

A photograph of a very muscular man with a short beard and intense gaze. He is wearing a black tank top that is pulled up over his shoulders, revealing his well-defined abdominal muscles. He is posing with his right arm raised and his left hand near his chest. The background is a dark, textured purple with faint, scattered heart shapes.

BE MINE
Twisted
VALENTINE

GIANNI HOLMES

Be Mine, Twisted Valentine

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Be Mine, Twisted Valentine by Gianni Holmes

Be Mine, Vicious Valentine by April Jade

Be Mine, Bloody Valentine by Skyler Snow

Be Mine, Heartless Valentine by Ashlynn Mills

Be Mine, Cruel Valentines by Brea Alepoù

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PATREON SERIAL

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FIND ME

ALSO BY

ABOUT GIANNI

Playlist

- “Flowers Need Rain” by Preston Pablo
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- “Dandelions” by Ruth B
- “Only Love Can Hurt Like This” by Paloma Faith
- “Little Do You Know” by Alex and Sierra
- “I Hate Everything About You” by 3 Days Grace
- “Born Without a Heart” by Faouzia
- “I Fell in Love with the Devil” by Avril Lavigne
- “Devil Doesn’t Bargain” by Alec Benjamin
- “Hurts so Good” by Astrid S
- “Middle of the Night” by Elley Duhé
- “I’m Yours” by Isabel LaRosa
- “Part of Me” by Disturbed
- “Nobody Gets Me” by SZA
- “It’s Not Over” by Daughtry

“Down with the Sickness” by Disturbed

“Bad Liar” by Selena Gomez

“Drugs With You” by TAECLA

“Dare to Love Me” by Avril Lavigne

“Prisoner” by Miley Cyrus

“Sick Like Me” by In This Moment

“Bad Wolf” by In This Moment

“The In-Between” by In This Moment

Foreword

Dear Reader,

Thanks so much for your interest in the Corrupt Cupid multiauthor series. As usual, if you have no need for content warnings then I'd suggest going into this one blind and experiencing the twisted delight that is Teddy and Duncan. If there's anything you may be triggered by in dark romance, then this is to help you be aware of content that may not suit you. Please, know your limits and read responsibly.

This book is a mixture of sweet and dark. The characters have a rich, dark past. Much of that darkness is hinted at with only a couple of scenes written out as it all happened fifteen years ago. However, their relationship in the present swings from dark to sweet. It's sweetly dark and spicy!

These characters are possessive and conscience doesn't stand in their way of using people to be with each other. Notably, one character cheats on his pregnant wife with the other main character.

You'll want to avoid reading this book if you are sensitive to any of the following: stalking, coercion, kidnapping,

Stockholm syndrome, branding, humiliation and degradation, white torture, forced isolation and loneliness, forced co-dependency, attempted murder, murder, extrajudicial killing of a teen, drug trafficking, the use of drugs during sex (poppers), physical assault of a parent, homophobia, incarceration, self-harm, miscarriage, and possibly more.

Please be reminded, this is a work of fiction—a tale spun from my imagination as I wondered “what if.”

I hope you enjoy the result.

Gianni

BE MINE
twisted
VALENTINE

PROLOGUE

DUNCAN

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

*L*ook. At. Me.

It was useless trying to command him with my mind. We weren't telepaths, but I couldn't yell the words at him across the courtroom. They had rules here about conduct and not intimidating the witness.

His lips moved, but his words didn't interest me, so I didn't pay them any mind. I already knew everything the victim was recounting for the jury's benefit. Of how I was an evil man who'd kidnapped him and held him hostage for nine months. Nine months of torture that had left him broken and uncertain of what was real and what was fake.

Tears slipped down his pale cheeks, and I swallowed. The front of my pants grew tight. His attorney might have coached him not to hide his emotions from the jury, but his wet face made me hard.

It reminded me of the first time I'd taken him raw, his young, virgin body trembling beneath me. He'd pushed at my chest as I pressed my way to the hilt inside him, but as soon as I'd pulled back, he'd gripped my hips and begged me not to leave.

To this day, I still didn't understand it—the desire I'd felt for this man when none other had ever made me hard. Yet here in court, standing trial for the things I'd done to him, I

couldn't stop the warmth that gushed in my gut and flowed to my cock.

I wanted to fuck him right in front of the judge, splash his body with my cum, and mark him as mine. Did they think locking me up would change that? I'd already made him mine.

Look. At. Me.

“Everything was white,” he said and inhaled deeply. His lips trembled, lips that had wrapped around my cock as he hummed in pleasure while staring up at me with devastating gratitude. He could have easily clamped his teeth down onto my cock and ripped it off, but he'd instead sucked and drooled, and when I'd come down his throat, he had whined and begged for more.

“What happened to you after staying in that white room for all those months?” the attorney asked him gently. He picked up a bottle of water and handed it to the victim. I frowned, my stomach coiled in anger like a spring.

I had fed him.

I had clothed him.

He had depended entirely on me.

Not anymore.

His hand shook as he opened the bottle of water and took a sip, spilling droplets onto his sky-blue shirt. He looked better in the white shift I'd only allowed him to wear during his time with me.

“It’s-it’s like nothing made sense anymore,” he said, his breathing unsteady. “There was no sound, nobody to talk to. Even the food was white and tasteless. You don’t know what it’s like. I’m used to my family and friends. The loneliness—I couldn’t escape it. I used to hit my head on the wall just to have some feeling.”

Until I’d found out what he was doing and tied him up. He’d stopped doing it fast. The only one who could give him pain and comfort him was me.

“And what happened when you tried to seek sensation by harming yourself?”

“He was furious. He blindfolded me, gagged me, and tied me up. I was left there for two days. At least I think it was two days. They all started blurring together by then. It meant I lost the privilege of going to the bathroom. He made me stay in my own filth for days.”

Now how was that fair when he didn’t mention the care I’d taken to clean him up myself afterward? Did he forget how grateful he had been? He’d sat on my lap and wept in my chest while I explained why I’d punished him so harshly.

I would have done worse had anyone else harmed him. He was my project. Not his nor anyone else’s to play with.

My little pet.

Look at me.

I whispered the words, but they were too low for anyone else but my attorney, Gerard, to hear. He shifted in his seat

beside me, but I didn't glance his way. My attention was solely on the young man on the stand.

"I know this is hard for you, Theodore, but the jury needs to understand exactly how this man tortured you."

"Objection, Your Honor," my overpriced lawyer said. "He's leading the witness."

"Sustained. Just ask the questions, Counselor."

"Sorry, Your Honor." The lawyer looked pissed, but he shoved his fisted hands into his pockets. "Theodore, did the defendant sexually assault and rape you while you were his prisoner?"

I straightened up in my chair. Teddy's Adam's apple bobbed in his throat, and he turned his head. Our eyes met. His big, beautiful blue eyes. They were prettiest when wet and drowning in misery.

The question was in a gray area. What would he answer? I never forced him. I never even initiated the act. He'd come to me, begging, seeking comfort, and welcoming touch wherever he could get it. The word no or stop had never graced his lips. I'd taken perverse pleasure from asking him if he wanted me to continue. Sobs would rack his chest while he reached for me and pleaded with me not to leave him alone. That I could take whatever I wanted from him as long as I stayed with him.

He'd simultaneously loathed and longed for me. He hadn't been able to do without me. And I'd loved it.

"Theodore, please answer the question," his attorney urged.

I smiled. They could lock me up and throw the keys away. His hesitation was everything I needed.

“No,” he said, staring directly at me. He didn’t embellish, didn’t expound at all. Just the one word.

His attorney looked startled, as if he’d expected another response from Teddy. He stumbled over his words and asked more questions about the things I’d done to punish and torture Teddy. The damage was already done, though. It was obvious to everyone in the room that Teddy’s answer didn’t suit him. He looked almost disgusted when he handed over to the judge.

“Thank you, Counselor,” Judge Berr said. “We’ll end the proceedings here today and resume tomorrow at ten a.m. The defense will have a chance to cross-examine the witness. Court is now adjourned.”

“This is good.” Gerard smiled. “Since Mr. Scott changed his testimony on the stand, they have no leg to stand on and will have to drop the rape charge. We can also argue that his account can’t be trusted, given the way he switched just now.”

My attorney kept talking, but I tuned him out. Teddy stepped down from the stand. Even with the jury, judge, lawyers, reporters, and eyewitnesses in court, energy crackled across the room between us. Tension zinged back and forth, and I sensed the Herculean effort it took him not to look back at me.

I couldn’t keep my eyes off his slender frame. He did look much better in white. His blond hair was growing back. I’d always kept it shaved. The pity. It was my one regret, since he

had such lovely hair, but it'd been a part of the humiliation he had to suffer at my hands.

“Mr. Whittaker, please stand.”

I tore my eyes away from Teddy and turned to the officer who'd transported me to court. Time to head back to the slammer. I rose to my feet and held out my hands for the handcuffs. He snapped them around my wrists.

“You son of a bitch!” A stout man barreled down the aisle toward me. Chief of police, Chester Scott, was no stranger to me. Today wouldn't have been possible without him after all. “You ruined my son! Rot in hell, you heartless bastard!”

Pop! Pop!

The muzzle of the gun in his hand flashed a second before a bullet ripped through my chest, followed by another. I stumbled back against the officer who'd handcuffed me.

Someone screamed. The sound was familiar. Teddy. He'd screamed for me just like that when I'd spread his legs and ravaged the insides of his thighs with my teeth. Fire spread throughout my torso, and blood filled my mouth. I felt myself falling as two cops restrained Teddy's father.

“We need an ambulance!” someone shouted.

The officer lowered me to the floor. My heart hammered, the pulse pumping in my ears. With my hands handcuffed in front of me, I couldn't do anything to stem the flow of blood that oozed out of the wound. My shirt was already soaked in it.

“Fuck,” I grunted.

“Duncan, stay with me.” Gerald kneeled to my left.

“Nononono!”

Teddy.

It was Teddy, still screaming, crying. I curled my hands into fists. Maybe it was better this way. He could live a peaceful life, knowing the man who’d damaged him was dead.

This wasn’t the way it was supposed to happen. All I’d wanted was revenge, but when I’d taken him, removed his blindfold, and stared into his blue eyes, I’d felt the most intense pain squeezing my heart. Like an arrow had been thrust through it. And I’d known then that, for better or worse, our lives would never be the same.

Someone ripped the front of my shirt. They were pressing on my chest, trying to stem the bleeding. I turned my head. Teddy was staring at me, his eyes wide and his face white.

I smiled.

That terrified look on his face was perfect.

He was perfect.

My vision blurred, turning hazy, but not before I saw him touch the mark on the side of his neck where I’d branded him.

That’s right, my twisted obsession. Even in death, you’re still mine.

CHAPTER ONE

TEDDY

“Don’t open your eyes.”

My wife chuckled softly and shuffled her feet. “Even if I open my eyes, I can’t see anything. Your hand’s doing a pretty decent job of blocking my view.”

“Good.” I pushed the bedroom door open and helped her carefully inside. It wouldn’t do for her to trip and fall. She was almost four months pregnant, even though she wasn’t showing through her clothes. “Okay, you can stop now.”

I glanced around the nursery I’d finished putting together last night when she was already in bed. I wasn’t much of a hands-on guy and didn’t make any of the furniture, but I’d assembled them. Which had taken me almost an entire month. The good thing was I finished it long before the baby’s arrival.

Now we could relax, enjoy her pregnancy, and wait for our little bubble of joy to be born.

“When I remove my hands, keep your eyes closed. Can I count on you?”

“Honestly, Teddy, you don’t trust me?”

“Nope. You’re the same girl who tricked me into dating you eight years ago.”

“Are you complaining?”

I kissed her temple. “Not one complaint from me.”

I removed my hands and stepped forward, unlocked my phone and opened the camera. So far, I’d documented as much of our pregnancy as I could, and this time would be no different.

“And open!”

Cassie slowly opened her eyes. They got so huge in her softly rounded face. I rocked back and forth on my heels with glee, then halted. The camera was bouncing up and down, and I needed to hold it steady to get a decent video.

“Well, what do you think?” I asked.

“Baby.” She covered her mouth with a trembling hand. I might not have been good at making things with my hands, but I knew a little something about decorating, and I awed even myself by the finished beige-and-cream nursery.

When we bought the house four years ago, the use of this room as a nursery had been a significant factor. With the curtains open, the wide double windows filtered in the beautiful morning sunlight, bathing the room in a natural glow.

“Oh my god, baby.” She dropped her hand and walked over to the white oval crib. She ran her fingertips along the edge. “And the rocking chair! So cute.”

“Isn’t it, though? Go ahead. Test it out.”

She sat in the white chair gingerly and slowly rocked back and forth. “This is amazing, Teddy. How beautiful is that sign?”

She pointed at the “twinkle” word on the wall next to the crib. “It’s temporary. When we decide on the baby’s name, I’ll replace it.”

“I can’t believe you did this all by yourself, honey. And I may never leave my rocking chair. I may eat breakfast right here.”

I turned off the video and lowered my phone. “You really love it? Because we have time. If there’s anything you’d like to change or add, we can totally do it.”

“Baby, I love it. I wouldn’t change a single thing.” She patted her belly. “You hear that, baby? Your daddy already loves you so much. He’s going to spoil you rotten when you get here.”

I walked over to her and kneeled in front of her, took her hands in mine and kissed the back of them. “I’m so happy, Cassie. The day we found out about the baby was the happiest moment of my life.”

Everything was coming together. After so many years... after the odds of me living a normal life, I’d done it. I had a successful career as an attorney practicing family law. I had a wife of five years who I couldn’t imagine my life without, and

a home we owned. We were both student loan free, and now a baby on the way.

After everything you did to destroy me, I still made it.

“I love you so much,” I whispered. She’d bulldozed her way into my life and made me feel things I never thought I would be capable of. It’d been a no-brainer she was the one. Before her, every touch of intimacy had me throwing up, cold sweat washing over my body with how wrong it felt. She’d been patient and understanding through it all.

“I love you too, Teddy.”

“Why don’t you stay here?” I asked. “I’ll bring you breakfast if you’re serious about not getting out of that rocking chair.”

“What did I do to deserve you?” She sighed.

“I’m the one who doesn’t deserve you.” I rose to my feet and leaned forward, capturing my wife’s lips with mine. So what if I didn’t light up or feel much excitement behind the kiss? I could touch her, kiss her, make love to her. I’d had enough excitement to last me this lifetime.

All I’d craved was a normal, peaceful life with someone who loved me back.

I left Cassie in the nursery and sailed down the stairs, full of energy. What a lovely start this was to my day. I had enough time to make us breakfast before taking off for work. On my way to my office, I would look in on my dad, who was making

a toy chest for the baby. Now that was a man who was good with his hands.

We weren't as close as I would have liked. When I was a kid, we were, but ever since...

I stopped in the kitchen and blinked. It'd been years since I'd thought about what had happened fifteen years ago. Maybe I needed to see my hypnotherapist again. I made a note in my phone to call them.

I cooked up some pancakes, sausages, scrambled eggs, and hash browns. Cassie no longer doused her pancakes in syrup. Even the sight of the bottle ruined her appetite, so I tucked it away in the cabinet. Normally we took our eggs sunny side up—just one of the many things we had in common—but she could only take them scrambled now. I poured her a glass of pineapple juice and put it all out on a tray to bring up to her.

The landline rang, startling me. Very few people contacted me on that number. I only gave it out when the contact was important in the event they couldn't reach me on my cell phone.

I put down the tray and raised the phone from the hook.

“Hello, good morning.”

“Mr. Scott?”

“Yes, to whom am I speaking?”

“This is Jonah Wellington with the Department of Corrections Office of Victim Services. You requested to be notified of the release of an inmate, Duncan Whittaker.”

My throat tightened, and my knees gave out. I clutched the counter to keep me from falling. Pain exploded in the back of my head, and I grunted.

“Mr. Scott, are you still there?”

I blinked several times and inhaled deeply, my breath shaky and jagged. The pain in my head wasn't real. Just a memory of when he'd knocked me out before abducting me.

“Yes.” Was that my voice? I barely recognized the whimper. I wasn't that same twenty-year-old he'd manipulated into giving him things I would never have if he hadn't brainwashed me.

“Mr. Whittaker will be released on parole on February fourteenth.”

On Valentine's day? The same day he'd kidnapped me? How could that day be anything but ruined for me now? Every year I would have to go through that day knowing they'd let that monster back on the street.

“I don't understand. Why is he getting out already?”

He was supposed to spend at least twenty years in prison. But I knew that wasn't how the law worked. With good behavior, he could be out in less time.

“The parole board granted the request based on a number of things, mainly for good behavior and this was a first time offense. I'll be sending you an email with all the information we have where the convict will be living. We'll also outline the guidelines he has to follow, including not initiating any

contact with you, the victim. If he does, we can revoke his parole.”

How could I live in the same state as the man who’d beaten and used me for nine months? Sure, he’d always lived here in Virginia, but at least he’d been locked up. I never ran the risk of running into him. How could I not look over my shoulder every minute of the day now?

“Do you have any further questions?”

Why are you letting that monster out?

“No, thank you.”

The dial tone beeped in my ear. I placed the phone on the counter. Unable to support myself anymore, I slid to the floor and gripped my knees.

Fifteen years. It happened fifteen years ago, and it still affected me like it was yesterday.

It’d taken one fucking phone call to ruin the illusion I’d carefully constructed over the years that nothing had happened. That the branding on my neck and the scars on my back were caused by a freak accident and not by the cuts he’d nicked into my skin with his knife and cigarette. That I hadn’t begged him to make me bleed because the red was color in the otherwise monochromatic room where he’d kept me a prisoner. The sting of the cuts had made me feel. The texture of the blood on my fingertips had been something to touch. My own blood had a metallic taste that counteracted the bland white foods he’d fed me every day.

A sob tore from my throat. This couldn't be happening. Not now. Everything they said I should have done, I did. I'd gone to therapists, attended every session religiously. I'd opened up my soul, relived every twisted moment of what he'd done to me to make peace with it. I'd continued my studies, passed the bar, and got a job as an attorney.

I even got married.

For god's sake, we were starting a family.

“Are you crazy, man?” I shouted, scowling at the hulking, dark brute who stood over me. My hands were still tied behind my back, but he'd at least removed the hood from my head. “My dad's the fucking chief of police. You let me go right now, or you're dead meat. He won't let you get away with this.”

So fucking arrogant. I'd been a cocky shithead when I'd mouthed off to him. I was so sure if he knew who my father was, he would get scared and release me. Instead, his palm had cracked across my face, sending me flying on the hard concrete floor.

He'd held nothing back from that slap.

I closed my eyes, my heart hammering. The scent of the kitchen faded, replaced by the moldy smell of the warehouse I had been initially kept in.

My ear rang from his huge hand connecting with my face, and blood poured from my nostrils. I couldn't use my hands to wipe it away, and some of it trickled down my throat.

I couldn't breathe through the flow.

*“Please,” I gasped and spat the blood out on the concrete.
“I can’t breathe.”*

He towered over me and watched me struggling to breathe through the blood pouring from my nose. Then he crouched, grabbed me by my shirt, and ripped the material down the front.

Oh god, no. It wasn’t bad enough I was drowning in my own blood. He was going to rape me too?

“Please, no,” I croaked and coughed, splattering his cheek with blood. He didn’t even flinch. What kind of sick freak had abducted me?

He stripped my chest naked, but he barely glanced at me. He balled up the shirt and wiped my face with it. He jerked me upright, shoved my head down, and pinched my nose with the material pressed to it.

“Let’s get a few things straight,” he said, his voice low. “Your father got you into this mess. I’m just repaying him for what he’s cost me. Mention him to me again, and I’ll cut your tongue out and send it to him from you nicely wrapped. Got that?”

I whimpered, a sound he seemed to take for agreement. He lowered his gaze to my torso, raking over my naked top half. “I have no intention of forcing myself on you. Pussy is more my flavor.”

My chest fell as I exhaled through my mouth. I’d rather be dead than let this brute assault me that way.

“But I can always make an exception.”

The tension returned to my shoulders. The way he looked at me made my skin crawl. It wasn't desire in his eyes but something sick and twisted. Something that promised pain and humiliation.

“But you don't have to worry about me forcing you,” he said. “By the time I'm through with you, you'll be the one begging me to fuck you.”

“I'm not gay,” I whispered.

“I know. I know everything about you, Theodore. Now it's your turn to learn everything about the man your father's pissed off.”

CHAPTER TWO

DUNCAN

“Your release is a privilege that can easily be revoked, Mr. Whittaker. Please don’t violate the conditions of your parole, especially when it comes to seeing the victim and maintaining contact with your past associates.”

The last words of my parole officer, Patrick Trombley, lingered in my mind as I inhaled a lungful of fresh air and promptly wrinkled my nose. Freedom smelled like piss and somebody’s vomit, but it was freedom. Couldn’t complain too much, though one would expect the outside of the state penitentiary to be much more pleasant to encourage staying out.

But after fifteen years in the pen, this wasn’t the worst thing I’d smelled.

“Duncan!”

A blue Honda Civic slowly came to a stop next to me. I’d already recognized the voice. Joanne, the only one who’d visited me in prison over the years, beamed a smile at me. She’d been my eyes and ears while I’d been locked away. I’d forbidden any of my associates to get in touch with me. The

moment I'd been sentenced, I'd been planning on exiting on good behavior.

I'd planned a lot of things.

“Jo, you're a sight for sore eyes.” I grinned, walked around the car, and got into the passenger's seat. I buckled in, and when she leaned forward, I gripped her by the chin and kissed her hard, fucking her mouth with my tongue. She took my hand and slid it beneath the hem of her dress right up to her pussy. The front of her underwear was already damp.

She was always so eager to fuck. Our relationship had been easy and casual before I ended up in the slammer. She was one of those women who stayed loyal regardless of the heinous crimes one committed. In fact, the more heinous, the hornier they got.

I released her lips and chucked her chin. Like me, she'd aged over the years. I'd left her a sexy young woman who shared my bed whenever we had an itch to scratch. Now she had lines on her face the Botox couldn't hide. She looked like she'd gotten lip fillers and a boob job since the last time I'd seen her.

“When we get home, sweet cheeks.”

Her chest rose and fell, and she nodded. I squeezed her pussy through her panties, making her squeal, then removed my hand. “Why didn't you tell me you would pick me up? I planned to take the bus.”

“I didn’t want you to wait. I’ve been getting the place ready for you, and I hope you like what I’ve done to it.”

“It’s just a house.”

She put the car into Drive and stepped on the gas. “It’d better not be just a house. For fifteen years, I kept it up for you.”

“You’re right. What would I do without you, Jo?”

“Probably find yourself another bitch to spoil you because, boy, you know how to fuck, and we don’t wanna let that go.”

I laughed and wound down the window to let the sound out. Fuck, this was freedom—flying toward the interstate with the wind blowing in my face. I could close my eyes and let my guard down without worrying about being shanked. So what if I couldn’t exactly return to my former life while on parole? I had enough money stashed away to live in comfort without touching another gun or coke.

“It’s been fifteen years, Jo,” I teased. “Maybe I don’t remember how to perform.”

She snorted. “Don’t tell me ya didn’t find some young softie in prison to be yer bitch, Dunc. You just been sliding it in the wrong hole, but you know I don’t mind which, as long as it’s filling one.”

More laughter spilled from me, and I shook my head. While Jo and I had never had a formal relationship, she was someone I could trust with my life. Well, almost everything about my life. She’d watched my brother every time I had to get my

hands dirty. Given how PC people were these days, I liked that she had no filter and spoke her mind. Her I could get behind—both literally and figuratively.

“There was no young, pretty boy in prison, Jo.”

Actually, there were several young, pretty boys who’d wound up in prison. She wasn’t wrong either in her assumption that they usually ended up being somebody’s prison bitch. I might have even been offered a time or two.

But only one blond guy had ever caught my attention. And that had been purely accidental. I still had no idea how that had happened, even after landing in prison because of him. Had I tortured, killed, and sent his body back to his father, as had been my initial plan, I wouldn’t be in this predicament.

“Don’t lie to me,” she said. “You don’t have to hide it from me. You were in prison. It’s the one place you can fuck a guy, and nobody thinks you’re gay.”

She wasn’t wrong. I’d seen lots of men enter the prison system straight, and within a year tops, they were bending some guy over in the shower and fucking them like the Becky they’d left at home. Because of my reputation, the other guys had left me alone. Mostly.

“Why don’t ya check the back seat? I got you something you used to like. If that gourmet prison food didn’t leave you with better taste.” She laughed at her own joke, and I reached in the back seat for the paper McDonald’s bag.

“All right. This is why you’re my favorite girl, Jo.”

“Aww, shucks, babe. Don’t waste all those sweet words. Save some for when you’re in my bed tonight.”

The Big Mac was even more delicious than I remembered. I wolfed it down along with the chicken strips and fries, washing it all down with the can of Coke she passed me.

“Fuck, I missed eating this heart attack between buns.”

“I thought you might like that surprise. Do you want to stop anywhere before going home?”

I fell silent. There was one place I wanted to visit. Somewhere I hadn’t been able to go for fifteen years, but I didn’t want to make the trip with someone else. Did I even have the right to see him after all this time?

“Nah, some other time.”

“You sure, honey? I don’t mind stopping.”

“I’m positive.”

Joanne kept up the chatter through the two-hour drive back to Plum Peak Valley, filling me in on everything that had happened in the last two months since she’d visited me. If I had a lick of sense, I would be on bended knee, asking her to marry me. I would serve my time on parole, put all my misdeeds behind me, make babies with her, and live the life of a changed man.

I never claimed to have a lick of sense.

Joanne was good for a fuck, but I was holding out.

For what?

Fuck if I knew.

The image of a blond, blue-eyed boy with pouty lips and a sexy ass flashed through my mind. After fifteen years, the details were a little faded, but my heart still raced every time I remembered. His sweet body spread out under mine. How he hung on to my shoulders and wrapped his legs around my waist when I fucked him missionary style. The way he didn't want to let go, even when we were both drenched in cum. He'd beg me to fuck him again to get me to stay with him.

And sometimes I'd lose my head and give in to him. Spend the whole damn night with him. Whenever I did, he would sleep with my cock in his mouth, something I damn near never did until him.

A lot of things I'd never done before I abducted him. Fucking another man was never on my agenda, but after the first time...I just couldn't stop.

And it'd only made me treat him more harshly, determined to break him, for him not to get any strange ideas that I fucked him because I really wanted to. I fucked him to punish him. To see him beg. To toy with his emotions and give him only what I wanted after taking away everything from him.

I was his devil and also his savior.

Sometimes I'd leave him alone for days. Other times weeks. When I'd first brought him to the cabin I'd prepared for him, I'd kept him without company for four months. He was only allowed to use the bathroom. Food was handed to him through the door.

Silently, I'd observed him breaking down day by day. His confidence on day one had completely disappeared on day thirty. I'd reveled in the crying and rocking in the corner. The screams and pleas to do anything I wanted. The way he'd pick at his skin until he bled for sensation.

It'd given me the idea to cut him myself, leaving decorative scars all over his back. The first time I'd had to tie him up. By the day I'd set him free, he'd come all over the bed as soon as the knife nicked his skin.

Everyone blamed me for what I'd done to him. But he was as fucked up as me. The day I'd let him go, he'd hesitated. I'd left the doors open and him unchained, then had gone about my way. I'd never imagined he would still be there, standing at the door like a beautiful caged bird who didn't know he was free.

I'd never expected how much I'd deprived him could be so effective.

"Duncan!" A hand shoved at my shoulder, and I blinked several times. I slowly turned my head. Joanne frowned. "You all right? You been silent, staring off into space the whole ride home." She glanced down at my lap, and I followed her gaze. My cock was so rock hard the fabric of my pants couldn't hide it.

Interesting.

After fifteen years, he had this effect on me still.

You need to forget about him or risk having your parole revoked.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked. “Whatever it is sure made you a horny bull.”

I licked my lips. “Thinking about sliding into your pussy the minute we walk in that door.” We’d arrived at my house, and I hadn’t noticed. Too busy thinking thoughts that were best left in the dark.

“You won’t hear me complaining, sweetheart.”

We got out of the car, and I adjusted the front of my jeans. My heart clenched as I gazed at the two-story house I’d bought for me and my younger brother. Despite everything, I’d tried my best to give him a normal life. I got my hands dirty so his could be clean. Instead, those fucking cops had sent him to an early grave.

“Let’s go in.” Joanne hurried ahead of me up the porch. I took my time, more choked up than I thought I would be. Everything seemed so familiar and yet so damn different. The basketball court in front of the garage caused a lump to form in my throat.

Although I’d promised to fuck her the minute we walked in, Joanne seemed to get my preoccupation with the house. Everything was clean and just as I’d left it fifteen years ago. It was like walking back in time. If I yelled his name, would he answer in that belligerent way of his? He’d been so unruly, but that was typical teenage behavior. They hadn’t needed to shoot him so many times and kill him.

I clenched my hands into fists and inhaled deeply to get my heart rate to slow down. I walked along the hall to the living room. The couches were probably out of style, but they looked in good condition. To avoid suspicion of where my money came from, I hadn't spent as much as I could, but the furniture was good quality.

"I kept them covered for you. Removed them yesterday." Joanne walked up behind me. "Welcome home, Duncan. I'm sorry I can't fix everything."

Meaning she was sorry she couldn't bring Cole back. I was sorry too.

I placed an arm around her waist and pulled her around to face me. She was about twenty pounds heavier than when I'd left, but I was jacked from obsessively working out. It'd taken my mind off the fact that I was caged like an animal. Like the little bird I'd abducted.

I kissed her, placed my hands on the backs of her thighs, and lifted her. I upended her on the couch just like I'd done so many times in the past and shoved her dress up to her waist. She tugged down the spaghetti straps of the dress, baring her newly installed tits.

"You like them?" she asked.

I blinked several times to dispel the image of a slender torso and cherry-sized nipples that ping-ponged around in my head.

My cock withered. Just like that, my balls shriveled up, and my dick turned limp.

“Duncan?”

“Fuck, I’m sorry.” I pushed up off her and sat on the couch, rubbing my temples. “It’s all too much. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize how overwhelmed I would be by coming home.”

“It’s okay.” She slid off the couch and undid the button on my jeans. “It’s Valentine’s day, you know.”

“It is?”

Oh yeah, she was right. I hadn’t thought of February fourteenth as Valentine’s day, though. I’d seen it as the day I would use my get-out-of-jail free card. How ironic it was also the day I’d abducted him.

Joanne pulled apart the flaps of my jeans and took my cock out. “Still as beautiful as I remember.”

“I’m not sure it’s up for work today, Jo.”

“No? You let me be the judge of that.”

She damn near swallowed my dick, and it wasn’t bad head. She was good at it, lapping at my slit before she deep throated me. She devoured the plump head, sucking and sucking. I even got semihard, but then all I could think about was him and the first time he’d sucked me off. It’d been his suggestion. Perhaps he’d thought good head would make me release him.

I’d given in, gripped his bald head, and fucked his throat raw until he was crying and leaking saliva all over the floor. He’d choked on my cum as he’d greedily drank it all down.

I'd been so surprised at how much I'd liked it that I'd left him alone for another month, only feeding him and allowing him to use the bathroom. He'd seemed broken then, talking to himself and sometimes bursting out into fits of laughter.

The memory of him so vivid in my mind kept my cock hard. Joanne wasted no time wrapping me in a condom and riding me desperately like she hadn't been touched since the day I'd left, which was unlikely. She was as uninhibited as me. But while she moaned my name when I flipped her on the couch and drove into her, it wasn't her face I saw. I clenched my teeth tight so I wouldn't whisper the name that lingered on my tongue.

It's been fifteen fucking years. Why am I still so obsessed with you?

The sex didn't last long. Joanne got off, and I was right behind her. I pulled out of her and sat up, stripped off the condom and tied off the end.

An uneasy feeling settled inside my gut. I shoved it away and stood. Even with the extra pounds, Joanne had a great body, soft and round. I smacked her ass and grinned.

“Sorry it didn't last longer.”

“Oh honey, any longer and I'd be addicted. I'll go and give you your privacy. Be back later with some dinner. How about that?”

“Shaping up to be a pretty damn good day.”

Joanne pulled up her panties and smoothed down her dress. “Before I forget, I got that number you wanted. It’s on the pad next to the phone.”

“You got the phone line back on?”

“Cable too, honey. Told you I’d take care of everything, didn’t I?”

“You’re the fucking best, Jo.”

“Yeah, still waiting for you to make an honest woman out of me.” She laughed and sailed out of the living room. “See ya!”

I didn’t bother to put my clothes back on. I needed a shower, a long one, but I walked to the side table. True to her word, next to the phone lay a notepad with a cell phone number and the words “He who you shouldn’t call.”

She had a point. The parole committee had made it clear that I was to stay away from the victim and not initiate any form of contact. Calling was a form of contact.

I picked up the phone and punched in the number. I wasn’t going to talk to him. Just wanted to hear his voice. Did it sound the same after fifteen years?

“Hello?”

A chirpy feminine voice answered the phone, and annoyance buzzed through my brain. Her. Joanne had told me he got married to her.

“Is anyone there?”

What the fuck was I doing? A few hours out of prison and I was already violating my parole because of him. If I wasn't careful, I'd end up abducting him for a second time.

My heart raced.

Fuuuuuuuuck.

I hung up the phone. Nothing good could come from this. He was no longer the twenty-year-old boy I'd kidnapped. He was thirty-five and married.

Best to forget all about Teddy and the fact that fifteen years ago, I'd marked him as mine.

CHAPTER THREE

TEDDY

I paused before my lips met the wine glass and stared into the blood-red liquid. What the hell was I doing? I strode to the sink and poured the drink down the drain with a shaking hand. I'd already had one drink to calm my nerves tonight. I never could hold my alcohol, and that hadn't changed over the years. Another couple of glasses and Cassie would find me facedown on the table.

What was taking her so long? I paced the length of the kitchen. She had talked me into changing our usual Valentine's day plan of eating out to a quiet dinner at home, just the two of us. I'd spruced things up by placing a dozen candles all over the dining room. A bottle of wine was sitting on ice, and the delicious aroma of the food I'd had delivered tickled my nostrils.

But two things were missing. My wife and my sanity.

He was out of prison. How could they let him out?

"Enough," I growled and rubbed my temples. "He can't hurt you anymore. If he comes near you, he'll go right back to prison where he belongs."

