



GLAMMED
BY THE
HITCHHIKER

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LENA LITTLE

CLAIMED BY THE HITCHHIKER

CLAIMED: BOOK 11

LENA LITTLE

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CONTENTS

[Free Books](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Also by Lena Little](#)

PREVIEW

I'm about to work in a new town, but of course, my car breaks down in the middle of nowhere. The last thing I want is to freeze my ass off as I sit on the side of the road.

Hitchhiking isn't the best idea, but it's not like I have any other choice.

Then, a Jeep appears. I half-expect the driver to be a serial killer wanna-be. Instead, I see a young, innocent girl with red eyes and a puffy nose.

Her beauty hits me like a freight train.

I don't know her story but I intend to find out. She's running away from someone, that much I can tell. And while my training kicks in, I resist the urge to pepper her with questions. I need her to trust me first.

It doesn't take long before she realizes I'm not one of the bad guys and starts spilling everything.

Finding out her father and his men are after her? It takes all of my willpower not to drive around and finish them myself.

And when those degenerates manage to locate her, they think they can take her from me and I won't do anything about it. They think I won't put up a fight even if it's six against one. They think I'll willingly give her up.

The thing is, she's already mine. And anyone who comes after her has to get through me.

No one gets through me.

These assholes think they can one-up me because they outnumber me? Please, f*ckers. Don't threaten me with a good time.

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“**Y**eah, well. Fuck you too, you rusty, old piece of junk!”

I raise my leg and swing it forcefully against the side of the truck, ignoring the sting in my shin.

How fucking funny would it be that I faced the most dangerous criminals only to die because I froze my ass off?

I check the time on my watch. 5:12 PM. Perfect. Just great. The sun is already dipping, casting its long shadows across the empty, blacktop road. It won't take long before the tall trees completely block any light from the setting sun.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I mentally run through my options as if I have many.

I'm in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but the stretch of woods in front and behind me. No cellphone signal, the next town is possibly an hour away, and no one knows I'm supposed to be traveling.

My dark blue 1970 Ford Bronco has served me well in the past six years, but of course, it's gonna break down today of all days. Right when I'm on my way to a new job as a homicide investigator. The new Chief of Police was my old boss, and he said he was bringing the gang back together. I didn't even hesitate. I was his best man. Too bad I'll probably freeze to death before my first day at work.

Trouble started when I heard a subtle rumble in the engine. I dismissed it because it was old and it was bound to make

noises. And the noises sounded expensive. The rumble then turned into a cough, and before I knew it, the old boy sputtered to a halt. I popped the hood of the car and ended up inhaling a full hot steam. That was when I realized it was bad.

The temperature starts to drop, and I shift my weight, a cloud of white mist forming in the chilly air with each exhale. I pull my leather jacket tighter in a pathetic attempt at shielding myself from the biting cold. Raising my cupped hands to my mouth, I blow warm breath to my numb fingers.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I begin walking because the last thing I want is to stay still and die without trying. Warmth seeps through my bones, and it takes a few moments before my semi-frozen ears pick up a faint sound.

Stopping in the middle of the road, I turn back, straining to hear the noise again. Come on.

I let out a huge breath when the low, rhythmic rumble cuts through the other white noises. Fuck yes. I shove my hands in my pockets and listen as the engine's roar grows closer. It's almost dark when I finally catch the beam of headlights.

Relief washes over me in waves as the vehicle comes into view. It's a crimson-red Jeep Wrangler, most likely bought within the past two months. That probably costs 20 times my truck. I whistle and watch at it in admiration, but that's before I notice a dent in its fender. A huge one. Damn. What a waste.

Doesn't matter. With a beast like that, the owner can definitely afford to have it fixed.

I extend my arm, thumb pointing upward. Never hitchhiked in my life, so I'm not sure if this is really how they do it. I've seen enough true crime documentaries and worked on enough cases to know this can possibly end with one body found in the ditch, but dammit. I don't give a flying fuck if the driver's a psycho or a serial killer. I can hold my own in a fight, and I have my gun with me. I prefer those odds against staying here when I have nothing to fight the cold.

I just need a ride.

The car is closer but the driver hasn't slowed down. When it passes by me, I mutter a curse. Can't really blame him. Who would want to stop and let a hitchhiker who looks like me in their car? I probably look like a serial killer myself. I mean, I am 6'5" and, because I spend most free time at the gym, built like a tank. With my five o'clock shadow and jeans caked with mud, I won't fault the driver for thinking the worst.

Looking like I moonlight as a thug has its perks when interviewing suspects, but obviously, it also has its downsides. I wouldn't want to be stuck in a small space with me either.

I scrub a hand across my face and start walking again. Looking ahead, I notice the Jeep stop and start backing. On instinct, my body tenses, already primed for a fight. It comes to a halt beside me, the driver lowering the window on the passenger side.

I don't know what I expect to see, but not this.

Jesus Christ.

I squeeze my eyes shut and snap them open again. The driver isn't some old guy. Not even my age. Not even a guy really.

A young girl with blonde hair tied in a messy bun, a smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Damn. My heart kicks hard at the sight of her, so hard I feel like I'm having a heart attack.

Her blue eyes are glassy, nose red, and she's white-knuckling the steering wheel. I've never seen anyone as beautiful as her, and I've never wanted anyone as much as I want her right fucking now. This reaction comes out of left field I don't even know how to wrap my head around it.

I wonder if she's real or if I'm dying from the cold and hallucinating. I can't even get a word out. In my 38 years, I have never been tongue-tied. Only because I can't stop staring at her.

Everything snaps back into focus when she snuffles. She squares her small shoulders and tilts her chin. "You need a ride?"

She's actually taking a stranger into her car. I frown, wondering if there's no ounce of fear in her body. She should. If I'm a bad guy with bad intentions, she can't overpower me.

Is she that innocent? If so, then she needs someone to protect her. Someone to make sure no one takes advantage of her. Someone to keep her safe.

Someone like me.

She clears her throat. "Cat got your tongue?"

I don't miss the slight tremor in her voice. If she's so scared, why the hell is she offering me a ride? Unless she has a companion hiding in the backseat waiting to strangle me from behind.

Maybe.

But fuck. I won't pass up the chance to ride with her and get to know her.

All my life, I worked and worked and worked. Worked till my head felt like it was full of cotton. Worked till my muscles screamed. Worked till my eyes stung from lack of sleep. Worked till I was palpitating so hard from the caffeine pumping in my blood.

For some reason, this girl I just met has me already thinking of a different path, a different future. A life with her.

Well, shit. Look at me already thinking of making her my wife and binding her to me with a child. And that's even before I've gotten a closer look or even talked to her. If she ever finds out what's going on in my mind, she'll be speeding away like a maniac in no time.

"Yeah, I do. Need the ride, I mean."

I open the door and slide into the passenger seat, welcoming the rush of warmth but not the unmistakable stench of fear. I am good at my job. Brilliant even. I didn't become a top detective by half-assing things. I'm observant to the core and notice even the smallest things.

Right now, I notice her. All of her.

Her face is ashen, and she's chewing on her bottom lip. Something's way off. But with the way she tries to hold herself together, I know I shouldn't pounce on her, especially since she just helped me.

"You okay? Should I take you to the hospital or the nearest police station?"

She waves a hand. "I'm a little shaken but I'm alright."

"Did somebody die?"

"No."

She shifts the gears and the truck lurches forward. She doesn't take her eyes off the road but keeps glancing at the rearview mirror. "Where you headed?"

"The next town. You?"

She opens her mouth and closes it. Pursing her lips, she grits out, "As far as I can go."

"Escaping someone? A boyfriend maybe?"

She laughs, but there's neither warmth nor humor in it. The laughter doesn't reach her eyes, and the sound seems to claw its way out of her throat. "Not boyfriend."

So she is running away.

Her tone indicates she's done talking, so I steal glances at her once in a while, staying silent the entire time. Her eyes are flat and cold, her mind elsewhere.

There's dirt under her fingernails, her long, billowy dress with muddy smudges and torn at the hem like she got stuck between branches and thorns and they snatched at the fabric. She's also barefoot, thin lines of red crisscrossing her ankle and the sides of her heel.

There's a story there, and I intend to find out. I will help with whatever mess she's involved in.

She's clearly not alright, and I should be ashamed of the way I'm already stripping her and exploring her petite body in my mind. *Fucking hell, Damien. Get a grip. You're not a hormonal teenager. Focus, dammit. Focus.*

“Don’t you know it’s rude to stare?”

“I know, but I also know when someone’s not okay. You wanna talk about it?”

“Why do you wanna know?”

“Because I can help.”

She bursts out laughing before it morphs into something different. Her slender shoulders tremble, and tears stream down her face.

“Pull over.”

She pulls over to the side of the road and puts the gear in park. With her hands covering her face, her whole body racks with gut-wrenching sobs.

I want to kill whoever hurt her like this. Whoever he is, I’m gonna cause him so much pain he’ll beg me for his death. If I end up killing him, I’ll feel no guilt for my actions. There’s no room for that. There’s room only for her.

Every inch of me is screaming to take her in my arms, but she’s so fragile she might break. The least I can do is shrug off my jacket and lay it on her back. “Who do I have to kill?”

Her head whips to me. “What?”

“Who hurt you? Who do I have to kill?”

“What makes you think I didn’t kill someone? That I’m not the bad guy?”

“You already said no one died, and I believe you. As for your other question, my intuition tells me you’re the innocent party.”

“What else does your intuition tell you?”

“That you’re running away from someone. Someone possibly dangerous. Someone who wields power. And I know you don’t know who I am, but I’m not the type to sit around while someone gets away with hurting another person.”

She lets out a shaky breath and closes her eyes. She wipes her cheeks with the back of her hand and rests her hand on the

gear stick. I cover her hand with mine and say, “Let me drive.”

That simple touch turns my skin feverish, and I pull my eyebrows together, feeling my manhood press against the zipper of my jeans. Fuck me. What is this? Why has my body gone rogue?

She narrows her eyes at me. Fair enough. “Why?”

“Because I don’t want to die before I start my new job.”

This time, her laugh is genuine, eyes crinkling at the corners. I can’t help but smile at her. She’s beautiful, sure, but happiness transforms her entire face.

My breath is knocked out of me, something roaring within me, and I’m arrested by the realization that no matter what happens, I’m not leaving her alone...to deal with whatever this is. “My name is Damien. I’m a homicide detective.”

Her forehead creases, and her lips press into a thin line.

I reach for the backpack at my feet, but I see her stiffen so I raise both hands. “I’m just gonna get my ID as proof. I promise. No funny business.”

Her eyes continue to narrow in a cautious stare, so I hold her gaze as my hand rummages inside the bag. I find what I’m looking for and hand it to her. She takes out my ID and reads it front and back.

