whip you while you suck my cock. Let others see what a dirty slut you are.”

He drags the tip down my ass, and I realize that this isn't going to be as easy as I thought it would—not coming again without permission.

“You are fucking exquisite, Kallie. The blue gem peeking out between your ass cheeks,” he rasps. “I wonder how many people are looking at you right now wondering if your pussy is wet.” He slips the vibrator between my legs and presses it against my clit while he places soft, sweet kisses on my shoulders. I close my eyes and try not to think of the pressure building in my core. He's making it impossible to focus on anything other than his voice, his touch, his presence. My abs are clenched hard, trying to hold back the flood of pleasure,

my thighs aching because I'm desperately trying to force them not to shake.

"I bet the people watching you would love to know how sweet this pussy tastes." He turns the vibrator up a notch, and I suck air through my teeth. "Maybe I'm too greedy. Maybe I should let others taste your sweet little cunt? Would you like that? Having another man or woman suck on your clit while you choke on my cock?"

"Gabriel," I breathe out, and he groans behind me.

"If my name didn't sound so fucking good on your lips, I'd punish you for using it." He pushes the vibrator into my entrance just a little, his lips brushing along the shell of my ear.

"I might just have you sit on my cock and pick which guy gets to eat you while everyone else looks on and sees how my good girl gets rewarded. Would you like that, baby? Having me pump you full of cum while another man licks your pretty little cunt clean?"

The slick toy moves, the vibrations directly on my clit now.

"No. Gabriel. I'm going to...oh, fuck." I come, every muscle in my body aching, sweat beading at the back of my neck, dripping down my spine.

Immediately, the vibrations stop and he takes my earlobe between his teeth before saying, "You're a bad fucking girl, Kallie."

"I'm sorry." I can't believe I came again. I had one job to do. Do not come. And he barely touched me before I let go, my pussy clenching around absolutely nothing.

He grabs the back of my neck and pulls my head back so he can show me a short, thick little silicone cock with a wide base and curved head.

"Open your mouth." He touches it to my lower lip before putting it in my mouth. "Suck on it. Get it all nice and wet for me."

I close my lips around the narrow neck while his hands move to my sensitive breasts, kneading the soft flesh, grinding his jean-clad cock against my ass. “Thinking about other men eating your pussy makes you come. I bet this turns you on too, doesn’t it? Having your ass and mouth full. I bet you would love having a cock ramming into your pussy while another one stretches your ass, and a third fucks your throat. You are my cock hungry little slut, aren’t you?”

The way his words went from sweet praises to degrading commands and jeers makes my core clench again. It makes my head swim because I can’t keep up with him, but by God, I love every second of it.

“Do you want to be shared?” He pinches my nipple hard. “You want to feel more than one man touching you, tasting you, fucking you. I have to admit, you would look stunning on a rack with one cock down your throat and one in your pussy. Others would stand around you, stroking themselves while watching you get taken apart. Just waiting for their turn. I wonder how many men would paint you with their cum before they even get close.”

With a hand behind my head, he forces my forehead against the glass. “I hope I painted a very clear picture for you because that’s all you’ll ever get. A fucking picture. I may allow men to watch you get fucked. But I’ll slit their throats before they can get near you.”

He rips the plug from my lips, grabs me by the throat, and leads me back over to the desk, slamming me down and kicking my legs apart. “The only cock you’ll ever have inside you again is mine.” He leans over me, his fingers digging painfully into my neck. “But if my little whore needs all her holes filled—” He shoves the plug into my pussy, and I cry out. “There. Now, your ass and cunt are both full.”

I’m still trying to adjust, my body soaring with the most exquisite fullness I’ve ever experienced when he jerks me up and moves to stand in front of the window, forcing me down on my knees.

I'm nothing but labored exhales and panting breaths as I watch him take out his cock, giving it a few hard and fast strokes.

"My baby girl still has one hole left to fill," he says, grabs my hair, and rams his thick length into my mouth. He moans out loud, the sound of euphoria vibrating up his throat. I love it. I love the sounds he makes, the growls he tries to suppress when pleasure consumes him.

Holding my head steady, he thrusts in and out, making me choke and gag. Spit leaks from my lips, running down my chin while he fucks my mouth.

"This is what you like, isn't it?" he snarls, and I look up at him, his blue eyes dark and hooded, his face laced with lines of sheer desire and ecstasy. "You like being used. You like knowing the entire world can watch me fuck your throat. This is what you're made for—my amusement, my enjoyment, my pleasure. Just fucking mine."

Gabriel rips his cock from my throat, sucking air through his teeth as he squirts ribbons of cum onto my cheeks, my lips, my chin. He's rocking his hips as he comes, his fingers clenched in my hair.

And while I'm licking his cum off my lips, I can't help but wonder how many levels of fucked-up I am. I went from a girl who took months to sleep with her now fiancé, to a woman who craves being used and fucked by a man twenty years older than her. There's no explanation for it, no plausible reason for me to want what Gabriel gives to me so perfectly. Except one.

I'm in love with him.

Twenty-Three

GABRIEL

I WASN'T KIDDING when I told Denise I'd only be in the office after noon. I can't get myself to leave this hotel room, to leave her. It's like a part of my soul is being held captive by her, and another is finding refuge in her presence. Kallie and I, this thing between us is a growing contradiction. It's so fucking wrong, it's almost right. It's forbidden and fucked-up, but it's the most beautiful thing I've ever experienced. Dammit. If I could put this woman in my briefcase and take her everywhere I go, I would. But no matter how much I want it, how deeply I yearn for this all to turn out okay, it won't. There's no good outcome to this. None.

Sebastian's flight is delayed. The tail I have on his ass has been checking in every hour on the hour with text updates. Fuck. This is what I've resorted to, going from a father who checks on his son to make sure he's okay to a man keeping tabs on the fiancé of the woman he's fucking.

I lie back on the bed, my fingers delicately stroking Kallie's hair with one hand while I thumb through emails with the other. She's had her mouth around my dick for the last fifteen minutes, keeping it nice and warm while I'm on my phone, swiping through emails. Her instruction—keep the fuck still.

“How you doing down there?” I tease, and her tongue moves against my shaft. “Nah-ah,” I say. “No sucking.” Her beautiful forest-green eyes narrow into slits. This is torture for her, but after disobeying me earlier by coming without

permission—twice—she’s hell-bent on behaving. At least, I thought she was.

Kallie starts to gently suck on my cock. It feels so good, I lift my hips just an inch and suck air through my teeth. “Don’t think for a second I won’t spank you.”

Her eyes are like two pools of jade sparkling with mischief.

“Don’t,” I warn, but the little minx grabs my length and runs her hand up and down my stiffening shaft while she sucks me farther into her throat. My balls tense, my thighs quiver, all sensations amplified many times over. Her long tongue licks along my length, her petite, gaping mouth taking me as far down her throat as she can, and I’m biting my bottom lip to keep from coming.

I tighten my fingers in her hair, pulling hard, and her hiss vibrates along my cock. I force her head down and push my hips up, her eyes flashing with arousal as she struggles to take all of me in her mouth.

“You weren’t supposed to do that.” I pull her off my dick, and she gasps. “But since you’re desperate for my cock, I’ll let you warm it inside your pussy.”

Kallie looks at me with a combination of lust and relief. She knows this is where she belongs, and that’s exactly what I want—for her to feel like my cock is meant for only her pleasure. No one else’s.

She climbs on top of me, straddling me, her tight, slick heat wrapping around my shaft. She’s so wet and hot that another wave of pleasure shoots through me.

I brush her hair from her face, cradling her cheek in my palm. “Are you going to be a good girl and sit still?”

“I can’t promise anything.”

I pull at her hair, her head jerking back. “I believe you meant to say ‘Yes, sir.’”

Her delicate throat bobs as she swallows, and her pretty pink lips part. “Yes...sir.”

“That’s my girl.”

I move my waist ever so slightly and watch her eyes close. “That’s not fair,” she murmurs, licking her lips like she just tasted heaven.

“No one said *I’m* not allowed to move. Now, shut up, sit still, and keep my dick warm while I try to catch up with the work I’m missing because I can’t get myself to leave you.”

Her gaze softens, her expression painted with an emotion I’ve never seen before. I’m taken aback when she leans down, places her cheek on my chest, and nestles into me. I pause for a second, a wave of emotion hitting me like a hurricane, and suddenly nothing else matters. Not work. Not obedience. Not Sebastian. Nothing matters but this moment right now.

I drop my phone and wrap my arms tightly around her back, drawing my knees up so my cock doesn’t slip out of her. All this time, when we’re together, she’s shown me her submission. But this is different. It feels different. And in that moment, I know...she’s mine.

I feel like the luckiest bastard in all of existence right now. My heart is no longer pulsing inside my chest. It’s beating in hers.

There’s a knock on the door, and I curse under my breath. “Goddammit. Stay here,” I say, gently easing her off me and wincing as I slip out of her. “I’ll be right back.” I pull on my jeans before stomping through the suite.

I fling open the door. “What is it?”

The concierge hands me a large envelope. “Someone dropped this off at the front desk.”

“Thank you,” I say as I take it from him and give him a hundred-dollar bill before closing the door. I start to open the envelope as I walk back to the bedroom, but I stop dead in my tracks when I find Kallie in bed, fast asleep. Conflicted doesn’t begin to describe my emotions as I take in the sight of her sleeping form. She’s even more beautiful when she’s not trying so hard to be strong, to prove to everyone around her

that she's not broken. But by God, those broken pieces form the most stunning creature I've ever lain eyes on.

I lean against the doorframe and take a moment to look at her. This woman, this enigma who has taken me by storm, has now managed to become the center of my universe. Everything I've been doing lately revolves around her; she wholly consumes my mind and thoughts. This undeniable attraction I feel toward her is no longer just that. It's more. Something deeper. More profound. The thought of being without her has me feeling emptier than I ever have. It's like a part of myself that was missing until now has been found...in her. The little thief has managed to steal my heart, and I'm helpless against it.

Deciding to let her sleep, I close the bedroom door and head to the kitchen, grabbing myself a bottle of sparkling water before I sit on the couch. I rip open the envelope and shake it out on the coffee table.

Ice explodes in my gut, and I stop breathing. It's a newspaper printout about Maya Pearson's suicide, about how her and her older sister's abduction and weeks spent with a psychopath led to her taking her life.

"Jesus Christ." I glance down the hall to ensure Kallie is still in the bedroom. She can't see this. It would wreck her if she found out about it being delivered here. How the fuck did they know she was here and not at home? Someone's watching her, watching us.

I throw the printout back on the table and look for a note, something, anything to tell me who sent this.

Fuck!

My instincts soar, and the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced Elenor is involved. This has that manipulating bitch written all over it, but why? What does she have to gain by playing these games with Kallie?

I think it's high time Elenor Stone and I had a chat—one evil fucker to another. She will be sorely disappointed when she discovers I'm no longer a scared teenager who will be

intimidated by the likes of her. This woman took my family from me once. I will not allow her to hurt anyone else I care for.



THE STONE ESTATE is in a rich but dated area of Chicago filled with gilded aged mansions full of old money. I drive past the gate, not bothering to park my car along the side but instead right in front of Elenor’s fucking porch.

I’m about to hammer my fists into the carved wooden door when the butler opens it.

“Can I help you, sir?” he says, looking down his pointed nose at me.

“I need to see Mrs. Stone immediately.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, and I don’t need one.” I brush past him, almost knocking the old fart on his ass.

“Sir, I am going to ask you to—”

“It’s okay, Gregory.” Elenor appears at the top of the stairs, her hair pinned up in a bun, her white, floral-printed cardigan buttoned up, making her look like the uptight version of Mary fucking Poppins. Older, too. “Gabriel, how lovely to see you. As always.”

“Spare me the bullshit, Elenor. When have you ever been happy to see me?”

“On the contrary,” she starts as she reaches the bottom of the stairs. “I’ve been the one sending you invitations to your son’s pre-wedding events, after all.”

A huge fucking aha moment strikes me, and I narrow my eyes at her as I square my shoulders. “You’ve been inviting me behind Sebastian’s back, haven’t you?”

She shrugs nonchalantly. “Just doing my part to reunite father and son.”

“After you took him away from me in the first place.”

She purses her red lips, wrinkles crinkling around them. “What do you want, Gabriel?”

“Are you trying to get rid of Kallie?”

“What? Of course not.”

“You sure?” I taunt. “It wouldn’t be the first time you stooped fucking low to get rid of someone.”

“Gabriel, I don’t know what you’re insinuating, but I—”

“Does Kallie not meet your standards?” I cross my arms in front of my chest. “Is she not good enough for the Stone name, either?”

“My standards?” She gives me a look of indignation, her heavily penciled brows slanting inward. “I like Kallie. She is a sweet, sweet girl.”

“But?”

“But nothing,” she snaps. “I have been working night and day planning a perfect wedding for her and Sebastian. Why would I want to get rid of her?”

For most people, you can tell if they are lying by their eye contact. When it’s shifty, when they never look directly into your eyes, they’re hiding something. Unless, like Elenor, they loathe you and find your mere existence insulting to their superior species. It’s the people who feel justified in their actions who can lie to your face without so much as fucking blinking.

I step toward her, sizing her up, studying every twitch on her face, every single eye movement. To straight-up accuse her of being the one stalking Kallie and leaving her notes would be stupid. If, by that one damn percent chance I’m wrong, and she’s not behind it, I’ll blow Kallie’s secrets out into the open, and even if I think Sebastian deserves to know, it’s not my place to tell him.

“Why are you inviting me to the wedding when Sebastian doesn’t want me there?”

“Well, I know I don’t look my age...” *Gag* “...but I am not going to be around forever.”

“Don’t make any promises you can’t keep, Elenor,” I say, smirking.

Her lips curl at the edges. “And then you wonder why I didn’t want you in my daughter’s life.”

“Yet I’m suddenly good enough to be in your grandson’s life.”

“Someone is going to have to be around to take care of Sebastian when I’m not here, and I think it’s high time you step up and be the father figure in his life.”

“You made sure his grandpa was that father figure for years.”

“But he’s dead now,” she snaps, her eyes wide and shimmering. It’s the first sign of emotion I see through the layers of makeup she has plastered on her face. “His grandfather’s absence has left a hole in both my life and Sebastian’s. It’s time for you to be a goddamn father.”

