



LIBERATING DECEIT BOOK THREE

CLAIMING

Liberty

NICOLE CYPHER

CLAIMING LIBERTY

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NICOLE CYPHER

Edited by
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Sneak Peek of His Prize

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HOLD UP



Hey reader! Before you begin, be sure you've read the first and second installments of Liberating Deceit, CAGING LIBERTY and TAMING LIBERTY. This is the third and final installment of Liberating Deceit.

If you have, get ready for a grand finale!

PROLOGUE

FIVE AND A HALF YEARS EARLIER

Liberty

The sound of classical music, polite but strained conversation, and the clinking of glasses in the ballroom fills me with unease.

In movies, these rich people events look so elegant, so proper. I won't lie and say I wasn't envious watching them. From the outside looking in, it seems like a dream come true to be Julia Roberts or Jennifer Lopez or any other poor girl meets rich guy and lives happily ever after character.

I wanted that. And now, in a way, I have it. Or, I'm getting it.

It isn't quite as sweet as I imagined it would be.

The noise in the ballroom muffles as I gaze at Robert, his mouth moving as he speaks to a couple we're standing by the bar with. The man's name is Gregory Husted. The woman's name is—get this—Mrs. Gregory Husted. That's how Robert introduced them. She doesn't even get her own name.

Her head goes back in a laugh when her husband says something about a mix-up at his law firm and good help being hard to find. It isn't remotely funny, but he has a humored grin and his wife laughed, so I let out a weak chuckle, my lips feeling awkwardly tight.

Robert puts his hand on my lower back, just above my ass, and I turn toward his admiring smile. The tightness in my lips

relaxes while we share a moment of understanding, just between the two of us.

These people are bores. When we go back to Robert's place, he'll catch me up on the latest gossip about every person in here, and I'll nod and widen my eyes at the appropriate times as if I actually care. In a way, I do. Not about the gossip per se, but about the fact that he doesn't seem to enjoy these people's company any more than I do.

No matter what the movies seem to portray, I don't for one second feel like I'll ever belong in this world. Certainly not at this charity event. There's an ice sculpture for chrissake.

Even while attending Harvard undergrad, I never really connected with my 'Daddy helped me get in' classmates. It was my off-campus coworkers I made the closest relationships with.

Despite feeling so out of place, I do feel like I belong in *Robert's* world. He tries, harder than he has to, to make me feel that way. Which is why he dragged me to this thing to begin with. He wants me to be a part of his life, all aspects of it. I think it's sweet, despite him never seeming to want to dip his toes into the water of my pool. My friends probably think I've made him up considering how elusive he seems to be when they come around.

But can I really blame him? It can't be the easiest thing, going from champagne and white tablecloths to Budweiser and sticky bar tops.

"So," Mrs. Husted draws, waggling one long, black nail—more like a claw than anything else—between Robert and me. "Where did you two meet?"

Her lipstick-stained teeth show when she fake smiles, and I catch the way her eyes dip to my feet. I'm wearing stilettos tonight, and I probably look like a fucking baby giraffe in them with how much I shift my weight, trying not to topple over. If Robert hadn't gifted them to me, they'd probably be snuggled up with a banana peel in a dumpster right now.

I straighten my spine and lock my knees, my body as rigid as a statue.

Heat flushes my cheeks at the pointedness in her question, but I try to shove my insecurities about how we met down and open my mouth to answer.

“Liberty is studying law at Harvard,” Robert says, drawing my attention to him. He puts his arm around my shoulders and hugs me to him. “We met at one of the football games. She was actually on a date with another student when we wound up with seats right next to each other.” He looks down at me and beams while I stare at him blankly, wondering how he can look so genuine right now. Genuine about a story I know to be fiction.

“Ah, so you wanted a real man,” Gregory says. “Smart girl.”

I turn to him, my breath catching. No one seems to notice.

“I miss the games,” Gregory’s shadow says, her lower lip pouted.

“You didn’t even go to Harvard,” Gregory retorts with open contempt.

She flushes. “I can still enjoy supporting your alma mater, dear.”

“Excuse me,” I say, breaking away from Robert. It suddenly feels stuffy in here. And crowded. A little hard to breathe.

Robert takes my wrist to stop me from leaving, turning his back on the couple.

“Where are you going?” he asks, a warning in his tone. I’m embarrassing him.

My mouth opens, ready to blurt out the hurt I feel for him bullshitting about how we met.

I worked for a maintenance company that was contracted out to Robert’s office building. He worked late nights, and I happened to be the one to empty his trash cans.

Essentially, I was his janitor. Sexy? Maybe not. Shameful? A little. But is it that embarrassing for *him*? For his friends to know that my spoons are made of stainless steel rather than silver?

It hurts. A lot. My stomach feels like it arches into my chest, taking up the space my lungs claimed at birth, but I don't voice this. I won't yet. Not until we're out of here, away from his friends.

Maybe he has a good reason for lying. Maybe he isn't ashamed of me. Maybe he's simply saving me from my own humiliation.

Maybe...

"I have to pee."

Robert's face hardens a smidge, and his grip on my wrist tightens. I lower my eyes to it and pull away.

"You're going to the *washroom*?" he asks. It takes several seconds for me to realize he isn't confused by what I said. He's correcting me.

"Yes." I give a slight nod.

The couple laughs again, and I peek around Robert at them. They aren't looking at us, but I get the gut-wrenching sensation that they're laughing at me. That the whole room is laughing at me. That *Robert* is laughing at me.

"Excuse me," I barely get out on a breath as I break away. I weave through people, no idea if I'm getting closer to the bathroom or not, but I change destinations when I see a set of doors leading to the balcony. I practically run toward it, my heart thumping in my ears.

I burst through the door and stumble toward the balcony, slapping my hands on the rough stone and closing my eyes while I suck in gasps of air.

I don't belong here.

I *really* don't belong here.

My eyes sting, and I suck in my bottom lip, my teeth sinking into supple flesh as I bite back tears. How pathetic would it be if I started *crying* here?

I shouldn't let these people do this to me.

At this thought, I suck in air through my nose, forcing my lungs to fully expand before letting out a slow exhale. I step out of my ridiculous heels and let them topple over onto the concrete.

What I wouldn't give for some wedges right about now.

"Are you all right?"

I gasp and jump at the accented voice.

A hand flies to my chest as I spin to face the stranger, my lips lifting into a forced, chagrined smile. "You scared me."

"I'm sorry," the stranger says, his honey brown eyes studying me like a lion watching a gazelle.

Instantly, I notice how handsome he is.

And instantly, I feel guilty for it.

"No." I swat his apology away. "I just didn't see you there."

"You seemed preoccupied."

My lips dip, and I swipe a loose strand of hair from my face, the maneuver giving me a brief reprieve from the stranger's penetrating gaze. I don't know that I could be any more embarrassed tonight.

I nervously chuckle and smile at him. "Right. I, uh... I just needed some air."

"Were you having a panic attack?" He rests his forearm on the railing and casually leans against it. He sounds curious. Not at all concerned. I'd think he was an asshole if I wasn't surrounded by worse people studying me, searching for reasons I'm not good enough to be here. At least he doesn't have a slight curl to his lip like the others.

Still, I do have *some* pride left.

I stand up straight, feeling more ridiculous without my heels than I did with them on, and shake my head.

“Of course not. Like I said, I just needed some fresh air. It’s stuffy in there.”

His lips lift ever so slightly.

Dick.

He slowly nods. “I can agree.”

His eyes lower while he unabashedly takes me in. Him lion, me gazelle.

My eyes narrow to slits, and as much as I try to fight the impulse, I tug my dress up to hide my cleavage.

“Right,” I mutter.

As if this guy thinks this place is stuffy. He’s probably right at home. I mean, come on. He’s in a black suit that’s fitted so well, it looks like a second skin, with a red tie the color of fresh blood. His hair looks like he paid someone a thousand dollars to comb each individual strand in place with just the right amount of gel in case any follicle dares defy him.

This guy belongs here. The only thing that makes him stand out from the others is the fact that he’s hot as hell.

Not that it matters.

“You’re not used to these events, are you?” Again, his eyes lower, moving until he’s taken in every square inch of me.

Goosebumps break out on my arms, and my nipples harden. I keep standing tall, letting my irritation at the obvious perusal of my body show, but underneath I’m praying my face isn’t reddening.

Finally, he meets my eyes, and I inject as much contempt as I can into my glare.

Fuck rich people thinking they can do whatever they want.

Fuck *me* for liking it.

He frowns. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to offend you. I only ask because your dress is a little crooked. You look

uncomfortable.”

My chin lowers to my chest as I look down.

If my face wasn't red before, it is now.

He wasn't even checking me out. He was studying me like everyone else here has.

I really do have a sign that reads 'doesn't belong' dangling from my neck, don't I?

“Oh.” I straighten my dress and laugh, dying inside as I run my hands over my face.

I am such a fucking idiot.

My shoulders sag as I drop my hands to my sides. This stranger has me figured out. No doubt about it.

At least he has the courtesy to point out my discomfort instead of silently judging me only to snicker behind my back as soon as I walk away.

At least he's honest.

“This isn't exactly my crowd.”

“No?” he asks as if he doesn't already know the answer.

I shake my head.

The unlit cigarette between his fingers catches my attention. I don't normally smoke, but fuck, I could use some nicotine right about now.

“Could I bum one of those?” I ask, pointing at his hand.

“What?”

“The cigarette.” I point again. “Could I have one?”

He stands up straight and looks down at the stick like it's his first-born child I just asked him for.

“Sure,” he says, holding it out to me.

His longing expression makes me hesitant to take it, but when I do, I smile appreciatively. “Thanks.”

He takes out a lighter, and I pop the cigarette between my lips before leaning toward him. He strikes the lighter and hovers the flame over the tip, sending a tingle over my neck.

Something about it feels ... intimate.

I suck in, pulling smoke into my lungs. It feels good. Sort of like hot sex with a bad boy. Horrible for you but worth it.

Okay, the cigarette isn't *that* good.

Why am I thinking about sex?

When my lungs start to protest, I tilt my head back and exhale.

"Fuck, I needed that," I say like I'm post-orgasm. I laugh and straighten my neck to look at the man. "I have no idea what I'm doing here."

"Little out of your league?"

I consider this a second before shrugging. I take another pull, then turn my head to absently blow to the skyline, as if New York could use the extra pollution. "I don't know if I'd put it like that."

On the one hand, sure, this is kind of out of my league in the sense that I don't belong here and these people would never accept me. On the other, why do I need them to? They aren't *better* than me. They aren't in a better league, they're just playing a different sport. Croquet or some bullshit.

"How would you put it?"

I glance inside, remembering the sharp-nailed woman. The one who doesn't even have her own name recognized but that would tear me apart as a juicy piece of gossip.

I meet the man's gaze. "Rich people are judgmental as fuck."

He grins like he's amused. "You don't say?"

"Seriously, what is even the point of this thing?" I ask, flicking a hand toward the gaping door. My ears start to heat. "I mean, how necessary is it to spend all this money throwing a party? Couldn't they have just donated the money they

would've spent on their ice sculpture to ALS directly? Do they *need* the tablecloths that cost more than my tuition?"

"Tuition?" he asks, his head tilting.

I halt my rant, suddenly feeling self-conscious, and close my mouth a moment. It's probably good that he cut me off. Talking shit about Robert's peers is probably not the nicest girlfriend move. "Yeah, I'm in law school."

I bring the cigarette to my mouth but pause when I remember the way he looked at the thing. I glance at his hand, cigarette free, and lower the smoke. "I didn't take your last one, did I?"

He shrugs. "It's fine."

I hold it out to him. "Shit, sorry. Here, we'll share it."

He waves me off. "I'm good."

I raise a brow. "I promise I don't have cooties."

"*Really*, you keep it."

"You're sure?"

He nods and smiles, his hands tucking into his pockets like he isn't sure what to do with them. I'm pretty certain he's lying, but it's sweet. He actually gives a shit about someone other than himself. How chivalrous.

I look inside, wondering if Robert would do the same.

Of course not. He'd be pissed if he knew I was smoking right now. But still...

My mind wanders to a piece of advice I got as a child.

I wasn't close to my mom growing up, but I was very close to my neighbor who babysat me while my parents had their date nights and whatnot. I was probably ten when she told me to only marry a man who lends you his jacket when it's cold. Cliché, right? Stupid. Especially in this day in age when men's body heat is supposed to equally matter to women's, but I still purposefully wear sleeveless dresses when going out on dates.

Robert's never offered me his jacket.

I blink away the thought and turn back to the man.

“Sorry if I offended you, by the way.”

His glazed eyes meet mine like he’s waking up from his own thoughts. “For?”

“I’m assuming you’re here by choice and don’t appreciate my ‘rich people suck’ babble. I’m really just nervous, and this is how I cope with that. Ignore me.”

His eyes lower, probably to silently critique my outfit again, but he quickly raises them back to my face. “No offense taken.”

“I’m Lib,” I say, holding out my free hand.

He takes it, the warmth of his firm grasp hitching my breath. “Angel.”

“Nice to meet you.”

He dips his chin and lets go, his fingertips brushing my palm as he pulls away. I drop my gaze to the delicious bit of friction on impulse. “You as well.”

His light accent makes everything he says sound serious. Important. Like no word is wasted. Or maybe it isn’t his accent, maybe it’s just him. But the accent helps. It’s kind of sexy too.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I take a final drag while I try to place the part of the world he’s from. The accent isn’t heavy enough for someone who lives outside the US, but he’s definitely not from here.

Spain, I think. Though it could be somewhere else. To be fair, Spain is the only foreign country I’ve ever been to. But I’m still pretty sure it’s Spain.

I put the cigarette out on the stone railing and leave the bud there.

“Where are you from?” I ask.

He blinks like he’s surprised to hear me speak, lost in thought again. “Pardon?”

“You have an accent.”

He leans against the railing. “Spain. Madrid, to be exact.”

“I thought so.” I smile. “I studied abroad for a semester a couple of years ago. Incredible place.”

He nods. “It is. I miss it.”

Miss it.

I was right. He lives here.

“So do I.” I give him a playful wink, feeling for the first time tonight that I have something in common with one of these people. “What made you move to New York?”

“I didn’t,” he says. “I’m only visiting.”

“Ah.” I nod.

Damn. I was wrong.

“I’m enjoying it, though. The women here are interesting.”

I shift closer to him, curious as to what he means. “How so?”

He looks down at my feet, and I try not to follow his gaze.

Oh. *I’m* interesting. The barefoot girl having the panic attack.

That doesn’t seem like a compliment.

I bend to stand my heels upright. “Well, I should get back in there,” I say, stepping into the death traps. “Nice talking to you.”

I brush hair out of my face, give him a tight smile, then head for the door.

He grabs my arm, spinning me toward him.

I don’t know if I’ve seen too many movies or what, but when our eyes meet, I feel something spark. A scene plays in my head where he kisses me, hard and passionate. The ‘interesting’ woman from America.

I can’t say I hate it.

But he doesn't kiss me.

He smiles apologetically and lets go of my arm. Then he just stands there.

I wish I could lie and say I'm not disappointed.

Boyfriend, Liberty. You have a boyfriend.

"Yes?" I prompt, my voice a little too heady.

His mouth opens to speak, but his attention moves to the doorway. I look over my shoulder at a blond man dressed in an equally impressive suit as Angel but not wearing it quite as well. Robert walks up behind him.

Oh, fuck.

Guilt startles me, and I turn and take a step away from Angel, afraid my thoughts will show if I stand too close to him.

"There you are," the blond man says to Angel, annoyance evident in his tone. His eyes stray to me, and heat immediately ignites in them.

I ignore it and focus on Robert. "Hey, honey."

He walks up, and it isn't until he reaches me that I realize I'm biting my lip. I quickly release it.

"You disappeared." Robert puts his hand on my shoulder. "I was worried."

"I just needed some air," I say, my voice a little too high pitched.

Robert looks at Angel, and his smile grows, but I'm pretty certain it's forced. Angel better pray Robert doesn't know a hitman. "I see you met Mr. Ramos."

My brow furrows.

Huh?

Robert wraps his arm around my shoulder possessively, his touch all but gentle.

He's pissed.

If I thought I'd embarrassed him before...

Fuck. I'm a terrible girlfriend.

I restrain myself from looking at Angel and look at the blond man instead. He's shamelessly leering at me. There's no misunderstanding his intentions. He isn't sizing up my outfit, he's straight up undressing me. Right in front of Robert.

Ass. Hole.

"Do I know you?" Angel asks Robert. I don't take my eyes off Blond Douche.

Robert pulls his arm away, and from my periphery, I see him hold his hand out toward Angel. "Robert Gaumond."

"He came to the island once," Blond Douche explains, finally dragging his eyes from me. "I introduced you."

"Island?" I ask, turning to Robert. All Robert does is work. I don't remember him vacationing.

Robert clears his throat. "Mr. Hansley owns a small, private island near Fiji. He was kind enough to invite me to a function there once."

Oh.

"You're welcome back anytime," Blond Do—er, Mr. Hansley—says, his gaze aimed at me. "Feel free to bring your pretty, um..." His eyes lower then slowly climb back to my face. "*Date.*"

Date.

He may as well make air quotes with the way he says the word.

He means...

Is he calling me a fucking hooker?

My eyes widen and blood rushes to my cheeks, partly from anger and partly from mortification.

Is that what I look like to these people? A prostitute?

"Right, I remember now," Angel says to Robert. "How are you?"

“I’m well, thank you,” Robert responds. “And thank you for keeping my girlfriend company.”

That was pointed.

Fuck, he’s jealous, isn’t he?

Why didn’t I just go to the bathroom?

“Sorry if I’ve stolen her.” Angel tips his head toward me.

Robert waves it off to show it isn’t a big deal, although I can see in his rigid posture that it is.

“I’m happy Sawyer had you tag along on this trip. I was actually hoping to run a few business ideas by you.”

“Of course.”

I stare at the man, Sawyer, who continues to ogle me. The pointed comment may have been at Angel, but am I the only one seeing this shit? This overt disrespect?

And this is Angel’s friend? The chivalrous dude?

I almost laugh at myself. He’s probably an asshole too.

Show me your friends, and I’ll show you your future.

I bet my dress wasn’t even crooked.

Robert puts his hand on my shoulder. “Darling, could you find Mrs. Ash? She’s been hoping to talk to you all evening.” My shoulders sag at the hint of condemnation in his tone.

This is the first event he’s taken me to as his date, and with the way it’s going, it’ll probably be the last.

I don’t even know how I feel about that.

I nod and move to leave, but he touches my arm, so I pause, looking at him expectantly.

“Don’t you want to say goodbye to my colleagues, dear?”

His colleagues? You mean the ones eye-fucking me?

I try to swallow my pride as I look between Angel and Sawyer, try to put out the fire inside of me. If these guys are somehow important to Robert or his business...

I guess I can suck it up.

“Bye,” I mutter.

Sawyer snickers when I walk toward the door, and I shoot a glare his way.

“Pleasure meeting you,” he says without an ounce of shame.

I look at Robert, thinking maybe he’ll stick up for me, but he doesn’t, and it makes my heart sink. I can’t get my neighbor’s advice out of my head.

I turn and head back inside, in search of some woman I may or may not have met but certainly don’t remember.

All the while wondering if I’ll ever be offered a goddamn jacket.

LIBERTY

PRESENT DAY

With my collarbone pressing against my knees, I inhale the same foul smell I've breathed since Angel's pilot, Peter, zipped me into this suitcase, the largest Robert had in his closet. It still isn't nearly big enough for my cramped body.

The smell is Robert's blood ... and probably some of his brains too. You'd think eventually my senses would stop registering it, but it's too potent to ignore.

I can't say I hate it.

The grinding of the suitcase's wheels suddenly ceases, and keys jangle.

We're at his home. *Please* let us be at his home.

When Peter had the idea of sneaking me onto the island in a suitcase, it sounded great. All I had to do was keep quiet when we landed and stay tucked into myself as he unloaded me from the plane.

It worked. No one searched the suitcase when we got off the plane, so Peter must be as trusted amongst the security team as he claims.

I don't know all of the details of what transpired since then, but I'm almost positive we were in a vehicle, and at one point, a boat. I thought I was seasick the day Angel took me out with his friends, but that was nothing compared to this.

Eventually, the stomach lurching eased, the suitcase raised, then started to roll.

And here we are.

My body stiffens as the suitcase is lifted into the air, gravity crushing my body into itself. I let out a low groan when my knee presses against my chest wound, and I pinch my lips together before another sound can escape in case Peter and I aren't alone.

A loud creak sounds, like a storm door would make, then metal grinds with metal. I imagine a key being inserted into a lock. A moment later, I'm swinging as Peter moves forward then gently sets the suitcase down. I'm tipped onto my side before the zipper slowly comes undone.

I turn my head to look up at Peter who's crouched over me with a concerned look on his face. "Are you all right?" he asks. "You're pale."

Sure, but I'm not covered in vomit, so I'll take that as a win.

Instead of answering, I unfold my arms and cringe as I lift myself. My body was already beaten up from the car accident long before I climbed into this thing, but the short trip didn't help.

"Damn," he murmurs, helping me out. His eyes are pointed at my hoodie, and I look down to see fresh blood staining the pink. Robert's dried blood makes a splotchy pattern around it.

Oh, that's why the smell came back.

"You need stitches," Peter says.

I groan as he helps me to my feet. My head swims, and I wobble, but Peter puts his hands on my arms to steady me, ready to catch me if I lose my balance.

"I have a first aid kit in the bathroom." He nods behind me. "Come on, I'll get you fixed up."

I turn toward the door he gestured to, blinking a few times to force away the vertigo. My equilibrium is all off, and I'm

hoping it only has to do with being in the suitcase and isn't due to blood loss or exhaustion. I can feel both, but I don't have time for either. I have to get to Elsie.

He guides me into the bathroom, and I sit on the closed toilet lid, staring off into space as I think about Elsie and what might be happening now. I barely register when he helps me out of the hoodie, leaving my chest exposed in nothing but a black bra. He swiftly removes the bandages he patched me up with when we were still in Spain.

The sun was setting when we landed, which means the wolves are out and prowling the manor. Which one of them is sinking their teeth into Elsie right now?

I close my eyes and inhale a steady breath, unsure if I should be picturing the countless possible scenarios or not. On the one hand, it makes me sick. On the other, it fuels the anger I need to force myself back into that hell hole.

"Sorry," Peter says, dabbing at the hole in my chest where glass went through when I wrecked the rental car.

I open my eyes to look at him, see the sympathy on his face, and realize he's apologizing for dabbing at my wound. Not apologizing for my niece being repeatedly raped by savages.

"Who are you?" I watch him closely as he sets the alcohol pad on the sink and rifles through a black bag.

"Angel Ramos's pilot."

"Yes, you mentioned that." My dry voice must catch his attention because his movements slow to a halt for a moment.

I've spent hours with this man, but we hardly used any of that time to talk. I cried when I called him, begged him to take me back to the island. I don't know if he understood my blubbering about my niece, but he was in my old house in less than a minute, and we were on the road within twenty. He'd been waiting outside.

As soon as he agreed to take me back, I sank with relief, and our conversation became him telling me what to do and me blindly obeying.

He takes out a needle and thread, putting all of his attention on my cut. I grind my teeth as he presses the needle through my flesh, and my hands fly at my sides, gripping at the edge of the sink and the toilet tank cover in search of relief.

“*Fuck,*” I grate out, sucking in a breath and holding it.

“It won’t take long,” he says, threading the needle through my skin. My arms shake until he’s done, and the tension in my fists and shoulders finally release.

I sit back and close my eyes, taking in one large inhale after the other. I don’t have time for this. I need to get to Elsie.

I open my eyes at this thought and look at Peter turning on the bathroom sink’s faucet and running water over the needle. He retrieves a rag from a drawer.

“I need to get to my niece,” I say with an urgency that begins in my voice and sinks into my toes that start tapping on the white-tiled floor. “Please, I think she’s at the manor. Her name’s—”

“Elsie,” Peter finishes for me. He shuts off the tap, sets the rag down, and turns to me. “I know. She arrived on the island a week ago, and yes, she’s at the manor.”

I blink a few times, my lips twitching to say something, but nothing comes out.

“You asked me who I am.” His deep green eyes stare into mine while his lips fit into a hard line. He searches me for something, his eyes breaking our stare to roam my face. “Can I trust you?”

Can *you* trust *me*?

I force my jittery feet to still and plant both shoes flat on the floor. “Depends on what you’re wanting from me.”

“I want to help you ... but I want you to help me first.”

My nose crinkles with a mixture of suspicion and confusion.

Peter walks to the bathtub before sitting on the edge, putting us on the same level. He steeples his fingers and leans toward me. “How did you make Angel Ramos fall for you?”

My chin dips as I rear back slightly. “What?”

“I know the man well, and I cannot for the life of me figure out how you managed to get him to let you go. I couldn’t even believe it when he took you to another *country*, but to let you go... How did you pull that off?”

I glance down at my hoodie on the floor, my bare chest coming into my awareness. I bend, wincing at the pain that comes from extending my arm, and grab the soft material. I hold it against my chest before looking at him again.

He’s still staring at me like he’s waiting for an answer to a question I’m not going to humor. I don’t know this man. I don’t *trust* this man. I did for about a minute, but now he’s freaking me out. I look around the bathroom, bare of anything but a towel rack and a bottle of all-in-one body wash.

“Did you seduce him?” Peter asks.

I turn back to him and glare. “What does it matter?”

His face remains impassive.

“Who *are* you? And what do you want from me?” I hold up a hand. “You know what, never mind, I don’t give a shit. I have to get to my niece.” I brace my forearm on the sink and pull myself up, my face pinching with pain as I do.

“Sit down,” Peter commands.

I step toward the door without further protest, but as soon as I’m through, he’s at my back, grasping my shoulder. I spin and sneer at him, shoving at his chest and consequently exposing myself. “Don’t fucking touch me!” I bring the hoodie to cover up, grasping at the material until my fingers hurt.

He shows me his palms and takes a step back. “What exactly are you going to do?” he asks, his brows furrowed. “Are you going to knock on the manor’s door and ask for Elsie?”

When I don't respond, he shakes his head disapprovingly and sizes me up. His hands lower to his sides. "Maybe I was wrong about you."

"What. Are. You. Talking. About?" I yell, frustration overflowing. I look over my shoulder at the dark window. I don't know exactly what time it is, but the playroom might be in full swing.

"I'll get your niece back for you."

I turn to him, not believing a word he just said but curious anyway.

I expect his eyes to be hopeful, maybe even crazy, but they're just as blank as before. "I'm going to dismantle the island."

He's going to dismantle the island... My first impulse is to scoff at the farfetched statement, but it still grants him my attention. "What?"

He takes a step toward me. "In a month's time, Sawyer Hansley will be dead, and all the women will be free... Your niece will be safe and sound."

I scrunch up my face, unsure what I'm supposed to make of this. "That sounds unlikely."

He nods. "It'll be damn near impossible if you fuck it up by going to the manor so everyone knows I brought you here."

I glance down at the hoodie, then back up at him.

"Go ahead." He gestures to the pink material.

I pull the cotton over my head and follow his finger when he points to a tan sofa that clashes horribly with the cream-colored carpet. My eyes dart around as I walk to the couch and sit down, searching for clues as to who this guy is and what the hell he's talking about. There isn't anything in here. The white walls are bare, and other than the couch, there isn't a single piece of furniture in the living room. It doesn't look like anyone lives here.

My eyes track him as he walks to a kitchen. Water gushes from a tap, and he returns a minute later with a plastic cup. He

hands it to me, but I don't take my eyes off him. My throat is parched, and my body begs me to drink the water, but I know better. I didn't see him while he filled this up, so there's no telling what he could've put in it.

He sits next to me and lets out a slow exhale. "There are several of us," he says, pausing a moment for effect. "We've been working on a plan for the last year, and we're getting close to executing. I didn't bring you here to fuck up everything we've been working toward. I brought you here to help."

I peer down at the water so he can't read my expression while I think. I can feel the hope bubbling to the surface, and I try to suppress it. Angel's words come into my head, explaining to me all the ways the island is secure, putting to rest every last scenario of escape. I don't know how I plan to get Elsie *off* the island. I only know I need to get her away from the manor. Now.

"What are you thinking?" Peter asks me.

I run a finger around the rim of the cup, my eyes following the movement. "I'm thinking you're either crazy or stupid. You may be able to leave whenever you want, but unless you have a hell of a lot more suitcases, there's no way to get the women off this island. If you want to try to kill Sawyer, please, give it a shot, but there will be a dozen guards waiting to gun you down before he takes his last breath."

"Not only that, but there will be about a hundred stupidly wealthy men all competing to see who can kill the witnesses who leave the island fastest," he adds.

I turn my head toward him, my eyebrows squeezing.

He leans forward, resting his forearms on his knees and clasping his hands together, taking on a posture similar to in the bathroom. "Believe me, I'm well aware of all the obstacles in our way. Like I said, we've been planning for a *year*."

I sit up straight and turn my body toward him. "I'm listening."

One side of his lips lifts into the tiniest of smiles. “I thought you’d be interested.” He puts a fist to his mouth and clears his throat. When he lowers it, he turns toward me as well. “For a long time, we had very little hope of pulling anything off, but recently, we got a very powerful member of the island to join us. His name is Shaun Miles, I believe you’ve met. He’s the one who told me about you and your ... fighting spirit.”

I search my mind for a Shaun Miles, even though I know it won’t do me any good. Men at the manor don’t tell the women their names. That’s rule number one. Surely, Peter knows this.

“Shaun is the architect of the island’s security, so we have all the information we need in order to prepare. We’ve managed to put a few guards on the manor’s property who are with us, and we have a handful of women on the residents’ side of the island willing to cooperate. What we *don’t* have is any women inside the manor, and our number of residents is still lacking. We need more people to turn, preferably inside the manor.”

I blink. He can’t be serious. “That’s what you want me for? You think I can get the manor whores to cooperate?” I bark out a laugh. “How the hell am I supposed to do that?”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t refer to them as whores.”

I feel my forehead wrinkle as I lean back. This is a weird twist.

His face softens. “We don’t need *you* to do it. There’s no chance in hell we’d get you into the manor without you being recognized. I just want to hear your ideas on how to get it done.”

“Trust me, it’s a waste of time. No one is turning them.”

He frowns. “You were able to get Mr. Ramos under your thumb. If you can do that, you can do anything.”

“Angel isn’t...” I draw a deep breath and let it out, my shoulders caving in as my chest deflates. “Angel isn’t what you think. He’s...” I don’t know how to finish that in a way that anyone would understand.

He's different.

He's kind.

He's *good*.

To an outsider, it would sound ridiculous.

"He's a murderer," Peter says. "He enslaves women, then kills them when they no longer meet his needs. He killed his own slave. It's miraculous you made it out alive."

I shake my head. "He didn't kill Beth; she committed suicide. And he doesn't enslave women. This is Sawyer's island. He—"

"Three different women watched him push her off a cliff." Peter's eyes narrow. "Hold on a second... You *believe* his lies?" He cranes his neck back while something flashes over his face that looks a hell of a lot like dread. He puts a hand to his forehead, closing his eyes. "You're in love with him, aren't you?" He lets out a dry laugh and lowers his hand, peering at me. "Please tell me I'm wrong."

When I don't immediately answer, Peter shoves from the couch and scrubs his hands over his face. He groans as he drops his hands and walks to the kitchen. I set my water on the floor and get up to follow him.

"I can still help," I insist, stopping a foot away from him as he grabs a shot glass and a liquor bottle from a cabinet that's otherwise bare.

He twists off the bottle's cap and tosses it flippantly onto the counter where it clinks on the white laminate. I can see the frustration fuming off him, see the regret on his face. He's disappointed he brought me here.

He pours a shot, but before he can knock it back, I grip his wrist, sending clear liquor splattering onto his skin and the floor.

"I can *fucking* help." I hold onto his wrist, my face a hard mask as he stares at me.

He pulls away from me and swivels his body my way. "How? You just told me you have no idea how we could turn

any of the women inside. And it doesn't sound like anything that happened with Ramos was intentional. If anything, he's the one who manipulated you. So how exactly could we use you? Hell, it sounds like you're *one of them*." He turns his head and peers at the bottle. "You're not an asset. You're a liability."

He pours another shot, and this time I don't stop him. I cross my arms over my bloodied chest and wait for him to look at me.

"You said you knew who I was. You knew I was Robert Gaumond's wife, and you knew I had a 'fighting spirit.' Correct?"

He stares at me without answering.

"So then you must know that I was drugged and taken to the manor against my will. I didn't tell them I'd be a good girl right away, so they secured me to a wall and sprayed my face with water until I felt like I was drowning. They starved me. And then, when I finally gave in, they forced me to dance naked on a stage for filthy fucking pigs to look at me like I was a *thing* instead of a human being. Angel is the only reason I wasn't raped repeatedly, but now..." I take in a sharp breath. My tone started out cold, but emotion rushes in, and I can feel my composure begin to break. "*Now* they have my niece, and they're doing worse to her."

I grab my hoodie and tug it out to show Peter. "Do you see my husband's brains on me right now? I swear to God, if you call me *one of them* ever again, I will fucking kill you just like I killed Robert. Do you understand me?"

Peter's image blurs through my angry tears, but I still make out the respect on his face. He pours another shot, tossing me a look before sliding the glass to me.

I will my shaking hands to still before snatching the shot off the table and throwing it back. Tequila. It's been a while since I've had this. Robert always said it gave him headaches.

His image comes into my mind, him on his knees pleading with me. I think of our wedding day next, about the necklace

he had sent to my dressing room, my bridesmaids gushing at the hundred-thousand-dollar wedding dress I ruined that same night with a careless spill of champagne. He didn't yell at me then. Didn't even chide me. He leaned into my ear, his hand creeping up my thigh as he whispered something I'll never forget. *"You're worth a thousand of these dresses, my beautiful bride."*

Two years later, he threw a vase of flowers my mother sent for my birthday because I burnt a lasagna one night we had guests over. He said words in my ear that night too, before the guests left. *"You're fucking useless."*

I slam the empty glass on the counter and pour another. The shot hovers in the air when I raise it, toasting my husband one last time.

'Til death do us part, bitch.

I throw back the Tequila, savoring it as it burns my throat and close my eyes, breathing in the horrid stench clinging to me.

"All right," Peter says, snapping the memory away. I look at him to see him watching me closely, his lips pulled up a hair. "Maybe we'll have some use for you."

When his phone goes off, he pulls it from his pocket and peers at the screen, no expression passing over him to indicate what the message is about.

He puts his phone away and takes one last shot before grunting and slamming the glass down. "Duty calls."

He walks back into the living room with me on his heels. "Where are you going?"

"Spain," he says, not looking back.

"To get Angel?"

He pauses at the front door and finally turns to me. "No. I'm going to a U2 concert."

I sigh, exasperated at the sarcasm, and cross my arms over my chest. "What about my niece?"

“I told you, it’s in the works. There’s nothing we can do right now, so just hang tight.” He points to my left. “I have friends a half mile that way. Their names are Layan and Kingsley, and they know you’re coming. His eyes travel up and down my body. “You might want to clean up first. I’m sure Layan will have some clothes you could wear.”

My brows pinch. “Why would I clean up if I’m going to change there anyway?”

He frowns and gestures to the bathroom. “Just trust me on this one.” He opens the front door and looks at me over his shoulder. “Don’t forget to lock up when you leave. I’ll see you soon.”

“Wait!”

His muscles go taught, and he turns, his face a posterboard of annoyance.

“Tell Angel about Jasper,” I say. “Tell him Sawyer sent Jasper to follow us, and that he wants to kill me. If you’re looking for powerful people to turn, Angel—”

“Stop.”

I close my mouth, my face falling.

“Angel Ramos does not give a single fuck about the women on this island. *Maybe* he would care that Jasper almost killed you, but he wouldn’t believe Sawyer ordered it, and I’d wind up dead for running over their errand boy.” He pauses a moment to let me consider that. “He’s not turning against Sawyer. Forget about it.”

He shuts the door behind him before I can respond, leaving me standing awkwardly in this nothing of a house.

I wish I could say with confidence that Peter is wrong, but I can’t. Angel has been adamant about his loyalty to Sawyer thus far, so I’m not sure how far Angel would be willing to go to cross his best friend. I can’t take a chance on seeking his help with my niece on the line.

Elsie.

Peter wants me to wait a month to get to her. How am I supposed to do that? I see his point about me ruining his plan, about it being useless to try to get to her on my own. I would get caught immediately, I know that, but I can't just wait here, knowing what could be happening to her.

It's too big of a risk to move right now on my own, but I need a plan. Fast. Much faster than a month.

But not yet. Right now, I need to push my emotions aside and recharge so I can think rationally. Which means getting to Peter's friends' house to get some sleep.

I turn around, hugging my arms to my chest as I walk to the bathroom. As soon as I look in the mirror, I understand what Peter meant about me needing to clean up.

It isn't just my hoodie splattered with my husband's blood. It's my face too. I lift my hand to my cheek and poke at the rusty crust. Maybe a normal person would be repulsed, immediately slapping water on their face or grimacing in horror. I think a few months ago, I would've been that woman. But I've changed. I've been a whore, a slave, a runaway, and now a rebel.

I stare at myself in the mirror and watch my lips curve into a smile.

ANGEL

I run my hand over two days' worth of stubble while leaning forward in the SUV. My knee bounces, my heel clicking against the floorboard. I wonder if Peter can hear it, can feel the nervous energy I'm putting off.

We just landed on the island, and he's driving me to the boat dock. Sitting in the back behind the passenger seat, I'd have a diagonal view of him if I looked that way. As it is, I face the window, my mind registering nothing we pass as a hundred thoughts race through my mind.

A ding coming from my pocket makes me flinch, and my spine straightens as I pull my phone out.

It's a text from Julia. *Home safe?*

I text back a quick 'almost' and watch as three dots pop up on Julia's side of the thread.

See you in a few weeks?

My tongue slides over my top teeth as I stare at the screen. Before leaving Spain, I promised Julia I'd be back to visit for a few days, and I'd meant it. I've been absent for so long, believing I was content, but seeing Sam and Adán, seeing *Julia*, made it difficult to picture myself spending the rest of my life on the island.

I never planned to spend my life here, but I hadn't seen any better options. Now, I do. I have so much to do before I can consider leaving, so much to discuss with Sawyer, but my mind is leaning that way more and more.

But that isn't what's at the forefront right now.

See you then.

I drop my phone in my lap and lean back against the seat, my head turning to Peter. He's as statuesque as ever with his tight muscles stiffly holding the wheel. Normally, I like the guy. He's quiet and leaves me alone with my thoughts. Right now, he's infuriating.

