



Cage & Thorn

MAYHEM

MAYHEM

MAKERS



THE THROWAWAYS BOOK ONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K.L. DONN

Cage & Magnolia

MAYHEM MAKERS COLLECTION

THE THROWAWAYS SERIES

BOOK ONE

KL DONN

Copyright © 2023 by KL Donn

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Editing by KA Matthews

Cover Designer: Clarise Tan @CT Cover Creations

Formatting by Alluring Write Productions

Contents

Introduction

Synopsis

1. Magnolia
2. Magnolia
3. Cage
4. Magnolia
5. Cage
6. Magnolia
7. Magnolia
8. Magnolia
9. Cage
10. Cage
11. Magnolia
12. Cage
13. Cage
14. Magnolia

Epilogue

About the Author

Also by KL Donn

Introduction

Motorcycles, Mobsters, and Mayhem author event proudly
presents **The Mayhem Makers Series**.

These standalone novels are brought to you by several
bestselling authors specializing in writing twisted chaos.
You'll get all the bikers, mobsters, and dark romance your
heart can handle.

[MAYHEM MAKERS WEBSITE](#)

Synopsis

From *USA Today Bestselling Author KL Donn* comes *Cage & Magnolia* as part of the *Mayhem Makers* collection.

**Devastating consequences lead to the worst nightmares,
and mine are no different.**

I wanted to change the world.

My part of it, anyways.

My name is Magnolia Taylor, and this is *not* my story to tell.

Fresh out of college, bright-eyed, and filled with hope, I
started my dream job.

Then everything went to hell, and I ran away.

Straight into another disaster.

Where he rescued me.

Cage Craven.

Darkness everlasting, rising from the ashes of hell itself.

Flaming red hair caught my attention.

Sad, ready-to-die eyes had me spouting promises I had no
business making.

Saving her should have been the end of it,

But she was fire in my arms.

An inferno in my bed.

Until she left.

Magnolia believes her story is over; little does she know I'm
coming for her.

Her past doesn't scare me. But her present will bring me to my
knees.

She thinks this isn't her story, and she's right.

It's ours.

CHAPTER 1

Magnolia

Excitement courses through my veins as I stare around my very first office. I opted to come in for the summer program to help some of the more at-risk youth and learn more about the community I'll be working in.

I'm unsure of when I decided to become a guidance counselor instead of a teacher, but I don't regret it. I'm not interested in being a disciplinarian to the kids; I'd prefer to be their confidant. To be the person they're comfortable enough to come to when they have a problem.

Middle school was my turning point in life. I was bullied so incessantly that I nearly committed suicide. Thought about it. *Dreamed* about it. For months on end, I wrote in my diary about how I would do it until, finally, the opportunity presented itself. I was ready. Prepared. Had accepted my fate.

But then *she* came.

Mrs. Campbell.

She noticed me on that Friday afternoon, saw something in me that no one else had paid any attention to, and made it her mission to ensure that I knew how much I had to live for.

If not for her simple question, I believe I would have gone through with it.

When you're twenty-five, what would you say to yourself now?

My first thought was *nothin'* because I'll be dead. But then I spent the afternoon contemplating what I would say to my younger self if I had the opportunity to. The entire weekend passed trying to figure it out until Monday morning came, and I finally asked her what *she* would say to herself.

Her answer gave me pause.

This is only one part of your life. It can and will get better.

And then she told me how she was picked on a lot and how much she hated school. Mrs. Campbell never realized it, but she saved my life with that one question.

And now, here I am. Hoping to do the same thing for students who are like I once was. My focus is to help kids navigate through life when their bodies and minds are at war with one another.

"Mrs. Taylor?" Spinning at the meek voice, I see a girl standing hesitantly in the doorway. Her dark hair is tied up on top of her head, her face is makeup-free, and she wears a pair of ripped jeans and a baggy sweater with Crocs on her feet.

"Hi. What's your name?" I smile and lean back against my desk, keeping my arms at my sides so she knows I'm open to conversation.

"Lucy. Lucy Michaels." Her fingers twist in front of her as she looks down. "You're the new guidance counselor, right?"

I nod and sweep my arm out, offering a seat on the couch that I had brought in or one of the bean bag chairs. "I am. My name is Magnolia."

“Like the flower?” It makes her smile, and she finally accepts a seat in the cupcake-shaped bean bag chair.

“Exactly.” I flash her another smile as she looks around the room. I have a massive window on one side looking out into the school’s courtyard, and on each side, nestled against the walls, are two tall bookshelves. Sensing she’s here for something, I grab a stack of books and begin placing them on the shelves, waiting, hoping she’ll talk a little more.

I get through organizing two of the four shelves on one bookcase before I hear her ask, “Are you married, Miss Taylor?” I almost erupt with laughter.

Shaking my head, I respond, “No, never been married. I’m not entirely certain that kind of life is for me.” I’ve suffered from depression almost my entire life, never knowing how or when I’ll be triggered again. I do know I couldn’t put a spouse or children through that kind of uncertainty. I’d hate for anyone else to feel any sort of agony because of me. Stopping what I’m doing, I turn to look at Lucy. “Why do you ask?”

Her shoulder lifts as she chews on her lip. “My parents got divorced a couple of years ago. Mom took off, and Dad, well, he’s still heartbroken.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that.” Going to the mini fridge I installed behind my desk, I open it and grab two bottles of cherry-flavored water, my favorite. Offering one to Lucy, I sit in another bean bag chair shaped like an emoji face.

I take a refreshing drink of water, as the afternoon is sweltering, and wish I’d worn shorts instead of the jeans I have on. “My parents separated when I was a few years younger than you are, too, and eventually, they got back together.” Relating to kids in this age of technology is difficult, but divorce is one thing so many have in common.

“Did they shut down on you?” Maybe this is one I can’t relate to as much, but I will try.

“Them...no. But *I* shut down on them and myself.” Her brows pinch together, confused.

“What does that mean?”

Oh, how to explain suicidal depression and ideation to a teenager? I don’t want to. I hate the idea of her even thinking about it.

“I closed in on myself. I pushed my parents away, my friends. I was angry and sad. I wanted to run away but didn’t want to leave those I loved.”

She nods like she understands, and this, she just might. “That sucks.”

A laugh bubbles up this time, and I let it out. “It does. Did. It really did.”

And that’s how our relationship begins to grow and blossom—finding companionship in the unlikeliest places at a time when we both needed it.

Three weeks later.

“Miss Taylor?” I glance up from the paperwork I’ve spent all day working on—it’s a proposal to the school board about establishing an after-school program during the regular academic year so I can continue working with some of these kids I’ve spent the summer getting to know—and I smile at a waiting Lucy.

Waving her in, she drops down into her favorite seat—the cupcake bean bag chair. “What’s up?” I reach behind me and grab two bottles of cherry-flavored water. She’s grown as addicted to it as I have.

“I need to talk to you about something, but do you have to report it?” Alarm spikes my pulse.

“Well, that depends on what it is. If it’s a crime, yes.” I doubt that’s what this is.

Lucy shakes her head no. “Nothing like that.”

“How about you tell me, and then we’ll decide how to best proceed?” Over the last few weeks, Lucy has been to school every day, participating in the activities I have planned or even helping and being a role model to some of the younger kids from the neighborhood. As word has spread, my program has grown, and I hate the idea of it only lasting through the summer.

“You know I’ve been seeing Darius.” I nod as she picks at the label on her water. “Well, he made me do some stuff. I told him no, but...” Tears crowd her doleful eyes. “He wouldn’t listen to me, Miss Taylor...” Taking a mouthful of water, I wait for her to continue, plotting to give this boy a piece of my mind and possibly getting the police involved. *We’ll see*. My gut is screaming I know where this is going. “I took a pregnancy test yesterday and two more today.” I hold my breath. “I’m pregnant, Miss Taylor.”

One week later.

“Are you sure you want me here?” Sitting in my car in the parking lot of the women’s clinic, Lucy looks sick to her stomach. It’s early in the morning, and the protestors aren’t as big of a crowd as at other times of the day. Thankfully, the facility has volunteers who accompany clients into the building without too much trouble.

“Yes.” She nods, sliding out of my car while I take a few deep breaths.

When Lucy told me she was pregnant, I was stunned. Probably as much as she was. But we spent the evening talking about options and where she could go that wouldn’t contact her parents and how to broach the subject with them if she chose to.

I’d given her the number for the women’s clinic the next day and told her she had to be the one to make the appointment, but I would take her if she wanted me to.

Now, here we are.

Pulling up the hood of Lucy’s jacket, I’ve never been so grateful for a rainy day as we walk around the corner to the path leading to the entrance. Immediately, three people approach, yelling at us as security comes to escort us inside.

After getting checked in, filling out the necessary paperwork, and taking Lucy’s vitals, we’re led to a room in the back. I believe we are the first appointment of the day because a doctor enters with a welcoming smile on her face a few minutes later.

“Good morning, I’m Dr. Sherry Martin. You’re Lucy Michaels?” Lucy confirms, and the doctor looks at me. “And you are...?”

“Magnolia Taylor.” It’s quite obvious I’m too young to be Lucy’s mother. “I’m her guidance counselor at school. I told her I’d be here for support if she needed it.”

The woman’s eyes lose a bit of their spark as she admonishes, “You can’t lead her in any decisions she makes.” I acknowledge that. *I hadn’t planned on it.*

“I’m only here as support. Whatever she wants, she’ll get. I don’t matter in this situation.” And it’s the truth. Lucy is so young—only fifteen—she has her entire future ahead of her. I’m simply here to ensure she gets the outcome she wishes.

“Good, let’s begin then.” It’s just like any other appointment. They explain the pros and cons of her options, the possible side effects. Offer counseling and social help. I’ve never been involved in an appointment like this before, but I’m pleasantly surprised by how well-equipped they are to handle situations like this.

I’m unsure if Lucy is more overwhelmed than when she came in or if she’s better prepared to make a choice, but I can see she’s not as tense. By the time we’re ready to leave, she has an appointment with one of the psychologists in a few days and then a final appointment about her decision next week. Both of which I promise to drive her to.

When I got into counseling, it was with the intent to help kids in trouble. If I’d been asked if this was the kind of help I anticipated arranging, I would have said no. Nonetheless, I’m extremely happy to be here for Lucy because, if nothing else, she deserves someone in her corner who will be silent but supportive.

Ten days later.

I haven't asked Lucy about her choice. I didn't want her to feel as though I was prying or attempting to change her mind. I just want to be her shoulder if she needs it. As we park, she's quiet, contemplative. The crowd is larger today than the past couple of times we were here.

I think they're getting to her. They spewed some horrifically invasive and cruel vitriol at her last appointment, making me wonder how they justify their actions. These people can be downright nasty, especially to the young girls I've seen coming and going. The parking lot is empty, though, so I'm hopeful we can get in quickly.

"It's going to be okay." I reach over and offer a comforting hand.

"I know," she whispers, her tears impacting her voice. I can't imagine how hard things have been for her, and I hate that I don't always know the right thing to say or do.

Taking her lead, I wait until she gets out of the car before joining her. She stops me before we head towards the building and wraps me in a tight hug. "Thanks for being here for me, Miss Taylor. I don't know anyone else who would have been as kind and supportive as you have been."

Tears clog my throat.

"I think, one day, you're going to be an amazing mom." Gripping hands, we're about to take a step when Lucy freezes, her body turning to ice.

"What are you doing with that girl?" a man shouts at us. His eyes zero in on where Lucy is squeezing my hand.

The protestors have yelled at us, thrown things at us, but they've never confronted us like this. "We're just going inside." I try to keep my voice calm, but even I hear the fear in it.

That fear is garnered by the gun in his hand. Another man approaches, then another, and soon, we're surrounded, only a few feet between them and us.

"Miss Taylor?" Lucy is vibrating with fear; I squeeze her hand.

"You forcing that girl to get an abortion, *mick*?" The way he spews the last word, I understand he means it as an insult. "She ain't your kind. Step away from her."

With my flaming red hair, bright green eyes, and pale skin, it's no doubt I'm no relation to Lucy, who is olive-complected and has dark brown hair and chocolate eyes. Doesn't mean I'm doing what he's insinuating, though.

"We have an appointment," I force through a rigid jaw. Wrapping an arm around Lucy, I try pulling her forward, but they won't allow us to pass. Not wishing to frighten her any more, I whisper down to her, "Let's come back another time."

My words set the man off because he starts yelling and raises the gun. Blocking Lucy's body with mine, we scream when the first bullet fires, the round going wild. But that second one...

That second one hits me in the back of my shoulder. I drop to the ground, fire racing through my blood, then another spears through the side of my gut. Lucy screams again as she stares down at me in horror. Yelling ramps up behind me, but as I stare down at myself, blood pouring from my wounds, my

body turns to ice as my ears ring, and before I can say anything else, four more shots blast out.

One hits my hip, throwing me face down into the ground, and three hit Lucy. “Noooo!” I scream...I think I scream. “Lucy?” I cry out as she drops just a few feet in front of me. Her eyes lifeless, her hand outstretched, and a hole in her chest where her heart pumps out her life force before, finally, there’s nothing left.

Dragging myself over to her, ignoring the agony zipping through my body, I pull her under me, securing her away from a world she was too good for. “Lucy.” I cry out her name until darkness takes me under, until my own breathing grows shallow. Until my lungs seize, and for a split second, I see a light. It’s warm and welcoming, and I want to follow it to the end.

CHAPTER 2

Magnolia

EIGHT MONTHS LATER.

Turning around as I hear giggling, I point at the two culprits, only a slight twinge of pain in my hip this time. “Care to share?” I wink when they both freeze, fear flashing in their eyes before they cover their mouths to hide their little girl chuckles.

“No, Miss Taylor!” they say in unison but hand me the picture in question.

“Oh lord,” I muse, staring down at the happy couple kissing, ignoring the pang of desire in the region of my heart. “Who is this?” I kneel in front of them.

Kaya answers, “My mommy and daddy.” The girls are both seven and obsessed with love.

“They’re smooching.” Annika puckers her lips together and makes kissing sounds, sending the rest of the kids into a fit of giggles.

When I arrived in Richards Bay, South Africa, I wasn’t sure what to expect, but after a month of learning the kids’ personalities and traits, I’ve come to realize I need them more than they need me. The exchange program I joined after the shooting was an impulse, one I’m eternally grateful I jumped on.

“Okay, okay, back to the lesson.” I clap my hands together to get the attention of the other ten students. Everyone straightens up and gives me their best ‘I’m ready to learn’ faces, which sends me into a fit of laughter.

I think we do laugh more than learn/teach, and it’s opened them up to me more. They confide in me in a way they weren’t able to with their previous teacher. The woman was all business, all the time, from what I’ve been told.

While I’m not a licensed teacher, they needed someone to fill in, and it turns out that I fit the bill. Since this is an art class, it hasn’t been too hard to do, and I really enjoy it.

Today, I have them practicing their clean line skills. Using rulers and lined paper, everyone does their best to keep their hands steady. It’s all for fun, a break from the academics, and they do wonderfully under my praise.

The rest of the day passes quietly, uneventfully. I teach two more classes, and as I’m about to dismiss my last one of the day, that’s when I hear it.

The sound I wish I didn’t instinctually know. The sound that changed my life.

A gunshot.

Followed by another.

And another.

Until finally, the screams reach my ears.

I freeze, unable to move or think, until a tiny hand tugs at my shirt sleeve, and I’m brought back to earth. “Miss Taylor?” One of the ten-year-old boys pulls so hard, my shoulder pops out of the neck opening.

“To the back of the class,” I instruct, aiming to keep the panic from my voice. The room with the kiln is the only place I can think to put them. “Hide behind whatever you can.” I don’t know how often events like this happen here, but due to my training at home, I sadly know what to do. “Keep quiet,” I tell them, closing the door so there’s just a crack open.

Running to the classroom door, I realize what I do next is risky, but I open the door to check if any students are lingering in the hallway. Four older kids are trying to hide in alcoves, behind water fountains, and in lockers.

Whistling, they all turn to look at me. “Quickly!” I hiss. Ushering them into the room, I tell them where to go and to keep quiet. Closing and locking the door, I shut the blinds around us just as I notice a large caravan of police arrive outside. What surprises me is the lone man shouting at the officials as they stand around.

Waving my arms to gain their attention, he sees me, his eyes narrowing and flashing with something. The tattoos on his face and neck make him appear terrifying. He motions for me to get down, and just as that blind closes, the classroom door kicks in, and in the doorway are two boys armed with automatic rifles. One smirks as he enters the classroom, the other raises his gun, aiming right at me, and all I can think is, why me? Why now? *How is this fair in any way?*

Before either of them can do anything, another boy appears. This one, I recognize. He’s about sixteen, and I’ve seen him around school a few times. I believe he has siblings here.

“You lied!” he shouts at the shooters, shocking me. I can’t even begin to understand what’s happening, so when he reaches for one of the young men, I watch in horror as he

brings a knife up to his neck, and in one clean sweep, blood spurts everywhere.

Screaming, I drop to the ground, and a shot goes off, hitting the window behind me. Shattering glass rains down, some pelting my back as I cover my head.

Shouting from outside can be heard, but I don't move until I feel a hand grab a chunk of my hair. Dragging me to my feet, the boy wraps an arm around my neck as he backs into the wall encasing the kiln room.

The two shooters are dead, blood pooling around them as their necks gape open; the knife used lays on the ground near their bodies. I become lightheaded as his arm tightens around my neck.

"Please don't kill me," I beg. He mutters something, but my ears are ringing, so I don't hear him. "Please, let the kids go."

"Kids?" he snarls, and I feel his head whipping around, looking for them. "What kids?"

"Will you let them go?" I won't tell him where they are until I know they're safe.

"Yes, yes, this wasn't my plan. This wasn't supposed to happen." He sounds distressed, but I can't let myself feel sorry for him. "Where are they?" he snaps.

Lifting a shaking hand, I point to the door nearby. "Just let them out. They've done nothing wrong."

Dragging me over, I can barely get my feet under me. "Open it," he demands. I twist the knob and register little whimpers of fear. "Everyone out!" he yells, and they all come shuffling out of the room, tears streaking their innocent faces.

“Go, run!” I encourage them. As they rush out the door, I remember the broken window and scream towards the police, “Children are coming out!”

The teen’s arm tightens on my throat as he drags me to the front of the classroom, watching the children leave before I notice a large shadow along the wall. *Someone is coming.* I can only hope that whomever it is can stop this boy before he kills me too.

Cage

A line of groaning bodies lies behind me as I make my way inside the school. I run into children and teachers as I carefully make my way to the classroom with the woman and her unruly wild red hair. I saw her through the window; she looked terrified.

It wasn’t just a fear of an active shooter, it was a fear born out of experience. When our eyes locked, a shift occurred inside me. The coldness I’ve lived with had a flash of warmth. A warmth I want to feel again. Like an addiction, I need to know it intimately.

When the school’s director called me this morning after being apprised about rumblings of an impending attack, I mounted up, ready to slay whatever assholes decided today was the day to cause carnage.

So far, I haven’t seen any dead bodies. No children, no teachers. But bullet holes litter the walls, floors, and lockers. It

was hysteria they were seeking, and from the stark look on the faces I've come across, they succeeded.

When I hear a voice yelling that children are coming out, I know whoever this is, has her. The girl with the sunshine hair and panic in her eyes.

A small group of children come running down the hall as I'm rounding a corner, and in the next second, I see a boy, maybe sixteen, with his arm around my sunshine's neck before they disappear back into the classroom.

"Mate!" I call. "I'm coming in." There's no sound, nobody telling me to back off, so when I enter the classroom, finding two dead bodies on the ground with guns in their hands, I'm surprised to see this boy still holding the lovely teacher hostage.

"She's just a teacher, mate. Not sure this is a good idea here." Staring at the beauty trapped in the petrified teenager's arms, I can tell she's on the verge of tears but is trying to remain strong as I talk the boy down.

"He doesn't have a weapon." Her voice shakes as she chokes out the words.

"I can see that." He's also twice her size. It wouldn't take much for him to snap her delicate neck should he choose to.

"What's your name, pet?" Maybe if the kid learns more about her, he'll let her go, and I won't have to use the Berretta that's in my hand, now resting against my thigh.

"Magnolia. Magnolia Taylor. I'm only twenty-three. I was born and raised in Chester, Arizona. It's a small town. I came here because—" Tears do drop this time. "I came here because the school I was supposed to start working at...there was an incident. Someone died." I'm curious about that. About her.

Her pleading eyes never leave mine; they're speaking to me. And suddenly, I'm curiously aware of her as a woman. An extremely attractive one that I want to have for myself. "Did you hear Magnolia, mate? She hasn't had a chance to live yet. Whatever has happened to you to bring you to this moment, it can be undone. I can help you."

"Please, I'm only a teacher, a guidance counselor." Her eyes continue to well up as she struggles to remain still in the boy's restrictive hold.

"You need to loosen your grasp. Her life outweighs yours right now, son." I notice his demeanor shifting, and when I look into his eyes, I recognize it.

That look.

I've seen it too many times not to understand its meaning.

"I'm not your son!" Her gasp as her captor cuts off her airway and the way she fights to inhale forces me to raise the gun.

He's ready to die, and he's going to force me to do it. "Let her go. Just let Magnolia go." I have about ten seconds before it's too late for her.

Her eyes are already growing heavy, her limbs becoming lethargic, and her clawing nails have less fight. She's losing. Hell, we're all about to lose here.

Three seconds.

I take aim.

Two...

Finger on the trigger.

One...

The kid drops her to the ground. A bullet in his shoulder.

“Breach,” I mutter into the mouthpiece in my ear. I don’t go to Magnolia until the team of cops waiting outside barge into the room and take him into custody.

Shoving my gun into my holster, I spot a bottle of water on the desk she had been teaching at before these boys invaded her safe space and drop to my knees next to her.

Magnolia.

What an odd name.

“Don’t move; just sit here for a minute. Take a drink of this.” Opening the bottle, I hand it to her. “Try to relax.” Her body violently shakes, and she winds up spilling half the bottle before swallowing a sip of the liquid.

“I-I-I-I ca-can-can’t s-s-s-s-eem to s-s-stop.” The stuttering grows worse as she tries to speak.

Sitting next to her, I grip one of her thighs and drag her over my lap so she straddles me. Bringing her head to my chest, I hold her tightly, maybe enjoying her soft curves a little more than I should. “Listen to my heartbeat. Just listen. We have nowhere to be right now.”

Yeah. I definitely like her in my arms a little too much.

“Wh-wh-why d-d-did they d-d-d-do this?” Her stuttering seems to get worse.

Blowing out a breath, I don’t think it’s possible to really understand acts like this. “Those two”—I nod to the dead bodies—“were here looking for a girl that broke up with one of them because he hit her. They wanted to scare her.” *She was at home.* She was the only reason we knew anything might happen. The girl is the one who called in the threat to the

school. “But they needed someone to get them in. Which was where the other one came in. I don’t believe he was expecting them to bring guns, though.”

Her elegant fingers grip my shirt so tightly that she pulls it from the waistband of my jeans and wriggles around in my lap. A lot. Too much.

Fuck.

I feel the beast rising, and I know she’s about to feel it in a second, too. Placing my hands on her hips to prevent her from moving further, my body acts on its own by pulling her closer and nestling her fully against my rigid length.

There’s no denying it now.

She freezes, and I wait for her disgust.

Seconds tick by, turning into minutes, until finally, Magnolia leans back and looks me in the eye. “That’s not normal, right?”

“What?” She’s old enough to know it’s normal for a man.

“For me to be okay with...” She points to where our bodies meet. “I should be appalled, shouldn’t I?”

