



CLOWN MOTEL

WALL STREET JOURNAL AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LANI LYNN VALE

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WALL STREET JOURNAL AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LANI LYNN VALE

Clown Motel
Crimson & Winston
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To the man that's currently driving me 8 hours to Gadsden, AL
who can't stand stupid drivers...you make me love you more
and more every day.

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Other titles by Lani Lynn Vale

The Freebirds

Boomtown

Highway Don't Care

Another One Bites the Dust

Last Day of My Life

Texas Tornado

I Don't Dance

The Heroes of The Dixie Wardens MC

Lights To My Siren

Halligan To My Axe

Kevlar To My Vest

Keys To My Cuffs

Life To My Flight

Charge To My Line

Counter To My Intelligence

Right To My Wrong

Code 11- KPD SWAT

Center Mass

Double Tap

Bang Switch

Execution Style

Charlie Foxtrot

Kill Shot

Coup De Grace

The Uncertain Saints

Whiskey Neat

Jack & Coke

Vodka On The Rocks

Bad Apple

Dirty Mother

Rusty Nail

The Kilgore Fire Series

Shock Advised

Flash Point

Oxygen Deprived

Controlled Burn

Put Out

I Like Big Dragons Series

I Like Big Dragons and I Cannot Lie

Dragons Need Love, Too

Oh, My Dragon

The Dixie Warden Rejects

Beard Mode

Fear the Beard

Son of a Beard

I'm Only Here for the Beard

The Beard Made Me Do It

Beard Up

For the Love of Beard

Law & Beard

There's No Crying in Baseball

Pitch Please

Quit Your Pitchin'

Listen, Pitch

The Hail Raisers

Hail No

Go to Hail

Burn in Hail

What the Hail

The Hail You Say

Hail Mary

The Simple Man Series

Kinda Don't Care

Maybe Don't Wanna

Get You Some

Ain't Doin' It

Too Bad So Sad

Bear Bottom Guardians MC

Mess Me Up

Talkin' Trash

How About No

My Bad

One Chance, Fancy

It Happens

Keep It Classy

Snitches Get Stitches

F-Bomb

The Southern Gentleman Series

Hissy Fit

Lord Have Mercy

KPD Motorcycle Patrol

Hide Your Crazy

It Wasn't Me
I'd Rather Not
Make Me
Sinners are Winners
If You Say So
SWAT 2.0
Just Kidding
Fries Before Guys
Maybe Swearing Will Help
Ask Me If I Care
May Contain Wine
Joke's on You
Join the Club
Any Day Now
Say it Ain't So
Officially Over It
Nobody Knows
Depends Who's Asking
Valentine Boys
Herd That
Crazy Heifer
Chute Yeah
Get Bucked
Souls Chapel Revenants
Repeat Offender
Conjugal Visits
Jailbait
Doin' A Dime

Kitty, Kitty

Gen Pop

Inmate of the Month

Madd CrossFit Series

No Rep

Jerk It

Chalk Dirty to Me

Battle Crows MC

Always Someone's Monster

Make Me Your Villain

Rattle Some Cages

Not A Role Model

Get Tragic

Strange and Unusual

Never Trust The Living

Gator Bait MC

Nobody Cares Unless You're Pretty

Good Trouble

Cute But Psycho

Annoyed At First Sight

The Voices Are Back

Special Kind of Twisted

I'll Just Date Myself

Clown World

Fun House

Freak Show

Show Off

Clown Motel

Sold To The Circus

Killing Booth

The Fool

Blurb

It's not every day you meet a man at the bar, stare at him for hours, and then right when you decide to make a move, he gets up to leave. Worse, when you follow him outside, you see him completely change his appearance by shucking a wig and a button-down shirt, dropping them into the nearest trash can.

When Crimson looks around to see who noticed the complete one-eighty that's just taken place, not a single person notices or cares. When she looks back, he's gone.

Dejected, she leaves, thinking maybe she'd hallucinated and made the whole night up.

Only, just as she passes a dark alley, she's taken. Literally and figuratively.

That's the night that Winston Cyrus Osborn, III walks into her life.

Crimson is the worst type of woman.

She's curious.

And curiosity kills the cat in his line of work.

With nothing else left to lose, he's set to rid this world of the filth that infests it. And in doing that, he's made a lot of enemies that would like nothing better than to ruin him and every single person he cares about.

At every turn, she's there, insinuating herself into his life. And despite his attempts to keep her at arm's length, she blows past every single barrier he erects.

He should really stay away.

He should also make sure that she stays out of his business.

Yet, he keeps letting her in. And she keeps reminding him why he wants her to stay.

CHAPTER 1

*Why be moody when you can shake your booty?
-Text from Crimson to Hades*

CRIMSON

I watched him from across the room.

I didn't know who he was.

I didn't know why he was there.

I didn't know why *I* was there.

What I did know was that I wanted him.

I'd never wanted someone so much in my life.

I dropped my gaze, my chin now touching my chest, and wondered what it was about the man that drew me in so.

He was tall.

Way taller than anyone I'd ever been attracted to before.

Normally I went for the shorter guys.

Being four-foot-eleven and three-quarters—and yes, before you ask, that three-quarters is important—you tended not to lean toward the taller men because there was just no way in hell body parts fit together like they should.

He was sitting down, though, and the only reason I really knew that he was tall was due to the way he was sitting in the booth.

He had one large shoulder leaned against the back part of the table that was against the wall, while both of his legs were stretched out across the six-person booth. I could see the bottoms of his black combat boots.

Then there were those arms.

He was wearing a flannel. That flannel was rolled up to his elbows, revealing a couple of thick forearms that were prime real estate for some tattoos.

Tattoos that he didn't have.

Which was weird, because the more I looked at him, the more I thought that he could for sure pull them off.

But the real winner of the day was the blue of his flannel bringing out the blue in his eyes.

Like, holy wow, blue. Blue the color of the damn well-maintained, rich-people swimming pools they were lucky enough to have.

So. Freakin'. *Blue.*

The only thing that was kind of weird about the man was the way he styled his hair.

I wasn't sure what was going on with it, to be truthful.

It was a wild mess that definitely didn't fit the overall 'vibe.'

He looked dangerous.

But then he had this wild blond hair.

He could also go with a beard.

But he was very perfectly shaved.

As in, not a bristle in sight.

If I had to 'fix' him, I would give him a five o'clock shadow—if not a full beard—short, close-cropped hair—a military haircut maybe—and I'd find him a new shirt.

He looked great in the flannel, after all. But he looked uncomfortable in it. I'd literally watched him unroll then re-roll the sleeves at least ten times that night. As if it was too tight yet there was nothing he could do about it but fiddle with the sleeves for relief.

A simple t-shirt, threadbare and so faded looking like he'd worn it and washed it a million times.

Yeah. Red.

A red t-shirt paired with those jeans.

His jeans and boots were the only things on him that looked like they fit.

The boots were black and caked with what looked like grease. Like he'd dropped all kinds of car fluids on them and didn't care enough to clean them off.

Then there were *his* jeans.

They were so faded and ripped that it was more than obvious that they were worn and worn well.

I couldn't wait to see his ass in them when he stood up.

I was picturing a chain at his side attached to a wallet in his back pocket.

"I'm sorry, but if you don't leave me alone, I'm going to have to have you escorted from this bar," my mystery man grumbled to the woman that'd been hounding him by coming by his table every few seconds.

Oh. My. God.

He had an accent.

It wasn't too prominent. In fact, had I not been studying—and listening—to him so closely, I might've completely missed the accent altogether. However, since I might've been paying more attention than I should have, I had noticed the way that he spoke.

It was obvious he was trying to appear incognito—the woman just wouldn't leave him alone—but it wasn't working. He was getting frustrated. And out came the accent for the first time that night.

I'd heard him order multiple beers for his friends and him. He'd also ordered an appetizer of fried pickles and then onion rings.

None of those times had I heard an accent.

“Are you staying or leaving?” the bartender asked. “Because you’re taking up prime real estate. People would love to sit here if you’re not going to drink anything.”

I looked down at my Coke that I’d just ordered.

“I literally have a drink right in front of me,” I pointed out snarkily.

God, sometimes dealing with people was exhausting.

Especially ones like the douchebag in front of me.

Not to mention, the bar wasn’t prime real estate. I had yet to see another person come up to this bar besides the waitress since I’d arrived ten minutes ago.

The bartender’s eyes narrowed, and I finally sighed and gathered my drink.

There went my freakin’ stalking.

I was able to see the man behind me using the mirror above the bar.

Then there was the fact that I could see him, but he really couldn’t see me.

The way the lights above the booth he was in were positioned meant he couldn’t really look up without them shining him directly in the face.

I’d just turned and taken a huge gulp of my Coke when I glanced instinctively at the booth I’d been staring at and found it empty.

My heart plummeted.

Not that I was going to go over there and talk to him or anything, but I’d definitely been enjoying the show.

He really was that attractive.

I glanced at the door, hoping to see his blue flannel, but no luck.

I sucked in air and realized that my drink was now empty.

Well, now was as good of a time to leave as any.

I'd really only stopped in this bar because I was thirsty as hell.

I'd gone for a run in downtown Dallas—don't judge me, a woman had to run, and I was now the proud owner of a twenty-two pistol that I liked to carry in my fancy fanny pack—and I'd been so dang thirsty that I was desperate for *anything* to drink.

But when I'd gotten inside, my newfound love for Dr. Pepper—yes, I still called it a Coke, sue me—had reared its ugly head, and I'd had to have it.

With the lovely taste of the sweet nectar of the Texas gods on my lips, I headed back outside.

I didn't put on my Shokz headphones, though. The headphones were bone conducting, which meant I wasn't completely oblivious to the outside world and would at least hear someone trying to kidnap me.

Instead, I looped them around my neck and walked carefully in direction of the apartment I'd rented.

We'd all rented them in the same building, actually.

A building that Slone and Tony had recommended because Slone's best friend, Titus, owned it.

Titus and Slone were pro football players. They had an obscene amount of money, zero desire to spend it rationally—at least on Titus's end—and had thought that owning an apartment complex in downtown Dallas would eventually be a good investment.

Except, he hadn't had anyone in it in a year because he didn't like any of the people that were trying to rent apartments from him.

Which led to us all moving into it—'us all' being my sisters and brother who remained working for Singh circus. There was Keene, Valhalla—better known as Val—me, Kissimmee and her husband, Coffey, Zip, Caristonia—Tony—had even

picked out one with her husband, Slone, and their daughter, Briley.

The only sister not currently living in the apartment was Hades.

Hades had taken a leave of absence from the circus right around the time Slone and Tony had hooked up. There'd been a falling out between the two, and later on we'd found out that Hades wasn't actually my father's child, but biologically from another worker who worked in the circus in that time period.

We hadn't treated her any different once we'd known, but she'd had some healing to do, and we'd allowed her to do that. That didn't mean that we didn't miss the hell out of her, though.

In fact, I still called and texted her multiple times a day just to hear her voice.

Though she didn't answer some of the time because she was working—she'd taken on a new self-employment gig that had her traveling all over the country. There was a high demand for her photography and business promotions, designing websites and promotional materials.

She was doing freakin' awesome, and it was just a reminder that all of us were being held back by staying where we were in this sinking ship of a circus.

All of us, every last one of us, had come home to the circus when our father had died.

It'd been a stipulation in his will that we follow all rules he'd set forth. Some of those rules included that we had to stay working for the circus—all of us—for a full five years before we could get our inheritance and sell it off.

We'd been doing that for a time now, and it was quite clear to all of us that this wasn't going to be something we did forever.

Val wanted to go back and finish everything up so she could become a doctor—she'd already finished the four years

of medical school, but had to do her resident requirements as a doctor to get finished up.

Then there was Zip. Zip had been in school for business administration, and had grand plans to start her own company, but that had been derailed with my father's plans, too.

Keene, our big brother, had thought to stay in the military until he retired, and I had a distinct feeling that he would definitely be going back once his obligations here were over.

Then there was me.

I didn't have any plans in life.

I'd gone to school and gotten my degree in art. I didn't even like art.

But it was a degree, and since getting it kept me away from my dad all the time that it did, I'd gone. After two years, my dad had demanded that I have something to show for his hard-earned money—let alone the fact that I, as well as my siblings, were free freakin' labor for him any time he needed it—and I'd graduated.

Luckily, he'd died before I'd had to go back home and live under his roof.

I didn't like my dad.

In fact, I didn't think any of our siblings liked our father.

He was a mean drunk, chose where we went and when we went, for years. Couldn't care less if we went to the dentist, were up to date on shots, or hell, even had antibiotics when we were sick. And God forbid we wanted to visit with our mothers.

Though, my mother wasn't my favorite person in the world.

I mean, she was nice when I saw her, but it was like we were two friends visiting, and not mother and daughter. Normal moms didn't allow the fathers to take their children with zero fight.

But my mom had.

My dad had demanded she hand me over, and she had. No fight whatsoever.

Luckily, Keene was there to raise us, even though he was only eight years older than we were—and yes, all the sisters were all close in age. My dad must've gone on a bender when we'd all been conceived, because he'd slept with five women in a six-month time period who'd gotten pregnant. Whether or not it was on purpose on his end, I didn't know. But there we were, living proof that my father didn't know what the point of a condom was.

But it was okay. We'd gotten our revenge. We were turning his precious, roaming circus into a permanent event instead of a circus that followed the fuckin' NASCAR schedule to a T. And yes, my father loved NASCAR. Which, of course, was why he tried to make all of his stops coincide with each NASCAR stop so that he could get to every freakin' race that was available for him to go to.

Then, because he had to make all the festivities that led up to a freakin' race, he made sure to leave us on our own from a very young age to fend for ourselves.

Hell, Dad was lucky we didn't burn the tent city down around us.

But now he was dead, and we were living life the way we wanted to.

We had a permanent address.

We were making things work.

We were...

My gaze caught on a body in front of me.

Up ahead, I watched as the man from the bar reached up, pulled at his hair, and the damn wig he was wearing came right off.

His real hair?

Close-cropped in a buzz cut. Dark as night.

Just like I'd envisioned.

"Hey, lady. Watch where you're going!"

I jolted, unaware that I'd nearly walked into a family of four as I'd watched the man rip his wig off.

A wig.

What in the hell...

"Sorry," I murmured as I moved around them.

When I looked back up, he was gone.

I hurried faster, intent on finding him just to watch him a bit longer, but he was nowhere. Like he'd disappeared into a cloud of nothing.

Cursing to myself, I kept walking, my legs already protesting my fast pace.

I'd run seven miles.

Six months ago when we'd decided to change our lives, I'd decided to change mine even further.

I'd decided to run a marathon.

Well, not just a marathon.

A lot of races.

At Disney. I was going to do the Dopey Challenge. Four races, all in the same weekend. A 5K, 10K, half marathon and full marathon. All at the ass crack of dawn.

And all by my damn self.

I was...

A hand snaked around my middle just as I'd been about to pass a shadowed alley.

Before I could scream, another hand covered my mouth, and I was proved horrifically wrong.

My twenty-two would do me no good at all.

Not when the man holding me, dragging me deeper and deeper into the shadows, had such a firm grip on my body.

Fear coursed through me as a lightning bolt of shock kept me from reacting.

I should've been fighting.

I should've been...

"Why have you been staring at me all night?" the deep, velvety smooth voice asked right against my ear.

That melty chocolate voice caused shivers of something I didn't understand down my spine.

"Cat got your tongue?" he teased, leaning forward and biting my ear.

My heartbeat skyrocketed, and I gasped against his hand.

My lips parting allowed him to slip a single finger into my mouth.

Then he tugged it so that I was staring up at him in shock.

I could see him.

When had that happened?

"Answer me," he ordered.

With his finger in my mouth?

How was I supposed to do...

His finger disappeared and his hand went to my neck and he started to squeeze.

"I...because you're hot," I squeaked.

His hold on my neck loosened but didn't go away.

"What?" he asked, as if he was surprised by my honesty.

"You're hot!" I repeated, finding strength from somewhere deep inside of me.

Now I was getting angry.

He'd pulled me into an alley because he didn't like me looking at him?

And how the hell had he even seen me, anyway? There'd been lights, dammit!

"You stared at me because you were attracted to me," he murmured. "For that long?"

I sighed. "I thought you couldn't see me."

The truth will set you free.

At least, I thought it would.

He didn't let go at all.

And, inwardly, I was kind of excited about that.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"Why would you think that?" he murmured, the vibration of his chest making me feel all warm inside.

"Because there were lights!" I cried. "Above your head. Every time you'd look up, you'd squint."

He chuckled. "That's because I was trying to read the ticker on the television above your head."

I deflated. "Oh."

"Oh," he agreed, twisting me around then, and forcing me to back up.

His hand fell away from my throat, and I wouldn't admit how sad I was about that.

I wouldn't admit, either, that I'd liked our previous position.

But this new one definitely had possibilities.

"I saw you, you know," I murmured as I looked at his head.

He tilted that sexy head—I never knew heads were sexy until I'd met him—and narrowed his eyes.

"Are you really that naïve?" he wondered.

I licked my lips. “What?”

My confusion wasn't feigned, and he understood.

“The only reason you saw me, darling, is because I wanted you to see me,” he replied silkily.

I felt my insides seize.

He *wanted* me to see him.

Had he not wanted me to see him, then I wouldn't have?

What?

“What?” I asked.

He used just the tip of his pointer finger and traced my jaw. “I wanted you to see me.”

“In the bar?” I asked, voice higher than it should've been.

“No,” he answered. “Outside. When you saw me ditch the wig.”

I had about a billion questions on the tip of my tongue.

One of which was: why were you wearing a wig?

But before I could ask, he moved in close, forcing me to move even further backwards.

“Are you scared?” he asked.

Was I scared to be in a dark alley with a dark, demanding, captivating stranger?

Yes.

Was I going to tell him that I was scared?

No.

Because I didn't want him to leave.

I didn't want him to give me any personal space.

I wanted him.

I wanted him bad enough to make a really stupid decision.

“No,” I whispered, sounding about as certain about my answer as someone about to jump out of a plane for the first time.

He smiled at my lie. “Is that right?”

I licked my lips, and he zeroed in on my mouth.

The dark alley, paired with the harsh overhead light above the outside door we were propped up next to, was making me confused.

The shadows and the blinding light, as well as the way he was staring at me, along with the long run I’d just finished, was making my poor brain think too hard.

“Are you gonna stare at something besides my mouth?” he asked. “Because if it goes on much longer, I’m going to think you want me to use it on you.”

I swallowed hard.

But by God, my gaze did not leave his mouth.

“Fuck, baby, but you do know how to make me want.”

I did?

“I do?” I asked.

He moved in close. “Last chance.”

“Last chance for what?” I murmured.

My damn eyes were still pinned to those lips.

They curved up at the corners. Just the minutest of amounts. But it was there.

He’d smiled.

Then his mouth descended onto mine.

And holy. *Shit.*

He could kiss.

With my breathing ragged and hands fisted in his shirt, he pulled back and stared.

“That answer your question?” he asked.

“What question?”

I was really confused.

“On whether or not I would act on those sex vibes you were casting off,” he answered.

Oh.

“I’m still confused,” I said.

His lips once again turned up.

Then he was moving.

Seconds later I was facing the grimy wall in the alley, and he was pushing his hand up my sweaty shirt.

My breathing went from ‘okay, you can do this’ to ‘no, you can’t’ in about point three seconds.

He didn’t balk at the sweat.

And I didn’t balk at the way he was now touching me so inappropriately in the middle of a freakin’ alley with my body pressed against a dirty alley wall.

“Seriously, last chance,” he said.

Last chance.

No.

I wasn’t going to say a word, because I was worried he might stop.

Moving my hands to the wall to provide some support, I looked at him over my shoulder.

The way the shadows were, I could only make out one half of his face. But that half was definitely telling me that what we were doing was going to happen. And I wasn’t going to be the one to stop it.

His fingers found my nipple and he squeezed.

Hard.

I gasped loudly, unable to stop myself.

That hurt!

But he soothed away the hurt with a twirl of his finger around my nipple.

I bit my lip, wondering what he'd do next, and was not disappointed when he pulled my top up higher, revealing both of my breasts.

Now, I'm not saying I'm the most well-endowed girl in the world when it came to breast size, but I definitely had more than I wanted sometimes.

So when the bra was finally free, I let out a relieved breath.

"You should never wear this stupid contraption again," he growled, tugging lightly on the fabric.

I snorted. "Yeah, and suffer a hernia or something when they go flopping around when I run or work."

I couldn't imagine them being free while I worked.

I could just see myself now.

High up in the air on one of the rings, body going one way, left breast going another, and the right breast doing the exact opposite.

He hummed, his hand smoothing down my belly.

Now, with breasts came hips. And I definitely had those.

I also had ass.

I was the shortest, most well-developed woman I'd ever seen.

It was a contradiction.

But the man who was now leaning into the wall, his muscular forearm planted just inches above my head, didn't seem to care about the contradictions.

No, that was definitely a well-defined cock I could feel digging into my back.

And also, what in the holy hell was he doing to me?

He wasn't even touching me intimately anymore, and I was panting.

If his hands were anything like his kiss, I might not survive the night.

Moreso, what in the hell was I thinking doing this with a stranger in public?

"Do you have a condom?" I blurted, suddenly in a hurry.

He paused, his large fingers trailing down the length of my hip, teasing the hem of my high-rise bike shorts.

"Yes," he said simply. "Now ask me if I want to use it."

I felt my heart hammer.

"You have no choice but to use it," I argued as I attempted to shuck my shorts and underwear. I didn't get very far with the shucking since I was way too plastered to him.

"If we're doing this, we're doing it right."

"As you say," he rumbled.

And, stupidly, I didn't push it. And maybe I should have.

If I was smart, I would have.

But he'd done something to my brain.

I was short-circuiting, dammit!

"Are we doing this?" I asked.

Were we?

Because I wasn't sure at that point.

He was acting cool as a cucumber, running his fingers up and down the buttery smooth fabric of my shorts. Meanwhile, I was panting and my knees were already weak.

"We're doing this," he confirmed. "When I feel like it."

Oh, boy.

Well in that case...

I had my first bout of smarts since this whole thing started.

“Then maybe I should go.”

I reached up to tug my bra down, but he caught both of my hands in his, and had them high above my head pressed against the wall, seconds later.

And my exposed nipples were dragging along the rough stone, and I was fairly sure that had been his intention the whole time.

“My nipples will get dirty,” I pointed out.

“There’s gonna be a lot of you getting dirty, darling,” he mused. “And I’m about to show you.”

Then, I kid you not, my shorts were down around my ankles.

There I was, standing in the middle of a dark alley in downtown Dallas, almost completely nude.

He was completely dressed standing behind me, blocking my view of the world with his big, bulky body.

And I was allowing it!

“Um,” I said softly. “Is this...should we...do you happen to have a place other than an alley where we can take this?”

Great job, Crimson. Great job.

He ignored my words and started to trail those fingers down the length of my side. When he got to my hip where it would move onto my leg, he changed his path, following the seam of my thigh. When he got to the inside where the lip of my sex was, he again changed directions, this time following it to the seam of my sex.

He trailed his finger, just one single freakin’ finger, up and down the length of that seam. Not quite touching anything vital, but not *not*.

On one such pass, he pushed slightly in, grazing the pad of his finger along my clit.

I felt like a thousand sparklers had been set off inside my body with just that one touch.

“Ho-holy shit,” I stuttered.

Was this real?

Was that all it took? One little teeny, tiny graze of his finger?

I was seconds away from coming!

CHAPTER 2

*Who left the bag of idiots open?
-Text from Winston to Crimson*

WINSTON

She was a hot little thing.

And she was letting me do whatever the fuck I wanted to do to her.