"Peter, I need to know where she is," I say, my voice somehow both pleading and authoritative.

"You asked me not to tell you, sir."

My eyes narrow at him, and my lips pinch. It's the same answer he's given me since we left Spain. I asked him not to tell me where he took Lib, but that was before Robert Gaumond stopped answering his phone.

My knee starts bouncing again. "I need to know that she's safe."

"She's safe."

"Peter."

He glances at me in the rearview mirror, his eyes uninterested. His disinterest comes in handy when I'm discussing sensitive information in front of him, but if I'd known he was *this* rigid, I would've thought better of swearing him to secrecy.

"Just tell me, did she go to New York?"

"You asked me not to tell you where I took her, sir."

"Robert Gaumond is unreachable," I grit out, my tone filling with impatience. "If you took her to New York, she could be in trouble."

Sawyer could know.

My chest tightens at that thought. If she went to Robert and he told Sawyer... She's already dead.

I slide a hand across my jaw, rubbing a little too roughly. "Look, I asked you not to tell me because I didn't want to be

tempted to go after her. I swear to God, Peter, if you dropped her off somewhere unsafe and something happened to her—”

“She’s safe, sir. You have my word.”

My hand clenches into a fist, and I lower it to my thigh, turning again to stare out the window. I want to believe him. I want to believe Robert isn’t answering his phone for some other reason that doesn’t have to do with Lib, but my gut turns every time I think about it. Sawyer hasn’t been answering his phone either.

Something is wrong. I can fucking feel it.

I should never have let her go. Not until I knew for certain it was safe, not until she understood the best move was to disappear. I love her. I want her to have her freedom, to live a life far, *far* from here, and I want her to find a happiness she could never have found with me.

But the woman is so goddamn stubborn, I’m terrified she messed it up for herself.

She could’ve gone to the police.

She could’ve gone to Robert.

Sawyer could know.

She could be dead.

“You couldn’t possibly know for certain that she’s safe.” I blow out a deep breath and close my eyes, tabling her location for now. If he’s right, and she is safe, then I genuinely don’t want to know where she is. I know myself... I make a game of practicing self-control, but there’s no force that could stop me from going to her.

“Have you spoken to Sawyer lately?” I ask, breathing through nausea.

“No, sir.”

Fuck.

“Is there something Mr. Hansley needs from me?” he asks, the tiniest bit of emotion in his tone. Probably bitterness. Sawyer uses Peter on occasion, but they do not in the slightest

bit get along. I don't know all the details, but I guess Sawyer wasn't as up front as he would've liked about the island and what all Peter's job would entail.

My pilot doesn't agree with my best friend's handling of things, which is why he works for me instead of Sawyer, but he's respectful—and smart—enough not to involve me in the drama. He flies me places, gives me his discretion, and in return, I ignore his silent hatred for my brother. It works out. Especially now when I need someone willing to betray a man almost anyone else would fear.

“No. I just haven't been able to get ahold of him for a couple of days.”

Not since he asked me to come back.

“Ah.”

My forehead creases when I look at him. “So you can imagine why I want more than your reassurance that Liberty is okay. If I knew where she was, I could make sure for myself.”

“She's safe. I'm sure if Mr. Hansley knew of her location, he would inform you.”

The fuck he would.

“The only way he would be aware that she's missing is if he sent someone to follow you when you left for Spain. You don't believe he would've done that, do you?”

“Of course not.” I reply immediately, but there's a hesitation in my mind over whether I believe it. I like to think we have complete trust with each other, but this is too important to chance.

“You didn't notice anyone following, did you?”

Peter looks in the rearview again, and I spot curiosity in his expression. It's rare for him to show anything at all.

“I would've told you if I had, sir.”

He goes back to the road, and I return my gaze to the window where the morning sun rises, the dock in view. In reality, it doesn't make much of a difference if Peter tells me

where he took Lib or not. I'll find out soon enough if Sawyer knows about it.

The SUV slows to a stop when we're almost to the water, and Peter puts it into park. He climbs out, and I follow his lead, walking to the boat while he retrieves my suitcase. I step inside and start the engine while Peter loads the luggage into the boat.

"Hey," I say when he turns to head for the SUV.

He stands up straight and turns to me with an almost blank expression. His eyes are all that give away hints of his lingering curiosity. It doesn't surprise me that he'd be interested in a rift between Sawyer and me.

"You understand how invested in this I am, right? I know your reasons for agreeing to help the woman, and I respect you for it. But if I ever found out you told anyone about this, including Sawyer, I would see it as a betrayal. I don't care what anyone threatens you with, I promise, if she's hurt because of your actions, I will react accordingly. I need that to be perfectly clear."

Creases form around his eyes as he glares at me, his hands tensing at his sides. He just helped me do something we both know could get him killed, so yeah, I get the sentiment. But we also both know the smartest thing for me to do in order to ensure no one finds Lib is to kill him. If I thought I couldn't trust his discretion, I would.

"The threats aren't necessary, sir," he says, his tone lacking any trace of respect despite the words. I can't blame him.

I give a curt nod, and he spins around and stomps away.

I face the ocean and start the journey to the manor. When it comes into view, it feels more like a foreign place than my home for the last decade.

I park the boat and take a deep breath before walking up to the gate. My hands flex into fists, opening and closing, so I tuck them inside my pockets to hide the anxious movements.

My jaw clenches and face hardens when I reach the gate, giving a nod as the guard opens it to let me through. Lately,

I've resented my inability to easily show my emotions, but now I wear it like a badge of honor. I need it for the conversation I'm about to have with Sawyer.

I ask the guard at the front door where Sawyer is, and he leads me to a sitting room Sawyer uses quite a bit for guests. It's the same room Jasper brought Chaffer to when Sawyer was out of the country and Jasper was filling in. My brother would've lost his head if he had seen his greatest rival sitting in his chair, smoking his cigars.

I go to grab the doorknob but pause when the guard knocks like he wants to give Sawyer a heads up.

Why?

A stuttered breath leaves my nostrils, and I try to mask my nerves by standing up straight and rolling my shoulders back. I throw open the door before Sawyer responds and step into the room, only to stop a moment later when I take in the young woman—maybe even girl—sitting next to Sawyer on the sofa. Tears streak her face, and she turns away like she doesn't want me to see. Or maybe it's that she doesn't want to look at me.

Sawyer jolts to standing when he sees me, quickly replacing his surprised, parted lips with an easygoing smile and spreading out his hands.

"Mr. A... Welcome back."

LIBERTY

Water droplets fall from the tips of my hair onto Peter's friends' bathroom sink as I stare at myself in the mirror. I'm a hot mess with a few little cuts on my face, but it's the bruises around my neck that make me appear battered.

I sigh. I'm not exactly out of place here, am I?

Voices boom up the stairs and through the space between the door and white-tiled floor. I turn my head that way as I blot my hair with the towel that my body has already dampened. A pair of shorts and a tank top belonging to a woman named Layan rest on the toilet seat.

It was late last night when I made it to Peter's friends' home. The two of them, Kingsley and Layan, stood outside with a porch light on like they were waiting for me, and when I came into view, they had drastically different approaches to greeting me. Kingsley waved and bellowed out an enthusiastic greeting, and Layan stood back, sizing me up like she didn't know what to think of me. I don't know what to think of them either, but I don't have high expectations. Peter told me nothing about these people, but Kingsley is a man choosing to live on the island, so I automatically don't like him. Of course, I've been proven wrong before.

I was exhausted and just wanted to be shown to my room. I only woke up about a half hour ago, opting to go straight for the shower, so we still haven't had to awkwardly make conversation. That's about to change.

I finish drying my hair, then pull on the clothes, my lips in a thin line as the muted voices grate my ears. I have no desire whatsoever to make polite conversation with anyone, but this isn't my home, and I don't know when Peter will be back, so I use the towel to soak up the puddle my feet made by the tub then hang it up and head out of the bathroom.

Elsie is at the front of my mind when I turn to head down the stairs, and I'm already lost in thought about what information I can get out of these two that might help me get to her. My steps halt when I spot the source of the voice I heard, my hand grasping the staircase banister for support.

Kingsley stands rubbing his neck while peering down at a laptop opened on his coffee table that a man I vaguely recognize is typing on. Kingsley fidgets like he's nervous, and when Layan's eyes move to me, I can see the same nervousness reflected in her brown irises. She sits in a chair next to the couch, her hands placed delicately in her lap. The collar around her neck catches my eye. She wasn't wearing it last night, and the sight of it now has me sickened.

Kingsley must sense my presence because his gaze finds me, and he jumps, his eyes going wide. The man with the laptop looks up as well.

"H-Hey," Kingsley says before clearing his throat. "Good morning."

I dip my chin in greeting and walk down the stairs into the living room. I get the strong feeling that I'm invading something private, but I think it'd be more awkward for me to turn back at this point, so I continue.

"I thought you only had one slave," Laptop Guy grunts, his pinched expression aimed at Kingsley.

All at once, I realize who the man is and why he's vaguely familiar. He's a manor guard. Or at least I've seen him there, at the manor. I never got the impression that he was a guest.

I cross my arms over my chest and look down so my hair will shield me as I walk to stand behind the couch, out of Laptop Guy's view. I don't think he'll recognize me since I

barely recognize him, but a small jolt of anxiety rushes through me anyway.

“Uh, yeah,” Kingsley stumbles. “I do. She’s borrowed.”

My shoulders jerk with a flinch when the computer is slammed closed, then Laptop Guy stands abruptly. Kingsley unfolds his arms to take the computer, but it crashes to the ground after the jerk thrusts it at his chest.

I scratch at my arm as I watch Kingsley’s Adam’s apple bob, his nervous stare aimed at the computer by his feet.

Laptop Guy leans into him to growl in his ear, the words loud enough for me to hear. “Don’t be late again.”

Kingsley nods, inhaling a shaky breath as Laptop Guy pulls back and walks to the door. He leaves without looking back, and as soon as the door shuts behind him, Layan falls forward, her face in her hands.

“What the fuck, Kingsley?” she groans.

“I’m sorry,” he says, smoothing a hand over his long hair, trapped in a man bun. His eyes find me. “Shit, you must be terrified.” He walks toward me, his hands raising in front of him like he wants to calm me down. I stand straight with my eyes fixed on him, unsure what it is I should be terrified of. He seems far more scared than I am.

“Are you okay?” he asks, clearly not reading my body language well.

“Of course she isn’t okay,” Layan incorrectly answers for me, jumping to her feet. She stomps over to us. “He could’ve recognized her.” She slaps his arm, and I feel even more confused.

He lets her *slap* him? Isn’t she his slave?

Layan turns to me, her lips parted. “You know him, huh?” She takes my hand, and my hand twitches, but ingrained politeness stops me from jerking away. “Don’t worry, I don’t think he recognized you. Even if he did, masters borrow manor whores all the time. It’s highly unlikely he would ever check in to it, so please, don’t freak—”

“What did he want?” I ask, my voice flat as I nod at the door.

Her mouth hangs open, and she coughs as it closes. Confusion flashes across her face, but she recovers. “Kingsley was late paying his quarterly dues.”

“Quarterly dues?”

“It was a *day*,” he whines, his words directed at Layan. She doesn’t look at him, but her jaw tics.

“Yeah, that the masters pay to live on the island. They come to collect when you’re late.” She points to the computer. “They were doing a wire transfer.”

“I paid Chaffer already,” Kingsley says to what appears to be deaf ears. “I thought I’d paid Sawyer too.”

“Whatever,” Layan snaps at him. Her face softens when she looks at me. “Anyway, it’s taken care of now, so no one should be back.”

“Oh... Okay.” I say, unsure what else to add.

“Again, I’m very sorry,” Kingsley says, though I’m not sure why. Why do they think I’m so scared?

“It’s fine.” I wave away the apology.

“It isn’t,” Layan says. “But thank you for accepting his apology anyway.”

I don’t say anything, instead opting to stare at the odd couple. *Are* they a couple?

I glance between them, taking in their casual clothes and differing postures. Layan stands with her spine ramrod straight and her hands neatly held in front of her, while Kingsley won’t stop fidgeting. He scratches at his muscular forearms while swaying side to side.

Based on her posture, Layan looks like she could be a submissive. She has a sharp tone with him, though, and I cannot for the life of me picture this man dominating anyone. He looks like a guy who belongs on the beach, with his sun-kissed skin peeking from the long slits in the side of his tank

top. But not this beach. He's too nervous, too unsure of himself.

"Hey, hon?" Layan turns to Kingsley who snaps to attention.

"Hmm?"

"Do you think you could make some tea? I'm sure Liberty's thirsty."

"Oh, yeah," he says, overly eager as a smile blooms on his face like he's grateful he doesn't have to stomach the torture of standing here another second. "Be right back."

He bounds for the kitchen, my gaze trailing him.

"Sorry about him," Layan says, dragging my attention back to her. She gives me a small smile. "He gets nervous being around women like us."

"Women like us?"

She nods. "Ex slaves."

Ex slaves?

When my eyes lower to her collar her fingers lift to it, as if she's just now remembering it's there. Her hands move to the back of her neck, searching for the latch.

"Peter said you were Angel Ramos's slave... Is that right?"

My face burns. "I don't know if I would use that term, but technically, yes."

She nods, her lips sinking into a sympathetic frown as she removes the collar and lets it dangle at her side. "I can't even imagine what that must've been like... I'm so sorry." She splays her palm toward the kitchen and flicks her eyes over my shoulder before going back to me. "We both are."

I shake my head. "Don't be. I'm fine."

"Right." She gives me a kind smile and goes to put her hand on my arm but thinks better of it, resting it at her side instead. "Well, you're safe now. I promise, there's no better place on the island than with Peter. He's really valuable to

them, so they leave him alone for the most part. You shouldn't have any more unwanted visitors."

"Who is 'them?' He's Angel's pilot, so do you mean him?"

She shrugs. "All of the powerful men with a residence on the island, I think. Peter works for Ramos, but he also does a lot of transporting goods for the island, so he and Monty Chaffer have a close relationship too. Someone has to bring that guy's fancy cigars over, you know?"

"Who's Monty Chaffer?"

Her kind eyes narrow with either confusion or skepticism. "You don't know who Chaffer is?"

I shake my head.

Her lips pout. "Mr. Ramos never took you to his house?"

"Why would he?"

"Why would who what?" Kingsley reappears with three mugs balanced clumsily in his hands. Layan takes one with a picture of Snoopy on it, and he hands me one with steaming hot, light green liquid next. I look down and stare at the 'Spring Break 2015' gold lettering for a few moments.

"Mr. Ramos never took Liberty to Monty Chaffer's house."

Kingsley's face reddens as he looks down at his mug. "Oh, really?"

"Isn't that weird?" Layan asks.

Kingsley shrugs. It could not be any more obvious that he doesn't want to talk about this.

"Who's Monty Chaffer?" I ask again.

Kingsley takes a sip of his tea and clears his throat before reluctantly looking at me. "He's basically the Sawyer of this side of the island. He has a mansion where he throws a lot of parties and things, you know..."

"I thought this was only Sawyer's island."

He nods. "It is, but Chaffer plays a big part in bringing residents here. Enough that he gets a 25 percent cut of the profit."

"Oh..."

There's *another* Sawyer?

Another fucking manor?

One Angel goes to?

"Yeah."

"So Angel is a frequent visitor at Chaffer's mansion?" I ask, hoping neither of them catch the slight break in my voice.

I don't know why I didn't think of it until now, but... The idea of Angel going to sex parties, sleeping with women on the island... It's repulsive.

Kingsley blows steam from his mug and takes another sip.

I follow his lead, if for no other reason than to be polite. I fucking hate green tea.

"Yeah," Layan answers when Kingsley takes too long. "I used to see him all the time."

"Used to?" I ask, too much hope in my voice. "You haven't seen him lately, though?"

I don't know why I even ask this. To hear confirmation, I guess. He hasn't even been on the island since we left each other.

My stomach drops. What if he went to this Chaffer's place *while* I was on the island?

I think of the nights I spent stripping, how he never liked to come to the manor. I always thought he was just working, but what if he went somewhere else?

Layan brings her mug close to her chest. "I meant before Kingsley, when I was Eli Colley's slave. Like a year ago."

I stare at her blankly.

"You don't know who that is either, do you?"

“I go sometimes, and I haven’t seen Ramos in a while,” Kingsley says, not giving me a chance to respond while speaking in a tone that makes me think bringing up her old master touched a nerve. He runs his hand over an impressive, blond beard. “Hey, do you need anything? Peter told me Ramos just recently ‘gave’ you to him, so if you need any more clothes or something, I can try—”

“Peter said Angel gave me to him?” My eyebrows raise, and Kingsley’s head tilts. I don’t think any of us are on the same page, and I want to call back my question. Surely, there’s a reason Peter lied to them, if that’s what he did.

“Is that not what happened?” Layan is the one to ask.

I hesitate for only a few seconds before speaking. “It—it is. I just didn’t realize how much information Peter was giving people.”

Kingsley’s face slumps sympathetically. Layan doesn’t look as convinced.

I search my brain for a change in subject, and an idea sparks.

“Hey, do you also go to the manor sometimes?” I ask Kingsley.

He shakes his head. “Not really, no. I wasn’t...” Discomfort settles over him, and he hangs his head. “Until Layan, I wasn’t aware of everything that goes on with the women there... I didn’t... I thought, uh...”

Is he trying to explain himself to me?

“He didn’t realize a chunk of the women coming to the island are kidnapped and that they start there,” Layan finishes for him.

I blink at them but don’t question it further.

“So you couldn’t go back then?” I ask, feeding my hope.

He meets my eyes. “Go back?”

I nod.

He looks at Layan before turning back to me. “Umm, what for?”

I lower my mug and inch forward like my excitement is propelling me. “I have a friend there, two of them actually, and I really, *really* want to make sure they’re okay.” I tell myself not to get too excited, my heart picking up its pace. “Is there any way you could go for me? All you’d have to do is ask around about an April and a...” I trail off as my heart sinks. I don’t know Elsie’s new name.

Fuck. Fucking fu—

“April?” Kingsley asks, his eyes lighting up. “I know a guy named Digby Barton who just bought a slave from the manor whose name is April.”

My eyes widen. “When?”

He squints as he thinks. “Like, uh, last week maybe? I don’t know exactly. I just remember him mentioning it when I saw him a few days ago. We uh...” He twirls his finger like he wants to explain himself again. “We sometimes surf together. It’s good to get a feel for all the residents, you know?”

I take another tiny step toward him. “Is there any way you could take me to her?” I nearly drop the mug. “Please, *please*, I would be so grateful.”

He looks at Layan again. “I uh...”

“*Please.*” My eyes start to water as I consider falling down at his feet, but he seems panicked enough when he sees my tears forming.

“Of course,” Layan says, her voice low.

My head snaps her way, but she’s looking at Kingsley.

He meets my eyes. “Maybe you could ask Peter to take you?” he offers. “I don’t know how he would feel about it, so in a couple of weeks when he comes back, you could—”

“A couple weeks?” My jaw drops.

Kingsley rears back. “He didn’t tell you when he’d be back?”

“No, and I can’t wait that long.” I shake my head, feeling panic start to take hold. “Please, all I need is to—”

“Okay, hold on a second.” Kingsley holds up a hand, his posture more rigid than it was a minute ago. “What’s going on? Peter told us you would be staying here to lay low for a little while in case Sawyer got suspicious about him having a slave. What you’re asking me to do is not *laying low*. Why don’t you know any of this, and why didn’t you know that Ramos gifted you to Peter? Did he...” Kingsley’s nostrils flare, and I take a step back. “Did he fucking lie to me?”

“Calm down,” Layan says, stepping close to him.

He shakes his head and takes a step back, dropping his mug which thumps on the floor, hot tea darkening a tribal-patterned rug. He’s acting like *he’s* afraid of *me*. “Fuck, did Peter *steal* you?” He presses a hand to his mouth. “Oh my fucking God, am I hiding Angel Ramos’s slave?”

“No.” I hold up my hands in an attempt to calm him down. “Not exactly.”

“*Not exactly?!*” His eyes bug out.

I shake my head. “He didn’t steal me from anyone.”

“Then what’s going on?” Layan asks. I turn to her, taking in her furrowed brow and crossed arms. Her tone isn’t panicked like Kingsley’s. Concerned, but not panicked.

I suck in a deep breath, buying time while I decide how much information to give, if any.

An hour ago, I wouldn’t have told them shit. I know Peter as little as I know them, but he’s the one who helped me get here. It stands to reason that I should trust him most right now...

But I don’t.

I almost want to comfort him when I peer into Kingsley’s frightened eyes. He has a boyish quality that comes off as kind, innocent, trusting.

“Angel and I are in love,” I say, letting my shoulders sag with the air rushing from my lungs.

Their eyes widen as they listen to me tell them everything, from how Angel ended up letting me go to Peter ditching me at his house last night.

“I have to get to my niece,” I say at last, finishing my ramble.

Kingsley and Layan exchange a look.

“You said Elsie is at the manor?” Layan asks me.

I nod. “As far as I’m aware.”

They exchange another look.

Finally, Kingsley turns my way, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, I can’t take you to her.” He deflates. “You’ll have to wait for Peter.”

He stomps to the coffee table while Layan cleans up the mess on the rug. “I’m calling that son of a bitch right now.”

“No!” I rush to him, grabbing his wrist when he picks up the phone. “Not yet. *Please.*”

“You could still take her to see Naomi,” Layan says, coming up behind us. She stops a few feet away, and Kingsley doesn’t look at either of us. My hand never leaves his wrist, and his phone stays firmly in his grasp. “Digby goes to Chaffer’s a lot, right?” Layan continues. “No one would have to know what you were doing, and Liberty wouldn’t necessarily even need to speak to Naomi. It would be enough to see that she’s okay.” Layan’s eyes move to me. “Right?”

“Right.” My head bobs several times as I whip back to Kingsley. “I just need to know that she’s okay.”

Kingsley’s eyes close as he pulls in a deep inhale through his nose. His grip on the phone releases, and it clatters onto the table.

He nods slowly, then opens his eyes, finally turning to me. “Okay. I can see if he’s going to be at Chaffer’s tonight. He usually brings a slave...”

I wrap my arms around Kingsley’s neck and squeeze, pinching my lips together when a whimper escapes my mouth.

“Thank you.”

He hesitantly hugs me back. “You’re welcome. You’ll need to pick a new name. And, Liberty, I need you to understand that if we get caught, it isn’t just our lives we’re risking.” I pull away to see him looking at Layan, so much fear in his pretty gray irises it makes me question myself for a moment.

“Hey,” I say, dragging his attention back to me. “I’ve never met anyone outside of the manor, and even when I was there, I was only a dancer. You said it yourself, there’s little chance anyone would recognize me or think anything of it even if they did, right?”

He doesn’t answer, so I continue. “The only two people who could see me and know what happened are Sawyer and Angel, and Angel has gotten me out of a hell of a lot of trouble before. I promise, if I somehow get caught, I won’t take you down with me. Either of you.”

I want to say more. I want to tell him Angel would protect Kingsley and Layan if I asked him to. I want to explain to them what an ally he can be, but I don’t. The skeptical look Kingsley gives me is enough to know he’d never believe it. I’m not sure which one of us would be wrong.

If Peter really does manage to dismantle the island ... would that put Angel with us or against us?

I guess we’ll find out.

ANGEL

Sawyer stands, arms outstretched, but my focus is on the girl sitting on the couch. Her head is down, and she's turned away, hunched forward with her arms wrapped around her stomach. Pink fingernails dig into her sides.

"Prudence, sweetheart, would you please see if Amari needs help stocking the bar?" Sawyer says, drawing my attention to him. His arms are at his sides now as he stares disapprovingly at the girl. Prudence, apparently.

She's still clutching her stomach as she stands, her eyes downcast as she scurries to the door. Purple around her eye catches my attention, and I reach out to gently take her arm before she can pass. Wide, fearful eyes dart to me, and she rears back like she's afraid I'm going to hit her. Up close, I can see for sure that she's young. No older than twenty, probably even in her teens.

I frown at the bruise coloring her left eye, the lack of swelling telling me it isn't recent. It isn't the cause for her tears.

"Are you all right?" I ask, scanning her face.

She swallows, her body starting to tremble beneath my touch.

As soon as my hand falls away from her arm, she hurries to the door like she's afraid I'll come after her.

My frown remains, but I don't know what to make of this. A woman being hesitant of me is not in the slightest bit unusual, so that isn't what's bothering me. Black eyes

occasionally happen, as unfortunate as they may be. Crying is certainly common, especially with someone new.

It's her age. I've never seen someone so young on the island.

Lib's voice sounds in my head, chiding me for my naivety. I haven't been able to get it out.

"Hey," Sawyer says, coming over to me with a warm smile tugging his lips. He pats my shoulder before bringing me toward him for a quick half hug. "How are you?" He pulls back, creases forming around his eyes as he rocks back on his heels and crooks his thumbs into his pockets. "How's your mother?"

"She's..." I take a quick peek over my shoulder at the door Prudence went through. "She's hanging on, but it won't be much longer. I'll need to leave again in no later than a few weeks."

His head bobs. "Of course, of course." He backpedals a few steps. "Thanks for coming back for now. I can hold down the fort, but I have to be honest with you, I'm drowning. With all the island shit *and* the Massachusetts deal... It's a little much, you know? I just got in last night, but someone is going to have to make another trip soon. The contractors have no idea what they're doing."

I scratch at my temple. "Sure, I'll take care of it." I glance over my shoulder. "Who was that girl?"

"Prudence? Runaway I started talking to a few months ago. It's a really sad story there. She ran away from home at fourteen and was whored out by some pimp named 'Big Daddy D.'" Sawyer chuckles at the name and shakes his head. "Anyway, she's been a prostitute ever since, addicted to all sorts of nasty shit. Which is, you know, what caused the black eye." He raises his chin and points to his face. "Detoxing is hard. Sometimes those girls get feral."

"How old is she?"

Sawyer blows out a long breath and raises his brows. "Eighteen." His hands shoot up as he retreats toward the drink

cart. “I know, I know, fucking *young*, right? Barely an adult. *But*, she begged to come here, and her situation sucked, so...” He shrugs.

The stomachache I started developing on the way here subsides, and I’m able to breathe again.

Why am I letting Lib get into my head? She doesn’t know Sawyer or his intentions. She doesn’t know anything.

Sawyer turns to the cart and flips over two glasses, tossing me a grin over his shoulder. “Thirsty?”

I run my hands through already tousled hair and sigh, reluctantly nodding. He pours the glasses while I walk to the miniature globe he has perched on a bookshelf that doubles as a door to a hidden safe room. It spins with a flick of my finger.

“Hey, how’s Liberty?” Sawyer asks, bringing a drink to me. I turn toward him and take the glass, clinking his when he tilts it toward me. “Everything go smoothly?”

His eyes sear into me over the rim of his glass as he takes a drink. I bring the amber liquid to my lips and take a small sip before turning back to the bookshelf.

I feel so foolish that a laugh nearly bubbles up my throat. My nerves have felt shredded for days, thinking it was possible my best friend could be capable of betraying me. In reality, I’m the one who’s betrayed him.

Liberty’s safe. Sawyer isn’t acting the slightest bit strange, so I’m positive he doesn’t know anything. That makes the lie I’m about to tell feel as easy as if it were the truth.

“No, it didn’t.”

It feels like the air is sucked from the room. I allow several seconds to go by while Sawyer watches me, studying me carefully, searching for meaning behind my words.

“What happened?” he eventually asks, sounding more concerned than angry which is a little surprising. I wouldn’t blame him for being furious.

I sigh and drink the rest of the whiskey in one gulp, cringing as I lower the glass and turn toward Sawyer. He takes

it from me but doesn't move to the drink cart.

"You were right." I look away and shake my head like I'm the one who should be angry. "It was a mistake to take her with me. I shouldn't have trusted her."

"She tried to run," Sawyer says, more a statement of fact than a question.

I nod.

"What did you do?" He leans toward me, and I finally meet his eyes.

The concern in his blue irises sends guilt shooting through me. It's far too easy to lie to him. It should be harder. It should tear me the fuck up to lie to the person left in my life who deserves my honesty most. So why? Why is this so easy for me? Why was it so easy with Lib?

"She isn't a problem anymore."

His face sobers, and he takes a step back. "You killed her?"

I turn to the globe, staring at the outline of Iceland with my lips pressed in a thin line, letting my silence be my answer.

Sawyer blows out a loud breath, and when he does it's like he's filling the room back up with air. "Shit, man, I'm sorry... I know she meant a lot to you."

I lift a shoulder. "She was an unhealthy obsession anyway."

"Yeah ... lil' bit," he agrees, backing up even farther. He pours me another drink, and I meet him halfway to take it. "What did you do with the body?"

I curl my fingers around the cool glass, then bring it to me. "I'd rather not talk about it."

His eyes dart down as he swallows, nodding sharply. "Right. Well..." He raises his lips into a tight smile before he extends his glass toward me. "To you, my brother. I'm glad to have you back."

His words sound like they have more than one meaning, and I try not to resent him for it. I know he didn't like Lib. I understand *why* he didn't like Lib. But his relief that Lib is supposedly dead still gets to me. I clink his glass and down the liquid in another gulp.

"Jesus, slow down." He chuckles. "I'm the one who's supposed to be lectured for day drinking."

I give him a small, slow smile and hand him my glass. "I'm finished. I flew overnight, so I'm fucking exhausted." I motion for the door. "I'm headed home and going to bed."

He claps me on the shoulder. "All right, man. Well, it's good to see you. I'll come check on you this evening, make sure you haven't drank yourself to death." He gives me a playful wink. "We'll catch up more then. I want to hear what your old man had to say about you being back."

When he laughs, I return it. "I'm sure you could guess."

I raise a hand in a wave and turn toward the door.

"See ya later," Sawyer calls to my back.

I lift two fingers then tuck my hands into my pockets while strolling through the manor, the back door my destination. My relief is so strong, I'd whistle if I was the laid-back type of person who did that sort of thing. I'm not sure I'd even know how.

Liberty's safe.

She's *fine*.

Peter was right.

I laugh to myself and allow my lips to relax into a small smile. Everything's going to work out fine. Lib will get the life she wants and deserves, and I'll find a life for myself as well.

I'm going to move back to Spain. The decision has been gnawing at my insides, but I know now it's the right one. I'll give myself another year here, long enough to help Sawyer slowly adjust to doing things without needing me by his side, but then I'm gone. No more black eyes, no more tears, no more women cringing at the sight of me.

I'll just be me. Angel. Uncle, brother, and someday maybe even son. I can do that. I can be that guy. I *want* to be that guy.

I'm still smiling when I approach the playroom, but my lips fall and my steps slow when I pass by the open doors. I turn around and stare inside, my brows bunching.

That girl looked so fucking terrified... If Sawyer did something to reassure her, it didn't work.

Does she know she's safe here? Is she still detoxing, still in pain?

I want to believe that if she needed something, someone would have gotten it for her, but Lib is in my head again. Lib was a special case, I know that, but she was almost brutally raped by one of the guards. She asked for my help, *needed* my help, and if she hadn't, I would've continued to be oblivious to what Sawyer was allowing to happen.

He said he wouldn't turn a blind eye again. The girl should be fine... Right?

I face forward and take a few more steps toward my destination but stop again. Annoyance at myself flares, and I groan while turning around and heading for the playroom.

Amari stands at a bar across the room with cases of glasses stacked in front of her. When she hears me shut the doors, she looks over at me, tumbler in hand. No sign of Prudence.

Amari sets the tumbler on the counter and gives me a timid wave. I stride through the playroom, the sound of my steps bouncing off the walls.

"Hey," I say when I get close. Amari eyes me warily. She's almost unrecognizable without the heavy coat of makeup and gaudy jewelry she wears while she bartends, but the wariness in her features is even more out of place. She's one of few women who *isn't* nervous around me. I'd even call us friends.

I flatten my palms against the bartop. "Have you seen Prudence?"

Amari's head lowers, and glass clinks at her feet. I lean forward and look down at Prudence who is kneeling on the

floor behind the bar. There's a wooden crate with liquor bottles in it that I'm guessing she was moving onto the shelf before I came in.

"Hey there," I say, trying to make my voice sound as warm as possible.

She glances up at me for only a moment before putting her attention on the bottle in her hand. She stands and carefully places it on the shelf behind Amari.

"Prudence, Mr. A is talking to you," Amari says, a warning in her tone.

I give Amari a disapproving look, and she goes back to the tumblers on the bartop, unloading each and setting them behind the bar.

Prudence slowly turns, her head down as she takes two steps toward me. A foot and a half of marble separates us.

"Hi," I try again. "I'm Sawyer's friend. I noticed you were crying earlier and just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine," she squeaks, fidgeting with her hands.

I squint at her, trying to picture her as a prostitute. A well broken in prostitute at that. I can't see it, and the more I look, the more unlikely it seems. She's far too shy and scared to have been in that type of profession for long.

What does that mean? Did she lie, did Sawyer lie, or am I just wrong?

"Are you feeling sick?" I ask, noticing the pale color of her face.

She shakes her head.

I stare at her another few moments, trying to sort through this, *her*. Who she is and how she got here. "What kind of drugs are in your system?"

She looks up at me, a squint in her eyes that makes me think she doesn't know what I'm talking about, then she looks down.

"I don't know," she whispers.

What do you mean, you don't know?

Amari clears her throat, and I turn her way. She eyes me for a second before addressing Prudence. "I can take it from here. Go back to your room."

Without a word, Prudence darts from the bar. She hurries out of the playroom, unable to get away from me fast enough, yet again.

"Has she heard about me?" I ask Amari once Prudence is gone.

Amari continues with the glasses. "Doubt it. The new ones are scared in general. It probably has nothing to do with you."

I lean onto the bar, bracing myself on my forearms. "She was a whore before. Why would she be so frightened? This has to be better than where she came from." My words don't sound convincing, even to my ears.

Amari's lips pinch, but she says nothing.

"What kind of drugs is she detoxing from?" I look toward the door. "She looks sick."

"That's a question for Sawyer."

My head slowly returns to her, confusion washing over me. "What does that mean?"

Again, she says nothing.

"Amari..."

She puts one last glass down before gripping the edge of the bar, her eyes downcast. When she looks at me, I see something in her expression I haven't seen in a very long time... Fear.

"I like you," she says, her voice low. "I've always liked you. You make a point to be kind to me, and I appreciate that. But please, whatever interest you have in Prudence, leave me out of it. I don't want any trouble."

I rear back. "What are you talking about?"

She goes back to the tumblers.

“I would never get you into trouble.”

She huffs.

“*Hey.*”

She flinches at my harsh tone, and I instantly regret using it.

I pull my arms in and relax my shoulders. “I’m not going to say anything, I just... Something doesn’t feel right about her. Sawyer told me she’s a prostitute looking to get clean. Just tell me ... is that true?”

She looks up at me. Her face is serious with a hint of fear in her eyes. Seconds pass before she brushes her hands together, then imaginary dust from her shirt. She walks from behind the bar then heads for the exit.

I sigh, thinking that’s as far as I’m going to get with her, but she pauses and looks back at me.

“Do you want to hear the advice my dad gave me when I was younger?”

My eyebrows pinch as I nod.

“If something doesn’t feel right, it probably isn’t.”

With that, she turns, leaving me with a hell of a lot more questions than I came with.

LIBERTY

*K*ingsley tugs at the collar of his yellow Polo shirt, his chin high like he's having trouble breathing. Caramel locks of wavy hair flutter in the wind, and every time he looks over his shoulder, I wonder what he's looking for. Either the engine of the boat or the ocean, or more likely, nothing. He's more nervous than I am, and I'd find it cute if it didn't increase our likelihood of getting caught.

"*Relax,*" I whisper, scooting closer to him. There's a couple on the boat with us, a man named Malekai driving and a woman named Millie at his side. Apparently, Kingsley never shows up at Chaffer's stag, so we're under the ruse of tagging along with these two.

He glances at me, a vein popping from his forehead. He looks like he's either holding his breath or about to vomit.

"It's going to be fine," I assure him.

He shakes his head. "This was a terrible idea."

"We don't have to stay long."

He looks at me skeptically, then sits up straighter as he peers ahead. I follow his gaze, my eyes drawn to flames up ahead. I squint at them a moment before realizing the fire is contained. Four giant vases spit flames ten feet into the sky, and beyond them is a red brick mansion with seemingly every light on. String lights poke out from behind the house, and as bright as everything seems, I would venture to guess the backyard is lit up as well.

"Woah," I say, my eyes pulled to the fire again.

Kingsley drums his knees without responding, but I catch his glance out of the corner of my eye. Malekai docks the boat, then takes Millie's hand before twisting to face us. "You good, King?" he asks, his smirk falling when he takes in Kingsley.

Kingsley coughs and stands with too much force, sending the boat rocking. "All good." He chuckles and gives the most awkward smile I've ever seen before extending his hand to me. I take it, smiling like this is a date, and let him help me up.

We all climb out of the boat, both couples hand in hand. Kingsley releases me to put his palm on my lower back as we walk up a concrete path toward the flames. The fire warms my skin even as we're probably twenty yards away.

Malekai's eyes light up, and he laughs. "Are you worried Layan's gonna find out about your date?"

Kingsley shrugs. His hand dips a little too low on my backless dress, and I subtly reach around to lift it back up. He jumps at my touch and snaps his gaze to me, his expression guilty, like he wants to apologize for almost accidentally touching my ass.

I could slap him. Tell him to man the fuck up so we don't look suspicious, but his good nature is a breath of fresh air here. I don't know how a man like him ended up in a place like this.

"Come on, dude, Layan isn't stupid. She knows monogamy isn't a thing on the island." Malakai slaps an arm around Kingsley's shoulders and chuckles. "*Relax*. It's gonna be a good night."

Did he really just say 'dude?'

Malakai removes his arm and motions to me. "By the way, I didn't catch your girl's name." His words sound like they're directed at Kingsley, but he stares at me, so I answer.

"Hope."

He grins and gives me a wink. "Nice to meet you, Hope."

I face forward when a spark ignites in his eyes that I don't like. My lip curls, but I try to flatten it.

“We should go back to my place when we leave,” he says, his meaning clear, probably even to the woman hanging off his arm. I sneak a peek to see her beaming up at him mischievously.

“Yeah, maybe,” Kingsley lies. Or at least it better be a lie.

I don’t bother adding anything, and my response is unnecessary anyway because they trail off into another subject I don’t care to listen to. Something about surfing. It sounds like Kingsley is an instructor or something.

We squeeze through a walkway that cuts through the middle of the vases, and it gets so hot for a moment, I’m scared I’m going to burn. I glance down and notice at the side of a vase are six nozzles sticking out that remind me of tiny shower heads.