Shrugging, I haven’t a fucking clue what she should be. “I’m not sure what you’re looking for here, pet.” Getting to my feet, I intend to set her down, but she clings to me like a monkey. “Planning to let me go so I can get us out of here, little one?”

“I can’t.” Her fevered breath on my ear makes my dick twitch. He’s a devilish bastard today.

“Sure you can. You release me, and we walk out of here.” Her head shakes viciously, tousled red hair cascading around

us like a waterfall, and all I can picture is how it would sway as she goes down on me.

I'm going straight to hell. First class ticket.

Clearing my throat, I begin walking out of the classroom and into the hallway. "You're coming with me, then." Not many women want that once they discover who I am and what I'm willing to do to get what I want.

I kill for money. I kill for mercy. I kill...because it's what I'm good at.

Today, when I was called in by the school director because of the danger, my one and only job was to get the kids out and ensure the only one who died was the one posing the threat.

I was prepared to do that.

Except he wasn't armed; he likely hadn't known how far those boys were willing to go, and he was a child himself.

I have rules. I don't kill innocent women, and I don't kill kids. I track when needed and do what has to be done, but nobody dies by my hand that doesn't truly deserve it.

"Where, uhm, where are you going?" She still doesn't loosen her hold.

"Home." Stepping into the heat and away from the building, I see the carnage left in my wake because nobody would let me into the school until the second spurt of gunfire, and for the first time in my life, I don't want someone to witness what I'm capable of. "Keep your eyes closed." She nods but otherwise doesn't say a word.

I didn't kill anyone today, but medics were required, and there might have been a couple of broken bones involved. My intent was to keep a school filled with children safe. If men got

hurt, it was their own fucking fault for getting in my way when I was called to solve the problem they couldn't.

“What's your name?”

“Cage Craven.”

“It suits you.” Her words are barely a whisper.

After meeting the precious woman in my arms, my priorities have shifted slightly. I'm not sure if it's due to my attraction to her, the haunted way she begged not to die, or the aftermath of working with the Cardarelli's in Italy when I lingered longer than I should have.

“Why are you here?” She hinted about something happening at home, and now I'm curious. Everyone watches us as I walk past with the terrified teacher in my arms. My Jeep is only two blocks away.

“I'm a guidance counselor. I'm there for the kids at the ages where their lives change the most. Where *my* life changed the most. I wanted to be what I never had in middle school.” Readjusting my hold on her, my hand slips, and I graze against her cunt. She gasps, and her back arches. Meanwhile, I wonder if the carpet matches the drapes.

“Not sorry,” I grunt. Christ, if I take her home, we're fucking. There's no way around it. And I'd be an asshole for taking advantage of her.

“There was a girl of only fifteen; she was assaulted. Too afraid to tell anyone, she came to me while I was at the school over the summer, offering my services to the kids who needed them and running summer programs. School hadn't even begun yet.” I resonate with the pain in her voice.

“She was pregnant by her rapist.” I don't need to guess. I see it all too often, especially in the parts of the world where I

work the most.

Magnolia confirms that. “The worst part is that he was her boyfriend.” Her grip around my neck tightens as I unlock my vehicle. “Please don’t let me go.”

“Can’t drive and hold you.” I slip into the driver’s side anyways, pushing the seat back to make room for her, and start the engine. There isn’t anyone around to stop me, and I highly doubt they would anyway. I’m too well-known around here. My reputation keeps people on edge.

“I thought you couldn’t drive.” She leans back, and the pressure of the move has her pussy flush with my cock. So tight that I can feel her lips butterfly open, wanting to wrap around me.

Her pulse races as her eyes widen and her nostrils flare. “Hold on.” I speed out of the parking spot and rush for home. “Finish your story.” I need the distraction, or I will come just like this.

“It took weeks before she told me what had happened and what she wanted. She couldn’t open up to her parents because the mother had taken off when her parents divorced, and her father turned to alcohol. He didn’t even know she had a boyfriend.” *Christ.* “We were at the clinic; there were protestors. They saw us. Me with my pale Irish skin and bright red hair and her with olive skin and dark hair. They thought I was forcing her to go.”

I fucking hate that I know exactly where this is heading.

“She had a few appointments before the final one, so they’d become familiar with us. The morning of the last appointment, someone became overzealous, and he had a gun. The men refused to allow us into the clinic...or even out of the

parking lot. When I tried to step in the way and make sure it was safe for the girl, for Lucy”—her voice catches, and I rub a soothing hand down her back—“to enter, the man pulled the weapon out and started shooting.” Tears now flow down her cheeks as she leans forward to lay her head on my chest once again.

Magnolia

I can't believe I'm spilling my secrets to a total stranger.

That I'm so turned on by him that I can hardly sit still in his lap while he drives to his home. I should be horrified by what's happening right now.

“He killed her,” Cage interjects. I've never said the words out loud, so I'm relieved he understands what I couldn't verbalize.

“Almost me, too,” I whisper.

“He fucking shot you?” The anger in his tone is fearsome. Shifting to study his face more clearly, I gasp again as I rub against his steel-hard length. “I'll fucking kill him.”

“He's in jail now.” Nearly eight months have passed since the incident, but I still have nightmares. However, if not for our tragedy, the clinic wouldn't be as secure as it is now. They hired private security, and it's more closely guarded than anything else in town. People come from all over the state now. I just hate that Lucy's life was the sacrifice to get to this point.

“I don’t fucking care. He deserves death.” Our eyes meet briefly as I feel one of his hands grip my ass, holding me in place. “Don’t fucking move.” His onyx gaze steals the breath from my lungs as I watch it further darken into pools of lust and desire.

Biting my lip, I keep my eyes on him as he navigates the roads until he jams on the brakes. The vehicle has barely shut off as he carries me out of the Jeep and storms up to his front door. Everything is a blur until the wooden panel slams shut behind us, and the deadbolt echoes, mixing with our heavy breathing.

“Tell me no,” he hisses, spinning us so my back smashes against the wall and his lips capture mine. Holding me hostage in the fiercest kiss of my life.

I can’t breathe.

I can’t think.

I can’t comprehend what’s happening.

I know I don’t want it to stop, though.

“Tell me no, Magnolia.” I shiver at the way he growls my name.

“Okay,” I whisper between kisses.

“Fucking say it.” He bites my lip so hard it hurts, but I like it. I like the way it makes my stomach flutter and my body grow heated.

“Yes, Cage,” I respond instead.

He growls like a feral animal. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re getting yourself into.” His lips move across my jaw and down my neck, biting as he goes. I love that he leaves little red marks with each nip.

As he glides across my shoulder, I lean my head into the crook of his neck and fasten on the tendon there. Sucking the flesh over his steady pulse into my mouth until I'm confident I've left my own impression. I murmur in his ear, "I know I don't, but I want to anyway."

"I'm going to fuck you dirty, pet," he growls just before taking my lips in another fiery kiss.

He bites and sucks as he plunders my mouth. I can't wait to feel what he does between my legs. I hope he works those lips just as hard. I need him to. I can practically feel my pussy dripping wet with its need for a real man.

A soft breeze brushes past us as he carries me to his room, and that's when I realize my bottom is bare. He managed to work my skirt off without me realizing it.

Dropping me on the bed, Cage steps back, his eyes eating me up from top to bottom as he licks his lips. One hand pushes on his hardness behind his pants.

"Oh my." He looks huge. He felt big, but seeing him up close is another story.

"Take your shirt off, pet," he demands, and I do it without question. I should be wondering where my sanity has gone, but all I can think of is having him fill me up.

I sit nearly nude before him. "Can I see?" I motion towards his straining hand as I unhook my bra from the back.

He smirks as he torturously drags the zipper down, revealing himself to me with a surprise I wasn't expecting. "You're pierced," I whisper in awe.

My mouth salivates as his pants drop to the ground, revealing his length, veins bulging and angry. I have a desperate yearning to taste him. Touch him in a way I've never

touched a man before. Dropping to my knees, I do just that before he's able to react or stop me.

“Oh fuck, Magnolia!” he curses, surprised by my bold action.

His hands delve into my hair as I devour every delicious inch of him. He's salty yet sweet. A tangy bitterness covers his entire length as he forces more of himself down my throat. I have no control; he's commandeered it with the tension in my hair and more pressure from his cock.

Swallowing, I fight the urge to choke. I love what he's doing, and I feel my juices sliding down my thighs. I pulse with the need to have him inside me.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he groans as he throbs in my mouth just before hot liquid pours from his tip. When he tries pulling out, I suck him back in. My mouth is like a vacuum as he comes, and the liquid slides down my throat with every swallow, pooling in my belly.

Yanking my hair, he rips me off his dick and throws me on the bed.

Hooking my legs over his arms, Cage holds me wide open so he can see every part of me. The first loud crack against my ass pierces my ears before heat covers my backside.

“You're a bad fucking girl, little pet. I wanted my cum all over you. For that, I'm taking this.” A scream tears through me as he slams into my tightness, ripping through my virginity and sinking as deep inside me as he can.

The pleasure rolling through me is just as surprising. I love it. I always figured I'd hate it, and I know I should; I don't know Cage from Adam, but it just feels so right. So good. Despite the agony throbbing between my legs right now.

I don't get a chance to say anything as he glares down at me. "A fucking virgin," he grunts as his hips throttle. "I should have fucking known." Burying his head in my neck, Cage holds nothing back.

I instinctively attempt to pull away as he advances, but he holds me steady, not allowing an inch of space between us as he thrusts ruthlessly. One of his hands lands on my ass in a smack so hard that I squeal and dig my nails into his shoulders, making him hiss.

"It hurts," I whine.

The burn and stretch have me wanting to scream.

"You fucking begged me for it, pet. *You. Begged,*" he growls, even as his thrusting becomes less painful and more sensual. "Breathe. Lift your hips," he instructs, and I gasp. "There it is, pet, hold on to it." Ecstasy rushes through my veins.

It's raw.

It's brutal.

Oh my God.

"I'm coming!" I scream as pleasure rips through my body, and Cage pulls me up so I'm resting against his chest. I feel him lean back the slightest bit, and suddenly, I'm sitting on his cock. He's moving me back and forth as waves of desire tear through me.

"Fuck yeah." He squeezes the back of my neck, securing me in place, while white spots dot my vision as one of his hands snakes around the back of my body, and he slips a finger into my ass. Pushing until he's all the way in and it becomes too much to bear.

“No more.” My voice is husky as I beg him to stop. The pain and pleasure mingle so profoundly that my body vibrates.

He latches onto my neck while his finger slides in and out. I feel him as he uses me to his liking. “You come so fucking pretty, Magnolia.”

I preen under his praise.

“Your cunt is so fucking tight. You’ll suck up all my seed, won’t you?” His voice is seductive, dark. There’s an edge to it.

“Yes,” I moan when he squeezes my neck in his grip. Pressure builds as he hammers his way inside me like I’m his favorite toy.

“Good fucking girl.”

He’s so expertly playing me that he’s able to force another orgasm from my body, one I didn’t think I had. My scream comes unrestrained as he lets me fly, blood rushing to the surface. My body goes limp as heat washes over me.

With one hand on my ass and the other in my hair, he drops us back down onto the bed and nails me without rhyme or reason to catch his own release. I close my eyes and enjoy the sensations he extracts from my body as he expertly takes me to paradise.

“I’m going to fucking come,” he says through gritted teeth.

He grips my hips for one final thrust before completely letting go and filling my womb with long jets of cum. I’ve never felt so fulfilled before. Like I was created for someone else.

The only sounds in the room are our heavy breathing, and as Cage kisses down my neck and across my shoulder before

rolling to his side and dragging me in close to his body, I feel the exhaustion from the day catching up to me.

Before I pass out, his head presses into the back of mine as he mutters the words no girl wants to hear—“That was a mistake”—and I force myself not to release a tear.

CHAPTER 3

Cage

THREE MONTHS LATER.

The sound of cell doors clanking open has me grinding my back teeth as I roll my head on my shoulders to work the tension out. Red Rock Correctional Center in Arizona is filled with assholes. In spite of being a medium security facility, half these bastards should be in a supermax.

For two weeks now, I've been shuffled around the varying prison units, but today is a new day, and I'm finally in the right spot. In the right cell block to take out my target.

Three months ago, I met a shell of a woman on the verge of death. After a soul-changing romp in the sack, that same girl fucking ran from me when I was out cold. It took me six weeks to get over my mad and dig my head out of the sand, and after four jobs that left me bitter and angry, I finally started looking for her. It was another three weeks before I located her back in the States, and only because she ended up on a fucking book cover, of all things. One that landed on the New York Times Bestsellers list.

I was fucking livid at seeing the douchebag holding her in his arms, in nothing more than a skimpy bra and panties that barely covered her ass, his hand around her neck and nipping at her chin. I wanted to kill him then and there.

Pride and rage held me firmly in their grip.

Magnolia is the most beautiful female I've ever come across, so I wasn't surprised to find her in such a place for the world to admire her. Doesn't mean I have to fucking like it, though. It took me two weeks to figure out that she wasn't in a relationship with the man; he was just another model that inspired the book by the author Jossilyn Marlowe. She's new in the romance book business but gaining popularity. As is Magnolia. Although I've only found her on the one cover, I know it won't be long before she graces more.

Which brings me to today. I've found my girl; now I need to slay her demons. Every last one of them. And that includes the man that sent her running to South Africa in the first place.

Digging up dirt on the warden wasn't hard to do. The prick is as dirty as they come, and once I'm out of here, I'll be making an anonymous tip about his prison fight ring. I've come across too many dead bodies of young men who had yet to live after making some stupid mistake, to let it go.

Cracking my knuckles, I get in line with the rest of the men exiting their cages and follow along like a good little puppy to the cafeteria for the mediocre food they call breakfast. It reminds me of pig slop rather than something edible.

"Craven!" One of the guards shouts, and I tense, waiting for this corrupt piece of garbage to pull some shit that will have me ending his life, as well as the man who shot Magnolia and killed the girl she cared so deeply for.

After discovering Magnolia's location, it wasn't hard to remotely hack into her computers and read the emails the two exchanged frequently. Finding Magnolia's diary opened up an entirely new world to her suffering as well. From when she

was a child to everything that happened leading up to our meeting.

Standing to the side, I wait for the guard to approach me, knowing how this will go before he even takes a step. Guard Wilkes likes to haze the new guys. I've witnessed him do it to three other men already. The difference between them and me is that I won't tolerate his abuse of power. I could disappear out of this hole just as quickly as I arrived, and nobody would notice a fucking thing.

His long stride gets clipped short by one of the seasoned guys sticking out his foot and tripping him so he hits the wall. I give the prisoner an imperceptible nod of thanks before letting a smirk cross my lips as Wilkes straightens back up, some of his steam blown out of his ass.

Getting in my face, he spits out, "Keep your ass in line." I raise a brow, and when he goes to land a blow to my gut, I stop him by grabbing his wrist and squeezing until he's about to drop to his knees at my feet.

"My ass was in line just fine until you decided we needed to measure dicks." His face turns red with anger as the other guard, the warden's son, comes up behind me.

"Let him go, Craven." The harsh demand is filled with pleading. "You're here for one thing. Don't forget that."

As much as it aggravates me to acquiesce, I release Wilkes and get back in the breakfast line. "This isn't over." When I get out, this prick is mine, and he's going to pay for this power move.

"Get yourself cleaned up, Wilkes," the warden's son suggests as we begin walking again.

Today is the last day I'll be here, so I match Wilkes' challenging glare with one of my own as he hobbles along, holding that wrist to his chest.

Pussy.

It takes twenty minutes to get to the mess hall, but I spot my target almost immediately. Garnett Fraser is an unimposing man. Barely six feet, maybe a buck sixty, and as skittish as the day he entered. I'm actually surprised he's still alive. He's squirrely and has the look of a snitch about him with the way his eyes shift from one table of inmates to the next. Always watching.

Even if I weren't here to kill him, he wouldn't last much longer on the inside anyway. Men like him never do. Eventually, he would turn into a rat for protection from another. I've seen it happen dozens of times before.

Waiting in line for the meal I'm not going to eat, I keep one eye on him as he sits at a table of obvious loners, arms wrapped protectively around his food to keep anyone from grabbing the slop. Holding out my tray, the guy on kitchen duty plops unrecognizable food in one of the sections with a muttered word about what it might be, but I seriously doubt it's oatmeal.

Dished out, I make my way along the wall over to where Garnett sits, an open spot next to him. He jumps as I drop my tray on the table and turns his back. I sit for a minute before surveying the area, the men at the table, and watching where the guards stand. The warden's son is supposed to be keeping an eye on this area, but his back is turned so I can do what I came here for.

"Magnolia Taylor." I say the name that I've kept trapped inside for the first time since I met her, and I grow angrier

about the fact that she fucking ran from me.

Garnett turns to stone as the name penetrates his tiny brain. “What did you say?” he seethes as he turns to me. When his gaze connects with mine, he swallows roughly as he gets a good look at me.

“Magnolia Taylor,” I repeat.

“What about her?” He spits out the question like she was the one who wronged him.

“She’s my girl.” He pales. “You nearly killed her. Took her from me.” Fury bubbles over and bleeds into my voice. “I can’t let that go.”

His eyes run around the room as fast as I’m sure he’d like his legs to take him. “What do you want?”

I draw out the penknife from my pocket without anyone the wiser and wrap an arm around his shoulders, dragging him closer and muttering in his ear like we’re old pals, “I want your fucking heart in my hands.” The compact blade jabs up twice, piercing his lungs, and blood spills like a small stream. “I want you to suffer every ounce that she has.” Reaching across his body, I dig below his ribs with the blade, thrusting it into his heart a handful of times. I watch as the life drains from his body, and he lays his head down on the table.

“Your life will do just fine instead.” Grabbing the carton of milk from his tray, I open it and use the liquid to wash the blood off my hand before gathering my tray and walking to another table.

It takes a couple of minutes before anyone notices the pool of milky red liquid spreading under the table and streaming against the wall. Satisfaction rolls through me as I see Fraser staring straight ahead, no life left inside him.

Now my mission can begin in earnest.

Magnolia thought she would escape me. I'm about to show that there is no running from me. Not when I want something as desperately as I do her.

She sealed her fate from the moment she didn't run screaming from my erection after enticing it while in the middle of a crisis.

Innocent as a newborn lamb, I crave her spirited inhibitions and have a desperate need to keep them all for myself.

CHAPTER 4

Magnolia

ONE MONTH LATER – PRESENT DAY.

Reading Jossilyn Marlowe’s latest book before she submits it to her publisher is one of my absolute favorite things about being her best friend and roommate. I get all the goodies before her adoring readers and demanding publishing entourage.

I thought she was crazy when she asked me to be a model for her last book. It took her weeks to actually convince me to do it. After agreeing to the photo shoot, I was still skeptical until her cover designer shared the final product with us, and then I couldn’t do anything but say yes to Joss’s pleading silver-blue eyes.

When I came home from South Africa, I stayed in Chester for all of two days before packing everything I needed and leaving. Driving from Arizona to Texas was an impulse move. I don’t know why I felt Texas was the right place, but that’s where I landed. Stopping in Fort Stockton, then San Antonio, I finally felt at peace when I arrived in Corpus Christi.

I don’t know if it was the ocean air or the laid-back atmosphere, but as soon as I got out of the car, a feeling of home settled in my chest. After staying in a hotel for a couple of days, I took to applying to middle schools again. My goal was still the same—to help the kids who needed me most—but

I was more cautious this time. After a few interviews, I landed a job at Malcolm T. Brewer middle school.

Looking for an apartment was harder to do until I stopped in a cute little coffee shop and met Joss. She'd been reading a book I had just picked up, and I asked her how it was. Her blush glowed brilliantly, and she stuttered her way through explaining that she was the author. I had a hundred questions for her after that because I'd never met one in person before.

Turns out, there's an entire online community of romance authors that I've been missing out on. She fondly referred to it as Romancelandia and filled me in on all the gossip. Which can be quite juicy.

Without realizing it, we spent nearly six hours in the café that day, talking, reading, me asking her a bunch of questions, and when I finally found out that the book was one she wrote for herself and the man who got away, I had to learn all there was about this Braxton character.

Their love was tragic before it even began. I do believe his intentions were noble, but it's been a few years since they've spoken, and as I read this newest love story of hers, I'm very tempted to sneak into her phone to get his contact details and tell him she needs him.

Joss is going to her first book signing since she began publishing two years ago. Her freshman book was a memoir about her life growing up in a cult and her father being the cult leader. When I saw she hit #1 on the New York Times Bestseller list and didn't celebrate it, I took her out for the fanciest dinner I could afford, and we went dancing afterwards. She'd never danced before. Not even for fun.

As it turns out, there's a multitude of things she hasn't done in her short life. After deciding to move in together in a

downtown townhouse, I made it my mission to help her live a little.

Which is how the book signing came about. Motorcycles, Mobsters, and Mayhem. It's right around the corner in Houston, and my dear friend has been a mess about it. Given that I'm the model on her latest release, the male model, Tyler, and I have agreed to attend with her.

Her next release, the one I'm currently alpha reading for her, is a motorcycle club romance, and the hero is what every girl's dreams are made of. He's alpha, obsessive, possessive, and has this dark edge to him. He's not afraid to get his hands dirty when it comes to the girl that turns his world on its axis.

If I'm being brutally honest, this is the fourth time I've read the book because the hero reminds me insanely of Cage Craven.

My very own hero.

Only he didn't like me as much as I liked him.

To Cage, I was a mistake.

Sneaking away while he was asleep and catching the first flight back to Arizona was a cowardly thing to do. I know that. Joss has told me that, but even if I wanted to change things, I wouldn't know how to get a hold of him. But I need to figure it out because Cage not only took my most precious gift, he also gave me one.

"Drink this." Joss hands me a cup of raspberry tea, eyeing the way I've been rubbing my stomach. Morning sickness is not nearly as easy as I've read about. It interrupts my day numerous times.

"You're a mind reader." I smile gratefully up at her as I accept the tea. It's one of the few things that calms my nerves.

“Do you want to see what I got today?” Her eagerness brightens her eyes in a way I haven’t seen before. I nod immediately.

Dashing off to the hallway, she comes back with a big box. Popping the top open, she pulls out the lanyards and iron-on patches that have her latest series name and logo on them for the book signing.

“These are incredible!” Joss has been ordering swag for readers for months now, never sure what they’ll like or want the most of. “I think these are going to be a huge hit.” Nausea forgotten, I pull one of each out, ready to stash them away so I can have them too. She laughs and hands me an envelope that contains even more than what’s here. “Seriously, this stuff is like crack. I can’t stop collecting it.”

Her head shakes at me, and I see the anxiety in her eyes. I’m not privy to all of Jossilyn’s past, even after having read her memoir, but I know she’s still hiding from her family. She lives in fear every day of the retribution she’ll face if they ever find her.

To be honest, it wouldn’t be hard. Aside from all her bills being under the name of her publishing company to give her that sense of anonymity and our townhouse lease being in my name, I don’t think she’s covering her tracks all that hard. *But what do I know?* I ran away to South Africa to avoid life and hid in a school where it caught up with me anyway.

We’re two inherently broken people trying to fake it until we make it. Or until we can’t fake it anymore. “You don’t have to do this, you know,” I remind her. Even though we’re both crazy shy and hate the spotlight, I try my best to get her to come out of her shell. But then I spot her fear and doubts, the

ones that echo my own, and I offer her an out. It's a complicated life.

"I know," she whispers as she lays one of the black lanyards across her thigh, the scars of her previous existence stark against her fair skin. "I want to, though. It's time I start living and stop hiding from my own shadow." Nightmares still haunt her. The number of times we've woken each other from sleep due to what troubles us is a nightly occurrence.