When she lifts her gaze, I know I’m one step closer to earning her trust.

“It’s time you tell me what’s going on.”

Has my luck finally turned?
Is he the answer to all my prayers?

I shouldn't keep my hopes up, I know that...but what if? What if he's the key to my freedom? What if he's the only one who can help me save Elise?

Does he have enough power to send Father and his men to jail?

I remember the look on Father's face as I got into the truck, locked the doors, and sped away. He had murder in his eyes, and I knew for certain he'd stop at nothing to bring me back. He invested way too much in me to let me go. And the longer I'm away, the higher the risk of people finding out about his operation. He won't let that happen.

With Damien's old leather wallet in one hand and his ID in the other, I stare at the black-and-white photograph. Damien Davenport.

I'm still reeling from my escape, but I'm not blind. He's good-looking. Not like the boys I see in magazines. Not the type of guy who swings his weight around but actually has nothing to back it up.

No. He's the kind of man who says what he means and means what he says. And that's sexy as hell.

He's so massive I actually mistook him for a tree and passed him by. When I saw him in the rearview mirror, I hesitated for

a beat because a man his size could easily crush me with his bare hands.

But...

I also couldn't leave him out in the cold, knowing I hadn't passed another soul in two hours.

When my truck lurched to a stop, I was shocked to see a ruggedly handsome man, his brown eyes dilated as he took all of me in. His dark hair was mussed up, droplets of water clinging to the strands. The tip of his ears and nose are flushed, puffs of steam visible when he breathes. He's impossibly tall, even if he's hunching his shoulders.

At one glance, he looked threatening. But his eyes said otherwise. It made me feel as though he was seeing through my soul. I couldn't explain it, but on a primal frequency, I knew I wasn't making a mistake by letting him hitch a ride. I very well couldn't have his death on my conscience if I left him in that weather.

I knew it was cold because I was wearing a thin dress with short sleeves. Well, I was cold until he offered me his jacket. When he wore it, it showed off his broad shoulders. On me, I look like I'm drowning in leather.

He's just wearing a black Henley shirt underneath, and maybe I should look away, but I'm mesmerized by how his muscles bunch each time he moves. And something about the way he talks, his deep baritone voice, and the confident way he sits do things to me.

I've seen guys once in a while in the compound and those in magazines, but no one can hold a candle to Damien. They all pale in comparison to him. It's not even a fair comparison. And just sitting beside him makes me feel safe.

Maybe even if they come, they'll lose to him. Maybe they'll run the other way. I can't wait to see Father's face when he sees Damien shielding me with his huge frame.

I don't know why that thought amuses me.

Damien's voice brings me back to the present. "You can scoot over. I'll head to your side."

When he's comfortably seated on the driver's side, he drapes his arm over the back of my seat and motions to the ID I'm still holding. "You can check my name online if we get access to the internet."

I struggle to make sense of his words, and he might as well have been speaking a different language. "Online? Inter-what?"

He tilts his head to the side as he searches my face, and I feel warmth rise to my cheeks. I don't look my best. Okay, that's generous. I look like total shit. And the way he's staring at me right now? It makes me self-conscious, something I've never felt before.

I've only just met him, but I've been subjected to various emotions that feel foreign to me. A man like him with someone like me? Ha. I doubt that. He probably thinks I'm a weirdo. Or crazy. Or both. I won't even be surprised if he thinks I escaped from an asylum. I mean, I look like I did.

He's about to ask me something, but just then, a sudden roar jolts me. My heart leaps in my chest as a motorcycle speeds past us. My pulse pounds in my temple, my breath coming in quick, shallow gasps. I swing my gaze to the rider, a cold sweat breaking out on my forehead as I quickly scan if I know him, if he's one of them.

But he doesn't stop. It's not them. It's not them.

Oh god. I'm losing my mind.

With my hand on my chest, I try to calm my racing heart. Realizing we've been sitting idle for a while, I pull on Damien's sleeve, electric current zapping through the air the moment my knuckles brush his bicep even with the thin fabric of his shirt between our skins.

I gasp and pull my hand back as if he just burned me. Maybe he did because I feel warm all over.

Turning my head to the window and keeping my gaze outside, I gulp. "Let's go. We can talk on the way."

He doesn't say a word, just continues to take a quick look my way before he shifts the gear and drives. When we're far

enough, I breathe a sigh of relief, the tension leaving my body.

I adjust the jacket and rub my dirty feet together.

Nothing escapes him apparently even if he's fairly quiet because he says, "I have a couple of socks and slides in my bag. Grab a pair so your feet won't get cold. If you're hungry, I also have a half-eaten sandwich and some granola bars. Help yourself."

He doesn't even need to tell me twice. Before I know it, I'm on my second granola bar. I don't know what it is but it either tastes good or my taste buds are overwhelmed after years of eating bland foods. "Aren't you wondering if I hurt someone?"

He does a double take. "Did you?"

"No. But you're not wondering why I look this way?"

"I am. But you're clearly traumatized about something, and the last thing I want is for you to feel like I'm crowding or intimidating you."

I let that sink in. Another first.

"So...are you gonna tell me?"

"Are you gonna help, Damien?"

"Yes. I'll do whatever I can."

There's no hesitation in his voice. I'm putting my life in his hands, but he's made me feel safer than I've ever had with anyone I've known for years, except Elise of course.

If he wanted to hurt me, he would've already done so. There's no stopping him. I can't stop him. Yet, I know with every fiber of my being that he'll never hurt me. Never. How I know that for sure, I have no idea.

"Okay."

"Okay. Let's start with the easiest question. What's your name?"

"Dani."

"Dani what?"

"That's it. Just Dani."

A crease forms between his eyebrows. “I meant your surname.”

I look away and busy myself with prying loose the flecks of dried mud near the window. I wish the ground would swallow me whole. “I know what you mean. I don’t have one.”

He’s dying to know more but careful not to upset me.

The women at the compound always told me that men only want one thing from me—my body. So I should steer clear of them because men are animals.

I smile to myself. Damien isn’t one of them, though. Maybe it’s the way his eyes fill with genuine concern or how he makes sure he gives me enough space or how he doesn’t take every opportunity to “accidentally” touch me.

No.

Damien Davenport is different. And just the thought of this big hunk of a man touching me makes my insides twist and my belly flutter with need. The need for what, I’m not sure.

For years, I’ve erected these invisible walls of ice around me, trying not to get attached to anyone. But with him, I feel it thaw and crack just like that.

Trust is a foreign concept to me. I learned that early on. It was costly to expect someone to be there for me and protect me. Elise was the only exception. But now... Now there’s also Damien.

“Aren’t you gonna say anything?”

“Actually, I’m waiting for you to start. I don’t want this to sound like an interrogation, Dani.”

Oh god. Why does my name sound different on his lips? Why does it sound...sexy? I shake my head, trying to ward off the urge to ask him to relieve this terrible, empty ache within me.

“I... I ran away.”

“From who?”

“Father and his men.”

DAMIEN

I grip the steering wheel, my jaw aching from clenching my teeth so hard.

It's worse than I thought. So much worse.

Her father and his men?! I don't know who they are or what they want with her, but for the past hour, Dani has burrowed herself under my skin. The more I know, the more boiling fury swells inside me.

By the looks of it, she doesn't have anyone on her side.

Surprise, motherfuckers. She has me. I don't even have half the story, but I already know—down to the marrow of my bones—that I'm standing by her. Keeping her safe. Making sure none of them can hurt her. Ever again.

She's mine to protect. And maybe, eventually, mine to pleasure. I have no idea how much she's endured, but she's suffered enough.

No more.

From here on out, she's not always gonna look over her shoulder or jump at the slightest sound of an engine rumbling. The way her face contorted with fear when that motorcycle passed us by will forever be burned in my retinas.

Earlier, I was just about to start a new life in a new town. Now, I have a mission. A renewed purpose.

Earn her complete trust. Take care of her problems, and by taking care, I mean I'm not above bashing those men's skulls

to the ground. Make her mine.

The last one is most likely a foregone conclusion. Judging by the way she reacted when she touched me, I say she already belongs to me. Even if she's not fully aware of it yet.

"Tell me about them." My tone comes out gruffer than usual, so I soften it as I add, "I need to know more about who we're dealing with."

"This is gonna sound crazy."

"I've seen my share of crazy, Dani. Tell me at your own pace. I won't interrupt. You have my word."

She shifts in her seat, her hands trembling on her lap. "I grew up in a small community with mostly women and other young girls. I-It's in the middle of the woods. We're totally off the grid. We have our own power and water supply, and that's the extent of technology we're exposed to. No TV or radio. But we had cameras, which followed us everywhere. Almost everywhere. They had these red dots that blinked, and it always creeped me out.

"We eat healthy foods, mostly fruits and vegetables from our own garden. Us girls are told to exercise at least an hour every day, spend some time under the sun, and have to undergo blood tests every few months."

There's a sinking feeling in my stomach and a pounding at the base of my skull.

"When we turn 18, we graduate and are sent to the main house a few miles away. We don't know what happens to girls who graduate since we never see them again. Well, I didn't until yesterday."

Without thinking, I reach out and cover her hand. Instead of pulling her hand back, she rests her other hand on top of mine and starts tracing my knuckles with her fingers.

Whatever coherent thought I had a second ago flies out the window.

My loins tighten, and my stiff manhood strains against my zipper. Heat licks through my veins, and my nerves are strung

so tightly I think I might snap.

Fucking hell. Dirty thoughts slam into my head, and I shake them away. No. Hell no. This is not about me.

Her touch is innocent, and yet here I am, a grown man turning feral at something as simple as hand-holding.

Maybe I'm the crazy one.

"You look angry?"

I slowly pull my hand back and scrub it roughly across my face. This is important to her. My cock is not the priority. "I'm not. Go on, I won't distract you again."

"Oh okay." She gathers herself and from the corner of my eye, I see her straighten her spine. "My only friend is a 16-year-old girl named Elise. She's very smart with numbers, but she's also nosy. There's a small office by the gate, and she goes there every morning to do some calculations and stuff. She has access to the file cabinet and easily figured out the blind spots inside. You know, where there are no cameras.

"That was how she pieced everything together. The graduation? Father wouldn't bring us to the main house. There is no main house. He'd bring us to a small clinic where our organs will be harvested and sold to the highest bidder."

I know what's coming before she even opens her mouth.

"I just turned 18 last month. I'm supposed to graduate tomorrow."

My pulse pounds in my throat, frustration rolling over me. I can't take it anymore so I pull over and turn the engine off.

