

*The Order of the Cronus Series*

# *Cerberus*

*M.E. Clayton*

# Cerberus



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Published by M.E. Clayton

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## Author's Note



Just a couple of things before I let you go and get your read on. While I am doing my best to work with better editing and proofreading software, all my books are solo, independent works. I write my books, proofread my books, edit my books, create the covers, etc. I have one beta who gives me feedback on my stories, but other than that, all my books are independent projects.

That being said, I apologize, in advance, for the typos, grammar inconsistencies, or any other mistakes I may make. Since writing is strictly a hobby for me, I haven't looked into commitments in regard to publishers, editors, etc. My hope is that my stories are enjoyable enough that a few mistakes, here and there, can be overlooked. However, if you're a stickler for grammar, my books are probably not for you.

Also, I am an avid reader-I mean an *AVID* reader. I love to read above any other hobby. However, the only downside to my reading obsession is when I fall in love with a series, but I have to wait for the additional books to come out. So, because I feel that disappointment down to my soul, when I started publishing my works, I vowed to publish all books in my series all at once. No waiting here...LOL. Now, the exception to that will be if enough readers request additional stories based off the standalone, such as in *Facing the Enemy*. At that point, if I decide to move forward with a requested series, I will make sure all additional books are available all at once. As much as this is a hobby for me, I am writing these books for all of you, as well as myself.

Thank you, for everything!

## Contact Me



I really appreciate you reading my book and I would love to hear from you! Now, unfortunately, because I do have a full-time job and one part-time job, plus a family that I love spending time with, at this time, I'm afraid it would be very hard for me to maintain a multitude of social media sites. However, for the sites I do participate in, here are my social media coordinates:

[Website](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Email](#)

[Newsletter](#)



# Dedication



For Kam –  
For Everything.

# Playlist



## *Series Theme*

Devil's Playground – The Riggs

## *Typhon*

You – Alex Condliffe

The Time of Our Lives – The Venice Connection

Prisoner – Raphael Lake, Aaron Levy & Daniel Ryan  
Murphy

Feel It – Michele Morrone

Bad At Love – Maddy Benson

## *Cerberus*

I See Red – Everybody Loves An Outlaw

Teardrop – Massive Attack

Expectations – Lauren Jauregui

All The Things She Said – t.A.T.u

You Are The Reason – Calum Scott ft. Leona Lewis

## *Basilisk*

Another Wave – Raphael Lake

Here Comes The Thunder – Lee Richardson, Jonathan  
Murill & Tom Ford

Lost In Your Eyes – Theo Chinara & Craig Hardy

Body Say – Demi Lovato

Burning Desire – Lana Del Ray

**Sphinx**

I Hate The Way – G-Easy ft. black bear

Underdog – Banks

Collide – Justine ft. Tyga

It's You – Ali Gatie

Iris – Goo Goo Dolls

**Siren**

I Am the Fire – Ghost Monroe

The Hunted – The Rigs

Here She Comes Again – Royksopp

Finish Line – SATV Music

Last One Standing – Skylar Gray ft. Polo G, Mozzy &  
Eminem

# Prologue



## *The Order of the Cronus*

This Non-Disclosure and Confidentiality Agreement is entered into as of the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ by and between \_\_\_\_\_ as an individual \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ as the Respective Party, The Order of the Cronus.

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### OBLIGATION TO MAINTAIN CONFIDENTIALITY

**Confidentiality:** At all times, for the duration of life, the Member shall hold in strictest confidence, and not use, except for the benefit of the Organization, or to disclose to any person, firm, or corporation without the prior written authorization of every Organization member, any of the Organization's Confidential Information.

**Term:** The Member shall maintain the confidentiality and security of the Confidential Information until the earlier of: (i) such time as all Confidential Information disclosed under this agreement becomes made public by the deaths of every living member.

### AMENDMENTS

No amendment to this agreement will be effective under any circumstances.

### ASSIGNMENT AND DELEGATION

**No Assignment:** The Member may not assign any of his rights under this agreement.

**No Delegation:** The Member may not delegate any performances under this agreement.

### SEVERABILITY

If any provision in this agreement is, for any reason, held to be invalid, illegal, or unenforceable in any respect, that invalidity, illegality, or unenforceability will not affect any other provisions of this agreement, but this agreement will be construed as if the invalid, illegal, or unenforceable provisions had never been contained in this agreement, unless the deletion of those provisions would result in such a material change that would cause completion of the transactions contemplated by this agreement to be unreasonable.

Complete Severability is determined by the Organization as a whole, all present members.

### PRINCIPLES

1. Confidentiality
2. Loyalty
3. Prosperity

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Member Signature: \_\_\_\_\_



# Chapter 1

## *Ross~*

My phone was on silent, but I knew it was lighting up like a sonofabitch. While Banks was always calling and texting me, he knew my senior year at Hales University was going to be different. He knew that I was going to be under pressure like never before. Still, from the way he's been calling me these past few days, he's either forgotten or didn't care.

*My bet was on the latter.*

Being a Carmichael wasn't an easy thing to do. The last name came with a mountain of restrictions, conditions, and demands. From birth, our lives have revolved around a series of agendas and obligations, and the weight of being a Carmichael wasn't going to lessen any time soon.

My father was Mitchel Carmichael, but everyone knew him as U.S. Senator Mitchel Carmichael, and he never let us forget it. My mother was Margaret Carmichael, and she was exactly what you'd expect her to be as a senator's wife. She was the perfect socialite and social crusader for my father's political agendas. So, yeah, being a Carmichael wasn't easy.

However, I've always been up to the task.

My brother, Banks, not so much.

Last year, he'd come out as gay, and my parents had not taken it well. In fact, for all of my father's commercial bullshit, he'd been quick to disown Banks the second that he realized that my brother had been serious about his sexual orientation. It was one of the bravest things that I've ever seen my younger brother do, but it had also been the stupidest.

Banks was two years younger than I was at only nineteen, and while I'd been proud of him for standing up for

himself and sticking to his convictions, he could have waited two more years before coming out. If he could have just waited until I had graduated from college, he wouldn't be in the mess that he was in now.

While I had my own money, I still answered to my parents. My life's plan was to go into politics, but I didn't want to become one of many. I wanted to run the country, and everyone knew that a run-of-the-mill senator didn't do that. You needed to be the Speaker of the House. You needed to be the Secretary of State. You needed to be the Federal Reserve Chairman. My father was just a senator, and my plan was to exceed even all that he's accomplished.

To guarantee that, I needed my membership in The Order of the Cronus to go off without a hitch. While I didn't relish being beholden to anyone, even I knew that I needed help to get where I was heading. The Order could help me do that, and I was counting on it.

However, my brother was jeopardizing that with all his fucking drama. If he had just waited until after I had graduated, my membership would have been cemented, and my parents wouldn't matter at that point. I would have been able to help Banks without the threat of my father coming down on my head. My money would be all mine-free and clear-and he would have had no say in how I chose to help my brother.

Banks hadn't waited, though.

He'd been in his feelings, had blurted out his secret, and has been getting into various kinds of trouble ever since our parents disowned him.

Privately, Banks had been disowned in the coldest act that I've ever seen.

Publicly, Banks had mental health issues that my parents were exploiting for the sympathy votes.

Still, I loved my brother, and though I wasn't responsible for what he got himself into, I couldn't be just

another person who's abandoned him. Sure, he was drama. Sure, it was of his own making. Sure, he was ungrateful.

*However, he was still my little brother.*

With the ceremony finally over, I went to congratulate Stone. "Congratulations, man."

He grinned. "Thanks."

"I hate to eat and run, but I got my brother blowing up my phone," I told him honestly. It wasn't like he didn't know about Banks. Well, he didn't know that he'd been disowned for being gay, but he knew I had major shit with him. They all knew. Well, all, except August Remington. Stone, Saxton, and Fox were a different breed, and I trusted them. If I were going to go into The Order as a member, there were no better men to join it with me than Stone, Saxton, and Fox.

"I understand," he replied. "It's not like this is a festive occasion anyway."

I grinned. "Oh, c'mon, Lexington," I chuckled. "You got the girl, didn't you?"

His eyes darted over to where his bride was laughing with her wedding party, and the look in them said it all. When he looked back at me, he said, "That, I did."

I knew it wasn't that he was upset about marrying Rylee. In fact, he'd practically forced the poor girl to marry him, so that wasn't the cause behind his grated remark. They'd gone through some shit to get to this point, and Stone was marrying her in a hurriedly fashion, so that nothing could ever come between them again. While Rylee didn't seem upset to be getting married at midnight in casual wear, Stone was very aware that she wasn't getting the grand wedding that most girls dreamed about.

"Well, I gotta go," I repeated. "I'll meet up with you guys tomorrow, yeah?"

Stone nodded. "I'll let the others know that you had to leave."

“Thanks.” I turned to leave but stopped. “Hey, Stone?”

“Yeah?”

“You know that we’re not going to let anything happen to her, right?”

His back straightened as he gave me a tight nod. “I do.”

“As long as you know,” I finished before heading out of the church.

The second that my feet hit the sidewalk, I pulled my phone out, and there were seven missed calls from Banks, and six text notifications. I cursed under my breath as I made my way to my white Koenigsegg Regera.

I called Banks back, and he answered on the first ring. “It’s about fucking time.”

A lot of people said that I had the patience of a saint, and for the most part, I did. I wasn’t big on flying off the handle. I preferred having shit work out in my favor, and patience played a big part in making that happen. I knew my road to becoming a powerful political player was going to take some time, and I was prepared for that.

However, dealing with my brother had a way of testing that patience I was so proud of. “Are you serious?” I snapped. “It’s past one in the morning, Banks. Why would you think that I’d be awake to answer your phone call any-damn-way?”

“Well, you’re answering it, aren’t you?” he tossed back, and I had to close my eyes and take a deep breath.

“What do you want, Banks?” I finally asked. “What is so goddamn important that you’re calling me at this time of the night?”

“I need some money,” he answered shamelessly.

*It was always money.*

“Then get a fucking job,” I replied. “How many times are we going to go over this?”



“I do have a job, asshole,” he sniffed. “It doesn’t pay me enough.”

Banks was supposedly working as a nightclub host, and from what he’s told me about it, the pay should be enough to pay his bills. Especially, considering that he shared an apartment with a roommate. So, if he needed money, it was because he was partying and spending his paychecks on dick and drugs.

“You said it did,” I reminded him. “The last time we spoke, you told me that you’d found a great job that paid you plenty. So, what’s changed?”

Banks was silent for a bit, more than likely hating that I remembered that part of our conversation and regretting that he’d ever told me that detail. Finally, he said, “I went over my budget this month.”

“Your budget, Banks? Really?” I deadpanned.

“I just need a couple of thousand,” he said, ignoring my sarcasm. “It’s not like you don’t have it, Ross.”

The way he said a couple of thousand burned my gut. He said it as if it was an insignificant amount of money, and it wasn’t. Sure, my family had billions, what with my mother’s inheritance, but that didn’t mean I didn’t know the value of a dollar. I had more money than any twenty-one-year-old student should have, but that didn’t mean I was a dick about it.

I debated not giving it to him, but I didn’t need him distracting me from all the shit that was going on right now. “I’ll send it over,” I told him. “But after that, I need you to handle your own shit, Banks. You know I got a lot of stuff going on right now.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he replied flippantly. “The Order and everything.” I could hear the resentment loud and clear. “Mom and Dad must be so proud.”

I hung up on the entitled asshole.

I didn’t need this shit.

## Chapter 2

### *Sutton~*

While wildly exciting, I still found it hard to believe that I was already into my senior year at Hales University. College life has been everything that I thought it would be, and I was hoping my senior year was going to be more of the same.

Even though I was only twenty-one, I knew this was my last year to be young. I knew this was my last year to be carefree and still engage in some poor choices before guilt and responsibility took over. While I knew that a lot of people felt it was okay to still flounder in your early twenties, I didn't want that for myself. I didn't come to college to still not have a plan for my life.

Being raised by my grandparents, a lot of old-fashion values had been instilled in me at a very young age, and responsibility had been one of them. My grandfather, Thomas Hadley, had been a pediatric doctor, and my grandmother, Natalie Hadley, had been a physical therapist before they had retired last year. With important and respectable jobs, they had been a shining example of success, responsibility, and security. Even before they'd been saddled with raising me, they had already started a college fund for me. As their only grandchild to their only daughter, they'd been eager to prepare for me financially.

While my story was a depressing one, I'd been too young to feel the loss of my parents. The story goes that my mother had married a wonderful man, and they'd had the perfect marriage, by all accounts. However, unbeknownst to my grandparents and...well, everyone, my father had been an abuser. He had been fond of beating my mother, and before she'd had the chance to push back her shame and ask for help, my father had killed her, though accidentally.

According to my grandparents and the news articles, they'd been fighting, and my father had struck her, causing her to crash against the kitchen counter. Her head had hit the edge of the counter exactly where it had needed to in order to end her life. It hadn't been until the autopsy and review of the body that it'd been discovered that my father had beaten her regularly.

While you could still see the heartache of losing their only child in my grandparents' eyes, they'd done a wonderful job raising me. I hadn't even been a year old when my father had killed my mother, so I hadn't known anything different, and my grandparents had done their best to raise me without tainting me as a victim. It was something I've always been grateful to them for. They hadn't coddled me, spoiled me, or turned me into an entitled, arrogant little shit because I'd lost both my parents. No. They'd raised me to rise above life's tragedies because life was full of them.

As for my father, he'd gotten sentenced to fifty years in prison because of the coroner's testimony of the prolonged physical abuse, but that was neither here nor there for me. I've never visited the man, and I had no intentions on ever visiting him. Being so young when it all happened, I had no bond with him, and even if I had developed a bond with him, the sonofabitch killed my mother. I had no mixed emotions about any of that.

So, when it was all said and done, I wanted to make my grandparents proud. They'd lost their only child, and they had rearranged their entire lives to raise me from infancy, so it was the least I could do. I wanted all their hard work to matter. I wanted to show them that, whether out of love or obligation, I appreciated everything they've ever done for me.

Plus, I'd already sowed some of my wild oats. Granted, they hadn't been as wild as a lot of people, but I'd done the whole freshman party thing. I'd done the meeting new guys and dating. I'd done the slutty Halloween nights and sex in the back of a car. Though I had stayed away from drugs or anything felonious, I'd had my share of good times. Still, I

was going to take this year to really enjoy the freedom I had of not being a full-blown adult yet.

Walking into my apartment, I saw Delta in the kitchen, and she looked to be making some lunch. “Hey,” I greeted.

She smiled up at me. “Hey,” she greeted back. “Are you hungry? I’m making a quick snack before I have to get to my Communications class.”

Delta Landry planned on becoming a journalist, and I had no doubt that she’d do just that. At twenty-one, she was stunning with her blonde hair, blue eyes, and trusting face. She was petite and carried herself with the confidence that only came with intelligence. Delta could never be mistaken for a dumb blonde bimbo. The girl was also the closest friend that I had.

We’d met during our sophomore year at Hales when she’d sat next to me in Computer Science. My future plans were to become an educational developer, but I wasn’t exactly sure how to go about that just yet. If nothing else, I’d have the credentials to become a teacher. However, I wanted to do more than teach children. I wanted to guide them in their educations and that included making changes in curriculum and creating new and challenging ways to engage young minds.

“No, I’m good,” I answered her as I set my school bag and purse on the couch. “I stopped by Shane’s with Earl and grabbed a chicken salad.” Shane’s was a popular deli right near campus, and I was a very loyal customer. It wasn’t that I didn’t know how to cook, but who had the damn time.

Delta grinned. “And how is the sexy Earl?” she teased.

“Still gay,” I replied as I made my way to the refrigerator for a bottled water. “Still gorgeous, but still very gay.”

“All the good ones are,” she sighed dramatically.

I turned to face her. “Malcolm is gay?”

She grinned. “He’s definitely not gay,” she replied. “However, I’m not sure if he’s one of the good ones yet.”

That surprised me. Delta started dating Malcolm over the summer when neither one of them had gone back home for those couple of months. According to her, they had run into each other coming out of the same movie, and she had ended up going to his place that very night.

Now, while most people would judge that, I didn’t. Malcolm House was hot as hell, and his voice was perfect for dirty talk. He was six-foot-two of solid muscle, and he always wore his hair braided in cornrows that reached just below the back of his neck. He had dark mocha skin, light brown eyes, full lips, and I’ve seen him in basketball shorts. The man was *not* lacking anywhere. So, two months later, I was surprised that Delta wasn’t all over that.

“I thought he was the perfect sex god,” I teased.

“Oh, he is,” she smirked.

“Then what’s the problem?”

Delta shrugged a dainty shoulder. “I’m pretty sure that I’m not the only one,” she answered, and my heart lurched a bit. “However, since we never labeled what we’ve been doing, I can hardly object.”

I set my water down on the counter as I took a seat in front of her. Our apartment was small, so we didn’t have room for a kitchen table. The apartment came with a breakfast bar, and that’s where we ate most of our meals. While the place wasn’t crowded, it wasn’t exactly spacious. With two bedrooms, one bathroom, a living room, and a kitchen, the only perk we had was the balcony that came with the apartments. However, with us living on the seventh floor, I wasn’t fond of hanging out on the balcony. I had no desire to be a freak accident news article.

“But what makes you think he’s seeing other girls?” I asked. Admittedly, I didn’t know Malcolm well, but every time that I’ve spoken to him, he’s seemed like a good enough

guy. He had no problem being affectionate with Delta whenever he was over, either.

“Sometime when I suggest we get together, he’ll pass but with no explanation.”

“Well...could it be that...well, like you, he doesn’t want to be too presumptuous?”

“Maybe,” she conceded after a couple of seconds. “However, I’m being very superficial right now. I’m not willing to risk the sex to ask a couple of uncomfortable questions. As long as we’re still using condoms, I’m okay.”

“Sex that good, huh?” I teased because she’s already said as much.

“Let’s just say that he’s going to be a hard act to foll-”

“What?” I asked as she stopped mid-sentence.

Her eyes shined. “Maybe I can get my answer without having to ask the question,” she said.

“How so?”

“Maybe it’s time for me to go on a date with someone else,” she suggested.

I winced. “I don’t know, Delta,” I muttered. “That’s playing games. It’s better to be honest.”

“I’d rather play games than be made a fool of,” she replied before taking a bite of her sandwich.

I didn’t agree, but I couldn’t really fault her. It was hard being vulnerable. No one wanted to look or feel stupid by putting themselves out there. It was hard when you really liked someone, but they were on a different level than you were.

I ought to know.

I’ve felt plenty of stupid before.

## Chapter 3

### *Ross~*

It was only Tuesday, but it's felt like a hell of a week. Between no sleep all weekend long, the wedding, Banks and his bullshit, my heavy classes on Monday, and the fucking text staring back at me, it's been a long few days.

*AG: Meeting tonight @ 9*

This wasn't how all this was supposed to happen. We were supposed to have been initiated, then sent on our way. We weren't supposed to be meeting so much or dealing with The Order beyond the initiation. While The Order owned us, it was never supposed to be to this extent.

The Order of the Cronus was an organization that had come about eons ago. Picture every secret society that you've ever seen in a movie or have read about in a book, and that's basically what The Order was. It was an organization made up of some of the most powerful men in the country. Their power and influence impacted a lot of what made up the nation and its relations with other countries. We're talking financiers, politicians, media moguls, etc. The organization only initiated the best of the best, and mistakes and poor choices were not tolerated.

I'd been fifteen when my father had pulled me aside and had explained the organization to me. A lot of the memberships into The Order of the Cronus were hereditary, and being the firstborn son, it had been a given that I'd be initiated into the organization when the time came.

The organization also didn't operate the way other clubs or societies did. Upon initiation, you were obligated to grant one favor to your fellow initiates, and that was non-negotiable. However, the favor came with an expiration date,

and that was when you reached the age of thirty. At that time, you were freed from your obligation to the organization. However, you were still 'in' the organization, no matter what the contracts stated. You were never really free from what helped you accomplish your goals.

The organization was strong and has stood the test of time because its sole purpose was to maintain its power, and the only way it could do that was to make sure all its members were powerful. They helped you get to where you needed to be in order to benefit the betterment of The Order and favors like that were never forgotten.

The initiating classes were also random, depending on who they were recruiting. We were chosen young, but we weren't initiated until our senior year of college. Upon graduating from college scandal-free, we'd become official members of The Order. However, in all the research that I've done, I've never heard of someone not meeting the requirements to becoming a full-fledged member. However, that could have a lot to do with the stipulations that came with our senior year initiation.

Each initiate had to pick a supporter. Supporters were supposed to make sure that none of the initiates went off the rails during their last year of school. Our supporters were supposed to make sure we didn't get arrested, get trapped by an unplanned pregnancy, fail any of our classes, get hooked on drugs, etc. Basically, they were glorified babysitters.

In exchange for babysitting us, upon their graduation from college, The Order helped them with the career of their dreams. Say one of the supporters wanted to go into advertising, well, The Order would get them a job at one of the top marketing companies in the country. The lure of a dream job was usually incentive enough for the support to take their job seriously.

However, we couldn't pick our supporters until we were freshman in college. No choosing one before that. I wasn't sure the reason behind that rule, but there was a lot of shit I didn't understand about The Order. While I knew



everything that I needed to know, I didn't understand a lot of it. Probably because a lot of it seemed archaic.

For instance, the members could only be male, and the supporters could only be female. The founding members of this little cult believed in the saying that behind every successful man was a good woman, and while I didn't disagree with that, it still felt a bit sexist. Maybe it was because I had a gay brother and viewed relationships differently because of it, but it still felt a bit chauvinistic to me.

Then there was the fact that hypocrisy was real and blatant in the organization. While the men in the organization cheated on their wives often, they held their Hera marriage contracts in the highest regard. If you and your supporter signed a Hera contract, that shit was sacred to The Order, and there was no divorce, no matter what. A Hera wife practically became a member herself, and The Order didn't fuck around with that.

However, my initiating class had been the first to ever enact a Hera contract. Before Stone Lexington, every member had all signed Circe contracts, and Stone Lexington marrying Rylee Madden had thrown The Order into uncomfortable and unfamiliar waters. It was the reason our initiating panel had stayed in Serenity Springs. Stone has been defying The Order's traditions from the beginning, and they had no idea what he would be doing next. However, that's what The Order had signed up for when they had recruited Stone Lexington. The guy was as powerful as they came, and he was a volatile sonofabitch.

That being said, my initiating class had been one of the most powerful to have ever been assembled. We'd only had five members this year, and they were me, Stone Lexington, Saxton Voss, Fox Harrington, and August Remington. While every man in my class had more money, power, influence, and drive than most, August Remington wasn't as honorable as the rest of us.

August Remington was a goddamn pain in the ass.

Then there were our selected supporters. Fox had chosen Alexis Wyatt, August had chosen Laney Spinner, Saxton had chosen Kincaid Black, I had chosen Jennifer Polk, and though last minute, Stone had chosen Rylee Madden. Though every girl had been vetted closely, Kincaid Black was the only wildcard. If she'd been born a male, she would have been in our initiating class as a member, not a supporter. That girl was more vicious than me, Stone, Saxton, Fox, and August combined.

I had chosen Jennifer Polk because she was unassuming. She had a simple life and came from a simple family, and I had chosen her because I knew she'd stay out of my way. While I had no intentions of running amok, I also didn't need some girl underfoot. I didn't need a babysitter. I had no plans on derailing from the plans I had for my future. I had chosen her because she fit in with my plans for my senior year of college.

Plus, I felt no attraction to her, whatsoever. Though Jennifer was beautiful, she was a-dime-a-dozen beautiful. She had blonde hair, blue eyes, an hourglass figure, and did that whole contouring thing that girls have been doing lately. In all actuality, apart from some childhood photos that had come with the background check I'd done on her, I had no idea what Jennifer really looked like these days. Sure, her makeup looked flawless, but she just wore so damn much of it that I had no idea what her fresh face looked like.

However, she was bound to me. For the next eight years, she was obligated to owe me a favor, should I ever need it. While my favor could be called in by Saxton, Stone, Fox, or August, Jennifer's favor belonged to me only. That's how the relationship between sponsor and supporter worked. If I didn't need a favor from Jennifer before she turned thirty, then she'd be free from me forever.

During our initiation, the men had received our symbols of membership along with our identifiers. I had a tattoo of The Order's symbol tattooed on the back of my left arm, and on the back of my right arm, I had a tattoo of

Cerberus, the three-headed monster that guarded the Underworld. Saxton had been dubbed Basilisk, Fox had been dubbed Sphinx, Stone had been dubbed Typhon, and August had been dubbed Hydra. We all shared the same organization symbol, but our tattoos were that of our membership identifiers.

There had also been the contract presentations. I had presented Jennifer with a diamond pendant, Saxton had presented Kincaid with a sapphire and diamond necklace, Fox had presented Alexis with a diamond bracelet, August had presented Laney with an emerald and diamond broach, and Stone had presented Rylee with a three-carat diamond engagement ring, which had surprised everyone. No one had known that he had planned on marrying Rylee until he had announced his intentions with a Hera contract. It had been quite a night.

Another text came in right after Alexander's. Alexander George, Donovan Cooper, and Jacob Townsend were our initiating panel, and we answered to them. At least, for now. The initiating class that was turning thirty were the ones to initiate the newcomers. That's how it worked.

Stone: *I'm guessing he's heard about the wedding.*

Because Stone Lexington didn't give a fuck, he had married Rylee without any of the panel members there, another break from tradition. I had no doubt that he was right about the reason behind the meeting, and while I understood it, the hard part was going to keep Stone from killing August. August wanted Rylee, and everyone knew it.

Especially, Stone.

Hopefully, Stone didn't kill him, even though August deserved it.

## Chapter 4

### *Sutton~*

Tuesdays and Wednesdays were my easy class days, but they were the days when I did everything else in my life. They were my laundry and shopping days. They were the days that I called my grandparents in the evening. They were the days that I cleaned the apartment, though Delta did her fair share of the chores.

I kicked ass during the week, so that my weekends were relaxing as they were meant to be. I had two days free from classes, people, obligations, and everything else, so I liked to spend those two days doing me. I was a big fan of self-care, and I cared a lot about myself.

Our apartment didn't come with a washer/dryer hookup, but it did come with a laundry room that was housed in the basement of the building. However, there were only five washers and dryers, so that was another reason to do my laundry during the weekday. The place got crowded during the weekends.

So, sitting down in the basement, waiting for my wash to finish, so that I could stick my clothes in the dryer, I was on my tablet, checking my emails, social media feeds, and continuing my addiction to Pinterest. I had Pinterest boards filled with recipes that I was never going to cook, outfits that I was never going to wear, makeup that I could never pull off, and projects that I was never going to complete. I had no idea why this site was my weakness, but it was.

After about another half hour, I tossed my clothes in the dryer, then went back to checking my social media feeds. While I knew quite a bit of people, I only had a few close friends, Delta being probably the closest thing that I could call to a best friend. Therefore, my social media accounts weren't

crazy. I didn't have a thousand followers or anything insane like that. I only accepted friend requests from people I knew. Plus, I wasn't very social media active. I didn't post things often, but whenever I did, I made sure it was all positive vibes. I didn't feel the need to share my personal drama and emotions with the world. That just wasn't my thing, though I didn't judge other people for what they chose to share.

As I was skimming through one of my feeds, I saw a picture of Delta and her friend, Sharlene, posing in front of Shane's, iced coffees in both their hands. It was a cute picture, and I loved how happy they both looked.

Ready to keep scrolling, a figure in the background caught my eye, and I couldn't stop how my stomach dipped a bit at the image.