"Welllll..." I draw the word out, and her head pops up, eyes narrowing on me. "Seeing as we're going, and it's in just a couple of short weeks, what do you say we go pick out our outfits to dazzle those beautiful readers with?" Since Tyler and I agreed to come, she's had dozens of messages from excited readers about meeting the characters from *Align*.

"Aren't you worried if you buy something now, it won't fit then?" Her hand motions at the oh-so-tiny baby bump growing in size on the daily.

"Spandex, my friend." I wink to ease her worry, but inside, I'm a mess. This was not how my life was supposed to go. I never thought I would have children or love, and after the shooting in Arizona, I was positive it would never happen. But here I am.

Pregnant and alone.

Turns out, I was only wrong about one of those things.

Corpus Christi, Texas. The underbelly of Satan's balls with its fucking heat. I can't believe this is where she chose to call home. I watched as Magnolia and the girl she rooms with left hand-in-hand, like lovers but with the closeness of sisterhood. I know they aren't a couple; my Magnolia was too much fire under me when I took her innocence. But the other one, I don't know enough about her yet, which is why I'm standing in their living room, ruffling through their belongings.

From what I've gathered so far, the other girl is Jossilyn Marlowe, famous author of a couple of books, best friends with my sweet pet, and in a couple of weeks, she's attending some book signing in Houston.

Magnolia is going with her.

And the fucking model who held her in his arms, too.

I'm at a crossroads right now.

I could stay here, announce my presence to Magnolia, let her see that she can run, but she can't fucking hide. Not from me. She's mine, and she has no idea what that entails yet. Or, I can slink back into the shadows, watch her from afar, crave her with the wildness I feel inside already, and pop up at this signing and give this romance community she's come to love a real show.

I wonder if she'd like that.

I read a few pages in the book on her nightstand, and the hero was decidedly too much like me. She's living out her fantasy of a man in charge through the pages of a fictional story.

Decisions, decisions.

I want nothing more than to drag her out of here and back to the solitude of my home, but she seems to have built

something for herself here.

I followed her tracks from Arizona because I wanted inside her mind. I needed to know what she was seeing while her trauma was still so fresh. Catch a glimpse of the woman behind the pain, masking it so strangers wouldn't see, afraid of what I'd find.

Until I arrived here.

Magnolia appears happy with her new friend. I've been watching them for a couple of days, and they share a bond. A traumatic one, but one they both have burned through fire to survive. I'm not in the market to strip that away from them. Which means I may have to give up the warmth and comfort of Africa for the god-awful humidity here in Texas. Beautiful land, terrible fucking weather.

Entering back into Magnolia's room, I relax on her bed. Needing to feel something of hers. Needing her to sense I was here, even if she won't. Because that's how I work. If I'm to stay away until this fucking event, allow her to have her happiness without me, then I can't leave a mark on her space.

The sound of rattling at the front door bolts me upright, gun in hand, as I silently make my way across the room and into the hall. I know it's not the girls. They have keys. Someone is trying to pick the lock. Unsuccessfully, I might add.

Glancing through the peephole, I find a young man, maybe twenty, fiddling with the locks while his eyes shift side to side, watching for someone.

Curious, I wait to the side of the door until finally, he gets it. It's luck, I'm sure, because this moron hasn't got any kind

of skill. He certainly has no instincts as he slips through the door and leaves it open a crack.

Hidden behind the curve in the wall beside the door, I'm back to making a choice again. Announce myself and clobber this asshole or wait and watch to see what he's come here for.

The girls live in a nice area of town, so I don't believe he's a junky looking for a fix. Could be a thief. Could be a stalker. The thought has my spine straightening and my finger itchy to pull the trigger. But if I do that, then Magnolia and Jossilyn will know for sure that their space has been invaded, and I really want to avoid that. They've found safety here, and I won't let anyone take that away from them.

I wait until the kid slinks down the hallway and enters a room before trailing after him. Spotting him in Magnolia's room, a pair of her underwear to his nose, I know exactly who this punk is.

Creeping up behind him is easy. He isn't even aware I'm here until my arm is around his neck and my gun is at his temple. His body freezes, and the pissant fucking whimpers.

"Whatcha doing here, mate?" The pleasant question is filled with menace.

"Just, uh, I, well..." I'm almost positive he's about to piss his pants.

"You've got my girl's knickers in your hand there. Shall I cut it off?" Not here. But he doesn't need to know that.

"What? No!" he shouts and attempts to struggle his way out of my hold.

"Perhaps you should explain why you're breaking into her home and making yourself comfortable in her room, then." I press the barrel of my gun a little harder into his temple. "If

you're about to piss, that's going to make me angrier. Try to hold it in."

His whimpering is getting on my nerves. "Magnolia, she lets me in; she lets me."

Blowing out a whistle, I'm surprised he had the gumption to lie to me. "Nah, she didn't, mate. My Magnolia is a private person. She has no interest in you."

"That's not true!" he bellows again.

"Done with this now." My arm tightens around his throat until he's unconscious. Hefting his piddly weight over my shoulder, I walk out of the townhouse like I belong. The street is quiet as I drop the young lad into the rear seat of my Jeep, zip-tying his hands behind his back and then his ankles.

His breathing has evened out, so I know he's not dead, despite every instinct inside me screaming to snap his neck. I'll need to get his name and background before making the decision to end his life. It shouldn't matter; he entered my sweet pet's space, invaded her privacy, touched her knickers. The anger festers and grows inside me, begging to be unleashed.

At a stop light, I spin and slam my fist into the side of his head. He deserves far more, far worse, but I settle for one hit for now. As the light turns green, I see Magnolia and her friend carrying bags on their walk back home. Settling in downtown was a brilliant idea on their part. Everything is at their fingertips. Unless it's night.

Fuck.

Which means I need to come back. To be here in case they venture out after dark. No matter where you are in the world or how safe your neighborhood is, nighttime is when the creeps

come out. Nighttime is when the bastards like me hit their targets so viciously that you never see them coming.

Fuck.

Quickly driving through traffic, trying to avoid the asshole in the backseat waking up, I park in the abandoned warehouse with one thing in mind. Eliminating the threat snoring behind me.

The stupid fool.

CHAPTER 5

Cage

P rivate: Have a job for you.

I glare at the device in my hand, hating it more and more as I stare at the blue screen and the message flashing at me. Being a mercenary has its perks. I take the jobs I want and pass on the ones I don't. But I've spent more time trailing after Magnolia in the past four months than not, and it's time I get back to what I'm good at. I know she's safe; I know she's happy here. I don't need to disturb her just yet. Not when I've decided to give her the alpha male she so secretly desires.

My plan to show up at her signing is in place; I even secured a ticket so no one can stop me from joining the event.

I've been feeling restless since eliminating the prick who broke into her townhouse. As it turned out, that wasn't the first time he'd done such a thing, and he'd even assaulted a couple of women who dared to come home while he was violating their space.

He was a predator through and through. Now, he's liquified in a barrel of lye, buried somewhere no one will ever find him. He'll never bother my pet again.

Magnolia and her friend haven't let on if they knew someone had been in their home, and since the incident, I made it very clear to their landlord that it would be best he

installed an alarm system and outdoor cameras to prevent his own misfortune. I tossed a few grand at him to get it done quickly and told him to lie through his yellow-stained teeth about why it was being done and to tell the girls it was an investment into his property, so he was footing the bill.

Me: Send the details.

I have ten days to finish this job before I return and claim Magnolia. I'll let her live in her safe bubble with her freedoms until then. Afterwards, there's no more holding back. She'll be mine, and short of death, nothing will stand in my way.

Instructions have come through, and I see I'm heading north to Prague. I wonder if Magnolia would like it there.

The job is a quick hit. In and out. The target—my ringtone whistles again—targets, it seems, are a rogue group of military men from Belarus who decided to take their radical frustrations out on a village of mostly women and children. There seem to be a few survivors, but from what I can tell, the ones left breathing wish they were dead.

The military unit is now celebrating its victory in Prague, making locating them easy. They've rented out a penthouse in Hotel Delarue, having alcohol and women sent up every night. They're dead, and they don't even know it yet.

A private jet awaits to take me there, and I wonder who the client is, as they've deposited half a million dollars for each of the six men into my account to secure my employment. I'll receive another half a million for each after they're dead.

If I had to take a guess at who the client is, I'd say CIA. I've been contracted by them before. There are times when they just don't want to get their hands dirty. That's where I

come in because I have no qualms about taking out assholes like this.

Approaching the airport, I get another text requesting that I call once I'm in the air. *Interesting*. I don't ordinarily receive those. I have a feeling it's because there hasn't been any news coverage about this particular tragedy, and they'd like to explain why.

Or, they're about to tell me how to kill the men and make it look like an accident. If that's the case, there's only one way, an explosion, and I get the feeling whoever this is isn't going to want me to blow up a hotel filled with innocent people.

"Sir." The flight attendant greets me as I climb the stairs into the aircraft. "We'll be ready for take-off in ten minutes. Can I get you anything?" Most women cower at the sight of me. Something about the scars on my neck, the tattoos on my face, and the dead look in my eyes. This one, however, has her gaze roaming up and down my body like she'd like to take a chunk out of me.

"Not a fucking thing." I ensure she understands there's *nothing* she can do for me. The only one I want is Magnolia fucking Taylor, and it still pisses me off.

I've been called many things in my life: deranged, psychopath, unconscionable, soulless. But never have I been accused of being obsessive like I am about the woman who stole my breath the day she was ready to throw her body in front of a classroom of children in an effort to save their lives.

Maybe it's her courage.

Could be her grass-green eyes that suck the life out of me anytime I stare into them.

Perhaps it's the hold her body wields on my dick. The way she writhed underneath me, begging me to take her like the animal I am.

If I'm being honest, it was the expression in her eye that day. She was prepared to die. She had welcomed death before it ever appeared on her doorstep, and I can't get that image out of my mind. No matter how hard I try.

I'm no fucking hero, not a knight in shining armor. I'm a killer, plain and simple. For money. That's my only motive in life. *Was* my only motive. The minute Magnolia ran away from me, she became my singular obsession. There is no longer anything I desire more than my pet.

On her back or her knees, I'll take her any way she'll let me, and her time is ticking away. I'm coming for her, and there's nothing that will stop me. Not her, her friend, or the slew of media that will descend once they've discovered I've kidnapped an American girl, should she not come willingly.

I saved her life. Took her innocence. Now she's mine.

All fucking mine.

Magnolia

Alone. I'm all alone for the weekend for the first time since Joss and I moved in together. Joss went to visit her sister in Colorado, and after assuring her I would be fine by myself—a lie I've mastered telling—I'm pretty certain it's not true.

Ever since our landlord installed a fancy new alarm system, I've been on edge, waiting for something disastrous to

happen. I don't know why. The security just makes it seem like we're in danger, and I've certainly had enough of that to last me a lifetime. But I can't help the way I feel. I wish I had more friends. Maybe my family. I wish I knew how to contact Cage.

Ever since our shopping trip a few days ago, he's all I've been able to focus on. For so long, I forced my memories of him from my head. I couldn't handle the way they made me feel. Then two months ago, I discovered I was pregnant and was bombarded with images of our brief time together. I cried a lot, not because I regretted what came of that one encounter, but because I had secretly hoped he'd come for me.

It's taken some time to come to terms with raising a baby by myself, and honestly, I have no idea how I'm going to do it, but I will. If only the man would stay out of my head. God, I miss him. We didn't even spend much time with each other, and what little we did was spent between the sheets with him making my body sing.

My dreams of him are so vivid that they often feel real, and I wake up in a sweat, wishing he were here. I smell him everywhere; at least, I think I do. Especially at night when I'm trying to quiet my mind and go to sleep.

"Cage." I whisper his name into the dark room as I stare out the window, watching the shadows of the city move. "I wish you were here." A tear slips from my eye, my emotions too big to handle alone, and I cry harder than I ever have before.

Startling awake by an annoying ringing, I dig the heels of my palms into my eyes to try and clear the sleep from them. The sun has barely risen, and I'm uncertain if I slept or not. I

know I cried a ton. The swelling and puffiness of my eyes tell me I did.

Reaching over to my nightstand, I grab my phone without looking at it and answer with a groggy, “Hello?”

“Darling!” *It’s my mom.* Not someone I particularly wish to speak with when I’m feeling so vulnerable. “It’s been weeks since you’ve called.” The pout in her tone rattles my nerves. “Come open the door, please.”

“What?” I screech, bolting upright in bed. “You’re here?” I need confirmation.

She sighs, and I almost feel her eyes rolling at me. “Yes, that’s why I’m calling and standing outside your door. Come and open it.” She hangs up, expecting me to honor her request. My mother is like a steamroller; if you’re in her way, you’re going down.

Staring down at my little bump, dread fills me because I haven’t told my parents yet. I’m not ready for the scolding and lectures the woman at my door will give me. Add in the fact that I didn’t clean up from dinner last night, and I know I’m in for it once she enters.

Tossing the sheet off, I slip into a pair of shorts and the baggiest shirt I can find that isn’t a sweater because then she’ll know something’s up. Grudgingly, I trudge to the door and open it, forgetting that my hair is likely a mess after going to bed without putting it in the silk wrap I ordinarily use.

“Hi, Mom.” I don’t even attempt to force a smile. I don’t have the energy.

Her lips flatten into a thin line as her eyes soak me in. From the tips of my manicured toes to the unruly mess of red

on my head. “Magnolia.” I don’t know why she comes to visit when it sounds like I’ve put her out.

Opening the door wider, I let her enter but nearly choke when I see she has four suitcases with her. “Uh, Mom, what is all this?”

“Give me a hand, would you.” It’s not a question and not an answer, either. Her fingers snap in my face when I don’t move. “Quickly, Mags. They won’t move on their own.” I notice she doesn’t bring in more than the small carry-on roller she has.

Hefting the bags up the steps one at a time, I feel the strain in my stomach muscles and have a feeling I’ll regret this later. “Why so much luggage?” I try asking again as I shut the door. A small group of teenagers across the street staring at my door momentarily distracts me, and I miss what she says.

“Are you even listening to me, Magnolia?” She does that thing I hate where she pokes my forehead to get me to pay attention.

“Stop it,” I snap. It’s too early for this. Joss isn’t here to quell my temper, and I’m starving.

“Excuse me, young lady. Perhaps if you spent more time cleaning up and less time partying, you wouldn’t be such a grump.” *Killing my mother is wrong. Killing my mother is wrong. I don’t look good in orange. My baby needs a mother.* I keep repeating the words in hopes that they convince me not to commit a crime. I don’t think it’s working.

“I’m not out partying, Mom. I work during the days, and I have the weekend to clean up if I need to. Last night, I was tired and didn’t feel like cleaning. Maybe you should call if

you're coming for a visit." I grind my teeth and clench my jaw tight so I don't vocalize the words flying through my head.

She rolls her eyes at me. "No need to throw a hissy fit, Mags. Is your bedroom clean, at least, so I can put my things away?" When Joss and I rented this townhouse, we only got the two bedrooms for a reason. So nobody—meaning my mother—would assume they could stay here.

It seems that plan has failed. "Why would you need to put your things away?"

Turning the kettle on in the kitchen for one of those raspberry teas Joss is so good at making, I nearly faint when my mother answers me. "Your father left, so I'm moving here. With you."

I feel sick.

I don't respond. I can't. Because whatever I say is going to be along the lines of, I don't freaking think so and go back home. Neither of which she'll listen to, and then she'll throw guilt at me for giving me life and paying for college and allowing me the time and space after the shooting last year. I'm already getting worked up, and I feel my chest tightening as I grab my phone and run out the door to sit on the step. Wishing more than anything that Joss was here.

It's too early to call her; she's a night owl, so I send a text instead.

Me: SOS. Mom showed up. Extraction needed.

I flood her with laughing emojis as well, so she knows I'm alright, but I don't believe I am. The moisture on my cheeks indicates that I'm not. I wipe the tears away using my shirt sleeve, but they just keep spilling over.

My mother is not someone that should have had children. I know that's terrible to say because she did give me life, but she was never there for me. Always more concerned about how she looked, how *I* made her look. When I was shot, she made it all about her. When my father forced me to tell them why I was home from South Africa six months early, and I filled them in on what happened, it circled back to her again.

She has never once asked me how I'm doing, how the nightmares are. If I'm getting counseling. Nothing. There is no concern for me whatsoever over what I survived, only that she nearly lost her only child twice in a year. To most people, her reaction appears caring, but she wasn't there in the hospital after any of the three surgeries I had. Not during recovery. Barely when I was home again.

I love her, but I don't like her very much.

The phone rings in my hand as I'm wiping my eyes, and I answer without looking at it because I assume it's Joss. "Hello?"

"Pet." That one word. Three letters. "Breathe, pet." This can't be real.

"Cage?" I exhale the word as I try to catch my breath.

"Yeah, pet, it's me." His accent is so faint, but it bleeds through as tears cascade down my face.

Sobs jostle my body. I knew I missed him but hadn't realized how much. "How...?"

"Look up." I do. "Wave to the nice boys." I do that too. They wave in kind. "They've been watching ya for me." I've seen them around more and more lately, but I would never have guessed. "Care ta tell me why yer crying?" His accent

grows thicker now, different than I remember, with his worry bleeding through.

My head shakes back and forth. “No. If you want to know, then you have to be here.”

“Yer the one who left me, pet.” The reminder cramps my heart.

“I know.” I squeak the words out, hating the reminder.

“I don’t begrudge ya, pet, but it’d be nice ta know why ya fucked and fled like that.” I cringe at the description, but he’s not wrong.

“Because you said...you said...” The words won’t form because if they were true then, then what if he says the same about our baby?

“I said what, pet?” Horns blare, and a foreign language can be heard spoken in the background, and I wonder where he is.

“You’ll have to come to me to find out that answer.” I have no idea if he will or not.

“That so?” His voice drops an octave; it’s the same tone he took when he told me he was going to fuck me dirty. I still blush, reliving his filthy words that day.

“Yes,” I breathe.

Cage

I hadn’t planned on calling her.

But when the street boys began sending me photos of her crying on her front step, I couldn't hold back. I needed to know she was alright. The second she answered the phone, her fate was sealed. Hearing her breathy voice again has turned my body rigid—to stone. I want only one thing, and that's her.

“Cage?” She keeps telling me that if I want answers, I must come to her. Quite the bargaining tool she's acquired.

“Yeah, pet, I'm here.”

Prague is taking longer than expected, and I'm growing annoyed with having to maintain a Scottish accent. Unfortunately, there's no way around it. Asher McCall calls the shots, and His Royal Highness is a pain in my arse. He wants me to delve deeper and find out if any more troops are committing the same atrocities as the ones I've taken out already. Thankfully, he didn't need me to make it look like an accident.

He required a bold statement.

Dead bodies hung in the massive fountain outside the hotel proved useful. I've since found two more sleeper cells. They took their last breaths yesterday evening. Now I'm here for one final clean-and-sweep before heading back home to my pet.

“Where are you?” she asks when a large group of noisy tourists walk behind me.

“Prague,” I reply. She lets free a whisper of a sigh. “You want ta be here?”

“You're there,” she says quietly, and I don't think I was meant to hear it. “Is it nice?” She recovers.

Glancing around the courtyard I'm sitting in with its swan fountains, planters of flowers, and cobblestone walks, I try to

see it the way she would. “I think ya’d like it.”

“Is that a Scottish brogue you have?” There’s confusion in her voice.

“Magnolia!” A woman screeches her name before I can answer her.

“Who’s that?” I don’t like the way she says my pet’s name.

“God, have some decency, sitting out here like a bum. You’re a mess. Come inside and freshen yourself up. You look like a scraggly rat.” Anger burns in my veins when I hear a little snuffle.

“Pet, who was that?” A door slams shut, leaving the sound of silence. “Magnolia.” I growl her name this time.

“My mother,” she finally admits.

“Yer mam speaks ta you like that?” My parents weren’t the greatest, but they never made me feel like shit.

“It’s just who she is.” That doesn’t sound any better. The tears in her voice make me want to give the woman a piece of my mind. “When you’re done in Prague, will you come see me?” The vulnerability she shows has me willing to worship at her feet.

“Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.” She doesn’t need to know she was my first stop after finishing here. “Must admit, though, I hadn’t expected ta see ya on a book cover.”

“You saw that?” she gasps.

“Read it, too.”

“Th-that’s Jossilyn’s love story, not mine,” she rushes to say.

I chuckle because some of the things in there would have made her blush, but I plan to do much, much more once I've got my hands on her again. "Trust, girl, I know. But don't ya worry none; I'll have my wicked way with you in every position possible as soon as I can."

"Yo-you w-will?" Seems she's forgotten just how explosive we were together.

"Yeah, Magnolia, I will. I'll see ya soon." I wait for her breathy goodbye before hanging up, replacing the SIM card, and texting McCall.

Me: Nothing left to do here.

He doesn't wait long to get back to me.

Mac: You're certain? Did you visit the old tunnels?

Me: Ya never mentioned them...

I'm going to beat this bastard if I ever get my hands on him.

Mac: Take a quick tour, then head home.

Removing the SIM card again, I snap it in half before pocketing the now-dead device. The only thing I want is to fly back to Texas, hold Magnolia in my arms, give that mother of hers a piece of my mind, and shatter the silence of her nightly dreams with pleasure and claim her as my own.

As I pull out a map, I realize that the tunnels McCall is so concerned about are going to take me two days to make my way through. If there's not a single asshole to annihilate in that time, I'm going to kill the king of that magical land he's grown so fond of.

CHAPTER 6

Magnolia

We arrived at the resort where the signing will take place, checked in, avoided bringing my mother, and now, we're lounging in the grass by the lake. My baby bump is officially impossible to miss. "I think my boobs are bigger, too," I mutter, glaring down at the little triangles working overtime to keep me covered.

"You're four months pregnant, Magnolia; of course, they are." Joss levels me with a look that signals I'm being weird. "Tyler should be here any minute," she comments after checking her phone.

He's a nice guy. Cute, funny, attractive to most, but he does nothing for me. Not like Cage. Nobody has ever affected me the way he does. I haven't heard from the man since we spoke the morning my mother arrived, and I have no idea when he's coming by. Which is why the doubts have made me more of an emotional mess this week. I've spent the past four mornings crying in the shower. Some of that is the ridicule from my mom, but mostly, it's the uncertainty of seeing Cage.

"Great," I mutter when Joss looks up at me.

"Don't worry, I'll be the buffer," she laughs. At first, Joss thought it was cute that Tyler would hit on me during the photo shoot for her cover, but then his persistence extended

beyond the day we spent together. I never gave him or anyone from that day my number, but somehow, he'd gotten it.

"I'm sure this"—I rub my stomach fondly—"will keep him at bay this time." *I hope.* The calls and texts had been daily at first, but about a month ago, they turned into weekly. I wish they would stop altogether. I don't know that there are many more ways for me to turn him down nicely.

"Hopefully," she murmurs as her phone chimes again.

"Everything okay, Joss?" Her frown doesn't bode well.

"Yeah..." She pauses before scowling down at the device. "Yes, everything's fine." Her bright smile comes off as forced, and I wonder what just happened.

"Are you hungry?" I ask her suddenly. "I'm starving."

"When aren't you?" Her laughter tinkles this time, and I know whatever that was, has been pushed to the back of her mind. "Fries?" She points to the small food shack.

"Would it ruin my image if I said a burger, too?"

She throws her head back and lets out an infectious laugh that grabs the attention of a few men at the bar. "Chocolate or strawberry shake?"

"Both?" They both sound delicious.