My fists are balled on my thighs, my head spinning and almost about to explode. Man's capacity for depravity never ceases to amaze me. I take a slow, deliberate breath, trying to quell the raging inferno pumping throughout my body.

Reaching for the interior dome light, I turn it on, unbuckle my seatbelt, and face Dani. She looks pale and exhausted.

As much as I want to rush to this compound with guns blazing, I have to take care of her first. I run a thumb along her jawline

and smooth cheek, and with a soft smile, she leans into my touch.

Fierce hunger ripples through me, and air rushes from my lungs.

This desire that began when she stopped in front of me has turned into a full-blown obsession. Something shifts between us, the tension inside the truck so palpable I can slice it with a knife.

Her breath hitches and her gaze lands on my mouth.

No, Dani. God. You're killing me.

If she gives me any indication that she needs this, who am I to refuse? Maybe she needs a quick break from the hell she's been through, maybe she wants—

“Kiss me, Damien.”

Say no more.

My pulse kicks into overdrive as I lean forward and press my lips to hers. She tastes so much sweeter than I imagined, and my staff roars to attention.

I struggle to keep it slow and unhurried, careful not to take more than she's willing to give. The fact that she's letting me kiss her is enough to tide me over...for now.

With a groan, she pulls back and glares at me. “Dammit, Damien. Kiss me like you mean it. I won't break.”

And that's how she unleashed the beast inside me.

Kiss her like I mean it? Consider it done.

Desire pools low in my belly and my toes curl.

I can almost pinpoint the exact moment he snapped. Gone is the gentleman, always-in-control Damien. In his place is someone more savage, more intense, more...demanding.

He claims my mouth in a searing kiss that makes me clench my thighs together. He begins coaxing me to part my lips, and when I do, his tongue slips into my mouth, plunging in and out in a way that has me digging my nails into his arms and moving my hips.

Oh god.

When we come up for breath, he rests his forehead on mine. He's about to kiss me again when out of nowhere, my stomach rumbles. I'm equally embarrassed and horrified.

I can't remember the last time I ate. Was it yesterday? Or the day before? All I know is after Elise told me what would happen after graduation, I lost any and all appetite.

He chuckles and tucks a strand of stray hair behind my ear. "Let's go get you something to eat."

I don't protest because yes, I'm hungry. I've been running purely on adrenaline, but now that I'm more relaxed, I realize I need food.

It takes us half an hour before we spot a gasoline station. It's a small, weathered building with faded red and white paint. There's only one pump, and adjacent to it is a convenience

store with faded posters on its glass windows. It's completely dark now, and a single light bulb flickers overhead.

We stop by the pump and I open the glove compartment, reaching for a couple of bills inside.

"Wait." Damien reaches for my hand and squeezes it. "Let me fill this up and I'll go with you to the convenience store."

Shaking my head, I squeeze his hand back. "No. It's fine. I'll just buy a couple of foods and go to the bathroom. There's no one else here."

His eyes dart around us, lines of worry on his forehead. "Okay, but I'll be watching you the whole time, and I'll go to you once I'm done."

I nod and step out of the truck, grabbing his spare clothes and pulling the jacket tighter around me. Glancing over my shoulder, I see him sliding the nozzle into the gas tank, his eyes on me.

I give him a small wave and head inside the store, the rusted screen door creaking as I enter. Its shelves are mostly empty, so I grab whatever isn't expired and check out the beverage section, where I take a few bottles of water and iced tea.

Making my way to the checkout counter, the cashier is a young boy wearing a vest and watching a show on the small TV beside him. He looks up at me, stands up, and starts ringing my purchases.

"Total's \$27.15."

I give him three ten-dollar bills. "Keep the change. By the way, where's your bathroom?"

He hesitates for a bit. "Uhm, it's not really clean."

"That's fine."

Nodding, he points to the side of the store. "Small white door. It's unlocked."

He wasn't kidding when he said it wasn't clean. But beggars can't be choosers, and it's a better option unless I want to pee in my dress. Besides, I need to change. I was so surprised

when I looked in the rearview mirror and didn't recognize myself.

No wonder Damien doesn't really want to touch me. I'd be disgusted with myself too.

Damien...

When I remember the way he kissed me, my knees go weak. I want more, so much more. I want him to touch me in that urgent way of his. There's nothing hotter than Damien losing his control and claiming my mouth. Well, I want him to claim every part of me. I want to be completely his.

I finish washing up and cleaning myself as much as I can, changing into his t-shirt and sweatpants. They're way too big for me, but they smell like him. And I like it.

The door closes with a soft click behind me, and I almost bump headfirst into what I first assumed was a wall.

Stepping back, I'm caught off guard when I see it's a man—a massive man. My breath catches in my throat, my ears ringing.

He's as broad and as tall as Damien, with a thick, unruly beard framing his face. He stretches his mouth into a sinister grin, and a cold shiver runs down my spine. Damien was a stranger too, but I've never felt anything remotely close to this with him. This guy, on the other hand, is bad news, and it doesn't take a genius to figure that out.

My muscles tense, feet rooted to the spot.

“Whaddya got there?”

My head swings to the voice behind him and I see another man emerge. My mouth turns dry, and my limbs feel heavy and almost uncooperative. What should I do? Where's Damien? Can he see me? Can he take on these two? Or should I run away? Can I outrun them? Will I make it to the Jeep in time?

“Oooh. I see you found yourself a little toy.” Another voice. Another man. How many are they?

I take a step back, putting as much distance between us as I can. My breath is coming in frantic, shallow gasps. I continue

until my back hits the wall.

I'm trapped. Oh god. There's no way out. I refuse to believe I escaped Father only to run into more of the same kind.

"Don't look so scared, girl. We're not bad men. Not really." One of them snickers and I'm one breath away from fainting.

"You know, someone who looks like you shouldn't be out here alone. I mean—"

"She's not."

My head follows the voice and seeing Damien almost makes me slump to the ground with relief. He stands there with a look on his face I'll never forget.

His mouth has gone hard, nostrils flaring, eyes turning cold. His fists are clenched on his sides, knuckles white. A vein bulges on his forehead, and even all the way from here, I see a muscle ticking in his jaw.

Danger oozes from his pores as he glares at the men with blazing heat that can melt steel. If they have common sense, they'll run as far away from him as possible. Then again, I don't think they have much substance between their ears.

"Step away from her." Damien's voice is menacingly low, but maybe the other men assume they can take him because of their number.

One of them laughs and says, "Or what?"

"Or I'll bash your head against the wall. Maybe break your hand if you dare to touch her."

"Well, shit. I'm quaking in my boots."

They howl in laughter, and the one nearest to me grabs my arm and pulls me close. I flinch and try to pull away, almost gagging at the smell of tobacco on his breath. "Whaddya gonna do no—"

He doesn't even finish his sentence because Damien's fist connects with his jaw. I don't even see him move. One minute, Damien's staring daggers at them, and the next, he's pulling me behind him.

That's it. I can't watch it anymore. I just can't.

With my eyes fixed on the ground, I sit on my haunches and cover my ears, doing my best to ignore the grunts, dull thuds, sharp smacks, and scuffling. I must have been sitting like that for a few minutes because my legs feel numb when Damien lowers himself to my level and lifts my face to his. "It's over, baby. Let's go."

He leads me to the truck on wobbly legs, still reeling from what happened. I glance at the three groaning men on the ground. Not so tough now, huh?

So I guess Damien is the real deal. There's not even a scratch on him. If he can take them on, then he can easily fight the guys at the compound. They work out, sure, but they haven't seen raw power and strength like Damien's.

I slide into the passenger seat, hands still clutching the plastic bag.

He locks the doors and windows before turning to me and running a hand down my back. "You okay? I didn't want you to see that. I'm sorry."

I give him a soft smile, still marveling at how the same hands that fought those awful men are now caressing me and helping me relax. "No. I'm just shaken by how those men thought they could have any girl they wanted just because they're strong enough to do so."

He nods in understanding. "Yes. There's no shortage of degenerates like them. That's why I don't want to let you out of my sight."

He takes my hand and brushes his lips along my knuckles, making my body flash hot. "I will protect you, Dani. I promise you that."

"I know. I don't know what I did to deserve you, but thank you."

"I'm going to make this world safer for you and other girls to live in, Dani. I swear on my life."

"Thank you. Did you find a signal here?"

He frowns. “No. Still a dead spot.”

We go back on our road trip, wondering how long it will take before we see civilization...or even just a place to rest. I don't mind sleeping in the truck, but Damien's too big to rest comfortably in the back seat.

I take a quick peek at him. Everything about him draws me to him, especially with the way he came to my defense. The way he didn't think twice about fighting three men because they posed a danger to me. With him, I don't have to pretend to be strong. I can just be myself. And that's so freeing.

With one hand on the steering wheel, Damien rests his other hand on my knee. It's such a big paw, so much bigger than my kneecap. His size may be intimidating to other men, but beside him, I feel small and feminine. The fact that I can make him moan with a kiss is like a drug. I want another fix. I want to see his eyes flare with naked hunger.

That's my favorite version of Damien.

I'm wearing his sweatpants so there's a thin layer of clothing between us. Feeling a little bold, I put my hand over his and slide it a bit higher up my thigh. His hand tightens and he sits straighter. “What are you doing?”

His voice is gravelly, and weirdly enough, it makes me feel powerful—that I can make him feel these emotions with a simple touch. I'm no seductress, and everything I know about intimacy between couples comes from books, magazines, and hushed whispers from the other girls.

Damien seems worldly. And with his looks and the way he treats me, I don't doubt he has a line of women waiting at his front door. That thought sombers me, the sharp sting of jealousy taking me by surprise.

It unsettles me, this gnawing feeling in my chest. No. I don't want to share his attention. I am his and he is mine.

But...what if he already has someone? No. Impossible. He just kissed me. Then again, some men...

No. He's not like them.

I want to shut that part of my brain, but it's like a dam breaking. I'm filled with fear that he has someone else. I didn't ask him, did I? And I practically begged for that kiss.

Oh god. What if he has a girlfriend? A wife? What if...?

"Are you with someone?" I almost pinch myself for blurting it out.

He looks at me from the corner of his eye, one side of his mouth lifting. "No."

"Have you ever been married?"

He lets out a deep chuckle that warms me from head to toe. "No. God, is this how an interrogation feels like? Officially, I've never been married. Unofficially, I'm married to my job."

I sag with relief, and of course, he notices. "Were you worried?"

"No! I-I mean... Kind of... Yes. Yes, I was worried."

"No need to worry, baby. This is the first time I've ever felt this way."

That confession gives me an extra boost of courage. It's like I'm finding these small pieces of myself with him. "Stop the car."

He turns and raises his brow but does as he's told.