I have to raise Kingsley’s hand from my ass one more time—he barely notices—before we make it to the entrance and step inside. There’s no one at the door, and I realize there weren’t any guards outside either.

It’s quiet except for our footsteps and the men’s conversation, but the noise picks up as we arrive at a double set of doors that remind me of the playroom entrance. I hold my breath as Malakai opens one, prepared to be hit with the stench of sex and loud music, but I let it out on a surprised exhale, my eyes narrowing as the room is revealed through a thick fog of smoke.

The space is large, and there are plenty of people, but it isn’t like the playroom. The music is low and classical for one thing, and for another, I can actually see in here with more than a strobe light. I don’t see a bar, only a drink cart off to the side of a card table with five men sitting around it, smoking cigars. There are a couple pool tables in the back, and people occupy a few couches in the room, some lost in conversation and some lost in each other’s lips. One thing missing stands out to me the most...

There’s no sex. No chains or devices, no stages.

Hmm.

My eyes wander the room in search of Naomi, but I don't find her.

"Do you want a drink?" Kingsley asks me, his voice noticeably calmer. I think talking to his friend has helped. That or the edible he ate before coming here has kicked in.

I turn to him, blinking away the burn in my eyes from the smoke. "Is this it?"

He bites the corner of his lip and shrugs.

"What, you're not impressed?" Malakai asks, coming up beside me. He drapes his arm over my shoulders like he did to Kingsley and leans into my ear. "You're a manor girl, huh?"

His fingertips tickle my shoulder, and I press my lips together to keep from snarling. I glance at Kingsley, but he stands awkwardly, looking away like he doesn't know what he should do.

"I'm a fan of the manor too," Malakai says. "Maybe we've seen each other before?"

"Doubt it," I say to shut down the line of thinking. "I haven't been in a long time."

"Yeah?" He arches a thick brow. "Aren't you a whore?"

I glare before shrugging his arm off me and taking a step away, my attention turning to Kingsley. "Didn't you say Digby would be here?"

"You know Digby?" Malakai cuts in.

Kingsley tucks his hands into his pockets and looks around like he just remembered what we're here for.

"He's probably out back or in a room." Malakai grins wickedly. "He's been glued to some fiery Asian girl. Seriously, dude, you have to try her. She could suck a grape through a straw."

"How do you know that?" My jaw tenses thinking about this fucking asshole near Naomi.

He angles his neck back. "What?"

“You’ve met her?”

His face pinches as he thinks for a moment. “The Asian chick?”

“They knew each other at the manor,” Kingsley explains to him, his hand pressing between my shoulder blades. “Come on, let’s go get a drink.”

I press my lips together and let Kingsley nudge me out of the room, then he leads me down a hall.

“Where are we going?” I ask, my teeth grinding.

He stops me with a hand on my arm, and I turn to glare at him.

He glares back. “Okay, first of all, you need to chill out. I talked to Digby earlier today, so I know he’s here somewhere. Just be patient. Second of all, don’t be a dick to Malakai. He knows these people better than I do, and he’s the only thing that makes it seem like we fit in here. You’re acting suspicious, and it’s making me nervous.”

I huff even though I know he’s right. He looks less nervous now than he did on the boat, but I know I’m not helping things.

I cross my arms over my chest but let my shoulders relax. “Sorry.”

He shrugs. “It’s cool. Let’s just pretend to have a good time, all right? Digby and your friend will show up eventually.”

I suck in a breath, trying to soak up some of my impatience before releasing it. My chin rises and falls defeatedly.

Kingsley continues down the hall, and I follow him to a kitchen. When he pulls a soda from the fridge for me, I think nothing of it, but when he pulls a water out for himself, I give him a funny look.

“I don’t drink alcohol,” he mutters, twisting off the cap. “Too many toxins.”

He chugs half the bottle while I sip my soda, and after a minute, once we've had a chance to relax, we walk back to the room to find Malakai and Millie. They've formed a semicircle with a couple of guys in front of a couch where a man and woman sit.

Kingsley seamlessly slides into the group, me at his side, and it seems easy enough for him to join in on the conversation. He thinks he doesn't fit well here, but he's likable as hell, and it seems the others think so too. They talk for what feels like a long time about surfing before the conversation turns to gossip. My mind wanders, but I manage a nod and smile here or there until Angel's name is said, and I perk up.

"You know he murdered another one of his slaves?" the guy on the couch says with a shake of his head. He scoffs. "Unfuckingbelievable. Kirk accidentally gets his slave *pregnant*, and it's a giant deal, but Ramos can kill bitches left and right, and all Hansley does is wag his finger."

The woman beside him rolls her eyes in agreement.

"Did he push this one off a cliff too?" Malakai asks with a tasteless chuckle none of the others mimic.

Couch Guy moves his annoyed stare to Malakai. "I don't know, nor do I care, but it's bullshit."

Where did he hear this? They're referring to me, right?

The urge to defend Angel crawls up my throat, rests on my tongue, and waits for another remark. I look away and try to ignore them before I blurt something stupid.

A guy with a mustache shrugs. "I don't know. I like Ramos a hell of a lot more than I like Hansley. Killer or not."

Couch Guy strokes his beard as he considers this. "Yeah, it's kind of sad, but I feel that way too. I can't fucking stand Hansley."

"Hey, has anyone seen Ramos lately?" Mustache asks.

Couch Guy shakes his head. "Not here. He hasn't been to Chaffer's since—"

“Who hasn’t been to Chaffer’s?”

I jump as a voice sounds just behind me, and I whip around to lock eyes with a pudgy man in a dark blue suit. Dull blond hair reminding me of the color of soap bars is combed back, revealing a wide forehead with wrinkles hinting at his age. He smiles at me but not in a friendly way. More like the way you’d look at a slice of cake you forgot was in the fridge.

He puts a cigar in his mouth and puffs on it, never taking his eyes off me.

“Angel Ramos,” Couch Guy replies.

The man looks up at Couch Guy and blows the smoke in my face. My nose wrinkles as I turn away.

“The last time I checked, he was smitten with Robert Gaumond’s wife,” he says.

“Not anymore,” Couch Guy retorts. “Unless that’s a different person than the one he recently murdered.”

The man’s lips pull into a grin, and he shakes his head like this is somehow funny. “Again, huh?”

“Again.”

He puffs on his cigar and turns his head to blow the smoke this time. “I should give him a call.” He looks at Kingsley and points to me. “Is she yours?”

Kingsley’s face reddens, and whatever nerves he calmed earlier are now lit up as hot as the fire we saw outside.

“No,” I answer for him.

The man turns back to me, one eyebrow raised with intrigue. Probably because I just spoke out of turn. It doesn’t matter how long I’m on this island, I will never, ever learn. Or maybe it’s just that I don’t care.

“He’s borrowing me. I belong to Peter Shaw.”

His eyes widen, and even more wrinkles break out on his face from his Cheshire smile. “Oh, *really*. He finally broke down and got himself a slave, did he?” His eyes travel down

my white, long sleeve dress and back up again. “He has good taste.”

My cheeks heat, but I don’t give him the satisfaction of looking away.

He extends his hand toward me. “Monty Chaffer.”

My tense jaw goes slack, and I quickly shut my mouth.

This is Monty Chaffer? *He* is the man whose attention I just drew to myself?

Oh, fuck.

I weakly shake his hand before he pulls away to brush my cheek, making me wince as the cut on my face stings. “What happened here?”

“Just an accident,” I say, my voice noticeably nervous now. I can feel Kingsley panicking beside me, and I absorb that too.

“Hmm. I like to have accidents with my slaves sometimes too.” He smiles like we’re sharing a secret, and I shudder. “If it makes you feel better, you’re still very pretty.” He moves his hand to my shoulder and squeezes. “*Very* pretty.”

My stomach turns as he pushes back my hair and explores the bruise on my neck.

“We should probably get going soon,” Kingsley says to me, leaning close enough that our shoulders brush. “We don’t have a lot of time before your master wants you back.”

Chaffer slowly pulls his hand away and takes a step back before he turns to Kingsley and gestures at the ceiling. “Feel free to use one of the upstairs bedrooms. There are plenty unoccupied.”

Kingsley nods. “Thank you, sir.” He puts a hand on my back and ushers me forward about ten steps before I dig my heels into the carpet and gasp at the people walking into the room.

There are five of them. Three men and two women. They stumble more than walk, and it’s hard to immediately discern

who is with who with the way the group hangs on each other, clearly intoxicated.

At the back of the group, with her eyes barely open and her head on a man's shoulder, is Naomi.

She smiles and blinks slowly, her feet dragging like she's forgotten they're there.

I'm frozen in place as they get closer, my eyes locking onto the white powder underneath Naomi's nose.

Shit.

She's so slow that the man whose shoulder she's leaning on pulls her around to face him and lifts her by her ass. He kisses her, almost falling over, and she kisses him back with so much bliss, I think I must be imagining it.

"April," I say, unable to help myself.

She opens her eyes and looks my way, her lips slowing when she sees me. I don't know what I expected to see on her face when we met again. Relief maybe. Hope. Happiness. But certainly not shame.

She turns away from me as they move past us with no attempt on her part to stop.

"Do you want to stay?" Kingsley asks me.

I don't answer. I'm too stunned to speak or move, but it doesn't matter. The choice was never mine anyway.

Peter walks through the door, his eyes blazing with fiery rage. He storms up to us, takes my arm, and drags me from the room. I look back at the door while he yanks me with him, Kingsley apologizing profusely beside him.

He doesn't say a word until we're all in his boat, and even then, it's only to snap at Kingsley to start it up.

I stare at Chaffer's mansion as we pull away, only blinking when my eyes sting.

She's doing drugs.

We haven't spoken about her struggles with addiction, but I remember Sawyer pointing them out to her when she came here. He claimed to be 'helping her' stay sober.

Now they're feeding the demon.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fucking fuck.

I mean to only yell it in my mind, but it barrels out of me. I slam my fists down on the seat and tilt my head back as I growl at the sky.

I need to get her off this island. Right the fuck now. Elsie too.

"What were you thinking?" Peter snaps at me.

I don't respond. Now isn't the time.

"You could've gotten yourselves killed! If anyone had recognized you—"

"They didn't," Kingsley interrupts. "No one knew who she was. Liberty just needed to make sure her friend was okay, and she did." He looks from the water to me. "So we're good now, right?"

"Good?" Peter scoffs.

"You're fucking reckless," he sneers at me. "I should've never brought you here." He faces forward and crosses his arms over his chest, his anger turning from fiery to a slow acidic burn. "You're bringing attention right to us when we need to fly under the radar now more than ever. We need the element of surprise, otherwise, nothing we have in place will work. They outnumber us by the hundreds." His angry eyes close. "You have no idea what you could've ruined."

What I could've ruined... I snort, turning away and staring out at the ocean, moonlight reflecting off the water.

I don't know everything his plan entails. He could be a mastermind. He could have a PhD in escapism for all I know.

But he's been working on this for a year and still hasn't gotten it done. He agreed to bring me here because he needs

me. For what, neither of us are sure. It isn't what he intended to get from me, but I'm still here, and I'm still valuable, regardless if I truly know how to 'seduce' men or not.

Chaffer's image comes into my mind, and nausea coils in my gut at the way he looked at me. All beauty has ever done for me is get me into trouble. It isn't as valuable as people might think.

Sawyer enters my mind next, another example.

I sit up straighter and look up at the stars as I consider the two men. From the conversation I heard tonight, it's safe to say Sawyer isn't well liked among them. And if Chaffer is the Sawyer of this side of the island, what kind of relationship do those two have?

Probably not pals. With the talk tonight, I wouldn't be surprised if they were enemies, despite their mutual benefit of the island. Still, Sawyer gets seventy-five percent of dues from people *Chaffer* brings in? That's got to make a man bitter.

Especially if he found out about something like Sawyer cheating him out of his share.

My pulse spikes as I get an idea and turn to Peter.

"What if we pinned Sawyer and Chaffer against each other?"

He shakes his head. "Already done. They don't need our help to hate each other."

"Okay, but what if we antagonized them? That could create a nice distraction, couldn't it?"

His glare softens as he sits up. "How would we do that?"

"Chaffer gets a percentage of the money the residents pay, right?"

Peter nods.

I uncross my arms and rest my palms in my lap as I lean toward him, excitement ramping me up. "What if Sawyer raised the dues without telling Chaffer?"

Peter eyes me skeptically. "He didn't."

“Right, and Angel didn’t kill me, yet Chaffer believes *that* as fact.”

Peter blinks at me, obviously confused. I forgot he wasn’t there for that.

“All we’d have to do is start a rumor.”

“We can’t start a rumor if the residents know how much they’re paying.”

Fair point.

I chew on my lip and think for a second. The solution is obvious to me, but I don’t like it. “Then one of us will have to tell Chaffer directly.”

Peter mimics my posture, leaning toward me. “By one of us, you mean...”

I rub the back of my neck and look away. Fuck, I hate this. I know what I’d have to do to get Chaffer alone, to get him to let his guard down.

I’ve done worse.

I squeeze my eyes closed and try not to think of his hands on me, try not to picture his naked body. The fact is, Elsie needs me. Naomi needs me. They don’t have forever to wait, and they’ve already been put through worse than one night with an egotistical man.

If I had a better plan, I’d go with it. But this is the one I’ve got.

With a sigh rushing past my lips, I open my eyes and look at Peter.

“Take me back.”

ANGEL

From across the playroom, Prudence nurses a drink she's too young to have. She pretends to, at least. I haven't actually seen her bring the glass to her lips. She swirls a tiny umbrella in the liquid, her head down and body stiff as she hunches forward on a couch.

A guy in ripped jeans and a sleeveless shirt sits beside her, his arm slung over the back of the couch while his mouth moves close to her ear. I don't know him, but he doesn't strike me as dangerous. Then again, I can't see that well with these goddamn strobe lights.

I've been watching them for a solid five minutes, and not once has Prudence looked up. I don't know if the guy doesn't realize she isn't interested or if he thinks she'll relax. She doesn't technically have to fuck him if she doesn't want to, but I'm sure she's figured out by now that making Sawyer happy is in her best interest. Sawyer's happy when the residents are happy.

The music is loud enough that my teeth chatter, so when I feel the pulse at my thigh, it blends in with the other vibrations, and I don't immediately reach for my phone. Not until I feel it again a minute later.

I pull out my cell and peel my gaze from Prudence to look down at the screen. I have a missed call from Chaffer and a text from him sent shortly after.

Sorry to hear about your girl.

My eyes narrow at the screen, though I don't know why it surprises me that he already knows about Liberty. Word travels fast on the island.

I sigh and go to put the phone away when another text comes through.

You should stop by. We miss you here.

I stare at the screen a moment before putting away the phone. The invite is tempting... A cigar and a game of cards sounds a hell of a lot better than blaring music and a perfume headache, but I don't plan on leaving the girl. Something isn't right about her. I don't know who she is or the true story of how she came here, but Sawyer lied to me about it, and I intend to find out why.

The guy with the ripped jeans looks to his right and smiles at a person walking up to the couch. I squint to try to make out the newcomer, but his back is to me, and it's too dark. Ripped Jeans scoots over, pulling Prudence with him, and the new guy sits on her other side. Once he faces this way, I see the dark hair carefully styled in an undercut and the scar running along his cheek.

Eli Colley.

My eyes widen as I look between Prudence and Eli.

I know him from Chaffer's, but I've never seen him here. I haven't seen him *at all* for maybe a year, not since Chaffer kicked him out for severely beating his slave on Chaffer's property.

The image of that woman sticks in my mind now, and I wince. I know some bad shit happens to women here, but the sight of half her ear missing was enough for me to bring it to Sawyer's attention. I thought for sure he'd banned him from the island.

I guess not.

Eli puts his hand on Prudence's knee before sliding it up her thigh, beneath her short dress. Finally, she looks up, her face twisted with disgust or fear or both, and we lock eyes. In

them is a plea so innocent that the air leaves my lungs, my stomach clenching like I've just been punched.

Eli must sense me approaching as I walk up to the couch because he turns my way.

He dips his chin. "Mr. A."

I give him a curt nod of recognition before addressing Prudence. "Are you ready to go?"

Her wide eyes blink. She looks between Eli and me before ducking her head.

"Do you have plans for her?" Eli asks.

I turn to him then flick my gaze to Ripped Jeans. I was wrong about him... Anyone making plans to have a threesome with Eli Colley is dangerous.

Fuck, am I really this bad a judge of character?

"Yes," I say to Eli, then move my gaze back to Prudence. "Did you not tell these gentlemen that?"

She looks up at me, her bottom lip quivering.

I roll my eyes and look at Eli. "Sorry if she's wasted much of your time. She's new."

Eli gives me a tight smile and stands, his hands raising in a 'my bad' gesture. "It's no problem." He glowers at Ripped Jeans a moment but speaks to me. "Sorry for encroaching on your territory."

Ripped Jeans pouts as he stands and slinks off with Eli in search of another woman to terrorize tonight.

Why the fuck is he even allowed here?

"Come on." I hold out my hand for Prudence. She stares at it for several moments before my patience wanes, and I bend to take her wrist. She reluctantly stands and follows me from the playroom.

My teeth grit thinking about Eli. If he's here, it probably isn't to play. The island is divided into two camps, those who like Sawyer and those who like Chaffer. It's possible his

fallout with Chaffer resulted in him becoming interested in the manor, but I doubt it, especially considering I haven't seen him around.

He must be here to buy.

I stop abruptly as a thought hits me, causing Prudence to run into my back. I spin and rake my eyes over the crowd, searching for Naomi. I don't see her, which isn't surprising in a crowd this big.

I told Lib I wouldn't protect her friend, but I can't let her be sold to that man. I don't know how I can let *anyone* be sold to that man.

I'll have to figure something out. But first...

I face forward and start toward the exit, dragging Prudence with me. We don't stop or speak until we're two stories up and in front of an empty bedroom the guests use with the whores.

I turn the 'in use' sign around on the knob and lead Prudence inside. Once the door is shut, I let out a groan and turn to her. Her head is predictably lowered, and her hand grasps her wrist with enough force for both her arms to appear flexed.

"Sit," I say, waving a hand toward the bed.

She flinches at my voice and squeezes her eyes shut, making no move to obey the command.

I should be gentle. Patient. Kind. I know these things, but I feel my confusion bubbling over into irritation. I roll my neck to ease the tension, then walk to the bed and sit on the edge, leaving Prudence standing several feet away, facing the door.

"I want you to sit," I say, my voice deceptively calm. "Please."

Prudence shuffles her feet but finally comes and sits as far away from me as possible, her shoulder rubbing against the headboard.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Prudence. I just wanted to get you away from the men you were talking to in the playroom. They're... They aren't nice."

She wrings her hands and doesn't respond.

I move my gaze to the door and clear my throat. "Has anyone told you *I'm* not nice?"

No response.

"They would probably be right," I say with a sad excuse for a chuckle, deciding not to defend myself against the rumors, especially considering I need people to believe the latest lie that I killed Lib. "But I still have no interest in hurting you."

Several seconds pass while I wait out the silence.

"Please," she whispers. I turn my head her way to see her tears falling onto her lap. "I don't want to have sex with you."

Her eyes hesitantly peek up at me through a curtain of hair. Jesus, she's young.

"I don't want that either. I only want to know a few things about you, and once I do, I'll leave you alone. Okay?"

She bites her lip and nods.

"How old are you?" I ask, bracing for the answer.

She lets go of her lip. "Eighteen."

"Truthfully?"

She nods, and I feel some of the tension leave my shoulders. That's one thing Sawyer didn't lie about.

"Were you a whore before you came here?"

Her lips pinch into a scowl, and she wraps her arms around herself. I'm not sure what that means.

"I'm not judging you," I go on. "It's just a question."

"I've only had sex with two guys."

I open and close my mouth, looking away. After a few moments, it hits why her irritation suddenly appeared. She thought I was asking her if she was a slut.

She's not a prostitute. She was *never* a prostitute.

“I don’t suppose you got paid by either of them?” I ask, not looking at her.

“No.”

I grip the bridge of my nose. “Were you addicted to drugs before coming here?”

“No.”

My bile in my throat creeps higher with each passing second. “Were you given drugs when you got here? Is that why you looked sick before?”

She doesn’t reply, just stares down at the carpet.

“It’s okay. You can tell me.”

“I’m not even supposed to be talking to you.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “What?”

No response.

“Prudence.”

She sucks in a choked breath and covers her mouth, but it doesn’t suppress the sob that follows. I itch to scoot closer, the instinct to comfort overwhelming, but I stay put. I’m not the right person for this. She needs one of the other women, someone who truly understands what she’s going through. Hell, she needs Lib.

But I need answers... Right? It feels less and less necessary the more time goes on. I needed to know if I’d been betrayed. I have my answer.

Sawyer lied to me. This girl wasn’t a junkie whore before coming here. Being here isn’t ‘helping’ her, and it’s obvious she doesn’t want to be here. She doesn’t *belong* here. That should be enough information for me to kick Sawyer’s ass.

But I still want to know more.

“Did Sawyer ask you not to talk to me?” I ask, already knowing he must have.

With a hand still covering her mouth, she nods. She lowers her hand and takes in a shaky breath, tears spilling onto her

cheeks. “He said you’re dangerous, and I should stay away from you. He said...” She chokes on a sob. “He said you killed both of your slaves and that you’d hurt me.”

My face heats, and my jaw tics. I look away, my attention already moving to Sawyer and what I’ll say to him. What I’ll do.

There’s a hell of a lot that needs explaining.

“He lied about that. I’m not going to hurt you,” I repeat. I wait for her to digest that before speaking again. “Did he drug you?”

She hesitates, then, “Yes.”

I force my jaw to unclench. “With what?”

Her shoulders lift in a shrug. “I don’t know. Something that made me tired.”

Something that made her tired...

She means she was sedated?

That’s a lot better than what I was thinking.

“You didn’t feel any euphoria from it, did you? You’re not having any withdrawal symptoms?”

She shakes her head.

Good.

“Please,” she says, her voice low. “I don’t want to get into any more trouble. Please don’t tell.”

“I’m not going to get you into any trouble,” I say, and it takes a second to register that I’m lying.

If I confront Sawyer ... would he hurt her?

A week ago, I wouldn’t have questioned that. Now...

Now I don’t know what he’d do.

Which means I can’t confront him. Not yet. Not until I wrap my head around all of this.

“Prudence, did you ask to be brought here?” I hold my breath.

“No,” she snaps. “Why would anyone ask to be brought here?”

I close my eyes and let out the breath.

Fuck.

“You were kidnapped,” I say, voicing the revelation out loud. She doesn’t bother verifying it.

Lib was right.

Her voice flits into my mind, and I flashback to when we were in the hotel parking lot, back to her telling me the reality of the island and how oblivious to it all I was. I remember feeling the doubt creep in but ultimately shrugging it away. I thought she didn’t know what she was talking about. That she didn’t know Sawyer.

I’m the one who doesn’t know him, aren’t I?

This girl was kidnapped and brought onto the island to be sold to men like Eli Colley. Sawyer plucked her from her home, destroyed her life, all to feed the sadism he brought here.

She’s only eighteen. Fucking eighteen years old.

I can’t do this anymore.

I stand, rubbing my hands over my face while my head spins out of control. I want to go home. Call Peter. Get on a plane, get the fuck away from this place, and never look back.

But I can’t do that, can I?

I did this. I helped build this place.

Now I have to tear it down.

I take a step toward the door, my throat too full to stomach any more of this conversation, but I stop before leaving to turn back to her. I’m probably the last person she wants comforting her, but I can at least point her toward help or support. There’s only one woman I know here who’s brave enough to vent about Sawyer.

“There’s a woman here named April who’s gone through something similar to you. You should talk to her. She can help you work through this. And if anyone tries to hurt you, tell them I’m going to buy you. That should discourage them.”

She looks at me through her wet lashes. “I thought you said you weren’t—”

“I’m not interested in you like that, no, and I don’t believe I actually have the power to buy you even if I was. But I’ll help you as much as I can.”

“Thanks.” I expect her to break eye contact, and the second she does, I plan to leave. I’m surprised when she continues staring.

“It’s too late for me to talk to April,” she says as an afterthought. “She was sold the day I got here... She was nice.”

I feel the blood drain from my face, and my lungs tighten. “Do...” I clear my throat. “Do you know who she was sold to?”

She shakes her head.

I scratch my cheek, thinking for a moment. I need to make sure she’s okay. If she was sold to Jasper... I shudder at the thought.

I can’t ask Sawyer who he sold her to. I don’t think I could look at Sawyer right now without giving away everything I know, and that can’t happen until I know how to handle all of this. I could ask around in the playroom...

No. There’s someone better who might know.

I pull out my phone and text Chaffer back.

Save me a cigar. I’m on my way.

LIBERTY

Peter walks beside me into Chaffer's den, our arms interlocked, and his posture is so rigid, he reminds me of a cold, heartless robot. If we were anywhere else, he'd strike me as stiff and unpleasant, but here, surrounded by all these men at Chaffer's, it comes off as strength. It makes me feel safer, protected, and I'm grateful for it.

My shoulders square to match his, and I straighten my spine, scanning the room for both Chaffer and Naomi as soon as we're inside. I spot her on one of the couches, leaning on the shoulder of who I'm assuming is Digby Barton with peaceful, half-hooded eyes only sex and drugs can create.

"Focus," Peter hisses in my ear.

I blink and let him lead me farther into the room. He pulls his arm from me and casually steps away when someone greets him. He switches from rigid to inviting in half a second as he dives into a conversation I doubt he genuinely cares for.

I distance myself farther, inching toward the side of the room as I seek out Chaffer. The plan is for him to see me alone and up for grabs.

He spots me before I find him.

My gaze roams until I land on the poker table to find his stare drilling into me. I hold eye contact for only a moment before turning my head and lifting my red-painted lips into a smile. I brush a strand of hair out of my face and look at him again. He's still staring at me with a wicked smirk.

I turn and sashay toward the exit, my hips swinging just the right exaggerated amount. When I make it into the hall, I press my back against the wall and wait with my chest extended and a black stiletto planted in front of the other.

When Chaffer walks through the doors, I mimic his smirk.

“Hi,” I purr.

He licks his bottom lip as his eyes dip to my chest. “Were you looking for me, sweetheart?”

I shrug.

“Does your master know?”

I quickly dart my eyes to the floor and don’t answer. I don’t know for sure, but if I’m pegging Chaffer correctly as a man who gets off on power, I think he’d rather Peter not know. I’m guessing it’s more fun for him to fuck someone’s girl behind a man’s back. The bigger the asshat move, the better.

He chuckles and steps up to me, close enough that his shoe connects with my stiletto, and his chest is inches from my face. He cups my chin and lifts so I’ll look at him. “Don’t worry,” he murmurs like he’s telling me a secret. “I won’t tell.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, bringing my heel back and standing up straight. My neck cranes to look at Chaffer, but I exaggerate the position to put my neck and pouty lips into view.

His nicotine-stained teeth show through his parting lips when he lowers his eyes to my tits again. His hands run up my sides and cup my breasts, and already I can feel him getting worked up.

It’s repulsive but expected. I’ve spent a lot of time around men like him, and I’ve even fucked a few at Robert’s demand. They’re arrogant enough that they don’t question a woman’s overly enthusiastic response to their touch. They think someone like me is lucky to be had by someone like them, and as much as that makes me want to stab his eyes with an ice pick, it makes men like him so fucking easy to fool.

I close my eyes and part my lips on a sigh when Chaffer wedges his knee between my thighs. His touch roughens, and he shoves the top of my dress over my shoulders only to halt a moment later.

I open my eyes and search his confused face before looking down at my stitches.

“Did he stab you?” Chaffer asks, his jaw dropped.

I shift uncomfortably and go to pull my dress sleeves over my shoulders, but he stops me.

“It’s okay,” he assures me.

I meet his eyes and wince at the darkness in them. There isn’t a trace of sympathy in his expression, it’s all excitement.

He takes a lock of my hair and gently fingers it. “I like a girl who can take it rough.”

When the doors to the den open, Chaffer stands up straight and jerks my wrist. “Come on,” he urges, yanking me down the hall.

I hurry to follow him up a flight of stairs and down another hall to a door. He throws it open and shoves me inside a giant bedroom that must be his because there’s no way he put this much thought into a fuck pad.

My eyes widen and jaw drops at my command when I take it all the ostentatious, look-at-me gold, mostly just the color but some of the metal too. The shiny walls, the bed frame, the curtains, comforter. Even the expansive white rug has flecks in it. He walks to a gold drink cart at the edge of the bed, his gait far more relaxed than it was when we were on our way up.

When he gets to the cart, he looks back at me and smirks. “Impressive, isn’t it?”

“Wow,” I say in fake wonderment. It’s gaudy as fuck without an ounce of charm, but it’s meant to impress, so that’s exactly what I’m going to put off. “This is incredible.”

I step farther into the room, swiveling my head as I take in everything to feed his ego. “I mean, I thought Sawyer’s bedroom was impressive, but *this*...”

I look at Chaffer and suppress a laugh when I see rigid lines carve into his forehead.

He turns his attention back to the cart, setting up two glasses and grabbing a bottle of brown liquor without asking what I'd like... Typical.

"Sawyer's bedroom, huh?" he grunts, pouring us each a glass.

I walk up to him, chewing on one side of my bottom lip as if I just realized I've said the wrong thing. "Well, I mean, I was a manor whore before I was Peter's slave."

"Right." He faces me and extends my drink.

I take the glass with a gracious smile. "Can I be honest with you about something?" I ask, letting my smile fall and averting my eyes.

"Of course."

"I kind of miss being with someone so powerful." I chance a look at him. He's annoyed, but curiosity starts to bloom in his eyes. "Peter isn't..." I let out a small laugh. "Well, you know."

"Is that why you sought me out?" Life comes back into his expression. "You wanna get fucked by a real man?"

By a *real* man. I've heard that before.

These guys are all the same.

I smile shyly and tuck my hair behind my ear. Before I have a chance to say anything, he goes on.

"For the record, Sawyer is not a real man. I'm the one who built this society. He merely takes the credit."

I tilt my head. "Oh?"

Chaffer nods before taking a big gulp of liquor. I sip mine before resting it against my chest.

"This place would be nothing without me. The man is..." His jaw clenches as he sucks in a breath through flared nostrils. "The man is a fucking snake."

I pout my lips and give him a sympathetic look. “He gives you a share of some of the residents’ dues, though, right? I mean, that’s what I’ve heard.”

He stares at me blankly.

I shrug. “In a way, you both share the island. A chunk of a million dollars per resident is a hell of a lot of money to split, so—”

“A million?” He narrows his eyes. “Where did you hear that number?”

“Hmm?”

“It’s seven hundred fifty thousand per resident. Not a million.”

I dart my gaze away. “Oh...”

“Who told you it was a million?”

My shoulders cave as I hug my glass to my stomach. This is going perfectly.

He closes the distance between us, sparking violent tension where he hovers inches from me. He takes my jaw in a tight grasp and jerks it so I’m looking at him. I gasp.

“Who told you it was a million?”

I jump at his growl, but inside I’m snickering. See? These guys are so fucking easy to play.

“Sawyer,” I squeak. If I could figure out how to force myself to tremble, I would. I tense instead.

“Are you *sure*?”

My head bobs. “I... Yes, I’m sure. B-b-but, maybe it’s only some of the residents, the ones he brings in himself.” I shrink like I’m afraid he’ll hit me. “I’m sure there’s an explanation for the mix-up.”

He glares at me like I’m somehow at fault for Sawyer ripping him off, and I start to think maybe I should’ve picked someone else to have fake told me. Sawyer is the best person I

could think of who Chaffer wouldn't believe if he confronted him. But, fuck, he's pissed.

So much tension builds in the room that the fearfulness I'm putting off becomes real. I try to take a step back, but his hold on me only tightens.

All at once, he shoves me, and my hands flail before my ass hits the rug. I shuffle backward, my heartbeat quickening.

"Get the fuck out of my house," he snarls, turning toward the drink cart and leaning with his hands clutching the edges. I wouldn't be surprised if he picked it up and threw it at me.

I clumsily climb to my feet and hurry out of the room before he decides to shoot the messenger.

I rush down the stairs and to the den, relief a visceral balm to my nerves when I spot Peter as soon as the double doors open. My expression must be panicky because his face pinches with concern as I head his way. He breaks away from the guy talking to him and strides to me with even more urgency than I'm striding toward him with.

When we meet, Peter grabs my shoulders and jerks me to the side, his average frame blocking me from a good chunk of the room. "We need to leave," he growls in my ear.

"Yeah, no shit," I spit back. "It worked, he's fucking pissed, but I'm eighty percent sure he wants to rip my head off. Seriously, I think we may be *more* on his radar now. Don't be surprised if he shows up at your house asking for more information because—"

"Shut up," Peter snaps.

I bare my teeth and glare at him. "*Excuse me?*"

He glances over his shoulder, then back to me. "You were supposed to take longer than this," he seethes under his breath like he's pissed that my time with Chaffer was cut short. My fist clenches, and I get the strong urge to punch him. "Walk in front of me very carefully to the door, and *do not* look back."

My fingers uncurl, and my eyes widen.

Is it Naomi? What am I not supposed to be seeing?

“What?” I ask, leaning to look around him.

He grabs my shoulders and shakes me. “Stop it!”

“Where is she?” I screech, far too loudly.

“Goddamn it, shut up!” he hisses.

“Hey, everything okay?”

Peter yanks his hands away from me and whips his head toward a man coming up to us. “We’re fine.”

I can feel the man’s eyes on me, but I don’t waste another second on him. I jump to my left to see what or who Peter doesn’t want me to see.

Every muscle in my body tenses when Angel’s handsome face comes into view from across the den. His white teeth gleam as he talks to Digby Barton with a posture that comes off as friendly and warm, a rarity for Angel.

He’s here.

He’s *here*, smiling and carrying on days after we said goodbye to each other. And to make matters worse, he’s buddying up with the man pumping drugs into Naomi.

My heart gets heavy as a brick and sinks all the way to my toes, and I blink slowly as I watch him. Peter gets in front of me and ushers me to the far side of the room to shield me, all while talking to the stranger who intervened in his escape.

I look around Peter to see Angel taking Naomi’s hand. He helps her up before they start toward the door.

My thoughts are sluggish and stuttered, my arms tingling.

“He’s helping her,” I say out loud to myself in a weak voice. “He... He’s helping her.”

“Are you sure she’s okay?” the man asks, his tone skeptical.

“She had too much to drink.” Peter takes my shoulders and pulls me into him, gently this time. I turn my head and stare for only a few seconds before Angel and Naomi come into

view. Once they leave, I pry myself away from Peter and head for the door.

“*Hope*,” Peter warns.

I ignore him, my heavy feet dragging on the carpet. I open the door a few inches and look into the hall. I catch sight of their backs, hand in hand as Angel guides Naomi up the stairs.

No.

No, he... He wouldn't.

“*Hope*,” Peter says, right behind me.

Angel and Naomi leave my sight, and Peter pushes me out of the way, walking ahead of me to look. When he confirms that the coast is clear, he shoves the exit doors open and takes my wrist. He drags me out of the mansion while I peer at the staircase over my shoulder like they're somehow going to reappear, laughing like this is some prank. Like the love of my life isn't about to take advantage of my drugged-up friend.

He wouldn't.

He couldn't.

“He's helping her,” I say out loud again with more conviction this time.

Peter gives me the side eye and shakes his head as we exit the mansion.

“Whatever you need to tell yourself,” he mutters.

I rip my hand away from him and stop. “He's *helping* her,” I growl.

Peter spins toward me, his eyes blazing. “I could not give less of a fuck, you idiot. We need to leave. *Now*. If you want to be delusional when it comes to your boyfriend, fine, but cry about it later.”

My eyes water as I turn toward the door. I know it's stupid. I *know*. But everything in me wants to walk back inside, find Angel and Naomi, and get an explanation for what's going on.

He loves me. I *know* he loves me. There's no way this could be what it looks like.

Then why am I dying inside?

“*Liberty,*” Peter grates out. “Let’s go.”

The door blurs as more tears pool, then spill onto my cheeks. Peter grabs me and throws me over his shoulder, and I don’t fight him. I stare at the front door while he carries me down the path to the boat.

I know he’s wrong about Angel. Everyone is. I *know* it. But he is right about one thing...

Chaffer is pissed, according to plan, and the best course of action right now is to get the fuck out of here before he decides he wants to know more.

ANGEL

THREE DAYS LATER

“*Y*ou missed a hair.”

My hand, sticky with gel, pauses at my hairline as I glance at Naomi standing in my bathroom doorway. A bag of Doritos—her latest request—crinkles as she shoves a hand inside and pulls out a chip.

I turn back to the mirror and finish taming invisible flyaways.

She’s growing on me. In the three days she’s been here, she’s tried bossing me around, asked me a million questions I’ve refused to answer about Lib’s whereabouts, and drank a bottle and a half of Patron.

It wasn’t until last night when I couldn’t sleep and found her outside with her head in her hands that I saw her vulnerability. I stood in the open patio doorway for several minutes listening to her cry and watching her shoulders shake with her sobs.

I thought about going back to bed, but instead, I cleared my throat to make my presence known. I’ve never seen someone shoot up so fast.

We didn’t talk much, but she let me sit in the chair beside her while she stared at her knees pulled to her chest.

She’s scared and hurt, but she’s normally too proud to show it. Last night, she gave me a sliver of insight into the real her, so I’m pretty sure that means she’s beginning to trust me.

We've come a hell of a long way from where we were three nights ago.

She was out of it, delusional even, when I found her at Chaffer's. I tried talking to her, but she barely recognized me. She kept telling me she needed to find her friend, over and over, chanting Liberty's name.

I only meant to make sure she was okay, but I couldn't leave her like that. Digby Barton isn't a cruel man, but cocaine is the last thing she needs. I don't know for sure that she has a drug problem, and I didn't ask, but most of the girls Sawyer brings to the island do.

So for now, she's here. I paid Digby fifty thousand dollars to let me borrow her for a week, and I have no idea what I'll do when time is up. She's safe for now, but I can feel myself juggling too many things, and sooner or later, something's going to drop.

"It's almost ten," Naomi informs me. "Are you going to the manor?"

I pull my gaze away from the mirror to look at her. "Soon, yeah."

She crunches on a chip while she stares at me, and I can see something brewing in her mind. I step around her and head for my bedroom door.

"You know, you're not going to be able to save that girl."

I halt and look up before blowing out a breath.

"You can't save me either," she says, her voice small. "You might as well stop trying."

I turn around to face her. "I just need to buy some time to think."

She scoffs. "Think about what?"