"You got it." As she stands, I notice some of the men watching her. Joss is beautiful. Short, curvy, killer smile and kind eyes. She's the kind of girl you want forever with—the epitome of a girl next door. But my best friend believes she's damaged goods, so she won't put herself out there.

It doesn't help that she's head over heels in love with a man that relocated her far away from her cult family a few years ago. I understand she bears the scars from her old life,

both emotionally and physically, but I wish she'd get that happily ever after she's been chasing in her books.

A shadow blocks the sun as I watch Joss, and it's not until I glance out of my peripheral vision that I notice a man in board shorts and an unzipped life jacket and realize he's here to speak with me.

"Uhm, hello?" I'm blinded by the sun as he takes a step aside and sits down on the end of my lounge chair. Drawing my legs up, my knees raise, hiding my bump.

"You're looking mighty lonely out here," he says, a brow arched as he places a hand down, just short of touching the bottom of my ass.

"Nope. My friend went to get us some food." I point to Jossilyn as she's ordering.

"Pretty girl like you shouldn't be out here all alone. Unprotected." The hairs on my nape lift at his choice of words. There's something about his accent as well. It's familiar, but I have a hard time placing it.

"I'm not." I repeat my words slower this time, "My friend is right there." His gaze flicks to Joss, and the smirk on his face tells me all I need to know.

"How's she going to protect a pretty thing like you?" Scooting back a little farther, I'm surprised when his hand encases my ankle.

"I don't need her to." I kick his hand off my leg and stand up. "I can protect myself." His eyes are immediately drawn to my belly. The quirk of his lips puts me on edge. Wrapping an arm across myself, I grab our bag and head over to Joss. This asshole ruined the entire afternoon.

“I think maybe we should eat in our room.” My eyes shift to find the creep still sitting there, staring at me.

“He hassling you?” She looks ready to spit fire.

“Sort of,” I mutter, my bravado fading, and I feel vulnerable again.

“Why don’t you ladies have a seat here to eat? We’ll flick off any unwanted assholes.” The girl behind the counter glares at the man I ran from.

“Sure.” I slide onto the empty stool next to Joss as we wait for our order.

“What was he saying to you?” I glance at her when he finally stands up and starts walking back to the boats.

“Just that I shouldn’t be out here all alone and that I needed someone to protect me.” I can’t get it out of my head. His tone was friendly enough, but the gleam in his eyes was something altogether different. It wasn’t interest and, undoubtedly, not protective.

It was almost like he knew who I was before he even approached me, and now, I’m unable to shake the feeling that I haven’t seen the last of him.

The Friday night meet and greet began an hour ago, and while I was never committed to attending, I feel bad that I didn’t go down with Joss. She encouraged me to stay in after I’d had a bad bout of nausea a couple of hours ago, and now, I’m lying in bed, watching *That 90’s Show*, enjoying the sitcom as much as I did the original.

Cuddled up in a baggy shirt, short sleep shorts, and fuzzy socks, I keep the ginger ale close by as a breeze floats in through the curtain of the open patio doors on our sixth-floor room.

My phone buzzes on the side table. I pick it up to find another text from Tyler. He arrived a few hours ago and has been messaging me ever since. Now, he's asking to come up to my room. I send a quick reply of denial, having had enough of being hit on by men today.

Until a week ago, Joss and I had agreed to keep my pregnancy quiet, not wanting to spread the rumor that Tyler and I did, in fact, hook up because that would spread like wildfire throughout the book community. But now, after eating and trying on my dress for tomorrow, there's no way I will be able to hide it. And without Cage here to squash the spread of any rumors of Tyler and me hooking up, I'm at a standstill because I know Ty. He'll eat up the attention and do nothing to dissuade the notion.

As my cell goes off again, I recognize that it's a phone call, and instead, pick it up with my eyes still closed. "I already told you no, Tyler." There's a pause, and I worry it's my mother. Looking at the screen now, it says private, and my stomach drops.

"Who the fuck is Tyler?" Cage's feral voice soothes every ounce of anxiousness I've been feeling all day.

"Cage," I breathe his name like a prayer.

"Pet, who is Tyler?" I know he's not about to let it go.

Explaining quickly, I realize he'll be no less angry. "He's the model on Joss' book with me."

“What the fuck is he not taking no for an answer about?” If rage had a sound, it would be Cage’s voice.

“I only had to say no, once,” I assure him.

“About. What.” He grits the words out, and I imagine his jaw locked up tight.

Pinching my nose, I anticipate that this won’t go over well. “Coming up to my room.” I brace for an outburst.

“Why’d you say no?” he asks instead, still that menacing growl in his voice.

“Because...” How do I say because I’m committed to a man that I spent one morning with after he saved my life and not sound like a stage five clinger? The answer is you can’t.

“Pet.” There’s a warning there that shoots tingles all through me.

“Cage,” I counter, wishing he were here.

“Don’t fuck around with me, Magnolia. I’m not in the goddamned mood.” Biting my lip, I realize I shouldn’t be so turned on by the way he speaks to me, but I can’t help it. Maybe it’s the hormones?

“I said no because, despite my best efforts, I can’t get you out of my head. I told you you’d have to come see me to find things out, but here we are a week later, and there’s been no sign of you. Yet, I wait for you anyway.” I hope he understood that jumbled mess of an explanation.

“Right for the fucking jugular, huh?” His laughter is riddled with darkness. “I’m coming now, pet. Coming to get my taste of paradise.”

“You are?” My voice is barely a whisper, but even I can hear the hope in it.

“Sure am.” He doesn’t seem to be bothered by how needy I am.

“I’m not at home, though.” I never mentioned the signing this weekend when we spoke last because I hadn’t thought he meant what he said despite wanting to.

“I know exactly where you are, pet. I’ve always known.” I don’t know why my eyes shoot to the open balcony door, but I half expect him to come flying in like some super spy from a movie.

“When will you be here?” I groan as my stomach flips, excitement getting the best of me.

“You okay?” he asks. I nod, but he can’t see me. “Magnolia?”

Closing my eyes, I slither down in bed and breathe deeply. “Yes. Just tired. When are you coming?” I’m both excited and nervous.

“I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“Mmmkay.” Drowsiness begins kicking in and taking me away.

“Sleep tight, pet. I’ll see you soon.” His voice is the last thing I hear before sleep pulls me under.

Cage

I had just landed in New York when I decided to give Magnolia a call. I wasn’t going to. My plan was to wait until her event tomorrow. I wanted my arrival to be a total surprise,

but something was niggling at me to call her. To check in on her, and now that I have, I'm damn glad.

There was a depressive note in her voice when I rang, and I'm not sure if that's due to her mother—after some digging, I suspect she's been an issue Magnolia's entire life—or something more. I can tell there's more.

This situation with the asshole bothering her will change from the moment I touch her. He'll know exactly who she belongs to, and if he tries to bother her any further, he'll find himself in a shallow grave.

I researched Magnolia's duties for this event and found out that she is expected to be there for the entire six-hour signing and possibly the after-party. Readers apparently get a real kick out of meeting the inspiration behind an author's characters. Models bring them to life.

I can understand that. Can respect it, even. Though I imagine that for someone like Magnolia, this will be a draining event. She's a vibrant woman, but her sociabilities are more geared towards the children she wishes to help.

I have much to learn about Magnolia, but from what I've discovered so far, she's got the politeness of a southern belle, and I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she overdid herself. Which means it's my job to take cues from her and ensure she—and by proxy, her friend—takes whatever breaks either of them may desire when it's needed.

I'll be the wall between Magnolia and the rest of the world for as long as she allows me. And if she ever tells me to stop, I'll continue doing it from the shadows because a man like me, once he's dedicated himself to a woman, that's it. He's finished. There will never be another like her, and I don't want there to be. Until I glimpsed Magnolia through that classroom

window, held her in my arms as she shook with fear, the only thing I cared about was the next kill. How high I could make my body count. It was a thrill for me.

Which is why I found it so confounding when I wasn't upset about there not being any more men to kill in those tunnels in Prague. I spent two days navigating through the underground before coming out the other side, and it didn't bother me that there was no cleanup. It meant I got to leave sooner. See my pet sooner. And that appears to be what I exist for now.

McCall had laughed at me when I sounded so confused over the idea. I spent the last couple of days traveling, wondering what the hell was wrong with me, only to discover the answer was nothing at all.

My heart simply belongs to another.

It will be a process to get used to, but for Magnolia, it's one I'll gladly walk through fire for. After my stint in prison, paying her gunman back for what he did to her, I still haven't heard anything about his death on the news or in the papers, so I'm assuming she has no idea what I did to the man either. I wonder if anyone outside the prison does.

Not that it matters; they'll never identify it as me. They'll never know I took the asshole's life simply because I could. And at a time when I was merely curious and angry about Magnolia too. That curiosity has blossomed into infatuation and obsession since then. The more I learn about her, the more I come to realize that she is the only thing in this world worth breathing for.

Her happiness is the be-all and end-all of my existence. I'm certain the men from my youth would laugh at me now.

Find it preposterous that I'm devoting my life to another after fighting so hard to escape the rule of a true tyrant.

One day, they'll understand this level of loyalty. At a time when they least expect it, too, I hope.

CHAPTER 7

Magnolia

An hour into the signing and the doors have opened to the public, the rambunctious group of VIPers having gotten their one-on-one time with their most-loved authors. Though, I don't believe any of them have left. So many stopped at Joss' table, wanting books, signatures, and pictures of her, Tyler, and me. My cheeks hurt from smiling so much, and my ribs ache from the constant laughter. For a bunch of women who are voracious about the written word but say they're far more introverted in real life, they sure know how to make a girl feel welcome.

"How's your hand?" I ask Joss, reaching over during one of her very few breaks from signing and begin massaging her fingers.

"Sooooo much better now," she moans and closes her eyes. We've both been nervous about today. Not for nothing, but it's been wonderful so far. And Tyler has been on his best behavior, for the most part. Which is a relief. We only had one incident before the readers arrived, and that was him trying to touch my bump, hinting about how the readers would go crazy if we claimed he was the father.

I had to restrain the urge to throw up on him. It's not that he's not attractive, he's just not for me. The readers love his

flirtations, and he seems genuinely happy to interact with them. Especially the ones he's connected with at other events.

"How are *you* doing?" Joss asks, leaning over to whisper in my ear as another group of women approaches.

I pat her hand and offer a smile to the women. "Hi, ladies!" Tyler welcomes. They giggle as he charms them with a smile from behind me. Gently, he places his hands on my shoulders, knowing I won't cause any kind of scene in front of an audience.

I smile through their questions and laugh when they talk about a part in *Align* that they loved, and when it comes time to take pictures, one of the girls looks between Tyler and me, stars in her eyes, and comments, "Tell me you two are together, and a love story was born because of the cover?"

Tyler wraps an arm around my shoulder, kissing my temple as he pulls me close, and mutters, "Something like that." At the same time, I hear Joss hiss out, "Oh shit."

Looking towards her, I follow her line of sight. A gasp gets stuck in my throat as I see what she does. See *who* she does. "Cage." I'm frozen to the spot as he glares at me, his eyes roving up and down my body. My bump is hidden because of the women standing in front of me, but he doesn't miss the way Tyler holds me or the fact that he doesn't let go when he notices Cage and how he devours me.

"Get your phones out, ladies. Here's the real love story," Joss snickers as Cage remains where he's at, his long legs covered in dark jeans and biker boots don his feet. His tight black t-shirt does nothing to mask his muscular frame, and the tattoos on his arms, neck, and face are on full display, making my thighs clench tight.

I take a step, and Tyler's grip detains me from going forward. Cage's gaze moves to the man, and if death had a look, he'd have just lasered it at Tyler as I shove him off.

Despite the three-inch heels on my feet and the tightness of the dress around my thighs, I make a fast beeline for Cage, his long strides eating up the distance between us faster than my short ones.

I catch the second he realizes it. Immediately, his demeanor changes—from uncertainty to anger to something indescribable. He's unsure if the baby is his, but he wants to kill whoever else's it could be.

My body has a mind of its own as I jump onto his solidly rooted frame. My arms wrap around his neck, holding the hair on the back of his head and angling for a deep kiss. He doesn't disappoint. Both of his hands grip my ass tightly, holding me as close as possible, while cheers erupt in the room, starting with Joss and the women at her table and moving through the expansive space.

As I draw back to breathe, his eyes instantly drop to the bump now pressed against his rock-hard stomach. "Got something to tell me, pet?"

We're almost at Joss' table again when I hear the woman across from her, Annelise Reynolds, laugh and say, "Wish a man would look at me like that." She's been handing out drunk gummy bears since we arrived. Her Texas twang makes me smile.

"Wanna bet that baby is his?" Cora Kenborn mutters to Murphy Wallace as they stand off to the side, playing Cora's dick ringette game with some readers to win prizes.

"So many things." I nip his lip.

“Care to start with the wee one?” His brow raises, and the heat in his stare restricts my breath.

“What would you like to know?” I don’t understand why I’m playing with fire. He’s the only man I want.

“Could ya start with the lineage, pet?” He sits down in the chair beside Joss that I’d been in earlier. Eyes remain on us, even after most have gone back to doing their thing.

“Oh, it’s yours.” Cora saunters over, leaning her hip against the table as Joss watches on intently. “She has been batting men off since she arrived, but then, here you come with that sexy killer swagger, and she’s on you like you’re her last meal.”

“That so?” A cocky grin appears as a blush flashes up my chest.

“Is that her name on your head?” someone asks, and I glance up at the tattoo on his forehead. It’s off to the side, along the hairline, and while it’s beautiful scripture, I can’t make out what it says.

“How’d ya guess?” he asks the woman.

“Once upon a time, I was a linguistics expert for the FBI.” That garners all kinds of oohhs and aahhs from the crowd around us.

“Cora, you’ve got a line,” Murphy calls, winking when I look back at her.

“Catch ya later, girly.” Cora blows me a kiss before heading back to her table.

“Well?” Cage lifts a brow.

“I thought he said it was his?” another reader points out, putting Tyler on the spot and causing Cage to turn to granite

beneath me. His deadly glare levels at Tyler once again.

I feel him getting ready to stand up, so I wrap myself around him tighter, press my lips to his ears, and confess, “It’s yours. I’ve been with one man, one time, Cage, and it was you. It’s always been you, Cage Craven.” A shuttering breath wracks his body as he relaxes.

“When’s the last time she ate, Joss?” His gaze doesn’t leave Tyler as he asks.

“About an hour ago. But I swear she’s eating for an army because she’ll likely be digging through her bag any minute now.” She chuckles behind a book as she’s signing it when I shoot her a dirty look.

“That true, pet?”

“No.” The denial is automatic. I’ve spent all week hiding my snacking from my mother, and even though I realize I’m eating for two, her berating words have infiltrated my mind. *Once again.*

“Is so,” Joss counters, and I swat her shoulder as she gets up to take a picture.

Reluctantly, I climb out of Cage’s snuggly lap and offer to snap the photo of reader and author. The happiness surrounding my best friend makes my aching feet worth every second as I wince when my toes pinch together.

Turning back around, I find Cage has a hand on Tyler’s shoulder, up close and whispering in his ear. Tyler just nods along, staring straight ahead. I can only imagine what the formidable man is telling him.

“You’re going to marry him, right?” a different reader asks as she approaches the table.

Cage turns then, his eyes territorial as they take me in. The vibrant green dress matches my irises and perfectly showcases my baby bump. My hair is twisted up in curls on top of my head, and my makeup is minimal because of how young my freckles make me look, and the heroine in *Align* is only nineteen.

“Lord, he’s just eating you right up,” Annelise whispers behind me, using her hand to fan my over-heated face.

Splaying one palm across my belly, his gaze follows, and before I can catch a breath, he’s twisting a hand around my neck, dragging my body into his, and capturing my lips in a kiss that has my heart ready to explode.

My body tingles everywhere, ready to do his bidding. From the moment our lips touch, he wrests control, devouring me completely, swallowing every breath I dare to take. Consuming my thoughts and having me wish that we were alone.

Cage

Tyler stopped getting so handsy with both Magnolia and Joss after I threatened to remove them from his body. Now, as things are about to wrap up, he’s relaxed some but keeps his distance.

I spent all afternoon watching Magnolia interact with readers from all over the place. I was surprised to learn some flew in from other countries just to attend. Tables were busy all day, with no one having more than a few minutes in

between readers. I imagine this is what is considered a successful event.

Joss sold out of books and began taking orders to sign and ship as soon as she got home, and even had to place a new order. I notice the same thing happening with quite a few other authors as well. Magnolia, however, is worn out. She kept swaying while chatting with anyone who stopped by, so I forced her to sit down.

Leaning over to Joss—whom I like immensely, not only because she’s kind, but because she’s spent the last few months taking care of my girl and helping her navigate her pregnancy—I ask, “How long until this after-party thing?”

Checking her watch, she replies, “About three hours. Take our girl up to her room; there’s nothing else for her to do down here. She needs to hydrate and rest.”

I couldn’t agree more. “Text me when you’re finished, and I’ll come help haul this up to your room.” She smiles gratefully.

“Thank you, Cage. I will.”

“Come here, pet.” I scoop her up in my arms and carry her out, watching as women regard us as we pass, some looking a little envious but planting smiles on their faces. At the bank of elevators, I realize Magnolia has already passed out. Her head rests on my shoulder, and her body is thoroughly relaxed in my hold.

Stepping on, a few faces I recognize board with us, each of them openly gawking. I imagine Magnolia is used to this. I’m not. Fighting not to scowl is difficult.

“I can tell you want to snap at us, but let me tell you how rare of a sight this is.” I raise an eyebrow in question.

“Reading about a man as possessive as you appear to be and meeting one who actually is, are very different things. Real men can’t seem to find the balance between being loving and controlling.” *Ah*, that I understand.

“She’s worth more than anything to me,” I respond.

“Good. I may have only met her for the first time today, but as soon as the cover for *Align* was revealed, Magnolia became a valuable and uplifting presence in our book community. She’s always had a kind word for everyone she interacts with.” Staring down at my precious pet, I’m not at all surprised.

“Thank you. I’m certain she’ll be pleased to hear that.” I nod as their floor approaches.

“If you happen to do a gender reveal or something, us fans would love to take part with a live feed.” The woman winks at me, and she and her friends are gone. None of what she just said makes a lick of sense to me, but I suspect Magnolia or Joss will have a clue.

The remainder of the ride passes by quietly; the soft ding on our floor doesn’t even cause Magnolia to stir. Slipping the key card that Joss gave me from my pocket, I’m quick to enter their room and lock the door behind us.

Magnolia’s bed is the one by the window. I can tell this because it’s mussed up and appears well slept in. Placing her on the cool sheets, I make quick work of removing the shoes I noticed bothering her early on and rub her feet down.

Carefully, I pull the pins from her hair, wanting her to avoid a headache later. Unzipping the side of her dress, I suck in a sharp breath as her plump breasts become exposed to me.

Oh, the wicked, wild, dirty things I'd like to do to them. They've grown since I last saw her.

Leaning forward, I suck a puckered nipple into my mouth, flicking it with my tongue. Needing to taste her. *Christ*, I've fucking missed this woman. Massaging the globes as I pull back, I watch her sleep like a fucking stalker, but I can't stop. This is my woman. She's been mine since she clung to me in that schoolhouse, begging me not to let her go.

"Cage." She breathes my name without waking up. Drawing the outfit the rest of the way off, she's left in nothing but the tiny matching green thong encircling her hips. Kicking off my boots, I tug my shirt over my head and slide my denims down my legs before crawling into the bed behind her.

Sliding a hand across her belly, I cup the small bump there, holding her slight body to me, amazed at this woman. She's giving me something I would never have dreamed of.

"I've got you now, pet. Never letting you go," I whisper in her ear. Kissing along her throat, she rolls back into me, cuddling in as I watch her sleep, and I have to wonder when the last time was that she felt safe enough to slumber so hard.

Curling my hulking body around her petite one, I lay my hands on her belly. *A baby*. I would never have imagined that. I wonder if she's felt the peanut move yet. She's so tiny, and the bump is quite pronounced; surely, she must have.

Growing up in the wilds of South Africa with parents that rapidly moved from one spot to another, thus having little time to settle, I am out of my element here. My parents never raised me; the animals, the trees, and Mother Nature did. I was as feral as a jungle cat until the village we were living in was slaughtered one night while a few friends and I were stalking lions.

When we returned in the morning, having gotten the photos of the pride and their cubs we wanted, blood was splattered everywhere. Bodies were torn apart; huts were burning. The medical tent where my parents had been treating the people of the village went from stark white to crimson with the slaughter. No one was left untouched.

As a fourteen-year-old boy, I vowed revenge on the men who ruined the lives of so many. It took six months before me and the group of boys left behind found them. We attacked just as they had. In the dead of night, with machetes and bottles of acid. No one survived.

It was my first taste of blood, and I craved more. Some of the boys left after that, but two remained with me, following a trail of blood and destruction, killing anyone we came across that gave us a sideways look. We gained a reputation, and eventually, people began hiring us to protect their camps. To escort medical personnel from those camps to the city.

After a period of time, I moved on from South Africa—my home, the one place I will always return to—and found more opportunities in the UK. America. Then all over the world. I've been to more countries than not and killed more men than I could possibly recall. I have thousands of enemies because once I'm called in for a job, there isn't much I won't do to finish it.

Early on, I had made a vow that women and children were off limits, though there have been a few females who deserved the deaths I bestowed upon them.

An Army general in the Philippines who recruited young boys, then sexually assaulted them.

A nun in Peru who beat children and stole babies from their mothers.

A factory owner in China who ran children ragged to the point of death, lying at their machines due to starvation.

Sometimes women need murdering as much as men. It's slightly rarer, but it still happens. I've never killed a child, however. Until I came across Magnolia in that boy's arms at the schoolhouse, and I discovered I was willing to kill him if he harmed her.

I've drawn lines in the sand that I thought I never would cross. As it turns out, I just might if it means saving my pet.

The vibrating phone on the table behind me interrupts my thoughts. Letting go of Magnolia is more challenging than I anticipated. It's a text from Joss, saying she's got everything handled and will be up in a few moments.

I've no doubt that creep Tyler has offered to help her and is on his way up with her now. Pulling my clothes on, I head out to the hallway, leaving the room door open a crack as I lean against the opposite wall to await them.

A shadow passes down by the elevators, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up as everything in me switches to high alert. Someone is there. Listening. Watching. When my phone vibrates again, I put it to my ear.

"What?" I snap.

"My friend, the attitude." Benito fucking Torres. Nothing good comes from a call from the Italian.

"What do you want, Torres?" Pinching the bridge of my nose, I drop my head back while anticipating the attack from whoever is waiting to make their presence known.

"You need a woman, Craven, to soften up those hard edges." I resist the urge to crush the phone in my palm.

“What about you, Torres? How’s things going with your little choir girl?” I heard the rumors about his long-lost stepsister and the shitty church she was sold to.

“Touché my friend, touché.” He’s quiet for a moment. “But she lets me touch her now, so I’d say that’s more than you.”

“So, it’s true?” I’d heard he was angling to make her his wife; didn’t think his stepmother would allow it, though. Not after her child had been missing for so many fucking years.

“Depends on what you heard.” He’s curious.

“That you plan to bed, impregnate, and tie her ass to you.” I like the Italian man; he’s a straight shooter and doesn’t play mind games like so many others in the business.

“Ah, yes, that. Very true, I’m afraid. Taking longer than planned, unfortunately. My patience grows thin.” Considering it’s been nearly six months or more, I’m surprised he hasn’t acted sooner. “The reason for my call. I heard a similar rumor about you, my friend.”

“Oh yeah?” There’s a ding from the elevator.