My breath came out in shallow puffs. The cuffs felt too tight around my wrists, like ropes binding them. I yanked at the button, which flew off and landed on the floor with a *ping*. I shoved the long sleeves of my shirt up, then stuck my fingers into my mouth. I gnawed at the short, neatly manicured nails, creating jagged edges. When I was satisfied, I scratched at my wrist, dug my fingernails into the skin. The sting of pain was familiar. I needed this. Needed to hurt.

The sight of the blood that dotted my skin made me freeze. I'd cut my skin in several places. The cuts were superficial, but they were bleeding.

“Shit.” I grabbed a paper towel and pressed it to the damaged area. It was like being locked up all over again. This time I was trapped inside my own mind, desperate to come out and not relive the horrors of the past.

My phone rang, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Cassie's picture popped up on the screen. I swiped to take the call.

“Cassie, where are you?”

What if he didn't come after me this time but after my pregnant wife?

Or maybe he'd forgotten me and the reason he went to prison in the first place, and I was being paranoid.

“Honey, I'm sorry, but I got held back at work. The staff meeting is longer than we'd planned, and I can't leave as long as Mr. Bird is here.”

“Who has a staff meeting on Valentine's day?”

“You know my boss. We always have it on the second Tuesday of the month.”

“But you’re pregnant. He can’t expect you to sit there for so long. Just walk out.”

“Sweetie, I’m his PA. That’d be incredibly rude, and I’m not going to let them think I can’t handle the demands of my job now that I’m pregnant.”

“You have a person growing inside you. Of course you’re going to be more tired.”

“I love you for worrying, but I’ll be fine. I’ll call you when I leave.”

“Do you want me to pick you up?”

“I’ve got my car, honey. Stop worrying. I’ll see you later, and I promise to make it up to you.”

She made kissy sounds on the other end of the line, then hung up. Son of a bitch. I placed everything in the oven to keep warm and dragged my feet to the living room. I plopped down onto the sofa and turned the television on. The Impractical Jokers was on.

Normally, the group of friends had me cracking up, but tonight they didn’t even make me crack a smile. I shifted forward with my elbows resting on my knees. The television morphed. It wasn’t the four guys anymore. Instead, I was looking at myself, sitting back in a chair while he shaved my head. It was just hair, but I’d never felt so violated before he did that.

Until it got worse.

Scene by scene skipped through my mind. The pain in my skull pulled me out of my daze. I'd ended up on the carpet on my hands and knees, banging my head onto the floor. Just like I used to do when I needed to feel something while he had me locked up.

My face was wet with tears. A sob tore from my throat. How could I continue to live this way, knowing he was in the same city as me?

Fifteen goddamn years and I was still a blubbering mess because of him. All my accomplishments had flown out the window the second they'd released him.

I gasped, my torso shaking with my efforts to calm my breathing. My chest felt tight, as if an elephant was sitting on it. Did I have a heart attack? I couldn't do this. He didn't deserve to still be alive.

"Say it," he whispered. "Tell me what you want. It's the only way you're going to get it."

I spread my legs, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, my face burning in embarrassment. I couldn't say it. The part of my brain he'd broken made me want things from him that I shouldn't. But it was enough that I was spreading my legs for him. It was enough that I let him use me and then leave me a weeping mess in this white room. He couldn't make me say the words.

I pulled my shift up and offered my hole to him. I was still sore from yesterday, and the muscles were a bit swollen, but I treasured every bit of the pain. When I was alone, the pain kept me company. Kept me from losing what was left of my mind. Because when I was hurting, it meant I was still alive.

He leaned over me, and I tilted my head back, waiting for his kiss. Which kiss would I get this time? The gentle ones that left me confused or the rougher ones with his tongue assaulting my mouth and his teeth ravishing my lips? I preferred the latter. Then I wasn't so muddled about what I should feel for him.

Loathing.

"I'll give it to you again when you beg for it." He gripped my neck and squeezed. My eyes popped wide open at the lack of air, and I clutched his hands, trying to pull him off, but he was much bigger than me. I couldn't even get him to lift a finger.

I beat at his arms with my fists. "Please..."

But if he did it, I'd finally be done with his torture.

He loosened his hand from my throat and threw me back onto the mattress on the floor. I cupped my bruised neck and coughed while trying to drag painful breaths into my lungs.

When I glanced back at him, he had his cock in hand, stroking it. My eyes followed his movements hungrily, and my ass clenched with need. Even after he'd almost killed me.

What was wrong with me? I curled up in a ball and cried.

I brushed the tears from my face. He'd left me alone again for two weeks that time. Just took away the only affection I was given during my time as his captive. I'd resented him for it, but I'd needed human contact more.

So I begged. Then he'd told me to stick my ass in the air while he used me. At one point, his foot had rested on my neck while he took what I'd offered him.

And the broken boy came hard to his sadistic delight.

His kiss had been gentle afterward.

I dashed the tears from my cheeks and struggled to my feet. I needed to end this. How could I start a family when the thought of him rendered me weak and worthless?

In less than fifteen minutes, I'd retrieved his address the DCS Victims Unit had sent me. I had no fear, no conscience to stop me. I would finish what my father had started.

If only he'd been successful that day. I was convinced the judge had let that incident influence the sentence he'd given that monster.

You know what you should have done to get him more years.

I'd never been to his neighborhood before. As I parked across the street, I double-checked the address. How could he live in such a normal neighborhood?

I opened the glove compartment and took out the gun. I bought it years ago to protect myself. Before I became anyone else's victim, I'd shoot my damn self. Never would I go through such humiliation again.

My hands were steady as I loaded the gun. I checked the safety was on and slid it into the waistband of my pants.

My phone vibrated. Cassie. I rejected the call and sent her a message.

I ran out to get something at the supermarket. Driving. Will be home soon.

I turned my phone off and fixed my attention on the front door of the house. My breath hitched. It was him. It really was him. He stood at the door with a curvy woman in heels. I couldn't make out her face, since her back was to me. It didn't matter anyway. I couldn't take my eyes off him.

Even from a distance, he looked huge. And he was never small to begin with.

He leaned forward and kissed the woman. Fire spread through my chest, searing me, like being raked over the coals. He slid his hand down her back and grabbed the woman's ass, squeezing it.

He used to squeeze my ass like that before he bent me over.

Mine.

Mineminemine.

The son of a bitch thought he could ruin me, and the day he was out of prison, he got to move on with some slut? Who hooked up with an ex-convict the day he was released anyway?

I fucking loathed him so much. But I hated myself more that it...bothered me? Did he mark her too, or had he reserved all the bad treatment for me? I rubbed my palm against the brand mark of a D at the side of my neck.

They pulled apart, and the woman walked down the short driveway to the house next door. How tasteless. He was fucking his neighbor.

I swung my gaze back to the house. He didn't return inside but lit a cigarette and took a drag. My hand twitched on the gun. Some of the scars on my back were from his lit cigarettes.

He turned, staring directly at the car, and I went still. Could he see me? No, he couldn't. He was too far away, and the windows were tinted. It didn't make me breathe any easier. Not until he flicked his cigarette onto the lawn and walked back inside the house.

My breaths came out rapidly. Shit. Oh fuck, what was I doing? This was crazy. I was letting him suck me back into his insanity again.

How he would laugh and feel satisfied with himself that after fifteen years he was still pulling my strings.

You're his. You'll always be his.

“But so is he. He's yours.”

Something fluttered next to my ear, and I jerked. What the fuck was that? No one else was in the car with me. Just me and the voices in my head he'd put there.

But that voice...those words didn't seem like my thoughts at all. They'd been whispered directly in my ear.

"You're losing your mind, Teddy," I said out loud. "You need to go home."

"You can't run from it, Teddy. He's yours."

A shiver ran down my spine. There it was again. That voice. It sounded too real.

I switched the ignition on and put the car into Drive. What had I been thinking? I didn't have the guts to take out that monster.

But maybe someday I would.

CHAPTER FOUR

DUNCAN

Reporting each week to a parole officer as a grown man was a bitch, but it was a small price to pay for my freedom. I went through the same lecture with him every time we spoke.

Do not contact the victim.

Do not get involved in any criminal activities.

If you change your address, I need to know.

Keeping productive and maintaining a regular job is mandatory.

How are you adjusting?

How was I adjusting?

Fifteen years was a long time. But not long enough for those around me to forget what I'd done. Other than Joanne, my neighbors avoided me. Once a little girl had wandered up to my driveway, and the mother damn near had a heart attack, running to snatch the child before hurrying away.

My house had become the Amityville Horror House, although I'd never brought Teddy here. Never tortured him within these walls, but none of that mattered to anyone. I lived here, and that was enough.

I'd expected the desire to return to my old life to be a constant itch, but I didn't even miss the crime. Didn't miss the excitement of the life I'd lived. Not after everything that had happened. None of my previous associates reached out. I'd made it clear I was to be left alone. If any of them fucked up my parole, I wasn't beyond taking them out before having my ass hauled back to prison.

Only one thought consumed me each day.

Teddy.

The therapist they'd made me see in prison hadn't helped. I'd only done the sessions, knowing if I stuck with it, I could use that in my parole hearing.

I was a changed man.

I snorted as I parked my car in the parking lot at Aldi's. A changed man who called his victim's number every single day to hear his voice. He sounded more confident now than the last time I'd seen him at my sentencing. The cocky edge he'd had when I'd abducted him was still not back, but his voice was robust and mature.

No longer whining, needy, and begging.

Oh god, I missed the way he begged.

The minimal digging I'd done at the public library—in case anyone was keeping track of my shit—had shown he was a lawyer, but I'd already known that. An odd choice for him. And apparently, the Valley was so desperate for news that they'd displayed a picture of him and his wife in front of their car and announcing that they were expecting.

I opened my glove compartment, took out the newspaper clipping I'd printed out, and clicked on the overhead light. In the photograph, Teddy smiled fondly at his pregnant wife.

He'd never smiled at me.

The newspaper article was a couple of weeks old. He had a pretty wife—perfect figure. But it was the face of attorney-at-law, Theodore Scott, that had caught my attention. He'd filled out in the shoulders but was still more lanky and slender than muscular. Those long legs had been around my waist. Those lips had been on mine. Those hands had been on my naked body, pressing me closer to him while he whispered, “please,” sounding satisfied and ashamed at the same time.

“Fuck.”

I balled the picture up into my fist and threw it out the window. I was playing with fire. My score with his father was settled. He'd taken my brother from me. I'd ruined his son and had even been generous enough to send him back. No reason I should still be thinking about Teddy.

He's yours.

A shiver ran down my spine, and I cocked my head to the right. That little voice inside my head was about to drive me fucking insane. When I'd kidnapped Teddy, it had been a constant presence, but it had gotten fainter over the years. Now it was back and stronger than ever.

I climbed out of the truck—the first thing I'd bought since getting out of the slammer—and lit a cigarette. I smoked it down to the quick to steady my nerves. When I was through, I ground it beneath the heel of my boots.

Exhaling the last of the smoke from my lungs, I glanced up and stilled. That car. Hmm. I was pretty sure it was the same car that had been parked across the street from my house the day I'd gotten out of prison. I'd seen it following me a couple of times over the past two weeks and had thought it was my parole officer keeping tabs on me.

Now I wasn't so sure. Someone else was behind that wheel. The tinted windows made it impossible to make out who the driver was.

What if...no, that was wishful thinking. He hated my guts. Why would he be following me?

I walked into the supermarket and grabbed a small cart. As much as I would love a fucking beer, I had to forgo alcohol. They'd made it clear they could call on me for random drug and alcohol testing. A waste of time since I never did drugs. Maybe experimented a couple of times when I was in high school. With deadbeat parents like the ones I'd grown up with,

I'd seen what drugs could do to people. Despite plugging it on the street, I'd known better than to touch that shit myself.

I loaded up on frozen pizzas and cans of soda instead. I'd been lucky to land a job at a garage owned by my brother's friend. After my shifts, the last thing I wanted was to cook. Joanne brought over food almost every night, but I needed to put a stop to that. She wanted sex, plain and simple. The food was a way to butter me up. But prison must have broken something inside me because I had no interest in what was between her thighs. She didn't make me hard, and I was running out of excuses for turning her down.

When I came out of the supermarket, the car was still parked in the same spot. Even though I was curious as all hell to know who was behind the wheel, I was sure that if I approached, I would spook them, so I continued to my truck like nothing was out of the ordinary. I'd gotten pretty good at looking over my shoulders, though. The last time I had my guard down, I'd been rushed to the hospital with two bullet holes in my chest.

That might have been the best thing anyone had ever done for me. No one could convince me the judge hadn't been light on my sentence because of that "trauma" I'd been through. That and my lawyer beating to death that my crime had stemmed from grief over the police killing my brother.

I got in and drove away. The car followed slowly, keeping a good distance behind me but staying on my tail. I white-knuckled the steering wheel. Trouble used to follow me

around before I ended up in prison. Could this have anything to do with the illegal shit I'd done in the past?

I pulled into my driveway and grabbed the two bags of groceries. Once inside, I packed away everything, my body humming with destructive energy. Not knowing who was in that car was killing me. I should call the cops and have them handle the matter, but what if it was him?

Wishful thinking.

But still...

I had nothing to do but wait. I popped one of the frozen pizzas into the oven and turned on the television. Normal behavior and not nervous at all that someone was stalking me.

While the pizza was heating up, I trudged upstairs, took a quick shower, and dressed in a pair of clean jeans and a T-shirt. Before going downstairs, I peeked out my bedroom window. The car was still there.

I ate in front of the television but didn't hear a single word. Who the hell was that driver?

Hmm, wait a minute. The car. It looked similar to the one in the newspaper article. Dammit, why had I thrown away the paper? I stared at my phone on the coffee table.

Was I insane? What if they checked my browsing activities? I opened Chrome on my phone and typed in his name anyway. The page populated data, and I scrolled down until I found the newspaper article. There it was. The fucking car.

I sucked in a deep breath, and a shudder ran through my body. It was really him. Why was he here? Was he still as haunted by the months we'd spent together as I was? But he'd hated every minute of what I'd done to him. Hadn't he?

But the way he'd hesitated in court...the way he'd screamed when his father shot me. Maybe I hadn't dreamed this entire thing up?

I closed the page and erased my browsing history. My chest was tight, but I forced myself to go through my regular routine. Every now and then, I'd peek through a window to confirm his car was still parked on the other side of the street.

He'd come to me. Had he suspected I'd been behind the silent calls to his home since the day I was released? No way he could have known.

I went to my basement to get rid of all the pent-up energy, but at the end of my workout, I felt like I could still go for a few more hours. The adrenaline pumping through my body wasn't because of the workout. I had to fight myself from yanking the front door open and confronting him, but I had my orders. I had to stay away from him. If and when we came face-to-face, he had to initiate the contact.

Maybe I needed to give him a reason to.

I stomped up the stairs to my bedroom. Perfect. The window overlooked the street. I opened the curtains and, standing with my back to it, removed every stitch of clothing from my body.

Maybe he'd missed what I'd given him. For a straight guy, he'd become so desperate to be fucked.

For a straight guy, I'd been too invested in fucking him.

Still too invested in fucking him.

It means nothing. I'm just fascinated that a man like him could still be under my spell. It'd been fifteen years.

This could be nothing but disaster.

But what beautiful disaster he'd made when you touched him.

I stretched, flexing the muscles in my back. Was he watching me, remembering how he ran his fingertips over the ridges of my stomach, tracing each ab? Or how I'd make him come on my stomach just for him to lick up every single drop?

My cock grew hard, and groaning, I cupped my balls and squeezed them. I was so rigid my cock ached for release. I faced the window and closed my eyes. Gently stroking along my shaft, I relaxed. The memory I sought flooded my mind.

Fifteen years but I still remembered everything about him. His smell. His whine. His panting. How tight he was around my cock. God, taking his virginity was a moment forever emblazoned on my mind.

“Pet.”

CHAPTER FIVE

TEDDY

“I’m so sorry.” I scrambled off the bed, my cheeks burning as I snatched my pajama pants up.

“Honey, what are you doing?” Cassie sat up in bed, looking bewildered and shocked. Her nightgown was parted, revealing her heavy breasts with the darkened nipples. My stomach lurched, and I glanced away.

What the fuck was happening to me?

Like you don’t know.

Two days ago, I saw *him* naked. Just standing right there in front of the window, undressing and jerking off. Who masturbated in front of a window with the curtains open? It was almost as if he’d been putting on a show for me.

But that couldn’t be.

He had no idea I’d been stalk—following him.

“I... need a moment.” I shoved my feet into the pants and bolted to the bathroom, where I barely made it to the toilet and emptied my stomach. When I was finished, I sat heavily on the floor, my heart thumping wildly.

*Why's this happening to me? I hate him. I hate him so much.
Why do I follow him around like a madman?*

I pulled myself to my feet and flushed the toilet.

“Teddy, is everything okay?” Cassie asked through the door.
“I’m worried. Should I take you to the hospital?”

A lump formed in my throat. Sweet Cassie. She didn’t deserve someone broken...someone pretending every day that he was fine. I was anything but fine. I felt like I was going out of my mind.

What could I do at this stage but pretend?

“I’m fine,” I croaked. “Just need a minute.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Please lie down. Don’t get worked up. It’s nothing.”

Her footsteps receded, and I let out a deep breath and wiped my cheeks. For the second time that night, I brushed my teeth and gargled mouthwash, but the bitter taste in my mouth wouldn’t leave. Each time I thought about him, it returned.

I patted my wet face dry with a towel and squinted at my image.

You listen to me. You have everything you could ever want. A successful career, a beautiful wife, a home, and a child on the way. You are no longer his victim. You will not let him destroy what you’ve spent the last fifteen years building.

Feeling calmer, I walked out of the bathroom. Cassie sat up on her side of the bed, reading. She closed the book, her brow

furrowed and her eyes full of concern.

“Teddy?”

“Probably something I ate.” I got into bed next to her and pulled her into my arms. “Want to try again?” I kissed her temple.

“Are you sure?”

“Hmm.”

We settled onto our sides, and I kissed her, sweeping my tongue into her mouth with determination. If my hands trembled when I parted her nightgown, baring her naked curves, I ignored it. If goose bumps broke out on my skin when I squeezed her breasts, I pretended they didn't.

“Teddy!” Cassie shoved at my shoulders.

I raised my head from her wet nipple. “What is it?”

Her chest rose and fell. “Umm, I don't think this is working.”

“What'd you mean?”

“You're not...” She squeezed. Shit, her hand was between my legs, trying to pump some life into my limp dick.

And nothing.

Yet while watching him jerking off in the window, you touched yourself.

But I hadn't even realized I was touching myself, so it didn't count. Not until after I'd blasted cum all over my underwear. I'd been so appalled I'd hit the gas and driven

around for a couple of hours until I had the guts to go home and face my wife.

That had to be the problem. I was feeling too guilty about coming from watching someone else, and it inhibited my performance now.

“I’m sorry.” I buried my face into her neck and shuddered.

“Honey, it’s okay. Do you want to talk about what’s troubling you? Is it work?”

“Yeah,” I lied. “Work stuff you know I can’t talk about, sorry.”

“I understand.” She slid her fingers through my hair, so soft and sweet. Oh god, I’d come watching my abuser a couple of days ago when I had a warm, affectionate wife. What was wrong with me?

“I’m really sorry, Cassie. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

“Silly, there’s nothing to make up for. How many times have I said no because I haven’t been in the mood? You don’t have to have sex with me because I want to. You think I can’t help myself?” She giggled, opened her drawer, and pulled out her vibrator. “You want to help?”

An hour later, Cassie was fully sated and fast asleep, curled up in my arms. I tightened my hold on her and tried to settle my brain, but I couldn’t get rid of the shame that was lodged like a permanent fixture in my heart. How pathetic that I couldn’t even get it up for my wife and had to use a vibrator to pleasure her.

Luckily, she was an understanding woman and was satisfied easily. She'd rambled a bit about her day as she nodded off, her final words for me not to worry about tonight.

But how could I not worry?

The seconds ticked by, the minutes, the hours. Wide awake, I tried to keep my wife in my arms. As long as I held her, I couldn't go anywhere, but she shifted away from me, shoving the sheets down. I knew better than to crowd her again.

I stared up at the dark ceiling.

Go to sleep.



Blood oozed from the scab I'd torn off my skin. A slight sting was my reward, and I closed my eyes and savored the feeling. I just wanted to feel something. If only I could reach the scars on my back from where he'd cut me repeatedly. Then I could reopen those wounds too and watch the red bleed some color onto the white floor, soak the white sheets with it, and stain my white gown.

How could everything be so white when I didn't feel clean? So dirty. My cheeks flamed as I remembered what had happened days...weeks? How long had it been? I couldn't tell anymore. If only the things I'd done had been as forgettable as the days were fleeting.

Where was he? Why hadn't he come to me again? What had I done that was wrong? He had seemed satisfied when he left

the last time. The cooling cum on my skin, the sticky evidence of it. It'd been so good afterward when he let me sit on his lap and hug him for comfort.

The only human contact I'd had in a long time. Regardless of what accompanied it, I wanted that contact, so I let him have his way. Even if his way was holding my legs apart and doing unspeakable things to me.

And making me like it.

I stopped picking at the scab on my arm and grabbed my head, squeezing.

No, no, no, he was doing it again, making me question things, blurring the lines of what was right and what was wrong.

This was so wrong.

He was wrong for locking me up, taking away everything I'd ever loved, and giving me only what he wanted. So what if hugging him felt good? It wouldn't feel that way if he wasn't the only one I got to hug.

But he was so gentle and kind.

He fed me.

Touched me when no one else was here to do it.

I screamed and smacked myself in the head with my fist. Over and over. It hurt so much. Good. This was all his fault. He was the one driving me insane.

The door opened, and I glanced up, tears blurring my vision. The man didn't say anything. He was dressed in white, just like me. My heart lurched, and I wanted to run to him, hug him, kiss him. To beg him never to leave me alone.

"I hate you!" I screamed, spittle flying from my mouth. He would punish me later by silencing me. I was only allowed to speak when he granted me permission, but I had been alone for weeks. I needed to get the words out. "I fucking hate you!"

With long strides, he was across the room. He stopped in front of me and, without a word, peeled down the elastic waistband of his pants, revealing a soft cock.

"I don't want it." I shrank back from him, glaring in defiance. He thought he was smart if he never pushed me to take it, but this time my conscience would be clear. If he wanted me, he would have to force me. "I'm not touching you ever again, you fucking sicko!"

"I'm only giving you what you want."

"What I want? I want to leave this hellhole. To go back home. To see my friends. To go to classes. I never wanted anything to do with that."

"Suit yourself."

He pulled up his sweatpants and stepped back. I widened my eyes. He was going to leave? But...but...

"Please."

He stopped and slowly turned around. "Do you want it or not? I'm not taking it out a second time."

I shouldn't do it. I'd never sucked cock before he brought me here. Never once thought about it, and now my mouth watered, and my throat was dry, waiting for his liquid to moisten it.

I got to my feet and inched toward him with great malice.

"On your knees."

Because I had to fucking beg for it.

I hated him so much.

I dropped to all fours like I was an animal and crawled toward him. I pushed down the front of his sweatpants, and his cock sprang out. He wasn't limp anymore. I looked up at his smirking face. He was enjoying this. How much I wanted this dark, twisted desire for something...anything once it wasn't the void that was left when he isolated me for weeks.

I should bite his cock off. That would teach him a lesson.

I jerked upright in bed, disoriented and shaking, and cold sweat washed over me.

Can't breathe.

The room tilted, and I squeezed my eyes shut tight. A dream. It was just a dream. But it felt so real. My throat was raw from the cock I'd swallowed down. My head hurt from him holding it down. My heart ached from him telling me not to move while he found another way to ruin me and break me down.

I knuckled the tears from my eyes and flung back the sheets.
I couldn't live like this.

I won't live like this anymore.

CHAPTER SIX

TEDDY

The house across the street was quiet. My hand was steady as I removed the pistol from the glove compartment and placed it into the pocket of my oversized sweater. I got out of the car and shut the door with a quiet thud. I scanned my surroundings, but had a police cruiser been driving down the streets, it wouldn't have stopped me.

How else could I have my quiet life back?

Burrowing my head into the oversized hoodie, I hustled across the street. The nightmare from earlier lingered, solidified my resolve, and gave purpose to my steps. I'd been here enough times to know the layout of his property, and once I'd seen him retrieve a key from under the mat on the porch. Who left their keys under mats anymore?

A board creaked beneath my foot, and a chill ran down my spine. My breath came out in white puffs. I crouched on the porch, felt under the mat, closed my hand around the key, and rose to my feet.

He deserves it. Look what he's done to you. It's the only way to get your life back.

I inserted the key into the lock and slowly turned the doorknob. I swallowed hard and pushed the door open wide enough to slip through. Thick, cloying silence greeted me. A single light from the kitchen penetrated the dark hallway.

It was the first time I'd been inside his house. I'd gotten close enough to peek in through the kitchen window, but then I'd run off, terrified at my action. His house seemed normal, not like a madman was living here. On the wall were pictures of him and another guy, a teenager who looked just like him.

His dead brother.

His attorney had brought the kid up to justify the rage he'd been going through when he'd kidnapped and tortured me. But I wasn't the one who'd killed his brother. My father had sanctioned the operation.

It would have been better if he'd killed me. The extent to which he'd gone to make my life a living hell didn't make any sense. Neither did the way he'd let me walk away after months of making me dependent on him for every little thing.

Oh god, what am I doing?

I'd walked right back into the lion's den.

"Don't disappoint me now, pet."

I froze on the spot, tightening my grip around the gun. Footsteps echoed, getting closer and closer until he came out of the kitchen and was standing directly in front of me.

I had to tilt my head up to look directly into his face. Had he always been this tall? He sure as hell hadn't been this thick

and muscular when he'd held me captive. The lines of his face were more pronounced. Grooves etched at the corners of his mouth and lined his forehead.

"I've been waiting for you since I saw you parked across the street." He crossed his arms over his massive chest and smiled. "Did you like the show I put on for you two days ago?"

The skin of my face felt cold and plastic. "You knew?"

"You thought I wouldn't sense you following me around?" He raised his eyebrows. "How does it feel, stalking me for a change? I like it."

My face burned, and heat flushed through my system. He took a step toward me. I drew the gun and pointed it directly at his chest. "Don't. Come. Any. Closer."

"Ah." He stopped. "I've been wondering why you've been following me around everywhere. You're here to pay me back for everything I've done to you. Is that it?"

"You ruined my life. You fucking ruined my life, and as if that's not bad enough, you choose to live so close to me. Have you no shame?"

"Yet you go out of your way for us to meet. You must really be eager to see me."

"Eager to see you dead, you twisted son of a bitch."

He smirked. "Now there's the spunk you had when I first took you. How many years did it take you to get it back? How long do you suppose it'll take me to break that spirit again?"

“F-f-fuck you.” The gun wavered as my vision turned hazy.
“You don’t control me anymore.”

“I should hope not. It’s been fifteen years.”

I pulled back the hammer. “Stop playing mind games with me.”

He unfolded his arms and took a step forward. “You want to talk mind games, pet?”

My arm jerked. “Don’t call me that.”

“And here I thought you liked that name. You played the part so well. Sometimes a little bunny—the way we would fuck up a storm. Remember that, Teddy?”

“I said to stop talking.”

“Or the way you’d become a little kitten, lying in my lap, purring while I stroked you.”

“I swear to god if you don’t shut up—”

“Do it, Teddy. Shoot me. You’ve convinced yourself it’s the only way you’ll find peace, right?”

“Don’t come any closer.” I inched back as he moved forward. “I’m warning you. I’ll shoot you if you come closer.”

“If you truly believe you can kill me and not fall apart after, do it. You have my blessing.”

He was so close. Too close. I shuffled back until I hit the door, and still he didn’t stop. He kept walking, so fucking sure of himself. The muzzle of the gun pressed into his stomach, and he still kept coming, crowding me, sniffing me, running

his nose along my neck. I stiffened against him and clamped my eyes shut.

I can't breathe.

“Admit it, Teddy.” He placed a tender kiss on my neck, along the pulse point. It fluttered wildly, out of control. He licked a path up my neck and bit my earlobe. “You didn’t come here to kill me. You came here because you missed this. You miss the one thing only I can give you.”

He closed his hand over mine and flipped the safety back on, then pried my fingers from the handle of the gun. He didn’t take it but placed it into my pocket. “Best to put that away. Wouldn’t want to accidentally shoot you and not get to pick up right where we left off.”

“You’re crazy,” I breathed out harshly, pressing my hands to his chest. “Please don’t.”

He stopped. Just as he had so many times in the past when I’d uttered those words. I hated him for it. Things would have been so much easier had he— What the hell was I thinking?

“Are you sure you want me to stop?” He cupped my chin and held it tightly, lowering his lips to brush mine. I opened my mouth, and he chuckled. “There we go.”

Why was I such a slut for him?

“I came here to kill you,” I whispered, clinging desperately to that thought. Maybe if I said it loud enough times, I would be brave enough to carry it out.

“And you’re doing it by not touching me. You know what I want.”

“No. Nonono, I’ll never do that to you again.”

“Is that a threat? Would me forcing you make you feel better that it happened?”

It took every ounce of self-control not to nod. I dug my fingers into his flesh through his shirt and clamped my eyes closed. Fifteen years and I was still so weak. I was such a fool to think I could confront him and get rid of him so easily.

A sob tore from my throat, and tears seeped through my closed eyes. “Wh-what have you done to me? I ha-hate you so much.”

“Of course you do.” He cradled my head against his chest. “It’d be sick of you not to hate me after everything I’ve done to you.”

He was mocking me. He had to be, and yet he sounded so sincere, once again confusing me, torturing me with his words. I couldn’t pry my fingers away from his shirt, couldn’t take the step back that I needed to put some distance between us so I could breathe again. The lack of oxygen in my brain wasn’t helping.

His hands fell away from me, and he rustled with his clothes. I pulled my head back from his chest and watched him roll down the waistband of his sweatpants. He was naked beneath, his cock big and hard with a flushed, plump head. My ass flexed, and I grabbed the door behind me.

No. Don't let him do this to you again.

You know you want it. Stop fooling yourself and just do it.

“There it is.” He stroked his shaft. “All for you, my pet. You must be starving all these years without it.”

A choked sound halfway between a sob and a burst of laughter left me. “You think you’ve been the only one?”

He lifted his head. The look of surprise in his eyes was the only tiny victory I’d scored tonight. He clenched his jaw.

“You let another man touch you?”

“One or two...maybe as many as a dozen.” I shrugged, my confidence returning in small leaps. His face was flushed red. Was he angry at the thought of me with other men? “You couldn’t possibly think I’d let your filthy hands be the only ones on my body?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed in his thick throat. How many times had I buried my face there to cry and seek comfort, blubbering over him like the idiot he’d made me?

“I don’t believe you,” he said. “If you were busy fucking around with other men, why would you be following me around? Why would you be here?”

I curled my hands into fists and shoved him back. “I told you. I came here to kill you.”

“How’s that going for you?” He scoffed. “The way I see it, you have two options. You either pull that gun and finish what your father started or—”

A flash of heat engulfed me, and I slapped him hard across the face. Something I wished I'd had the courage to do all those years ago.

“Don't you dare mention my father. Because of you...” My heart clenched, and I clutched at my chest where the pain radiated. Though dad's sentence had been light, a measly seven years, it was Duncan's fault my father had ended up going to prison too for shooting him.

He grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and slammed my back against the door, which rattled from the abuse. “You either use that gun the way you intended or get down on your knees. Personally, I think you'd do well to use the gun, but we'd have so much more fun if you do the latter.”

“You don't give me choices anymore, you bastard. I can walk away.”

He yanked me forward, opened the door, and shoved me through it. I stumbled back. What the hell?

“My door's always open to you, pet, but at least make up your goddamn mind about what you want before you waltz into a man's home.”

He slammed the door in my face. Humiliation washed over me in waves. I took a step back. My purpose for coming here blurred with the panic coursing through me. Why was I on the other side of the door instead of with him?

Where was the rage that had engulfed me and made me rush out in the middle of the night, leaving my pregnant wife

alone?

I braced my hands on the door and clamped my eyes shut.

Pathetic.

Weak.

He still pulled my strings and made me dance to his tune that only I could hear. Even Pinocchio had more willpower.

How cruel of him to make me beg. It wasn't enough that I was here?

Rat-a-tat.

The door opened, and the demon who'd consumed my soul appeared. He didn't say a word this time. Thank god for that. He opened the door wider. On stiff legs, I crossed the threshold.

“Before...” I swallowed the rest of the words down. “I need to know why.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

DUNCAN

I tried not to let the emotions overwhelm me when Teddy knocked on the door. I'd gambled by pushing him out. Gambled that somehow fifteen years ago, the control I'd had on him hadn't slipped completely. Back then, the more I'd rejected him, the more he'd tried to please me. If he was stubborn, I didn't have to force him. I never had to.

Leaving him alone for a couple of weeks had given me a better result. He would be so sick of his own company and in need of affection that he would be a good pet.

"I need to know why."

I narrowed my eyes. He was so different from the young man he'd been back then. He was older but not a day wiser. Did he think he could get me to tell him anything I didn't want to?

But I could humor him.

"After."

He licked his plump bottom lip, and I sucked in a deep breath. Years spent in the slammer and I'd never felt this deep

desire for any of the men there. Not even the pretty ones, and there'd been prettier than him.

He nodded, a slight movement of his head, but it was enough. I let the door slam shut behind him, and he jumped.

“Relax. It's nothing we haven't done before.”

“Please d-d-don't talk. Don't say anything.” He went down on his knees and tilted his head back. His eyes were glassy with tears. “It's bad enough that...”

He shook his head, inhaled deeply, and reached for the waistband of my sweatpants. His hands trembled. If I had any decent bone left in my body, I would have sent him home and told him he didn't have to do this. But how could I have any decency left after what I'd done to him already?

Things I never thought myself capable of.

Did he think I had any intention of sleeping with him when I'd captured him?

My cock popped out, and he shuddered. He stared at it for a few seconds. “It's been so long...” he whispered, then licked the head of my cock. “Do you know how many cocks I've sucked over the years, and yet I can't forget the feel...the taste of my first?” He snapped his gaze up to meet mine, and fury blazed. “I don't want it, but my mind tells me I need it. It's all your fault.”

“Stop talking.” I dug my fingers into his hair. Back then, I'd shaved his head. His hair felt better in my hands, but not even

the delight of the fine strands could quench the bitter heat at the other men he'd mentioned.

His wife, for some reason, I could excuse. She was a woman, but him being with other men rubbed me the wrong way.