I roll my shoulders, lifting my chin. “You’re the reason I never had the chance to be his father. You took him away from me, Elenor. Remember that?”

“I did what I thought was right for my little girl and grandchild.”

“And now?” I press. “You suddenly had a change of heart and think I’m good enough? What is your game, old woman?”

“Gabriel,” she starts, her tone now calm and collected, “let’s go into the living room, sit down, and have a cup of tea. Maybe it will help calm your nerves, and we can talk about your son and what we need to do to ensure his future.”

“Tea?” I scoff. “Are you serious? I have no desire to drink tea with you or eat fucking petit fours while we discuss my son.”

“Gabriel—”

“You better listen to me, Elenor.” I bring my face inches from hers. “If I find out you are trying to fuck with Kallie or Sebastian in any way—in *any fucking way*—I will pull the money I have been funneling into your art gallery so fast, your head will be spinning out of your ass.”

Her face pales, and I swear the lines on her forehead form grooves into her goddamn skull. “Funneling into my art gallery?”

“Did you really think your gallery just magically thrived during recessions and pandemics? I have been sending people to buy artwork and make donations to that gallery for the last ten years. Hundreds of thousands of dollars every year to ensure my son is provided for.”

“You bastard,” she hisses, and I swear her shocked expression sends tiny fucking butterflies down my spine to tickle my balls.

The front door opens, and both Elenor and I look as Sebastian walks in. “Hey, Grandma. We need to talk about something.” He stops when he sees me. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

I’ve been in such a maddened haze since opening that envelope I’ve forgotten to check my phone for updates on his whereabouts.

Elenor clears her throat and plasters on her sincerest fake smile. “Your father is here to talk about the wedding. He has offered quite a large sum to help pay for the venue and the honeymoon.” The ease with which this woman can lie is astounding.

Sebastian glares at me. “We don’t need your money.”

I straighten my suit jacket. “It doesn’t matter if you need it or not. My money is always readily available to you. It always has been.”

“You know what,” Sebastian starts, “I don’t have the strength for you right now.” He looks back at his grandmother. “We, ah...we need to talk.”

I slip my hands into my pants pockets. “You’ve been out of town for however long, and your first stop is your grandma’s?”

Sebastian licks his lips, his hatred for me practically leaking from his ears. “Stay the fuck out of my business, old man.”

I step up to him. “Just out of curiosity, have you spoken to Kallie?”

His stare is shooting bullets into my skull. “I’ve been swamped on set, not that it’s any of your business.”

I narrow my eyes at him, staring at my son, and can’t help but feel like I don’t like what I’m seeing. I don’t trust the dynamic he seems to share with Kallie. It’s just not...right.

It’s also none of your business.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me,” I say, stomping toward the door before turning back to Sebastian. “In case you were wondering, someone broke into your home while Kallie was sleeping.”

“What?”

“She called me, so I put her up in one of the executive suites in my building. She’s fine, by the way,” I add sarcastically.

“What? Why would you do that? She should have called me.”

I shrug. “She probably didn’t want to bother you, shooting on set and all.”

“You should go to her, Sebastian,” Elenor urges with sudden worry and concern. My bullshit radar is going apeshit. There is something wrong with this entire scene, but I just can’t put my finger on it.



KALLIE

*Baby girl,
I'll be back soon. If you even think
about stepping a single toe out of that
door, I'll know, and you won't be
able to sit down for a week.*

Gabriel

I TOY with the idea of leaving the room just to see if he would be able to tell and, if he did, what he'd do about it. But the ache between my legs is enough to convince me not to play dare with the devil.

I pick up the white tulip he left with the note and find myself smiling as a rush of warmth floods my veins. My insides are alive with a thousand butterflies beating their wings to the drum of my heart. Is this what happiness feels like? Absolute contentment?

While I kept him warm inside me, staring down at him, so many emotions overcame me that I was sure I'd explode. The thought of not being with him forced a lump inside my throat that stopped me from breathing. There was this sudden cold inside me, like ice had been pumped into my veins, and the only thing I could think of to get warm was to wrap myself against him. It wasn't lust or desire or the need to submit. It was my soul exposed, and only he could touch it.

Trying to put on a brave face for so long has taken its toll on me. I used to be able to fool myself into believing that it was all okay, but something inside me changed, and it changed the day Gabriel touched me for the first time when I didn't even know who he was.

What am I going to do? I don't know where to start to try to clean up this mess I've made.

As I inhale the sweet scent of the tulip, I close my eyes and allow myself to picture his face. His chiseled jawline. The look in his cobalt irises makes me feel like I'm drowning in a

sea of blue every time he looks into mine. The wicked grin that curls his full lips when he plays my body like an instrument. Gabriel is the reason I woke up with a smile on my face for the first time since... forever. I'm lost in my thoughts, absorbed by the memory of Gabriel's touch. His fingers running down every inch of my skin, setting me alight with desire and longing I can't control. I crave him even when he's close. I yearn for him even after my body has been satiated. But everything is so complicated with Gabriel. With Sebastian. It's so damn frustrating to let myself be consumed by desire and longing when all my rationality tells me it's wrong.

Absentmindedly, I pluck one of the flower's petals, letting it drift down to the carpet. The weight of guilt consumes me as I think about Sebastian. He doesn't deserve this betrayal from either of us, but Gabriel tempts every part of my being with his touch. I forget about the guilt when I'm with him. I forget the absolute deception because I only care about losing myself in Gabriel's arms. As much as I want to turn away from him, run in the opposite direction—something inside refuses to let go. My heart is caught in a never-ending battle between two men, each speaking to a different side of me, each owning a part of me.

Sebastian gives me normal—whatever that might be.

Gabriel gives me...peace.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. "Some mess you find yourself in, Kalliana," I whisper, placing the flower back on the dresser. The only thing any artist can do when emotions threaten to get the better of her is to throw herself into her art, which is what I'm going to do.

I throw on a shirt and jeans and head to my studio. I don't plan my work. I let the colors guide me and let the image take shape without any clear direction. Art is freedom. It's a moment in time without chains, without barriers or borders. It's our minds and hearts laid bare without the vulnerability of being judged.

My phone vibrates, and I reach for it, my heart skipping a beat as I hope it's a message from Gabriel. The intense

excitement has me holding my breath. But the second I swipe across the screen, my blood runs cold, the brush falling from my fingertips and landing on the thick carpet.

If you don't say something, I will. And when I speak...the whole world listens.

The front door slams shut in the foyer.

“Kallie,” Gabriel’s voice pulls me from the panicked stupor, and I run out of the room.

“Thank God you’re here.”

But his eyes pierce me with warning as he lightly shakes his head. “Someone’s here to see you.”

I frown at him in question, then Sebastian steps out from behind him. “Really, Kallie? My father?”

Oh, God.

Twenty-Four

KALLIE

MY GAZE BOUNCES between Sebastian and Gabriel, a giant lump lodged in my throat. “Sebastian, let me explain.”

“You called my father and not me?”

I almost choke on a breath. “What?”

Sebastian rushes over, takes my hands in his, and pulls me into a hug. “Why didn’t you call me? If I knew someone broke into the house, I would have been on the next flight back.”

“I, uh...” I glance at Gabriel, and he gives me a knowing look before walking over to the minibar. “I didn’t want to distract you from work.”

“Kallie, you know you come first.” He hugs me tighter, and I watch Gabriel open a mini bottle of vodka, downing it in a single shot before grabbing another one.

“It was nothing,” I say, wiggling free from his arms. “I’m sure I was just blowing it out of proportion.”

Sebastian interlaces my fingers with his and pulls me down on the couch with him. “You should have called me, Kallie.”

“It was nothing. Really. Besides,” I gesture toward Gabriel, “your father helped out, and I’m safe here.”

Sebastian glares in his father’s direction. “Still. You should have at least told me what happened.”

“I’m sorry. But it’s fine. I’m fine.” I give him a reassuring smile. “Everything is fine.”

“Did they take anything?”

“No,” I say. “Not that I know of.”

“Maybe it’s some sleazy reporter trying to snoop for shit to publish about me.”

Yeah, because it’s about you.

Sebastian brushes a piece of hair out of my face, then slides his hand down my arm, and I shiver with discomfort.

Gabriel clears his throat, and I catch him glaring at Sebastian’s hand, now settled on my thigh.

I nervously get to my feet. “Who’s hungry?”

“I’m starving,” Sebastian whines, slips out his phone, and checks his messages.

I look over at Gabriel, my heart shattered. It’s complete agony having him so close, yet unable to go to him and have him put his arms around me. And by the way he’s staring back at me, he feels the same way.

He places the empty mini bottle on the table. “Fuck room service. I’m ordering takeout. Burger and fries?”

Sebastian snorts. “No, thanks. Clogging my arteries with grease is not an appetizing thought.”

“Fine. I’ll get you a plate of celery sticks,” he sneers. “Kallie, burger and fries?”

“Su—”

“She’ll have a tomato, basil, and chickpea salad. She has a wedding dress to get into. Oh no, wait.” He looks up from his phone, brows slanted. “Chickpeas get her all bloated. If those vultures snap a candid of her from the wrong angle—” he grimaces “—people will think we’re having a shotgun wedding.”

I swallow hard that heavy, hollow feeling slowly settling into my gut. Gabriel merely glares at his son, whose attention is back on his phone, then cuts his gaze to me.

“What do you want for lunch, Kallie?”

It's a challenge—a dare for me to speak up, to find my voice. But he doesn't understand. He doesn't know that whenever I'm around Sebastian, my mask is slipped on, and I don't know how to take it off.

“Maybe a grilled chicken salad?” *Trying to find a middle ground that can keep anyone happy.*

Gabriel grinds his teeth into his lower lip, and I want to melt away into the twenty-five-thousand-dollar Persian carpet.

“Grilled chicken salad it is.”

“Good choice, babe,” Sebastian says, fingers flying over his screen. “Cameras can add five pounds to a person's body, and I'm sure our wedding pictures will be everywhere.” Sebastian doesn't even look up from his phone. If he did, he would see how rigid I am by mentioning our pictures being all over the media. That cannot happen. I don't know how to get that through to him without telling him everything.

“Speaking of the wedding, how are the plans coming along?” Is Gabriel trying to fold me into a little box of shame and discomfort?

“Oh, it's going great,” Sebastian answers before I get a chance to say I have no idea how the plans are coming along because, apparently, it's not compulsory for the bride to be involved.

“Your grandmother is planning it all?” Gabriel already knows the wedding is all Elenor, but he's hell-bent on starting a fire right now.

“It's for the best,” Sebastian replies. “Between myself and Kallie, we couldn't put together a dinner party, not to mention the wedding of the year.”

“Do you like what she's planning, Kallie?” Gabriel sits on the couch, placing his leg on top of the other, spreading his arms wide across the backrest. “Is this the wedding you want?”

It's impossible to miss the double meaning in his loaded question. It's as if he's provoking me, trying to force me into a corner while Sebastian is right fucking there. Is this a game to

him? Is he trying to see how far he can push me before I break, just like he does when we're alone? This isn't some erotic, fucked-up scene we're playing. This is my life.

I square my shoulders and lift my chin, hardening myself. "It's the wedding I'm going to have," I say, giving him the only answer I can. He doesn't look away from me. The tension is thick, heavy, and Sebastian isn't even paying enough attention to notice. I should be grateful he's distracted.

Sebastian's phone rings, and he darts up. "Shit, I have to take this. I'm going to take this in the other room."

Once the door closes behind him, I cut my glare to Gabriel. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not doing anything."

"Bullshit. You're deliberately trying to control the narrative here by pushing me into a corner. You're manipulating a situation that's already painfully uncomfortable enough as it is."

He lifts his brows. "Seriously? I'm trying to control the situation by asking if you're happy with the wedding plans?" He gets to his feet. "I'm sorry. I didn't know it's frowned upon to want to know what you really want for lunch and not have to hear how you're not allowed to fucking pick up weight."

"Don't."

"Don't what?" Gabriel storms toward me. "Don't try to get you to open your mouth? To find your goddamn voice around my son?"

"I can't do this with you. Not with Sebastian right here." I reach for my phone in the back pocket of my jeans when it slips and falls to the floor. I quickly grab it, and the screen lights up with the text I received earlier.

"What is that?" Gabriel growls over my shoulder, and I try to put it back into my pocket when he grabs it from my hand.

"Gabriel, please."

"Who the fuck sent this to you?" His eyes are wide, grooves forming on his forehead.

I lick my lips, my stomach knotted and heavy. “I don’t know. I got messages from that number before. I think it might be a reporter.”

“That doesn’t make sense. If a reporter out there already knows you’re Kalliana Pearson, they could just go public without speaking to you. Blow it all up.”

“I didn’t think about that,” I say, my thoughts scattering in a million different directions.

“Text back.”

“What?” I frown at Gabriel in question.

“Text whoever it is back.” He holds out my phone to me. “Tell them you’re ready to talk.”

“Are you insane?”

“Just do it.” He steps up so close his spicy scent fills the air around me, instant flames erupting beneath my skin. “Arrange a meeting. I’ll have the entire area set up. It’s the only way we can smoke this fucker out.”

“No. I’m not doing that. It’ll all just blow up in my face. It always does.”

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid Sebastian will find out.”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.”

“Are you serious? Someone is out there threatening to put your past on the front-page news, and you think you can still stop Sebastian from finding out?”

“I don’t want to do this right now.”

“Oh, we’re doing this.”

“Stop.” Tears are burning behind my eyes again. “Please, just stop.” I clench my jaw, and he takes a step toward me, forcing me to move back. He keeps stalking closer until my back is flush against the wall and he cages me.

“You’re afraid he won’t like the real version of you. You’re afraid of ruining that perfect fucking picture he has of you inside his head.”

“So what if I am?” I snap, glancing around, making sure Sebastian isn’t nearby. “Is it wrong of me to want to be normal? To try to forget my past and live a normal fucking life?”

He scoffs. “You think lying to your future husband is normal?”

“I did what I thought was best for me. I thought a life with Sebastian would be my only shot at happiness.”

“Are you?”

I recoil.

“Are you happy with Sebastian?”