About how the hell I'm going to live with myself allowing women to get kidnapped and raped. It isn't just Prudence and Naomi... There are others. I don't know who or how many or for how long this has been happening because none of the

women will talk to me, not even Amari. I have a feeling Prudence isn't the only person Sawyer's made afraid of me.

I still haven't spoken to him. If I do, he'll lie, and I'll find myself not knowing what to believe. I need time to wrap my head around this without him climbing inside it and twisting my thoughts further.

"I don't know," I answer to avoid having to explain all of this to Naomi.

The bag crinkles as she lowers it to her side. "Unless you're planning on killing Sawyer, just give it up. Let her accept her fate, and stop going to the manor if it bothers you so much. I know you have good intentions, but..."

My brow furrows. "But what?"

Naomi sighs. "If you don't stop, she's going to end up like Liberty and Beth."

Like Liberty and Beth... I'm not even sure what exactly she means. That I'm going to kill Prudence the way I supposedly killed Liberty and Beth? Has she heard both rumors? I don't have the best track record, but...

I don't know. I turn and leave without asking what she means because I don't want Liberty to come up in conversation. The safest thing for Liberty is for everyone to think I killed her. If that's what Naomi believes ... then I guess that's a good thing.

Naomi doesn't stop me as I take the stairs to the first floor and head outside. I walk down the path to the manor and see several people around the pool when I reach the gate.

Prudence is supposed to be hanging around the door to the playroom, laying low until I get there. That's been our arrangement. I show up early, take her to a room, and she stays there until it's late enough that she can get away with going to bed.

I keep my head down as I pass the pool and go inside. It's quiet as I make my way to the playroom, my steps echoing off the walls. When I get to the playroom doors, Cooper stands in

front of them. Normally there's only a guard on the inside, so his presence is unusual.

He steps in front of me to block the entrance, and I narrow my eyes at him.

“What are you doing?”

He cups his large hands in front of him and swallows, his throat working. The guy's a giant, six-five, maybe six-six, but right now he looks nervous.

“You're not allowed in tonight, Mr. A.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

“It was Mr. Hansley's request, sir... Sorry.”

I blink at him, taken aback.

Are you fucking serious?

My blood heats as anger sloshes through me. “Get the *fuck* out of my way.” Teeth bared, I step up to him and shove him when he tries to hold me back. He falls into the door with a bang, then clumsily pats his waistband before pulling out a gun and pointing it at me. I don't so much as flinch.

“Put it away, Cooper.”

Both our heads turn to peer at Sawyer on my left, and I throw my anger his way. “What the fuck is this?” I flick my hand at Cooper.

Sawyer's lips are drawn into a thin line as he motions to the foyer. “Let's talk in private.”

“We'll talk right fucking here,” I growl, my chest heaving.

Without a word, Sawyer turns to the foyer and walks that way. When he disappears out the main door, I turn to give Cooper one last glare before storming after Sawyer.

He stands waiting for me outside, his hands in his pockets.

“What are you doing, Sawyer?” I ask, stepping up to him and shaking my head.

“Well,” he drawls. “Since you've decided to stop answering your door and taking my calls, I don't see why it

would be unreasonable for me not to want you in my manor. Especially considering all you plan to do is walk the new girl up to a room.”

He’s pissed. I can see it in the hardness of his usually relaxed expression and the darkness in his eyes. But his voice is calm. His fists don’t clench like mine do, and his lip doesn’t curl.

“You lied to me, you son of a bitch,” I snarl, taking a step toward him. “Prudence wasn’t a junkie prostitute. She was just a girl. You *kidnapped* her.”

Sawyer removes his hands from his pockets and bites his bottom lip in frustration as he looks up at the stars. He lets out a bitter laugh and shakes his head before meeting my eyes. “You know, I find it highly ironic that you’re the one calling *me* a liar when that’s all you ever. Fucking. Do.”

He starts to circle me like he’s a fucking tiger or something.

I turn to watch him. “Don’t change the subject,” I spit. “How long have you been bullshitting me about the manor whores? How many of them did you force here?”

“You always believe what you want to believe, Angel. Do you want to know the truth?” he asks, almost *yells*, as he flings his hands up. “*Fine*. She wasn’t a junkie prostitute; she was someone’s pain in the ass they wanted gone. She didn’t come here willingly. I bought her. No, I didn’t tell you that,” he grinds out the words, pausing his circling. “Because I knew you’d play this high and mighty card like you’re somehow above it all.”

“I would never—”

“Don’t fucking tell me you’d never do shit!” Spittle flies from his mouth, and he gets in my face. “You are *ten times* as ruthless as I am. If this was your business, you would do worse.” He closes his eyes and rubs his temples like he’s trying to center himself.

I get the strong urge to shove him off the porch, but I stay still, every muscle in my body coiled, taut. I never thought

he'd admit to this. One half of me is furious, and the other is struck.

"*There,*" he says, his voice even. He opens his eyes. "I told you the truth. Your turn."

His eyes drill into me like he expects me to fess up to something. If it's Lib he wants to know about, he can go to hell.

"You need to let Prudence go," I say instead of feeding in to whatever it is he wants. "This isn't how things were supposed—"

"Where's Jasper?" he asks, his voice still level but his eyes are smoldering, almost manic.

My eyes narrow with confusion. "What?"

His lips lift into a pinched smile before he grabs my shirt and jerks me to him. "Where. Is. Jasper?"

I shove him away and take a step back. I'd be pissed if he wasn't starting to make me nervous. He's acting like he's losing his fucking mind. "How the hell am I supposed to know?"

He barks out a laugh and presses his hands to his cheeks. "I swear to God, if you don't tell me where he is, I'm going to lose it on you." The way he says this under his breath makes me wonder if he's talking to himself. He drops his hands and turns around like he can't stand to look at me. Several seconds pass as I search my brain for some recollection of what he could be talking about. The last time I saw Jasper... I can't even remember.

Why is this so important? If he thinks I'm done discussing the women, he's—

"You're my brother, Angel," Sawyer says, cupping his hands behind his back, his head tilted up. "I love you. I would kill for you. But if you killed Jasper and can't even tell me about it... I don't know what that means for us."

I tilt my head. "What are you talking about? I didn't kill Jasper."

Sawyer *humphs* and slowly spins to face me. “Did you kill *Liberty*?”

I stand, stone-faced, not bothering with the lie when it doesn't come out quickly enough.

He knows. He's probably known the whole time.

Did he...

My eyes widen, and my lips part. There's a stutter in my heart that almost knocks me over.

“Did you send Jasper to Spain?” I ask, barely above a whisper. I take a step toward him. “Is that why you think I did something to him? You had us *followed*?”

Sawyer's face is hard, giving me my answer just as I gave him his.

Jasper followed us ... which means he knew when I let Lib go.

Tiny pins prick my face, and my knees buckle. I fall onto the porch, my hands grinding against rough brick.

I can't breathe.

“Can you blame me?” Sawyer asks, his tone defensive. “I was afraid you'd do something stupid like let her go, and you *did*. I was protecting us.”

Himself. He was protecting himself. Not us.

I can't think about that right now.

She's dead. If Jasper found her, it's a guarantee that he killed her.

But she made it to Peter. He took her somewhere.

I tense at that thought, hope building.

Jasper might not have found her.

The front door swings open, and frantic screams erupt from inside. Two men hobble onto the porch, walking around me and trudging down the steps, one of them hanging on the other.

“Sir!” I turn my head to see Cooper hurrying onto the porch with Anna in his arms, the open door allowing the screams to reach us.

Sawyer’s face twitches with worry as he takes her. She’s barely conscious, and vomit sticks to her cheek and hair.

“What’s going on?” he asks, panic saturating his words.

Cooper jerks to look behind him then shakes his head at Sawyer. “I—I don’t know. It’s the whole playroom.”

A woman rushes through the door, shrieking and flailing her arms. She jumps over me, and it’s what I need to snap out of the momentary stupor.

I stand, and Sawyer grabs my shoulder to stop me as I start off the porch. I jerk from his grasp and stride away as more people shove to get outside.

I can’t think about whatever’s happening at the manor. I have to get to Peter. *Now.*

I need to find Lib before someone else does... Someone like Jasper.

“Angel!” Sawyer calls to my back, his voice pleading. I ignore it.

My strides shift into a run until I’m full out sprinting to my boat, ignoring the stampede of wailing people behind me.

LIBERTY

*P*eter's forehead rests in his palm like he has a migraine. "You need to be patient."

I pace the rug in Kingsley's living room while he and Layan sit quietly on the couch. Peter is at the window, his elbow digging into the frame.

"My niece can't afford patience," I sneer, stopping my pacing long enough to unclench my fists at my sides and face him. He doesn't look at me, but he does lower his hand and open his eyes, peering out the window.

Kingsley fidgets on the couch. "Liberty, if you just—"

He stops, mouth open when I glare at him, and he raises his hands and bows his head in defeat.

I start pacing again, a lump forming in my throat.

It's been seventy-two hours, and we have *no* idea if we've caused any friction between Sawyer and Chaffer. For all we know they could've fought, Sawyer could've explained himself, Chaffer could've had it verified that I'd been lying, and they could've moved on.

In the meantime, we're here hiding out in Kingsley's house like cowards, waiting for something to happen.

I push back my hair, my eyes starting to water with frustration.

"We have to do *something*," I say, though it sounds more like a demand. I groan into my hands, my feet pausing. "I can't just sit here."

“These things take time,” Layan says, her voice soft but firm. I turn to her, a snarky report on the tip of my tongue, but none of this is her fault. Her hair is swept to the side, still damp from a shower. She wears it in a side braid every day to cover up the fact that part of her ear is missing. And that’s only a small piece of the torture she endured from her last master.

That’s why Kingsley and Layan were so concerned for me when I arrived. They were worried I’d had similar experiences as a slave. She went through hell, and if she can be patient, I should be able to.

But I’m not.

I’m just fucking not.

“I know,” I groan, raking a hand through my hair. “I know, I just can’t sit here another—”

“Shut up,” Peter says, his eyes bulging as he stares out the window. Normally, I would spit something back at him, but his panicked expression sobers me.

He shoves away from the window just as someone furiously bangs on the door.

“*Go*,” he commands, pointing to the hallway just off the living room.

My heart stops as cold fear seizes me like I’ve been submerged in an ice bath. Layan grabs my hand and drags me into the hallway, Peter leading us, just as the door bursts open.

With my back planted against the wall, I peer at the stairs, my breathing heavy. Too heavy. If someone is here for me, they’ll find me in a second.

“Woah,” Kingsley says. “What’s going on?”

“Where is he?” a voice demands.

My lips part, and I jerk my head to peek into the living room. I can’t see him, but I know that voice. I’d recognize the accent anywhere.

Angel.

Layan tugs my wrist, urging me down the hallway, but I stay rooted in place.

“Where’s who?” Kingsley asks.

“You *know* who. Fucking Peter. I need to speak to him. *Now.*”

“H-have you checked his house?” Kingsley stammers. I wince imagining the icy glare Angel’s probably giving him.

There’s a bang followed by the sound of glass shattering, making me flinch. I inch that way, but Layan squeezes my wrist to get my attention. I turn to look at her, and she shakes her head. Peter knocks his head back, gently hitting the wall as he seems to be deciding something.

“He left his door unlocked. He wouldn’t do that if he wasn’t close by.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I-I don’t—”

“Then get him here!”

Peter pushes off the wall and walks into the living room, his stance rigid like he isn’t afraid. I don’t know how he couldn’t be... I am. I’ve never seen Angel’s temper until now. He sounds *violent*.

“I’m here,” he says, stepping out of my view. “What do you want?”

“Were you *hiding* from me?” Angel asks, disgust evident in his tone.

“Well, when you come barging into someone’s home—”

“Where’s Liberty?” Angel asks, clearly not caring about Peter’s explanation.

Where’s Liberty?

He knows I’m on the island?

Peter clears his throat, finally showing some nervousness. “You gave me the task of keeping her safe. I’m doing the best that I can to—”

“Sawyer knows she’s alive,” Angel cuts him off, desperation filtering into his words. “You were right, he had us followed.” I move closer to the living room despite Layan waging a protest on my arm. “The man who was sent to follow us is missing. If he has her right now, or if he finds her before I do, she’s as good as dead.”

I peek as inconspicuously as I can into the living room, and when I spot Angel, my stomach plummets. He pulls back the hammer on a pistol and points it at Peter’s head. “Tell me where she is *right fucking now*, or I will blow your brains all over this house.”

“Woah.” Kingsley takes a step toward the two men but halts when Angel points the gun at him.

“Get the fuck out,” Angel commands.

Kingsley eyes quickly dart to Peter, but he leaves without another word.

“Jasper isn’t going to find her,” Peter says, snapping Angel’s attention back to him.

“How do you know?”

“Because Jasper’s dead.”

Angel squints at Peter who folds his arms over his chest, slowly shuffling in the opposite direction as me, probably so Angel won’t look this way. If I could resist the temptation to watch, I would. I’m already using up so much of my self-control to keep from running to Angel and burying my face in his neck.

He’s afraid for me. That’s why he’s here. He’s afraid enough he’s willing to end a man’s life to protect me. Probably multiple men’s lives.

The only thing rooting me in place is not knowing if he’s willing to end Sawyer’s.

“I ran over him when I went to the airstrip. He was chasing Liberty.”

Angel gapes at Peter for several seconds without saying anything. Finally, “Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“Because I killed your friend, and I wasn’t sure what lengths I was allowed to go to keep Liberty safe.”

“*Any length,*” Angel growls. “You should’ve told me.”

“I wasn’t sure Mr. Hansley would see it the same way, sir. If he were to find out...”

Angel sighs and lowers the gun before scrubbing at his jaw. “I still need to know where she is. She isn’t safe while Sawyer knows she’s alive.”

“Don’t you think you’d be leading him right to her?”

“Goddamn it, just fucking tell me!” Angel yells, kicking an end table and sending it crashing onto its side. The beer I’d been sipping on earlier rolls onto the floor, liquid seeping out and soaking the rug.

“Okay,” Peter says, nodding. “I took her to New York.”

Angel’s stunned expression quickly morphs into anger, but Peter speaks again, halting whatever Angel was about to spew.

“Robert Gaumond is dead too. She killed him with the gun I gave her.”

“Are you sure?” Angel’s eyes dart over Peter like he’s searching for the truth.

Peter nods. “I helped clean it up. Then I took her to a safe location where some people I know are looking after her. I vetted them thoroughly, I assure you, and if there are any problems, they will let me know. She’s safe, Mr. Ramos. Go home.”

My heart strings tug when Angel blows out a breath, closing his eyes. God, I miss him. I miss him so much it hurts to breathe. When I saw him the other night with Naomi... I tried not to think the worst, but I couldn’t rule anything out. He could’ve slunk back into his old ways, turned into a man I never knew.

But no. Now it’s crystal clear to me. He was helping my friend. I don’t know how or why, but I know it’s true. I’m sorry I ever doubted him.

If he's willing to help Naomi...

Surely he'd be willing to help Elsie.

I have to take the chance. Layan digs her nails into my arms, clawing to stop me from stepping into the living room, so I drag her with me. I'm fully exposed when the door bursts open and Kingsley appears, phone in hand and jaw dropped. Peter shoots daggers at me the second Angel turns toward Kingsley.

"Something's happened at the manor," Kingsley rasps, his gaze flicking between both men.

Something's happened at the manor?

Does that mean... Did our plan *work*?

I quickly step back into the shadows.

"What is it?" Peter asks.

Kingsley raises his shoulders and shakes his head in astonishment. "I-I don't know exactly, but people are dropping. They think something was wrong with the liquor."

"I need to go," Angel mutters, striding to the door and slamming it shut behind him. Kingsley and Peter barely seem to notice his exit, but when Layan and I hurry into the living room, Peter glowers at me.

"It had to have been Chaffer," Kingsley goes on, shaking his head like he can't believe it.

"How many people died?" Peter asks.

Kingsley shrugs. "*Dozens*. My source says a big chunk of the playroom just started throwing up and dying."

"Were any women hurt?" Layan asks. By the way she grimaces, she must know the answer. We all do. We stand in solemn silence for a few moments.

Elsie pops into my mind. She was never much of a drinker at home. She maybe had an occasional beer with friends, but never the hard stuff. She wouldn't have drank at the manor...

But what if she did?

“Who’s your source?” I eagerly ask Kingsley.

He gives Layan an apologetic look before answering. “Eli Colley.”

“Can he find out if my niece is okay?”

Kingsley glances at Layan again. “Um, I don’t think it’s a good idea to ask. He was just calling to spread gossip.”

I sigh, exasperated. “But can you ask him? There’s no way ___”

“He’s the last person whose attention you’d want to draw to your niece,” Layan interjects.

I turn to Layan, her expression grave as she lifts her hair to show her ear.

Oh...

Layan rakes her fingers through her hair, covering the deformity before she starts toward the stairs with so much intention in her step, my head stops spinning long enough to fully focus on her.

She looks back at me. “Are you coming?”

I raise a brow. “Coming where?”

“To get ready,” she says, her voice strong and even. “We’re going to the manor to make sure your niece is okay.”

My fingers twitch with excitement as I whip my head to Peter.

He stares at her like she’s insane. “We’re not—”

“Layan’s right,” Kingsley agrees, walking to the stairs. “If there was ever a time no one would notice us, it’s now. We need to move quickly.”

He bounds up the stairs, and I hurry after him.

Peter takes my arm when I go to pass, and I jerk to face him with a snarl. “Let go.”

“We are *not* going to the manor,” Peter growls with steely determination.

I raise my fist and slam it against his jaw. He lets out a grunt and winces. My breaths come out heavy with both anger and excitement as he lets go of my wrist and takes a step back.

He rubs his jaw and squints at me with a mixture of hatred and respect.

Layan and Kingsley are already gone, but I glance up the stairs when Layan calls my name.

I turn to Peter. “You’re the one outnumbered this time,” I say, my voice even. “Are you with us or not?”

He twists his lips and crosses his arms over his chest, thinking. Looking away, he lets out a defeated sigh. “Go get ready.”

ANGEL

The front lawn of the manor looks like a battlefield in the aftermath of war. Bodies spread out over it with a pile of them by the porch.

My head swivels side to side to take everything in as I walk to the front door, the flashlight I brought for this morbid purpose gliding over bodies as I search for Prudence, hoping I don't find her among the dead, but if Peter's friend is right and it was liquor that was poisoned, she should be fine. She was waiting for me in the playroom with no intention of partying.

"Hey," I say to Cooper as he drags a man's body outside, the front door wide open.

He glances up at me and wipes sweat from his forehead with his shoulder.

"Where's Sawyer?"

Cooper shrugs and drags the body toward the edge of the porch. "I don't know. Anna's ... gone. I imagine he's upset."

I feel my lips tug down into a frown as I watch him drag the man into the grass, his skull hitting the ground with a thud. I came back to make sure Prudence was okay, but my stomach is a lead ball thinking about how Sawyer must feel right now.

I want to beat the shit out of him for sending Jasper, of all people, to spy on me, and I don't feel good about him knowing that Liberty's alive and free... But I know he liked Anna, and despite my anger, I feel the strong urge to be there for him. He's still my brother.

I tuck the flashlight in my pocket before entering the manor and walking to Sawyer's office only to find the door locked. I knock, but no one answers, so I go to the playroom instead.

The first thing that hits me is the smell. It *reeks* of vomit and death, and my nose wrinkles as I wander around. Scanning over the bodies guards have yet to haul out, I spot the heels of a woman behind the bar.

Holding my breath, I walk closer, and as more of the woman's body enters my sight, my dread increases. Amari's face comes into view, her head turned to the side with dead eyes staring ahead.

I let out my breath and crouch over her, taking her wrist to uselessly feel for a pulse. Confirming my suspicions, I close my eyes and sigh.

"Mr. A?" a weak voice calls.

My eyes flutter open as I crane my neck to see Prudence hiding beneath the bartop. She has her knees tucked into herself, and is shaking violently, her head poked out just enough to make eye contact.

I carefully rest Amari's hand on her chest, then smooth my palm over her eyelids to close them. Prudence whines as I stand and go to her, her eyes imploring me in a way that makes her seem so fucking vulnerable. Way too innocent to be here.

I kneel so we're eye level and offer her my hand. She flicks her gaze between my face and hand, unsure what to do.

"It's okay," I assure her in as gentle a voice as I can muster. "I'm going to take you to my home until everything calms down."

She sucks in her cheeks and slowly places her hand in mine. I help her up, and we make our way out of the playroom as Cooper returns, ready to play the part of gravedigger again.

He gives me a look when he sees me with Prudence, but he doesn't say anything nor stop me as we leave.

When we make it out the back door, I find Sawyer sitting at the edge of the pool. His feet are submerged in the water, and his back is hunched as his head hangs.

I stand still for several seconds, debating over what to do. The line between teammate and opponent is blurry right now, so I'm not sure how he'd feel about me taking Prudence off manor grounds.

Right now, he probably isn't thinking about anything but Anna.

What if it had been Lib?

I sigh and turn to Prudence who's hiding at my back, using me as a shield from Sawyer. "There's a gate to my house over there." I motion toward the trees. "Go ahead. I'll be there soon."

She crosses her arms over her chest and squeezes like she's cold, her uncertain stare aimed at Sawyer. I take off my jacket and hold it out for her.

"It's okay," I assure her again.

She makes eye contact as she takes the jacket, searching me for truth while she slips on the wool, then finally, she starts toward the tree line. I walk to Sawyer, take off my shoes, roll up my pants, and sit beside him. The cool water hugs my bare feet as I dip them into the pool.

"I'm sorry about Anna," I say, lowering my head to mimic his posture. "I know you cared for her..."

"Yeah." Sawyer huffs, sniffing as he straightens his spine. "I could tell you were real sorry by the way you ran out of here."

I open my mouth to defend myself, but instead, turn to look at the blue water, lit up by pool lights. "You're right... That was fucked up."

I angle my neck to peer at him as he runs his hands over imaginary stubble. "I think I might have loved her."

My brows bunch, but then I force my face to relax. It strikes me what a hypocrite I am to question his ability to love

a woman he brought onto the island to whore out. He could've loved her as much as I love Liberty.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He doesn't reply, just stares solemnly at the water.

"What do you think happened?"

He lifts a shoulder and lets it fall. "I have no idea."

"Do you think something got spiked?" I ask.

"I don't know, Angel," he reiterates. "Right now, I really don't care."

I look away and lower my head. "Right."

"I'll find out, though... Tomorrow. If it was foul play, I'll bring hell down on whoever did this." He takes a deep inhale through his nose. "Can I count on you to be with me?"

"Of course," I say, my face sinking. "You know that."

He glances at me, then looks back at the water. Several seconds pass as we sit in silence.

"You should get back to Prudence," Sawyer says. "I'm sure she's freaked out."

I slowly nod, letting another couple of seconds pass before I stand. I pull on my socks and shoes and turn to start for the gate when Sawyer speaks.

"I don't know what she's told you, but I can tell that her being here is turning us against each other... I'll get her someplace safe. I promise."

I turn to him, hoping my expression displays the relief I feel at hearing him say that.

I don't believe the idea of the island is inherently bad. In fact, I think this place could be great if used the way it was initially intended. A place for play. A place for people to live out their fantasies without judgment from the outside world. It's gone off track, and I don't plan on allowing the depravity to continue. For the first time since realizing this, I feel like it's possible for Sawyer and I to get on the same page.

“Thank you,” I say before turning and heading for the trees.

Prudence is shuffling her feet when I arrive at the gate, nervously watching for me.

I type in the code for the gate and swing it open for her before pulling out the flashlight. I could walk this trail blindfolded, but something tells me Prudence will appreciate having more than the moon to illuminate our way. I wouldn't be surprised if she told me she was afraid of the dark.

“Ready?” I extend my hand to beckon her through.

She hurries past me, hugging herself as we start down the path to my house. Every time leaves rustle, she jumps, and I have to assure her everything's okay. It's only animals, nature sounds. No one is after her. No one is coming to take her away.

At one point, just before my house comes into view, she stops and spins to face me. The flashlight illuminates the tears in her eyes, the paralyzing fear on her face. I lower the beam so I don't have to see it so clearly.

“I don't want to go back,” she tells me, her voice so quiet I barely hear it over the crickets screeching.

I frown, unsure if I should make her any promises. All I want to do is hold this girl, protect her, and preferably, get her the fuck away from here and never see her again. It makes me sick every time I look at her.

“You can stay the night,” I say, settling on that promise. “We'll figure out everything else later.”

She hesitates a few seconds, but then nods. She turns and starts walking while I follow behind, the beam of light directing us down the path. More rustling sounds, louder this time, and I perk up, turning the flashlight toward the noise. That was more than a tiny animal.

Prudence gasps, and I spin just in time to see the butt of a gun speeding toward my temple.

LIBERTY

“*S*top!” I scream at Peter as I leap from the trees. But I’m too late. Angel falls to the ground in a heap, and I run to him.

I drop down beside him, taking in the dark spot on his hairline. It’s hard to make out the red in the moonlight alone, but I know it must be blood. His eyes are closed, and his lips are slightly parted.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” I sneer at Peter, whipping my glare his way. It falls, along with my stomach, when he cocks the gun and aims it at Angel. I throw myself over Angel’s body to shield him.

“*Move,*” Peter commands.

“I’m not going to let you kill him, you asshole!” I scream at him, angry tears pricking my eyes.

We were not here for this. We came this way because I knew where Angel kept his gun, and Peter thought it’d be best to unarm him while we had the chance.

We were just getting to the house—the back patio door he normally keeps unlocked our destination—when we saw the beam of light on the path to the manor.

We hid in the trees, and I thought all we were doing was waiting for the person to pass. The sight of Angel walking by with another woman hit hard, but all jealousy has washed away by the absolute terror I currently feel.

He can't die. I don't care what he's done or what he could do to harm our plan, I would never let Peter, or anyone else, kill him.

Angel's protected me so many times. Now it's my turn to protect him.

"Peter, what are you doing?" Layan asks, her voice non-threatening as if to ease the tension. Or at least trying not to add to it.

"Go find that girl," Peter snarls to Layan and Kingsley, gesturing to the trees the woman bolted toward during Peter's ambush. "Make sure she doesn't go back to the manor."

"What are you gonna do?" Kingsley asks, nervously scratching at his arm. Layan's sandals crunch on leaves and brush as she walks off the path, but she doesn't go far, peering into the trees halfheartedly.

Despite the darkness, I can see the seriousness in Peter's eyes when he stares me down. I stare back.

He growls, and a piece of the boulder on my chest lifts when he lowers the weapon. "Liberty, *listen to me.*" He stabs a finger at Angel. "This is *not* a good man. With all the chaos from tonight and with us bumping into him... We're not going to get a better opportunity to take him out. He is Sawyer's *greatest* ally, and I promise, he will cause a multitude of problems for us. He was always going to die. So..." I stare down the barrel of the gun as Peter points it at my face. "*Move.* I'm not going to sacrifice our mission to save you, so if you have to die with him, that's your call."

"No," Kingsley says, striding over to us. "You're not killing anybody."

Peter scoffs. "This is Angel Ramos. Don't tell me you're too stupid to see what an opportunity this is too."

Kingsley meets my eyes and frowns apologetically. "Okay, fine, but you're not killing Liberty."

"I will if I have no choice."

I catch Layan out of the corner of my eye, walking up with her hands behind her back. We briefly lock eyes before she moves her gaze to Peter. He doesn't seem to notice her. I see no signs of panic on her face or in her steps. No sign of worry.

"You *don't* have a choice," Kingsley says. "I'm not giving you one."

Layan's close now. She makes eye contact again and nods toward Peter. It takes me a moment to realize she's motioning to the gun.

She wants me to go for it.

"You realize all the casualties from tonight were our doing, right?" Peter scowls, not letting Kingsley reply before continuing. "How many women do you think you've already killed? If you want Layan off this island, sacrifices are going to have to be made."

"Liberty is one of us."

Peter huffs, his head turned toward Kingsley. He's as distracted as he's going to be.

The gun is still aimed at my head, but I take a deep breath and ready myself to take a chance. I shoot my arm up and shove the gun away. A blast rings out, and I scream, my eyes closing.

A thump sounds, and something heavy lands on my foot. I open my eyes to see Peter on the ground, groaning as he touches the back of his head. Layan stands above us holding a rock.

"No one else is dying tonight," she says matter of factly before tossing the large rock in her hand onto the ground and picking up the gun.

I pull my foot from beneath Peter, gasping like I've just sprinted here as I look at Layan, hoping she can see the gratitude I feel if my voice can't manage it. "Thank you."

"Lib?"

All our heads move to look at the source of the voice. My heart seems to recognize it before my brain with the way it

pauses.

“Is that really you?” Elsie asks, her voice cracking.

“Elsie,” I say her name in a whisper, but when my brain accepts her presence, I jump up. “Elsie!” I scream, running to her. She meets me halfway where we throw our arms around each other.

She digs her face into my shoulder, and I hold one hand over her head as if that will give her extra protection from this world. I sob as she does and breathe her in. I cry harder when I don’t smell the shampoo that always scented her hair. Instead, it’s the same stuff I washed my hair with when I was at the manor.

She’s here. She’s really here.

I knew she would be, but a small part of me hoped she wasn’t. Hoped this was somehow all a mistake, like we’d had it wrong.

She’s here.

She’s *safe*.

For now.

I force my sobs to quiet, although my breaths still catch, and my lungs feel like they’re shaking. “I love you so much,” I whisper.

She hugs me tighter, and I plant my lips to her pretty blonde head I’ve missed so goddamn much.

“Umm, Liberty?” Layan calls.

I don’t turn around, instead squeezing Elsie like I’m afraid she’ll be pried from my arms if I don’t.

“*Liberty*,” Layan repeats more forcefully.

I quickly swipe a hand beneath my eyes and look over my shoulder. She’s pointing the gun at the dirt by Peter’s body. I can’t tell if he’s passed out or just laying there, but I don’t focus on him long. My eyes lock onto what has Layan’s attention.

Angel is sitting up, groaning as he touches his head.

“Shit,” I let out on a breath. I turn back to Elsie and plant my hands on both sides of her head. “Els.”

“No.” She shakes her head and squeezes me. “Don’t leave me.”

“I’m right here,” I whisper, smoothing her hair. “I’m right here, but I need to check on a friend.”

She pulls back and looks at me with her glossy eyes. “Mr. A?”

A wave of nausea passes through me as reality knocks me in the face. He was taking *Elsie* back to his house.

A lump forms in my throat, leaving me unable to answer with words, so I simply nod.

When she looks past me at Angel, I follow her lead. He’s looking around, obviously still a bit out of it, but I can tell the situation is coming into his consciousness.

Elsie pulls away from me and walks toward him, and I turn, holding my breath. He doesn’t recognize me in the dark, even with the flashlight on the ground shining my way, but I’m not surprised. I’m the last person he would be expecting.

His eyes narrow as Elsie approaches, and when she crouches beside him, he looks around at all of us.

“Are you okay?” Elsie asks.

His eyes pin on her, confusion written in his expression. “What the fuck is going on?”

Elsie looks back at me, and I roll my shoulders before walking their way. His eyes widen when he sees it’s me, his lips parting. “Lib?”

He shoves onto his feet but halts at Layan’s voice.

“*Stop.*”

His head swivels toward her and the gun pointed at his chest for only a moment before his attention moves back to me.

“You can’t be here.” He shakes his head. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I’m sorry,” I say, wiping a tear that spills from my eye. “I know everything you risked to let me go. But I found out Elsie was here, and I had to come back.”

“Elsie?” he asks, his shoulders sagging. “What?”

“You know,” I spit, bitterness in my tone. “The girl you were just bringing back to your house.”

His eyes move to Elsie, and he cups a hand over his mouth. “Fuck.”

“You didn’t know?” I ask, praying it’s the truth. Because if he did... If he was about to fuck my niece, knowing she was my niece...

Then I lied. I will have to kill him.

His hand falls from his mouth as he shakes his head. He takes a step toward me but stops when Layan clears her throat. “No. Lib, *no*. I swear to you, if I had, she wouldn’t still be here.”

“Still be on the island?” Another tear drops from my eyelash. “Or still be in your bed?”

“*What?*” he asks incredulously. “She’s a *kid*. You think I would...” He flinches like I’ve slapped him.

“He was helping me.”

Our eyes draw to Elsie.

“In the playroom, people...” Elsie shudders. “A lot of people died. Mr. A found me. He was just bringing me with him so I wouldn’t have to be there.”

I turn my head to Angel, my heart filling with so much love, I think I’ll be the one to pass out next. My face contorts as a sob escapes, and I close the distance between us to throw myself into his arms.

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

“I love you, too. And I’m sorry,” he whispers, running his hands over my back. “I’m so sorry, Lib. You were right about everything. This place is so fucked up, but I promise, I’m trying to find a way to fix it. Sawyer...” His breath stutters like he’s in pain. “I can’t believe he would take Elsie.”

“He’s a bad person,” Elsie pipes up, urgency in her voice. I pull myself away from Angel as he faces her, catching Layan’s eye. She smiles sympathetically, and I can’t help but notice the gun is no longer aimed at Angel, but at the ground. “I-I didn’t want to tell you before because I wasn’t sure I could trust you, but he lies. Amari told me tonight that I shouldn’t talk to you anymore because Sawyer would get mad if you knew about what goes on at the manor. She said he would kill me if I told you my real name or who my family is.”

Angel looks off and doesn’t respond to that. He probably doesn’t know what to think or say, and I don’t plan to push him any further. He knows. He has all the information about Sawyer, and he has to make up his mind himself, in his own time. I’ve figured that out by now.

“We have a way to stop all of this,” I say, dragging his eyes to me. “Everything that happened tonight was because I told Chaffer that Sawyer lies about how much the residents pay in dues.”

“Liberty, *don’t*,” Kingsley warns. I ignore him.

“If we start a war between them, we can kill off the bad people without anyone even noticing. They would do most of the work for us. And without them, we can leave. No one would stop us.”

Angel shakes his head. “Sawyer will stop you. You have to leave without him finding out you were ever here.” He flicks his gaze at Elsie. “I’ll figure something out to—”

“No,” I cut him off. “I’m not leaving anyone here this time. All the women get to leave.”

“Sawyer would—”

“Sawyer will be dead.”

Angel's face drains like he's just been given news of a terminal illness before he wanders back a step, turning to look away.

"Angel, please," I beg, going to him and taking his hands. He doesn't pull away, but he also doesn't look at me.

"If we had you on our side, we could do this. We could save so many people. You could right your wrong."

I squeeze his hands, but Angel tugs them away. I whimper at his absence when he takes several steps back. "*Please.*"

"I can't do that," he says, his voice low. "I'll figure something out, I promise you, but I can't help you kill Sawyer. He... He, um..." Angel pauses a moment. "He's coming around." He gestures at Elsie. "He was just telling me he knows bringing Elsie here was a mistake. I'm pretty sure he's already planning on letting her go."

"Bullshit," I groan. "Even if that is true, it isn't enough. No one should be forced to be here."

"Then I'll figure that part out."

"No, you won't!" I say, my hands flying desperately in the air. "You *can't*."

He frowns, and I slowly give my head a shake. "Angel, I love you. You're a good man. If you love me like you say you do, you'll do this for me."

His eyes narrow to slits. "That isn't fair."

"None of this is." I take a deep breath and let a moment pass. "If you could just... Just tell Sawyer that Chaffer is the one who poisoned the alcohol. That would be huge."

He eyes me skeptically. "Why?"

"Because then he'd retaliate," Layan answers for me, taking a step toward Angel. "Do you remember me?" she asks.

Angel pauses a moment, rolling his bottom lip into his mouth with discomfort, but finally, he nods.

"If you don't want to help us take down Sawyer, fine. I understand." She shrugs as if it isn't a big deal, but her

expression is as serious as I've ever seen it. "You could even tell him about us and stop all of this... But Eli Colley is the type of man you would be helping us get rid of. He deserves to die. If you want to stop us later, you can. But at least let us take some of the sadists out first... You'd be helping their slaves, even if that doesn't mean they get to leave the island."

This, he considers. I see the wheels churning behind his eyes, see him calculating the risks. Still, after everything, he doesn't fully turn against Sawyer.

"Just think about it," Layan says. She picks up the flashlight and turns to me. "We need to go."

Kingsley must agree because he goes to Peter, and he and Layan help Peter up. His eyes barely open, and he lets out a low groan while they each put one of his arms over their shoulders. As they help him down the path, I swing my gaze between Angel and Elsie, unsure how the hell I can leave either of them.

We didn't plan on taking Elsie. We all agreed it would be too dangerous, that they'd search for her and would kill us all once they found her with us.

But now... Now it doesn't seem possible to leave her behind.

"It's okay," Elsie says, seemingly reading my mind. She presses her lips together, and her face pinches like she's trying not to cry. "Sawyer would freak if I left."

I look at Angel, silently imploring him as if he has the power to change things. "Do you think Sawyer would buy you wanting to keep her for a few days?"

Angel sighs and lifts his hand to his hair, wincing when he touches the gash Peter left. He brings his fingers in front of him and eyes the blood.

"No," he says, his hand dropping to his side. "He's already made it obvious he doesn't want me around Elsie. He only let me take her because his mind's too busy thinking about..." Angel's mouth stays open like he just caught himself. He closes it and clears his throat.

I attempt to finish for him. “About what happened tonight, in the playroom?”

He nods. “Yeah.” I get the sense that I’m missing something but let it go. Elsie is here, and I have to leave her. I don’t have time to read into Angel’s cryptic response.

I turn to Elsie and hold back my cry. She falls into me and squeezes my midsection.

I swallow and suck air in through my nose until I’m settled enough to speak. “I’m going to be back as soon as I can be. Okay? I’ll have you home soon.” I close my eyes and force a smile. “You have the ivy leagues to get to.”

She lets out a gurgled laugh, her face in my chest. “I got into Yale.”

“I know.” I smile, this time for real. “I saw the flag in your bedroom.”

“You went back?” There’s confusion in her voice that I know I can’t settle right now. I don’t want to tell her about her uncle. Not yet. Not until we’re far away from here and she can handle one more death.

“Only to get you.” I pull away and cup her face, staring into her eyes. “I will never leave you here, do you understand?”

She bites her lip and nods before I bring her to my chest for one last hug. We reluctantly pull away, and I turn to Angel. He looks as hesitant to go to me as I feel to go to him, neither of us sure if we’re working with or against the other.

Later, it will matter. For now, all that matters is we’re both alive, we’re both okay, and we love each other, for better or worse.

