

Can one
devil
drive out
another?

THE
BROKEN

BATTERED SOULS

SHAE RUBY

BATTERED SOULS

Shae Ruby

OceanofPDF.com

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I see the invisible Band-Aids you carry; healing is a
powerful thing.

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PLAYLIST

Like a Villain- Bad Omens

Death of Peace of mind- Bad Omens

Numb to the Feeling- Chase Atlantic

The Way I Loved You- Taylor Swift

Bad Things- I Prevail

Deep End- I Prevail

Pain Killer- Three Days Grace

I Did Something Bad- Taylor Swift

Don't Blame Me- Taylor Swift

I'm Yours- Isabel LaRosa

Burial Plot- Dayseeker

Need to Change- Landon Tewers

You can find the complete playlist on Spotify.

[OceanofPDE.com](https://www.oceanofpde.com)

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Hello reader,

I write dark stories that can be disturbing to some. My books are not for the faint of heart, and my characters, many times, are not redeemable. This book contains dark themes to include graphic sex scenes, choking/breath play, dubious consent, mentions of sexual abuse, drug use and abuse, mental health disorders, self-harm, suicidal thoughts with a plan, suicide attempt, physical abuse/domestic violence, murder, kidnapping, and captivity.

I trust you know your triggers before proceeding, and always remember to take care of your mental health.

For more things Shae Ruby, visit authorshaeruby.com

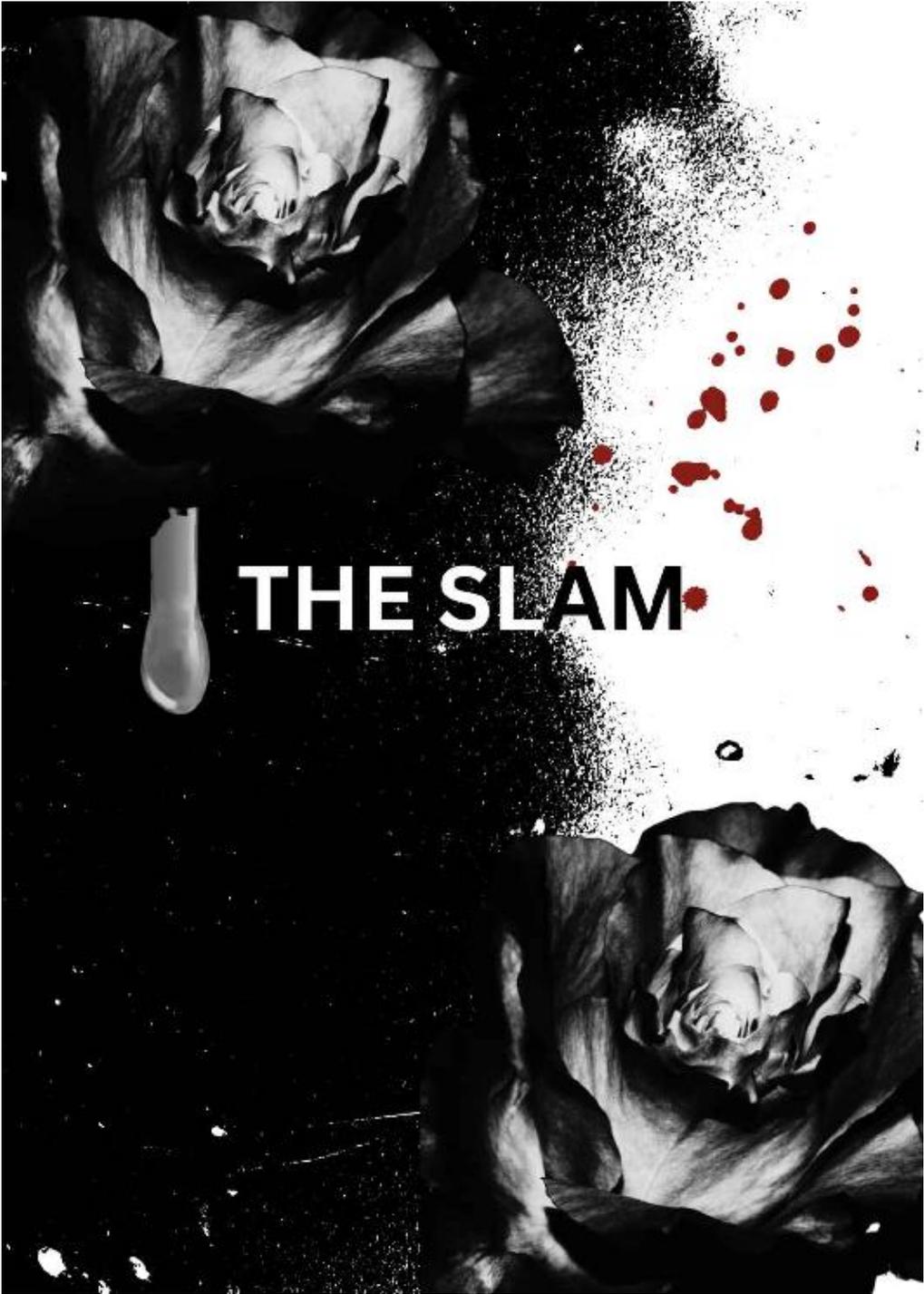
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NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION

If You Know Someone in Crisis:

Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (Lifeline) at **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**, or text the Crisis Text Line (**text HELLO to 741741**). Both services are free and available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. All calls are confidential. Contact social media outlets directly if you are concerned about a friend's social media updates or dial 911 in an emergency.

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THE SLAM

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CHAPTER 1

Hallie

They say love is unexpected, I just never knew that would have a deeper meaning for us. The way we are with each other... it can't end well.

It won't.

Doom always trails after us with a smile on its face.

Someone once told me that white roses signify loyalty, but for me, they've always signified grief. I've associated them with being placed on caskets right before the dirt is thrown on top, and that's always stuck with me.

When Zayne started bringing me white roses every day, I told myself it was because of his love and devotion toward me. Now I wonder if it was an omen. A sign from the universe screaming at me to enjoy him while I could because every good thing comes to an end. A warning that he would always slip through my fingers no matter how tightly I held on.

It's been two months since Zayne came to me at the hospital parking lot and since we moved in together. I'm so happy it

feels pretty impossible that this is my life. He's been clean this whole time. He has a job, and he's even going to school.

So why am I always waiting for the other shoe to drop? Is it only a matter of time before everything goes to shit again?

Disaster is always looming right around the corner when it comes to Zayne Wolfe, and I'm just here to hop on the ride to wherever the fuck he decides he's dragging me to. I can't even be angry with him, I *let* him do this to me. It's almost as if we can't exist without each other, and so he holds the broken shards of me even as they cut him, and the blood pours from his hands.

He drags me along, twists me around, and controls my life. I've even let him write my story sometimes when I'm too tired to fight and I just want to give in. That Hallie isn't far behind, she just waits around in the corners of my mind until I'm too weak to protest.

It's only a matter of time.

The sunlight streams in through the windows, illuminating Zayne's face and making him look angelic. His black hair is a halo on the pillow, and his straight nose flares as I straddle him, holding his hands above his head. He lets me, grinning like the devil he is. "You smell like sin," His corded arms flex under my grip, "Let me have a taste."

I'd gladly fall from grace for him, "Just one, Sinner." I lower myself to him until I'm flush with his chest, letting go of his hands so I can hold his face instead.

Zayne grabs the back of my neck, pulling me toward him even closer. He takes my lips with his, kissing me like he's trying to suck the soul out of my body. I know if he could, he would've done it by now.

His tongue brushes against my lips and I gasp, opening for him and letting him tangle himself against me. This is exactly why I'm with him. I'm fucking weak, and I can't resist him as I feel my knees shake on either side of his hips. His cock thickens underneath me, and I know my panties will leave a wet spot on his gray sweats.

I pull away from his lips, and he groans, "Five minutes, please, baby." He sighs against my lips. "It'll be worth it."

"Sorry, Zay." I give him one last kiss, rubbing my pussy against him. "I can't be late." The metal bed frame creaks as I get off him, and he sighs, sitting up in bed.

Zayne props a pillow against the black metal headboard, trying to get comfortable. When I decided to buy a Farmhouse-style bed, no one told me about how uncomfortable it would be to sit up in it. I sometimes wish I would've bought something different, but I guess it's not so bad when I'm holding on to it while he fucks me. It's the little things.

"You're teasing me." He pouts, and I chuckle. "But I'll get you back tonight."

"Get some sleep, baby. You're lucky you still have a while before you have to go to work."

I usually work the night shift, but on the days I have residency classes, I have to be there in the morning and stay after. I'm always exhausted, never able to recover fully. It's a miracle I even have time left to spend with Zayne at this point, so our downtime looks a lot different than it used to. No more parties, no more drinking until we pass out. We behave like adults now, almost resembling a married couple. It's the first time I've lived with a man, and even though Brit and I work at the same hospital and go to residency classes together, I feel her absence every day.

I grab my scrubs from the closet and go to the bathroom, shutting the door quietly behind me. The bathroom light is so bright that it makes the space look sterile, almost like a hospital bathroom instead of a home. I guess I can't escape that place anymore, or maybe the bright white walls throughout the apartment need some love. Maybe I'll paint them gray; any color but white will do at this point.

My hair is in disarray, purple bags are under my eyes, and my skin looks pale. My reflection makes me cringe, and I dig through drawers to find some concealer and makeup to give me some life. I usually shower before a shift, but I just don't have the energy today. Makeup and a hair straightener will have to make the magic happen all on its own this morning.

I put my clothes on, making sure the royal blue scrubs aren't wrinkled, before facing the mirror once more. I'm satisfied with the fit of them, hugging my curves in all the right places. I hate baggy clothes, they make me feel like a twelve-year-old. I've always been told I look much younger

than I am, and it's become a habit of trying to make myself look older at this point.

I sit on the toilet lid and put my Nike tennis shoes on, the memory foam sole making me sigh with happiness when I stand to my feet and put my badge on my uniform. Shoes are one of the most important accessories for nurses. You need something you can rely on when you have to stand, run, squat, and lift all shift long. I've found that when I have the wrong shoes, my shift sucks. There's nothing worse than lower back pain two hours into an all-night shift.

I quietly open the bathroom door, hoping that Zayne has returned to sleep. His back is turned to me and the comforter is pulled over his head. I cover my mouth, trying to suppress a chuckle. He always covers his head when he sleeps, and even though part of me finds it funny, I also know it's a defense mechanism for him. If he can't see anything, he doesn't have to wonder what's real and what's not. Thankfully he's been really great with taking his antipsychotics since we moved in together.

"I love you," Zayne shouts, and I laugh, shaking my head on the way out of the bedroom.

"I love *you*." I smile as I close the door behind me. He doesn't like when I say 'too'. He thinks I'm just agreeing with him. But in a way, I must be, because I don't ever want to live without him, so this must be love, right?

My new pearl white Chevrolet Equinox sparkles in the early morning sunlight, and I smile when I sit in the driver's side. I

never thought the day would come when I would be able to pick a vehicle that I liked and actually walk out with it. I've always believed I'd account for nothing, that I wasn't good enough.

The hospital is about a twenty-minute drive from my apartment and mostly spent on the interstate. There's nothing special about San Antonio, Texas, in my opinion. The only thing that drew me here was the level-one trauma center, which will keep me here for the foreseeable future. This is where people with the worst injuries in the area will end up, and that will facilitate my learning in the ICU.

I've always wanted to work in critical care. There's something so alluring to me about saving a life. I can't point out the exact thing that draws me in so much, but I get a level of excitement when we're getting a new patient on the brink of death. Maybe I'm just an adrenaline junkie looking for a safer way to get the rush I need, trading one vice for another. Or I could just be fucked in the head, that checks out too.

The rows and rows of taillights stress me the fuck out, and I look at the time. It's a good thing I left over an hour early, because this traffic cannot be taken lightly. In fact, there's a big chance I might still be late to class. The buildings in the downtown area stack up for miles and miles, and my patience stretches thinner.

I scroll through Apple Music until I pick Taylor Swift, my favorite artist, and blare 'I Did Something Bad' until I feel like I could go deaf from it. This is what I do before every shift, no

matter the time of day. I listen to music until I get to the hospital, because even if I live twenty minutes away, the traffic could potentially cause me to get there an hour later. Music is a way to distract myself, it's also therapeutic as well. It helps me calm down in some instances, and in others, it hypes me up. Most importantly, though, it helps me focus. If I don't play it loudly, I dissociate. I find that many times, I don't know how I get from one place to the other. It's as if I'm on autopilot, and the details of how I arrive from one destination to the other are left on the lanes of the interstate.

Almost an hour later, I find a spot in the staff parking lot. I have about fifteen minutes before I need to clock in, but somehow I made it on time. The problem is that it takes at least ten minutes to walk from the parking lot to the conference center where we have the residency classes, and that's if I switch from power walking to jogging every few steps. *Fuck.*

My phone dings with a new email as I lock my car and begin my journey to the classroom, and I speed my walk as I start to read it. We have to do a community project for residency, and apparently we are getting partnered up for it. I scroll down to the end and almost stumble. *Damien Carlisle*, that's who I'm assigned to, it would seem. He was nice to me when we first met a few months ago, in fact, he even put his number in my phone. But when I texted him, he never replied. We've said hello in passing since then, but ever since that first day he's never attempted to talk much. He's not mean to me,

but it's as if he wants to keep his distance. Almost like I have a disease he's trying to steer clear of.

I run into the building, slowing down in front of the information desk to catch my breath. I'm probably sweaty as hell and on the verge of an asthma attack, but I smile at the old man who sits behind the desk even as I prop my hands on my knees to gasp in some forced breaths.

The man stands behind the desk, leaning toward me to get a better look. There's a concern in his brown eyes as he tries to figure out if I need help. "Ma'am? Are you okay?"

I cough, nodding my head. I shouldn't run, I'm out of shape, but some things just can't be avoided. "I'm fine." I try to smile through the pain burning in my lungs and right myself as my breathing finally evens out. "Some people are just not meant to run."

We laugh together and he shakes his head, sitting back down with a glimmer in his eye. "Well, you stay away from running then, young lady."

I walk to the classroom and brace myself for residency, knowing that this group project will probably cause some problems. Why couldn't they pair me up with a woman? Zayne is going to lose his mind about this.

Brit stands by the refreshments, making herself a cup of coffee. I will say one of the nice things about this class is that they always have water and coffee for us, and sometimes if they're feeling nice, they bring us donuts too.

“That ass looks so good in scrubs,” I whisper in her ear from behind, and she almost drops her coffee. Her shoulders shake with her laughter, and I step back.

Brittany turns around, “Look, if you want me, just say that.” Her sea-foam green eyes sparkle as she puts a straw in her cup, never willing to stain her pretty white teeth.

“Where are you sitting today?” I grab a water bottle from a basket filled with ice, “I thought we could talk about this stupid project.”

“I’ll sit wherever you’re sitting.”

Brit grabs her bag from next to her feet and follows me to the table where I left my stuff. She takes the chair right next to mine on the left side, and every single chair is taken except for the one to my right.

“Who did you get paired up with?” I open my bag but then forget what I was supposed to get from it.

“Some girl named Anna.” Brit scans the classroom, but I guess she doesn’t find who she’s looking for because she turns around and continues to sip her coffee. “What about you?”

“Damien,” I whisper, and her eyes widen. “I don’t know if he knows yet, though.”

“I wouldn’t want to be the one to tell him.” She pats my back, “Didn’t he try to talk to you a couple of months ago?”

“Yeah,” I pull out my notebook and folder from my bag, finally remembering I needed them. “But he didn’t text me back after he gave me his number.”

“Interesting.”

One of my class handouts falls from my folder and lands about a foot away. I reach for it, trying to make my body longer than it is, and when I finally pick it up, I release my breath and straighten in my chair.

Damien stands next to me with a scowl on his face, “You’re sitting in my chair.” I don’t budge though, someone already took my usual seat and you don’t see me being an asshole about it.

Brit laughs, almost snorting her coffee, but I don’t let my eyes leave his. I don’t want the fact that he looks so handsome in scrubs to affect my decision-making. I refuse to move. But goddamn, I can’t deny that the royal blue color of our uniform makes his eyes stand out even more than usual.

I force myself to look away from him and shake the thoughts I shouldn’t be having out of my head. He smirks, pulls out the chair next to mine and sits facing me.

I arch an eyebrow, “I didn’t realize we had assigned seats.” I reply, goading him. I think he’s trying to be funny right now, maybe, so I’ll play along. Brit grabs my hand under the table and squeezes it.

“I always sit here.”

“What a coincidence,” I say, rolling my eyes. He chuckles, the sound deep and sexy. *Fuck*, stop it. “Are you here to talk about our project, or do you just like to argue?”

“A little bit of both.” He pulls out his phone, and I assume he’s probably looking at his email. “We’ve been assigned strokes.” *Great.*

“Do you know what this health fair is about, anyway?” I rest my hand on my chin, propping my head up.

“We teach the community about a topic, in our case, strokes.” I open my folder and start looking for handouts related to that. “We get our own booth, and we give freebies to the people who stop by.”

“So how about we teach them the FAST acronym and what to look out for?” I pass him a handout with the information, “We can go talk to the neurologist at the emergency department and see what we need to focus on with our teaching.”

“We could make a poster and put pictures of the different signs and symptoms of a stroke,” Damien says as he looks over the information and starts marking the paper indicating the most important things to remember. “We could also give out some magnets.” He shrugs, giving it back. I put everything back in the folder and face forward.

“Sounds good.” And somehow, that’s the end of our conversation. Damien doesn’t look at me for the rest of the time we’re here.

The hours pass slowly sitting next to him, and even between lectures and presentations from different physicians, I can’t seem to stop thinking about him, what to say, what to do. I have to fight the physical urge to look at him. Sometimes I

steal a quick glance at him, and Brit catches it every time. She elbows me, or squeezes me, or smirks. Her little ways of telling me she sees me making a fool of myself. But what bothers me the most is that he doesn't look my way once in eight hours. How the fuck is that possible?

Once the classes are over, the residency director comes to stand at the front of the room and gets our attention. Everyone's head swivels in her direction, and once she can see all eyes on her, she starts to speak. "Anna Limas has not shown up for five classes. After talking to the emergency contact on file, we have learned that a missing person's report has been filed. If you see or hear from her, please report to the SAPD."

People are frantic, looking around the room as if they would find her in here after we've been told she's missing. Whispers get louder until everyone is talking over each other, no longer able to control the panic in their voices. We've worked with her for months, some of these people are her friends, and others like me who barely even spoke to her can still feel the pang of sadness in our chests for what everyone else must be going through, for what Anna must be going through.

After a few minutes of hysteria, I get up from my chair and head to the ICU to complete my four-hour assist shift. Of course, so does Damien. The silence is thick and suffocating as we walk side by side to the unit. His shoulder grazes against mine as we get in the elevator, and when I flinch, he doesn't even look my way. I hold my breath for what feels like the

entire elevator ride, and I'm not even sure why. As far as I'm concerned, I don't even exist to him.

We check in with the charge nurse, and we're given the code blue bag containing all the crash team supplies. Wherever there's an emergency in the hospital, we go.

Only ten minutes into our shift, the intercom goes off.

“Code Blue Room 618. I repeat, Code Blue Room 618.”

Damien and I grab our bags and run across the hospital to the 6th floor. There's a herd of people standing outside of the room, and we have to get past several bodies to reach the bedside. Nurses gather with barely any space, the bed taking up most of it, and the bedside table has been pushed into a corner of the room to accommodate the people working there. It's fucking ridiculous how cramped we are in here, and truly incredible how we can even work under these conditions.

A short blonde woman stands next to the unlocked computer while looking at the patient's chart, surely preparing to give a report to the physicians when they show up. There's another nurse opening the crash cart, and three others stand by the patient while one of them performs chest compressions. Like a well-oiled machine, we all work together to accomplish our task: reviving this patient.

I give my bag to Damien and get between the nurses at the bedside, ready to take over when the one gets tired. The patient is being jostled about on the bed while a nurse performs chest compressions, and a resident physician stands by her head to insert a tube down her throat. The attending

physician walks into the room and goes directly to the nurse assigned to this patient, waiting expectantly.

“Adora Matthews, seventy-year-old female, presenting with CHF. She’s been taking forty milligrams of Lasix every twelve hours. Her last BNP was 2000 and she’s on eight liters of oxygen via nasal cannula. Telemetry notified me that she went into asystole, and when I came in she was unconscious. Lab already drew blood, and her latest results are...” The nurse assigned to the patient rattles off the report as pharmacy runs into the room. It might look like chaos to an outsider, but everyone knows their role in this.

When they call for a pulse check, I replace the nurse on the bed and position myself, ready to pick up where she left off. The patient’s hair is long and white and her skinny, frail body is exposed to all of us so we can better perform our jobs. Even though she’s a small person, her extremities are extremely swollen, or as nurses call it, edematous.

“No pulse!” Yet another person yells, and I start to do chest compressions, taking deep breaths as I set the pace. I accidentally glance at her face, and her open eyes make me nauseous. I close them, focusing on the depth and rhythm of my compressions. Once I set a pace, I feel the tingling throughout my body. It’s like I could go on forever doing this, even though it’s physically impossible. This is the adrenaline rush I’m talking about; this is precisely where I want to be during every code.

“One of epi!” I look beside me just as Damien steps in and plunges the epinephrine into the intravenous site as I continue to do chest compressions, the medicine trying to restart the heart just as much as my hands. I turn my head to get a better look at him for a split second, and he watches me with an odd expression on his face, almost awe, as he waits for more orders.

I put my entire body weight into the compressions, not stopping even when I grow short of breath. Pump, pump, pump, crack, crack, crack. I feel ribs give way under me; the seventy-year-old woman beneath me never stood a chance.

She doesn't survive.

The doctor calls time of death, and the crowd disperses, everyone looking for a way to cope, to find normalcy in the night again. The doctors go to make the phone call to the family member on file since there is no one here with her, and the nurse starts to gather herself to make the phone calls to the organ donation agency that's required when there's a death.

The stress of her night weighs down on me, knowing damn well that she still has to do postmortem care and paperwork, all while she takes care of five other patients. The staffing ratios are outrageous and unsafe, but no one ever stands up for us. I wonder how any of us get this job done sometimes, how we can shoulder this weight, holding people's lives in our hands. The magnitude of that responsibility is not lost on me, and sometimes I feel incompetent as fuck as I constantly try to rise up to the challenge.

Damien gathers our bags for us, and my hands shake as I reach for the one he offers me. His hand covers mine where I grab onto the strap, and my breath catches in my throat. He looks into my eyes. “You’re okay,” he whispers low enough for the people who are still in the room not to hear.

I nod, “I need a bathroom.”

We walk out of the room in search of the staff bathroom, and he stands across from the door to wait for me. I give him back the code bag and run in, slamming the door behind me right before locking it.

My hands shake uncontrollably as I turn on the faucet, and I scrub them with soap furiously as if that’ll stop me from feeling like a failure. *We didn’t save her.* My face is flushed a deep red, and strands of hair stick to my face, slick with sweat. I pat some water on my skin to try to cool myself down, but all it does is wash off my concealer and smear my mascara. I clean that up too, and try to make myself more presentable, but no matter how much I try to fix my appearance, I still feel an ache on the inside. Raw, ugly, all-consuming. This is the part I don’t like to talk about, that every high comes with a crash. And when we don’t save these patients, the crash plummets.

I exit the bathroom and take back my bag. Damien searches my face, but I guess he’s fine with what he sees because he walks ahead of me and leaves me behind, the caring parts of him tucked back in neatly until they no longer show.

The rest of the night goes the same.

Code Blue.

One after the other until faces and bodies blur together, and I can't tell the beginning from the end.

At the end of our shift, Damien and I clock out together, "We should probably meet outside of work so we can do our project. I don't think we get enough time between lunch and residency class." I tell him as he swipes his identification card in front of the screen.

"Where would you like to meet?" He waits for me to swipe my card too, and when I turn to walk toward the parking lot, he falls into step with me.

"My place is fine."

"Don't you have a boyfriend or something?" He clears his throat, appearing uncomfortable. I think it's an act, but I don't point it out. There's something off about it; the way he tries to act like that matters to him even though I can tell it's a lie.

"What's your point?" I roll my eyes, irritated, "It's a project, not a date."

"Tomorrow evening, then?"

I think about it for a second, remembering that Zayne works. I'm not going to hide it from him, but I also don't need him at home acting crazy. "7 p.m."

"Alright."

We part ways, him walking in the opposite direction as I get in my car. I don't leave yet, however. Instead, I watch him put on a helmet and get on a black and red Kawasaki.

I pull out of my parking spot and stop the car in the middle of the road right next to him. I slide down my window. “Hot ride.”

Damien looks up at me, his eyes wrinkling with a smile. “Do you want to hop on?” He winks, and my insides liquify. Somehow I don’t think he’s referring to the motorcycle, and it also doesn’t escape my notice that this is the first time he hasn’t treated me with indifference in the last few months. He’s *flirting* instead.

I force myself not to smile or show an ounce of how he affects me, even as my body temperature rises. I can’t deny the way he ignored me after I texted him hurt, but what hurt the most was when his sunny disposition went to complete indifference. Maybe it means I’ve always liked him, always wanted him. But it doesn’t really matter, I’m with Zayne. So I force myself to reply, “Not tonight, but I’ll keep the invitation in mind.” I’ll save the offer for a rainy day, because I have more of those than I need.

I drive out of the parking lot, my engine roaring as I go ten miles over the speed limit the whole way home. Once parked at the apartment, I let out a big breath, trying to scrub him from my memory. I don’t know why he’s getting to me now. I could barely even talk to him yesterday, or the past few months for that matter.

There’s a new moon tonight, and there’s no lighting in this parking lot to illuminate my steps as I get out of my car and walk toward the apartment. I look around, trying to stay aware

of my surroundings, and find Zayne standing on the sidewalk across from me. He walks toward me with purpose, glancing behind us like he's trying to make sure we're alone.

“Not so fast, baby.” He purrs in my ear when he reaches me, grabbing my arm roughly and walking me toward his car, which is parked right next to mine.

What the hell?

I know this voice. He wants to fuck me, but for the life of me, I can't understand why he's dragging me to his car rather than the house. Does he want to fuck me in it again?

“Where are we going?”

“You're smarter than that, Hals,” he grunts out as he shoves me against the hood of his car, spreading my legs and stepping between them. His tongue darts out to lick up my neck, and he takes my ear lobe between his teeth. “You're going to do whatever I say if you want me to let you come tonight.” I close my eyes, breathing him in. He smells like a freaking forest, and that's the most comforting scent to me now.

His words cause me to shiver, and when his thumbs hook into my scrubs and underwear, I know I'm about to love whatever he does to me. I look around frantically, and he pushes my pants down my thighs. “What if someone sees us?”

“So let them see.” He grins. “Now, keep your eyes on me.” His knees hit the ground as his face comes between my thighs, but I can't open them more than this since my pants are

restraining my legs. Cold fingers pry me apart, exposing me, right before his warm tongue licks exactly where I need it to.

“Oh,” I breathe out forcefully, my hands gripping the strands of his hair so tightly I’m surprised he hasn’t complained.

My pussy aches and I try to buck my hips to relieve the pressure building low in my belly. His hands grip my ass painfully, but it only feeds the pleasure he’s giving me, and his face goes deeper between my legs.

Just as I feel the pleasure cresting, the orgasm right around the corner, he gets up suddenly. The wind hits my most intimate parts, and he grabs my arm and turns me around, pinning me against the hood of the car.

I can hear the zipper of Zayne’s jeans as he lowers them, then he reaches between us and rubs his cock down my slit, groaning when he pushes inside me. “*Baby.*”

The gasp that comes out of my mouth is loud in the silence of the night, and as I look around as he begins to fuck me, he pushes my head into the hood, holding on to it so I can’t move.

“Is this my pussy?” he asks before he lowers himself onto my back, thrusting deeply, not pulling back much. I don’t answer, though. Instead, all that comes out is a moan, which he doesn’t like. He yanks my head back, exposing my throat to him, and bites me. “Answer me.”

“Yes,” I moan. “You know it is.”

Zayne growls against my neck and shoves his hand between my body and the car, then begins to rub on my clit. “So fucking tight, baby.” He sighs as he pulls away from my body, fucking me fast, the hood of the car whining as his hips slap against my ass. I grind my clit against his fingers, the friction almost driving me over the edge. “So damn wet.”

Zayne’s free hand comes to the back of my neck, gripping me tightly. I grind down harder, feeling my orgasm within reach, and he lets go of my neck to squeeze my ass, pushing me faster against him. I feel his moan vibrating through me. “Faster,” I urge him, and he obliges. “*Harder.*”

His fingers come around my throat, compressing my airway until I’m sure there will be bruises tomorrow, but he lets go quickly. My eyes squeeze shut as I start to shake, and my ears ring. “Zayne,” I breathe, “You fuck me so good.”

He empties himself inside of me, breathing hard, and collapses on top of my back. But I guess it was too hard because just as he does the car alarm starts blaring, and when we look back, balcony lights begin to turn on. We push away from each other, both of us putting our pants back on and running to our front door, panting when we slam it shut.

There’s a glint in his eyes and a grin on his lips, and the look we share makes us both start laughing until it hurts. It feels like old times again, when we used to be reckless. I fucking love it. This is the first time we’ve had sex in a public place where we could get caught since he moved in with me, and I love the adrenaline rushing through my veins right now.

Only one thought is ruining my high right now though, something that's been in the back of my mind. I should probably tell him about Damien and how he's coming over tomorrow, but I shake my head, ridding myself of the idea.

That's a problem for *tomorrow* me, not today.

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CHAPTER 2

Damien

There's a coffee shop and bakery that I love to frequent before my night shifts, mainly for the pastries and all-day breakfast. I could eat breakfast any time of the day, which works out perfectly because I sleep all day long when I don't have to go to residency class or when I'm needed by my father, which unfortunately has turned out to be more frequent as of late. Thankfully, I only have to go to residency class and then a short assist shift for now, which is why I have to rush a bit so I can eat before the traffic gets bad. The morning rush is no joke compared to the evening traffic going to work. At least I'm only a few blocks from the hospital right now, which is why this place is my go-to.

“Are you ready to order yet?”

She's served me many times before since I'm a regular here, and she's made it very clear in the past that she wants to give me more than the food I'm ordering. Her looks are not the problem; she's only a few inches shorter than me, which makes her tall for a woman. Her eyes are a pale blue that

makes them look almost transparent, and she has long blonde hair. She's beautiful, and yet, I refuse to involve myself. There are so many reasons for that, but the one that stands out the most is how lately I only seem to be interested in unavailable, brown-eyed brunettes. It's inconvenient and annoying, especially since I know I should keep my distance.

"Yes, ma'am." Sarah's nose wrinkles at my formality. She can't be older than my twenty-six. "I'll take a chocolate croissant and a French omelet, please."

"You got it." Sarah smiles at me, her dimples making an appearance. My heart squeezes in my chest for a brief moment, but I remind myself that attachments are not what I need right now, even if she looks like an angel.

She goes back to the kitchen, swaying her hips more than usual. I wipe my hand down my face, ridding it of the smirk that I keep letting sneak out lately. The metal chairs here are uncomfortable, and as I lean back, the bars dig into my spine. I guess I'm lucky there's padding where I sit. This little hole in the wall is cute with its black and white checkered floors, red and black metal chairs, and white walls. The tables could use some help with the wobbling and leaning to one side, but other than that, I can't complain much. I choose the small places for a reason, though. I like supporting the small businesses of hard-working people who pour all of their heart and soul into them.

The food is always out quickly here, and my stomach growls when Sarah puts my plates in front of me. I dig into the

chocolate croissant first because I have a sweet tooth and will always prefer dessert to actual breakfast, but I force myself to order only one. My mom always thought it was weird that I love sweets but prefer my coffee black, and I guess people who don't know me very well might think it's odd too. I shake my head to rid myself of thoughts about her and finish my breakfast, not wanting to open that can of worms today. It's never the right time to think about her anymore.

Once done with breakfast, I pay my tab and head out to my motorcycle, getting my helmet and putting it on. I fasten the chin strap and straddle the bike, twisting the keys to power it on. The engine roars to life, and I feel the intensity of it everywhere, my bones shaking with it. This is my favorite thing in the world; feeling this fire between my legs makes me feel more alive than anything else.

I press play on my phone, letting the Bluetooth motorcycle helmet flood with music, and then put it in my backpack. I adjust the straps one more time until it feels comfortable, then twist the throttle. I grin, letting myself relax on the seat before pulling in the clutch and putting the bike into gear.

Making sure there's no one pulling out of their parking spot and no one in my way, I let out the clutch and ease up on the accelerator, zooming out of the lot. This feeling, the *high*, is what I chase on the bike.

Since the hospital is so close to the coffee shop, I don't go too fast. I slow down enough that I won't be pulled over and just focus on loosening my body with the music blaring from

my helmet. *The Death of Peace of Mind* by Bad Omens fills the space and I mouth the lyrics as I look for a parking spot.

I park the bike, then walk toward the building with my helmet in hand. The countless windows facing me glitter like diamonds under the sunshine, making the red brick stand out behind them. I reach the sidewalk, shade enveloping me and cooling me down significantly due to the awning above my head. Of all the hospitals I've worked at, this one has to be my favorite design.

I arrive at the conference room where the residency classes are held and go directly to the coffee station, pouring myself my second cup for the day. Hallie sits in my chair in the same spot as yesterday, but rather than trying to sit with her again, I take a spot at the circular table right next to hers. I have a clear view of her, unobstructed, but she still hasn't noticed me at all. Setting my backpack and helmet on the ground beside me, I take out my notebook to write down notes. This isn't my first rodeo, but it needs to look like it.

The lights are turned off, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I hate the sterile white glow of the ceiling lights. Not only does it make everything look unnatural, but it also reminds me too much about my mom. Hospital lights have always triggered memories of her in an unconscious state, her body pale and weak from the overdose she was just pulled out of by the paramedics. Of course, as the oldest, I always had to ride with her because she had no one else. No one to give a fuck about her.

I close my eyes and wipe the sweat from my hands on my scrub pants. When I open them again, they collide with Hallie's pretty brown ones. So she did notice me, after all. I guess I need to be better at observing her. She's hard to read sometimes, her body language doesn't give everything away. It's like reading a book with an alphabet you don't recognize, and to me, that's fucking annoying.

Hallie smiles softly at me, with just her lips, then faces the front. I'm not entirely sure what to make of that, especially since this might be the first smile she's given me without having a conversation. I want to pull her back to me, steal one more. But I mimic her, facing the front, and only steal glances of her when I can no longer help myself.

An hour passes, and our eyes meet again. She doesn't look away this time, and it feels almost like a staring contest, one where I don't know what I will get if I win. But let's make one thing very clear, I *always* win.

She gets up from the chair, leaves her belongings behind, and exits the classroom. I follow her, trying not to make it obvious that I'm going after her, but as I close the door behind me, I speed up and catch up with her. The sound of my footsteps is muffled on the worn burgundy carpet, entirely at odds with the rest of the modern decor of this conference center. It's as if they forgot to update that, or maybe they couldn't afford to.

I'm breaking all my rules by going after her right now. She has a boyfriend, for fuck's sake. I shouldn't even be interfering

with that, I should just do what I'm here to do and move on. Only the more time I spend with her, the less I feel like following through.

She walks with purpose, looking ready to get out of here, which I can't say I blame her for. This hospital is shit, and I've hated every second of working here, but I have no other choice. When she opens the door and runs through it, I blow out a breath and stop in my tracks.

The women's restroom door slams in my face, and I retreat a step to wait for her. It doesn't feel right to be invading her privacy this way, as if I'm listening in on her, except when the toilet flushes and I hear the sink running, it doesn't matter anymore.

Hallie steps out, almost colliding with me, and narrows her eyes. "Can I help you?" The door snicks shut behind her, but I don't move, which causes her back to be flush with it.

I smile, trying to put her at ease, and her face softens slightly. "I was just making sure we were still meeting tonight." Her brows furrow in confusion, "Last night, you told me to come over at 7 p.m."

Realization sets in, and it's almost amusing to see all the emotions coursing through her, all of them reflecting on her face. Maybe I *can* read her, after all. "Right," her voice comes out rough, and she coughs to clear it. "Yes."

Our bodies are so close that I can feel the heat emanating from her, and I have to force myself to ignore it. "I'm running a quick errand before coming over, but if you send me your

address before we leave, that would be great.” I take a step back, “I’ll let you know when I’m on the way.”

I watch the rise and fall of her chest as she processes my words, the argument seemingly on the tip of her tongue, but then she pushes her shoulders back and straightens. “Sounds good.”

Just when I thought she was going to protest, she gives me a neutral answer. That kind of pisses me off; I like the arguments more. But why did she hesitate? Does she not want me to come over anymore? Did she not tell her boyfriend about it? Is she going behind his back? And if she is, what does this mean? What does this say about her? Me? I honestly could care less what she says or doesn’t say to him, even though a small part of me wants him to know I exist.

I turn on my heel and return to class, refusing to look at her even after the lights are turned off and we are told to have a good rest of our day. I still don’t look at her as we gather our belongings, as I feel her stare burning through my face, and even as her name pops up on my phone with a new text message. I do, however, look at her when she exits the classroom. Finally, letting myself have one indulging look without her noticing.

I wait five minutes until I know she’s not going to be anywhere around, and then I walk back to my bike. I truly do have somewhere to go before I can go see her, and I don’t want to be followed. She probably wouldn’t do that, but I do know she’s curious as fuck.

The red and black of my Kawasaki shimmers in the dying light, and my hand caresses the side of it before I straddle it. My legs hug the bike snugly, and I peel out of the parking lot again, completely uncaring of the people around me. The music blasts from the helmet, almost rendering me completely unaware of the noises around me. The only thing I can hear over it as I speed down the highway is the sound of the wind whipping against my face shield. It's so relaxing that I almost want to use it as white noise and fall asleep to it.

The warehouse is just a silver metal building with a blue front and back door and windows on either side. There are plenty of parking spots for the employees, and I always choose the one closest to the door next to my father's. I like to believe it annoys him when I park beside him, and that's why I do it.

I enter the building with my helmet in hand, passing the multiple break rooms and closed office doors that belong to the people who deem themselves most important. I have one of those myself but prefer not to use it if possible.

No one spares me a second glance as I enter my father's office, and that's exactly how I want things. I want them to be so scared they don't even want me to talk to them. Or maybe they think I'm nobody, just like them. Which is also fine by me as long as they leave me alone.

My father's leather couch is worn in, probably from all the people who come to his meetings. As I sit on it and prop my feet on the matching ottoman, my ass sinks into it more than I enjoy. I attempt to reposition myself to no avail. Fuck this

place, I want to get out of here as fast as possible. It still doesn't stop me from digging my feet into the ottoman a little, simply because I know he hates when I do it. I smile to myself. Yeah, I fucking love pissing him off.

The scent of cigars overpowers the room, reminding me of all the nights I spent holed up in here as a teenager to learn the ropes. I could've been doing anything else, living my life, being a kid, but I've never had many choices. There's very little I've been able to control over the years, which is precisely why I want to control it all now. Every aspect of my life needs to be in order so I can feel at ease, so I can breathe right.

He has never cared about me, only what I can offer him, which is money. I'm the face of his operation, but at the same time, I'm part of something bigger than him, and that makes him jealous.

I'll never forget how he left my brothers and me behind to fend for ourselves. He didn't care about the way our dope-head mother didn't feed us, clothe us, bathe us. When I was old enough to understand these were things that adults were supposed to do for their children, it was too late for him to redeem himself in my eyes. Especially when I had to take care of my brothers and keep my mother alive.

He only came to me once he realized he could profit from me, and I let him because I could always use the money. My mother was captured at that point, and everyone but him thought she had died from an overdose. It wasn't that far off

from the truth, though, since she was constantly in the hospital for it. Just how many times can someone be brought back to life before they realize they should start living it? I had my brothers to take care of, bills to pay, and somehow went to school, so I took him up on his offer and learned the ropes in order to make a name for myself. I wanted to be the best, and he wanted to take the credit for what I did. So I let him, if only for a period of time.

Ricardo, an employee, walks into the office. His almond-shaped eyes look around the room as if he's lost something, and then he snaps his gaze to mine. "He's not coming." The smile falls from my face and my feet meet the tiled floor. "His instructions were to wait for his call."

"And just when will that be?" My voice is tense, angry. I have shit to do, places to be, and I'll be damned if I'm sitting around like a puppy waiting for a phone call from *him*.

My cell phone begins to vibrate in my hand, and Ricardo nods once then turns around and leaves. "This is Damien." I keep my voice even, take the hatred out of it as much as possible. I'm sure he can still tell though. I am his son, after all. It's hard to pretend to be someone you're not around the only person who knows who you truly are.

"Did you locate the merchandise?"

"I'm still working on it." My father huffs on the other line, clearly irritated. "They chose me because I'm the best, and if I tell you I need more time," I grit my teeth, "Then I need more fucking time."

“And if I don’t give it to you?”

“Saves me the trouble.” I know he doesn’t want to save me any trouble. If he could, he’d make my life as hard as possible, which is why I know this tactic will work. I did find the merchandise, but let’s just say I’m not in the mood to hand it over. I want to play with it a little. Use it, if you will.

“Have a sense of urgency with this son,” He sighs, and I can just imagine him running his fingers through his own hair just like I do when I’m irritated. It’s a trait I wish I wouldn’t have inherited from him. In fact, I wish I hadn’t inherited anything at all. “*Al jefe no le gusta esperar.*” *The boss doesn’t like to wait.*

“*Yo sé.*” *I know.* “And now if you’re done, I have shit to do.”

“Better get to it then.” The line clicks as he ends the call, and I relax on the couch again. I could go my entire life without hearing from him and be happy. I look at my watch, and it’s almost seven. Damn it, I really need to hurry now.

The drive to Hallie’s apartment is fast as I go at least thirty over the speed limit, dodging cars and changing lanes every other mile. I’m determined to be there on time, because even though I try my best to remain unaffected by her, I do need to see this through. And even though she loves to act like she can barely breathe the same air as me, I see right through her. She doesn’t hate me. No matter how much I ignore her and act like she’s just another coworker, she still looks for me when I enter a room, and her eyes continue to gravitate toward mine even though she’s clearly fighting against it.

Just a little longer in this shit-hole town.

I sure as fuck wouldn't be here if I didn't have to, and even still, the idea of sharing a space with her alone makes me feel alive. Will she let down her barriers and let me have a brief glimpse of her? Or will I always have to arrange puzzle pieces to figure her out? Regardless of how frustrating it would be, I'd do it just to interact with her for five minutes, even if it meant arguing the entire time. That seems to be about the only thing that gives me a shred of excitement lately, anyway.

There are rows and rows of tall three-story buildings, the staircase leading up to the highest floor visible from the parking lot. The color of the siding is difficult to make out due to lack of lighting, but it looks light gray, and there's tan stone attached to only the last story.

The adjacent vehicles don't look expensive per se, but they're also not that bad either. Hopefully, no one steals my bike while I'm in there, but at this point it's a chance I'll have to take.

The front door is simple and painted black, my favorite color. I see the peephole and almost laugh at the fact that she's probably too short to look out of it. My helmet dangles from my left hand as I knock with the other and wait for her to open the door. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and tell myself to be a nice human. That takes effort for me; I'm not *nice*. Maybe I will stop arguing for five minutes and see what it's like when we don't.

Or maybe not.

It's exactly seven o'clock when she opens the door, and I'm momentarily stunned. Goddamn, she's beautiful. My eyes widen as I look down her body, her yoga pants giving me a glimpse of her hourglass figure that I don't get to see at work.

Hallie steps aside as I walk into the apartment, averting her eyes as I seek her gaze. The beige hardwood floors shine under the living room lights, the gray L-shaped sectional couch taking up most of the space, even though it's not large by any means.

I drop my backpack next to the couch on the rug and face her. The white barn-style television stand seems to be the center of attention in this room, with all of the fall decorations on the shelves. She's one of *those* people, the ones who start decorating for Halloween months in advance. I'm curious to see if she does the same for every holiday.

"We can work in the dining room," Hallie's voice rings out in the small space, and she points behind me as if to lead me there.

The dining room, if it can even be called that, is barely large enough for a table, yet she manages to fit a square one in the same color and finish as the tv stand. The barn-style table has small benches instead of chairs and a burlap runner going down the middle.

Markers, scissors, and her laptop wait for us on it, and a pink poster board is propped against the nearest wall. I bend at the waist to get my laptop out of my bag and she walks past me to sit on a bench. I know logically that this is her home and

she can tell me to work where she's comfortable to do so, but holy shit, this space is cramped.

The couch has just the right amount of firmness as I plop down on it, and I neither sink nor bounce too much as I land. I spread my legs, getting comfortable, and wait for her to notice. It's like she wants me to say something. Either that, or she's completely lost in her task, because she still sits there after two minutes without saying shit to me.

"We should work here instead," I say, propping my laptop on my thighs, "I bet it's more comfortable than your tiny little benches."

I can feel the heat of her stare on the back of my head, and I know she's probably mad right now. It brings me a semblance of happiness. "And what exactly is so wrong with my benches?"

"They're obviously made for small people, and I'm over six feet tall." What I really want to say is that there's no way in hell I'll fit on one of those without breaking it. "It's not gonna work, Hallie."

She seems to consider this, then mutters, "Maybe shrink a bit or something." I chuckle and cover my mouth as I turn it into a cough.

"Or..." I say, "You could just grow an inch or two." This is definitely a sore spot for her, especially because she always gets teased at work for being too short to do compressions from the side of the bed and constantly needing to hop on.

“It’s not in my genetic capabilities.” Hallie picks up her laptop from the table and pushes her little bench back, making a scraping sound as it drags along the hardwood floor.

“But you think shrinking is in mine?” I kind of do love pushing her buttons, she’s just so easy to antagonize.

Her annoyed voice echoes in the living room, “Whatever, I’ll sit on the couch. Just be quiet.”

The sofa dips as she comes to sit on it at least two feet away, and I try to ignore her as her cute little upturned nose wrinkles in distaste and she props her computer on her legs.

The goal tonight is to find pictures online for the project and print them out. Although as I spend at least ten minutes trying to focus on looking for the pictures, I force myself to think about the FAST acronym. I can’t help it and I look at her.

And she’s looking at *me*.

Her eyes are glued to the bulge between my legs, and I’m sure she’s noticed I’m not wearing underwear beneath my scrub pants. I never do. I clear my throat, and she sucks in a sharp breath, her head whipping up quickly in attempting to hide what she is doing. I strive not to let any emotion show even as her face turns a bright shade of red and she looks back down. I guess she doesn’t actually care to be caught staring. *Shameless.*

“Hallie, you bad, *bad* girl.” I smirk, “You should probably look away now.”

It's almost like she has to physically force herself to avert her eyes and look at my face instead, but even still, she says, "I wasn't looking at anything."

I shrug, "I won't tell anyone." An ad plays on my computer, momentarily interrupting the conversation between us, and I turn the volume down.

"I. Wasn't. Looking."

My chuckle shakes my shoulders, amusement running through my veins, "Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?" She looks away, clearly lying.

"Have you found anything for speech difficulties?" The change of subject makes me want to rattle her. I was enjoying where this was headed. Nevertheless, I know I have to take it slow with her, especially since I have been ignoring her for months on end. She's probably confused about my sudden change of heart.

"Yes, I have a picture ready." The computer screen has multiple tabs open for the pictures I've set aside, and she nods her approval when I show them to her.

"My printer is in my room. Are you coming with me?"

"I wasn't expecting to go into your bedroom." I can't help myself when I lean over her, my breath caressing her face. "It seems rather intimate, don't you think?" The silky strand of her hair brushes against my finger, and I tuck it behind her ear. Her deep brown eyes search mine as my hand doesn't stray from her hair, her pupils rapidly moving from side to side as if

trying to understand what the hell is going on. She flinches at my exhale, so I drop my hand from her face and stand up to wait for her.

The small bedroom she leads me to somehow fits a Queen-sized bed against a wall that has two windows with parted blackout curtains, the Farmhouse frame tying in together with the rest of the furniture. Everything feels premeditated, with clean lines and bright colors. All the walls are white, probably just the standard paint for the apartment complex, but instead of making it look barren, it feels airy and light. The only thing that bothers me is the ruffled mess of black satin sheets in the middle of the bed. It looks freshly *fucked* on.

My insides heat up, and I count to ten in my head to calm down. I don't know why the hell this bothers me, but it does. It's not like she's mine or like we've even talked much, but the way she looks at me and acts around me, I know that she could be if I wanted her.

I glance around, memorizing her space, the way she has a bookshelf in her room just like me, but instead of it being organized like mine her books fall down and aren't lined up with each other. The paperbacks and hardcovers are mixed in together in a cluster fuck of different book sizes that make me sweat a little, but even still, I mentally catalog everything about her life.

Hallie follows my gaze to the bookshelf and snorts, "I have OCD, you know."

"I can tell," I reply dryly, *sure she does*.

“I actually *really* do.” She moves to the printer that sits on the ground in her closet, connecting her laptop to Bluetooth to print out the pictures. “I’ve been trying to challenge myself.”

“By torturing yourself and those around you?” I prepare my laptop for her to plug in, setting it on the ground next to her kneeling body. “Sounds enlightening.”

Her head snaps to the side, and we lock eyes, “Are you always so...?”

“What?” I smirk, “You can say it.”

“Fucking annoying?” Her narrowed eyes and shallow breaths make me want to smile, but I tamp the urge down. I won’t give her one of those so freely.

“Only with you.” I push my laptop toward her and stand, going to the other side of the room to put some distance between us before I pin her to the ground and kiss her. The truth is no part of me dislikes her, but for some reason she believes I do. I just can’t afford to get attached to her, because I know if I do, that will complicate everything for myself.

The silence is uncomfortable between us. It prickles behind my neck and makes my skin crawl, but what’s worse is my eyes look toward the bed. I try not to look; I even close my eyes, but goddamn, it bothers me. She seems to notice and clears her throat, slightly startling me.

With the papers in hand, she walks back to the dining room, her hips swaying. I keep my eyes trained on the back of her head as I follow her, but I fail multiple times, giving in to the

appeal of her ass in those tight yoga pants. She knows what she's doing to me. I thought she loved her little boyfriend?

I know we're supposed to be cutting and gluing pictures at this point. That's why I'm here anyway, but once I catch up, I grab her hand and lead her back to the sofa. I could care less about this damn project, not right now.

Hallie's shoes touch mine as I sit on the couch with her standing before me, my head level with her abdomen. Her muscles are taut and coiled. She looks ready to bolt, and my hands itch to hold onto her.

"I thought you were only staying for the project?" Her voice shakes with what sounds like nerves, and I get a pang of satisfaction at how I clearly affect her.

The lightest shade of pink stains her cheeks, and her almost black eyes are slightly wide as she waits for my reply. I want to unnerve her though, so I tilt my head to the side and assess her, then my hand reaches up to stroke her cheek softly. "Do you not want me here?"

Her arms instinctively cross over her chest in a protective gesture, but instead of backing down, I lock eyes with her and lean forward, grasping the back of her thighs. She freezes against me, and I bet if I felt her pulse it would feel wild, erratic. "I didn't say that..." Is she scared of me? Or someone else? "It's just that--"

"Fine, I'll go." My hands slide up her legs as I rise from the couch, but she pushes me back down. It's just a soft nudge, I *let* her push me, but it doesn't stop my eyes from widening in

surprise. This is the last thing I expected from her considering how indifferent she's acted all night. Our eye contact doesn't waver, though, and as her eyes dilate her tongue moistens her bottom lip. "Hallie, if you keep looking at me that way I can promise you I'm going to do something stupid."

She snaps out of it and averts her gaze. "Looking at you like what?"

"Like you're in the desert and I'm your only water source." I keep my voice low. Her eyes meet mine again, and my lips tilt up slightly in a soft smile. Goosebumps scatter on her arms, the tiny little hairs standing on end, and her hands slightly trembling.

"I think you should go," she whispers, and my hands grip her thighs again, guilt coursing through my veins. I shouldn't be pushing her, shouldn't be tempting her. I'm playing with fire, but just like everyone who does, I want the burn.

My head bows against her, resting on her abdomen, and her small hand comes to the back of my head. When she strokes it gently, my hands weaken against her, and it takes all my energy to keep them fastened to the back of her legs. "Now you want me to?" I can't leave now, not when she's this close, when *we* are. Her hand tightens on my hair, making my eyes water, then goes back to stroking me. "You know I don't actually dislike you, right?"

Hallie lets go of me and stumbles a step back, except my hands on the back of her thighs prevent her escape. I look up at her; from this angle, her neck looks even worse. I've been

forcing myself to ignore the bruises on it. Clearly fingerprints, and my chest squeezes painfully every time I see them. I stand to get a better look, holding her at arm's length.

She tilts her head. "What are you doing?"

I reach for her, jerking her chin to the side. "What the fuck happened to you?" She pushes my hand away, turning her face toward me once more. Her cheeks are red with a blush, but she still meets my eyes defiantly. "Did he do this?"

"I don't think that's any of your business." Hallie tries to sidestep me, but I block her path, grabbing her forearm gently. She stiffens with my touch, smart girl. *Don't let me get too close, babe, I always break my favorite toys.*

If he's hurting her, I'll ruin his life. He's worth nothing. Just another piece of shit walking this planet, yet he acts like he's untouchable or some shit because he has a submissive woman by his side.

"Did you *want* it?" I pull her into me, my fingers digging into her arms as she looks up at me, breathing hard. Her eyes narrowing on me tell me everything I need to know, her lack of response screams volumes. *She's fucking into this crazy shit.* I laugh, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Interesting."

"Are we done here?" I let her push me away, needing to put some distance between us anyway.

I run my fingers through my hair and grip the strands as I try to control the irrational jealousy coursing through my

veins, but it's impossible at this point. The thought of someone else, *him*, touching her in any way lights a fire in my body. But touching her in the ways *I* wish I could?

I can't deal with it.

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CHAPTER 3

Hallie

There's a war taking place somewhere deep inside Damien, and I'm fixated on his face as I try to decipher which battle he's currently fighting. I hate how beautiful he is, mainly for the simple reason that I can't have him. His nose is straight with narrow nostrils, making him look like a Greek god, and the pouty lips on him just beg to be kissed.

His blue fuck-me eyes meet mine for just a second before he starts to pace, his steps echoing in the small living room, and when he gives me a view of his broad back and that tight ass in his scrubs, my knees feel a little weak. I've never let myself notice these things about him before, and it's been for this exact reason. I'm not sure I can control myself around him.

Damien stops pacing and stands in front of me again, and the flutter of those blue eyes as he looks down my body makes me feel a spark of *something* that I shouldn't be feeling. He's so different from what I'm used to, and maybe that's the problem. Even still, I admire how his eyes stay a deep blue

regardless of what he's wearing. It brings me comfort that they don't change colors on a whim.

His fingertips brush against my left cheek, and he grimaces in a way that speaks of physical pain. Do I do that to him? Does it hurt him to not be able to have me? Is that what this is?

The front door swings open, and I tense. Damien's head snaps up, peers around me to see who just came in, although I know who it is. However, he doesn't drop his hand from my cheek. I hold my breath, knowing this is about to get crazy, and look over my shoulder.

Zayne is stopped short at the door, looking between Damien and me, before he drops his bags on the ground and walks toward me— *us*. His strides are long and quick as he crosses the room, and his scoff is loud as he stops next to me. Damien drops his hand and backs away with one step.

I flinch as Zayne pulls me into his side possessively, painfully gripping my waist. Soft, full lips meet my temple in what he wants people to believe is a sweet moment, but I know better. "I don't believe we've met." He doesn't look at Damien as he extends his hand, only watching my face suspiciously. I work to keep my breath steady and force myself to make eye contact. "My name is Zayne." He realizes his handshake is not being returned and drops it to the side.

Damien glares at him, "I know your name."

Zayne raises an eyebrow. "And yours?" His fingers curl into my side painfully, making me lean against him to ease the ache.

“Damien.” He smirks. Somehow he has the balls to walk toward us until he’s face-to-face with Zayne, their noses almost touching. My body feels like a concrete wall next to them, unmoving. I don’t even breathe for fear of drawing attention to myself. “We don’t have to be cordial and pretend. I was just heading out.” He walks around us to grab his backpack from the ground and hoists it over his shoulder, then stops right in front of me to plant a kiss on my forehead. *He’s fucking insane.* I release my breath and tense for the millionth time tonight as I can feel Zayne shaking beside me, his rage barely restrained.

“I’ll be waiting outside, love.” For fuck’s sake, he couldn’t just say Hallie? I don’t reply though, and he looks over his shoulder for a brief moment before leaving.

Zayne whirls on me, “What the fuck is happening, Hallie? And don’t say it’s nothing. He just kissed your fucking forehead and called you *love*.” He lets go of me abruptly and I almost fall over from the force of his push.

I look up at the ceiling, taking deep breaths while simultaneously trying not to scream at him. Why is he so fucking angry all the time? Does the itch make him pissed off constantly? Is it that difficult to get through each day without using? *Go smoke meth and calm your fucking rage already.*

“I think he just wanted to push your buttons.” I chuckle, and deep down it brings me a sort of giddiness that he’s pissed off about Damien. I know he gives a shit. That much is obvious, but it doesn’t hurt to be reminded from time to time.

“What the fuck was he doing here anyway, in our home?” Zayne sits on the couch, elbows resting on his knees to appear the picture of calm.

“We were working on a project for residency.” I point to the table where all of our supplies are still laid out, “I told you my friend was coming over.”

“Yeah, you just forgot to mention the friend has a *dick*.” He gestures between his legs and stares at me with one raised brow.

“It’s not like that...” I take a deep breath. “You have it all wrong...”

“Oh?” He laughs, and I can feel the little hairs on my arms standing on end. “So explain it to me then.”

“You’re acting crazy,” I blurt out before I can stop myself, instantly regretting it. His eyes harden, and he stands, suddenly crowding my space.

“Are you fucking with me right now?” He lowers his voice, and I shake my head. “You bring another man here, and he has his hands on you, and I’m being called crazy for *reacting*?” He has a point, but I don’t want to do this right now. I don’t want to do it at all. I just find it a bit ironic that the master manipulator is offended when it’s done to him.

“I don’t have time for this right now. I have to go outside and make nice.” I smile, but it’s full of venom. He returns it, which I don’t expect. “I can’t have people from work talking shit.”

“You do that, Hallie.” He walks quickly to our bedroom, slams the door, making the walls rattle.

Unfortunately, I do need to fix this with Damien so we can move on with our project and make a good team. What doesn't sit right with me is the way he provokes, knowing damn well what he's doing. When I walk outside, Damien is leaning against the wall right next to the door. The smile on his face as he looks at something on his phone makes my heart stutter, and I have a split second of jealousy. He never smiles like this, not for me or anyone around us. Who the fuck is he talking to anyway? I just want to slap that smile off. “Why the *fuck* would you do that?” My voice comes out hoarse, weak, not how I intended it to at all.

Damien locks his phone and puts it in his pocket. “He needs to know he has competition.” His eyes meet mine, and they dare me to go against him, to challenge him.

“Is that what I am?” I raise an eyebrow and get closer to him. “A fucking game?” He has the audacity to grin, his hand going around my waist, pulling me closer. I almost lower my defenses, mainly because this is the first time he smiles at *me*. Is this his intention? To confuse me?

“Not to me.” His lips are a whisper over mine, there but also not. “But to him? Undoubtedly.”

“I won't be part of this dick-measuring contest between you guys.” I lick my lips, tasting his cherry Chapstick. “There's no competition anyway. You and I— *we* aren't anything.” I push away, and his hands brush against my ass as I back up.

“Not yet.”

Damien walks away without another word, his round, tight ass outlined by his pants making me shake my head at myself. When he straddles his motorcycle, I imagine what it would be like to have him all over me, his legs on either side of my waist as he pins me down. He looks like the type to dominate, while also seeming like the type to make your darkest fantasies come to life.

Once he disappears from sight, I force myself to go back inside, even though every cell in my body screams at me not to. I know this is not going to end well tonight, and every step I take makes the feeling of dread in my stomach grow and fester.

The house is eerily quiet, and for just a moment, I wonder if he left too. However, I was at the front door all this time, so he couldn't have. I decide not to turn on any lights, causing me to stumble over my shoes on the way to the bedroom. The door is unlocked, thankfully, so maybe I'm lucky and he fell asleep.

His body is just a lump on the bed. It's only when I join him and cuddle up to him, do I feel him stiffen under my touch. I burrow closer to him, bringing my body flush with his as I spoon him, my nose in his hair. I can smell him. Pine and citrus, like the woods. It's intoxicating, my favorite smell in the world, and I flare my nostrils to take more of it in. “You have no idea how much you mean to me,” I whisper, and he peeks at me over his shoulder. It might be a trick of the low

lighting in the room, but it looks like there might be tears on his face.

“Then why do you do this to me?” He flips over and rests his head right next to mine on the pillow. His nose brushes against mine, his lips just inches away. “Am I not enough?”

“You,” I take his face between my hands to kiss his lips, “will *always* be enough for me.” His shoulders shake slightly, and he snuffles, making my heart crack. I don’t dare move, letting him talk. I want him to show me what it looks like when he’s stripped of his armor.

“I wish I could be better... *more* for you.”

“I don’t need more.” I tilt his chin up, talking with my lips against his. “I just need *you*.” He sobs, and I know his heart is broken, and the guilt I feel makes the blood in my veins freeze.

“I wish I didn’t want the meth every minute of every day, and I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to be the man you need in your life.” I stop breathing at his admission. He hasn’t talked to me about his cravings in the few months we’ve been living under the same roof, and I didn’t expect him to start now. “I don’t know how to be *me* anymore, not without drugs. But I’ll keep trying... Please, don’t leave me.” Tears stream down my face at his confession, and I run my fingers through his hair, lightly brushing the strands. He cries harder, shaking the bed now, and all I can think of is how wrecked he must be to finally let me in. “You’re going to leave me.” His voice is hoarse, defeated. “I feel it in my bones... and when I saw you

with him, I didn't need any more confirmation." Is this what rock bottom feels like for him?

"I won't ever leave you," I lie through my teeth, knowing damn well that this lie will someday be the source of my pain. Because I know if he goes back to the drugs, well, I can't be with him anymore.

And that hurts more than I'll ever admit to him.



It's finally my day off, and all I want to do is be a couch potato, although someone has to feed us. So here I am at the grocery store trying to figure out which avocado is the ripest. I never used to care about these things, and now I'm a control freak about my fruits and vegetables like an old person, or maybe even similar to my mom. No, *fuck that*. I'm nothing like her. I do have to admit though, that while I hate her now, she did teach me valuable adult lessons once upon a time. At least I learned to cook and clean before entering the system. I was able to take proper care of myself by the young age of fourteen. Mainly because if I didn't do it, no one would.

I carefully select three of the best avocados I can find that won't go bad for the next few days and two green ones. Sometimes when I'm in a hurry, I'll eat avocado toast for breakfast, but tonight I plan on using it as a side for dinner. I'll probably make rice, beans, and *carne asada*. The avocado on the side will make it feel complete for me, even if Zayne hates them. Then again, he hates most food. He's the pickiest eater I've ever met, honestly. He doesn't like mayo or mustard and rarely eats ketchup. There are approximately two vegetables in his diet and not even one fruit. How the fuck does someone survive like that?

Apples with peanut butter are my favorite work snack, often replacing my lunches because of the lack of time for a break. I only grab five apples since I don't want them to go bad, and I'm evidently the only one who will eat them since I'm always concerned about my nutrition. It's a shame I can't live off hot pockets and microwaveable meals like Zayne because I'd be saving a ton of time.

I take my time selecting more fruits and add bananas, mangoes, and cantaloupes to the shopping cart. Just as I'm turning toward the vegetables, another cart T-bones me, which makes the little wheels screech in a way that makes my teeth hurt. It almost sounds like nails dragging across a chalkboard, instantly cringe-worthy.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am." The voice sounds oddly familiar, and I snap out of my trance and stare into dark blue depths. "Hallie?" Even as his eyebrows furrow in confusion, my eyes narrow at him. He's not getting out of this one so easily.

“What are you doing here?” I look down his body, at the fitted shirt and gym shorts that hug his thick thighs, the hem at least four inches above his knee.

“It’s a grocery store, Hallie.” He says my name like I’m a nuisance, even though he’s the one who hit me with his stupid cart. Maybe he shouldn’t have a damn driver’s license. He sure as fuck can’t drive a regular car. “What do you think I’m doing?”

I raise one perfectly shaped brow at him; I would know I take care of them. “Do you even live around here?”

“Probably about ten minutes away.”

“So why are you on this side of town then?” I right my cart and walk with it toward the mushrooms and peppers. “Don’t you have a supermarket near you?”

Damien shrugs, “I like this one better.” His hands turn a red pepper over, searching for bruises and imperfections. When he finds none, he hands it over without looking at me.

I take it, fighting the urge to hit him with it. I’m not even a violent person, except he seems to bring it out of me. “Is it because you can watch me here?”

“What?”

“Did you come here to watch me?” I select the pre-sliced mushrooms and put them in my basket, then look for more peppers. It’s hard to pretend I’m alone and go about shopping without feeling slightly self-conscious. Is he judging what I’m buying? Does he eat clean food like me, or does he just buy

what's convenient? The way he inspects these vegetables tells me that *maybe* he cares about his nutrition as well, but also the way his biceps bulge with his every move scream that he really gives a shit.

“And how would I know when you're coming here?” Damien's laugh is raspy, sexy as fuck. “Do you think I just sit outside your apartment and wait for you to leave?”

“I'm not sure,” I press, but even as I say it, it feels silly to think so. Why would this man be obsessed with me to the point of following me? He could have anyone he wanted. “You look a little boring.”

“You know, some of us actually care about what we put into our bodies.” His pointed stare tells me we're not talking about food right now. “Health is a priority and all that.”

“Is that why you come to Whole Foods?” I grab a cucumber and inspect it, holding it up for him. He raises an eyebrow as I try not to laugh, “For the *health*?”

Damien gifts me with a grin that changes his entire face. He looks prettier, breathtaking. “Occasionally.” He pushes his cart toward the pre-packaged lettuce and I take faster steps until I'm next to him again. *Damned short legs*. “But mostly to look at the pretty girls.” His eyes drift down my body suggestively, stopping longer on my bare legs. My baby blue sundress hits around mid-thigh, and I realize this is the first time he's seen me dressed outside of the house. It's possible he thought I only owned scrubs and yoga pants.

“And did you find what you were looking for?”

He glances at my lips, then back at the lettuce. “Not yet, although you could help me with that.” He selects a Caesar salad kit, tosses it in the cart, then points at it. “Do you want one too?”

“No, thanks,” I lie. “That dressing has too much fat.”

He does a double take. “I can’t tell if you’re joking.” We continue toward the middle aisles of the grocery store since I need some essentials. He follows me like there’s nowhere else he’d rather be, no one else he’d want to spend his time with.

“I guess you’ll never know when I am or not then.”

The shelves are fully stocked and organized, reminding me why I come here every week regardless of how pricey it is. Other than the fact that they sell the best produce in town and have a variety of foods for different dietary needs, I just like the aesthetic.

I add Mac-n-Cheese, microwaveable rice, and Ramen noodles to the cart, and Damien looks at me like he might complain but doesn’t say anything. Pop-tarts, Nutrigrain bars, and animal crackers are next, and this time he shakes his head at me.

The frozen aisle makes me shiver in the skimpy dress, and as I open the door to grab strawberry Uncrustables, his eyes bug out of his head, which makes me chuckle. “What?”

“Where the hell did the girl from the produce aisle go?”

“It’s called having variety, Damien.” I roll my eyes as I toss the box in the shopping cart. “I personally believe the

strawberry Uncrustables are the superior flavor.”

“Are you even shopping for yourself at this point?” He grabs a box of the same and looks at the ingredients. “Or is this all for *him*?”

“Most of the junk is for him.” I walk to the ice cream section. “However, sometimes I indulge.” Caribbean coconut gelato finally shows itself and I jump a little from joy. “Like with this.” I hold up the non-dairy ice cream and grin.

“That doesn’t even count.” He walks the aisle until he spots something, then opens the fridge and grabs it. “Now, this,” he holds up the ice cream, “that’s indulging.”

“Rocky Road may be *my* favorite, but not my stomach’s.” My pout is wildly exaggerated, but it’s warranted in my opinion. “I can only eat it occasionally and only a few spoonfuls here and there.”

“That sounds fucking miserable.” He laughs, putting the ice cream back. I can’t contain my outrage and a squeak escapes when he closes the door to the freezer. “But I bet it tastes even better when you can’t have it.”

“Most things do,” I mumble, headed toward the checkout line.

We stand in line for a few minutes, and to my surprise, Damien unloads my shopping cart for me so the items can get scanned. I always spend a pretty penny here. Logically, I know I have enough money in the bank, but I still get anxiety when I have to put my debit card in the chip reader. The irrational fear

that somehow my card will be declined, my bank account drained, hits me full force. It's odd to have money in it to begin with, especially after living so many years without any.

Damien watches me fidget, my leg shaking as I enter my pin code. The machine dings obnoxiously, ordering me to retrieve my card. *Approved* flashes on the screen, and my body visibly relaxes and I tip the baggers for putting everything back in my cart for me.

I wait on the sidelines for him to pay for his groceries, and then we walk out together. At first, I think he's just following me to help me out, and I start wondering where the hell he's putting all of these groceries. Does the bike even have a trunk?

When I open my trunk though, Damien opens the one from the sleek black car right next to mine. It's a Hyundai Genesis Coupe, according to the back of it, with matte black rims. *What the fuck?* He moves to my shopping cart and begins unloading it, gently setting the bags down in my trunk and arranging them for me. I bought so much crap. I'm lucky I live on the first level at the apartment complex or I'd be so screwed.

There's a faint thud as he closes the small trunk of his car after he's done unloading his own groceries, and I step back so I can close mine too. We stand facing each other, unsure of how to proceed. What now? Where do we go from here?

"You should come with me to the supplement store." He fidgets with his keys, the first nervous gesture I've seen from

him, ever. Is he nervous because he thinks I'll say no? "It's around the corner, maybe two minutes away."

"I don't think that's a good idea." It's possibly the worst idea he's ever had. Even if we managed to only talk about supplements and nothing else, somehow, we would still be staring at each other like this. "I have a lot to do today."

Damien's face falls into an almost frown, but he quickly recovers. "Another time, then?"

No.

"For sure."

"Alright, well, you enjoy your day off." He walks toward the driver's side of his car and opens the door, holding it to look back at me one last time. "See you later, love."

There it is again.

Love.

I'm not entirely sure how that makes me feel yet, but I know it shouldn't feel good. When he called me that in front of Zayne, I was startled, but now when it's just us two, it actually feels special. That's the worst part.

The gravel crunches underneath my tan leather sandals as I round the bumper and get in my car, the leather seats burning my thighs as I settle in. I work to pull my dress down a bit to protect my legs but it's useless, the Texas sun is relentless and this heat is not waning anytime soon. I pull out of the parking lot without glancing back, I don't want to see where he went so I don't feel compelled to follow him there like a creep.

It's almost time to cook dinner, and I'm grateful the store is only a few minutes from home because I don't want to deal with the afternoon traffic right now. A face mask and a good book sound like the perfect way to spend my evening, and it almost makes me want to order takeout just so I don't have to cook for us. I can't, though. I'm trying to put money away in savings just in case. I've been researching the importance of having three to six months' worth of income set aside in case of an emergency. It's too bad that my brain's definition of an emergency would qualify as Zayne relapsing and losing his job, not necessarily me losing mine for whatever reason.

Once home, I take out the groceries and put them away, not deviating from the system I follow when stocking the pantry and fridge. The shelves are categorized and so are the drawers in the fridge, some are even color coded. I cringe thinking about how little progress I've made with my OCD, but I can't win every battle.

I get started on cooking my beans, setting the lid on the small pot before moving on to the skirt steak. I lay it out on the cutting board and marinade it, then put it in a glass bowl to soak it in for a while. After what feels like forever but is probably only thirty minutes, I pat it dry and then grill it. The small charcoal grill in the backyard gets the job done, and I'm grateful I can do this on my own.

The aroma of the cooked carne asada fills the apartment, making my mouth water. The beans are also done, so all I have left is to make the rice. It will be an easy task, that's why I bought the microwavable rice, so I don't have to make an

effort when I'm feeling lazy. Damien would probably keel over if he saw me making rice this way, considering the look of terror on his face when I put it in the shopping cart earlier. Thank God Zayne doesn't give a fuck.

I sit on the couch and play *Friends* while I eat dinner, contemplating which face mask I'll use tonight. I'll probably settle for one of the white ones that make girls look insane, the eyes and mouth cut out. I love to scare Zayne with it, so I'll probably wait until he's close to getting home before I put it on.

As night sets in, the sky darkens, and my living room does too. All the lights in the house are off, setting the ambiance for a good night of sleep. My eyes feel heavy, my limbs too. And just like that, all thoughts of reading and self-care are forgotten.

This is why I'm unreliable, I'm always tired lately.

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CHAPTER 4

Zayne

I wasn't lying the other night when I told Hallie that I want meth every minute of every day, and I don't think that will ever stop. It's a constant itch that I can't scratch because it's just out of reach. No matter what I do, it never ceases. And I know myself, I can only be strong for so long. The monster has claimed a part of me, a fragment of my soul, and now I don't know how to exist without it.

And that's why I'm here now.

Because I'm fucking weak.

I've been hanging out with the wrong crowd again, thugs, if you will. People who have drugs at their disposal. They've offered me plenty for free, but every time they do, I think about Hallie and how she's going to leave me. No matter what she says, I know she will. She's not going to put up with this again, and I can't say I blame her. I'm a different person under the influence of Tina. Her personality becomes mine until I can't be sure where we begin and end. We are *one*. I've been trying my hardest to stay clean, but my will is slipping. I can

feel myself slowly giving in inch by inch, and I'm dreading the plunge into the darkness that comes with falling over the edge.

There's a warehouse on B Street that I've been frequenting, mainly because my new friends hang out here. Somehow, I've managed to keep my hands to myself, even when they offer me everything I fucking want.

What I *crave* more than anything.

"Are you sure you don't want it?" John offers me a small baggie full of an off-white powder that I know will scratch the itch. In fact, I know it will make it disappear completely. "It's free, man." I know that's what dealers do to rope you in, offer you the good shit until it's got its claws sunk so deep into you that you would give every last penny for just one more slam.

"For how long?" I raise an eyebrow. "Until I'm hooked and then I owe you money?" He laughs and I laugh, too, like we're sharing an inside fucking joke. But this shit isn't funny to me anymore. *This is my goddamn life.* And I'm constantly fucking it up.

"Nah, bro." He shakes the little baggie in front of my face, taunting me. "My boy D said this is free for as long as you want it." I consider his words, weighing my options.

"Who the fuck is D?" And why is he important enough to make those decisions? Why would he want to supply it to me for free? It all sounds sketchy as fuck. *Do it.*

No, No.

Hallie.

“That’s the boss’ son.” John steps closer, his brown eyes crinkling as he smiles at me. But the smile sends a chill down my spine. That’s not a friend. “It’s up to you.” He shrugs, puts the baggie in my hand, and I let him. “Just think about it.”

I go back to my car and stare at the little baggie in my hand. At this life-changing powder that I know will ruin me. I will lose my job, my schooling, and my girlfriend. Not that all of those things matter. No, the most important one is *her*. She’s everything to me.

I open the glove compartment and toss it in there. Try to forget about it. But I know if I keep it, I will end up using. I know if I keep it, it will fucking use *me*. I tug at my hair, trying to feel something, attempting to ground myself enough to get out of here and somewhere safe. Back to *her*, she’s safe. She won’t ever let me fall. She’s everything I’ve ever needed. She’s good, something I’ve never had before. I try to remember that as I drive away from the warehouse, wishing I’d never involved myself with these people, but it’s too late now. They have me.

I go to the store to get Hallie roses. It has rows and rows of pretty flowers, the scent of them flooding my senses and making me feel dizzy. The need to use is incapacitating me, and I will myself to breathe in slowly and compose myself. I pick a bouquet of white roses for her and pay, aiming to hurry up and get out of here.

White roses are our thing now, just the way breathing is our thing. Something I don't want to do unless I'm by her side. I don't know if I buy her flowers because of the guilt I feel or if it means something more to me. All I know is that I want to see her smile, it hasn't been happening very often, and I'm more than likely the one responsible for that.

I need to make up for yesterday's outburst, which was founded on jealousy, but I think it was pretty fucking normal to feel that way after what I walked in on. Another man with his hands on her. I wanted to cut them right off and feed them to him. She shouldn't be letting anyone touch what's mine. She shouldn't want him to. And yet... she wasn't moving. She wasn't *stopping* him.

Rage, hot and thick, courses through my veins. I try to ignore it, thinking of all the ways I could feel better. How I could be one plunge away from not giving a single fuck. That would feel good to not care about anything. But I know it's not real. It's just the drugs talking to me, luring me in. Because no matter how high I am, I can only stop caring about Hallie for so long.

All the stars in the sky are conspiring to push me to my downfall. Now it's a matter of letting them or not. What's more important?

Hallie, Hallie, Hallie.

I slam the car door behind me, lock it, and listen for the beep. You can never be careful enough, especially when you carry precious cargo in the glove compartment.

The apartment is mostly quiet when I enter, except for maybe soft background noise. Hallie's sitting on the couch, her legs crossed as she watches television, eating a bowl of ice cream. Her smile is bright when I approach her, and I return it. Life feels normal this way, with her in *our* home, eating *our* ice cream on *our* couch. I never want to lose that. I don't want us to stop being... *us*.

"Baby," I breathe, crossing the distance between us. Her eyes light up when she notices the roses, our weekly ritual. I replace them every time they die, refusing to let her think I've forgotten about it. "You're so beautiful." But if I'm being honest, her eyes light up every time she sees me, and it causes my chest to squeeze itself until I can't breathe. There's something so reassuring about the way she loves me that it makes me forget that I always mess everything up.

The blush on her cheeks makes a warmth flood through me. This doesn't happen very often, and my heart nearly stops from how much I want her. "Thank you." She gets up from the couch, her pillowy lips meeting mine for a kiss. "They're beautiful."

"They look the same every week."

"And they're always beautiful." She laughs, taking the roses from my hand and going to the kitchen in search of a vase. Her sleep shorts ride up her ass when she bends over to look under the sink, and I feel my cock thickening in my pants. I want to bend her over the sofa and fuck her, leaving the smell of our

sex all over it so everyone can tell what happens here when they come over.

Once she has arranged the flowers and put them in the vase, she goes back to sit on the couch, lowering the volume on the TV a few levels. “Come sit with me.” She pats the spot next to her and I indulge her, tangling our legs together.

“This is what I want to come home to every day.” Her skin is so soft, as it always has been. When I brush my knuckles over her cheek, she closes her eyes and smiles. There’s something so special about it, like I’m the only man for her. It makes me want to be better, not fuck this up. She doesn’t take what I say as seriously as I do. Especially since I know what I’ve been doing, how I’ve been jeopardizing this, our relationship. It’s just a matter of time before I destroy us, wreck her life like a tornado, and break our hearts. Before I sell our fucking souls to something that will never return them. And as always, I’ll drag her down with me because I’m selfish, and I don’t know how to be without her.