“You know the way I like it.”

I slapped his face with my cock, and he gasped. I shoved the tip between his lips. He opened his mouth wider, his nostrils flaring and his pupils dilating.

Fuck.

The sound he made when I shoved deep and hit the back of his throat almost made me come. He'd been so horrible at it the first time he'd sucked my cock. Had he been practicing with other men while I was in prison?

I tightened my hand in his hair, pulled out of his mouth, and shoved my cock back inside, fucking his throat. Tears spilled onto his cheeks. Those fucking blue eyes looked so damn accusatory, yet he'd come to me, not the other way around.

I released his hair and held him by the throat so I could feel the way the skin stretched every time he swallowed down my cock. Saliva spilled from the corners of his mouth, dribbled down his chin and onto the floor. I tightened my hold on his throat, and that sound...the deep moan that emitted from his chest and ended on a whimper.

“Fuck.” I squeezed harder, and his face turned red. “I never wanted this either,” I hissed at him. “So many times I tried to

stop wanting you this way, but...fuck!”

A cry roared from me. My toes curled, and I pulled his face closer, pressing his nose up to my pubes as I pumped my release down his throat. He gagged, body recoiling. He pounded my thigh with his fist, but I couldn't let go. So fucking good the way he took me like he was made for me.

As the high receded, I finally let him go. Teddy fell back against the floor on his hands and knees, struggling to drag air into his lungs between his sobs. He curled up in a heap, his legs drawn up to his chest and his face tucked into his thighs.

“Teddy, I...”

What could I say?

I stumbled against the opposite wall and stuffed my cock back inside my sweats. I clenched my hands into fists. What was he crying for? He was the one who'd come here. I never told him to. When I shoved him out of my house, he'd been standing on the other side of the door. He could have gone home, but instead, he'd knocked.

I should walk away, go back to bed, where I'd been unable to sleep earlier, so consumed with memories of him. Instead, I'd stared out my window when a car drove up the street in the dead of night. And when I'd identified the car, I'd gone to the kitchen to wait on him.

“You're going to make yourself sick if you keep crying like that.” My voice came out hoarse and uncertain. When I'd locked him up, I would have either comforted him or left him

alone to wallow. But...this was new. He was in my home, and technically he wasn't even supposed to be here.

“What do you care?” He unfolded his limbs and climbed to his feet, keeping his face averted as if I hadn't seen him at his worst before.

“I don't.”

He squared his shoulders and glared at me, but at least the sobbing had stopped. “Is your default heartless? Can't you see...”

“You act like it's the end of the world. So it's a little fucked up that you've been stalking me and—”

“I haven't been stalking you!”

I rolled my eyes. “And that you still very much like to suck my dick. It's hardly the end of the world.”

“You don't understand.” He grabbed the hem of his shirt and scrubbed his face. “I don't expect someone like you to anyway.”

“Should I offer you a cup of tea before you go? Will that make you feel better?”

“I don't want fucking tea. I want you to tell me the truth. Why?”

“Why what?”

“Are you going to make me say it?”

“A lot happened between us. Why did I kidnap you? Why did I have sex with you? Why did I let you go? Be specific.”

“All of them.”

“You already know the answer to question number one, and the answer to number two is simple. Why do two people fuck? As for the third...when I have the answer, you’ll be the first to know.”

“No, no, that’s not a proper answer. I-I sucked your dick despite everything. You owe me the truth!”

I smirked at him. “You sucking my dick is on you. You make it a habit, letting yourself into strangers’ houses in the dead of night, pet? You keep doing that, don’t be surprised if you end up on all fours. Can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I’d never let you—you put that thing inside me again.”

“Why not? There was a time you used to beg for it. Remember that, Teddy?”

“Because I didn’t have a choice! Don’t act like I did.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Teddy. At the worst, the lines were blurred, but you spread those legs for me all on your own, thinking you could convince me to let you go if I fucked you. I only met your expectations. Now I have a question of my own.”

“I don’t have to answer your questions.”

“You’re standing in my hall at two in the fucking morning despite my parole order to stay away from you. I think you’re going to answer my question.”

“Or what? You kidnap me again? Beat me some more? Torture me? Cut me up into tiny pieces this time?”

“I don’t need to. You came to me freely, didn’t you?” I crossed my arms. “Why did you come?”

“I already told you.”

“To kill me? I don’t want your phony excuse. You should be afraid of me. I want the real reason you’re here.”

“There’s no other reason.”

“Except you’re still standing in my fucking hall when you should be running for the hills, Teddy. Running back to your perfect little life with your wife... and unborn child.”

His face turned green. “Don’t talk...don’t even think about my wife.”

“I’m curious, though. You left your wife’s bed and traveled all that way to kneel for me. What would your wife think? Sucking the cock of the man who you claimed tortured you for months? What did you call me? A twisted fuck? And what does that make you, Teddy?” He was pale now, and his discomfort only fueled me to hit harder. “Can all the twisted fucks in the house raise their hands, please?” I raised my hand. “Why isn’t your hand up, Teddy? I think your wife would—”

“Don’t fucking talk about my wife!” Teddy withdrew the gun, pulled back the hammer, and fired.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TEDDY

“**G**oing home already, Theodore?”

At the unexpected voice, I jumped, slapping a hand over my heart. My coworker, Quentin, stood in the doorway. I laughed and regretted it instantly. The sound was too brittle...too shallow to be natural.

I looked away and stuffed the papers on my desk into my briefcase, moving around so he didn't see how much my hands were shaking.

Why was I startled in the first place? It wasn't as if *he* would have shown up at my office. A week had passed since I'd pulled the trigger. Then dropped the gun. Then ran away when the blood stained his shirt.

“Yeah, I-I have a date with my wife.” I rubbed the back of my hand across my damp forehead. The A/C was on. Why did I feel so hot and clammy?

“That's awesome you still do date nights after being married for so long.”

And his words gnawed at the jagged pieces of my heart that remained after *he'd* crushed it.

“Yeah, need to keep the romance alive. Can’t get too complacent.”

“That’s reminding me Darrell’s birthday is coming up, and I should probably make it special this year.”

“I’m sure he’d appreciate it.” I chewed on my bottom lip. “How did you and Darrell meet, by the way?”

“He was the only other gay person at my sister’s wedding. At least, so I assumed. We hooked up that night and hit it off.”

“Yeah? So you...” I cleared my throat. “Knew you were gay before you met him?”

“Yeah, knew since I was in middle school. That’s an odd question to ask. You questioning?”

I snapped my head back. “What? You think I—no, hell no, I’m not gay.”

“Well, you don’t need to make it sound like a disease or something.” Quentin frowned. “Were you always this homophobic?”

“I’m not homophobic.” I just didn’t like the idea that a man I despised could make me go down on my knees and suck him off, especially after all he’d done to me. But how did I explain my dilemma to Quentin? That I’d been searching and reminiscing over my childhood, trying to figure out something that could point out that I’d been curious about sex with other men before I met Duncan, but nothing jogged my memory.

I'd been as straight as a flagpole until months of isolation put it in my head to try to seduce him. I had never expected to enjoy it so much, and that scared me. Not what he'd done to me, but the number of orgasms he'd given me. I'd slept with over a dozen guys right after he released me, confused and desperately seeking for something I was never able to find. Those encounters had never lived up to the intensity of what I had experienced with Duncan.

"You sure you're okay?" Quentin asked. "Because you've been acting all spaced out of late."

He noticed? I'd tried my best not to let my inner turmoil affect my work, but baffling my way through the court case this morning hadn't been convincing. I was surprised my boss hadn't entered my office yet and demanded to know what had happened. My client had been beyond pissed at my poor, barely coherent representation.

"Yeah, I'm good. It's this thing with the baby. Guess it's freaking me out a little."

"You'll be a great father. Don't worry about it." He stepped out of my office, then stopped. "By the way, it's okay to question or to find your tastes have shifted. Sometimes personal biases we don't even realize exist obscure lines of sexuality, and as we get rid of them, things become clearer. We have bisexuality in the rainbow. Maybe look it up."

He was gone before I could tell him I wasn't bi. I was a hundred percent straight. Just fucked up because Duncan had made me that way. When I'd sucked his dick a week ago, it

hadn't been because I'd wanted to. It was a need I couldn't have shaken, no matter how hard I tried.

I needed to be on my knees for him that night. Needed to remind myself what it felt like to be used by him.

And the worst part was that I'd felt like that was where I belonged. At his feet like the dog he treated me like. What was sane about that? Absolutely nothing. If that wasn't the effect of what he'd done to me years ago, then I deserved to be locked away in a loony bin, strapped in a straight jacket, and have the key thrown out.

With a heavy sigh, I retrieved my briefcase, grabbed my car keys, and checked I'd put away everything that contained sensitive material. Satisfied, I shut the light off and locked the door. I took the elevator to the ground floor, huddled in the corner without saying a word to anyone. I wasn't in the mood to talk.

When the elevator came to a halt, I waited for the others to get off first.

“Mr. Scott!”

My heart jolted. The cop standing at the reception desk turned. Blood rushed into my ear and muffled the sounds coming from the lobby.

Oh, my god.

He was here to arrest me.

“Mr. Scott?”

I tightened my grip on my briefcase. I forced a stiff smile to my lips and pushed my weak legs to carry me the short distance across the lobby to the desk. When I was close enough, I leaned on it before my legs gave out.

“What’s up, Belle?” I nodded at the cop. “Officer.”

He didn’t say anything. Just nodded, but he kept staring at me. Sweat pearled on my forehead.

“I got a delivery for you,” she said. “The person dropped it off, although I told him he could go up to see you.”

“He?”

“Yes, it was a man.” She handed me a bouquet of beautiful white roses wrapped in white paper. “These are yours. I am so jealous. No one’s ever given me a rose before, much less fifteen gorgeous white roses.”

Fifteen white roses?

Fifteen years ago, this all started. His favorite color for me was white.

I placed the bouquet on her desk. “Then they’re yours. Take them.”

“I can’t take your flowers.”

“Yes, you can. I’m giving them to you. Have a good evening.”

I strode away before she could continue her protest. Once I was out the door, I inhaled deep breaths into my lungs. I hurried to my car, unlocked the door, and got in. Gripping the

steering wheel, I rested my forehead on it and squeezed my eyes shut.

Get a hold of yourself, Teddy. You can't let him rattle you like this.

How dared he send me roses at my place of work? At least now I knew for sure that when I fired at him, the wound hadn't been fatal. Not that I'd aimed for his head or anything vital. I'd shot him in the arm, panicked, and ran. Then worried for a week that I'd killed him and would end up in prison, never to know my child or to help raise them.

He wasn't dead, so I didn't have to think about him anymore. Best to push him from my mind.

I slowly drove home, caught up in the rush hour traffic. It seemed to take hours for me to arrive, and when I finally did, I was too exhausted to be upset or anxious. I parked my car next to Cassie's in the garage and entered the house from the side door through the mudroom.

"Cassie!"

I climbed up the staircase. The door to the nursery was open. I entered carefully and found her standing next to the baby's crib. She wore a soft fluffy purple robe, her hair done up in a twisted bun.

She looked up and smiled. "Teddy? You're home."

"We have a date tonight," I said weakly.

"You must think I'm obsessing over the nursery."

“A little.” I walked up to her and wrapped my arms around her from behind. I cupped her gently rounded stomach. “But you’re allowed to be. This is our first baby.”

“I never thought I’d have a child.” She put her hand over mine. “I never thought I’d do a lot of things until I met you, Teddy.”

Why did she have to be so sweet? I closed my eyes and rested my chin on top of her head. “Me too.”

“I really fell in love with you, Teddy. Sometimes I feel like I’m going to lose you, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Hey.” I turned her to face me. “You’re not going to lose me, I promise.”

“It’s just that I’ve done things in the past that—”

“Your past is your past. I only care about the present.”

Not what had happened to me fifteen years ago. Not what I’d done a week ago. All that mattered was loving her and being a good role model for our child. That was exactly what I would do.

Screw all the Duncans in the world. His release had taken me by surprise, but now I knew what to expect, and all I needed to do was avoid him. He wouldn’t dare to visit me, given his parole, so I just needed to stay the hell away from him where he couldn’t bewitch me.

“You’ve been so distracted lately,” she said. “I don’t know what to think. Is it the baby? Am I somehow less attractive to you now, or is there something else?”

My heart ached at her innocent questions. How could I hurt her with the truth? Or maybe I was just being selfish to avoid the drama that would surely ensue should I disclose the truth.

“Work’s been hectic lately, but things are finally settling down,” I said with confidence. “I promise everything will be back to normal. We have a date, don’t we?”

“To make up for me ruining our Valentine’s day plans.”

“You didn’t ruin it. If anything, your asshole boss did, but I’m glad we get to have a do-over tonight.”

“Me too. Now go take a shower while I get dressed for our date. I can’t decide on a dress, though, so maybe take a look at my options before you go to the bathroom?”

“Sure. I’d love to, although you look great in anything you wear.”

Her smile was the sweetest. This, this was all I needed.

CHAPTER NINE

TEDDY

For the first time since I'd picked up the phone and was told that Duncan Whittaker was out, I felt more like myself. If he'd found the time to send me flowers, he was well enough that I didn't have to worry about the fact that I'd shot him anymore.

Maybe it was the wine or the different setting, but I basked in having a tension-free night.

"I missed this." Cassie placed her hand over mine on the table. "We should promise to still have date nights, even after the baby is here."

"I agree."

I owed her everything. For giving me a life of normalcy. I reversed our hold and squeezed her hand gently. When we got home, I was going to make love to my wife. And I was going to make it last for as long as I could.

"You look beautiful tonight." She really did. Her features were softened by the pregnancy, and her face was getting rounder.

She chuckled and speared her cake with a knife. “I’m getting fat.”

“You’re not, and even if you were, I would love you just the same. You’re carrying our baby into the world.”

“But it’ll be difficult to lose the weight after delivering them, so I should probably put away this slice of cake.”

“Don’t be like that. It’s your favorite, and we’ve been having such a good time.”

I forked up a piece of cake and held it up to her lips. She opened up for me, and I didn’t stop feeding her until the plate was empty.

“In the future, when you think of leaving me for another, remember how you contributed to the extra weight tonight.”

Her words left a bad taste in my mouth. “I’d never leave you. You’re stuck with me.”

“I know, baby. I’m kidding.”

I picked up my wine glass and downed the contents, then reached for the bottle and filled up again.

“I guess I’m driving us home.” She chuckled softly. “You’ve been drinking that expensive Merlot like it’s water, and you know how you get after a couple of glasses.”

My cheeks burned, and I put the glass down. “Shit. I wasn’t even thinking.”

But that had to be the reason I was feeling mellow. I didn’t want to stop now. The night was going so well for us.

“It’s okay. I’m happy you’re relaxed, and I’m pregnant, not an imbecile. I can drive us home. How’s work?”

“Okay, working on a few cases right now. One’s a little difficult, since the husband doesn’t want to move on. It’s making things harder for his wife.”

“Hmm, what about you?”

“What about me?”

She propped her elbows up on the table with her chin on her folded hands. “Let’s say I wanted a divorce or one day you wake up and I’m gone, would you give up on us so easily?”

“Of course not.” She had a mysterious smile that made me laugh. “What’s this about? You planning to leave me?”

“Not unless you give me a reason.”

I gulped down the wine. Like sucking another man’s cock? That was reason enough for her to walk out on me. I could never tell her what I’d done.

I parted my jacket and removed the velvet box inside. It couldn’t change what I had done. It might not even make me feel less guilty, but I couldn’t shake living up to the cliché of flowers or jewelry after fucking up.

“What’s this?” Cassie took the box and turned it around in her hands.

“Open it and find out.”

“It can’t be an engagement ring, since we’re already married.” She looked thoroughly amused as she slowly opened

the box. And gasped. “Oh, Teddy, it’s beautiful.” She took out the slender gold necklace and held it up for me to see. “And the locket is so cute.”

“Look inside.”

She pried the heart-shaped locket open. “Is that…”

“Our last sonogram.”

“Sweetheart, it’s lovely.”

“Here, let me help you.” I got up from the table and swayed.

Shit, I’d really had too much to drink. I shook off the unsteadiness and took the necklace from her. My fingers were clumsy, but after some fumbling, I managed to secure the jewelry around her neck. It’d cost me two thousand dollars, and it wasn’t nearly enough for what I’d done.

I kissed the side of her neck.

“Honey, maybe we should get you a cup of coffee before we leave.”

“No, I’m fine. Just need to use the restroom. Then you can drive us home. I can’t wait to get you into bed.”

Another side effect of too much alcohol was leaving me horny, but that was welcome right now. I hadn’t been able to touch her since—*no, I’m not thinking about him tonight.*

I wound my way past the tables to the hall leading to the restrooms. The world tilted, and I placed a hand on the wall to steady myself. Fuck. Maybe I needed that cup of coffee after all.

Luckily, the bathroom was empty. I stumbled over to the vanity and turned the tap on cold. I splashed the water into my face and slapped my cheeks. The cold water did the trick. I wiped my face with a few hand towels. The bathroom door opened. I blinked several times, clinging to the hope that the man who had entered was my mind playing tricks on me.

“You! What are you doing here?”

He shrugged. “A man’s gotta eat.”

He looked at me like he was a starving man and I was the food he needed. He stalked to me, and I glanced around for something to use to defend myself. There! I bolted for an open stall and darted inside, but before I could slam the door shut, he caught the edge and pushed it in with such force I stumbled back and lost my balance.

Duncan slammed the door behind him and caught my arm, pulling me upright before I ended up in the toilet. At least the stall was pristine. For the cost of dinner, I didn’t expect any differently.

“What—”

Duncan yanked me to him and covered my lips with his. Startled, I opened my mouth, and he shoved his tongue between my lips. A shiver ran down my spine. He turned us both, pushing me up against the wall. He was watching me, even as he licked the inside of my mouth and flirted with my tongue.

It should be the weirdest thing kissing him with my eyes wide open, but I couldn't look away. Not after the way his pupils dilated. He shoved a hand between my body and the wall, impatient and rough as he grabbed my ass and squeezed.

He buried his face into my neck, kissing me there and squeezing my ass cheeks with both hands, hauling me roughly against his front and grinding up into me. "Fifteen years, Teddy," he groaned. "Why does it still feel so fucking good to do this to you?"

I trembled and clenched my fists to avoid grabbing his hair and yanking his head back. I had the powerful urge to kiss him senselessly so I didn't have to deal with reality.

"You followed me, didn't you?" I undulated against him. Fuck, but my hips were no longer my own.

"You can't prove it." He pulled his head back.

"What do you want?"

"You, Teddy. I want you."

"My wife—"

"Isn't here right now. It's you and me, Teddy. Just us. Why do you still keep fighting it? Shit happened between us, but this, this is real. You fucking shot me in the arm, and I'm still here. Deny that you want me, and I'll walk away."

I uncurled my fists and sagged against the wall. I couldn't look at him, so I focused on the third button of his dark blue shirt. "Tell me this has to do with what happened fifteen years ago."

“Of course it does.”

“I mean, tell me I’m still brainwashed by you and that’s why I’m not trying harder to escape. I’m sick, aren’t I? For letting you touch me this way.”

“You’re not the only one confused by it, Teddy.” He caught my belt buckle and undid it. “You think I want to risk going back to prison for another five years at least? You don’t think I want to avoid you, find some pretty brunette, and remember what it was like to only want pussy?”

“Why don’t you?” My heart pounded, and a roaring filled my ears.

Duncan slipped his hand inside my underwear and pulled my erection out. What was the sense in hiding it from him? He’d done this to me. He already knew I was too used to his hands on my body for it to feel strange. Instead, my skin caught fire like a match to dry paper. Arousal crackled and danced, engulfing me in the wicked flames.

This. This is what’s missing from my marriage.

“Damn if I know. I just can’t get you out of my mind, so you’re not the only one in this. Now shut up and turn around. Let me fuck you.”

“Not without lube.” I cringed at the words. What happened to saying no?

“Don’t worry.”

But I should. I should do nothing but worry about this man who peeled my pants and underwear down my ass.

“Fuck.” Duncan breathed hard, grabbing my firm cheeks. “They’re even rounder than I remember.”

I hid my face by pressing my forehead to the wall. Warmth spread through me. Was that preening I felt inside? Why did he make me feel like a good boy who craved his approval?

Fifteen years wasn’t as long as I’d thought. It felt like yesterday that he’d had me moaning beneath him.

Oh fuck, but it always felt so good when he used me.

Two fingers pushed between my cheeks, and I clenched.

“Is that your way of telling me you want it to hurt?”

I relaxed, and he rubbed my hole. “Good pet.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Too late.” A packet ripped open. Then two fingers were back at my entrance, but this time he pushed them roughly inside. I blew through my mouth and panted. It’d been years since I’d had anyone play with my ass, and I squirmed as my body adjusted to taking him in.

“That’s it.” Duncan plugged me, then pulled away. I whined and shoved back my ass. He chuckled. “You like that, don’t you?”

I refused to give him the satisfaction of a response. It was bad enough I was in a bathroom stall with my pants down. If someone caught us...

Cassie.

But his fingers felt so good moving in and out of my body. He kissed the side of my neck.

“Don’t. Don’t kiss me.”

Don’t act like this is anything more than a twisted fuck that was fifteen years in the making. Don’t pretend it’s more.

“Stop moaning so loud, or we’re going to get caught. Or is that what you want?”

I trapped the next sound bubbling up in my throat. My face burned. He was right. I was being too loud, moaning like I used to for him.

It was useless trying to resist him. He broke me fifteen years ago, and now he’d seeped his way back through the cracks.

The smooth round head of his thick cock pressed up against my hole. Just like he’d trained me, instinct took over, and I pushed out. His bold entry left a sting behind that made me gasp. He hissed a breath and sank his teeth into my shoulder.

“Fuck.” He bottomed out, and I lost it. Fifteen years and my body still remembered. The abuse and the pleasure.

I knuckled my fist against the wall and bit it to stifle the moans welling up inside me. But it only reminded me of how the sharp sting of pain he inflicted on me had become gratifying by the time he’d released me.

Duncan grunted and pressed closer to me. He dug his fingers into my hips, his nails biting into my skin, and my eyes rolled closed.

Harder, I wanted to beg. Just like you used to do to me, completely devastating me at the end.

His strokes were swift, but the viciousness with which he'd taken me in the past was missing. Maybe it was all in my head because I wasn't trapped this time. It hammered home how much I was into him fucking me. I had no excuse.

"Stroke your cock," he whispered in my ear. "I want to feel you come around my dick."

I didn't obey fast enough. He stopped moving, and the pleasure sensations dropped. I fisted my cock and sulked, glad he couldn't see my face. He was always good at that. Making me do what he wanted by withholding sex.

He hit my prostate, and a long moan spilled from my lips. He covered my mouth and kept pegging that spot.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Why does it feel so good?

The muscles in my legs strained, and I huffed into his hand, shudders racking my body as I exploded. He fucked me through my orgasm, and I was powerless to do anything to stop him. I didn't want to stop him. Just wanted to continue feeling this incredible high.

When I was floating like this, nothing else mattered. Not that I was being held captive and couldn't leave the room without his permission.

No, I'm no longer his captive. Why am I still acting like I am?

“Fuck.” Duncan stiffened behind me, his groin pressed against my ass as he came. He exhaled noisily and stumbled back from me, pulling out. Cum trickled down my taint.

Cum...

I spun around, my eyes wide. He'd been in prison, and I'd let him fuck me bareback.

“You...” My throat tightened up around the words. “You...”

“It's fine. I didn't catch anything in prison.”

I gritted my teeth and punched him in the shoulder right where I'd shot him. He gasped and grabbed my wrist.

“Fuck almighty. Isn't it bad enough that you shot me?”

“You deserved it. I was aiming for your heart.”

“If you wanted it so badly, you could have done the polite thing and asked for it.”

My mouth bobbed open and shut. What the fuck was happening now? My insides felt shaken up like I'd been on the world's biggest Ferris wheel.

“I-I need to go.”

The bathroom door opened, and I froze. Fuck, fuck, what had I done? No, I wasn't going to panic anymore. I'd fucked up again. It happened. No use panicking now.

Duncan placed a finger over his lips. Tense, I waited, hating that I was facing him and couldn't look away. He was a handsome man, though he had a rough manner about him. His damn shoulders were so broad. It'd been comforting to cry

there when he'd abducted me. My gaze dropped to his flaccid cock, and I looked away quickly.

I needed to get the hell out of here.

As if through an unspoken command, I raised my head. He was watching me. My stomach buzzed with nerves, but I couldn't glance away. A frown line etched his brow. What was he thinking? Why was he looking at me so intently?

"They're gone."

I jumped. "They are?" I'd been staring back at him so hard I'd forgotten there was another person just a couple of feet away from us.

"Yes, finish dressing quickly."

Was that... concern I was hearing? I shook my head. No way. This was how he got his way. Being both brutal and kind. Being caring enough to make my resolve waver.

I got dressed hastily, needing to get away from him. Cassie. She was waiting for me.

Without a word, I unlocked the door and stepped out.

"Wait." He caught my arm. "We should talk."

I yanked my arm out of his grip. "We have nothing to talk about."

"Really? After what just happened?"

"You ambushed me—"

"For fuck's sake, Teddy, give it a rest already." He swiped a hand over his face. "You wanted—no, needed this as much as

I did. Say it.”

“I don’t need to say shit. Stay away from me.”

I shouldered my way out of the cubicle. As much as I wanted to storm out, I couldn’t. I reeked of sex. When he followed me out, I glared at him.

“You want to blame me a hundred percent for this?”

“You’re the fucking one to blame. You made me this way.”

“You can’t believe I still control you after all these years. That doesn’t make any fucking sense.”

“My psychiatric bills over the last fifteen years say differently.”

“Teddy—”

“No, Duncan. Just no! You’ve done what you’ve set out to do—ruin my fucking life yet again.”

“You’re overly emotional. I’ll give you some time. You know where to find me so we can talk about this.”

He stalked toward the door.

“Wait, aren’t you going to wash up?”

“Why? I like the smell of you on my skin.”

The door slammed shut behind him. How could he say that and then leave? What kind of mind game was he playing now?

I avoided my reflection in the mirror. I couldn’t stand seeing the guilt that must be showing there. I wet a wad of paper towels and returned to our cubicle. The mingled scent of us

was strong. I tried to get as much of the cum out of my ass as possible, but I'd already left Cassie for so long.

Oh dear god, what have I done?

Duncan was right. I was every bit as fucked up as him. Hyperventilating, I bent over with a hand pressed against the wall and struggled to regulate my breathing. But I inhaled our fucking scent over and over.

It was too thick. My cock was already getting hard again.

I stumbled back out of the cubicle, washed my hands, and ran out of the restroom. I could never return to this restaurant. Would my life constantly be of me striving to forget?

I plastered a smile on my face as I approached the table where Cassie sat, scrolling through her phone. She didn't look impatient at all.

I reclaimed my seat and stifled my gasp. My ass was sore.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

How could it be? Nothing may be okay ever again.

"Yeah. Let's get the check and go."

I signaled our server, who came over quickly. "Anything else you'd like me to get you, sir?"

"No, just the check, please."

"It's already paid, sir."

"You paid?" I asked Cassie.

She shook her head. "I was waiting for you to get back." She turned to the waiter. "Are you sure?"

"I'm positive, sir. The gentleman said it was a gift for a favor rendered."

My cheeks heated up, and my stomach roiled. Duncan. It was him. The bastard. He'd paid for my ass. No, this was good—a wake-up call. A reminder that no matter how caring he may seem in one moment, he was nothing but a heartless monster. Whatever decision he made was ultimately to humiliate me.

"That's awfully nice." Cassie smiled. "Is he still here? I'd like to thank him."

"No!" The waiter and Cassie stared at my outburst. "I mean, we don't want to disturb whoever it was."

"But it's only polite."

"I'm afraid he already left," the waiter said. "But he said Mr. Scott should know what favor he means. If there's nothing else, have a safe trip home."

"Let's go." I rose to my feet and helped Cassie to hers.

"So who was it?" Cassie asked as I led her from the restaurant. "A coworker? A client?"

"Yes."

"Yes? Which is it? Are you still drunk?"

"No, I'm not drunk." Though I should claim to be. Then if I ever confessed about this night, I could use the alcohol as an

excuse for what I'd done.

If only it'd been the alcohol.

"It's a client, and you know I can't go into the cases with you, so I can't disclose the favor."

She sighed. "Fine, but you must tell them thanks for both of us."

"I will."

By the time we got to my car, I was once more a nervous wreck. I handed her the keys and took the passenger's seat.

"Do you mind if I put some music on?" I asked.

"Music is good."

I opened my Spotify app and hit Play. The sound was effective enough to stall conversation between us, but what would get me through the night of making love to my wife with another man's cum leaking out of me?

CHAPTER TEN

DUNCAN

“Mr. Whittaker, sir, what are you still doing here?”

I swiped a hand over my forehead and pushed out from under the Ford truck I was servicing. Jerome, my brother’s best friend—former best friend—stood over me, his hands on his hips. He’d ditched the overalls he’d been wearing today and looked decent in a pair of khakis and a shirt tucked in like a choir boy.

A sharp pain radiated from the old wound in my chest, but it hurt less than the first time I’d seen him when I got out of the pen. Back when Cole was still alive, the two had been inseparable. Both had been good boys and were top of their class. Jerome had started his own business—a successful garage.

Would Cole have been as successful had he been given a chance too?

“I was almost done with the truck.” I climbed to my feet and wiped my grimy hands on my dark blue overalls. “Figured I might as well get it finished before I head home.”

“Well, everyone else left, and you were the first person here this morning. You shouldn’t be the last to leave, too.”

“I don’t mind.”

Our eyes held, and his cheeks flushed. He looked away, which was enough to get my ass moving. Despite him allowing me to work here, he was obviously afraid of me. He was old enough to remember the horrible things I’d done.

When he’d appeared on my doorstep with a job offer for me, I’d been in no position to turn him down. I couldn’t go back to my old life, and no one was lining up to hire a parolee. I needed to convince my parole officer that I had well-meaning intentions of reintegrating into society.

The garage wasn’t the worst place to work. I was no stranger to working with my hands, and focusing on the job kept my mind off a certain man I was still hell-bent on fucking with. The only reason I’d arrived at work so early today was to stop myself from showing up on Teddy’s doorstep, ringing his doorbell, and not giving a fuck if his wife answered.

But that was a surefire way to get me locked up again. Even though he’d enjoyed my sexual advances and come while I was buried to the hilt inside him, Teddy had proved it wouldn’t deter him from sending me to prison. Fifteen years ago, he’d turned me in a month after I’d released him.

A whole fucking month.

We might have fucked in the bathroom stall of a restaurant a week ago, but as far as anyone could tell, we’d met by chance.

No one knew I'd gone to his house and waited for him to get home. Then I'd watched him leave a couple of hours later with his wife.

And followed them.

I'd sat so close to them I'd been sure he would see me. I'd meant for him to see me, but he'd only had eyes for *her*. Goddamn him. I'd trailed him to the bathroom, and fucking him had reassured me.

I still had his attention.

He was still mine to control. This was our cat-and-mouse game. He resisted just enough to make himself feel good before giving in.

"Mr. Whittaker, are you—"

"Duncan," I said. "You're my boss, so call me Duncan. I'm not Mr. Whittaker anymore."

"You'll always be Mr. Whittaker. You used to let me stay at your house when my old man was such a shit to me."

"Don't mention it."

"You should—"

"Seriously, don't mention it. You gave me a job, right? We're even."

He was my brother's best friend. Of course I wouldn't have let his old man beat the shit out of him. I couldn't stand by and do nothing.

He closed the distance between us. “But you don’t need it, right? I mean, Clive and the other guys—”

“Don’t.” I shook my head. “You don’t mention them to me. As far as you’re concerned, they’re no longer a part of my life. Do you get it?”

He nodded. “I’m sorry, I—”

“You got nothing to apologize for, Jerome. I’m gonna change.”

I stalked past him to the tiny room where we stashed our possessions while we worked. I changed as quickly as I could and scrubbed most of the dirt off my hands. The oil that had seeped under my nails would take more care to clean. The grime may never completely disappear.

After changing, I stuffed my dirty overalls into my bag. I’d have to do laundry tonight. Joanne had said I could bring them over anytime, but I hated bothering her when I couldn’t give her what she wanted. It felt too much like taking advantage and giving her empty promises. I wouldn’t do that to her. While I was in prison, she’d handled everything the way I’d asked her.

It was hardly her fault I didn’t follow the script.

Jerome had already turned off most of the lights. I helped him pull the heavy metal door closed and secured. His business was profitable, and if the streets were anything like back in the day, the underbelly of the city came out at night—

vicious, greedy, and willing to go to extremes to take what they wanted.

“Thanks for helping me lock up.” Jerome walked beside me to his car, which was parked next to my truck.

“Don’t mention it.” I quickened my pace and pulled my car keys from my pocket. I disabled the alarm and released the lock.

“Mr. Whittaker.”

I ignored him and opened the door.

“Duncan.” I glanced over my shoulder. “We haven’t really talked since you’ve been back. We haven’t talked about him.”

“Because there’s nothing to say.”

I might as well have been the one to pull the trigger and kill my brother. It had been my mess he got caught up in.

“How about a drink, then?” He dropped his head and scuffed the toe of his boot on the concrete. “I-I know it’s been fifteen years, but it’s not nearly as long as people think. I’ve... missed him all these years, but seeing you, makes it a little better. Makes it seem like he’s not completely gone.”

“It’s in the past.”

“Is it?” He tilted his chin. “I never told you I was sorry for that night. For not trying to stop him from doing that stupid shit. For not visiting you in prison after—”

In a few strides, I was standing in front of him and took him by the shoulders. His eyes were wet. But they weren’t blue. I

shook my head, shook off the distracting thought.

“Listen to me. You did the right thing coming to get me that night.”

“But it was too late.”

“At least I knew who was responsible.” I released him and patted his cheek like I’d done to him and my brother when they were younger. He probably hated it now as an adult, but I needed to remember him as the boy he used to be. Before my world had turned upside down. Before I’d lost the most important person in my life. “Don’t torture yourself about it. That will lead you to do stupid things. Ask me how I know.”

“I should be over it already—”

“The truth? I hope I never get over it. I hope I always remember.”

He shook his head. “I hear you. What are you doing later?”

Avoiding Teddy’s place. If they found out I’d been there once...

“Nothing. Why?”

“Let’s meet up at Peg’s and have a drink. We don’t have work tomorrow.”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Eight?”