I'd clocked her in the bar the moment she'd walked in.

She'd moved straight to the bar top where she'd taken a seat, giving me a direct line of sight to her.

And I'd had the pleasure of staring at her as she'd stared at me.

She was a tiny little thing, too.

All of five foot, if that, she had the longest red hair I'd ever seen. And it wasn't the normal red hair—like a natural redhead would have—but the kind that Ariel had on the Disney movie.

There was no doubt in my mind that it was fake.

But her fuckin' curves were not.

They were soft and luscious, and I wanted to taste every last inch of her.

She had creamy white skin, but it'd been her eyes that had captivated me.

They were gray.

Like a deep, dark, almost black gray that shined like a misty fog when she looked my way. The bar lights had lit them up, and each time they glanced at me, I got this feeling in the pit of my stomach that had me making terrible decisions.

Like letting her see me toss the damn wig.

That wasn't the smartest idea ever.

It was my job to be invisible.

It was also my job to limit exposure.

But there I was, letting the girl get a real look at my eyes, my face, and my fuckin' hair.

I was also seconds away from filling her up with my finger and fucking the hell out of her with it. When I was done with that, I was going to shove her up against the wall, bend my knees, and sink all the way inside of her.

It'd probably hurt.

She was a small girl.

I *wasn't* a small guy.

Pairing the two together likely meant that she'd need to be stretched beforehand...

I grazed her clit with my finger, just barely brushing it. Like running a feather along the barest hint of skin.

But it was enough to cause her to gasp and stiffen.

"Is that all it'll take?" I wondered, repeating the move.

Her feet nearly gave way.

"Baby," I said as I pulled back, not willing to touch her anymore or she'd come. And that wasn't something I wanted her to do without me inside of her. "I'm..."

The voices at the mouth of the alley caught my attention.

With the harsh light above our heads, if they came all the way down here, they'd see her.

And for some reason, the thought of anyone seeing this girl naked was abhorrent to me.

Picking her up with a hand around her waist, I went farther down the length of the alley until we were so far back not a single light penetrated the darkness.

Her breath was leaving her in harsh pants as the voices down the alley grew louder.

“We should stop,” she whispered, trying to turn in my arms.

I snorted. “Nice try, but no.”

“But...”

I unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans, prying my cock out.

She couldn't see, but there was no doubt that she could hear it.

I pulled my other hand away from her, not stopping her from taking off if that was what she wanted, but I said, “I'm about to shove my cock inside of you if you stay. If you want to leave, then you should. But it doesn't matter if those people come all the way down here and post up right beside us, I'm not gonna fuckin' stop.”

I heard her swallow.

The voices grew louder, as if they were coming farther and farther into the alley, but she didn't move.

Not until I pressed my hand onto her hip and started to crowd her into the wall. She didn't protest.

In fact, she shivered when she felt my cock press against her bare backside.

“Not even if they can see?” she whispered.

I pressed until her body was against the wall, then leaned down and lifted her.

She gasped and pushed off the wall, ready to start protesting, but before she could I brought her right down on top of my cock.

Her gasp of surprise was enough to make my smile widen.

“You-you-you,” she stuttered.

“Me, me, me,” I growled.

Then I started to fuck her, using the wall to help me hold her up.

I knew that it had to be abrading her nipples.

I also knew that I couldn't wait to see what they looked like tomorrow.

Not that I'd see her tomorrow.

But I might be able to get her to send me a picture.

If I fucked her good.

Maybe.

Probably not.

“Oh, Jesus Christ,” she whispered. “What the hell is happening to me?”

I lifted her and pulled her back down.

She groaned.

I was right there with her.

My God, she felt good.

Tight.

Wet.

Hot.

So fucking good.

I lifted and thrust. Lifted and thrust.

Over and over again until I was sure that she was on the verge and getting pissed. Right when she'd start to go over, when her pussy would tighten up, I'd pull back. Not stopping until she was cursing my name.

A scraping sound had me twisting my head from where it'd been buried in her hair, taking in the dark alley.

A dark, humor-filled voice from somewhere farther up the alley said that they were in need of a good blow job, and I

knew that someone just a bit away from us was about to get some.

Just like I was...

“If you don’t fucking...”

I pulled her off of me and turned her around, impaling her right back down on my cock.

She squeaked, wrapped her tiny legs around my waist, and reached up to touch my face.

“If I don’t fucking what?” I asked, curling one hand up around her butt, my fingers grazing that entrance that was oh-so tempting.

The other hand went up to her throat where I used my thumb to tilt her head up.

Keeping her back off the wall, I fucked her, this time ready to let her come. I also kissed her, depriving her of oxygen, not pulling back when I knew she needed a breath until I felt her quickening around me.

She came within three sharp thrusts.

I followed right behind her seconds later, pumping my seed deep into her.

My eyes crossed.

My stomach tightened and my ass clenched.

My toes scrunched in my boots.

And I squeezed her hips so hard I knew she’d see the evidence that I’d been there for a week. Though, she’d probably feel it, too. Her tits and pussy were going to wear my reminder for days as well.

I pulled away and she gasped for breath, her abused nipples grazing my flannel-covered chest with each inhalation.

Her shoelaces shifted against my back as she unhooked her legs from around me.

Getting the point, I put her down, pulling out of her as I did.

I heard the wet suctioned slurp of my cock leaving her pussy, and I wondered if it was normal to be highly attracted to a sound.

Damn, I'd love to repeat that sound over and over again throughout the night.

But, alas, I had too much to do.

I really didn't even have time to do her.

Yet, there I was, in an alley, fucking her senseless.

I tucked my cock back into my pants, zipped and buttoned, then resituated my hard cock in my jeans for comfort. Or, as much comfort as one could find when you were still as hard as a board and wanting more, yet you weren't going to get it.

"My clothes," she said softly.

I pulled the handheld flashlight—and no, not my fuckin' phone like the rest of gen pop—and clicked it on.

"I'll go find them," I murmured, leaving her there, standing naked, in her tennis shoes.

I found her clothes next to a couple fucking nearly in the same spot we'd been earlier.

Walking right up to them, I bent down and caught her underwear and shorts—if they could even be called shorts—and headed back.

My gaze swept the alley for her bra since I hadn't seen it, only to find it right next to her feet.

I bent down and picked that up, too, offering them to her.

"Thanks," she replied quietly.

I didn't reply.

Watching her get dressed, I wondered if I should get her name.

Or her number.

But then I decided there would be no reason to.

My life was a fuckin' whirlwind. Any repeat performances just weren't going to happen.

Not right now, anyway.

She may have the best pussy I'd ever had, but she was still just pussy.

Nothing would change that fact.

I waited until she was done getting dressed, then led the way out of the alley.

CHAPTER 3

*Thick and tired.
-t-shirt*

CRIMSON

I'd just had sex.

Mind blowing, never going to quite recover from what I'd just experienced, sex.

Hell, my entire walk home, I'd felt his eyes on me.

But I hadn't felt scared.

Just the opposite.

I'd felt protected. Cherished. Hunted.

When I turned into my apartment building, I chanced one last look over my shoulder.

But I didn't see him.

Not that I'd expected to.

He was invisible.

When he'd disappeared from that alley, I had hurried behind him only to not see him in either direction.

But as I'd started walking, I knew that I wasn't alone.

Pushing my way into the entryway of our shared apartment buildings, I was unsurprised to find Keene, Val, Zip, Tony, and Simi there.

“Hey!” Tony chirped when she saw me. “How'd your run go?”

Her eyes narrowed on the scrapes on my chest. If she could see my entire breast...

“Looks like it took a lot out of her,” Simi said. “I’m going to have to run by my apartment to get the babies. Coffey has to leave to get his run in as well. And he can’t do that until I come relieve him of baby duty.”

“Absolutely,” I said, hoping the ‘talk’ wouldn’t take long.

I needed a shower.

I currently had a man’s come leaking out of me, and I was fairly sure if any of them got close enough they’d smell it. If not see it. I was wearing gray shorts, dammit.

“Wait for me!”

We all turned from our trek to the elevator to find Hades rushing in the door, three boxes of donuts in her hands, a camera bag slung over one shoulder, and her man scowling at her back.

Hannibal, her man, caught the door before it could whack her in the back, then caught her hand before she could get too far away.

At risk of dropping the boxes of donuts—where had she gotten donuts this late at night?—she was forced to stop and turn.

Hannibal caught her chin and pulled her until she was facing him. One hard kiss on the mouth and a whispered conversation later, he was gone, and Hades was left dazedly staring at us.

“Hades!” I cried. “What are you doing here? I’m so excited!”

Hades grinned at us.

She walked forward and stopped a respectable distance away.

Eyes sparkling with life, she said, “I was hired to do some work in the city for the Cowboys! Can you believe it?”

Her gaze swept over to her twin.

Tony was leaking.

Her eyes were filled with tears.

She opened her mouth to say something, but her eyes closed.

“Keene, catch her,” Hades said casually.

Keene did, pulling Tony into his arms.

None of us reacted to her sudden reaction because we were all incredibly used to it.

Caristonia ‘Tony’—but also known as Ari to her husband, Slone—had narcolepsy. She also had another condition as well, pairing them together she went out like a light for no apparent reason. But, lots of emotion did trigger her, causing her to fall into these episodes more often if she wasn’t careful about getting overly excited.

We pushed into the elevator and went up three floors.

Keene was the only one on this level, which obviously meant his apartment was the meeting location for the day.

Everyone filed off the elevator, but it was me and Keene who were on it last, which gave him the opportunity to grill me.

“Where the hell have you been?” Keene asked. “We’ve been working our asses off here, and you’re off doing fuck knows what?”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’m off today, loser.”

Keene snorted as he carefully maneuvered off the elevator. “No one is off.”

“Everyone gets a day off. Those are in the new bylaws that we signed when we started this new venture,” I pointed out. “Literally last week. Have you forgotten already?”

We’d gone from having a traveling circus to having a permanent circus.

When we'd formed this new venture between all of the sisters and Keene, it was decided that there would be a couple of rules set in place. First and foremost, we all would have vacations and days off each week.

We'd also be more involved in the business aspect of the circus, freeing up Keene from many of the obligations he had for the daily running of the circus.

He'd been shielding us for a long time, and I had a feeling today's meeting—which was about the business itself—was going to be the enlightenment that we were all waiting on from Keene.

He'd put us off, saying he was still doing some research—when we'd started talking about doing a permanent location, he'd done a deep dive into the business to make sure he had all his ducks in a row—but the longer the wait went on, the more I got nervous. Because it wasn't like Keene to delay.

He was a get it done and over with kind of guy. Always had been.

So the hesitation was a bit unnerving.

We walked into Keene's apartment and Tony was deposited onto the couch to wake up on her own time. Meanwhile, the rest of us descended onto the boxes of donuts.

Zip, echoing my earlier thoughts, said, "Where did you find donuts this late at night? And wow, is that bacon on them?"

"They're called Hurts Donuts," she said. "And I found them on my way into town. There was this huge truck that was selling them on the side of the road. Their 'emergency donut' vehicle. It was cute. And there was a line around the corner. We were the last ones in line and Hannibal bought everything they had."

It was about ten minutes later, as we were all nursing glasses of milk, when Tony made her appearance.

"Hey," she said as she walked into the middle of us.

Hades moved the box toward her, and she caught up one of the bacon maple ones.

We waited for her to eat before we started in on our meeting.

“So what’s going on, Keene?” Zip asked with a sigh. “You’re killing us here. Your part in this was supposed to be figured out weeks ago, yet you’ve put us off at each meeting saying you needed more time.”

He grimaced. “I...”

“Just blurt it all out,” I ordered.

He rolled his neck, pops filling the air.

Then rubbed his eyes roughly with two fingers off of each hand before saying, “You know that huge crew of men and women we lost right after dad died?”

I did remember.

It was the weirdest thing.

People who’d worked for us for years—even if at the time I wasn’t one hundred percent certain what they did for the circus—had all gotten up and left after finding out that my father was no longer alive.

We’d written it off as a weird coincidence.

Only, the way Keene was looking so ashen right now, it wasn’t seeming like so much of a coincidence anymore.

“I think...” he swallowed hard. “I think Dad, and the circus, was involved in a child sex trafficking ring.”

Silence.

Utter and complete silence.

Then Zip stood up and shrieked, “What?”

Her high-pitched, what the fuck, ‘what’ was echoed in all of our thoughts.

“I can’t prove it yet,” he admitted. “Hell, I have no clue how to even go about doing it, but there are too many things that are lining up in some of the paperwork.”

“What kind of things are you seeing?” I asked.

“Well,” he said as he got up and walked to his office. He came back with a stack of papers. “This for instance.”

He showed us a picture.

I remembered it, actually.

A kid had gone missing after our show. The kid had gone home, the parents had put her to bed, and the next morning she’d been gone.

We’d helped look for this kid all over the area before we’d left.

The only reason I’d really remembered her when we’d heard the news was because she’d come up on stage with me. I’d been fifteen at the time, and the girl had come up and helped me finish my act. She’d been a really cute kid with bright eyes the color of a black diamond.

“What about her?” I asked.

Keene looked sick to his stomach, then looked at his fingers before clenching them so hard into a fist that they turned white.

“What’s this?” Hades asked, smearing chocolate on the folder that Keene had on his counter.

Keene squeezed his eyes closed, stood up, then walked toward her.

He caught the folder, ignored the chocolate on it—which totally wasn’t like him—and came back to the table.

“Come here,” he ordered Hades. “I can’t say this more than once.”

The seriousness of his tone was making my good mood suddenly plummet. Any and all earlier good vibes from the

encounter with my mystery man were gone. Replacing those feelings was one of deep foreboding.

“Keene...”

He flipped the folder open, and we all frowned.

“What’s this?” Zip asked.

I leaned forward so I could read—damn my bad eyesight causing me to practically shove my face up against the paper—and blinked.

“Names?” I asked. “Hey, this right here is the name of that little girl that performed with me in my show.”

Keene looked green. “These are all children that I was able to pinpoint attending one of our shows...that later went missing when we left town.”

Silence.

Utter silence.

“What are you saying?” Val asked, sounding weird.

“I’m saying,” he looked at the ceiling. “We have...had...the perfect cover story for children going missing. And then transporting those missing children somewhere that wasn’t where they would be thought to be looked for.”

Sick.

I felt sick.

“Do you think our father had something to do with this?” I asked, my voice sounding strange, even to my own ears.

“Yes,” Keene said simply. “There’s more.”

So for the next fifteen minutes, he showed us every single detail he was able to uncover. From dates of missing children lining up with our tour dates, to other details like brand-new trailers bought and sold within the same weekend.

It went on and on and on, these horrible coincidences that just kept getting worse and worse the more he explained.

“And every single one was chosen by Dad. Do you remember?” Keene asked. “I can pick four at least that I remember him pulling out there.”

“He was ringmaster. That was his job,” Zip said, sounding skeptical. Or was it hopeful? Was she trying to convince herself and us that this wasn’t what it seemed? Because it wasn’t going to work. Even my rose-colored glasses were seeing the answer plain as day. Something wasn’t right. “You do the same thing every show that you’re the ringmaster.”

Keene looked ready to throw up. “The difference between me and Dad is that mine really are random. And I let them go home safely with their parents, never to be bothered again.” He shifted in his seat. “But do you remember his bad moods? Do you remember how much happier he’d be after he picked those kids?”

I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, I happened to see Tony looking like she was horrified.

But that horrified look was directed at someone.

“Wait,” I said as I looked at Tony tossing looks in Hades’ direction. “What’s going on?”

Hades looked down at the napkin that she’d used to clean the chocolate off with. It was in shreds after listening to what Keene had just said.

Keene frowned and looked up. Seeing me looking in Hades’ direction out of the corner of my eye, he focused on her, too.

There was a knock on the door.

I got up and answered it, unsurprised to find Hannibal on the other side.

He didn’t leave Hades for long. At least, not unless it was his job calling him away.

If that was the case, he just called every hour to check on her.

“Hey,” I said, sounding weird.

His eyes focused in on me.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, alarmed.

He started pushing past me, uncaring that he had to bodily move me out of the way to get by.

Too stunned by all the things I’d learned in the last half hour, I had no other choice but to fall backward against the wall.

I let my head fall back, and I studied the ceiling.

The tiles, which had always intrigued me, were black in Keene’s apartment.

In mine they were bright red tin.

Zip’s, bright gold tin.

Val’s, purple tin.

We’d all chosen our apartments based solely on what the ceilings looked like.

My favorite color being red, the tin in my apartment made that the logical choice.

“What?” I heard Hannibal bark.

I swallowed hard, stomach nauseated and roiling, then I closed the door, unaware that I still had a watcher.

When I walked back into the kitchen, it was to hear Hades quietly recounting everything we’d just gone over in the last thirty minutes. Every little detail, minor or not, was retold.

By the end, my stomach was even more unhappy—why had I eaten two donuts before that talk?—and I was contemplating sticking my finger down my throat so I wouldn’t be tasting maple and bacon anymore.

But no.

I couldn't go down that path.

I'd been there, done that.

Having a father—God, he just kept getting worse and worse—like the one I had, always harping on every little detail about our bodies—Jesus Christ, even that was lining up with what we'd learned—I'd started to get a complex about what I should look like since I was a very young girl.

He controlled what we wore, how we presented ourselves, how much food we ate.

It was when I was fourteen that I started developing an eating disorder because of the amount of disgust my father had in me each time I put on my performance outfits.

I remembered like it was yesterday the first time he'd said something to me.

He'd come right up to me, grabbed my baby fat, and said, "*Getting a little fat there, Crimson.*"

I was nine.

And by the time I was fourteen, I'd started making myself throw up.

It took me years and years to stop starving myself. Then binge eating and throwing it all up.

"You know," I said softly into the quiet, not a single one of them was talking as they tried to process. "It's making sense. I mean, he always used to be so strict on us and how we looked. Then there was the fact that, conveniently, none of our mothers wanted to keep us. They all just gave us to him like they were the worst mothers on the planet. At least one of our mothers should've protested. Either they really are all bad, or he didn't give them a choice."

"Simi's mom was the only one to really refuse to leave," Keene said quietly.

And look what happened to her.

A crazy ass sheriff who'd seen her at a show and started obsessing over her had gone and killed her in our fun house. Simi was still recovering from that years and years later.

"Our names," Val said. "I watched a documentary once on child trafficking. They give the kids exotic names to help entice buyers."

Well if there wasn't another reason to hate our names...

All of us had complexes about them.

But I'd never truly wanted to change my name until now.

"I think we need to go through all of the business side of this again," I murmured quietly. "But I think it'd be better if a person that actually knows what they're looking for does it."

"A professional?" Zip asked. "Where do we find one of those?"

We all looked to Hannibal.

If anyone could find us a professional who knew what to look for, it'd be him.

"I, ah, actually found someone," Keene said. "I contacted Folsom. She started working on this last night. She came back with the name of a man who is going to meet us at the offices tomorrow at eight."

Folsom was a woman who had joined our circus for a year or so while she was trying to get her life back together. It turned out she was a computer genius mastermind who could hack into anything, anywhere, with the most minimal amount of effort ever.

"Eight," Simi said. "We will all be there."

Tomorrow morning at eight.

Hell, with the way I was feeling, I'd almost rather it be now.

At least then it would feel like I was doing something.

"Then it's time for us to disperse," Zip said softly.

“Wait,” Hades said just as quietly.

We sat back into our chairs.

Then she destroyed our world for a second time that day.

•••

Abused.

Abused wasn't a vile enough word for what our father had done to her.

He'd horribly, disgustingly, life shatteringly destroyed her.

He'd sexually assaulted her. He'd treated her horridly. And she'd killed him.

Words couldn't describe how happy I was to hear her say she'd killed him.

It honestly explained so much.

But only made the fire inside of me burn brighter.

Tomorrow I was driving to his grave.

And then I was going to destroy it.

CHAPTER 4

*On the bright side, I'm not addicted to cocaine.
-Text from Crimson to Winston*

WINSTON

“Win,” someone called my name. “Are you listening to me at all, or should we just leave?”

I looked up from my unseeing stare and leveled my gaze on a possible business associate.

Possible being the operative word, because I didn't like the tone he was taking with me, and I despised when people thought they were more entitled to my time than I was.

I'd had a long fucking night, paired with an even longer morning, and I wasn't going to deal with his bullshit.

“I'm sorry, would you like to repeat that?” I asked in a silky-smooth voice. One that didn't relay the anger that was now filling me in rolling waves.

Basten—short for Sebastian, even though it was spelled wrong which also fuckin' annoyed me—looked taken aback.

“I'm sorry, what?” he asked, looking nervous now.

I looked at Basten's father, who was studying the ceiling.

He obviously knew that his son needed to learn some patience just like I did.

He looked very apologetic as he said, “I'm sure my son didn't mean it to sound like that.”

Oh, we both knew that he did, but we were giving him a chance to take back his words.

I didn't need to work with the fucker.

I was the tenth richest man in the world. Though, I always liked spending other peoples' money, and not my own. Which

was why I was meeting with Basten and Cory Barnes.

My side business was one that needed a shit ton of cash flow to keep it afloat, and though I'd use my own if I ran out of someone else's, using my own wasn't conducive with me staying rich.

And staying rich was what kept me in the rich people's pockets. And rich people's pockets were what funded my special projects.

"I most certainly did. We've been sitting here for an hour!"

I gritted my teeth and almost lost my shit but shut it down before it could get past the seam of my lips.

Instead of ripping the little fuck's head off, even though I really wanted to, I forced myself to calm down.

Sitting back, I stretched my legs out in front of me and linked my hands behind my head.

Staring at him until he looked away, I said, "Would you like to see why I was late?"

Basten's eyes shifted from me to his father and back, almost as if he was afraid to say yes.

"Um, if you feel like showing me," Basten grumbled darkly.

I leaned forward and twisted the monitor I'd been studying before they'd arrived in my office.

On it was a young girl.

Six years old.

She was a talented little girl. Her mother said she was fluent in four languages. Was the Little Miss USA runner up. She could also play the violin like it was made for her.

I'd watched and rewatched the last concert she'd had a solo in just last Christmas.

Now, a year later, her life was irrevocably changed.

"What am I looking at?" Basten asked, looking grossed out.

“That,” I said softly, voice breaking slightly. “That is the remains of Tasia Tennison. She was taken away from her mother at a mall in Georgia. She was found on a tanker in the middle of the Pacific Ocean where she was stored in a storage container. She perished on the way to be sex trafficked with eleven other little girls.”

Cory Barnes visibly flinched.

Basten looked...haunted.

“What can I do?” he asked. “I assume that’s why you finally agreed to the meeting.”

I held up two fingers. “Two birds, one stone.”

His brows rose.

“I need your connections. You host one of the most prestigious fundraisers in the south. I want to be your charity for this year.”

He looked at the monitor again, lost even more color, then nodded. “Done. What was the other reason?”

I twisted the monitor back around before turning it to sleep mode.

I’d deal with that sweet girl later.

For now...

“The second is that I want to buy security systems for eleven thousand households,” he said.

He blinked.

“Eleven thousand?” Basten asked, surprised.

“Yes,” I nodded once. “For each of the families that were affected by sex trafficking in the area in the last three years.”

Cory looked stunned.

“A lot of them are low-income households. People who couldn’t afford to fight back.” I looked at the ceiling. “It’s going to be a donation from my company to these moms and

dads who were affected. Hopefully, it'll help give them peace of mind.”

Cory stood up and held out his hand. “I’ll discount and match you fifty percent.”

I stood up as well.

There were a few good rich people in this world. Cory Barnes did not disappoint.

Basten still looked sick to his stomach.

Good.

Hopefully today taught him a bit of patience.