Her fingers brush through my hair, making me close my eyes and groan. “Are you hungry?” The smile in her voice makes my eyes fly open. I *am* hungry. “I could make us some lunch, if you’d like. That way you’re not eating another one of those Hot Pockets you make yourself.”

I laugh at that. “I like hot pockets. Leave me alone.” Her pretty brown eyes roll at me, “I want something else for lunch, though.” I stand up and kneel on the ground, pulling her body

until her ass sits on the edge. She's relaxed, pliable even, and her legs fall open for me instinctively.

Her lips turn up until a full grin graces her face. "If I knew this would satisfy your hunger, I would've been feeding you this way all along."

I keep my touch light, letting my fingertips graze her legs all the way to the inside of her thighs. She shivers for me, goosebumps on her body from how I'm making her feel. It spurs me on, seeing her so worked up, her breathing labored as she waits for my next move.

Her cute little Hello Kitty pink shorts are a dichotomy to what lies beneath. When I pull them aside, her see-through thong shows me bare, glistening lips under the fabric. My mouth waters as I press my nose to her, inhaling the sweet, musky scent of her essence. *Goddamn it, I want to taste her.*

I shove her underwear to the side and watch her drip down her ass, a shiver running down my spine. My tongue darts out, and I lick her ass to clit, lapping her wetness like it's my salvation. Her sweet taste fills my mouth, and I groan against her, eating her with my whole damn mouth because I'm fucking starving for her.

Hallie's little moans fill the room, urging me on, and her hands fly to my hair as she rocks against me. I circle my tongue against her swollen nub and spell the alphabet, which may sound really stupid, but it works. Her muscles tense beneath me, her abdomen contracting as I suck her clit into my mouth. I know she's close, and I want to hear her screams.

When you spend so much time with someone observing them, analyzing them, *memorizing* them, you learn the cues.

“Yes, yes.” Her fingers tighten in my hair and my eyes almost roll back in my head from how that feels. We love the pain. We seek it, live off it. “I’m going to come.”

I take that as my cue to bite her clit, wanting to inflict my own pain on her, and she finally screams for me, her hips flying off the couch as she convulses under me. My arms pin her down, my fingers digging into her hips as I suck her into my mouth again while she holds her underwear to the side for me like the good girl she is.

“Zay!” God-fucking-damn. *Yes.*

My tongue slows, lapping her one more time as her body relaxes into the couch, “Say it again, baby.” I rub her clit with my thumb for good measure.

“Zayne.” She groans and swats my hand, letting her underwear fall back in place.

When I rise from the ground, there’s a massive smile on her face, and it’s contagious because I can’t help but let my own smile slip free. “I’m going to hop in the shower, baby. Do you want to come?”

“Wait,” her brows furrow, “What about you?”

“Today was your day.” I shrug, “I’ll get mine later.” I always do.

“I’m actually kind of hungry,” As if on cue, her stomach growls and her high-pitched giggle fills the space. “I’ll make

something for us.” She gets up from the couch to go to the kitchen, and I smack her ass as she passes me. The way it jiggles has me clenching my fists, ready to pounce on her again. Nevertheless, she’s starving so I just readjust myself in my pants.

“I’m going to go shower.”

My hands start shaking just as I turn the shower handle and adjust the water temperature. The deep breaths I force myself to take do nothing to improve it, and when I step in and dip my head into the hot water, my chest starts heaving.

You’re okay.

It’s okay.

Everything’s going to be okay.

A sob rips from my throat just as I lower myself to the ground, letting the water flow over me as if it’ll wash all my despair away. The porcelain hurts my butt as I bring my knees to my chest, but I ignore it. That pain is mild in comparison to the burning sensation running over my skin every waking minute of my days.

I don’t think I can do this anymore. Ignoring the little baggie in the glove compartment is getting harder to do by the second. The last few months of sobriety have been the toughest thing I’ve ever had to go through in my entire life, and I’ve endured plenty of difficult situations, especially with my dad and my mental illness. But this? I always knew that eventually I’d go to hell, I just never thought I’d *live* in it.

I haven't particularly been a good person in this lifetime. I've fucked over many people, hurt the ones who have loved me, and I will more than likely never stop doing it. It's just who I am. Maybe there is something wrong with me at my core. My DNA replication must have been sabotaged because there's no way this is normal. The worst part is that I know this is exactly the life I deserve, but it's still hard to come to terms with it.

There's a knock on the door, startling me out of my sobbing trance. Hallie doesn't wait for me to reply, she just barges in and stops in her tracks. I'm sure I look a mess with the shower curtain wide open and the puddle of water on the floor. She looks from the floor to my face, and her expression softens.

Her thin white tank top suddenly hits the ground in silence, and her shorts follow. She's fucking perfect from every angle, and sex usually curbs the cravings a bit, but I don't even have the energy to get a boner at this point. How tragic.

For just one second I believe she's here to fuck, but then she gets in the shower behind me and wraps around me like a blanket. Her arms come around me in a hug to rest against my chest, feet planting themselves on either side of me as her legs circle me tightly as if they'll hold me together for her. She just doesn't know that I've already fallen apart, and there's nothing left of me to hold anymore.

"It's okay, Zay." She rests her cheek against my back, the water surely beating on her face. I relax under her embrace, "Let it out. You're safe with me."

Sobs burst from my chest until I feel like I can't breathe, the force of them hurting my ribs. I don't know how to make the cravings stop. I don't know how to not fail. How will I stop myself from giving in? What if thoughts of Hallie stop being enough to say no? What if I fuck everything up, and she leaves me again?

"I can't do this anymore." She shushes me, her hands rubbing up and down my chest in soothing motions. "I'm not strong enough."

"Yes, you are. You're the strongest person I know, and you can do whatever you set your mind to."

"Why are you even with me?" I chuckle and wipe my tears. My voice doesn't sound like my own anymore, however. It's as if someone else has taken over my body and I'm just a spectator. "Why are you even *here* with me? Aren't you tired of being treated like shit? Aren't you scared of being with a fucking drug addict? You know it's just a matter of time before-"

Her arms squeeze around me, cutting me off. "You don't get to do this." The laugh that bursts from her lips is almost scary, except nothing she does actually makes me feel that way. "You don't get to sabotage this too."

"I love you."

My whisper is so soft that I'm not even sure she can hear me over the spray of the water beating on us, but it doesn't even matter because I've never been more sure of someone's love in my life. The problem isn't her, it's me. I'm

dysfunctional. There's something seriously wrong with me that can't be fixed, and no matter how much she tries to, I'm afraid it'll only end in disappointment that she wasn't able to achieve it.

But even still, I *can't* ever let her go.

I'll fucking die without her.

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CHAPTER 5

Hallie

The keyboards all seem to sing in tandem as the nurses write up the charts on their patients, and the familiarity of the sounds makes me feel at ease. My workstation on wheels is lowered the entire way for my short stature, and yet my neck is awkwardly raised. My wrists also hurt from the angle I'm typing. Damien smirks at my side when he sees me stretching my tight muscles, and I do my best to ignore him. He's lucky he's so damn tall and doesn't have to worry about going to a chiropractor for always looking up at people.

I begin charting my assessment, starting with the neurological section, and working my way down the list. My brain continues to rattle off the checklist as I type, muscle memory kicking in. It's funny how your brain is on autopilot the longer you do something, as if it learns your routines before you consciously do it.

Nights in the ICU consist of constant documenting. Vital signs every single hour, medication drips to adjust, blood sugars to be taken, fluid inputs and outputs to be monitored,

and the list goes on and on and on. Sometimes the to-do list is so long it physically hurts my head. Fortunately, we all work well together and it's a constant team effort for tasks we can't achieve on our own. For me, it consists of things like turning my patients. I know I can't do it on my own, so I always have to ask for help. I love my job, but it's also just a job. I'm not willing to hurt myself at the beginning of my career due to pride.

The sound of rustling and chairs being pushed back comes from behind us, and four of our coworkers go into a room. I continue to chart on my patient, an eighteen-year-old male who fell off a motorcycle and suffered an injury to his cervical spine, instantly making him a quadriplegic. Due to the severity of this patient's condition, he is the only one assigned to me tonight. Usually, our ratios are one or two patients per nurse, depending on the severity of the patient's situation and how much we have to do for them. Still, the general rule of thumb is that they are intubated and sedated, making them utterly dependent on us to do everything for them.

Damien glances over at my computer, being nosy as fuck, and sighs. He straightens in his chair and rolls back to his workstation. "What?" I ask him, spinning in my chair to face him. "Why are you making that sound?"

"That man's suffering is so unnecessary." He scoffs, "Just put him out of his misery already. His family is selfish as fuck."

"And why do you think that?"

“Are you kidding?” He whirls around to face me now, too, “Just look at him.” I follow his finger that points at the patient’s room. “He will never be able to move or feel any part of his body again, and right now, the only thing keeping him alive is that vent. He can’t even breathe on his own. Do you honestly think this is the life he wants for himself?”

“At least he’s alive!” I argue. “He could’ve just died when he fell off that bike.”

“This *is* death,” Damien counters, his hands balling into fists as his blue eyes narrow. “Look at him.” I turn my chair around and do, the glass walls and doors giving me an unobstructed view of him. There are tubes sticking out of every single orifice, multiple pumps putting medication into his veins, and bandages all over his body. “Just because he has a heartbeat doesn’t mean he’ll ever have quality of life again. That’s worse than death.”

“So having a worse quality of life than what he’s used to means he should die?”

“I highly doubt he will want to live this way.” I can tell he’s really serious about this topic because his neck veins bulge from the tension in his body. “I sure as fuck wouldn’t.”

“So what? You’d want me to pull the plug on you if you fell off your bike and were in this situation?”

“Hell yes, I would,” he answers without hesitation and faces his computer once more, clearly done with the conversation. The squeal of the office chair as he pushes further away from me is painful to my ears, and the cherry-colored hardwood

floors of the unit will probably have scuff marks from him at this point.

“I disagree.” My shoulders are stiff as I shrug, and the image of Damien on life support floods my mind. I don’t know why it doesn’t sit right with me, but the thought of pulling the plug on him makes me feel too much at once. Anger and sadness are at the forefront, and I’m not even sure why. I don’t dislike him, but I barely know this man. In fact, we just now started getting to know each other. “So don’t ever expect that from me.”

“It’s a good thing you’ll never be my healthcare proxy.”

“Well, you might want to be very specific when it comes to your advance directive since probably no one will put up with you long-term either way.”

Damien’s laugh echoes in the nurse’s station, making me smile. I think we enjoy pushing each other’s buttons, and it takes no effort on my part whatsoever to achieve it with him, which is actually a bit entertaining.

“My poor girlfriend doesn’t know what she’s in for.” I swear my heart stops beating in my chest at that word, and my face heats, which he doesn’t notice because I’m not even special enough to warrant eye contact during this conversation. Or maybe he’s just busy documenting on his patients and is multitasking. I could be overreacting. “I guess I should warn her.”

“You’ve never...” I shake my head, aiming to get my thoughts straight. “Spoken about her at all before.”

“That’s because she doesn’t exist.”

The relief that streams through my body at his words slightly worries me, although I guess I’m just glad he wasn’t hiding things from me. It would’ve been weird considering the comments he’s made, the mild flirting, the way he looks at me. If he had a girlfriend he didn’t tell me about, I probably would never be able to trust him again. It says a lot about a person’s character when they lie about something so significant. I also realize that’s hypocritical of me, but it still doesn’t change my point of view on it.

There’s a prickling in my face, and the feeling of being watched invades my senses. I strive to ignore it, focusing on my computer, but someone clears their throat at the nurse’s station counter, causing me to look in that direction.

Zayne.

His angry face flushes as he looks between Damien and me, and even though we’re sitting about five feet apart from each other, I know he wants to separate us even more.

As is, Zayne is a jealous person. He’s always been this way and would still be like this with a different man, even if he didn’t feel threatened by that person. The mere act of someone else breathing in my direction is offensive to him, and the fact that his jealousy is justified right now makes his blood boil at an even higher temperature.

I’m not entirely sure what qualifies as a valid reason for jealousy, but I do understand that the last time he saw Damien and me, we were in a questionable situation. Zayne lives

through his beliefs. He feels them to his very core and seeing me with someone else in any context makes him think that I'm replacing him. I'm not saying it's right, in fact, it's a little crazy, but it's just how he is. I have to accept certain parts of him if I want this to work out between us, and I can admit that I'm not perfect so I can't expect him to be that, either.

He lifts a bag of food up until it's at face level with him, then sets it on the counter. Sometimes he surprises me with food, bringing it to work so we can eat lunch together, and by lunch, I mean at three in the morning. It's the little sacrifices like these that make my heart speed up a little, especially because I know he can be sweet, even if he is not at his core.

I smile and walk toward him with a spring in my step, ready to go sit with him in the break room. Sometimes we go to the car, but since my patient is so sick I decide to stay here instead. I just hope that Damien doesn't make this awkward by joining us. I round the corner of the counter until I'm standing next to him, my body almost flush with his side. He searches my face, not looking any less pissed, regardless of the smile I've been holding in place.

"You ready?" I ask Zayne, grabbing his hand to lead him to the break room. Rather than taking it, he turns to face me and roughly grabs the back of my head until our faces are close together, our noses touching. His breath is warm on my face, the minty scent overpowering my nostrils. "Baby?"

"Hallie," Zayne breathes against me, his lips moving against mine when he speaks. "I'm trying not to lose my shit, I

promise.” My hands slide up to his chest, holding onto his shirt as my chest caves in. Please don’t do anything stupid. “However, I can’t take much more of him.”

“I work with him.” I tighten my fists around his shirt and yank him closer until my chest brushes against my knuckles. “And until our project is done, I don’t have a choice.”

Desperate green eyes meet mine, and I know he’s not going to let this go, but he has to for now. “Then fucking hurry up with it.” His lips meet my own for a chaste kiss, “You know what this does to me, baby.” It makes him fucking *crazy*.

“Let’s go.” I pull him toward the break room and realize Damien hasn’t said one word since Zayne showed up. It’s as if he doesn’t exist, or maybe like *I* don’t exist to *him*.

I look over my shoulder briefly to search for him, and his back is turned to me, his body coiled in like he’s in physical pain or maybe ready to attack. His face is not visible to me from this angle, but just as I’m about to face forward again, he looks at me, a frown furrowing his brows as his eyes travel from me to Zayne. It sends a chill down my spine as he watches us, but I continue to walk.

When we make it to the brown door of the break room, I enter the pin code and unlock it for us. The little beep each number makes as I press the buttons is therapeutic, and I love that almost every door in the unit does this except for patient rooms and staff restrooms. The med room, the supply room, and the break room are all locked for safety purposes.

The buzz of the door as it opens startles Zayne, which makes me giggle, and I direct him to the end of the long conference table so we can eat. When he opens the food for me, my stomach growls from how good it smells, and there's steam still rising from the container from how hot it is. The Chinese food restaurant is only minutes away, but I don't think they're open this late. When did he buy this?

"I got your favorite," he breaks the silence, handing me a plastic fork and knife. I walk over to the staff fridge and pull out two Sprites, setting them on the table for us. I don't usually drink soda, but it's either that or water and right now I'm not in the mood for hydration. "Are you off work tomorrow?"

I sit down next to him and open the sweet and sour sauce that came in a tiny little bowl on the side. The chicken and fried rice smell amazing, and my mouth waters as I pour the sauce over the top of it. "Yes." I take a small bite of my food, trying not to talk with a full mouth. "I'm off for the next two days."

"I thought so." He smiles and his forehead wrinkles. It's so endearing I want to kiss him. "I switched my schedule for someone to take those days for me at work. I was thinking we could go do something together tomorrow?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"There's a hot air balloon festival in town tomorrow. I know how you love those things." It's thoughtful that he changed his schedule in the first place, but him remembering that I love hot

air balloons and taking me to see them... I have no words. This might be the first time he has put in so much effort since we first started dating. Is it because he's scared Damien will steal me from him?

"I just need a couple of hours of sleep when I get home, and I'll be good to go."

Zayne reaches for my hand and gives it a soft squeeze. "I'll stay up tonight and we can sleep together then."

The door buzzes open and I try to take my hand out of his grip, but he holds on tightly to it, my fingers cracking under the strain. I maintain eye contact, not deviating from it since I know he'll get jealous. Although I can't be sure of who came in just now, I have a feeling it's Damien, and by the look of Zayne's body language I think I might be right.

The snap of a soda can opening draws my attention, and I let myself look behind me, slightly turning my body to get a better view. Damien is leaning against the break room sink and sipping on a Coca-Cola, staring directly at us. His gaze doesn't waver when Zayne turns around to look at him, but the can of soda crinkles in his fist as he squeezes it until his knuckles whiten.

"Damien..."

"I was just leaving, love." He straightens from his place against the sink and throws the soda can in the trash to his right.

Zayne pushes his chair back and stands, walking toward Damien with determination and a lot of fucking anger. Damien, however, just smirks and meets him halfway, his pearly whites on full display. He really does have the *best* smile I've ever seen.

Damien slightly bends at the waist so their noses touch, which has Zayne looking up at him as they share the same breath. I wouldn't say he's much shorter than Damien, but maybe about two inches and Zayne is six feet tall.

This is precisely what I've been looking to avoid, this confrontation. Zayne is the kind of person who likes to start shit. He doesn't give a damn about anything or anyone and will pick a fight on a whim. It's worse that Damien is clearly instigating at this point, and I'm sure he won't be letting this go.

I try to get between them, but it's pointless. There's no way in hell I'll be able to move these two. Instead, I decide to go for the person who I feel can be most reasonable and pull on his arm. "Leave, Damien." I tug one more time, but he doesn't budge.

"Ask me nicely, *Hallie*." He finally breaks eye contact with Zayne to look at me, and my heart skips a beat when those pretty eyes focus on my face.

"This is between us—" Zayne interrupts, but I talk over him anyway.

"Please?"

Damien nods, “I have to get back to work anyway.” They look at each other one more time, and Damien’s narrowed stare travels down the length of Zayne’s body as if disgusted, but about what, I’m not sure. He walks past us and exits the room, not looking back once in the process.

My chest deflates when he leaves like he took all the air with him, and Zayne invades my space. One hand comes to my waist, pulling me in, and one comes to grip my face painfully. “You shouldn’t have done that, Hals.” The way he’s glaring instills so much fear into me that I don’t even dare blink. The feel of his fingers crushing my jaw is the only thing keeping me grounded, and I’m afraid to breathe too deeply and break him from this hyper-focused trance he seems to be in as he looks into my eyes. “But we can talk about it later.”

I nod, and he releases me with a slight shove. My face aches and throbs from where he grabbed it, but I force myself not to touch it, not to draw more attention to it and show weakness. “I’ll see you at home.”

The unit is still dark as I exit the break room and run to the staff bathroom to gather myself. The tears flow hot and quick down my cheeks, smearing my mascara in the process. I smother my face with my hand, muffling the sound of my cries so my coworkers don’t get concerned.

The problem with Zayne is that when things are good, they’re amazing. However, when things are bad... he’s a fucking monster with me. His jealousy, his aggression, the way he has no regard for my feelings or my body, all make me

hate him in the moment. This isn't the first time he's done something like this, but he's never felt like he had a reason to do it *here* before now.

My nose is all stuffed up from crying so I blow it, then look at myself in the mirror and clean up the black tear tracks on my face from the mascara. Maybe I should invest in waterproof mascara, especially working in healthcare. I can't even count how many times I've cried in this bathroom, whether it's from being overwhelmed by my workload, due to a patient's struggle, or death in general, from my patients or someone else's. The staff restrooms are the home to heartbreak and despair, and if we could store tears in here, we probably would've all drowned by now.

After composing myself, except for my red and splotchy face, I exit the bathroom only to run into a rock-hard body. Calloused hands steady me by my arms, holding me at a distance. Damien's eyes look me over as if searching for injuries and settle on my face. The imprint of Zayne's fingers is still on my jaw and cheeks, and I know the moment he notices it because he closes his eyes and clenches his jaw. When he opens them again though, he is the picture of calm; a placid lake with no waves, not even a ripple.

"It's time to turn your patient." Damien nods toward the supply room, and we head there together to gather supplies. I like to stack my patient care, doing as many necessary tasks as possible in one go. Right now, we have to turn my patient so I might as well do everything I need to, especially since it's around three thirty in the morning. It might seem like there's a

ton of hours left of my shift, but when you're busy with a patient the time flies by.

“Do you need any help with anything else?” His soft voice pierces my heart, mainly because his question doesn't feel work-related. I know he can notice my pain, see it in my face, but him actually acting like he gives a shit is new. Does he care, or what is his game here? Do I even want him to care? And if he does, then why?

We walk across the hall to my patient's room, and I slide the glass door to the left to go inside. I'm immediately hit by a gust of freezing cold air, which makes me shiver. I must remember to cover him up again before leaving this room. It has to be so uncomfortable to be stuck in a freezer for this long.

Cole Harris is beautiful. I've seen his picture from before the accident in the chart. Straight brown hair that falls to his shoulders and bright blue eyes that remind me of the sky. Now his face is scraped and swollen, and even though he's recognizable to us, he doesn't look like the same person. His hair is matted in the back even though he's only been here for two days, and no matter how much I try to untangle it, I can't do it without hurting him.

“Okay, let's turn him on his left side,” I say to Damien, just as the monitor starts beeping, and his pulse slows way the fuck down. Shit. Shit. *Shit*. “Quick, turn him!”

Damien helps me turn him on his left side, and then I lift his gown and notice one of the electrodes on his chest that connect

to the monitor is not sticking properly. I need to see his heart rhythm on the monitor to ensure it's true bradycardia.

"I'll get one for you." Damien walks to the side table and rustles through medical equipment searching for the electrode stickers, and I go to the pulse ox on Cole's finger to make sure it's sticking properly. When Damien replaces the damaged electrode, the heart rate and rhythm still don't change. In fact it gets lower, and his pulse is thirty-nine beats per minute.

"Fuck, fuck." I get my penlight out of my pocket, go to Cole and pull his eyes back one by one. His pupils are not reactive to light and accommodation and not equal in pupil size. Goddamnit. "Call charge!" I tell Damien, and he runs out of the room.

Cole's blood pressure was in the two hundred's this morning and the day shift nurse put him on a labetalol drip, which lowers his blood pressure and heart rate. He hadn't experienced any complications all shift, but I guess that's how it always goes. When the shit hits the fan, it's usually sudden.

I adjust the cuff on Cole's arm and tap the monitor's screen to take his blood pressure. The whirring sound of the blood pressure cuff doing its job makes sweat go down my spine, and then the screaming fills the space. His blood pressure reads sixty over forty, and I run to the pump to stop the drip. I also stop the feeding pump, knowing I will more than likely be resuscitating this patient.

His face pales, and suddenly he is profusely sweating. "*Fuck!*" I scream. "Someone get me some fucking atropine

and call a rapid response!” I lower the height of the bed, then make him flat on his back. “Call the intensivist!”

The board sits behind the head of the bed, and I get it ready in case I have to slip it under him to perform chest compressions. “Cole, stay with me.” I squeeze his hand even though I know he can’t feel it. “*Stay* with me, don’t give up. Don’t, *Don’t*.” I remove his hospital gown, tossing it to the side as I have a feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach that he will more than likely not make it through this.

The charge nurse runs into the room just as the monitor begins to scream louder, and I stick the board under him with her help. “I already called the doctor, he’s on his way right now.” The rest of the unit nurses and techs start flooding the room, and thankfully this one has a lot more space than a regular floor because our critically-ill patients usually need more equipment and attention. I look up at the monitor and watch the heart rate fall to twenty, ten, *zero*. My heart falls right along with him, and the monitor flatlines into asystole. *No*.

The bed squeaks loudly as I climb on it, set my knees on the edge, and start performing chest compressions like *my* life depends on it instead of his. No, God, please *not him*. I put all my body weight and strength into pumping his chest. “Someone call the neurosurgeon!” I scream, the tears falling hot and quick down my face for the second time tonight, but this time it feels justified.

I can hear the charge nurse calling the surgeon in the background, but I'm so focused on bringing Cole back that I just hear the whoosh of blood in my ears, tuning almost everything out. I faintly hear the screaming of the nurses as they start getting supplies out of the crash cart, and someone comes around to place defibrillator pads on his chest as I continue compressions. Indigo eyes meet mine as Damien finishes putting the pad on the left side, where I'm kneeling on the bed performing compressions. I don't stop as we hold eye contact, and his eyes turn tender for me, which has never happened before.

“Pulse check!”

I stop compressions, removing my hands from his chest and wiping them on my thighs as I wait for the next round. Damien takes off one glove, reaching across the bed and wiping his thumb over my cheeks, drying my tears. “It's okay,” he mouths, then puts his glove back on. He comes around the bed and touches my back, rubbing it softly. “Let me take this next round.”

“No.” I shake my head vigorously. “No, he's my patient.”

“Hallie, everyone needs a break.” Large hands come to my waist, trying to pull me off the bed, but I resist. We don't have much time before the compressions need to be restarted. I don't have time for this shit. “I'm stronger, babe. I'll bring him back.” I look at him over my shoulder, tears flooding my eyes again until his face becomes blurry. “I'll bring him back for you.”

I know it's a promise he can't keep, and I know I shouldn't be this attached to Cole, but I let him pull me off the bed to take over. Maybe my attachment is with everyone, and maybe I'm not meant to be in critical care. This stress affects me deeply. I don't see my patients as a room number, they are people to me, and I want them to live. I want them to get better and go on to live their lives again.

Damien sets me on the ground just as the nurse yells, "No pulse! Let's shock!" We step back from the bed, and someone yells, "Clear!" Everyone in the room raises their hands to signal that no one is touching the patient, and the staff close to the bed also backs up further. The shock echoes in the room, but the rhythm on the screen doesn't change. "Resume compressions!"

Damien takes my place with compressions, yet the only difference is that he doesn't have to climb on the bed to perform them. He simply locks his arms and puts his hands over Cole's chest, ready to start. His pace is steady and robust, the pumps of his arms delivering so much power that Cole's body begins to jostle on the bed, and we can hear ribs starting to break under his hands. I stand at his back and take deep breaths, praying for my patient even though I never do that.

The intensivist walks into the room, and I give him a report on the patient, telling him everything essential and the condition he was in right before his heart stopped. She starts barking orders at everyone, telling them which medications to keep pushing.

After what feels like five minutes but is undoubtedly less than that, Damien stops and someone checks the femoral artery for about ten seconds. “We have a pulse!”

My body deflates, and a sob escapes me before I clamp my mouth. I’m so fucking thankful for Damien. I’ll have to show him another time, but right now, the intensivist starts yelling more orders about what medications to hang. Which, thankfully, we already have in the room. Lastly, she screams at us to rush him to the operating room, where the neurosurgeon is already scrubbing in and waiting for him.

Damien and I start gathering the pumps onto one pole that attaches to the bed, getting Cole ready for transport. It’s crazy how in sync we are with each other here. If I move, he moves, and he doesn’t have to ask me what I need, he just anticipates it. We make a good team, but that could also be from going to so many other codes together. I’m sure we’ve observed each other enough that we know what to expect now.

Once we finish setting everything up, we rush him to the operating room, where my heart is falling through my stomach from nerves. We give the OR nurses a report, and just as we’re walking out the door, someone yells, “Code Blue!”

I can’t do this.

The doors shut behind me. I rest against it and slide down to the ground, my hands shaking as more tears fall down my face. Damien kneels in front of me and takes my face in his hands, but I close my eyes and refuse to look at him. “Thank you,” I sniffle, as his thumbs wipe my tears, but they just

won't stop coming. "For bringing him back, even if only for a few minutes."

"I only did it for you." My eyes open slowly to meet his, and my confusion must show on my face because he elaborates, "You're so pure, Hallie. I knew you'd need to feel like you did everything you could, and now you did."

"I don't think I can work here anymore."

Damien lets go of my face for a moment and sits across from me, his legs spread open, then grips my waist and slides me toward him. I fit perfectly between his legs, and his hands come back to my face. "Look at me, Hallie," he says, and I take a deep breath as my shoulders start shaking again. His eyes look bright, but at the same time, they are still dark. It's like being trapped at the bottom of the ocean when the light starts reaching you the closer you get to the surface. I don't know if I'll drown or find respite in them. "You're so strong and such an amazing nurse. You can't give that up." I know he'd say this to anyone else having a mental breakdown over their patient, but I can't help the warmth that floods my body with his words.

I nod and rest my head against his chest, unsure of what to say. After a few minutes, we stand and head back to the ICU. He has two patients to take care of and with two hours of the shift remaining. I need to figure out what I'm going to do now that I don't have a patient. They'll either make me stay and take on a new admission or a transfer from a different floor.

Kristy, the charge nurse, is at the nurse's station probably waiting to talk to me after what happened. There's so much charting I have to get done, and my eyes beg her not to give me a new patient or I'll be stuck here for hours after the day shift gets here. I go around the counter and stand beside her, ready for bad news.

"Are you okay?" she asks, rolling a chair next to me and patting it so I sit down with her. "Do you need anything?" A break, a snack, sleep. Possibly a change of specialty, maybe a new career.

"I'll be fine."

"Okay." She doesn't believe a word coming out of my mouth, especially since she's been an ICU nurse for over twenty years, but I really don't want to talk about it right now. "Finish up your charting, then go home."

"But there's-"

"Two hours left of the shift," Kristy interrupts me, "And by the time you're done charting on him, it'll probably be close to seven either way."

"Thank you," I whisper, trying to hold in the tears. When the fuck does this job stop making people cry?

I end up spending close to two hours charting, just as she said, and when I'm done, I don't say goodbye to anyone. I walk out of the unit and don't look back, unsure of my next step. Do I want to come back here? Am I cut out for this? Why can't I stop crying? Why do these patients affect me so much?

The drive home is a blur, and when I finally make it inside the apartment, I strip my clothes as soon as I close the front door. I need out of this uniform, and these bad luck shoes are going in the fucking trash. There's no way I'm wearing them again.

It's quiet in here, with just the faintest amount of sunlight coming in through the blinds. Zayne said he was going to stay up until I got home, but he's not used to being up all night, so I can't hold it against him. He lies in our bed facing the window, the covers up to his neck. Soft snores disrupt the silence, and I pull back the comforter to get in behind him. Fuck a shower, fuck brushing my teeth, fuck eating. I just want to close my eyes and forget tonight ever happened.

I press my naked body against Zayne, and he stirs in his sleep, reaching back to take my hand and wrap my arm around his waist. Even though he has no idea what happened tonight, he still knows how to comfort me all the same. I close my eyes and let the profound exhaustion take me under, telling myself lies about how Cole will be fine so I can finally fall asleep.



Zayne and I missed the hot air balloon lift-off since it was at seven in the morning and I had just gone to sleep, but we're here now to enjoy some food, drinks, and hopefully watch the balloon glow at nightfall.

It's now five in the afternoon and we stand at the park surrounded by food trucks, trying to choose which one we want to eat from. Personally, I want to look for something on the healthier side since fried foods seem to upset my stomach. There's a Greek food truck that catches my eye, but the line looks about an hour long. I want to be upset about it, but this is just how it works at festivals like this one, so I sigh and pull Zayne with me to get in line. At least the weather is cooling down since it's getting later in the day.

I order a lamb gyro with pita and hummus on the side, and Zayne surprisingly orders a chicken gyro with French fries. I've never seen him eat semi-healthy, let alone Greek food, but I smile as he moans in delight when he takes the first bite. There's a gazebo with benches, and only one of them is unoccupied so we hurry toward it. It's a great spot with a clear view of the man-made lake in the park, and many families are sitting on the long stretch of grass in front of it.

Sometimes I enjoy people-watching, and as I eat the delicious gyro, I watch the families interact. Children scream, cry, laugh, and smile all in the span of one minute, and it's a little scary to think about raising one. I've never given motherhood much thought. In fact, I've had no burning desire to start a family with Zayne. Part of that might be due to the fact that I don't think I'd know how the hell to be a mother. I

haven't had the best role models when it comes to parenting. I'd know exactly what not to do, but it doesn't mean I would actually know what to do with a kid. Not to mention, I'm emotionally fucked and so is Zayne. I've heard Bipolar Disorder is hereditary, and if I can help it, I'd want nothing to do with passing that forward. It's not that I have anything against it, I just wouldn't want to see my child suffer the way he does. I think my heart is too weak for that.

Zayne's hand squeezes my thigh, and I turn my face to look at him. His green eyes sparkle at me, the sunset reflecting off them. This is the happiest I've seen him in a while, and this might be the first date we've had in a month. The hospital has kept me busy, and he barely has time off between his job and schooling. We've tried to work our schedules around each other, but unfortunately, my job doesn't always grant me my requests. It's a hit or miss.

An hour later the sun has completely set, and we walk around the hot air balloons in the middle of the park, which are stationary tonight. The lift-off only happens in the morning, and they're now getting ready to light all of them up for the balloon glow. People gather around the balloons, watching in awe as the burners are lit. The colors of the rainbow glow in the darkness, and they're absolutely right in their advertisements, it looks magical. Zayne holds my hand as we watch, and I squeeze his, trying to tell him everything I want to say without words. *I love you. I need you. Don't ever leave me.* We're mesmerized for a few more minutes, both of us

unable to tear our gazes away, until someone approaches and breaks us out of our trance.

“Oh my gosh, it’s you!” Alison squeals, throwing her arms around me. The smell of cinnamon tickles my nostrils, and her long golden hair brushes against my face. She lets go and holds me by my shoulders at arm’s length, beaming. “I didn’t know you’d be here. We would’ve joined you!” She works in the ICU with me, but last night was her day off. She probably doesn’t even know what happened.

“No worries,” I smile at her. “Oh, this is Zayne. My boyfriend.” I look toward him and her eyes widen. She holds out her hand to him and he shakes it firmly, plastering the fakest smile on his face.

“Wow,” she says as she looks at him, “You lucky bitch.” We all laugh together, and I do feel lucky sometimes. “I’m Ali.”

Zayne nods, wiping his hand on his jeans. “Nice to meet you.”

Alison directs her attention back to me, her features turning sad. “Damien is here too, you know.” Zayne stiffens at my side, and my spine goes ramrod straight. “He said he wants to talk to you.”

“About?” I try to keep my tone casual, even though anything relating to him speeds my heart up a little. I also don’t want to make Zayne jealous, which has been happening very easily lately.

“Cole.” Ali looks down at her shoes but then turns her head in the direction of someone calling her. A group of people from work come strolling toward us, Damien in tow. There’s only one person I don’t recognize, a tall blonde woman I’ve never seen before. She appears to be around my age, if not a little older. “There he is!” Ali exclaims, and Damien comes to her side, whispering something in her ear. She nods and walks away, leaving him standing in front of us.

The group disperses about ten feet away, except for the blonde. I raise my eyebrow, waiting for him to speak since apparently he wanted to, but now that we’re face-to-face, he stays quiet. Blondie grabs his hand, and Damien’s head whips down to look at her. She has to be at least nine inches taller than me, and he still has to look down. Fuck, he’s tall.

“Can I talk to you in private?” Damien asks me. “It will only be a minute.”

I look back at Zayne, and even though his fists clench at his side, he nods his approval. The blonde and he walk away together to join the group, and they start to engage in conversation. My blood heats, jealousy coiling in my core. Why am I jealous anyway? Is it because Zayne is talking to her? Or because Damien is with her?

“I wanted to talk about Cole.” He’s speaking so softly I’m surprised I can hear him at all with how loud the music is playing in the background, *Nightmare* by Halsey booming from the speakers. I nod, urging him to continue. “I went to visit him earlier to check on him. He... didn’t make it.”

“He didn’t?” My frantic eyes search his as if he could be lying to me when I know damn well he’s not. “Could they not resuscitate him after we dropped him off?”

“Oh, they did, but he had brain herniation.” Damien lets me process his words and continues when he thinks I’m ready. “They removed part of his skull to decompress his brain, but it didn’t work. He’s brain dead.”

“Brain...” I stutter, my heart feeling like it weighs a hundred pounds. “What happens now?”

“His family has decided to donate his organs.” I look around for a bathroom, not sure if I’m going to throw up. “There’s an honor walk tomorrow at three in the afternoon before they take him to the OR for harvest.”

“I’ll be there...”

“We all will be.” Damien reassures me, “When will we work on the project again?” His change of subject gives me whiplash, but in a way I’m grateful because I don’t want to break down in front of him again.

“I’ll text you tonight after I figure it out.”

He looks over at Zayne, who is still conversing with her, laughing and smiling. It makes me want to gouge his fucking eyes out of his head, and when I look back at Damien, he smirks like he thinks it’s funny.

“Right, well, I’ll let you get back to your date.”

“Yeah, have fun with yours too.” He doesn’t say anything to that, which is enough confirmation for me. They’re on a date.

He's *dating* someone.

Zayne comes back to my side once Damien goes back to the blonde, and we head back to our car. I'm ready to go back home and not do anything for the rest of the night. Just thinking of going back to work tomorrow on my day off makes my head hurt but thinking of Cole's organs being taken from his body makes me physically sick.

I get in the car, shutting the door softly, and Zayne does too. The purr of the engine lulls me into a state of hypnosis, and I don't even realize when we park at the apartment.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, why?" My voice comes out sharper than I mean for it to, and I turn a light on to look at myself in the mirror. My eyes look tired, mascara smeared under them probably from tearing up earlier, and my hair is a mess. It's no wonder he thinks there's something wrong with me. *Because there is.*

"You haven't said a word since we got in the car." He turns my head toward him, "Did he say something?"

"I'm just tired," I reply, "I should get some rest."

Zayne nods, brushing his thumb across my cheek gently. "My friends invited me over tonight, if you don't mind me going."

"That's fine. I'll probably work on my project tonight."

"With *him*?" His hand falls from my face and moves to the steering wheel, his knuckles blanching from the force of his grip.

“Yes, I have to.” I can see every single thought, doubt, and worry flash over Zayne’s face as he considers the implications of the situation. “You’ll be home tonight?”

“Of course I will, baby.” Zayne smiles, but it’s completely fake. “Be good for me.”

“Always,” I say, getting out of the car and slamming the door behind me. It doesn’t bother me that he’s going to see his friends, I just don’t think he’s strong enough to resist the temptations if they ever arise. Hanging out with groups of people is risky because you can never be sure of what will trigger him into a relapse. Something as simple as getting drunk could be detrimental to his progress.

It’s dark outside, and even though Zayne dropped me off in the front, I still have a bit of a walk to get to our apartment. The streetlamp that keeps flickering in and out is freaking me out a bit, and I look around to make sure no one is watching me, following me. I’ve always had a bit of paranoia, but I don’t blame myself for it. I think it’s natural, considering my childhood.

I finally make it to the sidewalk that leads to my front door, but I stop in my tracks when I see a figure leaning against my wall. Just who the fuck is this? The little hairs on my body stand on end as a shiver runs down my spine, and I clench my sweaty fists. I don’t dare move though, I don’t want to draw attention to myself. If the person can see me, I don’t know, but I start to back up slowly. I consider calling Zayne and telling

him to come pick me back up, that I'll go to the stupid party or gathering or whatever the fuck it is- I'll go with him.

A chuckle comes from the tall shadow figure near my door, and I gasp, backing up further. "Are you scared, Hallie?" What the fuck? That's Damien's voice. I visibly relax, which I don't know why because the way he's standing outside of my door should be raising all the red flags for me. Why is he not with his date? Why did he come here? Does he know that Zayne left? Was he watching me? What would he have done if Zayne came to the door with me? That would've been a fucking disaster.

"What are you doing here?" My steps are loud in the little hallway that leads to my door. There's a staircase right next to us, which is probably the reason for the echo. "I thought you had a date." It takes effort to keep my voice neutral. Why the fuck am I jealous of a gorgeous blonde, anyway? They're perfect for each other.

"She's just a friend."

I laugh, "Yes, holding hands was friendly." I retrieve my house keys and unlock my door. "But then again, that's none of my business."

"Hallie-"

"Please don't explain yourself." The creak of the door is startling, which is odd because it creaks the same way every single time I open it. The apartment is dark and cold, and when I turn on the light I feel relief to have no one hiding in the shadows. It feels like that's the theme of my life, to always

have someone lurking, even if it's just all in my head, in the corners of my mind and my nightmares. "You don't owe me anything."

"I know I don't." Damien sighs like I'm the most annoying person in the world to him. "I came here for the project."

Now maybe *that* should raise a red flag. "That's funny, considering I told you I'd let you know when you could come over." Never mind that I was about to call him anyway. The plan was to have him come work on this after Zayne left, but him showing up here uninvited is a bit weird. What is the real reason? What is he not telling me?

"I was trying to get away from Sarah." He stays outside my door, waiting for me to invite him in. Apparently, he can lurk outside of my apartment but won't come in. Interesting.

"You guys looked like you were having a good time, why would you want to get away from her?"

"Can I come in?" Damien runs a hand through his hair in what I've noticed is a sign of frustration for him. Good, I want him to be frustrated. I want him to be a fucking asshole, so maybe I can stop thinking about how pretty his eyes are. How I wish he would smile more because of how handsome he looks when he does it. Maybe then I could stop feeling so damn guilty about finding him attractive. I mean, I'm not dead, so it's only natural to find men attractive. The problem is when they flirt without purpose and make everything confusing. "She got the wrong idea, okay? It wasn't a date for me, but I guess it was for her."

How convenient. I feel bad for that poor girl. She probably likes him, and he's over here emotionally unavailable to everyone. "I wonder who made her think it was." I roll my eyes at him, which makes him look exasperated. "Whatever, come in, and let's get to work."

"We already printed the pictures, so maybe we should make the poster board tonight?" He looks around for it and finds it propped against the wall, exactly where it was the last time he came over. I knew he'd have to come over again to finish this, so I left it there, but now I'm starting to think that maybe we need a public space to wrap everything up. Having him here is dangerous, and I know that even though he doesn't want anything with me and I want to be with Zayne, I can *feel* the attraction between us. It's this palpable thing with a heartbeat, and it needs to be fucking squashed.

"I'll get the supplies out," I tell him before going to the living room coat closet and retrieving the plastic bag with our scissors, glue, and markers. Damien sits at the table, which looks hilarious because he doesn't fit on the bench. I swear if he breaks my furniture, he will be replacing it. I've worked hard to buy my things without any help from anyone, even Zayne. He pays some bills, but I've been shouldering most of the expenses since he's in school on top of work. "Here." I hand him a pair of scissors and a stick of glue, which are engulfed in his massive hands. I shouldn't have picked up the kindergarten scissors, but my hands are small, so I've never even thought twice about it.

“What the fuck are these?” He looks outraged as he tries to stick his fingers in the holes, and they don’t fit. I smirk, but then it falls when I realize I’ll be doing all the cutting. Fuck my life. “Well, I guess that saves me some work.” He says, and I want to stomp my feet.

“If you make me cut all of this shit, you’ll be the only one gluing it.” I sit on the bench across from his at the table and start ruffling through the papers I left on the table for the project. “We’re supposed to be a team.”

“Yeah, okay.”

We spend some time in silence as I cut everything we need from the papers on the table. Damien gets the poster board and sets it on the table in front of him, then starts moving the pictures strategically around as if trying to figure out what’s going to look best.

He’s the first to break the silence, “Do you think your little boyfriend will be fine with this?” I look at him, *really* look. He doesn’t possess the dark features that Zayne does. In fact, he’s quite the opposite. His skin is a light golden hue probably from being out in the sun, but I bet under all his clothing, he could be alabaster. His blonde hair slightly curls at the top, and it looks so fucking soft that I want to run my hands through it. I shake my head, forcing myself to stop staring at him, and when I look confused, he adds, “Me being here.”

“Don’t pretend to care about if he gives a shit.” Even as I say it though, my stomach bottoms out. I refuse to feel guilty, especially when I’m doing nothing wrong, but it still doesn’t

stop the feeling of impending doom. I know Zayne isn't fine with this, that much is clear, but he knows it'll be done when we finish the project. "We have to finish this either way."

"We won't be done any time soon," He says matter-of-factly, beginning to glue the pictures onto the poster board. His voice is soft again, and sometimes I wonder if he's two different people. I see a sweet version and another that reminds me very much of Zayne. I don't know what's worse for me. "There are still some loose ends to tie up."

"What do we have left?" My voice is harsh, but he doesn't even bat an eyelash. I'm not intimidating, I've never learned to be. Sometimes I hate the way I am, how submissive I've become since my stepfather ruined me for everybody else. It's something I want to change about myself, but I don't know how to do it at this point. I've been this way for so long that it feels like another one of my chromosomes, every cell in my body telling me to be a rug to be stepped on. "This looks done to me."

"We have to practice our presentation at some point."

I nod but don't reply, and I look at my phone to see if Zayne has texted me. He hasn't, and my heart tells me he's doing something that will ruin us. I try to get him out of my mind, but images of him strung out in a corner of the room make me physically hurt.

"Can I ask you something?" Damien looks up from gluing a picture, "Without you getting angry?"

"I guess." I make no promises about the anger.

“Why are you with him?” His eyes don’t stray from his task once as he waits for my answer. His indifference is laughable, I know he cares at this point, or he wouldn’t be asking.

“Why not?” I raise an eyebrow, “Why does it matter to you?”

His jaw ticks, “I’m just trying to understand why you stay with someone like *him*.” I’m about to reply when he interrupts me, “He controls everything about you, Hallie, don’t you see that? You won’t even breathe without his permission. And I’ve seen the damn bruises on you. Aren’t you tired of being his puppet?”

I laugh, a loud and harsh sound, “And just what the fuck makes you think I’m his puppet, Damien?” I point at him, “You’re here, aren’t you?”

“Because he *gave* you permission!” He hisses, “He makes all the decisions, doesn’t he?”

I know part of him is right, but I’m not going to sit here and take relationship advice from him. Whatever happens or doesn’t happen between Zayne and me is none of his fucking business, and he needs to understand it. “Stay in your lane. This isn’t your problem. *I’m* not your problem.”

“You’re damn right, but someone needs to tell you that what you think you have with him, none of it is fucking real.” I think of all the times Zayne has held me in the dark, soothed me after my nightmares, kissed my tears away, and loved me like I’m the most precious thing in the world to him. Like I’m

the *only* person in the world. There's no way in hell none of that isn't real.

I smile, but it's in a *I'm-losing-my-mind-shut-the-fuck-up* kind of way, "And you tell me because you don't care?"

"I tell you because I can see everything clearly from the sidelines."

I stand from the bench and walk over to his side of the table, stopping when his arm brushes against my waist. He has to look up at me for once, and it makes me kind of happy that for a small moment it gives me a semblance of power. "And that's exactly where you're going to stay."

Damien looks at where his arm brushes my waist and then back at my face. He seems conflicted, like he's trying to make a decision but not at the same time. Is it me? Does he feel it too? Or am I just imagining things? Is he fighting against it?

His hands wrap around the edge of my table, his fingers squeezing like he's about to lose control. One shoulder lifts with indifference, and he keeps his eyes on mine. "It doesn't matter to me either way." Fucking liar. *What a goddamn little liar.* "Just try not to get killed."

I'm not going to argue with him though. I have no reason to contradict him or beg him to care. I have no reason to believe my life is in danger, even though the little voice of reason in my head reminds me that Zayne has already busted my head open before, that he has violent tendencies, and that sometimes he hurts me without meaning to. It sucks to admit that there

might be truth in Damien's words, but I don't care to dissect that right now.

He pushes the chair back and walks away, and just as I think he's finally about to leave and give me time to analyze every thought running through my mind, he sits on the couch. A loud sigh comes out of his mouth, and he gets comfortable, putting his feet on my coffee table.

"Are you coming?" What the fuck is he doing? It's clearly time to go. I want him out before Zayne gets here, and I don't even know when that will be. "I'm done gluing."

"So then, why haven't you left?"

"Do you want me to?" He turns around, raising one eyebrow at me. The truth is that I don't, but it's not that simple. He *needs* to go.

"You have to."

Damien laughs, "Five more minutes will not hurt you, Hallie. *Please* come sit with me?"

"Five minutes," I go to the couch and sit next to him, letting my body relax against the cushions as a wave of exhaustion washes over me. He scoots closer to me, his body heat warming me from the inside out. "And then you have to go."

"Deal."

CHAPTER 6

Zayne

The party is fucking bumping, rainbow strobe lights flashing in every main room of this house. People flood every space available, especially the living and dining area, the kitchen with the open sliding glass door, and the backyard with the huge in-ground pool.

Ricardo and John had said it was only going to be a few people, a small gathering, but they clearly don't know the meaning of that, or our perceptions of it are wildly different because I don't even have to count to know that there are at least fifty people in this house. Probably more than that, to be honest.

There are many women here dancing together, grinding against each other in a way that hypnotizes all of us, and I have to physically force myself to look away from them. A black leather couch is occupied by about ten different people, which I don't even know how that's possible because it's a small ass couch. And then there're the ones playing beer-pong on the large dining room table that sits what looks to be at

least twelve people, the ones shooting back shots on shots on shots, and the ones drinking straight from the bottle. There are so many people here that you can't even see the decor, the sweaty bodies have become a part of it at this point.

My hands itch with the urge to smoke, shoot up, and get fucked up in any way available to me, so I take a deep breath to calm it down. Maybe if I drink a couple of shots, it'll take the edge off. It'll satiate the hunger that throbs inside me; the living, breathing thing that never rests. Yeah, that should do it. Just a couple of shots to make it all better, and then I can move on.

There's a bar set up on the black soapstone kitchen island, and I look at my choices for a moment before settling on Patrón. It's an easy choice for me, just a few shots of this and I'll be straight. There's no more glasses left on the island and there's no fucking way I'm putting my lips on that bottle, so I open the glass cabinets in search of my trusty little friend. Fuck, these people are rich as hell. I don't remember the last time I saw a kitchen like this one with fancy countertops, glass cabinets, and stainless steel appliances. I guess my spoiled ass has gotten used to living like a regular person now, and I can honestly say I don't miss my old life. I'd take any life with Hallie over what I used to have.

"Hey, man," Ricardo says, as I select a shot glass from the cabinet, almost making me drop it. "We're gonna have some ice outside if you want to come with me."

My blood runs cold, and I freeze midway through pouring the tequila into the shot glass. “Ice?” I know what it is, but I don’t think I’m strong enough to turn him down. Please say it’s something different. Please tell me it’s just ice from a cooler for a drink or some dumb shit. Anything else, but I know what it is.

“Meth, bro.”

I shouldn’t. *I can’t.*

“Uh, I’ll be out in a minute.” My skin feels like a match has been set to it, the flames spreading over every nerve ending until it feels like I’m being burned alive. Shit. I need to leave, I need to get out of here. *You need Tina more.*

I pour the Patrón into the glass and throw it back. Then I do it again, and again, and again. Five shots later, after the dizziness has kicked in, I think I feel a little better. That is until a girl grabs my arm and pulls me outside. I try to drag my feet a little. It’s not that I’m wasted, but being a little tipsy definitely doesn’t help me.

There’s a group gathering around a fire pit, and the girl keeps pulling me closer to it until I sit in a chair and she takes the one next to mine. I don’t even look at her, though, especially when there’s a little glass pipe with clear-blue rocks being passed around. It’s like watching a game of hot potato without any losers, and fuck if I don’t want to be another winner right now.

I watch as everyone takes a hit from the pipe and passes it over, and even though I should be concerned about germs and

getting sick with everyone's nasty shit, I could care less the closer it gets to me. The girl next to me takes a hit from the pipe and moans when she inhales, the game of hot potato almost over. She looks like she just had the best orgasm of her life as her body relaxes back into the chair, and the most gorgeous smile fills her face. Goddamn, I want to feel like that. I want it so bad.

Reluctantly, she passes me the pipe. I stare at it for much longer than the rest of the people, seeing my life flash before my eyes. Hallie kissing me. Me fucking her. Sitting on the couch together. Her forgiving me. Us crying. I know I shouldn't, I'm going to lose everything all over again. I'm gonna lose her.

It doesn't matter, you only need Tina.

I bring the pipe to my lips, hating myself for betraying her, for not stopping myself. Only I know my days with her are numbered either way, so it's time to get to what actually matters.

Chasing the euphoria again.

I hover the flame underneath the pipe and take the longest hit of my life. A rush of heat spreads quickly through my body, the familiar lightning strike welcoming me back to the love of my life.

There you are.

I missed you, Tina.

I missed you too.

My heart races and stutters in my chest, and my breathing picks up. The heat travels down my spine to my asshole and my balls, thickening my cock in my pants, and I remember exactly how I like to spend this time, although I can't do it here. I can't believe how long I held out. The months away from this fucking drug have felt like a lifetime, and I don't ever want to stop again. But I have to, and this one hit will have to hold me over until the next time.

I get up from the chair, needing to get the fuck away before I take another hit, and somehow end up in my car. The drive home is a blur. Between the meth and the alcohol, I don't even know what the fuck is going on anymore. How did I even get here safely?

My permanent hard-on from being high is pressing against my pants painfully, and I walk a little faster toward the front door hoping to relieve myself soon. Maybe Hallie will want to fuck tonight, but if not, well, my hand it is. I groan as I unlock the door, damn it, maybe this isn't such a good idea. What if she can tell? She'll know I used, she *always* knows. However, I promised I'd come home tonight, and I can't break that promise.

I guess it's time to go inside and face her.

The lights are off as I open the door, which I'm not surprised about because it's four in the morning, except when I hear someone stir and people talking softly, I freeze.

"What the fuck?" I hear Hallie whisper loudly, "Why are you—?"

I turn on the light, my eyes slowly adjusting to the brightness, and see Hallie and the fucking pest that won't leave her alone— on *our* couch. The one I've been so happy to spend my evenings on with her when she's off work. "Shit..." Hallie whispers, her eyes full of fear. Good, she should be fucking *terrified* right now.

My heart pounds in my chest, threatening to run its way out, and I know it's partly the drugs and partially, well, the rage I feel as I look at *my* girl with this stupid fuck. I raise an eyebrow in an attempt to tamp down the anger enough that my face relaxes slightly, "How fucking cozy," I spit out, "This is exactly how I wanted to find you." Hallie's face turns red, and I can't tell if she's embarrassed by being caught or just as angry as me. Nevertheless, that doesn't make any fucking sense, I haven't done shit yet.

"We were working on our project and fell asleep..." Hallie is still wearing the same clothes she wore to the hot balloon festival, her high-waisted bell-bottom jeans that make her ass look amazing and a pink crop top t-shirt. She looks hot as fuck, and if I wasn't so pissed at her I'd be bending her over and taking her from behind right now. Although maybe I should do it anyway so he can see me fucking her and get the fact that she's *mine* through his thick head. "I told you earlier I was tired, baby." I almost soften, instead, I narrow my eyes at her. I know her game right now. "*Nothing* happened, I swear." I believe you, I believe you. It's a chant in my head, and I can't stop thinking it as I try to convince myself to do it.

“Please, leave.” She looks back at *him*, and all the softness, the submission, evaporates from my fucking bones.

Damien keeps his head down, refusing to make eye contact with me, and walks past me quickly. What a pussy. “My phone will be on loud if you need me, love.” My muscles coil, ready to pounce, and Hallie must notice because she grabs my arm and shakes her head. I look at him over my shoulder, and he’s still looking at her, waiting for an answer. She better fucking not—

“Thanks.” She nods and tips her chin toward the door, gesturing for him to go.

I see fucking red. I’m right in front of her. Can’t she tell? Do I mean that little to her? Does she want him instead? Is she going to leave me now? “Why do you keep fucking everything up?” I grab her shoulders, my fingers digging into her flesh. Her body tenses, her eyes become frantic, and I have a split second of doubting myself. I can’t keep doing this to her when I’m under the influence, but I can’t seem to control myself. It’s a mistake I keep making over and over, and I regret it every single time.

“Please,” Hallie shakes her head, trying to pry my fingers off, “don’t do this.” She looks past me just as I start to shake her, and I should’ve seen it coming, but I’m too high and everything is blurry now.

Damien grabs me by the collar of my shirt and pins me against the wall, stepping into me until our bodies are flush. “Touch her again,” he grabs my throat, slamming my head

against the wall, “and I’ll fucking gut you.” His voice is low, but his tone speaks of death. A grin stretches my face even as I feel my skin getting hot, although him cutting off my air supply? Well, that shit doesn’t freak me out. I’m calm. What he doesn’t understand is... this is fucking foreplay for me.

He slams my head against the wall one more time and lets go of me. Just as my hands go to my throat and I begin to cough, I see him with Hallie, his hands cupping her face. “Come with me,” he tells her, brushing his fingers over one of her cheeks. My hands begin to tremble with the need to beat his face in, but I wait for her answer before giving in to my impulses. She shakes her head, and he exhales loudly, seemingly annoyed. Well, that makes two of us, asshole. “Please, Hallie.”

My Vans squeak on the hardwood floor as I step right in front of him, and he turns around to face me. “She won’t be going with you tonight,” I snarl. “Get the fuck out of my house.”

“I think she can decide for herself.”

Hallie looks down at her feet, she despises being put on the spot. I know I shouldn’t smirk, though I do it anyway. He doesn’t know her at all, and this shows that. “I think you should leave.” She looks at him, and he does a double take. “Zayne and I need to talk- alone.” She fists her hands by her sides, a tic she has when she’s scared.

Damien doesn’t argue, even though I know he wants to. It pisses me off even more to see that he’s holding back for her,

keeping himself in check so he can look like he's in control of himself. Maybe that would be attractive to another woman, but Hallie doesn't care about shit like that. Actually, she doesn't have any control over herself, so there's not much room for higher expectations. "Be safe," he mutters, and walks away from us, slamming the door when he leaves. Hallie looks a bit stunned, as if the fact that he left so easily was surprising to her. However, she knows I'm much harder to get rid of, so she better wipe that look off her face before she pisses me off even more.

Dark eyes meet mine, hard as stone. "You're using again." And for the fucking life of me, I want to know how she can tell. How does she figure it out so quickly every time I fall again? "Don't even try to deny it, Zay. This is the happiest I've seen you in months, even while getting choked. You can lie to everyone else but not me." I get closer to her, my arm going around her waist to pull her in and lean into her until our noses are touching.

The rapid rising and falling of my chest make it brush against her tits, and I try to ignore how my body wants to react to her even as my breath comes in short spurts. "You always expect the worst of me." *Please don't leave me.* I won't survive.

Her bright smile is fake, mainly reserved for people who know nothing about her, and I know for a fact that I don't fall into that category. It makes me want to throttle her to make her stop, to keep her from destroying us. I close my eyes and she tenses. I can't watch her do this. "All you ever do is show me

the worst parts of you.” Hallie’s hands are cold as they hold my face gently, and she kisses me. Her lips are so soft against mine that, for a moment, it feels like I’m dreaming.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, feeling the guilt creeping in, burying itself under my skin. “I thought I’d shown you the good parts too...”

“I think we need a break,” she tells me, and my eyes snap open. Hers are filled with tears, and I know as she witnesses the evidence of my newly fed addiction that this is the right choice for her. I’m not the one who will push her to make choices that take her away from me, even if she’ll be better off without me. Over my dead fucking body.

“A break?” My voice cracks, and I feel my own tears sting the back of my eyes, my throat closing up. “I moved here for you.” I force the words out, not breaking in front of her. “Don’t do this to us, baby.” Her tears fall, trailing down her cheeks and so do mine. “I’m begging you, *please*.” I fall to my knees, hug her to me, and bury my head into her. Gentle hands fall to my hair while I sob, barely living with my stupid mistakes, adding even more to the list of regrets.

And one of my biggest regrets is having her here to witness my descent from heaven, my sobriety being my sacrifice to the devil as he welcomes me with open arms. She can’t honestly tell me that she didn’t expect this from me; I know she was just holding her breath while she waited for my failure.

Well, she can breathe easy now.

I fucked it all up again, as always.



There's something no one likes to talk about when it comes to methamphetamine, and that's what we call the meth comedown. The main reason people get addicted to this drug is because of the dopamine rush you get with a hit, and the euphoria can last up to thirty minutes after you first take it. That rush is what people keep chasing over and over. Only the little fucked up secret everyone keeps is that you spend the rest of your life running after the feeling of your very first high, because nothing compares to it. The more your senses get used to the drug and you build up a tolerance, the harder it gets to achieve that feeling again, and the single way to do it is to consume a higher dose at a more frequent rate, which in turn leads back to tolerance, and it's a fucked up endless cycle.

Most people avoid the comedown by never letting the high wear off, and they just keep consuming it when they feel their high waning. That bingeing causes you to become addicted, and the tolerance you build to the doses you give yourself forces you to consume more if you want to avoid withdrawals. But, the comedown and withdrawals are not the same. In fact, if you only consume it once and don't take more before it starts

to wear off, you get the biggest dopamine crash of your miserable life. And that's where I'm at now, crashing and burning.

The point that Hallie asked for a break doesn't help the depression settling over me; clearly here to stay. I can't blame her though, and I can't even say I didn't know. She warned me plenty of times she wouldn't be with me if I was in the clutches of addiction again. The pain I've caused her, everything I did to her when I was in the thick of it, is unforgivable. And yet she forgave me, offered me another chance, an opportunity for redemption, but I can't ever keep my shit together. I hate how weak I am, how delicate this balance between sobriety and dependence is, and I'm always teetering on the edge, the scale never balancing for me.

She deserves better, but I'm the most selfish person she'll ever meet, and that won't change just because she breaks up with me. There's no way in hell I'm accepting that, and if she thinks she can walk away from me so effortlessly, then she's got another thing coming. Just thinking of another man having her, touching her, loving her, makes me lose my fucking mind. I will always go after her. This obsession for her runs more than bone deep and, at this point, it's on a cellular level. It's part of my essence. The way she has attached herself to my very soul is not easily undone, and I don't want to ever make it stop, even if it's the end of me. Honestly, not giving a fuck would be so much easier, but sadly I'm not there yet. I still care about what Hallie thinks of me, what she feels for me, the pain I inflict on her, and it makes me want to be under the

influence again so I can make it all stop. The voices in my head tell me that's the better choice, and it's taking everything in me to not go to the glove compartment of my car and put myself out of my misery all over again.

It's been at least twelve hours since my last hit, and I'm in hell right now. My body feels like bugs are crawling all over it while simultaneously being bit by fire ants. I'm so tired I can barely move, but with these aches, I can't sleep either. There's no winning this, so I just surrender to it.

There's a shuffle of footsteps headed toward the bed, but I keep my eyes closed. Maybe if I pretend to be asleep, my body will believe it and finally give me some rest, though I'm not counting on it. "Zayne?" Hallie's voice is soft, and I think she's doing it on purpose because she knows I'm probably in some sort of pain, which is accurate.

The covers are pulled back and the bed dips, and for just a moment everything feels normal again. For just a moment, I'm not crashing from the drugs I swore I wouldn't do. I didn't betray her, and she didn't ask for a break. For just a moment, she's coming to bed with me because she's missed me and wants to be around me, not to check to see if I need a hospital. She hasn't asked me as much, but I've seen her watching me with her nurse eyes all fucking day. I know she's just waiting for me to look really bad before she forces me to see someone.

Her body aligns with mine, her chest to my back and her legs coming between mine. It reminds me of lighter times, flashes of happiness shared between us that now feel like one

drop of water in a lake. How significant *were* those moments anyway? Did she feel this flame, this fire back then, or was it just in my head this whole time?

“How are you feeling? Hallie’s arm wraps around my waist, and her cheek rests against my back, her warm breath on my skin. “Any better?”

“Why are you here?”

She tenses, “I was trying to check on you.” She shifts her weight as if she’s about to get off the bed. “But I’ll leave now.” I clamp my fingers around her arm, refusing to let her go.

“I thought you wanted a break, Hallie.” My voice is hoarse, and my pain is evident in how I can barely get my words out. It feels like she’s slitting my wrists and leaving me to bleed out. “Why do you care?”

“I feel betrayed, Zay.”

“You shouldn’t,” I argue. “This addiction is a fucking sickness that keeps coming back, and it has nothing to do with you. I never meant to hurt you. I fought it for as long as I could... and when I couldn’t anymore, the first person I thought about was you.”

“I just can’t keep doing this over and over again.” Her hand grips my skin, her fingernails scraping me, and even though I’m in pain everywhere else, that feels good. I welcome the pain she inflicts upon me.

“You can’t love someone like me.” A warm tear falls out of my left eye, trailing down my nose and over my lips. The salty taste keeps me from breaking down further, making a damn fool of myself in front of someone to who I clearly mean nothing to. “You *don’t* love me.”

She sucks in a sharp breath, “How can you even say that? Have I not given you enough?”

I flip over in bed to face her, showing her my tears, my pain, and the hole she put in my heart that no one else can fill. “No.” I shake my head and search her eyes, my brows furrowing. “I want everything you have to give, and until you do, it will *never* be enough.”

“You will never be happy with anything, Zayne. You always want more.”

I laugh, which makes her narrow her eyes, and more tears fall from my eyes. “You’re right, Hallie. So give me fucking *more*.” I brush her hair away from her face, “Or don’t. I really don’t care as long as you don’t leave me.”

Small fingers come to my face, wiping my tears away, “I can’t be with you when you’re on drugs, Zayne.”

“Please, baby, *please*.” I’m not above begging, I will grovel all I have to. I’ll do anything that keeps her by my side, and if that means begging on my knees for the rest of my life, then that’s exactly what I’ll do. “Don’t leave me.”

“Let’s talk about this another time,” She says with finality, “Just hold me for now.”

I know I shouldn't get my hopes up, especially since I know her better than anyone, and my gut tells me she's really serious about leaving me. But as we lie in bed together and hold each other, all of my worries evaporate, at least momentarily. I don't want to think about what my life would be like without her, because I know it's not happening.

The one thing she won't admit is that she can't live without me, just like I can't live without her, and that's what bothers her the most.

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CHAPTER 7

Damien

The conference room is full even though we don't have any residency classes today, and it's all because of Cole. The director of the residency program and the instructors stand by the podium and talk amongst themselves, all with grim faces. As I look around, I see the resident nurses laughing and smiling as they talk to each other, utterly unphased by the reason we're here today. Most of them clearly don't understand the gravity of the situation, that this is one of the hardest decisions a family member will ever have to make for their loved one.

Except for Hallie.

I watch her from afar as she sits with her friend Brittany, the girl holding her while she cries. Hallie's shoulders shudder with the force of her sobs, and you can tell this is hitting her really hard. People look at her like she's a little crazy, but I can understand why this would be painful to someone who's never been exposed to it before. It's jarring to see how one moment everything is getting better, and the next, there's no hope left

for that patient. No chance of survival. It's personal to her since he was her patient, and there's a level of guilt attached. She's probably questioning everything about herself and this career. Could she have done more? What if she found it earlier? It's pretty normal for her to not be able to separate her feelings from this case, and this will definitely be one of the patients she never forgets.

I almost want to comfort her, but I have to remind myself I can't get involved with her, that I've already crossed too many lines. The type of job that I have to do doesn't allow for the kind of distraction she provides, and I could be seriously fucked if I mess it up.

Nursing isn't a career for me, it's more of a distraction. Something my father allowed me to study as long as I was getting whatever he needed from me done. I barely had any time on my hands, but I wanted more for myself than this dirty fucking business with drugs and enforcement. We're only the underdogs, my father may think he's the boss of this operation but he's only a speck in a vast swarm of bodies. The real boss, the top of the food chain, is somewhere in Mexico, safe and sound, while we do his dirty work, and it's bad.

I've done plenty of things I'm not proud of, but my father believes this is his legacy, and my brothers and I never stood a chance. We were never given a choice on joining this, it was shoved down our throats since I can remember, and if I could leave, I would go in a heartbeat. I hate doing this. It's one of the reasons I don't have a mother. My father likes to talk shit about how she was addicted to dope, but he doesn't want to

admit he's the one who supplied her with it in the first place. If he hadn't offered it to her, she'd still be here with us right now. That's the thing about my dad: he keeps things and people until they no longer serve their purpose. The instant you become an obstacle in his path, or even slightly inconvenient, he figures out a way to take you the fuck out.

The most crucial detail is that until I can get out of this mess, if I ever can, I'll have to be the faithful servant my father expects me to be, and if I'm not then it's my life on the line. I know that's selfish, considering all the terrible things I've done, and maybe I do deserve to die, but I don't want to. The cartel doesn't forgive, so if I have to keep a drug business afloat, manage the black market, keep trading and enforcing, that will have to happen until I can make a plan for myself.

I'm not stupid though, I've made sure to have something stashed on the side, and I've paid for another identity already. I'm working on disappearing, and I have a safe house in Colorado that's not under my real name. But if they find out what the fuck I'm up to, that I've done this behind their backs, then I'm probably dead either way. I only go to that house about once a year when I say I'm on vacation, and it's to hide out from humanity and be alone with my thoughts. The chaos of these jobs is sometimes overwhelming, and I crave peace and silence. I seek it out as much as possible.

What I hate the most about this is the lack of relationships I can have since I'm always lying about everything. Who I am, where I am, my job, my family, all of the details that make a person who they are. I can't share where I'm traveling to, why

I'm doing it, or why I have so much money. Because even if I lied, it would all fall apart as all lies do. All I can do is fuck casually and hope I don't get attached, which I've been successful with thus far, except for right now.

Then here comes Hallie, trying to ruin that for me. I can't seem to stop myself from glancing her way any time we're in the same room, and it's starting to annoy the hell out of me how beautiful she is, especially when she refuses to look back at me. I keep telling myself I should admire her loyalty toward her boyfriend, but instead, I hate it. She likes to pretend there's nothing between us, but the problem is that the more I try to fight it, the harder it gets to do. Doesn't she feel that too?

Maybe I should just fuck her once and get her out of my system, then I can focus on the damn job, even though I don't think it'll be that simple. Everything inside of me is telling me that if I give in, if I jump off that cliff, I'll never climb back up. There's something about her that sinks its hook into you, and now I understand the obsession her little bitch boyfriend has for her. What I don't understand is why the fuck it's obviously mutual. She's successful, educated, gorgeous, and surprisingly nice. So why is she with a college dropout who clearly has a drug addiction? Ricardo and John told me all about how they finally pushed the meth on him, and he caved. I've always known about his drug use; it's hard not to when you look at him. Although in the last few months he's filled out and packed on some lean muscle, the slight tremors in his hands and the way he carries himself scream that he's still

struggling. He's weak as fuck, and in my opinion, serves no purpose in her life.

I'm starting to wonder if she'll ever talk to me about him, but so far she doesn't trust me enough for that. I don't blame her, especially since I've only *not* been an asshole to her for a short period of time, even if I stayed to myself and watched her from the sidelines. I didn't want to draw too much attention yet, I was waiting for the right time to strike, and I think I accomplished that. Now I just sit back and let everything play out how it should, even though it's the last fucking thing I want to do.

I'm still leaning against a wall in the conference room watching Hallie, which I've been doing a lot lately. Her eyes are scanning the room for something, or *someone*. Is she looking for me? And if she is, why?

Her eyes finally meet mine, and even though I'm expecting it to be a quick glance and for her to look away, she holds my gaze far longer than she should. Warmth starts to spread throughout my body the longer she stares, and it settles low in my pelvis. *For fuck's sake*. I raise an eyebrow at her, and she smirks, refusing to look away. I think this just became a game for her, but she doesn't understand that I never lose. At the same time though, I'm glad she's momentarily distracted and finally not crying, because she's been stuck in this endless loop since two nights ago when he coded. I have to shake myself out of this. I can't be glad I'm the distraction or this is going to end badly for me.

The director of the residency program turns on the microphone at the podium, which causes everyone to look her way when it screeches, including Hallie, and she covers it with her hand to stop the sound. The people who haven't been sitting begin to search for a vacant chair, but I stay standing right where I've been the entire time.

“Today,” the director readjusts the microphone one more time until she stabilizes it, “we have the opportunity to witness a medical miracle. Now, you might be asking yourself, why is this a miracle when such a tragedy has occurred? The answer is simple, but also not. This is probably one of the hardest decisions this patient's family has ever made, but on the flip side, someone's life is about to be changed forever. The recipient has a brand new chance, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that sometimes isn't possible without tragedy.” The residency staff bows their heads, some of them wiping their eyes. “And so, today, we will pay tribute to Cole for providing the gift of life while simultaneously losing his own. The honor walk is to show respect and gratitude toward the patient and family in this extremely difficult time of their lives.”

I've only been to one previous Honor Walk, and it was when I was a nursing student. I had the opportunity to attend during one of my clinical rotations, and even though I know what to expect, it doesn't get any easier. You have to be entirely heartless for it not to affect you, and most of the healthcare staff usually cries during the walk.

“Let’s go pay our respects to Cole and his family,” she finishes, and walks away from the podium, her silver hair shining more than usual today.

We file out of the conference room and follow the residency program staff through the hospital, not stopping once until they show us exactly where they want us to stand. I haven’t paid much attention to how many of us are here, but I’d say there are at least seventy, and we have to line up against the walls leading to the operating room.

The Honor Walk will begin in the ICU, where hospital staff will be lined up against the walls all the way from the unit to the operating room doors where we stand, and the nurse assigned to the patient for this shift will push the bed with the family by their side. I’m relieved that Hallie isn’t working right now and doesn’t have to be the one pushing him the entire way. I have a feeling she wouldn’t make it.

According to the director, we have about ten minutes before the walk begins, so we line up as they instruct. Somehow, Hallie and Brittany end up next to me, and I try to keep my eyes forward as they look up at me. I don’t want to see the guilt in Hallie’s eyes right now. I don’t want to taste her pain, or I might just become addicted to it. Bodies shift in every direction and Hallie gets closer to me, so close that I can feel her heat even though she’s not touching me. Even though she’s only inches away, she feels galaxies away, and I have the urge to close the distance.

About twenty minutes later, the hospital bed comes into sight. It's rolling by slowly due to all the medical equipment they have to haul with them just to keep him breathing until the ventilator is ready to be turned off. Cole's mother and father walk beside the bed, holding hands, with tears streaming down their faces, and they're not the only ones. Every healthcare worker in this hallway has tears shining in their eyes, some even covering their faces.

Hallie's hand comes up to grip my arm, her fingernails digging in painfully when the bed stops next to us so the family can say their goodbyes. She looks one touch away from falling apart, and I don't think I can put her back together if she does. I'm not good at mending, only breaking.

"I love you, my baby," The mother says softly. "I'm so, so proud of you. You're going to save some lives today and live on through them." She gives her son a kiss on his cheek, barely able to with all the tubes, tape, and bandages on his face.

Cole's parents sob over his body, clutching at his legs, and even though we try to give them as much privacy as possible to say their goodbyes, it's hard to look away.

Hallie audibly chokes on a sob, the tears falling faster from her eyes as she digs her fingernails deeper into my arm. And I fucking let her because, goddamnit, *someone* needs to be there for her, and I'll do it... just this once.

The nurses wait until the parents step away from the bed, pushing Cole toward the operating room to leave his legacy

behind. As soon as the bed disappears past the OR doors, the mother falls to the ground in a tangle of screams and sobs. Multiple nurses step forward to hold her, help her up, and give her a shoulder to cry on. I'm not surprised Hallie isn't one of them because, as it stands, she's just another person who needs to be held up right now.

Hallie lets go of my arm to cover her face and sob into her hands, and I give in and pull her into a hug that could suffocate anyone, but she just leans further into me instead of away. Her face buries into my chest as her arms come around me, her hands clutching the back of my scrub top as her body shakes against me.

My arms tighten around her lower back as I pull her impossibly closer and bury my nose in her hair, inhaling the berries and vanilla scent of her. But I turn my face after indulging once, depriving myself of the smell, before it starts to mean something to me.

And then I just... hold her through this.



What is it about doing the wrong thing that is so exciting? My mind knows I shouldn't be in this state park with Hallie, and yet here I am under the premise that she needed comfort. I don't know if I'm proud of myself for having a heart this once or fucking pissed that she so easily manipulates me.

I keep telling myself that I came here for myself because it's my favorite place in this shit-hole state, but as I sit on this beat-up bench watching the sunset, I know it's just getting difficult to control myself around her now.

There's an orange glow shining on her face from the sun, and she looks angelic right now with her eyes closed and face tilted toward the sky. Her brown hair seems almost red in this lighting, and her pouty lips are tilted down in a frown. I wish she'd open her eyes and take in this scenery, the way we're literally so deep into this forest it's a five-mile hike back to the car. The pine trees wrap around us in a tight hug, and the one-hour drive here is worth every single second of being in the car.

Her sadness is palpable in the way her shoulders are drawn in, the way she hugs her middle, the way it looks like there's a permanent frown on her face. I want to touch her, but at the same time, I won't. I can't see her fall apart right now, and I can't be the one to pick up her pieces. However, I can offer a semblance of comfort, even if it's not entirely real.

"It's not your fault, Hallie." I watch her face closely, watch the way her frown deepens, and yet she has no lines on her face yet. Sometimes I forget how young she is, three years

younger than me, to be exact. I'm not saying that's a very big age gap, but so many life experiences can take place in such a short time. "I hope you know that."

"We both know that's just not true." She scoots closer to me on the bench and rests her head against the back of it until it hangs off. "I should've paid more attention. I should've checked him more often. I should've *seen* it coming."

"You can't live in the what ifs and the should haves. You're only human, and this was no one's fault. His body was too damaged, he was too tired, and honestly in a way it's better this way. He was a shell of himself."

"Why is this breaking me so much?" Hallie sniffles and sits up on the bench again, covering her face to hide her tears from me. How do I tell her that I want to see them? That I want to see all of her, no matter how wrong it is? How fucked am I?

Something gives way in my chest until it feels physically painful, and I remove her hands from her face. Her red and splotchy cheeks make her look shattered, and I don't know how to act right now. I haven't comforted anyone in a very long time, and I definitely didn't expect to be comforting her, especially with the situation I find myself in. And yet I'm leaning in to touch my nose with hers, her tears hot on my skin. "Because you're human." She looks stunned for a second but doesn't move. Her eyes are frantically searching, and with the sun shining on us, they look like honey. I wonder if she'd be sweet to me once she drops her act and stops pretending I don't affect her. Would she open up to me like she does for

him? Would she let me in? “And you’re a *good* person.” Unlike me.

I dip my head until my lips meet her cheek and kiss her tears away. The salty taste of her, the pain radiating off her, makes me cup her face tenderly, and she sighs softly. Who the fuck am I anyway? But just as fast as I lean in, I pull away once more. Hallie looks jarred, like I did something unforgivable to her, and maybe I did.

Don’t keep involving yourself like this.

“I’m not as good as you think I am.”

Is that what she truly thinks? Is that the reason she lets Zayne treat her like shit? I’m not any better, but I won’t be involving myself to that point, regardless. “Is that why you let him treat you like that?”

“We’re just different. What he and I have is different... not conventional.”

I laugh, and she looks at me like she could punch me right now. I kind of want her to, and maybe then she’ll get her head out of her ass and grow a fucking backbone. Someone needs to teach her to take control of her life. “I call that abuse.”