He pulls to the shoulder and the car rolls to a stop. We sit in the quiet of the parked car, the only sound is my heavy breathing. "Damien, do you like me?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you touch me unless I ask you to?"

"Because you're still too raw and vulnerable, and I don't wanna take advantage of you."

"But if I take advantage of you, would you mind?"

"Fuck, Dani. Take whatever you want."

His hands reach over and he easily lifts me off my seat, bringing me to his lap. His eyes zero in on my mouth while I straddle him, hands looping around his neck.

Damien runs a thumb and tugs on my bottom lip, eyes hooded, before he leans forward and kisses me hard. Fireworks explode in my body, and on instinct, I move my hips, electricity passing through me when I rub against his hard bulge.

Yes, Damien. Yes.

I whimper in protest when he pulls away, but he lowers his head to trail kisses down the column of my throat, along my jaw, and inside the shell of my ear.

I'm pulsing with need, and before I know it, he opens the door and gets out, his one hand under my ass as he carries me, carries me like I weigh nothing. I can't hear anything—not the slamming of the door, not the chirps, buzzes, and hums, not the rustling of leaves, not the wind blowing through the trees.

It's not as cold here, but maybe that's because my body is on fire.

Damien cups the back of my neck and drives his tongue inside my mouth. When he sets me on something cold and hard, I look around and find myself on the hood, his arms on either side of me.

“What do you want, Dani?”

“You. I want you. Touch me, Damien. I'm yours. All yours.”

Damien inserts his body between my thighs and grabs my face to kiss me with urgency like he can't get enough of me. His hands part my legs before he reaches under my shirt and cups my bare breasts, squeezing my nipples into tight, extra-sensitive peaks. I bite my lip and whimper, the sensation of having his rough pad on my nipple driving me crazy. He lifts the shirt and takes one taut bud into his mouth.

My back arches until I almost snap into two. He does the same with my other nipple, and my fingers wrap around his head, nails grazing his scalp. The slow, rolling lick of his tongue making me shudder.

When he comes back up for another kiss, I feel him tug and slide the sweatpants down to my ankles. I'm not wearing

anything underneath, and the cool air brushes my velvet folds.
“Wait! What are you doing?”

“Tasting you.”

“B-but...”

“You want me to stop? Tell me and I’ll do it.”

“No! No.”

I tilt my head back and breathe hard before looking at him again. “No, Damien. Don’t stop.”

Anticipation fills my senses and I can’t look away as he lowers his face and drags his tongue along my slit. I feel like someone just electrocuted me. He jerks my butt to the edge and lifts my legs over his shoulders before he licks another stripe down.

Oh. My. God.

I’ve probably died and gone to heaven. Because there’s no other way to describe it. All in all, this isn’t a bad way to go.

He makes a ragged sound as I yank his hair, and when he slides his tongue into my tight muscles, my hips push forward as if on their own volition and I tighten my legs around him. His fingers dig into my thighs, and I’m moaning and whimpering like crazy, saying his name over and over again. My brain stops functioning, and I don’t even consider the possibility that someone might pass by.

At this point, I’m beyond caring. If someone wants to watch, let them watch. I’ll go insane if Damien stops.

A knot of tension begins to wind tighter low in my belly, and I rock against him. Rock and rock and rock. Without a warning, my orgasm hits me like a sledgehammer, so intense I feel like someone shook me hard, and I lie down on the hood, spent, dazed, and still coming down from the high.

Damien smiles with my juices glistening around his mouth. He runs his lips down my throat, sucking on the pulse between my collarbones. He pulls up the sweatpants and loops my legs around his waist as he carries me back to the passenger seat.

We don't say a word, but he reaches for my hand and holds it, unaware that my legs are still shaking. A girl can get used to this. He makes me want to.

DAMIEN

Dani is fucking delicious.

And the way she came apart in my mouth? I'm storing that picture of her in my head, only taking it out if I need to service myself. My desperation to have her has reached new heights, and I don't know how much longer I can restrain myself. At this point, I'm gonna have to accept I'll be walking with a boner the entire time we're together.

And we'll be together for a long, long time. I'd rather have someone sever my limbs than let her go.

Less than an hour later, I round a bend in the road and make out a dim glow.

The motel comes into view. It's small, probably only has five bedrooms, and with a neon sign perched on a post, buzzing intermittently and casting a glow over the entrance. There's only one subcompact in the parking lot, and I bet it's the owner's.

There's still zero signal on my phone, and I'm almost nodding on the wheel, having been awake for more than 16 hours already. My eyes feel heavy, my mind starting to feel foggy.

Looking over at her, Dani looks just as tired.

That's it. We're going to stay here and sleep. Won't do us any good if I'm so exhausted I can't fight.

I pull in front of the first room, the crunch of gravel under the tires suddenly too loud.

The motel has an aged wooden siding and simple overhanging eaves, with layers of paint peeling in places.

Yep, it looks like it came straight out of a Hollywood horror movie. I won't be surprised if Norman Bates comes at us with an ax.

I turn off the engine and go to Dani's side. I hold her hand and we approach the small office and open the glass door, the small bell above it chiming softly. Along one wall are brochures, pamphlets, and maps—already faded and difficult to read. A red rotary phone sits on the small coffee table but without wires, so it must be just for decorative purposes.

A middle-aged man hobbles to the worn wooden counter. "Good evening. How can I help you?"

"We'd like one room please." I think for a moment Dani will protest, but she grabs my forearm and leans into me. Good girl.

The man reaches for a ledger, licks his finger to open it to a blank page, and starts asking for my information.

He looks up over the rim of his glasses. "How long do you intend to stay?"

"Just one night or two. We'll see."

He nods and grabs behind him a key attached to a wooden block. "Room 1. I think you're already parked in front."

"Thanks. Do you have a phone here?"

"Yeah, but doesn't work most of the time. You're welcome to wait until you hear a tone, though."

"Where's the nearest spot where I can get a signal?"

"Cellphone? Probably that fork in the road a couple of minutes from here. There's a small hill. Just have to climb it and you might get lucky."

"Thanks."

I enter the room first, quickly scanning it. The walls are painted beige, and a wooden dresser stands against one wall.

There's a small table with two chairs in one corner and a bulky, boxy TV beside the bathroom door.

Walking to the large window, I look for movement outside before pulling the curtains down. Dani climbs the large bed and, with a deep sigh, lies down and kicks off my slides. She sinks into the mattress face first, rolls over, and runs a hand along the smooth, cool linens, a smile on her face.

I hover above her, hands on each side of her arms, and kiss her nose. "We can ask the owner to cook for us or we can munch on whatever you bought and sleep afterward."

"I'm not up for a heavy meal."

"Potato chips it is, then."

She sits cross-legged across from me while I take one chair. I'm not exactly hungry so I open a bottle of water and finish it in three gulps.

"Tell me about yourself," she says, leaning her back against the headboard.

"What do you wanna know?"

"Anything. What you do, where you work, where you're headed, your family? I don't know. Everything."

"Like I said before, I'm a detective. I'm not really starting a new job, just transferring to a different town around four hours from here. I don't have a family. Never knew my father, and my mother passed away a few years ago. When you first saw me, my truck broke down."

"Hmm..."

I lean forward and rest my elbows on my knees, interlocking my fingers. "Dani, is it too painful for you to talk about it? Because I'd like to know more about the compound. I'm planning to check out that hill the old man talked about and call the Chief to let him know about your case. Is that okay with you?"

She jerks her head and swallows before taking a sip of iced tea. "I'm fine with it. Elise is still at the compound. If your Chief can help us, maybe I can save her."

“You keep saying compound. Do you remember its exact location?”

“Yes. I did my best to memorize the turns when I drove off. We can ask for a paper and pen from the owner. I’ll draw it for you.”

“Okay. I’ll do that later. What’s life like in the compound? Tell me all about it.”

She exhales a shaky breath. “It’s a small community. We have older women who supervise us girls. They give us tasks, make sure we follow all the rules, write reports, etc. We’re divided into two groups—the women and us girls. Every day, we wake up at 7:30, do self-care, eat breakfast, do our chores for an hour, eat snacks, go for a walk and exercise, eat lunch, take a two-hour nap, drink tea, read books, eat dinner, self-care, and it’s lights out at 9 PM.”

She’s holding a half-bitten chip, a faraway look in her eyes. “To be honest, it’s not that bad. There are rarely men around. Sometimes, they go there to harvest the crops, fix things, or anything that requires manual labor. Sure, they brush against us ‘accidentally’ but never more than that. I always knew something was off, though. The walls are so tall. We tried to climb up the roof and saw nothing beyond. We have a small library, with classics, old magazines, and fiction books. I didn’t even know the date when I left. I thought it’s still 2001.

“I know about TV, those surveillance cameras, and cellphones—yours is way smaller than the ones I’ve seen by the way—but not much else.”

“How did you learn to drive?”

“That’s a funny story actually. Found a book about cars and everything. Elise, ever the daredevil, found an old car by the barn. When we’ve been good, we’re granted our ‘me time.’ With ‘me time’, the women don’t follow us around and basically just let us do our thing. So Elise and I sneaked into a barn on the edge of the property and had a hell of a time. It took us a couple of hours to finally figure it out because it’s manual transmission, and of course, she crashed us into a hay bale. No one found out because it was raining hard that time

and it muffled the engine sound, but unfortunately for us, we had checkups the next week, and both of us had bruises.”

“Did they punish you?”

“I don’t know if you can call it that. They were always extra careful with our bodies, so what they did was take out our ‘me time’. I liked to read, so I wasn’t allowed in the library for a month.”

Dani chuckles and gives me a sad smile. “You know, I was looking forward to graduation. I knew there was a world beyond our walls, and I was more than ready to get out and leave.”

“How did you get out?”

“Elise helped me. I don’t know how she did it, but she planned it all out for me. I’ve never been a good liar, and she was scared my face would reveal everything. She’s still 16, so she’s still safe for two years. But after what happened, I’m scared that Father might rush everyone to graduate.

“You know why I was hesitant to tell you even though most victims would probably ask for help first? Because two girls got out in the middle of the night and ran all the way to the nearest police station. The following morning, the cops brought them back. They didn’t even make it to their rooms. Father gave them an early graduation. Turned out the cops were on Father’s payroll, so were several people in power.”

“Father. Why do you call him Father?”

“I have no idea. We rarely see him. He only appears at graduations, and he never interacts with us. He’s pretty old, maybe around...70? He has white, curly hair. Dark brown eyes, and a scar on the left side of his mouth. He’s always surrounded by at least five guys.”

She rests her chin on her hand and grimaces. “I know what you’re thinking, and after reading about it before, I also realized how eerily similar our setup was to all the other cults.”