And also gave him a bit of insight into how fuckin’ special his world really was.

If he only knew the horrors that were really out there, he’d never leave his fuckin’ bedroom.

“I appreciate it,” I said carefully. “I’ll have my secretary get in contact with your assistant and figure out logistics.”

With a shake of his hand, we parted ways, them leaving my office, and me going to my ensuite bathroom and closing the door behind me.

Last night was a huge failure.

After hours of scouting out a new location we felt might be a local hot spot for men and women to conduct their illegal business dealings, I’d left only to run into a very pretty distraction.

But when I’d gotten back, I’d learned about the cargo ship of little ones that’d been left to rot out in the middle of the ocean.

With some help from the Cajun Navy—a whole slew of men and women who liked to help during times of disasters—we’d located the cargo ship and checked every last shipping container.

All we found were dead souls on board.

None of them had lived.

Usually they stock them with enough water and food to get them to where they're going, but something had happened and they'd run out. That meant that they'd been sitting there for God knew how long before they'd died of starvation.

Needless to say, my good mood after I'd left the woman walking into her home had vanished, and now all I was left with was anger.

I washed my face off in my sink, then took a moment to study myself.

I looked old.

I felt fuckin' old.

I felt every single one of my forty-two years, and I was burning out.

But there weren't many people in this world willing to do what I did, and even more who were set out to throw hurdles at us at every step.

It was sick and disgusting, but there were so many people who were willing to help the abusers—even if by looking the other way—that it was sometimes just so defeating.

“Sir?” I heard a knock at my outside office door.

I yanked the stupid monogrammed towel—my sister's idea—off the towel rack and wiped my face before throwing the stupid thing into the sink.

Someone, likely my sister herself, would come in here and hang it back up.

Yanking open the bathroom door, I headed back to my desk and said, “Come in.”

Lisandra, one of my two assistants, came into the room.

She looked frazzled.

“I know that you said you needed some time, but I have the weirdest thing happening to my computer right now,” she said

as she walked over and showed it to me.

I glanced at the laptop.

“Call me?” I asked.

A phone number then blinked on the screen.

I sighed and picked up the phone, putting it on speaker before leaning back in my chair.

If they wanted to play a game, I’d let them.

I had my own in-house computer gurus, but I was in such a shit mood that it seemed easier to just play their game than fight right now.

About two dozen times a year, we’d have hackers try to break into some of the most secure parts of our business—at least the ones they knew about—and try to make a name for themselves.

And each time, my computer people would shut them down.

Now, well, now wasn’t one of those times.

Sometimes it was just easier to handle them directly.

“Hello?” a female voice said.

“You wanted me to call?” I rasped.

My voice sounded like I’d just drunk a fifth of whiskey and gargled with gasoline.

To say I was tired and needed sleep would be an understatement.

“Winston?” the voice asked.

“That’s me,” I replied tiredly.

“Are you alone?” she asked.

Did it matter?

“No,” I admitted. “Why?”

“Can you get that way?” she asked.

Rolling my eyes, I said, “Get my assistant’s computer back to normal so she can go.”

It took two seconds.

My assistant left without another word, shutting the door softly behind her.

“Did she leave?” was asked.

“Yes.” I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the chair.

Another one of my sister’s purchases.

It was the most uncomfortable chair I’d ever sat in. But it had ‘feng shui’ or whatever the fuck that was.

I longingly wished for the one she’d replaced it with.

It’d been well worn from use, and was the ugliest thing I’d ever seen, but it was comfortable.

My sister was right, though.

My chair was ugly and not befitting a multi-million, almost billionaire.

At some point last week I’d rolled into the nine hundred and ninety-nine million range instead of the billions. That was due to an emergency purchase that had cost me a cool fifty million. But it’d also gotten me back thirty kids, so it was worth it.

“Good,” the woman on the other end of the line said. “Now, for why I’m calling...”

I opened my eyes and glanced out at the Dallas skyline.

I hated living in Dallas.

What I wouldn’t kill for the view of my seven-thousand-acre ranch in Luckenbach.

“I called you,” I pointed out.

“Semantics.” I could practically see her waving her hand at the air. “I want to make sure you’re a good guy.”

I stiffened. “Why does that matter?”

“Because I have some delicate information I’m going to share with you, and the people who are using me as a go-between don’t have anything to do with the shit you’re about to hear,” she answered.

I forced myself to unclench.

“Okay,” I said. “Tell me.”

So she did.

I immediately connected my computer to my personal hot spot—I never kept my computer online for long periods of time—and started searching.

It took me thirty minutes, but I started to make the connections that she had.

“Singh Circus,” I said. “You’re sure they’re not dirty?”

She went on to explain the family’s dynamic. How they’d taken over the circus when their father had died. How they’d spent the next year of their lives following their father’s rules to try and get the stakes in the company. She’d then gone on to tell me that they’d decided to set up a permanent circus right here in Dallas, and how they’d just recently started making connections about the father and his circus.

“Things were learned,” the woman said. “I’m sure you have your own computer people that can work this, but if you don’t mind, I’d rather not have their information splashed everywhere. I’ll do whatever I can to keep it under control if you do splash them through the mud.”

I liked her.

She had guts.

“You want a job?” I asked.

She snorted. “You couldn’t afford me.”

No, it didn’t sound like I could.

“Give me an address for a meet,” I said. “I’ll talk to them. Decide.”

She gave me an address, and a time to meet for an hour before dark.

She also said she’d see me there.

Then we disconnected, and I was left wondering what in the hell had just happened.

I picked up my phone ten seconds later and said into it, “I want everything, and I do mean everything, that you can find dating back to when the father, Ansel Singh, took it over from his father.”

“On it,” LaDerrick said. “What time do you need it by?”

LaDerrick Pattinson, a ten-year employee, was my star pupil.

Nothing fazed him. If I asked him to hack into the Pentagon right now, he’d do it.

Me asking him to look into a circus was child’s play for him.

I looked at my watch. “A couple hours. Be thorough.”

“Will do.”

He disconnected and I got up from my desk and found my suit jacket.

Picking my cowboy hat up off the table—I was a cowboy at heart and didn’t leave home without it—I settled it on my head and left my office without telling anyone.

Though, I was sure it was noticed that I’d departed.

Security, as well as all my assistants, would’ve seen me go.

I didn’t answer to any of them, so I didn’t think it was needed to tell them when I was and wasn’t there.

I also controlled my own schedule, so I could cancel my appointments at a moment’s notice if I needed to.

Luckily, I didn't need to.

Which gave me all the time in the world to get in my old Dodge truck and head toward a circus to scout it out.

CHAPTER 5

*I'm currently surviving life at a rate of several WTFs an hour.
-Crimson to Val*

CRIMSON

I felt someone watching me.

I looked around, wondering who it could be, but saw nobody.

Well, I didn't see nobody.

I saw a truck parked down the street from our apartments. An old Dodge that looked very well kept. There was a cowboy in the front seat looking down.

I actually stretched my calves next to his truck, using the meter he was parked in front of to help balance myself.

Though, when I glanced into the front glass of the truck, it was to realize that it wasn't a person at all, but a hat on the dashboard and no one inside of it.

Which then made me feel incredibly silly.

Maybe no one was watching me after all.

As I'd felt a gaze on me as I'd exited, I'd wondered if it was *him* again.

I'd felt that knowing in the pit of my stomach for my entire walk home last night. Then I could swear that I saw him outside my apartment this morning after I'd left to clear my head.

But when I'd looked around, it was to find nothing.

Just like now.

I sighed and leaned my hand against the hood of the truck.

It was still warm from when it was parked, meaning someone had been here not long ago.

I moved my hand and switched to the other calf.

I probably shouldn't be running again so soon after last night's long run, but I felt restless. As if I needed to clear my head.

After Keene's revelations, and then Hades', I'd been in a wasteland of despair.

My sister.

My poor sister.

And my own father had been the one to do it to her.

How could he?

How could he treat her like she was a piece of trash on the bottom of his shoe?

If he wasn't dead, I'd kill him.

I'd wrap my hands around his throat and choke the absolute hell out of him.

I started my run.

My end goal of the circus in my mind.

The run was total trash.

I should've listened to my rational mind and not bothered, but I couldn't.

I just couldn't.

And I paid for it by the time I dragged myself into the grounds that would one day be our new circus location.

Though, now that I was looking at the huge banner that was being put up, I knew that if it was up to me, we'd never use that name again.

We'd start over new.

New circus. New permanent location. New staff and new overall feel.

No longer would we be affiliated with that piece of filth.

That would be the first thing I brought up at our next weekly meeting.

Today's meeting that we had in less than an hour wouldn't be for that kind of discussion.

No, tonight was all about the fears and the concerns that we had that my father was involved in human trafficking.

Next week was enough time to tell them that either we changed the name, or I didn't want mine associated with Singh Circus any longer.

I didn't care if we never saw another dime from the estate.

It was all blood money anyway.

At least, that was the way it felt.

And, to make matters worse, I now had to come up with a last name. Because though Crimson Eurie, my actual first and middle name, were okay—even though I wanted to change every letter of the name that man had given me and delete it from my mind forever—I still needed a last name. A nice, normal, never going to have to spell it for anyone ever again, kind of name.

I started weaving my way through the construction areas and future sites of permanent little booths.

“Hello, darling girl,” one of the construction workers, I believe his name was Tanner, said. “How are you today?”

I waved and patted him on the shoulder. “I'm well, Tanner. How are you?”

I'd learned last week that was his first job out of high school, and his little dimples were adorably cute.

“You remembered my name,” he flashed me a grin, bumping my hip with his.

I remembered everyone's name. I didn't know why or how, but I never forgot a name or a face. It was a superpower, what could I say.

I nodded. "I did. Have a good one."

My first stop of the day was the costume designer.

I got to the building with five minutes to spare and made my way inside.

"You're late," he snapped.

I wasn't late.

But I'd been dealing with this dude for fifteen years now.

His version of late and my version of late were completely different things.

If I was five minutes ahead of schedule, I was late. If I was fifteen minutes ahead of schedule, I was late. If I got there when he got there, I was late. If I arrived before he got there, then I was on time.

None of those scenarios, except for the last one, were acceptable to him and none of the scenarios, except for the first one, were acceptable to me. We would always agree to disagree.

Or I would ignore his comment and he would keep harping on it until either I acknowledged my lateness or I left.

And trust me, I would be leaving before giving this man an apology.

I couldn't stand him.

Hadn't been able to stand him since he started pointing out how much harder it was for him to have to give me extra room for my 'fat rolls.'

Honestly, if he weren't so freakin' good at not only designing costumes, but also making them and getting them out in an appropriate amount of time, then I would've suggested we find someone else a long time ago.

“I’m here,” I said instead of any apologies he might be waiting for. “Do you have the costume ready?”

He sneered at me, as if he was completely offended I’d even ask him that, and ripped it up off the table and threw it at me. “Go try it on.”

I winced when one of the sequins hit my eyeball.

Narrowing my eyes at him, I said, “If you ever throw something at me again, you’re fired.”

“You won’t fire me.” He laughed, rolling his eyes as he did and giving me his back.

“Actually,” I said, “I have full support to fire and hire anyone, thank you very much. I was made chief logistics of personnel. I can and will let you go if you ever do something like that again. To me. To my sisters. To my brother. To the freakin’ tooth fairy.”

He huffed.

“And an apology for doing this in the first place wouldn’t go remiss,” I continued.

“Apologies,” he said through gritted teeth.

I walked to the fitting room—man, it was nice to have a lock with an actual door instead of a tent inside of a tent—and tried it on.

Of course it didn’t fit.

Sometimes, I could swear he made it too small on purpose.

Usually, all he had to do was cut a few seams and let them out. It took no time at all because he ‘allowed for that to happen’ according to him, but he still had to fix them almost every single time I went and tried something new on.

Gritting my teeth, I walked out of the fitting room and said, “It doesn’t fit.”

The gleam in his eyes told me he knew it wouldn’t.

The ass.

I bet he had to take it in a little more than he usually did, too, because I'd been working out so much and training for this marathon. It would've been hilarious had it actually fit.

But alas, that wasn't how life worked for me.

I never got to stick it to the bad guy.

Stefan St. Croix, the costume designer who was on his last leg with this company, was on his final few strikes with me.

And the next ten minutes would decide whether my bad mood would carry out into his bad day.

Because every time I tried on a costume, it got me angrier than fire.

And my stupid redheaded temper had nothing to do with my dislike for this man.

"Of course it doesn't fit. It never does," he huffed.

Fucker.

Goddamn goat fucking fucker.

Dick.

I walked toward him and turned, allowing him to get to the back of my dress where I couldn't quite get it zipped up.

"If you lose about..." he started to say, but I interrupted him.

"Say anything about my weight, and I'll be utilizing my new powers," I said through gritted teeth.

Stefan scoffed. But amazingly, he kept his mouth shut.

The next ten minutes dragged by as he poked, prodded, pinched and pushed.

When I was finally changed and out the door again, I was annoyed as hell.

Which had to be why I didn't notice the duskiness or the person hiding in the gloom until it was too late.

I made it three feet into the shadows between tents when I felt a strong, muscular arm loop around my belly.

Before I could protest, scream, or make any sort of cry for help, another hand came up and covered my lips.

The first thing to hit me was the fear and the reminder of how it'd felt last night when the same thing had happened.

The second was the smell of cloves and spice.

"It's me," he whispered darkly, seductively, into my ear.

I melted.

I knew that voice.

I knew that scent.

I knew the feel of him against my back.

Him.

It was *him*.

And 'him' was all I had to go on, because I hadn't gotten his name.

He hadn't given it to me, and I hadn't asked.

"You," I breathed.

Him.

He was here.

Miles away from where I saw him last.

I started to tremble.

He let me go only to reposition his hands so that his arms were locked more solidly around me.

"I want to throw him off a building for touching you," he said.

Him being the costume designer.

Today had been fitting day for our new costumes.

And he'd definitely been touching me all over.

I'd thought it was a bit excessive, but he'd done it to all the women getting fitted that day—I would know, I'd watched them all get done hundreds of times.

“Then do it,” I suggested, surprised by my own words.

Damn, when did I get so bloodthirsty?

It was him.

It had to be.

I wasn't like this with anybody else.

I was the nice one.

The one who did what was needed of her.

The one who bridged gaps. The one who volunteered at animal shelters in my spare time.

“How badly do y'all need him?” he asked.

I thought about it.

It'd taken us months to get him on board with staying in a permanent spot in Dallas—apparently he liked to move around, which lined up well with his sleazy ways.

Hell, everything about the newly renovated Singh Circus was frustratingly hard.

Everyone who was anyone wanted to work with us. But on their terms, not ours.

Everything was a fight.

New hires wanting more than fair pay. Hell, some of them even wanted to have tips for their performances.

Then there were the security details that Hannibal had provided. They wanted to change everything. Not that I blamed them, to be honest, but shit. All the renovations and suggested security protocols cost money.

And that was something that we just didn't have in abundance seeing as we'd paid two and a half million dollars for the biggest goddamn building in Dallas, Texas.

But you had to have real estate to be able to do business in a permanent spot, and though we could've done the whole tent thing for a while, it was something that we thought might be better to do sooner rather than later seeing as we were trying to rebrand ourselves.

Though the tents were still going to be a large part of the circus atmosphere, we were going to make the main event rooms in the air conditioning.

Because holy hell, Texas heat was no joke.

“Are you even listening to me, darling?” he asked.

Darling.

That accent, saying that word? *Whoa.*

“Um, did you say something else?” I wondered.

He grunted. “No. But you didn't answer my question. How badly do y'all need him?”

I answered instantly. “Well, I was already on the verge of firing him because he threw my costume at my face and hit me in the eyeball with a sequin. Pairing that with the way he kept grabbing my fat and telling me how awful it'd look in his costume, I'm not sure we need him that much. Only, I would ask that we do this throwing off the building thing when he's done making all the costumes for the next month's shows.”

The dimness between tents didn't stop me from seeing the frown on his face.

He really didn't like the guy, and I'd just fueled the fire.

Hoping to get him to change his course, I said, “What are you doing here?”

His eyes slowly went up and down the length of my body.

“Didn't you just run?” he asked, without answering my question, might I add.

“Yes,” I said a tad bit defensively.

He wisely chose not to say anything, and instead said, “Which one are you?”

It took me a few moments to figure out where his brain was going with that question.

“Crimson,” I answered. “Your turn.”

His brows rose. “You don’t know?”

“If I knew I wouldn’t have asked,” I said. “And you still haven’t answered why you’re here.”

He slipped on his aviator sunglasses that hid his beautiful eyes and said, “Guess maybe you’ll need to do your research and find out.”

With that, he was gone.

The ass.

• • •

Still fuming a half hour later, I made my way into the offices, then into the conference room.

The problem with doing your research was that it was impossible when you had nothing more than a description of a man—which fit about half the male population in the country.

I’d even called Folsom, but the man had avoided every single security camera we had.

I couldn’t wait to tell Hannibal all about it.

In fact, it was on the tip of my tongue as I walked into the conference room.

“You know, Hannibal,” I said as I worked through a stack of paperwork—possible new hires—instead of looking at the occupants of the room. “You toot your own horn a lot, but I was just accosted in the middle of the dang circus by a man who wouldn’t share his name with me. And none of your security measures picked him...” I finally glanced up and froze. “Up.”

Why did I freeze in the entrance way of the conference room?

It wasn't because of the piles and piles of food in the middle of the big, gaudy ass table Val had insisted we purchase. It wasn't because of all the random people I didn't know the names of also filling out the table.

No, it was due to the man who was sitting at the head of the conference table like he had every right in the world to be there. As if he owned said conference table.

The mystery man himself.

"What do you mean?" Hannibal asked, looking angry all of a sudden. "There are no holes whatsoever in my security. I can cover every square inch of this place."

"Not every square inch," I disagreed. "Because that man right there was just pinning me to the tent wall between red and blue, and when I had Folsom go back and find him, he was nowhere to be found. It didn't even get me entering."

Hannibal looked over at the mystery man and narrowed his eyes. "What did I tell you about messing with my security, Osborn?"

Osborn.

Was that his first or last name?

"And what is she talking about you accosting her?" Hannibal asked.

This Osborn character snorted. "I didn't accost her. Nor did I do anything with your security."

He narrowed his eyes. "You carrying a jammer?"

Osborn's lips twitched. "Maybe."

I had no clue what a jammer was, but I was interested in knowing.

"I feel like you two may already know each other," Keene said as he leaned back in his chair, his gaze bouncing back and

forth between the man and me. “Winston, this is my sister, Crimson. Crimson, this is Winston Osborn. He’s going to help us look into our father.”

Help us look into our father.

He was the expert?

I’d slept with the man who was going to be looking into every little aspect of my life? Wonderful.

He looked at me with a smug expression on his face, and I wanted to punch him in the throat.

I crossed my arms over my chest, forgetting about the papers in my hand, and ended up crushing them.

“What’s your problem?”

I looked over to find Tony staring at me in confusion.

Not wanting to admit I’d slept with the man in an alley the night before, I said, “He scared me.”

He had.

Twice, actually. Pretty bad, if I was allowing myself to admit to it.

Though the first one had turned out a whole lot better than the second. I might have a different opinion right now had I had the same happy ending this morning.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean to,” Tony muttered, looking cross with me. “Sit down, you’re embarrassing me.”

I rolled my eyes and sat down, very much aware that I was in a sports bra and short shorts—almost the identical outfit in a different color as the one I was wearing last night. I was also more than aware of the fold of fat that rolled over the top of my pants that I couldn’t control.

I had a uterus, dammit!

I scooted up to the table to hide it from him.

He noticed the move and narrowed his eyes.

I also realized that by sitting down in the only empty seat, I was a lot closer to him than I wanted to be.

The only thing that was stopping us from touching was the corner's thick table leg.

I looked away and started flipping through my papers.

"Tell me what you think is going on," Winston—geez what kind of stuck up name was Winston?—ordered.

I wasn't sure who he was talking to, but the thought of his name had me wanting to look up everything I could about him.

So I pulled out my phone and started googling.

Winston Cyrus Osborn, forty-two, was a billionaire. A billionaire. With a big fat B.

He looked it.

Not forty-two, but a billionaire.

He was in a well-fitting suit that had a zero percent chance of it not being custom fitted. I mean, damn, the man fit that suit so well that it showed off every single attribute he had.

I mean, *damn!*

If you looked at the length of his pants, they showed off just a hint of his expensive looking socks where his leg was crossed over the other.

And then there was the fit at the waist.

I had been more than aware the man was fit yesterday—I mean a physically fit man could hold a person up. But not for that long without sounding like he was struggling to do it.

And there had been no exhaustion in Winston's voice as he spoke dirty words directly into my ear in that alley.

He had a flat belly. As in, not even a hint of a roll. Not even when he was sitting down.

His chest was thick and well-defined, and the way his tailored long-sleeved shirt hung open at the collar meant that I could see just the smallest hint of chest hair and muscle.

His shoulders were wide and well-defined, and yes, I could tell even through the perfectly fitted suit.

But my gaze kept going to one spot in particular.

Thankfully with the way he was sitting, it meant that I could see that particular spot that held so much of my attention.

He shifted in his seat, and I realized I was staring.

I turned back to my phone.

Winston was a third.

His father, Winston Junior, and his mother, Deborah, were married for twelve years before they started having kids. Winston had a sister—Katrin. A brother—Bellamy.

He had a master's in business that he'd gotten from a well-to-do college I probably should've heard of before, but hadn't.

I skipped down lower onto the page.

His blood type was O-negative.

Rare. But not as rare as mine.

I had what was known as 'golden blood.' Pretty much, I had an Rh-null blood type. That meant that I was one of forty-three people in the world who had it.

My sisters once joked it was because my mom and dad had been related—that was why I had it. But ultimately, my mother and father weren't related. Not even close—I would know, I ran a DNA test on myself when I was sixteen because they hadn't stopped teasing me about it.

Side note, but sisters were awesome...*not*.

Like now.

“Are you even listening, Crimson Eurie?”

I looked up at Val and narrowed my eyes. “Stop using my full name.”

Her eyes twinkled. “Well, maybe if you acted like an adult and paid attention, I wouldn’t have to.”

I gritted my teeth and said, “Why don’t you go fuck yourself.”

And that was how all of our arguments started.

It never failed, at least one of us started something when we were all together. Guess today it was mine and Val’s turn.

I also knew she knew that something had happened with Winston and me.

I mean, you didn’t spend the last ten years of your life trying to make people think you could predict the future without picking up a few attributes that helped you pretend.

Meaning, my sister was very good at reading people. She was even better at reading her sisters.

“Ladies,” Hannibal sighed. “Can we not?”

I closed my mouth and crossed my arms over my chest.

I felt sticky.

And I really didn’t want to be here listening to this disgusting stuff pertaining to the man who had fathered me, either.

I couldn’t stomach it, and we hadn’t found out anything concrete yet. How would this work when I did find out?

“...back to what we were saying,” I heard Winston say. He sounded like he was reprimanding me. I wanted to punch him in the throat. “I need everything you have. I would also like access to your computer friend.”

I snorted. Like that would happen if she didn’t want it to.

“Something to say, darling?” Winston drawled.

Darling.

Damn.

That sounded kind of nice, even if he did mean it as an insult.

“Folsom doesn’t work for us. She graciously helps us out when we need it, but sometimes we can’t even get into contact with her. She’s busy and has just started her own business with her husband.” Years ago, but who was counting? “And I think if she wanted to, she would’ve already offered to help.”

“I’m working,” I heard a mechanical reply from my pocket. “Hi, team!”

I sighed and checked out my phone, unsurprised to find that she’d hacked it.

I placed it on the table in the middle so everyone could hear.