She laughs, too, actually *laughs* like it’s funny. Is she serious right now? “It’s not abuse if you’re willing.”

“You didn’t look very willing two nights ago.”

“He had a moment of weakness, Damien.” She turns on the bench to face me, and I do the same. This might be the most serious I’ve seen her, and I realize she believes this. She sees it

as her truth. “It can happen to anyone. You act like you’re so high and mighty, like you never make mistakes. You don’t say much about him, but you don’t have to. The judgment is clear in your eyes.”

“Yes, I’m judging him. I saw how he treated you, and I guess it’s hard for me to understand why you stick around for that.”

“Because I *love* him,” she replies. “Have you ever been in love?”

I nod, “Once.” And she was a fucking cunt.

“Then you should be able to understand that when you love someone, you stick by them even when they’re not giving their best.”

“I can understand someone not giving their best, love, but when they’re cheating, abusing, or being dishonest in any way, then I believe in having enough self-respect and dignity to understand it’s time to move on.”

“Do you speak from experience, or are you just giving me a lecture?”

“My ex cheated on me,” I don’t even know why the hell I’m telling her this, it’s all getting too personal for my tastes, and on top of that, I need to stop caring so much about her relationship with Zayne. She should be able to live her life without my interference, until the right time comes, but I can’t seem to stop fucking that up for myself. “With my brother. Then she married him and now they have twins on the way.

I've moved on, and I'm happy with my life. You have to learn to be happy with yourself and not expect another person to give that to you."

"Is that what you think? That you're happy without someone else?"

The sun has almost entirely set and there's still a five-mile hike back to the car in scrubs, which is not the most comfortable attire. I get up from the bench and stand across from her, signaling with my head to go back. "I'm saying I don't rely on another person for my happiness, even if I have happy moments with them."

Hallie's eyes roll, and she doesn't reply as we go on the trail to walk back to my car. I understand the concept of 'relying on yourself for your happiness' is foreign to her, especially since she seems co-dependent on Zayne. It's almost as if her entire world revolves around him, like the gravitational pull is something she can't control. From experience, however, I can say that's not the right kind of love for anyone. What they have is bad for both of them, and this obsession will consume her from the inside out. She claims to love him, and maybe she does. I'm just not so sure he's able to actually love her the way she deserves.

The trail is relatively easy as far as hikes go. It's a flat dirt path with small rocks scattered here and there, the only rough part of it is the five miles if someone isn't used to walking that far. However, this is easy for me since I spend time in Colorado. Hiking in this elevation is nothing compared to

hiking at over nine thousand feet altitude, but Hallie seems to be a bit winded.

“Do we need to take a break?” I ask her, even though I’d rather get to the damn car as soon as possible before the sun is completely gone. At this point, I might just carry her the rest of the two miles left.

“No, it’s fine. If my heart stops, I trust you to restart it.” I smirk at that, but she doesn’t see it. She’s too busy trying to breathe as she keeps walking. Her face is tomato red from exertion and her chest is heaving. I’m sure it’s been hard for her to keep up with me since she’s so short, and I kind of feel bad.

“Here,” I stop and stand in front of her, “I’ll give you a piggyback ride.”

She looks reluctant at first, but then she seems to come to terms with it because she nods, probably physically unable to finish. I’ll look for a shorter trail next time, but this one is my favorite and I wanted to show her the spot I always go to. *There will be no next time.*

She’s so light when she gets on my back that she feels like a hiking backpack, and I hoist her up a little more so she doesn’t slide down. I tense when she rests her cheek against my back, but other than that the trip back to the car goes smoothly and completely silent.

Once the car is visible, I unlock it, and she asks me to let her down so she can walk the rest of the way. Our shoes crunch on the rocky parking lot, and when I open the

passenger door for her, she looks at me like no one's ever done it for her before. What kind of men has she been going out with? Damn. Oh, never mind, her boyfriend is a dumbass.

Hallie's more silent than usual on the way back to her apartment, and I wonder what the reason for it is. She doesn't look okay, but I can't tell if it's solely from the effect Cole's death had on her or if it's something more. Nevertheless, I don't pry because, at the end of the day, I really need to learn to keep myself detached from her, for my sake. For my fucking life.

I never expected it to be this hard to achieve that.

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CHAPTER 8

Hallie

It's been three days since our fight— three days he's been in bed, refusing to get up. Three days he hasn't done drugs, and every single minute has been miserable for him. I just don't see how we will get past this again.

I haven't stuck around to watch him suffer. I don't think I can handle seeing him in this state. I've still checked on him and made sure to bring him food and water, but for the most part I've stayed away from the apartment. I've been thinking about the break I asked for, and I don't know what it means for us. Does this mean we're broken up? If I asked for a break, are my intentions to get back together eventually? Every part of me screams out that I can't live without him, but I also know that I can't live with him when he's like this. He becomes this aggressive, abusive person with everyone, and the worst of his qualities come to light. It's as if he's possessed the whole time, like meth controls him and every one of his actions. I can't watch him do this to himself again, I simply will not stick around to witness him hit rock bottom.

“I brought you soup,” I say softly, trying not to aggravate his headache. I set it on the nightstand, but he still doesn’t move as his back is turned to me. He pulls the covers over his head even though the blackout curtains are closed. I try not to be irritated, but holy shit it’s time to stop this. “Please, eat something.” I wonder if he’s even called out of work or if he’s let his teachers know that he’s going to be absent, but at the same time I know all that matters to him right now is the next hit. I highly doubt any of this has crossed his mind. I can only hope it doesn’t ruin all the progress he’s made in every other part of his life.

“I don’t want it, Hallie.” He groans, hugging my pillow. I pace back and forth in front of the bed and then yank the covers off him. “What the *fuck*?” His scream makes me flinch, and I take two steps back.

“You can’t spend your life like this.”

“I’m trying to get better.” He gets up from the bed and gets in my face. “Can’t you see that?”

“Not when you won’t get up from that bed.” I get closer to him, our noses touching now. *I’m not scared of you.* Lies, lies, lies. “You need some sun, or something, to make you feel better.”

“I’m not gonna fucking feel better just because I go out in the sun.” He laughs, and I tense, knowing he’s about to hurt me somehow. So predictable. “There’s only one thing that can make me feel better, and you won’t let me have it.”

“Me?” I snigger right along with him this time, but it holds no humor. On second thought, I do find this a bit funny. How stupid I am for thinking he gives a damn about me. “I’m not stopping you. Feel free to get your shit and leave.”

“Fuck it, I’ve never even cared about you anyway,” he sneers, turning on his heel and getting dressed. “But, I bet you knew that.” Stupid, stupid, stupid girl.

“Yeah, I’ve always known that.” I pull his arm, demanding his attention. The way he looks at me should be scary since it promises violence. But I just can’t bring myself to feel anything right now. Not even the pain I know will hit me when this is over. “You only give a shit about your drugs and how you’re getting them.”

“Damn right.” He yanks his arm out of my grip. “But at least I can be honest about it.” If my heart could crack further, the shards would fall to my feet.

“Thank you,” I say sarcastically, rolling my eyes. “For finally not hiding your true colors.” I give him space to finish putting his clothes on, which he does quickly. He looks at me like he expects me to say something more, raising one eyebrow. “Now, get the fuck out.”

“I’m not leaving you, Hallie.” I guess he’s just leaving for the day, probably to get more drugs. I’m so sick and tired of playing this game with him, the one where he fucks me over every time. Zayne pauses at the door with his back to me, then looks over his shoulder. “You’re mine, and I won’t let him have you. I’ll fucking kill him before I give you up.”

I scoff, “You need to save yourself before you can make threats like that. You’ll hit rock bottom soon, and then what? You can’t do anything for yourself, or anyone else, like that.”

“Then you’ll fucking pick up my pieces and put me back together, just like we’ve always done.” Anger courses through my body. He can’t be serious. “I would do it for you if that’s what it took. What the fuck changed?”

“You’re exhausting.” I sit on our bed, my face in my hands. And I mean it, this is mentally and emotionally draining, and it’s only a matter of time until it catches up with me. I know my triggers and high-stress levels always push me into a depression that sucks me in and refuses to spit me back out.

“You should be used to it by now,” Zayne replies. “I’ll be back later.” He slams the front door, leaving me alone to curl up on the bed.

He leaves me behind without so much as a glance in my direction, leaves me behind as my soul cracks just a bit more.

I wonder where he’s going in this state, not having showered in days or brushed his hair or his teeth. He’s in bad shape, and it shows, but I imagine at this point the people he’s visiting expect him to look this way, almost like they’ve been waiting for him to come back for more. They won’t be disappointed because he will never stop. I’ve concluded that this will be a life-long struggle for him, and his periods of sobriety will more than likely get shorter and shorter, if not completely nonexistent. Which is exactly why I can’t be with him.

I want to remove my feelings from this situation, but it's just fucking hard. My heart physically hurts right now. It feels like it's being squeezed, and I can't even imagine how hard it will be once he's gone from the house for good. I don't think I'll be able to handle the emptiness of the apartment once he's not here. The endless silence will only make his absence louder, which I'm already noticing as I sit here all alone on my bed. Fuck this, though. I can't mope yet; he hasn't left forever. *And I'm the one who told him we needed a break.*

Thirty minutes later, I'm at my favorite bookstore called Nowhere Bookshop. One of the reasons for this one being my favorite is that it's easily accessible and has a coffee shop, which you don't see that often in an independent bookstore. There are shelves lining the entire store, all labeled, and each area also has a display table in a different color than the shelves. The decor is modern industrial, but then they mix it up with terracotta stone tiles, making it look like a completely different style that I have no idea what it's called.

I'm hoping for a distraction, so I could've honestly gone anywhere in town, but since I already come here once a week, I figured I'd stick to what I know. I don't have time to be disappointed when I'm trying to relax and forget about all of my problems. I'd like to find a romantic fantasy or maybe a rom-com. I guess I'll know when I see it. My favorite part is going into books blindly, so I never read the blurbs and primarily select a book if the cover catches my attention. I've heard the 'don't judge a book by its cover' so many times, but I disagree. I believe a good cover tells you a lot about the

book, and I'm a sucker for pretty ones. Not to mention I can always appreciate how much effort an author puts into their work.

I end up selecting *The Spanish Love Deception*, mainly because the bright colors drew my attention, and I also love cartoon covers. I always buy a paperback version before sitting down with it and going to the cafe. My favorites here include the vegan desserts, the chocolate croissants and cheese Danishes. I order a mango juice rather than coffee because I have trust issues. I can't even count how many times I've ordered almond milk in my coffee and they have given me regular milk. I sometimes wish lactose intolerance would make me break out in hives so people could see how bad it fucks someone up. I get incredibly sick from it, and it's unfair to pay for a service and not get what you ask for.

About two minutes after ordering, the barista calls out my name and hands me my mango juice and vegan chocolate cake. Yeah, I'm cheating today. I sit at the corner table with only two chairs for the seclusion. The first chapter is slow as fuck, and it takes me way longer than it should to get through it. When there's not much going on during a first chapter, it's hard for me to get hooked and actually read faster. I find that I fly through a book when I can be excited about what comes next, yet I'm determined to give it a chance since I just bought the damn thing. Maybe I should've read some reviews before purchasing, but I also feel like reviews are so subjective that you never know how you'll feel about it until you dive in

yourself. Everyone has different tastes, so I don't really trust those either, I guess.

It seems the pacing gets better because before I know it, I'm on chapter five and really digging the main character. At this point, I feel like he's carrying the entire book, and I want to know more about him. I'm so immersed in this story that I forget all about my food and drink. However, I start to feel like I'm being watched, and I slowly lower the book down for a second. Only to be met with the most beautiful blue eyes I've ever seen from across the room. I drop my book on the table, the loud thud probably heard by the whole store, and Damien smirks. What the fuck is he doing here anyway? And why do we keep running into each other everywhere I go?

I'm frozen to the spot, and he looks a bit confused about his next move, like he's not sure if he should come to me or keep his distance. I decide I'm not going to make this decision easier for him, as I'm happy to stay all alone in my little corner to just read and stuff my damn face. I don't need all the complications he brings me anyway. At least, that's what I keep trying to tell myself. I don't know if I'm trying to convince myself of that or not, but I'm going to try like hell anyways.

I take my mango juice and begin to sip, savoring the sweet taste of it, and then take a bite of my cake. There's no way I will maintain eye contact any longer, so I pick up the book and continue to read. Loud footsteps get closer to the table until the chair across from me is dragged back.

“Is this chair taken?” Damien asks, a smile on his face that makes my knees weak. I don’t understand why he doesn’t smile more often, it really might be the best thing about him. I shake my head to tell him no, and he sits with a book in his hands as well.

He doesn’t look at me; he just opens the book to the first page and begins to read. This is too weird. How can he just sit with me after randomly seeing me in this bookstore? And who reads *that*, anyway?

“Game of Thrones? Isn’t that just porn?”

Damien looks up at me, eyes narrowed. “Are you smut-shaming me?” When I don’t reply, he adds, “And just so you know, Game of Thrones is superior to any other smut you’ve ever read.”

Ew, what? There’s no way. “You’re probably not reading much of that, then.”

“Have you even watched the show?”

“No, and I don’t intend to.” I roll my eyes. “I bet you only watch it for the tits.” That’s what most guys watch it for, anyway. The truth is I watched the first episode, but I was grossed out by all the sex and blatant disrespect toward women in general.

Damien laughs at that, “I don’t need to watch tits on TV, love. I can see them *whenever* I want in real life.” He looks back at the page he’s been reading. “I watch it for the dragons.”

For some reason, I'm stuck on the part where he can see tits whenever he wants. I thought he said he didn't have a girlfriend? Or is he going to Sarah for sex? Or one-night stands? Maybe I shouldn't ask. I don't know why I even care.

"What's on your mind?" Damien looks curious, like he genuinely wants to know, but I won't give him the satisfaction of having this information in his back pocket.

"My book."

"What a little liar you are, Hallie." There's that smile again, the one that has quickly gotten under my skin. "Are you still stuck on the tits?"

"What makes you think that?" Am I that damn obvious? I hate how he can read me like I'm an open book when I know I'm anything but. I will admit that I do get jealous easily. I just don't know why I have those feelings with him.

"The face you were making." He scoots his chair forward, like he's trying to tell me something only for my ears. "You looked like a jealous girlfriend, love."

I meet his eyes, scooting up in my chair too until our faces are close together. "You'll never know what I look like as a jealous girlfriend."

Damien chuckles then grins, and it feels like he knows something I don't. His perfectly straight, white teeth are so damn bright it makes me want to close my eyes so that I don't have to look at him. It's unfair how gorgeous he is and even more unfair that he knows he's affecting me. I think it's

obvious he's using it against me, but he still hasn't told me his intentions.

“What are you doing here anyway?”

“Why do you always ask me that question, like it's not obvious enough?” He holds up his book, “I came here to purchase a book, but when I saw you sitting here all alone, I felt bad for you.”

Felt bad for me? What the fuck? “And just what were you feeling bad about?” I silently dare him to talk shit, but he looks honest about it.

“You look sad, like something's wrong.” Okay, so maybe I am an open book because he seems to read me just fine. How annoying. It doesn't matter, though. I won't be opening up to him any time soon. There's no reason for him to know about the problems Zayne and I are having.

“I'm fine, but thanks for the concern.” I push my chair back and stand, gathering my purse and new book. “Have a good day.”

Damien picks up my juice and begins to sip on it, standing up and walking beside me toward the door. “I will, now that you told me to.”

I want to snatch my drink out of his hands, but I decide against it. Who knows what germs he's carrying with all the tits he looks at. Whatever, I need to go home anyway. I shouldn't give a shit what pretty blondes with blue eyes say or

think about me. The problem is that he's obviously thinking about me as much as I am about him.

He stops abruptly before we can exit the bookstore, looking at a paper taped to the wall. His face changes, getting serious, and I look around him to see what it is. Sarah, his festival date, is on the missing poster that stares back at us. The shock I feel must kickstart my heart into a higher pace, and the "last seen at the annual hot air balloon festival" has me looking at him.

Instead of looking at me, he opens the door and walks out to the parking lot. Oh, hell no. I'm not letting him off the hook this easy. Was he the last one to see her? When did he ditch her? Did he leave her behind without telling her?

"Damien!" I yell after him, and he stops walking. Thankfully I catch up to him as he turns around. "Have you heard from her?" I ask him, observing his face, but he doesn't react at all.

"Not since the festival."

"So you don't know what happened to her? Where she is?" I press, and he shakes his head calmly.

"No, Hallie." That was stupid of me. Of course, he doesn't know. Why would he? She probably just went somewhere without telling anyone. That's possible, right? People do it all the time. "I have somewhere else to be."

Damien walks away and gets in his car, and I'm surprised he's even driving it. I thought he only saved it for grocery shopping, maybe hooking up with people. I'm probably just

used to his motorcycle, though. I don't move until he exits the parking lot, and even then, I stand still until he's completely out of sight.

Is Sarah missing? Or is she just not communicating with her family? Why do I care so much about this? I don't even like her.



It's the middle of the night when I hear Zayne stumbling loudly into our bedroom, not even bothering to turn on the bathroom light or close the door when he jumps in the shower.

What the hell?

It's been an entire week since I last heard from him, which is rude in my opinion, considering I went out of my way to make his favorite dinner after I left the bookstore. He didn't even show up for it. I shouldn't have done it, he's clearly high, and I know he left in a rage chasing more drugs, but my heart doesn't seem to understand that we are done. Which is ironic seeing I'm the one who told him we needed a break, but then I can't even stop trying to act like a fucking couple. Maybe it's

the fact that he hasn't left for good that has me feeling so confused. We're still sleeping in the same bed, sharing the same space, and seeing each other every day. No wonder I can't move on, I really shouldn't blame myself this much. Does he even live here if he hasn't come home in this long though? Who knows anymore.

I sit up in bed and turn on the lamp on the nightstand, the light illuminating the room in a soft glow. It has a setting to adjust the brightness, so I dim it as far as it'll go. What the hell am I even trying to get out of this? I should just turn it off and pretend to sleep, even if I can't actually do it for the rest of the night. I consider being grateful he left me to my thoughts earlier, that I had some alone time to think about everything, but I feel more confused than ever. Do I want him to leave or stay? And if he leaves, will I ever take him back? And if I don't, am I ready to face those feelings? Am I ready to be in a world of pain?

A few minutes later, Zayne comes out of the bathroom completely naked. He stops walking when he notices I'm watching him, then moves on to get his underwear out of the drawer. His body is still not ravaged by the drugs, thankfully. Instead, he looks fucking delicious, which makes it even harder to keep my hands to myself. I wish he looked like shit so I didn't have to want him this much, but even then, I still would as I think about how much I love him. I would be blinded by my feelings, regardless.

"Where have you been?" I ask, my voice just as vulnerable as I feel. I wait for his response, clasping my hands together

with nervousness. I don't actually want to know where he's been, because his face says it all. He moves to stand right next to me on my side of the bed, and I keep my eyes trained on his face, refusing to look at his cock just inches from me.

"Out," is all he offers, and my heart bottoms out.

"That's all you're going to say after a week?" *Don't fucking cry.* "I've been worried fucking sick about you!"

"What's the point?" He shrugs, turning off the bedside lamp. "You don't want me. You don't even love me anymore." He turns towards me, setting the underwear on the bed next to me, and his loud exhale makes him sound so defeated.

It's so sad that we've come to this, but who am I kidding? We've always been this way. Everything has always revolved around him and his addiction, and it's exhausting. But to go as far as saying that I don't care about him? That I don't love him? It pisses me off, because I've done nothing but show him that I would literally fucking die for him.

"I *do*." I reach for his hand, but he yanks it away, tearing yet another piece out of my heart. "I asked for a break. It doesn't have to be *forever*." The pain in my chest has me doubling over, and getting the words past the knot in my throat is difficult. "I love you," I whisper, gripping the satin sheets like they're going to keep me from falling apart.

"What did you say?" Zayne whispers back and sits on the bed next to me. I want to repeat it, scream it at him, but at the same time I know it's a bad idea. There's no saving us from this, and reminding him of my feelings won't make this easier

for us. But I'm weak for him, weak in general, I think. Sometimes it feels like everything I've gone through in my life has made me this way and stronger, all at the same time. It's like my mind can't decide who it wants to be or how it wants me to act.

Zayne pulls the covers back, and I scoot over on the bed to make room for him, but he doesn't move. "I love you," I sob, "I fucking *love* you." I wipe my tears with the back of my arm and take deep breaths to calm myself.

"Quit playing games with me, Hallie." His hands grip his hair as if he's about to pull it all out, and he rocks back and forth on the bed in distress. I hate what we're doing to each other, and I hate that he's even questioning what we have together, these feelings, this whole world between us.

"Let me show you."

I take off my oversized t-shirt, the only article of clothing I wear to sleep, and set it beside him on the bed. He lets go of his head and looks at me through his lashes. The curtains are drawn back slightly and the moon caresses his face. His eyes are hungry, and I'm surprised he doesn't look high. But then again, what the fuck do I really know about what he's been doing when he won't tell me?

I reach out to him, my hands all over his chest, and he closes his eyes. His skin is warm on my tongue as I circle his nipple, and God, I want to touch every fucking inch of him. Zayne whimpers when I grab his cock and pump it a few

times, and the sounds he makes for me cause my stomach to fill with butterflies.

Bringing him to his knees has always made me feel powerful.

“Make this hurt, baby,” he says, and a tear escapes my eye. I don’t want him to see me cry right now, but he has a way of making me forget what I want. “Make sure I never forget this moment.” This sounds like he wants it to be the end, and if this is the last time, then I want to remember it forever, too.

I lie down in the bed and he comes on top, leaning down and bracing his arms on either side of me. His body is flush with mine as he comes down to kiss me, and I tangle my fingers in his hair and grip it. He groans against my lips right before his warm tongue sweeps into my mouth. His hands are frantic as they slide down my chest, over my breasts, and down to my hips. I meet his kiss with my own desperation, pulling him closer to me by his hair and letting my legs fall open further.

Zayne grinds his cock against me, drawing a moan from my lips as he brushes against my clit. My legs wrap around his slim waist, and I crush him against me. Instead of continuing to kiss him though, I lick his lips which I know drives him fucking insane. He grins against me, making my stomach flip, and reminding me that he’s the only man that can do this to me, work me up this way.

He pushes his cock into me, a slow thrust that seems to last a lot longer than it actually does. When he fills me completely,

grinding against my clit slowly, I dig my fingernails into his ass determined to leave my marks on him, something to remember me by for at least one more week.

This time when I kiss him again, it's not desperate. It's languid, it's savoring, it's exploring. I'm fucking *memorizing* him.

If this is the last time, I'm making it count.

His pace is slow, as if knowing exactly what I need, and then I remember, of course he does. We're the same sides of a rusted coin, he and I— regardless of how fucked in the head the drugs have made him.

His tongue dances with mine and my fingers slide into his hair, deepening the kiss as we both moan into each other's mouths. He pulls away, beginning to trail kisses along my jaw and neck, and I shiver when his tongue darts out to lick me, suck on me. I know he's trying to mark me; he wants everyone to see I'm his. That's why he always leaves bruises on me, and his possessiveness always lights a fire in my core, which is why I let him do it. I allow him to ruin me for everybody else, and I don't even care that he does.

I can feel the impending orgasm, and my pussy clenches around his cock. I swear there's nothing better than what he makes me feel. I *am* a puppet; he pulls all my strings until he has me right where he wants me. The thing people don't understand is that I want to be there, I'm addicted too. He might sometimes take me to hell, but when he brings me to heaven, it's the best high of my fucking life.

My muscles tense, going taut as I get closer, and my body arches toward him. This time I do meet him thrust for thrust, undulating my hips to make the friction even stronger. I moan and whimper, raking my nails down his back in search of purchase, really hoping I'm drawing blood. Zayne doesn't hesitate though, he enjoys the pain. He needs it as much as I do.

"Don't stop," I cry out, digging my nails even deeper into his skin.

"*Never.*" He chuckles against my neck, biting it hard. I'm not sure if there's going to be blood, but I know there will be a bruise tomorrow.

"*Zayne,*" I moan as I start to tremble, the orgasm washing over me. He clamps a hand over my mouth, groaning against my ear. I've never heard anything more beautiful, and I'm determined to hear it again as I top from the bottom one more time.

"Hallie," he says through clenched teeth. "Fucking hell." He finishes inside of me, but I don't move. He just stays there with his brow pressed against mine. "I love you."

"Do you?" I breathe, still trying to calm my pounding heart.

"I loved you the moment I first saw you." His tears fall on my skin, sizzling with the promise of all the pain I know I will feel when this is over.

My throat gets tight again, and I can't speak. For some reason he takes that as his cue to leave. He begins to try to pull

out, his knees planting on the mattress, but I reach out and grab his face.

“Stay, please.” I cry, “Don’t go.” I pull him down to try to get him back to me.

He sighs like it’s painful to be near me. “If that’s what you want.” I nod my head, uncaring that I look desperate right now. *Just five more minutes.*

He lies back down on top of me, bracing himself so he doesn’t crush me. I run my fingers through the soft strands of his midnight hair and he rests his head in the crook of my neck, inhaling me deeply. I want to stay just like this for the rest of our lives, not living our reality, just the two of us existing in our own little world forever. “Don’t leave me, Hallie,” he chokes out. “I can’t be in a world where you don’t exist.” *I can’t be in a world where you don’t exist, Zayne.*

“Loving you fucking hurts.” My voice is broken, but as we hold each other in this safe space, it doesn’t even matter anymore, because he’s broken too. The problem is that I can’t keep picking up his pieces and putting them back together because every time I do, I lose a few of my own.

“I don’t mean for it,” he says into my neck, the words muffled, “I don’t want you to hurt this way.” So why do you do it? Why do you cut me so deeply?

“Sometimes I like the pain.” I whisper, “Sometimes it reminds me I’m alive.”

And it’s not a lie, I *do* feel alive.

I just also feel fucking depleted.

Walking next to the devil will do that to you.

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CHAPTER 9

Zayne

I know Hallie got the blackout curtains for me, but right now, I wish it wasn't so dark in the room. I want to see the sunlight kiss her skin one more time before I have to go. I guess today is not that day though, and I feel sadness enveloping me in a tight hug as I walk to the bathroom to get ready.

She's probably going to sleep for a long time today since she has a shift tonight, and I'm unsure if I'm sad or glad that I don't have to confront her this morning. She tossed and turned most of last night, and I couldn't sleep either, just thinking of what I had to do now. She can't watch me fall apart, but I also know that it's going to happen and I don't want to break her even more. I need to do this away from her, and my self-control is slipping.

At this point I'm hoping she stays asleep, because there's no way I can hold out until I leave the apartment. It's been too long since the last time I used, and my hands are shaking slightly. I know if I don't take a hit soon, everything is going

to go downhill. So I do the only thing I can to make it all stop, to feel better.

The bright white lights in the bathroom hurt my eyes, and I close the door quietly, so I don't wake Hallie. I flip the lock and sit with my back against it, just in case the floor is cold as fuck under me. The hidden pipe beneath the sink calls my name, which I retrieve, then get the meth that I brought in with me last night ready. I light it and take one, two, three hits, holding them until the smoke burns my lungs and I have the urge to cough.

The familiar tingling and warmth follows, but it's not enough anymore. I want— I *need* the monster. If I'm going to go down, might as well fuck everything up while I'm at it. I can't do this half-assed, especially since I'm already going to lose the most important thing in my life -besides Tina- so I might as well die and be buried with a needle in my hands.

I jump in the shower and spend probably an hour in there. It's hard to tell when I'm high since I lose all notion of time, then get dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. It's about sixty degrees outside this early morning, and all I can think about is how much Hallie loves this weather. She's always preferred the cold, whereas I've always liked being warm, but our differences don't deter me. You don't have to be the same as your significant other to have a good relationship, but then again I've never had one, and I don't think she has either.

I try to tiptoe quietly across the room. The last thing I need right now is a fight about how high I am. I need to get the fuck

out of here. My shoes are in the living room closet and I don't need anything else, so I can get away much faster than usual. I'm going to guess that by now I've been dropped from my classes for missing more than three days without notice or an excuse, and I'm also more than likely fired for not calling or showing up for about ten days. Do I give a fuck? No, I don't. More than likely, I'll never be able to get my shit together after this, and Hallie evidently doesn't want me here anymore, so it's not like I'll be helping her financially, regardless. At this point I could care less about anything. I don't even know where I'll go if I move out of here, but I can't go back to my mom's house. She's made that very clear.

“Going somewhere?” Hallie sits up in the bed abruptly, and I stop in my tracks to face her, ready to lie. “You're not going to say goodbye?”

“Just school, baby.” *Lies.* “I didn't want to wake you.”

Hallie raises an eyebrow at me, daring me to tell the truth. She knows that I haven't called work or school since my relapse, and it's apparent that I can't go to either place by now. “Of course you are,” she mutters, running a hand through her hair. “Give me a minute to brush my teeth, and I'll say a proper goodbye.”

Fuck, what the hell do I say if she asks me outright where I'm actually going? Do I lie to her again? Do I tell her the truth? If we're not going to be together, does it even matter what I say anymore?

Hallie goes to the bathroom to brush her teeth, and I just pace the room, my hands shaking with the need to get something stronger. That quarter I smoked didn't do shit for me whatsoever, but I don't know if I can get a teener, especially since it's free. If I ask for more, will they give it to me? I need to figure this shit out.

When she comes out of the bathroom, she has a worried expression on her face, and I know I've been caught. "Well, I need to run," I tell her, averting my gaze. "I'm going to be late if I don't hurry."

"Kiss?"

"Yes, baby girl." She gives me a soft kiss, brushing some hair away from my face with her cold fingers before looking into my eyes. The way she sucks in a sharp breath jolts me, my eyes widening when hers fill with tears, but even then she doesn't say anything at all. "Goodbye." My voice breaks and I look away, not wanting to see the sad look on her face.

She knows.

She knows.

She knows.

And now I can't come home.

I leave the house, trying not to think about the fact that I don't have any of my belongings or anywhere to stay, and get in the car. I know exactly where I'm headed, and even though I feel guilty, I shut my conscience out. I'm doing it either way, no use in feeling bad about it.

The only thing I feel bad about is leaving Hallie, especially knowing I won't be returning home anytime soon, if ever. I swore I wouldn't leave her, but she's the only thing getting in the way, the only one keeping me from what I want most. Still, I'm not sure she understood that goodbye, the fact that it may be the very last time I talk to her.

Traffic has cleared up on the interstate, which is good for me because I'm in a fucking rush. I haven't looked at the speedometer once, and it's a good thing I don't see any police around because, technically, I'm under the influence, even if I'm not as high as I want to be. This warehouse is at least thirty minutes away, I can't remember from the last time I went, but I'd drive hours for what I'm about to get.

When I make it there, John is already waiting for me outside, a wide smile on his ugly ass face. It's like he's fucking giddy about me tripping and falling. As if this addiction is a joke, like he doesn't give a shit if I ever get back up again.

"Back for more already?" He laughs, and I want to fuck his ass up, but I want meth even more than that, so I just nod and smile. It's fake as fuck, and he probably can tell, but as long as I get what I'm here for I don't care what he thinks.

My skin crawls, and I scratch at my face, making it sting. "You said it's on the house, right?" I'm desperate and if it's not free like he said, I'll pay for it.

He opens the door for me and waits until I step inside to close it behind him, the loud sound making me jump. The warehouse feels like one long hallway, at least this side of the

building, and I'm kind of glad I'm not here alone since I probably wouldn't know how to get out. "For as long as you want it." I nod, not bothering to reply. I mean, what the fuck do I even say to that? 'Thank you' feels like too much and not enough at the same time.

There's a cold draft from the air conditioner as we walk through the building, and I put my hands in my pockets to try to get warmer. John takes me through yet another hallway, leading me to a room with a conference table and foldable padded chairs. It almost looks like a break room, which I find oddly amusing considering this line of work.

"How much are we talking?" I ask as I sit down. He opens some cabinets in the break room, grabs a small basket with a bunch of labeled baggies and throws one at me. I'm frozen to the spot. I don't remember the last time I got free drugs. *That's because it doesn't happen.*

"A zip." I look down at the baggie with a one written across the front of it with a black marker, and my stomach bottoms out. A whole fucking *ounce*?

"Nah, man." I shake my head, tossing it back toward the center of the conference table. "There's no fucking way this is free."

"I told you, bro." He grabs the baggie, shaking it a little. I see the rocks shifting inside of it and I hold my breath, then release it. "D said it's free."

"And I still don't know who the fuck that is."

“Don’t worry about it.” John smiles, but I just can’t let this shit go. “If you don’t want it, I can put it back.” He turns and grabs the basket, going back to the cabinets to put it away. Panic seizes my chest, constricting my heart until it threatens to give out on me. What the fuck am I going to do if he changes his mind? Who do I go to if I want more? How much is it going to cost? I guess I could go downtown if I need to, but I really, really don’t want to be around that crowd right now.

“Wait—” I run my fingers through my hair, tamping down the urge to rip it all out. *I shouldn’t do this.* “I’ll take it.” Don’t. Don’t. *Do not fucking do this.*

He chuckles, “I knew you would.” That doesn’t sit well with me, him offering me drugs then treating me like a fucking junkie. I clench my fists and release them. He walks back to me and I stand, ready to leave this damn place. “Here.” The baggie makes contact with the palm of my hand, and I close it, feeling the sharp edges through the Ziplock bag. *Fuck.*

“I need to go.” I walk toward the door, looking to either side of the hallway in confusion. I don’t even remember how I got here. They really need to make this shit easier, but I’ll learn this layout sooner or later considering I’ll be coming in and out of here often.

“I’ll show you the way back.”

We pass a few open doors, offices it seems like, which is weird because these fuckers are *not* businessmen. Right? The drug industry is huge, but I’ve yet to see someone in a suit

here, even though there's expensive decor, desks, and leather chairs. What am I dealing with here? What did I just get myself into?

I put effort into making sure my feet aren't dragging over the carpet, looking down while I think about when and where I'll go to shoot this shit up. A thrill runs down my spine, and the excitement of it coursing through my veins again is enough to make me hard.

I look up to see where I'm going, and just as I do, someone comes out of one of the offices. "Oh, this is D," John says, introducing me like I don't know this motherfucker standing across from me.

Damien grins at me and nods like we're best friends. My hands fist at my side, and when I feel the meth being crushed under my grip, I release it just enough to not fuck up my product. The urge to slit his throat is strong, and I have so many questions, but the main one wins, "What the *fuck* are you doing here?"

"Me?" He smiles, spinning in a circle with his arms wide open. "This is my family's fine establishment." My blood runs cold. He's the one giving me drugs. Because he wants *her*. He wants to take her away from me, ensure I never get her back. And he won, he fucking won. She'll never want me after this. I know that for a fact.

"Why am I getting this shit from you?" I scoff. "And for free? What the fuck do you want?"

Damien steps up to me until our chests are brushing. “For you to get away from Hallie.” *I knew it.*

“So you use drugs to get what you want?”

“I use whatever method I need to use.” He chuckles, his tone condescending. “And with you? This was an easy route. You’re fucking weak.” I flinch involuntarily, and I hate myself for it. It only makes him smile wider, and it’s obvious who’s in control of this situation. I’ve just given him all the power, and he holds my life in his hands. At least, the only life I want.

“This isn’t forever.” I smile back, only I don’t know if that’s true. I can’t say for certain if I’ll be living on the streets a week from now or if I’ll ever have a normal life again. Despite that, I can get the drugs I want, when I want them, as long as I leave her alone is motivation enough especially since I don’t know how to be strong like I should be. “And Hallie *always* comes back.” That much is true, at least.

“We’ll see about that.” He points down the hallway, “Now leave before I change my mind.” He goes back into his office and slams the door. I want to go in there and rip his fucking throat out with my teeth, but instead I head toward the door. I can’t afford to lose this. I won’t give it up yet.

“You know where to find me if you want more.” John says, opening the door for me and letting me out.

“See you soon, then.”

It doesn’t matter how much I hate them, this situation, or my goddamn self. At the end of the day, if I perish with a

needle in my veins and a heart full of meth, I'll greet death with a smile on my face.

I get back in my car and drive with no destination in mind, at least, I don't think about it until I get closer. This is probably the stupidest decision I've made in my entire life, but as I enter my hometown, I can't bring myself to remember why I shouldn't do it. Yes, my supplier is two hours away, but I'd drive twenty hours for what he'll give me, and an ounce should last me a while, or maybe not, who knows.

I pull into CC's driveway, my heart pounding in my chest. She probably doesn't even live here anymore. There's a white car that isn't hers in the driveway, and all of a sudden this feels like a bad idea. I don't want to get high alone though, and that's what has me getting out of my car and knocking on the door. If she doesn't live here anymore, I'll go get high at Fishermen's Park. If I ever want to get back with Hallie, this is probably a terrible idea. *She won't ever take you back.*

It's probably only been a few seconds, but it feels like a lifetime as I wait for someone to open the door. I debate on going back to the car. There's probably not anyone here anyway, but as I turn around, the door creaks open. There's no one at the door, however, and I wonder if they want me to just come in. That's weird though, so I just stand there and wait all over again until Catherine finally comes into my line of sight.

"Are you coming in or what?" The smile on her face screams of trouble, telling me I should turn around and never come back. She's going to ruin my entire life, but at the same

time I've always wanted to fuck her, even while I hated her. Now's my chance to do it and when there's meth involved, I don't truly hate anyone.

"I thought you were too short for the peephole." I laugh, trying to keep things light-hearted until I show her what I want to do. "Yes, I want to come in."

"I have company, by the way." She gestures toward her sectional couch, a new addition since the last time I was here. I guess she turned her life around a bit, because she used to barely have any furniture and this place looked like a fucking dump. It's too bad I'm about to ruin her life all over again, just like she ruined mine. "What brings you here anyway? I thought I'd never see you again after you left with your little hoe."

I tense, rage boiling my blood, but I need to let this shit go. *Let it fucking go.* Hallie and I aren't even together anymore, and I don't want to talk about her. I want to shoot up and fuck. Those are the only two things going through my mind right now. "Does your company like to have fun?" I raise an eyebrow as I glance at the girl on the couch. Her brown hair is long and wavy, and her bright green eyes widen when she sees me. She looks a little younger than us, probably not old enough to drink, but it doesn't matter to me. I'm about to fuck her world up. "I come bearing gifts."

"Charlie and I are kind of busy." Catherine smiles, and I take notice of her outfit, which consists of a see-through tank top and boy shorts. Her tan legs are toned from a lifetime of

dancing, and I can't tear my eyes away. "Unless you have something worth our time?" The girl on the couch spreads her legs, the t-shirt riding up her torso to show me her glistening, bare pussy. I look between them to make sure I'm not imagining things. Are they asking me to fuck them both? Should I? I know the logical answer to that is, no, I don't even have a condom. Although, after we shoot up, none of that will matter anymore. I'll come one way or another.

"It depends on what you consider worth your time." I pull out the ounce of meth and dangle it in front of her face, gauging her reaction. Blue eyes meet mine, and then she chuckles, a raspy sound that goes straight to my dick. "Does this fall under that category?"

"How many needles did you bring?"

Technically I only have one needle, and it's for me. I thought she'd have her own, not even really considering she'd be clean. I'm not sure why, especially since I had achieved it for a while. It's *not* impossible to stop doing drugs, it's just very fucking hard, and it's even harder to stop once you start using needles. "Just the one."

Catherine seems to consider this. "We're going to exchange bodily fluids anyway," She shrugs. "I don't think it matters anymore."

She's not wrong, I haven't ever worn a condom with Hallie, and I'm not going to start today. I don't have anything against them. I'm just too impatient to go to the gas station right now

and be delayed, yet again. No, I just want to get this done right fucking *now*.

I pull the packaged needle out of my pocket and walk toward the bedroom door, stopping in front of it to wait for them. “Are you in?” Catherine skips toward me, and you can tell she’s giddy about what she’s about to do. “Are you in or out?” I ask Charlie, who looks like she’s about to shit herself. She’s trying to be rational right now, and I bet she knows she’s not coming out of this alive. Once you dip your toe into this drug, it grabs you by the ankle and drags you in until you’re drowning in the deep end.

Catherine walks into the bedroom and pulls the pink comforter off the bed, letting it drop to the floor in the middle of the room. I look at the other girl expectantly, and she takes hesitant steps until she stands next to me. “I’m in,” she says, her voice shaking as she nods frantically. Catherine looks like the cat who got the cream, which makes me roll my eyes. She’s the last person who should be gloating right now since we all know she’s never going to make it out of this. Dragging another innocent person isn’t something to be proud of, and even though I’m technically doing that right now, it’s her fucking choice.

“I think Charlie should go first,” I tell Catherine, gesturing to the bed. Charlie gets the hint and gets on it, fluffing a pillow and taking her shirt off to lie on her back. Her perky little tits point to the ceiling, tan nipples hardening from the cold room. Goosebumps scatter her entire body, and her face flushes as she meets my eyes. She almost looks like a cat with her little

mouth and big green eyes. “Let’s make her first time good, yeah, baby?”

Catherine takes the needle out of the packaging, getting it ready. At this point, the other girl looks like she really might pass out from fear. “I want to be the one to pop her cherry.”

I nod my agreement. “I want to be the one between her legs.” I walk to the bed and reach a hand out to Charlie, caressing her leg softly, which makes her visibly relax. “It’s okay, baby girl. I’ll take care of you.” She chuckles when I wink at her, and I can tell this is going to be a fun day. Charlie is the prettiest brown girl I’ve ever seen, with her little tits, big ass, and hourglass figure. But the prettiest thing about her is definitely her face, and I’m going to enjoy fucking it today.

I cook the meth and get it ready to be injected, then Catherine pulls it into the syringe and wraps the tourniquet around Charlie’s left arm. I lie on my stomach between Charlie’s legs, and she seems a little shy as she looks down at me. I grin, trying to put her at ease, and also, because holy fuck, that’s a pretty little pussy. I can’t believe I’m about to fuck it. I’m also very surprised I’m letting her take the first hit of my product, but as her musky scent fills my nostrils, I think I’d rather be sober to watch this happen. I want to see how I change her life, the look in her eyes with that first plunge. Everyone has it, the face of pure bliss, because that’s precisely what it is.

I hook my arms under Charlie’s legs, putting them over my shoulders, and nod at Catherine to continue. She taps a vein

one more time and tells Charlie to take a deep breath, which she does. I watch the needle go into her arm and my dick grows painfully hard underneath me, aware and ready for what's about to happen to me too.

I hover my mouth over Charlie's pussy, letting my breath warm her slit, and watch Catherine nod. My tongue parts her, and I push in deeper until I find her clit, then lick her softly, just teasing her. I watch Catherine plunge the syringe, and Charlie's big eyes widen even more, then roll to the back of her head. Yeah, babe, I know. *I fucking know.*

I close my lips around her clit and suck, and the way she screams makes me want to smile. *That's it, baby, this is why people get so fucking hooked.* Charlie's hands come to the back of my head, her fingernails digging painfully into my scalp as she bucks her hips into my mouth, flooding my face with her come.

There's a split moment of guilt as she lets go of me, and I remember the life I've built with Hallie back home. *Home.* Somehow it still feels like I belong there even though I know I don't. She doesn't want me. She doesn't want to deal with this anymore, and I can't spend the rest of my days thinking of what could've been. What should've been if I didn't fuck it all up.

Catherine goes to the girl, smiling up at her, and brushes some hair away from her face. "How do you feel?" She asks her softly, and Charlie's face breaks out into the brightest smile I've seen from her since I got here. There are dimples on

her cheeks, and her bright white teeth glisten as her smile widens. Too bad that beautiful smile is about to go to shit soon. It's only a matter of time before this ruins her life.

“Amazing...”

“Our turn,” I say to Catherine, going back across the room to the baggie so I can cook up more meth. “Get me the syringe.”

I get the drug loaded into the syringe, then wrap the tourniquet around my upper arm and search for a vein. It doesn't take long, especially since I haven't used it in a while and still have some good veins left. I find the one that I want but don't get ready to inject yet. Rather I take off my pants and underwear, then go back to the bed and lie down with my head on the pillow, in the same exact position Charlie had been. I'm expecting this to be a quid pro quo, and I have a feeling I won't be disappointed.

Catherine comes on top of me, her legs hugging my waist and ass toward my face, while Charlie kneels between my spread legs and grabs my hard cock, pumping it slowly for me. They're making me harder by the fucking second, until I can literally feel myself throbbing from how badly I want to come. Catherine spreads her legs and rubs her pussy all over my chest, and I rip off her underwear just so I can see her do it, then throw the scraps on the bed. Her pink pussy lips and clit shine in front of my face, and I can't help myself anymore, I touch her.

Her skin is soft as velvet, and I see her ass and pussy contract when I brush my thumb against her clit. Suddenly, two tongues slide up each side of my dick as they brush against each other. It feels like they're trying to make out with each other and I'm just in the way, but I don't care, this feels amazing.

"Do it," Catherine says, then takes me into her mouth and all the way down her throat. My moan vibrates through my body, and I grip the needle in my hand to find the vein again. Charlie puts my balls in her mouth and softly sucks just as Catherine keeps deep-throating me, and somehow I figure out how to inject this shit into my veins while lying down.

It's tricky as hell, and at first, it feels like I might fuck this up. "Stay still for just a sec," I tell them, and finally get the vein. A thrill runs down my spine in anticipation of what's about to happen. "Okay, I'm ready."

I slam the fucking plunger.

There's a rush of heat spreading over my body, which intensifies even more with the feel of Catherine's lips wrapped around my cock, and Charlie literally spreads my legs as far as they'll go and spears my asshole with her tongue. Holy fucking shit, who knew that could feel so good?

It feels like a lightning strike down my spine, and then the heat spreads down to my dick and my ass. Charlie's tongue is still circling my tight hole, her hands pulling my ass cheeks apart as far as they'll go, and Catherine keeps swallowing my dick. I grab onto her hips and rock them against my chest,

making sure her legs are spread as far as they'll go so she can feel the friction against her clit. "God, baby, please don't stop. Please, *please*," I cry out desperately, hovering on the edge of coming so fucking hard that I might pass out. I move her hips harder, faster, and she begins to choke on my cock, her moans reverberating through my balls. Catherine starts to rock against me too, helping me make her come, and I shove two fingers in her pussy just to help her out. She pushes back against me, fucking my fingers while rubbing her clit against my chest. She comes, screaming around my dick, her wetness pools on my knuckles from how good I made her feel.

And yet, through all of this, she doesn't stop gagging on me, doesn't stop choking on my cock.

"Don't let her stop, Catherine." I feel Charlie's face being shoved in closer to me, and her teeth scrape against me in a way that should hurt but instead feels fucking phenomenal. I focus on the feeling of her tongue in my ass, and that's what makes me come. Not the blow job, not the fact that I'm hitting the back of Catherine's throat, but this innocent-looking girl licking my ass makes me fall apart. And it's the best blow job of my life, thanks to that.

My come hits the back of Catherine's throat, and she swallows it down like a good girl. The thing about meth is that I'm so fucking horny the first hour after consuming it that I recover in literally two minutes, then I'm ready to have sex again. Watching her climb off me and walk across the room to cook her meth and get it ready, reminds me of exactly how much I want to fuck her right now.

Charlie comes to kneel next to me on the bed, and a devious smile crosses her face as she watches Catherine sit next to me and look for a vein. “Cat,” she says, and I watch the dynamic between them. They’ve clearly been doing shit with each other for a while, you can just tell. “I wanna be on top while you ride the high.”

“Okay, but I need your help.” Catherine plunges the needle in, wincing a little before she gets ready to slam it. “I need you to push the plunger and pull the needle out.”

“Lie down, I got you.” Charlie keeps the needle steady as Catherine lies down, then finally pushes the plunger, sending her into oblivion.

Charlie climbs on top of her just as Catherine spreads her legs, and they begin to scissor each other, their pussies rubbing. My hard-on is fucking painful. I need relief, and since Charlie is the closest one to me, I spit on my hand and rub it against her ass. I wait for her to tense, to say no, but she doesn’t. I push the head of my cock against her ass and she pushes back against me, surprisingly. At this point she’s lying on top of Catherine with her legs spread and her ass slightly tilted toward me for easier access, and when I push past the ring of muscle and bury myself to the hilt, this bitch begins to fuck us both. *What the actual fuck.* She knows exactly what she’s doing.

I don’t hold back on her as I pound her ass and chase my orgasm, not giving a fuck if she comes or not. She’s not my problem anymore. I already gave her one, she can work for the

next. Catherine's and Charlie's moans crescendo as my thrusts get faster, and when I come, they both scream together. I pull out and go to the bathroom, leaving them on the bed together to talk about their feelings or whatever the hell they're into. Now that I'm truly high, I want to keep it this way for a few days, and who better than them to do it with?

I just hope they understand I'm here for a good time, not a long time.

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CHAPTER 10

Hallie

Depression has its claws sunk deep into my battered soul, and I feel like it won't let me come up for air. I'm tainted in black, ruined forever by Zayne. His toxicity is spreading through my body like venom, and I don't have an antidote. Except, I don't want to be cured. I think I'd rather die.

I haven't seen him in almost two weeks, and I'm starting to believe he left for good. Except his clothes are still in my home, as well as all of his belongings. He probably overdosed somewhere and that's why he hasn't come back, but I have no way of knowing because he turned off the location on his phone. Won't text or call back and hasn't been to work or school. At this point, I just hope he's not dead.

And that's why I'm here with Brittany, at the best sushi spot in town, sharing a California and Philly roll. To keep my mind off him. I'm sure I'll stuff my face so that I don't have to think for five minutes.

This is the first time I've left my house in three days, since I've been off work, and Brittany dragged me out just to make sure I ate. There are no groceries left in my fridge and barely anything in the pantry. It's been way too depressing to go to the store when I don't have to buy anything for him. It should make me feel better to have her with me, but honestly, I don't really think anything short of him coming back will help.

"Are you okay?" Brit stuffs sushi into her mouth and chews loudly while she waits for my answer. "You look a little lost in your thoughts..." Yeah, I've been doing that a lot lately. I can't focus on shit because I'm always thinking about him.

"Is this a trick question?" I roll my eyes. "How do you think I am?"

"I just feel like this is a bit much for a breakup." She looks pointedly at me, her lips pinching together. She's right, this is too much for a breakup, but how do I control my feelings? How do I tell myself I'm fine when the world is swallowing me whole? Like, I can't breathe if he's not near? "Don't you think?"

"I don't know, Brit. Yeah, maybe this is a bit much but have you ever loved someone to the extent where you can't even function if they're not around?" I grab more sushi with my chopsticks, looking around the restaurant to ensure no one's listening in on our conversation. The red booths are all connected to each other, and I don't want anyone to know my business, even if it's not even that exciting.

“Not really, Hallie. And to be frank, it doesn’t sound healthy at all.” Brittany’s cold hands rest over my right one, stopping me from picking my chopstick back up. “Perhaps think about it, this might be for the best.”

My voice wobbles as I talk, and I hate it. Why am I so weak for him? I hate it so fucking much sometimes, but he makes it so easy to just give in and let him take all the power. “I just didn’t expect him to actually go through with it.” I avoid eye contact at all costs, not wanting her to know how broken I feel about this. “When I told him he had to go if he was on drugs.”

“He had to leave, Hallie. You can’t always take care of him. He’s bringing you down.” She squeezes my hand softly. “You have to show him there are certain things you won’t put up with. He needs boundaries. I’m just sorry he hurt you so badly.” I know it was only a matter of time before he did, it was always bound to happen, yet somehow that knowledge doesn’t make this any easier.

“Are you, though?” I give her the fakest smile possible, turning around in the seat to face her, and I know she can tell, but her face doesn’t change. “I bet you’re happy as fuck right now.” She’s always hated him, and it was even worse when we got back together. Everyone loves to point out that he doesn’t deserve me, but shouldn’t I be the one to decide that? Why can’t people accept that I can choose to put up with how I’m treated if I want to? Both Damien and Brittany are stuck on this and won’t move on, and it pisses me off. What if I want him to treat me like shit because then he’ll stay? Let me fucking live.

Brittany scoffs, “Believe it or not, I don’t take pleasure in your suffering. Only Zayne does.” She pulls her hand back and reaches for the food again, and suddenly I miss her touch. I just need someone to hold me for a little bit and keep my pieces together, but I don’t want to have to ask for it.

“Zayne and God, if there even is one.”

“There’s not,” Brit sighs. “I’ve called out to him so many times.” She winks, and I laugh. It’s hard to be sad around her. I know she’s trying to lighten the mood, and I can tell she’s upset with my attitude toward her, although that’s why she’s my best friend. I just don’t feel like myself right now.

I wish we had more moments like these in the past four months, but when I took Zayne back, I lost the last of my self-respect and everything else that mattered to me. I can see Brittany’s argument when it comes to being better off without him, but I just can’t accept that. It feels like a limb has been amputated, like a vital part of me is missing. So why the fuck did I do it to myself? *I* told him to leave.

Once we’re done eating, the server comes with the tab and I hand him my debit card. I figure it’s easier if I just pay for her therapy services in the form of food. She’s always done so much for me, and I hate to say it, but I take her for granted most of the time. It’s sad how I’ve pushed everyone away to make more room for one person, and now I need to figure out how to undo all the damage I’ve caused.

Brittany is forcing me to go to the grocery store with her since she knows I need to. In a way, I’m kind of glad, because

I don't think I will go on my own. I'd probably starve at that point or order from UberEATS, which I've been considering the last few days anyway. Eating cereal every night for dinner will make you contemplate your life and mine is obviously utter shit right now.

I mean for this to be a quick grocery haul; I don't need that much right now, just the essentials. So when we get to the store, I only look for the items I absolutely need. Almond milk, cocoa pebbles (my favorite cereal, obviously the superior kind), bread, cheese, deli meat, and some Chobani Flip yogurts, because I need to eat something so I don't starve. I don't plan on cooking anything for myself for at least another month, which makes me question my finances since I'll be paying for everything on my own now. Zayne didn't contribute toward the rent, but he did pay for all the utilities and the internet. That falling to me now is going to stress me the fuck out. So really, I should be going back to beer and ramen like my college days, but I don't want to. I'll have to pick up more shifts at the hospital to make up for the difference, but the level of tiredness that I've been feeling lately tells me that's not going to happen any time soon.

I swear I only buy around ten items and it's somehow fifty dollars, which makes me cringe as I try to remember what the fuck my bank account looks like right now. I finally breathe a sigh of relief when the transaction is approved. Jesus Christ, I never want to be scared about money again, and this breakup situation isn't helping me whatsoever. I need to marry an old

millionaire who can support me and let me travel wherever and whenever I want. One can dream, right?

The drive home from the store is silent. Apparently she finally understands that I don't really want to talk about him. I require time, silence, and space so I can get used to my empty home and being without him. My routines have to change to make me feel less lonely. My heart needs to fucking shrink so I don't feel this pain as much.

If only.

I hold my breath when we park at my apartment complex, and I release it ever so slowly as we get out of the car. My legs shake all the way to the door, but I will myself to keep taking steps forward. I despise going home now. Maybe I need to move.

I unlock the front door while Brit stands behind me, and as I push it open, the house is dark and quiet.

Gone.

Just like that, he's still gone.

I turn on the lights and walk into the apartment, the cold air making me shiver, and I notice something is different. I look around trying to place it, and my eyes land on the open coat closet door, where his jackets and shoes are missing from it. I run to my room, open *our* closet, and everything is missing too. "What the fuck?" I shriek, the sound piercing my own ears. I can't do this. I can't.

Suddenly the weight of his departure hits me full force, and I fall to my knees, gasping for breath. My chest is so tight that it feels like I'm having a heart attack, but I know this pain is emotional, even if it feels like someone is stabbing me. The way my breathing picks up is scary, but even as I try, I can't control how fast I take in air. My sweaty hands slip and meet the hardwood floor as I try to support myself, only keeping myself upright is nearly impossible right now.

Brit's hand reaches for my back, rubbing slow circles on it, but my body doesn't want to obey. She kneels next to me, drawing me into a tight hug and squeezing me, then rocks us back and forth on the ground together.

"Shhhh." She continues to rub circles on my back. "It's going to be okay." I know she's only trying to help, but I honestly don't believe anything short of death will help me. Why is my heart so destroyed over him?

I sob an ugly, loud sound that resounds in my ears, and I can barely get any words out as I ask, "How—" I gasp, "Could he do this to us?"

"How fucking *dare* he?" she sneers. "How dare he do this?" Her outrage stuns me. I don't know if she cares or if she's just doing what she thinks I need right now. Either way, it makes me feel a little better because that's the question I've been asking myself for the past two weeks. He knew all along when I told him to leave that even though I didn't want to put up with him doing drugs and didn't want to watch him fall back

into his addiction, I didn't really mean it when I told him to move out.

I fully recover after about three hundred deep breaths and try to support my weight with my hands once more on the ground, getting up on all fours. "How could he leave me, B?" I sniffle, "After everything I've done for him?"

She shrugs, "He's always been a stupid motherfucker."

I start to laugh so hard my belly hurts, but the laughter quickly morphs into bawling, and it's a guttural and heart-wrenching pain I never want to feel again.

I don't want to feel *anything* at all ever again.

"Come on," Brittany helps me get up from the ground and supports me all the way to the bedroom. "Take a shower, babe. It'll make you feel better." She goes to the bathroom and turns on the water for me, then sticks her hand under the spray to test the water temperature. "I have to head out soon since I have to work."

I don't even have the strength to fight her anymore, so I do as she says, taking off my clothes and dropping them on the ground. I test the water temperature before getting in just in case it's too cold, then make it twice as hot once I get in.

I take my time lathering my body and stand under the spray way longer than usual. She was right, it is making me feel better. Maybe there are healing properties in scalding hot water, or my demons want to play today. Either way, I don't

care as long as my skin is bright red by the time I get out. I need to distract myself from the pain in my heart.

I get out of the shower to hear my phone ringing repeatedly, and I run out of the bathroom as fast as I can, water dripping from my body all over the floor. “Hello?” My voice is hoarse from all the sobbing I’ve been doing, and it has a slight tremble from fear.

“Hey, baby.”

My heart starts to pound loudly in my ears, and relief courses through my body when I realize he’s alive. I feel myself relax, and I walk back to the bathroom to grab my towel. It’s fucking cold. “Where the fuck have you been?” The relief turns into anger real quick, and I take three deep breaths to try to calm down. He goes this long without giving me a sign of life and has the balls to call me ‘baby’ like it’s a regular day in our lives? Fuck that.

There’s a long pause from his side as I walk back to the bedroom and search for clothes. I almost think he hung up, or I imagined this whole encounter, but then he says, “I’m an addict, baby. I’ve been doing the only thing I know how to do.” I sit on the bed, my hands gripping the sheets, tears streaming down my face at his admission.

The first step to recovery is accepting that you need help.

Is that what this is? Will he let me help?

“I thought you were dead,” I choke back a sob. “You could’ve just said you didn’t want me anymore. That you

weren't coming back."

"You're right, I don't want you." My breath catches in my throat, my stomach bottoming out. "I *need* you back. Please, help me get out of this."

"I can't keep doing this with you, Zay. It's not healthy for me." I sniffle. "As much as it hurts, it might be better this way." It's not better. It will *never* be better. But I need him to be serious about his recovery, and it doesn't feel that way. He wants to get sober for me, not for him, and that's never going to work.

"You and I apart?" His voice rises, "Nothing could be worse than that." I can think of a few things, but I don't say them. "How can you say it's better this way?"

"Because then I wouldn't have to see how you're throwing your life away over this shit anymore." I throw one hand up in frustration and then realize he can't even see that. "I'm not sticking around to find you dead in our home."

"Meth is a monster, Hallie." He sighs, sounding regretful. "All that matters to me is getting my next fix."

"So is that what this is about? Do you need money?"

"All I do is shoot up and think about you." I cringe at his words. "I want to get clean again... but I know it's pointless. You'll never take me back now." What a fucking lie, I'll probably always take him back. Even if it ruins me completely.

“So what do you need, then?” I try to get him back on track, back to the reason for this phone call. I don’t want to prolong this pain, and the longer I hear his voice, the more my soul aches. I need to turn off my phone for the next week and be left alone.

“I would like to get more of my things back, if that’s okay.” I frown. Didn’t he just get all of his shit? I go back to the closet and see some shoes in the corner. I roll my eyes. Is this a ploy to get me to see him? Over three pairs of shoes?

“Why did you leave the shoes?”

“So I could see you again.” He chuckles, and it makes me smile. “Believe it or not, I can’t go through life if you’re not in it.”

“You can come for them if you’d like them back.”

The sigh of relief from his end of the phone is sad. We shouldn’t be going through this. “Be there in an hour.” He hangs up the phone without another word, and I wonder if he’s actually going to stop by or if he’ll get sidetracked on the way here.

I’d much rather he didn’t show up. That way I don’t have to think about how much it hurts to see him and not be able to have him. Not to mention he’s been doing drugs for weeks now, and I don’t want to see the way this has fucked him up. I thought I had seen him at his lowest before he got sober, but this level of nonchalance is a whole different rock bottom. He’s never gone this long without trying to contact me, without *wanting* to. The possibility that he’s been too high to

give a fuck about me is too real to handle, and the question is, why now? Why does he care about coming over for the three pairs of shoes left in the closet? Why does he want to see me now and not two weeks ago? What does he *need* from me?

When I go back to the living room to let Brittany know he's coming over, she's gone. There's a note on the dining room table, '**Be safe, I'll call you later. Love ya**'.

I love you too.

I sit on the couch to pass the time, using the television as background noise since I can't seem to focus on anything. Thoughts of Zayne drift in and out of my mind, and I try to remember the last two months, all of our happy moments. The evenings spent on this couch together, strolls in the park, dinners, being silly with each other. Now all of it feels tainted, ruined, by the stain of his cravings. I wish he craved *me* in its place.

The front door opens, he's using his key to come in, and the hallway lights illuminate his body and the space around him from behind, casting him in a halo of brightness he wouldn't possess on his best day. He slams the door behind him and ambles toward me, as if he's trying not to spook a wounded animal. Like I'm that fragile.

As he gets closer, I look to see the devastation the drugs have managed to cause in two weeks, but instead, I barely see a change at all. His face looks slightly gaunt from lack of eating, but other than that, he's still Zayne.

He still looks like *my* Zayne.

It's a punch to the gut, truly. Shouldn't he look different now that we're not together? Less him? More... destroyed?

He kneels in front of me and takes my hands in his, making my heart beat so fast I feel like I might faint. Why do you have to do this to me?

"I love you," Zayne whispers, our home and myself the only witnesses to his destruction. "I want to see you again tomorrow for a couple of hours."

"I don't know." I do my best not to let the tears fall, looking up and breathing in deeply. "I'll think about it."

Zayne grabs his shoes and walks to the front door, looking at me over his shoulder with a frown on his face. When the door shuts behind him, it feels so final.

I'm left alone with my thoughts.

My life.

My nightmares.

And the dullness of everything without him.



It's been exactly twenty-four hours since I've seen Zayne, and the pain in my heart still hasn't dulled. I was supposed to have a residency class today and then a shift, but I called out and stayed in bed all day instead. My stomach is growling at me from not eating since yesterday, but I don't get any food because the pain is distracting me from everything else.

The blackout curtains are pulled back, and I lie on my side to watch as the light drains from the sky. The moon is bright tonight, and the light filters through the window illuminating my bedroom. I debate on taking the Xanax on my nightstand, downing the Vodka right next to it, but something stops me. It would undoubtedly numb the pain in my heart for just a little bit, which would be ideal, but I don't want to be a hypocrite. If I'm going to tell Zayne I don't want to be with him while he refuses to get clean, then what kind of person would I be if I did drugs? I hate having a conscience sometimes, and even though my moral compass has always been slightly defective, it's choosing to hold me accountable now.

The problem with this type of accountability is that it leaves room for other escape methods, and none are healthy. As I lie here and think about how easy it is to leave me, how worthless I am, it occurs to me that there's one way to numb this emotional pain, and that's by inflicting a physical one.

Zayne didn't leave me because I told him I wanted a break. He didn't even leave me because I asked him to move out. I know him well enough that he left because he wanted to go about his business in peace. He didn't want me to tell him what he could and couldn't be doing, and right now, what he

wants to be doing is something I don't agree with. The fact that he's making the drugs his priority is the biggest problem, especially for someone like me who struggles with abandonment issues. Similar to when things are great, I still have to remind myself that I'm okay, that there's no reason for him to leave me, and that we're fine. Talking myself out of leaving before being left is also a weekly routine, and right now, I'm kicking myself for being so stupid. For thinking that he wouldn't leave me behind like everyone else.

A warm tear trails down my cheek, and I lick it away as it passes over my lips. Surely this pain will dull over time, right? I know I can't live my life like this for much longer, and I need to make it better somehow right now.

I get up from the bed, wiping my face as more tears spill over, and go to the bathroom. The loud sound of the water faucet jolts me when I begin to fill my tub, the water hot enough to burn me. I take off my Texas Longhorns T-shirt, my favorite team, and search for my razor blade in the vanity drawer. Panic seizes my chest when I can't find it, and I ruffle through all the junk in the damn drawer and begin to take it all out. Finally, I spot it underneath all my scrunchies, so I grab it and take it to the tub with me.

The water is scalding hot when I step in, and even as I lower myself into it, I swear my pussy burns so painfully that I know I will likely develop blisters. Still, I force myself to sit and think about my choices, which causes me to cry harder. Sobs tear from my throat and make my body shake, and my

forefinger presses into the corner of the razorblade, bringing some awareness back into my brain.

I put the razor blade against my wrist and try to talk myself out of this, but all of the voices in my head remind me of how unimportant I am to him and everyone else in my life.

My father left me.

My stepfather raped me.

My mom didn't protect me.

No one loves me.

No one cares. Even *I* hate myself.

I usually cut myself on the inside of my thighs, so when I slice through the skin, I do it in a way that ensures the nick is shallow. I don't have a name for this yet, is this only self-harm or a suicide attempt? Do I even want to live? Is this the way I want to go? Will it be painful? I don't know the answer to any of these questions. All I know is that I need to feel *something* other than my chest caving in.

Sometimes it's easier to mask the emotional pain with the physical kind.

So I cut my wrist in a very shallow slice, yet there's so much fucking blood coming out that my eyes bulge out of my head in surprise. It doesn't matter, though. Even as the water turns pink, I decide I don't give a shit. The slit stings like a motherfucker when I submerge my hand underwater, and I hold my breath when tears start to prick my eyes. Why am I crying now? Clearly this isn't enough, so I take the razor blade

and slice where I usually do, on the inside of my thigh. Now *that* really burns and the water is turning darker, just a little more red. But as my mind clears and I'm able to lie back in the tub, my chest finally feels lighter. Why does this help me so much? Am I that messed up in the head that this is the only way to bring myself temporary relief?

I watch the blood curl to the surface of the water, razorblade still in hand, when I hear a faint thud. I tense, then remember I left my front door unlocked. God, sometimes I'm way too stupid for my own good. Did I even get a degree? I don't dare move; maybe the person won't know I'm in here. Wait, even that sounds dumb, of course they will know since my light is on. Is it even a person? Did I imagine this whole thing?

"Hallie?" Nope, definitely didn't imagine it. "Where are you?" I instantly relax once more, which again, I shouldn't be doing because why the fuck did he even come in? Emotions war inside of me, sudden anger at him coming into my house, relief that it's him and not a stranger, and lastly, excitement at seeing him. What the hell is wrong with me?

The door opens just an inch at first, but then he seems to stop caring about my decency because he ends up pushing it all the way open and walking into the bathroom.

Damien stands across from me in a pair of gray sweatpants and a long sleeve shirt. It must finally be getting cold outside, but I wouldn't know since I haven't stepped out of the house. He looks me over, seeing the razorblade between my fingers, and pauses. His eyes travel from the razorblade to the dark

water, as if they're going to tell him what to do and how to handle this. I bet he didn't expect *that* one.

His hands begin to shake slightly. It's very subtle, but I see it, and he fists them when he notices me looking at them. He drops to his knees, comes to the edge of the tub, and yanks my wrist out of the water. The cut is shallow as far as wrists go, but it's still bleeding a little, just not enough for me to die. Not enough for me to stop feeling.

"What the fuck, Hallie?" He drops my hand, and I let it fall back into the water. "Give it to me." I try to hide the razor blade, but just as I'm about to put my other hand under the water, my finger nicks the blade. Blood suddenly starts dripping from it in crimson waves, and his eyes widen in surprise.

"No." I hold on to it for dear life, and I know he won't force it from me, mainly because it will cut me again.

Damien's nostrils flare, and he looks angry, his face turning red now. "Now, *love*." His hand is out expectantly, but I don't budge. There's no way I'm handing this over yet; I'm not done. I will decide when I'm done.

"I need to cut," My voice betrays me, showing the vulnerability I try to keep under wraps. There are so many layers to it that most people just give up trying to figure me out. "I need to feel something other than this... pain." My body begins to shake, and even with the scalding water at my feet, my exposed upper body begins to feel cold.

“You already cut. You don’t need to keep going.” He gestures at the water, “What the fuck happened?”

A shiver runs through my body, and I want to tell him to fuck off, that I can make my own decisions, but something else comes out instead, “No one gives a fuck about me.” I take a deep breath, three breaths in, one long breath out. “He doesn’t give a fuck about me.” I hate myself for telling him that. He hates Zayne. Why the fuck would he care about how I’m feeling? He’s probably glad I’m hurting because then I’ll stop pining over him. What no one understands is that no matter how much he hurts me, I’m not going to move on from him. Not yet, not like this.

“I give a fuck about you,” he snarls, “He doesn’t deserve you, Hallie.” Damien takes my face in his hands and cups it. “Let me take care of you.”

I look down at the tub, the water a pale pink now, and I imagine it turning crimson with the blood I’ll shed from a deeper cut. “Just let me do this.”

“Cut me,” he says softly. “Cut me instead.”

“What?” I ask him, outraged. I’ve never thought about doing that to someone else, it’s always been about the release. It makes me feel something I can’t explain, except... *better*.

“You heard me.” Damien stands, tugging his shirt off and setting it next to the bath rug, his sweatpants following. He’s ready to get in the tub with me, but there’s no way I’m letting that happen.

“No fucking way, Damien.” I shake my head vigorously. I can’t cut him, I would never forgive myself. What if I go too deep? What if I hurt him? What if he hates me after too? What if he’s judging me right now? “It goes against everything I believe in. I won’t do that to you.”

Damien bends at the waist, his hand tangling in my hair, forcing me to look up at him. He gets close enough to share breath, and I can feel his lips move at the corner of my mouth when he speaks, “Don’t you ever want to be in control?” He pulls back to look into my eyes, and the blue of his gets swallowed by black.

My head stings when I try to shake it, so I remain in place. “Not like this,” I tell him, and he steps back, a frown in place. I can’t help but look at him, his abs rippling with his heavy breaths. Why is he so angry about this?

“But you can cut yourself?”

“That’s different. That’s for...” I think of the right word, but don’t find it, so I settle with the closest description, “release.”

It’s true, though. As far as I can remember, I have always cut when I feel sad, angry, or unhappy. Ever since Michael burned through my childhood, that has been my escape from everything. When I hurt so badly I can’t focus, this clears my head and makes everything better. All would be right in my world again with just the simple nick of a blade.

“You’re full of shit,” Damien says through gritted teeth, pushing me forward in the tub and sinking into the water behind me. His strong legs wrap around my waist in a tight

hug, and the calm that courses through my body is alarming. Rough stubble scratches my cheek as he leans into me, and I feel the smile on his face even without seeing it from the way his cheek flexes against mine. “It’s really quite simple, babe.” He takes my wrist in a brutal grip and quickly moves my hand over his thigh, slicing a shallow line. It takes me by surprise, but I’m ready the next time he tries to repeat it. I try to fight him off, unwilling to hurt him, but he’s too damn strong. When he moves my wrist once more and slices a second deeper line right below the first one, my body feels hot. I’m not sure if I feel the release I always do when I cut myself or just pure outrage, but he looks at me like he just *saved* me, when all he’s doing is ruining it for me.

The tendrils of blood in the water envelop us in crimson waves as the drops trickle down, and I smile widely. Maybe I do feel something after all, even if the pain isn’t mine. This is probably the next best thing. I can’t believe he did this for me, and the same question keeps nagging me. Why? Why did he do that?

His jaw tightens as we make eye contact, and we stare at each other for what feels like forever. I turn my body around somewhat to face him from my side, and he looks away from my naked body. It makes me want to grab and force him to, but he won’t even turn my way. I’ve been avoiding him as much as possible, and sometimes it feels like he’s been doing the same, just for me to turn around and see him everywhere. The grocery store, the bookstore, and now he comes to my house? Why is he even here? Why am I just now wondering

that? This man blinds me almost as much as Zayne does, and that's a scary freaking thought.

His full lips taunt me, and I have to bite my own to keep myself from doing something stupid, which he notices immediately. His blue eyes narrow, and I reach a hand back to support myself, but it lands on his abdomen instead. He tenses when I dig my fingernails into his skin.

“Why are you here?”

Damien starts to breathe hard, his chest falling and rising quickly, and he grabs me possessively by the throat, his fingers digging in painfully. He doesn't know this is how I get off, how I like to be fucking treated, and I bet it's not what he prefers for himself. I take his face between my hands and pull him toward me until his nose touches mine, our lips almost touching too. “Do it,” I tell him, my voice hoarse from his hand around it, still squeezing.

I know he won't, he'll stop himself, but I like to see the emotions crossing his face as he considers it. I'm giving him permission, and yet he still doesn't make a move. He just stares into my eyes and rests his forehead against mine. The sigh of relief that comes out of my mouth is short-lived when he covers it with his, and it's so unexpected that I have to brace my free hand on the edge of the tub to keep myself from fucking passing out.

His full lips are soft on mine and my stomach bottoms out as his tongue sweeps into my mouth, his fingers tightening

faintly around my neck. But it's gone before I can register it even happened, like I blinked my eyes too fast and missed it.

The look he gives me could make anyone's panties come right off, but then he's cold again and pushes me slightly away to make room for himself as he stands from the tub. Water sloshes from his underwear down his thighs, mixing with the blood, and I notice his erection straining against his boxer briefs, impressive even while restrained. I force myself to look away from his cock and watch as he reaches for my towel instead. I want to tell him to get a new one, but when he raises it to his nose and smells it, all words die on the tip of my tongue. I don't know if I want to laugh or be creeped out, maybe a little bit of both. He dries off and turns around. My eyes catch on the massive Chinese dragon tattoo on his back, the tail going down into his underwear, with part of it being visible around his hip. He looks at me over one sculpted shoulder, "Come on."

I look down and see his blood and mine mixed together in the water, the razorblade still between my fingers. The pressure in my chest returns, his sacrifice only giving me a temporary reprieve. It takes all of my restraint to drop it to the bottom of the tub, getting up from the water and shielding my body as much as possible, but he doesn't even look at me as he hands me a towel.

He exits the bathroom and leaves me to dry myself, and I can only think about one thing— getting more of what he just gave me. I know it's wrong. I know I shouldn't, but God, do I want to.

Don't do it.

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CHAPTER 11

Damien

Hallie's bedroom is so unexpectedly... her. I know I've been in here before, but I still look around as she dries herself in the bathroom. The closet is wide open and half of it is empty now, which explains the change in her mood and her absence from work. I didn't want to tell her when she asked me, but I was worried about her since she never misses work. It was wrong of me to come here and check on her and, even worse, to come into her home without permission. Although, I keep telling myself it's just part of what I have to do to keep an eye on her.

There have been changes since he left, making me smile a little. Finally, some parts of her that I didn't know about come to the surface, and I'm trying to memorize all the little details. Her sheets are light pink now, and there's a plush rug big enough to cover under the bed and around the side that wasn't there before. The bookshelves are perfectly organized now, the hardcovers and paperbacks on their own separate shelves, all of which are lined up from tallest to shortest. There are also

tall crystals on her nightstand, along with an orange prescription bottle and Vodka, but just as I'm about to pick up the medicine and read what it is, Hallie comes out with a towel wrapped around her torso.

She still has that lost look on her face, like her thoughts are leading her somewhere she can't navigate, and I wonder what's on her mind. What's the real reason she wants to hurt? Surely she's lying about that, no one wants pain for themselves.

I don't know how she does it, but somehow she still functions enough to walk to the dresser and retrieve a t-shirt, her back facing me. The towel drops from her body, and I get a view of her perfect ass. I look away quickly, and fuck if it's not the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I'm not usually the nice guy who gives a fuck about respect, but right now, I can't make her feel like I just want to fuck her. Even though it would make sense if it were the only thing I wanted to do. I want to tell her she should know she's safe with me, that she always will be, but I refrain. Mainly because it's all lies, and I'm tired of lying to her. I can't tell her the truth, either. That would fuck us both.

Once her shirt is over her head, she goes to her bed and sits on it. She's not wearing underwear, and it makes me want to go back to the bathroom for my sweatpants. I need an extra layer of protection around her. I don't want to suddenly lose all my self-control and end up naked with her. It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world for me, but at the same time, it would. I might just end up dead over it.

Hallie pats the edge of the bed, gesturing for me to sit next to her. I keep my eyes on her face as I walk toward her, staring into her beautiful brown eyes while trying to figure out what's going through her head.

“Why?” I ask, my voice hoarse. She's always trying to show strength, but right now, I want her to know that it's okay to let go, to be vulnerable. I can't fathom why someone so gorgeous and successful would want to hurt herself. The pain she goes through seems to be more than she can handle, but I can take it away.

I can't.

“I don't want to keep doing this...always trying to connect with someone just for them to keep fucking me over.” She sniffles as a tear escapes, “I'm just so... tired.”

“I've been tired before. I get it.” I sit on the bed beside her, far enough away that we don't touch. I need to stop tempting my damn self, but she makes it fucking hard for me to achieve that.

“How could you get it?”

Memories of my mom replay in slow motion, and I force myself to keep my body as relaxed as possible, even as images of dirty needles scattered on the ground invade my mind. “My mom was a heroin addict.” This is the first time I've talked about this with a woman. I've never wanted to bring up my mother before. She brings enough bad memories for a lifetime, even though I have many great ones. Thankfully my mother didn't ruin my entire childhood, and sometimes when I close

my eyes, I can still see her baking my favorite chocolate cake or chocolate chip cookies. I always had a sweet tooth as a kid, and even though I still somewhat do, I've controlled it a lot because I don't want to think about her when I indulge.

“Was?”

“She's dead.” I smile softly and meet her stare, refusing to look away from her even as I lie, pretending this doesn't affect me in the slightest. Talking about my mom is the one thing – *the only fucking thing*– that hurts me, and I won't give her that weapon to use against me. I won't give it to anyone.

“How did she die?” Her eyes stray away from mine, waiting for the arrow of rejection to strike true. It's as if it's all she expects from me, from everyone, and I'm ready to disappoint her. I'm not saying I'll be laying my soul bare for her, but I'll give her a kernel of my life. “You don't have to tell me if you don't want to.”