“You found a beautiful Irish lass.” *Fuck.*

Joss’ laughter is audible before I see her rounding the corner with Tyler. That shadow still remains at the end of the hall. Opening the room door further, I press a finger to my lips so she’s quiet. Joss nods. I place a hand on Tyler’s chest to prevent him from entering.

A negligible shake of my head has the man stepping back, but annoyance flares in his eyes. “Benito, my friend, you shut those fucking rumors down.”

“Oh, I did, I did. But...” My eyes are peeled to the end of the hall.

“But?” I bite out, not in the mood for this shit.

“Do you remember Carlos Vega?”

“Venezuela,” I mutter. I killed the boy’s father when he was only eight. He swore retribution. I ignored him, figuring I’d be dead by now. “His father was a drug lord.” Tyler’s eyebrows raise to his hairline.

Benito clucks his tongue. “That’s the one. Well, he’s eating up these rumors, following your footprints across the globe.”

“He’s here.” Now more than ever, I believe he’s the shadow.

“Need backup?” His loyalty to me is uncalled for. It wasn’t his life I saved back in the day but his half-brother. The boys I ran around with in South Africa? Roman Castille was Benny’s baby brother from a different father. We forged into men together. It’s the only reason I trust Benito so much. “You know I’ll come. I’ll call Roman.”

“Not yet.”

“I could send the Cardarelli you like so much,” he snickers.

“I see Santi, and I’ll fucking shoot him back.” I haven’t forgotten about that. I still bear the scar on my leg. Benny’s booming laughter can be heard across the globe, I’m sure. “Shut the fuck up.” He’s lucky he’s not in front of me, or I’d shoot him too. “Hanging up now.” The man’s laughter continues as I pocket the device.

Whipping out my Beretta, Tyler crooks a brow before stepping out of my way. *Smart move.* Gliding stealthily down

the hallway, I keep to the walls, needing to see this asshole for myself.

As I turn the corner where the elevators stand, the shadow is already gone, and I know Vega is as well. Cursing under my breath, I ignore the two women exiting the car, eyes glancing up and down my body when they see me barefoot and shirtless.

Dismissing them, I make my way back to Magnolia. “Get out of here, Tyler,” I hiss as I pass him, and the man scurries away like his ass is on fire.

CHAPTER 8

Magnolia

The after-party is in full swing. Dinner was buffet-style, with a bunch of food that made me want to puke my guts out. I'm not sure if it's the pregnancy or the fact that so many women keep flirting with Cage. He hasn't said a whole lot since discovering I'm pregnant, and it worries me. Like I knew it would.

Foolishly, I had hoped he'd be excited and tell me he was keeping us both. He did, sort of, but then he didn't say anything more. And I don't want him to stick around just because of the baby. I want him to want me. And right now, I'm feeling the most insecure I've ever been.

It doesn't help that my mom has been texting me all day, informing me of how frumpy I look in this green dress and that I need to start watching what I eat because I'm getting fat. Not once did it occur to her that it might be more than just average weight gain. Let's not forget the comment about my cankles, either. The list went on and on. I cried twice before making myself sick.

Joss is totally in her element here. For as nervous as she was about the entire event, she was welcomed with open arms. Right now, she's dancing with a group of authors and having the time of her life. She was stopped by a few readers after

dinner, who asked her a hundred questions, and it was amazing to see her so receptive to them.

While a lot of these women are considered online friends, there's a bond within their circle. A comradery that can't be faked. I've also been welcomed into it, and I'll be forever grateful for that, but I don't see myself gracing any more book covers. Not for anyone but Joss, anyway.

The vibrating phone in my pocket pulls me from my thoughts. Glancing at the screen, it says Chester PD, and worry infiltrates my bones.

"Hello?" The music is so loud I can barely hear, so I step outside the ballroom. I feel Cage following a few feet behind me. Despite his display during the signing, he wanted to give me a bit of space tonight and decided keeping watch was better.

"Miss Taylor?"

"Yes."

"It's Detective Boyd Ryce." The man who was assigned to mine and Lucy's case.

"How can I help you, Detective?" Cage tenses.

"This isn't an easy call to make." I inwardly groan and wonder what my mom's done. It would make more sense with the way she showed up. "Garnett Fraser is dead, ma'am." My world spins, and I lean against a wall.

Surely, I didn't hear that right. "Can you say that again, please?"

"Garnett Fraser is dead." There's a long silence before he carries on. "He was murdered in prison. We aren't sure by

whom yet. The person seems to have gotten in and out undetected.”

Dead.

He’s dead.

Hardly punished at all.

“Hey, whoa, pet, I’ve got you.” Cage holds my failing body as my knees give out, sliding us both to the floor while taking the phone from my hand. “Sorry, mate, she’s got to go.” His hands glide up and down my arms, trying to warm my body from the chill that’s overtaken me.

“He’s dead,” I whisper as tears flood my eyes. I should be relieved, right? But I’m not. I’m angry. Lucy lost her life; I’ll bear scars for the rest of mine. “It’s like he just got away with it.” He’ll never know true suffering. Not the way I have, the way Lucy’s family has. It doesn’t feel fair.

Leaning into Cage’s chest, I bury my face in his warmth, letting the anguish run through me as I rage about the injustice. It’s not fair. It just isn’t fair.

For a long time, I wished he were dead. If Lucy wasn’t breathing, then he didn’t deserve to, either, but somehow, that anger lessened, and I wanted him to live so he could suffer behind bars. Alive but trapped. No freedoms. No life. Nothing but bars and orders.

“It’s not fair,” I seethe as his hand brushes through my unruly hair, massaging my scalp.

“What do you say we get out of here for a bit? Sit outside by the water.” I’m only capable of nodding my head. Helping me to my feet, Cage guides me outside. As soon as the fresh air hits me, I breathe a little easier. Being one with Mother

Nature has always helped calm my soul in a way that nothing else has.

We walk in silence towards the docks, where lounge chairs are set up for a relaxing night by the lake. Slipping off my shoes before I sit down, I'm not surprised when Cage scoots in behind me so that I rest between his strong thighs. His arms wrap around me; one hand on my belly, the other on the V of my collarbone, and his large fingers bracketing my throat. It's a possessive hold for anyone watching. It's comforting for me.

"Why are you here, Cage?" I've wanted to ask him that from the minute I saw him, but I worried he'd think I don't want him here.

"For you." Such a simple answer. "For both of you."

"You didn't know there was a both of us," I point out, and it's my own words that help me realize he wanted me before he knew about the baby.

"Which makes it all the sweeter." His lips kiss my head, and I close my eyes. I need this. Need to feel connected to someone so badly right now.

So when he says, "I did it," I don't know how to react. "I killed Garnett Fraser." His words are muted as he confesses.

Sitting up, I turn to face him, a hundred emotions rolling through me at once. I don't know which one to focus on, so I just stare at him.

Cage leans forward, his bulkiness towering over me, even as we sit down. He cups my cheek and presses our foreheads together. "I'm a fucking terrible man, pet. I kill, I hunt, I prey. Snuffing out his life wasn't even a choice; it was a breathing entity inside of me that needed to slay the man who hurt you so."

I open my mouth to comment, but nothing comes out.

“Do you remember telling me about him? The broken way your voice cracked when you told me he killed that girl. The way he shot through you like you were nothing. Do you remember the pain? I felt it. I embraced it, and from the minute you ran from my bed, I began my hunt.”

“Hunt?”

He nods. “My hunt to eliminate anyone who dared cause you pain.”

“I never...”

“I know.” His lips brush across mine. “I know you’d never. But the fact he was left to breathe in a world where you exist was unforgivable to me. He belonged in hell, and he should have been sent there the second he pulled the trigger.”

Closing my eyes, I breathe in this man’s scent, his masculinity, his desire for me. His overwhelming need to protect me from past and present threats. My anger drains away at the realization.

Clasping his face in my hands, I exhale against his lips, “Thank you, Cage,” before pressing into him, nipping at his bottom lip. I know he’s allowing me to take control, and I keep biting and sucking at him until he loses it. Until I get a glimpse of the Cage I met that first time.

“You bring out the beast in me, pet.” His gruff hands slip under my ass, and he drags me into his body, cradling me against his brawny frame. My legs spread across his thighs, pressing into the cushion on either side of his hips while he plunders my mouth. Teeth scraping against sensitive flesh as we each attempt to gain the upper hand. Cage wins, of course, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. I’ve been an independent

woman my entire life; granting him this control, this power over me, is freeing.

“Cage?” I huff out when he kneads a handful of my ass in his firm palm, pulling me closer to the burgeoning bulge in his pants.

“Yeah, pet?”

“Are you staying?” He tenses as he draws back, resting his spine against the lounge chair and discerning me. There’s a longing in his gaze that I don’t understand.

“Staying.” He repeats the single word, and I chew my lip. “I was hoping you’d come home with me.”

“Where, uhm, exactly is home?” I have a feeling I know, but a man like Cage is filled with mysteries.

“South Africa.” The most beautiful country I’ve ever been to. A country that, for a time, I would have called home as well, but then my world exploded again.

“I see.” Sitting back, I put distance between us. I can’t think when he’s touching me like he owns me. Because he does. Cage owns every part of me without even trying.

“I have an isolated piece of land that you didn’t get to see last time. But it’s nice. The village isn’t too far. There’s a community center that could use a woman of your caliber.” Gazing out across the lake as a boat speeds by, pushing waves across the water, I try to picture what life would be like out there. “I wouldn’t let anything happen to you, pet.”

That’s not even close to what I’m worried about. There is so much to consider about moving to and living in Africa. “I have a life here,” I say, my argument weak, even to my own ears.

“How long until you can’t fly?” His fingers dance across my belly, and I feel a flutter from inside.

“Oh my god!” My hands cover his. “Did you feel that?” I meet his imploring stare as his other hand moves to cover my belly.

“I did. Feather light.” There’s awe in his voice, matching my own.

“I’ve never felt that before.”

“Could be a sign,” he says, “babe wants to come home, too.” I know he’s not trying to manipulate me by the way he looks at me, almost pleading for me to want it, also.

“I can’t make that big of a decision right now.” He concedes. “I need to think about it. Consider all my...our... options first.”

“I know, pet, I know.” Our lips touch, and I sense the flutter again. His grin is disarming when he feels it as well. “He’s going to be a kicker.”

“How do you know it’s a he?”

“Gut feeling.”

Cage

We lay by the water until the sun sets and the sky turns from blazing orange to midnight purple. If you look hard enough, stars dot between the clouds, and the moon is high and shining bright. The people in the water on their boats and other water

vehicles begin coming in before the darkness completely invades and silence reigns.

Nothing is left but lanterns and other folks enjoying the quiet of the tranquil evening. Magnolia has relaxed so deeply into my arms that I don't want to move her. I want to keep her tightly wrapped in my embrace for the rest of time, but she needs a real bed.

"Come, pet, let's get you upstairs." She hums her annoyance about being moved but grabs her shoes as I help her to her feet.

With a hand on her back, I guide Magnolia into the hotel. Her head rests on my shoulder as she walks, more relaxed than I've seen her all day. I'm glad I could give that to her.

The excitement of the day continues to buzz as women I recognize from the signing wander around, chatting in different places around the hotel. Some recognize us and smile and wave, others stare. I'm sure we're quite the sight. Especially given that Magnolia is all light and sweetness, and I'm the shadows in the dark that you hide from.

What they don't realize is that her light bleeds into me, waking me up and giving me a life I never imagined. Joss spots us as she comes out of the ballroom and easily glides in with us as we head to the elevators.

"You alright, Mags?" I'm glad she has such a good friend, and I have a feeling Joss is the reason she's hesitant to leave her life in Texas. *I wonder if I could convince her to move as well.*

"Just tired," my girl answers her friend, reaching out a hand. Their fingers entwine, and the jealous growl rumbling through my chest has them both glancing at me and laughing.

“Joss is no threat to you.” Magnolia smiles up at me, rubbing a hand down my chest.

The ride up to the girls’ room is quick, and I’ve got them both stowed away before beginning my search for Vega on the grounds.

“You’re leaving?” Magnolia pouts as I tuck her into bed wearing one of my t-shirts.

“I’ll be back.” *I promise.* There isn’t much that could keep me away from her. Not in this lifetime or any other that follows.

“Okay.” She yawns as her head hits the pillow, and I believe she’s asleep before I’m standing again.

“She has nightmares,” Jossilyn whispers as she leans against the wall next to the bathroom. “Every night. It’s been worse since her mother arrived because she resists sleep. She doesn’t want the bitchy old woman to know.”

“Why?” Though, I can imagine after the way I heard her speak to Magnolia on the phone last weekend.

“Her mom is a Georgia Peach.” Confused, I raise a brow for her to continue. “A southern belle. Like a real-life one. Born and raised in Georgia. With proper manners and the idea that a woman has to be a certain way. Think 1940’s Georgia, where women were demure, obedient, and never stepped out of line.”

“That sounds horrifying.” But I understand her point.

“Right, so imagine her surprise when she learned her daughter was counseling a young pregnant teen on making a life-altering decision and then got shot for it. Or when she flew to South Africa to nurture kids simply because she needed a change. Needed to feel like she was helping someone when

she thought she'd failed the first kid who came to her for assistance. Magnolia has a thousand layers to her personality, but the one constant thing for her is that she doesn't believe she's good enough."

I frown down at the woman snoring lightly, covered up to her chin in blankets. So selfless, so caring. "Not good enough," I repeat. "Not good enough for what, exactly?"

Jossilyn's sigh carries as she climbs into her bed. "To be a mother. To be a woman. To be alive." Each explanation is like a bullet to the gut.

"I'll show her she is." *If it's the last thing I do.* "What do you think of South Africa?" My eyes level on the woman; hers are on her friend.

Jolting to a sitting position, her eyes widen. "You're taking her there, aren't you?"

"Only if she agrees. I have a feeling she won't go if you're left here alone."

Twisting the blanket around in her lap, she looks up at me with vulnerability in her eyes. "I wouldn't stop her if it was what she truly wanted."

"Would you go with her?" I counter.

Her shoulders seem to slump with relief. "I can write from anywhere as long as I have Wi-Fi."

Nodding, I make my way to the door and warn, "Don't open this for anyone. Not even if you know them." She agrees, and I leave the girls to begin my hunt.

It's nearly impossible to be inconspicuous in a place like this. Especially after the scene Magnolia and I made in the

signing room, but I keep to the walls, allowing the shadows to envelop me as I search.

If Vega is anything like his father, he won't be satisfied with hiding. He enjoys the hunt, the cat and mouse games. What he likes most is to believe he has the upper hand. Until Benito called, he might have. All I knew was that there was a sinister force here; now, I know his name. His goal. His endgame.

If he gets his way, I'll be dead.

If he doesn't, Magnolia and our unborn child will be dead.

If he's lucky, *he'll* be dead.

Because I'll never allow the first two options to occur. Nothing will happen to Magnolia while she's on my watch.

After querying at the counter about Vega with a photo Benito sent me, I'm told to check the bar. He isn't a guest, but the girl recognized him from earlier when he entered the hotel, and she's spotted him a couple of times since then.

Entering through a back doorway, I sit at a table secluded behind a pillar, in the shadows of light, but I spot my mark across the room. One woman on his side, hanging on his every word, and at least three guards scattered around. They have no idea I've spotted him, and they won't. Not until I want them to.

"Can I get you anything, honey?" the server asks as she cleans up the table next to me.

"Got Witblits?" Her eyes widen at the name as she nods. "Bring the bottle." As she scurries off, I watch Vega, count the guns he and his men have, and shake my head. They have no idea what they're in for.

I'm not the best in the business for no reason. I've earned every nickname, every kill. And this will be my most fulfilling hunt to date.

CHAPTER 9

Cage

One by one, they left.

Smokey left out the back door for a smoke before heading to his car. He never made it there. Not with breath in his body. Right now, he's lying in the trunk, unlit cigarette crushed on the ground, neck bent at an awkward angle.

Whiskey left with a bottle in his hand and a girl under his arm. I sent her on her way with a wad of cash and an order to forget she ever met the man. He's currently at the bottom of a dumpster with a knife in his gut, bleeding out, spinal cord severed, and no way to call for help. If I had to guess, he's got minutes left, if he's not dead already.

Which leaves me tailing behind the last man standing. I call him DB3—dead body number three—I don't care about their names. I don't care who they are at all or where they come from. They work for the Vega family, and that man is number one on my hit list. As far as I'm concerned, he's just another dead man walking, breathing on borrowed time.

They aren't staying at the resort, which I already knew, but DB3 is driving Vega and two of the girls back to their hotel a couple of miles away. I maintain a few car lengths behind and mimic their turns until they pull into the Hilton.

A few minutes later, I follow their path and stop at the reception desk, placing another wad of cash on the counter. With my ball cap pulled low so the cameras don't catch me and the lady working doesn't get too good of a look, I inquire, "What room are they in?"

Accepting the bribe, she turns a screen to show me the men getting off on the sixth floor—careless assholes—and which rooms they've been assigned. DB3 enters one close to the elevator, and Vega goes into one at the other end of the hall. Not even close to each other. Like I said, careless assholes.

They're either stupid or cocky. I'm thinking a mixture of both. I bet DB3 believes he can prevent an attack by being right at the most likely point of entry to the floor. People are so fucking arrogant, always thinking a man will go for the easy option.

The stairs are where any effective attack would come from. It's where I always enter. Rarely are there cameras in a stairwell.

Nodding my head at the woman, she holds up a key card, muttering, "It's universal; don't break the doors down."

"See you around, Heather." She snorts.

"It was a quiet night. Nobody in, nobody out. Don't know what you're going to see." Her head still hasn't lifted from the book she's reading. *Smart lady*. She's lived a life on the dark side.

Or watched enough movies to know when to keep her mouth shut. Either way, I like her. She's got spunk.

Walking along the corridor of the first floor, I go to the back stairwell that will lead up closest to Vega's room. But

he's not my target. Not yet. Probably not tonight. DB3 is. I want Vega fucking terrified when he wakes up in the morning and realizes his entire posse is dead. I've been collecting phones all night and have every intention of answering each of them when he calls.

He thinks he can hunt me down? Hunt my girl down? He is in for the surprise of a lifetime. I'll never allow that to happen. There is nothing I won't do to ensure Magnolia's safety from predators like this animal.

Taking the stairs two or three at a time, my long legs have me on the sixth floor in no time. Quietly opening the door, I casually walk down the hallway like I belong here, fiddling with my key card and looking at room numbers while keeping my head down.

Passing Vega's room, I can hear him and the women in there. My fists ball. I'd like nothing more than to smash his face into dust, but I must wait. Because acting out of fear is what will give him away. He'll threaten me, bluster, and measure dick sizes. When he realizes that's futile, he'll attempt to negotiate, barter a deal where he promises to leave me alone, but then, one day, show back up and try again. And once he knows that's not going to happen, he'll resort to bribery. He'll do anything not to die like his father did before him.

What he'll fail to comprehend is that all he had to do, to begin with, was forget what happened that day and never come after me. I had no reason to seek him out; he should have left the past where it belonged. In the past.

Now, his own stupidity is going to get him killed. The kid is barely in his twenties, and his first act as some new top dog

in the drug trade is to exact his father's revenge without having enough knowledge about his opponent.

Arriving at DB3's door, I remain to the side and listen for sound. I can make out the TV, as well as the shower running. Slipping the card in the slot, the door opens without issue. I step inside, keeping my back to the wall until the soft snick of the door closing and the lock engaging is heard. Sliding the door chain in place, I shake my head at the man's arrogance. Mistakes like this are how people die. It's why *he's* about to die.

Doing a quick sweep of the room, I remove his weapons, tossing them, along with his phone, into his duffel bag before slipping on a pair of brass knuckles and pulling out my favorite knife. A blade my own father gave me as a boy. The handle is chipped, the wood worn from frequent use.

Concealed by the wall of the bathroom, I brace my feet shoulder-width apart as the shower turns off. I don't believe this idiot has a gun with him since I packed three away, plus two knives, but I've learned to prepare for anything. I have no interest in using a gun—bullets penetrate plaster, and that's how innocent bystanders die. I'm not in the business of killing people who just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

A billow of steam precedes the man out the door, and I inhale deeply, calming the pounding of my heart, waiting for my target to appear. He's humming out a tune from Mamma Mia, and I can't fight the eye roll. This is the guy Vega trusts with his life? He deserves to die on principle alone.

His foot pops out, and before he can understand what's happening, I give a quick jab to the temple with my brass, and he's lights out on the floor in a crumpled heap.

Dropping the knuckles and knife on the bed, I drag his immobile body to the lone chair in the room. Ripping the sashes off the wall meant for the curtains, I use them as rope and tie the man up. Draping his towel back over his lap, I grab the bucket of fresh ice, pop the cap off the water bottle on the desk, and pour some in. I wait a few minutes for it to get cold before throwing the freezing concoction at his mostly naked body.

The icy cold wakes him up as he splutters and curses. Donning the brass knuckles again, I sit on the edge of the bed in front of him and watch as he realizes what's happening.

His eyes flare when he sees my face, recognition reflecting back at me. He tamps it down pretty quickly, but he knows me. Because he's here to help kill me.

"You know who I am; can probably guess why I'm here. So, tell me, why are you here? What's Vega's plan?" His eyes harden into a glare, and I can tell it's going to be a long night. "We can do this the hard way if that's what you want." No change. "Have it your way."

Heading back to the bathroom, I grab one of the facecloths and saunter back into the room. He's looking for a way to escape; he won't find one. Death is his only option tonight.

"Last chance," I offer. He sits stonily mute. Balling up the fabric, I force his mouth open and shove it in. Before he can try to extract it, I bury my blade in his thigh.

His scream becomes muffled as the sharp edge hits bone, digging in and making it difficult to extract. A sick grin spreads across my face. This is about to suck for him.

"I'm going to ask you a question. Nod for yes, shake for no. A non-answer will result in more holes in your body, and

I'm telling you now, yanking this blade out is going to hurt like a motherfucker. It's in the bone." He doesn't respond, so I wiggle the blade a little. Tears spring to his eyes. "Nod if you understand." This time he does.

"Is Vega here to kill me?"

A nod.

"He plan to kill my girl?"

Another nod.

"Any other men here?"

Third nod.

"Other than the two that were in the bar?"

His eyebrows draw together before shaking his head no. Obviously, he had no idea I was surveilling them all night.

"It was the three of you and Vega?" Nod. "Are there more men close by?" Hesitation before he shakes his head. *Liar.* "Don't lie to me." I jiggle the knife again, and he whines behind the cloth. "Are there more than five men?" He shakes his head. "Do you know their location?" He hesitates again but eventually nods. "Good. You're getting the hang of this little game of mine."

Blowing out a breath, I look him dead in the eye and find his fear oozing through his flesh. "You're going to die. You came here with Vega to hurt my girl, my very pregnant soon-to-be wife. Nobody is going to live. So now is your last chance to get even with Vega by telling me anything else I should know."

Pulling the cloth from his mouth, the tears dry in his eyes as he accepts his fate. "You'll make him suffer, yes?" I confirm. "His other men, the only men he has left in

Venezuela, are an hour south.” He gives me the location, one I am familiar with.

Snapping his neck, I rip my knife out of his thigh and place his body on the bed. After covering him up and hiding any evidence that I was here, I walk out. Leaving as quietly as I came.

Checking the time just as the sun begins to rise, I consider my two choices: go back to the hotel where Magnolia and Joss are or head south and eliminate the men Vega will call once he awakens.

As much as I want to cuddle into Magnolia, shower her with affection, and show her I’m here to stay, I know this threat needs to be eliminated immediately. Shooting her a fast text, I can only hope she’ll listen to me.

Me: Head home ASAP. I have business to take care of. I’ll meet you in Corpus Christi.