*Ross Carmichael.*

I let out a deep breath as I took in the picture. When Delta had snapped the picture, Ross had been heading into Shane's, him and a couple of other people making up the background in Delta's selfie.

Ross Carmichael was American royalty. His father was Senator Mitchel Carmichael, and his mother was an heiress, Margaret Carmichael. He had a younger brother named Banks, and if his last name and wealth weren't overwhelming enough, the man was sizzling hot.

At six-foot-one, Ross had dark blonde hair, these vibrant blue eyes, a face that looked like Roman perfection, and the body of a god. He worked out regularly, and it showed. Muscular in all the right places, the guy could land a magazine cover if he wanted to.

He was also a beast in bed.

An unfortunate fact that I was very aware of.

Hales University had a pre-school party tradition that I was sure a lot of colleges had. The week before the beginning of classes, there were parties every night of the week. It was so

insane that there were often three to six parties going on each night.

Well, it was at one of those parties that I had run into Ross and one thing had led to another. It had started out extremely awkward because he was Ross freakin' Carmichael, but his interest had been obvious, and my hormones had been happy as hell about it.

While I'd never heard anything bad about him, the guy was still intimidating. Truth be told, Hales had quite a few intimidating people attending classes here. There was a lot of American royalty here, and I wasn't ashamed to admit that I was intimidated by most of them. Especially, Kincaid Black. That girl was something else, and it was better to avoid her than get on her bad side. Now, while I didn't know her personally, you didn't get the reputation of being brutal if there wasn't some truth to the smoke and fire.

So, after a night of the best sex that I'd ever had, things had been feeling very fairy tale-ish. Ross hadn't run out immediately afterwards, nor had he jumped out of my bed at the first sign of daylight. In fact, we had spent two glorious weeks together, getting to know each other inside and outside of the bedroom. It had felt...perfect, really.

Until it hadn't anymore.

After two weeks of sharing myself with the guy, Ross had ghosted me like an absolute pro. It had been subtle and stealthy enough that it had taken me another couple of weeks to finally realize it. Since then, I haven't so much as spoken to him, though I've seen him around. Granted, he looked preoccupied a lot of the time, but I had more than enough pride to keep me from approaching him and demanding questions. After all, though it had been an amazing two weeks, it still had only been two weeks.

The problem I had now was that Ross Carmichael was going to be a hard act to follow. Everything had felt so blissfully perfect, safe, and exciting, and like a drug, that I had become addicted to him rather quickly. So quickly that I had

shared secrets that I had always been afraid to voice before. In two weeks, Ross had fulfilled sexual fantasies that I hadn't even known I had. Not to mention, the boy was packing some serious heat inside those boxer briefs of his. Eight inches of thick, hard, hot muscle wasn't easy to come by, and I knew what a rarity it was to find a man who, not only had the equipment, but also knew how to use it.

Have you ever been tied town and forced to take it until you couldn't anymore?

Well, it was the best fucking thing ever.

Ross had gotten off on making me cry and beg, and I had gotten on of crying and begging.

Then, poof.

Nothing.

Some lukewarm text replies and some talented avoidance, and it was like those two weeks had never happened.

Plus, the worst of it hadn't even been that he had ghosted me. The worst part had been how hurt I'd been that he'd done it. No one should have been as hurt as I'd been after only two weeks of hanging out with a person, but I'd been feeling extremely hurt. Hell, I was still kind of hurt over it.

Instead of going back down that road again for no reason, I went back to obsessing over Pinterest. It was bad enough that I saw him on campus, and he acted like I didn't exist. I didn't need Ross Carmichael taking up any more of my time or emotions.

Besides, common sense told me that I had never been in it for the long haul. Men like Ross Carmichael ended up with women like Kincaid Black or Hastings Martin. Kincaid with her inky black hair, black eyes, stunning face, and curvy body. Hastings Martin with her platinum blonde hair, hazel eyes, beautiful face, and perfect body. Men like that didn't end up with regular women. Though I didn't consider myself ugly,

I didn't stop traffic, either. I could easily get lost in a crowd, and I was actually okay with that. Being beautiful had to be stressful as hell, I would imagine.

With my thoughts directed back on Pinterest-and rightfully so-I started scrolling through my feed, thinking now would be a good time to look for some Halloween ideas. Sure, Halloween was still a few weeks away, but last-minute costumes were a pain in the ass. Plus, with Halloween being every college girl's opportunity to show the goods and not feel guilty about it, a lot of the good costumes were usually taken. While I had no idea what I wanted to dress up as, it'd be fun to look at ideas.

As I was scrolling, my phone rang, and when I saw it was Delta, I answered. "Hey."

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"Laundry," I answered. "You know how I do things."

She chuckled. "I know, but what are your plans for tonight?"

"I was actually going to try to get my laundry and shopping in today, so I could relax a bit tomorrow. Why?"

"Malcolm's having a few people over for his roommate's birthday," she said. "It's not a real party, just a small group of people to wish Derek a happy birthday."

While I had nothing against Malcolm, I didn't know his people. "And?"

I could hear her sigh over the phone. "I want you to go with me."

"Why?" I asked. "You know that I don't know any of his friends, Delta. Wouldn't that seem odd?"

"I don't want to go, Sutton," she admitted. "Now that... I've got thoughts in my head, I'm starting to feel uncomfortable around him outside the bedroom."

"Oh, Delta..." My heart hurt for her.



“I know,” she mumbled miserably. “I just...”

Making a snap decision, I said, “Let’s have a girls’ night. Tell him you can’t go.”

Her voice perked up. “Yeah? You want to do that?”

“Yeah,” I told her because heartache really was a cold bitch.

## Chapter 5

*Ross~*

This was not my idea of fun.

Not in the least.

However, I had expected it. With Stone running amok, I imagined a lot of these meetings in our future. Plus, something was telling me that August Remington wasn't going to just fade off into the night. That dude was bad news, and I didn't trust him for shit.

“While I can admit that this year's initiation has been... unprecedented, that does not mean you are allowed to continue to do whatever the hell you want,” Alexander stated, kicking off our reprimand. “There are rules, traditions, and stipulations that make all of this work. There's structure to keeping The Order running at its finest. You forget yourselves, gentlemen. You are not full-fledged members until you graduate without scandal.”

“If you want to yell at someone, yell at me, Alexander,” Stone told him. “The others weren't a part of my decision to marry Rylee without the panel present.”

Alexander looked over at Stone. “While it is encouraged that you form a bond with your initiating class, you answer to the organization first, Mr. Lexington. Mr. Harrington, Mr. Voss, Mr. Carmichael, or Mr. Remington should have informed one of us of what was transpiring.”

“In my defense, I hadn't been invited, Alexander,” August smirked. “So, I can hardly be held responsible for not informing the panel.”

*And that's why I disliked August Remington.*

Instead of just keeping his fucking mouth shut, he was saving himself. He would always save himself and that's not how a brotherhood should work. Yes, Stone had made the decision to defy the panel and not invite them to the wedding, but Fox, Saxton, and I had made the decision to attend, even though we knew it was against the rules, and we were owning that decision by accepting Alexander's reprimand.

Alexander looked over at August. "Mr. Remington, if you think that is a point in your favor, you are very mistaken," he replied, his voice tinged with a bit of anger. "If you are being kept out of the loop, then there must be a reason for it. Might you know what that reason would be?"

I had to give Alexander points for that. It was no secret that he and August were close, but he wasn't letting that relationship cloud his purpose. My guess was that Alexander did not want to be the first panel leader in the history of The Order to have to report that he'd been unable to control his initiates. He would look like the biggest failure, and The Order didn't take that kind of shit lightly.

"I have no idea what you're referring to, Alexander," August lied. "I haven't done anything."

Alexander didn't look like he believed him, but without hard proof of any wrongdoing, what could he say? If we were going to take August Remington down, we needed proof.

Alexander turned back towards Stone. "And where is Ms. Madden living now?"

We all watched as Stone took a couple of steps forward and practically got in Alexander's face. "*Mrs. Lexington* is living at my place," he bit out. "There's plenty of room, and my roommate is okay with it." Then Stone looked over at August. "Rylee Lexington. It has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

"Fuck you, Stone," August spat. "Like I give a fuck about your whore-"

"I'm going to fucking kill you!" Stone roared as Saxton, Fox, and I rushed him, holding him back, though it

was hard.

However, Alexander was in August's face before August could respond to Stone's threat. "Speak about a Hera member like that ever again, and the consequences will be astronomical, Mr. Remington," he seethed. "Leave."

"But--"

"Leave this instant, or I will instruct Mr. Voss, Mr. Harrington, and Mr. Carmichael to get out of the way," Alexander threatened.

With hate shooting out of his eyes, August stormed out of the abandoned factory that Alexander had deemed our meeting place for tonight.

As soon as August was gone, I lost it. "What in the fuck was that?" I asked Alexander. "Why are you letting him get away with that shit?"

"Mr. Carm--"

"No, he's right," Fox jumped in, taking a step back from Stone now that August was no longer in the building. "First, he disrupts the initiation, and now this?"

"I told you that he wanted Rylee," Stone snapped. "What more proof do you need?"

"Seriously," I continued. "Is he sucking your dick or something?"

Alexander's eyes shot my way. "I'd be very careful if I were you, Mr. Carmichael."

"Okay, let's just all calm down," Saxton instructed. "Losing our shit isn't going to help anything." He looked at all of us, but when his gaze landed on Alexander, he added, "However, something needs to be done about August and Laney, Alexander. If you don't want Stone killing him, then you had better do something."

Alexander's brows furrowed. "What's Ms. Spinner have to do with any of this?"

“She tried to break Stone and Rylee up,” I told him. “It didn’t work, but she tried.”

“Do you have proof?”

“We have a video, though she claims it was all a joke,” Saxton answered him.

“Well, that’s hardly proof,” Alexander replied. “Some jokes-”

“Fuck this shit,” Stone scoffed. “Look, either take control of August and Laney or I fucking will, Alexander. Even if Rylee wasn’t my wife, I’d kill any guy who talked about my girlfriend like that.”

“I will look into Mr. Remington’s behavior,” Alexander promised. Then looking over at the rest of us, he added, “Perhaps this is a good time to suggest that the rest of you not take up with a female until after graduation. Do what you need to in order to fulfill your needs, but the less complications in your life right now, the better.”

Sutton Hadley immediately popped into my mind at Alexander’s stupid advice, and the thump in my chest came about just like it did every time that I thought about her or saw her.

At the beginning of the school year, I had run into her at a party, and I had ended up going back to her place that night. While I’d known who she was, that night was the first time that I had ever spoken to her. She’d been a sweet change from the usual girls who chased my money and last name.

*I’d been immediately smitten with her.*

The following two weeks had been spent getting to know each other and having the best sex of my fucking life. Sutton had started out shy and reserved, but the more comfortable she’d gotten with me, the more adventurous she had become. The sex had become so incredible that it’d gotten to the point where Sutton would let me tie her up and torture the fuck out of her. I’d gotten orgasm denial down to an art,

and when I would finally let her cum, each time felt life changing.

Plus, Sutton's looks weren't a dime-a-dozen. She had dark auburn hair that fell down to the middle of her back, bright green eyes that glowed when she was getting fucked, a perfect doll's face with a flawless complexion, and lips that felt like heroin wrapped around my dick.

It wasn't just that sexy mane of hair that she had or that perfect face of hers, though. Sutton also had a body made for fucking. The girl wasn't thin. There were no bones poking out anywhere. She was soft, feminine, and sexy as hell. Sutton had curves and enough soft flesh to grab a handful wherever my hands landed, and I had loved that about her. Her tits bounced, her ass jiggled, her thighs warmed your ears, and she could take a good spanking on the ass.

All too soon, I'd known that I was getting in over my head. I'd fallen in love with the girl after only two weeks, but when the seriousness of that had hit me, I had ghosted her. While I'd had a good idea of what The Order was going to expect of me, I'd hadn't known the details, and I couldn't bring Sutton into this world when I'd had no idea what those details would entail.

So, not sure what to do, I had ghosted her, and she hadn't asked why. She had gone about her business like those two weeks had never happened, and I've been feeling the sting ever since, even though I knew I wasn't the victim here.

*I had walked away from her.*

"You're not going to dictate what I'm allowed to do in my personal life, Alexander," I told him. "My dick, and what I choose to do with it, is none of your business."

"Unplanned pregnancies are my business, Mr. Carmichael," he retorted. "Bastard children are not an acceptable to The Order."

"We're not fucking stupid," Fox remarked. "Besides, we've been protecting ourselves from gold-diggers since our

dicks first started getting hard. We know the score, Alexander.”

Alexander took a deep breath. “Just...watch yourselves.”

Little did Alexander know that I wasn't interested in screwing around. While offers never stopped coming my way, there was only one girl that I wanted.

Too bad that I had fucked it up.

## Chapter 6

### *Sutton~*

While girls' night had been a success, Delta and I had stayed up way past what was responsible for two girls who had classes the next day. Though my Wednesdays were easy days, I still had one morning class that had been a bitch to get through. Even after downing a coffee advertised to keep me awake for days, I had struggled.

However, even with my poor decisions and lack of sleep, it had been easy to see that Delta had needed the distraction. While I had encouraged her to just have a candid conversation with Malcolm, I was pretty sure that was going to be her last resort. She was so afraid of what he might say that she'd rather not know. When I pointed out that she was sounding a lot like someone in love, she had brushed my comment off. She had sworn that she wasn't, but I was pretty sure the girl was lying to herself.

“Hey, Sutton!”

I turned at my name being called out. When I noticed Earl Peters jogging my way, I smiled. “Hey, Earl.”

He stopped when he was standing in front of me, then smiled down at me. “You busy?”

I shook my head. “No,” I answered. “I just got out of my Humanities class. I was going to grab something to eat before my next class in an hour.” Earl grinned wider, and my eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Why?”

Earl adjusted his backpack over his shoulder, and though it was such a simple act, it made his muscle ripple underneath his t-shirt. Six-foot of lean muscle, sandy brown hair, hazel eyes, strong cheekbones, and a cut jaw, Earl Peters was a good-looking mofo. We've been friends for a while now,



and we've hung out enough that I knew that he was hiding a six-pack underneath his clothing. The boy really was sexy as hell.

And gay.

Very, very, very gay.

Plus, do you want to know what else? In a sad, tragic turn of events, his boyfriend, Drake, was just as fucking hot and just as fucking gay. The worst part was that they didn't do a lot of PDA, so girls were constantly mistaking them for being straight. They were hit on all the time, and I've often felt a girl's disappointment when she was told the sad, sad news.

Their female unavailability aside, they were awesome people. Never a harsh word about anyone, and always friendly to everyone, I was kind of bitter that they were gay. Granted, with as good-looking as they both were, had they been straight, they would have both been snatched up by someone higher up on the food chain than little, old me.

"Soooooo, there might be a small gathering at our place this afternoon," he started out. "Nothing big or fancy, I promise. Just a barbecue with some friends."

I was still eyeing him. His tone was suggesting something more. "I see," I remarked thoughtfully.

"You're invited," he said. "Delta, too." He added that last part too quickly for my liking. "She can even bring Malcolm."

This time, I cocked my head to add to my narrowing eyes. "What's going on?"

"What-"

I threw my hand up to stop him as I adjusted my purse and book bag. "You shouldn't sound this cagey just inviting me to a barbecue, Earl," I told him. "So...what's the catch?"

His eyes began to shift like he was looking for an escape. When those hazel eyes finally looked at me again, he

said, “Okay, so there’s a friend of ours who I think is perfect for y-”

“Nope.” I started shaking my head. “Nope, nope, nope.”

“Oh, c’mon, Sutton,” he whined. “He’s a really great guy. Plus-”

“Sutton?”

I whirled around in complete shock at the sound of *that* voice, and Ross Carmichael was standing behind me, his gaze on Earl, though he’d said my name.

*What the hell?*

When his eyes found mine, he said, “Sorry to interrupt, but do you have a minute?”

*Hell, no, I didn’t have a minute.*

Before I could tell him that, Earl was speaking up. “I’ll let you go, but the barbecue starts at four,” he informed me. “I expect you there, Sutton.”

I turned back to face him. “I...okay,” I said because I was super off balance. “I’ll text Delta.”

Earl gave me a sheepish smile. “I already texted her,” he confessed.

Normally, I’d give him the what for, but Ross talking to me had me at less than my best. “You’ll pay for this.”

Earl smiled. “I know,” he said before he sauntered off, leaving me alone with Ross.

I turned back towards Ross, and I did my best not to take a visible deep breath, though I needed one for...well, for whatever this was. I haven’t spoken to Ross in weeks, or better yet, he hasn’t spoken to me, so I had no idea what he could want now.

“What do you want?” I asked, and though my voice sounded fine, I still recognized the rudeness in my question. However, I didn’t owe Ross Carmichael anything. I really didn’t.

Those blue eyes looked as if he was trying to peer into my soul, and I didn’t like it. “Can we talk?” he asked.

Though it said a lot, I adjusted my book bag, proving just how nervous I was right now. However, I couldn’t take the move back. I’d already done it. “About what?”

He let out a deep sigh, and if I didn’t know better, I’d think that *he* was nervous, though that couldn’t be true. He was Ross freakin’ Carmichael. The boy had the world at his fingertips. He had no reason to be nervous about anything.

“I was hoping you’d let me apologize for how I acted,” he admitted.

“You mean, for ghosting me?” No way was I going to let him off the hook. If he truly wanted to apologize, I wasn’t going to let him get away with wrapping it up, all nice and neat. What he’d done was shitty, and I had enough self-esteem to know that he was responsible for his behavior, despite his wealth, power, connections, and good looks.

To his credit, he didn’t shy away from the truth. “Yes,” he replied. “For ghosting you.”

“Why?”

“Why did I ghost you?”

I shook my head. “No. Why are you apologizing?” I corrected. “It’s been over two months. Why bother now?”

“I...I had some things I needed to sort out,” he answered, vague as hell. “I...they’re sorted now.”

My brows jumped high on my forehead. “So, there’s finally time in your schedule to apologize? How convenient for you.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he replied. “That’s not how I meant it.”

I looked up at the guy, and I knew that I needed to get away from him as soon as possible. My feelings were still hurt, but worse, I was self-aware enough to recognize that hurt feelings meant that I still had feelings for him, and I didn’t need that crap in my life. He might be the best sex that I’ve ever had, but great sex wasn’t everything. Plus, I wasn’t stupid enough to let someone burn me twice. Though I hadn’t experienced any of it firsthand, my mother giving my father second, third, fourth chances had been enough to teach me a harsh lesson about second chances.

“Save your apology, Ross,” I told him. “I’m good. No hard feelings.”

He knew I was lying.

It was there in his eyes.

“Sutton-”

“Seriously,” I lied again. “It’s been months. I’m fine. Again, no hard feelings.”

“You’re lying,” he accused, those blue eyes looking right through me.

I straightened my back, though my five-foot-four was no match for his six-foot-one. “If I’m lying, then it’s for a reason, Ross,” I countered. “And that reason could only be that I don’t want or need your apology. It could also be argued that I’m lying, so that you’ll leave me alone.” His eyes flashed. “So, whether I’m telling the truth or not, the end result is the same. I’m pretty sure that we’re done here.”

“I get that I’m in the wrong here, Sutton,” he said, ignoring everything that I just said. “But if you give me a chance to explain-”

“I don’t want an explanation from you, Ross,” I told him, my voice cracking a bit with the betrayal of my emotions.

“I don’t want an apology, an explanation, anything. There’s no point to it.”

“Sutt-”

“We fucked for two weeks, then stopped,” I coldly recapped. “No one needs an apology or explanation for that.”

“Sutton?”

I turned to see Delta, and I’d never been so grateful for divine intervention in all my life.

## Chapter 7

### *Ross~*

I had to keep reminding myself that I was the one with the reputation for being patient, but it was hard. However, Delta approaching Sutton had been the best thing for the situation.

Because I was pissed.

It wasn't that I didn't deserve her cold response, but there was no way we'd been just fucking. It'd been more than that, and Sutton knew it. She could be mad at everything else but reducing what we'd had to fucking for two weeks had struck me wrong.

Storming around the corner of the Wexler building, anger was blinding me enough that I almost ran Fox down in the middle of the hallway.

"Whoa," he rushed out.

I stopped, then took a step back. "Oh, hey...sorry."

His dark brows shot upward. "Is everything okay?"

"Why do you ask?"

The bastard smirked. "Because you look mad as fuck, Ross."

I let out a deep breath as I adjusted my book bag. "That's probably because I am," I admitted.

A knowing brow arched coolly. "There's only one thing that can put that look in a man's eye, and it's a female," he remarked.

I didn't have a lot of friends. Sure, I had a million acquaintances, but no real friends. When your last name was Carmichael, you always had to be on the lookout for users and

manipulators, and there were too many of them to weed out from the rest. Plus, before Banks had gone off the deep end, he'd been my best friend. He probably still was, but our lives were completely different at the moment, and I didn't trust him. I loved him, but I didn't trust him.

Being in The Order forced a sort of camaraderie, and even if it hadn't, Fox Harrington had a solid reputation. Though we were all ruthless to some extent, we weren't corrupt. We still exercised integrity, even if it was through our own skewed vision. Fox Harrington didn't have a reputation for gossiping, so I saw no reason not to confide in him.

"Do you know Sutton Hadley?" I asked.

He nodded. "Kind of," he replied. "Her friend, Delta, is dating Malcolm House. While we're not the best of friends, we've hung out and have played some ball together. I've seen him with Delta and Sutton a few times."

Class forgotten, I told him what was going on. "Sutton and I hooked up at the beginning of the year, and I ghosted her."

Fox let out a low whistle. "Dude."

"I know, I know," I muttered. "But...I really started liking her. Falling in love, actually." Saying the words out loud made me feel worse than I already did. "Yeah, it was happening too fast, but it felt real, Fox."

A strange glint shown in his eyes as he said, "I can see that."

"Well, I hadn't counted on...falling in love with the girl," I admitted. "And while I knew enough about the initiation and the organization to know what to expect, I didn't know the details, you know. I didn't want to get wrapped up in Sutton without knowing all that was going to be expected of us."

The problem with being in a relationship while completing our final year of school was explaining the

presence of our supporters. If you had a girlfriend, you had to explain to her why this other girl was always around and at your beck and call, and how did you do that without breaking all the millions of NDAs you signed? How many girls would be okay with another girl hanging around their boyfriend all the time with no explanation as to why?

Not to mention all the secret meetings and shit like that. Trust was a motherfucker, and I couldn't think of any girl who could trust blinding like that, and not think that their boyfriend was screwing other chicks or into some illegal shit.

“So, you ghosted her?”

I shot him a look. “I know it was a shitty thing to do, Fox,” I assured him. “But I couldn't bring myself to tell her that it wasn't working out when it was. I couldn't lie to her face like that. I couldn't be sure that I wouldn't have told her everything had she started crying or something.”

“That serious, huh?”

I nodded. “Yeah, it was.”

“So, why are you pissed now?”

“I haven't spoken to her since I ghosted her, and when I tried to just right now, it didn't go well,” I admitted.

“Ya think?” he remarked dryly.

“Look, I know I was an asshole,” I reiterated. “But that doesn't mean she gets to reduce those weeks to just fucking.”

Fox winced. “Damn, that sucks.”

“I can take her being pissed,” I told him. “I can take her being bitter and wanting to draw me up by my balls. However, I can't take her dismissing what we had so casually.”

Fox slid his hands in his pockets. “Look, Ross, I'm the last person to be giving relationship advice, but ghosting is going to be hard to come back from, dude.” Then he cocked in head in thought. “Plus, how are you going to explain Jennifer?”



How are you going to explain disappearing at odd times? If you can't lie to her, then what's the plan?"

"I haven't gotten that far," I confessed. "But...I don't know, man." I shook my head. "Seeing Stone and Rylee together, it just..."

"Watching Stone defy everyone is giving you a different perspective?" he finished for me.

"I'd been raised to believe that The Order was infallible," I said. "I'd been raised to believe that it was absolute, and that there wasn't any room for mistake. Now, I'm not so sure."

"I know what you mean," he agreed. "Between all that stuff with Stone and Rylee, then whatever August is up to, it doesn't feel...none of this shit should have been allowed."

"Exactly," I exhaled deeply. "Stone should have been dealt with, but he wasn't."

"True," Fox murmured. "But he's also Stone Lexington. The Order knows exactly who it recruited when they chose us. They knew Stone could be a problem when they went after him. It's August that concerns me more." Fox's phone chimed with an incoming notification, but he ignored it, and I thought that was rather decent of him. "His outburst at the initiation should have been the end of him."

Before I could reply, my phone chimed also. We stared at each other, knowing it probably wasn't a coincidence that both our phones had gone off. So, as Fox reached for his phone, I reached for mine, and the text message was simple and to the point.

Alexander: *Meeting 2nite @ 11pm. Bring ur supporter*

We never knew the place until the last minute, but that was okay. It wasn't like we had the option not to show, no matter where it was. The only odd thing was the request to bring our supporters along. Usually, they attended the initiations only. They weren't privy to anything beyond that.

I looked over at Fox. “Meeting?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Do you find it odd that he’s asking our supporters to attend?”

“Normally, I would,” he answered. “However, that mess between Rylee and Laney is another thing that needs to be addressed.” Fox ran a hand through his hair. “I just wish I knew which side Alexander was on.”

“I think he’s on his side,” I replied. “No matter what he has going on with August and his family, there’s no way Alexander’s going to risk his place in the organization for August Remington.” I shrugged. “Not to sound like a complete asshole, but out of all of us, August is the least...beneficial.”

Fox smirked. “True. However, he’s not completely inconsequential, either. He wouldn’t have been recruited, otherwise.”

I glanced at my watch. “Well, this class is done for,” I sighed.

“My classes are done for the day,” Fox stated. “Want to grab a drink? We can figure out what to do about your Sutton problem.”

I eyed him, and I was grateful he was being decent again. Fox Harrington didn’t owe me anything. We might be bonded through The Order, but that didn’t mean we had to be friends. Still, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that all the shit going on between Stone and August was turning us into friends. It was clear that Fox, Saxton, and I were on Stone’s side. Even without the drama, there was no getting around the fact that August Remington was a shifty motherfucker.

“Yeah, I’d appreciate that,” I answered.

Though grateful for the ear, it was going to take more than one beer to fix things with Sutton.

## Chapter 8

### *Sutton~*

The barbecue had been lively enough, but it hadn't been lively enough to get my mind off Ross goddamn Carmichael. The worst part had come when Earl had introduced me to a guy who I would normally have been interested in, but not this time around.

When Earl had introduced me to Heath Resnik, my eyes had raked him in, fulling appreciating what a good-looking guy he was. He was tall, around six-foot, and had light blonde hair, kind brown eyes, an All-American face that you usually saw on magazine ads, and he was built nicely enough to imagine that he wasn't a disappointment in bed.

Any other day, I would have chatted him up, gotten to know him, then hoped for something more. However, today wasn't any other day. Today was today, and today sucked fucking donkey balls.

The only thing that had saved the awkward meeting had been Delta. She knew all about what had happened between me and Ross, so when she'd seen him talking to me, she'd already known to come in for the rescue. Delta was very aware that I still had feelings for the asshole, and I owed her big time for rescuing me.

So, after meeting Heath, Delta had stuck to my side, and they had ended up bonding over their strange love for eighties music. It had ended up being a good time, but even as miserable as I'd been, it hadn't escaped my notice that Delta hadn't invited Malcolm to the barbecue.