It doesn't matter that she's looking away from me, my gaze always follows her no matter where she is in a room, and at this moment with her flushed cheeks and bare face I can't tear them away. I shouldn't be so fixated on her when talking about this, but my emotions never want to obey me when I'm around her. “She overdosed.” A half truth. Hallie's hands close into fists, her mouth falling open as she makes eye contact with me again. She seems surprised, triggered, or maybe a little bit of both. I know she's probably hoping that he will eventually get better, but I already know for a fact that's not going to happen. “Addicts don't change. They will always be addicts.”

Hallie's teeth click together as her mouth snaps shut, and I grimace. This is weird, sharing shit about my life when she's still crying over some other dude. Maybe I should stop, but at the same time I want her to know what happens when you keep having faith that an addict will turn their life around for *you*. No, they must want it for themselves. They will never achieve it for anyone else, no matter how much they care about that person. "Is that really how you feel?" she asks me, and her face is so confused she almost makes me question myself.

"That's what life has shown me again and again."

Hallie gestures to the side of the bed closest to the window. "Lie down with me," she says, waiting for me to climb in. I freeze and almost tell her I can't, that I need to go home, that I've been at work all day because that's what I should do. Except that's not what I say. Instead, I nod and do as she asks, pushing the comforter out of the way for us. When she lies down, it's on her side, facing me, and my heart almost stops from how close we are to each other. "Stay," she whispers, barely audible.

I reach out to touch her face, an impulse I should've fucking controlled, and she flinches. I need to keep my hands to myself, and I guess this is my reality check. "Are you lonely?"

Hallie closes her eyes, and tears cling to her lashes, the dark strands caressing her cheekbones from how long they are. I want to wipe her tears away, but I refuse to move my hands

when she clearly doesn't want me to touch her right now. She nods her admission but doesn't say anything.

“You don't have to be,” I say, and she wraps her fingers around my wrist and squeezes once but doesn't let go of me. I guess what I'm hoping for is that she doesn't leave *me* alone. I remember a time in my life when I wanted the same thing: to not feel or keep going through the pain. It's not quite the same situation, but the feelings are similar.

With a soft tug, Hallie brings my hand to her face, still holding on to my wrist like she wants to direct what I do. The moonlight makes her look angelic, and when I stroke her cheek, she leans into it. More tears spill from her eyes, and I brush them away from her left cheek with one thumb, then trail it down her jaw and hold on to her chin.

Her nostrils flare. “You smell fucking delicious...” she tells me. It makes me smile, but I also wonder what I smell like to her, because her berries and vanilla scent have been driving me insane for over a month now. I don't know how the hell to get it out of my head. I don't know how to stop searching for it.

My thumb moves to her plump bottom lip, and I tug it down slightly, watching intently as it bounces back. God, I want to kiss her again, taste the vanilla on her tongue one more time and take her lips between mine. But that was a slip-up, a momentary lapse in judgment, and I'm glad I got myself back under control. I can't bring myself to take her in the way I want to because she's so fucking helpless right now, and I'm

not going to be the one to take advantage of that. I can wait until she really wants me, then I'll give her everything. She will just have to be the one to make the first move. *What the fuck am I even saying? I shouldn't.*

“What do I smell like, Hallie?” She smiles when I say her name, and I know I'm in for a world of trouble. I really need to try to distance myself, but how do I do that when I also have to keep her close?

She scoots closer and presses her nose to my neck, her dainty little hand resting on my shoulder as she inhales deeply. When she lets it out, her warm breath touches my skin, and I close my eyes to feel it, feel her. My fingers find the back of her head, and I softly comb her hair. The strands are a little wet, but somehow they're so damn smooth, just like the rest of her. It makes me want to find out just how soft every single part of her is and if she can handle rough edges to counteract her softness. Something tells me she'd have no problem with that, and that's precisely the problem.

“Like the ocean.”

I chuckle, “No one's ever said that to me before.” Her eyes flutter closed again, and her breathing evens out. She looks like she's ready for bed, and honestly I am too. I'm freaking exhausted and have a busy day tomorrow, but surely she doesn't really want me to stay here. “If you're tired, I can go.”

Hallie's eyes snap open, and she shakes her head, “No, don't leave, please.” Her hand starts feeling around on the bed for something, then behind her. She brings her phone between

us and taps on the YouTube app. “Do you want to listen to music?”

“What do you like?” I ask her, thinking she’ll probably be able to fall asleep to something soothing. My favorite alternative band comes to mind, and suddenly I want her to play it.

“Anything really.” I highly doubt that, but whatever.

“Search for Bon Iver.” She does as I say and then selects the first song listed. It’s one that I always fall asleep to, and my eyes immediately close. I sigh as I get comfortable, but when Hallie laughs I know I won’t be sleeping yet.

“What the fuck is this?”

“Wait,” a frown takes over my face, “you don’t like it?” So maybe we won’t be able to get along that well. There’s no way she doesn’t like this band.

“I’d prefer some rain sounds, to be honest.”

“Okay...” There’s disbelief in my voice, which only makes her smile, “So what kind of music do you actually like? Other than white noise.”

“White noise is not music, Damien.” Oh, here we go. I refrain from rolling my eyes, but I really want to. “Mostly alternative or rock. But sometimes I’ll listen to country music too. We do live in Texas, you know.”

“In Colorado—” I stop myself, goddammit this is why I don’t talk to women. The brain stops working properly, and an entirely different head takes over. Suddenly you got a flowing

tongue, and your most valuable secrets come out. That's exactly why women use sex as an interrogation tactic. "I don't listen to a lot of country music." I try to steer the subject away, but when she narrows her eyes, I know she knows what I'm doing.

"What's in Colorado?" Now thanks to my stupidity, I have to make some shit up, and I don't even know what to say. Where do I start? What can I say that won't raise even more questions?

"My home." I decide to answer as honestly as possible without giving too much away. "I still go sometimes." Not a lie, I do own the house and I still go a few times a year. Only a handful of people have been there before or know where it is. "I'm just here temporarily."

Her eyebrows crease, "Why?"

Now *that's* the million-dollar question, the one I can't answer because my life depends on it, and although I feel like I put myself in this situation, I need to get the hell out of it.

"For my family." For the cartel operations that now fall on my shoulders, and I can't escape. I need to think about a way to get out of this life, to make a plan where no one can ever find me no matter how hard they look, even if I have to live under a rock. "So, what's your favorite band, then?" I desperately need to steer her away from this conversation, and I plead with the universe to grant me that much.

Hallie thinks about it very dramatically, then grins widely, and I can't help but return it, relief coursing through my body.

“The Fray.” It’s not Bon Iver, but it’s similar.

“Damn it, I should’ve gone with that one.” She chuckles. “I can respect that. Bon Iver is for when I want to fall asleep, so I don’t play it in the car, or I’m a goner.” I love looking at her face. She looks so relaxed right now as she smiles at me, scooting closer until we’re sharing a pillow. “But during the day, I’ll listen to Bullet for my Valentine, Three Days Grace, Pierce the Veil...”

“What about The Plot in You? Or Motionless in White?” What? There’s no fucking way she listens to that. *I don’t believe you.*

“What do you even know about those?” I laugh teasingly. She’s girly as hell, barely ever wears black, and looks like the type who listens to Justin Bieber on the way to work.

“A lot, but I have layers,” she says, “I love Taylor Swift.”

“Oh, me too. She’s hot as fuck.”

Hallie smacks my arm and rolls her eyes. “What’s your favorite song, then?” She genuinely thinks I don’t know anything about Taylor Swift, which is kind of cute. *Everyone* knows something about Taylor Swift.

“I Did Something Bad,” I tell her, and she smirks. It makes my stomach flutter. I want to do something bad to *her*, but I shake the thoughts out of my head. “What about yours?”

“Basically the entire Reputation album, I can’t pick a song.”

“Of course you can’t,” I say just as she looks at the time. It’s around midnight now, and I take the hint when she yawns.

“Find your white noise, and let’s play a game of who can fall asleep first.”

“I bet I’ll win.” She starts scrolling on her phone and finds it, then sets it on repeat. Dear God, I’ll be listening to this all night... got it. She takes a deep breath as she closes her eyes, and when she lets it out, I smile.

She will be winning this round, especially since I can’t tear my eyes away from her face. It’s possible I’ll never have this opportunity again, to lie next to her and truly look at her. She falls asleep quickly, and her soft little snores make my shoulders shake in silent laughter. I bet she’s one of the girls who swears she doesn’t do that, which makes it even more endearing. I’ve never seen her face so relaxed, and I wonder if she always looks like this when she sleeps or if it’s just because of me.

Her fair complexion makes the tiny freckles on her cheekbones stand out, and her pouty lips part slightly as she falls deeper into sleep. I’ve never slept so close to anyone before. Certainly not on the same pillow, but I’m so exhausted that when I close my eyes I fall into a deep slumber.

Several hours later, I wake to a very uncomfortable bladder and remember I didn’t even go to the bathroom once since I got here last night. Dawn’s pale glow filters through the blinds, just enough to help me find my way to the bathroom. I extricate myself from Hallie, slowly untangling our legs, and get off the bed as quietly as possible. My underwear is dry now, which makes me question everything about myself for

falling asleep with it wet. I find my sweatpants and shirt on the ground behind the bathroom door, relieve myself, and then get dressed.

My phone is still in the sweatpants pocket, and I pull it out, noticing seven missed calls from my father and one from Ricardo. What do they want now? It's five-thirty in the morning, and these calls are from twenty minutes ago, so for the life of me, I can't figure out why they would expect me to pick up when I'm supposed to be asleep right now.

I exit the bathroom quietly, almost tiptoeing across the apartment until I find my shoes by the front door, a habit I can't break since my family used to scream at me to take off my shoes when I came in the house. I slip them on and open the front door, letting it click softly behind me. Thankfully Hallie doesn't have any pets, particularly dogs, who would give away my escape. Then again, it's not like we had sex. Somehow though, it feels like I'm doing something wrong by walking out before she wakes up, only I can't worry about that too much right now.

It's getting chilly out here, not nearly as cold as Colorado by any means, but enough that I shiver and crank up the heat in my car when I turn it on. I take out my phone and dial Ricardo, hoping he can tell me what the hell is happening.

"Ricardo," he answers, and I wait for it to connect to Bluetooth before pulling out of the parking spot.

"Did you need something?"

Ricardo sighs on the other end of the line like he's annoyed with me. He's the one calling me at five in the fucking morning, and *he's* annoyed? Unbelievable. "Your father is trying to get in contact with you. He wants to see you in person."

My heart nearly halts in my chest, and I lift my foot off the accelerator, stopping near the apartment complex gate so I can make a plan. "Where?" I won't ask for the reason because I already know if my father wants to see me, then it's urgent to him.

"Carlisle Ranch."

"Thanks." I end the call and take my foot off the brake to start making my way to my father's house when I see the familiar little bitch car that Zayne drives. Is he fucking kidding me? Did he not understand the deal between us?

I lower my window just in time for him to look at me while he slows down as he comes into the parking lot, and his eyes widen. I shake my head at him but don't say shit. He needs to understand that actions have consequences, and I'm about to teach him a lesson.

My tires screech as I peel out of the parking lot, and I speed to the ranch in Natalia. My father thinks he's more important than he actually is and lives in the middle of bum fuck nowhere in a gated ranch surrounded by security guards. Some may think it's warranted, that maybe he needs the protection. I think he's dramatic, or maybe he's pissed off all the wrong people. Either way, I am not usually the one that handles it, I

could care less. His people, his money, and as long as it doesn't affect me, I'm not going to say anything to him. Even if it makes my damn eye twitch every time I have to come here.

The guards open the black iron gates with the 'Carlisle Ranch' sign, and I drive through, tires crunching on the rocky dirt road. Hopefully, I don't get a flat out here because there's no fucking way I'm staying longer than I need to.

The sun has finally risen, and the rays reflect off the tin roof of the barn-style home. The black siding makes the house look almost modern, but the shape of the house is literally a barn, which I've never understood the appeal, but my stepmother loves it. There are big windows all around the house, which let the light come in and make it feel more 'airy,' according to her.

My father meets me at the front door, and I nod my greeting as I pass him and come in the house. The concrete floors are so shiny I'm almost afraid to walk in here with shoes on, but I'm in a hurry, so I'm not going to take them off today. I halt in front of the black entryway table, the rustic style matching the rest of the home, and look at myself in the gold mirror. There are bags under my eyes, my curls are dry and crazy, and I really need to wash my damn face. All in all, I feel disgusting, just a regular day after working in the hospital. The only difference is I didn't shower yesterday, so now I feel extra nasty.

“Let’s go to my office,” my father says, and I follow him in. I take the chair across from his mahogany desk and clasp my hands in front of me as I wait for him to tell me what the fuck is happening. “How are you, son?”

“Don’t pretend right now, please,” I say in annoyance, not interested in pleasantries. “What do you need to talk about?” He might genuinely be trying to find out how I’m doing. Maybe he finally wants to be a father. Possibly even regrets how he’s treated me and my brothers. However, at this point, I simply don’t want to deal with it, or him.

My father sighs, and when his mouth opens to speak, one of the housekeepers enters the room with coffee and a whiskey decanter with a glass set of two. “Victor,” Nina says as she hands him a mug, then sets the whiskey and cups on the desk for us. On her way out, she also hands me my mug of coffee, the aroma instantly waking me up. Finally, someone who gets me. I need coffee so bad, and she knows exactly how I like it. Not that it’s hard anyway, it’s just black coffee.

I take small sips of it, waiting for my father to get started again. He leans back in his chair and checks his watch like he has somewhere to be, like he’s ready to be done with me, and we haven’t even begun. The feeling is mutual.

“The merchandise deadline has been moved up.” His eyes connect with mine, and I stop sipping my coffee, then put the mug on the desk. Fuck caffeine, this is enough to wake anyone up.

“By how much?”

My father seems to consider the question like he doesn't have a direct answer. "Two weeks at the most." I hate him for this just a little more than usual, but I don't have time to analyze my feelings about this situation. I'll do that later in the silence and comfort of my own home, where no one can disturb me, and I can think in peace.

"There's no fucking way I can do that. I'll be in Colorado." Where no one knows how to locate me, and I want to keep it that way. Besides, this is all happening way too quickly. How the hell do I even get them what they want... all the way over there?

"Then ensure the merchandise makes it there somehow and drop it off."

I laugh, a cynical sound that makes my father cringe. "You say it like it's just so fucking easy."

He suddenly sits up in the chair, anger evident on his face as he leans forward to rest his elbows on the desk, "I don't care how hard this is," he sneers, "You'll make it work."

I nod and get up from my chair, coffee and whiskey no longer a part of my itinerary. I need to stop trying to give him a chance every time I see him. Maybe Hallie isn't the only one emotionally fucked. "Are we done here?"

"You're dismissed."

I walk out of the office, out of the house, without looking back. And when I make it all the way to my own home and

park my car, I *really* let myself feel the gravity of the situation I'm entangled in.

For fuck's sake.

My fists land on the steering wheel repeatedly as I scream out my frustration, and the person next to me looks a little scared as she exits her car. I can't bring myself to think about what's next. I just can't.

How am I going to do this job in two weeks? And am I ready to do what it entails? Am I capable of doing my duty?

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CHAPTER 12

Hallie

The Health Fair is running smoothly, the public is gathering for more education about strokes. Damien and I demonstrate what signs and symptoms they should watch out for and what to do in different scenarios, which is honestly freaking exhausting. Some take brochures and business cards, and others linger at our poster board to continue reading after our demonstrations.

We teach a new crowd once every hour, with a fifteen-minute break in between, and I'm ready to be done with this day already. The hours seem to be crawling by, and during our fourth hour, I finally snap and tell Damien we should get coffee at Iron Bank Coffee Shop, right across the street from the park we are at. The building is large, the Greek architecture evident in the arches and columns that adorn it. It seems to be split into different shops, all having a portion of the space.

The smell of brownies wafts out of the cafe as we open the door, and the barista takes our orders fairly quickly, which is

great because we have already spent five minutes walking here and we need to get back for the next demonstration within the next ten minutes.

My toasted almond coffee tastes like ass, and I instantly regret ordering it when I start choking. I cough violently, having to stop on the sidewalk to clutch my chest. Fuck, I really can't breathe. Damien pats my back a few times, the coughs die off, and I finally get enough air into my lungs. That was fucking disgusting.

My grimace makes Damien laugh outright, but then he offers me his coffee. "Here, trade me." I take his and give him mine, but I highly doubt he will drink that shit water. Personally, I wouldn't even try it, but here he is taking a sip of my coffee. "Fuck, this is awful." He makes a disgusted face, his full lips pursing together as he does.

I chug down a few gulps of the coffee he gave me, the vanilla taste making my mouth water. "Yours is pretty damn good."

"Who knew you'd have such terrible taste in coffee." Damien smirks, throwing it away in a nearby trash can. "You should try drinking it black sometimes."

"Ew, that sounds even worse than what I just drank... but no, I don't have terrible taste." I roll my eyes, "I didn't know it would be so nasty. I just picked whatever sounded good." I tend to do that often, I just pick whatever seems good at the time just to find out it's actually awful. Especially when it

comes to men. Clearly, I can't be trusted to make good decisions.

“Which is evidently a terrible idea.”

“A lapse in judgment, if you will.” I shoulder-check him playfully, but goddamn, they feel like rocks and it hurts. “What do you eat? Iron?” He laughs at me when I rub my aching shoulder, and I wonder how much time he spends at the gym.

“A lot of protein,” he says, and I remember how just two nights ago, I saw him half naked in my bathroom in all his golden glory.

I keep replaying that night in my head, how he came into my house and saved me from myself without hesitation. How he kissed me, his hand around my neck, his thighs around my waist. Everything about that night makes my palms sweat, and the fact that we fell asleep on the same pillow while talking to each other makes it even more perfect.

We walk the rest of the way back to our booth, and as I savor the white mocha he bought, I realize it probably has milk so I'm *fucked*. I can't believe I didn't think about that.

Shit.

I stop chugging the coffee, although I already basically inhaled half of it, and hand it to him as soon as we're back in the booth. I rub a hand down my face as I try to remember where the nearest bathroom is, because I'm going to need it very soon.

“What’s wrong?” Damien’s brows furrow as he looks between the cup and me. The look of confusion would be almost amusing, if it isn’t for the fact that I’m about fifteen minutes away from feeling like death. “I thought you liked it.”

“It’s poisoned.” I purse my lips, looking at him with regret.

Damien pops off the lid and starts looking in the cup, but obviously, nothing actually *looks* bad. “What the fuck? How would you even know?”

“It has milk.” *I should’ve thought about that.* “I’m lactose intolerant.”

“Oh, goodie.” He smirks down at me, and I raise a brow. I just know he’s never going to let me live this down.

“I bet it does please you to know I’ll be sick as fuck in no time,” I say, sitting at one of the foldable metal chairs in the booth. My thighs feel cold, and the wind is blowing hard, which I know won’t help when my stomach starts to hurt. I gather some supplies from the table to give out when the new session starts, putting a bunch of magnets in a plastic bin.

Damien stands next to me and helps me put more magnets into the bin. “That doesn’t please me, Hallie.” He runs his fingers through his curls. “I’ll cover for you if you have to go, um, take a shit.” He makes eye contact with me, and I cringe, which seems to amuse him.

“Stop it!” I swat his arm and turn away, the flush on my skin making me hot in my jacket even though it’s thirty degrees. “You’re so vulgar.”

“You’re really cute when you blush,” Damien says, pointing at my face, which is probably the color of a tomato, and grins.

As the hours crawl by, I do end up racing to the bathroom several times. Damien has set up a drink station for me with water and Gatorade, but I can’t keep anything down. My body undoubtedly hates me, and the more trips I make to the bathroom, the weaker I feel. Thankfully Damien does all the teaching, which makes me feel guilty on top of being sick. Being lactose intolerant is truly not that bad if you have self-control. The main problem is when shit like this happens. The most embarrassing part is someone else witnessing it, and even though I have literally cut into his skin and he’s seen me naked, this is not something I want to share with him. At this point, I just want to go home and be alone.

Damien gets me yet another water bottle, “Hallie, you look really pale.” He takes the seat next to mine and offers it to me, “Drink.”

“No.” I shake my head but stop short because it’s making me nauseous again. I need to lie down for a bit, and then I’ll be okay. “I’m just going to throw it up.”

“If you don’t drink it, then I’m going to have to take you to the ER for some fluids.” The bottle of water is suddenly open and on my lap, and I hold onto it with both hands. “I don’t think you’d enjoy being at the hospital as the patient. You’re clearly a bad one.”

“Fine.” I raise the bottle to my lips and take a small sip so I don’t trigger my gag reflex. The water is refreshing, the cold

soothing my throat. “But only because hearing you nag is worse than the nausea.”

“Watch the attitude, love.” He sighs, “I’m just trying to help you.”

Another wave of nausea runs through me, and I cover my mouth. “I think I have to-”

I go to the nearest trash can and hurl, but there’s nothing left in my stomach to expel, so I just dry heave. Damien comes around and rubs my back in slow, soothing circles, which makes my body go rigid from embarrassment. I straighten quickly and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, but everything starts spinning.

I sway on my feet, grabbing onto the trash can for purchase. I know I’m going to regret that. I don’t even know where the hand sanitizer is. Ugh, fucking gross. “I think I should go.” I clutch my stomach in a futile attempt to keep everything in. “I don’t feel so good.”

“You almost fell over.” He holds me by my shoulders, steadying me. Concerned eyes watch me closely as I do my best to not throw up again. “I’m driving you home.”

He begins to pack up our booth, gathering the poster board, magnets, and all the props and taking them to his car. The table and chairs are the property of the hospital, and they will fortunately be taking care of that. My car is parked right next to his across the street, and now I need to figure out who’s going to drive me here to get it back, but at the same time I’m also grateful that he’s helping me. The fact that this is the very

last time we will work together in our residency does not bode well with me. I won't lie, I'm a bit sad because now there will be no more excuses for him to come over. No more reasons to see him outside of work. What is it going to be like now in the ICU? Is he still going to talk to me? Or will he forget all about me after the ceremony?

Damien comes back for me and helps me walk to the car, my body swaying from side to side as we do. Maybe I really need a hospital after all. He was right, there's no way I could've driven myself home.

I clutch the door handle as he pulls out of the parking space and close my eyes, taking slow, deep breaths so I don't hurl in his car. It doesn't help that I get car sickness on top of everything else. Gosh, I'm just all kinds of fucked up. I do almost throw up in the car, and there are a few times I almost ask him to pull over for me, but thankfully we make it home without any incidents.

I give him my house key as we walk to the front door, knowing I won't be able to do it right now. He takes me to bed and lifts the blankets until they're at waist level, tucking me in.

"I'll be right back," He tells me, then walks out of the room. He takes so long that I begin to think he's gone and left me here to suffer alone, but then he returns with Jell-O, crackers, a bowl of soup, and a Gatorade under his arm. The bowl of soup is warm, and I set it on the bed between my legs as he sets the Jell-O and the drink on the nightstand and opens the crackers for me.

I close my eyes as I savor the tomato soup and groan at how good it is. “Do you want me to get you anything else?” he asks, looking between the snacks and me. I shake my head, “I’ll wait on the couch for a little just in case you need me, and then I’ll be on my way.”

I need you.

“You don’t have to—” I start, about to tell him he doesn’t have to leave, but he cuts me off.

“Yes, I do.” He chuckles. “Or I’ll pretend you’re my girlfriend for the night.”

I open my mouth, then close it, unsure of how to respond. He seems to understand and walks out of the room, leaving me alone to finish my food. I probably won’t need anything from him anyway, so I guess he’s not wrong for leaving. It’s not like he can keep me from puking.

About an hour later, I walk out of my bedroom with my phone in hand, just to find him on the couch watching Star Wars on the TV. He’s so immersed in the story that he doesn’t even notice when I stand next to him, it’s genuinely amusing.

“Are you having fun?” I ask, chuckling. I want to sit next to him, but at the same time feel like I shouldn’t. Maybe if I maintain my distance, I’ll be able to stop thinking about him so damn much.

“Absolutely.” He tears his eyes away from the screen and looks me over, concern evident on his face. “Are you feeling better?”

I actually am. I've finally been able to keep some food and a few sips of Gatorade down, which is better than earlier. "Yes, don't worry about me. I'm good now-" My phone begins to ring in my hand, and Damien looks at it intently. Zayne's name flashes across the screen in mockery, a sign from the universe that I will never escape him. "I'll be right back."

I open the sliding glass door to the balcony and step out, feeling the freezing wind through my scrubs. Shit, it's freaking cold. Or maybe I'm just getting used to the hot San Antonio weather, and this is not normal anymore. "What do you want?" I ask Zayne, my voice tired and just a tad annoyed. I want to get this over with. I'm in a weird place where I don't know if I should be excited for his calls because at least I know he's alive or if I should want him to stop calling altogether so I can finally move on.

"I need you to let me borrow some money." No please, no pleasantries, no pretending. Just the drug addict that's come to collect. "I lost my job..." Of course, he did. What did he expect when he didn't even call out?

"I'm paying all our fucking bills, Zayne," I hiss, losing my cool. I cannot believe him right now. "I can't pay for your damn drugs too."

There's a brief angry exhale on the other side of the phone. "You're so fucking useless sometimes, Hallie," Zayne seethes, the rage in his voice barely contained.

Useless.

Unlovable.

Whore.

I cover my mouth with my hand, my lower lip trembling, but as the tears trail down my cheeks, I'm grateful that at least he can't see me. It's the small mercies. "I'm—"

"Sorry?" He laughs, but what I was going to say was that I'm done with him. I just can't bring myself to voice it now. "Fuck your apologies."

"O-o-kay." I attempt to keep a firm voice, but all that comes out is a wobbly one. One as watery as the tears now streaming down my face. He only ever aims for the low blows. So why the fuck do I always come back for more?

"I hate you." He says, and the conviction in his voice dispels all my doubts. He means this shit, no doubt in my mind, and it's all because he can't control me right now. Any time he can't make me do what he wants, he gets just a little crazier.

"I hate you too, Zayne," I whisper, then hang up the phone without another word. I can't keep doing this, I just can't. I have to be done with him.

I toss the phone on the small table from my patio set and rub my fists over my eyes, then when I turn around Damien is standing in the doorway. I'm sure he just listened to this entire conversation, but I don't want to think about his opinion on the matter. Quite frankly, I just want to be left the fuck alone.

"What did he say to you?" he asks me, except there's no way I'm talking about this with him— not now, not ever.

“Time to go, Damien,” I reply, trying to go around him, but his arm comes up to block me. I look at his face, which remains neutral, and almost softens. I can’t be weak for him too, I refuse.

He must see the resolve on my face because he nods and drops his arm, stepping back into the living room. I go back to my phone and set it to airplane mode, then sit on the chair and look up at the ceiling, almost expecting him to refuse to leave. He proves me wrong, though, as I hear the door click shut behind him as he exits my apartment. I’m almost disappointed. Zayne would never do as I asked, especially so peacefully. But I don’t want to think about them anymore, instead, I want to look for a sign from the universe that I’m going to be okay.

I close my eyes and wait for salvation, but I think that maybe damnation is all that will greet me in this lifetime.



My days have all become a blur. They bleed and blend with each other as I keep my distance from everyone who means anything to me. I’ve needed time and space, and I’ve managed to stay well and far away from both Zayne and Damien,

knowing I don't need more waves as I navigate this sea of confusion. I have enough to get over as it is, I don't want to keep adding to the pile of shit.

So, then, why the hell am I walking toward the table where Damien is seated for his break? And why am I pulling a chair out to sit next to him? I could be anywhere else, my car, the break room. I could even sit at a different table, but instead I scoot the chair so close to him that my leg brushes against his.

Damien has given me space, and I've appreciated that, but at the same time I'm beginning to wonder if he cares. Although I can admit that he probably feels punished, and I have no good reason for it. I've been kicking myself every single day just thinking about how I booted him out of the apartment and then didn't respond to his messages or talk to him again for the last few weeks.

I haven't stopped thinking about him, his muscular legs wrapped around my body and how he looked at me when we shared a pillow. Even the concern on his face when he asked me what Zayne had said during the phone call still lives in the corners of my mind, and I'm starting to think I'm actually going crazy.

At first, Damien looks confused, but then he arches an eyebrow at me. I mimic him, arching one of my own, and the chuckle that follows is long, a sexy raspy sound that ends with a shake of his head. I can't blame him if he doesn't want to talk to me right now, but I suddenly want his attention, need it.

I run my fingers along his arm, stopping at his corded forearm to rest my hand there. He inhales sharply and looks at me, his cheeks turning a bubble gum pink. *You're really cute when you blush.* Look at him now, blushing all pretty for *me*. It might be from anger, but I don't really care about the reason.

“What are you doing?” His eyes narrow. “You haven't spoken to me in weeks, and now what? What do you want from me?” I almost flinch at his words, but I know I deserve them. He hasn't been outright mean to me in months, and I can't lie it really stings.

I take a deep breath. “You.” I want him so bad my hands are itching, but he probably doesn't return the sentiment.

“I don't want to play your games tonight, Hallie.” The roll of his eyes makes me want to scream at him in exasperation, and I dig my fingers into his arm slightly, just enough to get his attention. “I'm exhausted.”

The way he runs his free hand down his face makes it clear he doesn't believe me, and I know I need to make sure he understands what I mean. “I want you to talk to me.” I scoot my chair closer to his, still not letting go of him, “I want you to walk me to my car in an empty parking lot.” My eyes are pleading, begging him to understand what I'm asking.

His eyes flash before he smirks, knowing exactly what I mean. “Oh, is that what you want now?” Damien chuckles then tilts his head, “And what if I don't want to do that?”

“I highly doubt that's the case, but if it is...” I shrug, trying to exude a confidence I don't feel. “Your loss.”

“No, Hallie.” Damien clicks his tongue, closing the space between us by grabbing my chin gently, “*Your* loss.” His face gets close to mine, his lips almost touching my own. “*I’m* so much better for you than him.” I pull away and look at my watch rather than responding, noticing it’s time to go back to the unit. The place where he’s going to pretend I don’t exist all over again.

The air feels too thick to breathe in as Damien begins to gather his trash and leaves me at the table, not once turning around to look back at me. I’ve never been rejected by a man before, but I imagine this is exactly what it feels like. I guess this could be considered my first rejection after all.

I force myself to go back to the unit and get back to work, which actually helps to take my mind off him because I’m super busy with the patient assigned to me. Thankfully the next four hours fly by, and before I know it, I’m already done and giving a report to the incoming nurse.

I swipe my card to clock out and walk toward the elevator, noticing that Damien is sauntering toward me, almost as if he’s daring me to wait for him. *Hurry up*. When the elevator dings, I ignore it. I let it open and close as I stand by it, pressing the button again. The next time the elevator comes around, he’s right beside me, and we walk in together.

He stands close enough to feel his body heat but not close enough to touch any part of me. I try to brush my fingers against his, but he steps away just before they make contact,

and the overwhelming desire to push him against the wall makes my vision hazy. Why is he being so damn difficult?

My breaths come in shallow gasps by the time the elevator opens, but he still doesn't look my way as he exits and walks toward the parking lot ahead of me. I walk at my own pace behind him, not wanting to look desperate even if I am, and when he reaches the awning at the end of the sidewalk, he halts his steps. For a second, I consider stopping too, but I just dodge him and keep walking toward my car.

I hear heavy footsteps behind me, which I assume are his, but the probability that he parked his car or motorcycle close to mine is exceptionally high so I try not to read into it. My car is still rows away from where I am, and I shiver from the early morning chill.

It's almost Halloween now, and the Texas weather is still not sure which season to pick, so yesterday I decided to leave my scrub jacket behind, not wanting to overheat. I just didn't consider that I'd need it in the morning. Fuck, I'm so tired of trying to guess the weather in this town.

I feel a raindrop on my face and curse my life. Of course, it would start raining when I have nothing to keep me warm or dry. I walk faster, half-jogging, when my car finally comes into view, and throw all my things into the passenger side when I finally reach it.

As I'm about to get in the driver's side, Damien says softly, "Hallie." I stop abruptly, still standing next to my open car door, and stare straight ahead.

“What, Damien?”

He grabs my wrist and pulls me forcefully until my back slams against his chest. “I thought you wanted to be taken to a deserted parking lot and...” he whispers in my ear, and my breath catches as his hand leaves my wrist and trails up my torso, brushing against my breasts before settling at the base of my throat. His grip is loose, giving me plenty of room to breathe, but there’s just something so fucking sinful about the way he holds me there.

“And what, *love*?” I taunt him, using his pet name for me. I don’t have one for him, and I won’t. It’s just not my style. “What do I want?”

His grip on my throat tightens as he spins me around, my back against the side of my car now, his arms caging me in. The rain picks up slightly, and the cold drops on my face make me close my eyes. Damien tucks a stray hair from my bun behind my ear, and the soft caress makes me shiver all over again.

I look up into his deep blue eyes. “You want whatever I give you,” he says, and his hand comes to the back of my head, pulling my hair until my face tilts up. My body begins to tremble from his proximity as he starts to lean in, and my nerves feel like a live wire, threatening to burn me alive. He gets so close that I can’t tell where my breath ends and his begins, and right before I close my eyes, I see his flutter shut as well.

Damien's lips are soft on mine, and gentle. He captures my bottom lip between his and lightly sucks, making my stomach swoop as it does on a roller coaster. My hands instinctively come up to cup his face as he deepens the kiss, and I lean into his body, standing on my tiptoes. He soothes something deep inside me, something I've been denying myself for so long.

I pull away slightly and open my eyes to find his meeting mine, burning desire in his irises.

Desire for *me*.

"*Damien,*" I breathe in a low voice, and his jaw tightens ever so slightly. His name is both doubt and conviction, a whisper of unspoken promises.

My hands slide from his face and down his body until I reach the hem of his shirt and slip my hands under, searching for skin. His grip on my hair tightens as I dig my nails into his lower back, and he forcibly pushes me against the car, making my back slam into it. The rain falls in earnest now as his lips crash against mine, and I wrap my arms around his neck. There is nothing tentative about these kisses as he holds me close to his body and brushes his tongue between my lips, his other hand skimming down my side, making goosebumps scatter all over my skin.

I open for him, my tongue reaching for his, and we become tangled in more ways than one. We suck and taste each other for minutes on end, and I don't even feel cold when I become soaked to the bone.

My hands now move everywhere, groping his arms and shoulders, and then move to his hair, my fingers losing themselves in the soft curls at the top of his head. His hands slide down to my hips and grip me, pulling me closer until I feel his erection against my abdomen. He groans as I kiss him more urgently, our tongues twirling around each other, and I feel it vibrate through my body. By the time he pulls away, we're both panting, and I'm a wet fucking mess in every way possible.

Damien smirks and brushes his thumb over my swollen bottom lip, and I feel a wave of heat travel to my pussy, soaking my panties further. Fucking hell, this man knows exactly what he's doing. "Did you get what you wanted?" he asks, even though he knows damn well I did. I don't respond though. Instead, I get in my car, with my wet clothes making me slide on my leather seat. "Goodnight, Hallie."

With that, he shuts my car door and walks to his motorcycle without looking back, leaving me reeling. He just gave me the best kiss of my life, and quite frankly, I'm going to need seven to ten business days to understand what just happened.

He smiles genuinely as I drive past him, which makes my heart stutter, but I manage to keep going and make it home in time to lose my shit in the comfort of my own room.

I can't believe he kissed me. And it was glorious. Fucking perfect. And I really, *really* want to do it again. But all those feelings just make me feel guilty because I know better. I'm too damaged for him, and I don't think I can be fixed.

Not by him, anyway.

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CHAPTER 13

Zayne

I've lost track of time in this apartment, and I guess sharing an ounce of meth with two hot girls could distract anyone, especially when you're fucking them all day. But now that we've had enough of each other and ran out of drugs, it's time for me to go.

They're both coming down from the high, lying in bed together in a naked tangle of limbs. That's exactly where I leave them without another word. They don't care about me, anyway. They only care about what I can give them, even if the pleasure lasts a short time. Next time I'll keep the meth to myself, though. That was a dumb move considering we went through an entire ounce in a matter of nothing. Who knows why I even stayed here this long, but I think it's because Catherine ended up getting even more meth for all of us, so the party lasted a lot longer than it should've. I almost feel bad for Charlie because this isn't something she'll be able to recover from, but then again, fuck her. I don't give a fuck.

The battery on my phone is at ten percent, and I call Ricardo as I pace the driveway because I need to know when I can get more crank before my phone takes a shit on me. Just when I think he's not going to answer, he does after the fifth ring.

"Hey, man," I tell him. "I just finished my ounce. When can I pick up more?"

Ricardo chuckles, "Sorry, homie, that shit was limited edition."

"What the fuck do you mean?" I get in my car and slam the door, feeling the prickling under my skin worsen just thinking about not having more. "You said I could have more whenever I wanted."

"Yeah, and D said you broke the deal." I hold my breath, remembering him as I drove into the apartment complex. Fuck, fuck, fuck. "So you're done until further notice."

"No, no, no," I try to plead. "Tell him I won't do it again. I won't go back there." I'm surprised I can hold my phone at this point from how much my hands are sweating. This can't be happening right now. What was I even thinking? She's not worth all this bullshit happening right now. I should've stayed the hell away.

"You and I both know that's not how this works." he says, "But I'll let you know when he changes his mind." I want to argue, scream, cry, and tell him to go fuck himself, but he hangs up on me before I can do anything. I pull my hair, and scream into the silence of my car, then reverse out of the driveway.

My head is pounding as I drive to my mom's house, and even though I know she'll hate me if she sees me like this, I'm also hoping that maybe she's not home. Or, if miracles existed, she allows me to stay for a few days until I can return to San Antonio.

It's almost like she knew I was coming, because as I park in front of her house she's already waiting on the front porch with her arms crossed. Maybe she saw my car when I entered the property or something. What makes me stop dead in my tracks though is seeing my father, clad in a suit, coming out of the house behind her. What the fuck is going on here? There's no way they're friends again.

I consider backing out and going home, but then I remember I don't have one of those anymore. Fuck me.

I take the key out of the ignition and get out of the car, my hands shaking as I lock it twice. I brace myself for the negative comments and backlash when they figure out I'm still a meth head. My hair is a mess, my clothes are dirty and torn, and I don't even know what grooming is anymore. All I've done for days on end is get high.

I wake up, I get high.

Instead of eating, I get high.

I don't drink water, I get high.

I don't shower, I get high.

It's an endless cycle for me, and I don't believe that will ever change. Hallie was right, I don't want it bad enough. I

want to be high; I want to escape. High life is better than my regular life, and I want to always feel that way.

How I'm functioning on such little sleep is beyond me, and it looks like I have two black eyes right now. They will be able to tell I'm on drugs, and I haven't even told anyone that Hallie and I aren't together anymore. I don't know if my mom will be sad or happy about it, but I do know eventually I will have to tell her.

Just not right now.

The meth has finally caught up to me, and I know if I keep going down this road I don't have much time left to live.

My mother gasps as I get closer to her, and the way her jaw drops when she takes me in makes my heart squeeze painfully in my chest. This is exactly why I shouldn't have come. I knew she couldn't handle seeing me this way. I'm sure I look like absolute shit.

"What's he doing here?" I ask my mom, nodding my head toward my father. She looks between us but stays silent, giving him all the power again. I guess we're back to square zero.

"The question is," he interrupts me, "What are *you* doing here?"

The way he comes to stand next to my mother bothers me, like they're a united front when he fucking left her, left *us*. And now he wants to act like he's worth a shit? Like I should be answering to him?

"I'm visiting my mother."

“What a coincidence.” He adjusts his silver cuff links, a habit I fucking hate. “Me too.”

“He wanted to talk about you.” My mother finally joins the conversation, and I almost relax, yet I can’t. Not after what she just said. “Let’s go inside.”

My parents lead the way into the house, and I’m sad it looks the same. It’s as if she carried on with her life without thinking of me once or missing me.

They stand across from me as I sit on the couch, and I wait for them to talk. Clearly, I’ve interrupted something between them, and if I had known they’d be ganging up on me, I would’ve never come here. I guess it’s too late for that now.

I look suspiciously at them and notice the red fitted dress and heels my mother is wearing. Were they leaving together? What the hell is going on right now?

“Zayne,” my mother says softly, pacing slowly in front of me. She looks deep in thought about what she’s going to say next, maybe trying to figure out a way to say it nicely. “Hallie would never support this.” She makes eye contact with me, her blue eyes crinkling with concern. Sometimes I think I prefer her when she doesn’t give a shit about me. “I thought you were clean...”

My father stands beside her and puts a reassuring hand on her shoulder. It makes me want to cut it right off. The way his black suit fits him so perfectly makes me nauseous, and just thinking about how this would’ve been my life if he had stuck around makes me glad he left us all those years ago.

“You look like shit,” he tells me with a grimace. “Are you high?”

“I’m always high.” I smirk, leaning back on the couch and spreading my legs. I make it clear to him that this is my home and not his, and no matter what happens, my mom will never choose him over me. I think. “Didn’t you know?”

“I’m going to call Hallie.” My mom begins to turn around, her heels clicking as she walks.

“No,” I tell her, getting up from the couch. If she wants to get me worked up, then this is the perfect way to do it. By bringing her into this. Hallie has no right to know what’s going on with me, not after how she abandoned me. I can fuck with her all I want, but this is no longer her business. “Hallie doesn’t support anything I do anymore because she left me. She left me like everyone else does.”

My mom’s eyes widen, and she stops walking, “I didn’t know...”

“Of course, you didn’t, you haven’t talked to me in months.” I zero in on my father’s face, and he has the decency to drop his eyes. “What do you want?” I ask him, trying my best to keep calm.

My mom leaves the room as tears stream down her face, but I can’t feel bad right now. I know she loves Hallie, but she acts like she’s the one going through the damn breakup right now instead of me. Fuck that.

My father goes to sit on the opposite end of the couch and waits until she's out of sight before he speaks again. "I want to try to make things right between us, son."

I cringe, knowing damn well he hasn't earned the right to call me that. "Why? Is the guilt eating you alive?" His eyes flare in anger at my question, and I refrain from smiling even though I want to.

I hit a nerve.

This is why we can't try to make things right between us; I'm way too bitter to forgive him. Some say that forgiveness is to find peace within yourself, not grant it to the other person. Well, I wholeheartedly disagree. I sleep just fine at night knowing I fucking hate him, and there hasn't been a day in a very long time that I've thought about him at all.

My father's sigh is loud between us, his frustration evident in his posture and the creases in his face as he frowns. "I want to try to love you the way you deserve to be loved."

"So you don't love me, right?" I know for a damn fact he doesn't. I heard him say it himself. "For once in your life, just tell the truth."

"I've tried." He clears his throat, "I've tried to love you."

"I don't need your scraps or your remorse now." My mother drops a gym bag by the door, mine, and I assume it has my belongings inside. Perfect, I desperately need to change into different clothes. I should even take a shower, but I can't stay here one more minute with him. So I stand up from the couch

and walk to the front door, opening it. “I also don’t need your pity. Take it somewhere else.”

“It’s not pity, I want to do better by you.”

“You had your chance.” He follows me as I unlock my car and get in it, turning the key in the ignition. “You told me everything I needed to know.”

My mom comes running out of the house, almost falling down the front porch steps. “Zayne! Do not leave!” my mom yells after me as I close my car door and lock it.

“Good talk,” I say to myself as I reverse the entire way down the driveway, not even caring if I hit something on the way out as long as I get the fuck out of here fast.

I never want to see that asshole again in my life.



The monster has won, and I’m entirely under its control.

I don’t care anymore, however. I don’t have to *feel*. I don’t have to *think* about my problems. I don’t have to think about *her*. I can just worry about my life when I come down from

my high, but not for long, because the next one is always close behind.

If she's going to hate me, then I'm going to go as hard as I can for as long as I can until there's nothing left of me. Let the floor fall out from under me, let me hit rock fucking bottom. I'll pick up the pieces later, if there even is a later. I'm not really concerned with tomorrow; I never believed I would live long enough to put the pieces of my life back together.

My only concern right now is: How do I get *more*?

And I will be getting more from John soon, even if I hate who it's coming from. Unfortunately, the craving is stronger than my morals now, and I've been punished enough for coming to see her.

According to Damien, I broke our deal. The one where he gives me drugs in exchange for staying away from Hallie. Which is precisely why I'm here now, in this alley getting Meth from a homeless person. Yeah, I've stooped low, but this is the cheapest option available. I don't even have any clean needles left, so I keep reusing them. This is what I get for breaking the rules, but when it comes to her, I seem to do that a lot. Not to mention, I'm broke because I officially have no job, and somehow one of the guys I worked with is letting me crash at his place. He's an addict too, but his drug of choice is cocaine, so he understands what's happening to me in a way and doesn't judge me for it.

"Hey, man, you got any crank?" I ask the guy sitting alone in the alley, a grocery cart with his belongings parked right

next to him.

“Jamie,” he tells me, and I guess that must be his name. I want to say I don’t really give a damn about who he is; I just need to buy a teener to get me through the next few days. Which technically isn’t shit because I can use that up in one day, but my wallet is only stretching so far. “How much do you need?”

“A teener.”

He pulls out a bag full of off-white powder, and my hands start to sweat, my heart beating just a little faster as he dangles it in front of his face. I don’t even know how much he’s going to ask for.

“That’ll be seventy-five dollars.” Honestly, as far as prices go, that’s cheap for a teener, but considering I have two hundred dollars left to my name, and only because my friend let me borrow the money, this feels steep. It’s not like I have a choice, though. Until the Mexicans feel like being nice to me again, I have to buy, and I have a feeling they probably won’t be nice for a while.

I will, however, go see Hallie again after this. If I’m already on their shit list, it shouldn’t matter whether I’m in her life or not. I will not be controlled if I have no motivation, and right now, I know that Damien must have his own. There’s a reason he wants me to stay away from Hallie and why he’s using drugs to control my every move, and I need to find out what it is. I’ll see her one more time today, just to get my fix, and then I’ll stay away until I can figure out what the fuck is going on.

I hand Jamie the money. Luckily I came prepared to sell my ass if that's what it took. I pocket the little baggie and walk back to my parking spot. Getting in my car, I thank God that at least it's already paid off and I can sleep in it if I need to, then head home. Or Hallie's home now.

I really fucked this all up.

If I wasn't so weak, I could be with her right now watching *Friends* and cuddling on the couch, or even better, buried in that tight pussy of hers. But I always mess everything up, and unfortunately for me, this time I've dug a bottomless hole that I can't seem to climb out of.

It doesn't matter, though, because she always returns to me in the long run. We might be trapped in an endless cycle of bullshit, thanks to me, and she probably doesn't even like me half the time, but she fucking *needs* me. The same way I need her. She's the next best thing to meth, and if I had never fallen into that rabbit hole, she would more than likely be my only addiction. I've heard you can be dependent on more than one drug, and as I park in my usual spot, I know for a damn fact that Hallie *is* a drug. The combination of everything I've wanted and needed from someone.

I crave her submission like my life depends on it, and my hands around her neck are an aphrodisiac in itself. Seeing, feeling, hearing how she needs me, can't live without me... well, that's a high I'll never stop chasing. And that's why I'm here tonight, knocking on the front door of our apartment like I don't still have a key. Thankfully I took a shower and

changed my clothes, so I won't look as fucked up as I actually am.

Hallie answers the door immediately, her hair dripping water onto the hardwood floor. Her scrubs are stuck to her body, completely soaked, revealing every dip and curve of her figure.

I want to rip them off and fuck her, but then I notice her lips are swollen and slightly bruised, and it lights a fucking fire inside of me.

What the *fuck*?

I know what she looks like freshly kissed, but he's about to find out what she looks like freshly fucked. I don't care about our little arrangement.

I step forward, and she gasps, stepping back as if on instinct. She knows my limits; she knows when she needs to be scared. "Am I not who you expected to see tonight, *baby*?" She lets go of the door and steps back again as if trying to run away. Like she even could. Wherever she goes, I'll fucking find her.

She doesn't answer me, just looks at the ground.

I walk into the house and grab her by the throat, slamming the door behind us. She doesn't fight me at all, rather, she stays still for me and lets me. Not with words, but I know her. She's into this shit. *She lives for it.*

I can still remember all the times I've choked her. When she's laid there on the brink of fainting, still holding on by a

thread with a smile on her face as she comes. The way she holds on to me, scratches my back. The way her pussy clenches around me and her eyes roll back in her head when I hit the spot she likes. All of it tells me she can't get enough of what I do to her, enough of *me*, and I know exactly how to give her what she wants.

I walk her backward toward the dining table, my hand still around her throat, and push her against it. I bet it fucking hurts as it digs into her back, and I lean my body weight on her just a bit more to make it worse. She sucks in a sharp breath as I squeeze her throat tighter, and her eyes widen. Only instead of fear, I see the excitement in her eyes, and it's confirmed when a smile graces her lips. I swear to God, my heart stops beating in my chest.

She knows how to fucking play with me.

I bite my lip, breathing through the pain of my hard cock straining against my jeans. I want to take them off and toss them across the room, except I can't even adjust myself right now. I can't do anything but look at her.

“Are you going to fuck me, baby?” Hallie pushes her throat against my hand, demanding more pressure. *Goddamn.* “Or just stare at me all night?”

There's something erotic about the way she's come out of her shell in the last few months. She used to never talk to me like this, but she knows I'll fuck the attitude out of her, and that's why she does it. No amount of time between us will change our dynamic.

I release her neck and hoist her up onto the table. “Lift your ass for me, Hals,” I rasp, and she lies down on the table for me, doing as she’s told. I yank the scrub bottoms and underwear down her body, which takes more effort than I thought because they’re completely stuck due to them being soaked.

“Fuck, baby.” I groan as I look at her tiny waist, the itch to hold on to it while I fuck her strong. “You’re so fucking perfect for me.” My pants follow, and I slide them down my legs to rest against my ankles, not taking them off completely.

Hallie grins and spreads her legs, her pretty pink pussy glistening for me. “Am I not your good girl anymore?” she asks, seeking my praise. I’m in love with this version of her. This high, I never want to come down from it. It’s better than any drug I could consume.

I pull her ass to the edge of the table and guide myself into her tight heat. We gasp in unison as my cock fills her, stretches her, and as I look into her wide eyes I know she’s *it* for me. Sex with her isn’t just fucking to me. Watching her every move, the way her breathing changes, when her back arches just a little... all of it is a spiritual experience for me. I can’t get enough of it.

The first thrust is excruciating, and I breathe in deeply, trying not to bust already. She wraps her legs around my waist, pulls me further into her until I’m buried to the hilt, and then closes her eyes. The way her skin turns pink when I’m inside

of her recharges my batteries, and I want her to turn red for me.

I lean my body over hers until we're almost flush with each other and her fingers tangle in my hair, gripping it until my eyes water. This is how we are with each other, constantly inflicting pain because we want to, and no one can do it quite like her. No one can make me want to simultaneously love and hurt the way she makes me want to do it to her.

My hand comes around her throat gently as I pull back slowly, and the way her pussy grips me has me holding my breath. I sink into her, keeping my feet planted as I increase the force behind my thrusts, then do it again, and again, and again.

Hallie moans softly, almost like she's holding back. Like she doesn't want to give me that much, and it spurs me on. My eyes feel like they're going to roll into the back of my head, that's how fucking good she feels. My hand around her throat squeezes while my other hand tugs her head back until her neck is bent at an unnatural angle. I want to hurt her, I want her never to forget who owns her.

"Yesss," Hallie hisses, and her legs wrap tighter around me, her feet crossed at the ankles. "Fuck me harder." She groans then reaches between us and starts to rub her clit. I let go of her hair, letting her get comfortable. I want her to look at me while she comes.

I fuck her so hard the table starts moving with us, the legs screeching as it's pushed toward the wall. The moans coming

past her lips are about to be my undoing. I try to tune them out as I feel the tingling sensation down my spine, my balls rising up to my body as I close my eyes and try to breathe deeply.

Hallie's nails dig into my forearm so deep I'm sure there's going to be blood, and my eyes fly open, "Don't take those pretty eyes off me." Her response is only a grunt. "Come for me, baby."

Her walls flutter around me, and I tighten my hand around her neck, ready to make her come all over my cock. Her mouth opens on a moan, only no sound can come out, and I grin. This is what I like to see, this is what gets me fucking off.

Her pussy clenches around me, and I see black as her nails dig into me again, and she starts to tremble. "That's it, baby. Let me feel how much you like this cock inside of you." Her face starts to turn red as she lets the hand she was using to rub her clit fall to her side. I finally get a view of her pretty pussy, and I fight the urge to close my eyes. "You take it so well, baby." My balls clench and my cock swells inside of her, and a broken moan falls past my lips as I come.

I let go of her neck as she gasps and coughs for air, yet her body lies limply on the table, almost like she's too tired to get up. I lay my head on her chest, listening to her heartbeat, still not pulling out. Her hands come to my hair, and my eyes flutter closed, the steady pounding of her heart lulling me to a state of sleep.

"I love you," I whisper, breathing in her vanilla and berries scent, letting it wrap around my soul until it feels like I'm

choking on my sorrow. I want to be able to smell her every day, kiss her every day, be with her every day. Suddenly I'm overcome with the need to cry. I can't believe I did this.

To myself.

To her.

To *us*.

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CHAPTER 14

Hallie

There's a knock at the door, and I try to hurry up and put some dry clothes on. Fuck, this really can't be fucking happening right now.

I kissed Damien an hour ago, and now I'm fucking Zayne?

Fuck.

"You need to leave," I say breathlessly, pulling a shirt over my head. "*Now.*" I look at Zayne, still leaning against the dining table, and he rolls his eyes. Somehow all he had to do was pull his pants up, but me? No, I have to be fucking laid out like a meal for him. Goddamnit.

"You're welcome." He smirks and smacks my ass. "You could thank me from time to time, you know."

"Whatever," I huff, pointing at the exit.

Zayne walks to the door and looks through the peephole as the person on the other side knocks again. "Are you expecting me to fucking let him in too?" He turns around and sneers at me, his eyes heated. "Are you gonna fuck us both?" He grins a

bright white smile, but it just makes him seem deranged. “I don’t like to share, baby, but I would for you.”

“I highly doubt that.” I walk to the door and open it, motioning for him to get out. He has to dodge Damien, who does a double-take and looks between Zayne and me like he’s missing something— well, he is.

Damien and Zayne look each other up and down, and Zayne smirks, glancing back at me. The grin that spreads over his face says it all. *Fuck my life*. After about thirty seconds, he walks away, but Damien still stands outside in the doorway.

We make eye contact, and he shakes his head at me, disappointment written all over his face. But also something else— *jealousy*. He’s pissed.

“Are you coming inside, or are you just going to stand there the whole time?” I’m trying to lighten the mood and dissipate this awkwardness that seems to be choking me, although he just frowns at me.

“Did you fuck him, Hallie?” His voice is low, barely audible, and somehow this is a scarier version of him than I’m used to. Like his violence is hidden under a few layers— I don’t fucking like it. I want to know what I’m dealing with, not uncover someone’s secrets.

I debate on what to say, what lie to tell, even though he should know who I am. He should know I don’t care about anything. That I will probably hurt him, break his heart— it’s just who I am. I don’t know how to be *good*. I’m too defiled for that shit. “Yes.” I maintain eye contact, and I don’t know

what I was expecting, but a smile from him right now was definitely not it.

“And here I thought you were a good girl.” He laughs, and it gives me goosebumps. “I thought,” he gets closer, “well, never fucking mind what I thought.” He comes into the house and backs me up against the wall. “You’re just a dirty little skank, aren’t you?” he rasps against my lips, and a wave of arousal threatens to take me under.

I search his eyes. What the fuck is the right answer to this?

He pulls my hair lightly, tugging my head back. “Are you going to be *my* dirty little skank, Hallie?”

“Yes.” I breathe. “Yes.”

He grins, “Not today, love.” I tense as he lets go of my hair. “I don’t want his leftovers.”

Who knows why that’s so hurtful right now, he’s not exactly wrong. I wouldn’t want to fuck him if I knew he just got done doing it with someone else. So then, why does it hurt so bad when he walks through the door without another word? Why do I want to chase after him even as I close the front door?

I stand in my living room, stunned and a little confused. “Bye, Damien,” I whisper to the empty apartment before going to my room and getting in bed all alone.

It’s depressing just thinking about how I have to sleep by myself now, and turning over to a cold bed makes me want to have a one-night stand just so it doesn’t feel so damn lonely in here. A stranger’s warm body is better than no body at all.

Maybe I'm more fucked up than I thought.

I close my eyes and try to sleep, but I can't stop thinking about the events of the last few hours. The shit show keeps playing on repeat in my brain. An endless fucking loop. Kissing Damien and then fucking Zayne doesn't seem to be the worst thing a person could do. I could've fucked them both, I guess. And yet, I feel dirty. Is it because he looked at me like I was disgusting? Or are societal standards making these intrusive thoughts drive me crazy?

I toss and turn all morning long. When I finally check my phone, it's only noon, and I hate myself a little more for being unable to get my shit together enough to not overthink everything about my life.

I get out of bed, dragging my feet to the bathroom, and look at myself in the mirror. Deep dark circles are under my eyes, partly from not sleeping but also from working the night shift; they're like a permanent part of my face now. But the way they look today, I doubt even concealer will help me cover them up. Even still, I put some on, then foundation, and lastly mascara. I don't like putting makeup on my face, but I also don't want to look like I'm dying when I see the doctor this afternoon.

My side of the closet is packed to the brim, and maybe I should start spreading out my belongings since the other half is entirely empty, but I just can't bring myself to look at it. I don't want to think about all the things missing from my life right now, or how much I fucking miss him every minute of

every day, or how he makes it impossible to forget about him when he keeps coming back into my life and making me want to beg for more.

My high-waisted jeans hug my figure, and the blue crop top hides enough skin that it's still appropriate enough to wear to the psychiatrist's office. My outfit makes me look like I care about my appearance, even if I know that's a lie right now. But I have to look like I'm trying, at least. The last thing I need is to be forced to stay inpatient right now.

I'm in desperate need of a medication refill and possibly adding a new one to my little polypharmacy, so I can't afford to push this appointment back again. My mental health has been shit lately and I plan on asking for a leave of absence from work, at least for a few weeks, so I can get my life together. I don't know if I can help anyone at the hospital if I can't even help myself.

As I drive to the office, I find myself thinking about how I'll word my symptoms without getting thrown in a mental hospital again for my Major Depressive Disorder. Trying to pretend you're sane when you're the furthest thing from it is more challenging than people realize. The urge to slit my wrists and the intrusive thoughts screaming at me to end it all is getting more difficult to tune out. The overwhelming need to feel peace is stronger than ever, and I just want it all to stop.

I park right in front of the entrance door in the small lot designated for the clinic, right next to the disabled parking spots. The clinic is on the rich side of the city, and it shows,

with the white stone exterior and silver metal roof. I walk up the three steps that lead to the entrance and open the door.

The interior is decorated with rustic furniture, the wooden chairs taking up half of the waiting room and a dark brown cowhide rug under them. There's a flat-screen TV mounted on the wall that plays the news, how fucking boring, and a kiosk in the far right corner.

I walk to the kiosk and tap to check in, which gives me a small piece of paper with a number, and then sit in one of the chairs. After two minutes, the receptionist calls me to the desk and asks to see my ID, then checks me in.

She pushes a clipboard toward me, "Here are some forms to be filled out." The soft tone of her voice annoys me, it's almost like she's making an effort to talk this way so patients remain calm. Well bitch, you're only pissing me off more.

"Thanks."

I go back to sit in the very uncomfortable wooden chair, which is clearly just for looks, and start responding 'no' to everything. Do you want to hurt yourself or others? No. Are you suicidal? No. The list goes on and on and on. The only questions I answer 'yes' to have to do with feeling hopeless and depressed, experiencing a change in sleep habits, and having anxiety.

"Hallie Cox," Dr. Brown calls out from the doorway that leads to the back of the clinic, and I walk toward her at what I'm hoping to be an average pace.

The clipboard taps against the side of my thigh with every step I take, a grim reminder of all the lies I'm spewing, but I can't bring myself to tell the truth when I know what the outcome will be.

The doctor's smile seems genuine and inviting, but after having spent the better part of the last four months in this office, I know it's all a facade. In reality, she's cold and calculated, probably a product of being desensitized by all the fucked up things she's seen in this profession. It still doesn't make it better in any case.

She gives me the fakest smile I've ever seen as she leads me into her office and gestures to the chair so I can take a seat. "How are you doing today?" I've always hated going to the doctor, mainly because seeing someone for my mental health is almost paralyzing. The fear of being institutionalized is always in the background, but it comes back in full force when I see any professional.

I try to answer as honestly as possible without giving too much away. "I've been better." I've been cutting myself, not sleeping well, not wanting to get out of bed, not eating, and not showering. You know, just the usual.

She goes to sit across from me at her computer desk, and the expensive leather chair doesn't even squeak when she sits on it. Fancy bitch. Ugh, maybe I do hate her. "What's going on?" Her icy blue eyes don't deviate from mine, almost like she's trying to catch me in a lie.

“I’ve just had really low energy lately, and I’ve been crying a lot.”

Dr. Brown nods at me, then starts typing on her computer. “How’s your appetite?”

“I’m not hungry, so I haven’t been eating much.” I twist my fingers on my lap, which she notices, and then she takes more notes.

“Any thoughts about hurting yourself or others?”

“Sometimes, about myself,” I say slowly, my muscles coiling as I try to word this in a way that won’t raise too many red flags. “Although I’m not going to act on them.”

Dr. Brown looks at me briefly, a neutral expression on her face. She does have a good poker face. It’s impenetrable, honestly, you just never know what the fuck she’s thinking, and that’s the scariest part about these appointments. *Please have mercy.* “Well, Hallie, you do have Major Depressive Disorder, so I would expect you to have episodes since you’ve been unmedicated. Are you interested in changing that?”

“I’ll try anything at this point,” I say, regretting that. Because not *anything*, maybe only Zoloft. “I just want to be productive.”

“Have you heard of Lexapro?” She looks at me, and I nod. “Great. We can start at the lowest dose and in two weeks see how you’re doing with it.” Dr. Brown pushes her chair back and stands as if she’s ready to be done with me, and judging

from how short our previous appointments have been, I know she is. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“I think I need to take some time off work, to be honest.” I lean back in my chair and close my eyes, trying to tell her without words to sit the fuck down. It’s going to be a minute. “I have thought about quitting, but I don’t want to lose this job either.”

“Well, don’t quit your job just yet.” She clicks her pen in a way that makes me want to throw my clipboard across the room, and I realize she hasn’t even asked to see what I wrote. How pointless. “Why do you think you need time off?”

“I just can’t do my job properly in this state of mind.” I straighten in the chair and look at her. “The ICU is very stressful, and I don’t think I can handle it right now.”

“I’ll start your short-term disability paperwork. Just check in with the front desk by tomorrow so they can email it directly to the hospital.” She walks toward the door and opens it, a clear cue that she’s done with me. For fuck’s sake, she’s so rude. “I’ll give you a few weeks off.”

“What’s a few weeks?” I need to know how long I have to get my shit together.

“I will sign for a two-week leave of absence under the condition that you check yourself into a facility if you’re suicidal.” I stand from my seat and join her at the door. “Who’s going to be with you in case of an emergency?”

“I... don’t really know,” I say, thinking of how I no longer have Zayne with me, and I probably fucked everything up with Damien too. Maybe Brittany will let me stay with her for two weeks. “But I’ll make sure I’m not alone.”

“Please let me know in the portal as soon as you have someone. I want to give you this leave of absence, but I must also ensure your safety.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’d like to check in once per week on your mood. We can do it over the phone.” She pastes another fake smile on her face. “Make sure to get the receptionist the email address we need by tomorrow.”

I nod and walk through the door. “Have a good day, Dr. Brown,” I tell her, but she doesn’t even reply before she closes the door behind me.

God, she’s a fucking bitch.

Once back in my car, I reapply some lip balm because my mouth is drier than the Sahara desert and clean up the mascara smears under my eyes. I really need to start investing in waterproof makeup, but as always, I seem to never learn my lessons.

As I pull out of the parking spot, I notice a familiar car from my peripheral vision. I do my best to look subtly, but I suck at that, and when I spot the Hyundai Genesis, I want him to know I saw him. I still have to go to the pharmacy, which is about twenty minutes from here, and pick up my prescriptions.

I exit the parking lot and get on the highway, and when I glance at the rearview mirror, he's still trailing after me a few cars behind. He follows me the whole way to the pharmacy and parks a few parking spots away from me but doesn't enter when I do. I take longer than needed, waiting ten additional minutes after they've given me my medications before I go back to my car, only to look around and find that he's gone.

Why the fuck was he following me? And how long has he been doing it for?

Five speakers are at the ceremony today, and I'm convinced they want to bore us to death. Surprisingly, they start speaking faster after about ten minutes, as if they are ready to get this over with as much as the rest of us.

Damien sits to my left, his thighs parted as far as they'll go, and I'm basically on the opposite edge of my chair trying not to fall off as I attempt to not touch him. Brittany keeps pushing me away from her, she's rude, and I have to go back to the middle.

It's been five days since Damien trailed after me all the way to the pharmacy, and we haven't spoken to each other at all. It's possible he doesn't know I saw him, or maybe he realized I knew what he was doing and that's why he left. I'm not going to be the one to bring it up either way.

The names are called in alphabetical order by last names, and it seems to be moving fairly quickly due to the speaker rushing through it. I don't really think this means much to

anyone. All it says about us is that we completed supervised training to learn about the hospital and can now work independently. I guess I'm proud of myself for it, but on the other hand, I just feel relieved to not keep having to work so many hours. I'll finally be able to work my three shifts and be done without worrying about homework, projects, or class times.

"Damien Carlisle," the speaker calls out, and he swiftly stands and makes his way to the front of the room. The way his slacks hug his perfectly round ass should be a crime, and I can't tear my traitorous eyes away.

Brittany clears her throat next to me, forcing me to look at her. The smirk on her face tells me I've been caught, but she can't even talk shit, she looks at everyone's ass. "So, Damien and I made plans," she starts, and I freeze in my chair. What the fuck did she just say? She seems to sense that there's something wrong with that statement and grins, like she's discovered my little secret. The main problem with this is that I didn't even know they talked like that. When the hell did that even happen? "We're going to a Halloween party tonight, and you're coming." I process that information. *We* are going... as in him and her, as in together? Like a couple?

"I'm good," I smile at her, "I don't like to be a third wheel, you know that."

"Ugh, shut up." Brit rolls her eyes, "We're all going together as friends."

I look up as they hand Damien his certificate of completion and shake his hand, taking a picture with him. His bright smile looks fake, but maybe it's because I've been blessed with a few real ones.

“Whatever, just get me drunk,” I tell her as Damien walks back to the chair.

As soon as he's halfway to our row, the speaker calls out my name, “Hallie Cox.” I gather my courage and walk to the front of the room, even as my heart pounds loudly in my ears and it feels like I'm going to fucking faint. *Please, please don't trip.* “Congratulations.” The speaker says as he holds the certificate out to me and shakes my hand, taking a picture, all in a few seconds. My face burns as I become the center of attention, but I don't look at anyone as I walk back to my seat.

Damien smirks at me when I make it back, probably amused at the color of my face. I take deep breaths and pray that I can get it together, and Brittany squeezes my hand softly in reassurance. It doesn't even matter I took my anxiety medication before this, it's still hard, but I guess I should be thankful I didn't embarrass myself by having a panic attack. That would just be the icing on the cake of my life.

A few more people are called, and when Brit is up, we both cheer loudly for her. She smiles broadly, the freaking hoe. She *loves* being the center of attention. When we go anywhere, she's always the social butterfly, talking to everyone, flirting with everyone, and trying to fuck everyone. And I love every

second of it, because it means no one is paying attention to me.

The residency program director comes to the podium, adjusts the microphone and demands everyone's attention. "I would like to make an honorary mention for Anna, who has been missing for a few months. Wherever she is, she has not been forgotten, and I hope she is found soon. She will always have a spot in this hospital to come back to." She pauses, looking around the room as if trying to find someone guilty of this crime. "Let's bow our heads in prayer for our fellow nurse."

We bow our heads and say 'amen' at the end, making me a bit uncomfortable because I'm not religious, but it had to be done. As we're dismissed, we file out of the room in a disorderly fashion, despite what they request. Brit pulls my arm to an area where the people aren't attempting to trample each other. It looks worse than middle school kids running to their class when the bell rings. What a disaster.

"I know you have a slutty costume somewhere in your closet," she tells me with a grin. "So go find it, and we'll pick you up in two hours."

I grin back, "I'll be Harley Quinn if you'll be my joker."

Brittany gasps, "You bitch!" We laugh together, but she knows this is the only way she's convincing me to go, so she just pouts and nods. "I'll be the hottest joker anyone's ever seen." I know she will be, seriously.

We go our separate ways, and then I spend the entire next two hours literally getting ready. The person looking back at me in the mirror is a brunette Harley Quinn, but it'll have to do. My red and blue boy shorts show half my ass, but the fishnet stockings make it a little better. My favorite part of the costume is the long-sleeve shirt that says, 'Daddy's little monster' and the jacket that matches the color of the boy shorts. I did color my hair pink and blue and even went as far as getting fake tattoos to match the persona. It's been a long time since I've worn this costume, but I guess I'm a little happy I saved it for a rainy day.

Damien's car is parked by the curb since he's only waiting thirty seconds for me to come out, and when I open the passenger door, his eyes narrow at me. I don't know why he's so offended by my outfit, considering he's wearing a cloak with no shirt underneath, but whatever. I have to stop caring about what men want from me, even if it's not that simple.

"Oh my fucking God," Brittany squeaks. "Doesn't she look fucking hot?" she asks Damien, but he doesn't reply. His only sign of anger is in the way his jaw locks.

I look back at her, green wig in place that makes her eyes pop, and laugh. Oh, she's good. She's wearing a lime green bra, a purple jacket, and white and black striped pants. I don't understand how she pulled this off with two hours' notice, but she looks amazing. "You're calling me hot?" I wink at her, "I think I could be into girls for one night by just looking at you." She laughs in the backseat and I turn around and put my seatbelt on. She thinks I'm freaking hilarious and as Damien

drives away from my apartment complex, he just shakes his head like I've personally offended him. I want to ask Brit why she wanted him to come, he's being a mood killer. Who peed in his cereal? Damn.

After about thirty minutes of being blinded by headlights and taillights, we pull up to Wild Country, and it makes me want to turn around and smack Brit. She knows I fucking hate going to the club. "What the fuck, Brittany?" I turn around to look at her, and she puts her hands up in submission. "You said we were going to a party!"

"Everyone from work is here celebrating, so it *is* a party."

The moment Damien parks, I get out of the car, slamming the door behind me, and go stand in line. It's ladies' night, so thankfully, I don't have to pay anything before they give me a wristband. I go inside, leaving Damien and Brit behind because I feel played right now, and head straight to the bar. It's crowded as fuck, with a bunch of dudes squeezed together and women trying to get through. This is exactly why I hate places like this one.

I finally get to the bartender, a cute guy with brown eyes and a pretty smile, and order a cherry vodka sour. He mixes it quickly and hands it to me, saying it's on the house. Thank God, now I know I'll be getting fucked up tonight, even if I have to Uber home.

There are two levels to this club, the lower one with the bars and a dance floor, and the upper one with tables and chairs. It's

not fancy enough to need a reservation for a table, so you just have to take what you get.

The dance floor is crowded with people in costumes dancing basically on top of each other, and the strobe lights reflect off every surface. I don't understand why this place is called Wild Country, they're not even playing country music.

I chug my drink and put the glass down on a corner of the bar, then head to the dance floor. At first, I'm dancing alone to 'Under the Influence'. Guys start piling in, surrounding me on all sides and suddenly I'm sandwiched between four guys. I don't even care. I close my eyes and sway to the music, feeling hands on my body, men grinding against me from all sides.

There's a rush of air behind me as one of them leaves, and then someone else takes his place. One strong arm comes around my front until his hand is resting on my chest, pushing me into him. I almost protest, wanting to tell him not to get that close to me, but I end up closing my eyes. When plastic fangs brush against the side of my throat though, my eyes open.

"What do you think you're doing, love?" Damien asks, his hand cradling my neck now as he speaks in my ear.

I smile, and he probably knows I'm doing it even if he can't see it. "Dancing," I reply, my hand resting over his, silently giving him permission to squeeze my neck. He doesn't. I guess he's in a boring mood tonight. But me? I'm getting drunk as fuck.

I try to walk away so I can go back to the bar, but he wraps his other arm around my middle, immobilizing me. “You’re coming with me.”

“Fine!” I shout over the music.

Damien pulls my arm until we’re outside the club, standing behind the building. It’s almost quiet out here, the thump of the music barely audible. I finally get a good view of his costume as he stands across from me, and my breath catches. Lord have fucking mercy, he’s hot.

The fitted slacks he’s wearing fit him like a glove, and his six-pack is on full display as he’s not wearing a shirt under the Dracula cape. He has fangs in his mouth and blood at the corner of his bottom lip. I avert my gaze as he removes the fangs and pockets them. I don’t need to be tempting myself when I’ve already been drinking alcohol. It’s not going to end well.

Damien steps toward me, closing the distance between us, and I look up at his face. His expression is neutral, but then he asks, “How was your doctor’s appointment?” I want to laugh, he’s got balls.

“Why were you following me?” He smiles at my retort, and I smile back. I guess he knew I noticed him after all. “Better yet, don’t tell me. I honestly don’t want to know.”

“Why’s that?” He steps closer, our shoes touching, and wraps his arm around my waist. My chest collides with his bare one, and my hands long to touch him. His golden skin is smooth, and I miss it under my fingertips more than I’d like to

admit. I didn't touch it as much as I should've when he was in my bed, and I regret it deeply. "Are you scared of what I might say, Hallie?"

"I simply don't care." I'm such a liar and he knows it as his hand tightens on my lower back. "You won't be following me when you're at work, and I'm not."

Damien raises an eyebrow, "What if I told you I won't be at work, either?"

"Oh?" I chuckle. Maybe he is a little crazy, after all. It's too bad that's just my type. "Where will you be?"

"Colorado." He leans in, his soft lips meeting mine for a kiss that I want to prolong, but he pulls away. "Come with me," he says, and alarm bells ring in my head.

"Why?"

I see his shoulders shrug from my peripheral vision, yet I keep my eyes trained on his face. "Because you have time off and so do I. Why not?"

"I hadn't considered leaving the state..." But that's not the real reason, and I don't know the real reason either. "I only have two weeks to get my shit together."

His thumb pulls down my bottom lip, and heat races down my spine. "A change of scenery is always helpful." He's being very convincing as his hand trails down and cups my ass roughly, his fingers digging into the bottom of my ass cheek as he lifts me up slightly. I stand on tiptoes and my arms go around his neck. "A change of man is too, or so I hear."

“Really?” I snicker, “I haven’t heard that one before.”

“It will keep you from moping around.” The arrow of truth strikes true. “At least that’s all you’ve been doing lately.”

Has no one taught this man how to have a little tact? Jesus. “That’s a bit dramatic. I’ve been eating and taking showers the last few days.” Not entirely true, but not a lie either. One meal counts.

“I’ll be booking tickets for us tonight.” I start to protest, but he interrupts, “And if you don’t want to stay, then you can always come back.”

“What about Zayne?”

His arm tenses around me, his fingers digging deeper into my skin. “What about him?”

Oh, I don’t know. The fact that you both look like you want to kill each other, or maybe that you saw him leaving my apartment right after you kissed me. Or maybe, just maybe, that you know he fucked me again.

Shouldn’t this be influencing this kind of decision?

“Doesn’t it bother you that I had sex with him?” I say slowly. “Why do you want me to come with you after I did that?”

“Yes, it fucking bothers me,” he says against my lips. “But I know it’s not going anywhere with him, Hallie. You obviously kicked him out.”

I don't want to tell him that doesn't mean anything when it comes to Zayne and me, so all I say is, "You're right."

I try to kiss him just as he pulls back, but I grab the back of his head and force him to meet my lips. This time I seek his tongue with mine and deepen the kiss, and when I rub myself against his thick erection, he groans. Two can play this game.

"I'll go with you."

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CHAPTER 15

Damien

There are a lot of loose ends I have to tie up before I can take Hallie to Colorado with me in four hours, and it's starting to get really stressful. Thankfully my trunk is already packed with my two suitcases and there's just enough room for two more, or maybe not. My car is small. All I have to do is pick up Hallie in an hour, which gives me enough time to run one last errand, or two if you count talking to my father as one. This shit is getting old, fast.

John let me know that one of our guys named Armando has been giving information to my father about what I'm doing, and his big fucking mouth is about to cost him a lot. I've never had to explain myself to my father before, and he probably won't even care about me giving that junkie free meth, but it's the principle. You don't snitch in this line of work and get to keep your limbs, or even your life, and today I'm not feeling very generous.

It's six in the morning, and I've been awake for two hours. If anyone knows me, they know I am *not* a morning person. I

function best at night, which is why I work the night shift in the hospital and do everything else for the cartel at night too. No one controls my schedule, only I decide what it looks like. Which is a perk of being in the business for over ten years now. So tell me why the fuck I'm at the warehouse right now, headed to the quiet room?

The metal door creaks as I open it, and the expanse of the room is entirely empty except for one chair in the center. Armando sits in it, bound and gagged, with tears streaming down his face. Oh, he knows what's coming. I've done this kind of work before and earned a pretty nasty reputation, so maybe he's smart, after all. He should be shitting himself; they don't call me the slasher for no reason.

I stand across from him and dial my father, putting him on speakerphone. Victor is the kind of person who wakes up at the ass crack of dawn, and although it's been annoying to me my entire life and I can't quite understand why he'd put himself through that, I'm grateful he's going to pick up the phone when I need him to right now.

"Victor," he answers, as if he doesn't know it's me. It's always irked me how he can't even bother to say good morning to me, 'how are you son', or even just 'hey son'. Any fucking acknowledgment besides what he gives his goons would be fucking nice.

"Father," I try to keep my voice neutral, but it's hard when I want to tell him to go fuck himself. "You wanted to speak?"

“What’s this I’ve been hearing about you giving a man free product?”

I chuckle. “You can speak plainly, I know it was Armando.”

I can hear the decanter clinking as he takes the lid off and the pouring of a liquid into a glass, more than likely whiskey. “So then you won’t mind explaining yourself now that we got that out of the way.”

“I have a job to do, father. One that you keep reminding me needs to be *rushed*.” I begin to pace, and the footsteps echo in the space. Armando’s eyes are bulging out of his head, and it’s almost amusing at this point. “It was the quickest way to get him out of the way.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard,” my father tells me. “That’s all you had to say.”

“I don’t have to run my decisions by you,” I almost growl, beginning to lose my cool. This is not going to end well for the man in the chair. “But now that we’re done here, I have things to do.”

“*I am the fucking boss here.*” His voice booms through the phone, and I can almost imagine the housekeepers scurrying away from the door, the nosy cunts. “You will answer to me.”

I laugh, “You know I work for my damn self.” I hang up on him, not wanting to continue this conversation. It’s already taken entirely too long.