IT TAKES two rings before he answers, and I'm digging the heel of my shoe into the soft soil, unable to calm down. I've been restless ever since that talk with Dani. I hate sitting here while her Father roams free.

"Chief."

"Davenport. You in town?"

"Not yet, sir. Got stuck a couple of hours away after my truck broke down."

"I hate to say I told you so, but I've been telling you to sell that junk for years."

I chuckle. He's been trying to convince me to buy a new ride. Guess I don't have much choice now.

His voice changes, and he clears his throat. "So, I sense something. Why are you calling?"

"Yeah, so. I hitchhiked after I was standing in the middle of nowhere. Driver's a girl. I noticed something was off, and she was scared out of her mind, jumpy too. Almost had a heart attack when a motorcycle roared past us. Did a bit of digging, and she told me she escaped from a compound deep in the woods.

"I have her sketch right here, and I'll send a pic to you. Says a guy who calls himself Father has an entire community of women and young girls. They're taken care of like they all need to be perfectly healthy. They also get blood work done every few months. By the time the girls turn 18, they have this graduation. And it's really just them leaving the compound and being brought to a small clinic so their organs could be harvested."

Chief doesn't respond. The only obvious sign he hasn't hung up is his heavy breathing. "You have an idea what this Father looks like?"

"Curly hair. Brown eyes. Scar near his mouth."

I hear him curse under his breath. “You say you have a sketch for the location? I’ll gather the team as fast as I can and go where you are. It might take some time because there’s some asshole or a team of assholes leaving black duffel bags in public areas, so we’re out in full force. Everyone’s breathing down my neck since people are panicking. Send me your motel address.”

Something niggles at the back of my mind. “You’re not really surprised. Do you know about this?”

“Yes. We’ve had several reports about organ harvesting somewhere west of here. Deep in the woods, like you said. Someone sent people to scour the area and found nothing.”

“It would be hard to find it tonight.” I give him the motel’s address.

“Send me the photo. I’ll just check something.”

He mutters another curse, which is surprising because he rarely does so. “I was right. There’s a precinct near this location, and I’m friends with the new Chief who moved in almost at the same time as me. He says he’s currently cleaning up the ranks, so he might not know about this but he’ll go back to the office to check.”

“Yes. Dani said two girls escaped before but were brought back by police officers. They’re in her Father’s payroll.”

“We have to be careful. We don’t know how far and deep that bastard’s claws reach.”

“Figured out as much.”

“Plan is to surround them. Can’t have a chopper announcing our arrival.”

“Right. I’ll wait at the motel so we can follow you.”

“We’ll do it first thing tomorrow as soon as we can. It’s gonna be a pretty big operation. Keep your lines open.”

IT'S past 10 and I fully expect Dani to be deep asleep, especially after the long day she's had. I'm still pumping full of adrenaline, unable to rest until I find these fuckers and make sure they can't harm anyone anymore.

When I step inside, I see her on the bed, watching TV and in nothing but my t-shirt. Her toned legs stop me in my tracks, and I have to shove my hands in my pockets to keep myself from reaching out and running my hands and tongue along her curves and dips. Damn. It's getting more and more difficult to restrain the animal who wants to devour her.

And I'm getting dangerously close to acting on my thoughts. Especially after getting a taste, I crave for more. The way her folds part around my tongue? I can only imagine just how it's gonna feel for my dick.

"You talked to him?" Her voice snaps me out of it, and thankfully, she doesn't notice the bulge in my pants. The very obvious bulge.

"Yes. He knows about it, actually. But no one ever gave him the exact location."

"Is it possible Father paid him?"

"I doubt that. He transferred there only four months ago, and if there's anything you need to know about Chief, it's that he's as straight as an arrow. Between the two of us, we've investigated dozens of corrupt officials, most of them found guilty."

"Okay."

"I also looked at the Jeep for any tracking devices. None."

"Maybe he didn't expect one of his girls to steal it."

"Maybe."

Our eyes meet, and the air between us crackles. When she came apart in my arms earlier, it felt glorious. I've been chasing that feeling ever since. But as much as I want to bury myself to the hilt inside her, I don't want to rush her until she's ready.

And by the time I make her mine, fully mine, I'll serve her paradise on a fucking silver platter.

I told her I was married to my job, and that was true.

Until her.

Until those baby blues stared into me and held me captive.

When all this is over, I'll help her move on and we can start our new life together. Because in less than 24 hours, I went from finding her beautiful to doing whatever I could to help her and destroying anyone who wants to hurt her.

I'm gonna take care of those pieces of shit even if I have to break their necks with my bare hands.

Protecting her and keeping her safe are my priorities, but this. Her spread out on the bed with nothing but her panties, her nipples turning into tight peaks, pushing against the cotton fabric of my shirt.

I lost control more than once today, but I want her badly, desire smashing into me over and over again. My stomach shudders, and I'm so hard to the point of pain. I don't know who owns this body anymore—me or her.

Dani peers at me from under her lashes until they stop on the thick tent in my pants. I let her look her fill, but when she licks her lips, that almost pushes me to the edge.

Her chest heaves with each inhalation, neck and chest flushing. God, she's a vision. Everything about her just seems unreal, like I'm dreaming and about to wake up any minute now.

I stalk toward her and stop just in front, raking my eyes up and down her body. My girl can wear a sack and she'll look like a fucking queen in it. My queen.

Hunching my shoulders, I curl my hands under her knees and pull her to the foot of the bed. I raise her left leg and graze her smooth skin with my lips, running it along her inner calf and thigh, smirking when she gasps and squirms.

“Do you like this, baby?”

She writhes against the sheets. “Yes. I-I’ve wanted you since I first saw you.”

“If you met me under different circumstances, would you have let me touch you like this?”

“Yes! Yes, Damien. I would have launched myself to you the second I saw you.”

If there’s anything about my girl, it’s that she’s so fucking responsive. I can even smell her arousal and see a wet spot in her panties, and it’s turning me feral.

I pull my shirt over my head and toss it to the floor, feeling myself grow bigger when her eyes glaze over just watching my body. Fuck, yes. Stare to your heart’s content, baby girl, because it’s all yours.

Lowering my face to hers, I suck her bottom lip between my teeth and she moans into my mouth, a sound that goes straight to my cock, making it twitch. I cup the back of her head and slant my mouth, so I get that perfect angle to tangle my tongue with hers.

Perfect. So perfect.

Using my other hand to reach from under her shirt, I squeeze her soft globe, massaging and pinching her hardened peaks.

“Too many clothes,” I rasp before stepping back, unbuckling my pants, and taking it off in record time. She does the same and throws her shirt to the side of the bed, sitting in her thin panties that’s now soaked through. With nothing but my tight boxers on, I tug it down and discard it, my swollen cock jutting proudly against my stomach.

“T-that won’t fit,” she stammers.

“It will, baby. You’re made for me, remember?”

I lift her and rest her head on the pillow. Forcing myself to go slower, I plant kisses all over her face and neck, going down between her breasts before taking one nipple into my mouth and sucking it. Her body bows off the mattress, hands flying behind my head. I do the same to the other nipple while one hand rips her panties.

She gasps and pushes me. “That’s my only pair!”

Biting her lower lip gently, I run my tongue along her teeth. “You don’t need underwear when you’re with me, baby girl. Makes everything easier.”

She starts to say something but snaps her eyes shut when my finger finds her wet slit, dripping for me.

“Oh god, Dam—”

Her mouth parts in a silent moan when I slip one finger into her pussy. Tight. Shit. She’s so tight. And she’s clenching around me. With superhuman effort, I bring her closer to the edge and take it out, her eyes flaring with anger and disappointment.

I laugh at her reaction. “No, baby. You come on my cock.”

At this, she grimaces and looks away, something indescribable crossing her beautiful features. A surge of protectiveness rises to the surface, quashing my overwhelming lust.

I hook a finger under her chin and force her to look at me. “What’s wrong? Is this too soon? Is it too much for you?”

She pins me with an incredulous look. “What? N-no! That’s not it. I want this. I want you.”

“So what is it?”

“I...uh...I...I’m a virgin and this is my first time,” she says the words so quickly, that I almost don’t understand at first.

When it registers on me, a snarl of possession lodges in my throat. I somehow figured she never had any man—or boy—ever. But hearing her say the words out loud rocks me to the soles of my feet. Her innocence is turning me savage, and I’ll lose my mind if I don’t drive myself home inside her soon.

“M-maybe you’ll be disappointed.”

Jesus Christ. She’s actually worried. This girl who can turn me on and make me burn without so much as lifting a finger thinks she’ll disappoint me. She has no idea how close I was to coming just by being in the same space as her.

“Never, baby girl. But I need you to know I’m not playing around. The moment I stake my claim, you’re mine forever. You’re not leaving my side. Ever. There’s no going back for you because you’re spending the rest of your days with me and only me.”

Blush rises to her cheeks and she smiles. “That’s all I want.”

With a harsh growl, I bury my face in the crook of her neck, sucking her sensitive skin. Every inch of her tastes so damn good. I dip my finger inside her and nudge her thighs apart with my knees. She’s primed and ready.

Wedging my staff in front of her entrance, I drive into her, inch by agonizing inch. I grit my teeth and hiss at the way her inner muscles contract and suction up around me. Not even halfway through and I tilt my head back and let out a guttural moan. I’m so fucking close to coming it’s not even funny.

I don’t realize I’ve stopped for a few seconds until Dani inches her hips toward mine. “Damien, don’t you dare stop. Please. I’ll die if you stop right now.”

We can’t have that now, can we?

My body is taut with tension, nerves strung tight. *Slowly, Damien. Stop acting like an animal.*

I slide further until I meet her barrier. With her starting to writhe beneath me, I drag my mouth along her flushed skin and latch onto one rosy bead, sucking hard and lapping. I’m halfway through the other when I ram my hips forward, breaking her barrier and sinking into her, my hips flush with hers.

Jesus.

“You okay, baby? How badly does it hurt?”

Tears well in her eyes, but she lifts the corners of her mouth and touches my cheek. “I told you not to stop, didn’t I?”

My god. This girl.

With her legs wrapped around my waist and her heels digging into my back, I take her slowly at first, but she drags her nails along my biceps and snaps, “I won’t break, Damien. Please!”

My hands grab the sides of her face, and I slide my tongue into her mouth, swallowing every moan and whimper as I drive into her with hard, merciless strokes.

“This what you want, baby? Take it. Take it all like a good girl.”

She meets me thrust for thrust, and my climax begins to crest. No. Not before her. Wrapping one hand around her waist and the other behind her neck, I stuff myself deeper, her fingers gripping my hair.

Her whole body trembles and she bites my shoulder to stifle her scream. That does it. I hit release as my whole world rips apart, pulse after pulse of warmth filling and coating her inner walls.