“Hello, Folsom,” Winston drawled. “I appreciate you being here to help.”

I listened to the group continue to talk about first steps, and when the meeting was finally over, I picked up my phone and shoved it back into my fanny pack.

One thing the meeting did do was piss me off again.

I wanted to break things. I wanted to rant and rage, and the best way I could think to do that was to drive somewhere and show my displeasure to the one person who deserved it.

“Hey, where are you going?” I heard my sister ask.

Val.

“I’m still off,” I pointed out. “I’m not scheduled to come back until tomorrow night. Bye.”

If I was back by tonight.

The drive would be two hours from here.

I could get there and back by dawn, but who knew if I could get my rage out before then.

I was marching my way toward the parking lot where I’d left my car the night before when I heard a step behind me.

I whirled around to see Winston standing there.

He was watching me from where he was leaning against a familiar looking truck.

“Are you following me?” I accused as I pointed at his truck. “I could swear I saw that as I went out for my run toward the circus this morning.”

He shrugged. “Coincidence.”

No. I didn’t feel like it was a coincidence at all.

But short of accusing him of being a liar, I was left with no other choice but to accept his answer.

That didn’t mean that I had to stay.

“Well, it was nice meeting you,” I lied.

I walked to my newly purchased car. It was a black and white BMW X4. It cost me a lot more than it should have, and I was going to be in debt for six years as I paid it off, but it was one of the safest vehicles around. And apparently a new driver needed safety in their cars.

At least, that was what Keene convinced me of when he helped me pick it out.

Getting into my car, I didn’t look back.

If I had, I would’ve seen the truck following me.

But since I had no clue I needed to do things like that, I didn’t see my unwanted visitor until it was too late.

CHAPTER 6

*I'm sorry I roasted you. I was trying to flirt.
-Crimson to Winston*

WINSTON

I wasn't sure why I followed her.

Well, I knew why I wanted to follow her. She was a new, interesting thing to me.

I didn't know why I did, though.

I had a hundred things to do today, all of which weren't what I'd already done.

Yet, there I was driving behind the little maniac.

"How fucking long have you been driving?" I asked as I watched the woman weave between two cars.

She drove like a goddamn teenager. Like someone who had nothing to lose.

I followed behind her for two full hours before she finally pulled off.

It was a good thing she'd stopped when she had, too, because I was close to needing a fuel break.

Luckily, just after she pulled off, she moved right into a gas station and straight to a pump.

Only, when she pulled up, she went to the wrong side to fill up, which added yet another layer of 'how fuckin' long have you been driving' to my already concerned state.

She twisted around, pulled back in again, and cursed when she got out and found out that she was still on the same side.

I had to have a laugh at the spectacle she was making of herself.

If I hadn't known she was a redhead, I would've thought she was blonde.

She finally got it right just as I was about halfway done fueling my truck up with diesel.

I winced when she started to reach for the green nozzle, then breathed a sigh of relief when she changed her mind and went with the regular gas one instead.

"Damn," I said as I watched her work. "You act like you haven't been driving long."

"Amen," I heard the man at the pump next to me say. "She sure is a pretty thing to look at, though, ain't she?"

She really was.

She'd drawn my eye in the bar last night the moment she walked in the door.

She'd been wearing a pair of skin-tight biker shorts, a bra that matched the biker shorts, and had her hair up in the messiest bun she could manage without it falling right out of the ponytail.

The thing I remembered the most about last night before I'd taken her up against the wall was just how short she was.

As in, she'd had trouble getting up onto the barstool short.

Her hair had been a shocking red. I hadn't even realized that you could get color naturally that red, but according to all of my research I'd been able to compile on her in half a day, she didn't dye it.

Everything about the woman was natural.

That didn't mean that I liked the dude next to me checking her out.

In fact, if I could give you a number on a scale of one to ten on how annoyed it made me that he'd noticed—him being old as hell or not—I'd be at a seventeen.

I ignored him and finished filling my truck up, then got back into the cab and waited.

When I saw her go inside, I bailed out of my truck and followed her in the door.

She didn't notice.

Just like she hadn't noticed me tailing her for the last two hours.

Extremely unobservant wouldn't begin to describe her.

It annoyed the hell out of me.

After pulling her into the alley last night, then again in between tents today, and now following her not only two hours in a car, but now walking directly behind her into the convenience store, I knew she was lucky to be among the living.

Being that unobservant wasn't conducive with staying alive.

It was completely disgusting how this world was, and she had no clue just how easy of a target she was making herself.

It was like throwing a blind rabbit into a pen full of ravenous foxes. It was only a matter of time before she lost her life.

I headed to the bathroom when I saw her heading in that direction and came out a few minutes before her and bought myself a chicken burrito and a pickle before heading toward the side of the store where I could keep an eye out.

She came out of the bathroom two minutes later talking to a woman that I hadn't seen go in.

They laughed about something and split off in different directions.

My eyes went to the woman who'd been doing the talking with Crimson. She walked up to a man and immediately started talking to him, gesturing wildly toward where I could see Crimson selecting a candy bar.

And, of course, they clocked her through the entire store.

I moved close to her back and the two people saw me and immediately exited the building.

I pulled out my phone and texted a friend, giving the two people's descriptions, where I was located, and what vehicle they got into with the license plate numbers.

In my line of work, you couldn't be too careful about people. The two of them could've been simply normal people just grabbing a break and a snack. Yet, my mind automatically went worst case scenario.

Work as many trafficking cases as I did, and you learned to trust your instincts.

When something tells you it's not right, you listen.

What's the worst that can happen? You look paranoid?

My motto is: *better paranoid than dead.*

Crimson left the store with a Nutrageous and a Starburst and walked to her car.

I threw my trash into the trash can on my way out and headed for the truck, not even trying to act like I wasn't watching her.

Luckily, nothing seemed to be remiss as we exited, and she didn't notice me once, even though I hadn't tried to conceal my presence.

Exceptionally unobservant, indeed.

I needed to teach her how to watch her back.

Especially after what I'd learned today.

Speaking of what I learned...

My phone rang and I answered it.

"LaDerrick," I said. "What did you find?"

"Pertaining to the couple you told me about in the convenience store, they're crooks. They steal women's purses.

I watched them on the security camera as they did it to an older woman just after y'all left the store," he said. "I already sent all that information out to the cops."

"What about the other stuff I had you look into?" I wondered.

As in, the shit that I'd learned from the Singh family today.

"I'm still doing some research, though your other hacker is really helpful. She's sent me everything she's finding as she finds it. I'm sharing my research with her as well. Hope that's all right. It seems easier to work together than keeping what I find to myself in case she can use my information as well to work off of. But what I'm finding so far...it's not looking good," he admitted.

I wouldn't think so.

With the conviction I heard in Keene's voice, as well as the gut feeling I had about the situation, it was too perfect.

I mean, circus came to town, kids came to the circus, pedophiles got to cherry pick the kids they want, and boom, they went missing the day the circus left town.

I didn't do coincidences.

What I did do were facts.

And the facts were adding up faster than they should.

"Thanks," I said. "Just go ahead and send whatever you find to my email. When I get home tonight, I'll have a look over it all and see what I can do with it. If I have any questions, I'll give you a call back."

"Sounds good," LaDerrick said. "Peace."

Then he was gone, and I was cursing because the woman in front of me crossed four lanes of traffic, driving on the wrong side of the road for a little bit of it, to take a hard left turn in front of three other cars.

If I hadn't known she was unaware of me, I would think she was trying to lose a tail.

But no, she was just that bad of a driver.

I waited until the lanes were clear of traffic to follow behind her and had to follow a cloud of dirt to find her.

She was pulling into a cemetery and shutting her car off before I could get to a spot to hide myself.

But again, it didn't matter, because when she got out she didn't once look back.

She was so intent on her purpose that she was seeing nothing but the path in front of her.

That's when I noticed the sledgehammer in her hand.

Who just drove around with a sledgehammer in her car?

The crazy one that I was for some reason highly attracted to...

I pulled over, parked under a tree for a little concealment, and got out.

Locking my truck with the key, I headed in her direction and was unsurprised to hear her cursing her way through the headstones.

She was marching through them with a purpose, and I couldn't wait to find out what that purpose was.

"You need to leave," I heard her say.

I rounded the large headstone to see a couple making out next to a concrete angel.

They both jumped apart and cursed.

"This is literally sacred ground where people's loved ones are buried," she said to the two young teens. "Not to mention it's freakin' weird that y'all are here making out on a pedophile's grave."

The two young teens looked at the concrete angel and their lips curled up.

"A pedophile?" the girl asked.

“A gross one,” Crimson grumbled. “Go.”

The two of them went, and I nodded my head politely at them.

They didn't say anything, just gave me a wide berth and headed out to the parking lot.

I hadn't seen a vehicle, but my guess was that they'd walked here.

“Now it's just you and me,” Crimson said to the gravestone.

Then she spit on it.

“You freakin' disgust me,” she said.

Then she took the sledgehammer to the concrete angel and started losing her shit.

I watched as she took her rage out on the headstone.

I walked right up to her and waited for her to notice me.

She didn't.

Not for a very, very long time.

As in, not until the concrete was unrecognizable.

She finally dropped the sledgehammer down to the ground and breathed in heavy breaths of air.

I was impressed.

Not only had she destroyed it, but she'd done it all without gloves, and all without stopping to breathe.

That was some hell of a pent-up rage fest.

I moved until I was just behind her and said, “You're a bossy bit of goods. Do you know that?”

She gasped and whirled, her gaze lighting on me.

“What are you talking about?” She narrowed her eyes. “And why the hell do you keep following me?”

I crossed my arms over my chest.

I really didn't want to like her.

Liking her was complicated, and I had zero room in my life for complicated. In fact, I had so little room in my life right now that this little detour would set me back days.

The last thing I wanted to do was find something interesting, because interesting made my fixation start to set in, and fixating on someone, especially someone like her, would be a disaster.

"I'm following you because you intrigue me," I said instead of lying. "Are you okay?"

I eyed her hands then, seeing that she'd not stopped sledgehammering, but maybe she should have.

She looked at her hands and shrugged.

They were positively shredded.

There wasn't a single part of her hand that didn't have rips and tears on it.

Shit.

I pulled the white handkerchief out of my pocket and handed it to her.

She took it with the better of her two hands, then fisted it between both palms.

"I'm following you because I like to do research on the people that I'm helping," I said. "You left in a rush, and I was curious what had you so out of sorts. And, since I'm such a cynical guy, I thought that maybe you were privy to some of the things that I was told today and that you were going to meet someone to discuss it."

I didn't really believe that, but it was better for me if she hated me.

It'd help keep me away.

"That's...pretty good." She sighed. "I think that's a great excuse to follow someone."

My surprise must've shown on my face because she said, "I don't think you can be too careful."

No. You couldn't.

I would fucking know.

I'd been doing this so long now that it was still a surprise at how awful human beings could be.

Every once in a while, one still crept up on me and surprised me.

I'd dealt with my fair share of people who acted like they needed help when, in fact, they didn't. They wanted to eliminate me from helping.

What better way than to lure me away from my protection and kill me?

That happened to be why I'd snuck into the circus today.

I'd had to do research on what I was told, and to do that, I had to do some sleuthing.

I'd yet to find a locked building that could keep me out.

"Glad that you think so," I mused. "Are you done here?"

She looked at the shattered remains of the headstone.

"Yes," she said. "I just need to burn his body first."

My brows rose. "You're joking, right?"

She shook her head. "No."

"How do you think you're going to do that?" I asked.

I mean, it wasn't like you could just go digging up a grave with torn apart hands.

"Him," she pointed behind me.

I looked and sure enough there was a guy heading our way from so far off that I couldn't make out his facial features. I could see that he was on a tractor, though. Why he was on a tractor at a cemetery in the middle of the night, I could only guess.

“You called in reinforcements,” I said.

“I had to,” she murmured. “I’m not gonna be able to dig a grave up to do what I need to do without it.”

“Why do you have to do this?” I asked.

She looked at the concrete remains for a long moment. So long, in fact, I could hear the sounds of the tractor making its way toward us.

“My dad was buried with some of his favorite things,” she finally said. “I want to see what those things were.”

“What kinds of favorite things are we talking about?” I asked, curious now.

“The kinds of things that were suspicious at the time, but he asked to be buried with them in his will, and everyone decided to just humor his last odd ball request,” she answered.

CHAPTER 7

*On the bright side, I'm not addicted to meth.
-Text from Crimson to Winston*

CRIMSON

I guess I could add 'grave digger' to my list of skills on my resume.

Well, if I was being honest, I could add standing there and looking like I was doing something to my list of skills. The man of the hour—or the man who kept following me—was the one to do the digging.

The man who'd brought the tractor had said he'd be back for it in an hour and wanted nothing to do with our thievery.

I smiled and said thanks and had intended to get on there and figure out how it worked, but Winston had beaten me to it.

Which led me to now.

I was staring down into the grave at the broken coffin lid.

For it being buried in the ground for a while, the top of the lid still looked fairly decent.

“Do we just break it and jump in there? Or do you think we should bring it all the way out first?” I wondered.

Winston, in his crisp white shirt that was now rolled up at the forearms, and unbuttoned three buttons at his throat, climbed down off of the tractor.

He did it so gracefully in loafers, too.

The man was a stone-cold killer.

I just knew it.

“That.” He pointed at the crowbar that was hanging partially out of a toolbox attached to the tractor. “We'll use that to pry it open.”

“Yay,” I said as I grabbed it and then jumped down into the hole.

I guess maybe I overestimated how strong the casket would be because when I landed, my left foot went all the way through the lid and into the open space beneath.

Yick.

“Or we could just do that,” Winston drawled. “Do you want to...”

I did the honors.

Hands hurting so badly I couldn’t think straight, I went to town on the casket.

At first, I was trying to pry it open, but the dirt surrounding it was too compacted, leaving me no other choice but to break into the casket.

Eventually realizing I wasn’t going to do it the nice way, Winston handed down my sledgehammer and I broke the wood to pieces.

At multiple points it went inside the casket and I heard something crunch, but I ignored it as best as I could and beat on it until I had a clear view inside.

The first thing I really focused on were the things that were now solidly tucked down into the side of the casket between my father’s dead arms and the plush, still quite white, padding.

“You know,” Winston said from above me. “I’m honestly quite impressed with how well you’re dealing with standing on your father’s dead body.”

I ignored him and started to yank things out.

A book.

Papers.

A ring.

A watch.

Anything and everything we buried him with I pulled out, until there was nothing left but the clothes on my father's body.

Hell, I even stole the ring off his left finger.

"I'm more impressed," I said as I stood up and stared at the remains. "That my dad still has skin on his face."

"That's the embalming effect, I'm sure," Winston said as he juggled all the things we'd pulled out of the casket. "You done?"

I held my hand up to him, blood and all, and he took it, lifting me right out of the eight-foot hole as if he'd just tugged up a pillow instead of a full-grown adult.

"Thanks," I said as I stared at him. "Do you think we need to bury him back?"

"I think we should or we'll raise questions," he said. "I'd dump the remains of his headstone in with him, though. That way if someone sees it they don't report it. And when someone sees the fresh dirt they'll just assume it's a newly buried person."

I nodded and he got back up onto the tractor.

He pushed the remains of the headstone in first, and I heard more things crunch. Hopefully wood, but at this point, I didn't care if it was his bones.

Fifteen minutes later, we were getting into his truck and I was wondering how in the hell I was going to drive home.

"What do we have?" he asked as he sat everything down.

I pulled the ring from the top of the pile and said, "My dad had this ring since I can remember. Wore it everywhere. Freaked out once or twice when it went missing."

"There's a symbol right here," he said as he held it up to the fading light of the sun. "Take a picture and send it to your friend."

I did and dropped it into the cigarette tray under his dashboard before picking up the next item.

“This is a book he had with him everywhere. He kept all his tour dates in here. Records of who worked for him when,” I said.

“That’s why you really wanted to come do this, isn’t it?” he asked as he took the book from me and started flipping through it. “This is good information. We can use it. Seasonal and yearly.”

“Dad had seasonal employees who joined us at each leg of our tour. Then there were the regulars,” I explained.

He placed the book down and picked up the pen.

“Again, one of those things he took with him everywhere,” I explained. “There’s nothing really to this, I’m sure, other than sentimental value.”

We moved on through the rest of it, and again those were likely sentimental value things until we got to the very last item.

A small book of dates and coordinates.

“What do you think this is?” I wondered.

He looked at it with a grim expression on his face. “If he’s really what y’all think he is, I would assume these dates and places hold significance to him in some way.”

I was so freakin’ angry.

There this man was, ruining peoples’ lives, and he’s out here keeping specifics on what he did and where.

I shoved it all onto the floor with a rush and said, “I freakin’ hope this isn’t what it seems.”

He looked at me then, all seriousness, and said, “Your gut is usually very effective in informing you of things that aren’t what they seem. And sadly, this is exactly what it seems. I may not have the concrete proof yet, but I’ve been doing this a long

time now. Things don't just line up this well for them not to be."

He had a point.

I sighed and pushed his door open.

The night air had gone from toasty to brisk in the span of twenty minutes.

"I gotta drive home," I grumbled. "I have to get to work tomorrow."

He snorted. "You aren't working with those hands."

I looked at my hands then shrugged. "I've dealt with way worse so many times I can't even count that high."

And I had.

I'd done a lot of stuff I hadn't wanted to do when I was younger.

Though, thank freakin' God, it hadn't been anything sexual in nature like my sister had to deal with.

But I'd been beaten, berated, forced into child labor.

Hell, it took me two years to get my GED because my dad had zero desire whatsoever to give us a basic education.

Needless to say, I could deal with pain if I had to.

Though, once my family got a good look at my hands, they'd try to talk me out of it.

Luckily, tomorrow was my contortion act.

No flying through the air and grabbing anything until Saturday of this week.

That was why the huge rush on my costume this morning.

Tomorrow we were doing a dry run for the friends and family of the circus staff.

We would be performing a small show to work out kinks between ourselves and add in anything that we needed to do to make sure everything fit time wise.

A movement caught my eye, and I turned to see Winston reaching into his pants pocket.

He pulled out a lighter and a cigarette.

I grimaced.

“What, don’t tell me you have a problem with smokers,” he drawled.

I mean, I hadn’t thought I had.

But the idea of him smoking...

“I don’t do it all that often,” he said when he saw my disgust. “Only when shit’s a lot...you know?”

Well...yeah. I did know.

“When shit’s a lot for me, I eat until I’m in a food coma and drink cheap wine from the liquor store,” I said. “Smoking seems so...bad.”

He snorted. “There are a lot of things I could possibly die from before cancer takes me.”

I wanted to know what those things were.

But I could see just by the set of his face he wasn’t going to expound on his comment.

“Anyway, I should go,” I said. “Long day ahead of me.”

He looked like he wanted me to get out of the truck, sitting there puffing away on his cigarette.

When I closed the door I heard him curse loudly, then he got out and walked with a purpose around his truck.

“What are you...” I said as he walked to the passenger side of his truck and yanked it open. “Doing?”

“I’m going to clean those hands,” he said. “I have a first aid kit in here. At least this way you won’t have to put your aching wounds directly on the steering wheel. Plus, that car looks fairly new. I would hate for you to stain the leather.”

He did have a point.

Though, my leather was dark brown, so I was thinking it might not stain it all that bad.

But before I could tell him that, he had me pulled in close with the cigarette hanging out of the side of his mouth on the side farthest from me.

He moved methodically, as if he was doing this in a way that was a platonic kind of thing. Not a 'I just had sex with this woman and I'm taking care of her' kind of way.

"This is going to hurt like a mother when you wash your hands," he said. "Do that as soon as you get home."

They were covered in dirt and grime, dried blood and flaking off, damaged skin.

Yeah, tonight was going to be a nightmare.

The next few days, actually.

Skin tears like this didn't heal so fast. And that meant I was in for a couple of days of pain.

But it was worth it.

Any amount of pain was worth it.

"Yeah," I said. "I've had my fair share of rips and tears on my hands. Being in the circus like I am, doing what I do, it tends to be rough on the hands. And practicing five hours a day, seven days a week, will definitely kill your hands. But they've never been quite this bad."

"Probably never destroyed a concrete angel before, either," he pointed out.

No. Never even given it a thought, actually.

But again, totally worth it.

"No," I said quietly. "No, I haven't."

He finished cleaning my hands, and I would cry about how much it hurt for him to do so when I was in the car alone. Because no way would I show him that weakness. He hadn't been gentle with me, either. Almost as if he was being a bit

rougher than normal just to prove that maybe he wasn't a good person.

And, to be completely truthful, maybe he wasn't.

But if he helped us, I didn't care about what kind of person he was as long as he helped us fix my father's sins.

"Thanks," I said when he shoved the large utility bag containing quite a few medical supplies back behind his seat.

"No problem," he grumbled as he pushed me backward, finally took the cigarette from his mouth—that I might add was perilously close to being burned all the way out—and jerked his chin.

I moved and headed for my car.

He didn't say anything, and neither did I.

But he did follow me all the way back home again.

He even waited until I was inside and my light was on before he left.

I would know when he left, too. Because when I got back up to my apartment and looked outside to check, I saw him smoking in the dark cab of his truck.

The moment he saw me look out, he started his truck up and left.

And I wondered if I'd ever see him again.

CHAPTER 8

*Something's telling me to punch you in the throat right now.
-Text from Winston to LaDerrick*

WINSTON

“What else did you find in these books?” I asked LaDerrick.

I fingered the cigarette, rolling it back and forth between two fingers, and waited for LaDerrick’s reply. I hadn’t had a cigarette in two weeks, and that was all because of a certain someone who gave me the ‘you shouldn’t be smoking that’ face.

LaDerrick took so long that I finally looked up at him.

He was staring at me with a bit of reluctance in his eyes.

“What is it?” I asked.

He scratched his head before saying, “The brother. He brought the dad’s old computer by.”

I nodded.

“Some of the numbers in that book lined up with files on the dad’s old computer,” he said. “Without them apart, you wouldn’t be able to make the connection. But with both of them together, and me being the smart man that I am, I was able to add two and two.”

I leaned back into the couch, tossed the unlit cigarette onto the coffee table in front of me and said, “Come on. Just fuckin’ say it.”

“Well, between all of the information I was given, I have names, dates, times, locations, and buyers,” he said.

My mouth fell open. “What?”

“I also have names of employees,” he said. “Last known addresses. Phone numbers. And which of those employees

correlates to each time, date, and location.”

I threaded my fingers together at the back of my head and waited.

“Overall, I was able to find thirty-two employees over a twenty-one-year period. I was also able to correlate missing persons cases to the descriptions on the pages in this book.” He held it up.

The one that I thought was innocent enough didn’t turn out to be so innocent.

Damn. There was a reason I paid LaDerrick the big bucks.

When he’d come to me when he was nineteen years old and he’d shared what had happened to his sister at the age of eleven, I’d known he would be perfect for this job. His tenacity and anger at the planet, and how much he hated pedophiles for what one had done to his sister? That made him one hell of a motivated individual.

At first, he hadn’t even wanted to get paid.

But I’d told him he wouldn’t get far in life with that attitude and had paid him anyway.

Now he was in a very stable relationship with a woman he loved, had a passel of kids, and continued to work his ass off for me on a daily basis.

“What’s in that one?” I asked.

“Well, at first, it looked rather innocuous. It’s what appears to be a list of employees. Descriptions. Costume size. Inseams. Things like that. Except, when I compare this list of employees to the actual list of employees, none of them match,” he said. “And the list of all these employees are eerily similar to all of the missing children in each of the cities they’d visited between a time period of the year two thousand to the year twenty-twenty-two.”