“Maybe.” It’s a blatant lie.

Gabriel leans closer, his warm breath skidding across my cheeks. “Happy women don’t fuck their fathers-in-law.”

I slap him across the cheek, his head jerking to the side. It’s a blind moment of rage and shame that sears my veins and grips my bones.

His irises turn the darkest shade of blue I’ve ever seen, his irises swimming in a night sky of fury while his lips pull in a menacing grin. “You don’t love him, Kallie. You never have.”

“You don’t know shit.”

“I know he hasn’t touched you in weeks because, if he did, he would have seen the marks I left on you the night we met. The night I whipped and fucked you behind a goddamn mask.” He inches closer, his eyes staring into my soul. “I know that the night of your bullshit engagement party, you would have let me bend you over that balcony and fuck you if I wanted to, with Sebastian right there.”

“Keep your voice down, please,” I whisper.

“I don’t care if he fucking hears.”

“Gabriel, stop.”

He slams his hand against the wall. “You’re lying to yourself, Kallie. Despite being engaged to my son, you went to

Myth because you needed something more. You needed to feel pain. And he never gives that to you.”

“That means nothing,” I say, but I almost choke on the bullshit I’m trying to play.

Gabriel leans his head to the side, his eyes darting from mine to my lips and back up. “I know you use the pain to ground you. On that balcony, you were on the verge of a panic attack, and I brought you off that edge and tossed you over a much better one.” Desperation and anger lace his every word. “I know my son has never sexually satisfied you a day in your relationship. Not in the way you need. Not in the way I can. You crave my cock more than your next fucking breath. I am the only man who knows who you truly are, how broken and beautiful you are. Leave him, Kallie. Leave Sebastian and be with me!”

His voice slams against the walls, and I shut my eyes, his words knocking the wind right out of me. I can’t breathe. I can’t think. I’m frozen with a heart aching so deep inside my chest that I’m sure every bone will break.

“Be with me, Kallie.” He forces his face so close his lips are touching mine without kissing me, and I’m afraid he just might. *I’m scared he won’t.* He inhales deep, long, as if my scent is a drug to him. “Leave my son and be with me.”

A tear spills down my cheek, and Gabriel brushes it away with his thumb.

I lick my lips, staring up at him. “If only you knew how much I want to be with you, how badly I want to stay with you.”

“Then do it. Be with me.”

I shake my head, tasting the sadness of my soul in my tears. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Even if I don’t marry Sebastian, I can’t build my own happiness on someone else’s pain.”

Gabriel’s expression hardens.

“I’m sorry, Gabriel. I can’t be happy with you knowing I had to hurt someone to be with you.”

He pushes himself away from me, stepping back, hurt darkening every line on his beautiful face. “You’re lying to yourself. You are grabbing at every reason not to be happy.”

I shrug, tears lapping from my chin onto my shirt. “Maybe. But as you said, I’m broken. I don’t run right.”

“And that’s why you pretend to be someone you’re not? Because you think no one can love the real you.”

“I don’t think, Gabriel. I know. No one can love someone as fucked-up as I am.”

“Then why the fuck am I in love with you?”

Everything stills. Every sound is muted. It’s like God himself grabbed the Earth and stopped it from turning.

“No,” I breathe out in disbelief. “No.”

Gabriel pulls his hand through his hair, his shoulders slanted. “Yes,” he murmurs as if he, too, can’t believe what he just said. “Yes, I’m in love with you, Kallie.”

My knees give way beneath me, and I slide down the wall as his words sink in like an anchor spearing through the sea, crashing against the ocean floor. All I hear is the sound of my heart shattering into a thousand shards of glass now lodged in my very soul.

“Sorry, that took so long.” Sebastian walks in, his gaze darkening when he finds me on the floor. “What the hell is going on here?”

I wipe my nose and get to my feet. “Nothing.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing.” His glare cuts to Gabriel. “What the fuck did you do? Did you say something to her?”

Gabriel merely steps back, and I sniff before pushing myself off the wall.

“It’s fine, Sebastian. Just—” I breathe in deep even though it aches “—just take me home. We’re done here.”

Twenty-Five

GABRIEL

“FUCK!” I hurl my keyboard across the room. Another dead end. I have been practically living in my office for the last three days, trying to find out who is threatening her.

I slump back in my chair, rubbing my tired eyes. I haven't been sleeping. The ghost of her haunts me every time I try. She's always there, lying on my sheets, her legs spread, that little blue jewel sticking out between her perfect ass cheeks. Or perched against my bedroom window, naked, writhing, begging for my cock. This morning while I showered, I could hear her soft moans, see her beautiful pussy teasing me from the reflection in the glass. I was so fucking hard, all it took was three strokes before I shot my cum against the tiled wall. I can't even jerk off in peace without having her inside my head.

She's my obsession. My vice. And now I can't even close my eyes without seeing her face as she leaves with Sebastian—the way she silently tells me it's over. That it never really fucking started in the first place.

My cell phone sits next to my hand on my desk. It's taunting me. I must have picked it up a hundred times to call her. The longing to hear her voice is excruciating. The empty feeling inside my chest is driving me mad, and no matter how many times I tell myself she's doing the right thing by walking away from me, I don't believe it. I can't.

And while I've been desperate to get Kallie out of my head, I had to take Victoria on that goddamn dinner date last night. Talk about intense suffering.

“Mr. King, is everything okay?” Denise walks in, holding another wireless keyboard.

“No, I keep hitting a dead end.”

“Is this about Agent Evans? I’m still waiting to hear from her boss. I can try again.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m handling her myself. I had that dinner with her last night.”

“How was it?” She takes a seat on the corner of my desk. “Was it as bad as you thought it would be?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“It was worse.”

“Oh.”

“She kept asking me personal questions. Like where did I grow up? What’s my mom’s name? How did I start Sterling Shipping?”

“You’re right. She sounds horrible.”

“I’ve never liked aggressive women.”

“It couldn’t have been that bad.”

Thinking back to the night with Victoria, it was, in fact, that bad. She was pushy and asked all these questions that had me wishing for a bottle of Xanax. I felt like I was being interrogated with all the personal questions. Finally, she gave up on getting to know me. I was relieved until she started hinting at everything she wanted to do to me back in my apartment. It didn’t matter how many times I redirected the conversation, she always found a way back to us fucking. And I would rather turn my balls inside out than have sex with her.

“It was so much worse,” I say. “But it served its purpose in calming the serpent. Now we need to get rid of her before more Dark Sovereign shipments come in.” I sit back in my chair and press the heels of my hands into my eyes. A migraine is brewing between my temples. I’ve been staring at

this computer screen for far too long. A less determined man would take a break. But breaks are for cunts.

She glances at the broken keyboard on the floor. “You know, that’s the fourth keyboard you’ve destroyed in a matter of days.”

“What’s your point?”

“No point. Just an observation.”

My phone vibrates, and for a second, my heart skips into overdrive, thinking it’s her—but when I see Victoria’s name flashing on the screen, I start wishing for a good fucking coma.

I put it on silent, and Denise lifts a brow. “You know she’s only going to call the office now.”

“Don’t answer.”

“I can’t not answer the office phone. What do you want me to tell her?”

“What I want is for someone to toss her into Lake Michigan.”

Denise shrugs. “Too messy. I suggest Hoffa style.”

I look up at her in confusion.

“Two in the back of the head and then dump her body in the wet cement of a landmark or a new skyscraper. Something that will be there a while.” She blinks back at me with an angelic look on her professional face.

“That’s disturbing,” I say, deadpan.

“And the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever heard.” Davian saunters into my office uninvited. “I mean it, Denise.” He takes a seat across from me. “My dick hasn’t been this hard since Gabriel’s mom had her mouth around it.”

“Out. Both of you.”

“Gabriel, relax. I told you your mom will always be the girl for me.” Davian winks, and I’m imagining his eyeball on a fucking toothpick.

Denise gets up and glares at Davian before looking my way. “Is there anything else I can help you with, Mr. King?”

“Has the hotel called about who dropped off that envelope the other day?”

“Hotel?” Davian sits up. “What hotel? Gabriel, are you fucking your secretary?” he says as if he’s scandalized and clutching his imaginary pearls.

“Fuck off, Davian.”

“I told you I call dibs on your secretary.”

“Excuse me?” Denise places her hand on her waist, cocking her hip to the side. “No one gets to call dibs, especially not you. What you want is a woman as chemically imbalanced as you are. If she isn’t trying to slit your throat in your sleep, you’ll just get bored.”

Davian doubles over in laughter, and I can’t help the ghost of a smile on my lips. She has a point.

“Denise, can you grab some aspirin for me? I have a feeling Davian is going to give me a headache.”

“Absolutely.”

Denise saunters out of my office, and Davian studies me. “You look like shit.”

“Thank you. So good of you to notice.”

“What’s going on?”

I let out a sigh, rubbing my fingers along my chin. “Kallie, my son’s fiancée—”

“The son who hates you,” he clarifies like an asshole. He is loyal but exasperating.

“Yes. That one. The only one I have.”

“That you know of.”

“Anyway.” I give him a shut-the-fuck-up look. “His fiancée has a past that he doesn’t know about.”

“What kind of past? Was she a hooker? Assassin? Republican?”

“No. Jesus. She has some childhood trauma that she hasn’t told him about, and now someone is blackmailing her, threatening to go public with it.”

“Okay, and you are involved, how?”

I take a deep breath to buy some time. How do I say I am in love with my son’s fiancée and I have feasted on her pussy right on this fucking desk? Should I mention I still catch the slightest hint of her perfume in this room, and my cock gets rock hard every time?

Can I admit my involvement in this entire scenario is that Kallie Sawyer is, in fact, mine? Mine to fuck. Mine to use. Mine to protect. But she’s not mine. She *should* be mine. But she’s not. Kallie should be under this desk right now, warming my cock with her mouth, trying to be quiet so Davian doesn’t know she’s there. She should be working on being my good girl so I can reward her with trips to Club Myth. Her biggest worry in the world should be how many lashes she can take and how many times she’ll be able to come for me in one night. Everything else she needs should be on me to provide. Her paint supplies, her clothes—or lack thereof—her food, anything she needs or wants should be my responsibility to provide for her. So, when I get home from a long day at work, she’s there, ready to comfort me and let me work out my frustrations on her perfect body. With the crop, whip, or just my cock.

Aaaand my thoughts are rambling again.

Instead, she is at home, waiting for Sebastian, being neglected by him. I will never understand how any man can ignore a woman like her, especially when he claims to love her.

“Gabriel, where did you go?” Davian waves his hand in front of my face.

I shake my head lightly. “Someone is...stalking her, in a way.”

“In what way?”

“The other day, she called me all panicked, hiding in her closet because there was someone in her house leaving her notes on the refrigerator. So, I set her up in a suite, and then someone delivered an envelope for her at this suite, which means—”

“Someone is following her.”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to kill them?” He didn’t even hesitate.

“Once I can figure out who the fuck it is, yes.”

“Get to it, then. It’s been a while since I brutally murdered someone.”

I lift a brow. “You, my friend, are one disturbed individual.”

“God, I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

“Why are you here, by the way?”

He sits back in the chair. “I just wanted to let you know that the shipment came in last night safe and sound.” The reason that made my dinner with the ball-shrivelor worth it.

“So I hear. And the cargo?” AKA, dozens of women who were being sex trafficked. We needed to get them in the country under the radar. There’s no telling which agencies are being paid off to report back to the people we stole the women from.

“Some are pretty damaged, but all is being taken care of.”

I nod, knowing they are receiving the best medical care. Once they’re fully healed, they’ll be given a choice. The Dark Sovereign would either give them all the assistance they need to acclimate back into the real world, or they will be taken care of at Club Myth for the rest of their lives. Their choice.

“Good.” An email from the hotel slides into my inbox, and I already know what it is. “Now, please leave my office.”

“Gladly. It smells kind of stuffy in here.” He gets up, buttoning up his suit jacket. “See you around, Mr. King.”

The second the door closes behind him, I open the file sent from the hotel's security. It's security footage of the front desk, people checking in and out, and staff members moving around. I'm forwarding the video, pausing, rewinding, trying to find *something*. It's when I'm two hours and twenty-three minutes into the video that I spot a familiar skinny ass in a pencil skirt. Victoria fucking Evans is wearing sunglasses, but that unnatural red hair of hers is unmistakable.

"Motherfucker. Denise!"

"Right here with your aspirin." She struts in, putting two tablets on my desk.

"Where is Agent Evans now?"

"I don't know, but I'm hoping she's somewhere very unpleasant, like getting a colonoscopy or something."

"See if you can find out where she is."

I grab my phone and dial. "Davian, get your ass back here." I throw my phone back down on the desk and start pacing. What the fuck is going on? How does Victoria know about Kallie? Is she following her? Is she following me?

"You need to work on your tone," Davian says as he swings open the door.

I rotate my screen to show him Victoria's face. "This woman. She's the customs agent who's been up my ass. But I don't think she is who she says she is."

He snaps a picture with his phone and starts typing. "What are you thinking?"

"I don't know what her game is, but she's the one who dropped off the envelope at the hotel."

"The customs agent? Fuck. Do you think it has something to do with our shipments?" He's no longer fucking around with jokes. This has the potential to be some serious shit, and he knows it.

"I don't know," I answer truthfully. "It doesn't make sense, though, if it has to do with business, because why is she stalking and following Kallie? Plus, Victoria has been coming

around my office for months now, and I only met Kallie at the engagement party.” *Myth, actually. But who’s keeping tabs?*

If Victoria is going around pretending to be someone she’s not, fingering through my business files, and knows about Kallie’s past, then this shit is bigger than I could have imagined.

Fuck. “Kallie. I need to check on her.” I grab my jacket and phone then point at Davian. “Find out who this bitch is, fast.”

Twenty-Six

KALLIE

THE FIRST THING I did when we left Gabriel at the hotel was order more paints. I have spent almost all of the last three days in the gallery, tucked away in the back. It used to be extra storage, but when we first got together, Sebastian cleared it out for me so I could have space to myself. The room reeks of paint and turpentine.