I have to be at Hallie’s apartment at seven to pick her up, and it takes me about thirty minutes to get there from this

warehouse. So that leaves me around fifteen minutes to get out of here, which is not long enough to clean up a body. The guys will have to take care of this one, which is convenient for many reasons, but one of them is that they'll see what the fuck will happen if they ever open their big ass mouths to my father and tell him anything at all about me.

“Armando,” I tsk, “It’s your lucky day today.”

He begins to scream behind his gag, rattling the chair as he tries to escape. There’s no way he’s achieving that, but watching him make the effort is a bit fun. I pull out my newly sharpened knife and flick it open. His face blanches and the stench of piss permeates the room, which I watch run down his pant leg. Pathetic. If there’s one thing that bothers me is weakness, and these fuckers like to act all tough just to piss and shit themselves when it’s their turn to pay for their mistakes.

“I’m in a rush this morning,” I step up to him, but I go around the side so I don’t stand on the urine. You would think it wouldn’t bother me as a nurse, but that job doesn’t require me to soak my shoes in it, only change it. “So, fortunately for you, this will have to be quick.”

Armando begins to squirm, tears streaming down his dirty face. What a way to go. The shame I feel for him travels through my veins like poison, and I take it out on him as I yank his head back and expose his throat for me. I don’t have to explain myself; he knows exactly how this will go. He’s seen me in action before.

“Any last words?” I taunt him, knowing damn well that he can’t say shit.

He has no wife, children, or other family members, so I have nothing to feel guilty about. And even if he did, mothers suffer for their children every day and they survive the pain. Just like my mom has. This is between God and me at this point, and when the reaper comes for me, I’ll face my sins with a smile on my face.

A high-pitched scream fills the room even with the gag, and I smirk, knowing it could be much worse. I should be torturing him for his transgressions, and I’m disappointed that I don’t have enough time to do so.

I press the knife against his carotid artery, and he tenses, knowing he’s got about fifteen seconds left before bleeding out. I’ve done this for years. I know the exact depth I need to cut and the exact motion I need to make. At this point, this is second nature to me, almost as easy as breathing.

I flick my wrist and cut about two inches into the neck and stay still, wanting him to bask in the fucking fear for a second or two, then slash his throat from one end to the other. Blood spurts everywhere, then it cascades down his body and onto the ground. It’s a good thing I brought spare shoes today because these are soaked. At least I am standing away from the gore this time, and luckily my clothing is still intact.

I walk around the mess and exit the room, letting the guys know they need to clean up before going back to my car. I’m just hoping the traffic on the interstate is not at a standstill

because I really need to get to Hallie's soon if we want to catch this damn plane. Her apartment is on the opposite side of town, and we still have to go through security at the airport. I hate flying for this reason. It feels like a constant panic attack from the house to the moment I sit at the gate. She's probably going to hate me after spending today with me. I'm not fun to be around under this kind of stress.

Thankfully the morning traffic is not as terrible as it usually is at seven in the morning, and I'm able to dodge my way through the interstate, constantly switching lanes to avoid the slow cars. When I pull up to Hallie's place, she's already waiting for me outside on the sidewalk, with one big suitcase and a carry-on in hand and a pink reflective fanny pack around her hips.

I get out and go around to open the door for her, grinning, as I get a glimpse of her platform combat booties. Who's going to tell her she can't wear those in the snow? I hate to burst her bubble, but she's going to be slipping and sliding everywhere. I guess I'll let her enjoy them until we get there though, so I just close the door and put her luggage away.

By the time I get back in the car, she's already connected her phone to Bluetooth. She gives me about thirty seconds of silence as I exit the apartment complex before she starts blaring PleaseXanny by Chase Atlantic through the speakers. The way she sings every word is a bit impressive, I'm not going to lie, but it also makes me feel like this is a cry for help as she keeps going on and on about a Xanax addiction.

I remember seeing a bottle of Xanax on her nightstand right next to the Vodka, and I guess that should've told me enough, however she's never shown signs of a struggle. I don't know how long she's been clean for, but I'm guessing a while, especially since she's had her nursing job for months, and they drug test us.

I get on the interstate, and there's traffic just as I suspected there would be. So as we're at a standstill, I turn to look at her. She's wearing an off-white chunky knit sweater paired with skinny jeans and a black knit beanie that matches her booties. And here she is singing along to yet another Chase Atlantic song, giving the cuss words extra attitude. You'd never be able to tell that she listens to anything other than Selena Gomez or Taylor Swift, but she's surprisingly diverse in her taste in music.

Hallie catches me staring and gives me a dazzling smile that makes a small dimple appear right above the corner of her upper lip, and my heart starts beating faster. Her dark brown eyes look caramel colored when the sun hits them, and her hair looks just a bit red. How can someone be so fucking beautiful?

Why does something forbidden make you want it all the more?

I force myself to look away from her, facing the road once more as the traffic starts moving along again. There's no way I can do what's needed with this little fucking crush. It needs to be... crushed. Maybe if I fuck her, I'll get her out of my

system. Knowing what she tastes like, feels like, will be the only way to stop fantasizing about it. I could move on.

When we finally arrive at the airport, I go directly to the long-term parking lot and grab a ticket. I'm going to park in the open lot, which technically is a terrible choice because people's cars get broken into all the damn time, but if I start spending too much money, she will get suspicious. I can't be drawing too much attention to myself, so here's to hoping my car is in one piece when we get back. Because if it's not, I'll have to find whoever did it, and I have way too much shit to worry about to add that to my plate.

The walk to get inside the airport from the long-term parking lot looks long as fuck. In fact, there are supposed to be shuttles, but we don't have time to wait for one. We have forty-five minutes until our plane starts boarding. I get all the luggage out of my trunk and click the remote until it beeps to lock the car, then pull on the handle to ensure it is closed. Hallie observes me with a smile but doesn't say anything. I think she can sense my irritation because she hasn't said a word to me since we got in the car.

"Could you walk a little faster?" I urge her, taking longer strides. Why does this place have to be three miles from the parking lot? And we still have to get through security. There's no way we're going to make it. Zero chance. "We're going to miss this damn flight."

"I have short legs, Damien!" she shouts at me, rolling her luggage and half-jogging to my side. I don't care how pissed I

am, that's genuinely hilarious. My belly aches from how hard I'm laughing, and a tear comes out of my eye. "Quit fucking laughing at me. You're being such a dick today."

Okay, I do laugh at that too, because she's not wrong. I woke up on the wrong side of the bed, and this three-hour flight better bless me with a good nap, or I'm going to be pissed off the rest of the day. We are flying Delta and I selected our seats so we can be comfortable *and* together. That last part was non-negotiable.

"It's not a good day for me, love," I tell her as we finally reach the entrance and make a right toward security, then remember we have to check in our bags. Oh my fucking God. At least they're right next to each other.

She's still jogging just to catch up with me, and I literally want to punch something when we get in line. This is going to take a long time. I keep pushing my suitcases in front of me, and at least there's only one person in front of us for this line, but security looks about an hour long.

"Really?" She gasps for air, bending over at the waist to catch her breath. "Because it just started, you know?" If only she knew my day started hours ago, and every single second has been annoying. Except maybe the ones I've spent in her company.

"I just really hate airports," I mutter, and her eyes widen like I just told her my most intimate secret. I don't have much time to react, though, because we're next in line now.

We present our identification cards, and they check us in and take our luggage. Now all that's left is going through security with her carry-on, which I'm hoping doesn't have electronics or we'll have to take them out too.

The security line moves about as slow as I expected, and Hallie must be getting tired because she keeps resting her head on my chest and closing her eyes. It's a bit weird how comfortable she looks considering my chest feels hard, definitely not pillow-like. At least that's what I've been told the last few months. Honestly, I'd probably fall asleep anywhere myself, so I can't even blame her.

When we make it to the front, I check my watch. We have ten minutes until the plane starts boarding and we still have one person in front of us, not to mention we still have to take off our shoes, put the carry-on through the scanner, and walk through the metal detector. It's safe to say we'll be here longer than ten minutes.

The TSA lady motions the person in front of us forward, but he doesn't move. He's on his phone, not paying attention, and halting the flow of the line. Sweat drips down my spine at the sudden urge to push his ass forward, and Hallie looks at me with concern.

"Could you please move?" I tell the guy in front of us, who then looks back at me, his thick black eyebrows furrowing with confusion. "Some of us are in a hurry."

He looks back at the lady who keeps motioning him forward and mutters, "Sorry." Then continues on to show his

identification card.

“Are you always this rude to everyone?” Hallie asks in annoyance, rolling her carry-on behind her as we get called forward too.

“Yes,” I reply without hesitation. She needs to know who she’s dealing with. “Always.”

By the time we’re done with security, our plane has already boarded, so I pick up the carry-on and start running toward the gate, Hallie following just a few steps behind. I didn’t give her enough credit, she’s fast for her height when she tries. We dodge the crowd, and yet another thing that pisses me off is that no one moves over for us when we’re running their way. How is that even possible?

The lady at the counter is picking up her stuff right as we run up to her, and we stop abruptly with our chests heaving and audibly gasping for air. I’m almost sure we made it to our gate in about two or three minutes, and Hallie seems more winded than me, even though she did really well.

“Let me see your boarding passes.” The lady reaches her hand out and I give them over. “They’re about to leave, so you need to hurry.” She gives the passes back to us and opens the door to the gate, letting us run to the plane.

“Thank you!” Hallie and I yell in unison as we run again.

The plane is jammed packed, I don’t think there’s a single unoccupied seat. Fortunately for us, our seats are the only ones in our row. I put Hallie’s luggage in the overhead bin and let

her have the window seat, because even if I hate life right now, I want her to be comfortable. I can sleep anywhere.

Within minutes we depart and are in the air, and I decide I need to close my eyes as I'm fucking exhausted. There's no way I can keep my eyes open anymore. Soft tingles erupt on my forehead and nose as Hallie touches me, and my eyes fly back open.

"Relax, *sweetie*," she says the last part sarcastically, and I grin because, damn, I know I deserve it. I've been a fucking asshole all morning, and maybe her making fun of me should piss me off right about now, but I don't even care as her fingertips trace my face. "Close those pretty eyes."

I oblige her, if only because I'm tired and this feels so freaking good. "You think my eyes are pretty?"

"Beautiful," she breathes, then traces the bridge of my nose down to my chin, pulling my bottom lip down slightly on the way. I relax further into my seat and exhale slowly. "All of you."

I don't think she meant to say the last part judging by how she abruptly stops. Although when she starts rubbing my face again, I smile softly. I want to tell her to stop and go to the other side of her seat, that I got her a window seat so she could leave me alone and go to sleep, but I can't.

"Awww, that's sweet."

She taps my nose and chuckles. "Shut up."

Nevertheless, the tingles spreading over my body are too potent, and eventually, I give in to the urge and fall asleep. I think I'm making a huge mistake by letting myself be vulnerable with her in any way, but I can't stop doing it. How do you interfere with the gravitational pull someone else has over you?

I need to figure it out.

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CHAPTER 16

Hallie

Snowcapped mountains surround us as far as the eye can see, and I literally can't tear my eyes away. It makes me wish I had thought of coming here before now, yet it seems like if he hadn't offered to bring me I probably would've never found out this place existed.

Damien says we will be staying at his family's cabin here in Breckenridge, which seemingly is in the mountains. That's probably the one thing making me nervous, I've never driven in the snow, and I don't want to start now. I also don't think I can trust another person with my life when it comes to it, even though I can tell he has driven in the snow plenty of times just by the control he has over this truck as we go up in elevation.

The winding roads are putting me on the verge of a panic attack, which I never thought would've happened, but I find myself holding my breath with every single curve. Maybe it's because some of these roads don't even have rails to protect us from the drop, or perhaps the elevation is fucking with my

head. Probably both. Either way, I'm ready to get to the house, I'm so tired.

It's been a crazy day, beginning with the fact that I just got on a plane with a man I don't know that well... and I'm going to be spending two weeks with him. Am I crazy for that? Also, the airport was seriously stressful and even if I wasn't the one being an asshole to anyone who dared to breathe in my direction, I could relate to Damien's irritability. Then lastly, the way Damien stared at me when we were sitting together in the airplane, and how he fell asleep on me and used me as a pillow for two hours of the flight.

We drive up to a circular driveway, stopping short due to the snow that has accumulated on the ground. It looks like at least two feet of snow, and the truck slides slightly as Damien engages the emergency brake.

"It'll be just a second," he tells me, then gets out of the truck and slams the door behind him. I hear him opening the bed of the car and getting something out, then there's a brief scraping sound before he closes it back up.

There's a large shovel in his hand, what I'm assuming is a snow shovel, and he begins to pick up the snow and pile it up on the side. Momentarily distracted by his nice ass, I realize I haven't even looked at the house yet. It's a gorgeous two-story log cabin with large windows and multiple decks, and it looks like we're facing the side of the house with sliding glass doors surrounded by stone.

Not at all what I was expecting.

The place is ridiculously big, and as he clears up the snow and reveals the circular driveway, I realize he didn't make a spot to park in front of the three garage doors. I'm assuming he doesn't use the garage for vehicles. What could he possibly use it for? It has to be gigantic.

Damien gets back in the truck, his shoes leaving dustings of snow all over the floor and pulls up to the spot he cleared. It's closer to the front door, which has a set of stairs leading up to it, but you can't even see their color right now. This winter wonderland reminds me of a Christmas movie, and I wonder if we could come back here next month, too, because this is beautiful. But who knows what will happen by then, so I don't want to daydream.

Once parked, I open the door and jump out of the truck, landing shin-deep in powdery snow. I huddle all the way up the steps and wait for Damien, taking a look at the view. There are mountains in every direction, not one spot where one doesn't surround us, and I can't wait to go out in the town and see everything better.

Damien comes up the steps with most of our luggage and unlocks the door. For some reason, I thought the house would be warm and cozy by the time we came inside. I definitely wasn't prepared for it to feel even colder than outside. He goes to the thermostat quickly and cranks up the heat, but I can imagine it'll probably take a while to warm up in a home this size.

I look around, taking in the rustic decor against the wooden logs lining up the walls and the floor-to-ceiling windows throughout the cabin. The mountains are visible no matter what room you're in, and I keep walking around to see where they look better, but it's impossible. They're absolutely breathtaking from every angle.

"Do you like it?" Damien asks, and I beam at him. Is he kidding? It's fucking amazing. This is what I would consider a real vacation, it doesn't even matter that I'm here to try and get sane again.

"I love it," I reply, and the dazzling smile that he returns is so beautiful my knees almost buckle.

"Let me show you where you'll be sleeping." He grabs my luggage and begins walking through the living room and then the hallway leading to the bedrooms. "It's been a long day." It has, but at the same time, it isn't very late. It's only four in the afternoon and the sun is already setting.

Once we make it to the master suite, Damien puts my luggage next to the bed and walks back to the door, giving me some space.

"Where will you be sleeping?" I walk toward him and stop a few inches away, looking up at him. He's so much taller than me. He moves his body away from the doorway and points at the room right across from us, which looks significantly smaller than the one he just let me have. "You're joking, right?"

“I can sleep wherever.” He shrugs, “I want you to have this room.”

“Why are you being so nice to me?” It doesn’t make any sense. I thought he would hate me after he showed up at my apartment and Zayne was leaving. There was a split moment before I fucked everything up again. I thought the person knocking on my door was Damien; I *wanted* it to be him. But I’m weak when it comes to Zayne. I always have been, and I don’t think that will change any time soon.

“Because I want to be.” Damien steps forward until our bodies are flush with each other. “Because I like...” He seems to snap out of it. The moment when he realizes he should be quiet is visible on his face. His lips meet my forehead in a rush and then he walks out of the room.

Disappointment weighs on me, except I can’t give in to it right now. I just want to sleep for a little bit, and then I can worry about feelings. I haven’t been doing much of that lately, and if I’m being honest, I didn’t even start taking my antidepressant until this morning. That’s probably one of the reasons I’m so exhausted.

I close the bedroom door and begin to look around, since if I’m going to stay here for the next two weeks, I might as well get acquainted with the room. I’d like to unpack my big suitcase and put my clothes in a drawer or in the closet, whichever one has space. I should probably ask him if that’s fine.

There's a king-sized bed in the center of the room with a wooden bed frame and matching nightstands flanking it, two simple white lamps adorning them. I push on the mattress and my hand sinks in. Holy shit, it feels like a cloud.

I walk into the bathroom and gasp at the colossal jet tub on one side, right across from a shower with glass doors. The first thing I'm doing after dinner tonight is taking a long bubble bath. I wonder if Damien minds if I take a nap, but with the overwhelming need to sleep and cry right now, I know I can't let it influence me. Maybe when I wake up, I'll finally be able to regulate my emotions.

I go back to the room and close all the curtains, making it dark, then pull back the covers on the bed and lie down, letting sleep claim me to hopefully not have to deal with any of these feelings.



The smell of food rouses me from a deep sleep, my stomach growling as I sit up. I fell asleep with jeans and shoes on, I must really have been tired. I get out of bed and take them off,

but then decide to put them back on because the floor is freezing cold.

I use the dresser mirror to make sure my hair doesn't look too crazy and run my fingers through it in an attempt to tame it. It's a good thing I didn't wear much makeup today, or it would definitely be smeared right about now.

I'm not even sure how to act with Damien when I go out there, mainly since we've never stayed anywhere together over an extended period of time. I wonder if this is going to be awkward, and if it is, what the hell am I going to do?

The kitchen is the only place I've seen in the central living space without log walls. Instead, the vaulted and planked ceiling is the center of attention. It's the same color as the logs throughout the house, so it matches and feels like a breath of fresh air. There are also horizontal beams that elevate the decor, and it almost makes me like the color of the cabinets. Unfortunately, those are not the prettiest. The green color doesn't go with the house at all.

Damien's bare back is to me. He hasn't noticed me yet, and I just stand silently for a moment and watch him get take-out containers from a brown paper bag, then he sets the food on the kitchen island. It's been some time since I've seen him shirtless. At least it feels like a long time, and I can't help but stare at the perfectly cut back muscles. His dragon ripples with every movement, and it almost seems like it's alive and ready to take flight when his muscles flex.

He turns around and startles when he sees me, a broad smile crossing his face after a moment. “How was your nap?”

“It was the most restful sleep I’ve gotten in a long time,” I answer truthfully. I’m not sure if it was the memory foam mattress or my antidepressants making me drowsy, but now I think I need to buy a new bed. “How long was I out?”

“Three hours,” he replies as he turns around to look for utensils. I don’t understand how someone’s body can look so damn... sculpted. From his back to his capped shoulders and bulging biceps, I can’t tell which part of him is more aesthetic. He looks like he belongs on the cover of a fitness magazine, and it’s intimidating as hell.

“Wow.” I cringe, knowing damn well I probably won’t sleep tonight. I’m not usually a nap person, the only times I have ever fallen asleep like this are when I’m sick, and I don’t think the change in altitude has hit me yet. “My body just feels sluggish. I think it might be my new medicine.”

“Probably.” He sets our silverware on the kitchen island, pulling out a bar stool for me. “Let’s eat. I got us some shrimp alfredo since you love pasta so much.”

“According to who?” I ask, not able to remember when I said that to him.

“Your grocery cart.” He chuckles while he sits next to me, nudging me playfully with his arm.

I sigh as I smell the food, the delicious scent making my stomach tighten from hunger. I open the container and take a

bite, the sauce making my mouth water. Our elbows brush as we each take bites of food, and when his hand falls to my lap, a rush of heat spreads through my body. He doesn't usually touch me this way, and I want to hold his hand there and not let it go.

The only time he has intimately touched me was when he kissed me, and I have to fight the urge to cross my legs from thinking about it. The way his full lips felt against mine, his tongue in my mouth. I want that again...

"After we're done eating, I'll give you a tour of the house," Damien says, squeezing my thigh. "The most important places are the hot tub and the theater room." He winks.

"You have a theater room?" I arch an eyebrow, and he nods. "Aren't you fancy..." I mumble.

Damien ignores my comment. "I thought you'd be more impressed by the hot tub." He laughs. The hot tub *is* impressive, but the theater room is over the top, in my opinion. "Would you like to watch a movie? I got you ice cream."

I perk up. "What kind?" Ice cream makes everything better, except maybe my stomach. If I eat one or two bites though, I can get my fix without getting sick, maybe.

"Rocky Road." He waggles his eyebrows, "It's my favorite."

"Ugh, It's *our* favorite." I bite my lip, contemplating my options. "Only if we can watch *The Notebook*."

“So you want ice cream *and* The Notebook? What exactly am I getting out of this?” He crosses his arms over his chest, a questioning look on his face. He does have a point, more than likely, he’s getting nothing at all, but I’ll still try to convince him. I haven’t met one guy who willingly watched the Notebook with me, but once they give in they seem to like it.

“I’m an excellent cuddler.” I grin as he raises his eyebrows. “Or so I’ve been told. It’s also my favorite thing in the world to do. Unfortunately, I will be comparing him to Zayne because he has been the one man to give me exactly what I need when it comes to this. The way he always wraps himself around me from head to toe makes me feel safe and cared for, and it’s safe to say that I don’t think it’ll be too easy to top that.

“I’m in,” he replies. “But only if you’re truly serious about the cuddles.” I nod with enthusiasm, and then I slow it down before I embarrass myself. I don’t want to come off as desperate. I’m not, although I do think I’m eager when it comes to him and I see that as yet another weakness.

Damien puts our plates in the sink then comes back to take my hand, guiding me through the dining room and the two living rooms first, then giving me a tour of the rest of the bedrooms. There are four in total with some bunk beds and a loft with a sofa bed. He shows me all three decks before directing me to an enormous hot tub, and when he lifts the cover, the steam floats into the cold winter air. I need to get in here soon. Then again, tonight is movie night which also means I probably won’t be taking a bubble bath.

We enter the house through one of the doors on the second deck, which leads us into a room with a U-shaped tan suede sectional couch. What looks to be at least a seventy-inch television is mounted on the wall, and the media table underneath matches the color of the logs. There are also red drapes hanging from the windows, making the room into a dark oasis. It looks understated yet elegant.

I walk to the couch and plop down on it, grabbing all the throw pillows around me and making myself comfortable. Damien puts a blanket over me, tucks me in, and then gets us the ice cream while I snuggle. It's still cold in this room even though the heat is cranked up, and I don't think there will be a time during the winter when this house will feel warm.

The remote feels like a block of ice when I pick it up, so I hurry up and look for the movie so I don't have to hold it longer. When he returns, he comes with popcorn, ice cream, and drinks. How he's able to carry all of that in one trip is beyond me.

Damien sits flush with me, not wasting time, and cuddles me as I press play. I crunch on the popcorn loudly as he opens the ice cream, and his abs tense against me from how hard he's laughing. The way he chuckles against my ear keeps making me press my legs tighter together to keep the traitorous ache between my thighs away. His deep, husky voice is fucking doing things to me.

The lights are turned off with a remote, fancy shit, and I grab the ice cream, moaning as I take the first mouthful. His

hand reflexively comes to my hip and grips me, and I hold my breath waiting for his next move.

He doesn't disappoint me as his hand wraps around mine and he eats another spoonful of ice cream, then leans into me until his mouth hovers over mine. I dart my tongue out and lick the remnants of it from his lower lip, his hand tightening around mine.

My hand lowers as he lets go of it, and just as I think he's going to pull away, he licks me back slowly making my stomach tumble. He's going to be the death of me.

I try not to think about his lips on mine again, but it's futile. Our kiss has lived rent-free in the darkest depths of my mind since it happened, and I can't dig him out of my skin. I still feel his fingers on my jaw, in my hair, on my hips. I still feel his generous erection against me, and fuck, I want *more*. I want more, but I won't let myself have it.

Why?

I think I may be feeling as if I'm betraying Zayne. Even though I know we're not together, it still doesn't make me feel any less guilty. In a way, however, it makes sense because I thought he completed me... and he still might. Except how can he complete me when someone else can take me apart?

"Are you going to kiss me...again?" I ask breathlessly.

"Oh, so we're finally going to talk about the best kiss of your life?" Damien smirks, looking at me with curiosity. I bet

he's been looking forward to this conversation since he shut my car door in the rain.

“Awfully confident of you.” I smack his leg playfully, trying to play it off. The truth is, I don't know whose kiss is better. They both do things differently, making me feel different things too. My feelings should be stronger for Zayne, and maybe they are since I've known him a lot longer. What my heart feels is one thing. On the other hand, what my body feels is entirely different. Damien lights a fire inside me that I'm unsure how to put out.

His hand comes to the back of my neck, tugging my head gently while his lips come to my ear. “You almost ate me alive.” He bites my earlobe, and I shiver. “I want you to do it again.”

I want *him* to do it again. I want him to give me everything, and perhaps I'll be so disappointed it'll be painfully obvious that Zayne is who I'm meant to be with.

“I was just along for the ride.”

His hand tightens in my hair. “So ride me again.” And I get a visual of myself on top of him doing just that, swiveling my hips while he holds on to my ass and tries to control the rhythm. Fuck, I'll never be able to unsee that now.

“You're not playing fair.”

“I'm not playing at all.” He bites my neck and soothes the sting with his tongue. My pussy clenches, and heat pools in my core. “I want you, love,” he groans against my ear, and I

swear to God I almost fold. I'm about ten seconds away from getting naked for him, and I know that's not a fucking good idea.

Damn it.

"You're going to have to wait." My self-control is slipping, but I need to hold off.

"I can do that." He kisses my neck and puts some distance between us. "For *now*."

With that, we go back to watching the movie, raising the volume a little more. There are several fits of laughter on his end, and I can tell he's enjoying it even if he doesn't want to. By the end, he has tears in his eyes. I knew it! There's something about this movie that makes everyone automatically bawl their eyes out. Or maybe that's just any Nicholas Sparks story, and that's exactly why I'm a sucker for them. Perhaps I am a masochist, after all.

We both laugh when we look at each other, both of our faces wet with tears. "I will never let you make me watch this again," he says as his laughter finally ebbs.

"Oh, shut up." I giggle. "You liked it."

"You'll never know for sure."

Right now, when we have moments like these, it feels like we're best friends. Is that how it should be with someone all the time? Because with Zayne, we mostly feel like enemies and sometimes lovers.

Zayne and I are stuck in this vicious cycle of love and pain—and the biggest problem is that we both enjoy hurting each other. We both keep coming back for more because it means that no matter how fucked up we are or how wrong we are for each other, we will always be there for one another. I believe our abandonment issues play a part in this. Neither of us wants to be left so desperately that we will do anything to stay together; thus, the cycle of abuse keeps restarting over and over. At times he treats me so badly I literally want to die, but when he's good to me, it's as if he brings heaven to me with his bare hands.

There's also a disconnect between us because he's often blinded by his feelings, and I'm not talking about love. No, I'm talking about rage, jealousy, sadness. Any extreme emotion turns him into a wholly different person until I'm dealing with twenty personalities in one day, and it's exhausting. He believes the world is against him so I must be too. There's no such thing as a team in his eyes. The only one who matters to him is... him. Until he hits rock bottom and wants to get out of it, and the only way to achieve that is by leaning on someone else. So if I know all of this, why do I stick around? Well, the answer isn't that simple. It may be a trauma bond or love, but there's one clear-cut reason to me: we're irrevocably obsessed with each other.

We call it love, but I know better. This fixation runs my life most of the time, even worse than my own addiction to Xanax, and he is literally one of my vices. Now I'm overwhelmed by my physical dependence for him, and it feels like I'm having

withdrawals if he's not in my life. So I keep taking him back. No matter what he says, does, or thinks about doing to me. Because at the end of the day, I'm just as bad as he is.

Damien, on the other hand, makes me feel... normal. I don't have to tiptoe around him or walk on eggshells to keep him from breaking. I can enjoy my time with him without having to worry that he's going to melt down over something that happened that wasn't even in my control. And the best part of it is we can have fun together.

Zayne's definition of fun is going for a stroll in the park with weed in his hand and meth in his pockets. Once upon a time, I indulged him and possibly might have enjoyed it too, but I've grown and moved past it. I can't meet him in the middle anymore when it comes to it, and he won't meet me in the middle for anything less.

Damien and I like the same music, the same foods, and have the same profession. We can enjoy a trip to the bookstore just as much as one to the grocery store, and when we get bored we can just go back to work and search for an adrenaline rush. He listens to me, cares enough about me that he doesn't want to see me sad, and he always gives me a shoulder to lean on.

Zayne and I's relationship is more profound and has more substance, but that's because I haven't known Damien for long. I haven't experienced as much with him, and maybe I've imagined all of this shit. But it doesn't change the fact that I want to know if there's more to him, more to *us*.

CHAPTER 17

Damien

Hallie has been sleeping her life away for two days, and I've been perishing from boredom. It's now the third day in the cabin, and I think her medicine is making her tired at this point because it's as if she physically can't get out of bed. I plan on forcing her to get up for a shower at least, but first, I'm going to get some things done around the house while she's not with me, so hopefully, she sleeps for at least another hour or two.

I've been trying to make the basement livable, and since I haven't been here I gave my only trusted person in this area access to the house to put things in here for me. Now, as I stand across countless boxes, I'm starting to regret that. How the fuck am I going to get all the trash out of here without drawing attention to myself? I haven't even told her this place exists, and I'm not going to. She'd have too many questions I can't answer, and I don't want her to be suspicious. The fingerprint access to the door might scare her even more

because basements don't regulate the entrance and exit of people.

The door leads down a flight of stairs and into a large room that has to be at least eight hundred square feet. There's a bathroom next to the stairs, and although it's not fancy by any means, it's usable. The shower has white subway tiles all the way to the ceiling and a clear glass door with bronze trim, which I renovated and made this way for the sole purpose of being able to watch the person inside.

I take out my pocketknife and begin to open all the boxes, hoping I have time to put all this shit together within the next two hours, but it might not be possible. My idea is to have a queen bed against the far walls so I don't have to put a nightstand on the left side and make it face the stairs for easy visibility. The nightstand will have a lamp and a clock, and there will be a full-sized dresser with a mirror on the opposite wall since there's no closet down here. Lastly, there will be a small, simple desk with a chair. This desk will be stocked with notebooks, pens, and art supplies, and I still have to think of other items that keep people entertained.

I'm able to put the bed and nightstand together in one hour. Thankfully I didn't buy any of this at Ikea, or I'd be so fucked. Even if I do love that damn store. I still have the pesky desk and the dresser, so instead, I start making the bed and unrolling the rest of the rug that I stuck under it. No way anyone can walk on this concrete floor during the winter without freezing their toes off.

Once the bed is made and the lamp is on the nightstand, I start gathering the empty boxes and setting them, and the trash, in one corner of the room close to the stairs. The dresser and desk will, unfortunately, have to wait. I don't think I have enough time to put those together too. At least the setup seems good enough, not that it should matter. For a finishing touch, I plug the clock in and set it on the nightstand next to the bed, then take a look at the room.

I don't know when Hallie will be this tired again, and I wonder if I should just say fuck it and take my chances. I won't be able to hear her from down here, this is a soundproof room, but I could come up with an excuse for why I disappeared. I should just open the door and listen for sounds in the house. I'm sure if she's awake, she will make some kind of noise. Yeah, that's what I'm going to do.

I press my thumb to the fingerprint scanner and wait for it to glow green. Once it does, I open the door as quietly as possible and step out of the basement. It's still utterly silent here, so I tiptoe across the house and to Hallie's room and take a peek. The door is open, which could be good or extremely inconvenient for me, but at least she's knocked the fuck out.

I need to finish putting everything together and pray that she sleeps for another hour since I don't think I'll get this opportunity again. Thankfully I make it back to the basement without a hitch and close the door behind me, the lock engaging as soon as it's shut. It sounds like a mechanical whirring sound, almost like unlocking a safe.

The dresser takes me the better part of an hour –this shit is ridiculous– and I don't put any decor on it except for the mirror. It may be a bad idea, mainly because glass can be used as a weapon, but I'm trying to be nice. And if it does come to that, I know how to defend myself. The desk only takes about fifteen minutes to put together, thank God.

Now that I'm done with it, I start setting all the notebooks on the shelf along with some books and a desk calendar to keep on the surface of it. I add a pumpkin mug I found and put a bunch of pens, pencils, and highlighters in it. Lastly, I put the art supplies on the second and last shelf of the desk and step back to look at them. The only thing missing is the mini fridge, so I open that box and get it out, too, plugging it in. I don't want to have to come back down here while I have to worry about Hallie finding this place. Sneaking around is stressful as fuck with her.

Now that I'm completely done, and the empty boxes and trash are set to one side of the basement, I make my way back up the stairs. I won't be able to take out this trash yet. In fact, I don't even know when it will be possible if I can't come out here without being seen. Maybe I'll wake up in the middle of the night and take these all to the garage so they look less suspicious when I take them outside to get picked up.

The house is still eerily quiet, and I'm not someone who gets scared easily, but I have goosebumps all over my body. Am I paranoid? Is that what this feels like?

I enter Hallie's room again and feel relieved when I see that she's still asleep, even though she is falling off the edge of the king bed. I wonder if this is just how she fell asleep or if she came looking for me and went back to bed. I guess I won't know until she wakes up if she has something to say about it.

I gently shake her, coaxing a stretch out of her, and notice she looks like shit. Maybe it's the lack of a shower because her hair is sticking out in every direction and the bun on top of her head looks tangled. The bags under her eyes are purple even though she's slept the better part of two days away, and I wonder what the hell is going on with her. I don't care how tired she is though, it's time to wake up and get out of this damn bed.

"Hallie," I start peeling the blankets back, "Let's get out of bed."

"No," she groans, hugging her pillow tightly. "I don't want to. I'm still tired."

I want to tell her I don't care, that it's time to get up. That she better fucking listen to me when I talk to her, but I can't do that. Not yet anyway. She may like possessive men, maybe even jealousy, but Zayne doesn't look like the type who knows how to exert absolute dominance. He just thinks he does.

"Come now." I begin to pull her up until she's in a seated position and let her blood pressure adjust before I drag her up by under her arms. "It's time to shower."

Hallie starts to cooperate, her feet dragging across the hardwood floor as we make our way to the bathroom. The tile

in here is cold, and I flip the switch to turn on the heat.

“I’ll be right outside the door,” I tell her as I release her, and she sways on her feet. “What’s wrong? Will you be able to stand on your own?”

“Yeah, I think I’ve just been lying down for too long.”

She clutches her head, seemingly dizzy, and doesn’t move. Fuck, I really don’t want to see her naked again. This is too much for me. How can I keep my feelings in check when I have to keep helping her this way?

“Do you need help?” I’m so nervous she’s going to fall and face plant, but at the same time, I’d run out of here if I could. Please say you don’t. *Please don’t make me help you.* “It’s okay if you do.”

“I do.” Hallie sighs. “I’m sorry.”

Shit.

I can do this. It’s fine. All I have to do is help her shower and leave her alone. It doesn’t have to be profound. No need for conversation. It doesn’t mean anything at all to her, so it shouldn’t mean anything to me, either. Right?

“Please, don’t apologize. Can you take off your clothes?” She shakes her head no, so I help her out of her t-shirt. What I wasn’t expecting was to come face-to-face with the most gorgeous pair of tits I’ve ever seen in my life— full, round, with small rosy nipples. I know I’ve gotten in the bath with her before, but I was behind her the entire time and forced myself not to gaze at her body. At least not the front of it. I’ve

memorized every freckle I could see on her exposed back, but that's beside the point. I kneel in front of her and hook my thumbs into her sleep shorts and underwear simultaneously. I look up at her as I pull them down, giving her a shred of decency. I won't look at the most intimate part of her until she wants me to. I'll let her have that control. "You know, this is not how I envisioned undressing you..." And a deep blush settles across her chest and makes its way up to her face.

I stand and turn the faucet to hot, no longer facing her or looking at her for fear that she will see my erection and tell me to get out. I take a few deep breaths and promise myself I will only glance at her face now.

"Come here, babe." I test the temperature, deeming it safe for her. She likes it hot anyway, but I won't be responsible for any burns. So if she wants it hotter, she will have to adjust it herself.

I take my shirt off so it doesn't get plastered to my body, but I leave my boxer briefs on so she doesn't feel weird. Hallie finally gets in the shower, and I hold on to her as I help her sit down, only looking at her face as I lower her to the ground. There's no fucking way in hell I'll be looking at her again in this bathroom.

I take everything I need from the shower shelf to help her, putting the products on the ground next to me as I sit on the tile. We sit under the hot stream of water, and I wait patiently while she tips her head back and enjoys the feel of it on her

skin. She scoots back a bit, and when she reaches for the bottle of shampoo, I smack her hand lightly.

“I’ll be doing that,” I tell her.

I put a generous amount on my hand and lather it up, then rub it into her hair, massaging her scalp. She makes a tiny sound of pleasure that goes straight to my cock, making it stir without permission. I focus on the foamy shampoo bubbles and take deep breaths, refusing to let this become something it shouldn’t.

I rinse her hair and put conditioner only on her ends, knowing damn well that she doesn’t want her hair to get greasy. She scoots up and out of the water for me, then I put soap on a loofah and begin to clean her body. She turns slightly as she goes back under the stream, and I see the side of her full, perky breast bouncing as she tries to rinse herself off. I immediately avert my gaze, and I don’t know if she’s doing it on purpose, but she tries to make eye contact with me. Nope, I’m not doing it.

I get out of the shower, take my boxer briefs off, and then wrap a towel around my waist. I hate the feeling of the underwear plastered to my body, but unfortunately it was necessary. I get a new towel for her and hand it over without looking, but she just stands there.

“Are you going to help me dry off?” she asks me, and I narrow my eyes at her. What the fuck is she playing at? And does she actually need my help?

“Sure,” I answer through gritted teeth and help her dry herself. I keep my eyes on hers, which seems to bother her if the way her lips are pursed and how she keeps huffing is any indication.

Once dry and dressed, she brushes her teeth, then grabs the hairbrush and begins working on the tangled strands. It seems like this is the only energy she can muster though, and she’s back in bed to continue sleeping her life away as soon as her hair is free of knots. I know how difficult it is to get used to medications, so I decide to not disturb her for the rest of the day, tucking her in and leaving the room.

“Damien?” she yells after me, and I peek my head back in. “Please stay.”

“Alright... if that’s what you want.” I join her on the other side of the bed and get under the covers as well, trying to keep my distance.

Hallie grabs me instead, crushing my plans, and pulls me toward her, tangling our bodies and putting her right leg over my hip. My hand reflexively comes to rest on her thigh, and she closes her eyes with a sleepy little smile. Damn it all, she really is going to be the death of me. Bringing her on a trip to another state was a terrible way of keeping my distance and not catching more feelings, but I was hoping to make it happen.

I watch her as the remnants of stress leave her face, only smoothed-out features left now except for the frozen smile on

her face, and I realize she's even more beautiful than usual because she's happy. *With me.*

I just feel guilty that it's going to be so fucking short-lived.

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CHAPTER 18

Hallie

Main street is as beautiful and whimsical as all the pictures show, yet it's even better in person. I feel like I'm living inside a Hallmark movie— at least the setting matches, even if the love story doesn't.

I remember walking through Main Street in my hometown and loving the old buildings, the antique shops, as well as the newer stores. Even still, nothing compares to seeing the mountains in the background as my feet crunch on the snow. The feeling of peace flooding my body is something I've never felt before from just being in a place, and I'm starting to think this is where I'm meant to live. I could always apply for a job and stay here instead. Except I will say my skin fucking hates me, and I'm dehydrated no matter how much water I drink, although I might be part lizard so I'll be fine.

There's a small beignet's hole in the wall right across from us, and I take Damien's hand and pull him toward it. I don't necessarily have a sweet tooth, but I will *never* deny myself one of these.

“Oh, these are the best,” Damien says as we walk to the counter to place our order.

We get three orders, with four beignets per order, and find a small round table with two chairs. You can tell this place is very old with the faded hardwood floors that could use refinishing and the chipped walls that desperately need fresh paint, but as I take the first bite of the warm pastry, none of that matters anymore.

“Holy fuck,” I groan. “These are amazing.”

Damien chuckles, “I’m glad you approve.” He gets one out of the bag and takes a bite too, white powder getting all over his face and black shirt, yet he doesn’t seem to mind. “How are you feeling?”

“Like a new woman,” I reply as I take another bite. Forget living in a cabin, I want to live here so I can get unlimited access to beignets.

“You look it.”

Wow. “Asshole.” I playfully smack his arm, making him smile, and something in my chest gives way to a flutter when it deepens into a toothy grin. How can someone’s smile be so beautiful? It’s almost as if his entire personality is revealed by it, if bold and adventurous could be displayed in a smile.

His burst of laughter is a deep rumble, “I’ve been called that once or twice before.”

I bet he has. I shake my head and laugh with him, then stuff my mouth with yet another beignet. I know one thing about

this vacation: I won't be holding back on my eating. If I want it, I'm getting it. Fuck portion control. It's not like I actually care what Damien has to say about it.

After the stunt I pulled yesterday, it became apparent that he's attracted to me, and that's exactly what I wanted to know for sure before I let this go anywhere because, at this point... I think I want it to. I haven't decided if I want it to go as far as a relationship, mainly because I'll never be over Zayne. Still, I absolutely want to explore whatever this is between us before we go back to where everything is confusing, and I'd probably never give him a chance.

I don't want to deal with the push and pull I know will come from being near Zayne. If we were in the same town, I'd still give in to him no matter how fucked everything is between us, and who knows where that would leave Damien. He wouldn't be happy about it though, and the last thing I need is for this rivalry between them to explode in our faces.

So how do I avoid that? Do I just let him have me here and pretend nothing happened once we're back in San Antonio? Will I even be strong enough to do that?

"What are you thinking about?" Damien startles me, and I jump a little in my seat.

"You," I answer honestly. I'm thinking about what it would be like to take off my clothes and offer myself to him. I'm thinking about how I know it would be life-changing, and how I wouldn't be able to move on. I know I'm not tough enough to have a vacation fling with someone I have to see regularly.

Especially when he doesn't treat me like that's what I am... instead, he treats me like he likes me, like we're *friends*.

"That's vague." He chuckles. "But I get it if you don't want to tell me."

"I was just thinking about how you're such an asshole to people," I snicker and he narrows his eyes, "But not me, mostly. At least not anymore." It's complete bullshit, but he doesn't need to know what I'm thinking. Besides, that whole interaction at the airport opened my eyes to a different side of him. He truly is an asshole to other people, so it's not like I'm making this up.

"I'm not always an asshole, you know." Damien reaches out, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "I can be nice to whoever I want... when I choose to."

"I see that." I won't lie, it makes me feel a bit special to think that he's being nice to me but not anyone else.

"There's this store right across the street that I know you will love." He stands and begins to gather our trash, then looks at me expectantly. "Let's go?"

"Okay," I reply, unsure where he could possibly take me that he knows I'll love so much. He's been paying attention to me more than I thought.

Damien opens the door to the beignet shop for me, and the cold gust of air slaps me in the face. I might need to invest in better clothing for when we go out because my Texas winter clothes are not cutting it here. Yeah, that's where we need to

go next. I need better boots, a waterproof jacket, and I'm not sure what else I'm missing, only I'm hoping he will tell me. He seems prepared for winters here, but he's not wearing as much as I would. He's more than likely just used to the cold. Don't get me wrong I love cold weather, I'd just also like to keep all my limbs.

A tall man blocks my path, and his frosty blue eyes sparkle as he looks at Damien, his gaze not wavering. I look between them, and I can feel the tension in the air as Damien stares right back. Then a huge grin spreads across his face and he steps forward, wrapping his arms around the man.

I move out of the way, giving them space until they let go of each other and Damien comes back to my side. The man is only an inch shorter than Damien, and I would even go as far as saying they look similar, maybe even related.

“Joshua,” Damien says, looking at the man. “This is Hallie.”

“Is this the girl that you're supposed to—”

“Make my girlfriend?” He looks at Joshua like he's stupid. “Yes, that's the one.”

Damien and the man must have some sort of telepathic communication for he only just nods, any additional questions forgotten. He turns to me and extends his hand, his fingers long and lean like Damien's. I offer him my own, and we shake hands, but I keep my eyes on his face. The man has light brown hair, blue eyes a few shades lighter than Damien's, and slightly thinner lips. But the nose is the same.

“Nice to meet you,” Joshua says, then looks past me. “Tavia, you can come say hi, babe.”

I look back to find a woman who appears to be a few years older than me, her dark skin glowing like she radiates her own light. She’s gorgeous, and her brown eyes are soft as she assesses me. “I’m Latavia,” she says, smiling at me with beautifully straight teeth. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too.” I shake her hand and glance back at Damien, who seems to be deep in conversation with the other man. Perhaps it’s just a figment of my imagination, but it almost looks like they’re in the middle of an argument. “Are you from here?” I guess I better try to make conversation if we’re going to be alone.

“Born and raised.” It’s almost like she has a permanent smile on her face, or maybe she’s faking it. No one could be this happy all the time. At least I can’t trust anyone who pretends to be. “So, how long have you and D been together?”

“We’re not...”

Latavia laughs, “Does he know that? He seems smitten.”

A blush heats my face unwillingly, and I pray it goes away quickly. I never in a million years thought we would be running into his friends, and I certainly wasn’t ready to meet any of them. “He does.”

“I bet he still has hopes, though.” She winks. “As he should.”

Damien and Joshua have walked even further away from us, noticeably still in the middle of a disagreement. Latavia's eyes follow mine to them, and it seems like she's trying to distract me from something. "Thanks." I guess.

"Do you work together?" she continues, and I have the urge to walk up to Damien and demand that we go back to the cabin, only I end up staying rooted to the spot and watching him.

"Yes, that's how we met."

"That sounds so sweet." And her voice makes me want to rip her eyes out. How do I go from feeling like someone is friendly and pleasant to... this? Still, I stare at her so I don't come off as disrespectful, yet tearing my eyes away from what's happening with Damien is more challenging than I thought it would be. "I'm sorry if I'm prying, but Damien has been keeping you all to himself. Are you here on vaca—"

Damien is suddenly at my side, his arm going possessively around my waist. "Tavia— *don't*. It's private." He's not wrong, but I'm not going to cower over this silly question, even if it's absolutely none of her business.

"I just needed a mental health break."

"There's nothing wrong with that." Latavia glances at Damien like she won this round, but I must be stupid because I don't understand what the fuck is going on here. Joshua is now walking down the street opposite us and yet she's not leaving.

“Have a good day, Tavia,” Damien tells her as he starts steering me away, finally.

We walk in the opposite direction of his *friends* and stop in front of a store, the window display being a mahogany shelf lined with the most beautiful crystals. I would go inside *any* store with access to a heater at this moment, and maybe that’s wrong of me, but holy shit I’ve never experienced this type of cold weather. My cheeks feel like they’re burning right now.

“This is the store I wanted to show you.” He points at the sign and pulls me toward the entrance. As soon as the cozy heat envelops me, relief and gratitude fill my veins.

It doesn’t go unnoticed that he must have seen my nightstand cluttered with the new crystals that I purchased after Zayne left in an attempt to purify my life. A soul cleanse? Yeah, that. If I could produce a sage bomb, I would. My life needs it, but since I can’t I’ll settle for smudge sticks and crystals.

The glass shelves surrounding the store’s perimeter have rows upon rows of crystals, all shimmering under their own set of lights from above the stand. There are so many familiar ones and even ones whose names I don’t know, and I find myself gravitating toward a pair of rose quartz-shaped hearts. Damien stays beside me the whole time as I browse, and when we stop next to the jewelry section, my breath catches. Everything is so beautiful, although the prices are also fucking outrageous.

I turn around to look at a different shelf with more affordable items, and when I look back, Damien is at the register paying for something. What could he possibly be getting from a place like this? Does he even like crystals?

I walk back to him as he is handed his bag, and we leave the store together. I have to consider my budget, especially since this leave of absence is unpaid. I'm lucky I have some savings to fall back on, but now that I'm going to be paying for all the bills on my own, I need to practice self-control. At least when it comes to things I don't need.

Damien drags me to a few others; a souvenir one, a clothing one, then a store that sells fishing and hunting equipment, all in quick succession. At a minimum, I can get some warmer clothing, even if I'm still in need of better boots.

I still can't even believe I'm here with him, it doesn't feel real.



The deck is illuminated by the bistro patio lights you see in restaurants, giving it a calming ambiance. Damien is already in the hot tub, the stream of bubbles on the surface of it and the

steam rising into the cold air. We have a clear view of the snow-covered mountains, and I quickly regret leaving my phone in the house. I need some pictures to remember this place forever.

I climb the ladder and get in the water, my skin burning as I lower myself in. I wince but quickly get used to it once I'm seated. My body relaxes as I lean back, resting my head on the edge.

I've tried my hardest not to think about Zayne, and sometimes it works, but I wonder how he's doing. Has he helped himself at all? Is he still doing drugs? Where is he staying? I want Damien to throw me a life raft and save me from myself, from Zayne, and from the inevitable fate that awaits me as I learn to navigate a life where *he* isn't with me.

A foot softly nudges my leg, and I sit up slowly, looking over at Damien on the opposite side where he sits with his outstretched arms holding on to the edge of the jacuzzi. I can't help looking down at his body, and I feel the incoming blush when he smiles at me. "Is the temperature comfortable?" he asks, his voice husky as he peers at me through his lashes.

Not anymore, the temperature in my body feels even hotter than the water, but that's because I can't seem to be within twenty feet of this man without losing my cool.

"It feels amazing." I lie, even though it's not the water's fault I suddenly feel like I might pass out. "I could live here forever. It's a dream, you're so lucky." And he is. The fact that he can come here whenever he wants... Now, that's amazing.

I can imagine myself waking up every day and brewing coffee while looking out the windows, then going outside to sit and watch the sunrise from the deck, the colors painting the sky behind the mountains. That's what I would describe if someone asked me what a peaceful day looks like for me.

"I mean, we could." Huh? I try to think of what that would mean for me, for us, and it's clear that we'd have to be together for that to work out. Is that what he wants? And if it is, why doesn't he tell me that? "It's mine."

"I thought you said it was your family's?" I can't remember what he said, but for some reason, I think he told me this.

"It was my grandfather's, and then he passed it down to my mother. Now it's mine since she's dead."

"Do you have siblings?" I shouldn't have asked this question, and suddenly I'm nervous that I've just opened up to the possibility of an intimate conversation. I don't want to talk about myself.

"I have two brothers, but I'm the oldest so the house goes to me," Damien explains. "Or at least that's what we agreed on. They were interested in other properties." Just how many properties are there to choose from? How wealthy is his family? For fuck's sake.

"Wow, that's amazing you guys could take your pick." But damn, if it doesn't make me feel inadequate when he starts talking about how rich his family is. I think about my days in foster care, and I can't help but feel beneath him, as if I'm not worthy of his attention. I clear my throat and try to change the

subject to less stressful territory, but when he looks at me with a pointed look, I relent. “I have two brothers too.” I guess that wasn’t so hard. I don’t have to go into detail if I don’t want to. I don’t have to tell him about how they were ripped from my life, never again to be able to talk to them for making my parents accountable for their actions. How they screamed and sobbed as I said my goodbyes, how *I* wanted to die the more I thought about them.

Damien smiles, “And were you one of the boys? Or did you make them play with Barbie dolls?”

“A bit of both, I guess.” I chuckle. “Even though my parents hated that they played with girl toys.” I cringe at the mention of them, instantly regretting opening this line of conversation. What’s done is done, though, and I hope he doesn’t pry too much about them. Why am I so damn scared of opening up to someone new? It was hard enough opening up to one person, and it didn’t work out. But still, shouldn’t I be able to have a conversation about this by now?

“Yeah, my mom didn’t have that problem since we were all boys.”

“Did your parents not live together?” I ask hesitantly. I know it can be a sensitive topic. At least that’s true for me. I don’t enjoy talking about how I don’t remember my father, and how my stepfather failed me in every way possible. For all I know, his relationship with his own father is shit. Or it could be amazing.

“No, they split up when I was in elementary school, when my dad couldn’t handle her problems anymore.” Damien looks into the distance as he thinks about the past, his face neutral, stony.

“But she got to keep you?”

“He didn’t fight for us.” He shrugs, “He only became responsible when she died.” I nod, acknowledging that he’s speaking but not interrupting. I think about what he said to me once, that she was an addict, that addicts never change. So how can a father abandon his children when the mother can’t even care for herself? Is he still in Damien’s life? Does Damien want a relationship with him? “We were only an obstacle to her, an inconvenience.”

When I don’t say anything to that, he continues again.

“She was always high, too fucked up to get off the couch. She wouldn’t cook for me anymore, wouldn’t bathe me.” His eyes flit from one mountain to another, but it seems unfocused. His hands are clasped on his lap, and I can faintly see him twisting them under the bubbly surface of the water. “After that, if I became annoying she would hit me, and sometimes she would burn me with cigarettes if her day was bad, usually from not having money for more drugs. She didn’t care about anything but the drugs.” With that, he does stare at me, “That’s all addicts care about. Their vices.”

I don’t even know how to respond to that. The problem with me is that even though I’ve been through plenty of my own shit, I don’t know how to act when it comes to other people

talking about their own traumas. Do they want me to say I'm sorry? Do they want a hug? Do they want me to not say anything at all? That's why I don't open up to people. I don't know how to be... normal.

I can't deny that this makes me feel a little closer to him, more connected. This is the first glimpse I get into his warm interior, a jarring contrast to the coldness he wants to put off. He had me fooled there for a while, but I think he puts on the mask because he wants to seem unaffected by everything around him. He's been pretending for a very long fucking time. I can relate to him, even if we didn't go through the same things. We both come from damaged families. He is a little broken, after all, just like me.

"She will never be able to hurt you again, Damien." That's the best I can do, as I reach for his hand, "You're a really strong person."

Damien glides through the water and sits next to me, not leaving any space between us on the bench. His hand comes to rest on my jaw, and he gazes at me like I'm the only human he has eyes for. I can tell he wants to kiss me, and when he leans in, I stay still, but he just hovers over my lips and strokes my cheek. The feeling of his rough fingertips on my skin makes me close my eyes, my breathing picking up slightly from anticipation... or desire.

Soft lips meet my own, and I angle my head to make it easier for us. His kisses are soft and patient, not urgent and hurried, not like we're dying. It feels good to take my time. He

pulls me in closer, my body flush with his side, and I flip over to straddle him. His erection is long and thick, pressing between my thighs, and I know it's so fucking wrong, but instead of going back to my seat, I move against him.

The sound he makes in the back of his throat is animalistic as his kisses grow in urgency, his tongue sweeping into my mouth as he tugs my head to deepen the kiss. I pick up my pace and use his chest as leverage, noticing how quickly he's breathing. It's as if he's trying to restrain himself, and I want to find out why.

Damien takes hold of my hips and grips them hard enough to bruise as I slow the pace down again, not wanting this to end, even if I'm near an orgasm. "Take it," he says against my ear, goosebumps breaking out on my arms. "Take what you need from me."

He pushes my hips forward until I'm rocking against him once more, and it takes no time before I'm at that place where my muscles coil taut and I feel the pleasure wash over me. I pull away from him to bite my lip, keeping from crying out.

Reaching up, he releases my lip from between my teeth. "I want to hear the sounds you make for me," he says, going back to controlling the motion of my hips. One more stroke and I'm seeing stars. Bright white spots engulf my vision and I'm moaning and panting, falling into his chest.

"God damn, Hallie."

Damien's chest heaves, setting my boneless body on the seat of the jacuzzi. He takes deep breaths and then looks at me,

really looks at me. His eyes take me in from head to toe, and he opens his mouth to say something but shuts it, then runs a hand down his face, frustration evident in his features.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, my voice small and scared, thinking that he’s going to push me away the same way everyone else has.

“I just...” He gets closer, reaching for my face until he caresses my cheek. The water drips from my skin, the cold breeze making me shiver. “I want you, Hallie. I don’t want to keep pretending I don’t.”

“So don’t pretend.”

I squeeze his hand once before I get up, water dripping from me as I get out of the jacuzzi. But even the cold breeze feels like flames licking at my skin as I leave him behind. I just started this thing between us, and I don’t regret it, but something tells me this may be a mistake. I seem to fucking love those.

I can’t fathom a future, a life, without Zayne. But I can move on until we find a way back to each other again.

Maybe.

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CHAPTER 19

Damien

When I return from getting breakfast, Hallie is in the kitchen wearing a silk pajama tank top and shorts set, and my balls automatically tighten as I look at her body. She seems to be getting bolder by the day, and I'm receiving her message loud and clear after last night. I don't know what I want her to do, if I want her to get naked and let me fuck her or walk away from me and never look back. Clearly, I fucked up last night when I told her I wanted her. I gave her the green light to mess with my head even more, and I have a feeling she's really going to enjoy the game. It's only the fifth day here, so we have a long way to go before she's no longer a temptation sleeping right across the hallway from me.

I'm so screwed.

The way she was rubbing herself on me last night was almost my undoing, and I don't know if I can keep my hands to myself if she does something like that again.

I've been able to be as normal as possible around her, not letting my emotions get in the way of being careful. I finally

got all the boxes out of the garage and onto the curb to be picked up by recycling this morning. Which means I won't have to worry about her getting suspicious and questioning me, because either way, there's not much I can say to her to put her at ease or even cover my ass.

Her expression is relaxed as she pours herself a glass of water. She hasn't seen me yet. I sneak up on her and press a soft kiss to the back of her head, then realize how damn intimate it feels to do that. She doesn't even startle, just relaxes back into me. It tugs at something in my chest, in my heart, I think.

"I got us some food at this really cool place in town." The fucking line was about an hour long. Anything for Hallie, though, at least that's what I kept telling myself as I waited in the longest line of my life to move at the pace of one person every ten minutes.

"French toast, I hope," she replies with a smile, making space on the table for the food.

"What else would I get for you, anyway?" I set the food on the table and tell her all about the famous hole in the wall called 'Breckfast.' Hallie giggles at the name and opens the take-out container to find a French toast sandwich topped with powdered sugar.

"Wow," her brown eyes widen as she looks at her food, "This is amazing."

"It's my favorite," I say between bites, and we eat the rest of our meal in silence because it's just that damn good.

When we're done eating, Hallie changes into a pair of jeans with yet another knit sweater. She seems to love those, and a heavy jacket over it. Her snow boots are cute, and I don't want to make her feel bad, but she needs more insulation than that for outdoor activities. I make a mental note to buy her new ones before I take her out hiking and skiing in a few days.

I haven't given her any hint as to what we're doing this morning, but she appears excited as we get in the truck. Maybe it's the simple fact that she's in a place with endless possibilities, but all of them could be fun. And it's true, this place is beautiful and there's a lot to do in the area. I could be here for an entire year and still not run out of things to do.

The roads are covered in snow as we make our way to Main Street, and I'm surprised they haven't plowed at least the main roads yet, considering it's almost eleven. The city usually gets it done around nine, but I guess they must be busy.

"Where are we going?" Hallie can't stop looking out the window, and I can't blame her since she never sees mountains like these. I would move back here in a heartbeat, except I no longer have that choice. I should've never joined my father. Now I will never have a life of my own unless I take it back by force, and it's going to be really hard to achieve that.

"It's a surprise." I park on the other side of the street from the bookstore I'm taking her to in hopes that she doesn't figure out where we're going, at least for now.

Hallie shivers as we walk in the direction of the store, and I pull her in toward me and hug her around the shoulders so she

can put her arm around my waist. Her cold fingers go under my shirt and grip me, and I grit my teeth to stop myself from pulling away from her. Shit, that's fucking cold. Today is overcast, so the snow on the sidewalk will not be melting any time soon. It's convenient for her with the boots she's wearing, and for me too, because I don't want to be the one to put her back together when she falls on her face.

“Close your eyes,” I tell her as we get closer, pulling her gently toward the door.

The bookstore is small but full of personality, and there are shelves around the store's perimeter, from floor to ceiling. There's even a piano with books stacked on top. It gives the place a certain charm that I've never seen recreated anywhere else— that's why it's my favorite. There's also a peculiar smell, something like leather and pine, that floats to you when you enter.

I think Hallie will appreciate it as much as I do, and we also need some entertainment to pass the time on the upcoming days when we're stuck in the cabin due to the snowstorms coming our way.

“Open your eyes, love.” She does, turning in place and taking it all in.

She looks around in awe, and it's like watching a kid open presents on Christmas day. It's oddly satisfying, but I refuse to give this feeling a name. She walks to the piano and runs her fingers over the keys, staring at it with unsubdued fascination.

“Do you play?” I ask her, and she looks at me, confused. “Piano?” I clarify.

Understanding dawns on her, and she shakes her head, “Not me, but someone I know.”

Zayne.

I’m sure that’s who has her looking at a piano with so much sadness, and the irrational part of me hates the fact that he crosses her damn mind at all. But I also know it’s not the right time to voice that because if I do I’ll push her away. There may never be a time that I can express it.

“There’s a snowstorm coming,” I begin to tell her, “so I thought we should stock up on some books to entertain ourselves with.”

“What will you be getting today?” She browses the shelf in front of her, then pulls out a book with a cartoon cover, turning it over to look at it.

“I like Lord of the Rings,” I reply, eyeing the book she has in her hands and wrinkling my nose. There’s no way in hell I’ll be reading that. I’ll stick with high fantasy or Sci-Fi.

“Oh, I do too. We can share them.” She winks. “I also really enjoy a good rom-com.”

“I’ve never read a *rom-com*.” And I don’t plan on doing it. Not for her or anyone else. The fact that she made me watch *The Notebook* is unforgivable, and what’s even worse is that I almost cried. No, I can’t trust her with this shit.

“Where the hell have you been living?” She picks up a book called “A Not So Meet Cute” and puts it in our basket. I’m assuming that’s for me. I don’t want to shatter her hopes but she couldn’t pay me enough money to pick it up. Nope, I won’t do it.

“Under a rock, I guess,” I mumble my reply.

We buy the entire Lord of the Rings series and a few spares she picks up that all have cartoon covers. This woman really does have a cover obsession, I only saw her read the back of a single book out of the five that she grabbed.

We spend the better part of an hour looking at books, and when it’s time to walk back to the truck, Hallie does it with a smile on her face. The guilt creeps up my back again, and it takes a lot of effort to push it back down. I love how happy she looks here, with me, but I also hate how I know it won’t last long.

“Did you even read the back of the books before putting them in the basket?” I ask, curiosity driving my question.

“What’s the fun in that?”

I smirk but keep my eyes on the road. She’s a little wild. It’s like she enjoys living her life on the edge without knowing what comes next, even if she bragged to everyone within hearing distance that she prides herself in the fact that she organizes her entire life in her planner, by the hour, no less. I don’t believe her, however, I never once saw that stupid planner when I went to her place.

Me, on the other hand, I can't afford to have a planner or take notes on my phone. I have no idea who could get a hold of it, so I can only count on my brain to get the job done and remember everything that needs to be done. It was a struggle at first and I fucked up a lot of important things, but eventually, I started getting better, and now I'm a fucking expert.

"Would you like to go to dinner tomorrow night?" I ask her, surprising even myself. It doesn't have to mean anything if she doesn't want it to. It's just dinner; we have to eat together anyway since we're staying in the same house.

Her head turns toward me, her eyes scanning my face. I keep my expression neutral, if not a little hopeful. "Like a date?"

I think about it before I say something that might scare her away but decide just to be honest about what I want. "Yes, a date," I say, as I pull into the driveway, parking right in front of the garage this time. "But only if you want to."

"Um," she gives me an exaggerated thinking face as I turn toward her, "I guess I could be okay with that."

My phone begins to ring, and when I look down, it's a private caller. Fuck, I really don't want to do this right now, but I have no choice. "I have to take this." Hallie's brows furrow in puzzlement as she looks between me and the phone, then narrows her eyes at me. "I'll be right back." I get out of the truck and leave her behind, walking to the side of the house where I know she won't hear the conversation. I don't

have time to think about her feelings right now, not when they're calling me.

I tap on my screen to answer the call, "This is D."

"Un pajarito me dijo que regresaste a Colorado." A little birdie told me that you returned to Colorado. I freeze, my heart dropping to my ass. I look back toward the truck but stay by the side of the house. Hallie is still watching me from where she's seated, and I give her a thumbs up to reassure her, even as on the inside I'm freaking the fuck out.

"What do you want?" I have to be straight to the point with these guys, they don't like when people fuck around or waste their time.

"I want my merchandise." He laughs, "Do you have it?"

"Not yet," I reply, "Give me a few weeks." I'm not fucking handing it over, but I don't voice that. I've changed my mind, I don't want this task anymore. I refuse to do it. It's just not the time to tell them yet.

"If you don't get this shit done, someone else will." A chill runs down my spine as he hangs up. He's not lying.

That's the scariest part of all.

Am I willing to let someone else take my place and ruin everything for me? Or do I hand over the merchandise and feel guilty for the rest of my life? Or even worse, what if I keep it and then I'm a dead man?

CHAPTER 20

Zayne

I haven't heard from Hallie since I left our place over a week ago, and I don't know what I was expecting but this certainly was not it. I've texted and called her repeatedly, at least one hundred times, and have received no response.

So here I am, taking matters into my own hands, quite literally. I twist the key in the knob and open the door, but an empty apartment greets me instead of her.

The place looks spotless, with not one thing out of place. The trash in the kitchen is empty, and our bed is made. It doesn't look like she's been here in a few days, or she could be at work and I'm making something out of nothing. It wouldn't be the first time I do it, anyway.

I sit on our comfortable sectional couch and lean back to stare at the ceiling, but rather than a feeling of peace, it's almost like I'm drowning. The silence of the apartment is loud in my ears, and I squeeze my eyes shut to try to stop thinking about it.

I hate the quiet, there's nothing comforting about it. My thoughts are too loud in my head, and I don't enjoy coexisting with them. Some people like to say they enjoy sitting in the stillness, but nothing resembles that about me. I would describe my mind as a bustling city that never sleeps, maybe even similar to New York. So why do I like stimulants so much? Because I can stay busy enough to not pay attention to the thoughts in my head. The downers calm me down too much until I'm forced to pay attention to what lies within me.

I'm not good at being patient, and as an hour goes by, I can't take it anymore. I call her again and again, and again, but it goes to voicemail every single time. I know she knows I've been calling her, it's been a week of doing it every day. So then, why won't she answer me? Why won't she respond to any of my messages? Where is she? Is she with him? Did she replace me already? Does she not care about me anymore?

Zayne: Hallie, I'm home. Where the fuck are you?

Hallie: *typing*

I watch the dots on the screen that tell me she's replying, but then they die off and she never sends the message. She's seeing them, she's reading them, but she won't say anything back.

Zayne: Where the fuck are you?!

Zayne: Why won't you answer me?

Zayne: Do you not care about me anymore?

Zayne: Why are you being this way?

Zayne: I thought you loved me.

Zayne: Everyone leaves me. I guess you're just another one of them now.

Hallie: I'm not coming home. I'm not in Texas.

So where the fuck is she, then? And why wouldn't she tell me she left? Why would she still let me keep the key to our place if she didn't want me here?

Zayne: Are you with him?

Hallie: It doesn't matter where I am or who I'm with. I'm trying to get over you.

My laugh echoes in the empty apartment, but it quickly turns into tears. Both of us know that's fucking impossible, but if she's trying to break me down, I guess she's achieving it.

Zayne: We both know that's not happening baby. Good luck trying.

I wait ten minutes, and when she doesn't reply I wipe my tears away. I can't be waiting around for her right now, not when my brain keeps screaming to numb this pain. How could she do this to me? I thought a break meant we still had a chance, but she's already trying to replace me? Fuck her, I don't need her anyway.

All I could ever need is in the front pocket of my jeans.

It's a good thing I brought everything I need with me, including my rig. Now I don't have to go back to my car and get everything just to come back to the apartment, instead I

can just sit and get high on the couch. It's not like she's coming home anyway, so she won't be finding out about what I'm doing here. But also, it's obvious she doesn't give a shit either way.

The kitchen is pitch black as I grab a spoon from the drawer, and thankfully I know my way around, but I make sure to turn on the living room light as I make my way back to the couch because I need to see what I'm doing. I didn't expect to be getting high in this apartment, of all places, but I'm not going to pass up this opportunity. Especially when she's out doing who knows what.

The needle, syringe, and lighter laid out right next to me remind me of all the ways I've ruined my fucking life, but I can't focus on that right now. Hallie being gone means I have somewhere to sleep, eat, and get high for now. When she comes home, I'll leave again. I know she won't want me here anyway.

There's a used water bottle on the coffee table, I'm assuming Hallie's, and even though it's not the most sanitary thing I've ever done and I should probably grab a new one, I'm going to use a small amount to dissolve the drug for injection.

I pour some powder into the spoon, follow it with water, and then cook it with the lighter for about twenty seconds. The liquid is still a bit cloudy when I draw it up with the syringe, but I don't give a damn at this point. Once the needle is attached and I've found my vein, I take a deep breath.

And inject.

The scalding rush spreading through my veins feels like liquid fire, and a grin spreads across my face. It's familiar, yet not at the same time, and I fall back on the couch and let my head rest on it. My body has a certain heaviness that... doesn't feel right. This doesn't feel like the familiar rush I get when I chase the monster, this feels like oppression. Like someone is trying to tame me, to *control* me.

My limbs don't feel like my own. Instead they feel at least a thousand pounds heavy, and I can barely move my fingers enough to call for an ambulance.

A wave of darkness is crashing over me, threatening to pull me in deeper, but I manage to give out my address and whisper overdose. Hopefully they can hear me, but maybe they can't. I hear my words slurring, and everything feels like it's happening in slow motion. My breathing, my heart, my blinking. Until I'm pretty sure I stop doing it almost altogether.

I only hear a few heartbeats, and they're no longer loud in my ears. It sounds like a faint thump, like when I'm trying to listen to something underwater.

My snoring is loud in my ears, but that's weird because I'm not even sleeping. What the fuck is happening right now? How did I even get here? What the fuck is in this? This isn't meth. I try to think of the guy who sold it to me, but I can't even remember his face right now.

I'm going to die.

I'm going to fucking die before anyone gets here.

Panic seizes my chest, yet I can't move. I can't talk. I can't even breathe. And when the bile rises up my throat, all I can do is choke on it. Over and over as I stare at the distorted ceiling, unable to turn on my side.

Suddenly there's muffled chaos in the background, and my blurry eyes can't adjust enough to understand what the fuck is going on. It sounds like shouting, but I can't really tell because it still feels like I'm underwater.

Then everything goes dark.

When my eyes open again, there's a clear mask on my face that's forcing air into my mouth, and I sit up abruptly to make it stop. My heart beating in my ears is so loud I can barely understand what the hell anyone is saying, and I close my eyes and take a deep breath. My drugs were obviously laced, but holy shit there are at least five people in here.

"Hey," A paramedic taps my cheek, and I open my eyes again, "I thought you were going down again for a second."

"I'm..." I start, but my words are still slurring. "O—"

"What did you take?"

"Meth," I answer, "But I think it was laced."

Two other paramedics start wheeling a stretcher toward me, and they all begin to carry me to it. The straps are tight, but it doesn't even bother me. I just have the urge to go back to sleep again, so I start to close my eyes. My head nods off to the side, and I feel myself slipping.

“One more dose of Narcan!” someone shouts, then something prods my nostril, and a nasty taste invades my mouth. It feels and tastes even worse when I inhale next, and my face scrunches up painfully.

“Jesus Christ,” another one says. “This is the fourth one we give him!”

They wheel me out of the apartment and into the ambulance, leaving a mess behind. I can only hope I’ll be able to clean it up before Hallie comes home but I don’t think I still have my keys with me. Did I put them in my pocket? Or are they on the table? The couch? Is Hallie going to hate me when she comes home to all my bullshit being on the couch? Am I going to jail now?

“How many milligrams?” Just how many people are here? With my eyes closed, I don’t even know who is talking anymore, but I don’t think it matters.

“Four,” someone says in disbelief.

“Holy shit, yeah, that’s a lot.”

The ride to the hospital is quick and bumpy, and the paramedics talk amongst each other. Two of them are riding in this ambulance, and I guess the other people in the apartment were police officers. This is the first time I’ve been awake in the back of an ambulance. The last time I was unconscious for days. I never expected to overdose on anything other than meth, but this is clearly not related to that. I cooked less than I usually inject, and I only did that because I wanted something quick to take the edge off and distract me, not to be fucked up

for days. I didn't want to chance being that way if Hallie came back home since I have no idea where she is or what she's doing.

That teaches me not to trust the shit sold on the streets, but at the same time it's a chance I have to take when something is affordable. Nowadays, people lace meth with downers, and although I've never been into that shit, I'd rather have that than nothing at all. This was some other level shit though, and I spiraled in the blink of an eye. If I hadn't recognized that something wasn't right, that today didn't feel the same as it usually does, I'd be dead.

The emergency room is busy as fuck when I'm wheeled into a room, and a nurse transfers me to their stretcher along with the paramedics. I feel fine now, I just want to go home. If four doses of that didn't put me back together, I don't think anything will. What a waste of my money, though. I can't just use the rest of my baggie that I left behind, not while I know it's tainted, and I'd die if I take it all. But then again, with how everything is going in my life, death sounds like the perfect way out of this shit show.

The paramedics leave me behind with the nurse as she prods and pokes me for several minutes until I want to beg her to leave the room too, but I try to feel thankful instead because no matter what I say, I can't die yet.

Not unless I'm right next to Hallie while it happens.

CHAPTER 21

Hallie

When Damien asked me out for dinner, I was not expecting this; white tablecloths and napkins with fancy gold silverware. Candles on the tables, a dark ambiance, and an expensive menu. The low lighting of the restaurant makes the table for two where we are seated feel like the only one in the room.

When the waiter comes to the table, Damien lets me order before himself, which is a nice change from how Zayne would always order for me, speak for me, breathe for me.

I get white wine, the elk medallions with whipped potatoes and broccoli, while he gets lobster tails.

“So, what’s the plan when you return to work?” Damien asks, then sips his water and leans back in his chair, his body relaxed. I’m jealous of it. I don’t think I’ve relaxed a day in my life.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think you’ll get a less stressful job?” I chuckle at the irony in his question. My whole life has been full of stress, what’s a little more?

“Not really. I love the ICU. I want to stay in critical care permanently, if possible.” I try to mimic him and ‘relax’ in my chair as well, but it feels weird. “Is there another specialty you’re interested in if you could do anything you wanted?”

Damien looks as if he’s lost in thought at my question. “I’ve always wanted to work in the emergency department, but that would be years down the road for me. I’d like to get as much experience as I can before making that jump.” I nod in encouragement and understanding, wanting him to spill his dreams to me, and maybe he will spill a few secrets without meaning to. Like who keeps calling him all the time and why he has to go to a different room to answer his phone. “I just don’t see how I can make that work and eventually have a family. Nursing schedules, as you already know, are not family-friendly at all.”

I freeze, my heart pounding in my chest, “Is that what you want?” My voice comes out small, and his brows furrow with confusion at my question. “A family.” I clear my throat, my eyes peering down at my hands clasped in front of me on the table. “You want children?”

“And you don’t?” As if it’s the most obvious thing in the world to want, like society hasn’t engrained it enough in women’s brains that they’re useless if they’re not a breeding machine.

I look up and into his eyes, and his widen in response. I can sense he's unsure if he's offended me in some way, and I want him to stew in that feeling because I just find it disrespectful that men always assume this. "I haven't given it much thought, but I don't feel obligated to become a mother. I think I could live a fulfilling life without children. Do you?"

"I guess I always thought it's what you're supposed to do, you know?" I nod my head absently as the waiter arrives, placing the food in front of us and asking if we need more refreshments.

How the fuck did we get here?

Silence descends upon us, the air thick with my discomfort. Or maybe it's both of ours.

"So," I say for both of our sakes, my cue to change the subject. "Who was that guy from yesterday?"

"What guy?" he asks, taking another sip of his drink. I can't tell if he really needs me to clarify or if he's just playing stupid, but when I raise my eyebrow, he says, "Oh, Joshua."

"Yes," I reach for the bread, "that one. I thought you were related."

Damien chokes on his drink, then coughs a few times before asking in disbelief, "Related?"

"You look alike."

"That's weird." He shakes his head, "No, we're not related."

The server sets our dinner on the table, saving us from the most awkward conversation we've ever had. Of course, it has to be on our first date because I never know how the fuck to be normal. Why can't I just keep my thoughts to myself?

I'm probably just distracted because Zayne had been texting me nonstop since I got here, and I didn't reply. It was only last night that I texted him back, but he disappeared again. I haven't heard from him in twenty-four hours, and it's almost like he doesn't exist all over again. I don't feel any relief from it, in any case. Now it feels like regret.

He was waiting for me at home, and here I am on a date with another man. A very hot, successful man who is nothing like him. Someone many women would like to settle down with, but not me. I don't know what the fuck settling down even means. Is that what I was doing with Zayne? But no, we're too damaged for babies, he and I already knew that. A dark-haired, green-eyed beautiful little baby was never in our cards. It never even crossed our minds to put ourselves in that position.

Nevertheless, why should I feel guilty for being here with someone else? For enjoying myself for the first time in so long? He's enjoying himself with his drugs and whoever the fuck does them with him. I'm not stupid. I'm sure he's fucked other people by now. So why shouldn't I? I'm tired of being the good girl he always gets to screw over. I don't care if his drugs make him do things he wouldn't otherwise do.

I look at Damien, really look at him for the first time since we got here, and I realize I've been defensive and keeping him at arm's length the whole day. I keep looking for flaws, things to hate about him so I can keep Zayne in the spot he's always had in my life. But maybe it's time for that to change, right? It's time to think about what I want for my life.

"You look handsome tonight, by the way," I tell him as the waiter walks away, and he grins at me. "And don't ask me if it's only tonight because you know the answer to that." He does look even better than usual though, with his navy blue button-down and black slacks. I don't understand how the hell he's wearing that in this weather, but then again, I did force myself to wear a dress and heels. Valet parking helps you do things you wouldn't normally do.

Damien chuckles, "Thanks, love." He picks up his utensils, then makes eye contact with me. "You're more beautiful than ever."

A blush instantly creeps up my neck, and I look down at my food. It's not that I don't like compliments, I do, especially coming from him. I just don't know how to act when someone gives me one.

"You should tell me about your favorite places here," I say to him, and he proceeds to tell me all about his favorite hikes, his favorite restaurants, and the things he likes to do during winter and summer.

Once we're done eating, he pays for the tab and we walk to his truck. Damien opens the door for me and I climb up, my

heel slipping on the running boards because, of course, this is my life. Thankfully, he catches me effortlessly and boosts me by my ass to help me up, then closes the door behind me. We should've waited for the valet people because these shoes are not meant to be used in the snow.

Rather than going back to the house, we sit in the parking lot and talk for hours, and before we know it, the clock says it's midnight. No cars are left here now, it's been wholly abandoned while we were lost in each other.

And as we make our way back to the cabin, all I can think about is how much I hope he doesn't fuck me over the same way everyone else has.



The Briggie House and Alice Milne House represent how the upper class lived during the mining era, and this might be the first time I feel genuine excitement about going somewhere like this. Damien and I decided to go to both before the snowstorm hits tonight and we're trapped in the cabin for who knows how long.