For as well as I believe I know her, I’m not sure if she’ll listen to me or balk at being told what to do, so I send another to Joss. This one a little more urgent.

Me: Get her home ASAP. I have a threat to eliminate.

I understand Joss only cares about her friend’s well-being and will try her best to do as I ask.

Magnolia

Slamming doors and aggressively tossing things into my suitcase isn’t going to help my mood or the desire to listen to

Cage. The infuriating man didn't come back to the room last night, and I woke up to a text from him saying to go home and that he'd meet me there.

The nearly four-hour drive back home appears daunting now. Like a chore I'd rather put off for the next year rather than leave Cage behind. I don't know where we stand with each other, despite what he's said, and I'm just unsure where I'm at psychologically. I seem to be a jumbled mess of emotions because of the pregnancy, and while I don't want to lose Cage and what we could possibly have, I don't want to put my heart on the line so easily, either.

Finding out he wanted me to relocate with him to South Africa was shocking. I don't understand why; it shouldn't be. To be honest, I never imagined us reconnecting at all. Now that we have, there are so many decisions to make, and I'm feeling more than slightly overwhelmed about it all.

"You're liable to break something," Joss says as she enters the room with a luggage cart.

"I'm just so damn...confused." I hate that I can't get my head on straight. I feel like I'm losing control again.

"About what?" She lifts her suitcase before grabbing mine and zipping it shut, for fear I have a complete meltdown and toss it off the balcony.

"Cage." I watch her reaction carefully. Joss and I may have only known each other a few months, but our connection was instantaneous. She's more than my roommate or best friend, she's the sister of my heart, and I can't imagine moving so far away from her.

"About moving to South Africa?"

"How'd you know about that?" I never mentioned it.

She shrugs as she puts the last bag on the cart, and we do one more sweep of the room before leaving. “He asked me if I’d go with you.”

I stop short. “He did not.” That’s ludicrous.

“He did so.” Her smile is so contagious.

“Well, what’d you say?”

“That I can write from anywhere as long as I have good Wi-Fi.”

“You’re insane.” I pound the down button on the elevator. “That’s insane. He can’t expect you to do that.”

“I think he does. I think he expects everything when it comes to your happiness.” *Why does she have to sound reasonable?* “Look, I’m no expert on love”—the car arrives, and we hop on before hitting the lobby button—“or anything even remotely close to it, but I notice the way he looks at you is ten times scarier than the way my brother-in-law, Loch, looks at my little sister Sage. And I thought *that* was scary. There’s an obsessiveness to Cage that can’t be rivaled.”

Damn. “But it’s too soon for something like that. That’s a huge decision. Moving to another continent.” I can’t just pack up and leave like it’s so easy. *Can I?*

“Like I said, not an expert on love, Mags. You just have to do what you feel is right for you and little nugget, there.” Her hand reaches out to rub my belly. A flutter erupts, and she jumps, staring up at me. “When did that start happening?” Her squeal has people backing up as the elevator doors open in the lobby.

“Last night,” I tell her as we get off and head to where we parked, having already done mobile check-out, “when Cage touched her for the first time.”

“Oh my god!” I think she’s more amazed than I was. “Do you think it’s a girl?”

“As long as he or she is healthy, I don’t care. But I wouldn’t be upset about a girl.” One with my wild red hair and Cage’s wild spirit. She’d be a natural beauty.

“Can you imagine Cage carrying around a little baby girl? Tutus and tea parties?” The image is one I can definitely picture.

As soon as we’re done loading all our stuff, Joss takes my hand and addresses me seriously. “If I’m what’s holding you back from going to South Africa with Cage, from getting the family and love you truly deserve, don’t let it. Go with him if you want. Be wild, be free, be *happy*, Mags. You deserve that so much.”

We arrive home in the middle of the afternoon. I still haven’t heard from Cage yet, and I don’t like the sound of the cryptic message he’d sent to Joss just after sending mine. The boys that were watching me all last week are still across the street, so I give them a little wave. They nod their heads in return.

“You know them?” Joss asks as she pops the trunk of her hatchback. As soon as the boys see what we have, they come running over to help.

“Sorry, Miss M. Big man said not to let either of you lift a finger. Just tell us where you want it all to go,” the larger of the boys says, grabbing both suitcases as his friends take the few boxes we brought back home, too.

“I guess you do.” Joss laughs as she walks up to unlock the door and open it, only to slam it shut again. “Uhh...we’re going to wait a minute.”

“Oh god.” I feel myself grow pale, imagining what she just saw.

“It’s just Miss M.’s mom and some guy in there,” the boy says like we know about this guy.

“What’s your name?” I finally ask him. I can’t keep thinking about him as some boy.

“I’m Rio, that’s Javier, Cake, and Clay.” He points to each boy.

“Cake?” Joss and I ask together.

The boy in question blushes. “I eat a lot of cake. My mom’s a baker.”

“A baker, you say?” I have a sweet tooth a mile wide lately. “Does she make cinnamon rolls?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He gives a prideful grin. “It’s the place around the corner. Lotti’s Baked Goods. Big pink sign; can’t miss it.”

“You let her know I’m coming in tomorrow after school.” He nods his head vigorously just as our front door opens.

I groan when I catch a glimpse of my mom in a thin, barely body-covering robe. “Mom. Go put some clothes on.” She does not need to be around these boys like that.

Joss leans over to whisper, “I thought she was a Peach? Shouldn’t she be, I dunno, demure?”

A bark of laughter escapes me before I can curtail it. “I don’t think she has a demure bone left in her body.” She

snickers as Mom turns back around, a snarl on her face.

If not for the constant berating that she's imparted on me over the years, I might not be so harsh and show a little more concern for what she's going through. Mom has always been a handful, though. I can't imagine what my father went through behind closed doors. The fact she hasn't shown any genuine upset over him leaving her, and now inviting another man into...*Oh god...my bed!* "Oh god. They were in my bed. I need a new bed."

"You wouldn't if you went home with Cage," Joss jests, wiggling her eyebrows.

Nugget takes this opportunity to do what feels like a ten-point cartwheel and press on my bladder, so I'm forced inside. Rio and his friends haul our stuff in as well, with the promise to come by for a BBQ dinner that Joss plans on attempting. She's an excellent cook, but I don't think she realizes just how much teenage boys eat.

"Go." She nudges me in the back, steering me towards her room. "Go lay down. I recognize the exhaustion on your face."

"What? No. I'll live. Besides, I'm not leaving you alone to deal with my family. That could ruin a friendship, you know." Joss snorts and forces me into her room just as Mom and *her friend* exit mine. She shuts the door before I can protest, and I stand there staring at it for a moment, seriously debating going back out there. However, the exhaustion eking from every pore of my body has me trudging over to Joss' enormous, comfy bed, though. The soft pillows and cool room beckoning me like a siren.

Sleep it is.

CHAPTER 10

Cage

It's well after midnight when I arrive at Magnolia's place. The house is dark and quiet, so I'm silent as I pick the lock and enter the townhouse. The first thing I notice is a pair of men's shoes near the door, mingled with girlish sandals and flats.

Not being a fan of a strange man here with my girl and child, I seek him out, to find the asshole in Magnolia's bed with her mother. I bet that went over well when the girls got home. Expecting Magnolia to be on the couch like she's been sleeping for the past week, I find Joss lying there instead, eyes closed but not asleep.

"Where is she?" I whisper.

Rolling over, Joss glares up at me. "You picked the lock," she accuses. "And you know the security code." I shrug, not being able to deny either. She points to the other closed door.

Peeking into the room, I see Magnolia in a pair of tiny shorts and a tank top, lying on top of the blankets with a fan on, despite the central air conditioning. The bed is plenty big.

"You should go in there, sleep in your own bed, Joss." I don't like the idea of a woman out here alone. If someone were to break in here, she'd be the first thing they'd see.

“No,” she protests. “I didn’t because I knew you’d want to be with her.” Her eyes close once again.

“You’re defenseless out here. I’d rather be the first thing a burglar saw than you.” When her eyes re-open and she spears me with a look of understanding, I wonder more about her.

“That sounds like something Braxton would have said.” Leaving the pillow and blanket, she heads into her room to sleep with Magnolia.

“Who?” I ask before she can close the door.

“The love of my life...once upon a time.” I don’t miss the notes of sadness and regret in her tone. There are many layers to Jossilyn, some I’m not even sure she realizes.

Kicking off my boots, I pull my shirt over my head and place my Beretta on the table next to the couch before tugging the belt from my jeans and undoing the button. I get a water from the fridge and chug half the bottle before settling on the sofa. I tip my head back and close my eyes, resting my feet on the ottoman.

Her scent reaches me before I feel her. Magnolia stands less than a foot away, and as soon as I open my arms to her, she crawls into my lap. I’m sweaty, cranky, and exhausted, but everything dissipates when she wraps herself around me.

“I’m mad at you,” she whispers into my neck as I delve my hand into her hair, massaging her scalp.

“I know, pet.” She melts into my body, relaxing almost immediately.

Slipping my other hand into the back of her shorts, I cup her bare ass, pulling her in closer. My dick waves a flag, begging for another taste of her. Protesting that it’s been too long since we claimed our girl.

She wiggles in my lap, causing me to grunt. “Still not sorry,” I hiss when she finds what she’s looking for—my stiff shaft pressing into her needy cunt. “Pet.” I growl the warning, nipping at her temple as she continues to shimmy and rock against me.

“Please, Cage.”

Fuck. I’ve never been good at denying her anything.

Pulling the revealing top off her body, it doesn’t take much to ditch her shorts as well and have her naked before me. “Jesus Christ.” Her body has filled out since the last time I enjoyed it. Pride swells in my chest because the reason for it is plain as day, round in her belly.

Her hips appear wider; her breasts spill forward, begging to be sucked on, and that pussy, the golden apple of her beautiful body, is weeping with desire. “Up.” I tap her ass so she slips to the side. Unzipping my jeans, I pull them down my thighs so there’s enough room for my cock to spring out, already leaking with cum.

Pulling her back into my lap, she doesn’t hesitate to sink the monster sucker into her hot as fuck cunt, swallowing it in one agonizing thrust. “Fuck, pet, you sure know how to shock the fuck out of me.” She’s still virgin-tight.

Probably because she’s only been fucked the one time. A wicked smile twists my lips. Cupping both breasts in each hand, I lean forward, suckling on one nipple while twisting and plucking at the other before switching sides.

“Milk me, pet, draw all that cum out of me into your heated little cunt.” She moans as her hips begin to move. Gripping each leg, I pull her thighs wider, forcing her to sink

down further. “You’re still virgin-tight. So fucking perfect for me.” The praise makes her blush as she finds her rhythm.

“It’s only ever been yours, Cage.” Gripping a chunk of her hair, I tug back, exposing her elegant throat. Nipping and sucking from her shoulder to her chin, I feel her snug, velvety walls rippling around me.

“Nobody had better touch this fucking pussy but me.” She pauses, her breaths panting, but her green orbs slide to mine.

“Or what?” The challenging question gets me to squeeze her ass so tight she’ll have fingerprint bruises for weeks.

“I’ll fucking kill them. Slaughter anyone who sees any part of you I don’t approve of.” Her cunt floods with desire. “You like that.” It’s not a question but fact. “You want me to kill for you?” Magnolia worries her bottom lip, eyes molten as she gives a sharp nod. “You are a bad little girl, aren’t you?”

Leaning forward, she presses her lips against mine. “Only yours, Cage, only yours.”

Biting her lip until it stings, I lick across them, my eyes drawn to the bruised muscle as her tongue peeks out of her mouth, brushing across my teeth marks. I fix her jaw in my hand and poke my thumb into her mouth, the pad rubbing along her tongue, holding her in place as I tilt her head back, forcing her to arch her chest forward.

Having control of the way her body moves on top of mine is heady. Pushing my thumb to the back of her mouth, I thrust up into her pussy, taking over the hard work so she can focus on her own pleasure.

“Christ, woman, you fucking unravel me.” It sounds like praise, but it’s an accusation. I both love and hate how easily

she can make me do as she pleases without saying a fucking word.

It's a hell of my own making because I want to give this to her. I want to be the one she runs to when she's in trouble. Especially after the way she ran *away* from me the first time.

Clutching her lower jaw, I drag her closer again, thumb still infiltrating her mouth as I growl in her ear, "You fucking run from me again, I won't give you space this time. I'll drag you back to Richards Bay kicking and screaming and chain you to our bed."

She smiles at my threat, ignoring the menace in my tone. "Do you promise, Cage?" Isn't *she* full of fucking surprises?

Flipping her over onto her back, I bury her in the couch with the weight of my body, thrusting my dick as far into her tightness as I can get. Grinding the base of my cock onto her clit so her eyes roll, and she mewls while biting that damn lip again.

"Give it to me, pet. Flood me with your pleasure." Her body shivers, shaking with the force of her orgasm. Fierce heat tightens around my dick, her mouth opens, about to scream, when I clap a hand across it, so she doesn't make a sound.

"There it is." I bite her throat, marking her again. Fuck, I like leaving my mark on her.

Clawing at my back, she rides her climax, taking me with her, sucking my essence right out of my dick. Flooding her insides with my seed, I keep pushing deeper inside her body, needing to be one with her.

When my ears stop ringing and my vision clears, I roll us to the side so her back settles against the couch. She's covered up, aside from her hip, which is peeking out with the widening

of her ripe body. The changes affecting her from this pregnancy only make me want her more.

Tangling my fingers into her hair, I draw her head back so her sleepy eyes are forced to look up at me. I study the curve of her lips as she cuddles into me, resting her head against my chest, the trust that shines up at me from her gaze, and I'm thrilled to say I could get used to this.

"Sleep, pet. I'll take care of you." Feathering a kiss on the base of my throat, she makes a humming sound before passing out.

My eyes close to rest, but I don't sleep, not deeply. Too many things could happen here for me to fully relax.

Magnolia

Warmth encompasses me from the top of my head to my toes. Cage's firm muscles shift under my face. Despite the size of the couch and how uncomfortable it should have been for the two of us to sleep here, I've never slept better than when I'm in his arms.

"Good morning, pet." His gravelly whisper as he kisses my forehead makes me want to curl around him. "What time do you have to be at work?"

My eyes pop open; I'd almost forgotten it was a workday. "Eight." I move to get up, but his arm tightens around me, holding me in place.

"Still got time," he mumbles as a bedroom door creaks open. From the sound, I know it's my door. "Make another

fucking move, and I'll blow your head off." His cool tone could frost up this entire space.

Given that the back of the couch faces my room, I can't see whom he's talking to, but I catch his free hand raising an impressive gun and taking aim at someone he's sighted over the top of the couch.

"Whoa, man, just getting some water," a man's voice says, and I shrink further into the cushions, trying to hide more of myself since I don't have anything covering me.

"Don't fucking care. Turn around, or your brain matter is going to be sticking to the wall. You aren't a welcome guest of my girl. Stay in that fucking room until I say otherwise."

I gawk up at Cage. The casual way he describes shooting the man has my stomach rolling. "Cage." I whisper his name, knowing that when his eyes shift down to me, he'll understand I'm not feeling so great.

"Pal, get," he snaps this time, and a second later, the bedroom door slams shut. "I'll help you up." Smoothly, Cage sits upright, lifting my body at the same time, and he carries me to the bathroom, where he places a towel across my back and leaves me alone just as I wretch into the toilet.

I haven't got much in there, so the dry heaves kick in, in no time. Wetting a cloth as I sit on the floor, I wipe across my face and chest before getting to my feet. As I'm brushing my teeth, I hear a loud screech from my mother, followed up by cursing and another slammed door.

Poor Joss.

The bathroom door opens as I'm rinsing my mouth, and Cage appears with my robe and a glare on his face. "Your mother has a mouth on her." I nod, already knowing this. Cage

removes the towel covering me and helps me into the robe. As he ties the belt around my waist, he asks, “How are you feeling?”

He’s still shirtless, jeans undone with an open V. Nail marks line his chest and arms—and, I’m guessing, back—from me last night. He seems to read my mind because he glances in the mirror above the sink, and a grin spreads across his face.

“One day, you’ll draw blood.” He doesn’t sound turned off by it; in fact, he sounds like it’s something he wants. “Hungry?” I can only nod; the man sure knows how to render me speechless when he wants to. “She’s in a mood this morning.”

“She’s in a mood every morning,” I respond. And it’ll only get worse when she discovers I’m pregnant. By the narrowing of his eyes, I don’t think he’s too impressed by that knowledge.

“What do you feel like eating?” Cage takes my hand as he leads me out of the bathroom.

The smell of caffeine hits my nostrils, and I instantaneously groan from the nausea. I know it’s not from Joss because we removed all caffeine from the house weeks ago when it was discovered I couldn’t stand the smell. We also told my mother not to bring any in.

Cage looks from me to every corner of the room, expecting to find something I would groan about. “What is it? What’s wrong?” he asks.

I don’t get to answer before Joss comes storming out of her room. “Who the hell brought that in here?” Unplugging the coffee maker, she dumps the contents of the carafe down the

sink before chasing it down with the lemon dish soap. “You okay?” she inquires.

Fingers pressed to my lips, I take a couple of deep breaths before nodding. “Yes, thank you.”

“Well, what did you do that for?” I hear my mother’s question, but instantly, I’m met with Cage’s chest as he encases me in his arms.

“We asked you not to bring caffeine in here when you arrived. It’s one of our hard and fast rules, yet, here you are, breaking it.” Joss fumes as she cleans out the coffee maker before putting it away and then hunting down the cheap coffee grinds my mother bought and tossing them in the trash.

“What the hell! I bought that; you can’t just toss them out.” Her foot stomps like a petulant child.

“Mom,” I snap, looking back at her. Leaving Cage’s arms is hard, but I do it. “Please, respect our boundaries. You showed up here without a word, kicked me out of *my* room, and now you’ve brought a man into *my* bed and *my* space. You don’t get to demand anything from us.”

“I’m your mother!” She stomps again, like that makes any difference. “I put up with you for years. You owe me.” Stunned silent, I can only blink as she continues with her tirade. “You’ve always been so ungrateful to me. I gave my life up for you. You’ve wasted it!” Her hands throw up in the air.

“I’m sorry to be such a huge disappointment to you. I didn’t realize I was supposed to live my life for you.” Tears sting the backs of my eyes, but I refuse to let them slip out.

“Well, you should have!” Confounded by her words, I turn around and head to the fridge to get water. “Don’t you walk

away from me!” That screech is followed up by her hand on my shoulder, dragging me back.

“Touch her, and you won’t take another breath.” Cage’s dire warning has everyone riveted.

Turning my head, I find my mother’s hand raised, prepared to strike me in some way. A tear escapes this time and slides down my cheek. For as cruel as she’s always been to me, she’s never hit me...not like she’s about to.

“Who do you think you are?” She whirls around to face Cage, venom lacing her words. She’s a rattler ready to strike.

Ignoring her, he strides forward, wiping the tear away with his thumb. “Are you alright, pet?” I nod, leaning into his comforting touch.

“Pet?” she mocks; he stiffens. “She’s not a dog.” Her arms cross over her chest. “Magnolia was never an obedient child. You couldn’t even get her to fetch if you offered the biggest piece of cake to her overweight ass.”

My eyes remain focused on Cage’s, so I don’t miss it when the flip is switched, and he morphs into the man from that hot African day when he rescued me. She has no idea what she’s up against.

“It’s time for you to leave.” He doesn’t look away from me. His touch is still gentle, but he’s gone cold inside, turning off any emotion.

“Excuse me?” Mom screeches. “Who do you think you are?”

“I’m sorry, pet.” I don’t understand what he’s apologizing for as he turns around to face the woman who gave me life. “I’m the man who will protect my woman and child from your venomous ass. I’m the one who will spend my life

worshipping the ground she walks on because Magnolia is that deserving of it. I'm the man who will knock her up as many times as possible in the future." I've never seen my mother speechless before. "I'm the one who has and will, again, kill for her. If you want to put yourself on that list, I have no problem pulling the trigger."

"You can't threaten me," she blusters.

"Ma'am, it's not a threat; it's a promise. If you continue to cause Magnolia turmoil, I will snuff your life out quicker than I would a rattler." I glance back at Joss, who has the weirdest look on her face. Like she's trying to figure out if what he's saying is romantic or cryptic.

I understand the feeling. I'm agonizing over it myself. Nonetheless, my body sure knows what it likes because I've never been as attracted to Cage as I am right now. Never in my entire existence have I had anyone stand up for me the way he is right now.

"Magnolia, are you really going to allow him to speak to me like that?" Cage maneuvers me behind his body so she can no longer see me. "What? I can't talk to my child now?" she hisses at him.

"No." That's it. That's all he gives her. "Magnolia is going to eat and get ready for work before I take her. If you know what's good for you, you'll both be gone before I return."

He doesn't give her any more of his attention—even when she starts throwing things at his back. "I'll get your clothes for you." Ushering Joss and me into her room, Cage closes the door behind us.

We share a look before staring at the panel and leaning in to listen. Mom is screaming at Cage...throwing things around.

All of this is so familiar to me because she was like this growing up with my father, too. A man mumbles something, and then the front door closes, but she's still going off.

The doorknob turns, and we take a step back, knowing it's Cage. "Two choices." He hands me the hangers displaying two of my favorite jersey dresses and a black pair of Chucks. "What do you want for breakfast?"

I don't need to think about it. "There's a bakery down the street, big pink sign. They have cinnamon buns."

"We'll stop on the way." Biting my lip, he leaves as quickly as he comes, and I imagine him standing guard on the other side of the door.

CHAPTER 11

Magnolia

Despite my resistance, I spent much of my day researching more about South Africa. Not just the parts that really need help but places near Cage's home, and not just for teaching positions, either, but in a social services setting, where I could be some help. I even shot off an email to a youth center that's looking for a counselor and organizer.

I'm still not sure I'll go with Cage—it's a crazy amount of paperwork to even get a work visa, let alone uprooting my entire life—but it's worth considering. There's a huge part of me that wants to say the hell with it and go with him, but then there's the scared young woman inside, begging me to stay put. To not leave the safety and familiarity I've built with my life here.

With this week being the last of the school year before summer break, I'm swamped with all the things I have to tie up before leaving, so pushing thoughts of Cage and Africa to the back of my mind is easy.

"Miss Taylor?" My head whips up from the applications I was filling out for some students to join an art class over the summer.

"Yes?" I offer a warm smile to Mrs. Wyatt, our receptionist. "What can I do for you?"

She chews on her lip as she glances back at the office, a worried expression on her face. “There’s a rather intimidating man here to see you.”

Nerves flicker in my belly as I feel the baby roll around. The only intimidating man I know is Cage, but experience tells me it could be anyone. “I’ll be right there.” I’m unsure if I succeed in hiding my own nerves.

Standing up, I take a drink of my now-cold raspberry tea and smooth the wrinkles out of my skirt as I step around my desk. By the time I make it to my office door, I’ve worked myself into quite the tizzy and need to press a hand to my stomach to attempt to stop the butterflies.

I see Mrs. Wyatt standing behind her desk, wary of the newcomer, but he’s hidden by the pillar in the doorframe. Despite reassuring myself that it must be Cage in the office and that I’m worrying for nothing, I’m surprised when I enter, and it’s not him.

Rather, it’s a man about half a foot shorter, with dark hair, and when he turns at my entrance, his eyes are even darker, and it’s then I realize he’s the man from the signing. The one in the life jacket who had warned me I needed protecting. There’s a scar along the side of his face, and even though he’s impeccably dressed, he gives off a menacing vibe.

“Can I help you?” I don’t bother to appear chipper; I know it won’t work. Not with him.