The color red has been my muse for so long. Yet, here I am, in a different place inside my head. The pieces that I make are no longer centered around the vibrant hue. Instead, this mysterious cobalt blue now wraps around every piece of art I attempt to create. It's like this shade takes on a life of its own, and I'm merely the willing vessel it uses to express itself. I'm the canvas.

I close my eyes, letting the brush glide across the canvas, the blue paint oozing out of it like liquid velvet. This color captivates me in ways I can't explain. My brushstrokes become more erratic, more passionate, as the deep color consumes me. As I continue to paint, I lose track of time, space. It's just me, my art, and this mesmerizing shade of blue that pulls me into the memories of forbidden touches, passionate kisses, and intense desires laced with wild fantasies that came true.

My heart aches for him.

My body yearns for him.

I've been crying myself to sleep every night, wishing he was the one lying beside me. Sebastian tried to initiate sex

once, but I couldn't do it; I blamed it on a lingering stomach bug. But the truth is, I can't stomach the idea of another man's touch. I can't even imagine being with Sebastian or anyone else without experiencing this intense agony inside my chest that won't go away.

It's like I stopped breathing when I walked away from Gabriel, that elevator door sealing the fracture of the most intense connection I've ever felt with anyone. And I haven't been able to think straight since.

"Kallie."

The world stops. It just fucking stops, and the brush slips out of my hand. I don't move. I don't dare turn around. "Gabriel," I breathe, taking in his familiar scent—mixed spice and something distinctly him. It makes my heart pound against my ribcage like thunder inside an empty room. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm not here to cause trouble."

I don't want to turn around and look at him. I can't. Instead, I remain frozen with my back turned toward him, trying my best not to break in front of him. "You shouldn't have come here."

"I tried calling you."

"I left my phone at home." On purpose because the urge to call him was just too much. "What do you want, Gabriel?"

"I came here to make sure you're safe. Please turn around and look at me."

"You need to leave." I wipe my nose with the back of my hand, clenching my jaw as I fight the heartache.

Silence follows, and I wonder if he left, turning around only to see him stare at the paintings scattered all over. My heart turns inside out as I take him in. The way his suit jacket hugs his shoulders, the way his tie is loosened just a bit, the way he runs his hand through his thick salt and pepper hair. It's all too much and yet not enough. He's beautiful, and it hurts to look at him.

He walks toward one of the paintings and studies it deeply, his hand reaching out to touch it, but doesn't. The space between us is suffocating as we both try not to acknowledge the pulse of a connection we wish wasn't there. It would be so much easier if it weren't.

I clear my throat, trying to break the tension that's building. "Gabriel, please leave," I plead, barely above a whisper.

He turns his gaze back to me, and his eyes bore into mine. They're filled with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine as he speaks in a low voice, "Don't marry him, Kallie."

My bottom lip trembles as I try to hold back the emotion that's threatening to erupt. I cross my arms, looking down at my bare feet. "I'm not going to."

"You're not?" There's a slight uptick in his voice.

"No." I breathe in. "I just...I haven't found the right time to tell him."

"Is there ever a right time?"

"I suppose not."

He starts to move, but I hold up my hand as I step back. "Don't."

"Kallie, you're not marrying Sebastian. That means—"

"That means what?" I cut my gaze to him. "That we can be together now? That we can just go back to your place and live happily ever after?"

"It means we don't have to fight this anymore."

"He's still your son."

"He'll get over it."

I scoff. "You know, the last few days away from you made me realize just how fucking selfish we are, screwing around behind Sebastian's back. We tried to live a lie, a lie we hoped to God would eventually turn into something real."

"It is real."

“Is it? Or is it just two people who have been hurt too damn much, trying to justify this sordid affair by blaming it on our pasts? We were using each other, Gabriel.”

“Bullshit.”

“I was using you as an outlet for my pain, and you grabbed the opportunity to fall for a woman you can never have because there was no threat of a commitment.”

He scowls at me, those deep blue eyes raging in silence. “That’s bullshit, and you know it.”

“It’s not.”

I can feel my heart pounding against my ribcage as Gabriel walks toward me. His movements are slow and cautious like he’s afraid I might break if he moves too quickly. I’m worried I might break.

“You are trying to convince yourself that you’re in pain right now because there is no way we can be together when it’s as simple as fucking accepting it.”

“Nothing about us is simple.”

“It’s only as complicated as you want it to be.”

“Don’t do this,” I beg. “Just leave.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Then I will.”

“Kallie—”

“I’m going to call off the wedding, and then Sebastian will need his father. He’s going to need all the support he can get.”

“And you?” he snaps. “What about what you need?”

I shake my head, biting back tears. “I’ll survive.”

“That’s the problem. All you’ve been doing is surviving, and that’s not enough.”

“It’s enough for me!”

“Stop lying to yourself, Kallie. My God.” He pulls his hands through his hair. “Just admit that you’ve never felt more

alive in your entire fucking life than when you're with me.”

“It doesn't matter!”

“Of course, it fucking matters!”

“Have you thought about it, Gabriel?” I cross my arms.
“About us being together out in the open?”

“I've thought of nothing else.”

“And you want a relationship with your son?”

“Yes. In a perfect world.”

“Have you thought about how family dinners will play out?” I press. “When you and I sit at the same dinner table as Sebastian? Birthday parties? High days. Low days. Fucking church?” I snort. “Imagine sitting in the same pew as your son with the woman who used to be his fiancée, but she left him because she preferred the way his father fucked her.”

“Don't do that. Don't cheapen what we share. This is not just about sex. This is about two people finding peace in each other, despite all the odds against them. This is about two people who understand each other more than anyone else ever will.”

He takes a deep breath and stares at me for what feels like an eternity before finally speaking. “I want to be with you, Kallie. And I don't care how it looks or what people think, or fucking church pews. All I care about is you. Being with you.”

Backing away from him, I clench my jaw, desperately trying to hold on to the last bit of strength I have left. His words are tearing me apart. But Gabriel knows me better than I know myself, and he sees right through me. He steps forward and takes my chin in his hand, forcing me to meet his gaze. My heart is racing uncontrollably as I look into those deep blue pools of desire. My breath hitches in my throat as his fingers brush against my cheekbone and slip behind my earlobe, his touch spreading an ache through my body that's too much to bear.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask, pleading with him to understand. “You know we can never be together.”

“I don’t believe that,” he says firmly. “I refuse to accept it.” He steps closer now, his eyes never leaving mine as he takes hold of my arms gently but firmly.

“Gabriel...”

“No more excuses,” he tells me sternly. “No more running away from your feelings and pretending like they don’t exist.”

“You’re making this harder than it has to be,” I say weakly.

“I’m accepting what we can’t change.” Gabriel leans in, his lips hovering dangerously close to my own. “You are meant to be mine, Kallie. And I’m meant to be yours.” The heat of his breath sends shivers down my spine, causing a deep ache between my legs, feeding the fire that’s already burning inside me. It was set alight the moment I heard his voice.

“I’m scared,” I whisper, tears streaming down my face as his grip on me tightens.

“Don’t be,” he says fiercely. “I’ll protect you with everything I have.”

Before another word can escape his lips, he pulls me into a searing kiss—his lips hot and hard against mine, igniting every cell in my body as our tongues dance passionately together. I don’t even realize we’re moving until my back hits the wall, and he pins my hands above my head.

“I’ve been going out of my fucking mind without you.” He slides his thick thigh between my legs, pressing against my sex. “I’ve done nothing but think about you, about touching you, kissing you.” He sucks air through his teeth. “Fucking you. Tell me you haven’t been thinking of me, too. Thinking about how good my lips feel on yours, how my touch burns on your skin. How exquisite my cock feels inside you.” He palms my breast, and I inhale sharply as desire flares. “Tell me how much you missed me, and I will reward you.”

“Gabriel...” I whimper, overcome with a need that floods my system.

“Tell me, baby girl,” he says before kissing the hollow beneath my throat. “Tell me so I can fuck you right here, right

now.” He pushes his thigh harder against my pussy, sending a shockwave of lust through my body. “Tell me, Kallie!”

“Yes! Okay? Yes.” My breathing is rapid, my blood fire. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t sleep,” I admit. “I’m sick without you, and the thought of not being with you scares me so damn much, I can’t breathe.”

His intense gaze is etched on mine, his eyes swimming with liquid desire, swirls of promise and sin. He touches my chin tenderly. “That’s my good girl.”

Every tether of strength snaps. Every thread of control is cut into pieces. It’s like something as simple as a butterfly flapping its wings, causing a hurricane on the other side of the world.

He kisses me again and lets go of my wrists. “Keep your hands there. Do not move.”

I press my hands against the icy wall above my head, and he drops to his knees in front of me, his fingers working my jeans and pulling them off with my panties, tossing them aside.

“I’ve craved your taste, baby doll. So fucking much.” With a jerk, he hooks my leg over his shoulder, and I’m a gasping mess as he drags his tongue through my slit. A moan rips from my chest as my eyes slide closed.

“Keep your eyes on me, princess. I want you to watch as I take you apart.”

I open my eyes lazily, sparks erupting in every direction as he teases, licks, and sucks. His hands grip my thighs tightly as his tongue flicks and swirls, pushing my pleasure higher with each stroke. He slides one finger inside me, then two, the orgasm building into something so exquisite I feel like I’m floating away from my body. Gabriel’s expert mouth knows exactly where to go, and how fast and slow the pressure should be. I’m lost in sensation as he brings me closer and closer to the edge of madness—a place only he can take me.

I have to fight to keep my eyes open, locked on his—the sight of his velvet tongue flicking against my clit, my orgasm

building and building until I...until I crash and burn, my body shaking with pleasure. My voice is lost in a wild cry as Gabriel presses his mouth against me one last time before standing to kiss away the tears that had fallen from my eyes.

Gabriel straightens, my arousal glimmering on his wet lips curled in that sadistic, smug smirk of his that is just sexy as fuck. He slams his mouth against mine, letting me taste myself on his tongue as it duels with mine, each stroke becoming more desperate right before he tears away.

With a snarl, he grabs my jaw and grips it tight. “Do you want my cock, little lamb?”

I breathe out, “Yes.”

“Say it.”

I swallow hard.

“Say it,” he grits, and my lips part.

“I want your cock.”

He hisses, grabs my hand, and jerks me around, forcing me forward against the table full of paint supplies. Brushes roll and fall on the floor, cups and jars clattering around.

Gabriel’s hands go down to my hips and pull me back a step, bending me a little at the waist and arching my back, rubbing his palm over my ass before slapping it hard enough to sting before spearing inside me, a low growl rolling from his lips.

I moan as his cock stretches me, hitting deep, my body taking a moment to adjust to him.

I expect him to rail into me hard and fast. That is what I want and need, and he always gives me what I need. Instead, he’s slow, methodical. Each steady, deliberate thrust drags over my G-spot. It sends shock waves of pleasure down my spine as his lips kiss my shoulders and his large, warm hands massage my breasts.

“Fuck, I missed this. I never want to go another day without this pussy wrapped around my cock.”

I gasp, unable to respond, my head spinning with the intensity of his thrusts and the pleasure coursing through me, taking me closer and closer, until...

“Kallie, babe. Are you here?” Sebastian.

Abruptly, Gabriel pulls me up by my hair, slamming his hand over my mouth.

“Shhh.” His lips are on my ear, his cock still buried inside me.

My heart is pounding impossibly fast, sweat beading along my brows.

“Babe?”

“Keep quiet,” Gabriel whispers, then rocks his hips and I pinch my eyes closed as he moves inside me.

“Kallie?”

No. No. No.

I shake my head, trying to tell Gabriel to stop, but he only leans closer to my ear. “I’m not pulling my cock out of you. So, you’re going to have to handle it.”

I nod. *Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.* If Sebastian walks in here...but I can’t stop.

Gabriel’s hand tightens on my waist, and he pumps faster while I bite down on his palm to keep from crying out.

“Kallie, where are you?” Sebastian’s voice is close now. Oh, God. He’s so close!

Gabriel stabs into me with short, sharp thrusts that lift my heels off the floor.

“Aaah,” I moan, unable to contain it.

“You’re going to come,” he demands so softly I almost don’t hear him. “And you’re not going to make a sound, are you?”

I shake my head, and he buries his face in my neck, fucking me harder and faster, tears beading in the corners of my eyes because everything is too intense. The thrill of

Gabriel fucking me with Sebastian so close he can walk in at any moment drives me mad. I've never been this turned on. It's like walking on a tightrope that's about to snap and not knowing if you'll reach the other side before it does or fall to your death.

“Come.”

My body quakes, and I stifle a scream as an orgasm curls through me like something powerful and consuming, stealing the air from my lungs. Gabriel's hand is still tightly clamped over my mouth to muffle my moans. He's rocking hard into me as he murmurs for me to keep quiet before, finally, his own low groan follows mine seconds later.

He stills immediately. It's the most I've felt him jerk inside me as he comes, feeling every twitch of his cock. I think it's because he's not moving at all, and now I feel everything.

We both stay like that, barely breathing as we try to listen for sounds of Sebastian coming closer. The seconds tick by, and it seems he hasn't heard us because the sound of his footsteps fades away into nothingness.

Gabriel slowly withdraws from me, turning me around so I'm facing him as he pulls his tie off, easing it between my legs. “You okay?”

“What the hell were you thinking?” The silk tie against my sensitive clit as Gabriel cleans me sends a jolt of electricity up my spine. I close my eyes, trying to catch my breath. “Sebastian could have walked in on us.”

“But he didn't.”

“He could have.” I'm still reeling with adrenaline, but it's like the reality of what just happened is slowly closing in on me. “We shouldn't have done that.”

Gabriel tucks the cum-stained tie in his pocket. “You know you could have snapped your fingers if you wanted to, and I would have stopped.”

“This is not a game, Gabriel. When will you realize that?” I pull my jeans on and wipe sweat from my forehead. “Just... please leave before he comes back.”

“You’re coming with me,” he says with a tone that screams finality.

“No. I’m not. Please. You have to leave right now.”

“Kallie—”

“My God, Gabriel!” I blurt. “For once, just fucking listen to me. Listen to what I’m saying. Leave. Now. Please.”

My chest rises and falls. There are too many emotions crushing together, creating havoc in my bones.