“Okay. Catch you then.”



At five minutes past eight, I stepped through the doors of Peg's, a bar I'd frequented a lot before going to prison. Everyone went to Peg's, and that hadn't changed. The place was jam-packed, which was expected on a Saturday night.

Thick smoke curled up in the air. This wasn't the place to take women on a fancy night. It was a rough-and-tumble bar with raucous laughter, crude talk, sports, drinking, and the occasional fighting.

A few men turned their heads in my direction, then whispered to their companions. They didn't even try to make it less obvious they were talking about me. When I scanned the faces, familiar eyes met, then instantly averted. Days passed when I used to buy the entire bar drinks after a good night. Everyone would cotton up to me.

Not anymore. I'd never heard the inside of Peg's go so silent before.

"Duncan! Over here."

Jerome waved at me from a small red booth. I sidestepped a couple of guys who looked fresh out of high school to get to him.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea." Jerome glanced around us nervously. "Want to go somewhere else?"

"No. We're here already. What am I going to do? Hide for the rest of my life?"

"All right, then. Let me get us some drinks. You're not hungry, right? The Buffalo wings are still good."

“Just drinks.” I’d already eaten a frozen pizza an hour ago.

“What should I get for you?” Jerome jumped to his feet.

“Ginger ale.”

He frowned. “Ginger ale? Why not a pitcher of beer?”

“I’m on parole, Jerome. Can’t have a drink.”

“Oh, sorry. I wasn’t thinking. Be right back.”

I shook my head as he hurried over to the bar. He’d been like this when Cole was alive—eager to please. Whenever he stayed with us, he would always volunteer to do the dishes or other chores, while I had to threaten my lazy brother to get stuff done.

I clenched my hands into fists.

“Here you go.” Jerome returned with a pitcher of beer and my ginger ale and sat down.

“Thanks.” I took a gulp from my drink and drummed my fingers on the table. “What’s up with you?”

“Ah, nothing much.” He chuckled and combed his hair back. “The business is great.”

“Any wife and kids?”

He ducked his head. His whole demeanor was amusing. He wasn’t exactly shy but bumbling around me. I’d always taken it that he was afraid of me. But maybe I’d missed something.

“No,” he said, his voice low. “I...I just broke up with my... boyfriend.”

The ginger ale shot down the wrong way. I coughed into my fist as my eyes watered. “What did you just say?” I wheezed.

He pulled back and sat up straight. His face as white as a sheet, he gripped the end of the table. “I’m...gay.”

“Oh.”

He hung his head. “I’m sorry I’m such a disappointment. I should go.”

“Jerome, stop.” I cleared my throat, which still hadn’t fully recovered from the coughing fit. “I don’t care if you’re gay. Didn’t I teach you boys to have a spine? So what if I’d had a problem with you being gay? You should be ready to say fuck you and march out of here proud anyway.”

He squared his shoulders. “If it were anyone else, I would have, but...I respect you and care about what you think.”

His face had gone from white to red, and understanding dawned on me. All this time I’d thought he was a timid, mumbling mess, but he was only ever that way around me.

He wasn’t bad looking. He had a sturdy frame, dark brown hair, and eyes the color of cocoa. His nose was slightly crooked from where my brother had broken it when they’d gotten into a fight at fourteen.

“I’m nobody special.” I glanced around the bar. The other patrons had gone back to their chatting and games.

“Don’t say that. If it hadn’t been for you, my old man would have killed me.”

“Your old man was weak. Hope you pissed on his grave when he died.”

“I did.”

“Good boy.”

Jerome blinked and scrambled to his feet. “I—Shoot, I just remembered something important I have to do. I have to leave.”

“Don’t worry about the bill. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thanks. Maybe some other time we can do this again.”

I pulled out my phone. I didn’t have anything better to do at home. My company was gone, but I didn’t mind my own. The chatter of others was sort of comforting.

Home was lonely.

Too damn lonely.

After lingering inside the bar for half an hour, I was ready to go home. Would Teddy come tonight? Why the fuck was he so stubborn? We’d both felt good when he was riding my dick. He’d shot me in the arm. Thankfully, it’d been a flesh wound, and I wasn’t up in my feelings over it.

Why deny himself what we could have? Because he was married? I scoffed as I rose to my feet. That marriage was a sham, anyway. How could he bend over for me like that if it was anything else?

I paid for our drinks and got a Canada Dry for the road. The nip in the night air made my nipples hard. My dick wasn’t far

behind. Damn, but I was horny.

“Fuck you, Teddy,” I muttered under my breath and unlocked my car door.

Footsteps crunched on the gravel behind me. Sliding my car key between my fingers, I turned.

Fuck. Six of them.

Maybe three I could handle, but not six. This was the last fucking thing I needed. If I ended up in a brawl, my parole officer would get involved. I shouldn't have gone to Peg's in the first place. They wouldn't care that I'd had no alcohol.

“Well, well, well, look who we have here.” The ringleader, Kyle Webster, stepped up in front of me.

“Nice to see you too, Kyle. What'd you want?”

“For someone like you to stay off our turf. You thought you could show up here and not expect any trouble?”

“I'm not looking for trouble. Had drinks with a friend. Now piss off.”

“You still think you're the shit, Duncan? Because last I heard, your so-called best friend took over your operation and cut you dry the moment your ass landed in prison. Who's going to back you now?”

“Don't need anyone to back me. Now fuck off.”

“You—” I dodged his fist, grabbed his shoulder, and shoved him back. He came at me again, more livid and manic. “What the hell are you waiting for?” he yelled.

Fuck. I hadn't hit him because I wanted to avoid the fight at all costs, but there were six of them and one of me. The longer I drew this out, the less likely I was to walk away unscathed.

I jabbed my fists twice in Kyle's face. Someone punched me in the stomach, and I lashed out in the direction it came from, catching one of them in the chin. If I had four arms, I would have come out as the winner. Two didn't quite work. I gave them a hell of a fight, though, but fists connected with my ribs, back, and chest.

A blow to the head from behind stunned me. The world tilted, and I went down on one knee. Another fist to the temple and I was on both. A kick to the chest knocked the wind out of my lungs. The blows kept coming, one right after the other, some together. I rolled into a ball and covered my head with my hands.

Fucking cowards to come at me all at once.

"You sick fuck!" Kyle shouted. "Your brother deserved what he got."

His last words drifted through my mind as everything turned black.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TEDDY

I parked next to my sister's minivan, my stomach in knots. The whole family was here, then. Suzanny and her four kids were a handful enough to be a distraction. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad with them acting as a buffer between me and my father.

"You're awfully quiet," Cassie said.

"I wish you had asked me before you told my mom we would be here today."

"I already apologized for that, honey. I assumed with your mother's poor health, you would want to spend as much time with her as possible."

"My mom's not the problem," I muttered and got out of the car. I opened the door for her and helped her out. "You know how my father treats me."

"It'll be fine." She kissed my cheek. "He should be too busy doting on your sister's brood to bother you."

If only that were true. The old man always found time to poke jabs at me. Before my kidnapping, our relationship had

been decent. Everything had changed when I returned home alive.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “Forgive my bad mood. We’re here already, so we might as well go in.”

Suzanny let us into the house. My older sister was all smiles, leggy blonde, and radiating happiness for a single mom. Her husband died a year ago after he had a heart attack while driving.

“Teddy.” She hugged me briefly. “Wow, you look a hot mess.” She pinched the flesh beneath my eyes. “What’s with all this extra baggage? The baby isn’t even here yet.”

My stomach tightened at the mention of the baby. Thank god she released me and fussed over Cassie without waiting for a response from me.

“Good to see you too, sissy.”

“I didn’t come for you.” She stretched her hand out to Cassie’s belly but halted. “May I? I hated it when people touched my bump without permission.”

“Sure thing. You’re family.”

“And can’t wait for this little one to join us.” She rubbed Cassie’s tummy. “Have you guys found out the sex yet?”

“Nope and we’re not going to,” I said. “Don’t try to get us to change our minds.”

“Well, don’t be upset if you have a boy and end up with tutus from me.”

Cassie laughed. "I don't have a problem with that."

"Come on, let me get you a drink. Mom's resting upstairs. We'll wake her before dinner is ready. Dad's in the living room with the kids."

"Anything you need help with in the kitchen?" I asked.

"I've got it. Cassie will sit with me in the kitchen so we can exchange gossip."

"I like gossip too."

Suzanny waved me off and took Cassie's arm. "Don't be so timid. You know Dad hates it, but he's in a really good mood today, so he shouldn't give you a hard time."

"Thanks for the heads-up." I didn't feel reassured, though. I took in a deep breath and tried to relax. My dad could scent fear a mile away. It was a part of what had made him a good cop before he had lost his job because of his outburst in court.

"Uncle Teddy!"

The two younger kids, twin boys Dylan and Ethan, ran over to me. At six years old, they were cute but rough. Ethan smacked me in the stomach and grinned with bare gums from where he'd lost his front teeth.

"Oh no, I'm hit." I held my stomach and exaggerated a tumble to the floor on my knees. "I surrender. I surrender."

The boys giggled, and I tackled them to the floor and tickled them until they yelled, "I surrender!"

I picked them up off the floor and settled them back onto the sofa where their tablets lay forgotten. The two older kids were too busy on their phones to even notice I'd entered the room.

I brushed at the knees of my jeans and, with an inward sigh, walked over to Dad. Of course he sat in his favorite armchair. When we were kids, no one else was allowed in that chair, and that hadn't changed.

"Dad, how are you doing?"

"Good. Why haven't you come sooner to look after your mother? She's had to make up this fake family dinner to get you here. You too good for us now that you're a big shot lawyer?"

If only I could tell him the truth. That I no longer came around because of him.

"Just been busy with cases, Dad. My desk is overflowing with work."

"You know your mother misses you. At least pick up the damn phone and call her."

Except when I called her, she always tried to get me to come around or talk to Dad too.

"I'll go up and check on her."

"Well, don't go now. She just went down for a nap. Don't disturb her. I'll wake her when it's time for dinner. What's the matter? You can't sit with me for a few?"

“I need to talk to Suzanny about something important.” I surged to my feet.

“You’re such a pussy.”

My whole body shut down, and I froze. It felt like someone was dragging fingernails along my skin. Goose bumps broke out on my arms. I doubled my hands into fists.

“What? You want to fight your old man? You ungrateful piece of shit.”

Walk away. Just walk away.

My feet felt like lead, dragging with each step, but I finally made it out of the living room and disappeared into the half bath across the hall. I shut the door behind me, my body shaking. I clutched the edges of the vanity and closed my eyes. Why did he have to hate me so much? It wasn’t my fault what had happened. Was it? He’d acted on his own to shoot Duncan.

You wanted it, didn’t you? Do you know how you’ve humiliated this family? How dare you change your story on the stand?

I flipped up the toilet seat and emptied the contents of my stomach. Sweat washed over my clammy skin, down my neck, and seeped into my clothes. The tremors got worse. I heaved nothing, choking on anger, hatred, and...desire.

Tears dripped from my eyes into the bowl. I needed to see him. The desire was too strong. I should never have gone to his place that first time. Then the old feelings wouldn’t have

resurfaced. Now all I could think about was how warm he'd felt whenever I cried and how he'd hugged me. How in that moment, he had been soft and tender and seemed to care.

Oh god, I want to feel his arms around me just like that again.

And it was sick. No wonder my father hated me. Ever since I'd changed my story on the witness stand, he'd look at me with loathing. Our relationship had never recovered from that betrayal.

I stayed in the bathroom way too long. I scrambled to my feet, flushed the toilet, and washed my face. Shit, my eyes were red. I would have to play it off or be under scrutiny through dinner.

I closed my eyes and inhaled slowly. Just a moment of madness. I didn't really want to see him. I opened my eyes and stared at my reflection in the mirror. Was I pouting? My cheeks flushed, and I tore my eyes away.

Little by little, I would forget about him like I had before. I needed to stay away from him until then. If I'd done it before, I could do it again.

Suzanny and Cassie were laughing and chatting in the kitchen. Not wanting to intrude, I went to the back porch and sat in Mom's rocking chair. The garden in the backyard looked as pitiful as I felt. Mom didn't have the energy to maintain it anymore. I missed talking to her, but the tension between Dad and me made it too difficult to stay in touch. It didn't help that

she seemed to always be on my father's side, always expecting me to be the understanding one.

Why couldn't he understand the trauma I'd gone through and how it'd fucked up my life?

After hours of therapy sessions, I'd tried explaining to him once why I hadn't been able to lie on the stand. Before I could get halfway through my explanation, I was spitting out one of my teeth.

I'd never tried talking to anyone about it again. Not even Cassie. She knew the basics of what had happened, but I'd never shared my trauma with her.

My phone buzzed and my heart right alongside it. Was it him calling? He thought I didn't know it was him calling the house and recently my cell phone? Who else could it be?

I fished my phone out of my pocket. Huh, it wasn't him. What did Quentin want? I swallowed down my disappointment but didn't answer. It was Sunday, for crying out loud.

When the call ended, I unlocked my phone and opened the call log. He hadn't called me for over a week. Not since the bathroom incident. Had he forgotten about me already?

My stomach churned again. That should make me happy, shouldn't it? Yeah, I was happy. Happy he was out of my life for good.

“Teddy, oh my god, what are you doing? You're bleeding!”

Dazed, I stared at Cassie, who hurried toward me and lifted my arm. Dammit, my wrist was bleeding, and I had blood under my fingernails from scratching myself and digging into my flesh.

“Why would you do this?” Cassie looked at me with wide eyes, her face gone pale.

“It’s nothing.” I jumped to my feet and hid my arm behind my back. “I was itchy and got lost in my head. Didn’t realize I was scratching that hard.”

I reached up to cup her face, but my gaze fell on my bloodied fingers. I jerked my hand back and kissed her cheek. “Honestly, don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

She followed me into the house. “Dinner’s ready, and your mom’s downstairs. Everyone’s waiting on you.”

“You can start without me.”

“Honestly, Teddy!”

“I won’t be long.”

For the second time, I disappeared into the half bath and took care of the cut, which was deeper than I’d thought. Shit. I washed away the blood, then scoured the cabinet for a Band-Aid and put it on. Thankfully, it was my left hand. I would keep it out of sight as much as possible. The cut was too close to my vein. The last thing I needed was for my father to think I’d tried to kill myself.

When I entered the dining room, the family was already sitting at the table.

“Hurry up, Uncle Teddy! We’re starving.”

“Sorry for keeping you waiting.” I stopped by my mother’s chair and kissed her temple. “Mom, it’s so good to see you.” She didn’t look any worse than the last time I’d seen her, but she was much thinner than I was used to.

“We’ll have to catch up before you go,” she said. “Tell me all about your work. Come sit next to me.”

I took the chair next to her and answered her questions. With her attention on me, Dad had to focus on other things. Suzanny kept him occupied, regaling him with stories about the children, and slowly I relaxed. The tension in Cassie’s face eased over dinner, which was a relief.

After dinner, the kids ran off to the living room while the adults stayed behind to finish their wine. I downed mine way too soon.

“I got some interesting news today,” my father said to me.

“About what, Dad?”

“Do you all remember Duncan Whittaker? Son, you remember who he is, don’t you?”

The breath I inhaled got stuck in my throat.

“Chester, why do you have to bring up that evil man?” Mom waved a hand at Dad.

“Because he’s out on parole,” Dad said. I didn’t dare look at him, but I sensed him staring at me. “Did you know he was out, Teddy?”

Silence fell around the table. All eyes were on me now—not just my dad’s.

“Of course he didn’t know, Dad,” Suzanny said. “Can’t you see he’s in shock about the news?”

“Can’t believe they granted him parole,” Dad spat. “He deserved the chair for what he’s done to this family.”

Not to me but this family.

“That’s enough, Dad.”

“It’s enough when that bastard’s six feet under.” Dad’s fist connected with the table.

“Chester!”

“Don’t Chester me, darling,” Dad snarled. “Because of him, I went to prison and lost my job. Do you know people still speculate that Teddy went with him and made up the whole abduction story when their relationship turned sour?”

I sprang up from the table so fast the chair tilted and crashed to the floor. “Is that what you also think, Dad? That I’m to blame?”

“Of course no one blames you, dear,” Mom said. “Your father gets excited over nothing.”

“Cassie, let’s go.” I held out my hand.

“That’s right,” Dad jeered, getting to his feet as well. “Run away from your problems like you always do. Why do you have to be so weak? Do I have to fix everything for you?”

“Nobody asked you to fix anything!” I snapped. “He served his time—”

“And it’s not enough. It’ll never be enough. If he thought he’d get to live a normal life once he’s released, I bet he’s thinking differently now.”

Warning bells rang loud in my ears, almost deafening me. “What did you do?”

“I don’t have to do anything. I have buddies who take care of things now. This time it was just a warning. The next time he won’t make it home alive.”

“You are lucky you got the minimum sentence last time. Do you want to end up in prison again?”

“At least I’m mad enough to take action when someone fucks me over instead of just lying there and taking it like a bitch.”

“Chester, the children!”

I stumbled back and almost tripped over the chair. Suzanny screamed something at Dad. Mom started to cry. I needed to get the hell out of there.

“Teddy!”

“Drive home safely,” I croaked, tossing the car keys onto the table. “I-I need some air.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

TEDDY

Lightning streaked across the sky, illuminating the dark, solitary street. *Boom!* I jumped at the thunder that shook the ground beneath my feet. Soaked through to the bone and shivering, I stared at the door in front of me.

Why was I even here?

I raised my hand to knock, then pulled it back. Instead, I stooped, searched for the key under the mat, and inserted it into the lock. It wasn't needed. The door wasn't locked.

Did he know I would come? He'd always been good at predicting my actions and doing what would guarantee him a certain reaction out of me. Like walking away because he knew I would have begged him to stay.

I slipped into the house and closed the door behind me. What a fool I was to be here, but after stumbling through my emotions all evening, I needed to empty my head of all the questions swirling inside. And I was certain I would find the answers right here. If I were going to release the hold he had on me, I shouldn't avoid him. I needed to get him out of my

system. To prove to myself he was not in control of me this time.

I wasn't his victim anymore.

The light from the kitchen filtered into the hall, making the way visible enough for me to climb the stairs. From watching him across the street, I knew exactly which bedroom was his. I stopped outside with my hand poised on the knob.

What if he had someone else inside?

I shoved the door open none too gently and was instantly engulfed in darkness. Fabric rustled; a bed creaked.

“Who the fuck is there?”

The bedside lamp came on. Duncan was sitting up, leaning against the headboard, squinting against the light. Scrapes and purple bruises marred his face. His bottom lip was cut, and the Band-Aid on his brow didn't quite cover the wound. I dropped my gaze to his naked chest, to the old scars from where my father had shot him. More recent bruises stood out from the tattoos, wrapped around his ribs and no doubt continued to his back.

He looked rough.

“Teddy?” He frowned. “What are you doing here?”

“You left the door open for me.” I surprised myself at the confidence in my tone. What happened to the mess who'd been walking in the rain? Who'd avoided his wife's calls, knowing she wouldn't understand. None of them would. Even my sister's sympathies were useless.

Only one man understood the full extent of what I'd been through, and he was right in front of me. I'd had no choice but to come. I needed to retrieve my sanity.

“Did I?”

“Tell me you didn't, and I'll leave.”

Silence fell between us. When he didn't say anything, I turned to go.

“You're late.”

My back to him, I closed my eyes and breathed out slowly. I had been right. I might be too weak to say no to him, but for some reason, he was obsessed with me. Still.

I clung to that thought, determined to use it and not be his victim this time.

Slowly, I faced him. “I do what I want now. I go where I want.”

His lips curled into a smile. “So you want to be here? I'm glad to hear it.”

“There will be rules.” I kicked off my shoes and toed off my socks.

“Humor me.”

“You only get what I choose to give you.”

“So everything, then?”

“Wrong.” I tugged my shirt out of my pants and quickly unbuttoned it. I dropped the material to the floor, and my pants followed. My hands lingered on the waistband of my boxers

while I watched him. His eyes were focused on the bulge in my underwear. Heat licked at my spine, and I clenched my ass.

I need this.

Without it, I just might go insane wondering.

“You stop if I ask you to.”

“Don’t I always?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You’re not allowed to speak, especially about my...wife. You’ll leave her out of this.”

“Anything else?”

I walked over to him and cupped his chin in my hand, assessed the bruises on his face. “I’m doing this to get you out of my system. Nothing else. I don’t know what the fuck you did to me, but you’re going to make it stop.”

“What exactly do you want to stop?”

“Craving you.”

I bit my bottom lip. Had I said too much? I never came here with the intention of talking. What more could he say to me? Nothing would make me feel better about the reason I was here. In fact, I was as disgusted with myself as I was with him, but it still didn’t negate the simple fact.

I needed him like fire needed oxygen to thrive. Hopefully, I could get out unscathed if I controlled the narrative this time.

“How badly do you crave it?”

“Bad enough to be here.” I released his face. “They fucked you up real good.”

“Would have been worse if someone hadn’t shown up. Feeling sorry for me?”

I grunted. “You deserved it.”

“Maybe. What else do I deserve?” He pulled the sheet back. Damn, he’d been sleeping in the buff. His thick veiny uncut cock was already hard.

“You deserve to rot in prison for two more decades.”

I shoved him in the chest hard, and he hissed a sound of pain as I straddled his hips.

“Be gentle. Those bastards did a number on my body.”

I laughed, the sound dark and almost inhuman. That was how he made me feel. Inhuman. Like I didn’t have to abide by the usual rules because we were different and not like everyone else. “Are you fucking kidding me? You made me bleed.”

“You enjoyed it.” He raised his head as though to kiss me, but I pulled back.

“No kissing. Do you have lube?”

“What if I said no?”

“We’ve done without it before.”

“But remember how sore you were after.”

And I’d loved it. Even though he’d returned to giving me the cold shoulder, feeling my throbbing hole had comforted me.

“Lube is in the top drawer. I jerk off to thoughts of you before going to bed.”

“I don’t need to know that.”

I crawled off him and yanked the drawer open. Now that I’d made up my mind about doing this, I was impatient. Luckily the lube rested on the top along with condoms. I took out both and turned back to him. He’d shuffled down the bed and now lay in the center, scowling at the condom.

“We don’t need that.”

“I’m not fucking you bareback again. Who knows where your dick has been?”

He smirked. “The man you’ve grown into is quite interesting. I can’t wait to break him too.”

“There’s nothing left for you to break.” I ripped the condom wrapper open. “You’ve already grounded me into dust. What else do you want? To scatter it?”

I drew closer to him and rolled the condom down his cock. It looked weird. I’d never fucked him with a condom on before. From the first time, he’d made it clear his cum belonged inside me. It was the only way I got to have him, so I’d agreed.

But this time, I called the shots.

“That condom’s gonna ruin the whole show,” he said. “How else am I supposed to breed your ass?”

My hand trembled as I squirted the lube down his cock. Cassie was home alone. Probably waiting for me to show up. I should leave.

You're right where you belong.

I smoothed my hand down his cock.

Fuck, how could I leave without a taste of this? I'd never felt as full and steady as when I was fucking him. He had shattered the nice, fun life I'd been living when he abducted me, but then he'd taught me how fake it all was.

This was real. The need was too raw for it to be anything else.

"I'll go on top."

Duncan sat up straight. "Nope. I fuck your ass. That's the agreement."

My cheeks burned at his crude words. "I meant I'll be on top while you..."

No way was I finishing the words. I straddled his hips and took hold of his cock by the base. I lifted up, then slowly sank onto the head. Oh, the burn of him gliding inside. With one hand, I pressed my right cheek apart and took him deeper.

"Fuck, fuck," Duncan chanted.

He got that right. Oh fuck. I slapped my hands to his stomach, and he grunted as I connected with his wounds, but I didn't give a damn about them. I lifted off his cock and canted my hips, flinging my ass up and down his length.

So fuck.

My body opened up, making the ride easier. Duncan lay beneath me, sweat popping on his forehead and his lips twisted in pain.

“Fuck you,” I growled at him. *Fuck you for making it still feel so good.* “Fucking fuck you!”

I smacked him in the chest, and he growled. I kept riding him, my dick smacking into my stomach with each bounce. I couldn't get enough of him. Needed more. How would I get more?

“This isn't what you want,” Duncan said. “You know it's not the way you want it. Why don't you let me, Teddy? Stop fighting it.”

I sank all the way down onto his cock and stopped moving when I was fully seated. The pain in my heart was crushing. It wasn't the release I sought but what I'd had with him.

“Fuck.” I got off him and collapsed in a heap on the bed beside him. My face buried into the sheets, I clamped my eyes shut against the sting. I'd been kidding myself. How could I take charge when I depended on him to know what I needed and what to do?

Seconds ticked by without any movement from the man beside me. Just when I was thinking of picking up my clothes and running out of the house without even stopping to put them on, the mattress shifted.

“Turn the lights off,” I whispered, too ashamed.

“No. How else can I admire my masterpiece?” His fingertips feathered ever so lightly across my back, colliding in the raised flesh from the scars he’d left on me. Tissue scars from reopening old wounds to see me bleed.

How could I ever forget him when he’d marked my mind, body, and soul?

He slid his fingers into my hair and gripped it tight, then yanked my head back. I gasped as his lips came down on the side of my neck.

“No!” The word exploded from me. “My wife...hnngh.” A moan slipped through as his teeth sank into the flesh and pressed deep into the skin like he wanted to suck me dry of blood.

“Duncan.”

“Let’s get something straight,” he whispered. “When you’re in my bed, nobody else matters. You don’t have a wife. You only have me.”

He straddled my hips and pressed his cock into my hole in one swift thrust. “Now say my name again.”

My toes curled, and I elevated my hips. Duncan retreated then slammed his cock back inside me so hard my pelvis crashed into the mattress. He pushed my head down into the sheets and set a punishing pace.

Yes! Yes!

Fuck, I’d missed this. The way his pelvis slapped into my ass over and over. Relentlessly pounding my hole until I could

do nothing but grab the sheets in my fists and hang on for dear life.

Duncan pulled out and flipped me onto my back. He shouldered my legs and crouched over me, his face inches away from mine.

“You’re a man now,” he growled. “You can take a pounding without crying, can’t you?”

I hated the stupid smirk on his face that said he knew me too well. Only he knew how horny I could get for his cock. How much begging I could do when I was feeling empty.

“Don’t mistake this for anything else. I hate you.”

“Sure you do. That’s why you spread your legs and act like a bitch in heat for me.”

My face burned. Shame and anger flared inside me. How could I desire and hate him at the same time?

I spat in the smug bastard’s face. The saliva hit his cheek with a splatter. Unbothered, Duncan swiped the wetness away with a finger and sucked it into his mouth. My cock pulsed between our bodies.

“Dirty boy,” he said softly. “You missed my mouth. I won’t miss yours. Open up.”

“I won’t.”

He tightened his grip on my hair, and when I gasped, he spat into my mouth. Before I could retaliate, spit for spit, he crashed his lips onto mine.

No kissing. I'd said no kissing.

He was breaking every rule.

And it only made me want him more.

Duncan Whittaker didn't take orders from anyone.

He gave the orders.

And like always, I obeyed.

I moaned and wrapped my arms around his back, digging my fingers into his flesh. He guided his cock back to my hole and entered deep. I shuddered and twined my legs around his waist.

Hanging on, I met each of his thrusts at first, giving as good as I got. The bed rocked beneath our bodies, the headboard slamming into the wall. The fitted sheet snapped from the sides and left us half lying on the sheets and the bare mattress. Heat left sweat beads on my skin that turned into rivulets and made our bodies slippery as they moved against each other.

"Duncaaaaaan," I moaned. Oh my god, how could I not have been meant for this?

"Fuck, yeah," Duncan groaned. "I could be in that hole all fucking night. Give me that slutty hole, pet. Will you give it to me?"

"Ye-es." The word broke on a gasp.

"Whose hole am I fucking?"

"Yours."

Like a puppet, I answered the way I knew he wanted. If I said the wrong thing, then he would stop and leave me alone, cool and aloof. It would only make me crave him more.

I have to please him. Make him stay with me.

As the past and the present drifted into each other, I panted and firmed my hold on him. Oh god, I'd missed his all-night fucking. Of waking up in the middle of the night to his cock sliding inside my body, still full of cum from sex a few hours earlier.

His cum.

Oh fuck, I needed it.

"Take it off," I rasped.

"Take what off?" From the way he stared back at me, he knew exactly what I meant, but as usual, he wanted me to say it.

He wasn't the only one who knew me. I knew him too.

I clamped my eyes shut and swallowed. "The condom."

"Thought you'd never ask." He pulled out, yanked the condom off, and tossed it onto the floor. He held my legs in the air and slid back inside me. That first long slide of naked flesh against flesh was...transcendent.

Almost in shock, tiny tremors hitting my body, I could only stare up at him, this monster, the only one who knew how to pleasure me. I bit my bottom lip, tried to focus on my

breathing, but he tripped my P-spot. A spot he'd taught me about.

“That’s it,” he gasped. “Right there. I can see it on your face. Do you want to come, pet?”

“Oh god, yes!” I strained against his cock, which stretched my ass. “I wanna come. Please, please,” I sobbed the word. “Please make me come. I swear I’ll do whatever you want if you just make me come.”

“Deal.”

A couple more thrusts and my body sang like the penultimate note of an orchestral rendition choreographed by him, the conductor. He pressed one of my knees up to my chest and pegged my prostate from a different angle. I shuddered under him.

“Oh my god. I can’t. Oh my god. It’s too much. It’s...”

I went temporarily blind, my vision wiped out by the tsunami that pummeled my body, like a category five hurricane making landfall.

Duncan tightened his hand in my hair. “I’m bleeding all over you,” he groaned.

I snapped my eyes open. One of his wounds had opened, and blood trailed over my torso. He dipped his thumb in it, then pressed it on my bottom lip. I licked at it, tasting the metallic tang.

“Fuck.” A roar tore from him, and he made no effort to temper it. Buried deep inside me, he stilled, the muscles in his

arms and back straining. He pulled out and fell onto the bed beside me, breathing hard.

I untangled our legs and reached between my thighs to touch my tender flesh. The skin was looser than it'd been earlier, and there was a small gap left behind by his cock.

A warm fuzzy feeling rushed into my gut. All I wanted to do was curl up against his chest while he stroked my back.

Instead, I scrambled off the bed and almost collapsed in a heap when my legs gave out. I grabbed the bed for support and inhaled deeply.

What do I do now?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DUNCAN

Sex with Teddy had always been good, so it didn't surprise me how hard he'd made me come. My whole body hummed from the cocktail of pleasure drugs swimming through my system. Soon they'd dissipate, and then the effect of rough fucking him when I'd already been in so much pain from the beating I'd taken would crash over me.

But so fucking worth it.

This time the sex had felt different. No white room. No threat hanging over his head. No manipulation. No deprivation. Just us and the heat we kindled whenever our bodies touched. If anything, the new conditions had only made the fire burn brighter.

Does this mean we could have had something special if I hadn't kidnapped him?

I shook my head. Now was hardly the time to give in to foolish thoughts. We were both way in over our heads. He had a wife, and I was out on parole. And if I kept this up, letting him into my house, then I'd go right back to prison to serve the remaining five years of my sentence.

Teddy sprang up off the bed and almost fell. I sat up quickly, but he caught the edge of the bed to steady himself.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “Fuck, fuck.”

Here we go again.

“Look, it’s done. No sense freaking out about it.”

“Easy for you to say,” he snapped. “You don’t know any better. You’re a psycho.”

“Says the one dripping cum that came from the man who spent the last fifteen years in prison for kidnapping him. So who’s the psycho?”

“Thanks for reminding me how much I hate you.”

He stalked over to the night table and grabbed my pack of cigarettes and lighter. I bit back the retort, seeing how conflicted he seemed. I’d been there. After the first time I’d fucked him, I’d gotten drunk, hating myself for sleeping with another man and not understanding it. I still didn’t understand why him, but I’d had nothing to do but come to terms with it in prison while he’d moved on with his life and pretended like none of it had happened.

Now he had to face it again. Despite how we’d met, how much I’d damaged him, and how fucked up everything was, he wanted me.

Teddy lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. He closed his eyes and released the puff of smoke from puckered lips. Interesting. The one time he’d tried smoking one of my cigarettes, he’d almost coughed up a lung and his ribcage.

“Well, look at you. Didn’t know you smoked.”

“You don’t know me at all.”

I got off the bed, wincing at the aches in my body. His eyes followed the movement of my pectoral muscles. I smirked, and he glanced away, only his gaze landed on the bed where I’d just fucked him silly.

“Gonna answer me?” I asked. “When did you start smoking?”

“Don’t. We’re not friends.”

“After all the history we share?”

He spun to face me, his face red. “That’s not something you get to fucking joke about. Do you have any idea how much you ruined my life?”

He waved the cigarette around, and for the first time I paid attention to the Band-Aid on his wrist. I frowned and caught his arm.

“What are you doing?” He tried to yank away, but I held on.

“Stay still.” I peeled back the damp Band-Aid. The covering gave way to a nasty jagged gash in his skin. The area was scarred as if that fresh cut was just one of many.

“Let me go.” He managed to pull his hand out of my grasp but not before I saw them—the vertical slashes in his wrist. What the hell? For the first time since I’d taken him, regret washed over me.

“I’m going to take a shower.”

Coward.

I disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door behind me. I'd never thought he would actually try to harm himself. Every time he'd done that in the past had always been to get my attention...whenever I left him alone for too long.

The shower was hot, but it couldn't drive out the coldness inside.

Do you have any idea how much you ruined my life?

Not the scars I'd inflicted on his body, but the ones he'd created himself stood out in my mind. I wanted to ask him about them, but what right did I have?

I took more time than necessary in the shower. When I walked out of the bathroom, I expected him to be gone, but he was sitting cross-legged on the bed, smoking another cigarette. He'd already been through two from the butts on the floor.

"Don't know where you keep the sheets, so I couldn't change them," he said, his voice hoarse.

Without a word, I walked naked out of the room and opened the door of the hall closet, took out a new set of sheets and returned, but I didn't make any effort to put them on the bed. If he was going to stay, then we'd better hold off on changing them until we were done for the night.

That would be the only reason he hadn't left, wouldn't it? He wanted more sex. He was always like that. Craving it until he was wasted and could barely move. But I was no longer in

my prime. It was going to take a lot more time for me to recuperate.

“Are you seeing anyone?” Teddy asked.

I cocked my head to the side. “No.” Sitting next to him, I plucked the cigarette from his lips and took a drag. “Don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

He chuckled and coughed into his fist. “I used to smoke almost a pack a day.”