Dani sobs my name. Her limbs turn to melted wax, and she’s boneless in my arms.

I kiss the side of her mouth. “This is forever, baby girl. You’re never getting away from me.”

DANI

I never believed I'd ever be happy.

I wasn't exactly miserable at the compound before Elise found out everything, but I wasn't looking forward to waking up every day either.

I existed. And that was it.

One day bled into the next, and it was wake up, function, eat, sleep, repeat.

The most joy I felt was whenever Elise regaled me with funny stories, which were few and far between, especially when the women realized how close we were. Friendships were discouraged. I never understood why before but now I do.

Lying in his arms, I'm sated and happy. More importantly, I'm safe. Even if they come—and they will—I'm 100% sure Damien won't let them take me. With the way he fought three men his size, I have no doubt all the guys Father brings are no match for him. They don't have half of his strength, and Damien will just pulverize them to dust.

And I'll watch as he does so.

I wonder if fate actually exists because it's like the universe wanted me to meet him. He's the only one who can help me and make sure Father will be brought to justice. Out of everyone I could have met, I met him.

I knew how crazy my story sounded, but not once did he question me or doubt my words. He believed me. That was the biggest thing. He believed me and took my side.

THE GENTLE, golden hue starts seeping through the curtains, the first rays of sunlight filtering in. Back at the compound, I liked to wake up early because I had those first few hours to myself. I used to get up and walk around, enjoying having the whole place to myself, and pick up flowers to put on my bed stand. It was before I lost my freedom and got told what to do for the rest of the day.

I stretch my arms, Damien's warmth still clinging to me. I want to stay here but it's also nice to explore the woods around. I won't take long, just a couple of minutes to walk and enjoy my surroundings. The calm before the storm. Before Damien's Chief and other law enforcement attack the compound.

With a smile, I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and sit up, sucking in a sharp breath at the way the cold wooden floor feels under my feet. Turning to him, I marvel at how he looks like a naked warrior god sleeping on a small bed.

The sheets bunch around his waist, leaving his wide chest and muscular arms bare, and I curb the urge to run a finger along those hard planes. He's packed with muscle. I know because we spent last night exploring each other's bodies.

I'm still wearing his shirt, so I grab a pair of boxer shorts, slides, and his jacket before heading out the door. It closes behind me with a soft click, and I breathe in the refreshingly cool air outside mixed with the smell of damp earth. Lovely. I feel a slight chill in the air but far but it's tolerable.

I step into the woods, and the trees close in around me, the leaves rustling and the birds chirping up ahead. It makes me smile. Something inside me loosens.

Is this how it feels to be free?

Both Elise and Damien helped set me free, and I'm about to do the same to her. No one deserves to be in that compound. We were free to roam inside, but we were locked up from the rest of the world. Not to mention we were sentenced to death at 18.

I kneel and touch the dew-kissed petals, picking only the most vibrant wildflowers. When I've picked enough, I gather them in a small bouquet and bring them to my nose, inhaling the scent and smiling.

I'm about to retrace my steps when footsteps crunch on fallen leaves. I whirl around to find Damien's massive frame sauntering to me.

"Dani?"

I raise my hand holding the bouquet and wave it. "Here."

When he's close enough, his eyes flick behind me and to my sides. "I woke up and you were gone."

"Sorry. Couldn't resist waking up early to explore these woods."

His eyebrows furrow, a sigh escaping his lips before he massages his nape. "You can't do that yet. They're still on the loose. Until we've locked them up, you can't go wandering without me. It's dangerous."

Oh. My cheeks burn, and I hang my head. God. I'm so stupid. I got carried away. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't think. I just felt...I felt so safe with you, for a minute, I forgot about them. I won't do it again. I promise."

He nods, lifts my chin, and plants a soft kiss on my lips. "We'll get them, Dani, and you don't have to always look over your shoulder anymore."

Before I can even form a response, he grabs my face gently and kisses me. Then, I completely forget about everything else, and my racing heartbeat is the only thing I hear.

I wrap my arms around him, and his hands go to my ass, lifting me and hooking my legs around his waist, locking them at the ankles. He backs me to a tree, and the rough bark pokes my scalp.

Damien saws his tongue in and out of my mouth, a demonstration of what he did last night, the stiff spear of his erection pressing against my core. I'm already panting, heat

kindling in my veins, a flurry of pulsations making my limbs weak. I want him inside me right now.

We must have been thinking the same thing because he lowers me just to hook my shorts to the side and spring his cock free from his sweatpants. I still can't get over how big he is everywhere.

With one hand under my ass to lift me again and the other wrapped around his thick girth, it takes no time for Damien to slam and pound into me relentlessly. I rock against him, my breathing labored.

My fingers tunnel through his hair as I ride him, bobbing up and down and rotating my hips, taking all of him and trying to milk him dry. He flattens me to a tree, hips rutting wildly.

And then he hits the spot.

My breath comes in short bursts as my own orgasm blinds me, making me shake and let out a long moan. But he follows closely. He swells inside of me, delivering his spend, and hot jets of come fill me, rivulets dripping out of me.

He kisses me long and hard one more time before he pulls out and tucks himself in.

What a way to start the day.

“BABY, I need to call them and check where they are and if they're almost here. Come on. Let's go.”

I'm sitting in front of the TV and shaking my head. “Can I stay here? It won't take you long, right? I don't think I'll be much help anyway since I've already given you everything.”

Nothing escapes Damien, even small sighs. With his brows drawn together, he kneels in front of me and holds my small hands in his large ones. “Baby, what is it? Tell me.”

“I don't want to go with them, to be honest, not even to just stay in the car. I don't want to see the faces of the law enforcement officers as they take pity on me or whatever.

Please, Damien. You said you'd only be gone a few minutes for a quick call. I'll stay here and lock the door. I mean, you did leave me last night and I was fine."

He's conflicted, and I know he hates having me out of his sight even for one minute. But time is running out. "Okay, but I'll also leave my gun. Do you know how to use it?"

I nod, even though I've only read about it. There's no way I'm shooting anyone. I can't. I don't have it in me.

He kisses me softly and smiles. "It's almost over, baby. Tomorrow, you'll start your new life."

"With you?"

"Of course."

That makes me smile in return. There's no other place I'd rather be than beside him. "Okay."

Damien waits on the other side of the door while I slide the first bolt with a click. I reach for the second bolt and lock it in position.

Standing by the window, I watch and listen to the Jeep's rumbling engine growing fainter. My gaze shifts to the wooden chair nearby, and I start dragging it across the room, its leg scraping against the floor and making me cringe at how loud it sounds.

The owners must be wondering what I'm up to. I hope they're not curious enough to check.

I position the chair under the doorknob and wedge it against the frame. Next, I move to the windows and lock each of them, hands trembling. Not that it matters. They can break the glass and I can't do much to stop them.

I'm just about to sit back down on the bed when I hear a rumble outside. Huh. Damien's back? That fast? Maybe he met them halfway so he won't leave me long? But it hasn't even been ten minutes.

My knees and legs go weak when I realize there's not one or two but multiple cars not far away from here, the hum of engines and the purr of tires becoming louder.

Moving closer to the door, I rest my palm on the smooth wood and strain my ears. But I can't hear much past my heartbeat pounding in my chest like a fist on a drum. No. Please.

The cars come to a stop, engines idling.

Maybe it's not them. Maybe it's a family about to check in for the day. Maybe a couple of friends on a road trip decided to rest. Maybe—

Panic digs into every part of me when I hear footsteps making their way from the gravel parking lot to the wooden floor of the motel, stopping just in front of my door.

A lump forms in my throat, making it difficult for me to breathe. My palms are damp, and beads of perspiration form on my forehead and the top of my lip.

I'm so stupid. God. I should've gone with Damien.

My whole body is trembling violently, and I slump to the floor with a thud. I almost jump out of my skin when whoever's out there bangs a fist on the door, the sound sending shockwaves into the eerie silence of the room. The walls seem to close around me and my vision begins to blur at the edges, the world spinning in a whirl.

I'm breaking out in cold sweat, and no matter how I try to stand, my legs refuse to follow me.

"Come on out, Dani. We know you're in there. Father's waiting for you outside, and you know how he hates waiting. We don't want to kill the couple in the office, but we will if you leave us with no choice."

Oh god. No, no, no, no.

I'm doomed.

DAMIEN

I've never dropped a call so fast in my life.

After Chief told me they were only thirty minutes away, I make a mad dash to the truck and throw myself into the driver's seat. I slide the key in and the engine roars to life.

I back into the road and accelerate, the truck's tires squealing in protest.

The Chief's friend dug out some records and found several girls who sought help and complained about being locked up at the compound. No investigations were conducted. Cases were closed, and the reports chalked it up to minors running away from their mothers.

Fucking disgusting. Corrupt officials are second on my list of people I loathe, just next to criminals. Looking the other way just because you need money? They all deserve to go to hell.

I understand Dani's earlier hesitation to come with me. It's a lot for her to take in. I can still remember the fear and panic on her face when she wasn't sure I was on her side, if she could count on me not to turn on her. Based on what she told me, it was a massive operation. To have something like that operating seamlessly for years, maybe even decades, her Father must have some big names on his speed dial.

This. This is why I didn't think twice about working for the Chief. He's incorruptible. He's not rich, drives a ten-year-old sedan despite how he constantly badgers me about leaving my truck in the junkyard, and lives in the old Mediterranean. His wife is a teacher, and they have one kid in college.

Money's most likely tight in their household.

But the last man who tried to bribe him with a couple of million dollars found himself locked up five minutes later. The Chief made lots of enemies that day but also earned massive respect from men like me, men who just wanted to make the world a better, safer place.

Dani's Father is about to find out that his money won't always buy him protection and freedom.

A few minutes away from the motel and a sudden, nagging feeling of unease creeps over me. My senses are on high alert, and I know something's not right. I wasn't kidding when I told Dani how much I relied on my intuition.

I see the motel's sign, and a prickling starts at the back of my neck. Nothing's unusual...yet.

Following my gut, I park and kill the engine at a fair distance. I left my gun with Dani, so I rummage in the truck and find a mallet and a six-inch wench. This will have to do.

I proceed on foot, seeking cover from the trees lining the road. Adrenaline surges through me, and I barely notice the sharp sting of branches against my face.

By the time I reach the motel, my leg muscles are screaming, chest heaving with exertion. I look up and growl through clenched teeth.

My blood freezes solid at the sight of three red Jeeps similar to the one Dani was driving. A bellow lodges in my throat, barbed wires coiling in my belly, but I tamp down the fury and try to force a sense of calm into my veins.

Dani needs me, so fighting angry is not an option. I cannot lose. I refuse to lose.