When we had finally called it a day, Heath had pulled me aside and had told me all about how Earl had been trying to help him get over an ex-girlfriend. It had been a sweet

explanation of why we hadn't connected. Heath had taken full responsibility for the lack of sizzle and had wanted to own up to it. He had informed me how he wasn't quite ready to move on, much to Earl's annoyance.

Though our stories were nowhere near the same, my residual feelings for Ross had me telling Heath that I was also dealing with some complicated emotions of my own, and I thought it was a good idea for us to remain just friends. We had exchanged numbers, and I looked forward to hanging out with him some more. Plus, now Delta had someone she could rock out to the eighties with.

After the barbecue, I had come straight home, ready to just sleep the rest of the day away. I wasn't sure where Delta had run off to, but between Thursday being a heavy class day, that mess with Ross, then a barbecue that ran too late for my liking, I was exhausted.

So, sitting on the couch, the television on in the background for some noise, I was on my phone, scrolling through goddamn Pinterest again.

I wasn't sure how long I was numbing my brain before I heard the front door open. I turned around and Delta was walking in, a huge smile on her face.

"What's that smile for?"

"Nothing," she lied. "I'm just in a good mood."

"Reliving the eighties will do that to you," I teased.

She laughed. "Isn't he awesome?" Delta blushed like a schoolgirl, though I knew it had nothing to do with attraction. She really was just an eighties' music fanatic.

"He's good people," I agreed.

Delta dropped on the couch. "I just...I had fun."

"So, did I, considering," I conceded.

"Speaking of," she said. "Are you going to tell me what the hell all that was about earlier?"

When Delta had rescued me from Ross, she had been on her way to class, so there hadn't been time to tell her the details of our conversation. Then, by the time our classes for the day had been over, we had headed over to Earl's, putting the conversation on hold again.

"He wanted to talk to me," I finally told her.

"About what?" she asked with surprise etched all over her pretty face.

"He wanted to apologize for ghosting me."

Her brows furrowed. "Two months later?"

I nodded. "Yeah, and that's what I asked."

"What did he say?"

"He's been busy," I replied dryly.

"Busy?"

"Yep," I drawled out. "Busy."

Delta just stared at me a bit before she finally blurted, "What the fuck?"

I laughed. I couldn't help it. It was such an appropriate response to this entire ordeal. I had no idea why Ross wanted to make amends now, but I knew I needed to stay away from him. He didn't deserve my forgiveness, and I wasn't entirely sure that I wanted to give it to him.

"That's what he said."

Her shoulders dropped as she slumped back against the couch. "And what did you say?"

I shrugged. "I told him that he didn't need to apologize. I said that there were no hard feelings, and he certainly didn't need to apologize when all we'd been doing is fucking."

Delta winced. "Christ, you said that?"

I curled my legs underneath my ass, working to get more comfortable. “While I can admit that it probably wasn’t my finest moment, what else was I supposed to say?” I grumbled. “I had to salvage *some* pride.”

Her face softened, and I knew it was because she was aware that I still had feelings for him. “But aren’t you curious?” she asked. “Don’t you want to know why he ghosted you?”

I shook my head. “Not at all,” I told her truthfully. “I don’t need to hear some...” I let out a pathetic sigh. “I’m afraid that the feelings that I still have for him are going to *want* to believe whatever he says, you know.”

“Oh, Sutton,” she whispered.

“He could tell me that he got abducted by aliens, and I have a feeling that my vagina will want to believe him so badly that we will.”

She let out a choked laugh. “Sucks when the sex is amazing.”

I nodded in agreement. “What’s that saying? People eat lies when their hearts are hungry? Or whatever it is.”

“Or in this case, vaginas.”

That got a laugh out of me. “Be serious,” I chided, still laughing.

Delta stopped laughing, but she still had a smile on her face. “Look, babe, I get that he hurt you. I do,” she said. “But...well, have you considered that hearing him out might help you get over him?”

“What do you mean?”

“You are always going to be plagued with wondering what went wrong,” she went on. “That could be one of the reasons that you’re not getting over him. There’s no closure for you with this yet. And no matter what people say, closure is a big part of moving on. If his explanation is stupid, then

you can finally move on with the reassurance that you hadn't fallen deeper in love with the asshole. You'll be grateful that you hadn't wasted more than two weeks on him."

"And what if his explanation isn't stupid?" I asked. "What happens then?"

"Then you'll feel better at knowing that it wasn't you," she replied sagely. "You'll quit doubting yourself or questioning why you hadn't seen it coming. Either way, you still get to move on from this." Delta shrugged a dainty shoulder. "Hearing him out doesn't mean you have to give him a second chance, and...well, honestly, Sutton, did he even say anything about wanting to get back together?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Maybe Ross really did just want to apologize," she suggested. "Maybe he just wanted to explain things, so you wouldn't hate him."

As I thought about her words, her scenario didn't seem so crazy. This was Ross Carmichael we were talking about. He could have any girl he wanted, so it was stupid to even think that he hasn't been with a slew of other girls since we stopped sleeping together. Maybe this was just an attack of the conscience. While I haven't been with anyone else since Ross, that doesn't mean I haven't wanted to. I wanted to move on. I've *been* trying to move on. So, there was no doubt in my mind that Ross probably moved on a long time ago.

"Do you really think hearing him out is a good idea?" I asked warily.

Delta reached out and squeezed my thigh. "I think so, Sutton," she replied. "I get that you still have some feelings where he's concerned, but can hearing him out really make things worse?"

"Depends on who's hearing him out," I huffed. "If my brain is hearing him out, then it won't be a problem. If my vagina is hearing him out, I'll probably make a fool out of

myself. And if my heart is hearing him out, then I'll be making the biggest mistake of my life."

"My money is on your brain," she said encouragingly.

"Are you sure you want to make that bet?" I said, eyeing her.

She grimaced. "Okay, maybe not."



## Chapter 9

### *Ross~*

When I pulled up to the deserted farmhouse, I saw Stone's black Audi R8, Saxton's white Lexus LS 500, Fox's silver Aston Martin Superleggera, August's grey Jaguar, and Alexander's black Cadillac town car. My guess was that the rest of the panel must have ridden with Alexander because I didn't see any other cars around.

"Why won't you tell me what's going on?" Jennifer asked beside me in my white Koenigsegg Regera.

I tried not to sigh at her question, but she's been asking it since I picked her up earlier. Since inviting the girls to an official meeting was unprecedented, we had all agreed to drive them to the meeting place. Besides, it was the responsibly and gentlemanly thing to do. No matter how much I *didn't* think about Jennifer Polk, she was my supporter, and I had to respect that. After all, I was the one who had chosen her for the role.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Jennifer?" I bit out. "I don't know what's going on."

She scoffed and crossed her arms over her chest. "I seriously doubt that."

I glanced over at her. "Frankly, I don't care what you think," I told her coldly. "Don't forget your place." Before she could comment, I added, "Now let's go see what the fuck all this is about."

She unbuckled her seatbelt with a bit more flare than was necessary, but I wasn't going to entertain a temper tantrum with her.

Entering the farmhouse, I saw everyone was in attendance. It was also glaringly obvious where all the battle

lines had been drawn. In the center of the building near the hearth, Arlene, Jacob, and Donovan stood with Alexander. Near the kitchen's entrance, August stood with Laney by his side. On the other side of the room, stood Fox, Alexis, Saxton, Kincaid, Stone, and Rylee.

I went to go stand with the gang, making it clear which side I was on. Jennifer followed me, not uttering a single word, and I thanked God for that. Even if she didn't know what was going on, at least she had enough sense to read the goddamn room.

"Ah," Alexander started, doing his whole showman routine. "Now that we're all here, we can get started." No one said anything as he smiled at all of us. "I'm afraid I may have been remiss in my duties as this year's initiating governor, and I feel that I must rectify that immediately."

I could feel Jennifer tense next to me, but I had bigger problems at the moment. Banks had started blowing up my phone about an hour ago, and I was still pissed about my conversation with Sutton.

"Ladies, if you'll please step forward," Alexander instructed, and while Alexis, Laney, Kincaid, and Jennifer stepped forward, Stone had Rylee's hand still firmly held in his.

Alexander looked over at Stone. "Mr. Lexington, is there a problem?"

"Since my *wife* doesn't fall into the same category as the rest of the supporters, I see no need for her to join them," Stone answered, not giving one goddamn fuck.

"Ms. Mad-"

"Excuse me?" Stone said, cutting him off.

Alexander bristled, but he was in the wrong, and he knew it. Straightening, he said, "Mrs. Lexington may be your wife, but her role hasn't changed, Mr. Lexington. It is still her duty to make sure you achieve everything to the best possible

outcome. So, even though she is a Hera, she still has similar duties to fulfill to you and the organization.”

I watched as Rylee pulled her hand from Stone’s. “It’s okay,” she told him, even though it clearly wasn’t okay by Stone’s standards. Still, I couldn’t see him contradicting her in front of everyone. Rylee Lexington was more powerful than she realized, and Stone knew it.

With Rylee taking her place next to Kincaid, Alexander continued to address the room. “Ladies, your primary obligation is to your sponsor,” he told them. “In order for them to succeed to the level of The Order’s standards, they need your absolute support.” Alexander walked a path, back and forth, in front of the girls. “How effective do you believe you can be if you are engaged in needless drama? What good are you to your sponsor if you are causing ruckus in his life?”

Rylee’s back went up, and you could see the fire shooting out of her blue eyes. “If you have something to say to me, Alexander, then say it,” she practically snarled. “While I realize that you like to give these little shows, if there’s something you want to say to me, then be a man and say it.”

Alexander went to stand in front of Rylee. “Mrs. Lexington, while I have no doubt that you’re a handful, I wasn’t referring to anything that you may have going on with your husband.”

“Then what are you referring to?” Kincaid asked, her voice laced with a touch of boredom.

This time, Alexander stepped in front of Laney. “Though your obligation is to your sponsor, your signed commitment to The Order extends to all its members.” Laney started smoothing her hands down over her stomach, and I wondered if it was a nervous gesture. “I don’t have to tell you that sabotaging any initiating relationships is a grave mistake. However, sabotaging a Hera marriage is a mistake that you will not be able to come back from.”

“What does that mean?” Jennifer asked, and her question immediately got my back up. Why would she be

asking that? If she had no plans on messing with Stone and Rylee, then why ask the question?

Alexander gave Laney a pointed look before addressing Jennifer. “The consequences for trying to ruin a Hera marriage is the same as if you betray The Order, violate the NDAs, or do not pay on your obligatory favor, Ms. Polk,” he answered.

“O...oh,” she stammered quietly.

Alexander stepped back, taking his place next to Jacob, Arlene, and Donovan. “If anyone in this room feels the need to interfere with Mr. and Mrs. Lexington’s marriage, you will be ruined in the worst way,” he announced. “Now, while everyone doesn’t have to be best friends, you will respect one another, and you will respect the rules of The Order. You will respect our traditions and honor the way we do things.” Alexander eyed the girls again. “Do I make myself clear, ladies?”

Alexis and Jennifer mumbled their yeses, but Kincaid just snorted while Laney nodded. Rylee was the only one who hadn’t answered, but it wasn’t like she needed to. Alexander knew something was going on, but not the details or else this would have gone much worse. However, doing his duty by The Order, he was making it clear that Stone’s marriage to Rylee mattered more than anything else.

“Know your place, ladies,” Alexander added before he jerked his head towards the front door, Arlene, Donovan, and Jacob all following behind him.

As soon as the door shut behind Jacob, you could feel the tension suffocating the entire place. Not wanting to deal with a bloodbath, I walked over to Stone. “C’mon, man,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Rylee walked up and wrapped her arms around Stone’s waist. “It’s late,” she muttered. “Let’s go home.”

“I don’t know about you guys, but fuck this place,” Kincaid said as she walked up to Saxton. “I’m ready to leave.”

None of us were going to talk about the meeting in front of August and Laney, so there was no point in sticking around. “We can talk about this more later,” I said as Fox made his way over, minus Alexis.

All in agreement, we began making our way back outside, leaving August and Laney inside. Even if Alexis and Jennifer didn’t know what was going on, it was clear that August and Laney were the enemy. Now, while I had no problem with Jennifer hanging out with Laney, I needed to know, so that I could avoid Jennifer more than I had already planned to.

Once we were seated in my car, Jennifer didn’t waste any time. “What was that all about? Did someone do something to Rylee and Stone?”

My eyes shot her way as I started the car. “Why did you ask about that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you ask Alexander for details?” I clarified. “Do you plan on causing problems for Stone and Rylee?”

Her blue eyes widened. “N...no,” she stammered. “Of course, not.”

“Then why ask, Jennifer?” I pressed.

“I was just curious,” she answered. “I swear, Ross. I was just curious.”

I leveled her with a stare as headlights were bouncing all over the place, everyone taking their leave. “That’s all it better be, Jennifer,” I told her. “Don’t make me regret picking you as my supporter.”

She started shaking her head. “I swear, Ross. That’s all it was. I wouldn’t...I mean...the last thing I want to do is piss you off,” she replied. “And I sure as hell don’t want to piss Stone Lexington off.”

I wasn't sure if I believed her, but I had nothing on her to call her a liar. Instead, I started the car and couldn't wait to drop her off at home. I had nothing against Jennifer, but things were not working out as smoothly as I thought it was going to. Jennifer was supposed to have been drama-free.

I had enough issues in life.

My phone buzzing again was just another quick reminder.

## Chapter 10

### *Sutton~*

I was ready for this week to end, and the feeling only got worse when I finally made my way to the student parking area and saw Ross Carmichael leaning up against my light blue, very used, banged-up Ford Ecosport. Though the car had a lot of miles on it, I got it serviced regularly, so it was still reliable.

Delta's advice bounced around in my head, and I wondered if hearing him out was the answer to finally getting my shit together. Sometimes I couldn't wrap my mind around how two weeks could make such a difference. At other times, all I could remember was how *right* Ross had felt wrapped around me.

Making my decision, I headed towards my car to get it over with.

As soon as I approached, I asked, "What do you want, Ross?"

"Same thing I wanted yesterday," he replied. "I want to talk."

I opened the driver side door to my car, then tossed my bag and purse inside. Leaving the door opened, I turned to face him again "You already apologized," I reminded him. "What else more is there to say?"

Those blue eyes of his peered down at me. "Why don't we address that little comment you made yesterday about how those two weeks had been nothing but fucking?"

"Why?" I asked. "What's the point?"

"I want to know why you said it," he replied. "Especially, when we both know that it's not true."

“I still don’t see what difference it makes, Ross,” I told him. “What are you trying to do here? You’ve apologized. You’ve explained. Christ, what more do you want?”

“But I haven’t explained,” he argued. “Not with enough detail to make you forgive me.”

My head reared back. “Forgive you?” I choked out. “Why on earth do you need or even want my forgiveness for? We weren’t friends before we met at that party, so we certainly can go on with our lives continuing to not be friends.”

“I don’t want to be friends,” he snapped, that patience he reputedly had all gone. “I’m here to make things right. I’m here for a second chance.”

This conversation wasn’t going like Delta had predicted. I started shaking my head. “No,” I rushed out. “No. You don’t get to do that.”

“Do what?” he asked as he began crowing my space.

“You don’t get to ghost me, then treat me as if I don’t exist, then come back with an apology and the right to ask for more,” I replied, doing my best to hold in all my emotions. “If you want to apology, fine. If you want the opportunity to explain, fine. However, that’s where it stops. You don’t get to ask for more.” I did my best to step back, but I was trapped between the crook of the opened door and his body. “Quite frankly, you didn’t deserve the chance to apology and explain in the first place.”

“Sutton, it’s not that simple-”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I interrupted. “Treating people right should be the simplest thing ever. When you care about a person, treating them right should be nothing but simple.”

Ross straightened to his full height, and I couldn’t lie and say it wasn’t sexy to see the shift in him. Alpha males were the sexiest thing ever, and there was no arguing the point. “I fucked up,” he repeated. “I fucked up, and I own that.



However, that doesn't mean I'm walking away from this. That doesn't mean I'm walking away from *you*."

I let out a dark laugh. "Do you honestly think I'm going to give you the opportunity to fuck with my feelings again? Do I look stupid? Do I look desperate?" Before he could comment, I kept going. "I get that you're Ross Carmichael, and that most girls would choose you over their self-esteem, but I'm not one of those girls."

"Well, unfortunately for you, I don't want any of those other girls," he snapped. "I want *you*."

His audacity was killing me. "You *had* me, Ross," I practically screamed. "You had *all* of me. I gave you...Christ, I can't even think about all the things I gave you without feeling the humiliation of my feelings for you." The tears were threatening to come, but I held fast. "You're out of your mind if you think I'm stupid enough to make the same mistake twice."

Ross crowded me some more. "That's what you're not understanding, Sutton," he bit out. "It wouldn't be a mistake."

Before I could comment on that, his phone rang, and he swore under his breath. However, this was perfect. If he answered, then that said it all. If he didn't, then I was fucked because he was putting this argument with me ahead of whatever else he had going on.

Ross reached into his pocket, and my stupid heart dropped.

*I knew his apology was shit.*

I was just about to tell him exactly what I thought about him, but instead of pulling his phone out of his pocket to answer the call, Ross pulled it out long enough to silence it. He slipped it back in his pocket, and I'd never felt so weak for the hope that bloomed in my chest.

*God, females were stupid.*

When his phone began to ring again, I realized that it could actually be an emergency, so basic human compassion got the best of me. “Shouldn’t you answer that?”

“No, I shouldn’t,” he snapped, and I wasn’t sure where all the irritation was coming from. Was it from me or the phone call?

“What if it’s an emergency?”

Ross dark blonde brows drew inward. “The only emergency in my life right now is this fucking conversation, Sutton,” he growled. “Now, I get that I fucked up. I get that what I did was an asshole thing to do. Still, I’ve apologized and have explained.”

“What did you explain?” I scoffed. “That you had shit going on? What shit? That you were busy? With what?” I pushed at his chest. “You haven’t explained a damn thing.”

Ross grabbed my hands, then yanked me hard up against his muscled body. “Look, Sutton, I’ve been doing my best to take my thumps because this is all my fault,” he said. “However, don’t, for one second, think that my reputation for being fair and patient is going to get you out of this.”

My brows rose. “What in the hell does that mean?”

“It means that I want you,” he repeated. “And I’ll stop at nothing to get you back.” His blue gaze held my green one captive. “I think that’s the point you’re missing in all this.”

“So, because your last name is Carmichael, you get to just...dismiss people, then acknowledge them again when it’s convenient for you?” I huffed. “You have a lot of nerve, Ross.”

His hands tightened around mine, still trapped against his chest. “Fine,” he growled. “How about we make a deal?”

“What kind of deal?” I asked, regretting giving him any kind of chance the second I did it.

“Tell me you don’t miss me,” he challenged. “Tell me you don’t think about me anymore. Tell me you don’t slide

your hand down your panties and think of all the ways I used to make you scream. Tell me you don't miss how I used to tie you down and torture you until you cried. Tell me you don't miss how my cock used to stretch you wide and ready. Look me in the eye and tell me you don't think about all the ways my tongue used to taste you, my hands used to touch you, and my cock used to fuck you." His hands tightened around mine. "Convince me that you're completely done with me, and I'll walk away and never bother you again."

My chest was heaving, and my throat was dry. There was no way I could tell him all that and not be lying. I did miss the way he made my body feel. I missed it all. Plus, it was a shameful admission to confess that I did masturbate to the sinful memories that I had of him. In fact, I did it more often than was healthy for my heart and mind.

"It's not anything I can't find with someone else," I lied. "While I might miss the way you made my body feel, I don't miss the way you made my heart feel."

Ross let go of my hands, and I was certain my candor was going to be enough to make him walk away, but I was wrong. Instead of walking away-properly shamed like he should be-his hands grabbed my face, and his lips came down on mine in a way that transported me back in time. It felt like these past two months hadn't even happened. Ross was kissing me in a way that was made to consume all rationale thought. I felt it all the way down to my toes, and it wasn't his fault that I wasn't telling him to stop.

When Ross finally broke off the kiss, his eyes were like blue flames, burning me alive with just a simple look.

Or maybe it wasn't so simple.

"I'm not giving up," he announced. "I don't give a fuck if it takes forever to get you to come around, but I'm not giving up."

"Ross-"

“I’m going to make it right, Sutton,” he said, talking over me. “And not even you are going to stop me from making it right.”

Ross stormed off angrily, and all I could do was stand there and watch. I also wondered what in the hell did he have to be so angry about.

## Chapter 11

### *Ross~*

It's been a hell of a weekend, and I wasn't sure how much more I could take. I kept finding it harder and harder to hold onto that precious patience of mine. Every day became a harder fight, but determination kept me looking at the bigger picture, keeping my temper in check.

After another fail with Sutton on Thursday, instead of spending all weekend winning her back, I'd had to drive to the city to bail Banks out of a goddamn mess. Usually, it was just some money, or a ride, or something simple like that. This time, it'd been much more than that.

Upon arriving at his apartment, he had confessed to losing his roommate months ago. He was being evicted because he couldn't make the rent, and it was homelessness or another dip into my bank account. While he still had his job at the club, everything else was shit.

I ended up spending the entire weekend helping him find an affordable place to stay. When Banks had been offended that I'd pick such a dumpy place for him, I had nearly lost it. Giving him a choice between the 'dumpy' apartment and being homeless, he had chosen the apartment, I had paid the first, last, and deposit, then had given him another couple of thousand before making my way back home.

The entire drive back had been a fucked-up dip into the inevitable. I knew I wasn't going to be able to keep this up. I knew I wasn't going to be able to keep rescuing my brother and still maintain what I had going on. I loved my brother, but I wasn't about to risk my future for his. This wasn't about his sexual identity, and I was realizing that more and more. Banks was a spoiled little shit, and he was using his estrangement with our parents as an excuse to be an asshole.

I knew he had some emotional issues going on, and I understood that. Being disowned by your parents was a fucked-up deal. However, I've offered to pay for counseling a million times over to help him deal with his emotional and mental hang ups. His partying to the point of irresponsibility was beginning to become too much.

Plus, if it hadn't been enough to be dealing with Banks' shit, Sutton hadn't returned a single text all weekend, and my calls had been immediately declined. While I still didn't blame the girl, that kiss was proof enough not to give up on those two weeks that we'd had together. Sutton might still be hurt and mad as fuck at me, but the girl still wanted me, and I wasn't above using that to my advantage.

Monday had been typical and busy, but with Tuesday being one of Sutton's easy days, the plan was to harass her until she caved. At least, that had been the plan until August Remington walked up to me as I walked out of class.

*This motherfucker.*

"Don't think I don't know what you guys are doing, Carmichael," he said, starting out on the wrong motherfucking foot.

I stopped, and the only reason I stopped was because this wasn't a conversation to have out loud. "What the fuck are you taking about?"

"I'm talking about the secret meetings without me," he spat. "I'm talking about the girls hanging out without inviting Laney."

I had no idea what the fuck he was talking about, and I didn't really care. While I didn't trust the fucker, I had no doubt that Stone could handle him without mine, Fox's, or Saxton's help. Plus, we weren't having secret meetings. We've met a couple of times to discuss the mess between Stone, August, and Rylee, but we haven't been having any secret meetings pertaining to the organization. We knew better than that. While we all shared the same opinion regarding August,

we still had to play by the rules until we could prove his duplicity.

“Look, I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” I told him. I was about an inch taller than August, but it wasn’t a strain to look him in the face. “We’re not having secret meetings about the organization, and I can’t help what the girls do. If they’re getting together, and not inviting Laney, that’s Laney’s problem.”

Completely ignoring what I said, August kept rambling like a fool. “If you think you guys are going to run me off just because you don’t like me, you’re wrong.”

“Don’t like you?” I laughed unkindly. “Quit the shit, August. We all know you were behind that bullshit with Rylee and Laney. If it wasn’t enough that you disrupted the initiation with your jealousy, you have to be one stupid motherfucker to fuck with Stone Lexington. Either you’re giving yourself too much credit, or Stone not enough, but I think you need to move the fuck on, August. Whatever your hope for Rylee was, she’s married to Stone now. You’re fucking with a man’s *wife* now. Do you get that?”

“I saw her first,” he spat, and I knew I was going to need to talk to Stone and the others about this little heart-to-heart. The emotion in his voice had me concerned for Rylee. It wasn’t that I didn’t think Stone could protect her, but August was far from done with her.

“What are you? Five?” I mocked. “It doesn’t matter if you saw her first, dated her first, or even proposed to her first. She’s married to Stone. The girl is signing her name Rylee Lexington. She’s a goddamn Hera, August.”

His back straightened when I reminded him that Rylee was a Hera. If he kept trying to come between Rylee and Stone, there’d be no escaping the repercussions. There were always consequences for our actions, no matter how much we wished there weren’t. Case in point, Sutton doing everything in her power to avoid me.

“Well, perhaps you’re right,” he replied, his tone as shifty as his character. “Maybe I should move on to someone a little more available.”

I cocked my head. “You think?”

The smirk on his face should have been my warning, but I still wasn’t expecting what he said next. “Maybe someone like Sutton Hadley, perhaps.”

I had my hands in his shirt, my fist connecting swiftly, not caring who was around. “I’ll fucking kill you,” I snarled right before I felt hands pulling me back.

“What the fuck?”

“Shit.”

August was smiling at me through a bloody lip, and rage had me blind to everything else around us. “You go near Sutton, and I will fucking kill you.”

August stood up, then wiped the blood off his lip. “She’s single, isn’t she?”

Before I could say anything, Fox was standing in front of me, staring August down. “If I were you, I’d get the fuck out of here, Remington,” he spat. “You’re not doing yourself any favors here.”

Talk about fucking timing, Saxton and Fox were standing in front of me, and though I could have gotten to August if I’d really wanted to, even through my rage, I knew that now wasn’t the time or place. Just hitting him had the potential to cause enough shit within the organization. Between me and Stone, August could really sell the story that we were turning on him and trying to oust him.

August tried to stare Fox down, but it was hard to stare someone down when they were taller than you. Besides, Fox Harrington was as commanding as it got. We all had our reputations, and Fox’s reputation was that of fearlessness. If Fox wanted to become President of the United States, I had no doubt that he could. However, that’s not where he was headed.



Stone's future was in money. The guy was going to own everyone's pockets, and we all knew it. I was going into politics, and that had never been a secret. Saxton was going into media, and that guy was going to command the masses. Everyone knew whoever controlled the media controlled the world. And Fox was going to go into law, and I knew his endgame was going to be The Supreme Court, if not something more powerful.

So, if August thought he could intimidate Fox Harrington, he was very wrong. Especially, when August's goals weren't as lofty as the rest of us. August's career path was going to take him into pharmaceuticals, and though a powerful avenue, it was still limited. Plus, I wasn't even sure if August had it in him to see it all the way through.

"Fine," August replied, spitting blood on the ground. "I have somewhere I need to be anyway." He arched a brow at me when he said that, and there was no doubt that if I found him at Sutton's, I was going to kill him.

As soon as August was out of sight, Saxton asked, "What in the hell was that all about?"

"He said that he was going to go after Sutton since Rylee was now unavailable," I explained.

"Who the hell is Sutton?"

I looked over at Fox. "I gotta go," I told him, and he just nodded knowingly. Then I looked over at Saxton. "Fox can tell you all about her. I gotta go."

I took off towards student parking and my car. I wasn't sure if August was serious or not, but I wasn't going to take any chances. Sutton was still pissed and holding a grudge, and there was no way I was going to let August worm his way in between our broken relationship.

Getting into my car, I fired off a text, letting Sutton know that I was on my way to her place and that she better open the door when I got there.