I go to him, and he opens his arms for me to bury myself in his chest, just as Elsie did with me. It feels so good to be back in his arms, so safe. I breathe him in like it’ll be the last time, even as I assure myself it isn’t. That we’ll find a way back to each other when this is over.

“I love you,” he says to me, kissing the top of my head.

I love you too.

I pull back and wipe a tear from my cheek before giving him a tight smile. “Take care of her for me, okay?”

He nods and glides a thumb over my jaw. “Of course.”

I can’t stand another second of these goodbyes, so I turn, holding a sob in as I walk away.

“Naomi can go with you.” Angel’s words stop me. “She’s at my house. Digby Barton thinks I’m borrowing her for a few more days.”

I close my eyes and breathe.

I was right. He helped her. He helped her even when he assured me he wouldn’t.

It doesn’t matter what Peter or anyone else thinks of Angel. I know his heart.

Without another word, my feet carry me down the path again, Angel’s house my destination. I don’t turn around, don’t glimpse either of my loves again. If I did, I don’t know if I could bring myself to go back with the others, even though Kingsley’s house is where I need to be.

We still have work to do.

ANGEL

“*A*ngel.”

A delicate hand touches my shoulder as the voice enters my consciousness. For a tiny moment of bliss, I think it's Lib. I was just seeing her in a dream, felt her lips on mine, smelled the trace of chamomile in her hair.

“Angel, wake up,” the voice urges, snapping my eyes open.

Elsie's head moves between me and my bedroom door. She's still in Lib's PJs, which are entirely too revealing, and her hair is a crazy mess like she's just woken up. Her teeth are sunk into her bottom lip, and her blue eyes hold the same fear that's been in them since the first time I saw her.

“What's wrong?” I ask, bolting upright.

When knuckles rap on the door, Elsie yelps before jumping into bed with me, and I shrink away when the hot flesh of her shoulder connects with my bare chest. She slips her legs under the top sheet and throws the comforter over her head.

“Who is it?” I yell, my brow creasing.

“Cooper.”

“Please don't let him take me back,” Elsie whines, wrapping her hands around my waist and latching herself onto me.

If I didn't know this was Lib's niece, didn't remember all the things Lib told me about her, this would be uncomfortable.

Knowing her makes it so much worse.

I know that she cried every night for three months straight when she came to live at her uncle's. I know she always eats her dessert first, and I know her dream is to go to Harvard and study Mandarin to become a teacher abroad.

She's a child. A very sad, innocent child. Even more so than I already suspected when I knew her as Prudence.

"What do you want?" I yell to Cooper.

"Mr. Hansley wants the girl back at the manor."

"No," Elsie begs, her voice low so Cooper won't hear. "Please, I don't want to go." Her nails dig into my back, and I gently put my hands over hers. "It's all right," I whisper, trying to shift away from her. I'd love to give her the comfort she's clearly after, but she woke me up at the tail end of a dream that has my face flushed and my morning wood on full display.

"No, please," she whines when she realizes I'm trying to get away.

"Sir." Cooper knocks again. "I saw her go into your room. Could you please send her out?" His voice is strained like he's irritated.

"Hold on," I growl, regretting it as the bundle of anxiety clinging to my torso tenses.

I sigh as I throw the covers to my feet to expose Prudence. Her eyes are closed, creases jutting out on either side of them from how tightly she clenches.

I pat her shoulder. "It's okay," I assure her, taking her hands and prying them off me. She resists at first but eventually opens her eyes and slowly pulls away.

"Tell him to leave," she whispers.

Regrettably, I shake my head. "I can't. I need Sawyer to think I don't know who you are. If we fight this, it'll make things worse."

Her bottom lip sticks out as she pouts, and a glossy sheen spreads in her eyes.

“I promise, you won’t have to be there long,” I hurry to add before she can start begging again. “It’s just safer this way.”

“But I don’t want—”

“I know.” I nod. “I’ll come get you soon. I just need to talk to Sawyer first so he isn’t suspicious.”

She looks like she’s about to protest, so I scoot to the other side of the bed and stand before she has a chance.

I knew it was possible this would happen. Sawyer’s going to do his best to keep Elsie away from me, so it’s unsurprising he’d send Cooper here to get her before we have a chance to talk more. I could fight her going back—I *want* to fight it—but I promised Lib I would protect Elsie, and I can’t do that if Sawyer thinks I’m turning against him.

If he knows how much I know ... he might kill her. That could already be his plan.

So what I need to do now is make him change it. My mind spun all night, thinking about what to do, how the hell to get Lib off this island ... again. How to get Elsie off.

There are many unknowns, but I came to one very obvious conclusion. If Sawyer wants to stop me, he can, and he will.

If Sawyer is my brother who would never cross me, then I could tell Cooper to go fuck himself right now and either keep Elsie here or fly her someplace safe.

But if that isn’t true... If I’m a tool for Sawyer to use and he’s been manipulating me for most of my adult life... Then there are a hell of a lot of guards and only one of me.

I adjust myself as discreetly as one can before walking to the door and throwing it open. Cooper stands, blank-faced with his hands clasped in front of him.

“What the fuck are you thinking, coming into my house?” I ask, one hand against the door frame.

He visibly swallows, the only tell that he’s nervous. “Mr. Hansley wants the girl back at the manor... You weren’t answering the front door.”

“Mmm.” I nod slowly as I drill my icy stare into him.

He looks away. “I’m sorry to bother you.”

“Yes, I bet you are. Where is Sawyer now?”

Cooper shrugs. “Home, I believe, sir. He called the manor to make the request.”

I stare at him another moment, trying to read him. I don’t know Cooper that well, but he’s always come off as a decent enough human being. As decent as a guard can be anyway. I don’t like the way some of the others look at the women, but in the four years he’s been here, I’ve never gotten the impression that his tastes are especially dark. If Sawyer was sending someone here with the intention of killing Elsie, it seems unlikely he’d send Cooper.

“What are you going to do with her?” I ask, my head tilting. “The manor doesn’t have guests. Why would they need whores?”

“The playroom is opening back up tonight.”

My grip on the doorjamb tightens. “What?”

Already? What the fuck is Sawyer thinking?

Cooper’s eyes dart away before he looks into my room at Elsie. “That’s what Mr. Hansley wants.”

The way Cooper says it makes me think it isn’t what *he* wants.

But his opinion doesn’t matter. Neither does mine.

“Prudence,” I call, glancing at Elsie over my shoulder. The tears shining in her eyes stab me in the throat, but I keep my face hard. “Time to go.”

She waits several seconds, long enough that I start to fear I’ll have to carry her out of here, but finally she gets off my bed and walks to Cooper, her head hanging.

Once they’re gone, I walk to my bed and plop down, scrubbing my hands down my face.

This is the right thing to do.

It is.

It really fucking is.

Then why, *why* does it feel so wrong?

I let out a sigh and force myself to stay seated for several minutes. I take deep breaths to calm myself and practice everything I'm going to say to Sawyer in my head.

I'm good at lying. Hell, I'm *great* at lying. It's cake for me to mask my emotions, to the point where it's easier not to show how I'm truly feeling than not. But still, I'm not sure how I'll be able to hide everything from Sawyer.

To say that I'm pissed would be a drastic understatement. There's rage there, for sure, but it's a little pathetic just how much hurt is there as well.

He took Lib's niece. Then he tried to hide it from me.

He betrayed me. There really isn't any other way to see it, no matter how hard I try.

Finally, when I feel my heart slow and my breaths come in even, I get dressed and head for Sawyer's home.

* * *

"SO WHAT THE fuck happened to you?" Sawyer asks, leading me into his den where several empty beer bottles litter the coffee table. He waves a hand over his forehead, and I remember the gash on my hairline.

My hand reaches up on instinct but stops just before I touch it. "A misunderstanding."

"Ah." His eyebrows raise then fall with disinterest. "You're finally getting a taste of what the new girls are like, then. Lots of 'misunderstandings.' I'm surprised Liberty never popped you over the head." Without letting me respond, he waves to the cart. "Drink?"

His sandy-blond hair, usually neatly styled, hangs flat on his forehead, and red rims his eyes. He sniffs as he walks to

the drink cart, pulling leftover white dust around his nostrils into his lungs. The smell of booze is carried away with him, but the place still reeks of addiction and sorrow.

“Water,” I reply, glancing around the room as I shuffle to one of two red leather recliners. I sit as Sawyer slams a mini fridge and carries a water bottle to me.

“I heard you’re opening the playroom tonight.” I take the water bottle and twist off the cap.

He shrugs, sauntering to the other recliner. “If we make a big deal about it, other people will too. I don’t want to give people reason to be afraid.” He collapses onto the red leather and closes his eyes as he relaxes into it, his hands smoothing over the arms of the chair before cupping the ends.

My brow wrinkles, but I don’t respond. The last thing I need to do is start an argument. I take a drink of the water, then rest the bottle on my thigh.

“So I imagine you’re pissed at me again,” he says. His tone is a weird mixture of hard and disinterested, but I can tell it’s only to mask his disappointment. I think. I don’t know what I can tell anymore.

“Why would I be pissed at you?”

Without opening his eyes, he shrugs.

I turn my gaze to my water bottle and start picking at the label. “Is it because you had Cooper wake me up at seven in the morning to bring a girl back to the manor for no good reason?”

An irritated sigh rushes past Sawyer’s lips, but he says nothing.

“You don’t trust me,” I continue, letting my own disappointment bleed through. It’s only partially fake.

“What reason would I have to trust you?” he asks, gripping the edge of the armrests.

“You’ve known me for decades.”

He barks out a humorless laugh, never opening his eyes. He looks tired. I'd only be half surprised if he fell asleep. "*thought* I knew you."

I scoff, but it's forced. Of course he can't trust me. We aren't even close to being on the same page. "What are you talking about?"

Sawyer's eyes finally open, and he narrows them at me. "Robert Gaumond's dead," he says, his tone flat. "Care to tell me about that?"

I raise a brow and have a noncommittal response on the tip of my tongue, but I hold it there.

He stares at me expectantly, a tired yet frustrated look on his face. He obviously thinks I had something to do with Gaumond's death, and I doubt he's going to believe it's a coincidence that he died the same time I supposedly killed Liberty.

He isn't an idiot. He knows Liberty is alive, so withholding information will only make things worse. I've lost his trust. Now it's time to earn it back.

"I'm sorry," I say, turning my head and lowering my eyes to the plush, striped rug. I close my eyes and pray like hell that what I'm about to say isn't a mistake. "I love her, Sawyer."

Silence hangs over the room, and I have to resist the urge to look at him to gauge his reaction.

A tapping sounds on leather for a full minute before Sawyer speaks.

"What happened?"

I chance a look at him, take in his sympathetic frown, then look away like I'm ashamed. I pick at the label on the bottle some more.

"I let her go," I say, my voice low and weak. I wait for the air in the room to be sucked up, but nothing changes. There's no surprise on his part. I don't know why I'd expect there to be.

“Jasper found her,” I go on, hoping my line of thinking lines up with what he already knows. “He called me and gave me the opportunity to buy him off.”

I chance another look, sure I’ll see disappointment, anger, *something* to give away that Sawyer wanted Jasper to kill Lib, but all I see is pity.

It’s a lie. It *must* be a lie. How the hell is he so good at this?

I’m good at hiding my emotions. He’s good at faking his.

I swallow and decide to take a chance at testing him. “He said you wanted her dead... I paid him to kill Robert Gaumond then disappear.”

Sawyer’s lips part as he slowly inhales a breath. A few moments pass before he speaks. “I didn’t want her dead.” He closes his eyes and rubs his finger and thumb over the lids. “I still don’t. I just...” He drops his hand and gives his head a slight shake, meeting my eyes. His shine with tears I can’t imagine him having.

How? How could someone fake this?

What if he isn’t faking?

No. I can’t go there.

He’s betrayed me, over and over, making me out to be a fool. I can’t let him do that again.

“I just want us to be safe, Angel. I don’t want to end up in prison.”

I lean forward, trying to manage my anger. “You’re *not* going to end up in prison. I’m not an idiot. I would never let anything happen to either of us.”

I don’t realize it’s a lie until it’s already out of my mouth. And even then, I’m not sure. I’m furious... But I’m not ready to hurt him, or myself. I don’t know that I’m capable of that.

“I know, I...” He looks away and shakes his head. “I just have a hard time understanding your faith in that girl. But...”

He raises one shoulder in a shrug. “I guess I should. I thought about doing the same for Annie.”

“You did?” I ask, leather squeaking as I shift.

He nods. “I should have. She’d still be alive.”

Liar. That *must* be a lie. The Sawyer I know doesn’t take chances like that. It’s the reason I’m so afraid for Lib.

Still... He looks convincing.

“Shit,” I say on a breath. My shoulders slouch as I release another. “I’m so sorry, Sawyer.”

He looks at the wall and waves me away. “Don’t be. It’s my mistake... I’m glad you got Liberty out when you could.” He clears his throat as he looks at me, tears still shining in his eyes. One drips onto his cheek, and he quickly brushes it away. “Angel, I need to tell you something.”

“Anything,” I say, leaning toward him while trying to figure out how the fuck he could fake tears like this. The doubt that’s been creeping in grows, and it makes me wildly uncomfortable.

He stares at me for a second like he’s afraid to tell me, sending a line of ants marching across my shoulders, over my neck. I hold my breath.

“Prudence is Robert Gaumond’s niece.”

The breath I’m holding gets stuck in my lungs, like someone’s just closed the valves. I look away and try not to let my expression show until I realize it’s the exact reaction I should have, even if I didn’t already have the information.

I’m shocked. Horrified. Not for the reasons that he believes, not because I’m in shock that he’d do such a thing.

I’m horrified because he just told me the truth, and that complicates things. Is this real? Is he truly coming clean to me, or are there ulterior motives here?

Enemy or ally? Which one is he?

“I’m sorry,” he rasps out, his voice cracking. I can’t look at him. “I’ve gotten so fucking greedy, I don’t even know what

I'm doing anymore."

I close my eyes and don't respond.

"Please," he begs. "Let me make it right."

I open my eyes and look at him, imagining my face looks impassive.

He intertwines his fingers and shuffles his hands while scooting so he's on the edge of the recliner. "We can reach out to Liberty so they can be together. I don't know what agreement you made with Liberty, but we can work something out with the girl too. She's receptive." His head tilts, and his hands lift in a 'what do you think?' gesture. "With Robert Gaumond dead, it kind of works out. There won't be anyone looking for them. Hell, there's no one who even *knows* them."

My eyes flick over his face, searching for a crack in his sincerity, but all I end up doing is staring.

He wants to let Elsie go? No. That isn't possible. That doesn't line up with anything I know about him.

Am I wrong?

I think carefully before saying anything, torn between the façade I came here with and revealing how I truly feel.

Getting both Elsie and Lib off this island would be a fucking dream. It would make all of this so *easy*.

But it's *too* easy. Red flags raise in my mind as I keep watching for fissures in his expression, searching for a trap.

I don't see any, so I decide to play along.

"Okay." I nod. "I'll ask Peter to fuel the jet. We'll leave right away."

"We?" he asks.

"Elsie and me."

He leans forward with interest. "So you know where Liberty is, then."

Not a question, but a statement. A *tell*.

I'm staring at his face, but it's his voice that finally fractures the façade. There's a little too much curiosity in it.

I dig my fingers into the arm rests as anger ignites, robbing me of my words, my ability to feed this lie.

He wants me to lead him to her.

I try to search for some innocent reason he could want to know where Lib is. I suppose it could just be that he wants to ensure she hasn't told anyone anything about this place. It *could* be that he wants to see for himself that she's safe and in a secure location.

Or more likely based on him sending Jasper, of all people, after us, he wants to know where she is so he can kill her. He would kill the woman I love in cold blood.

I look away from him, my nostrils flaring.

"Ah," he says, seemingly reading my thoughts. I turn to look at him. He shakes his head and walks around the recliner to the drink cart. "You still don't trust me."

I don't respond. Instead, I just watch, wondering if he'd kill me too. If he knows he'd have to.

"Whatever." He flicks his wrist like it doesn't matter, although I can see it clearly does.

My heart beats fast with fury, and I force myself to look away from him, force myself to regain my composure.

This isn't why I came here. In fact, it's what I was hoping to avoid. He spun his bullshit, and now he's upset that I'm not buying in to it. Because he *needs* me to be complacent. He *needs* to cover his tracks.

In reality, I'm at fault for thinking this could go any other way. He's taken every precaution, *every* precaution to ensure discretion on this island. There have even been times I felt he was being neurotic. A lot of people have lost their lives for the benefit of Sawyer's peace of mind.

Of course, that wouldn't change. Of course, even the love of my life wouldn't be an exception.

This is my fault. All of this is my fault for ever allowing Liberty to come here, hell, for *bringing* her here. Sawyer was right to be worried all along. It was always going to come down to a choice between him and Liberty.

I close my eyes as this thought sobers my fury, a sharp pain stabbing my chest like a knife. I have no right to feel anger for his betrayal. Not when I'm willing to destroy his empire.

Why?

Because I choose Liberty. Even more than that, I choose *me*. Not the me I've been, but the me I want to be.

The me who doesn't contribute to an island of rapists and sadists.

I stand and turn away, running a hand through my hair before scratching at the back of my neck like I'm plagued by something else.

"This isn't why I came here," I say, turning to face him.

He arches a brow at me but doesn't press.

My mouth opens, but there's a pause before any words come out. "I know what happened last night."

"What do you mean?" His face twists with confusion.

"It was Chaffer." I square my shoulders and raise my chin. "He had some of the alcohol poisoned... I'm sorry, I just found out an hour ago."

"How..." He looks around the room like he might find the answers somewhere before shaking his head. "How do you know? How did he..."

"Someone heard Eli Colley running his mouth about it... You remember seeing him last night?"

"He's the one who did it?" Sawyer asks, his eyes darkening.

I nod. "At Chaffer's request, yes."

Sawyer's jaw juts as it tenses, and his hands ball into fists at his sides.

"How do you want to take care of this?" I ask.

He doesn't budge, doesn't even blink, so for a moment, I'm not sure he heard me. "I don't know yet."

When I walk up to him, his glare turns my way.

"I'm staying," I tell him, injecting the same sympathy into my tone that he had for me earlier. It isn't as hard as I thought it would be. Not now that my anger is gone, in its place is pure determination. "I don't know that it's such a good idea to let the girl go anyway. It could be dangerous for us."

His eyes dart around my face as he openly searches for my lie.

I sigh like I'm coming to terms with something, seeing his side of things. "We'll find her a kind master... She'll be all right."

"Seriously?" he asks, his head tilting as he eyes me with suspicion.

I nod and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm *with* you. Always. I would never do anything to hurt either of us."

I remove my hand and stand up straight, hardening my expression. "I say we leave Colley alone for now. Act as if we know nothing to avoid raising anyone's guard."

"As far as Chaffer goes," I continue, "we'll take care of that son of a bitch together. I have a few ideas."

LIBERTY

“*K*ind of a dick, isn’t he?” Naomi asks, referring to Peter.

Sitting in a kitchen chair with one of my feet propped on the table and the other tucked beneath me, I pick at a croissant Kingsley kindly made me a half hour ago.

Peter’s voice booms from the living room as he shouts at Layan in a fight that’s been going on for... I look at the stove clock... twenty minutes.

“Yup.”

“You’re as bad as Liberty,” Peter spits.

Naomi looks at me, a brow reaching for her hairline. “Is it always like this?”

A muffled clang sounds like someone just threw something against a wall, and Naomi jumps, turning her head that way.

I sigh. “Yup.”

Peter is *not* happy about last night, and no one can agree on what to do next. Peter thinks we should wait it out, let Sawyer figure things out on his own and retaliate. Layan thinks we should speed things along, capitalize while we have the chance. Kingsley... He’s pretty much always in the middle, running interference between the rest of us. Naomi is up for anything. She’d single handedly nuke the island if that was an option.

And me? For once, I'm siding with Peter. I'm too caught up in everything that happened last night to think straight enough to come up with a good plan, and I don't feel now is the time to be rash. Our actions cost a lot of innocent people their lives, so I'm not sure how smart it is to keep pushing, knowing more could die.

It also helps to know that Elsie is okay. She's with Angel, and he's been looking out for her this whole time, even without knowing she's my niece. Every time I remind myself of this, my heart strings pull, and all I want to do is go back to them.

I know I'm needed here. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't take part in freeing the women on this island, but it's still hard. It feels damn near impossible after seeing my loved one's faces, hearing their voices.

I pick at the dark underside of the croissant, watching the crumbs scatter as they fall on the ceramic plate. Kingsley is nice, *so* nice, but the man is a lousy cook. Something I must admit we have in common.

"If you had let me kill Ramos, we wouldn't need to rush anything," Peter yells at Layan.

"He'll help," Layan shouts back, sure of herself. I put down the croissant and look in their direction. I can't see them, but I throw my gratitude toward Layan anyway.

Peter laughs. "What, are you fucking the guy too? You're delusional!"

"If you'd seen the look in his eyes when he found out about Elsie, you'd know what I'm talking about. His loyalty to Sawyer is about to snap."

"For what?" Peter barks. "For *Liberty*? He's never going to turn on Sawyer. Not for anyone."

"He loves her."

"He loves *himself*," Peter counters. "He doesn't give a shit about the women on this island. He's not saving them because his girlfriend asked him to."

“*Stop*,” Kingsley says. “Both of you, just stop arguing about this. Liberty’s in the next room.”

“So?” Peter asks.

I get up and walk to the trash can, tuning out whatever is said next. I’m tired of this. Tired of the fighting. Tired of feeling like an outsider. And most of all, I’m tired of Peter.

After tossing the remainder of breakfast in the trash, I head to the back door.

“Where are you going?” Naomi asks.

Another clang sounds, but I don’t bother looking toward the source. “I need some air.”

“Do you want me to come?”

I shake my head even though her eyes aren’t on me. I don’t think her mind is either. She’s held her tongue about all that Naomi is capable of, and I can feel her excitement. She’s ready to fight.

“No, I won’t be long.”

She doesn’t turn to me, instead her gaze fixed on the entryway.

I slip out the back door and walk around the house to the beach.

The humidity is suffocating today, so sweat pebbles on my forehead before I even reach the shore. I wipe it away, but the sticky feeling doesn’t subside and probably won’t while I’m outdoors.

A boat is in the distance, but I don’t think much of it until I realize it’s headed straight toward me.

Hairs rise on the back of my neck, and I quickly duck behind a tree, planting my back against the trunk and hoping like hell I wasn’t just spotted.

Are they coming for us?

No. If they were, they’d send more than one boat... Maybe.

Fuck, I don't know.

The engine roars as it approaches Kingsley's dock, and once it shuts off, I bite my lip and peek around the tree.

I gasp when I spot Angel, fear transforming into curiosity when I see that he isn't alone. Four women climb out of the boat, their heads down, two with their arms crossed protectively.

What is he doing?

"Go ahead." Angel motions toward Kingsley's house before securing the boat to the dock.

Once the women shuffle ahead of him up to the house, I shift around the tree, out of sight.

Should they know I'm here? Should I be hiding from them?

Why? Why would he bring them here?

"*Angel*," I hiss when he passes.

He stops and looks my way, his eyes darting into the forest until he spots my head poking from behind the tree. "Lib?"

I step out into the open and give a small wave.

He looks up the path where the others are. "Go on ahead!"

They continue walking to the house, and one of them knocks on the door. The moment Angel steps into the forest, I run to him, no longer concerned about being spotted. My heart swells seeing his face, and when I jump into him, he catches me.

I wrap my arms around his neck and squeeze him to me, nuzzling my face against his shoulder.

He chuckles. "Hello to you too."

I pull back so I can look at him. "What are you doing here?" My eyes dart to the house which the women have disappeared into. "What are they doing here? Where's Elsie?"

"She's safe." Angel slowly lowers me to my feet but keeps his hands on my back in a partial hug. "She's at the manor, but

I promise she's safe."

My heart stutters. "What? No, Angel, you have to go get her." I put my hands on his chest like I'm about to shove him away, my gaze shifting to the boat. Panic pumps blood through my veins as Angel takes my face and brings me to look at him.

"She's safe, Lib. I promise you, it's best this way. If I had her, Sawyer would be watching me like a hawk. He needs her. He isn't going to hurt her."

"He—he needs her?"

"To get to you." He gives his head a shake like he's dismissing the thought. "It's a long story."

"What are you talking about?" I look at the house. "Who are those women?" My nails dig into his chest as I press myself into him. "Angel, please, what's going on?"

"Everything's fine," he assures me, running his hands over my shoulders. "Please, just relax. I'm going to check on Elsie as soon as I get back to the manor." He motions to the house. "The women are slaves of a few men I know. I figured they'd be safest here..."

My head tilts. "What? Where are their masters?"

"Dead."

My body tenses against his, and both of our heads snap toward the house when the front door slams.

Peter appears with a handgun, and Layan is right behind him, pleading at his back, Naomi quietly taking up the rear.

"Shit," I say, grabbing Angel's shoulders and tugging him. He slips away from me and walks onto the path to meet Peter.

"No, he's dangerous," I say on a sharp whisper as if Peter doesn't have a clear shot of us. When Angel doesn't listen, I groan and follow him onto the path.

"What the fuck is this, Ramos?" Peter asks, throwing a hand back toward the house.

"What you asked for." Angel's jaw is set in a hard line, and his shoulders are squared as Peter and Layan both get to him,

gun raised in Peter's hand. Naomi stands back from the others and tosses me worried glances.

"Put the gun down," Layan snaps, her glare pointed at Peter. Her face softens when she turns to Angel. "What are you talking about?"

"Their masters were Alex Prack, Garret Ryan, Ash Colligan, and Bishop Long."

Layan pulls back a step as she looks at Angel suspiciously. "Where are they?"

"I killed them," he says simply. "That's what you wanted, right?" he asks, his voice hard. I get the impression he isn't here to join forces. "To get rid of all the sadists?"

"Umm..." Layan looks at Peter, but Peter is staring at Angel, his forehead wrinkled.

Angel holds his hand out toward the house. "*This* is what I'm willing to do. I'll take care of the sadists and bring the women to you. You'll watch over them until everything is taken care of, and you will *not* get in my way." He steps up to Peter until the barrel is pressed against his chest. There's so much anger in his stance, it makes me shrink away, but I can't take my eyes off the gun.

"Angel," I say, but he ignores me.

"Last night, you killed a hell of a lot of people who didn't deserve to die," Angel says to Peter, his lip curling with disgust. "You do more of that and you're going to get your own people killed. And I swear to God, if you put Liberty in danger, you'll fucking wish you pulled the trigger when you had the chance."

"We'll do what we have to do," Peter snarls.

Angel shakes his head. "You don't *have* to do anything. I'll take care of everything that needs taking care of, but on the condition that you stand down, and you keep Liberty safe. Sawyer and the manor are off limits. You step one foot onto manor grounds, and I'll kill you myself."

Peter scoffs. “You’re out of your mind. Sawyer Hansley will never stand by while you kill all of his residents.”

“I have a plan,” Angel insists.

“Yeah, and what is that?”

“Tonight, I’m going to Chaffer’s with a box of laced cigars. I’ll be selective about who gets one.”

Angel slowly grips the gun and pushes it away from him. Peter continues to glare but doesn’t stop him.

“You can’t just kill everyone, Peter. That isn’t going to fix anything.”

“Oh, and you’re going to fix everything?” Peter laughs and shoves Angel back. “You built this place.”

A vein pulses in Angel’s neck, and I think for sure he’s going to hit Peter, but his closed fists remain at his sides.

“Just stay out of my way,” he sneers before turning around and heading for the boat, tossing me one last longing look before he goes.

“Ramos!” Peter calls.

Angel keeps walking.

A loud bang roars, and my chest seizes. Everyone stills, the only sound the ricochet of the gunfire and a few birds flapping from the trees.

In the second after my brain thaws of shock, I scan Angel, searching for any signs he’s been shot, then my eyes dart to Peter. The gun is pointed at the sky, but I watch in horror as he lowers it to point at Angel.

“Do you really think I’m going to let you walk away because you got rid of a few pigs?” he asks, his voice ice. When he takes a couple of slow steps toward Angel, even Layan doesn’t react.

This seems ... different. Personal.

“We want the same things, Peter,” Angel replies, his spine straight. “I just disagree with how you’re going about it.”

Peter lets out a humorless laugh. “Because you don’t want me to kill your friend.”

Angel doesn’t respond to that. Only stares.

Peter takes another couple of steps closer to Angel. “You know, this whole time you thought I hated Sawyer, and I do. But he’s nothing compared to you. He *knows* what a snake he is. He lies to everyone, but he doesn’t lie to himself.”

Angel’s face pinches. “What are you talking about? I’m not trying to pretend to be a good person. I’ve done wrong. I know that. Now I’m trying to right it.”

Peter shakes his head. “You can’t,” he says, his voice low.

The gun starts to shake in his grasp, and goosebumps break out over my flesh.

Something’s wrong. This isn’t a normal Peter argument.

I cautiously creep toward them, my eyes glued to the gun.

“Do you remember what I told you about how I came here? How I got tricked into taking this job?”

Angel’s quiet, but it’s clear he’s listening, waiting for Peter to go on.

“I lied,” Peter says, his voice cracking.

I’m close now, merely inching their way while neither man seems to notice.

“I *begged* Shaun Miles to get me this job. Begged him to introduce me to you.”

“Why?” Angel asks, puzzled.

Peter takes one last step toward Angel, his eyes filling with tears. “Because you murdered my sister, you son of a bitch.”

I gasp when I see Peter’s finger curl over the trigger. I don’t think. My mind freezes with fear, but luckily, my body doesn’t.

I lunge toward the gun, knocking it just before the blast rings in my ears. Pain explodes through my head, like my eardrum’s just burst, and when I cry out, I can’t hear it.

Peter shoves me, making me fly back. I land on my ass before toppling several feet down the hill. I can't hear anything, all there is is a ringing as I force myself into a sitting position to see Angel and Peter rolling on the ground, taking turns punching each other.

Layan rushes forward to pick up the gun, her mouth moving and face red. Kingsley comes barreling down the hill, and Naomi runs to me.

She gets right in my face, her lips moving as she puts her hands on my shoulders and tries to help me up, but I shrug her off.

“He didn't kill Beth.”

My tongue, lips, and jaw work to express the words, but I have no idea if they come out. Naomi gives me a weird look, worry in her eyes before she tries to pull me up again.

I clutch my head. Ringing. So much ringing.

“He didn't kill Beth!” I try again.

She tugs on my shoulders, and I jerk my arms away, jumping to my feet and closing my eyes to scream at the tops of my lungs, “He didn't kill Beth!”

I open my eyes to see everyone staring at me, even Peter and Angel have broken apart, both still on the ground with battered faces.

Layan backs up several steps, pointing the gun at the ground while Kingsley stalks over to the two men.

As Angel slowly pushes to his feet, Kingsley has to hold Peter back to stop him from lunging.

Angel walks to me and cradles my face in his hands. “*Are you okay?*” his lips say.

His eyes widen as he pulls his hand back, blood smeared on his palm. His gaze moves to my ear, so I touch it, wincing as it stings, and when I bring my hand in front of me there's sticky blood on my fingers.

Angel turns to the others, his arms on me tensing. Peter's angry mouth moves, and Layan stares at me with a sympathetic look on her face. She turns to start back up to the house, and Kingsley follows, dragging Peter with him.

Naomi looks between me and them, appearing to be pained by the decision she needs to make.

Her shoulders sag as she turns away from me and starts up the hill.

"Naomi!" I try to yell.

She turns back to me, her lips sunk into a frown. After a moment, she faces forward and joins the others.

I don't have to be able to hear to understand what Peter said, what the others obviously agreed to.

I'm not one of them. Angel isn't one of them. And neither of us are welcome here.

Angel turns me toward him and smooths hair back from my face. Thin lines break around his eyes as he mouths, "I'm sorry."

If I could tell him everything I feel when I look at him, I would. I would tell him how much I've missed him, how safe he makes me feel. I would tell him I'm glad to be done with Peter, that if it's between Angel and any person on Earth, I'd pick him every time.

Fuck these people. We don't need them. They don't need us.

I can't tell him this, though. I can't even hear myself breathe.

So instead, I kiss him, using my lips and my tongue to express everything I can't vocalize. Hard, rough, with my hands in his hair and my aching body pressing into his.

And when I pull away, I mouth three words.

"I love you."

ANGEL

*M*y hand on Liberty's chest moves with every breath she takes.

I hold perfectly still on the mattress with Liberty's back tucked against me, both my arms securely wrapped around her as she sleeps. She needs the rest.

Once we got to my house, she refused to sleep until I went to the manor to check on Elsie. By the time I got back, her hearing seemed to be better, but she still looked exhausted. Probably as much as I am. I would sleep too if I wasn't so hell-bent on savoring this.

It feels surreal to be holding her now, after I'd forced myself to accept that I never would again. I tried to forget the way her body felt, her warmth pressed against me. Her soft, smooth skin beneath my fingertips. The deep pink of her lips or the creases around her mouth when she smiles.

She's here, in my arms, and I hope she doesn't plan on leaving because I don't have the strength to let her go again.

She's mine. Forever. End of story.

She rustles in her sleep, pulling the sheet off her shoulders with her movement.

I know I have to leave soon. Chaffer's house will be in full swing in a couple of hours, and I need to be there before the bulk of the guests arrive.

There should be a hell of a crowd now that the playroom has been tainted. Hell, maybe people will stay home. Maybe

they'll *move*. After tonight, several people will want to. It'll become obvious that a war is starting, and most won't want to take the chance of being a casualty.

I plant a kiss on Lib's shoulder then reluctantly pull my arms away. Fighting back a sigh, I stand from the bed and creep toward the closet.

"Hey." She lifts a hand to her mouth as she yawns. Lowering her hand, she looks at me through half-hooded lids.

"Hey." I walk to the bed and sit on the edge.

"Where were you going?"

"Just getting dressed." I lean toward her and pull the sheet up to her neck. "Go back to sleep."

Her lips lift into a small, mischievous smile as she takes my hand and tugs me toward her. "What do you need to get dressed for?"

I lay down beside her and cup her cheek before closing my eyes and kissing her. Her warm palm flattens on my chest, and her hips shift toward me.

Our lips move, matching each other's rhythm, and it feels so good that I regret initiating it. I need to go. I *know* I need to go. But when Lib's nails make a delicious path down to my boxers, my cock takes over, never giving reason a chance.

I groan as she slips her hand into my boxers and wraps long, slim fingers around my length. She squeezes, and my cock fills with blood.

My hips rock into her touch, and I kiss her harder, shifting so I'm leaning over her. Her hand slides up and down, and I have to break the kiss just to get a complete breath.

Lib gasps as I take her chin and jerk her head back, dipping my head to run my tongue up her neck. I hungrily kiss along her collarbone, my teeth grazing soft flesh along the way.

Lib's hand pumps faster, and her breaths pick up until she's panting. She uses her other hand to grip the hair at the

back of my head and yank me to her mouth, kissing me for a couple of seconds before letting me break away.

“Touch me,” she commands, making my cock jump at the sound of her honey-coated words. Her back arches as she shivers, and when she squeezes the base of my cock, I thrust on instinct.

I trail kisses down to her tits and shove my hand into her panties, my breath shaking as I eagerly rub three fingers over her hood. She lets out a tiny whine as she lifts her legs, using my ass as a shelf for her heels.

I suck a nipple into my mouth, my cheeks caving, and rub her faster. I growl with the urge to squeeze her supple breast, but I can't because my fucking arm is too busy bracing me up.

A whimper slips past her lips when I rip my hand from her panties and roll us so she's on top of me. Both her hands fly to my face before she kisses me, her tongue eagerly searching out mine.

I take a moment to palm her full ass before ripping the flimsy material of her cheeky panties and finding her clit once again. I squeeze her tits and thrust my hips, seeking friction. She must sense the absolute need pumping through me because she breaks away from my lips and kisses down my body, her pussy leaving my touch in the process.

It's been a while since I've gotten a blow job. Not since that day Sawyer insisted she 'prove herself.' I've eaten her pussy a hundred times, but I'm pretty sure I ruined my chances of fucking her mouth because she hasn't done it since, and I haven't pushed her to.

So now, when those sweet, pink lips form around the head of my cock, my mouth opens in a sharp gasp.

She takes me into her mouth about halfway before the back of her throat stops her, and I can't help the way my hips jerk, seeking more. *Deeper.*

Ripples of pleasure spread through me as she sucks, her perfect mouth sliding up and down my cock, and when she goes back down she swallows with my head at her throat. It

tugs me, her throat contracting around my dick in a way that has a breath shuddering into my lungs.

She drags her mouth up me again, her cheeks hollowed from her sucking. I clutch her head, my fingers weaving through the silky strands of her hair. When she looks up at me, she winks like a goddamn temptress, making me want to shove her away, press her back into the bed, and fuck her mouth like an animal.

I lean my head back and look up at the ceiling, certain if I watch her do this, I'll blow far more quickly than either of us want. She bobs her head for a minute then releases me so she can lick my balls.

She alternates licking and sucking, not neglecting a single patch of sensitive flesh, and I clutch her head and let the sensations relax me while somehow riling me up at the same time. Sex is strange that way... It's pressure, building, building, building in my balls but it's like it takes stress from other parts of my body to do it. My shoulders unwind like I've been carrying lead weights in them for years, and the seemingly constant crick in my neck finally slackens.

All that exists in this moment is that sexy mouth on my cock.

Until, all at once, it's gone.

I open my eyes to see Lib climbing on top of me. She lines me up at her entrance and holds her weight by pressing her hands on my abs as she eases me inside of her, her mouth forming an O.

Her pussy squeezes me so tightly, I wonder if she needs to be stretched first, but she must not because her hips start gyrating and heady breaths come barreling in and out of her.

She is so fucking sexy, for a minute, all I can do is watch. It isn't until she picks up her pace that my mind gets hazy, and the hungry animal in me demands more.

I grab her hips and yank her down, holding myself deep inside of her before propelling her up again. She lets out a sharp moan and grinds on me while I yank her hips into mine

to give her movements more force, our bodies clashing with impact that hits the point just before pain.

She's so perfect. So... Fuck, everything. She's everything.

I reward her by placing my thumb against her clit, rubbing the hard nub as her pussy clenches around me. The sensation feels so good, it pulls me toward climax, and my teeth grind while I resist it. I've never fucked anyone as good as Lib, never gotten head that made me tremble so weakly, so I want it to make sure it's perfectly fucking clear to her that she's never been with a man like me.

I want her sweaty, exhausted, breathless, and begging me for more.

"Fuck, don't stop," she whines, her movements slowing.

I flip us over again so I can take control, then I rail into her with so much vigor, a growl rumbles in my chest.