“Fine,” he concedes, and I’m taken aback by how quickly he agreed, something he won’t do if he’s of a different opinion about anything. He stalks up to me, eyes wide and expression hard. “But we’re not done. Not by a longshot.”

Gabriel stomps out, and I breathe a sigh of relief when he’s gone. What we just did, we went too far this time. I can’t imagine what would have happened had Sebastian walked in on us. I would have died.

I quickly pull myself together, raking my fingers through my hair, rearranging my supply table before walking out, and bumping straight into Sebastian.

“Here you are,” he says, and I almost choke on a breath.

“Yeah. Here I am.”

“I’ve been looking for you. I was here earlier, then went to the café next door to see if you were there.”

“I’m sorry.” I wipe my forehead. “I was in the bathroom.”

Sebastian looks around. “Was my dad here?”

“No, why?”

“I thought I saw his car outside when I pulled up. But it was gone when I came back from the café.” He looks back to the front of the building.

“Sorry. I haven’t seen him,” I lie, and it tastes so bitter, so vile, I wish I could cut the lie from my tongue.

“Hey, listen.” He leans with his shoulder against the wall, crossing his arms. “My grandma called. She said you didn’t

show up for the first fitting this morning. Everything okay?”

“Yeah. No.” *Shit*. I can’t do this anymore. This morning when I received the stern reminder from Elenor about the dress fitting, I wanted to crawl into a ball and barf. The thought of trying on dresses and flipping through sketches of wedding gowns, veils, and tiaras makes me nauseated. I had no intention of going. I had no intention of having Gabriel fuck me, either. God, this has gone on long enough.

I wipe my fingers along my forehead, staring at the floor as I search for the right words. Who am I kidding? There are no right words for what I’m about to do—what I *need* to do. I just have to say it—just peel the Band-Aid right off.

I inhale deeply and close my eyes. “I can’t do this, Sebastian.”

“Of course, you can. You just go to the fitting and look at the options my grandmother picked out for you.”

“No. I don’t mean—”

“The wedding is in a few weeks.”

“It’s not—”

“You need to get your shit together, Kallie.”

“Excuse me?”

He roughs a hand through his hair. “I don’t know what’s been going on with you, but you need to get your head straight. We’re getting married, and I know it’s probably just pre-wedding jitters that have your head all messed up—”

“Messed up?” I narrow my eyes at him.

“Do you know how many women out there wish they could have this type of wedding? A wedding where there are no budget constraints. A wedding where A-listers are guests. My God, Kallie. George and Amal are on the guest list, for Christ’s sake.”

“You think that’s what matters to me? The fucking guest list and the amount of money being poured into the wedding?”

“Well, it should.” He shrugs. “My grandmother is bending over backward to make this a wedding we’ll never forget. The least you can do is show up at your fucking dress fitting.”

“I don’t want to get married, Sebastian.” The words come out in a rush as I meet Sebastian’s eyes head-on.

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “What are you talking about?”

“I mean it, Sebastian. This wedding—this whole thing—just feels like one huge charade.”

He shakes his head as though he doesn’t hear me right, the tension now sharp enough to cut through glass. “That doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“It makes perfect sense,” I say firmly, standing my ground for once. “This isn’t me, Sebastian. This big fucking wedding, the parties, the media, it’s not me. None of this is me.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to marry you, Sebastian.” There’s a sharp pang in my heart as I finally speak the truth. “I’m sorry.”

He stares at me in disbelief, then scoffs with a smirk as if he doesn’t believe me. “You’re not making any sense, Kallie.”

“No, actually, I am, for the first time since all this started.”

His eyes widen, his brows furrowed, and his forehead creased. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“This pretend fairytale that we’ve been living in since the day you proposed.” My voice shakes a little as I speak. “It has to stop.”

Sebastian’s eyes narrow as he steps forward, his hand reaching out to grab mine. “You’re nervous. I get it.”

“It’s not that.”

“I know a lot has changed the last few months with my career and me not being home as much, and I get that all this change can scare you. But that’s no reason to call off this wedding, Kallie. We can work through this.”

I shake my head and pull my hand away from Sebastian's grasp. "No. We can't. I'm sorry, Sebastian. I should have done this sooner. I never should have let it go this far."

We stand there in silence for several long moments, Sebastian's expression unreadable. Finally, he sighs deeply and runs a hand through his hair. "I can't believe this is happening. I mean, I understand that you're feeling overwhelmed, but we can't just call off the wedding like this. What will people think?"

"Oh, my God, are you serious right now?" I'm shocked, yet I don't know why because Sebastian has become consumed with his fame, trying to sell this fake life to everyone eager to gobble it all up. "You know what?" I lift my hands in mocking surrender. "I don't care. It's over. I'm done."

I start to turn when he says, "You're jealous."

"What?" I snap, frowning as I face him again.

"You're jealous of my success," Sebastian says, his voice tinged with accusation. "You can't handle the fact that I'm famous while you're a faceless artist who doesn't have the balls to put her goddamn name on a canvas." He stalks forward, his eyes green orbs of anger. "What is it, huh? Why are you so obsessed with hiding?"

"Sebastian, stop," I warn, taking a step back.

"Don't think I haven't noticed how you try to hide your face whenever our pictures are taken, how you manage to let your hair cover your face, your hand shielding your eyes. What are you hiding, Kallie?"

Warning prickles along the back of my neck. "You are hurt. I get that. But you need to leave before things are said that can't be taken back."

He laughs bitterly, shaking his head. "You want me to leave because you can't handle the truth." He steps closer to me, his face red with rage, eyes blazing with fury. "You know what you are? You're nothing but a fucking coward."

"You're a coward, Kalliana. You couldn't even save your sister."

“You fucking coward. This is all your fault.”

“She’s dead because of you.”

“It should have been you. Not her.”

“Get out,” I grit through clenched teeth.

Sebastian’s eyes glitter with both hatred and triumph.

“Coward.”

“Get the fuck out!” I yell, warm tears cutting trails down my cheeks.

“You have an hour to get your fucking shit out of my goddamn gallery,” he sneers before turning and stomping away.

The moment he’s gone, I sink to the floor, my shoulders shaking. My tears are hot and heavy, and my chest feels as if it’s about to crack wide open—old memories and bitter words all flooding back. It’s all my fault. Everything is my fault.

Twenty-Seven

GABRIEL

I END up back home with a bottle of scotch, fighting the desire to drink it all at once. I'm staring into thin air while I relive everything over and over. It takes a sick fuck of a man to do what I did with my son so close. Maybe I need to make an appointment with Kallie's therapist.

I glance at my phone. Davian is struggling to get leads on Victoria—or whoever the fuck she really is. Everywhere he looks, she comes up as Victoria Evans, customs agent. *Customs agent, my ass.* There's even a fucking Facebook page for the bitch, but creating a fake profile is as easy as snorting cocaine. But I know he'll figure it out. He always does. In the meantime, I have to wait, which is not something I'm good at doing.

I scroll to Kallie's number, my thumb hovering over it before clicking. I let out a breath as I wait for it to ring, but it goes straight to voicemail. There's an uneasy twitch in my stomach. Did she do it? Did she call off the wedding?

I take a large swig of the scotch and start pacing in front of the floor-to-ceiling window of my apartment when my phone rings. It's security telling me that a Sebastian Stone would like to see me. My thoughts run at a million miles a minute as I tell them to let him up.

Why the fuck would Sebastian come to see me? Unless Kallie broke it off and told him about us, which means he's probably here to kick my ass.

I place the bottle of scotch down and head to the elevator. If he plans on punching me in the face, I might as well meet him halfway since I do actually deserve it.

The elevator chimes, revealing a very forlorn Sebastian. His hair is messy. His eyes are red-rimmed. He looks like he's been high for days. *Yup, he knows.*

“Hey,” I greet him neutrally, hoping to gauge his mood before he decides to knock my teeth out.

“Did you see?” He steps out of the elevator and brushes past me.

“Did I see what?”

“It's all over the fucking news.”

I frown. “What is all over the news?”

“Kallie.” He weaves his fingers together behind his head, stretching his elbows out. “Her face is everywhere.”

“What?” I rush to my laptop that's open on the kitchen counter, fingers flying over the keyboard.

Fuck.

Kallie is everywhere. I open a fuckton of tabs, pulling up one breaking news article after another.

SEBASTIAN STONE ENGAGED TO *THE* KALLIANA PEARSON.

HOW DID THIS PEARSON SISTER HIDE FROM THE WORLD FOR SO LONG?

I sit on the barstool as pictures of her as a child pop up. It's hard to look at knowing what she went through, knowing how tortured she was with all these cameras in her face twenty-four-seven. Instead of giving her time and space to heal, they made everything worse by not letting her forget. They turned her pain into a goddamn media circus.

There are so many articles. All with different headlines and angles. Some call hers a Cinderella story—going from a

childhood victim to the woman who captured Sebastian Stone's heart. Others paint her as a gold digger, sinking her claws into the man who has become the newest Hollywood sensation. This isn't one reporter with a lead trying to make a mark. This has been intentionally blasted across the news community. There are TikTok videos about her with millions of views, for Christ's sake.

"It's everywhere," Sebastian says behind me. "There's a goddamn mob downstairs who all followed me here asking to speak to Kalliana Pearson. Whether she'll be making a statement soon now that she's been found."

I turn to face him. "Where is she?"

"I don't know." His eyes grow wide. "I haven't seen her since..."

"Since what, Sebastian?"

He curls his top lip, pain flashing in his eyes. "Since she broke up with me."

"When? How long ago did you see her?"

"Dad—"

My heart constricts. It's the first time I've heard him call me Dad.

"—I said things to her. Things I didn't mean."

"What did you do?" I grab him by the collar, lifting him onto his fucking toes. "What did you do?"

"Nothing! I did nothing, I swear. She broke it off, and I left, figuring it was cold feet and she would calm the fuck down and come to her senses."

I let go of him with a jerk, trying to fucking think straight.

"About an hour ago, my phone started going apeshit about Kallie being this Kalliana Pearson who got kidnapped with her sister." He frowns as if he can't believe the words he's saying out loud. "And then my agent calls me saying we need to put together a press release asap, but I can't fucking find her."

“No!” I snap. “No one is saying anything to the press until we find her.”

“I have to say something.”

“You don’t say shit to anyone,” I bite out through clenched teeth. “Do you understand? Not a fucking word.”

“I came to you because I know you have the connections and resources to help me find her. Once I find her, we’ll make a statement and get it all sorted out.”

“You will do no such thing.” I press my finger into his chest, and he falters back. “You are going to keep your mouth shut.”

“I didn’t come here to fight,” he sneers. “I came here so you can help me find her.”

“And I will.” I step back, my chest about to explode because Kallie is about to walk into a shitstorm out there, and my son is worried about making a fucking statement? Jesus Christ.

I take a breath, trying to calm myself. I’m not going to accomplish anything if I can’t think straight. It’s been four hours since I last saw her. She could be fucking anywhere.

“Was her phone off right after you left?”

“Yeah. I dunno. I tried calling her about half an hour after —” he swallows “—after she broke it off. I wanted to apologize, but—”

“And you said all this broke about an hour ago?”

“That’s when I started getting calls about it, yes.”

“Okay,” I say, trying to think clearly. “Maybe she doesn’t know about this yet.”

I grab my phone just as Alexius’ name starts flashing on the screen.

“Alexius.”

“You saw?”

“Just now, yes.”

“It’s a fucking frenzy,” he remarks. “And it doesn’t help her being engaged to your now famous son.”

“Yeah, I know.” I rub my temples. “But now she’s missing, and I don’t know where she is.”

“I’ll get my guys on it.”

“Thanks.”

“Listen, we found Victoria. She’s not a customs agent.”

“How did you—”

“Davian couldn’t find anything on her. He was worried she could be FBI or Homeland, so he came to us. Turns out she’s a sleazy, albeit highly recommended private investigator. I’m texting her address to you now. In the meantime, I’ll have my guy do a search on Kallie. See if we can find her.”

“Thank you, Alexius.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as we find anything.”

I hang up, opening the text with Victoria’s address.

“Who’s Alexius?” Sebastian asks, and I don’t even look his way.

“None of your fucking business.”

He scoffs. “You know what, fuck this. I come to you for help, and you treat me like shit.” Then starts toward the elevator. “I never should have come here.”

“Sebastian,” I call, and he stops, glancing over his shoulder. “If you so much as whisper a single word about Kallie or any of this to anyone, by this time tomorrow, your career will be over. I’ll make sure of it.”



THE ADDRESS ALEXIUS sent me leads me to a high-rise apartment building that is clearly trying to be something it’s not. Classy. Sophisticated. A hot spot for rich fuckers. But this

damn place doesn't even have decent security, and I walk right past the doorman, into the elevator, and straight to her apartment without raising a single eyebrow.

I bang on the door and hear her heels clicking across the tiles as she heads to the door. She opens it, and I don't miss the dumbfounded look on her face when she sees me—but she only takes a beat to recover, plastering on a fake smile.

“Mr. King,” she purrs and puts her manicured hand on the edge of the door as she leans against it. “Coming to my apartment is very unethical. You should have called. I could have changed into something more...comfortable.”

I push my way inside. It's sparse. Nice but bland. No personal touches like knick-knacks or pictures cluttering the place. It's clearly a staged rental, meaning she isn't local, and she's expensive. It reeks of lemon cleaner.

“Impersonating a federal agent isn't very ethical either, yet here we are,” I say, turning to face her. There's a moment when her expression gives her away, shock and disbelief laced on every line of her face. But again, she shakes it off quickly and slips into the persona she's been playing for months.

“I don't know what you are talking about.”

“I have to admit, you're good, having me fooled for so long. Tell me who the fuck hired you.”

“The United States government,” she says, clearly trying her hand at some good old-fashioned sarcasm.

“Spare me the bullshit.”

“I don't have to spare you anything.” She places a hand on her hip, and I slowly start toward her.

“Who is paying you?”

“I don't know what the hell you're talking about.”

“Bullshit!” I roar, and all it takes is a few more steps and I have her trapped against the wall and my hand around her throat. “If you're half as good as I think you are, you know who I really am, and what I really do for a living.”

“I...”

“I’ll tell you what’s about to happen.” I bite my fingers into her neck, feeling the ridges and curves of her delicate throat. “I’m going to ask you questions and you are going to answer them. If I so much as think you’re about to lie to me, I will kill you.”