I swallowed the smoke into my lungs and handed him back the cigarette. “Did it help?”

“What was it supposed to help me with?” Teddy fell back against the bed on his back and stared up at the ceiling. His legs twitched.

“What did you need help with?”

“If I answer that, you’re going to have to tell me about him.”

“Him?”

I lay down next to him on my side, my head propped up in my hand so I could look at him. He’d grown up into a gorgeous man. One I’d never imagined would come to my bed so easily, but here we were. Now how to make it more permanent?

“The guy you were with at the bar.”

“What guy...Jerome? You’re talking about Jerome?”

“If that’s his name.”

I smiled. “Wait a minute. Are you still low-key stalking me? Because I haven’t seen your car around.”

“I used my wife’s car.”

I threw my head back and laughed. Priceless. This guy. He was perfect. Didn’t he realize stalking me was exactly how it would begin? “You know I stalked you first before I took you.”

“You did?”

“That’s how I got your routine down pat and knew the right moment to execute my plan.”

He shivered. “You probably shouldn’t tell your victim how you plotted their abduction.”

“There’s a whole lot of things we shouldn’t be doing, Teddy, but here we are.”

“We’re drifting from the topic. You were telling me about Jerome. You looked close.”

“First, answer me this. Why didn’t I see you at the bar?”

“Because I left when I saw who you were meeting up with.”

“Hmm.” I rubbed my thumb over a scar on his shoulder. A scar I’d inflicted on him when I’d burned him with my cigarette. I pressed my lips to the mark, and he went rigid. “Jerome was my brother’s best friend.”

“Oh?”

“They were close. Jerome spent a lot of time with us because he had a deadbeat dad who abused him. When I got

out, he offered me a job.”

“Did he visit you in prison?”

“No.”

“But he shows up the day you’re back and offers you a job?” He scoffed.

“I’m not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. My life’s pretty much ruined too, you know. I can’t get a decent job in this town with my record.”

“You have no one else to thank for that.”

“I know.”

“Besides, everyone knows the criminal business you did. I’m sure you’re not hurting for money.”

“What’d you know about my business, hmm?” I thumbed his nipple and watched the way goose bumps took over his skin.

“Enough to know you’re a drug dealer.”

“No one’s been able to prove that.”

“Except that’s what got your brother killed, wasn’t it?”

I rolled away from him to put some space between us. “You were going to tell me what you needed help with and why you took up smoking.”

The silence that filled the room was only broken by the soft drag of the smoke and the seductive hiss of his exhalation. “I don’t think you fully understand what you did to me.”

“Do you want me to apologize for it? Because I’ve done the time.”

“And that lets you off the hook?” he snarled. “You beat me until I begged you to stop. You waterboarded me until I pissed myself. Cut me open with your knife, tied me up, monitored me like I was an animal in a zoo. You shaved my fucking head. Do you know how dehumanizing that was?”

“That was the point of it.”

“Well, good job. You executed it perfectly, and now I’m in your fucking bed when my pregnant wife is home alone. Fuck!” He slammed his fist into the bed. He climbed to his feet and stalked over to the night table to retrieve another cigarette.

“Teddy, don’t.” I plucked the cigarette from between his fingers. “You’ve had enough.”

“That’s rich. You care if I’ve had enough? I begged and begged you to let me go home.”

“And I did.”

He hit me in the stomach, and I grunted. My whole body ached. Fucking him might not have been the best idea when I was already hurting so bad. I was pretty sure I would do it again though. Never could keep my hands off him. “After you’d already fucked me up, you bastard.”

I clutched my stomach. “What the hell do you want me to say, Teddy? I’m not sorry for what I did. I was angry, and I loathed your father. My brother was dead because of him. You

know I raised him like my own kid? Our parents were fucking deadbeats and I didn't want him to have the kind of life I did. He was supposed to grow up and be somebody better, but he never got the chance, and that's thanks to your father. Why did he get to have his son live a happy-go-lucky life when I'd just lowered mine into the fucking ground?"

"So I had to suffer for the feud between you two?"

"It wasn't personal. You were my best shot at hitting him where it would hurt most." I carefully placed a hand on his bare hip. "Have I ever lied to you in the time I held you captive? Never. I never intended for it to get this complicated with sex. Fucking hell, I'm not even gay."

"But in prison—"

"I touched no one."

Teddy turned into me, eyes searching my face as if seeking the truth. "And since you've been out?"

"Once," I answered honestly, and when he tried to pull away, I tightened my hold on his hip. "But only out of gratitude for what she did for me while I was in prison. And the whole time I was thinking about you."

Teddy averted his face. "What are you telling me that for? It doesn't have anything to do with me."

"Then why'd you ask?"

"Shut up."

I grinned and pulled him closer to my chest, ignoring how stiff he got. I kissed his neck. “Forgive me, pet. I won’t touch her again.”

Teddy shoved me off him, his face red. “*That* you ask forgiveness for? What do you even think you’re doing? This”—he gestured wildly between us—“changes nothing. I’m going home.”

“Who says I’ll let you leave?”

He straightened his back, but he didn’t move otherwise. I slowly approached him, placed an arm around him, and planted my hand on his tummy. I pulled him back into me.

“That excites you, doesn’t it? Me threatening not to let you leave?” I bit his ear. “Do you wake up at night hard from dreams of what I used to do to you? Because it doesn’t have to be in your dreams anymore. It can be real.”

“I need, umm, to go home.”

“Or you can stay. You’re in control here, Teddy.”

Snorting, he spun around and shoved me back onto the bed to sit. “Don’t fucking lie to me. I’ll never be in control with you.” Teddy dropped to his knees between my legs. “This means nothing.”

He sucked the plump glans of my cock into his mouth. I slipped my fingers into his hair and leaned my head back.

Fuck. Nothing else had ever felt this good.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TEDDY

“S eriously, I need to go.”

I must have said that a dozen times since last night, but Duncan didn't pay me any mind and tumbled me back onto the bed. The sun was already rising, its rays filtering through the fabric, bringing sobriety in the wake of a night of drunken passion. My face grew hot at the memory of all the things I'd done with Duncan last night.

Fuck. I was every bit as bad as my father claimed.

“Duncan!” I yanked at his head. “I'm too sore.”

“Relax. I'm not heartless. Just a little something I want to do before you go.”

I pushed myself up on my elbows as he parted my thighs and kissed the insides.

Oh shit. He remembered how much that turned me on. No one had ever ventured to kiss me so attentively as he'd done. Usually, I was the one focusing all my attention on my partner, and I selfishly lapped up the way he scrutinized the insides of my thighs with his tongue, lips, and teeth.

I let out a long hiss that ended in a moan when he cooled the stinging bite with his tongue. My skin was already turning red from how he suckled the flesh, decorating the surface with hickeys.

“Duncan,” I gasped. My cock chubbed up, springing up from the thatch of hair that cradled its base. “Oh my god.”

Was every man particular to their inner thighs being kissed, or was it just me? If I hadn’t come so many times last night, I could have unloaded from the way he spread my knees apart and devoured every inch of skin.

Duncan wrapped his hand around my shaft, and I winced and shoved at his arm. “I’m too sore.”

“I can make you come without touching you.” He raised his head, and the devil in his smile was too damn hard to resist. “But since you need to go…”

I swallowed. “I can spare ten.”

Duncan rocked my legs back and bared my hole to his mouth. His tongue fluttered around the edges, stroking and licking.

“Oh fuck.”

This was new.

In the nine months we’d spent in the cabin, he’d never once eaten me out like this. He’d made me suck his dick and lick his ass while he jerked off. At the time, I’d thought he just wanted to humiliate me, but there was nothing humiliating about the pressure building in my gut.

Fuck.

Oh fuck.

It was indecent to spread myself out like this for another man. If my father could see me now, he would disown me.

My cock strained, and a streak of cum flew through the air. I cried out, staring at my dick pumping cum onto my chest and stomach. Duncan plundered my hole with his tongue, licking and sucking.

When I couldn't stand anymore, I pulled away from him and almost fell off the bed at the other side. My legs shook, and my breathing was all fucked up.

Duncan walked into the bathroom, looking way too damn cocky. I dropped back onto the bed and spread my thighs. Holy fuck, it was like a vampire had been in my bed. Bruises and bite marks dotted my skin.

"Here." Duncan threw a damp towel at me. "Clean up, and I'll drop you home. I didn't see your car."

"I used an Uber," I said. Small talk was good. Everything was better than talking about what had transpired in the last eight hours or so. The regret would surely hit hard later when I was myself again. When my father's words lost their effect and no longer made me feel frustrated and without the words to explain the hell my mind had been put through.

"It'll be faster if I drop you off."

"Uh, no thanks. That's not appropriate." I dropped the towel on the floor and gingerly walked around the bed to my clothes.

“My tongue was just in your ass, and it’s not appropriate for me to take you home?”

“I’m...married.”

“Sure as hell didn’t seem like it five minutes ago.”

I winced and swallowed the bile that rushed into my mouth. Without a word, I reached for my pants, but he snatched them up before I could.

“I didn’t mean that.”

“Yes, you did.” I yanked the pants, but he held on tight.

“All right, maybe I did. You already know I’m a fucking asshole.”

“I do.”

“A dangerous, fucking asshole.”

“I know what you are. I’ve experienced it.”

“Then why did you show up last night?”

Another attempt to get my pants from him was in vain.

“You might as well tell me, or you’ll walk out that front door with your bare ass hanging out.”

“Does everything have to end in manipulation with you?”

“It’s the only way to guarantee I get what I want. I won’t—”

“Apologize for it, I know.”

“Well?”

“My...my father and I had an argument.”

“And you come running to me? Didn’t know it was that easy. I’ve been waiting for you for a week. Do you know how dangerous it is for a man like me to leave my door unlocked every night?”

“You, of all people, should understand,” I snapped. “That’s why I ended up here. No one else can even begin to fathom everything you put me through. They judge me and pity me and misunderstand me, but you should at least understand.”

He released the pants. “I do understand. Better than you think. We’re both fucked for this.”

I shook out my pants. “Where’s my underwear?”

“I’m keeping it.”

Arguing with him was useless. I dressed quickly and in silence while he did the same. When I reached for the box of cigarettes, he grabbed the pack.

“You’re cut off.”

“Hypocrite.”

“And the list of things I am keeps piling up.”

“I haven’t even scratched the surface.”

He laughed, the sound rather pleasant and amused. Even when we had good days fifteen years ago, he’d never laughed.

Don’t be sucked in. He’s manipulating you again.

“Will I see you later?” he asked.

“This was a one-time thing.”

“I’ll leave the front door open for you anyway. Next time don’t wake me. Just crawl into my bed and suck me off.”

Shaking my head, I marched toward the door. I hesitated and turned around to survey the bedroom. The bed sheets were twisted and trailing on the floor. The condom he’d yanked off, condom wrapper, bottle of empty lube, clothes, and wet towels littered the floor. We’d wrecked the room.

I hurried out of the bedroom. Duncan came after me. At the bottom of the stairs, he caught my elbow.

“Slow down. I said I’ll drive you. Let me get the truck.”

“You’ll drop me off a block away.”

“Fine. Will I see you later?”

“No.”

He cursed and released my arm. I followed him to the garage. He unlocked the door, and I got in, buckled up and turned my phone on.

Duncan settled in the truck beside me and started the engine. The garage door opened, and he slowly drove out.

“Aren’t you going to give me directions?” he asked.

I scoffed. “I’m sure you already know where I live.”

He chuckled, clearly amused and pleased with himself. Why shouldn’t he be? I’d waltzed right back into the arms of my abductor and begged him to fuck me.

Jesus.

I was past redemption.

I'd spent the night fornicating with the man I'd put behind bars.

If anyone found out about this, I was screwed.

My phone vibrated, and I plucked it out of my pocket. A string of missed calls, mostly from Cassie, my sister, and one from my mother. So many worried messages from Cassie to please call her.

How was I going to explain all this to her?

I pulled the window down and let the crisp morning air in. I needed to sober the fuck up. Life wasn't a fairy tale. You didn't go around fucking other people when married. And definitely not a man. Definitely not this man.

Luckily, Duncan didn't attempt to speak to me. I wasn't in the mood to talk to him either. The severity of what I'd done last night hit me like a ton of bricks. I had a baby on the way.

Baby on the way.

Baby on the way.

"Stop the truck."

"What?"

"Stop the fucking truck."

I didn't wait for him to fully stop before I jumped out of the vehicle and spilled my guts on the side of the road.

"Shit." Duncan came around to my side and handed me a bottle of water. "You got like this the first time we..."

A cutting glare from me and he didn't finish the sentence. I took the bottle from him and washed my mouth out.

“Stop acting nice.”

“What?”

“You're not a nice man, Duncan. Stop pretending to be. You're the reason I'm in this mess.”

“Just tell her what happened. That I manipulated you.”

“Stop trying to help.”

She wouldn't understand. No one would. They would only blame me like my father did.

“Better yet, tell her she's not what you need.”

I had no words, so I ignored him. I'd been married for years. Cassie had been my comfort place. I'd grown to trust her, rely on her. She'd been patient when we'd started dating. Another woman would have walked away when it took two years for us to have a first kiss and our wedding night for us to have sex.

Walking away from her was impossible. It should be easier walking away from Duncan, but here we were, going in the same direction. Destination, wreck my life.

We got back in the truck, and I stared out into nothingness. The road ahead looked bleak. How could this turn out to be anything but a disaster?

Duncan parked at the corner of my street. I let out a sigh and unbuckled my seat belt.

“I'm going to try my best not to see you again.”

“Teddy—”

“No! I can’t do this to her. Can’t do this to my wife...my child.”

“Maybe it’s not as hard as you think. She won’t know. She might not even care that—”

“Are you insane?” I hopped out of his truck. “Of course you fucking are. Just give me some space.”

“You’re the one who came to me.”

“Thanks for the reminder.” I slammed the door shut and walked away. “Asshole.”

His engine rumbled and drove past me. He wound his window down and slowed down. “I can get rid of her for you, Teddy.”

I stopped walking and stared at him. A slow tremble set off inside my stomach. He wouldn’t dare. I quickened my pace to get to the house. I might have been an unfaithful husband, but I had to protect my wife and unborn child from that maniac.

Why the hell had I gotten them involved in this mess? Duncan was a dangerous man who couldn’t be trusted. He’d said manipulation could guarantee him what he wanted.

“Cassie!” I closed the front door behind me. She wouldn’t be off to work yet, but I needed to see that she was all right.

“Cassie!” I ran up the stairs two at a time.

“Teddy?” She walked out of our bedroom, wearing an open robe over her matching lingerie. At the sight of her tight,

round belly, my steps faltered. Images flashed through my mind of me writhing beneath Duncan and begging him shamelessly to fuck me.

“Teddy, oh my god, are you okay?” She ran over to me and threw her arms around my neck. “I was so worried about you. Other than the one text that you were okay and needed to be alone, I heard nothing back from you. Where have you been?”

She buried her nose into my neck, and I stiffened. Couldn't she smell him on me? I could.

“Is that cigarette?” She released me. “I thought you quit.”

“I did, but after yesterday, can you blame me for having a smoke?”

“Your father was out of line.”

“I don't want to talk about him. I'm sorry I spent the night out and didn't let you know. After everything, I needed to be alone.”

With him.

“I'm glad you're okay.”

If being deranged was okay, then yeah, that. I forced a smile to my lips. “I need to shower so I can go to work.”

She followed me into the bedroom. I undid the button on my pants, then stilled. Shit. No underwear. And I was covered in love bites. If she saw them, she would know what I'd been doing last night.

“Teddy.”

“Hmm?”

“You knew, didn’t you?”

“What?”

“You knew he was out of prison. That day you showed me the nursery and I found you in the kitchen having a panic attack—you knew then.”

I breathed out slowly. “I don’t like talking about it.”

“But I’m your wife.”

“Does that mean I’m not entitled to my private thoughts? My own private hell?”

“Why won’t you let me share your worries?”

“You can’t share this with me.”

“You don’t know that. Talk to me, Teddy, please. I feel like I’m losing you to your demons.”

“Just leave it alone, Cassie!” I snapped. I dropped my gaze and clenched my hands as I fought to regain control of my breathing. “If I need to talk to someone about this, I’ll make an appointment with my therapist.”

She reeled back as if I had slapped her, and I hated the tears in her eyes, but what else could I do? If I told her the whole truth, not leaving anything out, would she still be here with me? How could she not regret it?

For five blissful years, I was able to pretend I was a normal man, but Duncan had come back into my life and reminded me

that those months I'd spent in the cabin with him only revealed
I was as twisted and sick as he was.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DUNCAN

“Hey, Duncan, are you taking lunch now?”

Jerome sauntered into the restroom, but I ignored him and went back to splashing water on my face. The temperature this time of the year was supposed to be cool, but expending so much energy and wearing the protective gear had me sweating like a pig over a spit roast fire.

“Yeah.”

This was the time Teddy took lunch when he wasn't in court. He always had a thing for routines. I'd quickly discovered that when I'd stalked him the first time to kidnap him. It was nice to see some things about the boy had remained with the man. Made it much easier to plan my next move.

“Maybe we can have lunch together?”

I swiped the water from my face and stared at Jerome in the mirror. I didn't want to give him the wrong impression that I was interested in him, but his offer couldn't come at a better moment.

“Why not? I have a place in mind.”

“Great. The guys on the first shift will keep the garage while we’re on our lunch break.”

Jerome let me drive his car, a sweet ride, something I would have enjoyed owning, but I couldn’t touch the money I had. Not anytime soon anyway. I didn’t want to make my parole officer suspicious. For now, I had to be content with a roof over my head and a job that allowed me to make a living.

I stopped at the bistro next to the office building where Teddy worked. The charming restaurant had an outdoor patio with wrought-iron tables and chairs and pretty flowers in pots. Not exactly my jam. I was more into pubs and sports bars, but Teddy was refined. When I didn’t have him naked under me. Then nothing was different about us. Two animals fucking to feel good.

“Wow, you want to eat at this place?” Jerome asked.

“Yeah, why? Something wrong?”

He smiled. “No. Just thought we’d go somewhere more generic. This is nice.”

He looked way too happy about this—like it was a date. I’d set him straight later, but for now, I could use him to keep tabs on Teddy.

Does everything have to end in manipulation with you?

Damn straight if it gets me what I want.

The hostess looked down her nose at us both. I got it. We weren't exactly dressed like their regular clientele. They were in the heart of the business district, and the place was crawling with suits.

"If you could follow me, gentlemen," the woman said.

"We can seat ourselves," I said.

She stopped, looking uncertain, her smile too wide. "Certainly. I hope you enjoy your stay."

I glanced at my watch. We were fifteen minutes late, so he should be here already. Usually, he came in alone, sometimes with some guy from the same office building where he worked. I looked around. Ah, there he was. Today he was alone, a plate of food in front of him. He twirled a glass of wine in his hands, but he stared out the window as if he were in another time and place.

"We'll sit there." I placed a hand on Jerome's shoulder and didn't remove it as we made our way to the empty setting two tables away from Teddy's. Right in his direct line of vision.

As we passed him, he jolted out of his reverie. He gaped at us, and his gaze darted from me to Jerome and finally landed on where my hand rested. His nostrils flared and color washed his cheeks into a bright red.

I pulled Jerome's chair out.

"Thanks."

I squeezed his shoulder, then took my seat, which had me facing Teddy. Our gazes clashed. His lips were pinched tight,

and he narrowed his eyes.

Do it.

Make a scene.

I dare you.

“How’d you know about this place?” Jerome asked.

I broke eye contact with Teddy and turned my attention to the man across from me. He looked grateful to be seen with me in public. Being with him would be so uncomplicated. Our past was rich with good memories, unlike the ones I shared with Teddy.

But I had no desire to lead Jerome to the bathroom and shove him into a stall.

“A friend of mine eats here a lot,” I replied, my gaze drifting back to Teddy. “I was hoping we’d run into him.”

A server stopped at our table and handed us menus, took our drinks order, and hurried off. I surveyed the menu, half listening to Jerome chat about the options and what he should get. Teddy attacked his food with gusto as though he was determined not to let us ruin his lunch.

What was going through his mind?

“Duncan?”

“Hmm?”

Jerome frowned. “You’re thinking awfully hard.” He followed my gaze and looked over his shoulder. “You know that guy? He looks familiar, like I’ve seen him before.”

“Don’t worry about it. Did you decide what you’re getting? It’s my treat.”

He was back to smiling, forgetting all about Teddy and the fact that he was familiar because our faces had been splashed over the media a decade ago. We were old news, though, and hardly anyone recognized me now.

“I can’t allow you to pay,” Jerome said. “Not after all the times you fed me.”

Leaning forward, I cupped his chin lightly. “I’m going to pay, and that’s final.”

He nodded, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. I didn’t even feel a smidge of guilt for putting the sparkle of hope in his eyes. Teddy had pushed away his plate and was signaling for the waiter.

That’s right, pet. If you’re going to stay away, then I can play the field.

Our food arrived as Teddy paid. He rushed out the door. And lunch got way less interesting. I had to sit through Jerome’s chatter, mostly about the garage and his dreams for opening a second location someday.

After lunch, I paid our check but allowed him to leave a tip. I didn’t open the door for him, nor the car door. I ignored his confused glances my way.

“You drive.” I threw his keys back at him and got in the passenger’s side. With the window down, I lit a cigarette and took a drag. Teddy smoking had been sexy as fuck. Made me

want to share my cig with him, ruin our lungs together, and not give a fuck.

“Everything all right?” Jerome asked.

“Yeah.”

Not at all.

After spending the night with me, I’d expected Teddy to cut the bullshit already and admit he wanted me. I was all out of patience with him and the good husband act he had going on. He hadn’t been thinking about that phony wife of his when he’d slept in my bed. Did he think I was going to let him go just like that?

I took my phone out of my pocket. No missed calls. No messages. I rang his phone, not caring I was toeing the line now. Showing up close to his workplace and calling his number, but desperation was making me reckless.

Why are you avoiding me?

Pick up the fucking phone, Teddy.

I’ll walk right into your office. You know I will.

By the time we arrived back at the garage, I’d left him a dozen messages. Why hadn’t my “date” with Jerome worked to infuriate him? In the past, I’d been able to predict his moves, but parts of Teddy weren’t the same as they had been when he was twenty. He wasn’t so hopeless anymore, and he’d shown me that by staying away when I’d made it clear that I would leave my door open every night.

“I feel like I did something wrong back there,” Jerome said.

“This isn’t the time. We can talk later.”

When we walked inside, a man who had been chatting with a couple of the guys turned around. Damn it all to hell. Teddy’s father. The man who wanted me dead. What the fuck was he doing here?

“Hey, boss,” Blaine, the nineteen-year-old apprentice, called. “You should hear what this guy has to say. Do you know Duncan there’s a fucking rapist?”

Jerome crossed his arms. “You’re old enough to know not to slander someone, Blaine, especially in the workplace.”

A few of the other coworkers already knew. They had kept their distance from me and never talked about the situation. They were older and knew my name enough to understand the clout behind it, but this kid was green and barely out of diapers when I was convicted. He wouldn’t know the whole story.

“But it’s true,” Blaine said. “I ain’t working here with him. You should fire him.”

“No one’s going to fire anyone. Get back to work.”

“Like I said, man. I ain’t comfortable working here with him. What if he comes at one of us? I don’t mind the whole gay stuff, but if he’s gonna do that kidnapping shit, then I’m out.”

“Relax,” I said quietly. “You’re not my type.”

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?” Chester shouted, moving so fast he would have been in my face hadn’t Jerome stepped between us. “Why’d you pick my kid, you son of a bitch? You’re a coward, going after a spineless boy when you should have confronted me.”

The fucker standing in front of me might be Teddy’s dad, but he was also the man who’d given the order to use whatever force necessary to stop the drug run we’d been doing that night. I’d been with Joanne. I had never been anywhere close to the site when action was going down. Neither had I expected my brother to beg one of the guys to tag along.

“I’m standing in front of you now,” I growled.

“I fucking shot you once. Don’t think for a second I won’t do it again. Blow your goddammit brains out for what you did to my family. Ruined my boy and made him into your bitch, did you? You’re gonna regret it.”

“Mister, I can’t have you threatening my workers,” Jerome said. “This is private property, and I’m gonna ask you to leave, or I’ll call the cops.”

Teddy’s father stumbled back. “You want to call the cops on me? On me?” He took a few steps forward, then thought better of it. “This is far from over.”

“Man, I’m out too,” Blaine said and stalked after him. The garage fell silent at their departure.

“Anyone else want to question who I employ?” Jerome asked.

“Nah, we good. Just minding our business.”

“Good,” Jerome said. “I’ll be inside the office.”

I put on my work overalls and got back under the hood of the car I’d been working on before lunch. The guys were unusually silent. Normally, they would rib each other, laugh at crude jokes, but those familiar sounds were missing. Before, they’d been able to pretend my past didn’t exist, but now that it’d been voiced, their unease came off in waves.

Fuck, this isn’t going to work.

Once I was finished working on the broken starter motor, I headed for Jerome’s office. I stopped outside the open door. He had his feet propped up on the desk, frowning intensely at nothing.

I rapped on the door, and his feet hit the floor.

“Got a minute?”

“Close the door.”

The infatuated young man who had gone to lunch with me was gone. Jerome no longer looked at me like a kid suffering from a bad case of hero worship.

“It might not be a good idea for me to work for you,” I said. “You’ve built something great here, and the last thing I want is to ruin that for you.”

“So you’re going to quit?”

“It’s for the best.”

“Like the way you used me today?” He looked so betrayed and wounded. “I finally put two and two together when Mr. Scott showed up. That guy at the restaurant, he seems so familiar because he’s the one you...” He swallowed, forcing back the words. “Why did you go out of your way to see him and risk going back to prison? I don’t get it.”

“You don’t need to. It’s none of your business.”

“Cole’s dead. Torturing this guy won’t bring him back. You should stay away from him and take that man’s threat seriously.”

“Let me worry about it.”

He opened his mouth as if he had a lot more to say, but he nodded. “You can’t leave me stranded. At least think about it over the weekend, and if you still want to go, then I won’t try to change your mind.”

“All right.”

So many questions danced in his eyes. Questions he really shouldn’t ask. He wouldn’t like the answers. Before he got the courage to ask them anyway, I walked out. I shouldn’t have gotten him involved today. To get Teddy’s attention, I would have to achieve it some other way.

I would leave him with no other option but to come to me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TEDDY

I was seething.

He actually had me seething.

Several hours had passed since Duncan showed up at the restaurant with another guy, but I was more worked up now that I was on my way home than I had been all afternoon. I'd actually been thinking about dropping by his place tonight. After ignoring him for a few days, the familiar itch to see him and be with him was back.

At first, I'd felt a thrill when he entered the restaurant, but then I'd spotted the guy with him. Good looking. Extremely good looking. And the way Duncan's hand had rested on the other man's shoulder meant they weren't strangers. This wasn't a booty call to make me jealous.

In the time it'd taken the waiter to hand over the check and process my payment, I'd seen how at ease they were with each other.

I'd wanted to pick up my fork and stab him. Maybe both of them. That voice in my head had grown stronger until I'd had

to get out of there before I did something stupid.

“Fuck him anyway,” I muttered.

Except I was probably fucked too. Jesus. After everything he'd done to me, after I'd let him fuck me bare, I'd still believed that man. For all I knew, he'd been plowing the field in prison and on the outside. Was I so gullible, so unreasonable when it came to him that I went along with every foolish urge I got? Believed every lie from his mouth?

No more.

I white-knuckled the steering wheel and pressed my foot down on the gas pedal. He hadn't held a gun to my head. I'd willingly let myself into his house and into his bed. How much longer could I convince myself he still had control over me after all this time? But how else could I reconcile what I'd done with him? Crawling into another man's bed was not like me. I was a married man, for fuck's sake.

Oh god, the way I'd acted in his bed.

That wasn't me.

It was the boy he'd held captive, forcing his way back out to lap up every ill-intentioned attention he gave me.

So deep was I in thought that I passed my house. I jammed on the brake and reversed, then turned left into the driveway.

What the actual fuck!

I blinked rapidly, but the blue Ford in the driveway didn't vanish. Duncan's truck. No, no, it couldn't be him.

He wouldn't.

Would he?

Fuck, he would.

I bypassed the truck and parked in front of the half-opened garage. Double fuck. Cassie was home.

I flung the car door open and almost strangled myself with the seat belt. I unbuckled it and jumped out of the car. My hands shook, and my heart pounded like a jackhammer as I ran up to the front door. He wouldn't hurt her, would he? Even he had to have a boundary he wouldn't cross. He wouldn't hurt a pregnant woman.

I can get rid of her for you, Teddy.

Nononono.

If he hurt her...

"Cassie!" I shouted as I dashed into the house. "Cassie, baby, where are you?"

Oh my god, what if he'd hurt her?

My legs gave out, and I clutched the wall for support. I couldn't breathe. This was all my fault. If I'd left good enough alone, I wouldn't have invited him back into my life.

Gasping for air, I stumbled to my knees and clawed at my neck. The tie was too tight, the clothes too restricting. I couldn't breathe.

"Teddy! Oh no, Teddy!"

“Cassie,” I moaned her name and clamped my eyes shut, trying desperately to hang on to my sanity.

It's all in my head. I'm not actually strangling.

All in my head.

My body wasn't listening. It fought against my brain, and I could do nothing but make choking sounds.

A sharp pain filled my chest, and my body jerked.

“Teddy.” A calloused hand cupped my cheek. Not Cassie's. “Teddy, can you hear me?”

I blinked several times. Finally, my throat worked.

Get out of my house.

Get away from me.

Please just leave us alone.

We were happy before you came along.

A pitiful moan left me.

“He suffers from panic attacks,” Cassie was saying. “They've been more frequent lately.”

Duncan thumbed away a tear that had slipped down my cheek. His skin was rough against my flesh, but it was a touch that had never left my mind.

“You're going to be okay,” Duncan said soothingly.

“I'll get you a bottle of water.” Cassie's footsteps receded.

With the last ounce of strength I could muster, I grabbed the front of Duncan's shirt. “Get out,” I wheezed.

“I’m not leaving. You’re having a—”

“Get out now,” I snapped. “I’ll call the cops. I swear I will if you don’t get out now.”

“Relax. It’s not what you think.”

“Please get out. Just go. Leave us alone.”

“What’s he saying?” Cassie hurried over and handed me a bottle of water. “Can you get him on the couch?”

“No.” I shook my head and struggled to sit up with my back against the wall. “Just need a minute.”

I closed my eyes, and my hands shook as I uncapped the bottle. Water spilled from my lips down onto my shirt.

“How are you feeling now?” Cassie asked.

“A little better.”

“I should get going,” Duncan said. “Thanks again for the pie, Mrs. Scott. I hope your husband feels better soon.”

I forced myself not to watch Duncan walk away. The minute the door closed behind him, the air felt less suffocating, less full of him. After several minutes, I no longer felt like I was going to die. Cassie never left my side, even for a second.

She deserved so much more than this.

“Are you okay?” I climbed to my feet.

“You’re the one who had a panic attack. I’m fine.”

I worried my bottom lip with my teeth. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, what triggered your attack this time?”

I was still too mentally foggy to think up a good lie, so I stuck close to the truth.

“I saw a strange truck in the yard and thought something might be wrong.”

What had happened between Duncan and me had been before our relationship. She hadn't known me then. But she must have been curious and looked him up at some point. How could she not recognize him?

“One of the pipes in the bathroom was busted. I called a plumber.”

“Plumber?” He'd entered my house under the guise of a plumber? The man would stop at nothing to ruin my life.

“Yes, he was quite nice and thorough. He even helped me to put up a shelf in the baby's room.”

“He was in the baby's room?”

“Yes. He was quite helpful.”

I squeezed the bridge of my nose. “Don't let strangers into the house without letting me know, okay?”

“I'll try to remember. Do you think you should see the therapist again, Teddy?”

“I'll be fine.” Besides, the thought of spilling my truth to someone else was nauseating. I already knew I'd gotten in over my head with Duncan.

“Go change and maybe lie down for a few,” Cassie said. “I'll handle dinner, and we'll have a quiet evening.”



Cassie's breathing was deep and regular. It had been that way for about an hour now. I lay on my side with an arm around her, snuggling her from behind. She hadn't expected sex tonight, not after my earlier breakdown, so that had at least set my mind at ease.

At ease? I was a second away from another bad decision. I inhaled deeply and begged for a strength that didn't come. I slipped out of bed carefully and placed my pillow at Cassie's back so it wouldn't be so obvious she was in bed alone.

Stop fighting it. You know he's waiting for you.

The little voice in my head now seemed like a permanent fixture that didn't appall me anymore. I grabbed my car key, and my wallet. Like a zombie summoned by its master, I hopped into the car and drove away. I was halfway to his house when my toes tingled. Shit, I wasn't wearing shoes, but I was too far from my place to turn back.

For the first time, I parked in his yard instead of on the sidewalk across the street. I winced when my bare feet touched the cold, hard ground. I dashed to the front door and let myself in. A gust of wind swept up a few leaves, the rustling loud in the silence. I closed the door quickly, then froze. Newspapers lined the hall like a red carpet.

What the hell was he up to this time?

I stepped over a newspaper that had fallen from the pile, but a picture of my face caught my attention. I picked it up with

shaking fingers. A photographer had snapped the photo of me outside the courthouse. It was the day my father had shot Duncan.

I didn't need to read the story; I'd lived it. I let the paper slip from my grasp, and it fluttered back to the floor. Each newspaper showed headlines about our case. I'd never read any of the articles they'd written about us, and I didn't intend to do so now.

Why was he doing this?

The line of newspapers ended at the foot of the staircase. Sitting on a step halfway up the stairs, Duncan puffed on a cigarette. He removed the butt from his lips and blew the smoke in my direction.

Jesus, I was jealous of the smoke. Maybe if he consumed me that way, it'd quench the ache in my gut.

I shook my head. *No, I'm angry at him.*

"What's this for?" I asked.

"A reminder. Of everything that's happened between us."

"You think I need a reminder? You think I can forget?"

"You look better," he said, instead of answering the questions.

I clenched my hands into fists. "You crossed the line."

"She didn't know who I was." He puffed on the cigarette again, leaned back on his elbows, and puffed a smoke ring toward the ceiling.

“Fuck you. That’s hardly the point.”

“You don’t think it’s strange she didn’t recognize me?” He spread his thighs, and my gaze dropped to the bulge at his groin. “We were discussed in every newspaper back then. Our faces were everywhere. People talked about us.”