Her slick honey overflows from her pussy and lubricates my fingers, sending them gliding over her clit with ease.

She grips my shoulders and screams my name while she comes, but I don't let up. I can't. I'm nothing but a vessel of carnal need right now, so strong my body forgets to breathe.

My hips tense, my thrusts halting as I fill Lib with my cum. A grunt rumbles from my chest as my eyes clamp shut. Warmth runs over my spine.

By the time I'm empty, I'm the one who's sweaty, exhausted, and breathless. I fall next to her on the mattress and close my eyes, my chest heaving.

Lib turns onto her side and wraps her arm around me. She nuzzles into me and plants kisses to my chest.

"I missed you so much," she whispers, almost like she's saying it to herself instead of me.

I blink my eyes open and hug her back. "I missed you too. So fucking much."

"I don't care that the others don't want me," she insists, sounding a little sleepy. Sated but sleepy. "As long as you do."

“I will *always* want you.” My tone is sharp, perhaps a little too serious, like I’m threatening her or something. Which, maybe I am.

She’s mine.

And I’m never letting her go.

So she’d better not try to leave.

She squeezes me tighter and kisses my chest.

“I’m sorry, though.” I feel my lips sink. “I didn’t mean to have you ostracized.”

She lifts up her head to look at me, the sleep suddenly vanishing from her eyes. “You didn’t kill Beth.”

I stare at her a moment before looking away.

“Angel, look at me.”

She takes my cheek and turns my head toward her. “You did *not* kill her. What happened was awful, but it wasn’t your fault. This whole fucking place...” She gives her head a shake. “None of this is your fault. You’re not the man who built this place, you’re the man who’s going to tear it down. And I love you for it.”

“Lib, I—”

“No,” she snaps. “I don’t care who you were a year ago or even who you were yesterday. I know who you are *now*. And I’m with you. Forever.” Her enticing lips lift into a small, loving smile as she trails her nails through my hair. “We’re on the same team, right?”

The same team.

I see her meaning in her eyes, see the fear she still harbors that nothing has changed. I get what she’s asking me. It’s the same question Sawyer has been asking me since Lib got here.

Do you choose me?

“Yes,” I say, putting her mind at ease.

I know I can’t give her everything she wants. I’ll choose her over Sawyer’s false paradise in an instant. I’ll choose her

over his fortune. I'll choose her over his trust, over a relationship built over decades.

But I won't end his life. I won't choose that. Despite everything...

I tuck an errant strand of hair behind her ear and return her smile. "We're on the same team. Always."

Her smile widens, and she pecks me on the cheek. "Good." She sits up all the way and kicks the sheet off her feet. "Now let's get dressed." She hops out of bed, her exhaustion no longer evident. "We have work to do."

I sit up. "What?"

She walks to the closet and throws open the door without answering me.

I get up and go to her just as she's pulling a blue dress off the hanger. "This should be good for Chaffer's, right?" she asks, holding it up against herself while studying it in the full-length mirror.

"You're not going to Chaffer's."

She glances at me only a moment before going back to the mirror. "Sure, I am."

"Lib, you can't—"

She spins to me and presses a finger to my mouth, her face stern as her eyes penetrate me. "Same team, remember?"

I swat her hand away. "Yes, but—"

"No." Her lips set in a thin line. "I don't care if you think it's dangerous. I was there just last week, literally in the same room as Chaffer, and the world didn't end. I'm going. You can't change my mind, so why don't we just skip the part where you try, mkay?"

She spins back to the mirror, but I doubt she's still considering the dress. She almost looks ... disappointed, maybe. Worried that I'll argue further. Worried that I'll refuse.

Just the thought of her leaving my house terrifies me, let alone her going to a mansion full of men who could potentially

recognize her. Or at least become suspicious that I have a 'new' slave days after killing my previous one. Everything about it strikes me as dangerous, but at the same time...

This is Lib. She isn't idle, and she isn't a damsel. She's brave, fierce, and as much as I want to keep her locked up safe and sound...

She can't be caged. Or tamed... I've already tried to do both.

"Okay." I nod reluctantly. My eyes move to the closet, and I sigh before pointing to a red, spaghetti strap dress.

"Go with red... It suits you."

LIBERTY

“*I* don’t want you by yourself,” Angel tells me, his voice higher pitched than normal. Our fingers are interlocked as we walk past the obnoxious flames, and Angel’s hand squeezes hard enough that I pull away.

When I shake my hand at my side, Angel glances at it, then my face. “Sorry.”

“I *need* to be alone. Both of us do. I’m supposed to be Peter’s slave, so if we’re seen together, it’ll only call attention to you.” I roll my shoulders back and lift my chin as we approach, mentally preparing myself to go inside. “Plus, I have my own stuff to do.”

“What?” Angel grabs my arm to stop me. I look down the walkway to check if anyone’s there, and Angel does the same. It’s only us out here, but he leads me away from the door anyway, settling on a shadowed spot beside the bushes.

“All we’re doing here is dropping off cigars.” He pats his suit jacket where the bundle of paper-wrapped cigars hides. They’re laced with something that’s supposed to cause a slow death, twenty-four hours after exposure, so no one will know what happened.

“Right.” I try to make my tone light. Innocent. As if I haven’t been purposefully keeping my intentions from him.

Angel’s hold on my arm tightens as he inches closer, towering over me. “You’re not going to do anything that could come off as suspicious. If Chaffer finds out we had something to do with this—”

“I won’t be suspicious.”

“*Lib.*”

“Hope,” I correct. “Remember?”

Angel presses his palms against his eyes and lets out a half sigh half groan, his head hanging. I take his hands and link our fingers before pressing myself into him and rising up on my toes to kiss his scowling lips.

He tenses, probably surprised at the contact, but after a moment he leans into it. His mouth tastes good, like whiskey. I’ve never been too fond of the drink, but now I savor it, my eyes closed and head feeling suddenly heavy.

I pull back abruptly before I can relax all the way into him. We have work to do.

Angel is just as good at convincing me of things as I am at convincing him, but there’s no way I’m letting him talk me into going back to the boat. And if I told him what I really have planned, the whole reason I wanted him to bring me here, he would absolutely insist I go back to the boat.

Our fingers break apart, and I put my hands on either side of his head. “It’s gonna be fine,” I assure him. “I promise. I know what I’m doing. I’ll blend in fine.”

“What *are* you doing?”

I take a deep breath and prepare to lie to him, telling myself it’s the last time. We should be so far past the lies now, but they keep happening. It’s what we do best.

I shouldn’t have argued with him about staying together. I should’ve let him lead me inside, then broke away from him the second I had the chance. But that just sounded ... cruel. He only worries because he cares about me.

Regardless, I won’t be talked out of this.

“I want to take a mental inventory of the women in there and who their masters are. Find the ones who have bruises and such and make sure we’ll remember them if their masters don’t smoke a cigar tonight. That way we can get rid of those guys next.”

His eyes narrow, and he looks to his right as he considers this.

“That *is* our goal, right?” I ask, playing in to his earlier understanding with Peter. “To get rid of the sadists? It seems illogical to think they would all die or move because of Sawyer and Chaffer, so if we want to be thorough—”

“Fine.” Angel cocks his head. His fingers drum on his thighs. “But you won’t draw attention to yourself.”

“I will not draw attention to myself.”

He fingers drum another several seconds while he looks like he isn’t quite convinced. Finally, he moves his hand to his face and rubs his jaw. “Kay, well, let’s get this done, then.”

He takes my hand and turns toward the front entryway before leading me toward it. I can tell he’s nervous. Scared. And I doubt it has anything to do with him switching out a bunch of cigars that’ll end up killing people.

He’s nervous because of me. Because he doesn’t want me here. He still sees me as the princess he needs to save, but I wish he wouldn’t. I’m not that person anymore, which is good because that person hated Angel.

We go inside, Angel holding onto my hand tightly, and I have to force him to let go of his punishing grip on my hand once we stop at the familiar double doors.

He takes a deep breath, his gaze moving between me and the door.

“I’ll go first.” I give him a small, encouraging smile, one you’d give a child just before the doctors come and take you away for heart surgery. *Mommy’s fine, dear, don’t you worry.*

I push open the door and throw my hair back as I make my way into the smoky room. It looks a lot like it did before only with more people, several of whom I recognize from the night I came with Peter. It isn’t like this at the manor. There’s the occasional familiar face, but it mostly feels like an endless shuffling of men. It all kind of blurs together when you’re dancing on a stage.

My feet carry me farther into the room, and I try to look like I belong. I wasn't lying to Angel about everything. I *am* making a mental inventory of the women here, specifically the unhappy women. The women with masters who are heartless, vile men who made their lives a living hell the second they were bought from Sawyer.

Those are the women who are going to be the most motivated to help. A huge chunk of them are about to be masterless, which I can only assume puts them back at the manor. When Peter first brought me back to the island, he wanted me to tell him how to turn the women there. It was an easy answer for me: I couldn't.

They're too brainwashed by Sawyer. But these women? These women took their blinders off a long time ago.

I come to a small, two-person table on the edge of the room and quietly lean against it, hoping I look like I'm waiting for someone.

I roam my gaze around the room, surveying all the people. It's easier to pick out the women who aren't good candidates rather than the women who are. Several of them hang onto men I'm presuming are their masters, wearing smiles that light up the room.

I keep sifting, ruling them out one by one until I land on a woman with short, cropped black hair at the poker table. She's sitting on a man's lap with his arm around her waist, but her body language doesn't suggest she's relaxed by it. In fact, she looks tense, her back ramrod straight. Her stare is aimed ahead of her, but I don't think her glazed eyes are registering anything. There's no smile. To be fair, there isn't a frown either. Her face is blank, vacant, like she isn't even here.

It's harder than I thought it would be to pick out the tortured women, but I keep scanning, searching for bruises or *something* to tell me for sure that she can be trusted.

Just as I'm about to give up on the woman, I spot it.

Her legs. Her dress is short enough that the marred skin on her thighs is just barely visible. If her legs were crossed, I

would've missed it altogether, and if I hadn't noticed the same scarring on Layan, I would never have known what it was from.

Layan does a thorough job of covering up the physical reminders of her previous master, but the day we got dressed for the manor, I saw the raised, spiderweb looking patches of discolored skin. I tried to look away, but it's hard when you're imagining how someone could get that kind of scar. She told me without me having to ask the question.

Acid. It's an acid burn.

And from the looks of it, I bet they were done by the same man. It would be a weird coincidence otherwise.

My eyes move to the man. He's kind of attractive, in a way the vilest of people seem to be. He doesn't look particularly threatening, but somehow, staring at him, watching him study the cards in his hand, I know who this man is.

Eli Colley.

I turn and look down at the table, my pulse skipping. Goosebumps spread on my arms.

"Hey there."

I jump at the voice, and spin to face a man in an atrociously green shirt with his teeth gleaming in a wolfish smile.

"Sorry," he says, although there's only humor in his tone. "Didn't mean to scare you."

I don't say anything. It's silly to be afraid of evil at this point in my manor where journey, but being in the same room as the man Layan has told me about suddenly makes me want to leave.

The woman with the black hair catches my eyes before she walks to the door. I hurry toward her, never giving the green shirt stranger another look.

When I get to the hallway, my head jerks right and left. It's empty.

Shit.

I start down the hallway, slowing at each door to listen for someone inside. I don't know where the bathroom is in this place, otherwise, it'd be my destination. As it is, I wander around aimlessly.

Should I just go back? Wait outside the door for her to return?

I'm just about to when I remember Kingsley taking me to the kitchen to get a drink. It's worth it to check.

This place is so fucking big, I get turned around searching for the kitchen, but eventually, I see the swinging door. I stride to it, fully prepared to merely swing it open long enough to make sure that the woman isn't in there, but when I push into the kitchen, letting the door swish behind me, I catch sight of the back of her head and freeze.

The door slaps me in the ass, and I jolt forward

The woman turns to me, giving me only a cursory glance over her shoulder before turning back around and leaning against the kitchen island.

I walk to the fridge and open it, sticking my head inside while slyly looking over at her. She stares off, a can of soda pressed against her crossed arms as she lazily holds it.

I lower my eyes to her exposed thighs to be certain I saw what I saw.

"It isn't polite to stare."

I jump and smack the back of my head on the open fridge door.

She takes a sip of her drink but doesn't look otherwise affected. I wouldn't have known she noticed me if she hadn't said something.

I grab a matching can of soda out of the fridge as if that was my intention all along and walk it to the kitchen island, resting it on the granite.

"Sorry," I say because it feels right.

“What is it you want?” Again, her tone is flat. Uninterested. She doesn’t turn my way.

I think on it for a second. I don’t know what I was expecting ... that maybe she would be hiding, cowering, searching for a savior? I should’ve learned by now. This place doesn’t always break you. Sometimes it makes you stronger.

And this woman looks strong.

She looks *perfect*.

Still, I need to be careful.

“I was just, uh...” I force a nervous laugh to fly past my lips. “I’m sorry, I was just curious. I know your master. He and I, um... He was at the manor the other night.”

I search for jealousy, hurt, betrayal, but all she does is take another sip of soda.

“You *are* Eli Colley’s slave, right?” My back slides along the counter as I move closer. “I mean, he’s taken?”

Now I get a reaction.

She turns to me with her steely eyes narrowed in a look reminiscent of the one Elsie gave me when I asked her if she was going to miss high school. *Are you an idiot?*

“Taken?”

I look away, waving my hand to dismiss the idea. “Sorry. Never mind.”

“We’re not in a relationship, if that’s what you’re asking. What are you, a manor whore?”

I bite one corner of my lips and move my gaze back to her. There’s so much bitterness in her expression it makes me wonder if I should be happy I found the right person for the job or ashamed for hoping there was such a person in this predicament.

“Yeah.”

“What’s your name?”

“Hope,” I say, the lie easily slipping from my tongue.

“I’m going to give you some advice, Hope. You can take it or leave it.” She sets her soda on the island and turns her body to face me. “Stay the *fuck* away from him. In fact, stay away from all of them.”

“Why?” I ask, my head tilting. “Isn’t the ultimate goal to get a master?”

She stares at me like she wants to shove my head in a blender. “Sure, if that’s what you want.” She turns to the island, picks up her can, and pauses. “Like I said, take my advice or leave it.”

“Why wouldn’t I want a master?”

“Because you’re not a fucking dog,” she growls and takes a drink before slamming the can on the granite counter. Her eyes close as she grasps the edge like she’s holding on for dear life. I let her, giving her time to work through whatever’s going on in her head. As soon as her eyes open, her grip releases, and she starts around the island to the door.

“Where are you going?” I ask, a little too panicky.

Her steps don’t falter.

“What would you recommend?” I ask, the fear in my voice real. Not for the reasons she might think but because I’m terrified she’ll walk away without me having her on my side. I need her.

She sighs and turns toward me. “Honestly?”

I nod.

“Fuck Sawyer so good he doesn’t want to sell you. He seems terrible until you find out what terrible really is... Then when that stops working, kill yourself.”

She turns and starts to walk away but halts when I speak.

“If you had the chance to kill Eli, would you take it?”

Her muscles bunch, and she doesn’t respond. I slowly start her way. “As well as his friends?”

And Sawyer.

I want to say it, but I can't. I can barely say it to myself.

Sawyer has to die. That's the reality. He *should* die. But killing him would be betraying Angel, so it can't be a part of my plan. All I can do is hope it's a part of Peter's.

"Do you know how much pain you could cause yourself by saying something as stupid as that?"

I shrug. "If we should all just off ourselves, why not take a few of them out with us?"

She rears back, her lip curling. "What the hell are you talking about?"

I look away for a moment, my tongue poking into my cheek. If I tell her and she decides to tell Eli or anyone else, it'll ruin our plan. It'll ruin *everything*. It's risky. *Too* risky.

I look back to the woman to see her searching my face, but it's me who finds what she's looking for.

Hope.

If not this woman... Who?

"In twenty-four hours, Eli Colley will be dead, and you'll be taken back to the manor. Don't ask me how I know this, but it's the truth." I take a step toward her. "Now, if you want, you can try your strategy of being Sawyer's fucktoy, although I have to warn you, that position's taken... You could kill yourself, like you said, but I have a feeling if you were going to do that, you would've done it a long time ago."

She blinks and opens her mouth, but I cut her off before she has a chance to speak.

"*Or*, you can do exactly as I say, and we can leave this island together. Along with every other woman here who's being treated like property."

I take another step, and she just stares at me, her face skeptical but her eyes glimmering. "Who *are* you?" she asks. I'm sure she means to appear cynical, and I would buy it if her voice didn't shake.

When I reach her, I hold out my hand, not making a sound until she places her pale palm in mine.

“Liberty.”

ANGEL

I'm supposed to be staring at the stars, but I can't take my eyes off Lib. The rock we're laying on rubs against my exposed arms and calves, but her peaceful face makes it look like she's laying on a cloud.

"My mom used to sew," Lib says, lost in a memory. We've been talking for hours out by the waterfall, the same one I took her to before Spain. We came so she could stretch her legs and get some fresh air after the forty-eight hours she's been trapped inside my house. I hated the idea, thought it was too dangerous, but it's Lib, so she disagreed.

Now I'm glad. We needed this. Needed something peaceful, something to remind us that there are things outside of this life, good things that have nothing to do with death and pain.

"Well, not used to. I'm sure she still does," Lib corrects, her happy voice deflating slightly. "But, when I was a teenager, she made my prom dress."

My eyebrows raise. "Really?"

Her head shifts almost imperceptibly in a nod. "It was green and blue, made out of that frilly tutu material ballerinas wear." Her lips lift. "To tell you the truth, it was horrendous." She laughs. "The whole corset part was covered in sapphires and fake diamonds and was just all around too much. But it meant the world to me. Last time I was in my parents' home, they had a picture of me in that dress sitting on the mantel."

Her smile slowly falls. “Sometimes I’m hard on them, but I know they did the best they could.”

I take her hand and smooth my thumb over the soft skin on the back of it. “Maybe you could move closer to them. It isn’t too late to build a relationship.”

She turns her head toward me, our noses inches apart. “Maybe,” she says, her voice small and unconvincing. In a second, her expression sobers, and she pats my thigh. “You wore a black tux to prom, didn’t you? All I can ever see you as is *classic*.”

I blow a breath through my nose. “Is that a good or bad thing?”

She shrugs, her lips pursing mischievously.

My lips pull, but I roll my eyes. “Spain doesn’t have proms. There are fiestas on the street corners every night, so dressing up formally to slow dance to boring music isn’t much of an appeal.”

“Ah, that’s right,” Lib taunts. “You Spaniards know how to do it up right.”

“We do,” I agree playfully but also mean it. I’ve been Americanized for so long being close to Sawyer that I sometimes forget the things I love about my own culture. The buzz of late nights, the siestas, the shorter work hours... It’s somehow slower and faster paced at the same time. I miss it. Before being with Lib became possible, I was excited to go back. Now I’m silently hoping she’ll want the same.

“We do have big graduation parties, though.” A memory of gold banners and balloons, fast music, and pretty girls comes into my mind, but it’s gone in a second, replaced with Dario and his friend I murdered. I was with them that night too.

“Yeah? Did you wear a tux to that?” Lib asks, her tone teasing.

I chuckle. “I haven’t always been this *classic*.”

“No?”

“Well...” I smile and shift onto my side to face her. “Kind of. But no, I didn’t wear a tux.”

She follows my lead and rolls onto her side, her hands moving to rest on my chest while I cup her waist.

“You know I fantasized about this,” she says, her eyes dipping to my lips.

“Fantasized about what?”

Her eyes move back to meet mine. “About being with you, talking just like this. Like we used to in our messages.”

I smooth my hand up and down her side but don’t reply. I’m too busy remembering that time. All the late nights, the disrupted work hours, waking up and immediately checking my phone. I didn’t know what I felt, what was happening between us, all I knew was that I wanted more. I wanted *this*.

So I suppose, in a way, I fantasized about this too.

She peers into my eyes, but it doesn’t seem like she’s waiting for anything. She looks like she’s thinking. “This is going to sound crazy...”

I bring my hand to her face, tracing her sculpted cheekbone with my knuckles. “I can take crazy.”

She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes as I continue to caress her face, running my thumb over her temple and savoring the soft skin meeting her hairline.

“I don’t regret coming here.”

I glide my fingers through her hair and rest my hand between her shoulder blades, hugging her to me. “You wanted to help Elsie. I know that.”

“No.” Her eyes open, and she stares into me with something I’m beginning to recognize as love. “I mean, the first time. I don’t regret any of it. I don’t...” She purses her lips. “I don’t think it could’ve happened any differently. And I know this is probably ridiculous, but ... before this, I was a prisoner. I had designer clothes and lived in a pretty home, but I was trapped. Being with you makes me feel free.”

“I could’ve done things differently,” I whisper, my stomach twisting with remorse.

“No.” She shakes her head slowly. “I don’t think you could’ve. I don’t think either of us were at a point where we would’ve been willing to walk away from our lives.”

My mouth stays closed. I don’t want to admit to her that I agree. I don’t want to make any excuses out loud. And as much as I’m ashamed to admit it...

I don’t regret anything either.

“You’re willing to walk away now, though, right?” Lib asks, her hand shifting on my chest.

My brow furrows. “Of course. It’s a little late now to question it, don’t you think?”

“Right, but I mean...” She looks off like she’s trying to think of the right way to say something. “I mean, are you ready to walk away from Sawyer? What are you going to do if he finds out about all this and...”

“And?”

She sighs and looks me in the eyes. “And he tries to get rid of evidence. Don’t you think it’s risky to just let things play out?”

I shake my head. “Enough people have died, Lib. I’m still hearing word of residents who were at Chaffer’s dropping, and people have already begun leaving the island. Chaffer will retaliate, Sawyer will eliminate him, and there won’t be anything left to hang on to. Once that happens, I’ll talk Sawyer into disappearing. I suspect he already knows it’s going to come to that.”

“Right,” Lib says, frustration entering her tone. I try not to blame her. Try not to get frustrated myself, but it’s difficult. “But if he knows he needs to disappear, why wouldn’t he kill all the women? Don’t you think it would be wise, in his position, to get rid of every witness that he can?”

“Wise, maybe. And I’m sure he will try to cover his tracks, but not by killing a manor full of innocent women. More are

showing up by the hour. It's too much for his conscience."

"Okay, but what if you're wrong?"

"I'm not wrong."

"Angel, just listen to me for a minute. He—"

"Stop."

Her face falls, and a sigh rushes out as her mouth closes. This isn't the first time we've had this discussion, and every time we do, I get less and less patient. She's convinced I'm wrong. I'm convinced she's wrong. We never get anywhere.

While I can admit I've been lied to, maybe even manipulated, I'm not a puppet. Sawyer can fake a lot, but he can't fake over a decade worth of vulnerability, insecurities, emotion, and depressing stories from his childhood. He can't fake everything I know about him.

"He's done some bad things, but he isn't cruel, Lib. I know you're convinced he is, and I understand where that's coming from, but please, for once, just trust me."

She's quiet for several seconds, staring at me with pity I resent but try to understand. Eventually, she closes her eyes and tucks her face into my chest.

"It's hard," she whispers. "I just feel like there's so much you're not seeing."

I hug her to me, her hair tickling my chin. "I know it is. But do it anyway."

My phone goes off, and Lib groans. The time for peace is officially over.

It was nice while it lasted.

I sit up and pull my phone from my pocket. It's a text from Chaffer.

Need to see you. Now.

Lib sits up and stares down at the text. She looks at me and shakes her head. "Don't go."

"I have to."

“It could be a trap.”

It could be. He certainly isn't asking to 'catch up.'

But whatever it is, it's necessary that I deal with it.

“It isn't. He probably wants me to play peacekeeper with Sawyer.”

Lib glares at me like the lie is written on my face, but when I don't fess up to it, she looks away and blows out a breath. “You know you're as stubborn as I am, right?”

“*No one* is as stubborn as you.”

She glares at me, but when I smile, her anger cracks. She fights a smile as she slowly stands from the rock.

“Fine,” she huffs out. “But check on Elsie when you get back, please.”

If I get back.

“Of course.”

* * *

“HANDS AGAINST THE WALL.”

Chaffer's cleft-chinned guard gestures to the mirrored wall just inside the entryway. There's no gun in his hand, but there's one clearly visible on a holster at his waist. It's contraband. The manor is technically the only place on the island guns are allowed.

Chaffer usually has a few big guys hanging around for security, but nothing like this. I counted five guys outside just on the walk to the door. The flames aren't on right now, but I imagine his peculiar but effective 'fencing' is primed and ready to go at the first sign of trouble.

If I'd thought it was possible that Chaffer would back down, that thought is long gone.

My eyes dip between the gun and the guard's face, drawn to the cleft. There's something to be said about a small chin

dimple, but this looks like a full ass.

“Now.”

The challenge in his tone immediately flares up the animal in me, but for once, I suppress it. I don't know why I'm here, but I know I need to speak to Chaffer.

I plant my hands against the wall and let him pat me down. When he takes a step back, I look at him over my shoulder. “Satisfied?”

He gives a curt nod and motions for the hallway. “Mr. Chaffer is in his office.”

I start that way, and Chaffer's guy follows, which is annoying. I'm not an assassin. I don't know what Chaffer expects me to do.

When we make it to the office, Cleft Chin knocks and waits for Chaffer to beckon him in. He swings the door open, revealing Chaffer behind his ridiculously pretentious mahogany desk in a plush chair I bet cost thousands. It reminds me of Doctor Evil's, and it half surprises me that he doesn't menacingly turn at our entrance.

“Mr. Ramos is here to see you, sir.”

Chaffer doesn't look up. He studies a cigar, shifting it from one hand to the other. “Let him in.”

I'm standing right here.

When the guard steps out of my way, I walk into the office. The way Chaffer is studying that cigar... I don't like it.

The door shuts, and Chaffer nods to the chair in front of the desk. “Please, have a seat.”

“What's this about, Chaffer?” I ask, my voice calm. “Why are you having me frisked?”

“Sit, Ramos.”

My straight spine only stiffens at hearing the command, and finally, Chaffer meets my eyes. He rolls his and lifts the cigar for me to see.

“You gave me several of these the other night.”

I stare at him blankly. “Okay.”

His eyes dip to the cigar, and he continues to scrutinize it. It’s a Cuban I bought illegally on a business trip last year. I had four of them, and three went to Chaffer the other night. One I smoked myself while we bullshitted in his den.

I knew Chaffer wouldn’t be able to resist these. I myself had been saving them for a special occasion, and it was the best solution I had for preventing his death. I need a war. That can only happen if there are two opponents.

He examines me while running his finger up and down the cigar. He sets it on the desk and leans back in his chair.

He knows.

I know he knows.

But still, I stand, unflinching.

“Earlier this evening, do you know who came to visit me?” he asks.

I don’t humor him with a response.

“Peter Shaw.”

My brows knit, but I don’t ask the obvious questions of ‘why’ or ‘so.’ I just wait.

“He came to tell me that you were the one responsible for what happened the other night.”

“Did he?” I ask, sounding disinterested. Inside I’m tipping my hat to that son of a bitch. I do all the work, and he pushes me out of the way. Well played.

He’d better hope Chaffer kills me.

Chaffer nods. “He did.”

“Hmm.”

“I didn’t take him seriously, of course. Shawn Miles told me a while ago that your old slave was his sister, so it wasn’t hard to imagine Peter would have it out for you.”

I fold my arms in front of me. “You knew that, and you didn’t bother telling me? He’s been my pilot for the past *year*.”

He lifts the cigar. “Then I got to thinking about these,” he says, his face hardening. He tosses the cigar on the table, his forearms tensing as he flexes. “That’s how he did it, isn’t it? He laced my cigars.”

How *he* did it?

He as in Sawyer?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“*Don’t* lie to me. I asked you here because I think it’s time you learned the truth about some things. I’d like you to give me the same courtesy.”

“What things?” I ask, my curiosity genuine.

Chaffer gestures to the chair. “Sit.”

“No. What things?”

“Angel...”

“*What things?*” Surprised by my raised voice, I take a calming breath and force my fingers to uncurl.

I don’t have any idea what he’s talking about, but my chest starts to tighten when I think about all the other *truths* I’ve learned.

I don’t think I can take another.

Chaffer doesn’t respond. He just stares at me, waiting for me to sit, and reluctantly, I do.

He leans back in his chair, his legs crossing. “Why did you save my life the other night?”

My lips flatten, but I don’t move otherwise.

“I know you did, so don’t bother denying it. You knew what Sawyer had planned. What I want to know is why you sabotaged it.”

At my silence, he sits up and plants his forearms on his desk. “You’re not one hundred percent with Sawyer, are you?”

After a few seconds, I shrug. "I'm my own person."

Chaffer's thin lips lift into a tiny smirk. "Maybe you are." He tips his head as if he's just now considering this. "If that's the case, you must realize how unhinged your friend is."

"You murdered an entire room full of people, some innocent, and you're going to call Sawyer unhinged?"

Chaffer shows me his palms. "I'm not saying I'm innocent, but at least my actions make sense. The people who died have no effect on me. The people he killed were his own meal tickets. Not only that, but now his empire is nothing but chaos."

I sit back and pretend to consider this. What he said is true. Of course, it's true. It wouldn't make any sense for Sawyer to kill all the people who were making him millions.

But he didn't do it. I did. Sawyer only agreed to slipping a cigar into Chaffer's personal stash and gifting one to Eli Colley. He knows about the chaos created but believes it was the fault of the guard he sent to do it. I was never supposed to have been there.

Chaffer sighs. "In a few hours, I have an army of men prepared to storm the manor. I want you to give us access to your private gate."

I rear back. "What?"

"Sawyer needs to be taken care of, and I'm prepared to do the work for all of us."

"Sawyer is my brother. Why the hell would you even consider me helping you kill him as a possibility?"

Chaffer doesn't miss a beat. "Because, like it or not, he's as much your problem as he is mine."

I crane my neck side to side, my chest heaving with a deep, frustrated breath. I'm tired of this. So *beyond* tired of this.

"You know, I think I might've saved your life tonight. Peter will be assisting us with our attack, and I'm sure he's dying for the chance to personally kill you."

I let out a humorless laugh, my shoulders lifting with it. “Gee, thanks.”

“I’m only returning the favor.”

I run a hand over my face and stand, finished with this conversation. Maybe even finished with all of it. If Peter and Chaffer want to try to break through the manor’s security, fine, they can have at it. They won’t come out victors, but neither will Sawyer. The whole island is fucked at this point.

Liberty and I should just leave. Take Elsie and let the cards fall.

I start toward the door but stop when Chaffer speaks.

“I have a theory I want you to hear.”

My eyes close, annoyance seeping from my pores as curiosity simultaneously holds me in place.

“For a very long time, I thought you killed your slave. The first one, Peter Shaw’s sister. Part of the reason was because you never disputed it, but here lately, I’m not convinced.”

“So what?” I say, opening my eyes and staring at the door. “What the hell difference does it make?”

“I told Peter you didn’t push his sister off a cliff. I’d like to know if I’m wrong.”

The anger that’s been building since setting foot on his property peaks, and I almost, *almost* tell him to go fuck himself. Peter’s tried to kill me twice before, so it isn’t news that he’d want to try again.

But then I remember his sister. I remember Beth.

I don’t owe Peter shit, but I owe her everything. I wonder what she would think if she could see her brother now, dedicating his life to killing her killer, spending his days on an island she hated.

She’d want him to live his life. She’d want him to have closure.

A sigh rushes from deep within my chest as I turn. “No, I didn’t push her off that cliff. She jumped. I didn’t dispute

killing her because that's essentially what I did."

Chaffer lets out an unconvinced hum. "Three people claimed to see her get pushed."

"Three people lied."

I turn in time to see him shrug. "Maybe. But what if they didn't? What if they *did* see Beth get murdered that night? Just not by you."

I huff out a laugh and shake my head. I know what he's suggesting, and it isn't possible. Those women lied. Or they thought they saw something they didn't.

Or they... They were wrong.

They had to have been.

"Do you want to know what made me start questioning this?"

My face starts to prick, tiny needles stabbing along my cheek bones.

I should leave. I should stop letting him speak, stop entertaining his ideas. His *theories*.

But I don't leave. I stay rooted, paralyzed.

"About a week ago, someone told me you killed your most recent slave. But I knew that wasn't true because Jasper is the one who killed her. He told me before he left to follow you to Spain that Sawyer ordered him to do it. We had a good laugh at how pathetically under his thumb you are."

Chaffer stands and steps to the side of his desk. "But you didn't dispute *that* rumor either." He takes a step my way. "So my theory is, you let that girl go, and you have no idea that your best friend, your 'brother', had her killed."

He walks the rest of the way to me before leaning in so close, I get a whiff of his repulsive Cologne. "*This* is why you're going to help me tomorrow night, Angel. Deep down inside, we both know I'm right."

If my face wasn't numb, I'd glare. Maybe I'd even yell. I'd tell him how wrong he is, how nothing he's saying makes

sense.

Except, it does. Some of it, at least.

Sawyer did send Jasper to follow us. Jasper did try to kill Lib.

And Sawyer must have ordered him to.

It makes sense, it just ... doesn't surprise me. Lib was a liability. A terrifying liability, and Sawyer wouldn't be able to sleep knowing she was out there. In a way, I blame myself for Sawyer's decision. I'll betray him for his betrayal, but I won't forget I was responsible for pushing him to make that call.

But Beth...

What possible motive could he have had for killing Beth? She wasn't a threat. She was just a girl.

He wouldn't have had a reason to kill her... So why is it making so much sense that he did? What if those girls really had seen him?

What if...

What if now I have to kill my best friend?

"You were right to frisk me," I say, my voice low and serious. "If I had a gun, I'd shoot you in your fat fucking face, you piece of shit."

I turn and storm from his office, ignoring him when he steps into the hall and calls out to me.

"Just think about it, Ramos. I know you'll do the right thing."

LIBERTY

*M*y image reflects back at me in the bathroom mirror.

I look over myself, searching for scars that represent my life up to this point, but they aren't there.

There's a line of scar tissue on my chest from the car accident, but other than that, my skin is flawless, and I fucking hate it. It's weird to look the same as I did before arriving on the island even though I feel different in so many ways.

I'm stronger.

I felt weak for so long, being married to a man who saw me as his servant. I played the part of a doting trophy wife and never questioned whether I was worth more. It took actual slavery, transforming me to the point I barely recognize myself, to finally acknowledge my worth.

I'm braver.

Never would I have thought it would be so simple to put my life on the line for the sake of my freedom and others.

I'm more empathetic.

I didn't know real struggle before this, but now that I do, I can appreciate more what people go through.

But the biggest change of all is how much I deeply, truly love myself. Love the woman I've become and the strength I've summoned, which has given me the ability to truly love others. To truly love Angel.

I never had that before.

And now I do.

So it's hard, really, *really* hard to look at this woman in the mirror, so outwardly similar but so different internally, and wish to go back to my old life. To even consider what I would do if I were able to wave a magic wand and make all of this a dream. I really did mean it earlier when I told Angel that I have no regrets.

But damn, I'm ready to move on. As soon as Angel gets back, I plan on telling him my plan, what I want *our* plan to be. I've thought long and hard about it.

I want Elsie to go to Yale. I want her to have a normal young adult life, and I want to use my piece of shit, dead husband's money to put her through it. I want to spend summers and Christmases together, and I want her to always know that she can come to me for anything.

As for Angel and me... I want to go to Spain. Even if he doesn't admit it out loud, he misses his home country. I don't know if we could live near his family since he'll have to get a new name, but we could live along the coast or in Valencia or pick a quaint, little town and settle down there. With him being a fugitive, it's safer there than it would be in the United States anyway.

So that's what I want. A full life with him, even if it's on the run. Even if we're constantly looking over our shoulders. My first choice is Spain, but I'd go anywhere with him.

A noise sounds outside the bathroom, a screeching like someone is opening the back door.

Speak of the devil.

I take one last look at myself in the mirror, a tiny smile pulling, then I flip off the light and walk into the living room.

Angel's footsteps clomp in the kitchen as I tuck my hair behind my ear while walking to meet him halfway.

"How's Elsie? Is—"

I gasp when I bump into Sawyer's chest before reflexively jumping back. He seems just as surprised to see me, his eyes

going wide and jaw dropping.

“Liberty,” he whispers like he thinks he might be seeing a ghost.

I don’t respond. I have no idea what to say or if I should run or if I should try to explain myself or lie or what to do. Before I can make a decision, his shock wears off, his jaw tightening.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

ANGEL

Something's different at the manor tonight.

The guard at the front gate spoke into his mic as I approached. He hesitated before letting me through, and now I catch the eye of two more guards as I walk up the path.

I could be paranoid or suddenly feeling as if all these people who were once my allies are now my enemies, which they are, but they aren't supposed to know it yet.

I'm getting Elsie, then the three of us are getting the fuck off this island. Tonight. Now, preferably.

I don't know how much truth there is to Chaffer's 'theory' about Beth, but it only makes sense that Sawyer sent Jasper to Spain to kill Liberty. While I can understand why Sawyer might have done what he did, I can't forgive his actions, and I won't be sticking around to fight for him. Or warn him.

He is officially the enemy. No more gray area.

Another brute of a man—unrecognizable to me—stands in front of the manor door with his thick arms crossed over his massive chest, not budging when I step up to him. I glance around a moment, the yard lit up by outside lights, and spot multiple men I don't recognize. Sawyer seems as prepared for a war as Chaffer.

That isn't my problem.

"You plan on letting me pass?" I ask, my tone annoyed although anxiety blooms underneath it. They could stop me from taking Elsie. Or they could *try*.

“Mr. Hansley has requested you meet him at your residence.”

My residence.

Where Lib is.

My fingertips begin to prickle, but I hide the flush of worry from my expression.

“Did he say what he wants?”

The beast of a man just stares, looking like he wishes I would challenge him so he has an excuse to pummel me. He has a few inches and about fifty pounds on me, so I won't lie ... he'd have a good chance. Still, he obviously doesn't know my reputation among Sawyer's guards.

“Fine,” I growl at the brute, stepping off the porch.

As I make my way to my home, my muscles wind tighter with each step.

She's hiding. Of course, she's hiding. She's fine. I can relax.

And I try to, taking deep breaths in through my nose and out my mouth, but the whole time I know I'm lying to myself. He must've found Lib. The question is, what is he going to do about it?

There are two guards on my back patio when I arrive. *Two*.

More anxiety.

More fear.

Without speaking to either of them, I walk through my back door. My face is as hard as I've ever felt it, but my composure is forced. I want to scream.

“Angel,” Sawyer calls from the living room.