Her eyes open wide, and I can see the fear in her tiny, pinprick pupils.

She nods.

“Who hired you?”

She swallows hard, her lips parted, testing me with a few heartbeats of silence before finally answering. “Elenor Stone.”

I don’t even bat a fucking eyelash, not the least bit surprised. “Why?”

“To find dirt on you.”

“For what reason?”

“She wants to blackmail you.”

“For what?”

“Money.”

Okay, that tidbit surprises me a little. “That old hag has more money than she knows what to do with. Why would she need my money?”

“How about you let go of me now, and we can talk like two adults.”

“Fine,” I huff, letting go of her throat.

Her hand flies up to her neck, and she rubs the flesh now bruised with my finger marks. When she can right herself, she looks me in the eye and the strength just leaves her. I can see she knows there is no way out of this. She kicks off her heels and walks barefoot to the couch, for the first time not swaying like she is waving her ass at any man brave enough to take it.

She sits and motions for me to sit across from her in a chair. I take the gun from my waistband and lay it on my lap.

My fingers stay away from the trigger, but I want her to know the threat is still very real. It's not. The gun isn't even loaded, but again, what she doesn't know can scare her into pretty much anything.

"Start talking," I say.

She looks at the gun and swallows. "Elenor Stone is broke."

"How broke?"

"As in she's been living off loans and credit cards for the last two years."

"But that can't be. I've been funneling money into her art galleries."

"Which she knows about." *That bitch.* "She figured you'll be pouring more and more money into her business, so she became reckless. Spent more than she had until the money you've been putting in wasn't enough. As it is, creditors are already coming after her." Victoria gets to her feet, and I tighten my hand around the gun. "I'm getting a drink. You want one?"

"No, thanks."

I watch as she pours herself a vodka on the rocks, the ice clinking against the glass as she returns to her seat. "Right now, Elenor is riding on the hope that Sebastian's career will fix the problem, but she prefers to have a backup—hence why she's looking for dirt on your ass."

"So, what is her plan, exactly?"

"Blackmail you into funding her lavish lifestyle forever. She wants to take you for everything you have, maybe even threaten to expose not only you but some of your less-than-legal associates."

I almost burst out laughing. "Does that crazy uppity bat have a fucking death wish?"

"I think she prefers bold."

“She can prefer whatever the fuck she wants. She’s digging for dirt when all she’ll find is a target on her forehead.”

“The woman is broke and desperate.”

I crank my neck from side to side. “Enough about Elenor. Tell me how Kallie fits into all of this.”

She doesn’t respond.

“Are you the one who leaked shit to the press about Kallie?”

“No.”

“Then who did?”

Victoria takes a deep breath, and I don’t like the look on her face. “I’ll tell you everything. Her plan isn’t working, so her last check will bounce.”

“You want money?”

“I want your word that they won’t come after me.”

“And by they, you mean...”

“You know who I mean. When I started this job, I didn’t know who you were involved with. But as you know, by the time someone discovers any ties to the Dark Sovereign, it’s already too late.” She downs the rest of her drink, cringing as she places her glass on the side table. “So, I want your word that I’ll walk away from this as if none of this shit happened.”

“That depends on what you know.”

She eyes the gun in my hand, so I take it, hold it up then tuck it away behind my back, lifting my empty hands to show I am unarmed.

She nods and takes a breath. “You’re not going to like what I’m about to tell you.”

Twenty-Eight

KALLIE

THERE'S a red-hot poker stabbed into my skull, flaming needles being driven into my spine. My tongue feels like I have been licking Velcro since birth, and my mouth tastes like an ass. Dirty, disgusting ass.

I pry my stinging eyes open and look around the dirty motel room. The dingy carpet is littered with empty bottles. I vaguely remember renting this room and ordering Postmates to bring me a fifth of cheap vodka. I don't know where the gin bottles or the rum came from.

It had been years since I had gone on my last bender. Not since before I met Sebastian.

I sit up, resting against the headboard. The sheets are filthy, and they smell like sweat, booze, and vomit that have soaked into the mattress for years. Thank God I didn't get as far as getting under them. My stomach rolls, a wave of nausea hitting me hard.

After the fight with Sebastian, I ran. It was the only solution that made sense. If I disappeared again, the blackmail would stop. My mistakes would go away, and I would be back to being a nobody.

Then I booked a room here, in this disgusting motel, and decided to see if I could drown my emotions in something toxic and foul. Something that can make me feel like death afterward. Mission accomplished.

My stomach rolls again, and I rush to the bathroom and start puking into the stained toilet bowl. Each heave makes my

head feel like it's being stabbed over and over again, bitter bile scalding my throat as it forces its way out of me.

It takes all my energy to get to my feet and lean over the tub to open the faucet. But a new wave of nausea crashes over me when I spot the hair clogging the drain and what looks like something growing out of it.

“Oh, God.” I stumble to the sink, clutching the edges, trying to breathe deeply so I don't throw up again. My body is already aching all over. I really don't need to become worse by retching.

I glance up and see my reflection in the mirror. My eyes are drawn and puffy, my skin pallid and sweaty. I look like a walking ghost, and part of me can't help but wonder if last night's drinking had managed to kill me and my soul is determined not to leave this world quietly.

I splash cold water on my face, the rivulets helping ease away the hellish pain in my temples. I try to straighten my hair, but it's so tangled it's practically matted to one side of my head. It's taking all my strength not to burst out crying. But feeling sorry for myself is not going to help this situation. A trip to my therapist might, or maybe I should go visit Maya, be close to her, and pour out my heart to a grave.

I make my way back to the bedroom and grab my phone. It's dead—no surprise. I plug it into the charger and wait impatiently for it to turn back on. I need to get out of here, but I'm unsure where to go or what to do.

The phone finally turns on, and I see an endless stream of missed calls and messages from Sebastian. Guilt washes over me, and for a brief moment, I consider calling him back. But the moment passes as quickly as it came when I see a missed call from Gabriel. My heart breaks a little. No. My heart breaks a lot. It's practically little pieces of shattered glass moving around inside my chest, doing more damage to my insides.

I flip across the screen and open one of Sebastian's messages.

Check the news.

There's a link that I click on, and when I read the headline, every drop of blood drains from my body.

KALLIANA PEARSON GETS HER HAPPY ENDING WITH HOTTIE OF THE YEAR, SEBASTIAN STONE.

I SCROLL THROUGH THE ARTICLE, reading every word in a daze. It's like a nightmare come true, only this is happening, and I'm unable to escape it. There are so many pictures of us, of me, and the more I look at them, the more I start to shake. I can't believe this is happening. The one thing I feared the most is actually happening.

The phone slips from my hand, and I sink to the floor, the dirty carpet rough against my skin. The ache in my head intensifies, and I can feel the bile rising up my throat again. In a last-ditch effort, I try to think of what to do next. But my mind is blank, and every breath is a struggle.

I need to leave town, and I need to go now.

I grab my bag, quickly scan the room to ensure I'm not leaving anything behind, then rush out of the door. My heart is beating impossibly fast as I dart down the steel stairs, practically leaping past the last two steps and darting around the corner.

"Ms. Pearson!"

Flashes of light blind me, and I come to a screeching halt in front of a crowd of reporters shouting my name and yelling questions.

"Can you tell us where you've been all this time?"

"Why did you change your name?"

"Does Sebastian know you have a history with drugs?"

"Is it true that he broke up with you when he found out your true identity?"

The voices all start blurring together as the crowd seems to get bigger. No, I'm getting smaller.

Suddenly, I'm Kalliana again. Barely sixteen, and I have a coat over my head as I hold on to my mother's arm with one hand and hold Maya with the other as we are led out of the house to the car. Reporters and photographers surround us, shouting questions, shoving, and fighting to get a clear shot of us.

I can't breathe.

I can't hear my own heartbeat.

I'm lost.

"Kalliana! Kalliana! Is it true that Maya blamed you in her suicide note?"

My hands are over my ears as I try to block out the questions. My head is pounding, my chest hurts, and tears are blurring my vision.

"Stop, please," I whisper. They are crowding in tighter around me. It's so hard to breathe; I'm suffocating.

"Is it true that you were high the night you got abducted?"

"Did you push Maya when she hit her head against the sidewalk?"

I open my mouth to scream when a hand locks on my arm and pulls me out of the crowd. A jacket is pulled over my head and shoulders, shielding me from the cameras as I'm dragged, my feet barely able to touch the ground.

I'm shoved into the passenger-side seat of a car, and I'm barely able to breathe when the driver-side door is flung open, and my rescuer gets in behind the wheel.

As I stare at him, I wipe away strands of hair clinging to my face. "You came for me."

Twenty-Nine

“WHY ARE WE HERE?”

“This has kind of become our damage control headquarters.”

I watch as he half-smiles without looking at me, turning off the car’s ignition.

“How did you find me...Sebastian?”

“Um.” He scratches his temple then finally looks at me. “My father, he has connections. I didn’t want to ask for his help, but—” he reaches out, placing his hand on mine “—I had to find you.”

I appreciate how hard it had to be for him to ask Gabriel for help. Sebastian is a proud man, especially when it comes to his father.

I breathe in deep, my stomach still knotted. “Thank you,” I say softly. “For finding me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? You know, who you really are?”

I rub my palm down my jeans, the nerves making me restless. “I, uh...I just...I wanted to start over. I thought that if I had a clean slate, I could forget about everything and maybe have a chance at a normal life.”

“I get that, but you could have told me.”

“There were so many times I wanted to, but I couldn’t get myself to say the words. And then, you became this huge star, and I...” I let out a sigh. “I was afraid if the world found out

about me, you'd be dragged into it, and it would become this huge fucking mess just like it is now."

Sebastian's eyes soften. "I don't care about that. You know that, right? This doesn't change how I feel about you."

I cast my gaze down, my fingers toying with the hem of my shirt.

"I'm sorry, Kallie," he starts and weaves his fingers through mine. "I'm sorry for what I said yesterday."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not. I never should have acted the way I did."

"You were hurt. I get it."

"There's no excuse." He reaches and touches the back of his hand to my cheek. "I love you, Kallie. I really do."

"I know." Part of me wishes that things were simpler. That I could just tell him I love him back, let him take me in his arms and all would be well again. But it's not that simple. Because the truth is, I don't love him the way he wants me to.

I can feel his eyes searching mine, silently pleading for something, anything from me. But all I can offer is a tight-lipped smile and an awkward squeeze of his hand.

I pull away and open my door, glancing back at him. "We should probably go inside," I say.

He nods but doesn't move to get out of the car just yet. Instead, he takes a deep breath and seems lost in thought for a moment before finally speaking up again.

"I want to fix this between us," he says softly, his eyes pleading with me. "Please."

I swallow hard, my heart heavy. "Let's just...let's just get through today, okay? With everything going on, I can't think straight right now."

He nods slowly, his gaze not quite meeting mine. We sit in silence for a moment longer before finally stepping out of the car, and I trail behind him as we walk up Elenor's porch.

Sebastian is already on his phone before we even enter the front door.

We enter the living room, and I sit next to him on the couch, closing my eyes for a moment. The scent of air freshener—a sugary citrus blast—makes my stomach churn. The smell is so strong that it seems to have been sprayed straight onto my skin. My body begins to react, my arms breaking out into goosebumps and my gut lurching as if I might vomit. It makes my hangover infinitely worse.

I lean back against the couch, trying to ignore the pounding in my head and how every sound around me seems amplified. Sebastian's voice becomes a low murmur as he speaks on his phone, and I wonder if anyone else can hear how loud it is for me.

“Yeah, she's fine. We're at my grandma's house...Ah-huh...Ah-huh...Okay, send it to me when it's done.” He hangs up, and I lean my head to the side, facing him. “Who was that?”

“PR. They're just trying to do some damage control on their end. Do you need anything, babe?” Sebastian asks, putting his arm around me.

“Maybe some peppermint tea.” I close my eyes, rubbing my forehead. “I had a few friends over last night.”

“You did?”

“Ah-huh. Vodka, gin, and rum.”

Sebastian chuckles. “Let me see if I can get you some of that tea.”

“Absolutely not.” Elenor's voice pierces my eardrums. “You need to be up and on your feet. You are going to eat something, and drink a giant mug of coffee to liven you up.”

I bury my face in Sebastian's shoulder, trying not to throw up all over her Persian rug.

“Grandma, I don't think her stomach can take coffee right now,” Sebastian says.

“Well, I don’t really care. She needs to do her part to control this mess she made,” Elenor says and turns on the television that’s mounted over the fireplace. It’s already loud, and she turns it up even more.

I sit up, wincing at the sudden noise. My head is throbbing even harder now. “Can we turn that down?” I ask weakly.

Elenor ignores me and sits in her armchair, her eyes fixed on the screen as she flips through channels until she finally stops.

“Kallie Sawyer, the woman engaged to Hollywood heartthrob Sebastian Stone, is none other than Kalliana Pearson, the older Pearson sibling who was abducted six years ago by serial killer and rapist Albert Young.”

On the screen plays video footage of Sebastian and me as he tries to lead me through a crowd of reporters—a fucking mob.

My pulse races as I listen to the news report, and I clench my fists in an attempt to control my fear. The memories of my past come flooding back to me in a torrent of terror and anguish. My mind is overwhelmed by emotion and chaos, and it brings another wave of panic and confusion.

“Kallie?” Sebastian’s voice is soft and gentle, like he knows what’s happening inside me.

“I’m...I’m okay,” I say weakly. “Can we turn this off?”

“God, you look terrible, Kallie,” Elenor says. “You can’t be seen looking like that anymore. And why in God’s name were you staying at some sleazy motel?”

“That’s enough, Grandma,” Sebastian says. “Just take it easy on her. She’s been through hell.”

“Through hell?” Elenor’s penciled eyebrows almost touch her hairline. “If she had just been honest from the start about who she really is, then none of this would have happened.”

“We’ll figure this out, Grandma, okay?” He turns to face me. “I know this is rough, but we need to deal with this as

quickly as possible. The sooner we do, the sooner the dust will settle.”

Sebastian’s phone rings, and he checks the screen. “It’s my agent,” he says as he answers and puts it on speaker.