However, I had no problem breaking down the fucking door.

## Chapter 12

### *Sutton~*

I stared down at the text message on my phone, and even though I'd let the guy kiss me last week, his audacity was still incredible to witness.

Jerkface: *I'm coming over. U better answer ur fucking door when I get there*

The jacked-up thing about it all was that Delta wasn't even here to play referee. Though her Tuesdays were a light load just like mine, she had texted me earlier, inviting me to go study with her. I'd had to remind her that it was my laundry and shopping day, though I wasn't bothered by it. Delta always had a million things going on, so I didn't take offense when she forgot what I was up to.

Staring at my phone, I was at war between texting Ross back or letting him find out on his own that I wasn't home. With my laundry done, I had just entered the grocery store when his arrogant text had come through. A part of me wanted to leave the text unanswered, but then I imagined an unfortunate scene at my apartment complex with Ross banging down the door, and I didn't need that kind of complaint lodged with the housing management. Decent apartments within a reasonable price range were hard to find in a college town, and so I texted the jerk back.

Me: *I'm shopping*

His response was fast as hell.

Jerkface: *Where?*

Me: *Why?*

Jerkface: *So help me God, Sutton!*

Well, okay. While I could admit to not knowing what was going on, it was obvious that Ross' temper was teetering a fine line right now. And though I was still bitter as hell, I really didn't want to be on the receiving end of Ross Carmichael losing his shit. The guy was powerful where I was not.

Me: *Copa's Grocery*

Ross didn't reply, and I had no idea if that was a good thing or a bad thing. So, shoving my phone back in my purse, I grabbed the cart handle, and then went about my business. I didn't have a whole lot to pick up, so if Ross wanted to talk to me, he'd better hurry.

About ten minutes later, I was in the fresh fruit section when I heard someone huff loudly. When I turned to see what was going on, an angry Ross Carmichael was storming my way, rudely making his way around the shoppers in his path.

My brows shot upward when he stopped in front of me. "Problem?" I asked dryly.

"How do you know August Remington?" he asked, foregoing any sort of greeting.

"I don't," I answered, then went back to putting a couple of nectarines in the fruit bags provided by the store.

Ross grabbed the bag from my hands. "How many?"

"Five," I answered, nonplussed.

Ross stuffed the nectarines in the bag, then toss them in my shopping car. "Is that it?"

I stood there.

Confused.

Looking up at him, I wracked my brain, then ran through those two weeks together and wondered how I could never have suspected that Ross Carmichael was crazy.

Plum crazy.

I cocked my head in confusion. “Do you want to tell me what in the hell is going on, Ross? Or did you seriously come here just to help me shop?”

Those blue eyes of his were still firing with anger. “How do you know August Remington?”

“I already told you,” I sighed, tired to the bone with this guy. “I don’t.”

Ross grabbed the shopping cart handle, then started to push it. “Yeah? Then why did he say he was going to ask you out?”

That stopped me. “What?”

Ross maneuvered the cart to the side, then grabbing my arm, he moved us into a corner, away from other shoppers. “If you don’t know him, then why would he talk about asking you out?”

“Well, I mean...I’ve had him in a couple of class over the years, but it’s not like we hang out,” I clarified. “Plus, he’s August Remington. Everyone knows who he is.”

He didn’t say anything for a bit. It felt rather uncomfortable, and I felt like everyone was staring at us, though they weren’t. No one here cared that me and Ross Carmichael were in the middle of something crazy.

I watched him let out a deep breath before saying, “Stay away from him, Sutton.”

“Excuse me?” *Surely, I hadn’t heard him right.*

“Look, I know that I have a lot of groveling to do, and I know you’re still pissed,” he went on. “However, stay the fuck away from August Remington or it’ll get ugly, Sutton.”

“Whoa, wait.” I was doing my best not to yell at him, but it was hard. “Why are you mad at me because of something August said? How am I responsible for him running his mouth?”

“I’m not mad at you,” he immediately replied. “I’m just mad.”

“Ross-”

“Stay away from him, Sutton,” he repeated. “No matter what’s going on between us, stay away from him.”

I wasn’t an idiot. This was about more than Ross being jealous because another guy had said that he wanted to ask me out. It was there in his voice. It was in the way he kept telling me to stay away from August. Whatever Ross was upset about, it had more to do with August Remington than it did me.

“Ross, I don’t think I’ve ever spoken to the guy,” I told him. “It’s not me that has to stay away from him.”

Then further confusing me, he said, “I’ve already told him to stay away from you, so if he goes anywhere near you, let me know.”

I shook my head. “I don’t have time for this, Ross,” I replied, exasperated. “I need to finish my shopping, then go home.”

“Fine,” he snapped, and I didn’t even have it in me to take offense.

We quietly finished shopping, and I almost bit my tongue clean through when Ross had thrown in a few things that hadn’t been on my list. Those two weeks that we had spent together told me that the items were for him, and it took everything in me not to end up a viral video clip.

It was another test to my self-control when we reached the checkout counter, and Ross paid for the groceries. When I had reached for my wallet, he’d already had his ATM card out, handing it over to the cashier. The look I shot him was a clear indication that I wasn’t happy, but the look he shot back clearly stated that he didn’t care.

I stood by the driver’s side door of my car as Ross loaded the bags into my trunk, and I hated how a part of me

liked how domestic this had all been. I could feel myself wanting to give in, and I hated that. It was up to me to dictate what was acceptable behavior and forgiving Ross would send a very wrong message that he could treat me as if I were disposable and still be forgiven. People only treated you the way you allowed them to.

*So, why did I want to forgive him?*

When he was done putting all my bags in the trunk, he made his way over to where I was standing. Anger still swimming around in those blue eyes of his, he said, "I'm picking you up on Friday for a date, and so help me God, you better be ready and answer the fucking door, Sutton."

"Christ, you're serious, aren't you?"

"You're damn right I am," he replied. "Also, I meant every word I said about staying away from August Remington. If he comes near you, call me immediately."

"Why?" I asked, not ready to completely give over. "Is he dangerous?"

"Do you hate me enough to want to see me in prison?" he asked, and that threw me for a loop.

"Of course, not."

"Then stay away from him, Sutton," he repeated. "Because I will kill him if he goes near you."

*What in the fresh hell?*

## Chapter 13

### *Ross~*

Though what we were doing could be considered frowned upon, we weren't exactly breaking any rules. We weren't bonding like we were expected to, but it was safe to say that we weren't going to. None of us trusted August, and that was even before all that shit with Stone and Rylee had gone down.

With Stone, Fox, and I having roommates, Saxton's was the only place where we could all meet and speak freely. Stone's roommate was his best friend, Lennox, and Fox's roommate was actually a scholarship student that had gone to high school with Fox. While not the best of friends, Fox let him stay at his condo rent-free. My roommate was a guy named Toby Stiles, and we'd met when he had pledged a fraternity that hadn't taken too kindly to him being gay. The situation had hit too close to home, and so when I'd found him hauling his shit to his car, looking a dejected mess, I had gotten his story, then had offered up one of my spare rooms.

It was no secret that Stone, Fox, and I could easily afford to live by ourselves, but it wasn't about money for us. It'd been about recognizing decent people and choosing to give back. We might be assholes, but we weren't evil.

*We weren't August Remington.*

"So, what's going on?" Stone asked as soon as we'd all gotten settled. "I heard you popped Remington good earlier."

I glanced over at him. "Jealous?"

Stone grinned. "Extremely."

"So, then what? Is he planning on going after our girlfriends?" Fox asked.



I looked back and forth between Stone and Saxton. “Did Fox fill you guys in?”

They both nodded. “He told me as soon as you took off earlier,” Saxton replied.

“The guys filled me in before you got here,” Stone added. “I was wondering why you called a meeting.”

“Well, I’m not sure if he’s going after our girlfriends or if he was just baiting me,” I admitted. Then thinking about it, I looked at Fox and Saxton. “Do you guys even have girlfriends?”

Saxton shook his head. “No,” he answered. “However, I’d like to know what Remington’s agenda is in case I find myself with one.”

I looked over at Fox. “You?”

He looked like he wanted to say something, but quickly changed his mind. “No.”

I leaned back in my chair. Fox and Saxton were sitting on the couch, and Stone and I were sitting in some fancy ass armchairs adjacent to the couch. “August stopped me, and he started ranting about how he knew that we were having meetings without him,” I started to tell them. “He’s under the impression that we’re having organization meetings without him.”

“But we’re not,” Saxton remarked.

“I know,” I replied. “However, he’s thinking we are.”

“That’d be against the rules,” Stone said. “Even I’m not reckless enough to thwart the rules that brazenly.”

I nodded. “He also mentioned how the girls are meeting up without inviting Laney to go along.”

“How in the hell is that our fault?” Fox asked. “We can’t tell the girls who they can be friends with.”

“Well, I’m not sure about you guys, but I don’t keep tabs on Jennifer,” I said. “In all actuality, I don’t really have no use for her. It wasn’t like I was ever a partying frat boy to begin with.”

“Same here,” Fox informed us with a shrug. “I haven’t been keeping any real tabs on Alexis.”

“I just came from Kincaid’s, and as far as I know, she’s been hanging out with Rylee more, but that’s about it,” Saxton offered. “The only other person she runs with a lot is her roommate, Hastings.”

“You sure are at Kincaid’s a lot,” Fox stated, and you could feel a lot in that one statement.

If Saxton was offended, you couldn’t tell. He just smirked. “Have something to say, Harrington?”

“Just that you and Kincaid seem a lot chummier for someone you just picked for status reasons,” he replied, not backing down.

Stone cleared his throat, and Saxton tossed a grin his way. Looking back over at Fox, he said, “You’re right. We are.”

“If she-”

“Relax, Harrington,” Saxton told him, cutting him off. “Kincaid and I have been best friends since the second grade.” *What?* “So, you can cut the shit.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I practically growled. “Don’t tell me we have another goddamn love triangle added to this fucking mess.”

Saxton chuckled. “While I do love the girl, I don’t love her like that.”

I looked over at Fox. “And you?”

“Long story,” he muttered before looking back at Saxton. “Why didn’t I know that you’re her best friend?”

“You’ll have to ask her,” Saxton replied simply.

“Besides, we don’t have any love triangles,” Stone bit out. “August and Rylee never dated.”

“Okay, okay,” I sighed. “At any rate, while he was ranting and raving about secret meetings and the girls not including Laney in their outings, he...” The issue here was that Stone was a confrontational motherfucker. While I didn’t have an issue getting physical, I wasn’t Stone Lexington.

“He, what?” Fox prompted.

I looked over at Stone. “Man, I don’t think...I don’t think a marriage certificate is doing the job,” I finally told him.

“What the fuck does that mean?” he asked quietly.

*Too quietly.*

“He just kept ranting about how he saw her first,” I continued. “The more I advised him to move the fuck on, the more he...the more emotion he showed.” I ran a hand through my hair. “I’m not sure if that makes sense.”

“How did Sutton come into the picture?” Saxton asked.

“When I kept telling him to leave Rylee alone before Stone killed him, that’s when he agreed he should go after someone single. Sutton, perhaps.”

“How does he know about you and Sutton?” Stone asked, and I knew it was killing him to stay focused.

“I have no idea,” I answered. “We were only together for a couple of weeks, but...I mean, it wasn’t like we hid it or anything. He could have seen us together.” Then I thought about last week. “She let me kiss her last week while we’d been arguing in the student parking. He could have seen us then.”

“And still no goddamn proof of anything,” Fox grumbled in frustration.

“So, what the fuck are we supposed to do?” Stone asked. “And I need some serious ideas before I kill the motherfucker.”

“Look, we have the video of Laney and Rylee arguing. We have Alexander witnessing August losing it at the initiation. We have Alexander also witnessing August being an asshole at the last meeting. Plus, now we have August harassing Ross.” Fox leaned back against the couch. “I say we meet with Alexander with everything we have.”

“It’s possible that Alexander knows something,” Stone said. “When he questioned me about calling things off with Rylee, he told me to marry her as soon as possible. Said it would be best for everyone.”

“Okay, so we meet up with Alexander, then see what he has to say,” I replied.

“In the meantime, what do we do about the girls?” Fox asked. “While Alexis isn’t my girlfriend, she is still someone who can impact my life.”

“I’m not worried about Kincaid because...well, she’s Kincaid Black. The girl knows how to take care of herself,” Saxton chuckled. “However, I agree that August can’t be trusted, and Alexis and Jennifer aren’t Kincaid.”

“Well, I’m not letting Rylee out of my sight,” Stone said. “For the times when I can’t be with her, I’ll get her a guard.”

“Christ, I can’t believe we’re actually at that point,” Fox muttered, running his hands through his hair. “Let’s just kill the bastard and be done with it.”

“That’ll be Plan-B,” I remarked dryly. “But let’s try Alexander first.”

“What about Sutton?” Stone asked.

“We have a date on Friday,” I told him. “I’ll settle things then. However, I really think Rylee’s his objective.”

“Are you sure Sutton’s going to take you back after what you did?” Saxton asked. “I mean...”

I flipped him off. “We’re at the she-doesn’t-have-a-choice stage in our courtship, so yeah.”

Saxton laughed. “This ought to be fun.”

“Yeah, oodles,” I deadpanned.

## Chapter 14

### *Sutton~*

I was sitting at the table absolutely despising my weakness. Getting ready for tonight had been a nightmare of desperate curses and Delta chuckling at me the entire time.

It wasn't that Ross was forcing me on this date, and that was the worst of it. I could have easily refused. I could have easily said no, and then called the police if I had really wanted out of this date. Hell, I could have flown home to visit my grandparents for the weekend.

I could have done a lot of things.

However, I hadn't.

Instead of listening to my brain, my heart and hope had me sitting across from Ross Carmichael on a goddamn date that was going to lead to him in my bed by the end of the night. Not only did I miss sex, but I missed it with Ross. Sure, I've done a lot of solo loving these past couple of months to ease the tension, but there was nothing like Ross Carmichael holding me down, forcing his eight-inch cock deep inside my body while I cried, begged, and moaned.

Looking at the gorgeous sonofabitch across from me, I just wasn't sure if I was weak, or if I was weak just for him. Plus, there was all the other shit that I didn't understand. While I had no doubt that there was some bad blood between him and August Remington, I still had no idea why.

With most of the main meal gone and pleasantries no longer enough to sustain polite conversation, I decided to get candid. "So, now what?"

Ross' fork stopped in mid-air. "Excuse me?"

I glanced around the fancy restaurant, glanced at the food, the wine glasses, then back up into that perfect face of his. “So, you drive me two towns over, bring me to this very nice restaurant, order the perfect meals and wine, act like the perfect gentleman, pretty much executing the perfect night out, and for what?” I leaned back in my seat. “To impress me? We both know we’re way past that possibility.”

Ross set his fork down and gave me his full attention. “First off, don’t act like this is the first date I’ve ever taken you on,” he replied. “I’ve treated you to a nice night out before. Fancier than this place if I’m recalling correctly.” He set his arms on the table. “Secondly, I’m not doing any of this to impress you, Sutton. I know there’s no impressing you. I knew it when we first hooked up. You’re not that kind of girl. My money, social standing, reputation...none of it impresses you. That’s probably why I fell for you so quickly.”

Before I could say anything, a new server appeared at our table. While I had made the effort to do something nice with my auburn hair and play up my green eyes, I was nothing compared to this blonde beauty. Even in her work uniform, she looked lovely. I almost laughed at how she looked better in a restaurant uniform than I did in my best dress.

“Good evening, my name is Emmaline,” she greeted. “Trent is on break for the moment, so if you need anything, please let me know.”

I smiled at her. “Thank you, Emmaline.”

Ross didn’t even spare her a glance. He was still shooting daggers my way. “Thanks,” he bit out.

Then the inevitable happened.

Emmaline leaned in closer towards Ross. “I’m here for anything you need, Mr. Carmichael,” she cooed, announcing that she knew exactly who her patron was. “Anything at all.”

I should have taken offense. I should have pointed out that we were on a date. I should have broadcasted her obviousness. I should have felt...something. However, all I

felt was resigned. He was Ross Carmichael. This shit was going to happen, no matter where he went or what he was doing. Plus, she was prettier than I was. Why wouldn't she think she could entice him?

When I glanced across the table, that fire was back in Ross' blue eyes, only I had no idea what he was pissed about this time. For someone who had a reputation for being patient and level-headed, the boy sure did seem pissed a lot.

Then I watched in shameful fascination as Ross looked up at her and said, "The only thing I need help with is getting my girlfriend home as fast as possible, so I can fuck her hard enough, deep enough, and brutal enough that she never thinks of leaving me for another guy. So, *Emmaline*, unless you can do something about the traffic laws, I'd say there isn't a goddamn thing you can do for me." The boy was growling at her, and my traitorous vagina was cheering him on. "Perhaps, the check. Can you get us the check?" He turned back to face me. "And make it quick."

Emmaline scurried away, and I couldn't even feel sorry for her.

However, manners forced me to ask, "Was that really necessary?"

"She hit on me while you were sitting right across from me, Sutton," he snapped. "Hell fucking yes that was necessary."

"Maybe she thought I was your sister or cousin," I posed.

"I don't give a fuck what she thought," he shot back. "The assumption to always seeing a couple together is that they are on a date. You never do something so crass as make yourself available like that."

"She's very pretty, thou-"

"That's fucking it," he snapped, and I didn't say anything as he flagged the maître d, swearing under his breath.



When the maître d approached, he asked, “How may I help you?”

Ross pulled out his wallet, then handing over five one-hundred-dollar bills. “This should cover the cost of the meal and our original server’s tip,” Ross said before looking at me and saying, “Get up. We’re leaving.”

The poor maître d started sputtering, and that told me that he knew who Ross was, too. “Sir, is there an issue? Something wrong with the meals or-”

Ross stood to his full height and that made him tower over the poor man. “The problem is that I was enjoying a nice, romantic-“ I cringed at the word romantic because I wasn’t acting romantic in the least. “-dinner with my girlfriend when your server, Emmaline, thought it would be appropriate to hit on me right in front of my girl.”

The maître d gasped. “Oh, sir, I’m so sorry-”

“We don’t need you to be sorry,” Ross snapped. “We just need to leave.” Ross grabbed my elbow, then led me out of the restaurant, leaving a flustered maître d behind.

Once we made it outside, I couldn’t help myself. “You know, you have a reputation for being patient and composed,” I remarked. “I haven’t seen much of that lately.”

“That’s because of you,” he growled. “You’re making me crazy.”

I took offense.

“Me?” I squawked. “What in the hell have I done?”

Ross handed the valet his ticket before looking down at me. “You’re leaving me no choice but to force a second chance out of you,” he said. “I’d rather you gave me one because you *wanted* to.”

“And I’d rather you not be an asshole,” I scoffed. “Yet here we are.”

The valet pulled up, and I thought that rather fast. However, the restaurant was already aware that Ross Carmichael was less than thrilled with them, so they might be trying to do the most to make it up to him.

Ross opened the passenger door for me, then helped me in before making his way to the driver's side of the car. Soon, we were on our way and headed back towards Serenity Springs. However, we weren't even a few miles out of town before Ross pulled over onto the side of the road. With the kind of car he drove, there was no way that something was wrong with the vehicle.

“What are you doing?”

Ross reached down, then slid his seat back as far as it could go. “Get over here,” he commanded.

“What?” While it was dark, and we were parked close to some half-ass dirt road, we were still visible to the flowing traffic if they were inclined to pay attention.

“I said, get the fuck over here,” he snapped.

My mind was telling me this was a bad idea, but my vagina was telling me it was the best idea we've ever heard.

I went with the advice of my vagina.

Lifting the fabric of my dress, I climbed over the stick shift in between the seats. I straddled him, and I cursed how good it felt to have him nestled so comfortably beneath me.

“Now what?” I asked as his hands came to rest on my hips and his dick began hardening between my spread legs.

“Mark me,” he said.

My eyes rounded. “What?”

“Mark me,” he repeated. “When the day comes that you finally trust me, you won't have to anymore. However, until then, mark me and show all these rude bitches who I belong to.”

*Holy. Shit.*

## Chapter 15

### *Ross~*

Her eyes were wide with shock, but her pussy was pressing down on my hard dick, so any protests were going to fall on deaf ears.

*Sutton wanted me.*

She wanted me, and I was going to manipulate that want to my advantage. It was a bastard thing to do, but I was desperate. I felt like I was losing my goddamn mind, and Sutton was showing no mercy, though I didn't blame her. Sutton wasn't weak. Women just weren't made that way. Sure, there were plenty of them who appeared weak, but God help any man when a woman tapped into that inner strength that they all possessed.

"I'm not going to mark you, Ross," Sutton replied. "It's...what does that prove?"

"That I'm taken," I bit out.

She shook her head. "No, it doesn't," she argued. "It just proves you had a good time recently."

My hands tightened on her hips. "No girl has ever marked me, Sutton," I informed her. "Never." She started biting her lower lip at that. "Your mark *will* make a statement, whether you believe it or not."

Her shoulders sagged, and she looked...tired. "I don't need to mark you, Ross," she muttered. "It's not going to help me trust you-"

"Well, that's a shame," I said, interrupting what I already knew. Sutton didn't trust me, and I didn't blame her. She shouldn't. What I'd done had been shitty and I didn't

deserve a second chance. Still, that didn't change anything. "That's a shame, because I'm going to mark the fuck out of you."

"Ross--"

I leaned up and latched my teeth onto her neck. Her fingers were digging into my shoulders, but she wasn't telling me to stop. I bit, sucked, and laved a love bite on the side of her neck, and by the time I was done with her tonight, her body was going to be littered with them. Did it make me look like an insecure dick? Possibly. Still, I didn't give a fuck. I wanted everyone to know that Sutton was mine. I had a lot to make up for, and I was starting now.

Satisfied that I'd done enough damage, I pulled back, and an ugly, violent, purple stamp of ownership glared back at me.

*It was prefect.*

Looking up at the stunning girl perched on my lap, her eyes were like glittering emeralds. Normally, I'd just have my way with her because that's how she liked it, but I had to respect the fact that she was still mad at me. She might be on a date with me, and she might even let me fuck her, but Sutton was still mad at me, I wasn't confused about that.

I lifted my hips, so that she could feel what she was doing to me. "Say yes, Sutton," I told her. "Forgive me and say yes."

"I don't forgive you," she quickly replied. "But...but I can't lie and say that I don't want you."

Though I wanted her forgiveness more, her submission was going to have to do for now. I slid my hands over her thighs until my hands were on her bare flesh.

*God, I missed touching her.*

"Feed me your tits, baby," I commanded as my hands grabbed the delicate lace of her panties, pulling at them until the sound of tearing fabric echoed inside the car.

“What...oh, God...” she moaned as my hands squeezed her ass. “What if...if a car drives by?”

“Then they’ll see me sucking my girl’s nipples,” I replied easily. “They’ll see how you drive me fucking insane.”

“Ross, I-”

Her protests were quickly quieted as I slid two fingers inside her already soaked pussy. The wetness had me wishing that she was riding my face, but there was plenty of time for that later. The plan had always been to take her to my place after dinner. I still had all the toys that we used to use in my nightstand drawer, and Sutton was going to be handcuffed to my bed until morning.

“Do you want to wait until we get home?” I asked, but it wasn’t because I was trying to be a gentleman. I needed her absolute consent, and I knew my fingers deep in her cunt was going to get me the answer that I wanted. “If you need your modesty protected, we can wait until we get home.”

Her hips started to move, and I knew there was no way she would agree to wait. Especially, considering that she hasn’t had sex since the last time I came deep inside her. While Sutton didn’t know it, I’ve been stalking her since the moment I’d chosen to cool things off.

“Oh, God...Ross...” she moaned, fucking my fingers. “I...I...”

I leaned up and took one of her tits in my mouth over her dress. Her outfit didn’t allow for a bra, but it had come with built-in support because she needed it. While Sutton didn’t have huge tits, they were definitely a handful.

Her hips were really rocking now, so I slid a third finger up inside her, preparing her. I had a long, thick, and veiny cock, and Sutton had always needed a moment to adjust. It was one of my favorite things. I loved how she was willing to endure the pain and discomfort just to be with me.

“We can wait,” I lied. “We can wait until I get you home and tie you down.” She let out a dirty whimper. “If you need your pussy licked, we can wait until we get home. Is that it? Do you want me to eat that pretty pussy of yours? Do you miss cumming on my face? Do you miss how I make your legs tremble around my head?”

“Yes,” she rushed out breathlessly. “I miss it all...”

“I miss every-fucking-thing about you, baby,” I told her truthfully. “Every-fucking-thing.”

“Ross-”

“Do you want to wait?” I asked again. “Or do you want to ride my cock now? Let anyone who drives by see how hot you are for my cock? Let anyone who drives by see how addicted I am to your pussy? Because I want you badly enough that I don’t fucking care if they watch. I hope they watch. I hope they see how you belong to me, and only me.”

Sutton threw her head back, her hips riding my fingers, her neck baring my mark. “Oh, God...yes,” she cried. “I want that, too.”

I quickly pulled my fingers from her cunt and lifted her hips to work my pants undone. The second that I lifted my hips to free my dick, Sutton wrapped her hand around my hot heat, then guided it towards the center of her paradise.

Ever so slowly, she lowered herself on my dick, and I had to bite my tongue against the responsibility of a condom. We’ve always used them before, but I was past the point of caring about the right thing. It’s been too long, and I knew Sutton was on birth control. During those two weeks together, we had covered a lot, and one of those things had been protection. Even though she got the shot, we had still chosen to use condoms because I never had sex without one. Being double covered had been perfect, but I no longer cared anymore. If she got pregnant, it would screw up a lot of shit for me within The Order, but I just couldn’t find it in me to care at the moment.

When the back of Sutton's thighs came down on top of mine, feeling my bare cock lodged deep inside her of her felt like touching Heaven. I wasn't sure if I was going to last long enough not to disgrace myself, but I was going to do my best. It was easy to judge unprotected sex until you had it. I'd never felt anything like Sutton's pussy wrapped openly around my cock.

The second Sutton's hands gripped the headrest behind my head, I reached up and pulled the left strap of her dress down over her shoulder. Her tit popped out like I hoped it would, and I latched onto her nipple like a starved infant. It was sensory overload, and it felt like I didn't have enough hands, lips, or cock to consume Sutton the way I really wanted to.

"Oh, God..." she whimpered as she started riding my cock. "So good..."

I let her nipple go, then went to work on marking the mound of her tit. If she planned on showing any cleavage this week, she was going to be flashing my ownership. I was feeling feral with it, and I knew I was probably always going to feel like this. I had fucked this girl over, and I knew the guilt was never going to go away.

After I was satisfied with another mark, I looked at her, and her eyes were closed, her head thrown back, and she was riding my cock like she was afraid she'd never get to ride it again. "Fuck, yeah," I grunted. "Ride that cock, baby. Make yourself cum all over me."

"I'm so close," she moaned. "So close..."

I wasn't far behind her, so I reached in between our bodies and began playing with her clit. "Cum for me, Sutton," I demanded. "Squeeze me tight, baby."

I wasn't sure how much longer we went, and I stopped paying attention to passing headlights a long time ago, but eventually, Sutton was crying out her release. "Oh, God...oh, God...Ross..."



I held on for my life and made sure she was a shivering mess before I finally unloaded inside her pussy. For the first time in my life, I shot my load inside a warm, wet, tight cunt, and there was no way we were ever going back to using condoms again.

Even if I had to marry her.