“Magnolia Taylor, nice to see you again.” Obviously, he knows who I am as his eyes roam up and down my body, his gaze pausing on my rounded belly. I place a hand over it protectively, instinctively. A corner of his mouth lifts like it’s a joke that I’d want to protect my baby.

“How can I help you?” I repeat when I’d rather be anyone else right now. I’m not familiar with this man, but it’s clear that he’s not someone I’d mess around with.

“Can we talk privately?” My gaze flicks over to Mrs. Wyatt, and she pales. She knows, too.

“The conference room is free,” she offers, and I inwardly sag with relief because I didn’t want to bring him back to my office.

His eyes narrow as he glances through the doorway I came from. “Do you not have an office?”

“There are students working in there.” I’ve never lied so quickly in my life. He gives a clipped nod and gestures for me to lead the way.

Forced to enter the conference room first, I’m grateful the bank of windows facing into the office have open curtains because the click of the door closing behind my guest is unnerving.

“How can I help you, Mr. . . .” Standing on the opposite side of the long table, I put as much distance between us as I can.

“Vega,” he supplies. “I’m looking for Cage Craven.” Venom laces those words.

Licking my chapped lips, I’m hesitant about how I should play this. “I can’t help you.” Not a complete lie. I can’t. Cage was planning on going out after he made sure my mother left this morning.

“I’m certain you can. You see, Cage and I have . . . had . . . an agreement from many years ago. I’m here to collect.” That sounds ominous.

“I still can’t help you.” Africa is looking better and better right now. We should have left last night.

Taking a seat at the table, he steepled his fingers and lasers me with a look so penetrating that I feel it to my soul. “Magnolia, he took my family from me when I was a child.” His voice is foreboding. “I promised to return the favor when I was old enough. I’m here to collect on my promise. If that means cutting the child from your womb, I will do it, or he can surrender himself up to me. The choice is his. Please let him know he has twenty-four hours to decide.”

I feel myself paling at his words, my heart unable to decide between slowing down or beating so powerfully that it jumps right out of my chest when he stands. Pulling something from his jacket, he holds out a card for me to take.

When I don’t, he comes around the table. Clapping onto my shoulder, he slips it into the thick strap of my dress and leans in close. “Perhaps, I’ll take the both of you instead. You are a very beautiful woman; I’m sure your child will be, as well.” The implication is crystal clear.

And terrifying.

He cups my cheek, ignoring my attempts to pull away before placing a kiss on my lips, biting down on my lower lip until his teeth break the flesh. He chuckles when I rip away from his grasp.

“I’ll be seeing you soon, Magnolia.” He strolls out, and I remain in place until Mrs. Wyatt comes in to inform me he’s gone.

“Magnolia!” she gasps, running over with some tissue from the box on the table and dabbing at my lip. She asks, “Are you alright? Who was that? Should I call the police?”

I don't have a single answer for her because I don't have one for myself.

Cage

I'm sitting outside Magnolia and Joss' house with the neighborhood kids I paid to keep an eye on the girls. Inhaling the cigarette between my lips, I savor the nicotine as it flows through my blood. It's been a long time since I've enjoyed a smoke, and it'll likely be the last. I doubt Magnolia would approve of the bad habit.

I'm not a regular smoker, but every once in a while, it takes the edge off. Well, it helps. And right now, I'm feeling antsy. I have a bad feeling deep in my gut about shit around here. I wish my pet would agree to come back to Africa with me. I can protect her better there. Keep her and our child safe.

Americans ask too many questions when it comes to security. When they see weapons. Even now, many who walk past us stare, incapable of minding their own business.

The boys at the bottom of the step are currently playing some game called jacks. They toss a ball in the air and pick up as many of the jacks pieces as they can before the ball bounces a second time. It's a child's game but has them cheering and laughing, so who the fuck cares, I suppose.

When my phone vibrates in my pocket, I pull it out, and my blood runs cold.

Pet: Vega.

One word. Two syllables.

“Keep an eye out, yeah?” Jumping over the boys, I don’t wait for their reply as I crank the engine of my rental and speed towards Magnolia’s school.

I arrive just as a bell rings, and based on the time, the kids must be on lunch. Rushing through the throngs of children as they stream outside and then through the doors, I spot Magnolia in the front office.

My blood burns when I notice the crimson stain on her jaw and neck. “What happened?” Enveloping her cheeks in both of my hands, I maneuver her face until I find the source. Boiling rage overtakes me when I realize he has put his lips on hers, biting through her tender flesh. I decide right then that his life ends tonight.

Tears stain her cheeks as she grips my wrists. “Who is he, Cage?”

Cocooning her in my arms, I mutter only loud enough for her to hear, “A dead man, pet. A very dead man.” Vega was just going to die, but now, he’ll suffer. I’ll take everything he has left, and then I’ll take his life. He’ll never come for my woman and child again.

“Take me to your office,” I demand.

I don’t release her hand as she leads the way. Plenty of kids stare as we move amongst them. The closing of her door silences the youthful voices, and when I finally get a good look at her, I see she’s shaking.

“What did he say to you?” There is a couch by the window, and I force her to sit down while I go to the mini fridge behind her desk and grab her a bottle of her favorite cherry-flavored water. Opening it for her, I wrap her fingers

around the bottle and help her bring it to her lips. “Drink,” I command.

I wait until she finishes the bottle before sitting next to her. “What did he say, pet?”

“That you took everything from him, so he was going to take everything from you.” Terror crowds her eyes, the likes of which I’ve never witnessed in her before. “He threatened to cut the baby out of me.”

“He won’t touch you,” I vow.

“He said that maybe he’d take us both with him. That I was very pretty, and surely our child would be too.” The implication of selling them both on the market comes through clearly. Vega is known for trafficking tourists.

I’m so fucking glad she doesn’t flinch away from me when I reach up and brush my thumb across her busted lip. “How’d he do this?”

“He kissed me, then bit until he punctured the skin. Who is he, Cage?” Her question comes out more forceful now.

I slide a hand down my face, never intending for her to know about the shit I’ve done. I’m sure she suspects, but I never wanted it shoved in her face. “I’m a mercenary, Magnolia. I’m paid to do things others won’t.” Her eyes drop. “Vega’s father was a target many years ago. He was a drug kingpin in Venezuela that needed eliminating. The government paid me to take care of him. I should have killed the kid too.”

“Do you?” Her eyes meet mine now.

“What?”

“Kill children?”

I'm shaking my head before she's done. "Never. Children and innocent women are the exceptions to every rule I've ever made or broken."

"But you've killed women." It's not an accusation.

"Some women can be just as evil as men." It's the truth. Women have a tendency to be particularly cruel to children, and I won't let that stand.

"Vega wants revenge." I know she's talking to herself now. "What do we do?"

"*We* do nothing." *Christ*, she's a hell of a woman. "I exterminate Vega and continue to beg you to come back home with me where I can protect you and our children better." Because there will be more children. As many as I can convince her to have before she says no more.

"But—"

"No buts, pet. Vega is my problem. I will deal with him, and then I'll ensure no one is left to even think of coming after you or our kids." It's my new mission in life. Protect Magnolia at all costs. It's more critical than ever now that a threat has been made against her.

I'll make an example of Vega, and anyone who dares think of coming for her again will think twice.

"Now, come here." Dragging her over to my lap, I rub a soothing hand up and down her back as she lays her head on my shoulder. My entire world is in my arms, and I'll never let anything happen to them.

CHAPTER 12

Cage

“I need his number, Torres. He came for my girl.” Benito has his ear to the ground in damn near every country that has anything to do with anything. If there’s a family in charge of a drug trade, he knows them. Has likely shaken their hands. But we both have a special hate for the Vega family. I don’t know what his reason is, but if he doesn’t start cooperating with me, there’s going to be a problem that he won’t like.

“I understand. I’m working on it,” he says again.

“Not good enough. Put me in touch with the bastard.” I should have kept the bastard’s thugs’ phones, but I tossed them on my way to Magnolia. They must have gotten her name from someone at the event or the hotel staff because I know Joss’ agent has them travelling under aliases. “What if this was Daia?” The stepsister he won’t admit to claiming to the outside world. But the girl is scared of her own shadow; she’s confused about her beliefs. That fucking church broke her beyond repair. Benito is determined to fix her, though.

“You play a brazen game, Craven.” My phone dings and I see the information I’m looking for. “I expect to meet this girl of yours before you return home.” It’s not a question as he hangs up.

I've worked for Benny on at least a dozen jobs. Nobody pays better than him. Which was why it was so confusing to me that he never sent me after Daia. I'd have found her sooner than he did on his own.

Dialing Vega's number, I let it ring until he picks up before hanging up. Magnolia is inside cooking while Joss writes, so I have time to play with Vega before making it known it's me. Though, if he doesn't suspect, the fucker deserves far more than I'll do to him.

Dialing again, I wait. "What?" he snaps. A woman's voice can be heard in the background. *Fucking idiot*. "Who is this?" He has always been far more worried about getting his dick wet than getting the job done. I hang up again without saying a word.

"Cage?"

Standing up off the front steps, I stub out the cigarette I lit but never inhaled from and wrap my arms around her.

"Yes, pet?" A secret smile spreads her lips wide as a cute blush tinges her cheeks.

"You always call me that." My dick stirs at the arousal in her voice and the pebbling of her nipples behind her dress.

"Do you dislike it?" She shakes her head. "Do you enjoy it?"

She peers shyly up at me under her long dark lashes. "There's this growl in your chest that rumbles when you say it." I hadn't noticed. I'm glad she did. "It's very...possessive."

"Oh yeah?"

She moans a little as I slip my hand down to cup her ass. "It makes me think of very naughty things." *Christ*, I love how

innocent she is. “Makes me want to do them.” The whisper of her words is barely audible.

My entire body wakes up at her proclamation. “What kind of naughty things, pet?” I’ll give her anything she wants, so long as it won’t hurt the baby.

A timer inside goes off before she can answer me properly. “Oh! I have to get that.” My fiendish chuckle follows her back in as I step over the threshold and close the door, locking it as I redial Vega.

His composure has dissipated. “Who the fuck is this?” He continues to curse. To lose his cool. I carry on watching Magnolia’s domesticated display, humming to herself as she moves around the kitchen getting everyone’s dinner plated and served. Hanging up on Vega again, I decide, right now, that I’m going after him tonight. His terror ends before he has the chance to upset my pet any further and ruin the confidence that’s grown within her.

By the time dinner is done and cleaned up, Joss still hasn’t emerged from her writing, opting to eat in her room, and Magnolia is looking too exhausted to stand any longer.

“Bed, pet,” I instruct as I close the dishwasher.

“Hmm?” She can hardly keep her eyes open.

Scooping her up into my arms, I carry her to her room, where I changed the sheets earlier in the day. Placing her on her feet, I help her out of her clothes, kissing and nipping at bits of flesh as I reveal them. My eyes are drawn to her tiny bump, standing out against her fair skin. Freckles dot along her smooth body, and I want to lick each and every one of them.

After she’s slept.

Once she's rested, she's fair game, and I intend to take up as much of her time as possible once the school year is finished.

"Sleep now; I'll join you soon." She nods as she lays her head down on a pillow. Covering her naked body, I draw the curtains closed and turn the fan on that she has next to her bed.

She's constantly at war with the temperature, often vacillating between sweltering hot and shivering cold within the span of a minute. I have a lot to learn about my little love, and this pregnancy is showing me things I don't believe I'd have discovered for years to come.

Like her love of peanut butter and pickles isn't just a craving. She hates sleeping with the window open, no matter the temperature outside. Preferring to cool off with the fan. She has always had trouble sleeping, but it got worse after the shooting, and worse again after the attack that brought me into her life. The pregnancy drains her, unfortunately, so she falls asleep faster but often startles or screams herself awake multiple times a night.

I have yet to witness that one, and I'm hoping it's because she realizes she's safe with me. I'll never allow a damn thing to happen to her.

Back in the kitchen, Magnolia's phone beeps from the counter, and I look down to find a nasty message from her mother about how I kicked her out and that she is making a mistake having a baby, let alone with the likes of me. I want to tell the other woman to shut the fuck up, but I haven't a read on how Magnolia feels about the woman yet.

Deleting the vile remarks, I'd rather my girl be angry with me than upset over what she reads from the snake of a woman she calls mother.

I text Rio next.

I pay him, Javier, Clay, and Cake well to watch over my girl, so they jump at the chance to come sit on her front step and keep an eye out while I take care of Vega.

As the boys roll up, I see that Cake has a laptop under his arm, and I hand Javier the key. “Doors are locked. You go in there only if they’re in danger. No other reason, got it?” They all nod. “Don’t fall asleep, or I’ll keep the other half of this cash.” I hand them each a wad of bills.

“We got this, boss.” Rio salutes as they settle in on the stoop.

Climbing in my car, I regret leaving Magnolia again, but it must be done. Vega showing his face in Houston hadn’t been part of my plans. All I wanted to do was eliminate the man who sent Magnolia’s life into a tailspin, then claim her. Learning she was pregnant threw a wrench in my plans of simply dragging her off to Africa, but it certainly wasn’t a deal breaker. It never would be, not with her. It could have been another man’s baby, and the only shift I would have made was kicking him out of her life. I believe her when she says it’s mine.

The innocence in my woman can’t be faked. There isn’t a deceptive bone in her body. Her fucking mother, on the other hand, is another story. I suspect Magnolia is more like her father.

Shaking my head as I drive past Vega’s location, I’m not shocked to find a lack of security around the perimeter and briefly wonder about the inside. Torres couldn’t find any other men that were exclusively loyal to Vega like his father had. Which is more telling than not. Carlos Vega, Jr. is nothing like his father. He doesn’t instill fear or loyalty in any man.

Parking a few blocks away, I circle through the back of the beach house. Most of the homes on this street are empty, given the majority are Airbnbs. I'm sure more people will begin arriving for the end of the school year this weekend.

Slipping in through the back door is too easy, heightening my suspicions. My senses tingle as I search through the house, clearing the main floor before quietly taking the stairs to the second level. I hear snoring from the end of the hall, but my gut screams at me to check the door to the right of the stairs first.

I always listen to my gut. It's never steered me wrong before.

Tonight is no different as a bullet rips through my thigh.

A-fucking-gain.

Magnolia

“Cage!” I wake up screaming, my body in a complete panic as I reach for him, but he isn't here. Heart pounding, I hear Joss stumbling her way across the house to get to me before bursting through my door.

“What the hell?” she huffs, her eyes bloodshot and hair a mess on top of her head. “You okay, Mags?”

Frozen to the bone, I'm unsure of what I am. “Something's wrong.” Snatching one of Cage's shirts off the bench at the end of my bed, I pull it over my head. “Is Cage out there?”

She begins to shake her head before looking back out. “Nope. Thought I heard him leave a couple of hours ago, though.”

Going in search of my phone, I spy it on the counter. Immediately, I dial his number. It rings over and over and over, voicemail eventually picking up. Hitting end, I call again. Same result. I keep trying, and eventually, there’s an answer.

Only it’s not his voice. “Miss Taylor.” That man from school...Vega. His tone is detached. “How nice of you to call. Cage can’t come to the phone right now; he’s otherwise engaged.” The sound of flesh hitting flesh burns through the line, and bile rises up my throat.

“What are you doing to him?” I don’t think I want the answer, but I can’t help asking.

“Exactly what he did to my own father.” Which means nothing good.

“What do you want?” I doubt I have anything to trade for the man I’ve come to love so passionately, but I can’t allow this to happen.

“You know what I want.” His words are soft-spoken. To some women, they could be construed as seductive.

“Me,” I whisper, seeing Joss shaking her head back and forth. “Where are you?” There’s a shout in the background, followed by crashing and cursing. I know Cage is putting up more of a fight now.

“I’ll send you the address,” Vega says, then hangs up.

“I’m not a hero,” I breathe out. I don’t have the faintest idea how to rescue Cage. “What do I do?” My terrified eyes meet Joss’, and she looks as clueless as I do.

Great. We're going to make a hell of a pair. Hurrying to get dressed, I secure a dark-colored scarf over my bright red hair, figuring it'll make me harder to spot. Searching through Cage's bags, I'm hoping to find a weapon. Gun, knife...some sort of missile, I'm not picky. All I find is extra ammo and a pocketknife. Slipping the knife into my pocket, I find Joss standing in the front doorway, staring down at something on our steps.

"What is it?" I call out, and she steps aside. "Cake!" All four boys startle awake, jumping up like they've been doused with a bucket of cold water.

"What? We're up!" Cake shouts.

"Cage is in trouble," I state as we step outside. They all stand at attention, ready to do as we ask. Tilting my head to the side, an idea forms; not a good one, but one nonetheless. "Do you have any firecrackers or cherry bombs?"

They share a knowing look while Joss silently wonders about my sanity. It's written all over her face. "Yeah..." Cake hedges.

"Good. Go get 'em all."

"This isn't going to end well," my friend mutters as the boys scatter.

Within minutes, everyone is in my Jeep, a box of cherry bombs in the back, and boys ready for a fight. Insisting I let them come along, they made a few calls, and now there's going to be a dozen other friends meeting with us.

A pregnant woman, a romance author, and a group of teens to the rescue. Sounds like the beginning of a seriously bad movie, but it's all we've got.

The drive to the bay doesn't take long, but the silence is deafening. I let everyone out where Rio told the other guys to meet us with their box of explosives. Rolling up slowly to the house, I park across the street. I was told they needed five minutes to set everything up.

My phone is on mute in my sweater pocket while they listen in, too. One of the older boys suggested I try to figure out how many men are in the house when I get in there. I have no idea if the distraction will last long enough for me to get the gun someone gave me to Cage or not. But I know if he has it, he'll be able to handle the rest.

"Here goes nothing," I mutter as fear wobbles my legs while I walk. I don't know how I'm still on my feet. My heart pounds so furiously it's making me dizzy, and my stomach rolls like I've shoved myself on the tumble dry setting in the dryer.

Approaching the door, I have no idea if I'm supposed to knock or not, so I stand like an idiot for a full minute before trying the knob.

"This is a bad idea, Magnolia." Mumbling to myself helps calm my nerves. I leave the door open as I step into the house.

A low light emanates from the back of the building, so I head there, gently patting under my bump to make sure the small pistol is still tucked away. Held up by yoga pants and sheer will.

"Cage!" I gasp as I see him on his knees, blood trickling from the side of his face and pooling on the floor. Dropping down in front of him, I ignore the other men in the room, obviously not worrying that I'm a threat.

“Are you okay?” I wrap my arms around him, having slipped the knife I found into my hand, dropping it into his grasp.

“What are ya doing here, pet?” Oh, he’s angry. Very angry.

“I couldn’t leave you on your own,” I cry, tears falling freely from my eyes.

“Enough!” Vega barks, and hands drag me away from Cage. A steel glint enters his eyes, and even though he doesn’t show an outward reaction, on the inside, I can see him plotting a lot of mayhem.

“Ouch! You goon!” I shove the man off me, falling to my knees with a shout. I glance behind me to find two other men. I mutter the number, hoping my backup hears me. “Let him go,” I snap, my own anger spiking, fighting for dominance over the fear I’m feeling.

Vega and his men laugh. They think it’s comical that I could ever get Cage free. But they don’t see what I see. Cage has already sliced through the rope around his wrist and is just waiting for the right moment to attack.

“He’s going to lose the same things I did,” Vega threatens, reaching into his waistband for a gun, but the cherry bombs blast off as Rio and his guys throw them at the house. Windows burst, small explosions light the night, and when Cage gets to his feet, I quickly retrieve the gun from my pants.

Vega’s eyes widen with more fear than even I was feeling as I hand the weapon over to Cage. Both the men beside him drop to the ground with pinpoint holes in their heads as I duck and cover my ears.

I hear Vega whimper before a snapping sound occurs, and everything seems to stop at once. The explosions, the rage, the

fear. Gunfire. Silence fills the air, and I'm afraid to look up.

When I feel a hand on my elbow, I scream so loud my ears ring. As soon as I'm in my man's arms, however, everything is better. Cage is alive. A little worse for the wear, but alive.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" he growls, picking me up in his arms and slamming my back against a wall in another room, away from the dead bodies. "Are you fucking insane?" His lips find mine.

I don't get to answer because he devours me. Pouring all his frustration and worry into the moment. I swallow back a moan as his tongue forces my mouth open. Licking and nipping, he sucks on me, claims me in a way he hasn't before. There are no barriers holding him back this time.

Right now, Cage is raw, and it shows. He's wild. Formidable. Primal.

Exactly how I want him.

Cage

Using my hips to plaster her against the wall, I take her face in my hands. My beautiful little savior. "I could have fucking lost you, Magnolia," I bark at her; she doesn't even flinch. She's my fucking miracle. "Do you understand that?" Shaking her a little, her eyes widen, but her mouth turns sensual as she watches me.

Slanting my lips across hers again, I know I need to get her out of here, burn this fucking house to the ground, but I can't

stop touching my little pet. “Don’t ever fucking do something like this again!”

“Magnolia! Fucking answer me.”

Her hands run up and down my chest as her eyes search mine. “Take me home, Cage.” Jesus, fuck, this woman. She’s a contradiction and nothing like I believed her to be. “Take me to *your* home, Cage.”

My eyes widen at her request. Maybe it’s the adrenaline, maybe it’s what she wants. I don’t care. I’m not letting her take it back now. She’s mine forever.

“I fucking love you.” I hiss the words, barely able to get them past my lips. They feel heavy on my tongue, foreign. I’ve never said them to anyone before, and I’m going to have to get used to saying them because I know she’ll want to hear them as often as possible.

“I know you do.” Shoving my hands off her face, she buries her mouth in my neck, kissing along my throat before her teeth tug on my ear, and she murmurs, “I love you too, Cage.”

Holding her tighter, we exit the house. To my surprise, Rio and his friends have caused quite the stir. Spotting Joss, I set Magnolia on her feet next to her friend. “Take her home,” I order. Magnolia frowns as Joss agrees.

“What are you going to do?” Magnolia questions, not willing to let me go yet.

“Gotta take care of the cleanup here, pet.” Leaning down to kiss the spot below her ear that makes her shiver, I whisper, “When I walk in your door, I want you in your bed, stripped naked, ass in the air, because tonight, I’m owning you in a way you haven’t felt yet.”

Her face flames as bright as her hair, and her breathing increases as she nibbles innocently on her lip. With an emphatic nod, she leaves with Joss, Cake, Clay, and Javier. Rio and his other friends stay behind to help out.

“Let’s make this quick, boys.” After instructing them to collect everything they brought with them, I don’t allow them to enter the house with me.

As I collect my weapons that Magnolia brought with her, I wipe down anything with my fingerprints, douse the bodies with gasoline, and light it on fire. I’ll send the owners a check in the mail to cover the cost of their house later.

Sending the boys away, I linger a bit. Waiting until I’m confident Vega and his cohorts are good and burned before leaving, just as I register that sirens are on their way. I knew it wouldn’t be long. I’m surprised the cops weren’t called sooner when the cherry bombs started popping off.

With a quick stop on the way back to Magnolia’s to discard my weapons, I head back to her. Anticipation running through my veins. My dick is already hard as a rock, and by this time tomorrow, we’ll be on our way to South Africa, where I’ll get to shower Magnolia with as much love as I possibly can. She’ll be freer there than she ever was here.

CHAPTER 13

Cage

Everything is quiet as I enter the girls' townhouse and lock the door behind me. Joss can't be heard typing away on her computer like she usually is at this hour. But I see the soft glow of light shining from below Magnolia's bedroom door, and it ignites a fire in me.