“Ashley, you’re on speaker.”

“Sebastian,” a low, sultry voice starts. “Is Miss Pearson with you?”

“It’s Sawyer,” I correct. “Kallie Sawyer.”

“Really? Because I am looking at several articles listing you as Kalliana Pearson.”

“Yes, well, my name has legally been changed to Sawyer,” I say.

“It’s irrelevant,” she says, and I look from the phone to Sebastian, who just shrugs.

“Ashley, what do we need to do?” Sebastian asks.

“Well, the smartest thing we can do is use this to our advantage. We need to hit this hard, turn it around, and make it work for us.”

“What do you propose?” Sebastian starts pacing.

“We need to get a statement out as quickly as possible that shows you knew who she was—because we have to suppress the negative rumors about you not knowing. That will only make you look like an idiot.”

“And we can’t have that,” Elenor chimes in.

“Absolutely,” Ashley states. “We need to make it look like we intended for this news story to be published, not that a lucky journalist stumbled upon it. If we act like it was our decision, make it look like you and Ms. Pearson—”

“Sawyer,” I interrupt.

“Whatever. Basically, we’re going to announce that you’ve chosen to come forward with your identity and story to help other victims of kidnapping and rape. We’ll arrange a press conference before the wedding.”

Elenor smiles approvingly. “That’s a great idea. We’ll get even more attention on the wedding this way.”

What wedding?

I look at Sebastian, but he’s staring straight ahead of him. “My God,” I say, flabbergasted. “You haven’t told her, have you?”

“Tell me what?” Elenor demands.

“Nothing,” Sebastian snaps. “Let’s just deal with one crisis at a time, shall we?”

“Is everything good over there?” Ashley asks, but her tone is sheer sarcasm.

“We’re good,” Sebastian responds. “Go on.”

“Okay. My team is already arranging for Kallie to appear on various talk shows across the country. We’re also in the process of making contact with trauma centers, hospitals, shelters, and rehabilitation centers for teens dealing with similar trauma because we need to get Kallie associated with them. It will reflect great on both your public images.”

“No,” I whisper.

“Also, I found a name of a ghostwriter, the one who wrote that book about this girl who grew up in that religious cult in Southern Africa—”

“Oh, I read that one. It was excellent,” Elenor says. “I picked it up when it first came out. My book club chose it for our true crime month. It was so graphic and detailed. It just put you right in it.”

“I agree. This guy is good,” Ashley continues. “I already talked to his agent, and he says he would love to hear more about it and see if he would be interested. He would need all the police records, of course, and we can arrange for a photographer to take pictures of Kallie in the woods where they were held captive.”

“No!” I leap to my feet. “I am not some fucking circus animal you can parade around for the public to gawk at.”

“Kallie.” Sebastian takes my hand. “Calm down, okay? We’re not doing anything yet. Ashley is merely laying our options out.”

“I am not going along with anything she just proposed. I just want to forget it all and move on.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not an option,” Ashley says through the speaker. “The only way we can forget about all this is if the public does, and that is not happening anytime soon. I can promise you that.”

“I’m not doing it.”

Sebastian stands, placing his hands on my shoulders. “It’s out there now. We can’t take it back. People know, and if we don’t take control of this story, they will make up their own.”

“He’s right,” the agent says. “This is too big. It isn’t going away. We can be reactive or proactive. I prefer being proactive. It puts us in control.”

“Kallie, just sit down and let the professionals handle this,” Elenor scolds. “You have done enough damage.”

I look at Sebastian for help, but he’s merely staring back at me, silently begging me to accept all of this.

“This is exactly why I didn’t tell you. Why I didn’t want anyone to know, because I knew this would happen. I knew people would want to exploit my past and turn it into some fucking spectacle.”

“That’s exactly what we’re trying to avoid here. It will only turn into a spectacle if we don’t get a handle on it,” Sebastian tries to assure me.

“Can we continue now?” Ashley grows impatient. “We have limited time here.”

“Go ahead, Ashley.” Sebastian keeps his gaze on mine. He wants me to cooperate, to fall in line with everything they’re discussing, to be their fucking puppet while they use my life as a marketing tool for his image.

But as Ashley continues to rattle off names of talk show hosts and ghostwriters and photographers, I can’t help but feel

like I'm drowning. Like I'm losing control of something that was never mine to begin with.

"Oh, should we change her name back to Kalliana? It's so much prettier. It sounds more European."

"I'm not changing my name back," I snap. "I'm not doing any of this. I will not be forced to relive the worst thing that's ever happened to me just because you're all desperate to have control over Sebastian's public image. I am not a pawn. I am not a fucking marketing tool. This is my life!"

Tears run bitterly down my cheeks, and I'm struggling to breathe through the ache inside me that's growing stronger and stronger with each passing second. I can't take this anymore. I can't be here.

I shoulder past Sebastian, desperate to get away from it all.

"Is she leaving?" Ashley asks through the speaker. "Someone stop her. We're not done yet."

As I rush out of the room, I can hear Sebastian calling after me, but I don't stop. I just keep running down the hallway, my heart pounding in my chest. I need to get out of this place, away from everyone.

As I barge out the front door, I'm met with a tall frame, broad shoulders, and familiar blue eyes. "Gabriel," I breathe, and I just rush straight into his arms, and I feel shielded the moment he hugs me close. He holds me as I cry, his hand rubbing soothing circles on my back. It's like everything that's been building inside me finally comes pouring out in one big sob-fest.

"I got you, baby girl," he rasps against my ear, and I wish I could melt into him and stay there forever, never needing to face this world again. "I got you."

"What are you doing here?" Sebastian's voice is stern, and Gabriel eases his hold from around me, moving forward and guiding me behind him.

"You little fucking shit," he bites out between clenched teeth, stalking toward Sebastian. "Tell her what you did."

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Tell her...what you...did.”

I’m staring at them, confused. Sebastian is frowning as he looks at his father. “You need to leave. This has nothing to do with you.”

Abruptly, Gabriel grabs Sebastian by the collar, slamming his back against the wall. Elenor is shouting, screaming for Gabriel to let go, but he doesn’t listen. Instead, he tightens his hold on Sebastian, causing his heels to lift off the floor. “It was you. You’re behind all of it.” Anger rolls off him in violent surges.

“It was me, what?” Sebastian gasps, fear lacing his every word.

Gabriel peels him from the wall, only to slam him back against it, and I flinch, pinching my eyes closed for a second.

“The notes. The texts. It was you,” Gabriel sneers, and my world comes to a painfully screeching halt. “You were the one who leaked this to the press!”

“That’s absurd,” Elenor yells. “Let go of my grandson right now, or I will have you arrested for assault.”

But Gabriel doesn’t move an inch. He doesn’t even spare a glance in her direction, his fury entirely focused on his son.

“You knew who she was all along,” Gabriel continues to seethe in Sebastian’s face. “You fucking knew!” With a final shove, he releases Sebastian, who immediately rights his collar, his eyes furrowed and lips pursed, his eyes filled with hatred as he glares at Gabriel.

“This is none of your fucking business.”

“It was...it was you?” I whisper, stepping closer. “You were behind this all along?”

Sebastian clams up. He merely stares at me for a few seconds before looking away, his jaw tight and lips pressed together into a thin line. He doesn’t say a word, yet his silence is a confession.

“You were the one terrorizing me?”

He scoffs. “Don’t be so dramatic, Kallie. You were never in danger.”

Thirty

“SAY IT’S NOT TRUE.” My voice is nothing but a whisper, Gabriel’s words still ringing in my ears. “Say it’s not true, Sebastian.”

Sebastian’s eyes flicker with a dark intensity, and I shrink back from the raw power emanating from him. His voice is low and menacing as he speaks. “I was only doing what you didn’t have the guts to do.”

I take a step back and shake my head in denial, unable to process what he’s telling me. “No,” I say in disbelief, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

“Yes,” he blurts. “I gave you time. I was patient with you, waiting for you to open your goddamn mouth and say it.”

“How?” My voice chokes. “How did you know?”

“Gregory.”

“Gregory? Elenor’s butler?”

“He thought you looked familiar but couldn’t figure it out. Took the dumb fuck more than a year to finally recognize you.”

“So, it was you. The articles. The texts.”

Sebastian merely arches an eyebrow at me in reply, seeming amused by my accusation. “I had to do something to push you to talk.”

“You selfish little shit!” Gabriel yells.

“Why?” I ask, looking Sebastian in the eye. “Why would you do this to me?”

“Don’t you see it? Please tell me you see it, Kallie.”

I swipe at a tear on my cheek, and he frowns at my lack of response.

“Because this story is fucking gold,” he says with vigor that makes me shiver. “This is the kind of shit the world craves. Think about it. A beautiful woman, a talented artist with a tragic past, meets a young, up-and-coming celebrity and falls in love. We could set the entire world on fire. It hits every single hot button. It would trend across the board.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. He’s saying all these words; it’s coming out of his mouth, but I can’t make sense of it. “You want to use my life as entertainment?”

He scoffs. “Trust you to see this entire thing in a negative light.”

“Are you serious?” I glare at him in disbelief. “There is nothing positive about you trying to scare me so I’ll talk, and you get more time in the spotlight.”

“Despite what you might think, my reason for doing this isn’t purely selfish. You needed to come out with the truth for your own sanity. And being married to me puts you in an ideal position to help others just like you.”

“Just *like* me?” I narrow my eyes in disbelief. “And what exactly am I, Sebastian?”

“Look.” He lifts his hands in mocking surrender. “All I’m saying is that this story breaking was beneficial for both of us.”

“You dumb son of a bitch,” Gabriel exclaims. “Beneficial for both of you? I fail to see how this is beneficial to her.”

“You stay out of this.” Sebastian points at him, his glare shooting daggers. “Kallie,” he looks back at me, “think about it. This could kickstart your career as a world-famous artist. Your paintings will be worth millions. And you will have the power to help victims like yourself. Don’t you see? You can

take all the bad that happened to you and turn it into something good.”

“This isn’t about me,” I grit, tears now streaming down my face. “This is about you. About getting more eyes around the world on you and your acting career. You wanted to sensationalize my trauma and reap the benefits of it.”

“You think I wanted to see you subjected to the scrutiny of the tabloids? I had no choice here, Kallie. If Gregory could figure it out, how long before someone else figured it out? This had to come from you. You were supposed to be the one to tell the world who you really are, but when you...” He swallows his words, wiping a palm down his mouth as his eyes flash with hurt. “When you called off the wedding, I had no choice.”

“So, you leaked it to the press.” I’m barely able to breathe through the shock. “You son of a bitch.”

“I think we all need to calm down,” Elenor starts. “Let’s go into the living room and discuss this like adults.”

“That’s a good idea,” Sebastian agrees. “Once you calm down and think more clearly, you’ll realize I did this because I love you. Because I want the best for you.”

“Screw you, Sebastian.” I try to move away, but he grabs my arm and pulls me back.

In a flash, Gabriel is there, grabbing Sebastian’s shoulder and yanks him back. “I suggest you let her go right the fuck now.”

“I’m a little tired of your presence, old man,” Sebastian drawls out, his voice light despite the proximity of Gabriel’s fists.

“Touch her again,” Gabriel warns, “and you and I are going to have ourselves a problem.”

“Why the fuck do you care? I don’t even understand why you’re here. You abandoned me and my mother while she was pregnant. You don’t get to come back now and leech off my success.”

“Oh, I’m not the leech here. But your grandmother, on the other hand—”

“Excuse me?” Elenor gasps in shock, and Gabriel smirks at her.

“Your little private investigator told me everything, so cut the crap. You’re fucking broke, which is why you’ve been pushing Sebastian and his fame so damn hard.”

Her lips pull into a snarl, her eyes blazing pools of anger. “You have no idea what the hell you’re talking about.”

“I know you’re using my son for your own personal gain, and trying to dig up dirt on me so you can leech off my fortune, too.”

“That’s a blatant lie,” she protests, and my mind is about to implode.

“How’s this for a lie?” Gabriel cuts his glower to Sebastian. “I didn’t abandon you or your mother. Your grandparents took you from me.”

“Don’t listen to him, Sebastian.”

“They threatened me. Forced me to stay away from you, mindfucked me into thinking I’m no good for you.” He glares in Elenor’s direction. “Until I managed to make something of myself, and your grandmother started seeing dollar signs.”

“You could have come back for me,” Sebastian yells. “You could have told me the truth.”

“I did come back for you! I wanted to tell you everything, but you were happy. You loved your grandfather, and I just couldn’t take that away from you—not after you lost your mother.” Gabriel takes a breath, raking his fingers through his hair. “And I thought your grandparents were raising you right. But I can see now that I was wrong. I should have gotten you away from their poisonous bullshit.”

“At least they raised me, which is more than you can say.”

“Are you going to tell him, Gabriel?” Elenor crosses her arms, her thin lips pursed. “Or should I?”

“Tell me what?”

Elenor smirks. “Tell your son about your dirty little secret.”

“What secret is she talking about?” Sebastian asks, confused.

Elenor knows. I can see it in how she looks at me and Gabriel, her evil intent radiating off her.

I step closer, studying her. “How do you know?”

“The engagement party. The balcony,” she says simply. “I heard everything.”

Oh, God.

“The photographers were asking for you, so I went looking.” She leers at Gabriel with disgust. “Then I found you out on the balcony with him.”

“Why...why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because she was waiting until after the wedding,” Gabriel says as he steps in next to me, staring at Elenor as if he’s slowly putting the pieces together. “She was going to use it to blackmail me after the wedding. She knew I wouldn’t risk breaking up my son’s marriage.”

“Can someone please tell me what the fuck is going on right now?”

“That dirty little whore has been cheating on you,” Elenor snaps at Sebastian. “She’s been fucking your father behind your back.”

“You cheated on me?” His eyes narrow, his expression hard lines of confusion. “With my dad?”

Words are lodged in my throat. I don’t know what to say, because even after the way Sebastian betrayed me, it still doesn’t justify what Gabriel and I did. Two wrongs can never make a right. Ever.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, unable to say anything else. No matter what Sebastian did, there is nothing I can say to defend myself and what I did.

Sebastian steps back, shock written on his face. He looks between the two of us before finally looking at me again with a mix of betrayal and pain that cuts right through my heart like knives. “You fucking bitch,” he seethes. “You little, cheap-ass, dirty, fucking whore.”