## Chapter 16

### *Sutton~*

I was a nervous mess, and I had no idea why. I'd already ridden him in the car earlier, so modesty was hardly the issue at this point. Besides, not only had I ridden him in the front seat of his car, but I'd also done it with traffic passing by, no care to what anyone could see.

As Ross walked around the front of his car to come open the door for me, I was also very aware of the wetness between my legs. Ross and I had always used condoms during those two weeks together, but I had been so desperate for him, so...wild...that I hadn't even thought about condoms when I had seated myself over him. I had chased my pleasure with no thought to protection against anything unpleasant, and when Ross came deep inside me, it had been the hottest thing that I had ever experienced. There was something to be said for the dirtiness of such an act.

Ross helped me out of the car, and curiosity rushed out before I could stop it. "I need to ask you something."

He squeezed my hand in his, but he stopped walking to look down at me. "What is it?"

"While I'm protected from pregnancy, we didn't use a condom for-"

"Let me stop you right there, Sutton," he said, interrupting me. "You are the last girl that I've been with." My eyes rounded at that. No way. That couldn't be true. "We've already had the health talk, so what's the problem?"

"We still used condoms-"

Ross yanked me forward, my body pressed up against his. His eyes blown with desire, he said, "If you think I'm

going to go back to using condoms after just cumming inside your pussy bare, you are out of your mind.”

“Ross-”

“Tell me it doesn’t turn you on to feel my cum dripping from your pussy,” he challenged. “Tell me you aren’t feeling positively dirty with your pussy wet with my cum.”

I couldn’t.

Then he went for the jugular. “Tell me you aren’t eager for me to tie you down and make you take my cum now that you know how good it feels.”

My thighs clenched, the moisture between them making everything that Ross was saying true. “I can’t,” I admitted, and the bastard smirked before turning around and practically dragging me behind him into his condo building.

Having been here before, I knew where we were going, and I also knew that he had a roommate. Though Toby Stiles was a quiet one, I knew there was no way I was going to be able to stay quiet tonight. Ross had a lot to make up for, and I suspected that sex was going to be one of the ways that he planned on making it up to me.

Once we got inside, there was no tour of the place or offer of something to drink. Ross led me straight to his bedroom, and he locked the door as soon as it shut behind him.

His blue eyes raking me in, he said, “Take it off before I rip it off.”

I reached back, then unzipped my dress, letting it fall in a puddle around my feet. Unable to wear a bra, and after Ross ripping my panties off in the car, I was standing before him, ready and completely naked. I could feel goosebumps erupting all over my body, but I wasn’t cold.

I was hot.

“Get on the bed,” Ross instructed, and I did what he commanded as he walked over to the nightstand that held all

my fantasies. We had stocked that drawer together, adding to it the more comfortable I had become.

I pulled the covers back, then climbed into his bed. The sheets felt just like I remembered, and the bed was just as comfortable as it had always been. Ross' wealth was apparent in the way his bedroom was decorated. No cheap bedding here.

Still fully clothed, Ross straddle me over the sheet that covered my body. "You know what to do," he said, and I did.

Not uttering word, I raised my hands up over my head, and gave complete control over to Ross. When the metal of the handcuffs touched my skin, desire had my entire body trembling. The sound of him locking me to his bed was the hottest sound in the world, next to hearing Ross grunting out filthy things in my ears. The second that my other wrist was secured in the second pair of handcuffs, Ross climbed back off my body, then started unbuttoning his dress shirt.

"After I cum inside you again, we're going to shower," he said, my eyes glued to his hands working his shirt. "There's no way I'm not eating your pussy tonight."

I moaned. "Ross..."

"We have a lot of time to make up for, and I'm not leaving anything out tonight," he continued.

I didn't say anything because I couldn't. I wanted everything that I knew Ross could deliver. I knew what he was capable of with his face between my thighs, and I missed it. More than missing it, I craved it, though.

*I craved him.*

Completely naked, Ross climbed up back on the bed, his hard cock bobbing in front of my face. "I'm going to leave your legs free, baby," he said. "I'm looking forward to the fight." I let out a lusty moan, eager for the same thing. "But, first, I'm going to choke you with my cock. I'm going to fuck that smartass mouth of yours until you come to heel. Until you

realize there's no point in arguing about this anymore. About us."

Before I could say anything, Ross' hands were in my hair, and he was sliding his dick in my opened mouth. Ross was thick and long, and I was never going to be able to take him all, no matter how long we did this or how hard I tried. Still, I loved the challenge of trying. I loved how he got off on the gagging noises and wetness of my efforts.

"Fuck, you feel so good," Ross moaned. "I love the way you suck my cock."

I wasn't sucking his cock, though. Ross was fucking my mouth. Sucking his cock would suggest that I was in control, and I wasn't.

Just when I didn't think my jaw could take anymore, Ross pulled out of my mouth, tapping my lips with the head of his wet cock, and that's when I noticed them.

"Are...are those tattoos?" Ross hadn't had any tattoos those weeks we'd been together, so they kind of surprised me.

"Baby, the last thing I care about are my tattoos," he growled darkly, and I quickly forgot about them as he reached for my right breast. Pinching the nipple, he said. "I don't care about anything but you."

Ross covered my body with his, and the weight of his masculinity was a heady feeling. It felt so goddamn good. Good enough to turn me into a puddle of hormones. There was no other feeling in the world as that of a man covering your body with his.

I spread my legs, the shameless invitation obvious. With our earlier releases still a mess between my legs, Ross needed no extra help getting inside me. In one fluid thrust, Ross was lodged deep inside me, no more inches to give.

"Oh, God..." I mewled.

"I'm going to fuck you so good, baby," he promised right before he pulled back, then pushed back in. "You have no

idea how much I've missed this tight cunt of yours.”

The words came out before I could stop them. “I've missed you deep inside of me, too.”

Something close to a growled erupted from his throat, and his thrusts quickened into relentless drives into my body. You could hear how wet I was, but I was past feeling embarrassed. I was back in Ross' bed after what he'd done to me, so what more was there to be embarrassed about?

“Fuck, baby,” he grunted above me. “You're fucking perfect.”

“Please, Ross...” I begged. “Oh, God...please, don't stop...”

“I'm not stopping until you can't take anymore,” he vowed. “I'm not stopping until you pass out from all the pleasure.”

“Yes,” I panted like a slut. “Oh, God...yes...”

After that, nothing else matter. Ross slammed into me repeatedly with no give. He was out to prove something, and with every moan and plea, he was accomplishing that. He was doing what all jackasses did. He was making me forget the heartache of the past couple of months with every stab into my body. He was making me forget what an asshole he'd been.

Soon, my body was giving over, and I was calling out the only name that I wanted to for the rest of my life. As pathetic as that sounded, I was all in. I was all in the second that I had agreed to the date.

“Ross...”

“I'm right there with you, baby,” he promised. “I swear it.”

His words sounded too promising not to believe.

Even if that made me an idiot.

## Chapter 17

### *Ross~*

I was on my third cup of coffee, and I was probably due another one. Last night had been perfect, but it hadn't ended until around three this morning. I had over two months of pent-up lust that had needed to be unleashed, and I had unleashed it. Against all those fake protests of hers, I had used Sutton all night, and I hadn't stopped until she had actually lost consciousness.

When I received a text this morning at nine, I had showered, changed, then left Sutton in my bed with a note. No way was I fucking this shit up again. Along with telling her that I had a meeting, the note also included instructions about waiting for me to come home. Though I seriously doubted that she'd still be at my place, I had still included the demand.

"Long night?" Fox smirked.

I flipped him off as I drank the last of my coffee. "I'm good," I lied.

Before he could call me out on my lie, Alexander walked through the door of the deserted tire shop that we'd agreed upon. Why we had to continue to meet in deserted places, I had no idea. I understood it for the initiation, but I wasn't sure why we kept having to do it. However, Alexander was the one who named the places, so it wasn't like we had much of a choice.

Alexander stopped in front of us, looking as debonair as always. "Okay, gentlemen," he greeted. "What's the issue now?" The way he said it implied that we were becoming more of a handful than he'd been prepared for.

"We need to talk about August Remington," Fox answered, getting straight to the point.

Alexander looked around. "I suppose that's why he's missing from this meeting?" The censure was there, but it was hard to continue to care about Alexander's position in the organization. His chumminess with August was an issue for all of us.

Fox gestured toward Stone. "Show him."

Stone pulled his phone out, then played the video of Rylee and Laney for Alexander. We've already all seen it, so there was nothing to do but wait until it finished playing. Now that Laney was making noises about not being included in things, we had to show Alexander why.

Once the video was finished playing, Stone said, "That's not even the whole of it. It started at the initiation, and you know it."

"I take it you are assuming that Mr. Remington put Ms. Spinner up to it?"

"We know he did," I practically spat. "You know it, too."

"I know no such thing, Mr. Carmichael," Alexander replied, quick to defend himself of any wrongdoing.

"So, not only are you going to ignore his outburst the night of our initiation, or his outburst the other night, but you're going to ignore the video, too?" Saxton asked.

"Or how about our fight the other day?" I challenged. "Because I know you have to know about that."

Alexander gave me a tight nod. "It's my understanding that you assaulted Mr. Remington," he confirmed. "However, it's also my understanding that no real harm was done."

"Assaulted him?" I snapped. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"When August called you to tattle, did he include what made Ross knock him one?" Fox asked. "Did he tell you that?"



“He simply mentioned his interest in a very lovely young lady,” Alexander answered, and I almost popped him one. “He said Mr. Carmichael took offense because he has a past with the young girl in question.”

“I’m going to fucking kill him,” I muttered to no one in particular. “I swear it.”

“Mr. Carmichael-”

“He wasn’t just expressing his interest in a random student at Hales,” I snapped. “He was ranting about how he saw Rylee first and that he didn’t care that she was married to Stone now. When I pointed out that Stone would kill him if he went near Rylee again, that’s when he told me that he was going to go after Sutton.” I was pacing by now. “He also knows that Sutton’s mine.”

Alexander arched a brow. “I wasn’t aware that you were serious with anyone, Mr. Carmichael.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Stone exploded. “*That’s* what you’re concerned about? That Ross has a girlfriend? What about this brotherhood that August Remington keeps putting at risk? What the fuck about that, Alexander?”

Alexander let out a deep breath, and it was obvious that he hadn’t expected us to be so trying. He had probably imagined a simple initiation, some accolades for governing such a powerful class, and some college ass at his disposal.

No way could he have anticipated this.

“I understand that you are concerned with my close relationship with August and his family,” Alexander replied, his candor surprising us all. “However, my priority is to the organization, first and foremost.” He eyed us all. “Never mistake that, gentlemen. No matter my friendships, none of them are worth the price of losing everything that I hold dear.”

“Well, then what the fuck-”

“*Mr. Stone,*” Alexander interrupted, “while all your arguments hold a certain amount of merit, there is one thing you seem to all be forgetting.”

“And what’s that?” Saxton asked.

“That Mr. Remington is every bit a member of this organization as you all are,” he answered. “He is just as powerful as the four of you, and he was chosen for a reason. If you are going to oust a Remington from The Order, you need proof, gentlemen. Absolute, undeniable, undisputed proof of his wrongdoings. So far, all I have are he said/she said instances, and Mr. Remington’s word is every bit as reliable as all of yours.” Alexander looked over at Stone. “Certainly, his outbursts are a concern, considering that you and Mrs. Lexington are locked into a Hera contract, but those mild disruptions are not enough to remove his membership.”

“Outbursts?” Stone scoffed. “He’s after my fucking wife, Alexander.”

“He is,” I said, backing up Stone’s claim. “I heard it for myself. He’s obsessed with Rylee.”

“It doesn’t matter, Mr. Carmichael,” Alexander replied. “Proof is the only thing that can push your complaints against Mr. Remington forward.” He was honest as he eyed us all. “While it benefits The Order to have Mr. Lexington as a member moreover than Mr. Remington, we are a brotherhood, and we have never had to choose before. August Remington has a legacy within the organization, whether you want to admit it or not. Proof, gentlemen.”

“And if he goes after my wife again?” Stone asked.

“I thought he was interested in Ms. Hadley now?” Alexander glanced my way. “Yes, Mr. Carmichael, we are already very aware of her name and her family’s dynamics.”

“Sutton’s mine, Alexander,” I told him. “While she’s not my wife, I won’t standby and allow August to harass her, any more than Stone will allow him to harass Rylee.”

His chin jerked up. Ignoring me, he looked over at Saxton and Fox. “So, are there any young ladies that you two are involved with that we need to know about?”

“Why are you making this about us?” Fox asked. “Whether we’re involved with someone seriously or getting our dicks wet with one-night stands, you don’t see August going after our girls as a problem?”

“You’ve yet to introduce any proof to your claims,” Alexander reminded him. “Right now, Mrs. Lexington is the only young lady irrevocably spoken for.”

“That’s bullshit,” Fox spat.

Alexander ignored Fox’s curse. “Speaking of young ladies, it’s also been brought to my attention that your sponsors are icing out Ms. Spinner. Is that true?”

I chuckled darkly. I couldn’t help it. “How far up your ass is August really?”

He speared me a look. “It doesn’t benefit the organization to have your sponsors at odds, any more than it benefits the organization to have you gentlemen at odds.”

“They’re not icing her out,” Saxton told him. “Rylee and Kincaid have become friends, but they’re not getting together with Alexis or Jennifer and keeping Laney out of it.”

“So, Mrs. Lexington and Ms. Black are friends now,” he murmured. “Interesting.”

“This is pointless,” I said, not caring. “How is Rylee and Kincaid hanging out more important than what August is doing?”

Another sigh, it was obvious that Alexander was done with us. “Bring me proof,” he repeated. “That’s all I can tell you for now.”

As Alexander walked out of the room, it was a good thing that me and Sutton had made up. I had a lot of anger and

irritation I needed to release, and she was just the person I needed for that.

“So, what now?” Saxton asked.

“We get proof,” Fox answered.

Easier said than done, though.

## Chapter 18

### *Sutton~*

One Uber ride, some more sleep, a proper shower, and some toast later, I was sitting on the couch-not sure if I was happy or mortified-with Delta sitting across from me, grilling me. After all, it was kind of hard to hide all the damn hickeys Ross had planted all over my body.

“So...so, is this a good thing?” Delta asked hesitantly.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “He’s saying and doing all the right things, but...I’m still...”

“Hurt?” she prodded gently.

I nodded. “Yeah, I think so,” I muttered sheepishly. “Is it...petty of me that I resent that he hasn’t paid for what he did to me? Is it wrong that I’m...upset that he ghosted me, then went about his life just fine, only to let him back in?”

Delta shook her head. “No,” she grumbled. “I think that’s natural. No one wants to hurt alone.”

“I’m confused,” I admitted. “I mean, I take full responsibility for caving, but my emotions are still a jumbled mess.”

“Falling in love sucks.”

I let out a sad chuckle. “It sure does.”

“Do you think he’s going to be mad that you came home when he told you not to?”

I shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know,” I told her. “I also don’t care. I needed a proper shower after everything I let him do to me last night.”

Delta wiggled her eyebrows. “I bet.”

“What about you?” I asked. “How are things going with Malcolm?”

She grimaced a bit. “Nothing’s changed, and I don’t know if that’s good or bad.”

“How so?”

“I’ve been backing off a bit, and instead of questioning my absence, Malcolm just accepts my excuses, then goes about his business.”

I adjusted myself a bit because I was so damn sore before saying, “I still think you should just have candid talk with him, Delta. Let him know that it’s more for you. It’s better than living in limbo.”

She let out a sigh. “I know. I do. It’s just...avoidance seems less traumatic.”

“Well, it’s better than no answer at all,” I huffed. “I can’t get any real answers out of Ross, other than I’m his and he’s mine, and that’s all I need to know.”

“Do you believe him about not being with other girls?”

“I do,” I answered. “I mean, there’s no reason to lie about it. We’d already had sex in his car, so it wasn’t like he had to lie about it to get me in bed. There was no value in it for him to lie.”

Delta reached over and nudged my leg. “Then maybe he *was* heartbroken, Sutton,” she offered. “He said he ghosted you because he had some shit that he needed to take care of before getting too serious with you. So, how do we know that he wasn’t hurting, too?”

“Probably because I can’t imagine someone like Ross Carmichael being heartbroken,” I semi-joked. “He’s just so... commanding, you know. I can’t...I just can’t see him sad and crying in his room over a breakup.”

Delta grinned. “Okay, I’ll give you the sad and crying, but that doesn’t mean he’s not capable of experiencing a

broken heart. The dude seems too focused for a meltdown, but that doesn't mean he didn't suffer during your time apart, too."

"Maybe-"

A knock on our door stopped my sentence, and I shot Delta a pleading look. I was too sore to get up and do anything, much less answer the door.

Delta just laughed as she got up to go answer the door. I laid my head on the backrest of the couch, and I swear to God, I could have fallen asleep again.

"Oh, what are you doing here?"

Malcolm's voice was clear as day when he asked, "Good to see you, too."

"I didn't mean it like that," Delta grumbled as I heard her shutting the door. "I just wasn't expecting you to stop by. You usually text first."

"Hey, Sutton," he greeted, ignoring Delta's rudeness. "How are you?"

I stretched my neck back and over, so I could get a good look at him. "I'm good, Malcolm," I answered. "How are you?"

He let out a low whistle. "Damn, girl." He jerked his chin my way. "That mountain lion attack must have been something else."

I winced.

I couldn't help it.

"Yeah," I muttered. "They really need to do something about those mountain lions running loose."

Malcolm laughed. "I'm just teasing," he replied. "But that shit does look vicious."

"It feels vicious," I agreed. "I can barely move."

Instead of embarrassing me more, he turned to Delta. “Thought we could go to lunch together,” he told her. “We’ve been missing each other a lot lately.”

I bit my lip before reaching for my phone, pretending to be busy with something. It was obvious that Malcolm had been paying attention, and I was hoping that Delta would give him credit for that.

“Uh, oh,” she replied softly. “Yeah, okay. We can do lunch.” Then manners or nervousness had her asking, “Do you want to come along, Sutton?”

Before I could answer, there was another knock on the door, and Delta was on her way to answer it. However, I was able to get my answer out before she opened the door. “No, thank you. I-”

She didn’t let me finish as she greeted our newest guest. “Well, well, well,” Delta drawled out. “Look what the cat dragged in.”

I turned, and Ross was walking through the door, a cocky smirk on his face. “Good to see you, too, Delta.”

Commanding the room like the wealthy, entitled heir that he was, Ross walked up to Malcolm and stuck his hand out. “Ross Carmichael,” he said, introducing himself.

Malcolm took his hand. “Malcolm House.” He jerked his chin in that ‘what’s up’ kind of way that guys did. “And not many people don’t know who you are, man.”

Ross slid his hands in his pockets. “I don’t suppose so.”

Then Malcolm looked my way. “Is this the mountain lion?”

I choked out a laugh. “Dude!”

Malcolm threw me a wink before grinning like a lunatic. “Just wondering.”

Ross looked over at me, his brows up high. I let out an embarrassed huff. “He was asking about the mountain lion



attack,” I explained. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m a bit of a mess.”

Ross’ eyes flared. “Maybe,” he conceded. “But you’re *my* mess, so it’s okay.”

“Okay, so we’re heading out,” Delta announced to Ross. “Lunch.”

“Have fun,” he replied before addressing Malcolm again. “Just in case you missed it, Sutton’s my girlfriend. You might run into me a lot here.”

Before Malcolm could comment, Delta was making shit awkward. “Oh, don’t worry. Malcolm’s hardly ever here these days.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ross told her. “If there’s another guy hanging out in my girl’s apartment, I’d want to know who and why.” Ross shrugged. “Might just be a guy thing.”

And going for awkward gold, Delta said, “I think that only applies if the relationship is serious.” I watched Malcolm’s brows jump high, but Delta was already pulling him towards the door. “Let’s go and give these two some privacy.”

I watched as she grabbed her purse off the end table near the front door. Malcolm gave Ross another head nod before they were both out the door.

As soon as the door shut behind them, Ross turned towards me. “That was awkward as hell,” he remarked, a small grin on his lips.

I nodded. “Wasn’t it, though?”

He jerked his head towards the door before making his way to sit next to me on the couch. “What’s their deal?”

“They’ve been seeing each other for a while, and they’re somewhere between still casual and possibly more,” I explained. It wasn’t like I was giving up Delta’s deepest,

darkest secrets, but there'd been no way to disguise the awkwardness.

Ross reached out and began rubbing my thigh. "How sore are you?"

I arched a brow. "Came to get your dick wet again?"

"No, asshole," he replied. "I came to check on you and ask why the fuck you left my condo?"

My heart warmed a bit. "I needed a shower," I grumbled.

"And I needed to check on my girl," he replied, and that was all she wrote, folks.

## Chapter 19

*Ross~*

“That’s it, baby,” I grunted, my hands digging into Sutton’s hips. “Take that dick.”

Even though I had spent all weekend inside of Sutton, it still hadn’t been enough. With Mondays being heavy class days for the both of us, I had spent the night at my condo last night while she had spent the night at her apartment.

*I hadn’t liked it at all.*

So, not appreciating the fact that we spent the night apart, I had crashed her Tuesday laundry and shopping day, and we haven’t left her bed all day. I’d made a million promises about laundry and shopping tomorrow before Sutton had finally undressed for me, and I planned on keep those promises. However, in order to do that, I needed to get my fill today. Also, realizing that I was quickly losing my mind, I planned on moving her into my place soon. My only hope was that Malcolm was serious enough about Delta that he’d move in as soon as Sutton moved out. I couldn’t see Sutton wanting to leave Delta high and dry on the rent. However, I’d gladly play Delta’s rent if it came down to it.

“Ross, please...” Sutton whimpered, and I loved hearing the sounds that she made when I fucked her good. All the little moans, the weak whimpers, the deep groans, the way she cried out when she couldn’t break free of her restraints...I loved it all.

“Please, what?” I grunted. “Please, harder? Deeper? Do you need me to tie you down again?”

Her pussy clenched around my cock, and I knew it was the tying her down bit. I loved that we had that in common, and Sutton trusted me enough to surrender herself to me like

that. The girl might not trust me with her heart just yet, but she definitely trusted me with her body.

“Make me cum,” she begged, and it was the perfect thing to say.

“What do I get if I make you cum?”

“Anything you want,” she quickly moaned. “Whatever you want.”

A part of me wanted to coerce an agreement to live me with me out of her, but I knew I couldn't do that do her. I needed and wanted her to move in with me voluntarily. I needed her to still feel like she had a choice in all this. I was walking a fine line still, and I didn't want to fuck up the progress I'd made.

So, instead of telling her what I really wanted, I said, “I want your ass.”

Her elbows collapsed, and she let out a deep, lusty moan. “Oh, God...”

I slid inside her tight cunt all the way and held still. “Do you want to cum?” I teased. “Because if you do, that's the deal, baby.”

It wasn't something that we did often, but it wasn't anything that she's ever denied me. When Sutton and I had gotten into the deep end of our sexual ocean, anal fucking had been first on the list. The girl took it like a champ, but I knew it took a while for her to get into it. I was thick and long, and unless I prepped her for hours beforehand, my entry was always going to be uncomfortable for her.

“Yes,” she quickly agreed. “Please, Ross...please...”

I worked her pussy with my dick like my life depended on it. I haven't been in her ass since the night before I'd made the biggest mistake of my life, and the past few days have been spent getting reacquainted with her mouth, pussy, tits, and every inch of her skin. I'd been too impatient to work her ass. I'd been too revved up. Too desperate for her.

My hips were like hard pistons, hitting the back of her thighs relentlessly. Now with condoms out of the way, every thrust into her warm sheath felt like being reborn again. It felt like a miracle. There was no one better for me than Sutton, and I knew that to the bottom of my soul.

Soon, she was cumming all over my cock, white cream dripping down my shaft. Her legs were shaking, and she was crying out into one of the pillows that littered her bed. I could easily cum with her, but I wanted in her ass too badly to join her.

The second her body surrendered to the aftershocks of her release, I pulled my soaked cock out of her pussy and pressed the head against her forbidden little fuckhole. I dropped a stream of spit where my cock was working her open, doing my best to lubricate the fuck out of her. If I weren't such a fucking bastard, I would wait until we had some lube, but I never said I wasn't a bastard.

“Oh, Christ...” she moaned, her body relaxing for me. Though we hadn't done this often, Sutton knew that she was the key to how much this would hurt her, not me.

“Open that tight little ass for me, baby,” I encouraged. “Let me inside. Let me inside, and I promise to make it good for the both of us.”

“Ross...oh, God...yes...”

It took some effort, but soon, I was lodged deep inside her ass, and I dropped some more spit onto her entrance. A lot of people lost sight of the fact that men needed the lubricant just as much as women did. I had no problem with my dick being sore from overuse, but I sure as fuck didn't want it scraped raw from lack of lubricant. That's why it was always important to make sure your girl was wet as fuck at all times.

After slapping Sutton's ass for good measure, I grabbed her hips, then started working my cock in and out of her tight ass. I could see her hands fisted in the sheets, her knuckles white as she worked to accept the uncomfortable invasion into

her body. I knew it hurt, but I also loved how she wasn't telling me to stop.

"That's a good girl," I cooed. "Such a good fucking girl for me."

"Don't stop." Her plea was muffled by the pillow in her face, but I still heard her all the same. The pleasure would come once I started fucking her nice and steady. That's what she needed, and for Sutton, the ultimate pleasure was worth her current discomfort.

Soon, I was sliding in and out of her body with ease. Her whimpers were no longer filled with pain. Her moans were no longer filled with anxiousness. Now she was whimpering in pleasure. Now she was moaning with desire. Now she was pushing her ass back against my groin, taking me deep. Taking every inch of cock that I had. Her ass was gripping me tight enough that I knew I wasn't going to last much longer. Hell, I was proud of myself that I've lasted this long.

"It's going to feel so good to cum in your ass, baby," I told her, my right hand rubbing her ass. "So fucking good."

"Ross...don't stop," she begged. "Oh, God...don't stop..."

"Sutton, baby, move with me," I instructed, and she knew just what I meant.

Covering her body with mine, I held onto her hips as we both dropped onto our sides, her little spoon wrapped up in my big spoon. Fucking her hard and deep would have been better with me behind her, but this wasn't all about me. I wanted her to enjoy it just as much as I was. I wanted to keep doing this, and I wanted it to be worth it for her.

Hooking her leg over my thigh, I kept fucking her ass as I slid my left hand down and over her stomach, two fingers sliding into her soaked cunt.

“Oh, Christ...oh, God...oh, God...” she chanted, and her hand around my wrist felt like a goddamn vise.

Doing my best not to break my rhythm, I continued to fuck her as I played with her pussy. The thing about Sutton was that she liked her entire pussy played with. Not only did she like the pressure on her clit and my fingers stretching her wide, but she also like how I played with her slit and how I liked to pull her pussy lips apart, so that I could see it all.

“That’s it, baby,” I grunted in her ear. “Cum for me. Cum all over my hand. I want to feel you tightened around my cock.”

“Yes...yes...yes...”

The second I felt Sutton’s body give over, I grabbed her thigh, held it high, then fucked the holy hell out of her ass. Forgetting that this was about her, too, I rammed into her until I was erupting deep inside that tight, hot, addicting orifice.

With her calling out my name, and me swearing under my breath, we were shattering together all over the place, and it was harrowing and peaceful all at the same time. Every time she let me near her, it was changing me more and more, and I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t kill someone in order to keep Sutton by my side.

Sliding out of her body, I wrapped my arm around her waist, then pulled her closer next to me. “Christ, baby,” I whispered in her ear.

“So good, Ross,” she muttered tiredly.