“Son of a bitch.” I felt my stomach tighten in anticipation. “You got me a list of names?”

The file popped up on my phone seconds later. “Sent to you. I also sent it to your email.”

I clicked on the list of names.

He’d compiled me a great list of names, addresses, descriptions, last known locations. Hell, he’d even put in their driver’s license numbers, their bank account info, and so much more.

“Are there any employees on this list that still work with the company?” I questioned.

“The last four on the page,” he answered. “I highlighted them in yellow. There was one woman who used to work for them who was murdered not too long ago,” he said. “And also, there’s a woman on the end of the list. Her name is Idabell Lancaster.”

I looked at the name.

“She’s not an actual member of the circus anymore, at least as far as I can tell, but she’s drawn a paycheck since before there are records on the fucker’s computer,” he said.

I looked at the name.

Idabell Lancaster. Fifty-seven. Red hair. Gray eyes. Last known location: Huntington, West Virginia. Address: 18882 Stout Street. Education: high school diploma. Divorced. Children: Joseph Lancaster. Crimson Singh.

Son. Of. A. Bitch.

“You’re sure she’s listed as a participator?” I asked.

Because if he wasn’t...

“Sure,” LaDerrick promised. “She’s the mother of the woman that you made me run a background check on a few weeks ago. Though, from what I’ve been able to discover, there’s absolutely no contact between mother and daughter. Mom and son, yes. Mom and daughter? The last known contact was a text some time ago from Mom to daughter that said: I need money. Daughter didn’t reply.”

Fuck.

“Thanks,” I said. “Can you start getting me surveillance on all of the individuals on the list?”

“Absolutely,” LaDerrick said. “Though, it’s already half done.”

Knowing he could take it from there, I went back to the other three on the list who weren’t related to the girl I couldn’t stop thinking about.

First dude was some utility worker who was only there when needed. And they hadn’t needed him in the last six months since he wasn’t registered to work in the state of Texas, and this was their home base now. Number two was a dude who was currently having cancer treatments and hadn’t been there in a year.

But number three...

Well, number three had deserved being thrown off a building anyway with the way I’d heard—and seen—him treating Crimson when I’d first met the family.

And now, well...now, I was going to enjoy getting him to talk.

The drive to the Singh Circus took fifteen minutes from my loft apartment in the heart of downtown Dallas.

I was dressed more casually today, which helped me blend right in with other staff that was coming and going from the area.

I walked straight to where I’d seen the fucker the last time I’d been here and found him on the phone in his office.

He was talking loudly, saying that ‘nobody listened to him anymore.’

I reached for my gun and took the silencer out of the other pocket.

Screwing it on like I had all the time in the world to work with, I waited for him to notice me.

It took him five more minutes.

When he finally turned around, I was more than aware of what his conversation was about, and I was screaming mad all over again.

He was talking about that ‘fat bitch redheaded cunt.’

I didn’t need to get confirmation to know that he was talking about Crimson.

He saw me standing there and froze.

“I...gotta go,” he said quickly, looking at me like he’d seen a ghost.

“You know why I’m here?” I asked.

He blinked rapidly, as if he was hoping that if he closed his eyes, maybe when he opened them next I wouldn’t be there.

“Y-yes,” he stuttered.

“And why do you think I’m here?” I wondered.

He swallowed hard. “I didn’t hurt any of them.”

I gave him a pointed look. “How about we sit right here and you tell me exactly what happened. Then, when you’re done and I’m sufficiently satisfied that you gave me everything, I’ll give you a quick death. But if I’m not...if I think you’re holding even one thing back, I’ll make sure that this is the worst experience of your life. Over and over again.”

His eyes started tearing up.

“I...I...” he started. “I didn’t want to do it.”

“Nobody can be made to do anything,” I said. “Everyone has a choice. Sometimes, when you make that choice, it hurts like a bitch, but you still had the choice to make.”

He looked sickened.

“Come on, fess up,” I suggested. “Let’s make this a little easier on the both of us.”

“Why do you care?” he asked.

I let the years and years of dealing with people exactly like him bleed into my eyes. Then said, “Because, all those little voices who really didn’t have a choice got to be too much one day. And I couldn’t go another day without dedicating my life to helping those little girls and boys get vengeance.”

He looked away.

Then he started talking.

“It all started when Ansel Singh recruited me to work for him. He even sent me to fashion school to make this all seem legit.” He looked at his hands. “I’ve felt so sick all these years.”

I didn’t say anything to that.

He was sick.

A sick mother fucker who was going to rot in hell when I was through with him.

For the next twenty minutes, I listened to him give me a play-by-play accounting for the last ten years. None of it was entirely surprising. Once you heard one man’s sick motives, you’d heard them all.

It all boiled down to them being weak, and not wanting to fight the sick urges that roiled inside of them.

“I really wouldn’t have done any of this if Ansel hadn’t made me,” Stefan St. Croix helpfully pointed out.

I nearly rolled my eyes.

He inched closer to the scissors that were on the table.

“Don’t,” I ordered.

“I can’t go down like this.” He lunged.

I didn’t flinch when I pulled the trigger. Flinching stopped happening about two hundred pedophiles ago.

“Hasn’t anyone ever told you that you shouldn’t bring scissors to a gun fight?” I asked as he fell to the floor.

He was dead, though, so he couldn’t answer.

I screwed the silencer off the barrel, replaced it into my pocket, then re-holstered my gun.

I was just wondering whether one of the bolts of fabric that was half rolled up on the table would be enough to roll his dead body up in when I heard the angry pounding of feet coming my way.

I moved quickly, concealing my body behind a large cabinet in the room.

But the moment I heard her angry words, I relaxed.

“...Stacy told me that you called her a fat piece of shit today,” Crimson said loudly. “Are you fucking joking? Where are you? You disgusting piece of shit.”

If she only knew...

Though, I had a feeling she would know in a few seconds because I'd have to tell her everything.

Because she'd see the body in three, two, one...

“Well, fuck,” Crimson said.

I moved out from behind the cabinet, my hands going up to wrap around her face and upper chest just when she said, “Deserved. Though, I would've preferred a tall building.”

I was grinning when I pulled her into my body.

She stiffened, but didn't fight me.

“It's me,” I said.

I felt her deflate a bit at the sound of my voice.

“If I let you go, you can't scream,” I said.

Her answer was to bite me.

Hard.

“Ouch, shit,” I said as I pulled my hand back. “What the hell was that?”

She narrowed her eyes at me and said, “Stop scaring me!”

My brows rose. “You just walked in on a dead body bleeding out on the floor, and you’re worried about me scaring you?”

“Yes,” she pouted. “Because, listen, I’ve had a really bad day. I had to listen to three women come to me and tell me how this asshole,” she pointed at the floor, “called them fat and disgusting. None of them are fat or disgusting. Yet, they all want to quit because they can’t work in an environment where they have to deal with someone degrading them constantly. And I can’t blame them, because I’ve dealt with the same shit for years. I’m just pissed because I can’t freakin’ fire him, dammit! I’ve been waiting to do that for years!”

I started to say something, but then she continued before I could.

“I’m hungry. I ran today and it was the shittiest run I’ve had to date. My period started last night and it was like the red damn tide in my bed this morning. And just sayin’, but I just bought brand new baby blue sheets. And now they look awful. I don’t even know if the stain will come out. Not to mention it’s all over my favorite pair of underwear.” She fisted her hands at her sides, and I was trying really, really hard not to tell her how damn cute she was looking all small and angry like that. “Then, I get to work, and my brother ate my damn leftovers. And now this. *And* I’ll bet you had a really good reason for doing that. Mostly because I don’t think you care enough about me to get mad that he was touching me two weeks ago.”

Well, she’d be wrong on that last thing.

But again, she kept talking.

“I have a laundry cart that I can bring in here, and we can hide this.” She pointed at him. “And an industrial-sized bottle of bleach.”

I waited to see if she’d say anything more, but she didn’t.

“My turn now?” I asked curiously.

She sniffed. “Yes.”

“I have a team that deals with this. They were dispatched before I’d even walked into the building,” I said. “So I don’t need the laundry cart.”

She blew out a relieved breath.

I took her hand and guided her a bit away from the growing puddle of blood.

She jerked her arm out of my grip, and I really didn’t like that.

But I also wasn’t in a position to act on the feelings I was experiencing when it came to that woman, so I chose to not acknowledge the rest of her tirade.

“Cool, cool.” She nodded. “Well then, I’m about two seconds away from murder myself if I don’t eat. And my brother left about thirty minutes ago to bring back food since he felt bad for eating mine. See ya.”

Then she tried to leave.

And for some reason, her easy dismissal had my hackles rising.

I didn’t like that she’d dismissed me so easily.

I caught her hand before she could take two steps away from me before saying, “Do I need to explain what’ll happen to you if you talk?”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t need to know the entire story here, Ozzie.”

My eyelid twitched. “Don’t call me Ozzie.”

“Winnie?” she asked, blinking her eyelids at me rapidly.

Supposedly, she’d done it to be cute. But it just looked like she had something in her eye.

“No.”

“Billy Ray?” she asked sweetly.

My eyelid twitched. “Absolutely no.”

“Ton?” she said. “Win?”

“Yo, Win,” I heard someone say from behind me. I didn’t flinch, even though they’d surprised me. “Where’s the body... oh. There.”

Two men came in and methodically began scouring up the mess.

And I watched as it happened, not curious at what was going on, but contemplative of what the woman next to me was thinking as the cleaning happened.

She looked enraptured.

“You know,” she said quietly to no one in particular. “I’ve watched a lot of crime documentaries. I listen to crime podcasts. And sometimes they explain the cleaning up process. But I’ve never seen it actually carried out. I’m, in fact, quite amazed with the process.” She leaned forward. “I could probably eat off this floor right now. I’m sure it’s cleaner than some of the dishes in my dish rack.”

I snorted. “They’ve been doing this a long time. I have a friend who owns a home restoration business. He deals with natural disasters, and he’s also the man who takes care of cleaning up after murders. He lends me his guys when I need them.”

Her brows rose. “They don’t have an issue with just cleaning up like this? What do they do with the bodies?”

“They take them to the morgue that a friend owns and cremates them,” one of the men answered for her. “Now, stop asking questions.”

Crimson snapped her mouth shut and then opened it again to offer an apology. “I’m sorry. My mom always told me one of my most annoying habits was my inability to stop asking questions.”

“Questions aren’t a bad thing,” one of them muttered. “If you’re five.”

She snickered. “Noted.”

I caught up her arm and led her out into the hallway.

She came willingly, her eyes checking out our feet as we moved.

“We didn’t step in anything,” I pointed out.

“Just checking.” She sighed. “Wait. I gotta go pack his shit and then burn it. That way people think he left because I fired him. And not because you shot him.”

I gave her a pointed look before saying, “That’s the last time that you say anything joking like that.”

She held up her middle three fingers on her right hand before saying, “Scout’s honor.”

I caught her hand before she could turn around. “As for the stuff, I’ll get them to take it and burn it.”

She nodded and followed me through the maze of hallways, not leading but not heading in any specific direction, either.

“Where’s your office?” I asked.

“I don’t have one,” she answered. “None of us do. If we want to do something in an office setting, we go to the conference room.”

I nodded to the plaque on the wall of the room we’d just passed. “Then why does that say Crimson Singh?”

She shrugged. “That’s new.”

She pushed open the door and sighed.

I looked, too, and found a bathroom behind it.

“I’m gonna put a lock on this door, and then make sure that no one else gets to use it,” she murmured mostly to herself.

Sounded like a solid plan.

“Who did that?” I asked.

“My guess would have been Hades or Val. But since Hades went home to Hannibal’s Longview house after our talk, and I don’t think she would’ve found the time to come back and do

that while also in Dallas photographing the professional football team here...I'm guessing Val." She expounded way too much on her answer.

I pulled her into the bathroom and closed the door.

"Have a seat," I said. "You're gonna need it."

CHAPTER 9

No one wants to hear about your diet. Just eat your stupid salad and let the rest of us enjoy our fat.
-Crimson's secret thoughts

CRIMSON

I didn't like the seriousness of his tone.

If he was going to pull me into a bathroom, I would've much preferred him doing other, less serious, things to me. Like having sex with me against the bathroom wall.

Yet, the way his eyes were set, and the way he was being carefully neutral with how he spoke to me, I knew I wasn't about to like where this talk was going.

"Well, you have me where you want me," I drawled.

Jesus, the man was potent.

There I was, in a bathroom in the middle of the circus, only thirty minutes after he'd flat-out murdered my costume designer, and I was thinking about what it would be like to ride his dick on a toilet seat.

Yeah, there was something not right in my head.

"Are you going to focus here?" he snapped.

I blinked, then focused.

"Sure," I said.

He waited a few long seconds, I guessed to make sure that I actually was going to look at him and pay attention, and when he was satisfied, he rocked my world.

"Your mother was part of this scheme," he said without preamble. "She was, according to my information handler, LaDerrick, a part of the overall issue with the trafficking."

My mouth fell open.

Then I exploded up from the toilet seat as if I had a self-propelled rocket strapped to my ass.

“She *what?*” I screeched.

There was no way we were keeping it secret that we were in here together.

He winced at the pitch my voice had reached, then nodded his head and handed me his phone.

I reluctantly took it, then stared at the contents of the screen.

I read the dossier that he had pulled up, ending with the last little bit about the last time my mother had contacted me.

“I haven’t talked to her in years,” I said quietly. “The last time she did,” I wiggled his phone at him. “She’s not a good person.”

“Tell me her story,” he suggested.

Or ordered.

I was choosing to think it was a suggestion, though.

That way I didn’t get all bent out of shape when I needed to be focusing on the problem at hand.

“Nothing much to tell, I guess. All of us have pretty dead-beat moms. All of us except for Simi. She was the only one who refused to let her daughter go to Dad when he told them he was keeping us. From the moment I can remember, I’ve been with my dad. We’d go on supervised visits with our moms sometimes, but ultimately, all of us were here. My mom actually came and visited the circus a lot. At the time, I was fairly convinced it was because my mom and my dad still had a thing for each other. They’d always disappear together for a couple of hours, and then they’d come back all smiling and happy.” I shrugged.

“How long was she here?” he asked. “When she’d show.”

I shrugged. “A week was the longest. But during that week, I never, ever saw her. Maybe at dinner at the food trailer.

Sometimes I'd see her coming out of Dad's trailer. But she never showed up here and hung out with me. It was always as if she was here doing a job. Val used to tell me that they'd be up together all night long. Val's a night owl, FYI. She's up when everyone else is sleeping. It drives us insane."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Do you think if you called your mother right now, she'd come here?"

I snorted. "My mother does what she wants, when she wants, and hasn't ever done anything else. I could try, but to be completely honest, it would be pretty suspicious if I called her, because I never have before."

He sighed. "I was hoping to make this easy."

"Easy and my mother have never been two words put together before," I admitted. "You'll find she's a terrible person, and that there's a reason I turned out to be so good."

"And why is that?" he asked me, looking suspicious.

"That, being my parents had nothing to do with raising me. Hell, we all raised ourselves," I admitted. "We turned out pretty good, considering."

He pulled out his phone and made a call.

I chose to head to the sink to wash my face.

To be honest, my parents weren't angels. I'd never thought they were, either.

But to have this thrown in my face was like swallowing battery acid.

It was eating me up inside.

The cold water I splashed on my face felt heavenly.

The roiling in my stomach seemed to subside somewhat, and when I was drying my face, that's when Winston started speaking.

"Find her and bring her to me," he said into the quiet of the bathroom. "Don't bother getting her anything. She may not be

living long enough to need any toiletries.”

Again, that should really piss me off.

I mean, he was talking about murdering my mother, for Christ’s sake. But my mother had never been a mother to me. At this point, she was just another person in my life who had turned out to be nothing more than a person I knew.

The fact that I shared blood with two sickos did concern me, however.

My decision to never have children was sounding more preferable by the second.

When I was eighteen, I’d gotten on the birth control implant when my doctor had refused to give me a hysterectomy.

I loved kids and all—I mean I loved my sister’s kids which included a brand-new niece and nephew who were the apple of my world—but the thought of having my own sent terror straight through my veins.

“Thanks, LaDerrick,” Winston said.

I threw my wet paper towel overly hard at the trashcan and missed.

I bent down to pick it up, and when I stood, it was to find a hard body at my back.

“You’re standing awfully close,” I said quietly.

“You’re taking this rather well,” he accused.

I turned around so that I was face to chest with him. Damn, but he was big.

“My mother ceased being my mother when she got me a jar of jelly for my birthday that I ate, and then promptly was sent to the emergency room.” I sat down on the toilet seat and absently reached for a piece of tissue paper on the back of the toilet which I then started shredding into my lap. “I was nine, and she knew that I was deathly allergic to nuts. The jalapeño jam had nuts in it. Who puts nuts in jalapeño jam? My mother.

She thought it would be funny. She said she bought it, but turns out that she made it. And she didn't even can it right. I'm lucky that I didn't die from salmonella poisoning on top of nut poisoning."

His eyebrows were raised as if he was surprised to hear that.

"I can't relate," he said. "My mom and dad are the best parents in the world."

I gathered up the shreds of the tissue in my hand and tossed them into the trashcan.

I grimaced when I saw the used tampon packages inside.

Being as I practically lived with my sisters the majority of my life, I knew that when I started, their periods weren't far behind. Syncing periods was always really great when you shared a single bathroom on a tour bus.

Not to mention the close proximity to each other meant that we had a lot of PMS going around.

My brother hated us when we were growing up.

Hence him leaving and joining the military as soon as he was old enough to do so.

"I don't know what kind of functional family unit you have," I eyed him. "But you don't get to be the way you are without having something traumatic happen in your life."

Something flickered in his eyes, and I knew that I was right.

I was also unsurprised to see him leaving as soon as those words had left my mouth. "I have to go. If you hear from your mother, I want to know about it. Otherwise, I'll be dealing with her here shortly once LaDerrick fetches her for me."

"Your computer guy is a jack of all trades," I mused.

I didn't want to touch on the subject of my mother. The less I knew about her, the better.

Nearly getting murdered tended to take all the love out of a relationship.

“He’s a good delegator,” he said as he started washing his hands.

I waited until he was through to open the door to the bathroom.

And, of course, that was when my sisters—Val and Zip—stepped out of the doorway across from the bathroom.

They looked at me, then looked at the man following closely behind me.

“Well, well, well,” Val said as she looked from me to Winston and back. “Isn’t this surprising.”

“This is business,” I said as I straightened my shirt. If they thought that we were in there doing it, then good. It probably wouldn’t go as smoothly with them if they learned why he was really there. “Don’t make more of it than necessary.”

“Oh, I’ll make what I want to make of it,” Val said as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Zip, who was holding a half of a chocolate cake, didn’t bother to offer either of us any.

Even though it looked insanely good, I knew better than to ask.

Zip, like all of us, had an eating problem.

When we were on our period, that eating problem went from almost manageable to abominable, I’m going to eat your face off if you come near my food, levels.

Winston pushed me farther out of the doorway so he could get past, then said, “I’ll talk to you next time I need you.”

Then he was gone.

The ass.

I waited until I could no longer see that fine ass of his in his pants before turning back to my sisters.

We'd stopped watching at the same time.

So alike, but so different.

"What..." Zip said as she took a bite of her cake straight from the source, barely chewed, and continued. "Was that?"

"That," I declared. "Was a mistake."

Val snorted. "A man that rich is never a mistake."

I scratched my head with my fingernails before saying, "On another subject, we need a new costume designer."

Zip sighed as she gestured for us to follow her. We did.

When we got to the conference room where she had a shit ton of paperwork set out, she said, "I heard about what the douche said to one of our girls. It's all the practice hour was talking about. You fired him?"

Someone fired on him...

"Yes," I said. "He's no longer going to be employed by Singh Circus."

Zip grimaced. "I've been giving it a lot of thought, and I agree with you. I think we should rename our circus."

My brows rose.

She'd been vehemently against renaming the circus a couple of days ago, and now she was just suddenly seeing the light?

"Why is that?" I asked. "Did you experience something that you'd like to share with the class?"

Val snorted and shoved some of the paperwork away, then produced two small oranges from her pocket and started peeling them.

Val was a doctor.

Or about as close as you could be to a doctor without completing residency.

She ate healthy almost all of the time and didn't give in to her silly cravings like the rest of us did.

She also had the best body out of all of us, and refused to show it off. Though, she'd always been like that, even when she ate like a normal human being.

The smell of chocolate cake and oranges filled the room, and I was reminded yet again that I was on a strict diet to help me train for my marathon.

The only problem with this diet was that I was hungry. *All the time.*

And even the gross oranges—there was just something about the texture of them that I didn't like—were sounding pretty good to me at that moment.

“I gave it a lot of thought over the last couple of days, and I think that it would be best to start over now.” Zip winced. “When news gets out of what Singh Circus participated in—even if we're not the ones that had ever participated in it—shit's going to hit the fan. Associating our name with Singh Circus could be detrimental. We can brand it as new ownership, and when things do go a bit nuts in the future, we can say that we'd disassociated ourselves with that particular brand. We're new management, something like that.”

I nearly rolled my eyes. She'd literally said verbatim what I'd said the other day. But she'd said it as if it was her own logic, and not mine.

Not that I didn't love my little sister and all, but the woman was practically deaf when it came to us talking sometimes. She heard what she wanted, retained what she wanted, and then came up with information later on that would 'help her case' but was actually something we'd said to help our own cases.

Val looked at me with smiling eyes.

“Well, you were the only hold out,” I said. “And I have an appointment at the courthouse next week. I'm changing my last name.”

If I hadn't been wanting to change it last week, I would certainly want to change it after learning what I did today about my mother and father's business relationship.

God, it was sickening.

I wanted to tell Val and Zip right then and there, but for some reason, I was holding back. I wanted to know for sure what her role in all of this was before I relayed anything.

"Val," I said quietly. "Any news?"

Two months ago, she'd discussed finishing up the residency program so she could start working as a doctor. And, since we were all supportive to what everyone wanted to do lately, we'd all readily agreed that it was exactly what she needed to do.

"I'm waiting to hear back from my old advisor. But it's looking like, if all things go well, I can start the first of next month." She blew out a breath, causing the papers in front of her to blow away a bit. She caught them with one hand before saying, "I'm terrified."

"Why?" Zip asked as she leaned forward and took another large bite of the cake.

"Because it's been nearly four years," she said. "I can forget a lot of stuff in four years."

I snorted. "You will forget more stuff in four years than I'll learn in ten. You'll be fine."

Val was incredibly smart.

She would have no problem going back. In fact, I'd be more surprised if she went back and didn't walk right back out because she remembered how sucky it was to be 'under someone.' She hated being the subordinate in any situation—professional setting or not.

Hell, she couldn't handle playing poker without being the dealer, she was that bad.

Her 'always in control' attitude was stifling sometimes.

“Since the subject is on you...” Val looked at me with her all-knowing eyes, the ones that knew when I was lying. “How about you tell me what really happened in that bathroom today? I know what really happens when you have sex—you had sex hair when you came from your run the other day—and today wasn’t it, babe.”

I rolled my eyes. “He had some stuff to talk to me about, and the bathroom was where he dragged me.

I knew what she would ask next, but I let her ask it anyway before I said my peace.

“And what did he want to say?” she asked.

I scrubbed at my face. “He had a lot of stuff to say. But what I really need right now is time. Please.”

Val was a practical mind reader. There was a reason she acted like the all-knowing mind reader of the group—she saw stuff no one else could see.

And right then, she saw that I wasn’t ready to talk about it.

“If you don’t want to talk about that, you can tell me how the hell you’ve met Winston before,” Val offered.

I sighed. “Please, Val?”