It's day eight of being here now, and I'm starting to slowly feel better, or maybe it's just in my head. I'm still depressed, but because someone is giving me the attention I need, I feel like a new person. The new antidepressants probably haven't taken effect yet, but I think that maybe Damien is a new sort of medication for me.

What's the saying? Get under someone to get over someone?

I believe that's where this is headed, only without getting over anyone else. I don't know that I'll ever be over Zayne, but if I ever am, it won't be because of some biker bad boy who is only good to me. When I'm over *him*, it will be because of me.

I can't deny that while I still have thoughts of him, he doesn't control my mind or my actions while I've been away from him. It's interesting because he used to occupy all of my waking moments. Although, now it's as if he's a normal person, instead of this god I've made him out to be in my head. And that's given me some power back, enough that I can stop thinking about him for a while. Out of sight, out of mind, and all that.

Briggle House is a Victorian-style home that is not only enormous but also perfectly designed. The drapes are green velvet and complement the dining and living room rugs. Every piece of furniture is old and solid wood, unlike the MDF crap we get nowadays. Even the dining chairs are lined in velvet,

and they look absolutely gorgeous next to the wooden dining table with intricate details on it.

We spend the next hour walking through the house and taking in all the decor, then move on to the next one. The homes look similar enough that we walk through the second one much quicker than the first, since it feels like we've already seen it.

"We should've gone to an art museum." Damien looks guilty, as if he's failed me somehow, and I laugh.

"No, I like this. I like seeing antiques and how everything used to be." I reach for his hand in what I was hoping would be a comforting gesture, but he threads his fingers through mine, not missing a beat... or an opportunity.

"Are you sure? I mean, I suck at painting so I couldn't even say I'm artistic in that sense. But it feels like you would've taken longer to go through a museum."

"I'm sure." Squeezing his hand should feel weird, and in a way it feels like a betrayal, but it also feels so natural at the same time. "And I can paint. Maybe I'll paint you sometime. Are you artistic at all, in any sense of the word?"

"I play the guitar." He smiles, seemingly proud of that. "And I can sketch pretty well." Interesting. He doesn't look like a guy who can play guitar; he seems fancier, like someone who should be playing piano instead.

"I haven't sketched in a very long time." Ten years to be exact. "I miss it sometimes."

“We’ll have to change that,” he says as we head back to the truck.

Damien orders brownies from Domino’s because they’re the best, and no one can convince me otherwise, and we pick them up on the way back to the cabin.

Everything is covered in snow, but the roads are still drivable. In a few hours, we probably won’t be able to leave the house, so I’m glad we’re getting the dessert before we’re stuck there for days on end.

The more time I spend here, the more this place reminds me of a Hallmark movie. The blue spruce trees are looking more and more like Christmas trees with the dusting of white, and I lower the window in an attempt to smell them.

I love the smell of a forest.

Zayne.

I shake my head to rid it of thoughts of him, but it’s impossible. He’s all I’ve thought about for a really long time, and training my brain to stop has been more challenging than I thought it would be.

The truck slides on the driveway as he parks, and I tense. Driving in the snow scares me shitless, so honestly I have no idea how I’d even make it if I lived here.

“Relax, I know what I’m doing.” Damien chuckles, the low, raspy sound making my thighs clench even though he almost scared me to death five seconds ago. I swear his husky laugh is his superpower.

“Okay...” I squeak, and he laughs again.

Damien helps me out of the truck this time since none of my shoes are great in the snow, and he’s more than likely afraid I’ll slip like I almost did yesterday since I’m pretty clumsy.

I get the feeling he’s the kind of guy who would be there to catch me whenever I fall, in every sense of the word, and it’s scary because no one’s ever done that for me.

Lies.

Zayne has.

No.

Zayne and I would fall into the abyss together. He wouldn’t catch me. He would drag me down faster and hold on to me for dear life.

Once inside, Damien waits for me in the living room while I go to change into my pajamas. I take my time because, for starters, it’s cold and I’m functioning in slow motion right now, but I also want him to come looking for me. I can tell he’s been holding back, and I want him to stop.

After about fifteen minutes of waiting, he still hasn’t come to my room, and I’m embarrassed that I even expected him to. That I put myself in a position where I’d be disappointed. I don’t want him to realize that I was waiting for him, so I get out of bed and begin my walk back to the living room to pretend this never happened.

As I get closer though, I hear an angry voice talking to someone else, and I realize it’s him. When I peek my head past

the corner of the hallway, I see him talking on the phone, his back facing me. I don't want to risk being seen, so I step back and stay out of sight, trying not to feel guilty. I feel like it's weird that every time he gets a call, he always takes it when I'm not around. Is he talking to someone else? A woman, maybe?

"I already fucking told you," Damien hisses, and I step forward again to see his left hand fisting his hair. "I don't have it. I will call you when I do." I guess if I get caught, it is what it is. I just need to know what the hell is happening.

There's a pause as he listens in, but then he laughs coldly, and my heart begins to beat just a little faster. I've never heard this side of him; cold, mean, matter of fact.

"So then get someone else to do the job." He stands and begins to pace. "It sure as fuck would make it easier on me."

I hold my breath as he throws his phone on the couch and paces angrily. He looks like he wants to hit something, but I think he doesn't want to have to explain to me why he did. Why is he so angry? What is he supposed to have?

Damien looks up and meets my eyes, and I stumble back a step in surprise. Oh, fuck. I really shouldn't have been so damn close to that corner. Stupid, stupid.

"Hallie?"

"S-s-orry," I stutter, unable to think of a valid excuse for me spying on him, but I still try. "I didn't want to intrude. You look... a bit angry."

I take a few strides forward, not hiding anymore but also not close to him. Damien smiles at me, and even though it looks the same as always, I'm starting to think it's forced.

"Come here, love," he says in a gentle voice, trying not to spook me. "Let's eat some brownies, yeah?"

The brownies are on the coffee table, the box still closed. I thought we would be going to the movie room, but he's already got *Friends* playing on the tv for us here, so I close the distance between us and cross my arms when I reach him. His hand cups my cheek softly, and even though I try to relax, I can't. I know it's probably nothing, but that phone call makes me feel weird.

His brows furrow, "What's wrong?"

I want to lie and say nothing is wrong, but I know if I do, I won't be able to act normal for the rest of the trip here. "Who were you talking to?" I ask him, digging my nails into my forearms. Just because I dared to ask the question doesn't mean I'm not nervous about it. He could tell me to go fuck myself and not answer me, and that's technically his right. He doesn't owe me anything.

His hand tightens on my face, but the change is so slight I could've almost missed it if I didn't pay attention. He doesn't want to talk about this, in fact, I think he's surprised I heard him, or maybe he didn't think I'd bring it up. It's not like we're together. I don't actually have the right to ask him what he's up to or question him about who he talks to on the phone.

"My dad."

That explains the angry voice. Why I had no idea what the hell they were talking about, or why he goes out of the way to not be around me when he talks. He obviously doesn't like his dad, and I can't say I wouldn't be uncomfortable if my mother called me while I was hanging out with him. I'd likely leave the room too, if only to spare him from the shitty dynamic we have.

“Oh.”

Damien's hands pry my arms apart tenderly, and I concede. He hugs me to his body and puts his hand on my lower back, pushing me into him, making me close my eyes and sigh. I don't even have words to describe my embarrassment. What was I even expecting him to say anyway? I have no idea what that call would've been about if he hadn't been talking to his dad, so why did I jump to conclusions?

“Have I done something to make you not trust me?” I try to pull away to get a better look at him, but he holds on to me tighter. “Answer the question, love.”

I shake my head, “No, I was just being dumb.” I push against him, and he relents, letting me go. “I just thought...you were talking to a woman.”

The laugh that comes out of him is almost as cold as the one that I heard when he was on the phone, and I don't dare move. There's something about him that feels dangerous, I just can't figure out why. The way he walks toward me, with a predatory gleam in his eye, should be scary, but I don't crave sweet. Maybe I'm the one with the problem.

“You’re the only one I want,” he says and my breath shudders. “I thought you knew that by now.”

“Why haven’t you made me yours, then?” This question seems to catch him off guard, and his eyes widen slightly when I get closer to him and angle my head to kiss him. He shakes his head no, but I grip his shirt and pull him into me. “Why?” I ask him as his breathing picks up, his chest rising and falling quickly.

He finally looks ready to break. “Do you want me that fucking bad?” he asks, and the way he yanks my face up to his by the back of my neck has a fire blazing in my core. I groan into his mouth when he takes my bottom lip between his teeth and bites down. “God, you’re my favorite when you make those sounds for me.” My pussy throbs with those words, and I squeeze my thighs closer together.

“Stop playing games with me and take me to bed,” I say, and I can feel my pajama pants sticking to me since I’m not wearing any underwear. I need my imagination to stop running wild. I want to know exactly what he’s like so I can stop making it up in my head, and I can fantasize with memories instead.

Damien doesn’t look like he’s going to make a move. He seems to be fighting an internal battle with himself, but just as I think he’s going to walk away from me, he grips my upper arm tightly and drags me across the house. The way his fingers are digging into me is painful, but I’m too curious about what’s going to happen next to complain. My feet struggle to

keep up with his long strides, and when we get to the room, he pushes me hard, making me land on the bed.

“You still want me to stop playing games, babe?” he asks me as he takes off his belt, and I stand from the bed. As I start walking toward him, he says, “Strip.” And the authority in his tone makes me stop in my tracks.

I should ask him what he plans on doing with that belt or to put it away. However, I just start taking off my shirt and then drop it on the ground next to me. My nipples tighten automatically, it's cold in here, and his eyes are instantly drawn to them. The way he raises his eyebrow at me with impatience thrills me, and I tug my pants down and let them pool at my feet, then step out of them.

Damien lets himself have a long look, and when his eyes meet mine once more, he's biting his lip. He didn't get anything out of the last time we were together in the jacuzzi, and it feels like the perfect time to return the favor.

I drop to my knees in front of him and look up, keeping eye contact as I lower his pants and underwear down to his ankles, and his cock bobs up to meet me. The thick shaft has prominent veins running along it, and I'm not even sure if I can get half of him down my throat, if I'm being honest. But I'm sure as hell still going to try.

My lips feel dry, so I lick them in an attempt to keep them from splitting and wrap my fist around his length. Just as I put his cock in my mouth and begin to suck, he pulls away.

“You need to stop getting on your fucking knees for men, Hallie.” Damien yanks me up from the ground. “And start making them get on their knees for *you*.”

He licks the seam of my lips and I grant him entrance, opening up until our tongues dance together. The way he grips my waist and lifts me up makes me want to wrap my lips around his cock again so badly it hurts, so instead I thread my fingers through his hair and deepen the kiss as my legs squeeze his waist.

The bed dips as he sits on it, my knees resting on the mattress on either side of him. I can feel my wetness against us, on both of our skins, soaking everything. I never expected him to be this way with me, to know exactly what to say to me to get me hot like this for him.

He's not the only one.

No, I can't think of him right now. There has to be a time I get for just myself without thoughts of him constantly invading my mind. Is it guilt? And if it is, why do I feel so damn guilty? I bet he hasn't felt guilty one fucking day in his life. Fuck him.

Damien brings me back to the present when he presses his nose to my neck and breathes me in, his breath on my skin making the need between my legs pulse to the beat of my own heart, and I'm pretty sure I get even wetter. His hand fists my hair painfully, pulling my head back. “If you wanted me to *fuck* you, all you had to do was beg.” His whisper against my ear makes me shiver visibly, and he chuckles.

“I didn’t want to have to.”

I feel his breath against my cheek for a brief second, then he moves to my mouth and sucks my bottom lip into his mouth, then the top. I whimper, but Damien only grips my hair tighter with the sound, and I feel a burning pain in my scalp.

I want more.

“Get on my face, love.” He licks my neck, and I shake my head. I’ve never done that before, and I won’t do it when it’s his first time eating me out. But he suddenly lies back on the bed and hikes me up by my waist, putting me at face level. My knees land on the bed on either side of his head and he grips me like he’s trying to keep me from running away. “Ride me.”

“No way,” I whisper.

“Someone needs to teach you how to take control, Hallie.” Damien stares at my pussy and his tongue darts out to wet his lips, then gives me a slow lick that has me throwing my head back and wanting to lower myself onto him. “Now grab the fucking headboard and let me eat that pussy.”

His tongue darts out to taste me again, and fuck me if it’s not right where I want it. Right where I *need* it. My hands grip the headboard as my mouth opens on a gasp, and I look down at him. I want to see his mouth on me. I want to watch him take me like I’ve been wanting him to for months now, never giving myself permission.

Damien grips my hips tightly, jerking them toward his face, and rubs me up and down his tongue, making me ride it. A low

guttural moan comes out of me and I cover my mouth with my arm, breathing slowly through my nose, trying to ignore how amazing it feels. I don't want to finish this fast, but holy fuck, he's way too good at this.

Damien licks up my slit, swirling his tongue over my clit repeatedly until I'm panting with need. Once his teeth skim over the bundle of nerves though, I almost lose it. I grip the headboard so hard my fingers ache, and I circle my hips to ride his tongue. The way he groans against my pussy makes the sound reverberate through my body, making my stomach flip, and I moan even louder.

He bites my clit in earnest, and I cry out, the pain mixing with the pleasure just enough to drive me over the edge. My thighs clamp around his head as I feel the orgasm cresting, and I bite down on my arm to keep myself from screaming. The taste of iron invades my senses, and when he sucks my clit softly between his lips, I see fucking stars.

When he sucks me even harder, I begin to tremble above him, and I don't think I'll be able to hold my weight for longer. He pushes down on my hips until all my weight is on him, which makes the feeling even more intense. "Oh God," My legs shake even more as I tightly grip the headboard. "Don't stop."

I don't want this moment to end, but just as I think that my muscles tense and my eyes squeeze shut, a broken moan coming past my lips. When I open my eyes, white spots dance

across my vision and it takes a moment to adjust to the dim light again.

Damien grabs me by my hips and lifts me off his face, setting me on the bed next to him. I try to calm my erratic breathing but watching him wipe his chin with the back of his arm might be the hottest thing I've ever seen him do, and I really want to return the favor.

He turns on his side, his cock thick and heavy on my thigh, and touches his nose to mine. I can smell the musky scent of myself on his lips.

"Taste yourself on me," he says before he kisses me, slipping his tongue into my mouth, and I moan against him. "You taste like fucking heaven." I search his eyes as I reach down and grip his cock between us, and he smirks. "No." Damien strokes my hair. "This one was just for you." I flip over and straddle him, bucking my hips against his cock, teasing him with the wetness, and he smiles. "You're playing with fire, love."

"Then *burn* me," I growl.

"Oh." He laughs, "I will." I bite his neck and move against him, but he halts my movements. "But when I do, you'll be on your knees begging for it."

And I don't doubt it.

But this... this has my heart beating out of my chest again.

He does.

Is it possible to want two people at once?

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CHAPTER 22

Damien

What the fuck was I thinking?

Yeah, I know I said I would fuck her and get her out of my system, and I should've done that much because, for a fucking fact, there's no way I'll be able to get her out of my mind now, much less stay away.

No feelings! That's the rule of the game.

So when the fuck did I catch them? And how do I get rid of them? This inconvenience could cost me a lot, and I'm not sure how much I'm willing to give to her just yet. This is precisely why I haven't been in a relationship for the past few years, choosing to fuck nameless women with unfamiliar faces. I learned my lesson the last time when my girlfriend found out too much and had to be taken care of, by my father, of all people. But this is different, and so much worse. Even I know that. You don't shit where you eat, and this concept applies in more ways than one.

How am I supposed to spend six more days with her in this house and keep my distance? I don't have that much self-control. I'm not *that* strong. I may have dodged her for months, yet even then I slipped up sometimes. Now that I know what she tastes like, what she sounds like when she comes, there's no way I can keep my filthy hands to myself. The biggest problem is that she's willing to get on her knees for me; no woman should be that naive. When a woman submits to someone in my position, they don't get to walk away until we're done with them, and I know I won't be done with her too quickly.

Hallie is still completely naked on the bed at arm's length with her back to me, her deep breaths taunting me. The perfect curve of her ass is bare, and I pull the covers over her so she doesn't get too cold. It's about twenty degrees outside, and the temperature will keep dropping since it's still fairly early. More than likely, we won't be able to leave the house for the next two days, making everything even harder for me because I need some space to think and make rational decisions. She's clouding my judgment, and that hasn't happened over a woman in a long time.

I grab my phone from the nightstand and get out of bed. I need to start sleeping in my room anyway. There's a reason I assigned myself a separate bedroom, and I need to take it more seriously. But instead of going there, I lock myself in the movie room. I need to make a phone call that can't be interrupted, and I can only hope Hallie stays asleep for five more minutes.

The way she looked at me earlier when I was on the phone showed me that she was suspicious, but technically I didn't lie to her. I *was* talking to my father, even if it was about a job that would make her never want to see me again. She should be wary and apprehensive, but she evidently has no sense of self-preservation, which keeps fucking her in every aspect of her life.

She doesn't protect herself from anything or anyone. In fact, she keeps setting herself up for failure. Ignoring red flags and forgiving assholes seems to be her specialty, and she doesn't seem to grasp the concept that it will never end well for her. People don't change, they may adapt or modify behaviors, but you will never be able to truly change who they are at their core.

I shouldn't be surprised then that she's too blind to see me for who I am, or maybe she thinks she knows something is happening but lets it go. And that's exactly what gets people killed. I can't deny that I have gone soft on her. That's why she can't see what's right in front of her.

I dial the phone number I've been given and wait for someone to answer. My hands are shaking with anticipation, and even though I don't have a choice and I know that, I've somehow convinced myself that there's a way out of this. There's not.

“Quien llama?”

“Es D.” It's D, I reply. “Nos encontramos en Red Rocks en cuatro días si quiere su mercancía.” We will meet in Red

Rocks in four days if you want your merchandise.

“Te vemos a las cuatro de la tarde.” We’ll see you at four p.m. “Don’t be late.” Then he hangs up the phone, leaving me to think about how I have just fucked up big time.

I don’t want to think about this. There’s no way I could’ve prevented it, no matter how much I’ve been wanting to. When the Cartel orders you to do something, you fucking do it, and if you don’t, then you pay with your life. Personally, being beheaded and hung from a bridge half-naked is not on my bucket list, so I’ll bite.

I need to get back to Texas as soon as I’m done with them, and then I need to get my shit in order and get the fuck out of the United States. I’m thinking somewhere in Europe. Laying low for the rest of my life doesn’t sound half bad. I have enough money to last me the rest of my life if I need it to; I can live modestly if necessary. Living on the run didn’t sound appealing before, but now it sounds essential for my survival. If I keep taking on more and more jobs by these people, I’ll have to pay for my crimes. I believe in Karma and know it’s coming for me at some point. I also know that it will be more painful than anything I’ve ever experienced, so maybe she’s that for me.

I unlock the movie room and open the door to find Hallie on the other side, about to knock. Her hand falls to her side, and she looks angry. Jesus, what did I do now?

“Why did you leave me in bed?” she asks with a bite to her tone, and it makes me smirk. Maybe she does have a

backbone, after all, it just doesn't show all the time. She should stop letting it come out when it doesn't matter and maybe focus on being this way in situations that do. Like telling that stupid junkie motherfucker to get lost for good. I know for a damn fact if he begged enough and asked for another chance, she'd take him back in a heartbeat, no matter how many needle tracks are on his body. Her weaknesses will be the end of her, and I won't be able to save her.

"I just wasn't tired, babe." I shrug, then point toward the sliding door that shows the deck with the jacuzzi. "I think I'd rather be out there."

She follows my finger, then looks perplexed. "Are you fucking crazy? There's like a blizzard out there."

Hallie stands by the sliding door and looks outside, shifting from one foot to the other like she's unsure of her decision. We're both still barefoot and naked, and even though I've run through these woods in the snow just like this before, it was because of a dare. "Don't be boring." Her narrowed eyes meet mine, and I know I've struck a nerve.

"What do you even want to do out there?"

"Why don't we get dressed and sled down the hill?" I head to my bedroom because I know that I'll be doing it on my own even if she doesn't want to do that. There's too much on my mind, and sitting here with her or going back to bed is not going to help me clear my head.

"You have a sled?" Excitement creeps into her voice, and she walks behind me a little bit faster.

“Of course, I do, it’s Colorado.” Even though I told her this house was my family’s, it isn’t. Explaining that to her would’ve been too tricky, so I lied. I bought this with my own money under a fake name so no one would know where it was. My brother Joshua is the only person in the world who knows about it. We did grow up in this town, this was my way of staying close to my roots. Our childhood home is on the other side of town, closer to civilization, and sometimes I drive by it just to remember the old times. I lived here my entire life, until one day, my father gave me a job. At the time, I thought I had to take it. Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if I had stayed here instead. Would it be peaceful to live without a noose around my neck? Would I be married by now? “I have a snowsuit you can wear,” I tell her, even though I know it will be huge on her.

“You’re joking, right?” I do laugh now because that’s exactly what I knew she’d say. “You’re an entire foot taller than me. How is that going to work?”

“Just put the bottoms in your boots,” I tell her as I go to the master bedroom closet and pull out my smallest snowsuit. It’s a solid black color, and it just happens to have the most insulation out of all of the ones I own.

She holds up the snowsuit to me and scrunches her nose, then holds it over her body and looks down. I keep in my laughter this time because I don’t want to hurt her feelings, but damn, it does look ridiculous. Not that it matters, no one’s going to see it except for me, and I really don’t care how it looks. I just want a distraction that doesn’t involve close

quarters, so I don't bend her over the couch and fuck her senseless.

“Whatever,” Hallie says as she begins to search for warm clothes in her suitcase. “As long as I get the first turn on the sled, I don't care.”

The way she is so agreeable is conflicting for me. Sometimes, like right now, it makes sense. I love how willing she is to try new things and how fun she is. She brightens all of my days and every room she walks into. But there are also times when I want to shake her and ask her if she's ever going to stand up for herself. “Fine by me.”

I grab my clothes and change in the bathroom, giving her space even though we've been naked around each other this entire time. I think I'm the one who needs to put some distance between us so I can keep my hands to myself.

By the time I'm done changing, Hallie is already waiting by the sliding door that leads out to the jacuzzi. There are some steps on the deck that lead down to the yard, and not far from there is a hill that I use for this purpose every time I come during the winter. She doesn't seem to understand she has to hike up there in her shitty boots that have no insulation, with knee-high snow and no resistance to the altitude. She believes she's going to be able to have more than one turn. On the other hand, I think I'll have to carry her up the hill.

I open the sliding glass door, and the pile of snow being held by it immediately tumbles into the house. This is why I always keep a towel on the ground next to the door during the

winter, but I'll do the cleanup after we return. There's a snow shovel propped against the outside wall, and after shaking it off, I clear the mountain of snow in front of the door so more doesn't come in. I also scoop out the snow on my floor because I don't want them to get ruined. If anything, I want this house in the best shape possible so I can sell it quickly if I decide to do so.

"Where's the sled?" Hallie asks as she follows me outside, shutting the door behind her. The puffer jacket she's wearing makes her look like she stuffed blankets in there. You'd think she packed to go to Alaska. But the snow might actually be comparable to it right now so I can't even tease her about it.

"Here." Right across from the jacuzzi is a deck storage box containing two plastic snow sleds and other outdoor essentials. I've never brought anyone here before, but since I love the winter I always keep a spare sled just in case something happens to the other. "You realize we have to walk all the way up the hill, right?"

"I mean, I didn't think I was teleporting to it."

I scoff, but I secretly enjoy her attitude. "You gonna be able to make it up there on your own?" I ask her as I hand her the sled, "Or do you need a lift?"

"I'll manage."

Hallie goes down the steps, almost losing her footing on one of them due to not being able to tell where it is. There's so much snow you can't see the height of each step, so she huddles through it slowly.

I follow her up the hill, staying closely behind to make sure I can catch her if she loses her footing. She clearly hasn't spent much time around snow, and it shows just from the boots she's wearing. I bet they're soaked through by now.

When we reach the top, we both set the sleds down on the snow. She faces me expectantly, as if awaiting instructions, and puts her hands on her hips. "Is this your first time doing this?" I ask her, and she nods her head yes. "You can get on your knees and lie down on your belly, then use your hands and feet to push off the hill."

"Like this?" she asks, as she lowers herself onto the sled, her hands on either side. I do the same, lying down on my stomach and getting ready to show her how to push off the hill.

"Yes," I reply. "When you're ready, walk forward with your hands and push with your feet." I demonstrate how by walking my hands a few steps toward the edge of the hill. "Once you push off, then hold on to the handles."

"On the count of three?" she asks, looking terrified. Even still, she pushes herself toward me until we're both on the hill's edge.

"One... two," I grin at her, then push off, yelling three on my way down. She follows closely behind, and I steer the sled slightly to the left so we don't collide with each other.

Every time I do this, I can't help but think about my brothers, and how we used to sled in the parks because our house didn't have a hill nearby. I miss the bond we used to

have, the one that was ruined when my father made me who I am today. I did take care of them until they graduated from high school, but once I started enforcing for the cartel, I wasn't the same person. I became cold, emotionless. I didn't feel like myself anymore. It affected every part of my life, and now my relationship with the boys I raised is gone. I have nothing to show for all the times I fed them, bathed them, did homework with them. Keeping them away from the ugly reality of my mother's addiction is no longer enough for them either. Knowing what I do for our father makes them never want me in their lives again. They think that because I work with him, or for the same people as him, I've looked past everything we went through because of him. I haven't, but I've tried explaining that to them in every way possible and they still don't understand. They don't realize I did it all for them. So we could have money, so I could give them a better life. This is not something people can just quit when they want to.

Once at the bottom of the hill, we make our way back up, repeating this at least ten times as I usually do. This has always been one of my favorite things to do in the middle of the night when I'm here during winter, but it's so much more fun to do it with someone else. I'd completely forgotten how it felt to watch someone else go down next to me, to share this moment with another person.

Even though it's obvious she's having fun, she still screams the entire way down the hill, and it feels like a metaphor for her life. Hallie is the kind of person who takes the plunge. No

matter how scared she is of something, she constantly faces her fears.

“It’s fucking cold out here!” Hallie yells as she gets up from the sled. Her face looks red and chapped, and I know it’s time for us to go sit in front of the fireplace.

“Let’s go inside.” I grab the sleds from the ground and start walking toward the house. “I’ll make us hot chocolate?”

“Sure.”

The sleds go back in the box, and I open the sliding glass door for us, making sure to shake the snow off my boots before stepping into the house. Once inside, we remove the suits, take them to the laundry, and then put them in the dryer and start it.

A few minutes later, both of us are sitting at the kitchen island sipping on our hot chocolate with marshmallows, and even with the warm drink, Hallie is still shivering. Maybe it’s the fact that I grew up here or that I have kept coming back, but this weather feels fantastic. I don’t get cold that easily, and with the right winter gear I feel comfortable enough to be outside for hours on end, even in this temperature.

“What were you dreaming about last night after we came back from the restaurant?”

Hallie puts her drink down slowly and turns to face me, her brown eyes expressionless. “What makes you think I was dreaming?”

I wouldn't exactly call it a dream, a nightmare seems more fitting. The way her body thrashed on the bed and the tears streamed down her face is not something that happens during a nice dream. Her fingers were clutching the sheets, and she kept crying out. All of it is forever ingrained in my mind, but I didn't want to intervene. I thought I needed to keep my distance. "You were having a nightmare."

She takes a few deep breaths and seems like she's considering what to say. "I dreamed of Zayne." She pauses, and my heart crashes through my stomach. "He was... choking me and hitting my head."

"Was it a memory?"

"Yes, sort of. It all happened very fast, a long time ago." She looks at me and I try to lighten my stare. It probably looks like I want to kill someone. Because I do. Mostly him. "I don't know what's part of my imagination and what actually happened anymore."

"Wait, you're saying this happened before we met?" My brows furrow in confusion. "And you stayed with him?" This motherfucker was going to pay for so much already, but now he really is dead to me.

"Yes." Hallie averts her eyes. "You probably think I'm really stupid," she says slowly, "I just couldn't leave him."

"You could've," I deadpan. "You just didn't want to, and I'm not judging you for it." I understand what it's like to be caught in the claws of someone who knows exactly how to manipulate you, and he undoubtedly found her vulnerabilities.

“It wasn’t that simple.”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me,” I soothe, not wanting to start an argument. “You’re safe here.” *Don’t fucking trust me.*

“I want to, though,” she cries, her mascara running down her face from her tears. “It wasn’t just about love.” She shakes her head. “I don’t know what it was.”

“Obsession.” Hallie looks at me like she’s going to argue, but then surprisingly doesn’t. “We can talk about it if you want.”

She proceeds to tell me their whole story: the ups, the downs, and the lack of in-between. But instead of being glad, I feel dread in the pit of my stomach that she’s trusting me with this, sharing some of the darker stains in her soul. Anyone else would be glad that the person they care for is confiding in them, but instead, all I feel is... fear. I can’t catch her when she falls, and since we’re falling together, it’ll have to be into a black fucking hole.

“I thought for sure after what happened with him I wouldn’t be able to be a nurse,” Hallie says. “I thought finding him dead would trigger me.” My eyes widen as she speaks, but she doesn’t stop. “I guess, I’m not affected by much anymore.”

Yeah, it’s no wonder why. When you’re exposed to certain situations over and over, you’re desensitized to them. Seeing dead bodies, torturing people, killing them- none of it affects me like it used to. “You found him dead?”

She shrugs, “He was the first person I’ve ever done chest compressions on. The first real one, anyway.” I take a sip of the hot chocolate not wanting it to get cold, and she does the same. Thankfully hers is a vegan hot chocolate, I didn’t even know they existed. “I remember that night, the one that scarred me.” I wish she knew just how much I understand her. There have been so many nights that have scarred me too, but I’ll probably never share them with anyone, not even ghosts. “I don’t feel anything anymore, in any case. Just the adrenaline now.”

“So what actually scares you then?” I ask her, going straight for the jugular with this question. Selfishly, I want to know her better than he does, better than anyone else, even if I can’t have her for much longer.

Hallie doesn’t even think before she speaks. “Death,” she answers. “Ironic, right?” It is ironic, especially after what I’ve witnessed her doing. How can you constantly be so scared of something yet carelessly sprint toward it? “Considering the times I’ve tried to commit suicide, it feels a bit hypocritical. But it’s true, death terrifies me. Not knowing what comes afterward... the uncertainty of it.”

“I like to believe it’s just darkness, and we fall into a deep sleep we never wake from,” I say softly, like I’m trying to convince her or myself, I’m not entirely sure. “Mine is,” I take a deep breath, “to be abandoned.” We make eye contact, and I try to tell her so much with one vulnerable look. I can’t begin to explain why I keep giving her pieces of myself, morsels of my heart, for keepsakes. The things I’ve shared with her, I

haven't done with anyone else in my entire life. Maybe there's something about her that makes me speak about things I shouldn't, or perhaps I do have a death wish after all.

"I'm a selfish person, Damien," she tells me, but I've always known that. No one taught her how to be any other way. "I can't promise I won't abandon you." I keep my face neutral, detached. "I can't even promise I'll stay for long."

There's a roller coaster of emotions at war inside me, and I force myself to not let it show. I won't be another player in her game with Zayne, I can't be. I won't be part of this twisted pattern of hurting each other, leaving each other, yet being unable to live without the other. If she's mine, she's mine forever.

"I'll always find you." My jaw ticks as I look away. I hope she can feel the truth of those words in her bones. A chill runs down my spine at how she looks at me, "When you least expect it, I'll be right there. You will live your life looking over your shoulder."

"I know how to disappear." She doesn't get it, and I don't think she will until everything blows up in our faces. "I've done it before." She doesn't realize that I know something she doesn't. "What the fuck is this about anyway?"

"You're not going back to *him*, not anymore." I shake my head and grab her hand, placing it over my heart. Maybe then she'll finally understand that it beats for her, and I don't fucking know how we got here. "Don't you wish you never met him?" I rest my brow against hers, her sweet breath

against my lips. “Don’t you wish someone *truly* loved you?” I kiss her softly, and she parts her lips for me instantly. “He doesn’t.”

“And you do?”

I’m quiet for a second, trying to figure out what to say that won’t spook her. I’m scaring myself just thinking about what I’d be willing to give up to keep her. I shouldn’t. “I want to.” A whisper between us.

“And do you take what you want or merely wait for it to fall into your lap?” I stiffen and pull away from her, my hands fisting between us. She thinks she wants this, me, but she’s never been *taken* before. The man she’s been with is obsessive and may display dominance with her at times, but he has weaknesses and always submits to them. I don’t let trivial matters stop me from what I want; when I possess someone, I have difficulty letting go. Moving on.

“Once I get you all to myself...” I brush her cheeks with my knuckles, and her skin is so fucking soft. “I won’t let you go. You’ll be mine, *only mine*, forever.”

“Maybe that’s exactly what I need.” I know she won’t give herself to me freely, she really does need me to take her. She doesn’t know how to do this thing between us, and I know I’m running out of time with her.

“I’ll always give you what you need.”

CHAPTER 23

Zayne

My addiction has controlled my life in such a way that there are no claws dug into me anymore. Instead it's burrowed itself into my very soul.

There are bleeding sores on my face because I can't stop picking at my skin, a side effect I've been told about many times but didn't believe would happen to me. There's not a minute of the day that I don't spend high, which means I'm not hungry at all. People must think I'm starving myself, and what the fuck is personal hygiene anyway? Sleep?

The withdrawals, which now happen as soon as the high begins to wear off, are turning me into a terrible version of myself that I didn't even think existed. That's the thing about addiction, your personality starts to fade in the exact way you stop caring about everything. The bits of you that make up who you are as a whole begin to leave you one by one. Sometimes it progresses slowly as you watch pieces of yourself slip through your fingers. Other times, like now, you blink and everything's gone, and you don't even know how it

happened. You push people away until there's no one left, and then you cry about it because you never meant to.

I've plunged myself right off a cliff, free-falling with my eyes open and no end in sight. The hold this drug has over me is unlike anything I've experienced, but I can't let it win. And that's why I'm here to test a theory in this facility.

Will they be able to exorcize this demon, or are *we* just one now?

My mother sits next to me in the waiting room as I sign some consent forms, and I'm surprised she even wanted to come with me. If my track record is any indication, this is a waste of our time and her money. But still, she keeps her faith in me, even when she knows I will fail her.

Once I'm done with signatures, I go back to the desk and hand the receptionist the clipboard, and she begins to tell me about the next steps. Her voice is soft and low, barely audible over my pounding heart. Why am I so nervous? I can't tell if it's because I know this won't help or if it's because I'm scared I will die during detox. Thinking about the pain I'm about to go through is too much, but one thing I know is that I will miss it. I can't imagine feeling the way I do when I slam the meth into my body, nothing will ever compare to it. And that's scarier than any pain I have to go through.

I have not one fucking clue what she just went on about, but I nod and go back to my seat. My mother's hand rubs circles on my back as I hunch over with tears in my eyes and a slight

tremble in my hands. How the fuck am I going to do this? I'm not ready, I'm not.

"I'll get clean, Mom," My voice breaks as I tell her, and a tear falls from my right eye. "I promise." We both know the promise is empty, but I think the thread of my sobriety is holding my mental well-being. And she knows that.

"Yes, you will, baby boy." I sit up as a nurse calls my name to go to intake, "You're going to be just fine, Zay. You'll put in the work so you can finally have the life you always wanted."

"The only life I've ever wanted is with Hallie." I bawl as we stand and hug each other, and she squeezes me harder.

"And you will have her." My mom lets go of me, her sky-blue eyes crinkling in the corners as she fakes a smile. "She loves you."

"Don't leave me too, please."

"Never." Her hands come to cup my face, and she gives me a kiss on the forehead before I walk toward a set of double doors.

I don't look back as I walk away, I don't want to change my mind right now, and I know that I easily could. It would be so simple to step out of this building and never come back, just drown my pain and happiness with cooked meth in a syringe. But instead, I follow the nurse into a room with a bed in the center and a lot of medical equipment around it. I wish Hallie would've brought me. At least she'd be able to explain what this is all for. I think I'd be calmer if I understood.

The nurse hands me a gown and walks out of the room, giving me privacy before we start. I haven't used since last night, and I can already feel the craving getting stronger. My hands shake as I change into the gown, and I get on the bed to wait for the nurse to come back.

I wake to the room being empty, and I don't even know how long it's been since the nurse left me here. I'm alone in the room with the lights off, and she did what she needed to do because I have an IV in my arm and a heart monitor on my chest.

My body is now in full-blown withdrawals, and all I want to do, all I care about, is get drugs. I know I can walk out of here whenever I want to; this is voluntary, and as I start feeling worse, I consider it. The only thing keeping me here is the thought of getting clean for Hallie, for the sake of our relationship. Because there's one thing I know for a fact I can't live without, and that's always been her. So I guess I should be grateful I'm here and getting clean.

The crawling feeling over my skin is getting harder to ignore, and even though I know it's in my head when it feels like fire ants are biting me on every surface of my body, I can't help but scratch myself. But even that is hard to achieve when my joints are swollen and screaming in agony.

I just want to die.

The drip, drip, drip of the fluids being infused into my IV mocks me, reminding me of Hallie in a logical way since she

is probably stuck in a hospital with her own patients, but still, I resent it.

I know it's possible she won't want to be with me again even if I get clean, which is why I decided that I would only stay to detox in a safe place. Just long enough to go through the acute withdrawals, as they call it, and then hopefully curb the cravings for a little bit before seeing her again.

Because I *will* fucking see her.

I know she will reject me at first, and it's all because I'm worthless. I've made a fool of myself, treated her like shit, and now there's no hope for me. Not in this lifetime, anyway.

So why do I care if I die during this?

I don't.

However, they said during intake that meth withdrawals don't typically kill you, so I'm out of fucking luck. Guess I should've never quit shooting up. I bet it would be a quicker death compared to this never-ending misery where the urges never end.

I'm so uncomfortable on this damn bed, but I refuse to change positions with how heavy my body feels. Every time I've tried, it feels like someone is trying to set me on fire. If I ever do use meth again, I'll make sure I never quit because detox is fucking miserable.

I feel myself going down the rabbit hole of depression again, and even though I know it's from the comedown of the drug, it still doesn't give me much hope.

I'm tired of living in darkness, always searching for light.

Intrusive thoughts of suicide take over my mind until it's all I can think about. I don't even know how long I've been here, but it can't be that long since I'm still feeling miserable. I shouldn't want to use again after what I've been through to get out of it. But somehow, it's all I still think about. The cravings for Tina and Hallie are the only thoughts circling my brain, and I know damn well there's only one of them I can have. Hallie is probably with who she thinks is the good boy. If only she fucking knew the truth of it, if only she knew what *I* know. At the end of the day, though, she will always see me as a junkie, a failure, a disgrace.

And I know I deserve it.

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CHAPTER 24

Hallie

The tightness that grips my chest as I wake up in the middle of the night steals the breath from my lungs. I thought I was done feeling this way, that the medicine was finally working, but I guess I was wrong.

According to my phone, it's three in the morning, and I know lonely nights like these make all the feelings resurface, opening old wounds until they're gaping all over again. My childhood memories haunt me when I'm vulnerable, and thoughts of Zayne plague me even when I'm not.

I put my phone down on the ground next to my suitcase, the flashlight up toward the ceiling, and do my best to choke back a sob. There's a darkness in my soul that no amount of light can clear up, and maybe I'm defective. I just can't get the thoughts of cutting myself out of my head. It's like they're on repeat, taunting me over and over until I cave, until I'm so overwhelmed that the only way to make it stop is to give in to the urges.

I pull my cosmetics bag out of the suitcase and take out my trusty little friend, my razor blade. It's good that I don't sleep with my pants on because now I don't have to worry about taking off my clothes to do what I need. The edge of the razor blade is balanced against the inside of my right thigh, and I make a quick slice, barely feeling any pain. There's a sort of fascination with watching the blood bubble up, when a sick and twisted part of me likes the way the cut stings a little more as I focus on it. After the second, third, and fourth cuts, I'm bleeding down my leg and dripping onto the hardwood floor. Maybe I went a little deeper than I should have, but I usually do until I'm no longer numb.

Until I *feel* something.

The door slowly opens, and Damien stops in his tracks, taking in the sight in front of him and processing what I just did. He rakes his hand through his hair in frustration and approaches me slowly, like he's trying not to spook me. Why is he here anyway?

The way he kneels in front of me makes my heart beat painfully in my chest. His knees are right on the blood, yet he doesn't care about that as he extends his open palm to me. I give him the razor blade, feeling accomplished as I sit here with an aching leg. The pain is starting to become uncomfortable, the throbbing a reminder of my fuck ups.

How could I let him in? How did he rope me in so easily when I promised myself he wouldn't? How could I be so stupid to fall for someone else when I've been marked enough

by Zayne? I know my heart can't take any more pain than what it has already endured, and I don't want to put myself in a position where I will find out if it can or not.

I need to put as much space between Damien and me as possible. Especially after the night we had two days ago. *That* can't happen again. It can only ever end one way— with me getting hurt.

I'm getting too attached, feeling things I shouldn't. This isn't about getting over Zayne at all. I think I genuinely like Damien at this point... *really, really* like him.

“Let me clean you up...” Damien waits for me to nod, then scoops me up into his arms and doesn't set me down until we're in the bathroom next to the tub. He kneels in front of me, looks at my cuts, then hugs me. His hands are on my ass, his grip firm, and I just hang my head, refusing to touch him. When he kneels on the ground and rests his forehead against me, his nose against my pussy, I freeze. He inhales deeply and groans. “Hallie,” he breathes, “what are you doing to me?”

“I don't understand what you mean.” My voice shakes, and something feels off. His lips move to my thigh, to my blood, and then he kisses me. Wet, sloppy, with tongue. Sweat trickles down my spine as he moans against me.

“Every part of you tastes so fucking good.”

He pulls away gently, like it's physically strenuous, and motions for me to sit on the edge of the tub. The first aid kit is under the sink, and he takes out the supplies. When the antiseptic makes contact with the first open cut, I hiss, then

suck in a breath and hold it while he cleans the rest, dabbing them with alcohol-soaked cotton balls. Although it burns like a bitch, his touch is tender. He handles me like I could break at any moment, and when his blue eyes meet mine, my head starts to swim.

“This is the only time I’ll warn you of this, Hallie.” The air suddenly feels thick, charged. I can scarcely breathe. “I don’t like my things being tampered with.” He throws away the cotton ball he just used to clean me.

I frown, confused, and he notices.

“If someone hurts you, I’ll have to hurt them back.” Damien tips my chin up with his fingers, forcing me to look at him. “And that includes you.”

“And what will you do to me?” I arch an eyebrow, even though the tone in his voice makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

His lips find mine briefly, and I stay still for him. I can’t deny it does scare me a little when he talks like this, mostly because I don’t know the extent of what he’s truly capable of. “Do you *want* me to hurt you?” he asks against my lips. “I could be your worst fucking nightmare.”

What does he even know about my nightmares? It doesn’t matter, I only just want him. I lean in even further, craving his kiss, and close my eyes. His lips against mine make my stomach flutter. “Do whatever you want to do, as long as you don’t leave.”

“I’m yours.”

Damien stands and leaves the bathroom, heading back to the bed and stripping the sheets. I stand from the edge of the tub and watch him wipe his knees with them, getting the blood off. He then throws them on the ground, getting new ones and putting them on. The cold air makes my cuts sting even more as I walk back to him, although I relish the pain.

When I climb in, the bed feels cold, empty, lonely. Even with the heavy comforter, I don’t feel warm. I almost invite him to come lie down with me, but I don’t have to.

Damien nudges my back, and I let him in, scooting away from the edge enough that he has space behind me. His arm goes around my waist, pulling me in toward the warmth of his body, and I allow it. If only to not feel alone tonight, to forget Zayne for a brief period. He’s probably drowning in meth and women while I try to erase him from my mind to no avail.

I don’t care.

I don’t care.

Maybe if I tell myself enough, I’ll believe it.

“How long?” Damien asks, interrupting my thoughts, my grief, my self-pity. “How long have you been cutting?”

I inhale sharply. No one’s ever asked me that question. Somehow it’s more complicated than talking about Michael. “Ten years.” My whisper is loud in the darkness, and I close my eyes as if I could block out his reaction.

“Why?” His voice is a mixture of confusion and anger, and his arm tightens around me. It would be suffocating, overbearing, with anyone else. But not with him.

“To feel.” I swallow hard, my throat suddenly dry. “To stop feeling.” Trying to think of a way to explain it to someone who’s never experienced it is frustrating, and that’s why it’s always been easy around Zayne. He just gets me. “It’s peaceful to sit in the pain. I need to feel it to clear my head.”

“And have you?” His warm fingers splay over my abdomen, and the stupid little flutter in my belly returns. “Sat in the pain?”

“It’s what I do best.”

“I want to know why,” Damien whispers against my neck, “Why are you so good at it?”

“It’s all I’ve ever done.” I laugh, but it holds no humor. I take it back; my life is just one big fucking joke. “Everyone in my life has always taken advantage of me and stomped on my heart.”

My mother has never been a good one, and my stepfather, well, everyone knows how that went. Everyone who was supposed to have been there for me has failed me, and now Zayne too. How am I to not expect Damien to be next? Expecting different results after getting the same ones repeatedly is insane.

“You have to let it go, Hallie.” He sighs, “Let *him* go.” As if it’s that easy. Cutting Zayne off is like letting someone remove

a limb from my body and believing I don't have phantom pains.

"I *have*," I bite out, lying through my teeth. "Is that not enough?" What I don't say is that I never will. I'll never fucking let him go. He's part of my soul, my very being.

"It is." Damien tugs me even closer to him until there are no gaps between us, his hand roaming up and stopping between my breasts, over my heart. "For now."

He's giving too much of himself away, I think it makes him scared, and he should be. I don't know how to do the normal shit; the sweet love you see in the movies doesn't have space in my life. I'll probably bleed all the goodness out of him before discarding him, it's just who I am.

"It's not just about him, you know," I begin to tell him, and maybe I will regret being this open with him, but he needs to know the little fucked up parts of me that push me toward the edge of instability. There's a madness inside of me that takes the driver's seat when my mind is too overwhelmed, a little devil on my shoulder that whispers in my ear about how good it would feel to make everything stop. "My stepfather started raping me when I was twelve."

All the air whooshes from his lungs, and I know damn well this isn't what he was thinking I would say. Do I *truly* want to divulge my secrets? Give even more pieces of me away? What if he puts the entire puzzle together?

Despite all of my doubts, I feel a sense of peace at giving him this part of me, this version. I'm surprised I feel

comfortable enough to talk about this with him, and it could also be the fact that he's opened up to me about his own childhood, but it feels like we have a connection now.

“He would come to my room at night when my mother was asleep, and he did it for a full year before I gathered enough courage to tell her. Except when I did, she didn't even believe me.” My voice is so soft it borders on a whisper, as if the wind could carry it away from me and far away. It feels like I'm telling a secret I don't want him to hear even though I'm willingly giving it away.

“Where the fuck is he?” Damien growls against my ear. “I'll fucking kill him.”

Nevertheless, death is not what I want for him, that's too easy. He deserves to burn, to feel pain for the rest of his life. “Death would be a mercy he doesn't deserve. I want the guilt to eat him alive.”

“Fuck that,” he says, his hand coming to the base of my throat. “Would a monster who hurts a little girl even feel remorse? I don't fucking think so.”

“What would you know about that?” I ask him, my temper starting to slip. This is the one thing I can make decisions about, the only thing I have a choice in. I want nothing to do with justice, nothing to do with revenge. I want to live my damn life and never see him again.

“More than you could ever imagine.” Soft lips press against my skin, and the anger dissipates from my body as I melt against him. “But that's a conversation for another day.”

“Tell me,” I beg.

“All you need to know, babe,” he says against my ear, “is that I’ll never let anyone hurt you.” Believing this feels like I’m giving away yet more frail parts of me, or even plain stupidity.

I close my eyes and wait for my weaknesses to stop overpowering me, silently begging my pain to disappear.

But the thing about sitting in the pain is... you never escape it.



Today is warmer compared to the last eleven days, with it being in the forties, and yet the snow hasn’t melted. Not even a little bit. But at least we finally left the house, I was starting to feel trapped in there.

Damien has convinced me that we should go kayaking at almost sunset, which makes no sense with snow on the ground and the wind chill, though apparently the views are unforgettable. We only plan on being here for a few hours anyway, so it shouldn’t be that bad.

He insisted on bringing a cooler full of snacks and drinks and two waterproof blankets for the snow, which he had set on the ground about twenty feet away from the edge of the lake. Once we leave here, I'm sure I'll need a mug of hot chocolate and an hour by the fireplace. While this is pretty, I'm not used to being out in the cold for hours at a time, especially when the temperature drops again in a few hours.

The tandem orange kayak was strapped to the roof of the truck, but he has now set it on the shore of the lake along with the paddles. My boots crunch in the snow as I walk toward him, and when I get in and the kayak sways, he steadies me.

My squeal is loud as he climbs in behind me, almost tipping us over, and then we begin to paddle. The sound the water makes as we get further out is soothing, and I will say he was right. The view isn't exactly better from here, but it's different, peaceful. The sun is rising now, the orange hues and the pinks blending together until you can't tell them apart from each other.

I want to be those colors.

I want my battered soul to find some pinks and purples and oranges, to heal just a little bit. I don't think it's in my future, however. Maybe only blacks and grays belong in my world.

With only three days left of my leave of absence, I've realized I don't want to go back. Is there a way we can make this permanent? Move into this cabin and work at a local hospital? I wonder if Damien would ever want to stay here, but I think it's too soon to bring it up either way.

Or maybe this is just me running away from my life.

I don't know what's happening with Zayne back in San Antonio, and I want to say we're done, but it's not that simple. It never has been. Just thinking of letting him go has my possessive side screaming at me, telling me he's mine, no matter how much I try to push it down. I'm caught in a very intricate web now. How the fuck do I deal with two men who want to own me? There's a war brewing within me.

I'm at war with the person I used to be, the person I am, and the person I'm trying my best to become.

I thought I wouldn't fall back into Zayne's trap, but I've managed to fall into a different one. One that belongs to a much more dangerous predator who likes to play with his prey before eating it.

It's so easy to let myself fall down that rabbit hole again, especially when it's all I've ever known, all I know how to do.

After what feels like hours but is undoubtedly not too long, I look back at Damien. His eyes instantly find mine, and he gives me a heart-stopping smile. The fact that he's so beautiful makes him even harder to resist, and it's getting more difficult to remember why I should stay away from him.

"Let's go back, love," he tells me, motioning toward the beach area with his chin. "It's going to start getting cold soon."

We turn around and begin to paddle back to shore, and the wind blowing on my face makes me shiver. Holy shit, the

temperature is dropping. I can feel the chill through my jacket somehow, perhaps it's just the wind.

Once we're back at the beach area and Damien pulls the kayak out of the water, I spread one of the waterproof blankets over the snow so we can sit on top of it. Even though there's food and water in the cooler, I don't want to drink anything right now unless it's warm or hot.

I sit down on the waterproof blanket and drape the second one over me, and when Damien joins me he moves the cooler to the snow so we have more room on the blankets. Thankfully the snow isn't high anymore, so I guess it melted after all. It looks like one inch of snow and mud underneath it, and I don't want to think about what the underside of the blanket we're sitting on looks like. At least it's thick like a comforter and long enough to be used in a full bed.

"You were right," I tell him as he raises the blanket over his lap and reaches for my hand. "It's beautiful here."

"Not as beautiful as you are," Damien says quietly. "I've never met anyone quite like you, Hallie." He scoots closer to me, tightening his grip on my hand as I look at him. The sun is still setting, the light is almost gone and his hair is golden as the rays shine on it. His profile is bathed in orange and pink hues, his perfect, full lips set in almost a pout.

"I'm not unique," I chuckle, "I'm sure you've met other mentally unstable people." Like Zayne. Or maybe someone else I'm not even aware of.

"None that I liked."

The way my heart skips a beat at those words makes red flags go off in my brain, but I think that's just because I'm afraid of how this will end. "Should I be scared?"

"Never," Damien says, and I can't help the tears that well in my eyes. It feels like a lie, yet everything always has. I don't know what's real and what's not anymore. I don't know how to distinguish between my true feelings and my paranoia, either. "You'll always be safe with me."

I'm aware that safety is just an illusion. His hand reaches into his pocket, pulling out what looks to be a necklace. "I got this for you," he tells me, dangling a gold chain with a sun charm attached to it. "Because your light shines so bright in my life." Then he puts it around my neck, and I tuck it under my shirt.

There's a lump in my throat as I shift my body slightly, turning toward him. The scruff on his face scratches my fingers as I caress his cheek, and I trail one nail lightly along his jaw. "I love it," I say, my eyes brimming with tears. His eyes fill with an emotion that scares the hell out of me, tenderness, and something else I can't decipher, but he closes them before I can figure it out.

Damien's hand tangles in my hair, and he tugs my head back, getting so close he could kiss me if he wanted to. "Tell me to stop," he says against my cheek, his breath warm. I look beyond him. No one is here with us, not one fucking soul in this deserted lake. Large snowflakes begin to fall silently in

clusters, some of them landing on my upturned face. “Tell me to stop and I will.”

“Don’t stop,” I say through clenched teeth. “Please, no.” He kisses my cheek, showing me a devotion I didn’t know he possessed, then proceeds to kiss my nose, the corner of my mouth. “I want you.”

“I’ll break you, Hallie.” His lips against mine send a jolt of desire straight to my core, and I grip his shirt tightly with both hands.

“I’m already broken,” I taunt. “What’s a little more?” I bite his bottom lip until I taste blood, the iron tang of it filling my mouth, but he doesn’t even flinch. And that’s the problem. He’s just like me.

Maybe if I show him a little bit of the violence I’m capable of, he won’t have a problem with letting me fracture a little more.

He groans against my lips, and I smile. “Take off your clothes, love.” Huh? It’s fucking freezing out here. No way. I shake my head at him, but he grips my chin roughly. “I thought you wanted me to break you.” He lets go of me and slips his sweats down his legs. His cock, thick and long, rests against his abdomen. “So, let me.”

My pussy throbs, aching for him, and his hand comes to rest on my inner thigh. His fingers softly caress the most intimate part of me over my leggings and I have a split second of doubt, just enough to hesitate, and I do. I know everything will

change if I go through with this, but there's also a part of me that wants it to.

And that's why I kick off my boots and remove my leggings and underwear, setting them off to the side. The rest of my clothes stay on as I muster some bravery and get on top of him, holding on to his shoulders as I grind myself against his erection slowly. His groan spurs me on, and his hands grip my hips as I rock against him. My nipples draw tight from the cold, and I shiver even with the blanket on us. I can't imagine what it feels like for him with his whole back not covered.

"Damien," I whisper, "Yes." His head dips, and he captures my lips with his. I continue to move against him, my body tingling.

Disappointment fills me when he pulls away. "No, love." He shakes his head, "We haven't even played yet." Cold fingers trail across my jaw, a mirror of what I did just moments ago, and my insides flutter. "I'll take it easy on you, just this once. But you'll learn quickly that you come when I let you."

He reaches between us, his fingers finding my heat, and he dips them into me once, twice, three times before directing his cock to my entrance. His blue eyes plead with me, beg me, and I nod once, giving him my permission.

He fills me gradually, stretching me as he drives himself to the hilt. Our eyes meet when he's as deep as he can go, and he gasps. His eyes droop, the blue darkening as his pupils dilate,

and his chest heaves when I lift up slightly and start to slide him in and out.

Damien puts his wet fingers against my mouth, and I open for him, wrapping my lips around them. I taste myself as I suck them, and it only serves to make me needier, wetter.

I rub my clit against him, grinding down as I circle my hips and keep my eyes on his face. His nostrils flare as his eyes flutter closed, and the way he bites his lip makes me dig my fingernails into him.

“Fuck.” He moans, his right hand sliding up my back and holding on to the back of my neck, his fingers in my hair. *“We’re so perfect together.”* His eyes open again, and he looks at me like I’m his lifeline.

I circle my hips faster, picking up my pace until my hips slap against his, and I smirk at him when his fingers tighten in my hair as he brings tears to my eyes. It’s a sweet kind of pain.

My hands circle Damien’s neck, and I slow down my movements, focusing on how my clit rubs against him. It’s a struggle to keep my eyes on his as my muscles draw tight, and when I feel the orgasm within reach, I give in to the urge and close them.

“Look at me when you come, Hallie,” Damien demands. *“Say my name.”*

“Damien,” I moan, and his hands find my hips, directing my movements until it feels like I’m going to fucking explode. His

grip on me is sure, tight, bruising. “Please, please, *right there.*” My body starts shaking, convulsing, as I come apart on him.

The snowflakes start coming down bigger, faster, harder. It matches Damien’s pace as he lifts me up and slams me down on his cock. I close my eyes as he moans against my lips, biting me as he comes inside of me, and I can taste the metallic bitterness of blood in my mouth.

I love every fucking second of it.

“I’m not done with you,” he pants against my neck, then flips me over, the blanket completely forgotten.

Damien crawls down my body, making me stiffen, and bites my thigh. I gasp when his tongue swirls over my clit, then licks up my slit, not caring that he just came inside me. “We taste so fucking good, babe.” He moans against my pussy. “Tell me you’re mine,” Damien says, licking me one more time, making my body tighten again. “Tell me I’m the only one you want.”

I grab his hair and pull him closer, wanting him to stop talking and give me what I need. He squeezes his fingers on my thighs, pulls my legs further apart, and bites my fucking clit.

Shit.

I see stars as I squeeze my eyes shut, and my thighs embrace him tighter as I rub myself against his tongue. My hands fist the snow, except not even that can break me out of this euphoric spell he has me under.

“I’m yours, Damien,” I gasp, cradling his face between my legs. He looks at me, and I can’t help but think how perfect he is right now, with his blue-black eyes looking up at me through long lashes. “And you’re mine.”

This lie doesn’t bring me peace though.

Instead, it feels like the wind before the storm.

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CHAPTER 25

Damien

There are certain things in your life you never get over, and Zayne... I may never ever be free of him. It's not about the love or even the obsession, it's about how deep he dug himself under my skin. He's a drug—my drug of choice.

I've been told drugs ruin your life. You're forever changed; you will never be the same. No matter how much you detox, go to rehab, 'recover', pretend you're okay... there will always be an itch that you need to scratch.

That's what he is for me.

He's the itch.

He's the drug.

He's everything.

And I loved every minute of the chaos, every moment except for the end of us.

I know I probably shouldn't be reading her journal. A better guy wouldn't be. Nonetheless, I'm not the better guy. In fact, I

know I'm worse for her than Zayne is. She just doesn't know that, and I mean to keep it that way.

For now.

I was patient, waited for what I thought was the right time, but I failed. I restrained myself for so long, but at the end of the day, my dick lost the battle. I wanted her just once, only once, before I have to let her go.

She told me to take her, so why not?

And, goddamnit, it was the best sex I've ever had in my life. The way she held onto me, the way her eyes glittered with desire for me, the sounds that were coming past her lips. All of it, a catalyst to the rage I'm feeling now, for what I know I must do. For what I *don't* want to do.

Hallie and I have more in common than she realizes, or maybe she does get it. I know she feels the connection between us, it's fucking palpable, and the way she looks at me... she can't hide it. She doesn't know how to pretend, or how to tell lies. Not really. And when it comes to her, I can't hide my feelings either.

What she thinks she feels for Zayne is nothing in comparison to this. Maybe I'm wrong, or I'm lying to myself, but she doesn't look at him the way she looks at *me*. She doesn't realize that they're fucked up emotionally, probably bonded through trauma, although that'll never keep them together. She thinks it's deeper than that, but their obsession with each other is surface level. They don't actually love each other. He loves drugs, and she loves... nothing. Not even her

fucking self. Anyone can make you feel good, but only for a short time. If the bad outweighs the good, why would you want to keep hurting?

The journal feels all wrong in my hands, but since I'm already going to hell, I might as well do this too. She's taking a shower anyway, so I probably have a few more minutes of reading before returning it to its original spot. No harm in that, right? I just need some insight into her pretty little brain before I fuck her up for good. I need some damn answers.

Another day, another nightmare.

Another day, another memory.

Of him.

He's the new devil, and he replaced the old one.

How could he do this to me? How could he swear that he loved me when it was all a lie? How could he choose drugs over me? Am I not good enough? Does anyone even love me?

My dad left me before I could even remember him. My mom chose Michael over me. Michael, well, he's just a motherfucker who will never be worthy of anything good in life. And Zayne? He seems to be just like them, just another one of the people who took advantage of me.

Add him to the pile of liars and deceivers.

The pile of backstabbers.

And that's what he is, isn't he?

A traitor.

It feels like everyone's out to get me.

But then again, my therapist would say that's paranoia. Yet, I wonder, how can she not put two and two together? There's clearly a trend in my life, and I never thought I was the problem, but now?

Now I see I'm just the common denominator.

Maybe something is wrong with me.

Maybe I should end it all.

A chill spreads through my body, my organs, and my damn veins until it threatens to stop my heart at the mention of Michael. Why do I want to whisk her away when I know I can't?

I want to, God, I fucking want to.

I know it's wrong... but I keep reading anyway.

Damien has been a light in my life since the darkness consumed me. Before him, everything was bleak, black, and monochrome all over again. Now, I can see the end of the tunnel.

Now I can appreciate the sunrise again.

He is the sunrise of my life.

And I never want to stop staring at it, no matter how blinding it is.

She's so wrong about that. I've never met anyone brighter than her. The light flowing from her is mystical, ethereal, and so damn intense it hurts to look at. But I still force myself

because the sun has never blazed this way for me before. She's *my* sun.

Either way, I can't keep doing this much longer without getting caught. The shower is no longer running, so I put the journal back where I found it and start walking out of the room just as she opens the bathroom door.

"Hey," Hallie says. "Did you need something?"

My stomach drops as I turn around slowly and paste a smile on my face, trying not to look suspicious. "You," I tell her, and technically it's not a lie. I do need her, yet everything I've ever needed has been taken away from me, so I don't expect this to turn out differently.

"I think that can be arranged," she replies, dropping her towel on the ground and sauntering toward me until she's standing toe to toe with me.

Her pink nipples pucker with the temperature change, and goosebumps rise on her skin. Her eyes travel down my body, and when she wraps her arms around my waist, one of her hands going to my ass. I angle my face down, and she looks up at me with fuck-me-eyes, a smirk on her face.

Hallie doesn't wait for me to make a move. She gets on her tiptoes and brings her lips to mine, squeezing my ass as her tongue goes past my lips. She knows what she's fucking doing to me.

My cock strains against my boxer briefs painfully, and I know she can feel it because I'm not wearing any pants. The

way she rubs her naked body against me makes me want to throw her on the bed and fuck her senseless. Only I know I can't. We have somewhere to be today, and even though I want this more than anything, I have to put a stop to it.

She drops to her knees in front of me, gazing up at me through dark lashes, and slides my underwear down my legs. When her tongue licks up my thigh and all the way to my balls, I throw my head back from how good it feels.

Jesus fucking Christ.

My eyes being closed makes the feeling of her taking me into her mouth even more intense, and when she sucks me all the way to the back of her throat, my knees almost buckle. I hold on to her head and stare down at her, knowing when our eyes meet that she will be my undoing.

“Oh, God,” I whisper, and I push her away from me, a loud pop ringing through the room as she lets go of my dick. “I don't want to stop, but we have to go.”

“How long until we have to leave for the airport?”

“Ten minutes.” She pouts at me when I put my underwear back on, then I help her back up from the floor. “And you take forever to get ready. So hurry up.”

Hallie sighs loudly, “Fine.”

I leave her room to get ready, and once I'm done, I wait for her in the living room. The small pile of luggage next to the couch taunts me. Surprisingly, I don't have much time to think before she joins me. This might be the fastest she's ever gotten

ready, and I don't know if I should be happy to get this over with or not.

She's dressed down for a Colorado winter, but since she expects to be back in San Antonio by the end of today it makes sense for her to wear jeans and a long sleeve shirt. I'm sure she'll still have to wear the jacket, at least on the way to the car, considering it's fifteen degrees today.

I get up from the couch to gather our luggage and put it in the back of the truck. My hands are shaking so hard I can't open the damn door, so I take a deep breath and put the suitcases down, then wipe my hands on my pants absentmindedly. I need to get my fucking shit together.

Once the luggage and Hallie are in the truck, I go back to the house to make sure all the lights are turned off and so is the heat. I lock the front door and head back to the truck, my feet sinking in the snow and soaking my pants. I'm not dressed appropriately, either. We have two and a half hours until we truly need to be there, so I can actually take my time and not be stressed the entire way there.

I get in the truck and buckle up, then blast the heat for her and turn on the heated seats for both of us. I may like winter and cold weather in general, but I'm not out of my damn mind.

"I'm hungry," Hallie complains, and as if on cue, her belly growls. "Can we stop somewhere, please?"

I can go about this in two ways. Say no and either come off as an asshole and make her suspicious, or the other option is to take her somewhere for a quick meal and still make it there on

time. I don't think I can eat with the stress I'm feeling though, which might seem odd to her.

She doesn't know why she's here in the first place, doesn't know why I've been playing her knight in shining armor, and quite honestly, neither do I. I have a job to get done. However the more I taste her, the more I *feel* her, the less I want to do it. I just want to take her away and shield her forever.

But I can't, and it's fucking eating me alive.

"Sure, babe," I reply.

The roads are slippery and wet from the snow, and I drive slowly as we go down the hills to get to the downtown side of Breck. I could at least let her have one good last meal here before we head out, so I decide to take her to the diner I used to come to with my brothers every weekend when we all lived here.

Hallie looks out the window the entire way, and it almost seems like she's trying to memorize every detail about this town. I do the same every time I come, just in case it's the last time. I take in the snow-covered blue spruce trees, the mountains in the background, and the small-town feel. It's always hard to say goodbye.

I park closest to the entrance, then open the truck door for her and help her down. The last thing I need today is for her to fall on her face because it's slippery. No matter how much I try to keep my distance, it's as if she's drawn to me, and she grabs onto my arm the entire way to the hostess stand.

We're seated quickly, and I slide into the booth next to Hallie, wanting to be as close to her as possible before I can't be anymore. I hold her hand and she smiles at me, her eyes scrunching in the corners and her cute little upturned nose wrinkling. God, she's beautiful.

The waitress comes with water and sets them in front of us, then stands expectantly with her notepad. I put the lemon wedge in my water and stir it, looking at the menu since I'm still unsure if I want to eat anything.

"Well, if it's not Breck's bad boy," The waitress, Olivia – according to her name tag, whom I don't even recognize for the record– says with a twinkle in her eye. "What brings you to town?" She raises an eyebrow while I rack my brain, because I can't figure out who she is for the life of me, but I don't dare say that. Did I fuck her? Damn, I really don't remember.

"Just on vacation with my girl." I hold Hallie's hand again, hoping she gets a clue and leaves it be. I can't have her ruining my plans. I give her a pointed look, but either this bitch is dense as fuck or just doesn't care.

"I haven't seen you since senior year up at the Fairy Forest." My eyebrows raise at her stupidity. "Remember how much fun we used to have?"

"Not really." I brush her off. "Now, if you'd be so kind, I'd like to order Chef Shawn's Burger." I look over at Hallie and squeeze her hand, "And what will you have, love?"

She looks between Olivia and me, something like jealousy in her eyes, and clears her throat, “I’ll have the BBQ chicken sandwich, please.”

Olivia takes our orders and goes to the next table, leaving us in an awkward silence that even I don’t know how to fill this time. I sip my water, hoping Hallie won’t start asking questions. Ten minutes go by, and she looks at me.

“Did you fuck her?”

Here we go.

“I honestly can’t remember,” I grunt out, but rather than being pissed she rolls her eyes and snickers. Which is... different. Definitely not the kind of reaction women usually have to this. “I’m glad you find that amusing.”

Hallie laughs again, “It’s because I can relate.” Well, would you look at that, two peas in a pod. I try not to get pissed off at that. She did have a life before me, after all, except my hands still itch. I curl them into fists by my side. I don’t know why I give a fuck. I can’t *keep* her.

A different waitress drops off our lunch at the table, and my stomach clenches. I’m not hungry, knowing what I must do after this, my appetite is gone. Hallie, on the other hand, eats her food like she hasn’t been fed in a week. I should be amused, but instead, it makes me feel... apprehensive.

“How long will it take to get to the airport?” she asks, taking a bite of her sandwich, BBQ sauce on the corner of her

mouth. She looks so fucking innocent. I want to be the one to take it all away. “I might take a nap after this.”

“An hour and a half without traffic.” She nods, her mouth too full to reply. “Maybe a little longer if you’re lucky.”

“Perfect.” She smiles, taking another bite of her food. “Aren’t you going to eat that?”

“I’m not hungry right now.” I shrug, trying to keep my tone light and not give anything away. “I’ll take it to go.”

Olivia returns with the check, and I give her my card right away, trying not to seem in a rush, even though I am. I put my food in the to-go box, and when she comes back with my card, I grab Hallie’s hand and practically speed walk out of the diner.

Hallie surprisingly climbs up on her own, and I turn the key in the ignition and start reversing the truck just in time for her to close her door. I keep my breaths steady, slow and controlled, although my hands still shake on the steering wheel no matter how hard I tighten my fingers around it.

“What’s wrong?” Her voice is low, and when I glance at her, there’s concern etched into every single feature. Brown eyes are fixed on my white knuckles, and her gaze darts from my face to my hands repeatedly.

“I’m just cold,” I lie, and she blasts the heater for us, believing me so readily. “We have a long drive ahead of us. You should rest.” I set the GPS, but I don’t even have to hide the address as she reclines her seat and closes her eyes.

“I guess let me know when we get there?”

“Okay,” I reply, settling in for the drive.

She’s asleep by the time we get on the interstate, which is only ten minutes from the diner, and my chest feels like it’s on fire. Is this what a broken heart feels like? Or a fucking panic attack?

I rub the pain absently for the next hour, glancing at her occasionally. The guilt is starting to set in now, especially seeing how peaceful she looks as she sleeps. That won’t last long, so I’m glad she’s getting some rest while she can.

How the fuck do I move on from this? Will the hole that she will inevitably leave in my heart ever close back up?

The rock formations at Red Rocks Park come into view, and I feel like I’m holding my breath all the way to the deserted road I’ve been directed to go to. I was warned it would be somewhere secluded, but I’ve never had a feeling like this before. Like I’m making a huge mistake, and I don’t know if it’s the situation or just my heart interfering, but something feels shady.

Unknown Number: Are you at the location?

My stomach turns, bile rising to the back of my throat as I park the truck in the middle of a dirt road. I brace myself against the steering wheel, taking deep breaths, knowing I’ll regret what I’m about to do.

I’m sorry.

I’m sorry.

Fuck, I'm *so*, so sorry.

Damien: The merchandise is missing.

It's a fucking lie, one that will get me killed. I know it, yet I'd rather die than go through with it.

Unknown Number: I don't have to tell you what comes next.

I open the door and spill the contents of this morning's meal onto the dirt road. I guess it's good that I didn't have lunch, because at least now I don't have much left to puke either way. My stomach continues to heave even after there's nothing left, and I feel a soft hand rubbing circles on my back.

"Damien?" her sleepy voice questions as I hear a car coming from a distance. The crunch of the tiny little rocks on the dirt path is unmistakable.

I rub my hand over my mouth, spit one more time, and slam the door shut. I don't bother looking at her, don't bother explaining what the fuck is going on... I just peel out and speed the fuck out of there like I'm running for my life, because *I am*. They're not people I should mess with, but I did it anyway.

For her.

What the fuck did I just get myself into?

It's a good thing they don't know where the cabin is, though that's not to say they can't find it if they put in the effort. I've used my debit card in Breck. Now that I think of it, I've left breadcrumbs scattered all the way from San Antonio to

Colorado, which probably means it's not safe to go back there again. Maybe ever. I really fucked this up.

Why didn't I just hand her over? Why can't I let her go? What is she doing to me? I can't be in love with her, I haven't even known her for that long. *Can I?*

"Damien, where are we going?" Hallie sounds panicked, and she squeals when I make a sharp turn, almost flipping the truck.

"Please, stop asking questions," I bark, and she flinches. She shuts her mouth at that though, my smart girl, and that's what she is now. *Mine*. If I just fucked everything up for her, *my life*, I'm never letting go.

Her face is full of fear when I look at her, however I don't have time to worry about her feelings at this moment. Not when we're about to get fucking killed. They know it's me, or they wouldn't be chasing me like this. I can only hope that once we touch down in Texas, my father will protect me for just a little bit. But who the fuck knows? That man is heartless.

I take some back roads, and Hallie sets the GPS to the airport. After ten minutes of speeding aimlessly and taking the first road I see, I finally lose them. I can't let up right now, or rest, I have to get us out of this state. They probably know that's my plan, so the faster I can get us on that plane that leaves in an hour, the better.

I speed out of Denver and don't stop anywhere until I'm in the long-term parking lot. My brother will have to come get the truck, there's no other way around it. I leave my spare key

hidden behind the license plate, and grab our bags from the back. Hallie looks like she's in a state of shock, but she gets out of the truck with me and starts grabbing her things too. Then we run, and surprisingly she keeps up as we get to the elevator to head to security.

We get through quickly, maybe because of the time of day, who knows, but we're at our gate within ten minutes and there are still people boarding the plane. Once we're finally seated, she lets out a deep exhale that matches my relief.

At last, this feels safe. I'm under no delusion that safety is our reality though, and after we land in Texas, I will have to figure out what to do. See if my dad is going to give me away or what he's going to do about this. I know one thing for a fact: if this affects him in any way, he will throw me to the goddamn wolves.

And I don't know if I can survive this pack.

I click my seatbelt on and rest my head, closing my eyes in an attempt to relax. Even if I'm never going to achieve that feeling again. I need to make a plan, leave the country, and sadly for Hallie she has no choice but to come with me. Unless she wants to spend the rest of her life sucking someone's dick against her will, and that's probably the tamest thing she'll ever do. If she refuses, I'll have no choice but to kill her. I can't bear to see this happen to her. I won't do it.

"Are we going to talk about what the fuck just happened?" Hallie hisses, and I open my eyes and stare at her. "Or are you going to pretend we weren't just being chased?"

“Nothing to talk about, babe,” I reply. “I got lost, and those people didn’t look like they wanted me there, so we left.” She’s just going to have to live in the fucking dark. She’s pretty good at that. If I have it my way, she will never find out what this was all about. Except maybe when we’re living in Australia or some other country on the other side of the world.

“You act like I’m fucking stupid.” She scoffs, shaking her head. It’s obvious something is happening, and I can only lie to her face for so long. “How do you expect me to be in a relationship with you when there’s no communication?”

“Who said anything about a relationship, love?” I laugh, even though I don’t mean it. But I need to figure out what the fuck to do before I can play boyfriend, because as it stands, I won’t have much time to do it before someone slits my damn throat. And that’s on me for caring about some girl with daddy issues and a big heart.

“You said you wanted me to be yours...”

“You *are* mine.” I turn my body toward her and hold her chin between my thumb and index finger, looking into her pretty brown eyes. “Don’t get it twisted, though. Just because I care about you, doesn’t mean I owe you anything.” There, I said it. Maybe this isn’t how I needed to admit my feelings for her, nevertheless it’s the best I can do now.

She inhales slowly, and exhales even slower. “When we go back, everything will change.” She breaks out of my grip, turning her head away from me so I can’t see her face anymore, but I swear I see a tear in the corner of her eye. “I

won't be yours anymore." Maybe I haven't made myself clear enough, she's not calling the shots here.

I chuckle, getting closer to her, and whisper in her ear, "You'll be whatever the fuck I want you to be, Hallie."

Her body stiffens next to me. "I don't know what the fuck is going on, but I don't think I want to keep doing this." She shifts and gestures between us, making a lot of people look in our direction.

"Don't." It's just one word, but how I say it scares her. I can tell. Perhaps it's the power behind it or the way I'm speaking so low that she's the only one who can hear me, but she's smart enough to know when someone promises violence. "I'll give you what you want. I just need some time, babe."

"I'm not making the same mistakes again, Damien. I'm not living a lie. If you're hiding something from me, don't drag me down with you." She doesn't understand that she's the reason *I've* been dragged into this, not the other way around. It was always going to be her, whether I got it done or someone else.

"Everyone has secrets," I whisper, but I can't tell if I'm talking to her or myself. "Even you."

Although I'll always figure them out, one way or another.

She might try to distance herself after this, maybe even stop seeing me. But I will find a way to get her out of here, out of this, alive. Somehow. Hallie's not someone I'd be able to

forget in this lifetime, and I wouldn't be able to keep going if I let something happen to her.

I just hope she can forgive me one day.

I sure as fuck won't be able to.

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CHAPTER 26

Hallie

Damien dropped me off last night and left me alone without explanation or goodbye. He still hasn't told me what happened or why we were being chased, and quite frankly, I'm getting very suspicious. If he thinks I'm just going to let it go, then he must not know me at all.

He told me not to leave the apartment for a few days, which is weird in itself, but he can't control my every move and will have to learn that the hard way. I'm not going to stop living my life, which is precisely why I'm sitting at the apartment laundromat trying to get my shit together. Or at least it feels that way when I'm being productive, something I'm not used to feeling lately. It's like my motivation to do anything for myself has left my body, and not even this fucking antidepressant is resurrecting it. As fun as my little retreat in the woods was, it's back to reality now. Back to my sad little life. But I'm still ready to conquer whatever beast is prowling after me.

Including Zayne.

Speak of the devil, I haven't received a text or phone call from him in six days, which makes me question if he's okay. I've been ignoring him, but it was comforting to still know he was fine enough to communicate with me. Maybe he's angry at me for not replying to him, and now he's being petty. Or maybe something's wrong. Either way, I hate this radio fucking silence, which makes no sense because in actuality I should be glad. Instead, all I feel is a void.

Emptiness.

Nothingness.

I can't help but miss him. It's truly conflicting since I don't know exactly what I miss. Is it the attention? His green eyes? Full lips? Everything? The sex was cathartic, but it's not just about that. It's about feelings. For the briefest of moments, I thought he was my world.

Now, it's crumbled.

There's never been any good to come from him, so why do I want to hear his voice out of nowhere? I don't think I want him back, not really. I just also don't want him gone forever—what a goddamn conundrum.

I get up from the uncomfortable foldable metal chair with my two laundry baskets in hand and start transferring my wet clothes into them. I'm kind of annoyed that I don't have a washer and dryer hookup in this apartment, but it is what it is. Especially now that I'm paying for everything on my own, it's a little hard to worry about having more amenities. I'm stuck until further notice.

I go to the other side of the laundromat to pick a dryer, throw my clothes in it, and then do the same for the other basket. Once in, I pay with coins and take my phone out of my pocket. Still nothing from Damien, which is annoying. When the hell is he going to reach out? And why hasn't he done it yet? What is going on?

After the shit he pulled yesterday, I should want nothing to do with him, but I can't bring myself to stop talking to him, even if I'm skeptical about this entire situation between us. I can't be sure about what happened, but I also can't deny that I still fucking want him. I've shared deep parts of myself with him, even if it feels a little silly to say...we've bonded. I can't think that none of it was real. I refuse.