Opening her door slowly, my eyes swiftly roam the room before settling on her. The blinds are closed, the fan is whirring from the dresser instead of the night table, and a lamp emits light from the edge of her closet. Her bed is cleared of everything but two pillows and her supple body. Her curves are rounder with the weight of our child, and a wave of possessiveness hits me when she turns her head to look at me.

Her green eyes, more breathtaking than a million emeralds, fix on me, beckoning me. Calling me with their siren's song as her ass pops up in the air before she enticingly rises into a sitting position, her ankles crossed and profile seductive, making my cock twitch.

"Cage." She says my name like a fucking prayer, and I feel like a king. *Her king*. "I missed you." How is such a sweet confession so damn seductive? My hunger for her grows to a fever pitch, and I can't restrain myself anymore.

Kicking off my boots, I rip my shirt over my head before attacking my belt and jeans. The heavy material drops with a thunk as I step out of them. Toeing off my socks, I settle in behind her. An inch of space separates us, and heat radiates off her body in waves.

As I brush the silky curls away from her neck, she leans back into me, and my dick pulses, leaking pre-cum from the tip. Wrapping one hand around the base, I squeeze until it hurts so I don't release too soon once I'm inside my girl.

"How much?" I grunt, kissing along the creamy column of her throat, biting down when I reach her pulse. Lifting a knee to sit beside her hip, I use my body to press her down on the bed. My cock nestling right between her perfect round globes, rubbing against her beautiful little rosebud.

"More than I thought I could." Her ass grinds against my shaft, rubbing up and down and flicking at my dick hardware. A pulse pounds in my temple as tiny beads of sweat pop out along my neck. I need inside her.

Gripping a pillow, I shove it under her hips, protecting her precious belly. "Gonna let me inside my little treasure?" Licking along the shell of her ear makes her shiver as she stutters out a yes. "Give me your hands," I demand when she's face down on the bed.

Borrowing the tie off her robe from the floor, I gently wrap it around her wrists and command her, "Don't move." She purrs in response. "I need to taste you, pet. Open up these perfect thighs for me."

Her legs slowly spread apart at my request. Molding her ass cheeks with rough fingers, I open her wide before my very eyes. Her core pulses and grows wet from my inspection.

Brushing a finger through her lips, they part like the delicate petals of a flower, ripping an animalistic groan from my chest.

“So fucking beautiful,” I mutter, my heated breath on her damp pussy causing her to moan again. Covering her with an open-mouthed kiss, she cries out.

I feast on her, licking, sucking, plundering my tongue inside her tight hole, forcing her to take everything I give her before bellowing out my name. When I feel her body tightening up, I drag my tongue from her clit all the way up to her little asshole before biting into one of her fleshy cheeks. Leaving teeth marks on her fair skin.

Stroking my hands up her body, I take hold of her tied wrists with one hand and guide my dick into her entrance with the other before slamming all the way home. “Cage!” Her head has turned into the sheet as she screams out my name, muffling the erotic cry.

“Darling. Darling pet, you taste so fucking sweet.” Licking my way up her back, I nibble on her bound wrists. Spattering kisses along her shoulders, holding myself inside her welcoming warmth, absorbing the feeling of heaven. Sweet, pure heaven is what my pet is.

Reaching one hand around her front, I play with her shuddering nipples, pinching and twisting the tight tips as she tries and fails to remain still. Her impatience makes my cock jump and spurt inside of her.

Leaning forward, I bite harshly along her throat, leaving teeth marks. “If you didn’t carry my baby in you already, I’d be knocking you up again.” Pressing on the small of her back, her hips dart back and up higher, allowing me to sink deeper.

Digging in, I start to move, slowly withdrawing from her scorching cavern before pushing back in. It's a slippery slope. I want to fuck into her like a wild animal, but goddamn, I need her feeling the same way as I do. I need Magnolia to feel as barbarous as I do.

Greedily, selfishly, I continue the teasing pace, nearly breaking my own will until I feel her juicy cunt lock down on my dick like a vise. It feels like I've been captured.

"Cage!" she screams at me, throwing a nasty glare over her shoulder. "Stop teasing me!" Her fingers grab hold of the trail of hair leading from my belly button to my dick in warning.

An amused rumble shakes my chest. "You only had to ask, pet." Gripping her hips in both my hands, I anchor her to the bed and start pounding mercilessly. Her shocked cry is filled with carnality.

Pummeling into her harder with each thrust, my face contorts and twists as my release bubbles up within my balls, screaming to be set loose. I don't let it, though. I can't. Not yet. Not until Magnolia is on the precipice with me.

Her hips begin to squirm, her walls tighten around me; she's losing control. A swat on her ass settles her right down until I feel her pussy flood my dick with liquid heat. "Fuck, pet, you liked that?" She moans in response, glancing at me over her shoulder, gnawing on her lip. I do it again. Her rounded ass jiggles, and I can't hold back any longer.

I come deep inside her body. Reaching around her front to pinch her clit, and she skyrockets with me. "Cage." It's barely a whisper, more like an invocation, and I hear all her love for me in the single word.

“Pet,” I growl, latching onto her shoulder as pleasure detonates through my body. She does this to me. Turns me into a rutting animal. “Fucking love you,” I proclaim, kissing her. Feeding her my tongue before licking across her flesh, sucking her lip in my mouth, and biting in the same spot she was moments ago. “Fucking perfect, little pet.”

Untying her hands, she falls to the side, then I pull her up the bed until she’s comfortable. Rolling her to her back, I take her lips adoringly. Our hearts beat against each other, a perfect rhythm as her hands explore my powerful body. Fingers twist in my chest hair as she scratches her way down my frame, holding me tight.

“Never letting you go,” she murmurs, her eyes sleepy.

“Wouldn’t let you go if you tried, pet.” Pulling from her body, I drag the comforter across her, letting her snuggle into its warmth as I slip on my boxers and make my way to the kitchen to get her a drink.

After securing the house, I return to find her, unsurprisingly, sound asleep. To many, she appears peaceful, but I recognize the tension in her lips and brows. Despite the connection we just shared, I can tell she’s in the throes of a bad dream.

Crawling into the bed behind her, I encase her with my whole body, whispering soothing words into her ear and rubbing my hands up and down her flesh. Massaging her hips and thighs until, finally, she lets out a deep breath and relaxes back against me.

“Love you, Cage.” She grumbles her words, and I’m not sure she’s aware she said them, but I bask in them all the same. There’s nothing I won’t do for this woman, including helping her fight her demons.

CHAPTER 14

Magnolia

South Africa is a wondrous place to experience. The salty breeze off the Indian Ocean, the majestic fresh air, the wildness of the earth, it's a reminder of how truly small we, as humans, are. I'm able to breathe when I'm here. In a way I've never been able to elsewhere.

Despite my history in Richards Bay and the teacher center there, this feels like home. I have a sneaking suspicion that has everything to do with Cage, thankfully. He was quick to charter a private plane for the three of us because, of course, Jossilyn came too, and after the longest flight either of us had been on, we finally made it here.

Cranky, hungry, and exhausted, but nothing matters as I sink my feet into the sand of our private beach. I missed this last time I was here. I had no idea that if I'd gone through Cage's back door, I would have been just a few hundred feet from the ocean. The surf is calm, allowing the water to wash over my toes without the force from waves knocking me on my butt.

"Pet." His demanding tone never fails to light my body up like stars in the sky. "Come sit." As soon as I agreed to come home with him, he hired some local kids to build me my own

cabana so I could relax out here and be protected from the harsh rays of the sun when I needed it.

“I wish I’d stayed,” I spin around and confess. I truly do. It’s so magnificent here that it takes my breath away. But the biggest draw is Cage himself.

“Everything happens for a reason, pet.” I love that about him. In spite of his dark nature, he remains an optimist.

“Joss sleeping?” She’d looked like a zombie when we landed.

“Crashed before her head hit the pillow.” He laughs because she spent the entire flight typing furiously. She’s working on a new secret project, and I have a feeling she’s recreating mine and Cage’s story with her usual flair.

Holding a hand out for me, Cage helps me onto the elevated cabana floor and into the round lounge bed. He told me he had it built so high so that when the tide came in, we didn’t have to move it if we didn’t want to, but it’s light enough that he can take care of it on his own. Though I don’t understand how that is possible, it’s quite large.

Dragging him down with me, I cuddle into his body, head resting on his chest, leg thrown across his, and I close my eyes, allowing the warmth of the sun to relax me into a state of rest. Not quite asleep but not fully awake, either.

It’s not until the rays of the sun have disappeared and I register callused fingers gliding across my thigh, my leg being lifted, that I begin to rouse. “Cage?” I croak, and he chuckles, his comforting breath blowing across my bare skin.

I’m turned on my side, with one leg pushed up towards my chest, leaving everything between my legs wide open for his

perusal. “What are you doing?” I moan as two of his fingers slip through my lips, entering me and massaging my walls.

His stare is more intense than a caress as he observes the way I react to his touch. “Close your eyes, pet.” His husky voice grows deep, dark, with a hint of something I can’t identify. “That’s my sweet pet.” I shiver when he licks across my clit, flicking it roughly and adding a third finger to my hole.

Pumping furiously, Cage growls when I arch into his touch, biting the underside of my ass, not releasing it until I whine. I’ll be bruised there tomorrow, and that thrills me. “Nice and easy now,” he directs before I feel his fingers drag out of my sex and trail back to my asshole.

“Cage!” I gasp when he pushes with one finger, easily slipping in from how soaked he is from his ministrations to my pussy. “Cage, no...” I know I should tell him to stop, and I start to, but then the burn turns into something more as he wiggles his finger around.

“You’ll like it, pet, trust me.” And I do; I trust him more than anyone else.

“I do,” I squeal as he adds another finger.

“Scream for me, pet, loud as you want.” He chuckles when I glare at him. “Nobody is going to hear you.” He adds a third finger, and his other hand pushes my leg higher, exposing me further. “I’m going to fuck this ass so damn good you’ll be begging for more.” I doubt that, but then, it’s Cage. I’ll always want more of him.

“I don’t know...” I’m hesitant. I’m still so innocent when it comes to bedroom things, but he makes me want to do everything he suggests.

Getting to his knees, he leans forward for a kiss, and I give it to him. Sucking on his tongue when he pushes it past my lips, nipping the end. He hisses and then growls. “I like when you bite me, pet.”

“You’re such a fiend,” I tease when I feel his fingers retreating and being replaced by his cock head. “Oh god.” He’s not going to fit.

“Not God, pet. Cage. You scream my name, not his.” His gaze narrows on me before looking down to watch my ass gently swallow his dick.

“It hurts.” My voice sounds whiny.

“Focus on your breathing,” he grits out, hips pumping slowly, getting deeper with each plunge of his body. “Look at those beautiful tits, shaking, teasing. I can’t wait until they’re leaking with milk for our baby. Every time I fuck you, I’ll be sucking them until they hurt so good.”

“Fuck.” His brows lift at my use of the word. I don’t say it often. “Why does it feel good?”

“Cuz it’s me, pet. Everything I do to you will always feel good.” I don’t doubt him for a second.

In an unexpected but expert move, Cage flips us over so I’m kneeling on him, facing away and looking out at the ocean. The action forces me to sit on his dick, shoved so deeply in my ass that I can hardly breathe.

Dropping forward, I place my hands on his knees. My hair hangs like a curtain covering my face and tickles across his balls. A full-body shiver works through him. His strong hands move up and down my back, massaging the knots in my shoulders before he pulls me down further.

“Oh, Cage.” I can’t help the moan. This shouldn’t feel as good as it does. *Should it?*

“Ride my cock, pet. Fucking own it with this tight-as-a-vice ass.” With one hand, he fists my hair and drags me back while the other slaps across my cheeks.

“Dammit, Cage.” My body takes over, anticipating what to do before I do. Leaning back, I place all my weight in his lap while pumping my hips front and back, circling them, back... and forth. I find a rhythm that has him cursing and slapping my ass harder with each thrust.

I know he’s about to lose it when he pistons his hips up in tune with mine and grips my ankles so tight my feet tingle. “Cage,” I gasp, my body feeling like it’s on fire. “Cage, please.” I don’t know what I’m begging him for.

Reaching down between our legs, I grasp his balls, gently rolling them in my hand until I feel him stiffen and powerfully thrust up once more so I cry out. Tightening my grip and tugging as he explodes inside of me, I let out a yelp when his hand snakes around and slaps my pussy, repeatedly hitting my clit each time until I shatter.

My body jerks, lighting up with bliss. I tense as I feel him finally relax underneath me, and I scream so loud and long I might just lose consciousness.

It’s not until he’s wrapped me in his arms and turned us to lay on our sides that I come back down to earth and see and feel again.

“You’re my fucking miracle, pet.” Leaning down to kiss me, it’s all I remember before I pass out for the next sixteen hours, more at peace and happier than I’ve ever been in my life.

Cage

Glaring at any man who dares look at my woman, I'm edgy, waiting for an attack in a fucking maternity clinic for no damn reason. Today, we get to see our baby. It'll be my first time seeing him or her, first time hearing their heartbeat. It's about to be real.

Despite the fact Magnolia has been here for a month already, and I feel our child kick every time I touch my pet, I can't get enough of them. Each night, I fall asleep with Magnolia in my arms after making love to her until she's too exhausted to do anything but sleep. I've gotten the little vixen addicted to anal sex too. She's shy as fuck about asking for it, but I make her, every time, because I never want her wary of asking me for anything.

We've begun building an addition to my house to have a nursery right next to our room. That should be ready in time for the birth. Her father and his new girlfriend will be here in a couple of months before the arrival and staying for a month afterwards. Magnolia is both nervous and excited about the visit.

After a message she received from her mother about a week after we arrived home, explaining what a waste she was, I warned the woman never to contact Magnolia again and changed the number. My girl would never have asked me to, but taking the choice out of her hands had her crying with relief for the longest time. Now, when the older woman wants to speak to or know about her daughter, all conversations are

diverted through me. So far, there's been two. Both of which I ended when the bitch started getting rude with my pet.

"Magnolia Taylor?" I growl at the use of the name. Magnolia wants a large beach wedding after the baby is born. Her excuse is that she's only doing it once, so she wants everything to be how she always dreamed.

Following the nurse to a room, I help Magnolia up on the table as the door is closed. "You feeling okay?" I ask because she looks nervous.

"I'm fine, Cage." She tugs me down by my shirt collar for a kiss before we're interrupted.

"Good morning, Miss Taylor." The doctor enters with a cheerful smile, ignoring my growl. "I'm Dr. Bernice Callaghan. We're here for a look at the baby, then?"

"Yes." Magnolia directs me to the side as the woman asks her questions about how she's feeling and if she's taking her vitamins and offers up suggestions about the heartburn Magnolia has been experiencing for the last week.

"This is Dad, then?" I grunt, making Magnolia giggle.

"Forgive him, he's grouchy that I won't marry him until after the baby arrives." Her hand rubs up and down my chest, as the doctor lifts her shirt and squirts some gel on her stomach.

"My husband was the same way." She winks. "Don't worry, I don't scare so easy."

Ignoring everything else they say as an image pops up on the screen, my heart stops when I see our baby for the first time. Their strong heartbeat echoes around the room as the doctor moves the wand around, taking pictures and measurements.

“A beautiful little nugget. Healthy as can be. Whatever you’re doing, Magnolia, keep it up. Did you want to know the sex?” Bernice looks between the two of us.

I blink down at Magnolia. It’s up to her. “Whatever you want, pet.” She looks so uncertain.

Sensing Magnolia’s indecision, Bernice says, “You know what, I have to go grab something. Why don’t you two take a minute, watch your little one swim around on the screen, and I’ll be right back.” Nodding my gratitude to her, I brush a knuckle across Magnolia’s cheek as the woman leaves.

“There’s no right or wrong answer, pet. We can wait.” Until that baby is delivered, Magnolia is one hundred percent my complete focus and concern.

“I know. I want to know, but I also don’t. I’m just torn.” Her fingers reach out to touch the screen of our child’s tiny face, tracing their features. “What do you want?”

That question is a trap no matter how I answer it. “As long as they’re healthy, I’m happy either way.” She gives me a funny look, rolling her eyes. “Alright, fine. A boy would be ideal because then I don’t have to worry as much as I would with a daughter. *But,*” I say when she narrows her eyes on me, “a little girl, looking just like her mama, wouldn’t be so terrible either.”

“If we find out now, we could prepare. If we wait, we’ll have a lot of shopping to do later.” I’ll give her that. “Stop being agreeable, Cage.”

Laughing, the door opens again, and the doctor has a manila envelope for us. “I can see you haven’t a clue what you want to do.” We both nod. “I printed the results for you. Open

it or don't. Either way, your nugget is as perfect as can be, and I'll see you again in a month."

Thanking the woman, I help Magnolia up before we collect the information, and hold her hand all the way out to my Jeep. We drive straight home and down to the cabana after seeing that Joss is busy writing on the back deck. She gives a passing wave, but she's deep in concentration. Moving here has unlocked something in her, and she's been a writing machine ever since.

Sitting together quietly, with Magnolia between my thighs and holding the envelope, we stay that way for a few hours before she finally tears the top off and pulls out the paper to reveal our biggest secret yet. We spend the next few hours making love in the setting sun, the sound of the waves the backdrop to our own beautiful concert.

Epilogue

CAGE

Two Years Later.

We're back to where it began, in Texas for the weekend. Over the past two years, I've watched my stunning wife blossom from the insecure woman she was to a fucking powerhouse who takes no prisoners. After the birth of our first child, Magnolia got it in her head that she needed something else to do. She needed to contribute...

I was happy with her being barefoot and pregnant on our beachfront property.

After Joss and her man moved out and built their own haven not far away, my pet began modeling again. I fucking hated it. Wanted to burn every camera to ever capture her beauty. Once she saw how aggravated it made me, she started only doing poses from the back and never with other men. She tried doing a few with women, but as it turns out, my jealousy doesn't discriminate about who is putting their hands on her. It's women as well.

"Oh god, Cage, that feels divine." Her head leans against my shoulder, her warm breath gracing my neck as she looks up at me.

"You two are still so adorable." An author, Annelise something, sighs as she wraps an arm around Joss.

“Do you want to sit, pet?” Brushing my lips across hers, I keep my eyes on her as she shakes her head. I knew that would be her answer; doesn’t mean I have to like it.

“I’ll only be getting up soon.” Cradling her once again expanding belly in my supportive hands, taking the pressure off her petite body as I hold her against my chest, is an honor I discovered she enjoyed near the end of her last pregnancy.

“Say the word, and we’ll leave.” I always give her an out. The MMM signing in Texas is the only one she attends and only ever with Jossilyn. However, since becoming a rights agent, my Magnolia has been in high demand amongst these colleagues.

The one thing she told me she would always do was represent anyone who wanted it. Too many cliques exist in the industry, and she wants to ensure everyone gets a fighting chance. And she’s done one hell of a job. She’s got a couple dozen clients and has a hard time saying no to new authors.

Which is why I’ve somehow become her assistant. Poor Braxton is in the same boat as he helps Joss with her own books. They’re the leading ladies, and we’ve become their underlings. Though I know Brax doesn’t mind it any more than I do.

Every once in a while, he and I will go on a job together, and the girls will spend the entire time we’re gone in the cabana by the sea while the children play like mud people. When we leave, there is no schedule to their lives, nothing but the two of them with our two children, Joss and Braxton’s child, and a lot of laughter. We set up cameras so we could watch them. It alleviates our stress.

As the line at Joss’ table grows, so too does my wife’s exhaustion. She’s six months along, carrying twins, and I

know she misses our other two boys as they spend the weekend with her father back in Arizona. He's flying back to South Africa with them the day after we arrive home. Magnolia will need time to recover, and I'll need time spent between her luscious thighs before the tiny terrors absorb all her time again.

Never in my wildest imagination did I envision this would be my life just because I saved a ginger-haired bombshell in a hairy situation, but there isn't a fucking thing I would change.

The End!

Thank you for reading Cage & Magnolia, I hope you loved their story and would consider leaving a review. If you're interested in Jossilyn's story, you can preorder [Untouchable](#) now.

Want more of the MMM signing books, check out the [MAYHEM MAKERS WEBSITE](#).

About the Author

KL Donn is a USA Today Bestselling Author addicted to coffee and tacos. As a Canadian author she writes in multiple romance genres and isn't afraid of a new challenge. She brings you stories that will break your heart and heal it all in one breath. With over 60 published titles since 2015, she has many more planned for the future and enjoys connecting with readers.

On her off time, she's bingeing Supernatural, Grey's Anatomy, and raising 4 amazing children. Married for more than half her life, she experienced her own happily ever after with husband Steve, at just 17. You'll find them both at book signings once or twice a year, she's the shy one, he's there to tell you all about the books his wife writes and how proud he is of her.

Currently she is diving back into the Adair Empire world with the children and has plans to keep the series going with generations of dark stories to come.

Krystal loves connecting with readers so please feel free to get in touch with her at any of the platforms below:

[KL's Deviant Readers](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#)

Or follow her releases on:

[BookBub](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Newsletter](#)

Also by KL Donn

Damaged Love Series

[Unraveling Love](#) | Broken Love | Fractured Love | Tarnished Love

Decker Brothers Duet

[Wanted](#) | [Time Bomb](#)

The Throwaways

[Cage & Magnolia](#) | [Dorian & Clementine](#)

The Odessa Organization

[Anton](#) | [Vasyl](#) | [Petro](#) | [Forgive My Sins](#)

Adair Legacy

[Broken Princess](#) | [Tortured Duchess](#) | [Killer Prince](#) | [Delicate Dame](#) | [Dark Knight](#)

Mafia Made

[His Kingdom](#) | [His Jailbird](#) | [His Fight](#) | [His Solace](#) | [His Protection](#) | [His Torment](#)

Task Force 779

[Missing in Action](#) | [Explosive Encounter](#) | [Nowhere To Run](#) | [Dangerous Affair](#)

Neighbor Novels

[Possessive Neighbor](#)

Power of Vashchenko

[Taking Emmaline](#)

Uncontrolled Heroes

[A Girl Worth Fighting For](#) | [The Girl Who was Meant to be Mine](#) | [Loving the Girl
in the Tutu](#)

Daniels Family

[Until Arsen](#) | [With Kol](#) | [Embers Falling](#) | [Before Noah](#) | [Dreaming of California](#)

Those Malcolm Boys

[Obsessive Addiction](#) | [Accidental Obsession](#) | [Arrogantly Obsessed](#)

Adair Empire

[King](#) | [Luther](#) | [Castiel](#) | [Atticus](#) | [Carver](#) | [Trinity](#)

Timeless Love

[Once Upon A Time](#) | [Happily Ever After](#)

In His Arms Series

[Safe, In His Arms](#) | [Bullied, In His Arms](#) | [Coached, In His Arms](#)

Naughty Tales

[Dirty](#) | [Treat Me](#) | [Snowed In](#) | [Cuffed](#)

The Protectors Series

[Keeley's Fight](#) | [Emily's Protectors](#) | [Kennedy's Redemption](#)

The Possessed Series

[Owned](#) | [Consumed](#) | [Unrestrained](#) | [Grinched](#)

The Hogan Brother's

[One Chance](#) | [One Choice](#) | [Unchained](#)

Love Letters

[Dear Killian](#) | [Dear Gage](#) | [Dear Maverick](#) | [Dear Desmond](#) | [Dear Lena](#) | [Dear Steele](#)

Stand Alone Books

[Holding Out For A Hero](#) | [Love Comes After](#) | [Saving Their Princess](#) | [London's Calling](#) | [Cowboy Bodyguard](#) | [Holly's Knight](#) | [Last Chance Love](#) | [Dear, Soldier of Mine](#)

[Books in KU](#) | [Free Books](#) | [Boxsets](#)