I wanted to tell her that I loved her, but I knew it’d be too soon for her. We still haven’t had a cleansing conversation about how I’d ghosted her, and until we did, I knew it wasn’t a good idea to profess my undying love just yet.

Still, I felt it.

I felt it down to my soul.

As soon as her breathing steadied into a deep sleep, I got up to go shower. I knew she probably need one, too, but I didn't have the heart to wake her. Besides, she needed her sleep.

I still had a lot of shit to make up for.



## Chapter 20

### *Sutton~*

Like all self-sabotagers, I was waiting for the other shoe to drop because it just *had* to.

*It had to.*

Things were going too well for me and Ross. Granted, we spent a lot of time in bed, but when we weren't, it felt as if we'd picked up right from where we'd left off. We acted like a couple, and we talked like one. He knew all about my parents and grandparents, and he would ask me about my conversations with my grandma or grandpa. I spoke to them about three times a week, checking in and stuff like that, and Ross had caught a conversation yesterday, and it sucked how I just kept sinking further and further into the Ross Carmichael abyss.

I also knew all about his parents and his brother, Banks. I knew that Ross has been carrying his brother for a long time now, and I knew it was a sticky situation. A U.S. Senator's image was everything, and if it ever got out that Senator Carmichael had disowned his youngest son for being gay... well, that wouldn't be good.

However, there was still the issue of Banks Carmichael being an abusive victim. He had embraced his tragedy like a true Broadway star, and he's been abusing Ross' love for him ever since. The crazy part was that Ross knew Banks was taking advantage of him, but he didn't care. Ross had every intention of seeing his brother through this mess until he couldn't anymore.

Still, all of that crap was just life. We all had things going on that people didn't know about or wanted to know about. We all had secrets.

No, my concern was that we still haven't talked about why Ross had ghosted me. He'd been vague enough to make me throw caution to the wind and try this again, but he still hasn't given me any details about why he'd done it. As far as I was concerned, we didn't need to pick up from where we left off. We needed to start over, and we couldn't do that without clearing the air.

Still, even knowing all that, I couldn't help the way I felt when he touched me, when he kissed me. I felt him whenever he was near, and I could admit that I was weak for him. After all, why else would I have invited him back into my bed?

Taking a deep breath, I snapped myself back to the present, and finally got out of my car. I had two morning classes today, and while Thursdays weren't as bad as my Mondays and Fridays, Thursdays were still a full day of classes.

Looking at my watch, I saw that I had a good fifteen minutes to spare. There was a coffee cart near the food pavilion, and it was calling my name. Power walking my way around the Stratus building, I came to a skidding stop when August Remington came into view.

"Oh, shit," he said, "I almost ran you down."

Ross' voice was like a thunderous cloud in my head with all his warnings of staying away from August. Still, what could I do? I didn't want to be rude to the guy. I mean, for all the stuff Ross hasn't elaborated on, August Remington has never been rude or mean to me.

"It's okay," I replied. "I shouldn't be rushing."

Instead of letting me pass, he straightened right in front of me, then smiled down at me. "It's been a long time, Sutton."

I readjusted my bag over my shoulder. "Yeah, I...uh, haven't seen much of you since our last class together."

“Yeah,” he smirked. “I’ve heard that a lot has changed.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and it wasn’t a pleasant feeling. “Yeah?”

“I heard you’re dating Ross Carmichael,” he said, and I could only hope that my poker face was solid. While dating Ross wasn’t exactly a secret, the way he worded it bothered me.

“Uh, yeah,” I answered, doing my best not to stutter. “We kind of hooked up at the beginning of the year, then... recently...uh, reconnected.” The entire thing sounded stupid, even to my ears, but I didn’t know how else to word it. It was none of his business, and I wasn’t comfortable with giving out such personal details about my relationship with Ross to a virtual stranger. I knew who August was, and I’ve even spoken to him a time or two, but I didn’t know him, and we weren’t friends.

August’s smile stayed in place as he said, “You’re one of a kind, Sutton Hadley. Ross is very lucky.”

“Uh, thank you,” I replied like an idiot. “I’m not sure about Ross being very lucky, but we’re getting along well enough.”

“Oh, c’mon,” he chuckled. “Not many girls would be okay with their boyfriends having such a close relationship with another girl.” *What?* “Ross is very lucky to have such an understanding girlfriend.”

My heart was threatening to beat clean out of my chest. I knew about Toby being his roommate, but other than that, Ross didn’t have best friends or close relationships that I knew of. He had his brother, and from the stories that I’ve heard, I had always assumed that Banks was Ross’ best friend, even though they were brothers.

I had to lick my lips wet before I could talk. “Ross is very popular,” I remarked vaguely.

“Yeah, he is,” August agreed. “Still, Jennifer’s so important to him, some girls wouldn’t be okay with that.”

“Jennifer?” I couldn’t help it. Even though it probably showed my hand, the question behind her name just came flying out.

He cocked his head. “Yeah. Jennifer Polk. He hasn’t told you about her?” Before I could comment, he kept going, shaking his head as if he were talking about an errant child. “With as much as she texts him and spends time with him, I was sure he would have introduced you two by now.”

Right now, all I had was my pride holding me up. Ross’ phone was always going off, but I’d never questioned it because I had assumed it was Banks. He was always texting or calling Ross. Plus, I hadn’t been lying when I said Ross was popular. He was. He had people he spoke to, besides me. There was also the fact that I had totally believed him when he’d told me that he hadn’t been with anyone else since me. While I didn’t know the details of him ghosting me, I had no reason to suspect it’d been because of another girl. I had believed his lame ass excuse for ghosting me because he was Ross Carmichael. He had no reason to lie to a nobody like me.

*So, then who was Jennifer Polk?*

“Well, Ross is a grown man,” I told him. “It’s not my job to babysit him. He has friends, and I have friends. That’s the way it should be, don’t you think?”

“Like I said, Ross is a lucky guy.”

I did my best to smile back, though my brain was scolding my heart harshly for being so damn stupid. “Well, I need to get to class.” I glance at my watch. “I might still be able to grab a coffee before class starts.”

“Oh, of course,” he rushed out. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hold you up.”

“It’s okay,” I lied. “However, it might not be okay if I don’t get my coffee.”

August just chuckled before saying, “I’ll be seeing you around, Sutton.”

I smiled, nodded, then got the hell away from him. I had no idea if he was lying or not, but it didn’t make sense for him to lie. While August Remington was an important player in life, he wasn’t Ross Carmichael. These guys had seriously powerful reputations, and it wouldn’t do August any favors to make an enemy out of Ross. Plus, I’ve overheard a couple of conversations between Ross and Stone Lexington, and everyone gave Stone a wide berth. He was reputed to be volatile, confrontational, and wasn’t afraid to throw a punch-or take one, for that matter. August would have to be insane to get on Ross’ bad side, possibly making an enemy of Stone Lexington in the process. So, that could only mean one thing.

August hadn’t been lying about Jennifer Polk, whoever she was.

I’ve never heard Ross mention anyone named Jennifer, and that omission came with a million warning bells. While it was true that I wasn’t the type of girl to monitor or babysit her boyfriend, I couldn’t ignore how much time Ross spent on his phone, texting people. Most of the time, they were quick texts, but still.

Forgetting about the coffee cart, I made my way to class, and the entire time, I couldn’t help but think of what he’d told Malcolm that day in my apartment. He said he’d want to know if other guys were hanging around me, so should the same go for him? Shouldn’t I know who the women in his life were, and what the relationships were?

Sitting down in the first empty space I saw, I saw that I still had a few minutes before class started, so I grabbed my phone from my purse, then sent Earl a quick text.

*Me: I need a place 2 hide 2nite.*

He quickly replied with a thumbs up emoji, and I let out a deep breath that I hadn’t even realized I’d been holding in.

## Chapter 21

### *Ross~*

Anyone who said that women didn't possess superpowers was a fucking idiot. They possessed all kind of superpowers, the main one being the ability to infuriate a man like nothing else could. You'd think it'd be that treasure between their legs, but it wasn't. Their ability to incite maddening rage topped the list. Nothing angered a man more than the women he loved.

Knowing that yesterday was a heavy class day for Sutton, I'd left her alone for most of the day, only sending a couple of texts throughout the day. The plan had been to meet up for dinner, then curl up at her place or mine. However, my plans and what had actually occurred had been two very different things.

Sutton had disappeared, and Delta's loyalty couldn't be shaken, no matter what I had threatened. Sutton had turned her phone off, and it wasn't until around three in the morning that I'd finally driven off from where I'd been staked out in front of her apartment. She wasn't coming home, and her phone was fucking off. Sure, the battery could have died, but that didn't explain her not going home.

Luckily for me, I knew her school schedule, so I was waiting for her in front of her first morning class, not giving a fuck about classes-hers or mine. If she was ghosting me as some sort of payback, I had news for her; it wasn't going to work.

Two minutes before class started, I finally saw her making her way over, and she looked perfect. So, she had either gone home to shower and get ready this morning, or she had gotten ready wherever she had spent the night at last night.

*I could only pray that she hadn't spent the night with another guy.*

She showed no emotion when she noticed me waiting for her, and that just pissed me off further. I was pissed as fuck, and Sutton looked like she didn't have a care in the world.

“What the fuck, Sutton?” I snapped as soon as she was within earshot.

“What?”

I could feel the tick in my jaw threaten to crack a molar. “Are you fucking kidding me?” I snarled down at her. “Where in the fuck were you last night?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “At a friend's,” she replied flippantly. “Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get to class.”

*Yeah, like that was happening.*

I grabbed her arm and drug her behind me until we were around the corner behind the building. I had her back up against the building, and I was almost too pissed to even speak. Everything had been fine yesterday morning when she'd taken off from my place for class. If this was payback, I had no idea what I was going to fucking do.

“And you couldn't call me and tell me that?” I finally asked.

Her brows shot up. “Because you tell me about all your friends?” she countered.

My head reared back a bit. “What friends?” I asked. “You know I'm not really that close with too many people. Growing up, Banks was my best friend. You know this, Sutton.”

She readjusted her book bag over her shoulder. “So, you're saying you haven't made any new friends at Hales in all these years?”

*What the fuck was this?*

“Toby,” I replied. “And...well, I’ve been hanging out with Stone Lexington, Fox Harrington, and Saxton Voss lately.”

Her green eyes widened at that information. After a bit, she said, “Wow. That’s quite a cast of characters.”

I didn’t blame her for being impressed. I wasn’t blind to who we were, what we were capable of, who our families were, and how much money we all were worth. Separately, we’d be hard to tangle with, but if you put us together, no one would be stupid enough to go against us.

Well, except for August Remington.

“At any rate, you have your friends and I have mine,” she went on to say. “If you’re allowed to hang out with your friends, then I should be afforded the same courtesy.”

“What in the fuck are you talking about, Sutton?” I practically roared. “I don’t mind if you’re hanging out with your friends. My issue is that you turned off your phone. I had no idea where you were or who you were with.” I ran a hand through my hair, confused. Something was going on here because there was no way Sutton was this obtuse.

However, before I could say anything, I heard a voice calling for me. Turning around, I saw Jennifer making her way towards me and Sutton. Talk about motherfucking bad timing, all I needed was for Banks to call right now.

“Ross, can I talk to you a minute?” Jennifer asked, barely sparing Sutton a glance.

“No,” I answered. “I’m in the middle of something.”

“It’s important,” she insisted.

“Not as important as what I’m doing,” I argued.

Then she went and made shit worse. “Well, you haven’t been answering my texts or phone calls, and I need to talk to you?”



I turned from Sutton to give Jennifer my full attention. “About what?” I practically yelled, not sure who the fuck I was mad at anymore. “What’s so goddamn important, Jennifer?”

She glanced at Sutton really quickly before looking back at me. “Do you really want to discuss it here? In front of mixed company?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” She knew we couldn’t discuss the organization in front of Sutton, and her wording it that way made his entire exchange seem like something that it wasn’t.

“I just want to talk-”

“And I already told you that I’m fucking busy,” I repeated.

Jennifer started fiddling with the diamond pendant that I had initiated her with, and if I could kill a female, I would have killed Jennifer Polk in this moment.

“This necklace means something, Ross,” she pouted, and I felt like I was about to lose my mind.

“Okay, I’ve seen enough,” Sutton scoffed. “Go handle your girlfriend, Ross. I have to get to class.”

I whirled around, my anger barely contained. “She’s not my girlfriend,” I bit out. “You are.”

The look she shot me would have leveled a lesser man. “I’m not the one wearing a diamond necklace that’s worth thousands, so I think you’re mistaken.”

Before I could correct her, we were interrupted. “Is everything okay here?”

We all turned, and though I didn’t know his name, I knew he was a professor here. I’d seen him plenty of times around campus.

“Actually, I’d like to get to class, Mr. Custodia,” Sutton answered. “And their drama is kind of holding me up.”

I looked down at her. “Don’t do this, Sutton.”

“Mr. Carmichael, I think-”

“I don’t give a fuck what you think,” I said as I turned to him. I also wasn’t surprised that he knew who I was.

To his credit, he didn’t intimidate easily. “I will call campus security if you do not allow Ms. Hadley to get to class,” he replied. “I don’t care who you are.”

“Thanks, Mr. Custodia,” Sutton told him, and I had no choice but to watch him escort Sutton to her class. Between my parents, Banks, and The Order, I couldn’t afford to have the cops called on me.

As soon as it was safe, I turned towards Jennifer. “Do you want to tell me what the fuck you think you’re doing?”

She was so goddamn clueless that she didn’t even have the grace to flush. “Well, you weren’t texting me back,” she repeated.

“What for, Jennifer?”

Her brows furrowed, and she looked upset. “This is my future, too, Ross,” she said. “You haven’t reached out to me once since that night. How am I supposed to help you if you ignore me?”

“I don’t need your help, Jennifer,” I almost roared. “What don’t you get about that? Supporters only come into play *if* we need you. If we don’t need you, why would we call you?”

“But...but Laney said-”

That whole seeing red thing was real.

“Laney said, what?”

“Well, she said she hangs out with August a lot, and that’s how she knows she doesn’t have to worry about being paid her due.”

I did my best not to put hands on this girl. “I need you to listen to me, Jennifer,” I hissed between clenched teeth. “Do not ever contact me again. If I need you, I will reach out to you. Understand?” Her eyes widened. “We are *not* friends. We aren’t anything.”

Not caring about what she had to say, I took off, my phone already in my hand.

## Chapter 22

### *Sutton~*

For the first time ever, I skipped an entire day's worth of classes. After Mr. Custodia had escorted me to class, I had called Delta and had invited myself to her parents' this weekend. Delta only had a couple of classes on Fridays, and she had already made arrangement with a couple of classmates for notes when she had made the plans to visit her parents.

Last night, Earl had been a peach and had let me crash at his place without prying. Drake had been a doll and hadn't pried, either. We'd gone out to dinner, watched a movie, then they had set me up in their guest room.

The real shame had come when I had turned into *that* girl. I had internet-stalked Jennifer Polk, and I had no idea why we did that shit to ourselves. What was the point? As soon as I had entered her name into my first social media account, a beautiful blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty had popped up, and for as beautiful as the picture had been, my stomach had turned sour.

Plus, not only did she have that perfect blonde hair, blue eye combination, she wore her makeup flawlessly with the hand of a professional. And if that weren't enough, the girl had a hell of a figure on her. Whether store bought or natural, Jennifer Polk was rocking an hour-glass figure, and she was probably about as close to perfection as a girl could get.

*And she had some sort of relationship with Ross.*

After making my getaway, I'd driven straight home, pack a crazy person's overnight bag, then had jumped in the car with Delta. She hadn't said a word when we'd first headed out of town, but an hour into the drive, she had finally asked, and I had answered.

“I’m so sorry, Sutton,” she whispered. “I...don’t know what to say.”

I shrugged, still looking out the window. “There’s nothing to say,” I replied. “This is all my fault. I should have demanded more of an explanation, and I hadn’t.”

“You don’t really think he was cheating on you, do you?”

“It doesn’t matter, Delta. Secrets are secrets, and I can’t be with someone who’s comfortable keeping them.” I turned my head to look at her. “It was...it was like they were talking a completely different language, and I don’t think I’ve ever felt so stupid.” I straightened in my seat. “Actually, that’s not true. I was already feeling stupid when August had mentioned her. Right now, I’m just feeling humiliated for ever giving him a second chance.”

“Sutton, I-shit.” Her phone started ringing, and the screen showed that it was Malcolm. “Let me answer this really quick.” I just nodded, then went back to looking out the window. “Yeah, hey.”

“Am I on speaker?”

“I’m driving,” she said. “Hands-free.”

“Driving where?” he asked. “Shouldn’t you be on your way to class?” My heart twitched with how he knew her schedule.

“I’m actually driving to Couplet,” she told him. “I’m visiting my parents for the weekend.”

The silence was so loud that I turned and looked towards her phone to see if she was still connected on the call. Glancing at her, she shot me a grimaced look as she shrugged her shoulders.

Finally, Malcolm’s voice came back over the speaker. “Why didn’t you tell me you were taking off for the weekend?”

“I didn’t think about it,” she hedged. “We usually don’t...check in like that.”

You could hear his irritation loud and clear. “Okay, you know what? When you get back, we’re going to have to have a long conversation about what the fuck you think is going on here, Delta.” We both winced; that’s how upset he sounded. “For whatever reason, you seem to think we’re just fuck buddies or some such shit, and we’re not. You’re my girl, and you’ve been my girl for some time already. You might not feel serious about me, but I’m damn sure serious about you. So, when you get back, we’re hashing this shit out, okay?”

“Uh...Sutton’s in the car, Malcolm,” she muttered.

“Like I give a fuck,” he fired back. “It’s not like she doesn’t know how I feel about you.”

“Look, I-”

“I don’t want to hear it right now,” he said, interrupting her. “I don’t want you distracted while you’re driving.” My heart really skipped at that. He was upset with her, but he wasn’t letting that distract from his concern for her. “Text me when you get there, then text me when you get home on Sunday. Understand?”

“Yeah, I hear you.”

“I don’t think you do,” he snapped. “But you’re going to.”

I just stared at Delta as he hung up. If she had any doubts about how Malcolm felt about her, I’d say those doubts have been cleared up now.

We were silent for another mile before she said, “Wow.”

I barked out a laugh. “Yeah, wow.”

She looked over at me, and the smile on her face said it all.

*She finally got what she wanted.*

Though she was still smiling, she asked, “Am I a dick friend because I’m so happy, even though you’re heartbroken right now?”

I reached over and squeezed her leg. “Absolutely not,” I assured her. “I’m so happy for you, regardless of my broken heart.” I smiled with all my teeth. “This is so awesome.”

Her shoulders sagged. “It’d only be awesome if you were happy, too.”

“Don’t worry about me,” I told her. “In all honesty, I can’t even be mad at the guy. This is all on me, Delta. I knew better. Hell, I should have demanded better. Sometimes I wonder why girls like me set the bar so damn low, you know.”

“Sutton, c’mon,” she said softly. “Don’t do that to yourself. There’s nothing wrong with giving a person a second chance.”

“Maybe not,” I agreed. “But I still went back without real answers or...” I let out a sad laugh. “Hell, I hadn’t even demanded a genuine apology. He said he was sorry, and while I’d given good lip service, I hadn’t fought him all that hard. Ross kissed me, and that was it. I made the choice to be stupid, rather than still hurt. Only now, I’m hurt worse than I was before because I can only be mad at myself and forgiving yourself is a lot harder than forgiving someone else.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Nothing,” I answered honestly. “I’m going to do what I did last time. I’m going to move on and try to forget that Ross Carmichael was ever a part of my life.”

“I don’t know, Sutton,” she mumbled. “From what you said, I’m not all that sure that Ross is done with you. I mean, you did say he was angry and snapping at Jennifer.”

I sighed and dropped my head back against the headrest. “It doesn’t matter, Delta. I’m done with him, even if he’s not done with me.”

“Sutton, I think you’re deluding yourself, babe,” she said. “This is Ross Carmichael that we’re talking about. The guy can move mountains if he’s so inclined.”

“Maybe,” I conceded a bit. “However, for as powerful as he is, his father is a Senator, Delta. Ross can hardly risk scandal. The Carmichaels already have one son that the press likes to harp on, so I can’t imagine Ross doing anything to cause any more bad press. Their image is everything.”

“True,” she agreed. “Still, I think you’re underestimating Ross Carmichael, and that’s probably not a smart thing to do.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” she answered, her eyes on the road.

“What would you say if Malcolm wants to move in with you?” Malcolm shared an apartment with two other guys, so if things become live-in serious, it stands to reason that Malcolm would move in with us.

“Well, I’d talk to you about it first, of course,” she automatically replied. “Why?”

“Ross wasn’t able to find me last night,” I told her. “I... I don’t know. If Malcolm made up my half of the rent, maybe I could rent Earl’s spare room, you know.”

Delta didn’t comment on my thoughts. Instead, she reached across and squeezed my arm. “Hey, how about we leave all that behind for right now? Let’s just enjoy the weekend with my parents and...and just relax, yeah?”

I smiled because I didn’t want to ruin Delta’s weekend with her parents. She’d been kind enough to let me crash her party, so the last thing that I wanted to do was ruin it for her. Besides, my problems weren’t going anywhere. There’d be plenty of time to suffer from them when we got back home.

“Deal,” I replied. “But don’t get butthurt if they neglect you for me. You know they like me best.”



Delta laughed like I knew she would. “Deal.”

The rest of the ride was filled with singing eighties lyrics and a couple of snack stops. It really was amazing what one good friend could do for you.

## Chapter 23

### *Ross~*

Toby was out of town for the weekend, thank fucking God.

After Sutton had gone back to class, I had called for an emergency meeting, and luckily for me, all the guys had made the time. The only difference was that Rylee and Kincaid had shown up with Stone and Saxton. Too caught up in my anger, I hadn't even questioned it when I opened my door to them. Common sense told me that Stone wasn't going to leave Rylee unattended while he was unsure of August, but Kincaid being here was still a question mark.

"Okay, so what's going on?" Fox asked.

"Yeah, dude. You look like you're about to set the world on fire," Stone added.

I looked over at Fox. "Is Alexis giving you any shit about not hanging out with her?"

He shook his head. "Nah, she knows the deal," he answered. "If I need something from her, I'll let her know. Other than that, it's not like we're friends."

We were all standing in my kitchen, surrounding the island, and it was everything I could do not to just start breaking shit. "That's what I thought," I replied. "As far as I know, the relationships have always been like that, right?"

Saxton nodded. "Yeah. The supporters are just that. They're support in case we find ourselves in a bind. Though they have the power to step in if they see us doing some fucked-up shit, they really have no power over us."

I ran my eyes over each face before telling them what happened. "Jennifer's been blowing up my phone," I told

them. “It started yesterday, and when I wouldn’t call her back, and she became dissatisfied with my one-word replies to her texts, she sought me out.”

“What for?” Kincaid asked.

“She said that Laney was telling her how she needed to hang out with me and form a real friendship in order to guarantee her everything that The Order promised her.”

“What?” Rylee practically shrieked.

“Oh, that’s not the worst of it,” I replied.

“Christ, what’s the worst of it?” Fox asked.

“I was arguing with Sutton when Jennifer decided to make herself known.”

“Ah, fuck,” Saxton muttered.

“Shit,” Stone added.

“What’d Sutton say?” Fox asked.

“Hold up, wait. Who’s Sutton?” Rylee asked.

“Sutton Hadley,” Kincaid asked, then looked over at me. “Or I’m presuming it’s Sutton Hadley, right? I don’t know any other Suttons who go to Hales.”

“It’s Sutton Hadley,” I confirmed.

“So...she’s your girlfriend?” Rylee asked.

“She was,” I answered. “Up until Jennifer reminded me that the diamond necklace that I gave her meant something and that I couldn’t just keep brushing her off.”

Fox let out a low whistle. “Damn.”

Rylee started pacing, but Stone quickly grabbed her and yanked her against his body. “I should have kicked Laney’s ass when I had the chance,” she fumed.

“Okay, so this is obviously August’s handiwork again,” Saxton said. “It’s too much of a coincidence for it not to be. First, he tells you that he’s going to ask her out, and then Laney is encouraging Jennifer to force a friendship with you. Maybe that punch bothered him more than he let on if he’s out to ruin things for you.”

“Hold up, you punched August?” Kincaid asked. After quickly recapping what happened, the girl just looked at me before saying, “Okay, there seems to be a lot to unpack here.”

“I say we kill them both,” Stone said, and the seriousness in which he said it told us all that he wasn’t being facetious.

“That still doesn’t get me Sutton back, Stone,” I pointed out. “While I’d love to put Remington into the ground, that doesn’t solve my problems with Sutton. I already fucked her over once. Do you seriously think she’s going to forgive me a second time?”

“That’s why we’re here, huh?” Saxton remarked.

I nodded. “Yep.”

“Okay, I’m obviously missing something,” Rylee piped up. “Why are we here?”

“The only chance Ross has of getting Sutton to forgive him is to tell her the truth about everything,” Kincaid told her. “The problem with that is that it’s not only his secret to tell.”

“Even if I bow out of the organization now, Sutton is going to want to know everything, and quite frankly, it’s no less than she deserves,” I said. “But I can’t do that. I can’t break those contracts, no matter if I remain a member or not.”

“I get where you’re coming from,” Stone said. “I do. However, we all know that there’s no way the organization is going to just let you walk away by choice. You’re a Carmichael. It’s one thing if you fuck up beyond what is redeemable, but to just give it all up?” Stone shook his head. “It’s not going to happen.”

“He’s right,” Fox added. “You’d have to...shoot The Pope or some crazy shit like that, and even then, I’m not sure they’d let you go.”

“You know too much,” Saxton chimed in. “And you’d be the first person to ever walk away willingly. Between Stone and Rylee having the first Hera contract, the marriage, and the discord with August, if you tell Alexander that you want out, there’s no telling what he’ll do. He’s not going to admit to the governing panel that he’s lost control of his initiates.”

I ran my hands through my hair and pulled. “*Fuck.*”

“Okay, I realize that I’m new here, but...what’s the problem with telling Sutton the truth?” Rylee asked. “I mean, I get that legally it’s an issue with NDAs and contracts signed, but if you trust her, that shouldn’t be an issue, right?” Her head swiveled as she looked at each of us. “I mean, what happens when members marry at a later age? Do they not tell their wives anything?”

“Actually, when a member marries, his wife is required to sign the same contracts that you girls signed,” Fox answered. “Well, except yours, Rylee.”

“The only problem with that plan is that I can’t get Sutton to talk to me, much less marry me,” I reminded them.

“Would you marry her?” Stone asked.

“I love her,” I told him honestly. “I...it might be too soon, but I love her. So, yeah, I’d marry her.”

“Saxton?”

He looked over at Kincaid. “Yeah, babe?”

She didn’t say anything. She just looked at him, and it was like they were having their own silent conversation. It also didn’t go unnoticed how Fox tensed up when Saxton called her babe. Even though Saxton said they’ve been best friends since the second grade, Fox clearly had some issues with their relationship. However, since I had no idea what Fox and Kincaid had going on, I was lost to it all.

Finally, Saxton looked over at me. “If you love her, Ross, I got no issues,” he said. “If you trust her, then I’m fine with breaking the confidentiality of it all.”

The air in my lungs got stuck as I looked over at Kincaid. Whatever she was to him, she was someone extremely important for Saxton to risk his future for mine. She had silently told him what she wanted, and he’d heard her clearly.

“Fuck them,” Stone said. “I’m fine with it, too.”