Three trucks. Six tall, lean men surrounding our room. One shadow in the backseat, who must be the Father. None of them have guns, at least from what I can see. And the realization of why makes something acidic rise in my chest.

They want her alive. They need her alive. Must be so they can still make use of her and force her to "graduate". These sick

pieces of shit. At least it's going to be a fair fight. Doesn't mean they won't end up bloody and wishing they're dead.

Stepping out of the bushes, I waste no time grabbing the one nearest me and hitting him with the mallet. The others whip their heads to me, and after seeing what happened to their buddy, yell and charge.

It's fucking on.

They come at me all at once, and I have no time to think. I fight purely on instinct, punching one square in the jaw, kicking the other in the shin, breaking someone else's kneecaps with the mallet.

Someone hits my clenched hand with a baseball bat, striking me with a sickening thud, and I hear the sound of breaking bones. Fuck! It almost blinds me, my fingers throbbing and pain radiating to my arm and shoulder.

Doesn't matter. I still won't let them get their hands on Dani. If they think they can overpower me, then they've never seen how a man fights when he's running high on fury and desperation. And I'm full of both.

Four more bodies fall to the ground, leaving only me and the guy knocking on the door standing.

He points an accusing finger at me. "Who the fuck are you and what do you want with Dani?"

I smile, tasting something metallic on my tongue. "I'm not someone you want to mess with. You hurt Dani. You're not getting off that easily."

He must've seen something on my face because his Adam's apple bobs up and down. I don't doubt I look unhinged right now. Hell, I feel unhinged. "Give her to us and we'll let you go."

I throw my head back and laugh. Laugh like it's the funniest shit I've ever heard. "Even with only one functioning arm, I can still squeeze the life out of you, boy. You came here expecting to find a helpless girl. Too bad you have to face me instead."

We circle each other, and he lunges forward, fist aimed at my face. I dodge the blow and scoff like he's nothing more than an inconvenience. I counter with a right hook, my knuckles connecting with his ribs, and he grunts, hands flying to his stomach.

He staggers back and I pummel his face and chest until he's gasping for breath.

My pulse speeds up as I turn around and stalk to the last shadow in the truck. He doesn't say anything even as I beat his guys. Doesn't even seem fazed at all.

A bullet whizzes past me, and I duck behind the hood, listening to his door swinging open. There's a click but nothing else. Realizing I have to take this small window of opportunity to strike, I rush to him, slamming the car door in his outstretched hand and hearing him yelp.

One look at him and I can't reconcile the ruthless, brutal man Dani calls Father. He's wearing a wrinkled white shirt and black dress pants, and even those can't hide his frail frame. A thick mane of white hair curls around his ears and covers his forehead, the deep, piercing brown eyes radiating the kind of strength I only ever see with men my age or younger.

And there...the scar near his mouth. A jagged line from the corner of his lips running towards his jaw. Makes him look like he's perpetually smirking.

Yes, despite how he looks like every other old man, he's far from it. I have to remember all those people who died in his hands.

His wrinkled hand flies to his wrist, cradling it. I probably broke it when I slammed the car door. That's the least I can do for all his victims...at least, for now.

Hearing the sound of vehicles drawing nearer, I glare at him. Part of me wants to say so many things, while the other part wants to talk to him with my fist.

The police cars and an ambulance come to a jarring stop by the side of the road. The officers step out of the cars, guns drawn. I meet the Chief's gaze and he nods. Swinging my

head back to the old man, I stare him down. “It’s over for you. You’re gonna pay.”

To my surprise, he chuckles. “I can’t wait to see the disappointed look on your face when they release me.”

At this, I smile at him. “We’ll see.”

I spin on my heel toward our bedroom. But something nags at me, so I turn to face him. “How did you find us? There were no trackers in the Jeep.”

He tilts his chin, face all smug and arrogant. I want to punch him and erase that look. “I know people. People who are only too happy to help me.”

I give him a death stare, considering pushing my luck and breaking his nose. But no. I won’t give him anything he can use against me. Besides, it’s not a fair fight if he’s so much weaker than me.

Instead of wasting my time with him, I sprint to the bedroom, yelling, “Dani! Baby, it’s me! Open up!”

DANI

I stand in front of the ambulance, barely keeping myself together.

This is my fault. I brought all this chaos to him. Without me, he'd probably be on his merry way to his new job. He'd have a peaceful life, be married to someone without a string of people following her. I mentally shake myself. No. I don't care that we've just met, but thinking about him with someone else makes me feel like someone has my spine in a vise.

Biting my lip to stop the tears from sliding down my cheeks, I watch as a medic in a blue uniform checks Damien's hand, which is bruised and swollen. It looks painful, and I swallow the fresh wave of nausea.

I don't hear a word they're saying because I'm too focused on him, looking for any other injury. He tries not to show how much it hurts, but I've seen him wince twice. If it was me, I probably would've passed out minutes ago.

When I heard him call out to me, I flung the door wide open, almost sagging to the floor in relief even as I briefly scanned all of Father's guys groaning and in fetal positions on the ground.

I launched myself at him, only hearing him hiss when I hit his broken hand.

Holding Damien's uninjured hand, I look around me. I've already talked to his Chief, and he's on his way to the compound. The medic tries to convince Damien he needs to go

to the hospital, but he waves the young man away. “I will. I just can’t leave right now. I have to see this through.”

Realizing he can’t force Damien, he shrugs and goes to his colleagues who are attending to Father’s guys.

Something buzzes in Damien’s pocket and he slips his hand from me to take the call. He nods, eyes briefly flaring with anger. When he drops the call, he holds my hand again and purses his lips, his eyebrows drawn together. “The men found the compound. No one resisted so they’re bringing in medics and social workers to help the women and young girls. They have someone named Elise, and she’s asking for you.”

Tears spring to my eyes, a million emotions converging within me—relief, happiness, gratitude, freedom. Most of all, freedom. My vision blurs, and I brush away the wetness on my cheeks. I can breathe again.

The world has shifted, and everything will be different now. Everything will be alright. We can all start healing. I can start healing.

I smile through the tears as Damien stands up and pulls me against his chest.

A YEAR LATER, I can say I’m more than thriving.

Father and his accomplices are serving time. Everyone was rescued at the compound, including Elise, who I still see at least once a month. She lives in a different state, but we’re always talking on the phone a few times per week. She’s on her way to college, and I couldn’t be more proud of her.

Some of the women testified against Father, but I didn’t bother communicating with them. I don’t hate them but I don’t want to have anything to do with them. They all looked the other way when girls were taken and brought to the clinics. Sure, they didn’t have much choice, but Elise did more for us than all the women combined.

As for me, I still go to a therapist. Days after Father's arrest, I kept having nightmares, and I woke up bathing in my own sweat and shaking so hard that Damien would just hold me until I calmed down.

Good thing that's behind me.

My sessions used to be once a week, but we've made so much progress, I usually just go once a month. Part of the reason is Damien. He makes me feel so safe that I no longer live in daily fear of being found and brought back to the compound. I know he won't let anything happen to me, and that simple realization is enough to keep me at ease.

He rented a place big enough for us, and while I love working at the local florist shop, I have plans to go back to school. Still, I'm good at what I do. I mean, this was my favorite task at the compound too, picking the right flowers and arranging them beautifully. It's therapeutic and makes me happy. And seeing customer's faces light up when they see my arrangement? Priceless.

Damien also oriented me to the current technology. The internet still amazes me. Searching and finding things in seconds? Talking to someone from any corner of the globe on video? Mind-blowing. At one point, it felt like I just came from a different decade, and in a way, I kind of did. We were so isolated that the only world we knew was inside the walls.

My phone buzzes in my black apron. It's Damien.

I'll pick you up at 7, baby. Wear that beautiful blue dress.

He just closed a high-profile case. It was all over the news, and in one press conference, his Chief was beaming behind him, clearly proud. I'm so proud of Damien too and falling more and more in love with him every day. How can I not? He's all I ever wanted and more.

Five minutes before 7 PM, his car stops just in front of our place. Per his request, I'm wearing my favorite knee-length midnight blue dress made from satin. With its sweetheart neckline and thin spaghetti straps, it shows off just enough skin.

The skirt flares from the ribbon belt, falling in soft pleats and folds. It's pretty chilly, but I don't want to cover the low-scoop back, deciding I'm gonna be stylishly cold tonight. It's stupid, I know. But Damien's been so busy for weeks that I want him to froth at the mouth while he looks at me.

And boy, he does.

He steps out and looks at me over the roof, his hot eyes running down the length of my body, flashing wickedly and stopping just above my cleavage. His face darkens as he sucks his bottom lip between his teeth.

Damien doesn't say anything as he steps toward me, but he doesn't need to. It feels like he's already taking my clothes off with his intense gaze. He stops in front of me, skimming his knuckles along my jawline, his warm breath tickling my ear as he whispers, "You know what? Maybe we should head back to the room so I can rip this dress off you."

"Oh, don't you dare!" I laughingly push him away. "This is my favorite!"

A smirk plays on his lips. "We can always buy another."

"Just like how you buy me a dozen panties every week because you rip them off every chance you get?"

He shrugs, looking smug and proud of himself. "I go caveman whenever you're near. So...are you wearing that sticky thing on your lips?"

I chuckle. "Lip gloss? No. Because I know you're gonna suck it clean within seconds."

He doesn't even deny it, just pulls me to him and crushes his lips to mine. And just like that, I melt into him, clutching his sleeves and pushing my hips forward, gasping when the thick ridge of his arousal presses against my stomach. It's always like this between us, like we can't get enough of each other and we just want to burn.

"Jesus Christ. We need to leave, Dani. I'm this close to taking you right here."

And I wouldn't have objected.

I SHOULD'VE KNOWN he'd bring me here.

Last week, I told him about getting an order for a \$2,000 bouquet. We had it delivered to this high-end rooftop restaurant in the middle of the city. It was outrageous, but the establishment intrigued me because it was supposed to have the best views.

Now I'm staring in awe as we're ushered by a hostess into the terrace full of unique furniture and plush seating upholstered in rich red leather. We're seated beside the glass balustrade, with breathtaking, unobstructed views not just of the skyline but the bustling cityscape below.

I don't remember much of the meal because I'm too busy staring at Damien and thinking of the way he's changed my life. On nights when he's still working and I'm lying alone in bed, I think about what might have happened if his car never broke down or if I sped away instead of giving him a ride.

Maybe I'm still running. Or maybe, eventually, we'll still find each other. I hate thinking of a life without him.

"Dani, how about dessert?"

"And coffee?"

"And coffee."