“That’s enough!” Gabriel steps closer to me, and I find comfort in his presence. “It was wrong of us both,” he says, then takes my hand and squeezes it lightly. “We won’t apologize for this because there are no excuses for what we did. But I will not allow you to speak to her like that.”

“I never meant for things to turn out like this,” I say softly, my voice heavy with emotion.

Sebastian huffs and stares icily at me, his face an emotionless mask. “And how, exactly, did you think it would turn out with you fucking my dad behind my back?”

“It was wrong. And I’m sorry.” I swallow, exhaustion clamping down on me hard. “But it’s over, Sebastian.”

“No!” Sebastian roars as I move to leave. His roar of anguish grows as he lunges forward, slamming me into the wall with a deafening thud. But before he can finish his sentence, Gabriel rips him off me. The air is heavy with tension as I try to steady myself on my feet, and then suddenly, there is a sickening crack as Gabriel’s fist collides with Sebastian’s face. Blood spurts out in a pulsating stream as Sebastian crumples to the floor.

I gasp, watching him clasp his nose. “What the fuck did you do? You motherfucker!” His hand is covered in bright red blood. “I’m in the middle of shooting a movie, you son of a bitch!” His voice is all throaty, crimson bleeding into his grandmother’s expensive carpets.

But Gabriel isn’t apologetic about it. He’s raging as his towering figure looms menacingly over his son, expressionless and threatening. His voice is low and controlled but dripping with venom and hatred when he speaks. “Don’t you ever touch her again,” he says slowly and deliberately. He then grabs my hand and grips it tight, stomping close to where Elenor stands, staring in shock at what just happened. Gabriel’s cold gaze

pierces her as he speaks again, this time with more menace and malice than before. “And if I ever see you come near me or Kallie again, if I even catch a whiff of you stirring up trouble for us, I will rip you apart like the worthless piece of shit you are. Do you understand me?”

The tension in the air is so thick you can almost see it, like a veil of destruction shrouding the room. For a moment, no one moves; it’s so quiet, it makes my ears hurt.

Fear crushes Elenor’s features, and a part of me relishes the sight. I can see she’s holding her breath, as she doesn’t say anything. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen her rendered speechless.

“I said,” Gabriel moves close, his face hovering inches from her. “Do you. Understand me?”

She finally nods, her body stiff and unmoving. She’s biting the inside of her cheeks as if she’s trying really hard not to crumble.

Slowly, he steps back and meets my gaze; he knows I’m done here, too. All I want now is for him to take me away from this nightmare. “Are you okay?” His voice is gentle, his eyes soft.

“Yeah,” I breathe. “Just...take me home.” I look up, and he’s gazing deeply into my eyes. “To your place.”

Epilogue

KALLIE

Three Months Later

BUTTERFLIES ARE SWARMING in my stomach. The excitement, the anticipation is thrilling. It always is whenever we play at Myth.

I can feel his eyes on me as I approach the bar. There's an unspoken understanding between us that we only play with each other, making everything so much more intense.

As I order our drinks, he joins me at the counter and leans in close. "What are you wearing under that coat?"

"You'll have to wait and see, Mr. King," I tease, practically panting just thinking about what is to come once we venture to the back room of Myth where all kinds of debauchery take place.

"I wanted to be inside you earlier at the gallery," he whispers. "If there weren't so many customers demanding an audience with the artist, I would have had you on my lap keeping my cock all nice and warm."

I smile, thinking of how he lurked around the gallery, watching me as I answered questions from potential buyers. I love it when he watches me, telling me with his eyes all the dirty things he wants to do with me.

Gabriel and I both decided to make something good of the shitstorm that hit when the world found out who I really was. We opened a gallery for victims of sexual abuse who use art as

a medium for their pain. Any of them can show their work, but a percentage of every sale goes to a charity of my choosing, providing support for victims of sexual violence.

Our last two shows have sold out each time. Gabriel swears he has nothing to do with that, but I know better. He might be a beast in a suit, but his heart is made of gold.

I have also been attending group therapy sessions with other survivors dealing with PTSD. This group is a little more tailored to those whose trauma has also led to some intense kinks. It's a safe space for us, and it has helped me really come out of my shell and deal with, well, everything. It's a touch-and-go process. Some days are better than others, and I still visit Maya almost every week.

Elenor was recently arrested for tax evasion. Another thing Gabriel swears he had nothing to do with. Last I heard, she was bragging about being in the same jail as Martha Stewart. I haven't bothered keeping tabs on Sebastian's career. I wish him nothing but the best, but he is no longer my problem.

“You ready, baby girl?”

I bite my lip and nod.

We walk into the glass room—the same room where he had me tied to the St. Andrew's Cross a while back. Several guests are already standing and waiting, all wearing masks. Some men are seated on high-backed lounge chairs while their women are perched on their laps or kneeling at their feet. By the end of tonight, I expect most of those women will be sucking or fucking the men who own them.

I can feel the eyes of everyone on me as I go to stand next to large porcelain containers filled with fresh paint. Red. Green. And of course, cobalt blue. A shudder of excitement moves through me just thinking about what Gabriel is going to do with it.

Gabriel walks from behind a curtain, and he looks mouthwatering wearing nothing but a pair of jeans hanging low on his hips. The last thing we want is to get paint on one of his expensive suits.

He eases his hand into the front of my coat, and my skin prickles as he peels it off me, letting it pool around my black stiletto heels.

My insides twist into knots as I watch him take me in. “What do you think?” I ask, and he licks his lips.

“I’m thinking these people are going to be disappointed because this show is going to be over real quick.”

I’m wearing a pink bondage harness around my waist, straps enclosing my upper thighs with little pink bows attached to the straps that cross down my ass. It comes with matching cuffs, the restraints dangling down the sides.

He takes a finger and gently brushes it against my bare pussy lips, causing my pulse to pick up the pace. “I want you to get more of these,” he whispers. “One in every goddamn color available.”

“Yes, sir.”

He takes my hand and pulls me close, slamming his lips against mine, kissing me as if he’s using his last breath to do so. My life has changed since being with him. I’ve never felt this free. He has managed to fling open the gates of my inhibitions and show me how to embrace my true self. I don’t know where I would have ended up if it wasn’t for him.

I move to the canvas and step on the little stool at the bottom. Metal poles hang from the ceiling with leather cuffs attached, and Gabriel secures my wrists to it, then gently eases his fingers down my back.

“What is your safe word, baby girl?”

“Shadow.”

“Good girl.” He slides his hand between my legs, rubbing my sex through the lace. “We haven’t even started yet, and you’re soaked,” he rasps, and I’m practically panting already.

His hand is on my back again, and with slight pressure from his wrist, he pushes me forward, pressing my front flush against the canvas. I press my forehead down and close my eyes. Inhale. Exhale.

The wet flogger strikes my back, and with the sting, I feel drops of paint splatter across my skin. It doesn't hurt too much. This part isn't about pain. This is about warming my skin, getting it used to the impact and allowing my blood to rise to the surface of my flesh.

Another strike, and I suck in a breath. Gabriel continues to flog me gently, wiping away my inhibitions with each stroke.

I can feel the paint seeping into my pores, melting like a waterfall down my back. I imagine the explosion of color on my back, how everywhere his whip lands is left with brilliant splashes of color—reds, greens, and blues portraying an inspirational work of abstract art on my body.

He mixes his strokes, from sensuously light to firmly powerful, slowly pushing me to pleasure. His onslaught comes harder and faster, sending waves through me as they impact my skin. My blood is rushing, and my heart is pounding in a steady beat.

He stops, and I feel him close behind me, his breath skidding along my sensitive flesh.

“Every man here has his cock out,” he murmurs, and I lean my head back. “I bet the thought of fucking you has their dicks coated with precum. You like it, don't you, others watching you? Desiring you. Wanting your cunt.”

“No, sir.” It's part of our little game. If I say yes, he punishes me for being a slut. If I say no, he punishes me harder for being a lying slut.

“Did you just lie to me?”

“No, sir,” I say.

“Are you telling me that if I reach between your legs right now, you aren't going to be dripping wet thinking of other men's cocks in their hands?”

His hand is between my legs before I can answer, his fingers pulling the lace panties to the side, sliding easily inside me.

“Liar.” Abruptly, his fingers are gone, and I’m whimpering in need of his touch.

“Count,” he demands, and a loud crack follows with a searing pain along my ass.

“One.”

He strikes again, and the white-hot pain is the sweetest agony.

“Two.”

We make it all the way to twelve before he drops the whip, my body hot with pain and yearning for ecstasy.

“You want to come, baby girl?”

“Yes, sir,” I whimper.

“Not quite yet.”

My arms start to cramp, and I wince, trying to move them. Gabriel is at my side within a second, and he unhooks my arms, catching me before I fall back.

“Safe word?”

I shake my head lightly. “No.” Then I look back at the canvas. It’s the most incredible explosion of color I’ve ever seen. It’s me. It’s my life in color. The reds of pain. Lies shaded in green. And him... painted in blue, the deepest part of my soul.

Gabriel.



GABRIEL

SHE LOOKS AMAZING. Painted for me, my marks literally coloring her in the most vivid colors. Most of the others are still watching. A few have taken their pets to bed for the night. The ones who are still there are watching while their women lick and suck their cocks.

I bend her over the spanking horse, her feet firmly on the floor. “You took your whip very well, baby girl. You think you deserve to come?”

“Please, sir.” She moves her hips, the pink straps of the harness she’s wearing stained with splatters of paint, as well as her back. I slide two fingers inside her tight, wet pussy, feeling the heat radiating off it as her breathing quickens, then gently ease out of her, leaving her a panting mess.

I return to the table laid out with paints and all the different toy options. I grab the butt plug and a little bullet vibe. “Here is the game, little lamb. If you can last three minutes without coming, I’ll give you a special treat tonight.”

“Please, sir.”

“If you can’t last the three minutes, then I will spank this ass again, paint your face with my cum, and leave your pussy needy and achy until morning.”

She whines as I spell out the repercussions of her disobeying me.

“Can you be my good girl?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

I spread a generous bit of lube on the plug. It’s the next size up, and I gently ease it in, loving the sound of her moans as her body adjusts to it. Slowly, it slides in, and I apply a bit more pressure to get it beyond the widest part of the tapered edge.

God, I hope she doesn’t come. I want to fuck her with this plug in her ass so badly it hurts. She is going to be so fucking tight.

“Timer starts now.” I slap her swollen pussy before I place the bullet against her clit and turn it on low. She bites her lip and tries to fight off the pleasure that’s threatening disobedience. I tilt my head back in amusement, fascinated as she struggles to keep from coming. Her legs are quivering, and her back arches. I feel especially wicked tonight, so I flick the

bullet on its highest setting. She's stuck between wanting it so badly, and not being able to take it at all.

She whines and moans, and I can see her ass tremble as she tightens her muscles, trying not to give in. When I slide two fingers into her impossibly tight cunt, I hear her swear. She is trying with everything she has to hold on.

"You are fucking stunning, working so hard to be a good little slut for me."

Win or lose our little game, she is getting that special treat tonight. I hope she accepts it. It's taken me days to find the right one. I ended up giving up and just had it commissioned. It's a one-of-a-kind, and if she agrees, she will be mine forever.

She is panting now. The drying paint is loosening as her body is sweating.

"Are you going to win, baby?" I tease as I press into her G-spot.

"Yes, sir," she grits.

"Hmm, we will see. I desperately want to see my cum paint this pretty face of yours."

Her cunt tightens around my fingers as I say that. Her thighs are quaking, and little mewes are coming from her lips. She is right there and fighting it with everything she has.

I can hear the people in the crowd moaning. Most of them are filling their own women's mouths or cunts with cum.

"You should see all the men's faces, baby girl. Half of them already blew their loads down their pets' throats."

The timer buzzes. Three minutes.

I remove my fingers, toss the bullet to the floor, and pull my cock out, already dripping with precum. She cries out when I spear inside her drenched pussy, hitting her core, stretching her walls around my swollen girth. She's so fucking wet that I almost cream her cunt with the first thrust.

“Come,” I order, and she comes hard against me, gushing all around my shaft as she clenches down with each powerful pulse. I join her with a growl as my orgasm explodes into her, giving a few more final thrusts, making sure every last drop of my cum is drained into her tight pussy.

The glass walls frost, and I wrap my arms around Kallie’s waist, pulling her down to the floor with me. “You were so perfect tonight.”

We lie there together, drenched in sweat and cum. I can feel the satisfaction radiating off her. This woman is my one of a kind. She’s become the reason for every goddamn breath I take.

She looks up at me, her face flushed and breathing heavily. Her eyes are sparkling with contentment. “I love you, Gabriel.”

My heart constricts. I’ll never get used to hearing her say those words. It sounds surreal every time. I kiss her softly, savoring the sweet taste of our loving union. “I love you, too, Kallie.”

I lean to the side, reaching for the little black box I had placed just out of sight, then place it on my knee.

She lifts her head, blonde wisps of hair falling over her eyes. “What is that?”

“Open it.”

Kallie takes the box, her fingers running over the smooth velvet. She pops open the lid, and I swear my heart stops for a second. I don’t think I’ve ever been this nervous my entire goddamn life.

She gasps at what’s inside. “Gabriel.”

A stunning white gold ring with an exquisite rubellite center stone is nestled in white silk, round brilliant diamonds glimmering on the band.

I remove the ring from the box and take her hand. “Kallie Sawyer, will you—”

“Yes.”

I smile. “You have to let me finish first.”

“Yes, yes, a thousand times yes.”

A tear falls from Kallie’s eye, a single perfect drop that glistens against porcelain skin like liquid diamond. And when I lean down to kiss her, I know this moment is perfection, brought into existence by an unparalleled love.

THE END.



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Reckless

To Touch You

To Hate You



All the way from Cape Town, South Africa, Bella J lives for the days when she's able to retreat to her writer's cave where she can get lost in her little pretend world of romance, love, and insanely hot bad boys.

Bella J is a Hybrid Author with both Self-Published and Traditional Published work. Even though her novels range from drama, to comedy, to suspense, it's the dark, twisted side of romance she loves the most.

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