It was hard not to feel humbled. A month ago, I didn’t know these guys. Not like this, at any rate. We knew each other by sight, reputation, and banal conversation. However, now, they were in my kitchen, and they were telling me they were willing to fight with me on this.

Still, it had to be all or nothing. I looked over at Fox. “You don’t owe me anything,” I told him.

He glanced over at Kincaid, then looked back at me. “I got your back,” he said, and my knees were struggling to hold me up. “On one condition though.”

“What’s that?”

He shot Kincaid another look before scanning all our faces. “I expect the same loyalty when it’s mine turn.”

“You got it,” I replied automatically.

“So, we’re all in agreement?” Saxton asked.

After a round of affirmatives, Kincaid asked, “So, now what do we do about Laney and August?”

“Seriously,” Rylee harrumphed.

“Because I’m really close to kicking that girl’s ass, and I don’t care about the fallout,” Kincaid added.

“Let me tackle Sutton first,” I told her. “Then we’ll get to figuring the rest out, yeah?”

“Fine,” she replied. “But I’m not promising anything.”

## Chapter 24

### *Sutton~*

It was Monday morning, and the weak part of me had wanted to just move in with Delta's parents and hide from the world for the rest of my life, but that'd be kind of odd since my grandparents were still alive, and why wouldn't I want to live with them?

Still, after a good weekend and no phone, I'd been able to rebuild those defenses, and I could only hope that they were strong enough to hold up through whatever came next.

When I had turned my phone on last night, there'd been quite a few texts and messages from Ross, but I hadn't bothered listening to the messages or reading the texts. There'd been no point. Even though I knew there was no such thing as a perfect relationship, I sure as hell didn't want a toxic one. I also didn't want to date a guy that was going to be hell on my self-esteem. The Ross Carmichaels of the world should not be dating the Sutton Hadleys of the world. That's not how real life worked.

So, like a bad rom-com movie, I counted to ten, steeled myself, then got out of my car. I knew there was no way I could avoid Ross forever, even if I had entertained the idea of moving in with Earl at one point.

I just finished locking and shutting my car door when I felt someone in my space. Preparing for the worst, I turned around, only it wasn't Ross standing in front of me.

It was August Remington.

"Hey, Sutton," he greeted, and a wicked sensation slithered down my back. I might not know what in the hell was going on, but I knew August wasn't on the good guys' side. There was something calculating in how he kept approaching



me. We weren't friends. Whatever he was doing, it had to do with someone or something else.

"Hey, August," I greeted back.

"How was your weekend?" The question was innocent enough, but the look in his eyes belied that innocence.

"It was great," I semi-lied. "Went on a girls' road trip."

His head jerked in surprise, and for a second, the disapproval flashed across his features. "Oh, really?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"No Ross?"

"Well, Ross isn't a girl, so...." I joked, trying to keep my voice light. Whatever was going on between Ross and August, something was telling me to keep my mouth shut. Something was telling me not to tell August that I'd broken up with Ross.

"No, I don't suppose he is," he joked back.

I made a show of glancing at my invisible watch. "Well, it was good seeing you," I lied. "But I have to get to class. Mondays are a bitch for me."

"Oh, sure," he politely replied before stepping back some. "I'll see you around, Sutton."

I gave him a quick nod before going on my way. It wasn't that I thought he was dangerous, but I didn't need to get caught up in something that I didn't understand. I had enough problems of my own without being dragged into August Remington's twisted world.

My morning classes had flown by relatively painless, and I was at one of the deli kiosks, starving. Okay, maybe not starving, but my mind knew that dinner would be a late one, so I felt hungrier for lunch. Hales had a great lunch pavilion that had its own cafeteria, but also random food carts and kiosks in case the cafeteria's menu wasn't doing it for you.

Just as I stepped forward another spot, I noticed the two people in front of me stop talking. When I looked to see what had gotten their attention, I saw Kincaid Black walking our way. I wasn't surprised, though. Not only was Kincaid so beautiful that it was kind of hard to believe that she was real, but she walked with purpose. The girl wasn't lacking in anything, much less the confidence department. Females wished that they could be her, and males wished they could own her. She truly was extraordinary, and if someone told me that she was aspiring to be the next President of the United States, I'd believe them. I'd also believe that she could do it.

What did surprise me was how she didn't stop until she was standing in front of me, saying. "Can we talk?"

I didn't know Kincaid Black. We had nothing in common and nothing to talk about. If Ross Carmichael was out of my league, then Kincaid Black was out of my hemisphere.

*What in the hell was going on?*

"About what?" I asked, too shocked to mask my rudeness.

Kincaid's black eyes narrowed, and I swear it felt like a demon moving through me. Any sane person would have immediately agreed, but I guess I lacked in that area because, not only had I given Ross a second chance when he didn't deserve one, I was questioning Kincaid Black.

Quietly enough for just the two of us to hear, she said, "I think you already know. That little clueless act might work on other people, but not me. You might not have connected the dots yet because you're still trying to convince yourself that you don't care, but you're not stupid. You know there are dots that are connected." I just nodded because she was right. "What time is your last class?"

"Uh, three, but...I usually go to the library after-"

"Meet me at Scully's at four," she instructed, interrupting me. "I'll be waiting." Without another word, she

walked off, and when I turned back to see where the line for the kiosk was, four different sets of eyes were staring back at me.

*I guess I hadn't been the only one to experience that demonic feeling.*

Normally, Mondays felt like years with the class and workload I had going, but not this Monday. Not today. Today had flown by too quickly for my liking, and it wasn't hard to guess why. While I had nothing against Kincaid, I couldn't imagine what she wanted to speak to me about was a good thing. Hell, I was still flabbergasted that the girl even knew my name.

At four o'clock, I walked into Scully's, a bar a few blocks away from campus, and Kincaid Black was already there, sitting at a high-top table in the corner. Summoning as much courage as I could, I made my way over. It wasn't that I was necessarily *scared* of her, but Kincaid Black was no joke. The girl was intimidating, and her reputation was a rather brutal one. It was reputed that she feared nothing, and I believed it.

Taking a seat, she immediately asked if I wanted something to drink. "Beer? Wine?"

"Neither," I answered. "I'd rather be sober for... whatever this is."

She smirked, and my first thought was that she probably already ran the world. "Fair enough," she replied. "So, let's get down to the brass tacks, yeah?"

I nodded. "I'd appreciate that."

"Jennifer Polk isn't who or what you think she is," Kincaid started, and I couldn't hide my surprise.

"She's not?"

Shaking her head, she said, "No, she's not." I wasn't sure what Kincaid was drinking, but it was a tumbler of

something dark. “However, neither are Ross or August.” She pursed her lips. “Or Laney Spinner, for that matter.”

“That’s not really telling me anything,” I pointed out. “And it’s no fun being left in the dark.”

“True,” she conceded. “Still, while I might not be able to tell you what they are right now, I can tell you what they aren’t. Jennifer is not a side piece or Ross’ girlfriend. In fact, she’s rather inconsequential unless Ross says otherwise.”

“How do you know this?” As far as I knew, Ross wasn’t friends with Kincaid, so how did she know so much about him?

She sat up straighter. “That’s part of...all that you don’t know, Sutton,” she answered. “I know that it sucks, but do you want the absolute truth of the matter?” I nodded. “Ross ghosting you? Jennifer? August? It’s all part of the same... secret. However, Ross is in love with you.” My head reared back at that. “And this entire mess has nothing to do with his feelings for you.” Her black eyes were piercing straight through my heart. “I know you have no reason to believe me, but if you don’t...if you walk away from Ross, he’s going to end up throwing away his entire future to chase you, and I’m all for that, but only if you deserve that kind of sacrifice from him.”

“I don’t even know what any of that means,” I replied, my voice cracking with emotion. “What are you...saying?”

Kincaid stood up, threw some bills on the tabletop, then looked at me. “Let him tell you his secrets because he trusts you with them,” she said. “Not because you don’t trust him.”

I sat there, more confused than ever, as Kincaid walked out of the bar. I still had no idea what she was talking about, but that last statement made me sound like an asshole, even though I wasn’t the one in the wrong here.

Still, the more I sat and thought about it, the more I realized that secrets weren’t the way to go, no matter the reason. I just had to think of my mother to know that.

## Chapter 25

### *Ross~*

I skipped all my Monday classes, knowing that I wouldn't have been able to keep from hunting Sutton down. With the permission to tell her all about the organization, there was no way I wouldn't have forced her hand. Even with the given permission from Saxton, Fox, and Stone, and even with what I felt for Sutton, breaking the organization contracts and NDAs wasn't anything I was taking lightly.

If I chose to leave, then I was going to have to rewrite my entire future, and though I could still achieve my goals without the help of The Order, I couldn't guarantee that they wouldn't try to stand in my way out of revenge or bitterness. No one left The Order, and I couldn't see them taking kindly to it, no matter what.

So, instead of going to class like a responsible college student, I was at home, waiting for the guys. Late last night, Stone had sent a text, telling us that he had a report from his PI. With all the texts flying back and forth, one o'clock had been the only time none of us had classes, so that's what time we had agreed upon. Stone was no longer appreciating the late night, clandestine meetings now that he had Rylee warming his bed every night, and I didn't blame the guy.

Turning on ESPN, the plan was to kill some time until the guys showed up, but the second I turned on the television, my phone rang, and it was a ringtone I recognized all too well.

"What?" I answered.

"Wow, okay," Banks replied snidely. "Rude much?"

"What do you want, Banks?" I growled. "I'm not in the mood for your shit right now."

“Oh, what? Is life not working out perfectly for you today?”

“You know what, you little shit? I am so fucking sick of your little wounded bird act,” I snapped. “While what Mom and Dad did was shitty, it’s not like they dumped you in a cardboard box and left you abandoned in front of a fire station when you were two. You’re a grown ass man with two arms, two legs, and a working brain. Figure it the fuck out, Banks.”

“You don’t-”

I didn’t want to hear it. “I’m done holding your dick,” I told him. “You’re not the first child to be disowned because of their sexual preferences, and you won’t be the last. Either call Mom and Dad and work your shit out, or don’t. But I am done being your fucking crutch.”

“Are you serious?” he balked. “You’re my brother, Ross.”

“Yeah, a brother that you’ve been using with no regard to how disruptive you’ve been in my life,” I shot back. “If you were all that concerned about brotherly bonds, you wouldn’t only call me when you need money. When was the last time you asked how I was?”

“I don’t need to ask how you are,” he sneered. “You’re perfect, as always.”

“Christ, you’re such a fucking asshole,” I sneered back. “Instead of being grateful for the people who have stood by you after what Mom and Dad did, you’re acting like you’re owed compensation from them all. Well, guess what, Banks, you’re not.”

“Do you think this is easy?”

“Working for a living?” I spat. “Yeah, I can see how that’d be so hard.”

“Says the man who doesn’t have to work,” he fired back.

“Says the man who is going to live his life under a goddamn microscope to become something greater than just another entitled rich asshole,” I corrected.

“No one is forcing you to become a senator,” he pointed out.

“And no one is forcing you to snort coke and suck dick all day,” I countered. “Start taking responsibility for your own life, Banks. I’m done enabling you.”

“So, you’re just going to abandon me like Mom and Dad?” he accused.

I let out a dark laugh. “If that’s how you choose to see it, then there’s nothing I can do about that. However, just know this; I will always answer if you need me, Banks. Need *me*. Not my money.”

I hung up before he could argue any further. Besides, there really wasn’t much left to say. Everyone knew you couldn’t help someone who didn’t want to be helped, and Banks didn’t want to be helped. At least, not right now.

Just then, my phone rang, and talk about bad fucking timing. “Yeah?”

“Is that how you answer a call from your father?” Mitchel Carmichael replied.

“I just got off the phone with Banks,” I informed him. “So, if I’m in a shitty mood, it stands to reason, and since I’m on the phone with the source of it all, yeah...I’m not feeling very cordial.”

“I didn’t call you to talk about old business, Ross.”

“Well, your son might be old business to you, but he’s not to me. He’s still very much currently my brother.”

Ignoring the glaring dysfunction of our family, he said, “I just wanted to check in with you. The initiation was weeks ago.”

“Yeah, and you’re barely calling now?”

“How did it go, Ross?”

I let out a deep breath. “It’s fine, Dad. Everything is fine.”

“Good,” he replied simply, then the sonofabitch hung up on me.

Before I could throw something, there was a knock at the door. I walked over, then swung the door open without bothering to look through the peephole. Saxton, Stone, and Fox were all standing in the hallway.

“Did you guys all drive over together?” I asked as I stepped back and let them inside my condo.

“Nah, we all met up waiting for the elevator downstairs,” Fox answered.

After shutting the door, manners took over. “You guys want anything to drink?”

“Nah, we don’t have much time,” Stone answered.

“Alright,” I said. “Then let’s sit down.”

As soon as we were all seated, Stone got right down to business. “When all that shit went down between Rylee and Laney, I had my PI, Chicago, dig up some more stuff on Laney. I assumed she wasn’t sophisticated enough to cover her tracks as well as August.”

“Did he find anything?” I asked.

“There’s absolutely no texts or calls between August or Laney on their phones,” he answered.

“None?” Fox asked, surprised.

“None,” Stone repeated. “There aren’t any DMs on her social pages, either.”

“And how could you know that?” Saxton asked, his expression questioning.



“Let’s just say that Chicago is very good,” Stone replied dryly.

“Okay, so that has to mean they’re using burner phones to plan their shit, or talking in person,” I surmised. “That’s going to make getting proof a little harder.”

“When it’s all said and done, it’s all going to fall back on Laney, and the stupid girl doesn’t even know it,” Fox remarked.

Saxton looked over at Stone. “Does Rylee still have keys to her old apartment?”

“I’m not sure,” he answered. “I can ask.”

“Thinking of breaking and entering, Voss,” I asked.

The fucker just grinned. “It’s not breaking and entering if you have the key, right?”

“Rylee left in such a hurry, she could always argue that she went back because she forgot something,” Fox posed.

“Plus, she knows Laney’s class schedule,” I pointed out. “She’ll know when Laney won’t be home.”

“And if we happen to stumble upon a drawer full of burner phones, well…” Saxton smirked.

“I’ll ask Rylee,” Stone said. “We can sell the forgot something story to Alexander if it gets back to him. That proof thing should go both ways. Laney would have to prove that Rylee wasn’t there because she forgot something.”

Fox looked over at me. “Any progress with Sutton?”

“Not yet. I’m… I need to calm down before I approach her,” I admitted.

“Says the guy who’s supposed to have the patience of a saint,” Stone joked.

“There’s a reason most Saints weren’t married, Stone,” I remarked dryly. “It’s because everyone knows nothing tries a

man like a woman.”

“Can’t argue there,” he grinned.

“Okay, we search Laney’s apartment, then go from there yeah?” Fox asked.

Once we all agreed, the guys made their way back to Hales while I stayed home. I hadn’t been kidding when I’d told them that I needed to regroup before approaching Sutton. I also wasn’t entirely sure I wouldn’t kill August with my bare hands if I ran into him on campus.

Or Laney.

Or Jennifer.

So much for having the patience of a saint.

## Chapter 26

### *Sutton~*

I couldn't take it anymore. Maybe that made me stupid, or reckless, or I don't know what, but I wanted answers.

*I wanted to believe Kincaid.*

So, my curiosity-or stupidity-was what had me sitting at the Serenity Springs' public park at eight in the evening. Even though it was dark, and I was alone, meeting in a public place still felt relatively safer than having Ross come to my place or have me go over to his condo. I didn't trust my body's response to him enough to have any kind of privacy for our talk.

Plus, if Delta or Toby were home, we wouldn't have the privacy needed for complete honesty. Granted, it wasn't like I was expecting him to tell me anything, but better to limit any possible humiliation to just us.

Looking around for the millionth time, I finally saw Ross making his way towards me. I had chosen a bench that was off the trail, but still lit well enough. It wasn't ideal, but I could hardly be accused of making sound decisions these days.

When he stopped in front of me, he said, "I ought to take you over my fucking knee."

"Really?" I deadpanned. "That's how you want to start this off?"

"You chose a park at night," he replied through clenched teeth. "And if that weren't enough, you chose a bench way in the fuck over here? Are you looking to get robbed, beaten, or worse?"

“I’m not stupid,” I snapped. “I was keeping an eye out.”

“For what?” he bit out. “Murderers and kidnapers?”

“Because Serenity Springs has a high murder and kidnapping rate?”

Ross ran his hands through his hair, and was muttering a blue streak of curses, but I didn’t care. We weren’t here to discuss my possible murder and kidnapping.

“Are you done?”

He shot me a look that hinted at some possible violence. “Careful, Sutton,” he warned. “My patience is running on empty these days.”

Suddenly, I’d never felt so exhausted. Staring up at this tall, blonde, blue-eyed god, I cursed whatever it was that had put him in my path that night at the party. There were so many other guys at Hales that came with easier instructions.

“Well, if you want to sit down, we can get started,” I grumbled.

Ross sat down, closer than was safe for my lady bits, then said, “Get started?”

“I have some questions,” I told him. “You can answer them, not answer them, lie about them, whatever, but I have some questions and I want...I want to see how much you’re willing to give me, Ross.”

“So, it’s all or nothing?” he asked. “All my secrets for your forgiveness?”

I shook my head. “No,” I replied. “I don’t want you to confess all of your secrets, Ross. In all honesty, you could lay all your secrets bare, but that still doesn’t mean that I’ll forgive you. No matter what your answers are, or how you answer, nothing will take away from the fact that you’ve hurt me twice already.” He was about to defend himself, no doubt, but I put my hand up to stop him. “The first time is on you, but the

second time is on me. So, this...this meeting is like...like overtime to determine the game since we're both tied right now."

He gave me a terse nod. "Okay," he replied. "So, ask your questions."

"What's going on between you and August Remington?" I asked. "You've never mentioned him before that day you told me to stay away from him, so why is he an issue in your life now?"

"Do you know who Rylee Lexington is?"

I nodded. "Everyone does. Her marriage to Stone Lexington was all over the place. You couldn't escape it. And everyone knows who Stone is."

"August has a thing for Rylee, and he seems to think that he still has a chance with her."

My eyes were practically popping out of their sockets. "She's married," I drawled out. "And not only is she married, but she's married to *Stone freakin' Lexington*. Is the boy crazy?"

He surprised me by nodding. "I think so," he replied. "It's the only reason I can think of for him to keep pursuing Rylee."

The very idea that someone was that suicidal to lust after Stone's wife was insane. Stone Lexington's reputation wasn't a pretty one. "Okay, but...what's that have to do with you?"

"Stone and I are friends," he started. "August doesn't appreciate me having Stone's back, and I don't appreciate August chasing my friend's wife."

"So, coming up to me and pretending like you guys are friends is a...trap?"

Ross' entire body stilled. "You talked to him?"

"Yeah, twice."

“And you didn’t say anything?” he hissed. “After I told you to stay away from him, you didn’t say anything?”

My back stiffened quickly. “Do you really want to talk about the things we haven’t told each other, Ross?”

He looked like he wanted to yell at me but didn’t. Instead, he just said, “Fair point.”

“Okay, next question.” He just nodded for me to go on. “How do you know Kincaid Black?”

“She’s Saxton Voss’ best friend.” *Wow*. I hadn’t seen that coming. “When I started hanging out with Saxton, Kincaid came with the territory.”

“Do you know why she felt it necessary to talk to me about you?”

Surprise was etched all over his face at that one. “I have no idea,” he answered. “You’ll have to ask her that. Hell, I didn’t even know she spoke with you.”

I nodded. “Yeah, earlier today.”

“Well, I don’t know why she approached you.”

“Okay, so next question, yeah?” He just nodded again. “Why did you start talking to me again? I faded away with no drama after what you did to me. Why not just...go on with your life?”

“Because I never wanted to walk away from you in the first place,” he answered. “I knew the odds were slim to none that you’d forgive me, but I couldn’t not try.”

“And you walked away because you had a shift in your priorities, right?”

“No,” he denied. “You’ve always been my priority, that’s why I had to...take care of the other things that were distracting me.”

“And you chose ghosting as an acceptable way to do that, rather than just break up with me face-to-face?”

“The truth is that I didn’t think I was strong enough to break up with you face-to-face,” he replied, causing my heart to sink in misery because I wanted that to mean something. “It was cowardly, shitty, rude, and unforgivable to ghost you after all that time we spent together, but I felt like it was the only avenue I had open to me at the time.”

Staring at him, my next question was the obvious one, but the hardest to ask, even over him ghosting me. I wanted all the details about Jennifer Polk, but Kincaid’s words were stuck on replay in my head. *Let him tell you his secrets because he trusts you with them, not because you don’t trust him.*

Rubbing my hands on my thighs, against the rough denim of my jeans, I knew I was done questioning him. There were only two questions left anyways; why did he ghost me in the first place, and what was Jennifer to him that he had gifted her with a diamond pendant necklace.

I was stupid enough to admit that both answers worried me. If his reason for ghosting me wasn’t good enough in my eyes, then that would just make me feel doubly stupid for ever allowing him back in my bed. As for Jennifer, my brain was convinced that their families were friends, and they had some arranged marriage or something archaic that rich people do. While it sounded ridiculous, there had to be something very important there for her to have such an expensive and exquisite piece of jewelry.

“Well, I’m done here,” I told him as I stood up. “Thanks for humoring me.”

Ross immediately stood up, too. “Wait up. What do you mean, you’re done here?” he asked surprised. “That’s it? Those are all the questions you have for me?” He’d been expecting me to ask him about Jennifer.

“Yep,” I lied.

His expression dropped with a touch of resignation. “Sutton, don’t do this-”

“I need to get going.” And knowing exactly how this was going to play out, I added. “If you have any ounce of respect for me, you won’t make this harder for me than it has to be.”

“Sutton-”

“You owe me, Ross,” I said, playing my ace.

I watched his face turn to stone as he slid his hands in his pockets. He didn’t say anything, but what was there to say? He did owe me.

So, I cashed in as he let me walk away.



## Chapter 27

### *Ross~*

Letting Sutton walk out of that park last night had to be the hardest thing that I have ever done. The finality in which she had walked away had been enough to drop my ass back on that bench.

She hadn't asked about Jennifer or why I'd ghosted her in the first place. There could be only one reason why she hadn't asked those questions, and that was because the answers didn't matter anymore. As far as Sutton was concerned, I've fucked this thing between us up one too many times.

*Could I blame her?*

After I'd gone back home last night, I had put the shoe on the other foot and had tried to imagine how I'd feel if our roles were reversed, and it was quite a miracle that she was even willing to still speak to me. She was right; I did owe her. I owed her, even if she thought me letting her walk away from me last night made us even.

It didn't make us even.

Not by a long shot.

Doing my best to avoid her until I had a plan, I'd stuck to my morning classes, but had skipped my one o'clock. Walking out of my Comparative Politics, I was heading towards the student parking lot when I saw Kincaid walking up. She looked like she was on a mission, but she always looked that way. People move out of the girl's way whenever she was on the move, and I didn't blame them.

"Got a minute?" she asked when she stopped in front of me.

“Sure, what’s up?”

Her black eyes narrowed a bit, like she was trying to read me, but I wasn’t sure why. Finally, she said, “Look, I know we’re not exactly friends, and I’m probably way overstepping, but...we’re all in this together, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I suppose we are.” Here’s the thing about Kincaid Black; you wanted her on your side. No matter what. If Saxton, Stone, Fox, and I were shooting stars, Kincaid Black was a comet. Being Saxton’s best friend, he had a very powerful weapon at his disposal in Kincaid.

“I had myself a little chat with Jennifer,” she confessed, surprising me. I hadn’t seen or spoken to Jennifer since that disaster with Sutton.

“About?”

“I just got some more details out of the girl,” she replied. “Laney had been reaching out to her and Alexis a lot lately, trying to convince them that they needed to follow you guys around like shadows. Laney had Jennifer convinced that if you didn’t talk to her or spend any time with her...become friends or whatever, that the organization would bail on all their promises. Laney told her that she had to *actively* keep you out of trouble, or she’d lose her status as your supporter.”

“Have you told Fox yet?”

She shook her head. “I figured you were the priority, since...” She shrugged. “Well, since everything’s a mess with Sutton and all.”

“Gee, thanks,” I deadpanned.

Kincaid smiled, and she really should take care using that weapon like that. The girl was too beautiful for her own good. Whatever was going on between her and Fox, I was rather surprised that Fox hadn’t chained her to his bed forever.

“Look, I’m all for you fucking off the NDAs, but why rush it if we can figure something else out?”

“Is that why you had a talk with Sutton?”

“Partly,” she admitted. “But mostly because I don’t want that asshole to win. He’s breaking all the rules, and...if the initiating panel isn’t going to do anything about it, then we need to take matters into our own hands.”

I cocked my head as I regarded her shrewdly. “You know what I can’t quite figure out, Kincaid?”

“What’s that?”

“If you’re a part of The Order to take it to the next level or burn it to the ground.”

The spitfire straightened her back. “Everything I do, I do for the right reasons, Ross.”

“The right reasons or *your* reasons?”

She smirked. “The right reasons, Ross,” she answered. “Do you think I’m afraid to burn with the flames?” She shook her head. “Because I’m not.”

Like a demon walking over your grave, a dark chill ran down my spine because I knew she was telling the truth. “Are you the gasoline or the match?”

Kincaid grinned “I’m both, Ross.”

Deciding to move on from trying to psychoanalyze Kincaid Black, I asked, “Are you going to tell Fox about Alexis?”

Letting us move on, she said, “Yeah. I plan on calling him later.” She glanced at the Cartier La Dona watch that adorned her left wrist. “Shit, I gotta go.”

“Quick question before you go, yeah?”

“Sure.”

“What all did Sutton tell you when you guys talked?” I asked. “She left me holding my dick in my hand last night at the park. I’m pretty sure she’s done with me.”

She tilted her head a bit. “Are you done with her?”

“Not even fucking close.”

Her lips twitched. “I told her that you were in love with her and that you were about to throw away your entire future to be with her,” she divulged. “I told her to let you tell her your secrets because you trusted her, and not because she didn’t trust you.”

“She walked away from me last night, Kincaid.”

“But did she break up with you, Ross?”

“I...well, she told me to let her leave and to not make it any harder on her than it needs to be,” I told her.

“Did she ask about Jennifer or you ghosting her?”

I shook my head. “No.”

Kincaid let out a deep, heavy sigh. “Christ, you men are so damn blind sometimes, I swear.”

“What in the fuck does that mean?”

“Ross, if she was done with you, if she didn’t care anymore, if she would have had no problem asking the two questions that could hurt her the worst. She didn’t ask about Jennifer or you ghosting her because the answers to those two questions could have been enough to force her to be done with you for good,” she replied. “By avoiding those two very important questions, Sutton left a little bit of hope alive that you guys can work things out.” Her brows rose. “You know, that whole ignorance is bliss thing?”

“Are you saying-”

“Get your ass over to her place and do what you should have done in the first goddamn place,” she drawled out.

“And what’s that?”

“You’re Ross Carmichael,” she replied. “I think it’s time you introduced her to that man.”

I grabbed her by her shoulders, then planted a huge kiss on lips. “I owe you, Kincaid.”

She smirked. “You bet your ass you do.”

I went to take off, but then turned back really quickly. “Uh, don’t tell Fox I kissed you.”

“Don’t you mean Saxton?”

I grinned. “No, I mean Fox.”

Her chin came up. “I think you’re confused, Carmichael.”

“And I think you’re in denial, Black.” I threw her a wink, so she wouldn’t slaughter me dead.

Kincaid just rolled her eyes at me. “Go get your girl,” she muttered before taking off herself.