This is kind of our thing. We always end the night with dessert and coffee. It started one night when I craved something sweet and something bitter, and somehow, it just became part of our nightly tradition—unless he gets called on a case somewhere.

I'm looking at the bar's onyx countertop and wondering just how expensive that is when Damien takes my hand from across the table and kisses my knuckles. Just like always, my core clenches. My body goes haywire so easily when he's around.

"Dani, all those years before I met you, that wasn't much of a life. We've been together for a year, and you've filled those

parts in me I didn't even know were empty.”

He stands up, goes down on one knee in front of me, and opens a small, black velvet box. Oh god, is this...? “So, Dani. You said you never had a surname. What do you think about taking mine? Will you marry me, baby girl?”

My breath catches in my throat, tears pricking my eyes. The chatter around us fades, and I see only him and the dazzling diamond ring. My hands fly to my mouth, unable to believe this is happening.

I choke on a sob and smile. “Yes, Damien. Yes, I will marry you.”

It takes me a while before I realize other diners are clapping and cheering. But I don't care about them. I'm looping my arms around his neck as he wraps his arms around my body. This is what matters—him and me. Now and always.

“I love you, Dani. I love you so fucking much.”

“I love you too, Damien. I'm yours. Forever.”

WE DON'T EVEN MAKE it to the front door. We're already tearing each other's clothes in the front seat, not caring that one of our neighbors might wonder about the idling car. No, we care more about this renewed hunger for each other.

He slides the seat further back to make room for his long legs. I don't even need any encouragement. Lifting my skirts, I cross the center console and settle on his lap. I unbuckle his pants, moaning when I see his thick rod press against the thin fabric of his boxers. Taking it out, I wrap a hand around it and spread his pre-come around its head.

“Oh, fuck.”

With my panties hooked to the side, I lower myself on him, gasping until I'm fully impaled. I feel so full.

“Fuck, baby. Ride me.”

I'm straddling him, my hands clutching his hard shoulders, as I rotate and grind my hips, head tilted back because of how big he feels inside me. He lets out a gruff grunt, hands groping my ass and sliding me on and off him.

Oh god. Yes!

His eyes are hazy with lust, and I can't control the moans escaping my lips. It's so good, so good that I—

I scream through clenched teeth as I quicken my pace, reaching for that orgasm. And when it hits me, my toes curl, back arches, legs quake. He grabs my hips and sinks deeply into me. I feel him getting thicker, and with a growl, he fills me with his come.

"Now we just need to do the walk of shame to our front door," I whisper.

We laugh and his arms tighten around me.

God, I love this man.

EPILOGUE

DANI

I'm doing it. I'm finally doing it.

I can't believe it. I'm about to open my very own flower shop, and I still pinch myself every day, wondering if this is a dream and if I'm about to wake up. *Please don't wake me up. Please don't.*

It's the old business I used to work for. The owner—a nice, kind 80-ish lady who moved back to Ireland—asked me if I was interested in taking over and buying it from her. I wasn't sure at first because I just gave birth and still took online classes, but Damien being Damien, he supported me all the way.

He never ran out of cases to handle, but no matter how exhausted he was at the end of the day, he would take our baby, Dylan. He'd feed our boy, play with him, and tuck him to bed while I did my research and emailed suppliers. Several times, I walked in on him asleep on the couch beside the crib, and the sight made my heart swell.

At six months old, Dylan is starting to look like his father—with dark hair and brown eyes. He can be a handful sometimes, just like every other little boy, but then he goes and presses his cute lips to my cheek and we both forget he just threw a slice of orange at me.

“Okay. The pastel pink daisies and pink Casablanca lilies to the right storefront window, the pinkish purple tulips, red roses, and pink carnations to the left.”

I watch as the three young girls—all of whom were in the compound with me—rush to follow my instructions. We're doing last-minute touch-ups and finalizing the interior for tomorrow's opening—or reopening since we really just changed the sign and moved the arrangements a little bit. It didn't take a lot of work because the previous owner gave me free rein in decorating and designing it while I was still her employee.

Satisfied with how everything looks, I nod. "Great job, girls. Tomorrow's our big day, so go home, get some sleep, and we hope it will be a busy opening day."

I watch them leave and crane my neck to the back room, looking for Damien and Dylan, when I hear voices near the bouquet arrangement samples.

"Did you know? There are more than 6,000 varieties of peonies. How those people know what's what, I have no idea. Peonies are actually named after a Greek—or is it Roman—god. But yeah, it's popular among brides. Your mother had it when she walked down the aisle. That and some Baby's breath shit."

"Oh my god, Damien. Language."

He whirls around, eyes wide in pretend innocence. "I'm sorry. I don't know what you mean. I'm imparting great floral knowledge to my son."

I laugh. "I never thought you actually listened to me babble about the flowers."

His brows furrow, mouth forming a tight line. Despite the gleam in his eyes, he manages to look offended. "Baby, I always listen to you. Always."

"Okay, fine. Let's go home. I need to sleep early."

At 11 PM, I'm still wide awake, tossing and turning in bed, moving slowly to avoid waking Damien up. I go over my mental checklist for the hundredth time, attempting to find something I missed or overlooked.

The hours tick away, and my mind circles back to everything that might go wrong tomorrow. What if no one comes? What

if no one likes our new name? What if they don't want to support a new owner? What if my prices are too high? What if...?

Unable to take it anymore, I get up, my bare feet hitting the cold hardwood, tiptoeing to avoid making a single sound. I reach the doorknob and turn it slowly. The door inches open, and I slip through the narrow gap, taking extra care to close the door gently.

After checking Dylan and making sure he's sound asleep, I make my way to the back porch, the night air cool and refreshing against my skin. I settle on the two-seater wicker chair, arranging the oversized cushion behind my back.

I don't know how long I sit there, just staring into the distance and enjoying the nocturnal sounds around me, but the screen door opens and the floorboards creak behind me.

"I tried not to wake you."

"I know, baby girl, but the bed feels empty without you."

"I love you, you know that, right? I'm thankful for everything you've done for me and our little family."

"I love you too, baby. More than you know."

He steps behind me, his huge hands running along my arms and resting on my shoulders to give me a massage. I groan at the way tension leaves my body.

"Careful at the sounds you make, Dani."

I tilt my head back and smile, his eyes already at half-mast.

"Not my fault. It feels good."

"You know what else feels good? My cock in your pussy."

"The neighbors might see us."

"Don't care. They've probably already seen us way too many times."

"Wait. Is that why Mrs. Robinson had a disapproving look on her face the other day when she watched us kiss in the driveway?"

“Maybe. Or maybe she wishes they’re us.”

A few minutes later, I’m bobbing up and down his thick shaft, my nightgown bunched around my waist, my back pressed against his chest, and a quilt over our lower bodies. From far away, maybe we look like a couple just hanging out, with me sitting on his lap.

But my face and my whimpers betray what we’re doing.

The moment we head back to the bedroom, I crash on my pillow and succumb to sleep in seconds.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

DAMIEN

I'm a damned good detective, one of the best in the state, maybe even the entire country. I solved cases no one could crack. Saw patterns no one else did. Had a knack for finding out people's secrets.

But for the love of god, I cannot figure out Derek's handwriting. We spent two hours participating in his little game, and while I'd like to claim I let my kids win, I didn't understand anything about this supposed treasure hunt.

"Is this a g or a 9?" I ask Dani as she sets the plate on the picnic table.

She chuckles and I stand behind her, sliding my arms around her waist and nipping on her earlobe. "I deserve a consolation prize. The kids bruised my ego."

"What kind of prize?"

"You know what." I press her against my already raging erection. The things this girl can do to me and my body.

Instead of melting into me, however, she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and busies herself with setting the cutleries. Alarm rings in my head. "Hey, baby. What's wrong?"

She groans and rolls her eyes. "I totally forgot how observant you are."

"I'm always in tune with you. You know that."

"Yep." But she doesn't lift her gaze. She's flicking nonexistent dirt on the white linen.

“Dani... It’s been fifteen years. I know when your mood shifts without you saying a word. I can tell you’re upset even with just the way you sigh.”

“Fifteen years. Time flies, huh?”

“It does.”

“I mean, I can tell how long we’ve been married by the way I look.”

I rub my chin and stare at her. “Explain.”

She raises both hands in the air and huffs. “It’s like for every year we’re married, I get another inch on my waist.”

I’m about to argue with her but she puts a finger on my lips and shakes her head, eyes downcast. “You don’t have to lie, Damien. I know how I look, and I don’t like what I see in the mirror.”

Her arms hang at the sides, her eyes glued to her empty hands. This conversation is important to her. And it guts me that she feels this way, that she thinks this way. She still doesn’t know how perfect she is.

I step forward and hook a finger under her chin. “Dani, look at me.”

With an audible sigh, she returns my gaze.

“Have I ever lied to you before?”

She shakes her head.

“Do you believe every word that comes out of my mouth?”

She nods slowly.

“Now I need you to listen to me, woman. I need you to listen closely.”

The laughter and yells in the backyard become nothing but background noise, and it’s just the two of us. I cup Dani’s face, and she leans into my touch, closing her eyes.

“Dani, you are the most beautiful woman in the world. The sexiest. The hottest. You don’t know what you do to me when you glance my way, or touch me lightly, or even just say my

name. You gained weight? So what? It only means I can be rougher with you in bed, which I know you totally love. Besides, I love your curves. I love running my hands and tongue along them, love hearing your small whimpers when I hit a sensitive spot.”

I turn her around so my back is facing the kids, and they can't see what I'm doing to her.

I lower my hands and squeeze her ass, smirking when she gasps. I'm already so hard I ache, but I pull her to me so she can feel how hard I am. “See that, baby? Even if you don't believe my words, you know my cock cannot lie.”

And just like that, she smiles and sags at me. Her arms wrap around my waist, and I rest my chin on the top of her head. “I love you, Damien. Every single day, I wake up and fall in love with you all over again.”

My chest cracks open at her words because it's exactly the same thing for me. “Baby, I love you. And I'll spend every day making you happy.”

“Ew! Dad, Mom. Please stop. Can't you do that where we can't see? I want to burn my eyes,” Dylan yells, his face contorted in disgust.

“Someday, son. You're gonna understand why we are the way we are,” I yell back.

The three kids—Dylan, Danielle, and Derek—trudge up the stairs to the porch and sit on their respective chairs. Dylan and Derek are arguing about basketball players and stats, while Danielle snorts and helps herself to a spoonful of mashed potatoes.

It can be chaotic in our household, but it's OUR chaos. I won't have it any other way.

With a chuckle, I reach for Dani's hand under the table and squeeze. Her eyes light up, and she smiles.

Life's good. Life's really good.

This right here is my slice of heaven. Family first. Always.

The End. Thanks for reading!

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