“You have like a week,” she said. “Then I’m getting everything out of you whether you want to give it or not.”

That was more than I expected of her.

“You got lucky,” Zip said. “Now, how about we talk about how little food there is in the break room, and how I’m going to get out of getting yelled at by Keene when he finds out I ate all the chocolate cake that was supposed to be for Bertha’s party tomorrow.”

Bertha being our new front office person who was practically running the entire show.

I couldn’t wait to hear what she had to say when she found out that all her “Singh Circus” polos would have to be thrown out and new ones made.

My lower belly decided to spasm, and I groaned.

More cramps.

Periods were the devil.

CHAPTER 10

Mirrors don't lie. And lucky for you, they don't laugh.
-Crimson to Val

CRIMSON

It was late night creeping that had me making the decision to find out everything I possibly could about Winston Cyrus Osborn.

First, I started off on social media.

He had all the pertinent accounts, or, at least, his business face did. I didn't see any personal accounts anywhere.

That's when I started searching through Insta's photos.

Everyone loved a billionaire.

And, seeing as Mr. Winston Cyrus Osborn was so aesthetically pleasing, I knew there'd be a lot of photos of him online. Ones that he approved and didn't approve alike.

I started my search with the hashtags #Winston and #WinstonOsborn.

The first hashtag wasn't specific enough, so I moved on to the second one, and was instantly rewarded with a lot of eye candy for my viewing pleasure.

The first photo that popped up was from a gossip news website.

It was a photo of Winston at a gala wearing a black tux.

He was staring at the camera like it was his god given duty to be there but he'd rather be anywhere else.

His black suit was accented with a light pink bow tie that gave just the perfect amount of color to his overall dark self.

I'd never been a bow tie person before. I'd always felt they were a bit childish and stuffy. But I realized right then and

there that Winston Cyrus Osborn could make a believer out of me as long as he was the one wearing it. And he looked anything but childish or stuffy.

In fact, he looked all man in that tux, despite what he was wearing.

I could see the strength in his hands as he held onto what looked like a cane of some sort. He was holding it out to a person who was out of the frame.

The veins in his hands were pronounced, and I wanted to reach into the picture and run my fingers over the ropey skin.

It was his hair, though, that surprised me the most.

Why? Because he actually had some.

It was wavy and longer, swept back from his face, as he looked at whomever he was holding the cane out to.

I groaned when I saw all the likes on the photo. Eighteen million.

Wow.

The next photo was of him getting out of a vehicle. He was smoothing down the length of his tie as he got out, his eyes on the street beyond where the camera was positioned.

The next one, though, was what held my attention for the longest.

It was a beach photo.

In the caption it read: *Winston does Maldives on his lonesome.*

At first sight, what caught my eye about the photo was the blue clearness of the water. It was captivating.

Then the beautiful sun shining in the background.

It was a sad day when Winston didn't compare, but once he had my attention, he kept it.

The man was wearing black swim trunks.

But again, not ones that you'd go and buy off the shelves, but ones that were obviously custom made for him.

They were short, about five inches from the inside seam of his crotch, and they showed off his beautifully tanned skin and muscular legs.

His upper body was bare, and he had tattoos on his chest. Lots of them.

Mouthwatering, I scrolled and scrolled until I got to the end of the hashtags.

It was the final photo that caught my attention and held it, though.

Because he was looking at the camera the way I imagined he was looking at me weeks ago when we were alone in that alleyway.

It was a close up of him wearing some aviator sunglasses.

His mouth was turned up at the corner baring just a hint of perfectly white and straight teeth. Those lips surrounding that perfect mouth were plump and kissable.

And his eyes, covered up by those aviators, I could still tell were directed straight at the photo taker.

Also, wow, I didn't have to see the expression in those eyes to know they were heated and intense.

I clicked on the profile that'd posted the original photo and came to a dead end when the words on the screen said that the profile had been deactivated.

Going back to the previous page, I expanded the caption.

It read: *My every day, real life, book boyfriend.*

I narrowed my eyes and read off the name, then switched social media sites to see if I could find the woman on other platforms. I had no luck, so I chose to call Folsom for help.

When I explained what I needed, she said, "Of course. Let me get my computer."

She was back in less than thirty seconds and was humming away moments later as she said, “The account was deactivated seven years ago.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she confirmed. “Man, the kid is a genius. I couldn’t hide stuff this well at his age.”

“You mean Winston’s computer guy?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered. “He’s really good. In a few years, he’s going to be better than me.”

That was a feat that not many people could boast about.

Folsom was good. I’d heard of no one who could get into places like she could.

But also, I wasn’t really in the hacking world ‘in’ crowd.

I wouldn’t know if she was good or bad, but based on what she could find us when we needed it, I knew that she was good at what she did.

For her to give that kind of compliment to Winston’s man meant that he was *really* good, if not great.

“So did you find anything?” I asked after she’d been silent for a solid five minutes.

“Not a single thing,” she answered. “Though I did just get a Google hit, of all things. The wife’s name is Carissa Osborn. The article stated that she was committed to a mental institution in McKinney, then moved to a state penitentiary.”

“Oh,” I said. “That’s horrible.”

I wondered if that was why he was so closed off.

In all the information I’d gathered on him tonight using photos, none of them had a woman in them anywhere.

He’d been alone in every single one.

“What does the article say?” I asked.

My phone pinged.

I opened up the article just as she said, “I have to go. Kobe made dinner and now he’s threatening to throw it away because I’m ignoring him. I think he really might, though. So, if I find anything else after I’m done, I’ll send it your way.”

Then she was gone, almost as if she’d never been there in the first place.

I rolled my eyes, used to her abrupt departures, and went back to reading the article.

Wife of Winston Osborn incarcerated for murder at thirty-one.

Carissa Osborn, wife of billionaire tech giant Winston Osborn, was moved from McKinney State Health Institution to the state penitentiary in Shivley, Texas.

As of right now, no news is forthcoming on the switch, and we’re waiting for responses from Osborn and family. All have declined to comment since her entrance into the psychiatric facility.

I went to Google and tried to find more to no avail.

Winston really was a ghost. I was surprised I—Folsom—found what she did.

I did go back to Insta and put in a few different hashtags, including #bookboyfriend.

I didn’t find anything more—because holy hell did romance authors post a shit ton of #bookboyfriend inspiration—and soon decided that my next course of action needed to be some surveillance.

I’d just gotten myself dressed in a pair of black, skintight leggings—they were super stretchy to accommodate my distended belly from my copious rows of Oreos last night—a cropped black t-shirt, white slouchy socks, and white canvas Nikes, when Folsom called back.

“His computer hacker is *almost* as good as I am,” Folsom declared. “And I say almost, because he’s younger than me, and doesn’t have as much time under his belt as me. I’m sure

that in a couple of years, he'll be right there with me. But for now, I'm totally better."

I walked back to the counter where my abandoned Oreos lay and dug back in.

"So does 'totally better' mean that you found something? Anything?" I asked.

I was on row two of Oreos, and there was no end in sight.

That diet that I was to maintain for my marathon training had taken a nosedive out of a fifth-floor window.

Not only had I had Freebirds, the best burrito place in the world, for dinner, I'd then followed it up with an ice cream cone from Andie's, then a family-size cobbler from Cowboy Chicken. And now, hours later, I was eating my second row of Oreos.

There was no way in hell I was going to fit in my uniform tomorrow.

Luckily, it was a practice show, and I had plenty of time to get into the real uniform for the promotional videos that Hades was about to start shooting.

"Nothing," she said. "I just wanted to call and tell you this guy is a ghost. All those photos you found of him—they're disappearing by the second. It's like you looking at them made them self-destruct or something."

"I wonder if that's just something they do, all day every day. I don't think me looking at them would cause them to be taken down that fast," I pointed out.

"Whatever the reason, five have disappeared in the last thirty minutes," she explained.

"It hasn't even been thirty minutes," I stated the obvious.

"Whatever," she said. "Are you going somewhere?"

Again, I was unsurprised that she'd hacked into my phone's camera. She really didn't know what boundaries were.

“I’m going sleuthing,” I said. “At a particular business guy’s fancy shmancy office.”

“Have fun,” she said. “If you can get in on the ground floor in the back, you can bypass security.”

I got in my car and drove the thirty minutes it took to get to downtown Dallas—Jesus, traffic in Dallas was bad.

Finding a spot on the road a couple of blocks down from the building, I got out and looked at myself in the mirror.

I looked good for being up all night and eating so much I might explode.

Though my uterus was doing a fine job of making me hate life right now thanks to the cramps—did I say how much I hated my period?—and eating was sometimes the only thing in life that made me happy.

Tucking my hair behind my ear and wondering how noticeable the red hair would be, I started out toward Winston’s building, hitting pay dirt when I got to the alley beside the building and nearly got hit in the face by a door opening.

I caught it before it could hit me and held it open wide.

There was a woman pushing a rather large trash cart trying to maneuver it out of the building with very little success.

“Here, let me help,” I suggested as I held the door and lifted the cart to help her over the doorjamb.

“Oh, thank you,” the elderly woman said. “This thing is so cumbersome.”

I inclined my head in reply, and waited until she was behind the door and out of sight of the building before I went inside.

The door closed behind me, and a long, empty corridor greeted me.

I rubbed my hands together in excitement, then started walking.

CHAPTER 11

It's called karma, and it's pronounced 'fuck you.'
-Text from Crimson to Winston

WINSTON

“Sir.”

I looked up to find my chief of security, Jareth, and blinked.
“Yes?”

“I sent you a text message a few minutes ago,” he said, “but you never responded.”

I leaned back in my seat and clasped my hands into my lap.
“What is it?”

“There’s an unauthorized intruder in the building,” he answered.

I leaned forward. “How did this unauthorized person get into my building?”

There was a reason I paid Jareth an exorbitant amount of money.

He was good at his job.

“I was away from my desk handling an aggressive employee being let go when she entered the building,” he answered. “She entered via the east emergency exit when a staff member from janitorial needed help getting out of the building with a trash receptacle.”

“Got it,” I said. “Let me see.”

I could easily pull it up on my own computer, I had direct access to everything in this building, but that would take time. And sometimes it was just easier to have him show me than have to flip through twenty different screens to get to what he saw.

I shouldn't have been surprised to see who I did, but still I was.

"Do you know her?" Jareth asked.

I nodded. "I do."

"Do you want me to escort her up to your office?" he asked.

I was already shaking my head. "No. Let her explore all she wants. Only interfere if she gets into something dangerous."

She'd eventually make her way to me, and when she did, I'd be waiting.

"Would you like me to stop monitoring?" he asked.

Did I?

Actually, yes. I did.

"Turn the cameras off for the entire west wing. She won't be able to get into any other parts of the building without security clearance. And open up all the locked doors between here and there. You can keep the offices locked, however," I suggested.

Jareth nodded, then was gone.

I tried to go back to my boring report, but after five minutes of reading the same numbers twice, I gave up and switched over to the security feed.

I found her on the third floor looking into the janitor's closet.

Grinning, I kicked my feet up onto my desk and watched her move.

I found the most hilarity when she reached the floor where our technicians worked out of.

She opened every single door, then closed it, pouting when she didn't find anything fun and useful on it.

The final door on that floor was filled with the mannequins that we used at the training centers to teach basic first aid and

CPR. Jareth was CPR certified and taught the classes once every two weeks. The two courses were required by my employees, and they had to pass both to continue working at my facility.

Not that I ever expected anything bad to happen, but I really wanted to make sure that my employees could take care of themselves in the event of an emergency. That was also why I paid a generous fifty percent of all their gym memberships and any extra martial arts classes that they wanted to take.

It cost me more than my accountant liked, but I was all for making sure that my employees could take care of themselves if needed.

She stopped in the doorway and stared.

Once a week, people snuck in and rearranged the mannequins so that they were in compromising positions. The one to find them first was usually Jareth, and he liked to throw a big stink about it to the point that people kept doing it every week.

Though Jareth was able to pull up every news feed in the building, it never failed that the person doing the rearranging was never caught on that camera. At least not when it came to his face. And it was a him.

How did I know?

Because I made it a point to go in there every week and move them in a way that Jareth—the most Christian man who prayed for everyone’s souls—would find the most offensive.

And, seeing as I had a dick, I was definitely all man.

She walked inside, and I wished I’d taken Jareth’s advice and put a camera on the inside of the mannequin room just so I could see what she was doing.

When she came out ten minutes later, the curiosity was killing me.

I stayed where I was, though, grinning wickedly when the offices that were on the next ten floors kept her unamused.

She finally got to my floor, and I grinned.

Jareth, who I knew wouldn't be able to help himself with an unknown entity in the building, texted saying that she was coming into my private floor via the stairs.

Since I'd been watching, I sent him a 'you can turn the monitors off on my floor now.'

The screens went blank a few minutes later, letting me know he'd complied with my dictate.

I got up from my desk and moved until I was standing right in the open, hands in my pockets, waiting for her.

She didn't come in quietly, though, letting me know she wasn't trying to be sneaky as much as just trying to explore.

I felt my heart leap when I saw her walk through the doorway leading to the stairs.

She stared at the ceiling when she entered, completely missing me.

So I watched her and waited for her to notice me.

It took her a straight five minutes as she gawked at the opulence.

I'd splurged on the chandelier, buying a very big, very expensive, very heavy one that took up almost ten feet of ceiling space.

I rarely ever turned it on, though.

Mostly because it was too bright, and the reflection of the light off the glass crystals distracted me, especially when the fans were also going. Too much sensory input made it almost impossible for me to work.

I'd never been the best concentrator. ADHD and I didn't get along too well, and it'd taken me a lot of years to finally get to the point I was at now, thriving but also giving myself the breaks that I needed to function.

“Wow,” she breathed, jolting me out of my thoughts. “This is...wow.”

I looked around, trying to see it from her eyes.

It was wow. I’d felt the same way when I put it in, but now I totally disregarded everything that surrounded me, so used to the views that I no longer paid attention to it.

“What are you doing here, darling?” I asked.

She jolted, surprised to find me standing right in front of her.

“Oh,” she breathed. “I didn’t see you there.”

My brows rose. “You didn’t think I’d be at my own place of business?”

She shook her head. “I figured if you were here, I’d be caught by now.”

I flashed her a grin. “Think again.”

She took two steps into the room and stopped, her eyes finally taking me in.

“Wow,” she said. “That’s...very unprofessional.”

I looked down at my trousers and dress shirt before saying, “What’s unprofessional about it?” The only thing improper was my jacket being hung on my clothes rack.

“Everyone I saw in this building looked like they stepped straight out of a men’s fashion magazine. By the way, why did I only see men?” she questioned.

I grinned inwardly.

Outwardly, though, I kept my gaze directed on her face while holding an impassive look.

“Because you’re on the security wing, and all the girls that work here are on the side with the work that won’t make them want to throw up if they did it,” I answered.

Nothing against women, but when it came to the violence that this part of my job required, women didn’t often have the

gumption to do the bad things that might be required of them.

Though they'd fight to the death for the children, I was in the business of torture, and women didn't like torturing people.

"What kind of things do the men do in this part of the building?" she asked.

Just like I knew she would.

I loosened my tie.

Seeing her in skin-tight black pants, a cropped black t-shirt, and those cute fuckin' shoes made me want to rip every bit of her clothing off.

And to be completely honest, I'd done nothing but force myself to stay away from her over the last few days. My body had been acting like I was a drug addict in need of its next hit.

But I'd forced myself to stay away, knowing damn well and good that whatever we had going on wouldn't be something that we could continue in the long run.

I'd learned my lesson about having a woman, my ex-wife having all but eviscerated me in the end, and the last thing I wanted to feel was that kind of pain again.

She eyed me closely, her gaze starting at my head and trailing down to my feet.

"Your hair grows incredibly fast," she said. "The last time I saw you it was nothing more than stubble."

"You saw me days ago," I pointed out. "Having hair is an inconvenience sometimes. DNA being left behind in places where I don't want it to be is a bitch."

"Then why wasn't your hair shaved yesterday?" she asked. "Though, this thought was in my brain yesterday when I saw you."

"Because what I did yesterday I didn't deem to be a risk. There are so many people in and out of your building that

finding my hair there wouldn't have been a smoking gun if anyone were to find out what I'd done," I explained.

She rolled her eyes.

"You're an odd duck," she said as she came farther into the room. "Is this your office?"

I looked around and pointed to the desk. "Obviously."

"You don't have a secretary or anything," she pointed out.

"Actually, I do. It's just that I don't keep them on the same level with me," I explained.

"Why not?" she asked.

I thought about how to answer, then decided that her knowing the truth about me wasn't going to change anything where we were concerned.

"I have severe ADHD," I explained. "Anything and everything distracts me, so limiting my distractions—ie: other personnel on the floor with me—is something that's required if I want to get any work done."

She walked to the refreshment bar that was kept stocked at all times—the staff came and stocked it when I was gone—and pulled a package of string cheese from the fridge.

"These used to be my favorite," she said. "But our father always saw them as an added expense that he didn't want to deal with. I used to steal them from convenience stores."

"You little klepto, you," I said as I watched her peel open the string cheese. "Why are you here?"

She peeled off a small string of cheese and devoured it before saying, "I'm curious."

"About?" I asked, walking up beside her and pouring myself a cup of coffee.

Coffee, my poison of choice, was something that I had morning, noon, and night.

It was one of the only things that calmed me down—which was the exact opposite of what it was supposed to do.

And around Crimson Singh, I needed all the help that I could get.

“Want some?” I asked, offering her the cup.

She grimaced. “No. That stuff looks like you’re drinking black sludge.”

I snorted. “I’m drinking coffee. It’s imported and I grind my own beans and make a new batch every couple of hours. It’s most certainly not sludge.”

“Okay,” she said as she peeled off and ate another bite of cheese. “But also, that’s so black that there’s no way it doesn’t taste bitter as hell. I like my coffee like I like my powdered donuts.”

I chuckled. “You’re a mess sometimes, darling.”

That had her scoffing. “I don’t know what gave you that idea.”

I twirled a lock of her red hair around my finger and she froze.

When she still didn’t look at me, I tugged it.

Hard.

She gasped and looked up at me with wide eyes.

I didn’t let go of the strand of her hair as I said, “Why are you here?”

She licked her lips, causing my eyes to go to her mouth as I thought very naughty thoughts.

“You’re almost impossible to find any information on,” she said, sounding annoyed that I’d forced her to answer. “And it’s driving me insane that you know all this stuff about me, yet I don’t know a single thing about you.”

What was left unsaid was that she really wanted that information, and she was getting the information whether I

liked it or not.

I tilted my head. “Some would say that you know me better than anyone. Who else would I have killed in front of and let live? You know me more intimately, I’d say, than anyone else in this world.”

She rolled her eyes. “You wouldn’t have shared that information with me had I not walked in on it.”

That was most certainly true.

I liked to keep my public persona and my personal persona completely separate. And it turned out that this woman now knew both sides of me, and I wasn’t comfortable with that. Not only could she take that information and pretty much bury me with it, but it also put me into a compromising position that was somewhat worrisome.

“True,” I said as I dropped the lock of her hair, noticing the way her shoulders drooped when I did. “But it’s still more leverage than anyone else in this world has on me. Not even my own parents or siblings know that much information.”

She hummed under her breath, and I had the urge to force her to her knees so she could make that noise while sucking my cock.

Probably wouldn’t go over well.

“What’s with that look in your eye?” she asked.

And then a sudden burst of anger came over me, and I couldn’t stop myself from telling her exactly what was on my mind.

“The look in my eye you’re seeing is not anger,” I said as I forced myself to take a step back from her. “Unfortunately for me, I want to fuck you. Unfortunately for me, I’ve already done that one more time than I should have.”

Her brows rose, and I had the irrational urge to bite one.

Fuck, but she was hell on my control.

I took another two steps back, and only then realized that I'd forgotten about the fucking coffee in my hand.

I lifted the drink and took a careful sip, finding the brew now at a comfortable temperature that I could chug it like a beer if I wanted.

I didn't, wanting to appear like I had control.

"That sounds like quite a dilemma," she said. "If it makes your decision any easier to make, I'm on my period and it's like flowing like a raging river. Heavy and messy."

I blinked.

No, that didn't mean anything to me.

I was a damn murderer for Christ's sake. Blood didn't scare me off in the least.

"If you think that a man can't handle a little blood, then you're sadly mistaken," I said.

"Huh," she said. "Well, if you want to cross that line, I'm more than willing. I'd do just about anything to help deal with these cramps. I have PCOS, and let's just say that I'm absolutely fucked when I'm on my period."

The thought of her in pain, even menstrual cramps, didn't sit right with me.

Which was another reason I should stay very far away.

She grabbed a handful of chocolate candies from my mini bar and absently started shoving them into her mouth as she walked around the room. I tried hard not to stare at her shapely ass but failed miserably.

I could hear her crunching away, and I had to force myself not to follow her.

"This is nice," she said as she touched the velvet couch.

"My sister furnished the office," I explained. "Every single chair, desk, light fixture, and pencil, except for this chandelier, was purchased by her."

There, I'd told her something.

She looked at me curiously and smiled. "You told me something."

And damn, was the smile directed at me not a jolt straight to the heart.

"You have a sister?" she asked.

"I have a brother and a sister. Bellamy and Katrin," I answered.

"Your parents?" she asked, leaning against the back of the couch now, candies long gone.

"Deborah and Winston," I said. "I'm a third."

Her eyes gleamed. "I always wanted to marry a junior, and then call my son Trey for the 'third.'"

"That's insanely specific," I said. "Why?"

She shrugged. "I guess I just liked the idea of it. Nicknames. All my sisters and even Keene have one. Though Keene's is 'Keenie Weenie' so it's not exactly what he likes. But they all have one. I guess it's just a daydream of a stupid kid wishing for her life to be different."

I studied her.

She didn't look like she was messed up, but her family was too twisted for her not to be.

"If it makes you feel better, I don't exactly have a nickname, either. It wasn't something my parents allowed my siblings to do. Or me them, for that matter. They're not stuck-up snobs or anything, but they think names have power," I explained.

She looked out the window, which was grayed out so it would allow me to work instead of staring out at the Dallas skyline for hours on end—which is what I'd done when I hadn't had the smoked-out glass option.

“I’m changing my name tomorrow,” she said. “I have an appointment with the courts.”

I blinked.

“I can’t live with the name Singh any longer.” She paused. “I actually considered completely changing my first, middle and last, but ultimately decided to just get rid of my last name.”

“Have you decided what name you’re going to change it to yet?” I wondered.

Surprise must’ve been evident in my voice because she smiled at me. “Do you honestly think that I could keep this last name after everything that’s come to light over the last few weeks?”

“No,” I said and meant it. I couldn’t have kept my name, either, if I’d learned what she had about her father. And hell, even now her mother.

“And no, I haven’t come up with a name I’m changing it to,” she replied sheepishly. “I figure I’ll come up with one later, when I’m there. Whatever feels right.”

That sounded like a disaster, but I didn’t call her on it.

If she wanted to play that game, I’d let her. Because who the hell was I to tell her how to live her life?

“Winston?” she said, bringing my attention back to her. “Are you listening to me?”

No. No, I wasn’t. I was thinking about things that I shouldn’t. I was thinking about offering her my name, but only in the most platonic of ways.

But that would be a lie, too. Because what I felt for her was definitely not platonic in any way.

“Yes?” I asked, voice husky.

“What name do you think that I should use?” she asked.

Osborn was on the tip of my tongue, but I managed to quell my thoughts before they could form words. “Smith is pretty easy and utilitarian. You could get far with Smith.”

She scoffed. “That’s so boring. I was thinking something like Clementine. Or Ashwagandha.”