For once, shit was working in my favor because it was Tuesday, and I knew it was a slow day for Sutton. Normally, she stayed home and did her laundry and shopped a bit. There was no reason for me not to think she’d be home right now. Granted, she could be shopping, but I doubted it. By this time of the day, she was already planning dinner for her and Delta.

I tried not to grimace as I opened my car door. I didn’t necessarily want an audience for our showdown, but I wasn’t too worried about Delta. As far as I knew, she wasn’t the meddling sort, so I could see her letting me and Sutton work our shit out.

*I hoped.*

While I didn’t need the cops called on me, Kincaid was right. It was time to show Sutton Hadley who she was fucking with. The perfect scenario would be for Sutton to just forgive me-secrets and all-but I knew it wasn’t going to be that easy. I also knew that I’d marry her if that’s what it took to have it all. I was already in love with her, so in my eyes, marriage was inevitable. Since that was the endgame, what difference did it make if we married now or later?

*She'd have to love you back for that to work, moron.*

Starting my car, my mind was already shopping for diamond rings.

## Chapter 28

### *Sutton~*

It wasn't that I was begrudging Delta her happiness, but ever since she and Malcolm exchanged those three little words Sunday night after we'd gotten back in town, she's been at his place every night. While I was super happy for her, cooking for one sucked. I always cooked for the two of us, storing her portion away if she wasn't home. The food never went to waste.

I let out a sigh as I finished my sad ham sandwich.

Or maybe I was just sad.

Either way, today was not one of my best days. It didn't help that Kincaid's voice just wouldn't leave my head. What she had suggested was pretty much to put complete blind faith in a guy who...well, I didn't know what. However, who in the hell dated a guy-*willingly*-knowing that he had secrets that he couldn't or wouldn't share with you?

Nobody, that's who.

We didn't have that kind of foundation. Sure, those two weeks together had felt like...something *more*, but so did every time Ross touched me or was near. Yeah, I might be completely batshit crazy in love with him, but I still had a functioning brain. Plus, even though I knew it was unfair to compare, I couldn't just ignore the deadly ramifications that came with dark secrets.

A knock at the door snapped me out of my unhealthy trip down memory lane. Taking a quick drink of water, I threw my napkin full of sandwich crumbs in the trash, then rushed to go answer the door. If it was Delta looking for some home cooking, she was shit out of luck.

Peeking through the peephole, it wasn't Delta.

It was Ross.

It was Ross, and I hated the part of me that was happy that he was here. At the end of it all, wasn't that what all girls wanted? We wanted the boy to chase us. We wanted him to put in the effort. We wanted to feel important and like we mattered. We wanted to push him away to see if we were worth the fight. Guys were always saying the prettiest things to get in our pants, so it wasn't about their words. It was about their actions.

*Were we really worth the fight?*

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door, and I honestly had no idea if I was doing the right thing. My heart was ready to weep, but my mind kept reminding me of my mother.

"What are you doing here?" I finally asked.

"I'm here because I'm in love you," he said, and my heart felt like it was lodged in my throat. "I'm here because you're out of your fucking mind if you think I'm just going to let you walk away from me without a fight." Ross leaned further into my space. "And you better believe it'll be one hell of a fucking fight, Sutton." His hands came up and grabbed the door frame on each side, almost like he couldn't trust himself not to grab me. "Whether you realize it or not, this is my *future* I'm fighting for, and you're crazy if you think I'm not going to fight for it with everything I have."

"Ross-" His lips stopped whatever protests were on the tip of my tongue, and I was too stupid to stop him.

My arms wrapped around his neck because he was Ross Carmichael, and I was stupidly in love with him. I was officially that girl, and I just didn't care anymore. I never cared whenever I was in his arms. I never cared when his lips were on mine. I never cared when his hands were on my body.

I felt his hands gripping the back of my thighs, and without any strain at all, Ross lifted me until my arms were



wrapped around his neck and my legs were wrapped around his waist. I held on as his lips owned mine. I held on as Ross' growls came up to meet my whimpers.

I could feel him walking back towards my bedroom, and I was okay with that. As soon as Ross laid me down on the bed, he went back to shut my bedroom door and lock it. Though I was certain that Delta wouldn't be coming home tonight, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Turning around after locking the door, he walked towards the bed, his hands already pulling his shirt up over his head. The second that he tossed his shirt on the floor, I swallowed a pathetic moan. He was so damn gorgeous that it wasn't fair.

Nothing about this battle between us was fair.

"Take your clothes off, and I don't want to hear shit about it, Sutton," he demanded. "No more lying to me *or* yourself. No more denying what's between us. No more running from me. I'm sick and fucking tire of it, and none of it is going to do you any good any-goddamn-way."

"Ross-"

"I will rip it off," he threatened. "I swear to God." He was kicking off his shoes and sock as he threatened me, and I had no idea why I found that so sexy. It shouldn't have been sexy. The boy was threatening me. The fact that he was removing his clothing shouldn't have made it any less distasteful.

Still, it did.

I'd been dressed in a simple pair of yoga pants and a loose t-shirt, nothing fancy. However, the way Ross was staring down at me, you'd think that I was dressed in the finest lingerie. There was nothing sexy about my attire, hair, or makeup, but Ross didn't seem to care.

When Ross' hands went to the buttons of his jeans, my hands went to the waistband of my pants. His blue eyes had

me pinned to the bed as I shook off my pants and panties. Tossing them aside, I reached for the hem of my shirt at the same time that Ross pushed his jeans and boxer briefs down and over his muscular things.

I pushed myself up on the bed as Ross climbed on, stalking me. However, instead of making his way up my body to prove his point, his hands wrapped around each of my ankles, then slid their way upward in a slow, torturous path. My legs spread for him on his journey up my thighs, and with his gaze still pinning me in place, I was a puddled mess as he fit his broad shoulders between my legs. Then, with his hands tilting my hips upward like a sacrifice, Ross finally lowered his gaze right before I felt the first long, languid, purposeful swipe of his tongue through my already wet folds.

My head fell against the pillows, and my eyes closed as I let out a low moan. “Ross...”

He didn't utter a word as he went to work on the most delicate part of me. His fingers held me wide open as he focused all his attention on where I needed it the most. Ross' tongue was working every fold and opening, and it was driving me out of my mind as always. He was so good at everything and going down on a woman was no different.

My fingers clutched at the rumble sheets on my bed, and I did my best to hold onto my sanity as Ross slid two fingers into my wet heat, his tongue working my clit expertly. A swirl here, a nibble there, it felt incredible, and I knew it wasn't going to be long before he had me falling over the edge.

“I could eat your pussy for hours,” he murmured against my wet flesh, and the vibrations from his deep voice sent shivers up my spine. “I love the way you taste, baby.”

“Ross...please...” I begged, even though there wasn't anything left to beg for. He was feasting on me exactly like I needed him to, so there really wasn't much more to do.

“You need to cum?” he taunted. “Do you need to cum on my face?”

“Yes...”

Putting me out of my misery, I felt him slide a third finger in my ass, his other two fingers still working my pussy, and my hands nearly ripped his blonde hair from his head as I latched on like a lunatic and rode my hips against his perfect face.

Instead of slut talking me through my orgasm, Ross put all his efforts and concentration on working both my holes while his tongue was a furious pressure against my clit. Ross’ skill with the female body was my biggest weakness, and it was disappointing to admit.

Soon, my body was coiling like a snake, and my fingers pulled at his silky locks as I came all over his face. “*Ross...*”

“Fuck yeah,” he muttered right before his lips and tongue went back to eating me out.

My body was a trembling mess as waves of pleasure wracked my body from head to toe. Heat raced down every nerve of my body and the feeling was better than any drug out there.

Everything tightened, and instead of pulling out of my body and giving me a reprieve, Ross continued with his assault, and another orgasm ripped through my body, officially making me stupid for this man. I was losing the battle and the war, but my body didn’t care one bit.

I was vaguely aware of Ross’ body heat enveloping mine, but the weight of him was unmistakable. Being so much bigger than I was, he covered me completely whenever he was on top of me. I wasn’t complaining, though. His weight on my body felt divine.

My eyes were still closed when I felt his lips on the sensitive skin just below my jaw. It was the perfect combination of affection as my body was still coming off the high of pure bliss. In all honestly, I could probably pass out.

However, that plan went out the window as Ross said,  
“I’m going to fuck you so good, baby.”

I moaned, “Ross...”

“All fucking night long.”

## Chapter 29

### *Ross~*

It was morally wrong to manipulate Sutton with sex, but I was desperate. I had no problem adding this sin to the already list of sins I've accumulated over the years. I hadn't been lying when I'd told her that I was fighting for my life here.

*Because I was.*

"Ross..." she moaned again, and I just couldn't get enough of it. It was bad enough that I was addicted to her body, but those low moans, desperate whimpers, and throaty groans filled my ears like a heroin addict filled his veins with a needle.

"I'm going to fuck you until you're a crying, sobbing, wrecked mess," I threatened, my hot breath warming the skin of her neck. "I'm going to fuck you until you never think about leaving me again."

"Sex isn't the answer," she managed to choke out.

I quickly braced my weight on my elbows and looked down at her. "It is if it's the only way I can erase the past couple of months from your mind. It is if it'll make you forgive me. I'll use anything in my arsenal to win, Sutton. *Anything.*"

With that, I pushed into her soaked heat, and her body bowed beneath me as she got used to my size. Ask any man on the planet, and he'd be a liar if he didn't say that first thrust into his woman was always the best.

Even over his orgasm.

A woman-especially *your* woman-letting you inside her to mate with her, rut her, breed her, claim her, then eventually

own her...there was no better feeling on earth.

I reach down and hooked her left leg over the crook of elbow, then opening her up wider, I pushed in all the way, my balls resting against her ass. Sutton had my cock wrapped up nice and tight inside her welcoming cunt, and I wanted this every day for the rest of my life.

Was it too soon? Yes. Yes, it was. Was it crazy? That was also a yes. Was it reckless? That would also be a firm yes. Did I love her? More than my own life.

“Yes...” she whimpered beneath me, and that was all the encouragement that I needed.

I pulled out of her paradise, then slid back in slowly, just to torture her. I measured each stroke and did my best to tease her. I wanted her out of her mind with her want and need of what only I could do for her. It was satisfying to hear the wet sounds that her body was making with each push and pull of my cock. Going slow, the sounds mingled with our harsh breaths, and it sounded perfect.

“Do you feel that, baby?” I asked. “Do you feel how good your pussy takes my cock?”

“Oh, God...” Sutton’s body trembled beneath me. “Oh, God...”

“That’s all yours,” I continued. “Every inch of my cock belongs to you. All of me belongs to you.”

“Please, Ross...harder...”

“With pleasure, baby.”

I slammed into her, every thrust deeper and harder than the one before. The darker her moans, the harder I fucked her. The louder her cries, the deeper I stabbed at her. Her nails were like blades puncturing the skin on my back, and I hoped she left scars.

I wasn’t sure how long we’d been going at it before I knew I wasn’t going to last much longer, and since I was

determined to make this last, I pulled out, and her cry of protest put a smirk on my face.

“Oh, baby, I’m not done with you yet,” I assured her. I rolled off her body, sitting up on my knees next to her. Grabbing her by her throat, I pulled her up and over. With my cock bouncing in front of her face, I traced her lips with the leaking head. “Suck it.”

Her eyes dilated, and her pupils were blown with desire. Looking up at me, she opened her mouth, and I slid my cock easily inside, not stopping until I bumped the back of her throat. Sutton gagged, but she was used to it. The girl knew how to handle my cock. Whether it was in her hands, mouth, pussy, or ass, Sutton was a pro at working my cock.

“Swallow that dick, baby,” I growled, the sound getting lost deep in my throat. “Show me what a good girl you are, sucking my cock.” My right hand twisted in her auburn strands. “Taste yourself on my cock. Lick it clean.”

Her muffled moans vibrated all around my shaft, and her tongue cushioned each thrust down her throat. Sutton did her best to take me all, but she finally had to bring a hand up to encase the inches that she couldn’t swallow. However, a simple jerk in her hands was still better than any kind of sex with anyone else, and only a man in love would understand that reasoning.

When I felt like I was going to explode down her throat, I pulled her lips off my dick. Sutton pulled in a deep breath, like she’d been holding her breath. Her green eyes were watery, her face was flushed, and her lips were swollen with use.

She looked fucking spectacular.

*Stunning.*

“I’ll cum on down your throat later,” I promised wickedly. “The first one of the night is going deep in your pussy, baby.”

Leaning down, I grabbed her throat again, then pushed her onto her back, in the very same place she'd been before. Crawling back over her naked body, Sutton's legs were already spread wide, waiting for me. I gripped her shoulder as I slid back inside her body, and with no place to go, she was forced to take accept me in one fluid thrust.

"Ross...please..." she begged.

"I already told you," I grunted above her. "I'm not stopping until you beg for me to stop. I'm not stopping until you're a wrecked mess of sweat, cum, and tears."

"Oh, God..."

I went back to fucking her hard and deep, the headboard waking up the entire apartment building. If someone called the cops, I was going to make Sutton explain how she'd been getting the dicking of her fucking life. I wanted everyone to know that she was mine.

"After I flood your pussy, I'm cumming down your throat," I growled down at her. "Then after you've swallowed my second load, I'm going to cum on your face and tits next."

"Yes," she shamelessly agreed. "Yes, Ross..."

Her hips were bucking with need, and it just made me fuck her harder. "After that, I'm destroying your tight ass." Sutton's pussy clenched around me, and that was a good thing. I wasn't lying. I was going to fill her body up completely with my seed. I was going to mark her with everything I had.

"Make me cum," she begged breathlessly. "Please..."

I pulled out of her, then grabbing her hips, I flipped her over, her ass presented to me like a gift from the gods. Getting behind her, I slammed back inside her needy cunt, then slapped her ass before I started working her pussy again.

"Oh, God...yes," she screamed into the pillow, though it was still too easy to hear her.



She was taking me like a pro, but it still wasn't enough. Dropping a bead of spit on that sweet ass that I was going to invade later, I slid my thumb inside, alternating the motion against the rhythm of my cock inside her cunt.

"These sweet, tight, little fuckholes are mine, Sutton," I grunted. "*You're* mine. You're mine to do whatever the fuck I want with." When she didn't agree fast enough, I slapped her ass with my free hand. "Say it."

"Yours," she quickly complied. "I'm all yours."

Soon, her tight holes were constricting around my cock and thumb, and Sutton was screaming my name into the pillow. Her body was shaking and exploding all around me. It was enough to make me unload inside her.

Pulling my thumb out of her ass, I grabbed both her hips and ravaged her until rope after rope of hot cum was coating her womb. White spots danced behind my eyes, and my head was a rush of blood, causing me to shut my eyes tight.

I wasn't sure how long my orgasm lasted, but soon, I was collapsing next to Sutton on the bed. My breathing a ragged mess, my dick still leaking. I wasn't sure how each time kept getting better, but it did.

My eyes were closed, but I felt Sutton's body drop, her curled onto her side. Quickly following suit, I rolled over onto my side, wrapped my arm around her waist, then pulled back against my chest.

"Ross..." she mumbled.

"If you need a quick nap, then I suggest you take it," I told her. "I already told you that I'm fucking you all night long, baby."

I was certain she was going to argue, but she just muttered, "Okay"

She was passed out within seconds, and I let her sleep. We had all night, and she was going to need her rest. I meant

what I'd said about wanting to wreck her.

I tightened my hold on her, and I was generous enough to let her sleep a whole ten minutes. When I finally woke her up, I didn't let her rest again for hours later.

## Chapter 30

*Sutton~*

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know, Sutton.”

His words were said in a whisper, but they sounded loud as hell in the silence of my bedroom. With my head resting on his chest, I knew he wasn’t telling me because he trusted me. He was telling me because his secrets were the most powerful arsenal that he had in his fight against me.

Or his fight *for* me.

So, did I want him to tell me because he trusted me, or did I want him to tell me because I didn’t trust him?

His left hand was caressing my arm lazily while his right hand was caressing my thigh, the one that was sprawled out over his waist. It felt cozy, warm, satisfying, and safe. My body felt safe in his arms, but my mind and heart weren’t so sure, and I couldn’t pretend otherwise.

“I don’t need your secrets, Ross,” I told him. “This is about more than you ghosting me and keeping secrets. This is...this is about my parents. Though the details aren’t the same, this is about how my parents had kept some pretty dark secrets and what came from my mother constantly giving my father second chances.”

His caresses turned into grips on my flesh, pulling me tighter against him. “Christ, Sutton,” he swore softly. “You can’t honestly think that I would-”

“I said that the details weren’t the same,” I reminded him. “However, the principle is. Nothing good can come from keeping secrets, and nothing solid can be built from lies.” I pulled away from him and sat up, looking down at him sprawled out across my bed. “I think our foundation is too

shaky to build anything solid on it, no matter how much I crave the things you do to me.”

Ross sat up, then cradled my face in his hands. “That’s bullshit, Sutton,” he bit out. “I get that you have trust issues, and they are going to always be there, even if I never fuck up again. I get that, and I get why. I’m not dismissing the importance of what happened with your parents. Still, your lack of trust for people, and my missteps are not reasons enough to end this.” Dropping his hands, he sat up straighter. “Besides, I already told you that I’m not letting you go. So, we can...I don’t know. We can go to counseling together or whatever, or we can fight every day for the rest of our lives, but I am *not* letting you go, Sutton.”

“Ross-”

“I’m ready to fucking marry you, Sutton.” My eyes rounded with shock, and I couldn’t stop the gasp that escaped. “I will marry you *tomorrow*. That’s how sure I am that you are it for me. That’s how sure I am that I will never love or want anyone else for the rest of my life. Secrets or no secrets, nothing changes what it is I feel for you. You’re the only one who’s unsure here.”

“Are you insane?” I whispered in shock. “You would marry someone who doesn’t trust you?”

“No,” he answered. “I’ll be marrying someone who I love. Someone who I trust. Someone who I can’t live without. While I wish you trusted me and loved me as much as I love and trust you, this isn’t about how you feel about me. This is about how I feel about you.” Yanking me across his body, I was straddling him as his hands dug into my mess of hair. “I love you, baby. I love you so fucking much, and I will always regret hurting you. That regret is something that I will take to my grave. Still, I’m not letting you go. I’ll take your disdain, your mistrust, your anger, and even your hate over not having you at all.”

Tears started flowing down my face, and I couldn’t even tell you where they were coming from. I wasn’t sure if I

was crying because he was saying all the right things, or if I was crying because I felt weak. I felt like I was becoming everything I swore that I never would.

Yet here I was.

I was sitting on Ross' lap, ready to let him hurt me for a third time.

*Who did that?*

What kind of woman signed up for that kind of heartache? What kind of woman saw the signs but ignored them anyway? What kind of woman chose a guy over her own self-worth? What kind of woman opened the door to invite misery in?

*A woman in love.*

“Say something, Sutton,” he pleaded softly. “For the love of God, say something, because your tears are killing me.”

I took a couple of deep breaths and wiped the tears away the best I could. I wasn't sure what there was to say because I hadn't forgiven him, but I wasn't sure I could walk away completely.

Not if he kept coming after me.

Staring into his blue eyes, I knew my next words were probably all lies, but they helped me feel like I was still in some sort of control. “You hurt me again, and I'll walk.” He opened his lips to say something, but I slapped my hand over his mouth. “And you'll let me,” I finished. Lowering my hand, I added, “That's the deal, Ross. If you lie to me again, avoid me, hurt me, anything close to what's already happened, I will walk. I will walk and you will let me go.”

“I can't agree to that,” he replied through clenched teeth. “While I'll never lie or hurt you again, I can't agree to anything that allows you to walk away from me, Sutton. I can't do it.”

I moved to get off his lap, but he was on me before I could get away. With his naked body covering mine, it would be so easy for him to slide back inside me and make me forget all the baggage that was between us.

However, that's not what he did.

Instead, he braced his weight on his elbows, pushed my tangled hair back from my face, and looked down at me, his weight holding me prisoner. My legs were spread for him, and I could feel his dick hardening, but he wasn't pushing for more sex.

Looking down at me, he said, "Marry me."

I shook my head. "No."

"Marry me, Sutton," he demanded again.

"No," I repeated.

"Yes," he argued.

"Why?" I choked out. "Because you want to win? Because you want to trap me?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I want you chained to me in a way that you'll never be free from. I love you, Sutton, and I'm afraid that you truly have no idea the lengths that I'll go to in order to keep you." My heart thumped hard in my chest. "Marry me."

"I'd have to be insane to marry you, Ross," I pointed out. "People don't get married to fix the problem. They marry for love."

He arched a brow coolly. "You don't love me?"

"You're a bastard," I whispered because he knew that I did.

Ross crawled off my body, then sat up and reached for his phone on the nightstand. I sat up and watched in horror as he dialed someone. We were in the middle of the most

important argument of our lives, and he was phoning someone else.

“Hey,” he greeted to whoever was on the other line. “Think we can put together a quick wedding like yours and Rylee’s?” *Oh, my God. He was talking to Stone Lexington.* I wasn’t sure what Stone was saying, but soon Ross was replying, “I don’t give a fuck. She loves me, and I love her, and that’s the end of it.” Staring right into my green eyes, he said, “I don’t even give a fuck that she really doesn’t want to marry me right now. We’re getting married.” Another few seconds of silence, then Ross said, “Got it.”

As soon as he hung up the phone, I sat up on my knees. “Are you insane?”

Ross crawled back onto the bed, grabbed my chin with his fingers, and squeezed. “Do. You. Love. Me?”

I was barely able to spit the words out, but I wasn’t going to lie. “You know I do.”

“We will be married tomorrow night,” he said, so matter of fact that I felt kind of...stung. “If you want Delta there, I’m fine with that, but that’s all. No one else.”

He let go of my chin, so I could speak. “What about my grandparents-”

“Sutton-”

Then that got me to thinking. “Oh, my God. What about *your* parents? What are they going to sa-”

“If you think I give a shit what my parents think, you’re wrong, baby.”

“Ross, think about-”

“Do you love me?” he asked again.

“I already answered that,” I bit out stubbornly.

Ross sat on his ass, then gathered me up in his lap. “You’re probably going to want to claw my eyes out, but...just

trust me, Sutton.” My entire body tensed with that simple, yet difficult request. “Marry me, and I swear the rest will fall in line.”

I said the only thing I could at the moment. “My love for you feels an awful lot like hate, Ross.”

“I know it does, baby,” he replied easily. “I know it does.”

The next twenty-four hours that followed were horrible.



## Epilogue

### *Ross~*

It was our wedding night, and my bride was fire-spitting mad at me still. While she had lots of reasons to be angry with me, the invite list to our wedding was at the top of her very long list of grievances against me.

After my call to Stone yesterday, and not giving a shit that Alexander and my parents were going to be livid, I had spent the rest of the night keeping Sutton in bed with me. The following morning had been spent arguing about a prenup in between our morning classes. The afternoon had been spent working with Stone, Saxton, and Fox to pull off another midnight wedding, only this time, there was no Jennifer or Alexis in attendance. It had been me, Sutton, Stone, Saxton, Fox, Delta, Rylee, Kincaid, and the priest. The evening had been spent getting ready for the wedding that my fiancé had not been eager about, but her reluctance hadn't deterred me a bit.

Sutton was in love with me.

The rest would work out.

So, while the woman had a lot of reasons to be mad at me, right now, she was sitting next to me on the couch at my place, just blinking at me.

Finally, she said, "Secret societies don't exist."

My lips twitched. "And that's the very reason that they've lasted so long," I told her. "Discretion is the key."

Sutton's eyes widened as her back collapsed against the back of the couch. "Your new tattoos," she muttered.

I nodded. "Yep."

While I was sure she had a million questions, the one she asked first was, “Why Cerberus?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “It might have to do with my reputation for patience. Cerberus guarded the Underground. I imagine that took a lot of patience.”

“And...and the others?”

“Stone is Typhon, which I presume is based on all the power that dude wields. Plus, he’s super confrontational and doesn’t fear much. Saxton is Basilisk, which is apt because Saxton is capable of ending someone with the snap of his fingers. The guy’s ruthless when he’s at the end of his rope.”

“Jesus,” she muttered.

“Fox is Sphinx, which makes sense because Fox is a born leader,” I continued. “The sphinx had the power of four: to know, to will, to dare, and to keep silent. And August is Hydra, which is making a lot of fucking sense now. It was said that if you cut off Hydra’s head, two more would grow in its place, never truly destroying the creature.”

“So...what if...” She eyed me. “Not saying I’m totally buying all this right now, but...what does that mean for me? Does it mean anything?”

“I imagine Alexander will be knocking on our door in the morning with a mountain of NDAs for you to sign,” I told her. “And a lecture.”

“Are you...going to get in trouble?” she asked warily.

I just grinned. “Probably,” I answered truthfully. “Still, I haven’t violated any terms of my membership, so a lecture will probably be the worst of it.”

After a few quiet seconds, she said, “You know, I never would have said anything.”

“I know,” I replied. “But telling you would have jeopardized everything. Now that you’re my wife, my secrets are your secrets.”

“Is that the real reason you married me?”

I reached for her, then dumped her on my lap. Sutton was straddling me, looking down at me, and you could see the fear of my answer swirling around in her eyes.

“No,” I told her. “I married you because I love you. I married you because there will never be anyone else for me *ever*. I married you because I refuse to be without you ever again.”

“This is so insane,” she whispered.

“Don’t care,” I replied. “Just tell me you love me, baby. That’s all I care about.”

Sutton didn’t disappoint. “I love you, Ross. Unfortunately for me, I love you.”

*She had no idea.*

The End.

# Acknowledgments



The first acknowledgment will always be my husband. There aren't enough words to express my gratitude for having this man in my life. There is a little bit of him in every hero I dream up, and I can't thank God enough for bringing him into my life. Thirty years, and still going strong!

Second, there's my family; my daughter, my son, my grandchildren, my sister, and my mother. Family is everything, and I have one of the best. They are truly the best cheerleaders I could ever ask for, and I never forget just how truly blessed I am to have them in my life.

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Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who's purchased, read, reviewed, shared, and supported me and my writing. Thank you so much for helping make this dream a reality and a happy, fun one at that. I cannot say thank you enough.

## About the Author



M.E. Clayton works full-time and writes as a hobby. She is an avid reader, and with much self-doubt but more positive feedback and encouragement from her friends and family, she took a chance at writing, and the Seven Deadly Sins Series was born. Writing is a hobby she is now very passionate about. When she's not working, writing, or reading, she is spending time with her family or friends. If you care to learn more, you can read about her by visiting the following:

[Smashwords Interview](#)

[Bookbub Author Page](#)

[Goodreads Author Page](#)

## Other Books



*The Enemy Duet*

*The Seven Deadly Sins Series*

*The Enemy Series*

*Resurrecting the Enemy (Enemy Standalone)*

*The Enemy Next Generation (1) Series*

*The Enemy Next Generation (2) Series*

*The Buchanan Brothers Series*

*The How to: Modern-Day Woman's Guide Series*

*The Heavier... Series*

*The Holy Trinity Series*

*The Vatican (Holy Trinity Standalone)*

*The Holy Trinity Duet*

*The Holy Trinity Next Generation (1) Series*

*The Holy Trinity Next Generation (2) Series*

*The Eastwood Series*

*The Blackstone Prep Academy Duet*

*The Pieces Series*

*The Problem Series*

*The Rýkr Duet*

*Standalone*

Unintentional

Purgatory, Inc.

My Big, Huge Mistake

An Unexpected Life

Real Shadows

You Again

Merry Christmas to Me

Dealing with the Devil