I put the phone in the back pocket of my jeans and begin to walk back to my chair but stop short in my tracks when someone else is already sitting there.

What the ever-loving fuck is *he* doing here?

"Hals," Zayne's voice is low and raspy. It sends tingles down my spine. "We need to talk." Shit. He looks better than ever. Honestly, the hottest I've seen him in months. His black hair hangs over his left eye, and his skin is tanned like he's been working outdoors. I'd forgotten how handsome he is, it almost hurts to look.

I clear my throat nervously, coughing once. "Now is not a good time." I turn around and walk back to the dryer, but I hear his footsteps behind me. He grabs my wrist, a light touch, and I freeze.

“Then make it a good time.” He tugs on my arm and I turn around, our eyes meeting when I do. The green of his is a deep emerald today, and they match his shirt perfectly. Fucking beautiful. “It’s important.”

“Well?” I question, “What is it?”

“I went to rehab,” he blurts out. “That’s why I stopped contact with you. I didn’t have my phone.” I should be happy he’s clean, and I am, but more than anything, I feel confused. It can’t be as easy as this. What if he does it again? What if six more months down the road we find ourselves in this situation? I don’t think I can keep doing this for the rest of my life. “I did the work, baby. I want you back.”

“No.” I shake my head, walking backward until I run into a dryer. But he just takes steps towards me, putting his hands on either side of me, effectively locking me in. “You can’t just get me back from a week in rehab, Zay.”

“You want me, I know you do.” He huffs in frustration. “So why don’t you just give in and save us the chase?” Maybe I like the fucking chase.

“Maybe I don’t.”

“Some things never change, baby.” Zayne tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. He’s not wrong. Sometimes the things we want the most are not necessarily what’s best for us. Not that I’ve ever cared before, and I’m not so sure the person I’ve been fucking around with is any better, either. “I bet nothing has changed between us either.”

“Maybe not.” I push him away. “It doesn’t matter anymore, though.” I release a breath, my chest deflating the longer I look at him. It’s painful being near him. Close enough to touch, kiss, but not being able to. Close enough to feel my heart beating faster for him. “I’m so happy you’re clean, Zay.” I avert my eyes, looking at the ground. “But I started seeing someone else.”

“Look at me.” He whispers, and I meet his eyes once more. “Don’t be a fucking coward while you break my heart.” The way his words slice through me feels like a knife to my heart, to my fucking soul. His eyes well up and he laughs, the sound sending a chill down my spine, “Who is it?”

“You know who it is.” This time I don’t look away. This time I want to watch him break for me. I want him to hurt the way he hurts me. That’s all we’re good for anyway, inflicting pain.

“I see you’re finally with the *better* guy,” Zayne mocks. “Only I have a secret, baby.” His smile is devilish, “He’s not who you think he is.”

A chill runs down my spine, my insides turning cold. I’ve had my suspicions, an inkling that Damien is hiding something, but having someone else say it out loud feels like a confirmation I don’t want to face right now.

I roll my eyes, trying my hardest to look unaffected. “Who is he, then?”

“He works for the Mexican cartel.” The eerie smile is back, and it’s apparent that outing him brings him happiness. I don’t

like it.

Something is definitely off, but this might be pushing it. If Damien works for them, then why the fuck would he have a job at the hospital too? It makes no sense.

“I know you’re jealous.” My tone is low, and I try to speak slowly and clearly. “But that’s absurd, Zayne.” He scoffs, and it echoes in the small space. His hands grip his hair in frustration, and I can tell he’s resisting the urge to pull the strands. “Why are you telling me this anyway? So I will come back to you?”

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but I don’t feel right leaving you in the dark.”

I laugh, not believing he just said that to me. How hypocritical is that? “You’ve left me in the dark plenty of times, so spare me the bullshit.”

Zayne smiles like he’s amused at that. “The day before you left, I saw him there.” He gets close again, putting his hands on either side of me one more time. The pull to look into his green pools is strong, although I force myself not to. “My dealer was giving me meth for free, which by the way, never happens. I asked why he was doing it, and he said ‘D’ told him to.”

“And you assume ‘D’ is Damien?” I shake my head, trying to put together why the fuck he’d even want to do that. “What would be the point of that?”

“He wanted me out of the way, Hallie.” He leans forward again. “I asked my guy John who ‘D’ was, and he said he works for one of their coke suppliers, for the Mexican cartel. Then when I was at the warehouse, he pointed right at Damien.”

“Do you hear how fake this sounds?” I laugh, “Why the fuck would he even work at the hospital if he works for the damn cartel?”

“That right there,” Zayne grabs my hands and squeezes them, “is the million-dollar question.”

I think this over, and I don’t really know what to believe. This sounds so... impossible. Almost made up. If Damien does work for the cartel, then why would he have a nursing job? It makes no fucking sense.

I nod, “Okay.” I need him to prove it to me. I need to know without a shadow of a doubt that there are no lies in this. But then what? What if he did lie? Is that enough to make me change my mind about him? That would be hypocritical considering how many times Zayne has lied to me and I’ve still forgiven him. “Do you have proof?”

“I’ll get your proof.” He shrugs like it’s no skin off his back, like he won’t be fucking hung upside down and tortured if they find out. I don’t think the Mexican Cartel would be happy to know he’s looking into them. “But I don’t do anything for free, Hallie.”

“Oh?” I raise an eyebrow because, of course, he fucking doesn’t. “And what do you want in return?”

“You’ll know when I do.” He grins. “But it’s no secret between us, baby. I want you, and you know I get what I want no matter what.” He grabs my face between his hands and pulls me closer. His breath hovers over my lips, warm and sweet.

I shake my head, but he grips me harder, rendering me immobile. “I’m not yours anymore.” *Liar.*

“Oh, baby.” He kisses the corner of my mouth. “As long as I’m alive, you will *always* be mine.” And he’s not wrong; that’s the biggest problem. His lips brush against my cheek, the action making me wistful, and my eyes fill with tears that I won’t let escape.

He looks at me, really looks at me, and for a fraction of a second it feels as if we’re baring our souls to each other. There’s a silent understanding between us, and it doesn’t even matter that we’re not speaking, that we don’t say the words to each other. We fucking know we’ve ruined one another.

Can we recover from this?

Or will we always just thrive in the ruination of each other?

Zayne’s hands grip my jaw, but the pain is nothing compared to my heart. Nothing else hurts anymore.

The way he presses his lips to mine has me closing my eyes, and when his tongue sweeps into my mouth, I convince myself that I’m just letting him get it out of his system. I don’t kiss him back, even though everything inside me is begging, screaming at me, to do so.

He kisses me harder, like I'm his only oxygen and he's depleted. I feel flutters in my belly, manic fucking butterflies taking flight, and the tears finally spill out of my eyes. When I sweep my tongue into his mouth, I assure myself it's for just one second, even if it kills me. The taste of the salt from my tears makes me dizzy, and I grip the dryer behind me to keep myself upright.

This is the last fucking time.

Zayne grips me harder, and I pull him closer, my body seeking his, even when I know I shouldn't. The adrenaline rushes through my veins when his hand goes around my throat, but I force myself to pull away.

"We will never be done," he says against my lips right before walking away and leaving me alone in the middle of the laundromat, not caring that he's left me in pieces all over again.

How the fuck could I let him do that?

The guilt eats me alive.

He eats me alive.

I'm taking this to the grave.

I go back to the chair, the legs scraping across the tiles as I sit down, making a screeching sound that makes my teeth hurt. I wipe the tears away and cover my face with my hands, trying to breathe through the fear and frustration. If what he said is true, does that mean I'm in danger? Can I trust Damien?

How did this even happen to me?



I sit at the glass dining table, wondering how long it'll take for Brittany to come out of her room, but the way she has a double-take reaction when she sees me makes the waiting worth it.

“Bitch, are you trying to give me a heart attack?” she squeaks, holding on to her chest like she's truly having one. Having a key to her place is a double-edged sword. She's not the type to commit to anyone, and you have to be ready to bleach your eyes if you come here unannounced. You might see a dick or two without wanting to. “Text messages exist for a reason.”

“Why?” I ask her as she goes to the kitchen, opens the pantry, and pours herself a bowl of cereal. “Do you already have company?” I waggle my eyebrows, but she doesn't even see because she's too busy stuffing her face as she comes to join me at the table. Geez, she can't even wait to sit down.

I haven't been to her apartment in months, which is funny because I used to come all the time. However, since residency became more demanding, I had to put our quality time on the

back burner. I can only do so much. Between her and Zayne, I was already stretching myself thin.

“Maybe I’m just pissed off you didn’t text me for two weeks.”

I cringe, knowing she’s rightfully angry. “To be fair, I really had no service up in the mountains.”

“Girl, what did you even do in the mountains for that long?” Her smirk makes me blush, my face heating until it feels like I’m close to breaking a sweat.

“Hike, eat,” I shrug, “Fuck.”

“You fucking *slut!*” We laugh together, and it feels like old times when we were roommates. It makes me miss it so much, and I can’t lie, I’ve been debating moving back in together. “I knew it.”

“There’s already trouble in paradise.” I hate to admit it, but what Zayne said last night made me have some doubts. “You know *who* came to see me yesterday...”

“No, Hallie,” she gasps, and I nod. “Don’t let yourself fall back into his trap. He always knows what to say to make that happen.” He does, and I’ll always be weak for him. “What did he say this time?”

“That he’s clean... went to rehab.” I debate on telling her the next part. I don’t really want anyone to know in case it puts them in danger, but I need her help. “Oh, and then he said that Damien is not who I think he is.”

Brittany laughs, cackles is more like it. “He’s back on the drugs, that’s probably why he’s spewing nonsense.” My face falls, and I realize she might think I’m crazy for what I’m about to ask her. “What’s wrong, Hallie?”

“I think he might be right, Brit.” The sketchy phone calls, the distant attitude, all of it should’ve raised red flags, but my damn color blindness keeps fucking me over. The one thing that made me remotely believe what Zayne told me is remembering when we were being chased in Denver and the reaction Damien had to it. Before we even saw the vehicle, he was pulled over and throwing up on the side of the road. Why would he have that reaction? What could have made him so nervous? Something is not adding up. My fingers twist in my lap, my head spins, and my mouth goes dry. How the fuck is Zayne going to get proof? Is he even going to go through with this? “Can you help me find out?”

“What exactly did he tell you?”

“He said Damien is part of the Mexican Cartel.” She freezes, the spoon in front of her mouth dripping milk from the cereal. “The thing is, I don’t fucking know if it’s true or not. But when I was in Breck, he took me to this park in the middle of nowhere when we were supposed to be on our way to the airport. Then when I woke up from my nap he was throwing up on the side of the road. He wouldn’t tell me what was wrong, even though he peeled out of there so fast.” Brit’s green eyes widen. “When I looked in the rearview mirror, there was someone chasing us, and we sped all the way to the airport. He didn’t calm down until we were seated in the

plane.” My breath comes out in pants. “He won’t say a word to me, and we haven’t talked in two days.”

“That’s sketchy as fuck.” She shakes her head, “But I don’t really know how we can figure this out without drawing attention to ourselves. What if you talk to Zayne again? Hear him out?”

“Do you think that’s a smart idea?” I don’t think anything related to communicating with him is what I should be doing. But what if I need to? What if it’s all a lie? Why can’t Damien just tell me? Am I okay with dating a criminal?

You were fine dating a drug addict.

“Nothing that involves Zayne is smart, but he might be onto something.” She gets up from the chair and takes her empty bowl to the sink, washing it. “If he found this out, he might be able to find out more.”

She has a point, but I hate that I keep *needing* Zayne. Will I ever stop? How do I stop loving him if he’s always around? And what the fuck am I supposed to do about Damien now? Now that I, what? Care about him? Surely, I don’t love him.

Do I?

My brain tells me no, that it’s impossible, and that I barely know him. But then I remember how he’s treated me, the things he says, the way he fucks me, and I feel even more confused. My heart does beat for him though, and it will probably hurt me in the end.

Just like everything else does.

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CHAPTER 27

Hallie

The ICU is relatively quiet with hushed whispers in the background, as if the nurses are afraid to speak too loudly. The only loud sounds are the beeping of monitors and medical equipment, and the dim lights do nothing to soothe my anxiety. The hospital is slow tonight, too quiet, and we don't like to say that word around here. It brings bad luck. But that seems to be on my side lately, anyway.

Damien is here tonight. I saw him briefly while I was getting a report from the outgoing nurse, and we made eye contact for a minuscule second before he went into a patient's room. I saw the nurse he got report from coming out of the room, yet three hours later, he still hasn't left. It's his only patient so far, so it must be a high-level care situation, but holy fuck. I just want to see his reaction to me and know if he seems as affected as I am. There are a million questions I can't get out of my head, and even more answers I want to demand from him. I can't help the nagging feeling coursing through my body that something just feels... *wrong*. I know if I

confront him, I won't find anything out. I have to do this on my own. Figuring this out will help me determine if I can trust him.

I can't be waiting around for him; I won't do that to myself. He will not have the satisfaction of feeling that fucking important until I get an explanation about why he has suddenly stopped talking to me. Did he only want me for sex? Is that what this is about? And now that he's had me, he's no longer interested? That can't be right though, not with how he talked to me. He cares about me; I can feel it in my bones. I just don't think it matters.

Three hours into the shift, I go sit at the nurses' station to chart on my patient. That's one downside to critical care, the amount of charting is actually insane, and I spend hours and hours on it. Between the shift assessment, the notes, and the number of times I have to call a physician... I just want to clock out.

My phone begins to vibrate in my pocket and I pull it out to see who's calling me. My mom's name is flashing on the screen. What the fuck does she want now? I reject the call, but she tries again and again. A few seconds later, I receive an incoming text from her. I set the phone on the desk right on top of Ali's engagement party invitation and take a deep breath before looking at it.

Mom: We need to talk. Call me.

I don't have time for this shit. I have work to do, and the last thing I need is to be thinking about her and past family

problems when I need to focus on my patients. I put my phone back in my pocket and ignore the text.

Coconut and sea salt waft through the air, and I instantly know it's him plopping down into the chair next to mine. I refuse to look at him, in any case. In fact, *fuck* sitting next to this asshole.

“Leaving so soon, love?” His deep voice causes my stomach to swoop, and when he grabs my hand gently, I don't pull it away. I turn slowly and meet his gaze. One blonde eyebrow is arched at me expectantly, but I don't know what to say. I should be leaving. I should want to run away, get as far as possible until I find out what the fuck he's up to. But that would be a lie. I guess I'm just a sucker for the things that can hurt me or are plain stupid.

“I have things to do.” I weakly extract my hand from his grasp, holding onto my pants to hide the way it's shaking. “I better get to them.”

“So that's it, then?” He smiles, pearly white teeth shining in the dim lights. “You're not even going to ask why I haven't called?”

“What's the point?” I shrug, trying to be casual. The truth is, I feel the furthest from it. “It's not like you're going to be honest with me.” It bothers me that I'm so worried about that, and even though I know how we got here, I don't understand how he has no clue I know about his other life. The one he keeps under wraps. Or at least I think I know about it, it's

probably all bullshit. It can't be this easy to figure out what he's been up to.

Damien stands from the chair, his head cocked to the side as he brushes my hair away from my face, tucking it behind my ear. This man is obviously not stupid, and he's sniffing me out. It's as if he can sense that I'm questioning everything, and he's deciding what to do about it. "Come with me," he tells me, his voice so low that I'm sure no one else heard him. Not that it matters, I don't think they would suspect anything.

I shake my head, looking around at everyone else around us, but no one is within earshot. "Why?"

"We need to talk, Hallie," Damien says as his phone vibrates and he unlocks it, his brows furrowing as he reads it. Just as he does, Ali calls him to ask for help turning a patient. He sets his phone on the desk next to me and goes into the patient's room, leaving me alone to fight an internal battle with myself about possibly violating his privacy. Fuck it.

Unknown: You have twelve hours to turn in what we asked for.

It doesn't say who it's from, just that the sender is an unknown number, so probably blocked somehow. My eyes widen just in time for Damien to catch me reading it, and he swiftly picks up his phone and puts it away.

He grabs my arm and pulls me to an empty room at the end of the hall, the furthest one from the nurses' station, and draws the curtains closed so no one can see through the glass. We're

out of sight and earshot, but I'm sure they'd still be able to hear me if I screamed.

I sit on the recliner in the corner of the room and rest my elbows on my thighs, trying to make myself as small as possible, so maybe he will leave me alone and spare me all the pain.

I'm delusional. He's never going to do that, and every step he takes toward me solidifies that thought. His corded arms flex as he kneels in front of me, and when he grabs a hold of my hands, it sends a pang to my gut. Why do I have to want the things that are visibly bad for me? Fuck, I want him so badly. I wish he could just tell me the truth, then we'd be fine. I'm just tired of being lied to.

"It's not what you think, Hallie," Damien says as he pushes my legs apart, effectively fitting himself between them. My knees rest on either side of his waist, and I don't dare move. His hand reaches to wrap around my neck, but he doesn't squeeze it, not yet at least.

The blue depths of his eyes draw me in, threatening to drown me. "What am I thinking?" I ask. "If you know me so well, what am I thinking?" I raise an eyebrow at him, refusing to give myself away. I know that I wasn't supposed to see the text message, that much is evident, but I won't give him any piece of my mind.

His forehead comes to rest against mine, his hand tightening around my throat slightly, and his chest heaves with his breaths. "You think you don't know me." He whispers,

emotion coating his voice. “But you know me better than anyone.” His words take my breath away, but I don’t dare try to breathe with the way his eyes bore into mine, his nose nuzzling mine. This close, I can see the different shades of blue, not just one but many combined.

Damien kisses along my jaw, his hand tightening around my neck even more as I try to breathe again. “Say something.” He growls against my ear, his voice sending goosebumps crawling like spiders over my arms.

“I *don’t* know you.” I breathe, and he pulls back to look at me, “But I wanted to.” It’s not a lie, and that’s the problem.

“You know what really matters.” He says, “But I’m not being completely honest, and I know you know that.” *And yet you still won’t fix the problem.*

“I don’t care.” I lie. I grab the back of his head, pulling him toward me. “Not right now.” I’m pretty good at lying to myself anyway. “This isn’t the time or place to talk about this.”

“So let’s not talk then.” He says softly, his hand coming to the apex of my thighs, and he begins to rub circles on my clit with his thumb over my scrub pants. “Let me show you I care about you.”

I know I shouldn’t. Fuck, I *can’t*. I need answers to my questions, but I know he won’t give them to me. And I want him, just one more time before I leave him and never look back. My heart is breaking over him, my chest tight, and it feels like there’s a permanent lump in my throat just from thinking of not being around him.

“Come on, then.” I tell him, “Show me how sorry you are.” I lift my ass off the recliner and shove my scrub pants down to my knees. How fucking unsanitary of me, but I know these chairs are cleaned after every patient, so fuck it. “Or are you not sorry at all?” My pussy is bare for him, and he stares at it, licking his lips.

Damien lowers his pants too, then pulls me until my ass hangs off the edge of the recliner, my legs over his shoulders. “*I am* sorry,” He grunts out, his voice low. He guides his cock to my entrance, “But not for the reasons you think.” My breath whooshes out of me as he thrusts into me, his thickness stretching me to the point of pain. “*Oh,*” He gasps, making my stomach flip.

The weight of his body as he gets on top of me pushes me into the seat, and my knees touch my chest from how close he is. His lips are soft against mine, gentle. I fucking hate it.

“Stop treating me like I’m made of glass and fucking break me already.” I yank his head back, and he grunts, the sound going straight to my pussy.

I want more, then I’ll be done.

Damien takes hold of my throat and starts to fuck me, and I think we’re lucky that these chairs have locks in them because if they didn’t, we’d be halfway across the room by now with how hard he’s pounding into me. My legs wrap tighter around his neck, trying to get closer. It hurts, but it also feels good, and that’s exactly what I want.

“Be quiet for me, love.” He rasps against my ear, sending goosebumps all over my body and making me shiver. Holy fuck, he’s the best at doing that, and it’s so fucking hot. “We don’t want anyone to hear us.”

I take his bottom lip between mine and suck. When he pushes his tongue into my mouth and tangles it with mine, I feel butterflies raging in my belly. “Mine.” I whisper as I kiss him again, “All mine.”

“Yours.” He agrees, his hand coming to my face and holding it down against the chair. No matter how fucked up it is, how fucked up we are, it’s with that kiss that I feel myself falling deeper into the ocean that is him, never to return for air. I don’t need it anyway.

With him, I can hold my breath forever.

My pants feel tight against my thighs, my legs unable to spread wide for him, but this seems to be precisely what he wants. He keeps me trapped against him, not letting me move an inch as he slams into me. My breath catches in my throat as he moans, and I dig my fingers into his arms as his pace quickens, the sound of our skin slapping becoming the background noise.

“I want everything, Damien.” I groan as he reaches down between my legs and rubs my clit, his fingers slipping on my slickness as he tries to stay in the right spot, “Give me everything.”

He moans against my ear, and goosebumps scatter across my entire body all over again. “I don’t think you understand

the meaning of that, babe.” His fingers are still on the most intimate part of me, and he continues his ministrations as his other hand comes up and yanks my hair back, exposing my neck to him. “You just want my dick, but I want so much more from you than *this*.” He emphasizes with a more brutal thrust, and I squeeze my eyes forcefully as I start to feel the orgasm building, the heat spreading from my core down to my legs, and the way he bites my neck almost takes me over the edge.

“I care about you, Damien,” I tell him, and it’s not a lie. I really do. “I promise.”

He groans, letting go of my hair to stroke my face instead, his fingers soft on my chin as he takes a hold of it. “All you do is tell me pretty lies.”

I open my eyes, “I’ll take your secrets, you take my lies.” His eyes darken, and I can tell he knows I found something out. He may not know what it is, but the way his hand stiffens between my legs for a split second tells me he’s nervous about it.

He picks up his pace again, and my mouth opens on a moan, but before I can make a sound, his hand clamps over my mouth, squeezing my nose between two pinched fingers.

Something inside of me tells me that this is the moment when I’m supposed to run away, get the fuck out and never come back. Instead, I push my face against him, making the seal even more effective.

I like him this way; uninhibited.

My oxygen is completely cut off and I can feel my face heating as he deprives me of it and grins at me. My legs tighten around him once more and I buck my hips against him, rubbing myself on his fingers.

A whimper escapes me just as darkness engulfs my vision, and I squeeze his cock from the pleasure coursing through my body. I tremble in his hold, my legs shaking uncontrollably. He knows when I'm getting close because he starts tightening his hand on my face. The way he's fucking me, combined with his fingers and the oxygen deprivation, is driving me insane. There are bright spots behind my eyes now, and my lungs are screaming for air.

"Come for me, Hallie," Damien says against my ear, and my pussy tightens around him. I moan loudly, but his hand muffles the sound. "Yes, just like that."

My orgasm hits me like a freight train, and then one thrust later, he follows me over the edge. His moan and pants echo in the room as he comes, and he collapses on top of me.

Over the brink of bliss.

To the only place where we can meet.

Chaos and dysfunction.



This is the greenest park I've ever seen in the state of Texas, and as I sit on the bench and watch people walk their dogs, I wonder what the fuck I was thinking. Why would I even go through with this? Knowing damn well nothing good can come from it.

My mother comes to sit down on the bench next to me, her arm brushing mine, and stares straight ahead. She doesn't even acknowledge my existence, which I guess is not unlike her. I don't know why I expected that to change.

What are we even doing? I'm used to no pleasantries, but this silence is unsettling, especially being used to her screaming at me with every interaction.

The last time I saw her was when she tased Zayne, and I realized she never even told me what she wanted to see me for. Maybe this is my chance to figure it out.

"What did you want to meet for?" I ask, looking at her, but she continues to stare straight ahead. It's almost like I'm giving her an out. She could change her mind, not tell me shit,

and just be on her way. That would be the ideal situation anyway.

“You should come home,” she responds, finally spinning her head to look me in the eyes, and I won’t lie, I’m a little stunned by it. It’s been a long time since she’s had the guts to say something like this. I wonder why she came all the way over here to do it though, especially because she knows I won’t.

I search her eyes for something, maybe her fucking sanity, and laugh in her face. “You can’t be serious.” I scoff, scooting away from her on the bench. I would if I could put the whole planet between us right now. “You know for a damn fact I will never do that.”

“Dead serious.” She smiles, her brown eyes, the same as mine, rolling. “Your daddy and brothers want to see you. They *miss* you.”

Bitch, what the fuck?

I want to tell her he’s not my fucking *daddy*. She can fuck right off with that, and him. I can’t believe she had the nerve to come say this to me. “Is this why you came to my place all those months ago?”

“Yes.” She answers, clearing her throat. “But you were being dramatic as always.”

I ignore her insult, letting it roll right off. I don’t really give a shit what she has to say about me anyway. “I knew you’d

bring my brothers up to convince me to go, but why the fuck would you bring Michael into this?"

"It's time to move on, Hallie." She reaches for my hand, but I pull it away. She pats the bench instead. "*He* sure has." I bet. He's probably doing it to someone else as we speak.

"How comforting." I spit, venom dripping from my words. "If that's what helps you sleep at night, knock yourself out. But don't expect me to care about whether he's moved on or not. *I* never will."

"We could be a family again, baby girl." I cringe at the term of endearment, the same one he used for me, "Just come for one day. Please."

I narrow my eyes at her, knowing she never begs. What is she getting out of this? She doesn't care about me; she never has. "I already have a family." I shrug. I don't need her, even if it hurts that my brothers have always been used against me, too young to make their own choices. "Now, if that's all you have to say, I have things to do."

I get up from the bench, and walk away without looking back at her. She doesn't stop me, and for the first time in years, I don't wish for a different outcome.

CHAPTER 28

Zayne

The warehouse is pitch black and silent. The workers have seemingly left for the night, and now it's eerily deserted. I really fucking hope it stays that way, or we will all be in deep shit.

I pretended to need more meth from John and scoped out the place with his help, but I'm relying on what I've seen so far. I did at least make sure everyone would be gone before we arrived. All I have to do is steal security footage, as much as possible, and pray that I get the correct dates. I don't have much time to ensure it, so whatever I touch will come with me.

My shoes squeak, the sound ringing in the hallway, and a shiver takes hold of my body. It feels like someone is watching me, even though I can't tell who it is. There's no one visible.

I open Damien's office door, the one I saw him coming out of, and the squeak makes me cringe. Have these fuckers never heard of WD-40?

It's cold here, the air hitting my face as I quietly enter the room, making sure to keep the lights off, then close the door behind me. I had John leave as much security footage as he could on a thumb drive for me, and I see it on the desk. I just hope they don't kill his ass, but then again no love lost for me there. I only wanted him for one thing, but I need to keep my shit together for now. All I care about now is exposing this motherfucker and making sure Hallie never speaks to him again. He doesn't deserve her, and she needs to open her fucking eyes to reality already.

I put the thumb drive in my pocket, then head for the door. Just as I grab the knob, footsteps echo outside the office, and I halt. There should be no one in this warehouse.

I stand still for what feels like hours, but in reality is probably only a few minutes, and I wait. I don't hear anything for so long that I almost start to believe I imagined the whole thing. Except with my track record, I wouldn't put it past me.

I pull the door open, and as soon as I walk out into the hallway, I hear the sound of a gun cocking, putting a round in the chamber. A hot flash rolls through my body as I hold my breath and stay as still as possible to figure out who's pointing it at me and from where.

Fuck.

I pull out my phone and text the other guys to pull up so I can get ready to make a run for it. I decide that if I'm going to die, I'll be damned if I can't see who killed me.

I turn on the flashlight on my phone and point it toward the entrance to see if the sound comes from there. The last thing I need is to be blocked in.

A moment later, my eyes land on the opposite side of the hallway, the warehouse part leading to the production area. There's an office chair in the middle of the hallway, turned the opposite way. What the fuck?

I focus my light on it, trying to see who's sitting on it, but all I see is the back of someone's head. The chair swivels around, Damien's eyes meeting mine when it stops, and I bite back a gasp. How did he even know I'd be here?

Someone must have snitched.

The most important question right now is: How the fuck am I getting out of here alive? I only have a knife, not a gun.

I know, I know. How stupid of me, considering what kind of people work here, but something tells me I won't make it out of here in one piece. So it doesn't even fucking matter how stupid I am.

Damien grins, his gun pointed right at my chest, and I have to force myself not to move. Every muscle in my body is tense, ready to run the fuck out of here, but I know I can't outrun the bullet, so I stay put.

"If it's not the fuck-up, back to redeem himself." He all but purrs, and I wholeheartedly believe I won't be walking out of here tonight... at all. "Are you here for Hallie?" He gets up from the chair and takes two steps forward. I step back,

obviously. I don't have a death wish, even if sometimes it looks like I do. "I know you opened your big mouth and told her something. But it doesn't matter, you won't be doing that again." He might just be the devil.

"Oh?" I guess I might have a death wish after all. "Are you scared she'll find out who you really are?"

Damien laughs at this, "It won't change anything." His head shakes, his face amused. "I was just fucking that tight little pussy last night, so she must not care that much." He smirks, and I clench my fists, my body rigid. There's no fucking way she did that. I don't believe him. *I don't believe you.* "The way I see it, she doesn't have many choices. I'm the one keeping her safe."

"From what?"

"From everything," he mutters, as if that explains it all, and I narrow my eyes at him. He shrugs his shoulders and turns away to walk back to the chair.

This might be my only opportunity to get out of here.

I run with all my might toward the door, the adrenaline coursing through my body. I can hear him running behind me as I get closer to freedom, our breaths almost in sync as I pump my legs as fast as they'll go.

His breaths are loud in my ears, and I open the door just in time to hear a shot go off and feel searing pain slice through my arm. I stumble from the impact, but I gather the will to keep running, and another shot rings in the air as the bullet

goes through the back window of the car that's waiting for me at the curb.

I jump into the back seat and lower myself, and thankfully my friend doesn't wait for me to tell him anything before he starts moving the car.

Damien screams, "FUCK!" as my friend speeds the hell away from the building, trying to put as much distance as possible between us as fast as possible.

My arm is on fire, blood pouring freely out of it, getting all over the tan leather seats. I clamp my hand over the gaping hole that I refuse to look at. "I'm shot," I announce, and both of my friends turn around to look at me.

"You're *what?*" John asks, pulling back his mask, his voice rising in what sounds like panic. "We can't go to the hospital!"

"No fucking shit." I roll my eyes, trying to think. My brain feels like scrambled eggs, and a fog is descending on it. "I'm making a call; my girl is a nurse." I take off my jacket and throw it on the floor of the car. I need to keep pressure on this shit.

"Your ex," he reiterates, and David chuckles. I don't understand what is so funny about that, but I need them to get me to her house, so whatever.

"She'll still help me."

I hold my phone between my shoulder and ear so I can keep pressure on my arm. The blood is now pouring out from

between my fingers. How the fuck will she even help me if I'm bleeding out?

The line opens, but she doesn't say anything. "Hallie," I choke, "Baby, please help me."

"What's wrong?" She can sense my panic, I know she can, but she keeps her voice calm, soothing. It makes me want to shout at her.

"I can't go to the hospital." The phone slips a bit, and I push it up with my bloody hand. "I'm shot."

There's a moment of silence on her end, a moment when I believe she might tell me to go fuck myself, that she's not going to help me.

"Hurry up," Hallie finally says, and I can hear her rummaging in the background. She hangs up the phone without another word, and my friend speeds the entire way to her place.

What used to be *our* place.

It's a miracle we don't get pulled over. Sheer luck, maybe. Or the devil wants me to suffer some more, knowing I'll find a way to alleviate the pain for myself.

Finally, we pull up to Hallie's apartment and the guys drop me off at the front door, blood trailing after me. I slump against it, knocking only once as I feel my strength draining. The tires squeal as the guys peel out of the parking lot, and I cringe from the loudness of it.

She opens the front door and gasps, her eyes looking me over. Her face pales at what she sees, her fear palpable. Can she even help me? Or do I need a hospital after all?

Hallie pulls me into the apartment by my good arm, and I stumble in. The blood is still pouring out, flowing down my arm, dripping off my fingertips and to the hardwood floor. “I won’t lie to you, Zay. This looks fucking bad.” I see she already has a bunch of medical supplies set up for me and a towel on the ground. I kneel next to it, careful to not use my injured arm to lower myself to it. “You *need* a hospital. You look pale, and your breathing is shallow.”

“No hospital,” I grit out as I lie down on my back, the pain threatening to make me pass out.

“I won’t let you die; you’ve lost a lot of blood. I’ll make up a story.” She shakes her head.

How do I explain that I’ll get killed? Damien has probably put out a hit on me; I wouldn’t put it past him. I’ve really done it this time. I’ve thoroughly fucked everything up for myself in the name of... love. We need to leave here.

“I’m a dead man anyway, Hallie.”

“Who did this to you?”

I grimace and look at her. “Damien.” I don’t smile or mock. I need her to know I’m serious, that this is not a joke. “He was waiting for me in the warehouse. He shot me on my way out.”

She doesn’t even look surprised, and it’s almost jarring. Life’s had a way of fucking her lately, maybe she’s just used to

it now.

“What now?” she asks, getting a long instrument out that I really hope isn’t coming anywhere near me.

“Now you have the proof.” I reach into my pocket and pull out the thumb drive, handing it over to her. “Go watch the security footage in this.” I squeeze her hand tightly, then loosen it up. All this talking is draining my energy.

“How many are there?” It’s almost like she doesn’t want to watch them or acknowledge the truth. I love her, but sometimes she can be so foolish. She loves to live her life with her eyes closed.

I chuckle, a grimace taking over my face from the pain I feel. “Probably a lot, Hals, but it has to be done.” Hallie nods, looking at the blood pooling on her floor. “Just fucking get the bullet out,” I say, my arm on fire.

This is going to fucking hurt.

She gets a pillow for me and puts it under my head. “Lie on your side.” An open bottle of tequila makes its way to my lips. “Drink.” She holds it for me as I quickly gulp, feeling the burn in my throat and down to my stomach. Some spills onto the side of my face and she wipes it, her fingers gently grazing my skin.

Hallie cuts my shirt off with her work scissors, and I start to feel the buzz in my head. “The bullet is lodged in your arm, but I can see it. I’ll try to take it out, but I’m no expert.” She looks at my face, wiping sweat off my forehead. “This will

probably hurt, a lot.” She hands me a rag, making it into a ball, and directs it to my mouth. She’s fucking gagging me?

“What the-” I start, but she rolls her eyes like I’m being annoying.

“Get ready.” She grips my arm and starts disinfecting the area. “Bite down.” I might throw up. The anticipation is killing me.

When the instrument makes its way through my mangled flesh it’s unlike any pain I’ve ever experienced. I understand why people are put under now to get this out. This isn’t fucking shallow, she’s reaching deeper and deeper, and my breath is coming in bursts now.

“It keeps fucking slipping,” Hallie groans in frustration. The look of concentration on her face doesn’t make me feel better though, it only makes me think she doesn’t have this situation under control.

“Wait, wait,” I beg her, then take the bottle of tequila and bring it back to my mouth, downing half of it, feeling more blood spurt down my arm. “Okay, do it.” I shove the rag in my mouth just in time for her to fish around in my arm all over again.

A scream bubbles up in my throat, but just as I’m about to let it out, I feel myself getting hot, dizzy. My vision starts turning fuzzy around the edges, and my head is heavy as it falls to the side. I start to fade before I realize what’s actually happening. But when I do, I let it envelop me.

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CHAPTER 29

Hallie

Zayne is unconscious on the living room floor. His breathing is slowing down, his chest barely rising and falling.

Why did he do this? And why would Damien shoot him?

I call 911, panicking. There's a pool of blood under me, and I'm slipping in it while I give him mouth-to-mouth. Fuck, I need to keep him alive before they get here. He needs blood, and he needs surgery. After this, he will probably be in the hospital for at least a few days. I can only hope I sterilized the instruments enough, the last thing he needs is an infection. I am scared for him though, since he'll be given pain meds there, anesthesia. This might push him over the edge again after all the work he put in to get out.

Within minutes, the paramedics knock on the door, and I slip on the blood on my way up, falling and covering my whole torso in it. What a fucking shit show.

How many times will I have to put him in an ambulance?

I open the door and two men rush in, one pushing a stretcher while the other kneels next to Zayne and checks his pulse. They check his arm and start working on him to stop the bleeding until they get to the hospital. My stomach drops when they put him on the stretcher and start wheeling him away, and I walk after them.

“Wait!” I beg, walking over to Zayne and giving him a kiss on the forehead. “You’re going to be okay, baby. I’ll see you soon.”

I need to stay behind and watch the security footage before someone comes for it. When the paramedics exit my apartment, I turn off all the lights in the house and go directly to my bathroom to get these clothes off. I’ll clean up the living room later.

I take off my blood-soaked clothes and put them in my tub, then jump in too. The water is bright red as I scrub it all off, and when I’m done I put on an oversized t-shirt and go sit in my bed.

The thumb drive between my fingers isn’t heavy, but whatever is in there is ominous. I insert the thumb drive into the slot on my laptop, and a file pops up on my screen. There’s a long list of fifty unnamed videos, to be exact. Holy fuck, I’ll be here all night if I watch them all. I’m going to browse through them and try to find the important ones, even though I don’t know which ones those are. But there’s no way in hell I can get through all of these tonight.

I know what I find in these videos I'm not going to like. Regardless, I have to get it done. Not for Zayne, but for myself. I deserve to know what's going on, and I deserve to make my own choice from there.

At first, I don't see anything of use. It's like Damien's not in the footage at all. But after hours of searching, I finally come upon a video of him talking to a group of other men. It's from three weeks ago.

Damien is standing in the middle of a long hallway, surrounded. It looks like they're having a meeting, but it's confusing as to why it's taking place there. He tells the other men, mostly Mexicans, which makes sense since they apparently work for the cartel, to offer meth to Zayne and keep supplying him for free. He confirms he will be the one backing the cost of it, and no one bats a fucking eyelash. They don't ask questions, just agree to do as he commands. But why? Why does he want to do that?

My stomach churns, and I feel guilty for not believing Zayne and putting him in this position. Although, at the same time, he's not the most honest person. I'll have to investigate this situation myself. It's evident that Damien works in the drug business though, and that he's been lying to me all along.

I find another video that shows him speaking to someone on the phone. He says he hasn't collected the merchandise but is close. Again with that word. I wonder what the merchandise is, but from what I've seen so far, I assume it's more than likely drugs.

As I'm about to click on another clip, there's a knock at the front door. I tense and look at the time on my phone, then get out of bed. The knocking is incessant, the sound vibrating through the house from the force behind it. Who the fuck is here this late? The police?

I open the front door and falter, stunned to see Damien in front of me. I can't speak, I don't know what to say to him after what I've just seen. So he works for the cartel, fine. That doesn't bother me as much as him giving Zayne drugs for free and pushing them onto him. What was the point of that? That's all I'm interested in right now.

I wait for him to speak, to say anything at all, but he doesn't. I step aside to let him in, it would seem I'm full of stupid ideas. I need to keep him in the living room right now since those videos are still pulled up on my laptop screen in my bedroom.

He takes in the absolute cluster fuck of my living room. Blood is everywhere, bandages litter the ground in front of the couch, and medical utensils are all strewn about. His eyes darken as he looks at it, and when he meets my gaze, he looks pissed.

Damien paces back and forth across my living room, but he still doesn't say one word. I huff in frustration and cross my arms.

The sound of his shoes stepping on the puddle of blood is squishy and makes me cringe. "You helped him, then?" He

laughs, not one bit affected by the crimson now staining his running shoes. “Where is he?”

“Of course, I did,” I scoff. “What was I supposed to do? Let him bleed out?”

“Actually, yes. You were,” he replies. “He fucking deserved it.”

“And you don’t?” I raise my eyebrow at him. “You’ve been acting weird, Damien. I know you’re a fucking liar.”

“I know what this looks like—” His voice is pleading with me, but I don’t look at him anymore. I don’t want him to be yet another one of my weaknesses.

“Do you?” I snigger. How ironic. “Because it looks to me like I’ve been played.”

“Everyone’s been played, Hallie.” He shakes his head. “It’s not just you. This is bigger than me.” Even still, he doesn’t say what he should be coming clean about. It pisses me the fuck off.

“Oh, you mean the cartel?” I smile, “I figured that out too.” I walk toward him slowly until we’re facing each other, close enough to breathe the same air. I look at his face, but this is the most neutral expression I’ve seen from him yet. Not one line or expression gives away what he’s feeling.

Damien narrows his eyes at me. “I can’t just go around telling people my father initiated me into his business when I was a teenager.” He holds my face with both hands, his lips brushing mine before he smirks, “Or did you think you were

special enough for that information after a few months of being ‘friends’?” he mocks. “Or was it after fucking twice?”

My fingers curl into a fist, trying to stifle the urge to slap him across the face. “I don’t want to be with a criminal,” I say slowly, and I can see his pupils dilating and constricting, and it makes him look even more sinister as he drives the knife into my heart.

“Yet you’ll be with an addict, no questions asked.” He chuckles, “It’s a good thing we didn’t define this *thing* between us.” And we didn’t, which is why I haven’t felt that guilty about talking to Zayne.

“And I plan on keeping it that way,” I reply, defiance written into my every feature.

His hand shifts to grip the back of my neck roughly, and his fingers pull at the strands of my hair he can reach. I wince, “You seem to like no strings attached.” The anger in his eyes is almost scary, but I’m not easily scared anymore. “I don’t do well with it.”

“Lucky for you, it doesn’t seem like we’re a good *fit* anymore.”

“Oh, love,” he tsks, “I can remind you how great we fit together, if you’re having doubts. But for now, just remember that I don’t share, and after everything I’ve done, I refuse to let you go.”

“And if I refuse to stay?”

“That’s for me to know and for you to find out.” He lets go of me and takes a step back, “We can just go back to how things were, before this whole mess. I still want you. Please don’t do something you’ll regret.” He pauses, waiting for an answer.

I turn around and begin to pace, “I’m just supposed to forget you fucking lied to me?”

“Why not, babe?” His voice rises, “You’ve done it for *him* plenty of times.” I feel anger bubbling up in my chest, yet he’s not wrong, which makes the rage burn hotter. I’m tired of being weak.

I have to find out why he did this to Zayne, why he tore us apart. What does he gain from it? Surely having me wasn’t enough of a motivation for such a drastic measure. Or am I missing something? The only way to find out is if I stick around.

“I’ll stay,” I whisper, and he walks to the door and opens it.

He takes one last look at me, nods, then closes the door quietly behind him leaving me to my thoughts.

I’ll probably spend the remainder of the next twenty hours watching those videos, looking for clues, and wondering how this happened to me.

I want to be repulsed by him. For fuck’s sake, he shot Zayne, but the pull I feel toward him is blinding me. Do I fucking care that he’s in the cartel? Maybe, but I could live with it. What bothers me the most is the *lies*, the violence

toward Zayne, and his intention to set my life upside down. He knew what he was doing when he gave Zayne those drugs; I don't know if I'll ever forgive him for that.

Not in this lifetime, anyway.

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CHAPTER 30

Damien

The needles are scattered on the ground along with the tourniquets and spoons, littering my childhood like a house infested with cockroaches. My mother's arm dangles off the couch, fingertips dragging on the ground as she sleeps her high off.

Being a thirteen-year-old is hard enough but being one who takes care of his mother is impossible. When she's not doped up, she's selling my things, her things, and her body for it. Strange men come in and out of the house, and she tells me to stay out as if I don't know what's happening in there.

I carefully pick up the dirty needles and discard them in a plastic bin she keeps, which seems pointless considering it's overflowing. I make sure I don't prick myself though, who knows what she's sick with. My dad has talked to me about it in detail, what she could have and how it's transmitted, so I make sure to wear gloves every time I pick up after her.

There used to be a time when she was a mother, when she used to cook for me and study with me. That time is barely a

memory now, distant enough that I've almost forgotten about it, but not distant enough to make me think it didn't happen.

I'm not sure what could have happened to get her started, but it's been about three years since she spiraled. It was subtle at first: missed dinners because she felt too 'tired or sick', the house stopped being clean, and she wouldn't shower or eat anymore. Until all she cared about was her heroin.

Ever since then, there's been no going back. She won't try rehab, and she won't get better for me. But I have to take care of her and my brothers, because if I don't, who will?

It's been a decade since I've thought of her this much, yet now it's as if I can't get her out of my head. Maybe it's the guilt I feel for leaving her behind, for not following through with my original plan. I was supposed to get them their merchandise and get her back in return, but I knew that even if I did everything perfectly and got her back, she might still die. She's been an addict for a very long time, and that's not going to change now. They've been feeding her heroin addiction for the last ten years, and I won't be able to make her stop.

Now all I have are failing plans, a death sentence, and a traitorous heart that only beats for a pretty brown-eyed girl.

Fuck.

I've been giving her some time. I know what she found out about me isn't easy to digest, and honestly, I was never going to tell her about any of this shit. Nevertheless, she figured it out with the help of her piece of shit ex-boyfriend, and I know she's hurt and pissed at me. I don't blame her; I didn't handle

it well when she confronted me. I don't know how to be honest without divulging too much. It shouldn't matter at this point, though, since I'm about to get killed anyway. Or at least they'll try. It's up to me now to get her and me out of the country first.

I should've killed Zayne when I had the chance, but I won't be wasting any more time. I still have to tie up all loose ends before the next few days.

I'll have to work extra hard to get her to trust me again or, at the very least, get her to stay. Because, at this point, I can't bear the thought of never having her again. I pick up my phone and call her, she lets it ring until it goes to voicemail. Irritated that she's avoiding me, I type a message out quickly.

Damien: Please come see me.

Hallie: Not today.

Damien: It can't wait. I need to see you right away.

She doesn't reply, but about an hour later, Hallie is standing in front of my kitchen island. I can tell she's cautious and keeps side-eyeing me while she leans against it with her elbows propped on the counter, waiting for me to say what I need to say. If only I knew what that even was. I was a fucking asshole last time, so an apology may be a good start. How do you get someone to forgive something they don't even understand? Something that's not even under your control?

I stand next to her, but she doesn't look at me. Gently, I turn her toward me until we're facing each other. "I'm sorry." As I

hang my head, she finally peers up at me. “I shouldn’t have said what I said the other day. It was out of line.” My blue eyes seek connection with her brown ones, “I didn’t know how to tell you the truth without you running away. This is not the kind of thing I talk about and get to keep my head.”

Hallie nods, “I can imagine the cartel isn’t very forgiving.” Small hands cup my jaw, her fingers cold on my skin. “But you still should’ve told me. You had so much time to do it, and you didn’t trust me enough.” I can see the hurt in her eyes as she says that. If only she could understand how much I do trust her, how much I’ve already trusted her.

“I already fucked up, Hallie.” I sigh, “They’re coming after me.” I don’t tell her the real reason why. I don’t think I can ever divulge that. Not even if I’m being skinned alive. She will undoubtedly never forgive me, and I can’t hold that against her. I wouldn’t forgive me either. *However, I didn’t go through with it. I saved you, babe.*

“What?” She gasps, “Why?”

“I didn’t give them something they wanted.” I brush my thumb over her plump bottom lip, pulling it down slightly before dropping my hand to my side again. Her hands tighten on my jaw, and I tense, then try to release. “I never will, Hallie. This thing they want, I can’t give it to them.”

“What do they want?” she whispers, and my skin breaks out in goosebumps. “What’s so important they’d kill you for it?” *You.*

“Don’t concern yourself with that, baby.” I brush her hair out of her face. “Just know that I will always protect you. I’d lay everything down and sacrifice myself for you.”

“I’m scared,” she whispers. Her brown eyes shine a deep honey color when the kitchen light hits them, and it’s one of the few times they don’t look almost black. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“You should be scared, Hallie.” My lips brush over hers, barely touching. “But I can take care of myself.” I can, to an extent, but not if an entire Mexican Cartel is coming after me. I don’t add that though, I don’t want to freak her out more than I already have.

“What now, Damien?”

My left hand pulls her into me until our bodies are flush with each other, my right one splaying across her jaw. I hang my head in defeat. “Please don’t leave,” I whisper against her lips. “Please let me make it up to you. All of it.”

“I’m still so confused...” Hallie frowns. “You’ve been lying to me, Damien. For a long time, and I still don’t feel like you’ve told me the whole truth.”

“Hallie, I-” *Love you. You’re everything to me. Don’t do this, please.* “Please...” My eyes water, but I don’t dare blink. “Tell me where we stand.” I need this thing between us to survive. We need to get out of here before it blows up in my face and I have to drag her out. Where I go, she goes, and I couldn’t care less if she hates me for it.

“I don’t think we’re standing,” she replies, and I tense at her words. Her eyes fill with tears I don’t want to see fall, and they feel like acid rain on my fucking heart when they trail down her cheeks.

I need to kill everyone who knows any and all details about the job I was supposed to have done. I can’t let them roam free to tell her anything, and once we’re far away from here *together*, I’ll never do this again.

I just need to figure out how to get her to forgive me first.



The only lights illuminating the interstate are the ones from the cars behind me, and there are two of them. I grip my steering wheel until my knuckles blanch, and I can feel the butterflies in my stomach from what I’m about to do. It never gets old. The people who die at my hand always deserve it, for one reason or another. I’m the judge of that.

I take the exit that leads to an access road, then turn right at the light. The warehouse is only one mile ahead, and it takes me no time at all before I pull into a parking spot. I click the

remote once after I close the door behind me; I don't want the beep to alert anyone.

There's only one guy I trust in there right now, and he kept John here for me with the excuse that there was still work to do. He's just unaware that *he's* the only thing left to take care of today...

I unlock the front door with my key and enter quietly, looking around as I try to figure out where they are. The holster on my hip is heavy, and I touch my 9 mm handgun to ensure it's accessible. Reassuring myself, I cover it back up with my shirt and head to the production area.

This room takes up most of the building, and there are metal tables lining up one-half of it. There are scales to measure the product and all the supplies needed for packaging and distribution. The other half is for storage of the drugs until they're picked up by our suppliers. It's a chain that is carefully held together, one slip up, like the one he committed, and everything fucking crumbles.

When I enter, John is measuring cocaine and dividing it into the supply baggies. He doesn't look up at me just yet, and I take advantage of that, approaching slowly. Once I'm a few feet away, I clear my throat, and he looks up at me, making eye contact. His almost black eyes widen with fear, and he's paralyzed by it. The stupid fuck doesn't even try to run away, making me think of Zayne. The bastard was a little more fun to shoot.

But this one is necessary.

“Do you know why I’m here, John?” I ask him, my voice low and gravelly. His hands shake so hard that he starts spilling coke all over the metal table. I tsk, knowing my father won’t be pleased with wasted product.

“Y-yes.” He backs up one step, but I take out my gun and point it at his head. He stills.

“Where’s David?” The fucker who was in the car with him when I chased Zayne out of the building. “Be very careful with your answer.” Even if he tells the truth, he knows how this will end. He’s been working here long enough. Traitors get tortured and hung upside down for everyone to see, but I haven’t had time for that lately. I’m disappointed in myself, to say the least. For now, though, I need an easy, clean kill so I can get on with my day and check more items off my to-do list.

John closes his eyes, and I can’t tell if it’s from fear or acceptance. “He’s at his house.”

“That was helpful.” I smile at him, letting the demon inside of me surface. “Is there anything else you’d like to tell me?”

John shakes his head no, and before he can open his mouth, I put a bullet in his fucking brain. His body hits the ground with a loud thud, blood spurting out of his head, although I won’t be cleaning up the mess, so I don’t care.

Someone’s going to come to work tomorrow and get the message, that *no one* fucks with me. Even if I’m a dead man walking too. I’ll kill them all with a smile on my face if it means protecting Hallie.

I drive away from the warehouse, speeding to the interstate. Driving fast always clears my mind, and right now I need to be able to think about my next step. I've already had fake IDs and social security numbers made for myself and her, and I have an offshore bank account set up for me with my new name. I've bought a little apartment in Australia, on the gold coast, and it cost me a pretty penny. But since we'll be there for the rest of our lives, it barely even put a dent in my bank account, thanks to saving up most of my money over these years.

I withdrew the rest of the money that was in there, and it's hiding in my apartment inside of my safe. I have everything scheduled for two weeks from now. Our departure. Until then, I have to figure out a way to keep Hallie and myself alive. Then we run. I must be very careful about my every move, however. If I'm not, it'll get us both killed. Someone will be looking for me real soon, if they aren't already, which doesn't bode well. I'm usually the one who does the looking, the dirty work.

I unlock my cell phone and call my dad. The rings play loudly in my car from the Bluetooth. It hurts my ears, and he answers just as I lower the volume from my steering wheel. He knows I'm fucked, and he can't do anything to help me, even if he wants to. Not that he would, he'd be the first one to hand me over. But he *can* make sure the cartel gets something from me, the one who blew my cover.

“Victor.” This is how he greets me, like I'm not his son. Love you too, Dad. I shouldn't be surprised, I thought I had

moved past my feelings of abandonment. I guess they just resurface with our every interaction.

“I have some news,” I announce, and he exhales loudly on the other end of the line. “The man I was supplying meth to snitched.”

There’s rustling in the background, and I hear his whiskey decanter being opened. It’s late, why the fuck is he still drinking? “What did he snitch about?”

“He told Hallie about our little operation, not the full story but enough to fuck everything up.”

“He will be taken care of, Damien,” he says, matter-of-factly. “When are you handing her over to them?” *Never*. Over my dead fucking body.

“I’m not, father.”

Silence greets me on the other line. I almost think he’s hung up on me, then he says, “What did you say, Damien?”

I pause, considering my words carefully. “I said, I’m not fucking handing her over, Dad.”

His laugh booms through the speakers, and I lower the volume again. “Did you fuck her?” With tight knuckles on my steering wheel, I take deep breaths. It’s hard to keep my mouth shut right now, he’s lucky he’s not saying this in person. I have half a mind to slit his throat. Blood bonds, be damned. “Got one taste of tight pussy and you’re giving up your life?”

I guess that’s one way to put it, but what I feel for her is so much more than that. I want to keep her. Forever. And I

always get what I want. “That’s none of your fucking business,” I growl, trying to reign in my temper. I need him for this. “All that matters is taking out Zayne Wolfe.”

“I already said he will be dealt with,” he says, his voice annoyed. I hear a crash in the background, and I think, maybe for once, this is affecting him. It might be the fact that I’m probably going to get killed soon. “You’re fucked, you know that, right?”

I smirk, “I’m aware.” Like the cartel didn’t already warn me themselves. Putting two and two together doesn’t take much effort, and the way I fucked them over is not forgivable. Not ever.

Silence greets me once again, and as I glance at my phone to see if he’s hung up, he says, “I can’t get you out of this, son.” *Son*. Without my permission, tears gather behind my eyes and fall down my face. I haven’t cried in a long time. Is this really what it takes for him to have a soft spot for me? To be a dead man walking? “All you can do is run. Don’t tell me where you’re going. If they question me, I’ll have to tell them whatever I know.” Coward.

“I’ll be out of here soon.” I force myself to not sniffle or sound like I’m falling apart. It takes effort, but he wouldn’t know what I sound like when I cry if it hit him in the face. “Promise me he will be dealt with.” I sigh, “He needs to die.”

“He will.”

The line clicks, and I’m engulfed in the silence once more, the only sound penetrating my thoughts is that of my engine. I

need time to get everything ready. Somehow, I'm going to have to convince Hallie to get on a plane with me, and without telling her what I was supposed to do, I don't know if it's possible. I don't even know if either of us is going to Ali's engagement party, our coworker, but I imagine she'll be there just to go against me wanting her to stay home.

Guilt gnaws at my insides, and the pain in my heart is worse than any torture I could endure. She doesn't deserve this, and even if I didn't go through with it, I didn't tell her. I didn't fucking tell her, and now I'm giving the universe the chance to do it for me. She will never understand; she'll hate me. I shouldn't have killed all those people. I shouldn't have been involved in these types of operations for the last decade. I know I'm a bad person. I know I can't be redeemed. But goddamn, I was hoping to have some semblance of happiness in my life, and I guess I did. I just wish it wouldn't have lasted thirty seconds. I want more time with her.

I need it.

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CHAPTER 31

Hallie

The City View Terrace's rolling hills with the San Antonio skyline as the background is spectacular, the perfect venue for an engagement cocktail party. I knew Alison's fiancé was rich, but I didn't realize how rich, until now.

As I stand in front of the bar and order a glass of Prosecco, I feel entirely out of place. Her family and friends all seem very normal, and some are engaged, married, or pregnant.

Then there's me, a mess, still trying to figure out which guy is right for me. Still trying to convince myself to make the right choices. A drug addict, and a member of the cartel, how messed up is that? The truth is, Zayne and I are similar in more ways than one.

I'm an addict too.

I crave the back and forth, the on and off, the hair pulling, the choking, the biting, the fucking.

I crave it much like Zayne craves drugs.

The shot of dopamine I get from making up is probably what has me all fucked up. I seek the chaos, the wreckage, and the possibility of falling without anyone to catch me. It's the *what ifs* that keep me on the edge, and it's the edge that keeps me coming back for more.

What do you do when two people offer the same thing?

Damien wanted to come together, but I never replied to his message. I don't know if he will show up, and if he does, I will be civil for Ali's sake, but fuck, this has turned into a rollercoaster that has no end. I don't know what to do about him, but he's clearly dangerous. Maybe even more than I realize.

So, why do I still want him?

I walk with my glass in hand to mingle with people from work, and I meet some new people too, but all I can think about is getting out of here. I came to show her my love and support, but it just feels lonely to not be on anyone's arm tonight. I feel hot, sticky, and like people are watching me. As I look around, I see Damien's blue eyes focused right on me as he stands by the railing with a glass of whiskey in hand.

I stand rooted to the spot in the middle of the damn place, with no direction, a ship without a sail. But he always knows, somehow, when I'm struggling and adrift. He walks toward me, downing his drink in one go before putting it on a nearby cocktail table. Once in front of each other, he reaches toward my face, trails a finger down my jaw, then tucks my hair behind my ear.

His eyes roam down my body, focusing on the necklace he gifted me, then all the way down to my high heels and then back up to meet mine. The blue of his irises seems stormy today, and he bites his lip in a way that has me clenching my thighs. I wish so badly that I didn't care about him, that he didn't make me feel the way he does, like my heart is going to beat out of my chest. Right now, he's holding it in his fist, and the blood is trailing after him as he takes it with him.

And I don't want him to.

If I could get rid of this attachment, pretend that I don't care, I would. But it's impossible, no matter how many lies he's told, how he's hurt the other person who matters to me, how he's uprooted my fucking life. Maybe we're not so different after all. I might even be able to forgive him. But what's confusing me is where this is going. It's like all three of us are stuck in a game, and the stakes are too high for any of us to lose.

"I've missed you," Damien tells me, his voice hoarse. It cuts deep, knowing he's hurting. I know he cares for me, that much is obvious, no matter how much he tries to hide it. "Come back to me."

I miss you too.

I want to.

I can't.

"Then what?" I ask him, getting closer to him and fisting his dress shirt in my hands. I stand on my tip toes and press my

mouth to his ear, inhaling his coconut and sea salt scent that drives me fucking insane. I close my eyes as a pang of want courses through my body. I want him so bad it hurts. “What will you give me?”

His hands come to my lower back, and he grips me tightly, pulling my body against his. My silk dress rubs against my skin, and he bunches it between his fingers. “Everything.” My hands tighten on his shirt, and I dig my nails into his chest. I want him not to lie to me, to take back his half-truths. “We can go far away from here, leave this place behind.”

I pull away from him, “Run away?”

He nods, “Together, love.”

His face is serious; he means this. Would I do this? Could I? Will I leave Zayne behind to wonder where I went for the rest of his life? I cock my head in confusion, “Why would I do that?”

“Because I love-”

Amanda, Alison’s sister, interrupts us with a glass of champagne. Damien’s eyes stray a few feet beside her and follow the person at her side. Deep green eyes meet mine as he pulls Amanda into his side. Zayne smirks, and I take the bubbly from her, trying to rein in the shock on my face.

Jealousy threatens to boil my fucking blood, and Damien must notice because his arm goes around my waist and pulls me in, bringing me closer to his body. Or maybe he does because he’s trying to claim me, mark his territory. I’m so sick

of their dick-measuring contest. And I just can't watch him with Amanda right now, even if I have no right to say shit.

We're not together.

I excuse myself and go to the bathroom, making up some bullshit to get out of there before I strangle him. I take my sweet time, scroll social media, reapply my lipstick, and fix my hair. Once twenty minutes have passed and I've calmed down, I make my way back to Damien.

Except, when I go back to where I left him, he's no longer there. I look around, walking the perimeter of the room, and whisper excuse me's as I bump into people from not having enough room to get through. Shit, this place is packed. There are at least a hundred people here, and while it's a large venue, everyone seems to want to be right in front of the view.

Finally, I spot him, only he's not alone. I walk closer, but when he sees me, he shakes his head. I stop in my tracks, knowing this probably pertains to his other job. The cartel must be here for him, or maybe someone else he works with? Or do they all belong to the same group? I don't know how this works.

I can see the two men from here, in any case. They're both taller than him, which is saying a lot, with full tattoo sleeves. One of them also has a face tattoo, but I can't make it out from this distance. They seem to be in a heated discussion, hands waving everywhere, bodies tense and ready to fight.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a cherry lighting up in the dim light. About five feet to the left of them stands Zayne,

calmly smoking a cigarette and not looking at them at all. Nevertheless, I can tell he's paying attention as he stays very still and pretends to look into the distance.

I stare at him for a long moment, waiting for him to feel me watching him. When he turns his head toward me, he smiles, raises one brow, and looks away again. As if he's utterly uninterested. It makes me fucking crazy, and he knows it too, judging by the grin on his face.

Both men make their way to the exit without looking back, and Damien stares after them until they disappear. What was that about, anyway? What could they need *right now* that would be worth cornering him at a party they weren't even invited to?

Damien walks quickly toward me and grips my arm, "Let's get the fuck out of here," he says against my ear. I can feel Zayne watching us, and as Damien pulls me by my arm toward the exit, I see him shaking his head at me.

"Wait!" I try to talk some sense into him. "We shouldn't leave yet, it's rude."

"I don't give a fuck, Hallie." He barks a sarcastic laugh as we make it out of the venue doors. His pace is brisk, and I struggle to keep up with these fucking shoes. "Do you even realize who those people were?"

"I have a pretty good idea." Even though he hasn't given me any real information about his specific involvement with the cartel, I can only assume. We make it to his motorcycle and as he turns it on, he hands me my helmet.

Damien looks desperate as he grabs me by the shoulders and leans in against my lips, “Then stop fucking arguing, and let’s go.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you.” Zayne’s voice makes me freeze, and Damien looks at him. The anger in his voice lets me know this isn’t going to end well. “Hallie, come here.” He waves his hand toward himself as if that will make me walk faster. “Now.”

I look at Damien, who has now put his helmet on the sidewalk and is walking toward Zayne, stopping right in front of him. They both tense, bracing themselves.

“And why the fuck do you think she’d go with you?” Damien asks, laughing coldly, and I see Zayne’s eyes flicker with anger.

“I don’t want to have to say what I know,” Zayne raises one eyebrow, “But I fucking will.”

“She doesn’t want you anymore.” Damien’s face may look amused, but the way he clenches his fists tells me he’s worried about what might come out of his mouth. “You should give it up already. You look pathetic.”

Zayne grins, “She’ll come around, she always does.” He shrugs, “She’ll never stop, because I give her what she craves, what she needs. And you can’t do that for her.”

Damien’s smile falters, “Fuck you.” He walks back toward the motorcycle, trying to nudge me to walk away with him, but I stand my ground. “We’re done here.”

“I want to know what he has to say,” I announce, and Zayne smiles.

“Someone bought you, baby.” Zayne looks at Damien while he talks to me, like I’m not even here. “He was supposed to deliver you. I guess he screwed them out of it because they seemed pretty fucking pissed. Didn’t they, Damien?”

I look at Damien, instantly seeing fear flick through his eyes in slow motion, and I know Zayne is telling the truth. Rage, hot and thick, blazes through my chest, threatening to burn everything in my path. How could he do this to me?

I open my mouth to talk, to scream, but Zayne interrupts. “They still want you.” Fear paralyzes me to the spot, and Damien pushes me out of the way to get to him.

And then... he goes fucking crazy.

Damien throws one, and then two punches land on Zayne’s face, but he’s quick too, hitting Damien back almost instantly. Both stumble as the punches pick up, and I can’t tell who’s hitting who anymore. All I know is that there’s a lot of blood. On the ground, on their clothes, on their faces.

Zayne slumps against the wall, sliding down it until he’s sitting on the concrete floor. His face is swollen enough that one of his eyes looks shut, even though he’s noticeably struggling to get it to open.

Damien grabs my shaking hands and puts my helmet on, doing the same and climbing onto the seat. “Let’s go,” he

barks out; however, I don't obey him. My feet are rooted in place as I stand my ground.

“There's no fucking way I'm leaving with you tonight.” Even though I don't have a ride back and my phone is dead. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Do I mean that little to you?” I hit his chest with both hands, and he grabs onto my wrists, easily restraining me. “You had the chance to tell me this,” I say through gritted teeth, hatred coursing through my veins. *How fucking could you?*

Damien yanks me closer by my wrists and lowers his face to mine, the way it contorts with anger makes me flinch. “Do you want to die tonight, Hallie?” His voice is rough, “Because they're coming for us, babe. So, if you want to live, get on this fucking bike *now*.”

That snaps me out of it, and I can't help but follow his command. Fear slithers over every bone in my body, and the only one who makes me feel safe is him, fucked up as that may be.

I get on the motorcycle behind him, my arms around his waist. I close the visor on my helmet, but even that won't stop the tears threatening to fall. It isn't from the wind, it's caused by my fucked-up life, but I try to focus on the freedom I feel when Damien speeds away from the venue. The purr of the engine, the wind slapping against my helmet, the adrenaline pumping through my veins the faster he goes. I do my best to feel that instead of worrying about all my unanswered

questions, my worries, the terror, the pure betrayal I'm feeling... I clear my mind and think of nothing.

I just *feel*.

Although a few minutes later, the ache in my chest threatening to make my heart explode, I give in and lift my face shield. The wind blows against my eyes, the tears finally spilling over and streaming down my face.

I tilt my head back and look at the stars; even their dim twinkle doesn't give me comfort like it used to. I grip him tighter as his body shifts to the right to hug the curve, and I lean with him as we get on the interstate. The ride is instinctual, and I mimic his movements, doing what he does. It feels so natural.

The way my hair whips in the wind, the utter peace I feel as we race at a high speed on the highway, is just enough to make me want to let it all go. It's enough to make me want to say fuck everything and let the universe finally take me.

Damien lets go of one handlebar and grips my arm tightly as if he knows everything I'm thinking. I smile, remembering how stupid I've been. I'm just a game to him, a chase. And for some twisted reason, he doesn't want to get off this ride. He wants to keep me all to himself.

We pull up to his designated parking spot at his apartment and hop off the bike, holding on to our helmets as we walk side by side in silence. I don't know where to go from here, and I know I should be scared to be in his home right now, but I still go inside. Maybe deep down, I know he wouldn't hurt

me. So far, he hasn't. He didn't hand me over. That must count for something.

Damien turns on the living room light and locks the door behind him. I tense, trying to scramble my brain around and figure out how I will escape out of here if things get heated between us. That's probably what he wants to prevent. What if he's saving himself now in exchange for me? No, he wouldn't do that. Right?

He walks to me, grabs my hand, and pulls me toward his bedroom. I can feel the anger emanating from his body in waves as he takes off his dress shirt and jeans, until he's standing in front of me in just his boxer briefs. He makes no move to take those off though, and I go to the edge of the bed and sit down.

"You have to know..." He kneels in front of me, his hands coming around my waist, his head on my lap. He stays like that for a few seconds, then he looks up and into my eyes. My nipples harden, my breaths getting shallow. *Damn it, Hallie, get it together.* His ocean eyes swirl, "When I look at you, I know *you* know."

I shake my head because I don't understand what I know anymore. In fact, I'm so freaking confused I don't even know what to think. "You," I grab his face, digging my fingers and nails into him until I draw blood on his jaw, crescent moons marked on his skin, "*You fucking betrayed me.*" My face crumples, but I have no more tears for him. "So no, I don't know shit anymore."

Damien's jaw clenches, but he makes no move to touch the cuts. Tears gather in his eyes until one spills over, and it feels like my heart is breaking. How many times can it take this? My eyes flutter closed, unable to look at him for one more second. "I won't give you up," he whispers, his voice breaking. "I would burn down this fucking world for you."

Is that truly how he feels? Is this love?

Do I love him?

I think about never seeing him again, never hearing his voice. The thought of it makes me sick, and I feel the bile in the back of my throat. Can I live like that? Will I ever stop feeling this way? Can I survive this?

"I-" My voice breaks, and I stop myself. "Don't know what to say right now." I grab his hand, not reciprocating his confession. "Can we go to bed? I'm exhausted."

He nods, the frown making his eyebrows furrow and his forehead crease.

"If that's what you want."

I wait in bed with my eyes closed for what feels like hours, but he still doesn't go to sleep. I can tell by the way he keeps fidgeting that he's not going to fall asleep any time soon, and I curse myself for coming here with him in the first place and not making him take me home.

Damien lies on his side facing me, and I only know that because I can feel his breath on my cheek, his hand coming to

rest over my heart. I do my best not to move and pretend I'm asleep, but I wonder if he can tell.

His fingers splay over my skin, and his face comes closer to mine until his nose is against my own. Soft lips meet mine in the gentlest kiss he has ever given me, and his tears trail down my own face. *No, baby, don't cry.* I didn't know someone else's pain could be so heart-wrenching, but as he lies on my pillow with his lips against mine, I've never felt more gutted.

"Te amo tanto, mi amor," he whispers against my lips, another tear sizzling on my skin, making me wish I could open my eyes and ask him what that means. *"Vas a estar bien, te lo prometo."*

He wipes the tears off my cheeks, and I pretend to stir, turning away from him until I face the door. I keep my eyes open this time; I can't actually afford to fall asleep. I need to get the fuck out of here, no matter how much my body, my heart, my fucking soul wants to stay tied to him. The pain in my heart is excruciating, and I never thought it could break like this before. This wasn't even a possibility in my brain when I gave Damien a chance, and now the regret runs deep as I realize my heart is even more shattered than it has ever been with Zayne.

How is that possible? I thought Zayne had my whole heart once upon a time, but now I realize it's split in two, and I don't get a slice of it anymore. That much was clear when I didn't even seek Zayne out at the party. He wasn't even at the forefront of my mind any longer.

It takes a while, but once his breaths even out and turn heavy, I know I need to go before he wakes again, even if I can't ever put myself back together. Even if this is the hardest thing I've ever had to do.

I have to do this.

But how am I going to leave here without making noise?

I get out of bed, not putting on my shoes so I can keep quiet and look back at him. He's also facing the door, his face peaceful and his breathing heavy. I want to engrain his face into my memory forever, so I can't forget him. My heart beats a little faster at the thought of never seeing him again, and it physically hurts. Maybe this is the wrong choice. Maybe next to him is where I've always belonged. Because why would doing the right thing hurt this bad?

Leave, Hallie.

I place a hand on my chest like it's going to ease the pain, and whisper, "Bye, Damien." Sneaking down the hall, I turn on my flashlight on the lowest setting, focusing all my attention on not stumbling on anything that could be loud, and give me away.

Finally, I reach the front door. I honestly didn't think I'd get this far, and I hold my breath as I unlatch the lock. It's fucking loud. But he doesn't come. He doesn't chase after me. Maybe he is sleeping, or maybe he's done with us.

My breaths come in pants, my hands shaking. I don't want to do this. I don't. But I still grab the handle and twist it,

opening the door and walking into the dark of the night.

Leaving him behind.

Sometimes the hardest thing and the right thing are one and the same.

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CHAPTER 32

Damien

I stand in the bedroom doorway, hearing the door click closed.

As soon as it does, I go to the living room to look out the nearest window. Hallie runs toward the apartment complex's entrance without looking around once, utterly unaware of her surroundings. This is exactly why I didn't want to be out of her life. She has no situational awareness, whatsoever.

She suddenly stops in her tracks, as if she can feel my gaze, and looks at my window. I place my hand on it, showing her I am, in fact, here, and her own hand comes to her mouth to cover it for a quick moment. She then lifts it in the air in a weak wave and turns around again, taking my heart with her.

My breath fogs the window from how I'm pressing my face against it until I can no longer see her. I can't believe I fucking did that.

I let her go.

It was a stupid thing to do, but I'm hoping she gets out of here, away from this town, somewhere I can never find her again. Because if I do, I won't let her go.

It's bad enough I told her I love her, but at least she didn't understand me. Maybe I should've said it in English, then that might have changed her mind. All that matters is that I meant it. It's the only reason I haven't offered her to the cartel on a silver platter. A smarter man would've done it already and saved himself. Now I have to watch my back for the rest of my, probably short, life. There's no way I can live this way for long.

Why the cartel wants her is beyond me, yet I've never really been in a position to ask questions. I've always received orders and executed them; now that I think about it, I shouldn't have gone in blind for so many jobs.

I never should've listened to my fucking dad and joined in. I could've had a normal life or as close to normal as anyone has. But it would've been *mine*. I have a degree, for fuck's sake, I could go anywhere I wanted. Be anyone too.

I beat my forehead against the glass of the window until I feel a dull ache throbbing on the top of my head. I'll take any pain at this point other than the one that feels like it's gutting me from the inside out.

Let her go.

My chest is on fire. I've never known heartache like this. I don't even think I've loved someone before, other than my brothers. Yes, I've had girlfriends in the past and cared about

them, but I never told them I loved them. It certainly didn't leave me weak in the knees when they walked out of my life.

Even still, I force myself to get dressed and put my holster on my hip, my gun safely tucked under my shirt. I grab a suitcase out of my walk-in closet and start to put some essentials in it. Clothes, shoes, a hygiene kit, three guns, the money in the safe, and lastly, a folder with all of my important documents. I make sure to grab not just my new fake identities as well as Hallie's, but my real social security card and birth certificate too. Just in case.

Once packed, I turn off all the lights in the apartment and text my friend, letting him know I need everything moved out tomorrow and sold and to use his Power of Attorney to cancel the lease. I'll pay any amount required to break it. I want no ties to this place. I'm not coming back.

I look around as I lock the front door, and when I'm sure no one is lurking in the shadows, I hurry to my car and put everything in the trunk. It's cold when I get in, and I hate that I couldn't warm it up beforehand. Nonetheless, I'm in a hurry. I don't even have time to be sad about leaving my motorcycle behind. Riding has saved my life more than I can count, and I'll have to buy another wherever I end up.

As I get on the highway to check into a hotel, my phone begins to ring. My dad's name flashes across the screen, and I steel myself for what I know is the beginning of the end for me. He won't protect me from them, he never has. Victor will

not be the one to sacrifice his own fucking head for anyone else.

I accept the phone call, hold my breath, and wait for him to speak.

“Damien.” Goosebumps rise on my arms, and I rub them with my free hand absentmindedly.

“Father.” There was a time when I felt like he was the closest person to me, like he was my whole life, back when he took me in and gave me a lucrative job. Now, I see him as an obstacle. Someone who will kill me just to keep his position. Blood ties don’t matter in this game. Water is thicker than blood in every case when it comes to them.

“Where is the girl?”

I exhale, and it’s loud in my ears. I can just imagine it grating on his nerves, and a smile of satisfaction lights my face. “Gone.”

“I can’t help you if you don’t help *yourself*.” His voice goes up an octave, unmistakably annoyed that he even had to make this phone call. If I didn’t know better, I would think he’s showing fatherly concern. Only I really know he’s more put out by having to give me a millisecond of his valuable time.

“I know damn well you won’t be helping me at all.” I chuckle, “Anything I tell you, you’ll say to them.”

After a brief pause, he replies, “That doesn’t mean I don’t want you to be okay.” I know they’re coming after me, but

they're probably going after her first. I just hope she's smart enough to get the fuck out of here.

"I'll be waiting for them."

I hang up the call, pulling up to a hotel at the River Walk. They'll come to my apartment first, break-in, and once they realize I've left they will go on a scavenger hunt. It's a good thing I have millions of dollars in a suitcase. I have to cover my tracks from now on. I can't afford to use a debit or credit card in my name for the rest of my life.

And neither can Hallie.

If she does, they will know exactly where she is. But how do I warn her? There's no guarantee that she hasn't blocked me or even that she will answer a call. A text message will have to do once I'm settled.

I pull up into a garage parking spot, the tab is thirty dollars a night, which is ridiculous for a hotel if you're asking me, but I need the safety it provides. Not everyone can just come in here and look around, they must have a room. It's a good thing I already had a reservation.

The hotel is not luxurious by any means, but I have to save some money if I want to make it last. I also don't want to draw attention to myself. I get my suitcase out and go directly to my room, looking around before I open it with the keycard. I don't want to be spotted; I don't want anyone to know where I am.

I'm probably not going to sleep tonight, and I didn't bring any electronics with me other than my phone, because I don't

want to be tracked. However, I can still access Hallie's accounts, and I have the app for her bank account logged in to my phone. I have to keep tabs on her, I can't just abandon her. I need to know where she is at all times, where she goes, where she stays, and if it ever remains inactive for more than a day, then I know she's been taken. If it was this easy for me to get into, it'd be even easier for the cartel.

The bed dips as I sit on it, and I take out my phone to call Hallie. I know she probably won't answer, and if her phone is being intercepted, a voicemail will be risky. Nevertheless, I can't just leave her in the dark.

The phone rings for a while, and just before I think it's going to voicemail, she answers. She's sniffing, and my heart squeezes in my chest a little more. I want to ask her if she's as broken as I am, if she misses me already as I do her, if she made it home alright. How does it feel to live without me already?

But instead, I say, "Babe, you have to get out of your place. Pack some of your things, your most important documents, and go stay in a hotel. Don't go to work, don't even take your car unless it has a parking garage." I hear her gasp. "Don't use your debit card. Take out as much cash as you can."

"For how long?" Her voice trembles, and I hear rustling in the background, a zipper too. She might be getting her shit together, after all.

"Until we can leave the country."

Something crashes, probably falling to the ground. “I’m not leaving the country, Damien. I will not be scared into running.”

“Your fucking life depends on it, Hallie!” I yell, and she hangs up the phone.

Fuck!

I can’t do this right now. I won’t be able to protect her if she refuses to do the things I say. There’s no way I can take her out of the country against her will, and I know I won’t be able to convince her at this point. I’ll have to go somewhere else, Breck maybe, and hope they don’t find us until I can make a more concrete plan.

After an hour, I track her phone and see that she did listen to me, at least on this one thing. She’s staying in a hotel on the opposite side of town from her apartment. A quick search tells me the exact name of the hotel that matches the address. Now I just must figure out a plan to get her out of there. But before that, I need some fucking rest. I won’t be getting much of that later.

Then it’s time to play.