“Ashwagandha is an herbal supplement,” I said. “And Clementine is a first name, not a last. Plus, I’d like to point out that you just stated your first name was odd enough for you not to have a nickname. If you changed it to something like that, you’d be laughed out of the courtroom.”

She sighed. “Like I said, I don’t know what I want.” Her eyes cut to me and she blushed, letting me know that maybe she did know what she wanted. I just wasn’t going to give it to her. “I’ll figure it out when I get there.”

A knock at the side of the elevator—because I didn’t have a door at all—had us both turning.

I nearly rolled my eyes when I saw my brother, sister, and parents standing there.

I’d turned off the cameras to the floor, and now they were there surprising me instead of me knowing they were coming so I could prepare.

And by prepare, I meant getting rid of Crimson.

Not that I was embarrassed by her, but I knew without a doubt that my family would see this as a step in the direction of healing, when I most certainly had no intentions of doing that. Ever.

My anger kept me sharp and motivated, and I’d never go back there.

Never.

Crimson stiffened at my side and whispered, “Holy shit, where’s the nearest exit?”

So she had a problem with families, too?

“They’re standing in it,” I pointed out, twisting so that I was practically shielding her from view. “But you could probably just jump out of the window like I’m about to do.”

She poked me in the back. “Get them to move.”

I scoffed. “My family has yet to do a single thing that I want them to do. If they did, I’d be left alone for eternity.”

“We can hear you,” Bellamy drawled out as he moved out of the door of the elevator. “Who’s your friend, brother?”

Bellamy was my much younger, barely out of high school, brother. He was shiny as a new penny and had no idea that this world could be as hard and demanding as it was. I couldn’t wait for the world to rear back and slap him. It would be awesome when he finally realized that life wasn’t as easy as waking up in the morning and going to school, then coming home to a homecooked meal and your laundry done for you.

“My friend is a client, and I’d like you to give me some time,” I said stiffly.

Maybe that would work.

“Your secretary, who we stopped and checked with first before coming to this level, said that you had nothing on the books today,” Mom replied helpfully.

I felt my eyelid twitch. “She also doesn’t control every aspect of my life.”

“Well, I guess we could leave,” Dad drawled.

Even though I could tell he would rather do anything but.

Dad still thought himself important, even though he’d retired from the game five years ago when he suffered a heart attack.

I might’ve taken over his business, but I’d turned it from small potatoes to great, giant sweet potatoes.

Or what-the-fuck-ever I’d done. It was nothing like it’d once been.

It'd gone from a medium size, well earning business that I had to bust my ass to make high six figures to a multi-million-dollar empire that he couldn't even fathom how to run.

Yet he still treated this place like he was the one who ran it and turned it into what it is.

Truthfully, though, I loved the hell out of my dad, he'd taken the business over from his own father, and had done nothing to improve or grow it. He was a man who loved to feel like he was important, and that meant daily golf meetings, lots of schmoozing at events, and extracurriculars that kept him out of the office where he could make this place shine.

"Actually," Crimson came out from behind me, "I suppose we're done. I was just here to ask him to come to an event and sponsor our new business, but he's turned me down."

The nerve.

I felt my eyelid twitch again.

"Oh, Winston," Katrin said, sounding sad. "Why would you turn down her offer?"

I sighed. "Because I'm not seeing how sponsoring a circus could advance my career or my business."

Katrin looked at Crimson. "You own a circus?"

"My family and I do," she answered. "Thank you for your time, sir."

Sir.

I wanted her to call me that when she was down on her knees in front of me with my cock shoved down her throat.

I gritted my teeth and allowed her to not only walk away but leave completely.

The elevator dinged, proving her departure, and I looked at my family expectantly. "Is there a reason you're here?"

I wasn't trying to be rude, but they knew that I worked my ass off, and I was only in the office for brief stints. When I was

here, I had things to do. Like going over a spreadsheet that could possibly show me which jerk off thought stealing from my business was a good idea.

“We’re here to invite you to a gallery showing,” Mom said. “And to see if you wanted to grab dinner.”

I looked at my watch.

Damn, it was already well past six in the evening.

I hadn’t eaten a single thing all day.

Their expectant looks, even my father’s, had me capitulating despite having more things to do before I should go. “Fine. But I have to be quick. I have a lot of stuff to do before I catch my flight to Istanbul tomorrow morning.”

Katrin clapped her hands in front of her like a delighted seal. “Yes!”

I followed them out of the building, and it never occurred to me to check to make sure that the woman I couldn’t stop thinking about had left until I got the first text.

And I didn’t turn the damn cameras back on, to boot. Which fuckin’ sucked because Jareth had left for the night, and my freakin’ app that allowed me to turn them back on remotely was no longer working.

Which, I might add, I had a feeling that infuriating woman played a part in.

CHAPTER 12

*What a week this day has been.
-Text from Crimson to Winston*

CRIMSON

He'd left.

I rubbed my hands together excitedly, happy to have the entire floor to myself for my snooping pleasure.

The first thing I did was give it a good ten minutes in the stairwell before I'd gone back inside.

I couldn't believe my stroke of luck.

He thought I'd left.

Obtuse of him to believe...or was that naïve?

Whatever it was, luck was in my favor.

I watched him through the stairwell window as he talked with his family, his hands on his hips in a frustrated kind of way.

He threw up his hands, the sister jumped and clapped hers, and two minutes later they were walking onto the elevator.

I gave it five more minutes before I went back inside his office.

Completely alone.

And was that the sound of excitement I could hear?

Laughing to myself, I did a lap around his office, not touching, but noting all the things I wanted to come back to.

I waited for security to come and kick me out, and when that didn't happen, the first thing I did was go back for another handful of chocolate and a bottle of water from his very well stocked mini bar.

Hell, it might as well be a small kitchen.

He even had premade meals in there.

Going through the top ones that were labeled, I settled on a macaroni, chicken, and bacon one, popped it into the microwave that was built into the cabinetry underneath the counter—and wow, it was fancy—before starting another trek around the room.

I stopped at the Dallas skyline that I could just barely make out through the opaqueness.

I ran my fingernail over the glass, wondering vaguely if it was a paint or something before realizing it was inside two panes of glass when my fingernail came back clear.

I walked around, wondering where the controls were to make it clear, and found a switch that was mounted to the side of Winston's desk.

I pressed it, and the fan on the ceiling turned on.

“Okay,” I said to myself. “So that's a fan switch. It's gotta be here...ahhh, there it is.”

I pressed the next button I found and the glass went from opaque to crystalline clear in a half a heartbeat.

I gasped.

This late at night, all the lights in the area were lit.

Huge swaths of red, green, blue, and normal colored light poured into the space.

“Wow,” I breathed. “This is incredible.”

I pulled out my phone and sent a text to Folsom.

Me: I need Winston's number.

An airdropped contact appeared on my phone seconds later.

Me: Thanks. I'm assuming it came from his locked computer? Can you unlock it for me?

Folsom: Give me five. Kobe says I'm ignoring him and his attempt to make a plan for tomorrow. Once I set him straight, I'll try to get it for you.

The microwave dinged, and I walked over to it with anticipation buzzing through my veins.

I hadn't been hungry until I saw what was written on the package but now...

I pulled it out of the microwave drawer and walked it over to Winston's desk.

He didn't look like he ate here, and he didn't strike me as the type to drop crumbs on his important documents, but I wasn't that kind of person.

I worked and ate. It was how I functioned.

I took a quick bite and immediately regretted it.

Doing the 'hoo hee hoo haa' of a girl who had hot food in her mouth and didn't want to spit it out, I picked up my phone and saved his number into my contacts.

The computer in front of me came alive and I grinned.

Me: Thank you!

Folsom: Don't get arrested and call me. Kobe's super mad at me right now. Apparently, I was supposed to take the day off of sleuthing.

Laughing to myself, I pulled up the photo I'd snapped of the skyline and sent it over to Winston with a message.

Me: <Attachment> Gasp, wow! This is the greatest view ever! What are you eating for dinner?

Me: <Attachment> This is what I'm having. Who cooks for you? This is delicious, even though I burned off all the tastebuds in

my mouth as well as the roof of my mouth.

Wiping my fingers on my shirt, I started clicking around on his computer.

I'd never understood the point of personal space.

Having grown up the way I had, I'd come to realize that privacy was a thing that I didn't have the liberty to have. And if I couldn't have it, then why should anyone else have it?

I took another bite of my food and moaned.

Wow, I'd have to get back with him about who makes his food.

The computer dinged, and I grinned.

He had his computer and his phone synced.

Rookie mistake.

So that was what I did for the next five minutes while I waited for him to see the message. Snoop through his messages.

I sent another one and watched it across my screen.

Me: Wow, your texts are extremely boring.

I could almost feel him getting annoyed with me.

I couldn't wait for him to respond.

Except, it didn't come in the form of a text message like I'd expected it to.

It came in the form of a phone call.

I grinned when my phone started to vibrate and I saw 'Winston Calling' scroll across the screen.

"Hello?" I answered, mouth full of another spoonful of macaroni.

"You better not be eating my fucking macaroni," he snarled.

I looked down at it, then back up at the screen. “Is it special?”

Because God, it tasted special.

“It’s really fuckin’ special. I only get three of those a week, and I ration them. My chef hates making macaroni, says it’s beneath him, so if you ate that, and I don’t get my last hit of the week, I’m going to tie you up by your hair in the middle of my office and torture you.”

I had a feeling he would, too.

He was so serious sounding, in fact, that I considered wrapping it back up and putting it away. But I’d eaten too much. There was no way this little of an amount would satisfy him. It’d probably only piss him off.

“Huh,” I said. “Well, it turns out that I didn’t know you liked macaroni so much.”

He snarled something low and under his breath. “Get out of my fuckin’ office.”

“Will you send security up here to make me?” I questioned.

“No,” he growled. “I wouldn’t force Jareth to come back even if I wanted to. You’re going to leave, or you’ll regret it.”

I might very well regret it. But I’d enjoy the absolute hell out of myself until he came back to make me leave.

“Okay,” I said. “Well, then I guess we’ll talk later.”

I hung up on him about to say something more. Probably like ‘you better freakin’ leave or else.’ But more likely, he’d have replaced freakin’ with fuckin’.

He immediately called back, but I didn’t answer.

Instead, I went back to finishing my food up, then continued to go through his computer.

The minimized tab at the bottom was some excel spreadsheet with a note to the side every few rows that said ‘inconsistency’ and ‘doesn’t add up.’

So for the next twenty minutes, I marked more inconsistencies for him, added up numbers, set up formulas, and eventually stopped at the end of the spreadsheet and highlighted a few important things. Then I wrote him a note about where he should double check a few things, and a recommendation on firing employee ‘355534B.’

Mr. 355534B was definitely stealing from him and didn’t seem to care if he was caught.

After deciding that everything on the computer was extremely boring, even the ones that were marked as ‘confidential,’ I moved to his desk drawers.

They were all locked.

I pulled the lock picking kit out of my pants—I’d thought about breaking into a few of the areas on the floors below me, but hadn’t been so inclined—but his desk drawers? Yes, I was definitely inclined.

The first drawer I hit pay dirt.

Candy. Lots and lots of candy. Like full-size candy bars from the gas station kind of candy.

I picked up a Snickers, opened it, then inhaled half before sending another text message.

Me: Wow, this drawer has lots of snacks in it!

Me: Sweet tooth, much?

He immediately tried to call again, but I declined it.

He texted about two minutes later.

Winston: I swear to fuckin’ Christ, I’m not playing around. I will end you.

I doubted he would.

Mostly, he was putting on a good show so I’d leave. If he actually wanted me to leave, he wouldn’t have been so amused by allowing me to sneak through his building unopposed.

Me: Sorry, but you're not here to make me leave. So I think I'll stay.

Plus, there were lots of nooks and crannies I still needed to go through.

Starting with the rest of his drawers.

The second drawer I found a shit ton of Sharpies, a prescription bottle of Adderall assigned to him, and some tea bags.

Boring.

The next drawer was filled with staples.

Fifty boxes of staples.

Why did he have so many freakin' staples?

I asked him that next.

Me: Why do you have exactly twenty-one boxes of staples?

Winston: Get out of my fucking desk!

Grinning manically, I moved to the other side of the desk, finding each of them just as boring as the staples.

In the end, there were no secret little compartments hiding a gun, or some secret treasure.

My phone beeped and I glanced at the screen.

Winston: I'm going to leave here and strangle the life out of you if you're still in my office when I get back.

Me: Promises, promise. Why you tease me, naughty, naughty?

He probably wouldn't get that TikTok reference, but it made me smile.

And, speaking of smiling, a vindictive little piece of me had an idea, and I couldn't stop myself from thinking about what he'd do if he got the picture I was thinking about sending.

He'd probably actually go through with the murdering he'd been talking about.

Ass in his computer chair, I leaned back in it, threw one leg over one arm, and then tugged my shirt down as low as I could get it, exposing quite a bit of boobage.

I may be small, but I wasn't lacking in the boob department.

I had some great ones, and the photo I'd just captured proved it.

Hitting send on the photo and wondering what he'd think about it—he'd been very clear that there would be no more advances from his part—I dropped the phone to his desk without closing it.

I was still smiling as I left my phone open and where it was to continue snooping.

The only problem with the snooping, I hadn't realized how much time had passed until it was too late.

CHAPTER 13

*When I close my eyes, I can't see.
-Text from Crimson to Winston*

WINSTON

Crimson: Did anyone ever tell you that you have anal retentive tendencies? Why do you have so many books on your shelf that match? And why are they literally in alphabetical order?

Jesus Christ, I really was in the mood to commit murder. I knew when I got there, every single one of my books would be out of order, and they wouldn't be color coded, or size coded, in the least.

I could practically hear the grin splitting her face as she took pride in moving the books around on my shelf.

“Are you even listening to us?” Katrin asked, annoyed.

No.

No, I wasn't.

Why wasn't I?

Because the woman who wouldn't get out of my fuckin' brain now had my personal cell phone number, and she was currently in my office doing fuck knew what, eating my goddamn food.

“I'm listening,” I muttered, turning my phone screen off and placing it face down on my lap.

I immediately got a text message.

I had to clench my hands on the fork and knife in my hand to keep myself from reaching for it again.

“What do you think about a vacation to the Bahamas?” she wondered.

I felt my left eye twitch.

The Bahamas were a goddamn breeding ground for child abductions.

And female abductions.

Any freakin' tourist trap country at this point was.

All these rich pricks coming over there with their fancy clothes, designer kids, and money. They were practically slapping a sign on their asses telling any bad guy who was willing to listen that they were free game.

Easy free game.

"No," I said. "I'm not doing the Bahamas."

Not now, not ever.

"What about Italy?" she asked. "We could do Lake Como."

I was already shaking my head in the negative. "No, thanks."

She sighed dramatically, but it was my mother who finally said, "Then where would you like to go, Winston? You're more than capable of choosing a destination."

I was.

But nowhere was safe, and that wasn't something that I could just put out of my mind.

"We could visit Ireland and Uncle Patrick," Bellamy suggested.

That wasn't a half bad idea.

"That's good with me," I said.

Plus, I always had work there. Not to mention Uncle Patrick was just as security conscious as I was, seeing as he was my silent partner in all of this.

"I'm okay with that," Dad said.

"That's good with me. I could catch up with Nel," Mom agreed.

“Ugh, we have been there so many times!” Katrin grumbled.

“Then it’s decided. We’ll go to Ireland.” Bellamy nodded. “Your phone sure is getting a lot of text messages tonight.”

I’d felt and heard the phone go off multiple times since I’d last set it down.

“Business,” I lied. “I didn’t lie when I told y’all I was busy. There was a reason I tried to decline dinner.”

And lunch for the last few days.

I just had no time.

In between my regular workload, then the new workload that the Singh family had dropped in my lap, almost every single second of my time was taken up. When I wasn’t doing anything, I was sleeping. When I wasn’t sleeping, I was working, preparing to work, or something to that effect.

Needless to say, they should be thankful I was here at all.

“You work too much,” Mom grumbled. “I miss the time we used to all spend together as a family.”

I didn’t.

I loved my family, but I’d been relieved to get out of the house when I was eighteen.

In fact, I loved my family unconditionally, but fuck. There were times when I could handle them—though they were few and far between due to their meddling—and there were times that I wanted to be anywhere—preferably three hundred miles away—but with them.

My mom was one of those helicopter moms since she had no one else to focus on—like her husband who worked all day every day and barely made it home to sleep—but us. Meaning, we spent a lot of time with her.

At times, it felt like I was being smothered, and no one liked to live their life like that.

My phone buzzed for a fifth time, and I couldn't stop myself any longer.

I had to know.

I couldn't stop myself.

I opened the message with my phone in my lap, and nearly inhaled a piece of steak.

As it was, I had to cough my left lung up to keep breathing.

There she was, sitting in my desk chair, Dallas skyline at her back, giving me the sexiest fucking picture I'd ever received in my life. And she had all of her fuckin' clothes on.

"Jesus, what's wrong with you?" Bellamy asked, looking concerned now. "You're acting like you're dying."

I was.

I most certainly was.

"He doesn't want to be here, so he's acting all weird so he can go back to his work and do god knows what for god knows how long." Katrin rolled her eyes.

No, I hadn't been. But had I known it would be that easy...

My mother sighed. "He's really what is keeping this family afloat at this point, so if you have a problem with how much he works, maybe you should change your lifestyle. Go get a job that's not with him. Make it easier for him to work shorter hours."

I felt my mouth quirk up at that.

Katrin really was quick to get annoyed when I worked as much as I did, keeping the family from spending birthdays and holidays together. But my mom was right. I literally provided for all of them.

Hell, Bellamy was getting college paid for by me. Katrin had a job as an in-house interior designer...and I hadn't used her services in well over six months.

Hell, I wasn't even sure what they did all day, but it certainly wasn't come up to the company and put any work in.

Not that Dad was allowed to at this point. After suffering his heart attack while at work, there'd been a lot of things we'd put our foot down on, and him coming in every single day was one of them.

Now, he only showed up to the office twice a week to offer advice or attend a board meeting.

Just the way I liked it.

The waiter showed with the check, and I had three hundred-dollar bills waiting for him.

He accepted and left, not bothering to ask if we wanted a to-go box.

I eyed my sister's steak that she didn't eat, because red meat was bad for your cholesterol, and thought that the woman that was currently occupying my office might eat it.

Hell, there was no might about it. She'd devour the fuckin' steak, like she devoured my favorite macaroni and cheese.

I flagged down a waitress who was passing by and asked for a to-go box.

She came back in thirty seconds, provided it, and I handed her a tip. "Take twenty out of this and give the rest to the waiter."

Her eyes widened and she pocketed the cash.

I half wondered if the girl would give it to him, and then decided I couldn't care less. I'd intended to give the waiter more money when he brought the cash back from what remained after he'd paid the check, but as I waited for the waitress to come back with my to-go box, I'd seen him outside smoking.

Needless to say, he hadn't planned on coming back. So he'd get what he got.

“Thank you, sir.” She smiled and then said, “Can I get y’all anything else?”

Dad ordered a margarita to go, causing the woman to laugh. “Sorry, but we’re not allowed to send alcohol home. We don’t have any fancy to-go drinks that are ‘tamper proof’ like Daquiri Express.”

Dad chuckled and waved her on. “We’re good, darlin’. Thank you.”

She left with a smile on her face, and I waited for the rest of them to finish up their meals before taking everything that wasn’t touched.

A steak, macaroni, and cornbread.

Why I’d taken these things when I didn’t eat them, I didn’t know. I knew it would be suspicious, that my parents and siblings would question it, but I did it anyway.

The place had the second-best macaroni I’d ever tasted, as well as the best wagyu steak you could get in a hundred-mile radius.

Their cornbread was also to die for.

But again, I maintained a very strict diet. Only when I could stand it no more did I eat the macaroni that my personal chef made for me.

“You’re taking the cornbread?” Katrin narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“There’s a stray dog that I pass every day,” I lied. “I like to feed him the leftovers.”

There was a stray that I passed, and I did feed him my leftovers. But the animal was a cat, not a dog. And I couldn’t get anywhere near the damn thing.

It was like he judged me as I threw him food that he ate.

Yet I did it anyway.

“You’re such a softy, Winston.” My mother stood and swept her skirt into place. “Always have been.”

I wasn’t.

But there was no use arguing with your mother.

“Are y’all heading straight home?” I asked.

We’d walked here, the best steak restaurant only a couple of blocks from my office.

It was Dad who answered. “We’re gonna walk.”

Dad and Mom lived in a high-rise a few blocks from the office. My sister lived in a one-bedroom even closer. It was my brother who lived far away now, over thirty minutes where he went to a technical school right outside of Terrel.

“Are you staying with Mom and Dad?” I asked.

“I left my car there so I could walk with them,” he said as we neared my office.

My heart was freakin’ pounding.

The closer I got to her, the closer I was to punishing her for tonight.

And my one-time sex thing was about to fly right out the window...

“I thought you got that for your stray dog?” Katrin asked, eyes narrowed as we reached my office.

“I didn’t see him,” I lied. “Did you?”

Katrin sighed. “Have a good night working your life away.”

I went inside as they kept going. My dad’s plan was probably to walk my sister to her apartment before heading to their own condo.

“Hello, sir,” the night security guard said as I entered.

I nodded my head to him and walked past without a word, heading straight to the elevator.

I didn't go all the way to the top, though, because I didn't want her to hear me arrive.

When I was on the floor below mine, I got out and headed for the stairs.

Anticipation was zipping through my veins as I walked through the door. I knew the minute I walked inside she would freak out.

And for some reason that only made the anticipation all the greater.

I silently opened the door to the stairwell and immediately spotted her across the room. She was sitting on my desk, legs swinging, as she checked out the night sky.

I walked silently across the floor toward her, undoing my tie as I did.

The moment I was close enough to her, I glanced down to see what she was doing on her phone.

It was our text message thread as if waiting for me to reply.

Of course, I hadn't replied to her last message. I had saved her photo to my phone, though. And might've even added that photo to my favorites, and put it under her contact information.

Taking the tie in my hands, I moved until I was close enough to loop it around her throat. Then I pulled her backward to me.

She gasped, her hands going to her throat.

I pulled her until she was looking backward and up at me and said, "What did I tell you?"

Her eyes were wide as saucers, pupils dilated, as she said, "I thought you were kidding."

I smoothed one hand down her throat, then gripped it. The silk of my tie felt soft and sweet under my grip.

Her breath started to come out in pants as she struggled to get away. Which only set me off even more.

I liked that she was struggling. I liked that she was staring at me with fear in her eyes. I also knew that today was going to be my breaking point.

There was no going back. She was going to be mine after today, whether she wanted to be or not.

Bending down, I caught her around the waist and pulled her over the top of my desk.

When she was where I wanted her, my body pressed to the length of hers, I bent her over my desk.

She gasped when I let go of the tie, but groaned when I caught her hands around her back and tied them securely with it seconds later.

She squirmed, ready to fight, but I forced her down on the desk with my body.

“Don’t move or I’ll tie you to the fucking desk.”

She kept moving. Kept fighting.

Grinning because I liked her fight, I reached for my clothing rack that just so happened to be close enough to the desk for my convenience.

I yanked off two ties that I’d taken off and left here last week, then picked her up and moved her to the skinny side of the desk.

“What are you doing?” she squeaked.

“I’m about to do you,” I said. “It’s either that, or I fucking strangle you. Which one would you rather it be?”

She stilled underneath me, giving me enough time to secure the first tie to the top drawer’s knob and then around her hitched arms.

She started to move again, and I placed my knee against her lower back and leaned into the desk.

She hissed at me. “Why can’t you just be normal?”

I’d never been normal. Never would be, either.

“Where is the fun in that?” I asked, moving to the other side.