I stiffly walk that way as I square my shoulders, pausing when I spot him by my couch. Two drinks, probably Brandy, are poured into glasses gifted to me by Sawyer years ago, both resting on the coffee table beside a bottle of ... yep, Brandy.

“Come.” He beckons me over with a wave. “Let’s have a drink.”

“Are the men outside necessary?” I ask, slipping my hands into my pockets while slowly strutting up to him like a predator would its prey.

He shrugs. “I don’t know, Angel. Are they?”

I fight the urge to peer up the stairs, as if Lib will be there with a finger to her lips to assure me it’s all okay. That she wasn’t caught. That she isn’t already dead.

She could be dead.

My heart stutters, and icicles coat the hairs on the back of my neck. I mentally survey the room, searching for the closest weapon without taking my eyes off Sawyer. The Brandy bottle might be my best bet.

“Please.” He motions to the sofa. “Sit.”

“I think I’ll stand.”

“Mmm, I think you should sit.” His words come out clipped, irritated. Threatening.

I don’t budge.

“Where is she?” I ask, cutting through the bullshit. There’s no reason to drag this out. I need to know *right now* if she’s dead. Because if she is, then so is he.

He raises his brows. “Are you referring to Elsie or Liberty?”

Without waiting for a response, he drops onto the couch and snatches one of the glasses off the table. He takes a deep gulp before resting it on his knee.

“She’s safe. Both of them are,” he says, staring at my wall instead of me. “I’m recognizing now that I underestimated how important Liberty is to you.” He lowers his head and gazes at his lap before shrugging. “And I fucked up. I fucked up horribly. I shouldn’t have sent Jasper to follow you to Spain. I damn sure shouldn’t have even agreed to buy Liberty

for the island in the first place. In hindsight, it's obvious you cared a little too much about her."

"We can leave," I say, walking to the recliner catty-corner the couch and sitting. "We'll leave with Elsie now. Neither one of them will ever be a problem for you."

He weakly lifts a hand as if to say 'who knows?.'

"Sawyer..."

"What were you doing at Monty Chaffer's tonight?" His head lifts, so his hardened eyes can drill into me.

"He asked me to meet."

"Mmm, and how did that go?" he asks, his tone flat. "Did you manage to get rid of him for us? Or did you manage to..." He opens his palms and lifts one shoulder. "I don't know, get information on him? Lure him to a meeting on *our* property? Gauge his security? Or..." his face cracks with either anger or sadness. "Were you there to betray me?"

"Don't be stupid," I spit. "I would never *betray you* for Monty Chaffer's benefit. I went to speak with him because I felt it would look suspicious if I didn't. He's gearing up for a war, Sawyer. His house is crawling with guards, all carrying guns."

"Mmm," Sawyer hums again. "And then he just ... let you go."

"He knows if he killed me, he really would start a war," I lie.

Sawyer's lips lift into a half smile. "He would've. I would've gutted anyone who even *tried* to hurt you. I love you. You are the closest thing to family I've ever had." His eyes begin to water, and a fake laugh bursts from him before he sets his glass on the table. He rubs his eyelids with his thumbs. "That's why this is so fucking hard."

I turn my head toward the back door. It's open. Ready for the guards to come through.

My eyes shift to the Brandy bottle.

He inhales a loud breath through his nostrils and drops his hands to his lap. "I want you to know that this was the last thing I ever wanted. And if I could go back and do things differently, I would." He stands. "But unfortunately, I can't just let you kill me."

I remain seated, anger brewing inside me, smothering all remnants of fear.

He's not going to kill me. He's too big of a coward for that.

No, he's going to let the men outside do it.

"I had no intention to," I say, my voice steel. "Rumor has it, you killed Beth. You tried to have the love of my life murdered. And still, I had no intention of killing you."

He gives me a tiny, sad smile and huffs. "You know, you're the best liar I've ever come across. I genuinely can't tell when you're doing it."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Sawyer." I stand, gauging where the Brandy bottle is, practicing grasping it in my mind. "You're a damn good liar yourself."

I swing my arm for the bottle but hit the base instead of the neck. I still grasp it with ease, it's still quick, but it's just slow enough to give Sawyer a chance to raise his forearm in time to block the blow to his head.

I drop the bottle and rear back my fist, crashing it into his jaw before he can properly react.

He stumbles backward but rights himself before I swing again. His head ducks, and my fist meets empty air, knocking me off balance. Sawyer takes the opportunity to grab me behind the neck, using it to brace himself as he slams his knee into my stomach.

Air doesn't rush from my lungs... For what seems like an excruciatingly long time, it gets trapped inside them. Sawyer breaks away from me as I hunch over, air finally expelling from me. It's the perfect opportunity for his knee to smash my face next, which I unfortunately realize with only enough time to brace myself.

But it doesn't come.

The two men who were on my patio file in, and one jerks me up before forcing my hands behind my back. I yank my arms away just before the other guy kicks me in the stomach, and I lose whatever breathing capabilities I had left.

I'm shoved to the ground, my cheek burning against the carpet while one guy presses his knee into my neck and the other ties my hands behind my back with some kind of cord.

"I know it's not a lot, but I want you to know I'm not going to kill Liberty or the girl. If she's worth dying for, I'll respect that."

"Go fuck yourself," I growl, although his words bring me relief.

I can't save her. I don't know that I ever could have. I know whatever Sawyer provides isn't the life she'll deem worth living...

But at least she'll live.

I turn my head enough to barely make out Sawyer's face while my ankles are tied together with the same cord-like material. It's wrapped around my knees next, like he's planning on wrapping me up like a mummy.

Sawyer's eyes are watery. I've questioned so many times as of late if he's been real with me. If he's as good at manipulating me as everyone seems to claim.

Looking into his eyes now, I know without a shadow of a doubt that those tears are real. And I wish like hell that didn't mean anything to me. That *he* didn't mean anything to me.

My brother.

My best friend.

My only family I've had my entire adult life.

Now my enemy. My murderer.

It's almost funny... Everyone's been hoping for me to kill him, but I never once seriously questioned if he'd kill me.

He turns away and takes a step toward the kitchen.

“Sawyer.”

He turns, tears still glistening in his eyes.

“Did you kill Beth?”

He lets a couple of seconds pass which is a couple of seconds too long. My heart sinks, and my throat clogs.

He nods before turning away.

The cord tying my wrists is connected to the cord at my knees, not quite a hog-tie, but there's plenty of strain in my arms. The two brutes leave me where I am, following after Sawyer. No bullet in my head like I expect.

It isn't until I smell smoke that I figure out why.

LIBERTY

Austin leads me away from Angel's house to the manor.

Not that it matters much, considering I'm probably walking to my prison or even death, but I would've preferred Cooper. At least he wouldn't hold my arm in such a bruising grip.

"Hurry up," Austin snaps, all but dragging me to keep up with his long strides.

"Well, excuse me for not being a fucking giant."

All he does is growl and quicken his pace, large black boots sinking into soft earth like he's a dinosaur.

I look over my shoulder at the break in the trees that leads to Angel's house, but unsurprisingly, he isn't there. Not yet.

"Austin, I have a question for you." I try to tug my arm away, but he doesn't let up. He throws open the back sliding door and hauls me inside. "Do you think Angel will start from your mouth or your asshole when he slices you open?"

Austin scoffs and tosses me a fleeting, sinister grin. "I wouldn't be too confident in your boyfriend, Ivy. My guess is you'll outlive him."

I huff, but his words cool my blood.

Sawyer wouldn't kill Angel. He'd kill *me*, but he wouldn't kill Angel.

That would be crazy ... wouldn't it?

I'm too afraid to ask.

“My name’s Liberty,” I mutter, the fear somehow absent from my voice.

“Whatever.”

Confusion blooms when we start up the staircase to the second floor, where the women’s rooms are.

We’re not going to the cellar?

Sawyer’s just what ... going to make me a whore again?

What about Angel? How the hell is Sawyer going to convince him to let that happen?

“Why do you think I’ll outlive Angel?” I ask, irritated by the quake in my voice.

Austin laughs but doesn’t answer.

“Sawyer wouldn’t kill him.” I try to proclaim this matter of fact, but it comes out sounding unsure.

“Everyone has their limit, princess.”

When we reach the second floor, Austin doesn’t pause. He tugs me up another flight to the third floor.

I try to resist, but he grips harder, dragging me when I stumble. My knees bang against three steps before I can regain my footing and manage to keep up with him.

After we reach the third floor, we take a right and start down a long hallway into a part of the manor I’ve never seen.

“Where are we going?”

“Shut up,” he snarls. “You talk way too fucking much.” With that, he yanks me in front of him and shoves me forward, releasing my arm.

I walk without protest, mostly because I’m anxious to see where we’re going, what’s going on. Fear hasn’t stopped coursing through me since I saw Sawyer’s face, but speculating over the unknown is even worse.

Will he kill me?

Will he kill Angel?

Will he kill *Elsie*?

Oh fuck, Elsie. My stomach drops, and I nearly sink to the floor with it.

If he hurts her...

“Take a right,” Austin commands.

I do what he says, squinting down the hallway at the large pieces of furniture pressed against the wall. No, not the wall, doors. An armoire, two dressers, and a heavy looking shelf stand in front of two doors on each side of the hall with several rooms in between.

Austin grabs my shoulder and yanks me to a halt in front of the armoire. He looks at me with so much intensity, his eye twitches. “If you move a muscle, I will hurt you. Do you understand me?”

I nod, not because his words scare me, but because I need to know what’s behind this door. I’ve felt pain, I can handle pain. What I can’t handle is being in the dark about what’s going to happen, what my fate is.

He plants both his palms on the side of the armoire and grinds his teeth as he slowly shoves it out of the way. A large vein bulges along his bicep, and with the way his face pinches, I wouldn’t be surprised if the cabinet was full of cement.

Once it’s out of the way, he pulls a key from his pocket and unlocks the door. He throws open the door, his eyes aimed inside instead of at me, and he quickly raises a fist.

What the fuck?

“Go,” he growls, tossing me a hurried glance.

I hesitate, his cautiousness making me think there’s a lion in there or some shit. I look inside, surprise stealing my breath when I spot a woman instead. Then another. And another.

I walk into the room, barely making it inside before Austin slams the door shut.

“Lib!”

My eyes dart among the women, ten or so in this cramped room, before I spot Elsie. She runs to me, her familiar honey scent a momentary salve as she throws her arms around my neck. My eyes close, and I pull her into me tighter, my throat closing up.

For there being so many people in here, it's quiet. I can hear the faint sound of Elsie's cries and my heavy breaths, but with my eyes closed, it'd be hard to tell anyone else was around.

"Shit," a familiar voice grinds out.

I open my eyes, my hold on Elsie loosening as I find the voice's owner.

Joan, Eli Colley's prisoner, scowls at me with her arms crossed. "I was really hoping you'd be saving the day."

"Joan."

Elsie pulls away, and we exchange a look before I walk to the woman and bring my arms around her for a hug. To my surprise, she hugs me back a couple of seconds before pulling away.

"Are you okay?" I ask, glancing around at the others. They just stare at me with curiosity, some openly, others averting their eyes.

My gaze refocuses on Joan as she shrugs. "For now. Who knows what they're planning?"

Her eyes darken. "Did your master, uh..." She runs a finger across her neck.

"No," I quickly say, hoping like hell it's the truth. "No, he isn't dead. Sawyer found me in his house, though."

"He did?" Elsie asks, her voice high.

I turn to her and nod. "I tried to fight the bastard, but..." I wave a hand over myself in a 'here I am' gesture.

My mind takes me back to Sawyer holding me down, begging me to stop struggling, insisting he didn't want to have to hurt me. It didn't make a bit of difference to me at the time,

but in hindsight, it was weird. I would've rather he be rough. It would make my efforts feel less pathetic.

“He’s a hell of a lot smarter than we pegged him as,” Joan says, pulling my attention to her. “I came here with every intention of following through on our plan, but they took me straight to this room.” She lifts her arms before letting them slap against her hips. “I think they knew to be cautious. With exception to her,” Joan motions to Elsie, “everyone in here has either had a master die or leave the island. I’m pretty sure there are others being held here as well.”

The other doors with furniture up against them enter my mind, and I sigh. “Yeah, I think so too.”

“What do we do?” Elsie asks in a meek voice, taking my arm.

I force my face to stay neutral, even as my lips feel heavy.

I want to say we’ll fight. We’ll find a way out of here, out of the manor. We’ll wait for the guard to come back, then we’ll all band together, freeing the others as well. I *almost* say this, think this even, but deep down I question if we’re too late.

Sawyer can’t keep dozens of women locked away. There aren’t enough residents left to simply sell us all. And he can’t let so many of us roam the manor when we so clearly outnumber his guards. He knows this. Joan’s right ... he isn’t stupid. And now he has Angel, his biggest ally, to deal with. He can’t just let Angel walk free when he knows Angel will come for me. Sawyer’s backed into a corner, and there’s only one way I see out.

One way or another, this is all about to end.

“Well,” Joan answers for me, her voice as skeptical as I feel. “The good news is, if we’re going to fight, everyone here is on board.” My eyes follow as she gestures around at all the women, seeing their bitterness, the hatred, the sorrow I couldn’t see when I was at Chaffer’s the other night. It was there, lurking beneath the surface, covered up by smoke and lust.

“The bad news is, I doubt we’ll get the chance,” Joan finishes.

I try to argue, even in my mind, wanting to stay positive, but it’s hard.

When Elsie looks at me, her eyes big and sad, I close my own and hug her to my chest. Once more, I try to summon the fighter in me. I’m going to need her.

Something tells me my knight isn’t coming for me this time.

ANGEL

*M*y lungs feel impossibly full while empty at the same time.

My coughing is endless, like there's so much filth inside of me, my body is demanding to get it out, but there's no oxygen to be found. Or if there is any in the room, I don't know where to get it.

I uselessly shove my shoulder into the front door for what must be the hundredth time. The doorknob is too hot to touch, but that proved to be equally useless. Before it got too hot, the knob turned in my bound hands when I grasped it from behind me, but the door wouldn't budge. And believe me, I put everything into it. It wouldn't move a centimeter. Something's blocking or bolting it shut.

The fire must've been set in the back of my house because the kitchen was the first thing to go up in flames, making the back door off limits.

So that leaves the windows. Which would be doable if I wasn't tied so effectively. My hands are tied to the back of my knees, so it took an immense amount of strength and muscle strain in my arms and shoulders just to get to the door. Standing up isn't possible.

Liquid spurts from my mouth with my next cough, and I look down at my shirt where the black slime landed.

Fuck.

I turn to the door and shove against it with as much vigor as I have left in me. My eyes water and sting from smoke, so I

close them. I would let out a frustrated scream if I could stop coughing.

I don't know when it happens... The action isn't conscious, but at some point, I stop ramming into the door. My coughing slows, then ceases altogether, and I fall onto my side.

This is it.

I never gave much thought about how it would feel to die. I think that's something reserved for people who are afraid of death. Even now, I don't feel fear, even though that fact barely makes sense to me.

I feel ... okay ... as strange as that sounds.

I'm not dying out of someone's revenge. I'm not dying because I've wronged someone. I'm dying because for once in my life, I tried doing the right thing. I tried not being the villain. It came at a great cost, but it was worth it.

I made amends with my older brother, something I'd been wanting to do for a hell of a long time. I said everything I wanted to say to Julia. I got to say goodbye to my mother and youngest brother.

And I got to find love.

As short as my life's been, it was a fuller life than I would've had if I'd stayed the course. Stayed the villain.

Liberty's going to be okay. Chaffer will be attacking any time now, and if I know Liberty—which I *do*—she'll find her way out of it. She'll find a way to be free.

What more could I possibly ask for?

Her image floats into my mind as my consciousness drifts off.

She's in that red dress, the one she wore when we first met, and she's smiling at me. She walks up to me and lays a delicate palm against my cheek. She's warm. Fiery hot, really, but still, I lean into the touch.

My skin sears where she touches me, and sparks fly from her hair. She's still smiling when flames ignite in her brown locks then spread from one shoulder to the next.

It's hot, like I'm standing next to an open oven, but I don't feel the fire licking me. It doesn't look like she does either.

"Wake up, Angel," she says.

My eyebrows pinch with confusion. "What?"

She caresses my face, flames pouring from her fingertips as the rest of her is engulfed. "It's time to wake up."

My eyes crinkle at the sound of glass breaking. A loud crash. Something being thrown through a window.

"Ramos!" a voice yells.

I can tell it's close, but everything seems so far away. Like it's happening outside the tiny bubble I'm in, and I'm a mere spectator of this. Or I'm hallucinating. Or dead.

"Shit," the voice growls.

Warm air brushes along my scorched skin when my weight lifts, large hands against my torso. "Kingsley, help!"

Peter. It was Peter's voice.

I must be in hell.

I urge my eyes open, but my lids feel like they are buried beneath sandbags. The strain that's been constantly flexing my shoulders suddenly releases, and my upper body slumps forward.

I rock back and forth and feel as if I'm floating out to sea on a crude raft. A cloud hovers over the sun, basking me in total darkness as the inferno raging around me is doused by all the water.

Then I fall onto a rock.

"Wakeup, you son of a bitch."

Something slaps against my face, and a stinging sensation radiates from the point of impact.

"Come on, breathe, damn it!"

Breathe.

I'm not breathing.

My lungs expand with a loud gasp as oxygen fills my chest cavity, and my eyes shoot open as painful, hacking coughs roar from my charred sternum. Someone rolls me onto my side while liquid soot drains from my mouth.

My body aches as it alternates between sucking in air and choking it all out, both actions completely outside my control.

A hand forcefully slaps my back, helping the gunk in my lungs to loosen.

By the time I'm done coughing, my throat feels like someone's taken a razor blade to it.

I roll onto my back, regaining strength with each breath, and stare up at Peter. Peter. The man who wanted nothing more than for me to be dead.

I catch sight of my house up in flames behind him.

Why the hell would he save my life?

"Hello to you too, asshole."

I cough and spit again, cringing as I sit up. There are people shuffling around, but it looks like most are headed away from my house. Toward the manor.

The manor.

My eyes widen as I look at the top of the manor above the trees.

Liberty.

"She's fine," Peter assures me. He must've read my thoughts. Or my face.

I turn back to him.

"We've already emptied the women's quarters at the manor and taken out most of the guards. She's safe."

Safe.

Liberty's safe.

“We can’t find Sawyer, though,” Peter adds, his face hardening. “We’re setting the manor on fire now. We’re gonna smoke him out.”

“Here,” a feminine voice to my right says. I turn to see Layan crouching by my side, an open bottle of water in her hand. I gratefully take it and chug, wincing at the contact against my throat. After a couple of seconds pass, the cool liquid works to soothe instead of ache.

She squeezes my shoulder before walking away, her destination seeming to be the manor.

When the bottle is empty, I toss it to the ground and meet Peter’s serious eyes again.

He pulls a key from his pocket and tosses it in my lap. “As much as I’d love to baby you, I need to get back to the manor. There’s a ship way out there.” He points behind me, and I turn but can’t see past the trees. “Take the speedboat with the red stripe across it, and go to the ship. Liberty should be there waiting for you.”

He gives me one last look. I spot something in his eyes that hints at regret before he stands and starts toward the manor.

“Why?” I croak, the one word a painful effort.

He turns to me, and I hope he understands my question because I don’t have it in me to elaborate.

Why do this?

Why save me?

“Chaffer told me what happened to my sister,” he says, the slightest bit of an apology in his tone.

I think he’ll leave it at that, but he doesn’t budge, the harsh lines framing his mouth softening some. “Did you care for her?”

Did I care for her? An outside observer would view this as a simple question, but there’s so much more to it.

He wants to know if I treated her like a slave or like a lover. If I loved her like I love Liberty. If she loved *me* like

Liberty does. If she was happy.

The answer is no. I didn't love her, she didn't love me, and although there were times it felt like all was well, I now know that what I perceived as happiness in my previous life was surface level and always fleeting.

We fought, mostly about how I wouldn't let her into my head. She wanted more. I don't know if she wanted love, but she wanted trust. She wanted to know more about me, about my business, about everything. And I never gave any of that to her.

But did I care for her?

Yes. Always, yes.

I give him the best I can manage, which is a nod. I wish I could give him more.

He tips his chin, then turns and walks away.

I peer down at the key, heavy in my palm, and grasp it tightly. Mustering all my strength, I stand. Later, I'll be able to recover.

Right now, I need to get to Liberty.

LIBERTY

“Somebody open the fucking door!”

A woman named Allison alternates between banging her fist against the wooden door and jerking viciously at the handle. The two women on either side of her have been swapping out doing the same.

The panic in the room is palpable and consuming to the point it feels hard to breathe. Elsie trembles in my arms, and I squeeze her just to keep my own hands from shaking.

Several people sob, creating a nightmarish symphony that makes it impossible to hear any activity outside the room since the gunfire and loud booms that were clearly audible maybe fifteen minutes ago. They lasted for what felt like a while, a temporary hush filling the room as we silently imagined our own versions of what was happening outside. Although each of our images were surely different, we all exchanged excited looks, each of us hoping for the same thing. That Sawyer is the one to lose this fight to the death.

But then the sound stopped.

And then somebody smelled smoke.

“Please,” Allison cries, her fists weakly hitting the door. “Please let us out.”

“Can you smell it?” Elsie asks me, her voice soft and scared.

I look down to meet her eyes and shake my head, my face as neutral as it was before she asked the question.

I'm lying.

But I hope I'm wrong.

I keep telling myself the smell is in my head, and it could be. But the booms sounded a hell of a lot like blasts from something explosive, like grenades. We're on the third floor in the biggest mansion I've ever seen out of a magazine or movie, and all of the excitement came from below us, so it wasn't just gunfire downstairs. It was more. It was enough to start a fire.

"They'll come get us when it's safe," I assure Elsie, lying again. It doesn't much matter who wins this war if the 'good guys' don't know where to find us, though. Not if the whole goddamn building burns to the ground.

Angel would look... But I think he might be dead.

My eyes close at that thought, and I hug Elsie to me.

"Somebody help!"

I open my eyes and find a woman with a tattoo sleeve screaming with her head back. She violently throws her body into the door like she's going to break through it.

"Shut up!" Joan yells, silencing the room all at once.

In the quiet, the faint yells are easy to make out. They aren't coming from downstairs. They're at the same level as us.

The knots in my neck, chest, and stomach contract painfully when I realize it's the women in the other rooms.

"Maybe we should all scream at the same time," I suggest, my voice anything but hopeful. Why? Why am I giving up now?

Every other time my situation has felt hopeless, I still fought. Now isn't the time to lay down.

I clear my throat and stand from one of four mattresses, the only furniture in the room. Elsie clings for a moment but then let's go.

"What are you doing?" Elsie asks.

“We’re here!” I scream. “We’re up here!”

Joan waves her arms in an upward motion to those who haven’t been throwing themselves at shit in a panic. “Everyone up, join in. Make as much noise as you can.”

The women hop to their feet and join me with their screams. Elsie rises and screeches at the tops of her lungs, stomping and jumping along with others. The noise from the other rooms completely drowns out, but I hope they follow our lead.

Tattoo drums the wall with her palms, and several others join in. There aren’t any windows, and there isn’t a single thing other than the clothes on our backs and the mattresses in here, so all we have to make noise are our voices and our bodies.

“No!” The shriek pierces the air, standing out from the rest enough to break my concentration. My eyes find the source ... a woman who’s jumping up and down in horror, pointing to the bottom of the door.

I follow her finger, and when I see the smoke snaking in through the small space, terror curls through my veins like a thick fog.

And then all hell breaks loose.

The panicking women rush to the door, shoving and crying out while they each compete for the spot closest to the imaginary exit.

“Keep screaming!” I instruct, beads of sweat breaking out on my forehead. It’s hotter in here than it was a minute ago, but I try to ignore that frightening fact. Try to pretend it’s all the hot breaths and body heat. Even as my chest feels like a hummingbird is trapped inside.

One woman stumbles and falls to the floor in the middle of the crowd, her features crumpled in pain. I can see her through the five or so sets of legs surrounding her when she gets kicked in the back of the head.

No one else even seems to notice.

“Calm down!” I rush to her, having to shove two people out of the way before I can grab her arm to help her up. “Stop panicking!”

“Lib!” Elsie cries just behind me.

I help the woman up, then spin just as Elsie’s shoved hard into the wall. Her head slaps against the sheetrock before she falls in a heap on the floor.

“Elsie!”

I dive to my knees beside her and turn her head toward me. Her eyes are closed, and her lips are parted.

She’s knocked out.

Someone kicks my back, and I jolt forward, nearly crushing Elsie.

“Stop!” I hopelessly growl, looking over my shoulder. I grab Elsie’s arms and pull her as far away from the chaos as I can, but the room was cramped before the panic began. Now the room feels more like a tiny jar packed with wasps, all frantically searching for the way out.

I hold Elsie’s head in my lap and caress her cheek while tears cool my hot cheeks. Never would I have thought I’d be glad about her being knocked out cold.

I don’t want her to see what happens next.

SAWYER

I never wanted to be the villain.

It's true, I didn't. I've never thought much about what I *did* want to be, even as a kid, but as I stand in my safe room, staring at the men with machine guns backing away from the manor, the only thing that's perfectly clear to me is that this isn't what I want.

Not because I lost to Chaffer.

Not because I'm losing *everything*.

But because I just killed my brother, and it wasn't even necessary. Unbeknownst to me, it was too late to stop this. Angel could've lived, if they didn't kill him too. He could've taken off with his girl and lived as peaceful a life as someone like him is capable of.

But now he can't. He's dead. I killed him.

For *nothing*.

"We should go," Austin says beside me, watching the same retreat that I am. Several other cameras show the manor, fire spreading through the inside and out. The inside caught from their grenades, but for the outside, they used the same flamethrower I used to burn Angel's house. It's fitting that I die the same way he did.

But I can't. Because I'm a selfish asshole.

"Yeah," I agree, my head slowly bobbing.

Austin opens the door to the safe room, more books clattering to the ground when they fall off the shelf meant to conceal the cube of reinforced steel. He holds it open for me, and I take a breath before striding through, pushing my thoughts to the back of my mind.

I can pout later.

Right now I need to survive.

We walk from the sitting room I use to greet the newcomers, the safe room door hanging open, and don't reach any flames until we come to the kitchen, which sucks because it's our destination.

They must've set the back of the manor on fire.

I cover my arm over my mouth and cough, kicking open one of the swinging doors before squinting through the smoke into the kitchen. The island is ensconced in fire, flames shooting up to the ceiling. The boards above us will weaken soon if we don't hurry.

"Maybe we should find an exit instead," Austin yells, his shirt pulled over his mouth.

I shake my head, ash assaulting my taste buds. "They would've blocked off the exits."

Or covered them in flames.

Thinking quickly, I grip the top of the swinging door and land three hard kicks with the bottom of my shoe before the wood finally splinters. Austin must catch on to my idea because he takes the other door and does the same.

One more kick and I'm able to rip the wood off its hinges, stumbling back when it gives. I catch myself and reset my equilibrium before holding up the board to shield myself from the flames. I sidestep through the kitchen, Austin following my lead with his own makeshift shield.

When I reach the pantry door, I throw down the broken wood and rip off my shirt. I wrap the material around my fist and quickly turn the scolding hot knob and yank the door open.

Three crates of who knows what are stacked up on top of the board I need to move to access my secret tunnel. I quickly grab each one and hand them off to Austin who then tosses them into the kitchen, glass rattling and smashing with each one.

A cough barrels out of my lungs as I crouch down, holding my shirt to my mouth with one hand while using the other to find the loose spot in the thin, gray carpet. I rip it until the trap door is exposed, relief pulsing through me.

“Holy shit,” Austin murmurs from behind me. Until about twenty minutes ago when I told Austin, I was the only person who knew about the tunnel leading to my house, barring the workers who dug it. Not even Angel knew about it.

One thing I’ve learned in my life is to be prepared for every scenario. I think through every possible outcome and do everything necessary to ensure I have control of the situation. To survive an alcoholic father and schizophrenic mother, I had to know how to anticipate anything and everything and how to act accordingly. It’s how I learned to read situations. It’s how I learned to read *people*.

It’s how I knew Angel would turn on me.

Deep down inside, I think it’s how I knew not to tell Angel about this tunnel, this one backup he wasn’t a part of.

Austin bends down next to me and grips the handle before hauling it open, his face pinched with a groan.

I find the canned soup on a top shelf and slap them to the side, some clanging onto the floor and rolling into the dark pit. I grab the small flashlight I stored behind them and flip it on before shining it into the hole.

I stick the flashlight between my teeth and am just about to climb down the dingy wooden ladder when I hear something above me over the roar of the fire.

It’s faint. Faint enough that I’m not sure I didn’t imagine it, but my eyes lift to the ceiling as I whip the flashlight from my mouth.

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Austin tilts his head to look at the ceiling.

There it is again. A faint scream. Maybe even screams.

I’m hearing things.

It’s probably the sound of things burning and crashing from the fire. That or I’m losing my mind from all the adrenaline running through me and the smoke depleting my oxygen.

They got the women out. We watched them being rounded up on the security feed...

But we don’t have cameras on the third floor.

Surely they checked...

“They got all the women out, didn’t they?” I ask, unease filling my voice.

Austin coughs, looks behind him into the kitchen, then shrugs and crouches. “Who cares?” He climbs onto the ladder and starts down.

I don’t budge.

My eyes glue to the ceiling when I hear the sound again.

“Boss, let’s go!”

“I think they’re still up there.” My mouth dries, and a chill travels down my spine despite the oven I’m standing in.

“It’s too late to go back,” Austin shouts. “We need to go!”

He’s right. Time is of the essence. If we don’t leave now, there’s a good chance we’ll never get out of here.

I look down into the pit, bile threatening to creep up my throat.

Forty-three women. That’s how many are trapped on the third floor.

Forty. Fucking. Three.

Forty-three human beings who are going to burn to death. Forty-three more notches on my ever-growing belt.

I am a monster. A sick, sick monster. I came to terms with that a while ago, let greed take hold of me until I no longer recognized myself, but this...

I'm not this.

"Go without me!" I yell, jumping across the hole and lifting up the broken door.

"Boss!"

I ignore Austin's call and race through the kitchen, the board taking the brunt of the flames. They kiss my fingers, sending a slur of curses rushing from my mouth, but I don't drop the piece of wood. It'll be my face touching the flames if I do.

After I plunge from the kitchen which is practically engulfed in flames now, I throw the door down, not sparing a second as I race toward the staircase for the second floor.

It's probably only thirty seconds before I reach it, but it feels too long. Too late. Every second that goes by feels like an innocent life lost.

It's lucky the manor is so huge because the fire hasn't covered the staircase yet. The rafters above aren't looking great when I glance up at them, but they aren't on fire yet, only darkening.

I need to hurry.

My lungs burn as I take the stairs three at a time, my arms pumping in a literal run for my life. By the time I reach the third floor, I'm gasping for breath, taking in smoke with the shrinking oxygen and spewing it back out in coughs.

This section of the third floor hasn't caught fire yet, but the smoke burns my eyes. I turn down the hallway where the women are, their screams now piercing my ears.

I come to the armoire first but continue past it because it's the heaviest piece of furniture. With adrenaline fueling me, I shove a dresser from one door, then immediately move to the next as women stampede from the room.

They shriek down the hall, tripping over one another in panic. Another wave of women flood into the hall as soon as I get the next dresser moved.

I go to the shelf next, and then finally, the armoire.

My eyelids squeeze shut, and I grunt as I press all my weight against it, my shoes slipping on the hardwood as it budes. Summoning every ounce of strength I have, momentum finally takes my side, and the massive thing slides an inch, then another, sweat sliding into my eyes and making me clench them shut. Before it's fully moved, the door pushes open, and women shove through the gap, pouring out like a burst pipe. I'm shoved out of the way and land hard on the floor, cringing as the last of the women sprint away.

I'm not sure if I've ever felt so exhausted.

My skin feels like it's been engulfed in flames along with my empire.

I'm tired. I'm... For the first time in my life, as I stare at the ceiling, my chest rising and falling with toxic air, my survival instincts don't kick in.

Right now, death doesn't feel like such a bad idea.

"Help!" someone screams. I recognize Liberty's voice immediately.

My eyes close.

"Please, somebody help me!"

I don't see her face behind my closed lids. I see Angel's. And I know what I have to do.

With a pained groan, I climb to my feet, swiping the sweat from my forehead. I glance down at my reddened chest before rushing to the room the armoire is still partially in front of. I'm just able to squeeze my body through.

Liberty is holding Elsie's wrists and is dragging her toward the door. "Someone, please!" she yells, a panicked cry escaping.

I slip back out into the hall and use my new rush of adrenaline to shove the armoire a few more excruciating inches.

“Thank you,” she calls when she must hear that I haven’t left. She bawls with relief, but when I step back into view, revealing myself, that relief drains from her face along with her color.

She gasps and jumps back, her shoulder colliding with the wall. I stride to Elsie and lift her into my arms before jutting my chin toward the door.

“Hurry up, let’s go.”

Liberty’s eyes lower to Elsie, uncertainty pooling in the pretty blue of her irises.

With a frustrated growl, I run around her, throwing a look over my shoulder. “We don’t have time to argue.”

I sprint into the hallway and to the stairs, thankful when I see Liberty on my heels. Elsie stirs in my arms, but I don’t look down at her. I clutch her to my chest, my heart galloping. I don’t see any of the others as we take the stairs down to the second floor, and I hope like hell that means they made it out.

Forty-three women. Forty-three women I enslaved in order to fill my pockets.

Forty-three women I can’t let die.

We make it halfway down the stairs to the second floor when a beam falls from the ceiling above us. I look up, my jaw slackening as I jump to move out of the way. Singeing pain tears at the skin on my back, and I yell out but catch myself before stumbling down the stairs, Elsie held firmly in my arms.

“Sawyer!”

I spin to face Liberty, my heart dropping into my shoes when I see her standing on the other side of the fiery beam. It’s propped up on the staircase, leaving no possibility of jumping over it.

“Just go!” Liberty screams, her eyes aimed at the girl in my arms. “Get Elsie out of here!”

I glance down at Elsie, then move back to Liberty.

If this was any other woman, I might listen. I might leave, maybe even take the girl with me to the tunnel if the kitchen isn't fully in flames or to the safe room to wait the fire out.

But this isn't any other woman. This is Liberty. This is the woman I promised my brother I would protect.

I can't leave her.

“Hold on!” I yell before turning and flying down the staircase. I jump onto the second floor and rush around to stand below Liberty. She leans over the railing and peers down at me, her face a mask of fear.

“You need to go!” she screams.

I lay Elsie down several feet away, her eyes blinking open then going wide. I hurry back to stand below liberty, then hold my arms open for her. “Jump!”

“You can't catch me!”

It's a long staircase, so she's maybe fifteen feet above me, and she's right, I can't catch her. I can only break her fall.

Adrenaline surges into my bloodstream when another beam falls, landing maybe ten feet behind me. I flinch and twist that way. The fire roars in my ears as it takes on the life of a starving animal, devouring furniture, the walls, the ceiling, and soon, us.

Frantically, I peer up at Liberty. “Now!”

She hesitates only a moment before climbing over the railing and letting herself fall. Her body hurls into me, and we slam to the ground, my head bouncing off tile.

Everything goes dark.

ANGEL

I stand in front of the manor, my eyes trailing over the flames pouring out of burst windows.

Bodies dot the grounds, a pile on my left with Chaffer on top. Apparently, he wasn't as big a part of the plan as he thought.

There's a row of men standing just in front of me, their guns pointed at the front door in case Sawyer decides to escape through it.

He won't. As thorough as these people think they've been, they don't know Sawyer. He's either waiting inside his fireproof safe room or he's somehow managed to leave already. Even if the ambush surprised him, he was ten steps ahead of these people. He's ten steps ahead of everyone, including me, at all times. Always.

I consider telling someone this, but instead, I just stare, my eyes dry and my throat burning. He left me to die, so it makes sense that I'd want revenge, but I'm catatonic instead. Lib is supposed to be on a big ship about a half mile out at sea, and I had every intention of heading straight to her, but the sight of the manor has me paralyzed.

It's mesmerizing ... and also a little sad.

Women are free now. The depravity has been stopped, and the world is a better place for it. But I still feel like a piece of me is dying inside that manor. Like the last twelve years of my life were nothing but a tainted blur.

The front door opens, and I suck in a sharp breath, tensing.

No.

To my surprise, it isn't Sawyer.

I release my breath while staring in confusion as women push past each other out the door, more and more coming through.

I turn to find Peter, the confusion I feel mirrored in his expression, then I turn back to the flood of women.

Peter said they were already out.

What the fuck is going on?

Where's Lib?

My chest tightens at that thought, more closely scrutinizing the screaming crowd that's quickly approaching. Searching...

I stride to Peter as he slowly side steps to make room for the surge of women.

"What the fuck is going on?" I growl, only looking at him a moment before looking back at the crowd.

"I... I don't know."

"Lib's not in there, right?" I ask, still not finding her among the others. When he doesn't immediately answer, I swivel toward him. "You said she was already on the boat. You saw her, right?"

His mouth opens and closes, blood draining from his face.

I grip his collar and yank him toward me. "Did you fucking see her?" I roar, my voice raising as my blood pumps hotter.

He stares at me like he's in shock, blinking several times before he finally answers. "I didn't see her, I just assumed..."

My dry eyes widen as I push him away from me, his collar slipping through my fingers. Gripping my hair, I spin and frantically search through the crowd.

"Lib!" I walk past a couple of women crying in each other's arms. "Liberty!"

My head moves left and right, my tense shoulders growing tauter with the movement. “Lib!” I call again, but as soon as I do, I know I won’t get an answer. There are a lot of women, but not so many that I wouldn’t be able to tell if she was here.

My heart jackhammers against my sternum when I see Elsie running from the manor. Our eyes meet, and I nearly double over at the sorrow written in her expression.

I take off toward the front door, running faster than I probably ever have.

“Where is she?” I yell at Elsie, barely slowing while passing her.

She spins to face my back. “By the staircase! Hurry!”

“Angel, no!” Peter’s voice hits my back, ping-ponging off of me with as much good as it does.

My feet barely touch the ground as I leap into the manor, my body soaking up too much adrenaline to realize until it’s too late that I’m missing an incredibly important detail.

The staircase.

Which. Fucking. Staircase?

There are four of them alone that lead to the second floor.

And then there’s a whole other floor above that.

Then there’s the staircase leading to the cellar.

The cellar.

Sawyer would’ve kept her there.

I sprint inside the manor and head for the cellar. “Liberty!” I shout as I run, my eyes darting around, searching every corner in case Sawyer tied her up like he did me.

No.

This can’t fucking be happening.