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CHAPTER 33

Hallie

I t's been five days here, completely isolated, and I can't wait one more day to get out. I pace my cheap hotel that has a king bed, a closet, and even a couch that pulls out to a bed. This is all I need for now. I'm heading north to Alaska, and I need to be as far away as possible from Texas, from fucking Mexico. I don't know how I'll get a nursing license there without being tracked, but I'll figure it out or do something else for work. My life is not worth this bullshit.

I call Brittany, and she answers on the first ring. I don't know if she's working or at home, but I'm glad she always picks up since this is an emergency. "Hey, babe, remember how I told you something was fishy with Damien?"

"What the fuck did he do?" she growls, and I know her protective side is coming out. But even she can't save me from this. She can only save herself.

"He sold me."

Brit gasps. "As in... human trafficking?"

“That’s what I’ve gathered from this, Brit. But I’m not sticking around to find out. I’m leaving tonight.”

“Where the hell are you going? Alone?”

“Yes. I don’t know yet,” I lie. I can’t say a location over the phone, and I don’t think I’ll ever tell anyone again. I also need to get rid of this phone, just in case. “You need to do the same. I don’t know if someone will come after you trying to get to me. Please, leave Texas.”

“I love you,” she says. “I’ll leave, but please call me again and tell me where you are going. I want to go with you.” The desperation in her voice and the sniffles make me grip the phone tighter. *Don’t break down yet.*

“I love you too,” I tell her, tears prickling my eyes. She’s like a sister to me, she’s been with me through my lowest lows, and now when she’s offering to pick me up again. I can’t let her. I have to start over somewhere new. “I promise I will,” I lie to her again, and it hurts to do so, but she can’t be found with me if they come after me or take me. I can’t risk her life as well.

I cut the phone call off, knowing I can’t bear listening to her sad voice. Instead, I text Zayne. I’ve been trying to reach him since I left Damien’s place, but he’s probably nursing his wounds somewhere. He was completely covered in blood when we left. He also probably hates me for choosing Damien. The sting of betrayal is deep for him.

Even still, I text him again with my address and to meet me by the pool. I’ll wait for him there for a while, and if he

doesn't show up, I'll leave. I have to do everything in my power to say goodbye. I can't just leave him without an explanation. He's not strong like Damien, he'd fall apart, drown in drugs, probably die, and then it would all be my fault.

No, I won't live with that guilt for the rest of my life.

My suitcase is heavy as I lift it off the stand, and the wheels are loud on the tile as I set it down. I double-check the room to make sure I'm not leaving anything behind, then walk directly to my car to put my luggage away.

Thankfully, tonight is eighty degrees outside and the pool is heated, so waiting to see if Zayne shows up will not be inconvenient in the slightest. If he doesn't come, then at least I took a dip in the pool. No harm done.

I take off my shorts and t-shirt until I'm standing in my cheeky bikini, half my ass showing with it. Maybe I should care since this is a family-friendly pool, but as I get the Xanax out of my pocket and swallow it dry, I decide I don't give a fuck. It's deserted here anyway, and the staff doesn't come out at night. At least, they haven't since I've been coming here every night. There are cameras, but since I won't be here too long, I don't care about that either.

I probably shouldn't be taking downers before a long drive, but it was calling my fucking name. Also, since I won't be returning to work any time soon, I'm not worried about failing a drug test. Speaking of work, I did email my boss with a resignation letter and explained I had to move out of the state

due to a family emergency and couldn't stay for the two-week notice they usually require. I can only hope they will be willing to put in a good word for me when the time comes to get another job. But I'm not counting on it. I'll probably have to start from scratch since I didn't complete a full year.

I dive into the pool, which I probably wouldn't do if I was taller. When I resurface for air, Zayne is sitting on the steps, waist-deep in the water, with a joint between his fingers. My heart skips a beat knowing what I'm about to do, but I also know this is what's best for me. I have to learn to choose myself, and this is me doing exactly that.

The little blue pills have relaxed me already, and my body feels weightless as I swim toward him. The steps are rough as I sit my ass down next to him, and he passes the joint to me. He always knows how to help take the edge off.

I smile and take a long hit, coughing when the burn hits my throat, just to take a second hit. He chuckles, and I bump my shoulder against him playfully. It's been a long time since I had pot, and my head is swimming in the best way. Once I take a third hit, I hand it back. I need this high to wear off fast if I want to drive soon.

Zayne's breath tickles my ear, "Miss me, baby?"

Every hair on my body stands on end, and the whisper makes my heart skip three fucking beats and convert to an arrhythmia. I'm going to need a goddamn hospital visit after this. Why does he have to affect me so much? But maybe this

is precisely what I need before I disappear from his life forever.

I turn my head to face him and come nose to nose with him, his minty breath making my lips tingle. The urge to close the space between us is so strong I have to dig my fingernails into my arm to keep myself from doing it.

“Not even a little,” I lie through my teeth, as always, because what am I supposed to say? I’ve missed you since the moment you left? You’re my ultimate weakness? I can’t help but remember his kisses, the frenzy, the fucking desperation I feel every time I’m with him. But it must end. *Now*. I probably won’t ever get over him, but I’m leaving. *I have no choice*.

He passes the joint to me again, and I take it, greedily sucking until I fill my lungs. Fuck it, I need to be high as fuck for this. I turn to him, letting the smoke escape my lips and nose simultaneously, the same way he’s always done to me. It drives me crazy for him. He grins and his eyes darken.

Zayne leans in, and we’re sharing breaths from how close we are to each other. I missed this, *him*, and I’m craving the pain more than ever. “I hate my life right now,” he says against my lips, and I lick them. My tongue brushes against him, and I can taste his sweetness.

“What do you hate?”

“Everything.” His hand grabs the back of my head, pulling me further into him, his lips meeting mine briefly before he takes my bottom lip between his teeth and bites it. “Losing you.”

I shake my head, but I don't reply.

How do you tell someone they'll never lose you, even if you're not with them? I know I'll never be free of Zayne for as long as I live, and that's harder than anything I've ever had to face.

I'm a slave to the pain, a fiend thirsty for the hurt, and I never feel satisfied with what he inflicts.

I always want *more*.

We suck the life out of each other and make sure there are no pieces of us left in the process. It's sick as fuck, but it's who we are.

What I feel for him, what I will always feel, is a scream, a cry, a storm laced with desperation. It will always feel urgent, needy, and demanding.

"What am I doing here, Hallie?" he asks me, and I let my hand go to his hair, my fingers getting lost in the soft strands.

There's nothing gentle about us. It's a give-and-take of pain unlike anything I've ever experienced. I yank his head back and expose his throat for me, then bite him hard. He doesn't make a sound, just grips my face roughly, like he's on the verge of losing his mind. And damn, I fucking *need* him to. I don't want to talk yet; I want him to make me remember him.

"Why don't you show me?" I smile, coming back for a second taste of his lips, and I feel him smile against me right before I slip my tongue in his mouth and let the need I feel take over my body.

Zayne's hand wraps around my throat, slightly constricting my airway enough that I can still breathe with some effort. He takes my bottom lip into his mouth again, sucking gently. My pussy throbs at the contact, and when he bites my lip until I taste blood, my nails dig into his back.

Hurt me.

Zayne lifts me and sets me on the concrete, my ass hanging off the edge of the pool, his knees on the second step. We're not coming out of this unscathed; this is about to fucking hurt. He crushes his body against mine, and the air whooshes out of my lungs, but I don't need oxygen, just *him*.

His fingers trail up my arms, summoning goosebumps on their journey to my shoulders, and then he pulls the strings of my bathing suit, taking them off and letting them float on the water beside him. I feel him lowering his pants just enough to take his cock out and press it against my entrance.

"You have five seconds to change your mind," he says, and my heart stutters and trips on itself, not knowing what to do with the feelings battling inside of it. His eyes are on my chest, which rises and falls rapidly. I'm terrified, of these feelings, him, *us*.

I know he can tell.

I stay very still, letting the five seconds pass without stopping him. Zayne smiles, a devil with an angel's face, and closes the distance between us. The press of his lips to mine sends tingles down my spine, and my pussy gets even wetter as one of his hands trails up my leg to cup my ass. His other

hand grabs my chin, and he enters me in one swift thrust, hitting as deep as he'll go.

“You’re *mine*,” he says, and for now, I give in to it. “Never his.”

He reaches down between us and circles my clit as he pounds into me, his balls slapping against my ass until I’m panting. I seek the friction, rocking into the feeling of pure bliss flooding my body.

There’s a pressure building inside of me as I move against his fingers, and I close my eyes as I try to feel it more intensely.

Zayne’s lips find my ear, moving against it as he speaks. “You’ve been a fucking slut, baby.” His free hand is everywhere until he grabs onto my hair and tugs it back, my neck uncomfortably bent at an odd angle, my face scraping against the concrete.

“What are you going to do about it?”

I moan as he hits the spot that makes me see black, and he tightens his hold on my hair until tears spring to my eyes, trailing down my cheeks. “You want me to fuck you how he fucked you?” His breath hits my ear, making shivers skate down my spine. “Well, I’m not him, and you better fucking remember that.” He drags me off the edge, pulling my body into the water while we’re still connected, and the scrapes on my back sting when he submerges my body.

He doesn't allow me to take a breath before he takes us to the bottom of the pool and gets on his knees, grabbing my ass and fucking me deeper. My head falls back when his fingers find my clit again, and I can see the lights reflecting on the pool's surface. I dig my fingernails into him when I need to take a breath, but he doesn't listen, just keeps pounding into me. I look at his face, and he grins under the water, then grabs my head and kisses me. I try not to lose any more air while doing it, but it's impossible, and when he pulls away, taking my lip with him for a second, there's a trail of blood in the water floating in front of our faces. I tap him, attempting to get out of his grip so I can go up for air, but he keeps me there until spots begin floating in my vision.

When we break the surface, I gasp for air, but he just turns me around and presses my body against the edge of the pool, and I hold on to the lip with both hands. He enters me once more, his thrusts turn languid as he rubs his pelvis against me, and he grabs one of my hands and places it on my clit. The feeling of the friction against my clit and him fucking me has me arching my back, trying to fuck him too, and my eyes roll to the back of my head.

"Is this how you like to be fucked?" His voice sounds strained as he picks up his pace, tugging my head back and eliciting a whimper from me.

Fuck yes.

I moan loudly into my hand, biting my knuckles until I draw blood. It feels so good I might just pass out. Except, in doing

that, I let go of the edge of the pool and go underwater again. It doesn't impede him though, and I don't stop rubbing my clit even as he lifts me out of the water by my hair, my scalp screaming in fucking pain.

My hand comes back to the edge of the pool, and I open my mouth to cry out, but he shoves his fingers into it instead, making me gag on them. He fucks my pussy harder, driving his fingers further in, and I can feel myself about to wretch, yet he doesn't let up. I breathe through my nose slowly, but just as I do, he spreads my ass cheeks with one hand and enters me *there*.

I scream around his fingers, and drool starts coming out from between them, dripping down my neck. The pain is intense. It feels like I'm on fire, and just as my eyes water and adjust to the fullness, he pulls out and enters my pussy again.

His grunts send my stomach tumbling down, adding fuel to the fire. He's still grabbing on to me, spreading me, and thrusts back into my ass again. "You look so good when you take me in both places, baby." It's filthy, and exactly what I missed about him. We are completely uninhibited, and we take from each other until there's nothing more to give.

I rub my clit in faster circles, shutting my eyes as I feel my ass tighten around him. His fingers leave a wet trail down my chin as his hand comes to my neck and squeezes. The lack of oxygen to my brain is the perfect combination because it somehow makes everything feel *so much fucking better*.

“Yes,” he moans, wrapping his arm around my middle, and pulling me even closer to him. “That’s my good, little dirty fucking slut.” *Fucking hell.*

The orgasm almost takes me back under, it would have if he wasn’t holding on to me. The feeling of fullness, along with the friction on my clit is almost too much. Holy fuck, it feels better than my pussy. My mouth opens on a silent scream just as he bites my shoulder, and the added pain takes me all the way to the finish line. With blurry eyes, I fuck him back, and I try to focus on something, anything, but I’m seeing two.

Panic seizes my chest as my lungs burn for oxygen. My hands reach for him, scratching at his arm, his chest, his face. He only tightens his hold even more and shushes me.

I mentally slap myself as I start to fade, and I can barely register my body. The Xanax and his hand might be the death of me tonight, and as stars explode in my vision, all I can think of is how I will never experience this again.

Zayne moans his pleasure into my neck, and then his pace becomes erratic. His hand loosens around my throat, and he releases inside of me, his final thrust bringing us completely flush together as he moans into my ear.

The best sound I’ve ever heard.

He stays like that for a minute, and neither of us moves. His demeanor has totally changed, and his arm comes around my chest as he pulls me closer to his body. “What’s the real reason I’m here, baby? And don’t you dare say it was for *this*.” He knows me too well.

“To say goodbye,” I whisper, and his teeth bite down on my neck again.

“Never.” His voice is hoarse as he pulls out of me and turns me around, pushing me back against the wall of the pool forcefully. He lowers himself so he’s at face level with me and cups my face, staring into my eyes.

My own eyes water, “I can’t stay. They’re coming for me.”

I grab his face as well and pull him toward my lips. “Let’s go, Hallie.” I look into his green orbs, the blue flecks in his irises almost hypnotizing me. “Let’s leave here and never come back.”

“Where to?” I frown, knowing damn well he can’t come with me. I have plans, I need to protect him. None of this includes him.

“Anywhere but here.” His thumb rubs my cheek, and I kiss him, long and slow. “It’s always been us, baby. Forever.” I believe him. Fuck, I believe everything he tells me, but it doesn’t make a difference now. Maybe later in life, we’ll find each other again. Maybe fate will have my back.

I close my eyes, and the forest smell that seems to define his whole essence relaxes me. “Okay. Can you get my suitcase from the hotel room? I need to use the bathroom and get dressed.”

“Yes.” He pulls away, walking backward with a smile. “Where’s the key?” I watch him go up the pool steps, looking around before I even reply.

I clear my throat, so he can't hear my voice break, "In my pants." He bends down to grab it, puts his shoes back on, and heads back inside, dripping a trail of water behind him.

I don't grab my bathing suit bottoms. Instead, I run out of the pool, put my shorts on, and then slip my shirt over my head. I don't have much time, my hotel room is only a few doors down from the one that leads to the pool. Thankfully I'm just wearing flip-flops, and I grab my car keys and run to my car.

The leather seats soak beneath me, probably fucking ruined now, and I blast the heat as soon as I turn on the car because I'm freezing with all this water dripping off me. My headlights come on, and just as I reverse out of the parking spot, Zayne comes running toward my car. Although I don't stop. I speed up a little more as he continues to run after me, and when he stops with his hands on his knees, I say a silent goodbye.

I'm so sorry.

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CHAPTER 34

Zayne

I watch Hallie drive away with my hands on my knees as I gasp for air, but I run back to my car with all my might to chase after her, my heart pounding in my ears. I'm not a superstitious person by any means, but something is telling me I need to reach her right fucking now. Something doesn't feel right.

"Fuck!" I scream as I hit my steering wheel, burning out of the parking lot and heading in her direction. She's probably on the interstate by now, so I run all the lights and stop signs, not slowing down until I'm on the ramp. Once I make sure there's no one in my lane, I speed up again. I can see her SUV from here, and I don't even want to blink in case she disappears, again.

I remember all the times I've made her laugh, and I hope she'll let me do it for a bit longer. I'm not ready to give her up, not yet, not ever. She can't just decide I'm not the one she wants. She's not allowed to do that. Her teeth are sunk deep into me, not letting me up for air, and I know I'd be glad to let

her pull me to the bottom and drown me if that's what it takes to spend one more minute next to her.

I call her, my phone connecting to the Bluetooth, but she rejects it. I'm not fucking giving up that easily, however. My speedometer reads one hundred, and even still, I push my gas pedal even more and call her again.

"I can't do this," Hallie says as she answers. "I'm sorry, but I can't. Stop coming after me, please." I can hear the way she's crying, and it makes a lump form in my throat. I can't even breathe.

"Why?" I choke on a sob, tears filling my eyes until everything's blurry. I grip my shirt with one hand like it's going to stop my heart from shattering. "Are you leaving with him?"

She's thinking of Damien, even though he did this to her. Even though we might fucking die because of him, she still cares about him, *for* him. "No," she replies, her voice shaking, and I can't tell if she's lying to me. For once, I really don't know. "I'm going far away from both of you. Alone."

I know her better than anyone else, no matter what she tells herself to sleep better at night. I know her quirks, her fears, her hopes, her dreams. I remember every single encounter, no matter how high I was, and she's my heart. The love of my life. No matter how fucking twisted we are with each other. She can't do this.

"Please, baby," I cry, and she does too, the sounds broken and hoarse. I hold my breath for an answer, but it never comes.

“Pull over. Let me come with you.”

“I can’t,” she says. A deep breath from her end echoes in my car. I know I’m not going to like what comes out of her mouth next. “You should know it’s not just you anymore. Not just *us*.” My stomach bottoms out at those words. “I can’t choose between you two.”

Why does it feel like I’m being stabbed?

I brace myself for what she’s going to say next, how she’s going to break my heart, tear my fucking life apart, suck the soul from my body. “You want both of us?” I switch to the left lane and speed up.

“You already knew that,” she replies. I don’t dare break down yet, but I’m so fucking close to doing it. “That’s why I have to be alone.”

I shake my head, laughing. “I’ll never leave you.” There are bright headlights behind me, the first car I’ve seen since I merged. It’s one in the morning, and this dumbass looks like he’s swerving everywhere. “You can’t run far enough that I won’t find you, Hals.” I don’t even bother to look at my speedometer as my foot pushes further down on the gas pedal. “I don’t care if you love him too. You’re fucking *it* for me. My life, my world...” I look over at my rearview mirror and see the headlights getting closer, “my *everything*.”

A tear escapes my left eye as I get even closer to her, but the car behind me hits me, sending me spinning, and spinning, and spinning. My face scrunches up as I hit a wall, and the airbag

deploys, making contact with my body as something sharp hits my chest.

Hallie screams into my Bluetooth, a shrill sound in the quiet of the night. “Zay?” she yells. “What the fuck?”

I gasp, trying to catch my breath, but then the car goes still and I’m upside down. It’s even harder to breathe like this, and panic starts gripping me by the throat. Pain unlike anything I’ve ever felt consumes every cell in my body, flooding me until blood pours out of my mouth in spurts.

“Zayne!” Hallie screams, and I claw at the airbag, my seat, the doors. “Oh my fucking God!” I scramble for my phone, but I can’t find it. “I’m going to call the police!” Her screams are painful to my ears, yet her voice is the only one I want to hear if I’m going to die here.

“No,” I cough up more blood, “I can’t find my phone. Stay with me, please.” My voice trembles, and I see headlights shining in my direction.

My body feels hot, my chest tightens to the point that I might pass out, and I’m fucking terrified. My hands go up to my throat, searching for something, for *air*, but it won’t come. Finally, I can inhale deeply, but it still doesn’t feel like enough.

Three men are headed in my direction. I can see them from the mirror still attached to my door, even if it’s a little cracked. Fear grips my body as I reach for my seatbelt again, but it won’t budge. “Never mind, call them!”

“I love you,” she says. “Don’t you dare fucking leave me.”
And then she hangs up on me.

The sound of glass crunching under shoes is the only one in this desolate road, other than the blood rushing in my ears. One of the men kneels next to my broken window, not even caring that his knees are on the shards of glass, and sticks his hand inside, pressing something into my nose. I try to pry his hand off me, but the force of it makes me inhale, and when I taste the bitterness of it in my mouth, I know I’m fucked.

I shake my head, my vision dark at the edges, and I try to fight it just a bit longer. Tears escape my eyes, and I rabidly grapple with the seatbelt to no avail. “Get the fuck away,” I slur, reaching for my phone that I can’t locate. But I feel myself slipping the longer he holds that shit to my face, and my hands start to feel numb, too weak to get him off me.

I see Hallie’s face when I close my eyes, and it’s as if a highlight reel replays our best memories back to me. Her laugh, her smile, the crinkle in her eyes. Her hand in mine. My body on hers. Her lips against mine. I blink one more time and grin. At least this is distracting them from her.

Even if it’s for just a bit longer.

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CHAPTER 35

I pull over at the gas station, my hands shaking and my breaths coming fast. Even the Xanax in my blood can't stop this panic attack. My chest hurts, and something akin to rage burns through my veins like an uncontained wildfire, consuming me until only ashes are left in its wake. My chest becomes tight, tighter than it's ever been, and breathing is a chore. I'm panting, gasping, hyperventilating.

Someone hit him on purpose, that much is clear, and I think they were after me. Why can't he ever listen? Why would he do this?

I scream until my voice is hoarse, the images of the car flipping burned into my memory. Sobs rip from my throat until no more sounds come out, and I rest my head against the steering wheel.

He's dead.

I know it in my bones, my heart, my fucking soul.

But maybe God will have mercy on me for *once*.

Doubtful... although I'll still hold on to my scraps of hope.

I dial 911, but as I put the phone to my ear it's snatched from my hand. I scream, the echo of it hurting my ears, and look back just to come face-to-face with Damien. He hangs up my phone, turns it off, and then throws it in the trunk.

Fear grips my body until I'm immobile. I thought he cared about me and wanted to let me escape. What sort of sick game is he playing?

"You won't be needing that anymore," he states, scooting to the edge of the seat until our faces are close together. "You're coming with me."

"Fuck that," I reply harshly. "I won't be doing anything I don't want to fucking do."

"That much was clear tonight." His eyes burn into me, "You fucked him, Hallie." A bead of sweat travels down my spine, my body getting a hot flash. "I had to watch the whole time."

"You didn't have to—" I start, but he interrupts me.

"How could you do that to me? Us?" I blink, at a loss for words.

I don't fucking know! I just mess everything up all the time. I can't make the right choices, ever. That much is evident to me. I have no idea how to do things as I'm supposed to. It's never been taught to me.

He searches my eyes, and I glance down, tears falling down my face. I nod my head, yes, but I can't answer him as I stab him in the back this way. I don't even care that we're not

together. It feels like I fucked him over, even though I just walked away from him.

Why do I have to want them both?

“You really shouldn’t have done that, babe,” Damien whispers, and I know he feels the wound I’ve inflicted, one of which he will slowly bleed out from. None of this screams a quick death.

I wipe the tears from my eyes, a sneer on my face. “You left me no choice,” I scoff, even though it’s a lie. I’ve always had a choice. It doesn’t fucking matter, I want, *need*, to take my anger out on someone. “*You* did this to us, to me.” My laugh sounds manic, so unlike me. “I actually loved you. I managed that much, somehow.” I let that slip out, and his face changes.

His hand comes to rest on my face, cupping my left cheek. The seatbelt is digging into my side, yet I refuse to take it off. I have to get the fuck out of here and soon, but without him. *Think, Hallie.* How the hell do I do that?

“And yet, you still loved him.” His gaze is intense, the blue of his eyes looks like a fucking tsunami ready to destroy everything in its path, and he looks at me like he wants to burn me, hurt me, own me. “Did he fuck you better?”

“No one fucks me like you do,” I say slowly, my voice soft, neither confirming nor denying. He might just snap my neck if I make a wrong move.

I glance around, letting my eyes stray for a brief moment before meeting his again. It’s a huge gas station, and it feels

like someone might help me if I screamed. If I somehow got out of here, I could go inside and ask for help, giving him enough time to escape if he wanted to. Even if it's with my car. I'll just report it stolen.

“I thought you'd say that.” He smirks, but his eyes are cold on mine. “You've always known just what to say, haven't you?”

I don't reply. I need to keep my damn mouth shut, since it clearly doesn't help me when I need it to. When the chance comes, I'm going to run like a bat out of hell, but until then, I need to appear docile.

“Here's how this is going to work,” Damien continues, “You're going to get in the passenger side, and I'm going to drive us away from here. Permanently. Then, you're going to get on a fucking plane with me and leave this country behind.”

I haven't answered yet, but he must see the defiance in my eyes, because he exhales and rests his forehead against mine, seemingly almost...defeated. He gently grabs the back of my head and leans in as if he's going to kiss me. I close my eyes, too weak to pull away, except when the gust of air hits my face, I realize he's no longer in front of me. Instead, he jabs a needle into my arm, pushing the plunger immediately.

I feel it scrape against my bone right before he pulls it out, and my body starts going completely numb. “No!” I scream, slumping to the side, my head hitting the window. The glass is slightly cooler than my skin, and I feel my eyes getting heavy even as I try to blink repeatedly to keep them open. My vision

blurs at the edges, and I close my eyes, surrendering myself to my fate.

I'm unsure of how much time goes by, but when I open my eyes again, the sun is rising and painting the sky in bright orange. Except I'm not in my car anymore, I'm in Damien's. What the fuck did he do with mine? Did he leave it at a hotel? Gas station?

My limbs feel heavy, my body weak, and my mind fuzzy. It feels like I have a hangover, my cottonmouth unbearable. But, then again, I did pop a Xanax and smoked pot right before being drugged all over again. He could've killed me, and I'm a little sad he didn't. Everything would be so much fucking easier if he had.

Damien's eyes are on the road, and even though I'm sure he's noticed I'm awake he doesn't interact with me. It pisses me the fuck off. The least he can do is explain himself after what he just put me through. "Where are we going?" I ask him, and it's so frustrating that he went from 'caring Damien', to one of few words and even fewer answers. After a minute of silence, "*Tell me.*"

It looks like west Texas with the windmills and flat acres that seem to never end. If I could take a wild guess, I think we're almost at the state line. He's been driving for at least eight hours, even with speeding and no traffic.

"Do you really want to know?" He smirks, and a chill runs down my spine. "Because this is a nightmare you won't be waking from." The road sign for Texline, Texas, is a few feet

ahead of us, and I turn my head to stare at him. I knew it. But there's not one trace of remorse on his face.

I want to scream at him. I want to open my car door and jump out. He seems to notice but merely smirks at me again, uncaring. Like he's in on a little secret, and I'm on the outs. The irony doesn't escape me. I've been on the outs of his secrets for months, and they all have involved me.

"You were running away with him. Taking what's *mine*." I glance at him in surprise, completely stunned, but he keeps his eyes trained on the road, not seeing my reaction. I think of grabbing the steering wheel, veering us off the road and killing us. But when I imagine him dying, I feel no comfort. Just panic. He shakes his head, and his hands grip the steering wheel tighter until his knuckles blanch. "I took it back."

I laugh, "What the fuck are you even talking about?" I grab his arm, digging my fingers into it. "I left him behind!"

"You would've gone back for him, Hallie." He looks at me with narrowed eyes, "I fucking know you. And after what I watched you let him do last night... to you, I know for a fact you'd do anything he asked you to."

I try to distract him from his jealous rage. "Where the fuck are we going, Damien?"

"The cabin," Damien replies nonchalantly, shrugging one shoulder. I tense, "Until we can leave the country."

A tear escapes me as I think of how stupid I've been. I should've never gotten in my car without checking the

backseat. I didn't use the debit card like he told me to, and I didn't use anything to leave a trail. So how did he find me, then? The way he turned off my phone and threw it in the trunk of my SUV comes to the forefront of my mind, and I realize he fucking tracked me through it, but didn't want anyone else to be able to... so he made it stop.

Damien looks at me and grins. He knows exactly what I'm thinking. Is there anything I can keep from him at this point? Does he have a tracker for my thoughts, too? "It's just you and me now, love."

"I can't do this." I try to open the door, but he only drives faster. If I jump out, I'll die, but isn't that what I've wanted for the longest time? *Do it.*

"Close the fucking door," he growls, grabbing my arm. "You're leaving me no choice."

He pulls over, gets out of the car, and comes around to my side. After he opens my door, he lowers himself until he's at face-level with me. The tenderness in his eyes has me forgetting everything that's happened for a split second, and I close my eyes as his hand caresses my cheek. But that split second, that tiny blip in time, has me wanting to let him take over and ruin what's left of me. He's going to do it anyway, so why not be willing? I'm so tired of fighting this.

His lips brush across my forehead, and he pulls out another syringe. I know if I don't consent, he will just hold me down. I'm also aware that there's no fucking way I'll be able to escape from him. He's not going to let me out of his sight. At

this point, the only way out is through or out of a moving vehicle. I think, for now, I'll pick the option I will most likely survive.

I nod and look away from him, but this time he's gentle, almost loving, as he pinches the muscle in my shoulder and inserts the needle. I don't even feel it, and when my body feels heavy, he repositions me in the seat and closes the door softly.

Damien puts on his seatbelt, and I watch him search for one of my favorite songs and play it for me. I wish he wasn't so beautiful, so genuinely kind to me, that he'd search for my favorite song just to make me more comfortable. I'm not saying this isn't wrong, by any means. He's screwing me, taking my choices away from me, and drugging me, for fuck's sake.

But is it crazy to think maybe he's having mercy on me after all?

I wouldn't want to be awake for any of this, anyway.

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CHAPTER 36

Damien

Hallie's going to hate me for this, but as we get closer to the cabin, I just stop giving a fuck. I have bigger fish to fry and getting home undetected is the most important event on my to-do list for the day. Wiping her tears... not so much. I'm not insensitive, I understand why she's hurting. She trusted me, she let me into her life, and I betrayed her. But is it truly a betrayal if I saved her life? If I didn't even go through with handing her over? At this point, I'm doing more than anyone else could do for her in this situation. So why can't she see that, then? Is she that blinded by panic?

I'm not hurt by the fact that she's angry with me, I probably deserve that, but it does hurt me to take her away from the life she has built for herself. I know how hard she's worked for that. What doesn't affect me, though, is taking her away from *him*. From what I saw, my father did his job and pointed the cartel in the right direction. Good fucking riddance.

After what I witnessed last night, I probably would've killed him with my own bare hands if they hadn't done me the favor.

I can't believe she fucked him, in a goddamn public pool. Images of her spread wide open for him on the edge of the pool flood my mind, and I tighten my hands on the steering wheel, my jaw clenching.

That was something I could've lived my entire life without seeing, and I'm disappointed in her for going back and forth like this. I can't keep up with her bullshit anymore, except if it was a goodbye she was searching for... she fucking got it. That's the *last* fucking time she'll ever see him.

She's cried half the trip, and I think every tear she has shed has been for him. The last four hours she has spent unmedicated, basically since we passed the Colorado state line, per her request.

I've been taking back roads as much as I can, trying not to draw attention to ourselves, and we haven't stopped anywhere unless absolutely necessary. I do find it odd that she hasn't caused a scene or tried to run away during bathroom breaks. Although, she could also be feeling like shit from the two doses I used to knock her out. Not to mention the drugs I saw her doing before she started driving. She's so reckless when she feels lost, she's a danger to herself, and she doesn't even want to admit it. Or maybe she's self-aware but doesn't care.

Turns out that there are no more back roads available to the cabin and I will have to take the main road now, but thankfully we're only ten minutes away.

"I have to pee." I look over at Hallie, who proceeds to cross her legs, trying to make a point. "Now." She points at a gas

station, and I sigh. Not a chance. We're going home. No stops in this town.

"It's not happening, babe." I try to muster an apologetic tone, but she can wait just a little longer. She's a nurse, I know for a fact she can hold it longer than this. I'm not gambling with her life right now, and maybe she's been waiting this entire time to make a run for it since she knows her way around here. It was probably a mistake to have brought her here in the beginning of November. Especially now that it's Thanksgiving tomorrow, I bet she doesn't have much to be thankful for.

I do, though. As long as she's with me, I'll have plenty to be grateful for.

"I thought you didn't want me to hurt?" A frown takes over her face, but I know she's trying to manipulate me. She's a fast learner.

My jaw clenches and my nostrils flare, then a slow grin spreads across my face. She has this all wrong. "I only meant I want to be the only one to inflict the pain." She swallows audibly and nods, but she doesn't really get it. Not yet.

I'm fucking exhausted from driving with no rest, and I can't wait to take a damn nap. I'll probably have to sleep with one eye open for the rest of the time we're in the cabin, but I also have another problem.

Hallie.

She will probably try to run away at some point, and I need to be ready for it. I don't feel like chasing after her right now, but I will if I'm forced to.

As we drive to the front of the cabin, I open the garage door with my remote. It's dark now, and it's a new moon, which means the visibility is low. I make sure to stop and look around before I go up the driveway, just in case someone's already discovered us. I keep my headlights off and drive into the garage, then make sure no one's in here to greet us. Once I'm done looking around, I close the garage door and rest my head on the seat, closing my eyes and taking a few deep breaths.

This next part is going to be hard, I already know it, but she needs to understand I'm just trying to keep her safe. I will make her as comfortable as possible, for as long as possible. But if I have to force her ass, I will.

I get out of the car and walk to Hallie's side, but she shakes her head when I offer her my hand. She's wearing a cozy sherpa sweatshirt I got her and left in my car just for this, along with sweatpants and running shoes. Still, I know she must be cold. It's seventeen degrees and dropping, and it's always freezing in this garage.

"I'm not going in there with you," she says, and I laugh. I guess it's gonna have to be the hard way. "It's tainted."

"Well, it's about to get worse, love." I chuckle, but deep down, I don't want to hurt her. If I did, I would have handed her over and gotten this over with. However, I know I'll be

fucking destroyed if anything happens to her. “Come on, don’t make this harder than it has to be.” *Please*. Don’t make me do this to you. To us. I’ll take no pleasure in her pain.

“You’ll have to drag me in there,” Hallie replies, and I nod. She crosses her arms over her chest, and I reach into the car and grab her. She screams when I hoist her over my shoulder and swat her ass hard.

“Don’t scream.” I tighten my hold on her legs, and she punches at my back, telling me to let her go. “If someone else finds out we’re here, I promise they won’t be as nice as me.” She freezes at that, her breathing ragged.

I open the garage door that leads into the house, going to the alarm system to put in the code so it doesn’t go off. As soon as I close the door, I enable it all over again. The beep lets me know it’s ready to go, and I head to the thermostat to adjust the temperature. It’s freezing in here, and I can see our breath around us. I don’t dare turn on any lights, though, since there are windows everywhere. I should’ve thought that shit through before making this my safe house. Oh well, maybe next time.

All I know is that I can’t draw attention to us. As far as everyone else is concerned, this house is empty. If someone is watching from afar, they’ll continue to see an empty house. I had to count on my brother to stock the fridge and meal prep for us, which was stressful because I’m not sure if he took the necessary precautions to ensure that he wasn’t seen. I can’t be too demanding though, Joshua did me a huge favor, and I’ve

never asked anything of him before this ordeal. I did tell him the cartel was looking for me, but I didn't mention Hallie.

Surprisingly, she stays quiet as I set the thermostat to seventy-five and walk to a hallway she doesn't even know existed. I can tell she knows something is different by the way she stiffens in my arms, and it feels like she's gearing up for another fight.

"Where are we going?" Hallie whispers as I navigate through the darkness, walking quickly so she can't figure out how we got there. I don't want her to ever be able to get away from me. "Are you going to kill me?"

I chuckle, "Now where's the fun in that, love?" I purr. "I like to play with my toys." She starts fighting now, throwing her body around, and I won't lie, I almost drop her. Maybe I should. A little pain would calm her the fuck down.

Her nails dig into my skin as she pulls the back of my shirt up, and I wince. Fuck me, this is getting ridiculous. She continues to kick her legs and squirm, and I kind of want to knock her out again, but we're here anyway. I wonder how she will act once she realizes this has all been set up for her... for a while now.

I press my thumb to the scanner, and the basement door clicks open. She stiffens in my arms as I enter, shutting the door behind me. I go down the steps, making sure not to trip or send her flying across the room. Once I make it to the last one I flip the light on. My fingers pull the dimmer down, so it's not so damn bright in here, and I set her down.

“What the fuck is this place, asshole?!” She screams, but fortunately, this room is soundproof. She can lose her voice if she wants. It won’t make a difference to me.

“Our new home.”

Hallie’s eyes widen, and I watch her take in her surroundings, starting with the bed in the corner of the room, a dresser, and a clothing rack stocked with clothes. There will be even more when I manage to get her belongings from the car. I even have a bookshelf in here for her, a kindle. Entertainment will be essential while we live here.

“What the fuck?” she repeats, swiveling around to face me. Her eyes are furious as she looks me up and down. “How long have you been planning this?”

Since I met you. “Since I fucked you,” I say instead. I couldn’t let her fucking go. “I made the mistake of letting you return to Texas.” I walk to the left side of the room and open the bathroom door. “I won’t make that mistake again.”

“I can’t believe this shit.” She starts laughing, but it quickly turns into full-body wails. I try to comfort her by wrapping my arms around her, but she shoves me away. “Don’t fucking touch me!”

I straighten and start to pace. I understand why she’s upset, but goddamn, she’s blowing this out of proportion. I’m trying to help her. Does she not care about her fucking life? “You will have everything you need here. This room is fully stocked for you,” I say softly, hoping she will snap out of this little

episode. I point at the mini fridge next to the dresser, “You can live comfortably here.”

“A comfortable prison is still a *prison*, Damien.” She sneers, and her face gets red from how angry she is. I want to bend her over and fuck it out of her.

“It could be worse,” I counter, “You could be with *them*.” The man who bought her won’t be kind. Who even knows what sick shit he’s into, what he’d force her to do. She doesn’t understand the gravity of this situation, and I don’t think I’ll be able to make her no matter how hard I try or what I tell her.

“And what makes you any better?”

I grab her shoulders, shaking her a bit, and she stiffens. “The fact that I fucking care about you, Hallie.” Her eyes soften, her lower lip trembling. “Can’t you see I’m trying to save you?” Seriously, though, she’s being very dense.

She can’t escape them forever, especially on her own. She doesn’t know who to watch out for. How to live under the radar. It won’t take long for them to figure out where she’s started a new life. She would leave breadcrumbs that would follow her all the way to wherever she planned to hide. But me? I can evade them a little bit longer, and when they find us, we’ll keep running. I know how to do that.

“For how long?” Her voice is stern, and I know she probably hates me. That makes two of us.

“Forever.”

Tears stream down her face, and I can't watch them. I can't afford to be weak for her when she fights me constantly. She needs to accept her destiny and make the best of it. I turn my back on her and go back upstairs, making sure to close the door behind me.

It's weirdly quiet in the living room, even my breathing sounds loud. The squeak the couch makes as I sit on it has my body recoiling with paranoia, and I pull out my gun and set it on my lap. I need to close my eyes for a little. But I'll have to do that downstairs. I can't have someone creeping up on me and slitting my throat. That's not how I plan to go out of this world. No, I'll go back down in an hour, she needs time to regulate her emotions. I hope no one discovers us before it's time to leave, but I'll guard her life with mine if needed.

I only have a few more ducks to line up before I can make that happen.

CHAPTER 37

Hallie

It's been an entire week since I've been trapped in this basement. There are no windows in the room, just a clock and a vase of Forget me Nots, and thanks to the notebooks and pens Damien stocked for me I've been able to keep track of dates. He's been kind, giving me three meals a day plus snacks. I have enough to do here that one week shouldn't be a big deal, but it still doesn't help me not feel like a cornered animal.

As if summoned, Damien opens the basement door, shutting it audibly behind him. I guess this is his way of making sure I wake up. He pads down the stairs and goes into the bathroom, leaving the door wide open.

I sit up in bed, the covers clinging to my legs as I rest my back against the headboard. I hear him brushing his teeth like everything is normal. I don't even know how to act. Should I still be defiant? Should I accept my fate? Should I try to escape?

The truth is, even if I didn't fight, even if I stayed, I don't think he'd want me after he saw me fucking another man. I could see the disgust in his eyes but also... the pain. Something has shifted between us, and I feel it. It makes me nervous. He still wants to keep me around for whatever reason, but his intentions are questionable. I know he's doing everything he can to keep me safe, and while I don't agree with his methods, I'm grateful for him...as much as I can be. It doesn't help that I still have feelings for him. Even after all of this, I can't just flip a switch in my heart and turn it all off. I wish I could though, that would be so much fucking easier.

I think I may love him. Somehow this happened to me. My heart beats a little faster around him, and the thought of him being hurt because of me... for trying to save me... It's too much to bear. I can't imagine my life without him, either. I don't know how I'm going to survive this. I just also know that my feelings are not enough. Not anymore.

Getting out of bed, I put on my slippers because this concrete floor is cold as fuck, and walk to the bathroom to brush my teeth too. Damien's body takes up most of the space, and I can't help but notice his chiseled abs and his defined chest in full display. I want to look away, turn around, and go back to bed, but we've already made eye contact. He smiles at me slowly, looks down at my body, and bites his bottom lip. I blush, my face heating up, and he raises a brow at me. This is getting problematic. I need a break from being near him. I can barely catch my breath when he looks at me this way.

I turn my eyes away from him, trying to break this fucking spell, and brush my teeth. Only he doesn't leave, he keeps invading my space, making my hands tingle. Once I'm done, I turn around and try to exit, but he grabs my arm and stops me.

He takes a step in my direction, effectively closing the space between us, his front to my back. "I never meant to hurt you, Hallie," he whispers, his other hand coming to the back of my neck and holding on to it possessively, his fingers tightening slightly. "You have to believe that." Damien presses his nose to my hair and inhales deeply, and my eyes flutter closed.

I relax in his hold, and tears sting my eyes. Why does it have to be this way? We could've been so good together, but now I must find a way out of here, even if it means using his feelings for me against him. I also have to make sure that my heart doesn't hurt at the end of this. It would be so easy for him to crush it without even trying.

"What did you mean to do, then?"

"Protect you. Never tell you this even happened." *So you were still going to be a liar.* His hand comes around to my jaw, and he gently tilts my head to the side, brushing my hair away. "I wanted us to be together, far away from where any of them could find us."

I scoff, "Why should I believe that?" However, the way he says it, makes it sound believable. When his lips meet my neck in a soft kiss, I shiver. I know he can feel it, and he knows exactly what he's fucking doing to me.

“Because if I didn’t want you,” his nose trails up my neck until his lips are against my ear, and his deep voice makes me clench my thighs together, “I would’ve turned you in.” He takes my ear lobe between his teeth, biting softly. “I would’ve spared my own life.”

I reach up and grab his wrist. “I’m barely keeping it together,” I tell him, and his free hand begins to trail a path down my belly. My fingers tighten around him, and he takes a shaky breath.

“Then let me make this better.” His hand goes under the waistband of my shorts, pushing my thong to the side, and his fingers dip into my wet heat. “I’ll take care of you.”

“You hate me,” I mumble, and his fingers go deeper, my legs opening for him. My breathing turns ragged, “For wanting *him* too.”

Damien withdraws his fingers and grabs my jaw, trailing the wetness across my face and to my lips. I open up for him, twirling my tongue around his digits. His cock grows harder against my back. “I could tell you that your feelings for him don’t matter to me, but that would be a lie.” He begins to pull down my pajama shorts and panties from behind, leaving them on the ground. “But what matters the most is that you’re never going back to him.” He directs me back to the room, walking me all the way to the bed, and once we’re in front of it he turns me around and pushes me back. His heavy body takes my breath away as he straddles my hips, bending at the waist to bring his face close to mine. He takes my bottom lip between

his teeth, biting it until it stings. “I won’t be the one to let you go.”

The way he’s looking at me steals all the thoughts from my brain. It feels like he’s peering into my very soul. His deep blue eyes roam over me, to my lips first, my neck, then down to the plunging neckline of the silk tank top I’m wearing. The air grows thick and heavy as we stare at each other in silence, and he repositions himself until he’s between my legs. I spread them and rub myself against him, trying to take some pressure off my throbbing clit.

Anticipation has my muscles coiled, my breaths coming out in pants. He notices, his eyes returning to my chest a few seconds longer. Damien wets his lips, his hungry gaze on my own like he wants to devour me. I slide my hand behind his head and pull him closer to me, our lips meeting so softly it’s barely a kiss. Instead, it’s more of a brush, and it somehow turns me on even more. I reach between us, hooking my thumbs into his underwear and pulling them down. He helps me by taking some weight off me, giving me the chance to grab his cock and pump him a few times.

“Fuck,” he hisses. “Yes...” He gasps and pushes his hips into my hand, rocking back and forth slowly. The way he moans makes me tighten my legs around him.

His eyes close as he gets closer to my face, his breath on my lips, and I glide my tongue over his bottom lip. He opens his mouth for me enough to slip my tongue inside, and when he tangles his with mine, my head spins a little.

“Do you want me?”

I swear my heart stops beating, the air in my lungs escaping forcefully. “No matter how hard I try not to, I want you so fucking bad.” And it’s not a lie, but I will also do whatever it takes to get out of here. “Make me forget.”

Damien dips two fingers between my pussy lips, collecting my arousal and rubbing it up my slit. “Is this all for me?” he asks, bringing his fingers to his mouth, tasting me, and I pull him back down and guide my mouth to his.

I grab him again, stroking his cock, jerking and twisting lightly in a way I know he loves, and soon he’s moaning into my mouth, breathless against me. When I let go of him, his cock juts out against my stomach, thick and heavy. His hand travels up the side of my waist, tugging my shirt off. Kissing down my chest, he pulls my nipple into his mouth and bites down slowly.

“Fuck me already,” I beg, needing relief from the throbbing between my legs. “Please,” I whisper.

He’s fucking torturing me, and he knows it. “Not yet.” His mouth tips up in a smirk.

Slowly, his hand slides down until his thumb parts me, rubbing my clit in slow circles. The way my muscles tighten up and the pressure builds inside me has me gasping all over again, “Right *there*.”

His fingers halt. “I won’t survive if you leave me,” he says against my lips as I hold his face. My heart begins to pound in

my ears as his forehead rests against mine. No, this is not the time to feel guilty. Not right now.

“Make me stay.”

Damien flips me over onto my stomach, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me up until I’m on all fours. My clit pulses between my legs as he positions himself behind me, grabbing on to my hip with one hand, and holding on to his cock with the other. He rubs himself up and down my slit before shoving his way into me forcefully. The fullness of him is enough to make the air whoosh out of my lungs, and he pants as he buries himself inside of me.

“This is the best pussy I’ve ever had,” he moans, “And it’s all mine.”

His hand comes to the back of my neck, and he shoves my face into the mattress. My cheek hurts from the pressure, but even still, his fingers come back to my clit as he pounds into me. He speeds up the rhythm of his fingers in time with his thrusts, and I close my eyes to get lost in the feeling of him inside me, possibly for the last time. I hate to admit how much I’d miss this, miss him, if I didn’t have it any longer.

He leans over me until his lips are against my ear, whispering, “Be a good girl for me, and make me come.” I angle my ass up for him, and he drives into me with deeper thrusts just as I start fucking him back.

I reach between us and cup his balls, massaging them softly, and he groans loudly. “*More,*” he urges me on, and when I let go, his finger on my clit presses down harder. I go further,

though, seeking his tight hole and rubbing it in circles. He moans, fucking me harder until my face bounces on the bed. I slip part of my index finger in, sliding it in and out slowly, trying to get past the tight ring of muscle.

He's so fucking tight.

“*Hallie.*” He hisses just as I get my finger inside him up to my knuckle and finger him while he fucks me. I grip his ass with the rest of my hand to keep momentum, his fingers rubbing me faster until I begin to shake. “Fuck, I can feel you,” he moans, my walls tightening around his cock, “You’re right there, baby, just take it.”

Damien fucks me faster, one hand gripping my hip as his other continues rubbing me. His fingers and his cock going at the same pace is enough to drive me insane, yet the feel of his tight ass clenching on my finger drives me over the edge and down a precipice. I fist the pillow with my other hand and cry out as I see stars.

“I’ve *craved* you.” His voice is hoarse against my skin, and I feel the vibrations down to my core with his lips on my back. “Every single fucking day.” He bites down on my neck, and I feel his cock swell inside me as he comes.

If only I knew it wouldn’t last long, I would’ve dragged this moment out for a little while longer. I would’ve ingrained it into my memory to keep it hidden forever.

“Let me show you how good our life can be,” he says, and my stomach drops. More than anything, I wish I could, I didn’t want it to come to this. He keeps his weight off me but

somehow manages to still be flush against my back. I slip my finger out of him slowly and he gasps. I know the feeling. “Please, trust me.” I nod, but I won’t ever trust him again.

He should know by now that I never actually mean what I say.



I haven’t seen Damien in three days, which has me feeling more confused than ever. Maybe he figured it out, that I’m fucking with his head to try to get out of here. What he doesn’t know though, is that I’m fucking with my own head too, and I don’t know how much more of this I can withstand. The more time I spend with him, kiss him, touch him... the more my heart hurts when I think of leaving. I wasn’t prepared to get this involved when I had the genius idea to go through with this. I may be ‘playing’ him in a way, but he makes all the rules of the game. And this game is hurting my heart. I don’t know how I’ll let him go when this is all said and done.

It’s not just the sex, however. Yes, it’s mind-blowing, but the way he can be gentle with me, like no one has ever been

before, is messing with my head. The way he talks to me, I wish he would just be quiet, so I don't have to keep thinking about everything he tells me. And the biggest problem is that I believe him. Whereas I know that while Zayne loves me, he's the most selfish person to ever breathe.

There's a loud buzz, and then the door opens just to slam shut, making me jump. Damien runs down the steps and stands in the middle of the basement, chest heaving, hands on his knees as he attempts to catch his breath.

"Damien?" What the actual fuck is happening? I've never seen him so disheveled. "Are you okay?" My voice trembles, and I can feel the panic attack coming. They must be here to fucking kill us. Holy shit, there's no way I can get out if they're in the house.

He gulps in more breaths, "No. Give me a minute, Hallie." His body is shaking, and there's dirt on his face and all over his clothes too.

"What happened?" I get up from the bed and walk toward him, and he tenses. My hand rubs his back slowly, soothingly, and his shirt clings to his skin.

He sighs. "Can we just pretend this never happened?" I notice the purple bags under his eyes as our gazes meet. Where the fuck has he been?

"I'd love to," I say slowly, carefully. "But, you know that's not how it works."

“I was being followed, okay?” Damien says, his voice panicked as he starts to strip from his jeans and long sleeve shirt. There are shallow cuts on his arms and torso, maybe from branches scraping him. “I saw them in town. They’re not supposed to know this place exists.”

My heart stutters, “So they know where we are?” Of course they do. What kind of stupid question is that?

“I don’t think so,” he replies, and I head to the bathroom and start the shower for him as he finishes taking off his clothes. “I ran through the woods and left my car behind. I stayed the night there.”

I turn around to face him. “You didn’t come home?”

He grimaces, then tests the water’s temperature. “I couldn’t risk your life.” The way his back muscles ripple as he gets in the tub has me holding my breath. He’s fucking deadly, and I start to rethink my plan to escape. He’d protect me; he’s already been doing that. Suddenly, it doesn’t feel like the wisest thing to do anymore. Maybe I should drop my bullshit and stay. I don’t even know what I’d do if I get out of here. Where would I go?

It doesn’t matter.

I wait until he’s under the stream of water, tilting his head back and sighing as the hot water warms his body. “Why don’t you let me go?” I ask, and Damien freezes with his hands in his hair and narrows his eyes at me.

“Why, love?” He chuckles. Humor must *really* be his defense mechanism. “So you can go back to him?” He tsks and rinses his hair without looking at me. “I’ve seen the way you look at him, and it’s similar to the way you look at me.” I hold my breath, regretting my question. Now he’s probably going to be watching me even more closely. “But I found the difference.”

“And what’s that?” My voice is hoarse, and I clear it.

“You look at him like he’s your salvation, even though he’s not.” Damien turns off the shower head. “But me?” He pivots to face me, the water dripping down his body. I watch the droplets roll down his abs, all the way down to his cock, then snap my eyes back to his. “I’m your fucking ruin.” I let that sink in. He’s not wrong. Zayne will never be my salvation, no matter how badly I want him to be true. But Damien... he has ruined everything.

“I know who I belong to,” I whisper, and he blesses me with a smile. It makes my insides melt, and I briefly remember him in the dark, his warm skin against mine, his lips worshiping me. I begin to sweat, my face turning red, and he smiles even wider.

Damien gets out of the shower and walks toward me. His fingers grasp my chin and I tilt it up to gaze at him. “Who then?” He arches one eyebrow.

The ocean blue of his eyes threatens to pull me under into a bottomless sea, to drown me in them, and it’s getting difficult to swim against the tide.

“You.”

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CHAPTER 38

Damien

Hallie sits on the bed and watches me reach under it to pull out an empty suitcase and open it. I go to her drawers and get the essentials out, packing as much as I can for her, then line up our luggage next to the stairs. Her face is hard as stone. She's back to being pissed at me, not wanting to leave yet. But she doesn't understand what these people are capable of, and it's urgent that we get out. I have everything ready for us to flee the country, all the documents, money, passports, and plane tickets are good to go.

She doesn't want to hear it, though, any of it. She's not ready to leave, according to her. The more she fights me, the hotter the fire in my chest burns. I can't let anything fucking happen to her. I'd rather die.

I've been staying home so I don't draw any more attention to us, especially after seeing the Sinaloa Cartel in town. I try not to think about how fucked we are, how we've been discovered. The way they followed me, I know they must have

done it more than once. I'm almost certain they know where we are, which is why we need to leave. *Today.*

We can't wait one more day.

I start to pace in front of her, and she stands up to come to my side. "Why won't you listen to me?"

"We have to leave today." I sigh, running my fingers through my hair in frustration. "It can't wait any longer. I think they know where we are. I don't want to worry you, but I also don't want to be trapped here."

"Tell me where we're going then," she says defiantly. "I'm not leaving until I know."

"I'll tell you in the car, babe," I reply, grabbing our suitcases and taking them up the stairs. "All I need from you is to follow directions. If I tell you to run and leave me behind, you do it. If someone kills me, you run like fucking hell."

"No fucking way."

"You have to." I reiterate, "Promise me."

Hallie nods, but I'm not stupid, she finds a loophole for everything, and she never says the words back.

"I'm going to start putting everything in the truck, okay?"
Again, she doesn't respond.

I go to the garage and begin putting as much as possible in the back of the truck. I've had some time to think about this, and I plan on driving to northern Canada. I don't think they'd see that coming, and once there, I can get us truly secluded,

living off the land if necessary. Eventually, we can go to Australia.

I put the last suitcase inside and close the door, looking around as I feel a pair of eyes on me. Something just feels... off. My skin crawls, and I stay very still, not wanting to make any noise. I have this inkling that I'm forgetting something very important, and I look in the truck again to make sure I put everything in there. I double-check for my wallet, house keys, and snacks. It's not until I return to the house that I remember I need more weapons.

I head to my office where my gun safe is, trying to be as quiet as possible, but just as I round the corner, someone hits me upside the head with what feels like the butt of a rifle. I can hear the crack of my skull, feeling the blood pouring down my face. The room starts to spin, and I fall to the ground. My head bounces off the hardwood floor, making me see stars.

Someone's putrid breath is on my face, "Where the fuck is she?" I think I recognize his voice, but I can't remember who it belongs to. More than likely, we've worked together, and I want to be offended but I know it's not personal. We've always just followed orders.

"I don't have her."

"Don't fucking lie to me," he growls, his hand coming around my throat, squeezing until it feels like the veins on my face are about to pop. "I'll make this hurt more, *cabrón*." I really don't want to make him angry; I know this is still his nice side.

“No la tengo,” I don’t have her. “¿Comprendes?” You understand? It’s getting difficult to see through the blood pouring over my face, but I curl up on my side, preparing for the pain I know is coming.

He laughs, “Le voy a llevar tu cabeza al jefe.” I’m taking your head to the boss. “Así que mejor dime lo que necesito saber.” So it’s best if you tell me what I need to know.

“Vete a la mierda.” Go fuck yourself. Even though I’m smiling, it’s all a fucking act. It feels like I’m about to pass out, yet I try to think of a way to get out of this. We need to fucking leave.

There’s a knife in my pants, but I can’t draw attention to myself. I stay still, but he seems to take the bait and kicks me in the ribs again, again, and again. I reach for my knife while he kicks me, and I hide it in the palm of my hand.

Searing pain lights up the entire left side of my body, and I try not to cry out as he kicks me a fourth time. I can feel my ribs breaking under his steel-toed boots, and I just think of Hallie. Everything I do is for her.

“¿Vas a hablar o que?” Are you gonna talk or what? He cocks his gun and points it at me, raising an eyebrow. I don’t move, I don’t even fucking breathe. “The Sinaloa Cartel sends their regards, puto.” He kneels next to me, pressing the gun right against my temple. My pulse pounds in my ears, and a cold sweat breaks out over my body. I only have one fucking chance to do this, and I might not even have that much if he’s quick, which he probably is.

I take a deep breath as he looks into my eyes, his smile eerie, and when I stab the knife into his neck, his blood spurting on my face, I grin. “*Jaque mate, pendejo.*” I cut across his throat, blood spilling down his body in a crimson waterfall, getting all over me in the process.

I grab his gun, put my knife back where it belongs and lie on my back to make my head stop spinning. If I can get back to the basement, Hallie can help me. There’s a first aid kit there.

I roll to my side, crying out from the pain of my broken ribs, and try to stand. It’s futile, I can’t do it on my own. Instead, I decide to crawl all the way to the basement door. Once there, I kneel long enough to put my thumb on the scanner and be let in. I crawl into the basement, shutting the door behind me, and lean against the wall.

“What took you so long?” Hallie calls out from her bed, but I focus on taking deep breaths, working to figure out how I’m getting down those stairs without standing. Maybe if I let myself fall, I’ll hit my head on the way down and fucking end this already. “Damien?” I hear her footsteps on the stairs as she climbs them. “What the *fuck?*”

“They’re here,” I gasp, and she kneels by my side, hands trembling as she holds my head, examining the wound on it where blood is still pouring down my face. Why is it that the shallowest head injuries bleed so fucking much? “Help me, baby. We need to leave, and soon.”

Hallie shakes her head. “There’s no fucking way we’re leaving tonight.” She lifts my shirt over my head to inspect the side of my body, and it sticks to my skin, my face, my hair. I glance down at what she’s doing and see purple and red bruises covering my side already, and it’s only been a few minutes. This is bad. The pain is so intense I can barely take in a deep breath. It’s a good thing I kept pain meds stocked down here, just in case. Well, my *just in case* fucking came true. How ironic. “Can you get up?” she asks me.

“No, love.” I cradle the side of my body, trying to deepen my breaths, knowing if I don’t my life will be worse. “I need pain meds and stitches. The First Aid kit is under the sink.” Hallie nods and goes to the bathroom, retrieving what I asked for.

When she returns, she falls to her knees in front of me, using wet gauze to clean my face and forehead. “Well, you won’t have a perfect hairline anymore.” She smirks, and even with the pain, I let out a low laugh. I take the pills out of the bottle and swallow them dry, grimacing as they scrape my throat. At least she can have a sense of humor as she patches me back up.

She’s a lot stronger than she gives herself credit for. Rubbing alcohol is pressed to the wound as she tries to disinfect the area, keeping everything as sterile as possible as she gets ready to stitch me up. She grips my face and tilts my head back, “Take deep breaths for me.”

The needle is poised, and I can feel the tip against my forehead. I take two deep breaths, “I’m ready...” Fuck, no. I’m not. But what choice do I have? I should probably get a damn CT scan of my head at this point, but unless I become unconscious, I won’t be going to the hospital.

The first prick of the needle is fire to my skin, and I groan, trying to keep my shit together as she pulls the needle through. My face scrunches up from the pain, and she starts to sing ‘Vienna’ by The Fray. I wonder if she’s trying to tell me something, but then she puts the needle against my skin again, and I can’t think straight anymore. I fist my hands, put them on my lap and grip my shirt between my fingers to keep myself from touching her in case I have an involuntary reaction.

Time crawls by as I drown in pain, but I know she’s being relatively quick. It’s just that this fucking hurts. When she’s done though, I can feel the narcotic has kicked in. My head and ribs don’t hurt as bad. I can probably walk down the stairs and lie down in bed for today at this point. This is more than likely going to be the best I feel for the rest of the night. I’m definitely staying in the basement. I don’t think my body can handle any more surprises for the time being. We can wait one more day to leave. Not really a choice in this anyway.

“I think I can get up now,” I tell her, holding on to the banister and pulling myself up with both hands, letting my arms do most of the work. I somehow make it to the bottom of the stairs without falling, and I say a quick thanks to God for that.

My jeans are sticking to me with blood, and I go to the bathroom to take them off. I'm unsure if it's mine or his, probably both of ours, and when I start pushing them down my hips, I wince. My side still hurts, even with the pain medicine. I don't expect it to be magical, but goddamn. I certainly won't be letting the spray of the shower that Hallie is starting for me hit my torso until further notice.

I take deep breaths and try again, but Hallie stops me. "Here, let me do it." Her voice is soft as she kneels in front of me, pushing my jeans the rest of the way down. There's a sickening sound as she peels them from my skin and sets them on the tiles. Even though this doesn't usually make me squirm, I feel bile rising to the back of my throat. Fuck this shit.

"Thanks," I mutter, my ribs screaming at me as I get in the shower and bend down to rinse my legs. I don't want her touching all this blood, she's seen enough as it is.

Once out, I wrap a towel around my hips and head back to the room, stopping by the thermostat to bump the heat up even more. I can't put clothes on right now, so it's about to get toasty in here.

"You should get some rest," Hallie tells me, pointing at the bed. I was planning on it, my body feels positively wrecked, and I need sleep before it's time to go. "I don't think we should leave tomorrow. You look like shit. At least rest for two days, then we can go."

"Tomorrow is best," I insist. I don't know how many people will show up here once they figure out their guy isn't

responding to them. “They’re probably going to come back.”

“You can’t function like this.” I guess she has a point, but I could drive one hour to start with. Hole up somewhere for a few days. Change vehicles. I have plenty of cash. “Two days. For me?”

“Two days, and then we’re gone.” She rolls her eyes at me, and I have a feeling she’ll beg for more time if I don’t get better by then. “I don’t care if I look like I’m dying.” The biggest problem is that I don’t know if there’s already more men here, and I only have access to one gun in this basement, which is hidden in a place Hallie can’t reach. But even that isn’t enough. I should’ve gone to the safe the first night we arrived. Why didn’t I?

“Deal.” As if she has a fucking say. At the end of the day, she’ll have to do whatever I tell her to, but I’ll appease her for now.

I pull back the covers and lie down on my right side. Hallie turns off the lights and then snuggles in behind me without wrapping her arm around my body. She knows I’m in pain, but she does get close enough that we’re molded together. And that’s how I fall asleep, to the feeling of her soft breaths caressing my skin.

Even through the pain, the heartache, the worry, the fear... she still puts a smile on my face. She means everything to me.

CHAPTER 39

Hallie

The incident from yesterday put a damper on my plans since Damien hasn't gotten out of bed much, which means I've had no access outside of this room because I need his fingerprint. I've been tending to his injuries, and I firmly believe he needs a hospital, but he won't listen. I wouldn't be surprised if he has internal bleeding, especially with how his entire left side is purple and black at this point.

I look at the clock on the nightstand, it reads midnight. Tonight is going to be endless. We don't leave until the morning, and while I know I should get some sleep, I don't know if I can. Not with what I know I have to do; I'll probably never get over it. Regret will have to be my lifelong companion.

My plan all along has been to go to Fairbanks and start a new life there. I want to be close to the mountains, and with proper clothing, I've realized I actually love the snow. That might be a different kind of cold though, but I'll get used to it. I wonder if I'd be able to get an apartment or a job without

triggering the cartel, but if I can make it out of this alive, I have faith I'll be able to run even further north if necessary.

I don't know how to live off the land; I've never been taught how to. My family wasn't the type to do anything outdoors, we never even went on hikes. Fishing and hunting weren't something I was introduced to either, so I'm pretty much fucked if it comes to this. I'll probably be a bear snack within the first few hours, but I think I'd rather do that than be held against my will by whoever fucking *bought* me.

I lie in bed until five in the morning, staying still for the sake of not hurting him, but holy fuck, I have barely even blinked this entire time. I'm going to be so exhausted today. Of all the times I've had insomnia, why did it have to be now?

The bed squeaks as I extricate myself from Damien's side, and I slow my movements down so as not to wake him. His breathing is deep, and his snores fill the silence of the room. I allow that to be my guide to alert me if I need to stop and go back to bed. Holding my breath, I count to thirty, and since Damien doesn't move or stop snoring, I walk silently to the bathroom. His jeans are still in a corner with blood caked to them. I know I have to be careful with touching them, the last thing I need is to have blood on my hands while I try to be fucking sneaky. The pocket is tight as I stick my hand inside it, and I stop what I'm doing to listen for his snores again. Once I'm reassured, I continue my search.

Cold steel meets my grip, and I tighten my hand around it, holding it against the side of my body in case he wakes up. He

doesn't. When I make it back to the bed, I slip it inside my pillowcase. Just as I'm about to lie down again, he turns his body toward me.

"What are you doing?" Damien asks, his voice sleepy, a grimace on his face. I can't make out much since the nightlight is far away, but it almost seems like his eyes are narrowed at me with suspicion. Or perhaps I'm just paranoid.

"I just can't sleep." I keep my breathing level and make eye contact, hoping he'll think I'm telling the truth, even if I'm freaking the fuck out on the inside. "I think we should leave soon. I just feel a bit nervous that someone will be here, and we won't know."

"Okay," He nods, sitting up in bed and wincing, his hand clutching his injured side. "I can go check the house real quick, then we can leave?" Once at the edge of the bed, I help him put his sweatpants on, and he groans as he stands. He took his medicine only two hours ago, which should help him for at least two more. Unless he doesn't stay still and over-exerts himself, which is probably what's going to happen.

"Yes," I answer him. "And while we're at it, you need a hospital. You're almost out of meds." He goes to the dresser and grabs a long sleeve shirt out of the drawer, pulling it over his head slowly.

"Fuck that," Damien replies gruffly, walking toward the stairs. "We need to leave."

No, *I* need to leave, but I don't think it'll be happening any time soon without a plan of action. How do I get out of here? I

have the urge to rip my hair out from my frustration, but instead I stand still as a statue and watch him.

He grips the banister as he goes up the stairs. Once he's in front of the door, he pauses and takes a deep breath. The beep of the door is not as loud as it's been the last few times, and I wonder if he somehow lowered the volume, but before I can ask him, he closes the door behind him.

I pace back and forth for a few minutes until I feel like I'm going insane, so I decide to just go up the stairs and wait for him there. I can't leave right now without knowing if it's safe. The last thing I need is to be caught in the middle of their fight.

It doesn't take long before he comes back inside, but before the door can close, I push him against the wall, my hand squeezing gently around his throat. His eyes heat as I get closer, and I stand on my toes and pull him toward me by the throat and kiss him.

Damien is frozen to the spot for a brief second before he relaxes, then his hands come to my hips, pulling me closer to him as he grinds himself against my abdomen. "What are you doing, Hallie?"

"Just one more time before we leave," I whisper. "I just need to feel you one more time." His fingers tangle in my hair, gripping it tightly, and he drags me by it down the stairs, throwing me on the bed. I know it hurts him because he clutches his side, his breaths ragged.

I yank my sweats and underwear off, throwing them on the ground, but keep my sweatshirt on. He joins me on the bed, crawling between my legs and pushing them aside with his knee. His eyes burn into my most intimate part, and he spreads me apart with his fingers.

“You’re so perfect for me, Hallie.” He smirks, and a wave of heat flares down my spine. His fingers glide along my core, and my heart begins to race, my heartbeat pounding in my ears with anticipation. “My heart would stop in my fucking chest if I lost you.”

My eyes water, and when I blink, one traitorous tear falls. He catches it with his nose, kissing my cheek softly before pulling his own pants down. The way he enters me slowly, gently, has more tears threatening to make an appearance. He grunts, and a strangled cry escapes my lips. I’m going to hate myself for this for the rest of my miserable fucking life.

Damien’s body feels like a warm blanket over mine, his elbows on the bed while one of his hands slides under me to grip my back, his fingers splaying on my skin. The slow friction against my clit as he thrusts into me feels amazing, and I almost wish he would’ve done this before now because I can’t fully enjoy it.

He throws his head back and closes his eyes, and I can’t stop staring at him as his moans echo in the small basement. He’s beautiful. I kind of love everything he does, the way he smells, the way his voice dips when he fucks me. The way he looks when he comes.

It's too bad I'm about to ruin it all for us.

His head comes to rest at the crook of my neck, and his lips tickle me as he whispers against my skin, "I love you so fucking much, Hallie." My chest tightens unbearably, and a lump forms in my throat, more tears falling from my eyes. One must land on him, because he pulls back to look at me. "Do you love me?"

My stomach flips, but he deserves to hear the truth. "I do love you," I reply, pulling him closer and taking his lips with mine. I roll my hips under him while his tongue sweeps into my mouth, and I moan into him. His fingernails dig into my back as he groans, and I reach my hand into my pillowcase.

I know exactly what I have to do.

And I've never been more terrified in my entire life.

With sweaty palms and shaking hands, I grip the open pocketknife, bringing it to my side while my other hand holds him close to my face, continuing to kiss him. The steel is slick in my hand when I bury it into his side, my fingers on the hilt flush with his skin.

Damien cries out as he flinches, his breath catching, and his eyes open wide. "Don't do this." He shakes his head, and his hand wraps around my throat. "Don't fucking do this to me, please," he begs as tears stream down his cheeks and drop on my skin.

The regret is bone-deep, filling my veins like a bucket of ice, but it's too late to take it back. "I'm sorry," I sob, pulling

the knife out. His hands go to his gaping wound, covering it with his fingers, and he falls to his side on the mattress.

“This is goodbye.” My heart squeezes in my chest, but I still scramble off the bed to put on my sweats and tennis shoes and look back at him. He’s got the sheets fisted in his hands, using them to apply pressure to his wound, and I pick up his phone from the nightstand and throw it next to him. He needs to call someone, or he’ll die, and I just can’t live with that shit right now. “I was never meant to stay.” My eyes find the vase of Forget Me Nots on the nightstand, and I pluck one away, throwing it next to him as well. A symbol of my love for him.

We make eye contact, and his eyes make him look like a broken little boy, lost to the world. I want to go back and tell him everything will be okay, that I’ll make us all better again. I can’t though, so I walk away and go up the stairs.

“No, not like this,” He sobs, and more blood spurts out of his wound. I close my eyes for a second, unable to get that image out of my head. He’s going to bleed out quickly if he doesn’t call for someone. “Don’t leave me...”

I look back at him, my face covered in tears, my eyes blurring from the ones still trying to make their way out. “I’m sorry, D.”

“Don’t, don’t, don’t!”

But I have tunnel vision, and I walk out of the basement, ensuring the door doesn’t shut. I hear noises behind me, it sounds like he’s coming after me, but I know he’s not fast

enough to catch me right now. I hope he can forgive me one day and understand why I did this to him, and us.

The garage door is open, and the truck is unlocked. I climb in and close the door, coming up empty-handed. I didn't grab the fucking keys. *I didn't grab them.*

"Fuck!" I scream, hitting the steering wheel repeatedly, tears coming even faster down my cheeks. My chest is heaving with my wails, and it hurts from how hard I'm crying. I take a few deep breaths and try to calm down, then wipe my tears away with the back of my arm, my sweatshirt scratching my face.

I grab my jacket from the backseat and put it on, then get out of the truck and close the door quietly. I have no car keys, no money, no phone. What the fuck do I do? I can't go back to him, he probably hates me now. With good reason too.

I decide to take off in the direction of the road where it's free of sticks and rocks and sprint until my lungs burn. Once I'm unable to see the cabin, I head into the wooded area. I have to stay unseen until I can reach someone who can help me. I don't know what help will look like for me anymore, but I suppose I will know when I see it.

I walk through the woods, the snow soaking through my shoes. The sun still hasn't come up all the way, the early morning chill making me shiver, and I blame myself for all the fucked-up shit that's happening. I should've listened to Damien. I should've stayed with him, followed directions from the beginning. He wanted to help me; he wanted us to be

together. I love him, and I fucking failed him, betrayed him, stabbed him.

What the fuck did I do?

Please let him be okay.

The creaking of branches makes me stop in my tracks, and I hear footsteps getting closer. My breathing turns ragged, and a drop of sweat runs down my spine. When I turn around, there are five men in front of me, all grinning like they've won the lottery.

A tall man with a bald head and face tattoos nods at the others, and they surround me from all sides, caging me in until they've formed a circle around me. He points a gun right at my chest, "*Arrodillate.*" I frown, shaking my head.

"I don't know what you're-"

"I said *kneel*, bitch." He smirks, points the gun toward the ground and then back to my chest. I do as he says, my body trembling so violently it feels like I'm having a seizure. I close my eyes, not sure what comes next, but also not sure I want to know. I have a pretty good idea, but after they take me, then what?

I hear a man walking toward me, but I don't know from which direction. I refuse to open my eyes, and I pray they make this quick. Maybe since I've thoroughly pissed him off, I'll get lucky enough to get taken out in these woods. "*Kill* me, please," I beg. It's worth a try.

Someone laughs, and it sounds like the bald guy again. “Your fate is worse than death, little girl.” Someone comes up behind me and holds on to my shoulders. “*El jefe* won’t be pleased if we do it for him.” And just who the fuck is that? If I’m going to spend the rest of my life as someone’s sex slave, shouldn’t I know who it is?

I open my eyes, and just as I do, a black bag comes over the top of my head. Darkness engulfs me, bringing back memories I want to keep away. I whimper, fear paralyzing me, and they all chuckle. “You’re gonna be doing a lot of that, mama.” Strong hands grip me, and suddenly I’m lifted over a shoulder, my body hanging upside down, and somehow this fucking bag doesn’t come off my head. I reach for it, attempting to take it off, and the man wraps his arms around me tighter. Pain shoots to my hips, and I still. “Don’t,” he says in a low voice.

“Please, just let me go,” I cry, and he laughs. “*Please.*” I kick my legs and punch his back. He doesn’t even budge as I turn into a wildcat, scratching and grabbing at anything I can.

Someone punches me, landing a blow on my cheekbone, and pain explodes in my head. I groan, and when a gun is pressed to my head over the black bag, I still. “Stop fucking fighting, cunt.” The accent is heavy. “Or I’ll have to put you out.”

I stay motionless for the rest of the short walk, maybe two minutes, and when someone throws me into the trunk of a vehicle, hogties me, and shuts me in, I let the tears fall.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I should've let him take me far away. I should've let him love me. *I'm so sorry, D.* I just hope he can forgive me, because I'll live with this remorse for the rest of my life. I can only hope it's a short one now.

The ride is long, but I can't tell time anymore either way. All I know is that I have to pee really badly. I focus on trying to fall asleep, ignoring my screaming bladder, and manage to doze in and out. My tears have dried, but the fear is crippling. My muscles are tense, my body aching, and after what feels like an entire day, we stop.

No.

The trunk opens, and I feel the breeze, hot and musty. Suffocating. I break out into a sweat immediately. We must be in the southernmost part of Texas, or even Mexico. I hold in my cry, refusing to make more noise or draw more attention to myself. I won't show them weakness right now.

I steel myself for pain, and someone picks me up again. This is going to be my life. I try to ignore the feeling of hands on me and not think about how I won't have rights to my body anymore. It's too much to bear. I can't do this.

I count the steps in my head as we enter a massive house, the black bag over my head finally slipping off. I can breathe again. Two thousand, five hundred and fifty-seven steps. Marble floors shinier than diamonds give me a glimpse at the kind of money these people have, and I wonder if I'll be the only person they bought or if I'll have company. I shouldn't

want this for anyone else, although I sure as fuck don't want to suffer alone.

A door creaks open, and I'm thrown on a lumpy mattress. A Mexican man who can't be much older than me kneels in front of me, his eyes crinkling in the corners with what seems to be concern, yet that can't be right. He smells the same as the one who carried me through the woods, so it must be him. "Don't fight him, whatever you do." He shakes his head, pushing my hair back. "He won't be kind to you." This guy seems gentle, nice even. I won't get used to it. He'll do whatever his boss tells him to. They will probably all take turns on me, and he won't be the one to sit out. I nod, close my eyes, and hear him walk away. He shuts the door behind him, and I finally allow myself to peer at the room.

Natural light comes in through a window on the ceiling, and I get a view of the sky. The room smells like urine, and I notice a toilet in the far corner on the opposite side of the bed. A sink, too. No mirror. The floors are tiled, like in most old Hispanic homes out of the country. I must be in Mexico.

There are sheets on my bed, but I'm still hogtied, so I can't reach them. I finally let the tears fall as sobs rack through me. My entire body shakes from the force of them, and I do my best to take deep breaths and wipe my face with my arms.

I flip over to face the wall, refusing to give my attention to anyone who comes to see me. My tears finally dry, my breathing evens, and my sobs wane. I'm not sleeping, but I'm

also not wholly awake. It's as if I'm stuck in a state of limbo, not knowing how to get out.

How will I get out of here? Will Damien know where I am? Is he going to rescue me? Even try? Is Zayne even alive to come after me? Do I have anyone who gives a fuck about me anymore?

The door creaks open, and I stiffen. I didn't know what I was expecting, but definitely not to get started so soon. At least give me the night. *Please.*

There's a shuffling of steps coming toward me, but I refuse to turn around. I won't give them the satisfaction. I breathe in deeply, trying to calm my erratic heartbeat.

"I've been waiting for you, baby girl." Fear slithers down my spine, and my heart threatens to give out on me. I *know* that voice, it haunts my fucking nightmares. "A very long time." He laughs, "But you're finally here, and I'm never letting you go again." No. No. *No.*

Michael.

I shut my eyes. This can't be real. This is a hallucination, a delusion. Maybe I hit my head too hard, and that must have caused this somehow. This isn't fucking happening. But as his fingers wrap around my jaw and force me to turn my head, his hazel eyes meeting mine, I know this is real. *Very* real. And I have no way out.

I used to tell myself that nightmares are just that, bad dreams that you can wake up from, run away from.

Turns out that sometimes you live them.

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WHAT'S NEXT?

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading *Battered Souls*! Please don't forget to review if you enjoyed the book. Reviews are so important to indie authors like me. I am forever grateful for your support!

If you'd like to be part of the community and talk about the series, join the Facebook Group, Ruby's Darklings.

The next book in The Broken Series, *Tattered Bodies*, will go deeper into what happens next with all the characters. It is expected to release in late summer of 2023.

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AFTERWORD

If you've read *Shattered Hearts*, you know how passionate I am when it comes to shedding light on mental health. A lot of you know by now that I've struggled with Bipolar 1 Disorder, anxiety, and PTSD. I want to bring awareness to this taboo subject, one that a lot of people are afraid to talk about. I'm here to say it's okay to have a mental illness. You're not damaged or broken. You *are* capable of whatever you set your mind to. You *are* beautiful. You *are* worthy. You're whatever the *fuck* you want to be. Never let anyone say otherwise. Don't let others dim your light. *You're enough*, and that's beautiful.

So much love for you,

Shae Ruby

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Battered Souls had a longer journey than expected. A lot seemed to go wrong during the process, but mama I made it!! I am so happy and excited to FINALLY be here, sharing my work with all of you yet again. Publishing my first book was nerve-racking, but this second one brings me so much excitement. I am over the moon to be given a chance yet again.

First and foremost, I want to thank YOU, my readers. None of this would be possible without you. I can't begin to explain how grateful I am that you've taken a chance on me. I have no words, just happy tears, and love from the bottom of my heart.

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All of you mean everything to me.

XOXO,

Shae Ruby

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