“You had no right to enter my home.”

“I don’t have a right to do many things, Teddy, but you think that’s gonna stop me?”

“Why are you doing this?”

He sat up quickly and stabbed the cigarette in the air. “Because you’re a disease. A malignant cancer that’s spreading through every fucking cell of my being, and I’ve given up on fighting it.”

Oh god, he’d described perfectly the way I felt about him. I didn’t want him. Didn’t love him. Could never love him, but he was like a bad rash that irritated me until I scratched it. Then the itch turned into the most satisfying high I craved. And to get that high was to be content with the rash.

“You can’t do that again.” The words came out weak and desperate, like I was begging him instead of issuing a threat.

“I can do anything I want.”

“Fuck it, Duncan. You’ve already won! I walked barefoot to your door in the middle of the night. I left her bed to be here. Why can’t this be enough for you? Why must you ruin everything?”

“Because I’m a greedy man, Teddy. You know that. I take and take until there’s nothing left of you to give anyone else.”

“You want too much. I’m already here. Leave her the fuck alone.”

Duncan rose to his feet and slowly descended the stairs. When he was face-to-face with me, he cupped the side of my neck and rubbed the pad of his thumb over the scar from him branding me. I’d thought I was going to die when he’d done it. Now the big D that represented his name was left on me for all the world to see.

“Remember what I told you when I gave you this gift?”

“Gift?” I croaked. “I thought I was going to die. It took weeks to heal.”

“That’s not what I asked, Teddy. Do you remember what I told you?”

You’re mine now. Just like a dog belongs to its master, you belong to me.

“What more do you want from me?”

He leaned in, nuzzled my neck, and kissed the scar. “Let me kill her.”

My nostrils flared. He was licking my neck, nibbling on the skin, holding me captive. I grabbed his shoulders to keep me upright. Then his words sank in.

Let me kill her.

“No!” With the last ounce of strength left in me, I pushed him back. “How can you even suggest such a thing?”

“You’re not flattered at how far I’d sink for you?”

“Why the hell would you think I’d be flattered you want to murder my wife and our unborn child?”

“Hmm, I guess there’s the child to consider. But I’m patient. I waited fifteen years in prison to have you again, didn’t I? I’ll wait until after she delivers your child.”

“No, no! You’re not going to kill her, not before, not after. You’re going to leave her alone.”

“I don’t know, Teddy. I don’t like thinking about you sharing her bed. I’m a jealous man.”

A shiver ran down my spine. The things he was saying were hard to wrap my head around. He sounded so sincere. It could have been romantic had it been a different man and he hadn’t threatened to kill my pregnant wife.

I didn’t doubt for a second that he would hurt her.

“Promise me you won’t touch her,” I said.

“And what do I get in return?”

I was going to regret this. “What do you want?”

“Hmm.” He dragged his gaze slowly up and down my body. “I don’t want much.”

I scoffed. “You won’t be satisfied until you’ve carved my heart out.”

He laughed. “I won’t have to. You’ll give it to me for free.”

“Is that what you’re hoping for?” I met his stare, unflinching. “That this will turn into love? Because I know this twisted thing between us isn’t love. Will never be love. Love is not abusive and not hurtful. It’s gentle and kind.”

“Sounds boring. I’ll take the jealousy. I rather like the idea of love keeping a record of wrongs. Because I just spent fifteen years in the slammer. That’s fifteen years for you to make up to me.”

“You abducted me.”

“And you loved it.”

I swallowed back my retort. “You won’t hurt her, will you?”

“Not as long as you do what you’re told.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TEDDY

How the fuck had I ended up like this again? Tied up to the staircase like a naughty pet with a belt collared around my neck. It'd been years since I'd been chained up like this. Years since anything save for a tie had been around my neck.

And my racing heartbeat scared me. Why did I feel excited about this? It was degrading to be an adult male, treated this way, but he'd promised not to hurt Cassie if I did what I was told.

He'd provided me with a white T-shirt but didn't allow me to wear underwear. The familiar feeling of being a nothing crept into my joints and spread to my bones. He'd objectified me the same way when he'd held me captive before.

"There, there." He combed his fingers through my hair. "Now that you're all tied up, I know you'll still be here when I get up. Be a good pet and stay while I go to bed."

"You can't leave me here," I protested.

Something that felt too close to disappointment bloomed in my chest. I'd thought he would fuck me right here on the staircase, and my half-hard cock was already down with the idea.

"I thought the whole point to our compromise was that you have to do exactly what I say."

"But..." I bit my runaway tongue before I could show him my hand. Nothing good could come of that. He was already getting away with so much.

"But what? Was there something you needed?" His hand dropped to my naked thigh and disappeared under the T-shirt. He grazed my cock lightly with his fingertips, and my cock throbbed. I parted my legs. "Tell me."

I shook my head. "Go to hell."

He chuckled. "Why are you so quick to send me to hell when you'll only follow me there?"

"You—"

Duncan's mouth crashed onto mine, and like a cheap tent, I folded, opening up for his warring tongue. But I'd already waved the white flag. His kiss was punishing, bruising, and I moaned into his mouth, my body straining toward his in submission. His lips wove their magic as memories unleashed, bringing familiarity with his touch.

And then he was gone.

His lips were a ghost that lingered as his footsteps echoed up the stairs. He couldn't be serious about this. He couldn't

leave me tied up to the stairs. What kind of sick bastard did something like this to another human being?

The one you crave most.

I clenched my teeth and held back from demanding him to untie me. He was just playing with me. To him, I wasn't a person but a thing to poke and prod and bend to his will. He didn't need to tie me up to the staircase. He did it to prove a point. That he had the upper hand. That he was in control and could do all sorts of unspeakable things to me. And I would let him.

A shiver ran down my spine, and I huddled closer to the railing to which he'd tied the rope that looped around my wrists. He'd left enough slack to allow me to move a couple of steps up and down but no farther. I picked at the rope, but the knot was impossible to get undone. My legs were free but useless.

The light turned off upstairs, and I was plunged into a black void. Normally, I wasn't afraid of the dark, but how could I not be this time when I knew the kind of ugly that lurked? What did he have up his sleeve?

My breath came out in heavy pants in the otherwise silent house. I waited, hoping—or dreading, I didn't know which—his return, but I must have sat there in the dark, my ass cramped, for a long time before I faced the truth. He wasn't coming back until morning. If I needed to take a piss, I would have to do it right there on the stairs.

It would serve him right to wake up tomorrow morning with his staircase smelling rank.

I shuffled down the stairs and stood, giving my ass a break from the hardness of the floor. When my legs grew tired, I had no option but to sit. I tried lying vertically along the stairs, but the edges poked me in the ribs.

Goddamn asshole. I almost begged for him to untie me. But would he even listen? I yanked at the ropes and tried to unknot them again. The restraints chafed my wrists, and the belt around my neck seemed to be tightening. It was my imagination, I knew, but the utter silence, the inability to see, and the lack of movement made me frantic.

What if I ended it all? Kneeling on the step, I clutched two balusters and breathed hard. It wouldn't take much for me to crawl over the side of the railing and let my momentum take me away from this misery. If I were gone, he couldn't torment and humiliate me anymore. He couldn't threaten my wife, my family, and everything I'd worked so hard to achieve over the past decade and a half.

It's your own fault. No one told you to go looking for trouble. Why are you even here, Teddy?

Exhausted, I slumped against the stairs, clutching the baluster, and gave in to the blackness.

A buzzing sound woke me up. I shook my head, trying to get rid of the mosquito, and hit my forehead against the balustrade.

“Fuck.”

Blood trickled along my temple. I’d bashed myself pretty good. The pain was enough to wake me up completely. Instead of a damn insect, my phone was ringing. My stomach churned bitterly.

Cassie.

No one else would call me so late. She must have woken up and noticed I was gone. So stupid. I should have left her a note.

Sorry, babe, I left our bed in the middle of the night to spread my legs for the man who kidnapped me years ago.

There. I’d admitted the truth. The sole reason I was here tonight was to be screwed. Shameless. Served me right for him to go to bed and ignore my needs. When had he ever cared about what I needed? Even the few times when he was attentive to me in the past, he had his own agenda.

I’d do well to remember that.

I stretched out my foot, searching to catch my pajama bottoms, which he’d carelessly tossed somewhere down the stairs when he’d given me the white T-shirt and told me to strip right there in front of him. Damn, where was it?

Bastard.

I squirmed at the weight of my bladder. Fuck. Not now. Why hadn’t I taken a piss before I came over? I opened my mouth to call him but clamped it shut. Wasn’t that exactly what he was waiting for?

The phone vibrated over and over. I didn't know how long had passed when I couldn't take it anymore. Tears slipped down my cheeks as my bladder gave out. There was no sense holding it back. When my bladder was empty, I collapsed back against the steps.

Stupid. Stupid. Why did I never think properly when it came to Duncan? I should have directed the stream of piss through the baluster and whizzed all over the floor downstairs. Now I had to spend the night inhaling the scent of my urine.

I couldn't even summon the energy to care anymore.



“Hmm.”

I pushed at the hand under my shirt, rubbing my nipple. Too tired. I wanted to sleep and be left alone. My body ached, and I couldn't feel my ass anymore.

“Open your mouth, Teddy?”

“Wha—ugh!”

A hand squeezed my jaw apart, and I tried to jerk back, but his grip was too tight. Something round and weighty landed on my lips. The salty precum of his cock left a smear on my bottom lip.

“I'm losing patience, pet. Open up. It's gonna make you feel so good. Make all the bad things disappear.”

I parted my lips wider, and Duncan's cock filled my mouth. He was standing over me, his feet planted on either side. He

had tilted my head, slipped his hands into my hair, and thrust to the back of my throat.

“Arggh.” I choked on his dick, but he didn’t stop. He kept a firm hold on my head and rode my face, pressing my nose up against his hairy pubes while he ground as far back as he could go.

I clenched my hands into fists but didn’t bother to try to push him off. My cock was so fucking hard, and I was getting closer to that place he’d mentioned. The place where the things he did to me blurred between abuse and pleasure.

“Fuck, yes,” Duncan hissed. “I missed that mouth. Jesus, baby, that fucking mouth’s working magic on my dick.”

I relaxed my throat to make it easier for me to swallow him down the way he liked. Saliva drenched the front of my T-shirt. Tears clung to my lashes, and I breathed noisily between gagging and trying to catch my breath.

“Ugh. Yes, that’s the way to do it, baby,” Duncan groaned in the dark. “Only you know how to do it right. Only you deserve my cock.”

I stiffened, and my throat tightened. A strangled cry garbled around his cock as I came hard, my dick twitching and shooting cum onto my skin.

“Fuck.” Duncan pulled out of my mouth. I moaned, clutching my throat and coughing. “Did you just come from sucking my dick?”

“Fuck off.” I got to my knees and crawled away. I was wet from urine, saliva, and cum. A tug on the belt around my neck stopped me.

“Are you sure that’s what you want to say?” He shuffled closer to me, his breath ghosting against the side of my face. “Because I can give you many more of that.”

I need to end this. How else can it stop if I don’t do anything?

But no one’s ever made you feel the things he makes you feel. The hate. The fear. The desire.

I wanted love, not those.

Screw love when a man can make you come alive.

A shiver ran down my spine.

“Well?” Duncan prompted. “Say the word, and I’ll escort you home.”

He didn’t make sense. But when did he ever? He was a psychotic man. Just earlier, he was threatening to kill my wife, and now he was willing to let me go without any issues?

“Will you harm my wife if I go?” I asked hoarsely.

“If you walk out, I won’t harm a hair on her head.”

“But earlier you said—”

“I know what I said, Teddy. I want her out of the picture because then I have you here permanently. If you don’t want to be with me, then there’s no reason to dispose of her.”

“You talk about her as if she’s not a person.”

He shifted and tugged at the ropes that secured me to the railing. “She’s an obstacle to me. That’s all. You were never hers, Teddy. You belonged to me first. These years with her were borrowed, now I’m taking back what’s mine.”

I fell silent. The rope came loose, and I sighed with relief. Before I could pull my hands away, he held on to the left and pressed his fingers into the indentation made into my skin and massaged it.

His touch felt so damn good.

“Are you staying or going, Teddy?” he asked, then placed a kiss on my cheek.

No, don't let this side of him fool you. You pissed yourself because of him.

“We need rules,” I mumbled the foolish words.

What was the use of rules when he would only break them?

“The only rule you need, Teddy, is to give yourself to me, and everything will go according to plan. I’ll give you what she can’t give you. What no one else can give you. On your knees.”

He squeezed my shoulder, and I got on my knees for him. Duncan rubbed lubed fingers inside me.

“You need a shower.”

I stiffened. “It’s your fault.”

“I know. You’re filthy, and I love it. Here.” He groped until he found my hand and pressed a small glass bottle into my

palm. “You’re gonna need it.”

Fuck.

I didn’t need to ask what it was. I twisted the cap off and took several whiffs from the bottle. I’d only ever done this with him. My father was a cop, and he’d lectured us too many times on drug use for me to cave under peer pressure. But Duncan had introduced me to poppers fifteen years ago, when he was breaking my ass in.

The head rush was immediate. My muscles relaxed, and my body turned languid and receptive. Duncan fumbled between my thighs and shoved his cock into my ass. I grunted and braced my hand against the stair to keep me steady.

“Fuck me,” I croaked. “I want to forget.”

A deep sense of shame flooded me. What I wanted to forget wasn’t him. But my family. Being married. Expecting a child.

“I’ll make you forget them.”

He knew me so well that he immediately understood what I was asking. Duncan clutched my hips and pummeled my hole with his cock. What might have hurt without the drug was only pleasurable now. I took a few more whiffs and shoved my ass back into Duncan’s crotch.

When he hissed and his hips stuttered as if he was taken aback, a chuckle left me.

“Find that funny, do you?”

He planted his right foot one stair up and tugged at the belt around my neck, forcing my head back while he drilled into me like a miner close to hitting gold. My hole squelched around his thick cock as he dragged it in and out of me.

“Yes, yes, yes.” I canted my hips forward with each thrust. “Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

“You think I can stop this, Teddy?” He groaned and pulled. The belt tightened, and I strained back so the leather wouldn’t cut off my breathing completely. “If I could, I wouldn’t be fucking you on the stairs. I’d have sent your ass home from the first day you came to my door. You’re nothing but trouble, Teddy. Nothing but trouble.”

“You think I want this too?” Fuck, my cock was hard again. I fisted it in my palm and stroked myself. “I don’t want anything to do with you.”

“Liar. Liar. I’m going to keep fucking you until my name becomes your prayer. I’m your savior, Teddy. Only I can give you this.”

Fuck him for being right.

“Say it. Say my name.”

“Duncan.”

“Louder. Say it louder.”

I shouted his name as I came for the second time that night. Completely spent, I collapsed onto the stairs. Duncan pulled out of me, and I could feel his cum oozing out.

It was just what I needed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DUNCAN

“**T**eddy, don’t fall asleep.”

He was on the verge of rolling down to the bottom of the stairs. In the darkness, his body was just a lump. I felt for his shoulder and prodded him to his feet. He groaned, and I smiled. He was going to feel this when he woke up.

“Son of a bitch,” he moaned. “What did you do to me? I feel nauseous.”

“The poppers. Hold on to the railing. I’m going to help you to the bathroom and clean you up.”

He did as I told him, and we climbed up the stairs. He was sticky, and the scent of bodily fluids wafted around him. It didn’t turn me off, though. Nothing about Teddy could ever turn me off.

“You’re doing it again,” he said.

“Doing what?”

“Acting like you’re nice. I know your game, and it won’t work with me.”

I started to repress my smile but then remembered he couldn't see my face in the darkness anyway. His words were grumpy, but he sounded content. He was always like this—prickly—then mellowed out after sex. The way to a regular man's heart might be through their stomach, but Teddy's was right up his ass.

I led him to my bedroom and flicked the lights on. I hadn't slept a wink since I'd left him on the staircase, listening to him moving and groaning. Only after hearing nothing but silence had I ventured out of my bedroom and gave him exactly what he'd come for.

He could never claim I wasn't a generous man.

“Oh god, I'm going to throw up.”

I flipped the lid of the toilet seat for him, but I was too late. He emptied his stomach right onto the floor. His body was no longer used to consuming the poppers. He'd had a similar reaction the first time he'd tried it.

“I feel awful,” he said.

A twinge pricked my chest. Where my heart used to be. Was that concern for his well-being?

“I'll run you a hot bath and get you something for your stomach.”

“Don't bother. Just let me curl up here on the floor and die in my own vomit. It's nothing less than I deserve.”

He slumped, but I caught his shoulders and hoisted him upright. I turned down the lid of the toilet and pushed him to

sit. When he seemed steady, I released him and turned the tap on to fill the bathtub.

“Don’t move. I need to clean this mess up.”

After putting him to bed, I would take care of the stairs.

I wet a towel and got down to business. Teddy groaned, clutching his head.

“I’m a terrible person,” he mumbled. “I’m going straight to hell.”

I chuckled. “What did I tell you? You’d follow me there.”

“Laugh all you want. You’re not the one who’s married. No, I’m *not* a horrible person.”

“Nah, you’re terrible.” He lashed a foot out and kicked my thigh. “Ouch. I was agreeing with your first statement. Didn’t you just say you’re terrible?”

“It’s all your fault.”

“I know. I know,” I muttered. “But saying that is like telling me I’m the reason for the sun shining. Am I right?”

He groaned and went back to bemoaning how horrible of a person he was. I didn’t pay him any mind as I wiped the tiles, but every word grated on my nerves. Did he really love that woman? I’d been counting on the past we shared being enough for him to leave her.

How else could I explain what I’d done to him, even from behind bars? We were already in a precarious position. If he knew about that...

“Why didn’t you kill me?” he grunted. “It would have been better for everyone if I was dead.”

“Shut up, Teddy!” I snapped.

“You should have killed me fifteen years ago!”

I was a second away from smacking some sense into him. “If you ask me that, then you don’t know me at all.”

“I don’t! I don’t know shit about you.”

“Facts, Teddy.” I raised my head. “You don’t know the useless facts about me, but you know what’s important.” I stubbed a finger into his chest. “You know what’s there.”

What had prevented me from killing him those years ago.

“I don’t get it.”

Dammit, he was so dense at times. If he was waiting on words, he was out of luck. They would never come. Shouldn’t my actions be enough? I’d just cleaned up his vomit, for fuck’s sake.

I dumped the dirty towel into the hamper, grabbed his arm, and hoisted him to his feet.

“Get in the tub.”

“You’re not getting in with me.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time, would it? You used to love it when I washed you after sex.”

“I didn’t love it. I just wanted not to feel dirty anymore.”

I tightened my hand on his upper arm. “Get in.”

His grumbled words were too low for me to hear, but he got into the bath, leaving space behind him. Some of my irritation dissolved. He had a right to be confused about what he was feeling. None of this was ideal. Not for him and not for me. Should anyone find out he was seeing me, his life would be ruined. And if my connection with him was proven, my ass was going right back to prison.

But it was already worth it. How could I regret something that felt so good?

No sooner had I settled behind him than he leaned back against me. I tucked his head under my chin. His breathing was even and his neck control questionable.

“Are you sleeping?” I asked.

“Hmm.”

“That’s not much of an answer.”

“It’s the only one you’re going to get from me.” He yawned and stretched back into me like a contented kitten. He had so many pet-like qualities, and yet he got upset if I called him that nickname. Go figure.

I took up the soap bar and washed him as best I could from my angle. He didn’t try to stop me but made soft sighing sounds. I cleaned his chest and shoulders, his thighs and between them.

“Turn around.”

He hummed, eyes closed, and flopped around, splashing water onto the floor. He gave me all his weight and rested his

head on my chest. For a moment, I was too stunned to do anything but stare down at him. I couldn't stop staring. He was one fine ass man.

After a few seconds, he cracked an eye open and frowned. "What?"

"Nothing. Shut up. Go back to sleep."

"I'm not sleeping."

I washed his back and ran my hands down to his perfect, round ass. Fuck. My cock was on E, but I wanted to play with him so badly. If it were humanly possible, I would be inside him again. I satisfied myself by slipping two fingers down his crack and into his hole.

Teddy stiffened against me. "I'm sore," he whispered.

His face was red. "There's nothing to be embarrassed about. Haven't I touched you everywhere already?"

"It's different this time. I'm not the same."

"You're right. We're both two different people, and yet, this hasn't, will not change."

I breached his hole with my two digits and slowly opened him up. Cum and lube had mixed inside him. He wrapped an arm around my neck and clung to me. Teddy fastened his lips onto my neck and suckled hard, his breathing labored from me fingering him.

"Feels good?" I asked.

"Hmm."

He didn't need to answer. His cock was already hard again and poking me in the abdomen. He moved his hips back, and the water splashed around us.

"More," he begged, but there was no way I was going to get it up again. The heart was willing, but the flesh was weak.

"Up." I urged him to his feet and positioned him to stand over me. "Now lower your ass."

"Oh god."

Teddy sat back on my face, clutching the sides of the tub to steady himself. I pushed his cheeks apart and swathed my tongue over his hole. He swore, and the moan that left him fired up my commitment to giving him another climax. I alternated touching his hole with my thumb and tongue. He was all nice and opened up for me, making it easy to slide my tongue in and out of his body.

"Oh fuck. Oh my god. Hnnng."

His hole tightened, and he shuddered. One minute he was upright, and the next, he was falling ass-first into the tub, getting water everywhere.

I couldn't even be mad.

"I can't move." He sighed.

"Is that your way of asking me to carry you?"

"No. I just need a minute to—heh!"

I stood, urged him to his feet, and released the drain. I turned the shower head directly on us and rinsed the suds off

his body, then did the same to myself.

“Wait.”

I stepped out of the tub first and grabbed fresh towels. I secured one around my waist. He didn't resist when I helped him out and dried him.

“Hmm.” Teddy leaned heavily into me with his eyes closed. Did he realize how affectionate he was when he was tired? My lips curved into a smile. In the past, he would end up in my arms like this, even after I'd doled out a brutal punishment. He couldn't resist being held.

“Teddy.”

“Hmm?”

“Do you often have panic attacks like the one today?” Now was as good a time as any to get the words out of him.

“Used to.” He yawned. “Right after you let me go, I was a mess. And then after the trial...it's been better. Until you showed up again.”

“So I'm the root of it.”

“Who else? You're the cause of everything bad in my life.”

And yet here you are.

“It can't all be bad, right?”

There had to be something good about us. I couldn't find anything in our toxic relationship, but something kept him coming back. It had to be more than codependency. Fifteen

years was a long time in comparison to taking him for less than one year.

“Everyone hates me,” he mumbled. “My dad can hardly be in the same room as me. Only Cassie—only Cassie has been with me through it all, and now I’ve done this to her.”

Water trickled onto my bare shoulder. No, not water. His tears because of some woman who was no good for him.

“Enough,” I said. “Don’t talk about her to me.”

“Of course I’ll talk about her. She’s my wife, and you—”

I wrapped the towel around his waist and stepped away from him. He stretched out his hand to me, then dropped them.

“I should go home,” he said.

“I’m not done with you yet. Go to bed. I’ll be there as soon as I clean up the mess in here.”

Without a word, Teddy headed for the door.

“And don’t even think about leaving, Teddy. If you do, I swear to god I’ll be in bed with you both the next time you open up your eyes.”

“Doesn’t it get tiring being an asshole twenty-four seven?” He slipped out of the bathroom and slammed the door shut. I winced and closed my eyes. What the hell was I doing? Only one thing was clear. I had to have him. Theodore Scott belonged to me.

A piece of paper with his name next to hers couldn’t change that. Fifteen years in the slammer couldn’t change that.

I threw some towels down onto the floor where the water had spilled over and quickly took care of the mess. My bones felt stiff as I entered the bedroom. My body still bore the wear and tear of the beating I'd took, and fucking Teddy every chance I got wasn't helpful in the least.

Teddy sat on the edge of the bed, twirling his phone in his hands. He wore another white T-shirt of mine. It looked good on him.

Something about him in white and knowing all the dirty things he made me do to him floated my boat.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Trying to figure out what to say to Cassie.” Finally, he looked up. “She called me almost a dozen times, Duncan. Come on. I have to call her back. It's the decent thing to do.”

I stalked over to him and grabbed the phone from his hand. “I told you to get into the fucking bed.”

“She's my—”

The phone smashed against the wall and broke into pieces. Teddy gasped and tried to get off the bed, but I shoved him in the chest.

“Jesus. Must you be so difficult?”

“When you're with me, you don't think about her. It's been a shit day with your asshole of a father showing up at my workplace. I just want to get a few hours of sleep without your nagging about your bitch wife.”

“She’s not a—”

“I swear to god, Teddy. Get on the fucking bed.”

He clamped his lips shut and shuffled up the bed and to the other side. “I was already on the bed,” he mumbled.

I sighed, turned off the lamp, and climbed in next to him.

“That’s not the way we do it, do we?” I asked.

Teddy slid under the bedsheets to position his head next to my groin. He was the reason I slept in the buff. Whenever I’d stayed with him during the nine months we’d had together, he would sleep like this, his lips wrapped around my cock, sucking away in contentment.

I lowered my hand and stroked his hair. “That’s a good pet.”

Lethargy settled in my old bones, and I stifled a groan. This part with him was always easy. It was the rest I had to figure out. How to get Teddy to fully commit to us. Not just the sex.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TEDDY

My body ached. I groaned and rolled over onto my back, squinting at the light that filtered through my eyelids. I rubbed at my temples, where a headache had developed.

Last night.

I jerked up to a sitting position and glanced around the bedroom that wasn't mine. Shit. It wasn't a dream. I'd really gone and committed myself to the devil.

The shattered pieces of my phone still lay on the floor. I threw back the bedsheets and got out of bed. It was no use. The phone was broken beyond repair.

Maybe this was a good sign. I had a good excuse for not being reachable. Now all I had to do was come up with a credible lie about where I'd been all night.

On stiff legs, I made my way to the bathroom to pee. A toothbrush still in its package was on the vanity. I ripped it open and brushed my teeth.

Fuck, I was starving. Where was Duncan?

Should I grab some underwear out of his drawer? Nah, I'd better not. It was bad enough I wore his shirt.

The scent of bacon frying mingled with the disinfectant he must have used to clean up after my accident last night. He'd never made a fuss cleaning up after me in the past either. In fact, he'd seemed almost pleased to do it.

I entered the kitchen hesitantly. What kind of mood was he in this morning? Last night I'd annoyed him by talking about Cassie.

"You're up." I jumped. The man must have radar or something. He hadn't even turned around. Tattoos of a barbed wire fence stretched across his back. Right along his ribcage, his brother's name stood out with the year he died. The bruises on him had started fading.

"Don't just stand there. I made breakfast, or do you want me to feed you?"

He smirked at me. My stomach fluttered, and I couldn't look away. He was kind of handsome when he smiled all cocky like that.

"What are you staring at?"

"Nothing."

He laughed, the sound causing goose pimples to form on my skin. Why was he being so nice this morning?

"You'd think after a good night's sleep, you'd be in a better mood."

I took a seat at the island. The kitchen looked good, spotless, and modern. Not at all like a place that had been abandoned for years.

“We went to bed sometime after three,” I replied. “And before that, you had me tied up like a dog. Still questioning why I’m not in a better mood?”

“But I made you come three times. That has to count for something.”

I scoffed. Like all would be forgiven because he knew how to bang my brains out.

Duncan brought over a plate with crispy bacon, scrambled eggs, and slightly burned waffles. A cup of coffee topped up the meal. He sat opposite me, his plate loaded with bacon and four fried eggs, all sunny side up.

“That’s a lot of food,” I said.

“Trying to build back the energy you took out of me last night. Hopefully, tonight won’t be as difficult.”

“Tonight?”

“You’re coming over, aren’t you?”

I dropped my gaze to the table. He wanted me back. Why was he so into me?

“It’ll be late before I can make it.”

“Be here by ten.”

“Duncan, I—”

“Please, Teddy. Just do what I fucking tell you. It’s not like I’m asking you to divorce her. Yet.”

“Divorce Cassie?”

“Eat your breakfast. I’m no longer in the mood to talk.”

I dug into my breakfast, and we ate in silence. He couldn’t be serious about me divorcing Cassie. Could he? As long as she didn’t know my whereabouts, we didn’t have to change a thing. He had to know us being together would be impossible.

My father wanted to kill him, for fuck’s sake.

My father. Hadn’t he said something about him last night? I’d been too tired to focus.

I put my fork down and took a gulp of my coffee. “Duncan, did you say my father visited your work yesterday?”

“He sure did.”

I tightened my grip on my cup. “Why?”

“I’m sure you can guess why. To threaten me.”

“He did?”

“Yup.”

“Why are you so calm about this? The last time...”

He’d almost lost his life the last time. A chill ran down my spine and back up. My cheeks tingled from the unexpected brush of cold. It had all happened so fast in the courthouse.

I’d been terrified for him.

“You should be avoiding me,” I said. “If he finds out we’re...”

“Together.”

Was that what we were? Together? Duncan wasn’t the sort of man I’d considered relationship material. He was often times too rough. But he could be tender too. Like when he’d washed me last night.

“That,” I said. “He hates your guts.”

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, do you hate my guts, too?” His lips twisted with wry amusement.

“Yes, I do!” I snapped. Ignoring him, I cut off a piece of waffle, stabbed it with my fork, and stuffed it into my mouth.

“You got something here.”

“What?”

He stretched across the countertop and swiped syrup from the corner of my lips. He brought his finger up to his mouth and sucked on it. “Hmm, sweet.” Then like nothing was out of the ordinary, he went back to eating.

“Seriously, you should avoid my father,” I said softly. “He—he’s not been the same since my abduction.”

“How so?”

I moved some eggs around on my plate. “He blames me.”

“What?”

“Because of what I said on the stand.” I squirmed in my seat. “That you didn’t...you know. He was livid about the whole thing, about the way I reacted when he shot you.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“He lost everything. He did time for shooting you which cost him his profession. His job meant the world to him, and he had to resign.”

“That’s not what I asked you, Teddy. Did he hurt you?”

I rubbed my neck. Dad had beaten the shit out of me. If Mom hadn’t rushed into the room, he would have strangled me to death.

“What does it matter? You hurt me too.”

“Was it really hard for you? Adjusting after? I thought you’d be relieved I was in prison.”

I snorted. “You have no idea. I had to fake it a lot of times. I feel like I’m faking now.”

“With me?”

I shook my head. “With everything else. You and me—it’s so messy, but it feels right. Like it’s real and everything else is fake.”

I clamped my lips tight. What in the world had I just admitted to him? Duncan took my hand. It didn’t feel weird at all.

“Your father was wrong. You weren’t to blame for what happened. It was all on me.”

“You blamed my dad for giving the order that killed your brother.”

He dropped my hand. “My rage at your father masked who I was really mad at. It was all my fault. My brother was a good kid who made a stupid choice, and the son of a bitch who included him on that drug run paid the price for it.”

“He was very young.”

“Exactly. Do you know what I was told, Teddy, when I investigated what happened? That he was crying, begging them to take him to the hospital, and they didn’t. They just left him there to bleed out.”

The pain in his voice couldn’t be faked. That was probably what drew me to Duncan. Whatever he said, he meant. He was sincere even in his cruelty. His brother’s death had hit him hard.

Now I understood a little more why he’d taken me to punish my father.

“Can I ask you a question?”

He nodded.

“You said you never meant to sleep with me when you kidnapped me. Was that true?”

He chuckled. “I had no interest in other men.”

“What changed?”

“I’m still trying to figure it out. We had nine months of something different—something life-changing. I controlled you. I was responsible for you. The way you needed me for everything turned me on.”

“But it’s different now. I don’t need you at all.”

“Don’t you, Teddy?”

His question left me stumped. I might not need him for food and taking care of me like I was back then, but the need for him was still there. The need to be around him, to have his attention on me, to be used by him and then comforted by him.

“Duncan, you know there’s a strange car parked in your driveway?” A woman yelled as the front door slammed shut.

I jumped. Shit, I needed to hide. No one could see me here.

“It’s okay.” Duncan rose to his feet. “She’s one of mine.”

A woman dressed in a tiny skirt and bralette from which her knockers threatened to spill out walked into the kitchen. She halted, her gaze darting from me to Duncan and back at me. She narrowed her eyes.

“Duncan, what did you do?” she asked. “You know this is a bad idea.”

“It’s none of your business, Jo. Did you want something?”

“Not really. It’s been a few days since I last saw you. Thought I’d check up on you to see if you needed anything.”

It didn’t take a decoder to figure out what she was here to offer him. And I didn’t like it one bit.

“I don’t think there’s anything he needs.” The words flew from my lips before I could think twice. Both Duncan and Jo stared at me.

I got up off the chair. “I should get dressed and go.”

I slipped past the woman and hurried up the stairs, slammed the door shut behind me and looked around for my pajamas. What had he done with them? I didn’t have the time to search for them.

I plucked at the shirt I had on. His shirt. It was bad enough to leave my wife, wearing only my pajamas, but coming home in one of his shirts? No, no, this wouldn’t do at all.

Left with no other choice, I raided the closet. His clothes were too big for me, of course, but I found a pair of sweats that should fit. With the drawstring, at least it stayed up on my hips.

The bedroom door opened, and Duncan came in.

“Are you really leaving?”

“Yes. I need to go home and call my work to let them know I’m not coming in today.”

“Stay.”

I smoothed his T-shirt down my chest and shook my head. “I’ll get out of your way so your friend can entertain you.”

“Are you jealous?”

I blew out a breath and turned my back. His question didn’t even dignify a response. What did I care if he fucked that

woman? We weren't exclusive, and he wasn't mine.

Duncan's arms came around my waist, and I nearly shed my skin on the spot. "Stay with me," he said. "She's nothing but a good friend."

"Who barges into your house as if it's hers."

"She won't be doing that anymore."

I grabbed hold of his wrists and tried to pry his hands away, but he wasn't budging.

"Duncan!"

"I won't release you until you promise to stay. I want you to stay."

He lowered his head and nibbled on the skin of my neck. Ugh. Not fair. That was my sweet spot.

"All right. I'll stay, but I really need to leave around noon if I am going to come back later tonight."

"Good."

I inhaled deeply. "Will you still sleep with her?"

"No."

"Okay."

"You take my word just like that?"

"You've always been honest with me."

Even when he beat the hell out of me or punished me in some other way.

“Jo helped me while I was in prison. Ensured I had everything I needed, looked after this house and my general state of affairs.”