I pass the den, the open door showing curtains engulfed in flames.

If she's dead... If Sawyer killed her... He'll fucking wish he burned to death.

"Liberty!" I turn the corner, spotting the hallway to the cellar, but I'm forced to halt. Burning sheetrock covers the floor, the scalding hot flames as tall as me.

Fuck.

"Lib!" I yell, but this time it's more a desperate cry than a call I want answered.

"Angel!"

I whip my head toward Lib's voice so fast, I won't be surprised if I wake up with whiplash. If I wake up at all.

"Angel, over here! Angel!"

I run in the direction of her voice, weaving through two halls before I come to the staircase Elsie must've been talking about.

There's a burning rafter that's fallen on it, blocking my way, but I still start up the stairs.

"Angel!"

I spin around, searching for her, then I jump off the stairs, hurrying around them to see her tugging on the arm of someone, helping them up.

When I rush closer, I see who it is.

Sawyer.

I push in front of Lib, shoving her behind me before I rear back my fist.

"Angel, no!"

My knuckles crash against Sawyer's nose, sending blood spraying and knocking him back down to the floor.

Fire has this place lit up like we're literally in Hell, but all I can see is red.

I climb on top of him and thrust my hands against his throat, squeezing as hard as I can while blood thumps in my ears.

On more than one occasion recently, I've been asked to kill this man.

Never did I think I could.

But seeing him with her... Knowing now what he's capable of...

I've never wanted anything so badly.

He tugs at my wrists while my hands shake with intensity.

"Stop it!" Lib screams, yanking on my arms. "Stop, please!"

I don't.

I can't.

She takes my face, then jerks it so I'm looking at her.

"He saved me and Elsie." The words rush past her lips, her voice cracking. "He saved all of us."

Saved you?

He *enslaved* you.

He ordered your *death*.

He killed Beth.

He tried to kill me.

My eyes water, causing her image to blur. When Lib puts a gentle hand on my arm, I let go of Sawyer's throat.

He gasps for air, clutching at his throat and rolling onto his side when I climb off of him.

"Go!" I say to Lib, my finger stabbed the way I came.

She shakes her head.

"Go, *now*," I roar, my hands shaking with fury. Not at her. Never at her. Hopefully she knows it. She moves her eyes between Sawyer and me, then hesitates a few moments before turning and running the opposite direction.

I stare down at Sawyer who's laying on his back, his bloodshot eyes looking sad. Defeated.

He makes eye contact but doesn't speak.

"Why did you do it?" I ask, my voice low, pained. "Why did you kill Beth?"

He closes his eyes, creases jutting out beside them like he's pained by the memory. When he opens them, he peers up at me. "Chaffer was using her to get information from you. He wanted to blackmail us to gain more control of the island."

"So you killed her?"

My chest quakes as I suck in smoky air. I don't for one second question this because instantly, it makes sense to me. All the prying. All the fights. The feud between Sawyer and Chaffer.

Beth was trying to play me. *Chaffer* was trying to play me.

And as always, Sawyer was ten steps ahead.

He closes his eyes again. "I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I demand just before my lungs constrict, and I let out several successive coughs.

I need to go. Now.

But I can't. Not yet.

He shakes his head, his shoulders shifting in a partial shrug. "I didn't think you would understand... But I knew after that night that it was a mistake." He looks to his right and coughs. "I would never hurt you like that again. Jasper or Chaffer or whoever told you I ordered Liberty's death... They lied, Angel." More coughs, then he rolls his head to face me. "I don't care if you kill me now, but if I have to die, I want to die with you knowing the truth."

The truth.

There's been so goddamn little of it in my life. My reality seems to constantly be changing, my perspective shifting, my own lies causing monstrous amounts of damage.

It's been hard to sift through what's true and what isn't.

But this? Looking into Sawyer's eyes, I know without a doubt is the truth.

And after all the headache, all the confusion, all the talk of manipulation, I know for certain that I didn't get everything wrong.

I do know Sawyer.

Who he is and who he was.

What I don't know is who he will be. That's up to him.

I take the boat key Peter gave me from my pocket, study it a moment, then toss it at Sawyer's feet.

Without a goodbye, I turn and walk away, too numb to force my steps to break into a run.

I walk from the manor just as the left corner caves in, the loud crash startling me, sparks singeing the cuffs of my pants. I turn my head that way only for a second before finding Liberty waiting for me on the lawn. She runs up to me, tears pouring from her eyes as she jumps into my arms.

Her lips find mine, kissing me like she's desperate. Scared. Relieved. Happy. Sad. Every emotion possible wrapped up into one passionate kiss.

When we finally pull apart, we rest our foreheads against each other's.

"Elsie already went to the ship," Lib whispers.

"Is she okay?"

Lib's lip trembles as she lets out a humorless laugh. "Are any of us?"

My mouth stays shut, holding back words I don't think I should say, a habit I've found impossible to break.

But I'm done with lies. A lie is what brought me to Liberty, they're what saved me from myself, *liberated* me, but that's our past. There won't be any lies in our future.

There's no room for anything but the truth.

“I’m okay,” I reply, closing my eyes. “As long as I’m with you, I’ll always be okay.”

I open my eyes when Lib cups my face, a tiny smile on her face. “Let’s go home.” Her smile deepens. “Or into hiding, I guess.”

A chuckle slips past her lips as I set her on her feet. She takes my hand, and we start toward the row of boats, my eyes searching for one we can catch a ride on. A line of men still stand in front of the manor at the ready, but I have a feeling they’ll never see Sawyer again. Not even his corpse.

“We don’t need to go into hiding,” I say, clutching her hand.

She turns her head to look at me, confusion creasing her forehead. “How do you figure that? There’s what, a hundred plus people ready to give a full rundown of some pretty gruesome shit you did. I mean, sorry is good enough for me, but—”

“No one knows my name,” I say, cutting Lib off.

She quirks a brow.

“Angel Ramos is my island name. I use it to conduct business associated with the island residents, but it’s fake. Sawyer thought we should keep our legal names separate ... just in case.”

Ten steps ahead.

“I’m not even a US citizen. Peter knows what part of Spain I’m from, but I mean,” I shrug. “We should be fine.”

“What’s your real name, then?” she smirks, and I can’t help but marvel at how beautiful she is. “Or don’t you trust me?”

Trust you?

I trust you with my life.

“Angel Rivera...” I squeeze her hand. “No more secrets.”

She flashes me a radiant smile, her eyes gleaming. “No more secrets.”

We face forward, walking into the sunrise instead of sunset, but it's just as glorious.

“Liberty Rivera,” she repeats, leaning her shoulder into me. “I like the sound of that.”

EPILOGUE

LIBERTY

Our family stands in a semicircle around Angel's mother's and Dario's headstones.

They left this world around the same time, Martina going about a month after we arrived in Spain and Dario a few days later. The succession came as a surprise that, in hindsight, wasn't so surprising. It's almost like Dario was waiting for her. A mother should never see her child die.

My hand goes to my belly on instinct as I look down at the ever-growing lump. My heart warms when my little bundle kicks. As sad as this one-year anniversary is, it's filled with equal parts joy.

We just came from the doctor's office. We're having a girl.

Nobody cries as Angel takes the bouquet of lilies up to Martina's grave and lays them by the headstone. I don't think anyone feels true sadness or loss, more like peace that comes at the end of so much suffering. Broken pieces put together, not in their original shape, but creating a beautiful mosaic, nonetheless.

Angel walks back up to me, his eyes lowering to my belly. She isn't even born yet, and he stares at her with love bursting from his eyes.

I take his hand as he stops next to me, then rest my head against his arm. He kisses my hair as we watch Sam carry the other garland of flowers to his father's headstone. He takes a

moment, staring down at it before walking back to Elsie and Julia.

Julia gives him an encouraging smile before opening her arms for him. He gives her a hug then stands strong, his features as hard as they were before. His composure is so damn similar to Angel's father, it's striking. If I didn't know Angel so well, and if I hadn't gotten to know Reyes, I'd miss how much of a front it is. I wouldn't know how soft he is underneath that layer of rock.

Elsie gives him a gentle pat on the shoulder, her big blue eyes overflowing with care.

She formed an instant bond with Adán, and especially with Sam, as soon as we got here. Julia took us in until Angel and I could buy us a house, and as hesitant as I was to throw Elsie in with strangers after everything she'd been through ... it couldn't have worked out better.

She was there for Sam like no one else could be when he lost his father, and they were able to look out for one another when they left for school in the States. Sam has decided he wants to go to Yale after he graduates high school.

My eyes drift to Luis when he clears his throat. Simone, barely contained in her tight black dress, arches her head back comically to look up at her husband. An image of them at their wedding enters my mind, and my lips pull.

It was magical in and of itself, but the part that makes me smile is what happened afterward. What happened when Angel and I were back at home, my head spinning from too much to drink, still dressed to the nines in our flashy wedding attire. He'd been right... They know how to party in Spain.

He was holding my hair back while I hurled into the toilet when the ring box slipped from his pocket and clattered onto the bathroom tile. I soon learned that he'd been carrying it around with him for weeks, waiting for the 'perfect time.' Despite my elation, I almost killed him for making me wait and refused to waste any more time planning a wedding. I'd been ready to take his last name before we'd ever left the island.

We got married in a courthouse the next day. Little did we know, our baby girl was with us.

After Luis makes a brief yet thoughtful speech, Reyes, Julia, and Sam speak.

Angel is noticeably quiet, but I wait to ask him about it until we're alone in the car.

He shrugs. "I said everything I needed to before they died."

I nod in understanding and rub his knee as he puts the car in drive and pulls away from the graveyard, heading to his dad's house next. We're having a big 'celebration of life' block party with family, friends, and several of Dario's old buddies.

When Angel rests his hand on my thigh, I turn to find his face calm, his shoulders relaxed against his seat. This is the first time he hasn't been nervous to see people from his and Dario's past.

He's finally at peace.

"I want to name her Martina," I announce, pulling his eyes to me. My lips lift into a wide smile. "And call her Marti."

"Marti Grace," Angel adds, his eyes lighting up. He smiles and moves his hand from my thigh to my belly, flicking his eyes from me to the road.

"Marti Grace Rivera," I say, putting my hand over Angel's. My belly roils with her movement, and I tell myself that means she agrees.

I don't fight to hold back the tears forming as I rest my head back. I've never felt happiness like this. Never knew happiness like this *existed*. That a man could make me feel so safe, so loved, so *equal*.

There are no secrets between us. Marti will be born into a world with parents who are open and honest with each other. Although I can't say we won't adjust the story of how we met when we tell it to her. I'll probably leave out all the lies, all the

deceit. I don't know if anyone besides Angel and I could ever understand how that deceit liberated both of us.

“Fuck, I love you so much,” Angel says with so much emotion, I lean toward him on impulse.

I smile. “I love you so much too.”

People like to say that nothing good comes from a lie.

But I beg to differ.

* * *

Wow, what a ride! I hope you enjoyed this trilogy, and if you want to read more books by me, be sure to check out my website and the Also by section of this book.

If you loved the heavy plot and thriller vibe of this series, [HIS PRIZE](#) is a book I recommend! Keep flipping for chapter one :)

THANK YOU

Thank you so much for your interest in *Liberating Deceit*! And thank you for sticking it out with me! I know those cliffhangers were ... oof, rough.

As I said in the Thank You section of book one, this was my first trilogy, and I absolutely LOVED it. Loved the setting, the plot, the characters, and now that the story is finished, I can finally say that I really, REALLY loved writing the villain. Not Jasper or Eli, but the other man behind the mind fucks, Sawyer.

I didn't *plan* it starting out, but at some point when he told me his motivations, his true thoughts and feelings, I sort of fell in love. Maybe it's my oh so forgiving heart, but he redeemed himself to me. He charmed me as skillfully as he did Anna, and then, well, he started asking for a story of his own.

I have NOT started writing it. With as much as he pokes the back of my mind, I've been making him wait. But I'm curious about what YOU want. Let me know by clicking yes or no in this [one question survey](#), or by shooting me an email. I'd love to hear from you!

I really hope you enjoyed reading about Angel and Liberty. If you did, please consider leaving a review or shooting me an email. I love hearing what readers have to say <3

Oh, and sign up for my [newsletter](#) at [nicolecypher.com](#) for my FREE bully romance, Vicious Knight, as well as exclusive bonus chapters and updates on upcoming novels and giveaways.

With love, always,
Nicole

FREE NEWSLETTER EXCLUSIVE



Vicious Knight

Everyone has secrets...

What do you do to the person who learns yours?

I'll tell you what I did. I went after her.

I *wrecked* her credibility.

I *destroyed* her friendships.

I *ruined* her reputation.

And she responded in the most foolish way possible. She fought back.

My last name might be Knight, but she's the furthest thing from being rescued.

This book contains scenes and situations that may be triggering for some. Reader discretion is advised.

ALSO BY NICOLE CYPHER

For a comprehensive list, check out [Nicole's website](#)

The Darker Places Series:

DESIRED

DEPLORABLE

DETHRONED

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JULIUS

Soulless Kings MC:

FENDER

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HIS PET

HIS PRIZE

HIS PUPPET

HIS PROPERTY

HIS PASSEROTTA

Liberating Deceit:

CAGING LIBERTY

TAMING LIBERTY

CLAIMING LIBERTY

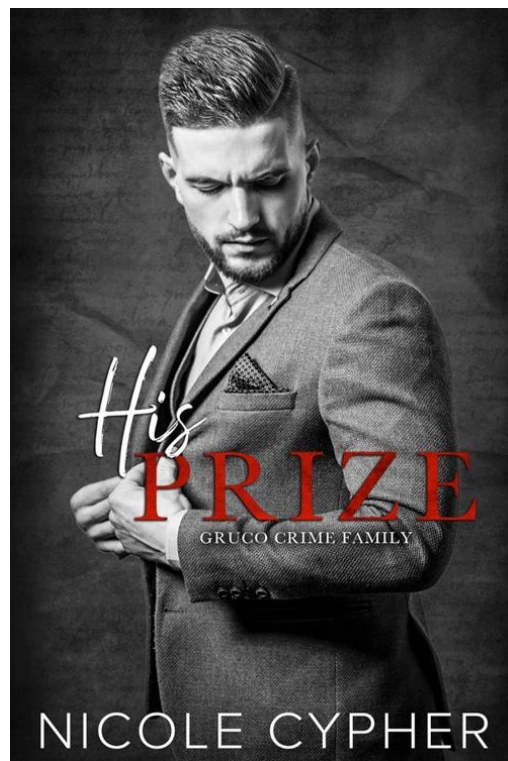
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UNHINGED

VICIOUS KNIGHT

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SETTIMO'S STORY IN THE GRUCO CRIME FAMILY WORLD



Alex...

He won me in a poker game.

It wasn't my fiancé's place to bet me, but what do you expect from a man who's being forced to marry you? Imagine my surprise when the man I met at a chance encounter, the same one I later learned was the don of the Italian mafia, is the one who claims me as his prize. As the daughter of a Russian member of the Bratva, I'm supposed to be a peace offering for the Italians. But the don seems to have no idea about it. Settimo Gruco is rumored to be as sinister as he is dangerous,

and I'm told if he learns who I am, he'll kill me. But in a world full of criminals, he becomes the one I trust the most.

Settimo...

I won her in a poker game.

All I wanted was another night with the beautiful girl I met on one of the darkest days of my life, and her fiancé was stupid enough to give it to me. I tell myself Alex is just another girl, but she's becoming an addiction, and I can't seem to curb my craving. When I find out her connection to my greatest rival, I'm forced to weigh the benefits of keeping her alive. Despite where she comes from, I trust her. If my gut instinct is right, by the end of the war with the Bratva she'll be my biggest ally... if they don't kill her first.

Tempers are rising, with threats closing in from all sides. In an escalating war, can two opponents join forces? Or is blood truly thicker than water?

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CHAPTER ONE

I hope no one throws me a funeral when I die.

They're tedious, expensive, and frankly, artificial. About half the people in attendance are there out of obligation, and a quarter never even liked the person. You think I want Bethany The Bitch from *high school* weeping into a snotty tissue over me because we shared the same home room? No. Don't fucking bother.

Maybe I'm just in a bad mood or maybe I'm bitter. All I know is right now the last thing I care about in the whole world is Syrus Gruco's death.

I happen to be in that twenty-five percent. Only in this case, at *this* funeral, it has to be more like ninety. I wonder how many people will be there today. How many associates and soldiers will sit among the congregation with sullen faces over a man who never cared they existed.

I bet they hate him as much as I do.

I frown as I turn onto the street for the church. Hate isn't the right word. In truth, I don't know anything about the man. I've never met him. But he's a crime lord. Well, *was*. How good of a guy could he have been?

My frown deepens and I squint at the sparse parking lot as I pull my ten-year-old Bug into the lot. I glance at the dashboard clock and see it's 10:24AM. Six minutes before the funeral is supposed to start.

Where the hell is everyone?

I park my car and kill the engine before swiping my phone from the cupholder. I pull up the message from my dad giving me the address to the church and make sure I'm at the right place. I am.

Did I miss it?

God, that'd be great.

I click on my dad's contact and hit call. The phone rings in my ear and I tilt my head back against the headrest. My dad answers on the third ring.

"Hello?" he says in his deep Russian accent.

"Where are you?"

"Home. Getting ready for the funeral."

"What?" My brow furrows and I pull the phone from my ear and tap to get to my messages again. The time he gave me was ten-thirty.

"Are you at the church?" he asks.

"Yes, I'm at the church. You told me to be here by ten-thirty."

"I expected you to be at least half an hour late." There's a rustling sound and then he comes back on the line. "Look at you, three minutes early."

My jaw clenches, and I put a fist to my mouth.

"Alexa, are you there?"

I drop my fist. "Yes, I'm here." *And stop calling me that.* It sounds like he's talking to an Amazon product. "What time is this thing?"

"This *thing*? This is the funeral of a very important man. One important to us, and one especially important to our merging family. You will show respect."

I wince. Not at my dad's disapproving tone. That much I'm used to. But I wish he wouldn't talk about our 'merging family'. As if that's truly what my marriage will bring. It's more of a business transaction than anything else, and I have

thirty-six days before it becomes real. I still have time to pretend it doesn't.

“Paolo should be there in half an hour to forty-five minutes. Wait in the parking lot and go in with him,” Dad commands.

My face heats, and I end the call without another word. At some point today I'm sure I'll be reprimanded for that, but I don't know how. What else could he possibly take from me that's worth more than my freedom?

I toss the phone in the cupholder and lean across the passenger seat to yank open the glovebox. I grasp a lighter and the old film canister, pop off the top and shake the stashed joint into my hand.

I wouldn't call myself a pothead. Before last month I only used weed recreationally on occasion, but I'm finding it does a beautiful job calming down my anxiety.

I grip the door handle with a shaky hand and fling the door open. I climb out and curl the joint and lighter in my palm so they aren't visible. My head swivels around the parking lot, but the few cars here peek from the back of the church, and I'm guessing they belong to the church's staff. There's a park behind the church, and one of those disgusting bathrooms looms at the far side of the grounds. Trees and a metal fence are all that's behind it, so there's plenty of privacy on the far side of the bathroom.

Perfect place for a stoner.

I kick off my heels, grab them with my free hand and head off in that direction. My eyes are drawn to the vehicles parked behind the church. A black Mercedes, a black Lincoln, and a red Jaguar are parked beside a hearse and on the other side is a Toyota Camry. I don't see anyone inside any of the vehicles, but even if they saw me, what are they gonna do? Bust me for smoking pot? Tell *Daddy*?

I look straight ahead and chuckle.

I slide the joint between my fingers and ease my grasp on the lighter. I'm just about to bring my hand to my lips when I

round the corner of the bathroom and stop dead in my tracks.

The spot's already claimed.

A man is sitting on top of a picnic table, his head hanging forward and a flask in his hand. He lifts his head, and our eyes meet. For a moment, we just stare at each other, his face emotionless while my eyes are wide and lips are parted.

He brings the flask to his mouth, never looking away. When he brings it down, he swallows and rests the flask on his knee.

His eyes dip and he tilts his chin. "You gonna light that?"

I dart my eyes to the blunt in my hand and then back to him.

He chuckles and shakes his head, his gaze moving forward as he brings the flask to his mouth again.

I glance over my shoulder and consider walking back to my car, but when I look toward the man again, he seems disinterested. My presence doesn't appear to be getting in the way of his somber mood.

I step into the shadows of the awning, drop my heels, and press the joint between my lips. With a flick of the lighter, the tip of the joint blazes, and I puff to make it catch. I suck in the potent, wonderful toxins and hold it in my lungs. I pull the blunt from my mouth, balance it between my fingers, and lean my head back. Pressure builds in my lungs, and I slowly exhale, clouds of smoke fluffing the air.

I feel better almost immediately. The tension in my neck eases and my mind stops spinning. Anger at my dad no longer seems so important.

"You look like you're having a rough day."

I lower my head and take in the man, just as he's doing to me. He has a smirk on his face that I bet he practices frequently, and his bloodshot eyes hold curiosity in them. He's dressed in a suit that would be impeccable if it didn't have a slight wrinkle, and his dark hair is slicked back over his head.

I take in his concrete jaw and defined cheekbones and think he might be one of the most handsome men I've ever seen outside of Hollywood. Not in a starstruck way. It's just a fact. He looks to be in his late thirties, so too old for my twenty-two years. Even older than my fiancé.

There is one defining feature that tells me everything I need to know about the man. His olive skin.

He's Italian. At a mobster's funeral. I smell a criminal.

"Yeah, well, I'm attending a funeral. It'd be a little odd if I was chipper, wouldn't it?" I ask.

"You're here a little early, don't you think?"

I wave a hand toward him. "As are you." I take another drag and prepare to put the blunt out, but the man holds out his hand, making me pause.

"Can I get a hit of that?"

I drop my gaze to the flask in his hand. "If I can get a taste of whatever that is, sure."

He stretches the hand with the flask toward me, and I walk to the picnic table and climb on the bench, planting my ass on the wooden table top just as he has. I exchange the joint with the flask and bring it to my lips.

I'm not sure what it is, but it tastes expensive and burns my throat. I cough and pull the flask away, setting it on the table.

The man exhales smoke and hands the blunt back to me. I put it out on the table and turn toward him.

"So why are you here early?" I ask.

His lips purse and he shrugs. "Didn't want to be late."

I nod idly and rest my forearms on my knees. "Same. Well, my *dad* didn't want me to be late. He gave me the wrong time."

"Ah," the man says and leaves it at that.

I try to study him out of the corner of my eye. I don't know if he's sad or bored. Why anyone would be sad about Syrus Gruco's death is beyond me, but I've been surprised before.

"I'm Alex, by the way."

He glances at me and nods.

"And you are?"

Now I have his attention. He turns toward me with his nose wrinkled and his eyes narrowed.

Oh, I get it. Big man. Probably important. How dare I ask who he is when I should already know. Jesus, these mafia guys are arrogant.

I almost guarantee he isn't as 'important' as my fiancé, so I'm not exactly intimidated.

But then it hits.

"Oh shit, are you a part of the family?" No wonder he's out here, drinking, looking like somebody hit his dog. That's who would truly care about the don's death. His family.

Which would actually make him—

"No."

I sigh in relief and tip my head back.

"Unless you mean the familia. Then yes." I meet his eyes just as he holds out his hand. "I'm Settimo."

I grip his hand and shake, the whole thing seeming too formal, but Settimo's lips pull into a slow smile and it lightens things. He's got white teeth too. A powerful, muscular frame. If he was standing in front of me, he'd tower over my 5'6" frame.

"So, what are you doing here?" he asks, letting go of my hand and leaning back in a relaxed pose.

I hold up the joint and raise my brows. "Isn't it obvious?"

"No, I mean at the funeral. How did you know Syrus?"

"I didn't. I mean, not personally. I knew *of* him, I guess. My fiancé is the son of a Capo." I say it with a mixture of

pride and disgust, and then I feel more disgust for ever having any pride. But power, you know? Who doesn't like that? If my fiancé wasn't a giant dick, and if I wasn't being forced to marry him, I'd probably be pretty psyched about the arrangement. Anything to get the hell away from the butcher shop.

I catch Settimo looking for the ring on my left hand, but it's bare. The ring, a little dainty if you ask me, is in the cupholder in my car. Right underneath my phone. I only wear it when I'm in the presence of someone who gives a shit.

"Hold on a second," Settimo says, holding up a hand. "You mean to tell me, you're the *fiancée* of the *son* of a *Capo*? I didn't realize I was in the presence of such an influential figure." He flashes me that smile, and my own lips tug. He's being more teasing than mocking.

I roll my eyes. "I didn't mean it like that."

He chuckles. "No?"

"No, I just mean..." I think about it for a second. "I just mean that's how I'm connected to the familia."

"Ah, I see."

"And how are *you* connected? Soldier? Associate?"

"We're talking about this very lax for two people who don't know each other."

"Worried I'm a cop?"

He studies me, his eyes roaming my face before peering into me. For a second, I think he actually is worried about it.

"I'm the brother of the neighbor of a Capo's barber."

"Wow, they really invite anyone to these things."

"Right?"

"And *expect* us to attend."

I didn't mean to say that with so much contempt, but it leaked out of me none-the-less. I stare at Settimo, trying to

gauge his reaction. His eyes have widened like I surprised him, but then amusement flickers and he smiles. I return it.

“They’re a bunch of assholes, aren’t they? The higher ups,” he asks.

“Finally, someone agrees with me.” *Damn, I really am bitter.*

“Fuck ‘em.”

His expression softens, and my smile falls with his.

“You actually liked Syrus, though, didn’t you?” I ask.

“Why do you say that?”

I shrug but glance around us, surveying the cigarette butts on the ground and the dirty picnic table that’s old and probably rotting. “You’re here. Drinking away your sorrows.”

“I’m an alcoholic.”

“You’re a liar.”

One side of his lips lift. “That too.”

I smirk and prepare to change the subject, but Settimo’s amusement fizzles and he looks away from me.

“To be honest, no, I didn’t really care for the man. He was arrogant and rigid. Everything needed to be done a certain way, and get in his way... it didn’t matter who you were. You were moving.”

“Isn’t that how all dons are? Arrogant and rigid. With a big ‘don’t fuck with me’ attitude.”

He stares at the brick wall and considers this for a moment. “Yes. Probably.” He turns to me and meets my gaze. “Even still, I don’t like change.”

I nod in understanding, and I actually do get it. This changes the entire dynamic of the organization he works for. It would be like if Nikita, the head of the Bratva, died. Who the hell knows what would happen next?

“I guess that makes you rigid, too,” I say, my voice low and kind, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

He lowers his eyes to my dress. It's black and backless, with a high neckline and short sleeves. It stops at the middle of my thighs and hugs my body tighter than I like, but so does every other item I own. That's the trade-off for having curves and double Ds. Everything you wear looks like you're trying to get laid.

My nipples pebble and press into my bra, just from this man's eyes on me. For a brief moment, I *wish* I'd chosen something more revealing.

My skin heats, and when Settimo's eyes move back to mine, he gives me a knowing wink. "I don't know how rigid I am, but I'm probably not as flexible as you."

I stare at him, my lips slightly parted, and it isn't until he laughs that I realize he was joking. I think.

He slaps my knee, and I snap out of it, shifting on the bench and clearing my throat.

"So, who is the lucky guy, anyway?"

"What?"

He nods toward my hand. "The man whose ring you aren't wearing."

I touch my hand, the phantom shackle squeezing my finger. I rest my hands in my lap. "Paolo Romano. He's the son of—"

"Leo Romano. I know him."

"Paolo or—"

"Both."

I bite my lip and wonder how stupid a move it was coming out here. Would he tell Paolo about my *recreational activities*? Would it matter? Do *I* even give a shit?

Yes, I do. As much as I want the man to trip off a ledge at the Grand Canyon, I'm afraid of him.

"So, are you... friends?"

"With Paolo?"

“Either one.”

“No.”

I nod, but I realize I’m holding my breath. I exhale and draw a long breath as discreetly as I can. “Do you talk to him?”

He snickers. “I’m not going to say anything to him about your weed, sweetheart.”

My jaw tenses at the pet name, but I’m too relieved to give it too much thought. “Thanks.”

“I have to ask, though, why aren’t you wearing the ring?”

I swallow and shrug. “It’s getting resized.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah.”

“You know what it kind of seems like to me?”

I suck in another breath and release it. “What’s that?”

“Kinda seems like you’re getting cold feet.”

I start to laugh at that. First a small giggle, but it builds to a real, belly-aching laugh. I bend over and press a hand to my stomach. Tears spring to my eyes. I don’t even know why I find it so funny. It wasn’t a joke. There isn’t a punchline. I think I’m laughing more manically than anything else.

When I come down from it, I look at Settimo and wipe my eyes. His brow is raised and there’s no trace of his charming smile.

“My feet aren’t cold. They’re frozen. And shackled. And there are guards at every exit.”

Settimo pauses for a few seconds, and then his eyes light up. “Oh,” he says. “It’s one of *those* engagements.”

I make a gun shape with my index finger and thumb and flick it at him with a click of my tongue. “Bingo.”

“So how much did Daddy owe?”

Whatever amount of manic amusement I have in me dies with that question. My face hardens, and I don't answer.

"Sorry, touchy subject?"

"Obviously."

Settimo holds up his hands in mock surrender.

I tuck my hair behind my ears and hop to the ground. I glance at the joint but don't bother picking it up. It has to be getting close to time, and I'd rather not have to explain it to my father or Paolo.

"Thanks for the conversation, but I should probably get back."

My back is to him, and Settimo grabs my wrist. I spin and face him, my gaze darting between my hand and him.

"I'm sorry if I upset you."

"You didn't," I say, deadpan.

"For the record," he lets go of my wrist, "I don't even know you, but I can tell you deserve a hell of a lot better than Paolo Romano. Plus, I think he's gay."

Really?

"Like you said, you don't know me," I say.

"I know enough."

He leans back on his palms and lets the sunshine bathe his face, all while not taking his eyes off me. My feet itch to move, but he dangled his bait, and I'm too stubborn not to bite.

"Why do you think he's gay?"

Settimo gives me a smug smile. "Just a feeling. You of all people should know what he's into in the bedroom, though. I could be wrong."

My cheeks heat. No, I don't know what he's like in the bedroom. We haven't had sex. Come to think of it, he hasn't shown much interest in me at all, other than the occasional hand on my lower back.

I'm assuming he's expecting to 'save me' for the wedding night, just like I've been doing since puberty. I've felt like a fucking fool every night since I found out I was going to be a pawn for my father. My virtue was something I held on to, something I cherished. I believed in true love and saving yourself and all that absolute bullshit they tell you about when you're young and naive. It's one of the only things I did that my father asked of me, and I was stupid enough to believe I was doing it for myself.

All it did was make me a target. A bigger triumph. A grand *prize*.

Thanks to me, I'm a better bargaining chip for my father.

I really wish I could hate the man.

"Is that a sensitive subject, too?" Settimo asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

I blink and shake my head. "No. Just a boring topic, to tell you the truth."

"That's a shame. You look like the adventurous type." He hops off the bench and stands in front of me. I was right. He towers over me.

His gaze lowers to my body again, and it responds as it did before. My core tingles and moisture dampens my panties. All with a look.

I can tell by the smirk that he knows exactly what he's doing to me.

And I don't hate it.

The weed isn't doing its job anymore. Not after all this talk about Paolo and all the thoughts swirling in my head. The anger, resentment, bitterness, they're all back and seated, no intention of leaving.

My mind swirls and all I can think about is my wedding night, thirty-six days from now. That's when I'll give my virginity to a man who plucked me from a Russian drug dealer, all so he could dangle me from his arm like I'm a stuffed animal he won at a carnival. And he didn't even need

to give my father a cow or sheep or whatever the hell is given for dowries. No, it's much simpler than that.

I'm a sign of good faith.

A gift from the Russians to the Italians.

An offering.

I'd rather give my virginity to the guy who lives under the overpass. Or anyone else. Fucking anyone.

Including Settimo.

Settimo brushes my hair over my shoulder and grazes my neck with his knuckles. I close my eyes and shudder.

I'm going to do it.

Just rip the Band-Aid off.

Get rid of this fucking misfortune I've been foolish enough to think was a gift.

Settimo's hand caresses my face, and I open my eyes as he leans down. He tilts his head and angles his lips so they're close to mine. His breath skates over me, raising goosebumps on my skin.

I close my eyes and ready for him to kiss me, but his mouth moves to my ear.

"Nice to meet you, Alex."

I open my eyes, my brow wrinkled, and look up at Settimo as he stands straight. He winks and goes to walk around me, but I put a hand on his chest to stop him.

He pauses and cocks his head. Now he's the one confused. Because I don't think he was serious, I think he was just messing with me.

But I'm serious.

I raise onto my toes and weave my hands around his neck before dragging him down to kiss me. His lips crash to mine, and it's hard at first. Forced. But after a few moments, his hands go to my waist, and he urges his tongue inside my mouth.

I part my lips wider for him and caress his tongue with my own. His hands move from my hips to my breasts, and he presses the heel of his hands against my hardened nipples. He palms me and squeezes, and I wish a second time that I chose something less modest. Something with a lower neckline so his hands could find what they're searching for.

Settimo breaks the kiss, gasping, and lifts his wrist to look at his watch. "We have to make this quick," he says, looking back at me.

I nod because there's no way I could form words. My throat is closed up, and if I tried to speak, I'd choke, and then he'd know. He'd know this is more than a quick fuck for me, and I can't risk him not going through with it.

He grips my jaw and kisses me firmly. I place my hands on his chest and lean into him, smelling his cologne, along with the liquor he's drowned himself in.

He grips my hips and lifts me, his hands moving to my backside and exploring my ass. He carries me to the brick building and rests my back against it. I break away from his lips and arch my back, puffing my chest out and exposing my neck to him. He eagerly nips and sucks on the supple flesh, leaving a trail of moisture to the fabric of my dress.

He lowers me to the ground and spins me around. I clap my hands against the brick and lay my face against it while Settimo hikes up my dress and exposes me. My panties gather at my ankles, and I have to kick them off so I can spread my legs for him.

No man has ever seen me like this.

I close my eyes and try not to think about what he's seeing. The brick is cool and rough against my face, bringing both satisfaction and displeasure. Why do I suspect that's all Settimo can give, as well?

Settimo's index and middle fingers find my clit, and I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, this time it's out of rapture, but at an intensity that's uncomfortable. See? Satisfaction and displeasure.

My body adjusts to the overwhelming sensation, and my core floods with goo. It leaks from my core onto his fingers, and with a minute of expert swirling of his thumb, I'm coming undone. Right here, against a nasty public park bathroom with my panties on the ground and my dress bunched in a man's free hand. A man I don't even know.

My body doesn't seem to care.

Settimo's hands leave me, and I whine without meaning to. His belt jingles, and his pants unzip. I look behind me and watch as he pumps his cock a few times, it sticking out from an opening in his slacks. He doesn't even plan on pulling his pants all the way down.

He presses his hand against my back, and I lay my cheek against the wall and close my eyes.

He rubs the tip of his dick in my opening, coating himself with my juices and running it along my folds to my clit. He lines up at my entrance, and my breath hitches.

This is going to hurt. I tell myself this, brace for it, expect it, and still, I'm not ready when Settimo impales me. My eyelids clench, and I claw at the brick. I clench my jaw and hold in the scream threatening to tear itself from me. Maybe that's what's causing the tightening in my chest.

Settimo's hips work like he has no idea the anguish he's causing me. His heavy breaths hit my back, and my spine tingles from it, even as my core splices in half.

He snakes a hand underneath me and finds my clit with those deft fingers again and works me.

"You're tense," he says, barely easing up. "Relax, I'm not telling Paolo shit."

Paolo.

Paolo.

I remember why I'm doing this, and my jaw clenches harder. I push myself up and rest my elbows and forehead against the wall, backing my hips into Settimo.

“There you go,” he says, slowing just enough to kiss between my shoulder blades.

His fingers continue to work, and it feels good, great, fucking fantastic, but my mind doesn't fog from it. I don't feel that overwhelming ecstasy you see in the movies and stars don't burst behind my eyes. Maybe it's because I'm an expert, myself, at making me orgasm, or maybe it's because I'm still angry, still feel betrayed, and yes, I'm even a little sad.

I come again, harder this time, and when Settimo's fingers leave me and he picks up his pace, there isn't any pain anymore. His cock massages my insides, and my breaths quicken. I don't know if my walls adjusted or if my mind just decided to numb the pain, but for the last few minutes, I think I might actually like sex. Even though all it's done is curse me.

Settimo stills and digs his hands into my hips as he comes. He glides his hands over my back in a gentle caress before pulling out. His cum leaks onto my thighs.

I take sharp inhales through my nose and grind my teeth, fighting back the tears I know are inevitable.

Settimo steps away, and there's silence. Tension squeezes the space between my shoulder blades, and I don't think it's just in my head. I open my eyes and push myself off the wall. I turn and shove my dress back down to my thighs. I don't know if I'll bother with the panties.

My eyes go wide as I stare in absolute horror at the blood that glistens Settimo's cock or the red spots that dampen his boxers.

He stares down at it with his palms open in front of him. There's blood on them too.

He looks up at me, confused, and he waits like he's expecting an explanation.

“Sorry,” I say, my voice sounding like someone shoved sandpaper down my throat. I clear it and smooth my dress. “I swear, I thought I was off my period.”

He nods without saying a word and shrugs out of his pants, careful not to touch the material with his hands. He removes

his boxers and uses them to clean himself up, and then he tosses them to the ground. He pulls back on his slacks and only now does he look at me.

“I really am sorry,” I say, fighting back tears.

Sorry? Sorry for what? For giving this man your virginity?

That’s what happens when you pop someone’s cherry. You get messy.

But I *am* sorry. Not for him, this man I don’t know and will never see again. I’m sorry for me.

He frowns and closes the distance between us. He cups my chin and kisses me on the lips. My eyes stay wide open.

“I don’t give a shit about a little blood. That was fucking great, and I really needed the distraction. But I have to go now.” He kisses me again, then gives me a wink and a smile as he backpedals a few feet. “See you around.”

He turns and walks away. Only when he’s out of sight do I let the tears fall, ruining a face of makeup I’ll have to wash in the repulsive bathroom’s sink.

And still, I think I prefer this over my wedding night.

Click [HERE](#) to read the rest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nicole Cypher is an author and avid reader of dark romance. She began her writing journey in college and hasn't looked back since. In her books you can expect a yummy anti-hero, plenty of action, and a happy ending.

Be sure to sign up for her [newsletter](#) at nicolecypher.com to stay up to date on the latest releases, special offers, and exclusive bonus chapters.