“It’s okay. I don’t want to talk about her.”

I was more interested in us.

CHAPTER TWENTY

TEDDY

“**Y**ou will come back, won't you?”

I wanted to make a jab at how needy Duncan sounded, but the words stuck in my throat. It was a rare occasion when he showed any sign of vulnerability. The look of uncertainty and worry in his eyes stumped me. How could I make fun of him?

We'd spent the morning together talking like normal human beings. It'd been slow at first as we tested the waters until we grew more relaxed with each other and the conversation flowed. He'd talked to me a bit about his time in prison, and in turn, I'd told him about my work.

I'd taken care not to mention my marriage at all.

“Teddy.” Duncan clutched a handful of my shirt. “You will come back.”

“Hmm.” I didn't dare meet his gaze. Sometimes the intensity with which he looked at me as if he would consume me scared me. “It might be later or earlier. It depends.”

On what happened when I got home. If Cassie believed my lies and thought nothing of me being out all night and morning without getting in touch with her.

“You owe me a cell phone.” I tugged my shirt out of his grip. At least I tried, but he only rolled up the material some more and yanked me to him.

“I’ll have a new one for you when you get here.”

I braced a hand on his chest. He was too close, too imposing, sucking up the air I needed. How was I supposed to breathe when the scent of him filled my nostrils and expanded inside my lungs?

“I was joking.”

“And I wasn’t. Kiss me.”

“What?”

My stomach was having a tango party. Just when I thought I had him figured out, he pulled this sweet and sappy shit with me.

“I said kiss me.”

“Why?” I licked my lips and stared at his.

“Because I want you to.”

“Why?”

He groaned, grabbed my face, and kissed me hard. “There. For once, I’m asking instead of demanding, and you—”

I grabbed him by the back of his head and returned his kiss. My sensible world came crashing down. Block by block, the

sturdy, beautiful walls I'd erected crumbled, revealing all the ugly hidden behind them. Duncan thrust his tongue between my lips. He'd colored my life with pain, heartache, lust, and so much more.

Buzzzzzzzz.

The doorbell echoed through the house. I stared up at Duncan, still too captivated by him to move. I groaned and placed my face against his throat. He hadn't let go of me either. His hands were on my hips. His throat worked furiously. I wasn't the only one going through the confusion and uncertainty of us. But one thing was clear. Duncan wasn't through with me yet, and I wasn't ready for him to be.

Fists banged on the door.

"Duncan, are you in there?"

Duncan's body turned stiff. He dropped his hands from my waist.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"It's my parole officer." He gripped me by the jaw, his eyes narrowed and threatening. "He can't know you're here."

I pushed at his hand, and when he released me, I rubbed my jaw. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Go back to my bedroom and hide in the closet if we head upstairs."

"Will you?"

“I don’t know. It depends if he decides to search the house. Just get in there. If he finds you here, I’ll wind up back in prison.”

“Duncan? You there?” the unfamiliar voice called.

“Coming.” Duncan hurried down the stairs.

I ran up the stairs to his bedroom, quietly closing the door behind me. I couldn’t hear anything from downstairs, and I didn’t dare to open the door a crack.

Here’s your chance to get rid of Duncan and return to your life.

Biting my fingernails, I paced the bedroom. I could do it. If I announced my presence, they’d lock up Duncan again. He would be in prison, no longer out to haunt me. My life with Cassie could return to what it was before Duncan’s release. My child could have a decent father who would focus on them instead of obsessing over a man who was all wrong for him.

“Fuck.” I sat on the bed and waited.

About fifteen minutes later, the doorknob turned. I jumped to my feet and dashed off to the closet, but Duncan entered alone.

“He’s gone.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “That was way too close.”

“What was he doing here?”

“Routine unannounced visit to ensure I’m living up to the terms of my parole. He stopped by my workplace to check up

on me, and when he didn't find me there, he decided to drop by."

"And what did you say?"

"I got the day off." He walked by me to the window and surveyed the driveway. "He's gone. You should go now."

"So this is what it will be like if we..."

"For the next five years, I have to lie low before I can get my life back."

"Your life back, meaning the illegal things you used to do?"

"Don't worry about it."

I swallowed hard. I was a lawyer, a decent man. Could I really throw everything away to be with a man who I wasn't even certain I had a long future with?

Duncan walked me to the door. He took my hand and squeezed it. "Don't overthink things. And don't forget what will happen if you don't show up tonight."

I rolled my eyes and pulled my hand away, then hurried to my car in my borrowed clothes and his scent clinging to my skin. I glanced over my shoulder. Duncan was watching my ass. He grinned, and I ducked inside and hastily drove off.

The closer I got to my place, the more the severity of what I'd done last night hit home. All the other times I'd seen Duncan in secret hadn't seemed so bad. I was still trying to figure shit out then, but how could I face Cassie now, knowing I'd promised Duncan I would be naked in his bed later?

Cassie would be at work. That should give me enough time to get the scent of Duncan off me and to change into my own clothes. Not to mention some time to think up my lies. I still had no idea what to say to her.

When I pulled up into the driveway and drove into the garage, my heart sank. Cassie's car was there.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

My hands trembled as I turned off the ignition and crawled out of the car. I'd only make things more difficult if I prolonged this. The best thing to do was act natural.

“Cassie!” I called her as I entered the house. “Honey, are you home?”

Downstairs was too quiet. A quick sweep of the rooms revealed she wasn't there. I climbed the stairs and checked our bedroom first. Empty. I continued to the nursery. Cassie sat in the rocking chair, the curtains at the window drawn so the room was cast in darkness.

“Cassie,” I said softly. “Why are you sitting in the dark?”

I found the light switch and turned it on. And wished I hadn't. Her eyes were red and puffy, and her face was pale. She clutched a green throw in her hands and held it up to her neck.

“I'm sorry I worried you,” I said. The words stuck to my tongue. “I-I don't know what to say.”

All the lies I'd thought up in the car seemed insufficient and dishonest in light of what she was going through.

“Where were you, Teddy?” She sniffled. “Who were you with?”

I swallowed and dropped my gaze.

“For fuck’s sake, answer me!” She choked on a sob. “I deserve to know who was so important that you left me all alone, didn’t even pick up your phone.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, taking a few steps toward her. “I never meant for any of this to happen.”

“I hope it was worth it. You cheating on me while I was miscarrying our baby.”

My heart stopped beating for a second, then pounded as if I had run a marathon. “What?”

Tears pooled down her face. “I called you so many times when the cramps started, but you didn’t answer. I had to drive myself to the hospital, where I was checked and told to go home and await the process of miscarrying our baby.”

“Oh my god.” I stumbled forward and kneeled in front of Cassie. “I didn’t know. I swear I didn’t know.”

“How could you? You were too busy being with someone else.” She sobbed hard into the throw. “I did so much for you, Teddy. When we first met, you were a mess. I went through so much with you. I was patient with you, always there for you, not pressuring you or questioning you when you wouldn’t tell me what was going on. And this is the thanks I get.”

We’d lost our child.

Bile gushed up in my throat. Oh god, I'd been sleeping with Duncan while she was losing our child. How could a relationship born from such tragic circumstances as ours turn out to be anything but insanity?

"I'm sorry, Cassie," I murmured. "I know you don't believe me, but I'm so sorry. Please let me make it up to you."

She didn't deserve this.

"If you want to make it up to me, then leave."

"Leave?"

She nodded. "I can't do this with you anymore, Teddy. I've done everything possible for you to love me, but now I know you don't."

"Cassie, I—"

"Don't insult me by lying to me, Teddy. I've tried to be patient, and I'm done. Just leave. Go! Get your shit and get out!"

CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE

DUNCAN

I took a long drag from my cigarette and glanced at the time on the dashboard. My cousin Clive, who'd taken over my business, was late, which was unusual for him. He knew how much I hated unpunctuality. I just wanted to go home and wait for Teddy to show up.

What if he didn't?

He had to. He'd promised. All I had to do was be patient instead of barging over to his house and doing what I'd threatened.

Someone knocked on the passenger's side of my truck. Then the round face of my cousin and closest relative appeared. Like me, Clive had grown up with drug addicts for parents. Our brotherhood had been forged out of necessity from as early as I could remember. I leaned sideways and opened the door for him. He hopped in and slammed the door shut.

"Dunc," he said, his voice all choked up and shit as he hugged me. "Good to see you, man. I kept waiting to get word

from you to meet up since you've been out."

"Jo's been bringing you my messages?"

"Yeah, and I get it. You want to stay away while on parole. You don't have to worry about your business none. I got everything under control."

"Like I knew you would. You're a ruthless businessman but also fair. I couldn't ask for anything more."

"We've taken over a lot more turfs since you've been gone."

"So I heard. Good job, man. Really. You've worked hard and deserve the reward."

Clive shifted in the seat. "Something you're not telling me?"

"Yeah." I took one last drag of the cigarette and flicked it out the window. "I'm not coming back."

"What?"

"I want out."

"Are you serious? I mean, I'll buy out the business if that's what you truly want, but you spent years making a fortune from these streets. And you're fucking good at it."

"I'm positive, and you don't have to buy out the business. It's yours. All of it. You deserve it."

"I can't—"

"You will because I'm giving it to you. Let's not talk about it anymore."

Clive sighed. "Fine, but if you change your mind, you just let me know."

I wouldn't. I'd already made Teddy's life so difficult. This was the least I could do for him. How was he supposed to be in a relationship with me and continue his job as a lawyer if I returned to a life of crime?

Now was the time to make amends.

"This will be the last time we'll get in touch for a while," I said. "I can't risk things going wrong with my parole. You need anything, you go through Jo."

"She's one tough and loyal broad. You gonna put a ring on that?"

"It's not like that with me and Jo."

"No? She always has the hots for you. Or you find someone else?"

"Just about." I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. "If I tell you, you can't say how stupid I am."

"I'd never."

"Hold that thought." I exhaled a deep breath. "It's that guy Teddy."

"What? Teddy? I don't know any Teddy."

"The guy I got sent to prison for."

"Holy shit. Are you serious?"

"Yeah. I know it's messed up."

“Fuck me sideways.” Clive gaped at me as if trying to find the right words to add.

“That’s all you’re going to say? You not freaking out that he’s a guy?”

Clive scoffed. “Man, that’s the least of your worries. Who cares he’s a man when he’s the one who put you in the slammer? Jesus, Duncan. What the fuck, man? I can’t wrap my head around this. How the hell did this happen?”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s happened.”

“Just...don’t do any more of that weird shit where you kidnap him. If you’re gonna, at least kill him this time.”

“I’m not going to kill him, and he wants this as much as I do.”

“Hmm.” He scratched behind his ear. “I always wondered why you gave the order from prison for us not to touch a hair on his head. Thought it was because you feared everyone would think you hired the hit on him.”

“See to it that remains. No one is allowed to hurt him.”

“Only you.” Clive laughed. “Duncan, you son of a bitch. How do you find yourself in these predicaments? If there’s anything I can do for you, just let me know.”

“Thanks. I need to go back now. This parole officer pops up in unexpected places.”

“We can take care of that for you too.”

“Not necessary. I have this under control.”

Clive hopped out of the truck, shut the door, and stalked away. I watched him in the rearview mirror as he got in a black Sedan and pulled out of the abandoned parking lot. I gave him a few minutes, then left as well.

It took effort not to floor the gas pedal on the way home. The night was still young, and it might be some time before Teddy arrived. I couldn't wait to give him the new cell phone I'd bought him. According to the sales agent who'd helped me with the purchase, it was one of the best on the market. He'd looked almost envious when I'd explained the phone was intended for my partner, so I needed something top of the line.

What the hell? Teddy's car was parked in front of my house. I double-checked my dashboard. A few minutes after nine. Why was he here already?

Inside, I shrugged off my jacket, hung it into the coat closet, and walked along the hall to the living room. It'd been a long time since I felt this good. I'd go to see my brother tomorrow now that some of the guilt over the part I'd played in his death had faded. I'd tried to visit him since getting out of prison, but hadn't been able to work up the courage.

Teddy was sitting on the couch, staring blankly at the television.

His body was way too stiff for my liking.

"Teddy, you're early."

He startled and jumped to his feet, wiping his palms down his jeans. "I-I didn't hear you come in."

“What happened? You look like you’re thinking hard about something.”

He nodded slowly. “Yes, about us. I’ve given it some thought, and it doesn’t work. We don’t work.”

I narrowed my eyes and clenched my teeth. That bitch of a wife of his. What had she done now?

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t want to be with you. Being together brings nothing but trouble.”

“Why the change of mind? Did something happen?”

He squeezed his eyes tightly. A tear slipped down his cheek. “She lost the baby.”

“She did?”

“Yeah, last night. You wouldn’t let me answer the phone. We were—we were fucking around when she was losing our baby.”

“Now wait a minute.” I walked up to him, but he stepped back. “I’m sorry you’re hurting, Teddy, but this has nothing to do with us.”

“Are you crazy? It has everything to do with us. If I hadn’t sneaked over here last night, I would have been with her when it happened. I could have comforted her. We had created a life, and because of this twisted obsession with you, I wasn’t with her. She had to go through the loss alone. How can it not have anything to do with us?”

“We had no idea it would happen. It’s not like you spitefully left her alone to deal with it.”

“What does it matter? We’re supposed to be together.”

“No, you’re not.” I clutched his shoulders. “You’re supposed to be with me. Me!”

“How can I?” He shrugged off my hold. “Our relationship is based on lies, manipulation, abuse, and cheating.”

“That was still the case this morning when you were happy at the idea of us being together.”

“Because when I’m around you, I can’t think clearly, but now I know what I need to do. We have to go our separate ways, Duncan. You said you would let me go if I wanted to.”

“Never.” I grabbed his arm and stopped him before he could walk away. “I changed my mind, so you get that thought out of your head. You’re never, ever leaving me. I’ll kill us both before I let that happen.”

He sucked in a deep breath. “See? That right there. That’s it. That’s not love.”

“Fuck love. What we have is stronger. Better.”

“You can’t honestly think that.”

“You can’t honestly think otherwise. You feel it. This connection we have. It’s strong and powerful, and it’ll survive this.”

“It’s my choice too. Cassie did so much for me, and I need to pay her back. I’m going to win over her affection again. I

won't stop until she forgives me.”

“It won't work. And you know it. You won't be happy with what she can give you. In one night, I've given you more than she's ever done in the years you've been together. Am I wrong?”

“Not everything is about sex.”

“I'm not talking about the sex. I won't let you ruin this, Teddy!”

“Stay away from me, Duncan.” He inched back. “I'll tell your parole officer that you got in touch with me if you don't leave me alone.”

Teddy slipped past me.

You can't let him go.

“You've spent fifteen years waiting for this moment.”

He can't leave you.

He's yours.

The voice screamed the words in my ear, filling me with doubt and fear. I couldn't let him leave me.

I wrapped an arm around Teddy's waist and pulled him back into my chest. I jammed the crook of my elbow in his neck and hooked him from behind in a chokehold.

“No, I'm not letting you walk away from me.” He struggled against me, and I tightened my hold on him. “Never.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO

TEDDY

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Why had I trusted him? If I hadn't, I wouldn't be in the trunk of his car again.

I'd long since given up trying to pry apart the zip ties on my wrists. He'd put duct tape over my mouth and zip ties around my ankles as well. I'd been trussed up like an animal, and I needed to get out.

We'd been driving for a while when the air in the trunk no longer seemed sufficient. I tried breathing through my mouth to make things easier.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

It wasn't working. Why wasn't it working?

I tried to adopt my happy place my therapist had advised me to use as a coping mechanism whenever I felt anxious and

stressed, but the image of Duncan took root in my mind and refused to disappear.

I have to get out of here.

I stomped my feet and squirmed, but it was all useless.

“Teddy! Teddy, it’s okay. It’s me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

My throat hurt like I had swallowed a bunch of needles. What the hell happened? I blinked my eyes open. Duncan stood looming over me. He had removed the duct tape from my mouth.

Had I blacked out again?

“I’ll get you out.”

“Don’t touch me,” I croaked.

“I have to get you out of there, Teddy.”

“Just untie me. I’ll get out myself.”

He brushed a finger alongside the curve of my cheek, wiping the tears away. I clamped my eyes shut. No, he didn’t get my forgiveness this time because he was being gentle.

I hate him.

“Teddy, I’m sorry.”

My heart cracked. He’d never apologized before. Not when he’d done worse to me. He’d always acted like it was a fact that he had to hurt me.

The ties around my hands loosened. The one around my legs followed. He tried to help me out, but I slapped his hands away.

“I said I’ll do it.”

I pushed myself up and scrambled out of the car, but the minute my feet hit the ground, my knees buckled. Duncan caught me and pulled me into his chest. I clutched his arms and closed my eyes.

Why did his arms always feel so good, even when he was the one who hurt me? This was the worst day of my life.

“You should have let me fall,” I said hoarsely.

“I can’t.” He sounded so damn miserable. Good. Because I didn’t know if my heart could ever be pieced back together after this. I’d done horrible things with him, and now it was only fitting for us to be wretched and unhappy. We deserved it for all the people we hurt.

“I can never let you fall, Teddy. I swear to god I’m sorry for everything. For hurting you then. For hurting you now, but it’s the way I know how to deal with you. Please tell me what to do to make you stay with me.”

“I’m going to hell,” I croaked. “I’m such a bad person, Duncan.”

“No, you’re not.” He kissed my hair and tightened his arms around me. “I swear you’re not. I’m the bad person who fucked up your life and made you this way, but I’ll do better. Just give me a chance. Don’t go back to her.”

Cassie. This was all about his selfish desire to keep me to himself and away from Cassie. I was a fool. He didn't...care about me. Not the way I did him.

I pushed at his arms, and he released me. I glanced around. Why wasn't I surprised where he'd brought me? The cabin. Our cabin where I'd experienced the worst humiliation and pain of my life.

And where I'd fallen in love too.

"Why did you bring me here?"

"I didn't know where else to take you but I needed to get you away. This is our place. Come."

He walked ahead of me. I hesitated. It was dark. No way I could get back down on my own.

With a sigh, I wobbled after him. He unlocked the door and stepped aside to let me enter first. The cabin boasted a big main room and modern kitchen. Two bedrooms were to the back, with a single bathroom between them. One of the rooms I knew too well.

I made my way toward that bedroom, the thud of Duncan's footsteps behind me. At the door, I paused with my hand pressed to the wood. So much pain because of him.

"We can use the other room," he said. "I didn't get a chance to change anything yet."

Instead of responding to him, I pushed open the door and walked in. Duncan reached along the wall and snapped the lights on. It was like stepping back in time: the white walls and

floor, the white sheets on the bed. White everywhere. The corner where I'd hide from him when he was feeling particularly evil.

“Do you regret it?” I turned to face him. “Do you regret bringing me here and treating me like an animal?”

His throat worked, but he didn't answer.

“Tell me, Duncan. I deserve to know all your truths for once. You can't expect me to-to commit to you and not understand everything that's happened with us.”

“No,” he said hoarsely. “I don't regret bringing you here then, and I don't regret doing it again now. And I'll keep you here for as long as it takes for you to admit you want to stay. Back then, after a while, you didn't even try to escape anymore.”

“Because you broke me.”

“If I'm telling the truth, then you have to do the same, Teddy. No more lies between us. Let's take the masks off for once. Why didn't you leave when I gave you every opportunity to do so?”

He had. Like the day he forgot to lock my door. Or when he'd fallen asleep next to me with the keys to his truck just in reach. The time we'd gone for a walk, and he'd forgotten something at the cabin and had returned for it, leaving me alone.

My heart ached.

“I didn’t want to leave,” I admitted. “You made me depend on you too much. I spent so much time with you alone that I couldn’t think of leaving. But you forced me to.”

“It was the only way.”

“The only way to what?”

“To stop this. The abuse. It didn’t feel right to hurt you that way anymore. I loathed doing it. It’d make me sick afterward. I kept telling myself that if I killed you, I could move on, but I couldn’t.”

I walked over to the bed, putting some distance between us. I sat on the lumpy mattress and ran my hand over it.

“Nothing you did to me hurt as much as when you let me leave.” I balled up a corner of the sheet into my fist, reliving the devastation I’d felt the day he drove me back down the mountain. The way I’d felt like I was going to die when he dropped me off at the gas station and then left me.

How could I live without him now?

“You’ve shaved my head, branded me, beaten me, done all sorts of things to me, and I’d never felt as humiliated and like nothing as the day you left me at the gas station and drove away.”

“I was giving you your life back.”

“A life I didn’t remember because you ripped it away from me!” I surged to my feet and shoved him in the chest. “You uprooted me from my family and the people I loved, brought me here and made me care only about you, and then you threw

me away like toilet paper. No longer useful after you've used me to wipe your ass. How could you have just left me there? How could you leave me, Duncan? After everything you did to me and I let you, how could you just walk away?"

"It wasn't easy for me either. All I knew was hurting you made you react to me, but I couldn't do that anymore. If I couldn't give you that, I thought it best to let you go."

"I was a wreck when I got back home," I said. "The shrinks couldn't get through to me. I changed everything in my room to white. Tried to recreate our life together here, but it wasn't the same without you. I was a mess, asking for you, making my father mad. He'd slap me around and call me names. Told me I begged for it and I was no good. That I should just kill myself. I slept around with so many different guys at first, trying to find what we had, but it didn't work. Every time I did, I felt sick after. They weren't you."

"God, Teddy, I didn't know it was that bad." Duncan reached out his hand but then thought better of it and dropped his arm.

"I refused to talk to the cops. I swore you would come back for me. That you would miss me the way I did you. I waited for a month."

"And when you realized I wasn't coming, you started talking."

"I came to look for you first."

He snapped his head back as if I'd hit him. "You did?"

“This isn’t the first time I stalked you, Duncan. I followed you around and saw you were living your life as if nothing had happened. And then I saw you with her. That Jo woman.”

“You saw me with Jo?”

I nodded. “That’s when I realized you didn’t care at all. That you’d wanted to use me to humiliate my father. That what had happened between us meant nothing to you. So I talked. I told them everything you’d done to me. You see, you aren’t the only one who sought revenge. I needed to punish you, not for kidnapping me, but for not caring about me.”

“Then why did you change your mind? On the stand. Teddy, you have to know lots of professionals would have testified what I did to you counted as rape.”

“I let you every time. I couldn’t lie about it. Not about those intimate moments between us.”

“Jesus, we’re fucked up.”

“And that’s why we can’t work. A relationship between us is impossible. There’s too much bad blood between us. We’ll fight too much. A part of you must hate me for being locked up for fifteen years, and a part of me hates you still for pushing me away. There’s no place for hatred in a healthy relationship.”

“Who says we need to be healthy?” Duncan clutched my arms. “Fuck all those making shit up about what a relationship should be like. We may not be healthy, but we’re real. What

we have is real, and that's enough." He slammed his mouth to mine and kissed me hard. "This is—"

"Sex."

"Real. It's real, Teddy. You're the realest thing I've ever had, and I don't want to lose that. Please give me a chance to prove you wrong. To prove we can work."

"Duncan—"

"You can't say no. I gave up my old life for you."

"What?"

He cupped my face. "The night you asked me if I would go back to my old life when my five years were up, it got me thinking. I don't want to make your life difficult anymore because of my choices, so I gave it all up. Well, not the money I already have. I'm going to need that to make things up to you for the rest of my life."

"You know it doesn't matter. Once people find out I'm with you, they'll isolate me. I may lose my job...my family."

"I'll be your family. I'll be your whole damn world. In case you haven't figured it out yet, I don't like to share you. Teddy, say yes."

"Cassie—"

"You don't love her. You love me."

I frowned. "Who said anything about love?"

"You don't have to say it. I just listened to everything you said, and you know damn well you love me."

“What about you?”

He brushed my cheek with his hand. “I’ve never felt this way, so I don’t know if what I feel is love. Fuck, because we’re being real here, I don’t even know if I’m capable of loving, but I know the thought of you hurting makes me want to kill whoever is responsible for causing you pain. I know I’ll do the fucking worst shit known to man to make you stay. I’m not above kidnapping you and tying you to my bed to make you mine. Fuck, I’d fake both our deaths and move away with you to somewhere we can start over, and I wouldn’t hesitate to put a bullet in anyone who stands in my way of having you.”

A shiver ran down my spine. He sounded demented. For sure, what he described was not love...could not be love, but god, I wanted it so much.

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

TEDDY

“Come back to bed. It’s too early.”

I leaned over and kissed Duncan’s cheek. “It’s not, and I’m just going for a walk.”

He sat up and groaned. “Fuck, we can’t sleep in here tonight. I’m too old for this lumpy mattress.”

I grinned. “You’re the one who wanted to recreate one of our memories last night.”

I rubbed my wrists, then touched my neck. He’d tied me up and fucked me last night while slapping my face, choking me, and making me swallow his spit. My dick stirred at the memory, but my ass was sore and needed a break.

“Let me put clothes on, and I’ll come with you,” he said.

“No need. I want to walk alone.”

He scowled. “Why alone? You’re not going to try to run, are you?”

“Why would I? You’d only hogtie me and bring me back.”

“Fucking right about that. Don’t try any sneaky shit, Teddy.”

“I won’t, my lord and master.” I rolled my eyes.

“Keep that up. I love it.”

“If you want to be helpful, have breakfast going by the time I come back.”

“You should cook for me.”

“Why? You were the one who said you would serve me for a lifetime, remember? I made no such promise.”

He cursed a blue streak as I slipped out of the bedroom and laughed. Then sobered up. This was exactly the reason I needed this walk, to clear my head after everything last night.

Being with Duncan made my heart feel settled, but it was restless too. Cassie and the baby we’d lost rested heavily on my shoulders. If there was only a way I could make it up to her.

I sighed and walked out of the cabin. I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jeans and took the trail Duncan had led me on so many times in the past when he was being considerate. The morning air was fresh and crisp with a nip that made me shiver. We didn’t even have any clothes. We couldn’t stay up here long before having to go back to our lives.

So much to consider. Should I resign from my job and start my own practice? I couldn’t imagine my bosses would still want me to work for them when they found out about Duncan.

But no one could know about us for the next five years anyway. Not until Duncan's parole was up.

Unless we went the route of him faking our deaths and us moving on. We could move to the Caribbean. No one would find us there.

I shook my head and chuckled. "Don't be stupid."

The whole situation was sort of romantic, though. In a sick, twisted way. But Duncan was right. Sick and twisted existed in the real world. What we felt was real. Only that mattered.

Soon I came to the small pond I remembered. If I was good, Duncan would let me swim in it.

I stripped and smiled at the marks on my body, at the hickies he'd given me. I dipped my toe in the water, then let the water lap over my feet. It was too cold to dive in completely.

It was so peaceful here. Hard to believe a place that held such life and serenity had been the spot of a crime scene. Duncan had money. Would he be up to expanding the cabin and making it a cozy home for us?

I lost track of how long I'd spent in the pond, basking in the warmth of the sun. If I didn't return to the cabin soon, Duncan would come searching for me.

Damn, I had forgotten to bring a towel. Pulling my clothes over my damp body, it was, then. I took a languid pace back to the cabin. My stomach grumbled. Breakfast had better be ready when I got back.

When the cabin came into view, my happy mood evaporated. A familiar silver Dodge was parked right next to Duncan's truck.

Dad was here.

A single shot rang out, destroying the peaceful morning.

"Nooo!" I rushed toward the door and flung it open. The smell of burned toast filled the cabin. Duncan was slumped back against the counter, clutching his shoulder and biting his teeth. Blood soaked through his fingers.

Dad had his back to me, the gun in his hand trained on Duncan.

"Dad, no!" I cried.

"Teddy, leave!" Duncan shouted. "For god's sake go."

Dad gave me a cursory glance. "Well, well, well, if it's not the whoring son. I knew you were more involved in this than you let on fifteen years ago. A real man would have put up more of a struggle than let some piece of shit criminal ride his ass for nine months."

"Dad, please don't do this." I took a step toward Duncan, but Dad waved the gun. "You'll go to prison. Think about Mom—"

"Were you thinking about your mother when you were fucking him last night?"

I blinked rapidly. "You—"

“Cassie called us. Told us everything. She didn’t know where you went after you left home. I tracked your car to his place, but you were already gone. I took a wild guess where you’d end up.”

“Wait a minute. You tracked my car?”

“Put a tracker on it when you came over for Sunday dinner. I had a feeling you were up to no good. You were acting suspicious. Last night wasn’t the first time you’ve been to his place.”

“It’s none of your business, Dad.” I walked up to him.

“Teddy, stay away from him,” Duncan said.

“I love him.”

Dad’s face turned red, and he muttered something unintelligible. He lashed out and hit me in the face with his gun. I stumbled back, blood dripping into my eye. Another blow to the head left me stunned. The world spun around me, and I stumbled to my knees.

“Teddy!” Duncan shouted my name. “For god’s sake, don’t hurt him. He’s your son.”

Dad turned, swinging his arm around and pointing the gun at Duncan, who was rushing toward me. I grabbed Dad’s legs, and he lost his balance. I pulled harder, and he went down hard.

“Teddy, stay back,” Duncan yelled.

But I had to stop my father from hurting him. Still woozy, I wrestled him to the floor and fought him for the gun.

“You’re disgusting,” he spat at me. “You’re no son of mine.”

The gun went off, and fire spread in my gut. Another shot rang out, and I fell back.

Duncan shouted something I couldn’t understand. A flash of steel glinted.

“Nooo!” I shouted.

Too late. The blade sliced across my father’s neck, and blood poured from the wound.

“You—” Dad raised the gun and pointed it at me. “No son of mine.”

Duncan kicked the gun out of his hand and rushed to my side.

“Teddy.” He yanked off his shirt and pressed it to my chest. “You’re bleeding. Oh god, Teddy, it’s so much blood. I can’t get it to stop.”

“You have to help him.” I shoved at his chest. “He can’t die.”

“I only care about you,” he said. “I only fucking care about you. Everyone else can go to hell.” He kept pressure on the wounds and I cried out.

“Duncan, it hurts so bad.”

“I’m sorry, Teddy. So fucking sorry for ruining your life.”

Tears dripped onto my face. “Are you crying? I’ve never seen you cry before.”

“You’ve never seen me do a lot of things, Teddy. You need to live so I can show you all the things you’re missing. Please stay with me.”

“I don’t regret anything,” I said. “Not with you.”

“Shh, don’t talk. I need to get you to the hospital.”

“You can’t.”

“I have no fucking choice, Teddy. Just hang in there.”

He ran off, his footsteps thudding on the floor.

Everything went black. I came to in his arms as he carried me to his car. A tight band was around my chest. It was already soaked through with blood.

“Teddy, please hang in there. I’m gonna get you help.”

But help was far away, and it was bad. I could tell it was by the way he was panicking. Duncan was the most unperturbed man I knew.

“Duncan.” With all the strength I could muster, I pulled at his shirt. “You can’t.”

“Hush. Save your energy.”

“If you take me to the hospital, you’ll go back to prison.”

“Then so be it. Five years is nothing compared to losing you for a lifetime. I refuse to live without you, Teddy.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR

DUNCAN

“Mr. Whittaker, I’m Officer Cade Murphy.”

I sat up in my chair. A tall, reed-thin man in a police uniform stood before me. Took them long enough. I’d been expecting them since I drove Teddy to the nearest hospital, which was a damn long distance away. I’d been worried that by the time we arrived, he would have already bled out.

That’d been hours ago. The doctor had taken care of my gunshot wound and strongly reprimanded me for refusing the painkillers and not staying for observation. I’d stayed long enough for them to pump a bag of something into me before I checked myself out. The wound in my shoulder was a clean shot. I wasn’t the one whose life hung in the balance.

I’d been camping out in the waiting room since, hoping for word about Teddy’s condition. So far, one nurse had told me he was in a “stable condition,” but what exactly did that mean? I needed to see him for myself.

“I’m here to ask you a few questions about what happened tonight.” The officer took a seat across from me. “Just to verify, you’re the one who brought Theodore Scott in?”

“Yes.”

If I’d learned anything from the long trial I’d been through after kidnapping Teddy, it was to keep my answers short and to the point.

“What’s your relationship with Mr. Scott?”

“He’s my—we’re a couple.”

He frowned. “A couple? You expect me to believe that? Mr. Scott was the man you kidnapped fifteen years ago.”

“It doesn’t matter whether you want to believe me. That’s what we are.”

“Hmm.” He made a note in a small leather-bound pocketbook. “Just so we’re clear, anything you say here can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

“I’m familiar with this.”

“And you still stick by your statement?”

“Look, Officer.” I balanced my arms on my knees and leaned forward. “I took Teddy to the cabin with me.”

“He went with you willingly?”

“No, but he stayed willingly.”

“You admit to kidnapping him?”

“We needed to talk. I took him somewhere we could do that. So we talked, made up from arguing previously. We had sex, slept together, and he went for a morning walk. That’s when his father showed up with a gun.”

“What happened then?”

“I was in the kitchen, making us breakfast. I was making eggs the way Teddy liked them. The door opened, and I thought it was Teddy. I called to him, but he didn’t answer. When a man entered the kitchen, I realized it was his dad with a gun aimed at me.”

“And?”

“I tried to talk to him about what he was about to do. He was beyond reasoning with. He’d trailed Teddy and me last night and seen us having sex. He blamed me for ruining his son’s life.”

“He saw you last night but waited until this morning to attempt to kill you?”

“Yes. Maybe he went back for the gun or something. I don’t know, but he claims he saw us together. He shot me, and then Teddy showed up.”

“What happened then?”

“Teddy did the same thing, tried to talk him out of doing something stupid. While he was talking to Teddy, I grabbed a knife. He didn’t see. He and Teddy wrestled for the gun, and the gun went off. He shot Teddy a second time. I slit his throat.”

The cop flinched. “We have people heading to the cabin to check out the crime scene now to verify your story.”

“Fine. I’ve said everything just as it happened.”

He stood. “Until Mr. Scott wakes up to corroborate your story, I’ll have to take you down to the station and hold you.” He removed his handcuffs.

My heart sank. Too fast. Why was everything happening so fast? I hadn’t even seen Teddy yet.

“Please, I’ll go without a fuss. You can do anything you want to me after, but I need to see him first. I need to know he’s okay.”

“This isn’t something you get to negotiate, Mr. Whittaker.”

“For god’s sake, I love him, and he’s lying in a hospital bed, fighting for his life. Can I just see him? I need to know how he’s doing.”

“Please don’t resist and make this harder on yourself. I’d hate to have to call for backup.”

A part of me wanted to fight, to argue and rebel, but my actions so far had only hurt Teddy. I couldn’t cause a scene here. Not when he was so badly injured.

I allowed the cop to handcuff me and read me my full Miranda rights. Apparently, I was under arrest for killing his father, though it was self-defense. It had been the only thing I could do to save Teddy’s life, or he might have been shot again.

This was all my fault. If he died, how could I forgive myself? From the moment we first met, I'd done nothing but bring that man pain. Now he had almost been killed. His own family had turned on him because I'd found it more important to have him than to see him happy with someone else.

I sat in the back of the police cruiser in silence. Through the comm unit, he conversed with the team who'd gone up to the cabin. They'd found Teddy's father's body just the way I'd described, along with the knife I used to kill him with and the gun he still had on him.

The station was practically empty except for the officers on duty. They chattered about Teddy and me, our history bubbling back to the surface. Booking went quickly. They didn't take me to a cell but to a holding area—a bare room with a cedar-brown table in the center. They didn't remove my handcuffs.

After waiting for close to two hours, the door opened. Instead of the police officer from earlier, my parole officer came in, wearing the grave look I've come accustomed to. Patrick Trombley was strict but fair, and he didn't look happy.

“You fucked up, Duncan.” He sat in the chair across from me. “Was this why you petitioned for a parole hearing? To be back on the streets, just to return to prison for doing something so stupid?”

“How is he?” I asked.

“What?”

“How's Teddy? Has he woken up?”

“If I were you, I would worry about your own ass. Stay away from the victim. I must have emphasized that a dozen times. Stay away from the fucking victim. Now see what happens when you don’t follow procedure. We got a dead former cop, a man battling for his life in the hospital, and your ass facing criminal charges.”

“I don’t care. I just want to know he’s okay. Sentence me to life in prison if that makes you feel better. Is Teddy okay?”

“I didn’t check.”

“You should.”

“What?”

“You should check. When you do, I’ll talk to you.”

“You think you’re in a place to negotiate?”

I placed my hands on the table and leaned forward. “What do you want me to say? I’m worried sick about him. All I want to know is that he’s okay. Then I can focus on everything else. Please, I know you’re a decent person. You must see that I care about him.”

The man observed me, stared really hard as if trying to figure me out. “Are you bullshitting me right now?”

“I would never with something so important.”

“You know you’re going back to prison to serve out your sentence in full, right?”

“Yes, and that’s fine as long as Teddy lives.”

He inhaled deeply and sat back with his arms folded. “What the cop says is true? I read the report he wrote up. You and Teddy were in a relationship?”

“Yes.”

“You know we can’t take your word for it. We can’t even take his word for it if he agrees. Everyone who knows about this case understands he’s an unreliable witness. You brainwashed him before.”

“It doesn’t matter to us what you all call it. We know it’s real, and that’s all that matters.”

He sighed. “I’m not making any promises, but if I’m going to check up on him, will you at least tell me the truth? How long have you been seeing him? I checked your prison records, and he never visited you once.”

“It was after.”

“After you came out? You’ve been barely out for a month.”

“Yeah, well, we have history.”

“I told you to stay away from him.”

“And I did. He came after me.”

“What?”

“He pursued me, and naturally, I responded.”

“Well, naturally, your ass belongs to the state pen again. Of course it’ll be the decision of the parole board, but we know it’ll happen. You’ll be held without bail until the board meets

and decides your fate. That'll happen in about two weeks' time."

I nodded. Five years wasn't so bad. I could do it once Teddy was all right. It was nothing less than I deserved anyway. "I understand."

He rose to his feet. "I'll see what information I can gather about Theodore. Who knows? Maybe if he testifies on your behalf, then the board will lift your warrant."

He'd already been through too much. Our court hearing had been hard on him. How could I let him go through that again? The best thing for me to do was let him go. He would be much safer.

"No," I said. "Whatever happens, I don't want him at the hearing. I don't want to see him. Just let me know he's okay."

CHAPTER TWENTY- FIVE

TEDDY

Why did I feel like I'd been run over by a truck? I groaned and forced my heavy lids open, blinking as the harsh white light hit my pupils. Where was I? I forced my eyes open wider and took in the hospital room.

Like a flash, everything returned. Duncan coming out of prison. Stalking him. Sleeping with him. Cassie's miscarriage. Duncan kidnapping me and Dad showing up at the cabin. He'd shot me. My own father had tried to kill me because of the relationship I had with Duncan. Our relationship had been strained, but I'd never expected Dad to go this far.

How was he anyway? If Duncan had gotten me to the hospital in time, then there was enough time to save my dad too, right?

I frowned. Where was Duncan?

He probably left me at the entrance of the emergency department. If anyone found out he was in any way connected with me, then he would be in big trouble. But hospitals called

police officers when there was a gunshot victim. What the fuck would I tell them about what had happened?

I couldn't lie to the authorities.

"Theodore, you're awake." The door opened, and a nurse entered the room, smiling. "I'm Clover. On a scale of one to ten, how severe is the pain you're feeling right now?"

"Seven."

"The doctor will be here shortly to do his rounds. He'll prescribe you something stronger if you like."

She checked my vitals and made a note of them in my chart.

"What's wrong with me?" I asked.

"Other than the two bullets we've taken from your abdomen? You were hemorrhaging and had to be rushed to the OR twice. Your blood pressure's low, so we're monitoring that as well. After a week, your vitals were consistent, and we're hopeful your recovery will be successful."

"A week?" I croaked.

"You've been in a coma for a week."

I'd missed a whole week of life. How was Duncan doing? What the hell was going on?

"Nurse, was there anyone else with me when I was brought in?" Duncan had been shot too. Had he come in for treatment? First my dad shot him. Then I shot him, and my dad shot him again.

Jesus.

“Don’t worry, honey. The police took the bad man away. You don’t have to worry about him.”

“Took him away?”

“Yes. You’ve become quite a bit of a celebrity on the ward. We’ve had journalists here every day, trying to get information about you. Who would have thought someone to be so shameless as to kidnap you twice? I hope they sentence him to life imprisonment this time.”

“No, no. It’s a misunderstanding. I need to speak to someone. A police officer.”

She frowned. “One should be here soon. They’ve been waiting for you to wake up so you can give your statement. Your kidnapper has been claiming that your father tried to kill you, but no one believes that. More than likely, he was after you and killed your father when he tried to defend you.”

What the hell was she saying? None of it was true, but she kept prattling on, not letting me get in a word edgewise. But it was useless talking to her anyway. She wasn’t the one who could let Duncan go. This wasn’t his fault. All he’d done was protect me.

“Wait a minute.” Finally, her words sank in. “Did you say he killed my father? My father’s dead?”

“You poor thing.” She hummed, patting my hand. “I’m sorry to break the news to you, but by the time the police officers arrived at the cabin, he was already gone.”

I slumped back against the pillows. Dead. My father was dead because of me. How many more deaths until Duncan and I realized our obsession with each other was destructive?

A doctor came to check me out and pronounced my body was healing fine. He prescribed a sedative to help me with the pain while the nurse rebandaged my wounds.

As soon as they were gone, I fell asleep again.

I startled awake. Sweat beaded on my face and neck, and my chest hurt with each breath I took. Even in sleep, I'd kept reliving the horror in the cabin.

"Mr. Scott, you're awake."

I turned my head to the man sitting in a chair across the room. I'd never seen this cop before. He came over to the bed.

"How are you feeling?"

"I don't know."

It was the honest truth. I was still trying to wrap my head around the fact that Duncan was back in custody and my father was dead.

"That's understandable. You've been through quite an ordeal."

"I'm sorry. Who are you?"

"Forgive me for not immediately introducing myself. I'm Patrick Trombley, Duncan's parole officer."

"Oh." He was the man who'd shown up that day Duncan and I had been at his house together. "Mr. Trombley, I think

there's a misunderstanding.”

“How so? We've been waiting for you to regain consciousness to talk about what happened.”

“Duncan didn't try to kill my father. He was only defending me.”

“Are you certain? You don't have to cover for Duncan, you know.”

“I'm not covering for him. I told him not to take me to the hospital for fear of this—that he would be arrested—but he said he didn't care. It's my fault. He shouldn't be locked up again because he tried to save my life.”

“But it's not the first time he's been in contact with you since he was out on parole, is it?”

The lie sprang to my lips, but I held it back. He said it with such certainty. He must already know the truth.

“I was the one who went after him.”

“Whether or not you want to admit it, you both played a part in everything that happened,” he said, his tone full of reproach. “All you had to do was stay away from each other and your father would still be alive. Duncan's parole wouldn't be under threat.”

“I can testify—”

“It'll do no good. He broke parole, and you appearing to testify with your love story will only make things worse for Duncan. No one will believe this love is real. They'll bring in

experts to testify that you suffer from Stockholm Syndrome toward your kidnapper.”

“But I have to do something.”

“The best thing you can do for Duncan is be honest about what happened at the cabin when it’s time so he won’t be charged with murder in your father’s case. Unfortunately, for the parole violation, there’s nothing you can do.”

Nothing I could do? So Duncan had to spend another five years in prison?

“If you want my honest opinion, Theodore, I suggest you see a psychiatrist to work out what Duncan did to you in the past. Falling for the man who abducted you isn’t healthy. It’s problematic, and you should deal with it. So far, it’s done you no favors.”

The man walked out of the room, closing the door behind him. Didn’t he know we already acknowledged our love was problematic? And why should I go to a psychiatrist? For them to tell me something was wrong with me? Wasn’t something wrong with all of us? But at least I knew how to fix what was wrong with me.

Duncan was the fix.

After the parole officer left, the police came. They spent almost an hour grilling me with questions, which I answered with the same things I’d told the parole officer. I might have lied about whether Duncan had kidnapped me and taken me to

the cabin. No one else needed to know how I got there. I'd stayed of my free will and had slept with him.

No, my father hadn't come to rescue me and Duncan killed him. No, Duncan hadn't drugged me or brainwashed me. He hadn't done anything to me at all. The police officer gave me a look of disdain, but I couldn't summon the energy to care. He left, but not before also taking a jab at me that I should see a shrink.

The door closed behind him, and I fell into an exhausted slumber. Nurses woke me up to check up on me, but as soon as they left, sleep took over again.

Late evening someone entered the room, but I didn't bother to look who it was. It wasn't Duncan, so what did it matter?

"You won't even look at me."

My breath hitched, and I snapped my head up. Cassie. She had dark shadows under her eyes, and she had lost weight.

"Cassie."

"I told myself I wouldn't come. That I didn't care what had happened to you and you deserved what you got for what you did to me, but your family is good people. They shouldn't have to go through this. Couldn't you have at least thought about them before you made the choices you did?"

I closed my eyes and swallowed. "I don't expect you or anyone to understand."

"He kidnapped you, Teddy. I saw the way you struggled to get over what had happened to you. I lived with you through

it. I don't understand how you could even entertain that man. How could you?"

"It's private."

"Private? I am your wife. If you're busy fucking someone else, how on earth is that private? I deserve to know the truth. What is this hold he has on you?"

"Maybe you're right. Maybe he does have some hold on me, but I can't break it. I don't want to break it. Being with him feels right."

"And with me..."

"I pretended it was right."

"You're heartless, Teddy. I gave you everything."

"I know what I did to you wasn't right. Don't get me wrong. And I am sorry for it, but I never knew I would still have this strong reaction to Duncan."

"Will you get counseling? Maybe we can work things out now that he's behind bars where he belongs."

I shook my head. If it wasn't Duncan, I didn't want anyone else. After experiencing how real what we had was, I couldn't pretend with anyone else. I would wait for him if I had to.

"It's useless, Cassie. You deserve better."

"And so should you. Your family won't come, you know. They're through with you. Your sister, she feels betrayed. She won't forgive you for having your father killed."

"He tried to kill me."

“His method wasn’t right, but who wouldn’t want to do the same when they see their son has lost all sense of reason?”

I swallowed hard around the lump in my throat. “If that’s what you think, then you should go.”

“I am going,” she said. “I’ll file for divorce and move on with my life. It was wrong of me to get involved with you in the first place.”

“Maybe.”

“No, you’re not listening, Teddy. This image you have of Duncan is an illusion. He’s not a good man.”

“You don’t think I know what he is? I was the one he abducted, okay?”

She shook her head. “He hasn’t told you the complete truth, but you deserve to know. Maybe you’ll see how manipulative he is.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We didn’t meet by chance.”

“What?” I frowned.

“Duncan planted me in your life from the beginning.”

“What?” I scoffed. “Don’t be absurd. How could he plant you into my life?”

“He’s had you under surveillance since he went to prison. I know because my aunt Jo is the one who got me to work for him. She said he paid good money and all I had to do was get

close to you and report back to them about your therapy sessions, your love life, how you were handling everything.”

My lungs ran out of air. “You’re lying.”

“I wasn’t supposed to fall in love and marry you, but I did.” She chuckled. “I was so foolish. I thought that because he didn’t protest us getting married he was okay with it and would leave us alone, but he never intended for me to have you forever. I was only meant to be with you until he got out of prison. Then he would pick up where I left off.”

“Oh my god.” All these years, she’d been lying to me? None of it was real? No wonder Duncan insisted all along that he could get rid of her. I searched her face and found no trace of humor. She was speaking the truth. “Oh my god. You’re not lying.”

“I’m not. I had to keep up the fake pretense that I didn’t know him or what you’d been up to all this time. I hoped I was wrong. The day you came home and saw him at the house, he was there to threaten me to disappear out of your life.”

“But you didn’t.”

“I was scared, but I knew he couldn’t risk you finding out the truth because then you’d know for sure he is manipulative and would break things off with him. I’m guessing that’s why he never told you the truth about me. I’d look bad, but so would he. We would both go down together.”

My thoughts swam around in frantic strokes, too scattered for me to put them together properly. Duncan had gone

through so much trouble just to be with me. How could he insert someone in my life like that? Normal people didn't do shit like this to people they cared about.

“He's not good for you, Teddy,” she said. “There's no hope for us now, but you should know where you're making your bed before you lie in it. Good-bye, Teddy.”

“Wait!”

She stopped at the door with her hand on the knob. “What is it?”

“The baby. Did you really miscarry, or did you do something to make it happen because you knew I'd chosen Duncan?”

“You lost the right to ask me that question when you disappeared on me that night.” She waved her hand. “What will you do now, Teddy? Will you walk away from him or waste your life on someone so toxic?”

Cassie walked out of the room, leaving me with her question ringing in my ear.

Will you walk away from him or waste your life on someone so toxic?

She was right. Duncan was toxic. What he'd done, forcing Cassie into my life, was cruel. What if I'd fallen in love with her? Would he have broken my heart just to have me?

I clamped my eyes shut, and a thrill tingled through me. It was sick. It was twisted. But for someone to go through so much just to be with me... How could I give up on him?

CHAPTER TWENTY- SIX

DUNCAN

One Month Later

I followed the guard to meet my lawyer. What was that about? To the best of my knowledge, I didn't have anything to discuss with him today. My preliminary court hearing had dismissed the case against me for murder. Teddy had taken the stand and given his testimony of what had happened the morning his father showed up at the cabin. He'd told the whole damn world we were involved in a sexual relationship.

Our world had turned upside down with stories of our history being splashed all over the news again. A victim falling for his abductor fifteen years later made for a pretty decent headline. The day he'd testified, it'd taken everything out of me not to stare at him, even when I'd felt his gaze straying to me more than once.

Seeing he was okay and recovering from his wounds had been a relief, but I'd maintained my stance. I didn't want to see him, didn't want to speak to him. My obsession was mine to carry alone. No need to get him further involved in this mess. He should be free to live his life. He'd lost too much already.

The guard brought me to a small private room and opened the door to let me in ahead of him. The other man in the room had his back to me, but I couldn't miss the blond head. He turned slowly until he was face-to-face with me.

He looked like he'd lost weight, but he was alive and looked well.

"You have an hour," the guard said and closed the door behind us.

I remained standing with my back against the door. I couldn't stop looking at him, my heart hammering. The night I'd told him I wasn't capable of loving, I'd been so wrong. If cutting out my beating heart would show him the proof, I would have done it.

I loved him so damn much. I'd fallen in love with him the first time I'd kidnapped him. *That* was the reason I'd let him go.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Teddy asked.

I swallowed. "Are you crazy? What are you doing here? What if they find out you're passing yourself off as a lawyer?"

"I am a lawyer."

"You know what I mean. A criminal one. Teddy." My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. Damn the man. Couldn't he see staying away from me was safer?

"You've been ignoring every attempt I've made to contact you," he said. "I got your lawyer's help, and here I am. It's been over a month, Duncan. Isn't it time you stop pushing me away? I'm not going anywhere."

"You don't have to. Just stay away from me. I've already ruined your life."

“Exactly. You’ve already ruined everything. My dad died, and my family kicked me out of the funeral. My sister, the one person who was always close to me, won’t have anything to do with me. I can’t even visit my mother. I had to resign from my job. Every day I get hounded by reporters wanting to know about us. You’re the only thing I have left, and I’m not going to let you take that away from me.”

“Teddy...”

“No, don’t Teddy me. I told you I loved you. I meant every word. You can’t just pretend you don’t feel the same.”

I licked my lips and looked away from him.

“I bear scars on my body that won’t make me forget you. So do you. We belong together. I’ve been telling the whole world this, and they may not believe what we have is genuine.” He laughed. “I’ve seen psychiatrists on talk shows dissecting our relationship, but none of that mattered because we both know what we have.”

Teddy walked slowly toward me until he was only a few inches away. “You left me once, Duncan, and I always blamed you for it. But in the past month we’ve been apart, I realized I was as much to be blamed. I never made any effort to stay with you back then, but I am now. It won’t be so easy to get rid of me.”

“Teddy, aren’t you tired of me hurting you and ruining your life? You have to know as long as we’re together, people will continue to treat you badly.”

“Let them. I’m only interested in the way you treat me.”

“How are you so stubborn?” I growled. So stubborn and beautiful. I wanted to ravish him.

“So give in already. I had to take some time to recuperate or I would have made it here sooner. I don’t want to go another day without you.”

“Except I’ll be in prison for the next five years.”

“And I’ll visit you in the capacity of your lawyer.” He gestured around the room. “It’s nothing fancy, but at least we have privacy.”

“Five years is a long time, Teddy.”

“We just did fifteen, and nothing changed. What’s another five?” He closed the distance between us, and I wrapped my arms around him. He clung to my shoulders. “I missed you so much.”

“Me too.”

He raised his head, and I kissed him. Teddy wrapped his arms around my neck and kissed me back hungrily. I slipped my hands down his pants and cupped his ass. Still as fine as I remembered.

“You’ll stop being so distant then?” Teddy asked, nibbling on my bottom lip.

I sighed. “I’m worried I’ll cause you so much trouble until you start to resent me.”

“Not possible.” He smiled up at me. “I mean, Cassie told me the most interesting story, and I’m still here.”

I went rigid in his arms. “All lies. Everything she says is all lies.”

“I know it’s not.”

“Fuck. You know, and you’re still here?”

He nodded. “Other people might have run after they found out how manipulative, obsessive, and possessive you are, but I find myself attracted to you even more at the extent of what you have done for us to be together. You’re one scary man, Duncan.”

“Then you should run, pet.”

“But it’s so much more fun to be caught.” He ran his hands up my chest. “How’s your wound?”

“Good. Yours? Any complications?”

“No.”

“Thank god.” I kissed his hair. “You fucking worried me. I thought I’d lose you, and then I didn’t get a chance to see you before they arrested me. I had to squeeze information out of my parole officer about how you were doing.”

“You had him check up on me?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t answer me earlier.”

“Maybe I am waiting for you to ask again.”

“Will you stop being distant and let me date you in prison, Duncan Whittaker?”

“Yes, I want that too.” I slipped a hand into his hair and held him close. “You can’t miss a visitation.”

“I won’t.”

“You’ll come as my lawyer.”

“I will.”

“And we have an hour, which means I can fuck you if I feel like it.”

He nodded at the table. “Shall we give it a try?”

“But you have to be quiet. If they find out...”

“They’re lazy here. They won’t bother us until the time is up or I’ll slip the guard on duty cash.”

“Good.” He grabbed my hand. “You have a whole month to make up for.”

He dropped his pants and bent over the table. We didn’t need to prep. He already had his asshole lubed with a silicone plug up his ass. Who was the obsessive one now? I fucked him as hard as I dared with the guard standing outside. Teddy was silent, but this was acceptable for now.

One day I would hear him scream again.

EPILOGUE

DUNCAN

TEN MONTHS LATER

The sounds of the two inmates grunting in the corner of the bathroom as they fucked and the courtesy flushing of the toilet from another weren't enough to put a damper on my day. Today I got to see Teddy, and although it was for just an hour, the visits made my stay in prison bearable.

This was shaping up to be the worst part of my prison sentence. Long periods of loneliness usually followed the brief moments of happiness with Teddy, where we tried to squeeze as much as we could into the time.

Luckily, I had purchased a cell phone from an inmate. We texted as often as we could and that helped me somewhat to hang in there until the next time I saw him. I couldn't help but worry, though, that someone would convince him he was wasting his time on me. That he could have a more successful life without me in it.

It's been months though, and he still comes.

I peered at my reflection in the useless metal mirror and marked myself as passable. There was only so much I could do. At least my hair was properly groomed. Nothing I could do about the prison jumpsuit, but they were clean. I'd saved this new one especially for today.

Valentine's day.

"Duncan."

I stifled my groan and inclined my head as Cam entered the bathroom. For the past month, he'd been my new cell mate—an annoying guy at just twenty years old who was doing time for killing his stepdad. He looked all innocent with his bright red curls and striking green eyes, but he was a sneaky shit who knew how to manipulate the inmates and guards around him to wheedle his way out of the trouble he usually caused.

And he'd been offering me his ass from day one.

If he kept this shit up, I'd have to bribe higher up the chain to get me a new cellmate.

“What do you want, Cam?” I asked.

“Will you watch my back while I shower?”

“You don't need me to watch your back.”

He might look slender, barely coming up to my chest, with skinny arms and legs, but those childlike hands had plunged a knife into his stepdad, killing the man. His lawyer was appealing his case, but from what I'd seen and heard of the boy, since he chatted so much, he'd done the deed and had no regret.

He glanced over at the two men in the corner, still fucking like rabid animals, and returned his gaze to me. “That looks fun. Are you game? I know what you're packing, and I want it.”

“Not interested.” I shoved the items I'd brought to the shower back into the bag. “You're wasting your time.”

Yup, definitely needed to bribe someone to get him out of my cell. I had a jealous man, and the last thing I needed was to fuck up and have to woo Teddy all over again. I was done with that kind of game. Now I just wanted him to be completely mine.

I returned to my cell and waited impatiently until the guard came to take me to speak to my “lawyer.” The guard brought me to the door, and I slipped him a hundred bucks to look the other way. I wasn’t ending our time today without Teddy leaving with a little of me in him.

“Keep it down in there,” the guard said, and opened the door for me.

I got butterflies swarming my stomach as I entered the room and saw him. Teddy got up from the chair where he’d been sitting. He looked so damn good in his tailored pants and long sleeve shirt. His jacket was on the back of the chair and his tie on the table.

We lasted until the door closed behind me.

“Duncan.” He flew into my arms and I held him tight to me. We didn’t kiss. We had time to do that later. I just needed to feel him.

He enclosed his arms around my neck and clung to me. I buried my nose in his hair and inhaled the citrusy scent of his shampoo.

“Duncan,” he sighed. “Happy Valentine’s day.”

I eased back. “Happy Valentine’s day, pet. Did you get my gifts?”

Teddy’s eyes sparkled, and his cheeks were full of color. He looked happy. I would make him even happier when I was out of this joint.

“So many things, Duncan. I don’t know where to start. I love it all.” He dug into the top pocket of his shirt and took out a necklace with a pendant made from a bullet. “But I love this best.”

I reached out and took the necklace from him. “Then why aren’t you wearing it?”

“I wanted you to be the one to put it on me.” He turned his back to me, and I slipped the gold string around his neck and fastened the hook. With my hands on his shoulders, I spun him around and took in the masterpiece that represented us.

“You really like it?” I asked.

He nodded.

“You know where that bullet came from?”

“It’s from me shooting you, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe you kept it.”

“It hurt like hell when you shot me, but the pain you inflict on me is the only pain I welcome.”

He caught my face between his hands. “Duncan, you twisted son of a bitch.”

I smashed my mouth to his and kissed him. My valentine.
“Say you’ll be mine.”

“I’ll be yours.”

“My valentine.”

“Yes, your valentine.” He reached for the top button of my jumpsuit and slipped each through the holes quickly.

“You’ve gotten good at this,” I said.

“Have to make every second count.” He grabbed my hand and led me over to the table. He kicked the chair from under it and shoved me down to sit. Leaning over me, he kissed me.

“Hmm,” I moaned. “Take your pants off. Quickly.”

I helped him unbuckle and shoved his pants down his thighs. He wasn’t wearing underwear. I grasped his hips and pushed his shirt up so I could kiss his lower back and bite his flesh. Teddy gasped and his body jerked away in response, but always returned for more.

I peeled down the arms of the jumpsuit. “Soon, Teddy,” I said. “Soon, I’ll have you in a bed and I’ll take my time kissing every inch of you.”

“This is just as good, Duncan. Hurry!”

He never once complained about dating an inmate. Never complained that sex was too quick with me having little to no time to engage in foreplay. He accepted me and what I offered. And it made me want to offer him the best.

Soon.

Teddy grasped my cock and sank down on me with his back to my chest. Bracing on the arms of the chair, he rose and fell, riding me hard. I humored him. For a few minutes, before I grasped his hips and, rising from the chair, bent him over the table.

“Yessss,” he hissed, spreading his legs as far as his pants allowed.

Grasping Teddy’s hair, I drew his head back. He twisted around enough for me to kiss him while working my cock in and out of him. My pelvis slapped into his ass. So tight. So firm.

“Fuck.” I couldn’t get enough of him.

Still holding him by the hair, I shoved him face first into the desk. “Oh god, yes,” he moaned.

“Shh,” I hissed. He was being too loud.

He shoved his fist into his mouth and bit down on it. I loved seeing him like this. Helplessly lying there, pinned down, hurting but also enjoying every bit of my hands pulling on his hair while bruising his tight little hole.

Teddy shuddered beneath me. A whimper tore from his lips, and his opening clenched around my cock. I chomped my teeth together to prevent the cry that rose in my throat as I slammed into his ass and emptied myself into him.

I pulled out and sat back in the chair heavily, pulling Teddy along with me. He sat on my lap, head against my shoulder. I

closed my eyes and swallowed as we both caught our breaths. These little moments we got together were worth it.

“Why do these five years seem longer than the fifteen I spent before?” I asked.

He kissed my neck. “Because of me?”

“Yeah. Are you sure you can do this?”

“I have to. I don’t like it, but there’s no other way to be with you.”

“For now.”

“Hmm. We should get decent before someone finds us like this.”

“We have time.”

Even so, it was a good idea for us to be prepared for anything. Teddy slid off my lap, and I hated that we didn’t have more time together. We dressed quickly. He sniffed the air. “Well, can’t get rid of that.”

I laughed. “You don’t care if the guards know what we really get up to in here?”

“What else can we do? I refuse to wait four years to sleep with you again.”

I caught him around his waist and pulled him back into me. I bit down hard on the brand mark on his neck. “And I’m not providing you with another bride for five years. The last one proved problematic when it was time for her to hand you back over to me.”

Teddy elbowed me in the stomach, and I grunted. “Stop treating me like an object.”

I released him and rubbed the sore spot. “I thought you loved it when I treated you that way.”

“Well, I will not marry anyone until you’re out.”

My head snapped back, and I stared at him, too stunned for words.

He frowned. “What? You can fuck me but not marry me?”

“No, it’s... I didn’t think you’d want to marry me.”

“And why the hell not?”

“So, this is like a proposal?”

He shook his head. “No way. Not while you’re in here. Make it all grand and shit. Blow my fucking mind.”

I stroked my chin as if thinking hard. “Have you always been this high maintenance?”

“Not my fault you started this relationship with a bang by setting the bar so high when you kidnapped me. Now you’re gonna have to beat that for the rest of your life. Or at least equal it.” He smirked. “Not to mention all those gifts you keep sending me through Joanne. You know you don’t have to do that.”

“You’re my man. I take care of you.” I fiddled with the buttons on my jumpsuit. “Don’t want you to forget all about me while I’m here.”

“You think I’m going to forget you?”

“I’ll never let you. Being with me is for the safety of other people. Prevents me from—”

“You shouldn’t say such things in here, Duncan!” He glanced around us like he expected the guards to turn up and take me away forever. “And I hope you’re not fooling around with anyone else while you’re here.”

Cam’s face popped up in my mind. Just for a split second, but it was enough for Teddy to not seem pleased with my expression.

“Are you?” he demanded.

I grinned. “What’d you do if I said yes?”

“I’d find a sex club and let a dozen guys bang me tonight. So what is it?”

My grin turned into a scowl, and I grabbed his arm. “Teddy, you better not. I’m not playing.”

“Neither am I.”

“I swear I haven’t fucked around with anyone.”

“Then what was that look on your face?”

“Just thinking I need to get a cellmate change. The new one is problematic and I don’t want to fuck with anyone else but you.”

“Your cellmate wants to sleep with you?”

“I won’t.”

Teddy’s hands balled into fists. “Get rid of him.”

“I will. Calm down. Sheesh.” I cupped his neck and ran my fingertips along his jaw. “You’re so jealous.”

“As if you don’t like it.”

“I do, but let’s not fight about some guy who doesn’t matter. We have little time. Tell me how it’s been with you running your own practice?”

“It’s going good. Someone’s been paying me a hefty retainer fee that keeps me in business.” He sighed. “Honestly, if you weren’t doing that, I’d be flipping burgers at McDonald’s.”

“I’m sorry I fucked up your life.” He smacked me in the chest with his fist and I grunted. “Why so violent today?”

“Don’t apologize for that anymore. We have what we do now because of it.”

“I won’t then. Talk to me. Your family—”

He shook his head. “Still won’t talk to me, but there’s a little ray of hope. My nephew, the eldest, dropped by my office a week ago and we talked, so I guess not everyone hates me.”

“Good.”

“And I’ve been visiting your brother for you. I bring him flowers.”

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply before re-opening them. “Thank you. I waited too long and never got the chance to visit him while I was out.”

“Then as soon as you’re out, you’ll go.”

I nodded.

“Good.”

We chatted about nothing much for the rest of the time we had together. Movies he watched, the new gym he joined, crocheting that he took up. Before we knew it, his time was up and the guard had reappeared to take me back to my cell.

Teddy leaned in close to my ear and whispered, “Your cellmate, Duncan. I won’t be back to visit you until you’ve gotten rid of him.”

I groaned and watched him go, but a deep sense of pride filled my chest.

That’s my pet.

“Howell,” I said to the guard as he led me away. “You help me get a new cellmate and I’ll pay you a grand. What do you say?”

The man nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.”

After all, I couldn’t miss my next visit with Teddy.



I hope you enjoyed reading *Be Mine, Twisted Valentine*. I have bonus scenes of Duncan and Teddy to share with you through my newsletter, so don’t forget to sign up here. If you could spare a minute to write a review here, I would appreciate. Don’t forget to check out my other dark romance

series Daddy's Little Deviants.If you enjoy the forbidden aspect of cheating, then consider reading my book Class Act.



They called him Vicious... I called him *mine*.

Sebastian St. James was more mystery than human...

His timid, feeble disposition contradicted the violent rumors that surrounded him. He wasn't a murderer... but they were afraid of him, anyway.

I was fascinated by him and the cautious way he hid his face. His hands trembled when somebody stared too long, and he was wary of speaking.

Secrets burned beneath his skin, and it was my job to expose them all. Bit by bit, I was tasked with tearing him apart until there was nothing left but the truth.

The funny thing about the truth? There's always two versions, and it was Sebastian's version that made me bleed.

I no longer wanted to wreck him. I wanted to protect him.

They called him Vicious... but it was me they should've been afraid of.

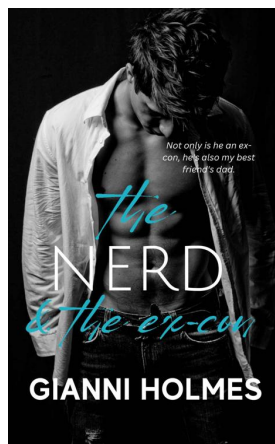
Read Now

There are so many bonus scenes from *Be Mine, Twisted Valentine* that I would love to share with you. For example, Teddy's POV when Duncan is at the window entertaining him, the day Duncan kidnapped Teddy for the first time, Duncan's POV when he learns of his brother's demise, some scenes from Teddy's abduction, Duncan finally being released from prison and how they spend the next four Valentine's day with Duncan incarcerated before his release.

I'd also love to hear from you if you would be interested in a story of Duncan's cellmate, Cam. Sign up for my newsletter and don't miss out on the extra content coming your way.

Join Gianni's Newsletter

PATREON SERIAL



Scott

I've been sending letters behind my best friend's back to his father in prison for almost ten years.

When Griff gets out on parole, I can't say for sure who's more shocked.

My best friend finding out what I've done. His father discovering the lies I've told him.

Or me immediately thinking "Daddy" when Griff shows up on my doorstep.

Griff

I've spent the last 20 years in prison.

But it takes seeing the boy I've been talking to for the past
ten to realize how not so straight I am.

Sure he's lied to me about who he really is.

Too bad that's not enough to turn me off.

I much prefer this version of Scott anyway—braces, glasses,
and the nerdy way he talks dirty to me.

But can I be with Scott when it means losing the son I may
finally have a chance of connecting with after all these years?

Read on Patreon

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This was a wild ride that would not have been possible without the group of authors in the series who agreed to take this journey with me. Thanks so much for listening to a crazy and idea and jumping on board. It was so much fun working with you all.

Thanks to my patrons, Marissa Miller, Tammy Jones, and Lori Martini for giving this manuscript a final proof.

FIND ME

I have a vibrant Facebook group that all readers are welcomed to join. I share lots of teasers, book covers, and author friends stop by for giveaways and parties. Looking forward to having you join us in Gianni's Gems.

I also have a Patreon account where readers can join to access my exclusive book club, patreon serial, signed paperbacks, and artwork of my books. Join my Patreon here.

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ABOUT GIANNI

Gianni Holmes is a former high school Spanish language and Hispanic literature teacher who is fulfilling her dream of being an author. A mother of one, who hails from the Caribbean, she loves her romance with a bit of danger and intrigue. Join her on this journey of love is love.

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