“I’m on my period. This won’t work,” she tried again, twisting so that she could get her hand away.

She didn’t succeed, but I did get it looped around her elbow and then tied to the hole that was made for cables at the back of the unit.

“All trussed up and nowhere to go,” I teased as I smoothed my hand down her ass.

She growled at me.

I couldn’t stop myself from chuckling as I pulled my hand back and brought it down hard on her supple backside.

The jiggle of her ass pleased me. Her scream did as well.

“Sadistic bastard,” she grumbled.

“Sadistic?” I asked as I pulled her feet in close then bent down to remove her shoes and socks.

She shivered and stilled, her breath going choppy.

Smoothing my hands up the length of her thighs once she was barefoot, I came to a stop at her leggings’ waistband. Hooking my fingers under the elastic, I pulled them slowly down over the swell of her ass. Then farther down the length of her thighs.

The smooth, creamy skin of her ass was just begging for me to bite it, so I did.

She squealed, and it was so adorably cute that I did it again on the other ass cheek.

She groaned as I pulled the fabric off of one leg, then the other.

Tossing the pants to one side, I got up and walked around my desk. She turned her head to watch my every move, and

her eyes missed nothing as I pressed a button to shut off access to first the elevator, then the stairwell.

If she got free, she couldn't leave. But that also meant that nobody could enter, either.

Her breathing sped as I reached for her next, my fingers going to her shirt as I pulled it up as far as her tied up hands would allow.

Reaching under, I helped the bottom of her sports bra over her tits, pushing it up as far as I could and giving me a great side view of her tits pressed up against my desk.

A view I'd definitely be thinking about later. Too bad my desktop wasn't made of glass. It would definitely be a fun imprint to see in the morning.

"You do anything rigorous, and that fancy computer and your cup of pens are going to go flying," she said.

Maybe. But I would have my secretary buy me another one tomorrow, and it'd be set up and ready to go by the time I got home from my work trip.

Tonight, there would be no control.

And the thought of stopping long enough to move the electronics from my desktop sounded like too much work. The pens? Well, fuck those pens.

Especially when I had a naked woman pressed against my desk.

"Do you have a tampon in?" I asked, trailing one long finger down her spine.

She pinched her lips closed, red flooding her cheeks. Gosh, she sure was cute.

"I'm thinking that maybe you need to fuck off right now," she hissed.

My brows rose.

“No reason to be shy, baby.” I grinned, loving the way she glared. “I can find out on my own if you’re interested.”

Her eyes went hard. “I don’t wear tampons. According to TikTok, they make your periods heavier. So now that I have access to a washer and dryer, I do the period panties thing.”

Period panties.

Had that been what those were that I pulled off with her pants?

“Interesting,” I said. “I’m not sure about the validity of TikTok when it comes to what you’re speaking of, but it sounds intriguing.”

That was something to think about for another time.

What I was thinking about now was dragging my finger through those sweet cheeks of hers.

“What are you...” She wiggled when my finger pressed between those tightly clenched cheeks, as if she could stop what was about to happen.

“Do you want this?” I asked as I felt my finger dance over the pucker of her asshole.

She shivered and spread her legs infinitesimally wider, but then realized what she’d done and slammed them closed again.

“I’m not sure that you’d listen if I said no,” she grumbled.

I stopped and went back to where I could see her face.

Dropping down to my haunches so we were on the same level, I said, “If you don’t want this, I’m not going to take it.”

Her eyes flared.

“It’ll be messy.” She squeezed her eyes shut.

I snorted and stood. “Again, I’m an adult male. Messy is what we like.”

Then I was stripping out of my clothes.

My white undershirt went to the side. Cufflinks to the edge of the desk right in front of her face. Shoes. Socks. Pants. Belt. Underwear.

All of it went into a pile at the edge of my desk until I was completely nude.

I couldn't say that I wasn't excited. Just the idea of being completely naked with her, having her at my mercy, was sending jagged heat down my spine. My balls were high and tight. My dick was so hard that it hurt.

And my breathing was ragged.

God, I wanted her.

That alley had been just enough of a tease that I wanted more.

Wanted her.

Exactly where I had her.

"Yes?" I asked her, palming my erection.

She swallowed hard, her eyes going to my hand that was now working my cock in slow pulls.

"It's your mess to clean up after," she grumbled.

Oh, I'd definitely be cleaning it up.

"Precisely," I said. "My mess to clean up. My mess to take care of. Mine all alone."

Then I was at her back, smoothing my hands up her thighs.

Her ass jiggled as her body started to tremble in anticipation.

"This ass," I said as I smoothed my hands up her perfectly formed cheeks. "It's perfect."

"This ass is courtesy of three rows of Oreos," she grumbled darkly.

I felt my lips twitch at that.

“Well, then maybe I should buy some stock in them. Keep your pantry filled,” I suggested.

She snorted.

I took that as her disagreement and moved my hands up her lower back, pushing hard against her.

She groaned. “That feels good.”

I imagined it did.

I’d always heard women complain about their lower back hurting during their cycle.

“Later I’ll rub it for you,” I mused as I stepped up behind her and pressed my cock into the crease of her ass.

Her breathing changed, became more labored, as she waited to see what I’d do next.

Planting one hand on the desk beside her hip, the other went around her hips to her sex where I slowly started to circle her clit with two fingers. Not quite touching it, but not quite not, either.

Her backside pressed against my engorged cock, and I felt excitement start to push through my veins.

I’d wanted this for a while. Her trussed up, exactly how I wanted her.

But first...she needed to pay for disobeying me today.

My hand pulled back from her and she hissed out, surprised at the sudden withdrawal. I didn’t make her wait long, though, bringing my hand down in a sudden slap against her pussy, catching just the tip of her clit with one finger.

She screamed.

She came.

And I smacked it three more times in quick succession. One. Two. Three.

I could hear the sound of my palm hitting her sensitive skin ring out in the room around us, along with her scream of

approval.

“Fuck,” I growled, unable to stop the harsh curse from leaving my lips.

She stilled then, stunned. “What the hell was that?”

“That?” I said. “Was the tip of the iceberg.”

Then I thrust my cock home. One sharp, swift push.

I filled her up completely, feeling her walls seize around me, as my pubic bone met the flesh of her ass.

She groaned as I closed my eyes and held onto each ass cheek like my life depended on it.

“What the hell was that?” she repeated, surprised all over again.

I waited until I thought I could control myself before letting my grip on her ass go.

“Punishment,” I said. “As you deserve.”

Then I fucked her.

Hard and fast.

My pens went first. My computer second.

My cufflinks clinked onto the tile floor and skittered all the way across the room to the elevator doors.

Still I fucked her.

And she came.

She came and she came and she came.

And only when she was begging me to stop did I make her go one more time before following.

By the time we were finished, we were both panting, and my body was straight rung out.

But my fucking God.

There was no way I wasn't going to have that again.

I needed ten minutes, though.

CHAPTER 14

*The only D I need is direct deposit.
-lies Crimson tells herself to make her feel better*

CRIMSON

I left while he was getting cleaned up.

He'd so graciously allowed me to get cleaned up first, and what a mess that had been, and then he'd passed me in the doorway with a lascivious grin on his face.

When he'd been cleaning up—because he'd needed to. I'd made a mess and so had he—I'd taken off and hadn't looked back.

Mostly because I knew if I stayed, there would be more of that going on, and I wasn't sure how I felt about the first time. Let alone subsequent other times.

So yes, I'd run.

I was good at running.

When I got home, I finally scrounged up the nerve to check my phone and wasn't surprised to see the little chicken emoji front and center of his text messages.

He hadn't sent anymore, but he hadn't needed to, had he?

I knew exactly what he meant by sending that one.

And if I thought that would be the end of it, I would be sorely mistaken.

Winston wasn't the type of man who would allow me to get away. Not after what I'd done—invading his privacy, giving him really good sex.

And it was really good.

As in, I wanted to do it, again and again, kind of good. The kind of good that I was beating myself up for leaving halfway

home, kind of good.

Needless to say, when I finally lay my head on the pillow in my apartment and allowed my mind to drift, it was to one thing. Him.

Forcing myself to consider other important things—such as what I was going to name myself—I left Winston behind.

At least, I tried to.

I kept him in the back of my thoughts the rest of the night as I brainstormed.

In the end, I went to bed without accomplishing either goal—thinking about him was a necessity at this point. And coming up with names was stupid hard. I didn't know how parents did it.

•••

The next morning, I couldn't help but smile as I blinked open my eyes.

When I'd gone to bed, I'd fretted about what my last name was going to be.

But now, the perfect idea hit me as the sun pierced through my eyeballs.

Osborn.

He would kill me.

I couldn't freakin' wait!

Throwing the covers off, I stared blankly at the ceiling of my apartment and took stock of my body.

To say that I felt like I'd been hit by a freight train would be an understatement.

I groaned as I rolled out of bed.

I was sore in places that were quite unusual.

But sore in a good way.

Sore in a holding down my thighs to the desk way. Sore in a fucking me so hard from behind that I bet I had imprints of his fingers on my ass kind of way.

I walked stiffly to the bathroom, tossed my underwear in the hamper, tossed my shirt on the floor, and immediately stepped into the shower.

I hated it.

The shower was old and outdated, seeing as my apartment was one of the only ones that hadn't been renovated top to bottom.

That was in the plans for the future, according to Slone, but in the meantime, I was left dealing with a finicky shower that liked to go cold at random times.

But, since I was now a healthy person who liked to live life to its fullest, I started taking cold showers in the morning to help wake my brain up and give me health benefits such as a decrease in inflammation and an increase in circulation.

After cleaning up down there—and blushing as I thought about the horror show after last night's escapades—I stepped out of the shower and wrapped the big fluffy splurge of a bath sheet around my body.

As I did, I got a text message and narrowed my eyes at the phone that was lit up on the vanity across the room.

Unable to help myself, I walked to the phone and glanced down at the screen.

I narrowed my eyes as I read the text.

Winston: I hope that you're feeling me this morning.

The ass.

I picked it up and typed out a text.

Me: Feeling cramps. Wish I could give them to you as a souvenir.

Winston: What name did you choose?

Me: You'll have to wait to find out.

I put down my phone and got ready and was headed out the door within fifteen minutes.

The walk to the car took me five minutes, and I ran into three of my sisters on the way.

After assuring each of them that I would be back for rehearsal in a couple of hours, I drove downtown to the courthouse.

It took me ten minutes to change my name.

It took longer to walk into the courthouse and through the metal detectors.

“Thanks!” I chirped to the judge as he waved me out.

He winked and waved the flyer. “I’ll be at the next circus. Thank you.”

I stepped back and admired my paperwork.

I was officially Crimson Osborn.

I snapped a photo with my phone and sent it to the man that’d fucked me so hard last night I had trouble walking this morning.

Then I turned it on silent and went to work.

I didn’t look at it again for another half a day.

And wished I had.

CHAPTER 15

I'm always here if you ever need a shoulder to put your legs on.

-Winston to Crimson

WINSTON

“Answer your goddamn phone,” I growled.

She didn't, of course.

For the fourteenth time, it went to voicemail.

I looked at the tracker that LaDerrick was able to get inserted into an app on Idabell Lancaster's phone.

She was only minutes away from her daughter, and I was half a goddamn world away.

I cursed and called the sisters, one by one, all over again.

And got nothing.

Son of a bitch!

I tried Keene's phone again as well, and still got nothing.

After another three failed attempts to get ahold of one of them, I called LaDerrick back.

“You and Jareth get to the circus and pick her and her mother up,” I said. “I have another hour or two here, dealing with business. Then I'll get on the first plane back. House them in my condo until I get back. I want twenty-four-seven surveillance on the both of them. Don't let the mother out of your sight, though. And don't let her snoop around my home.”

LaDerrick, who knew how to fuckin' answer his phone, agreed with a clipped ‘yes, sir’ and hung up.

I spent the next two hours wondering what in the hell I was doing, bringing them both to my condo. To my sanctuary. The one place that was never touched by anyone but me.

I didn't want the mother there, but it was the easiest way to get her where I wanted her without setting off a ton of red flags. Plus, it was my every intention to get her to talk the easy way—via Crimson. If I had to wade in, it wasn't going to be nice, and it wasn't going to be easy.

I went back to my meeting, the surveillance app open on my phone while I worked, and kept an eye on my apartment.

It took them over three hours to arrive. But arrive they did.

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After shaking hands with a few investors, ones that weren't interested in my legitimate business, but my making sure there are less creeps in the world business, I finally turned on the audio and backpedaled to when Crimson, her mother, LaDerrick, and Jareth got to my apartment.

Neither Jareth nor LaDerrick had been to my apartment, either. Meaning it was a new thing for them all.

The one least affected by their new surroundings was Crimson.

“When do you think you'll tell me what's going on?” Crimson asked over the video.

Cool and collected.

That was my girl.

“Boss says that you need to be here, you need to be here.” He shrugged. “I didn't ask questions.”

“And her?” Crimson asked, staring at her mother who was looking on with a mutinous expression on her face.

Crimson's lips twitched, so I knew she thought it was funny.

“He wants her secured and in a place he can surveil until he gets back from his overseas trip.”

“And when will that be?” Idabell hissed. “I'm not staying here forever.”

I thought ‘you will if I want you to’ just as Jareth parroted my thoughts.

“You’ll stay here as long as Winston wants you to stay here,” Jareth growled. “And you’ll shut your fuckin’ mouth, keep your ducks in a row, and not bother us at fucking all.”

God, I loved Jareth.

He was six foot-four, two hundred and eighty pounds, and a former Marine.

There was no soft bone in his body.

He looked like he could blow you over with his breath alone, and people found him intimidating, just the way I liked it. But also, he was as soft as a baby’s butt.

He had seven kids with his wife, Melisandre. With another one on the way. He loved those kids unconditionally, treated his wife like gold, and thought every woman in this world should be protected.

He’d been in Somalia with me, him in his military career and me on a black ops mission, when we’d first met. I’d liked the way he handled himself, loved the way he became so protective of the children, and remembered him for years because of a story he told about his wife, Melisandre, who’d been abducted at the age of sixteen.

That story had stuck with me for a long time until I finally got to a point where I could start doing clandestine missions on my own, and needed a security chief at home who could have my back whenever and however I needed it.

He’d readily accepted, as long as it didn’t take him out of the city, and he could be with his kids every night.

And we’d been inseparable ever since.

That was why I trusted him to do what he was doing.

He wouldn’t let the sick fuck of a woman out of his sight until I was back—before dinner time, might I add. No one

messed with Melisandre's dinner. Even women who sold their souls to the devil.

"I'm not going to stay here!" Idabell all but shrieked. "I don't even know where here is, since you wouldn't let me look out the freakin' window!"

I rolled my eyes and headed out of the lounge where I'd met my clients. We'd flown into a private airstrip at my client's private estate, and he'd given me permission to stay as long as I desired.

But unlike when I'd planned it with him, I no longer had a desire to stay any more time than I had to.

I suddenly had something very interesting at home.

Exiting the room we'd had the meeting in, I walked out into the beautiful day and straight to my plane.

"Ready, boss?"

I nodded and topped the steps, taking a right into the cabin while my pilot took a left into the cockpit.

We were in the air when I tuned back into the feed.

"You got her in the back bedroom?" Jareth asked.

LaDerrick shook his head. "No. I put her in that big linen closet. There wasn't anything that she could destroy in there or use as a weapon to hurt us."

"I'm sure she could find just about anything to use as a weapon," Crimson muttered darkly. "Hell, she could strangle me with a sheet if she got out."

Both men looked at her, and she flinched.

They took that as her being scared of them when in reality she just hated having attention on her.

I'd witnessed that particular feature about her twice now in person. Even with her family she was reserved and didn't draw attention to herself. But it was in the videos that I hadn't had

to force myself to watch, over and over might I add, where I watched her perform on the tight rope.

There was a moment when she got on stage, and the lights hit her, that she winced and withdrew into herself.

The first show I'd watched was the one where she'd first started performing. She'd been all of twelve at max at the time. She'd walked on stage and she'd looked absolutely terrified.

She'd smiled up at someone off stage and had put what felt like these blinders on that had blocked out the crowd and the lights.

She moved directly to the ladder that'd been set up on one side of the building and had climbed and climbed and climbed until she finally reached the top. And, to my utter shock, she'd walked right out on that tight rope without a fuckin' safety net, harness, or anything.

She was literally fifty fuckin' feet off the ground, throwing herself around on a tight wire.

And when she'd gotten off and everyone had clapped, she'd paled.

Then her dad had chewed her out while she was on stage in front of what looked like hundreds of people.

"We're not going to hurt you," LaDerrick promised, bringing my focus back to the three of them on my screen. "We're just here until Mr. Osborn gets home."

That's when Crimson smiled. "Did you know I'm Ms. Osborn now?"

LaDerrick blinked. "Your last name is Singh."

His positivity was amusing.

"Nope." She popped the p. "Not anymore. As of oh-nine-hundred hours, I'm officially an Osborn."

LaDerrick looked confused. "You...y'all married?"

His confusion was rather adorable.

At least to her.

“Sure, if you want to say that,” she said. “And I’m fairly sure Winston wouldn’t have sent you after me had he been worried that you’d hurt me. Not to mention, if you had hurt me, he might’ve killed you. Friend or not.”

No. I wouldn’t have. Maybe.

I trusted those two men with my life.

And my trust.

That was an enormous amount of power they could wield over me. They could sell me out to any trafficker in the world, and I’d find myself buried with the fish in the next hour. But they didn’t. They felt just as strongly about all that they’d experienced in their personal life to ever stop me, or harm me in any way, because they knew that I did the work needed to make this world a better place.

To harm me would be to harm themselves at this point.

“Good,” LaDerrick said. “I’m not sure about where the spare bedroom is, but...”

He looked around in confusion, making me wince. I probably should’ve given them the tour before now.

“Oh, I’ll be taking over Winston’s room for now. Thanks.” She batted her eyelashes. “I know where it is.”

She faked it well.

She walked down to the end of the hall like she knew exactly where she was going. As if she’d been there a hundred times before.

She walked right into my room and closed the door behind her as if she owned the place.

LaDerrick looked at Jareth and said, “They’re married?”

No. No, we were not.

Jareth looked confused as well. “I didn’t know they were...”

That’s because we’re not, I wanted to tell them. But I wanted to see where she was going with this.

But the notion that she thought she could play this game was intriguing to me, and I decided not to call her out on it just yet. Even if it could’ve all been solved with one phone call.

I switched to my bedroom monitoring, dismissing Jareth and LaDerrick.

I found her in the bathroom staring at the walk-in shower.

“I figure you would’ve had a freakin’ tub, man.” She sounded pissy and slightly disappointed.

My stomach sank.

There was a very good reason I didn’t have a tub in my new place.

One that even thinking about right now caused my throat to flush and my vision to blur.

“Are you watching me right now on the cameras?” she asked, looking around. “I can’t see them, but for some reason, I know they’re here.”

I felt my stomach tense as she slowly started to unbutton her shirt.

She was wearing a Hawaiian shirt.

One that was way too big on her to ever make me think that it belonged to her.

I instantly wanted to burn it.

“I’m guessing you are,” she said as she dropped the shirt to the floor.

My eyes focused in on her leggings—gray today—and black camisole.

She wasn’t wearing a bra.

That I could tell right off the bat.

My stomach clenched.

“You know the good thing about having such a bad period?” she asked me.

And she knew she was talking to me.

“I’m thinking you haven’t answered my question.” She crossed her arms, making those perfect tits perk up.

I wanted to rip that shirt off her body and feast on them.

“No,” I said to the empty cabin. “Why?”

I didn’t keep flight attendants on my flight, much preferring privacy and seclusion than having a woman who would wait on me hand and foot.

“Because when they’re as heavy and as horrible as mine are, I only have a period for like a day and a half,” she answered.

My heart jolted.

Not that I didn’t love fucking her any way she gave it to me, but the thought of her caring how she gave it to me meant that she wanted more.

More of me.

More of what I could give her.

“Damn,” I said.

She started to lift the camisole up, but only got it to about halfway before she reached for her leggings and shoved them down.

“I’m about to get into this shower, though,” she said. “And clean myself up for when you get here.”

My stomach clenched and anticipation thrummed in my veins.

Goddamn, but this was going to be a long trip home.

And I was right.

I was right because I watched her get all wet and slippery in my shower, then masturbate with her tits pressed against the glass.

Then I watched her dry off and toss the towel to the floor before walking to my bed and falling face first on top of it completely naked.

Then she masturbated there, too.

With my watch on, which she'd pulled from the side table.

"Fuck," I repeated again.

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Six hours later, I was walking into my apartment well before dinner time.

"You can go home to your wife now, Jareth," I said. "Thank you for helping."

Jareth nodded. "You know we'd do anything for you."

"Anything but allow you to skip dinner," I winked.

Jareth left, leaving me to consider LaDerrick.

He was at the kitchen counter with his laptop out in front of him. His eyes were on the screen as he said, "I feel like I faltered when I didn't find out that y'all are married."

I was already shaking my head. "We're not married."

He whipped his head around to stare at me. "But she changed her name to your last name."

"She did. But we're not married," I repeated.

He looked confused, but I waved him away. "Did you find anything more on the mom?"

"Nothing as to why she's here and not where we'd been surveilling her," he answered.

Great.

“I’ll go talk to her tomorrow,” I said. “You can leave for the night.”

LaDerrick nodded and stood, collecting his things. As he did he said, “This is the first time I’ve been to your place. It’s rather sparse.”

I snorted. “You mean, it has no life to it, kind of like me.”

That was one of his favorite sayings.

He liked to point out my lack of life in any way every time he could.

He shrugged. “If the shoe fits.”

I rolled my eyes. “Get out of here. See you in the morning at work.”

He tilted his head. “I took her to the bathroom an hour ago. Fed her. And told her that was it for the night. I kept her hands tied, though.”

“Thanks,” I said as I walked him to the door. “I have someone coming to get her, anyway. She’s not staying the night here.”

LaDerrick chuckled. “I didn’t figure. Especially since you’re ‘newly married.’”

I grinned wickedly at him. “Don’t worry. I’ll have fun correcting her after we have the house to ourselves.”

LaDerrick left, meeting my transport on the elevator.

LaDerrick nodded at Bryson as he passed, saying, “Have fun with that.”

Bryson grimaced. “Is she bad?”

“She’s just lovely, friend,” LaDerrick drawled.

Then the elevator doors were closing between them.

Bryson turned to me with a grimace. “Holiday pay, bruh.”

I snorted. “You get paid well enough as it is without getting holiday pay. And what holiday is it, anyway?”

He pulled out his phone and then said, “It’s National Chocolate Chip Day, and according to Google, it’s Genovia’s Independence Day.”

“Genovia?” I frowned. “Why does that sound so familiar?”

“Genovia is the place that teenager off of *The Princess Diaries* is a princess for,” he said.

I snorted. “Ahhh.”

He walked into my house and I called him toward the linen closet.

Like the others, he took a good look around, but didn’t say anything.

The door to my linen closet opened and closed behind us, and we found Crimson’s mother, Idabell Lancaster, leaning against the linen shelf looking pissed as hell.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

Idabell glared. “To see my daughter.”

“You haven’t been to see your daughter in well over fifteen years,” I said. “Try again.”

“I missed her. Realized that I’d messed up.” She continued to lie.

“You found out that we were investigating, and you wanted to know what we knew,” I said. “Who were you going to see? The costume designer? Stefan?”

Idabell’s eyes widened. “No.”

But her vehement denial was too quick. Too stilted.

That was exactly what she’d been there to do, trying to get ahold of Stefan.

“How often did you keep in touch with him?” I asked. “Are you still helping them?”

Idabell pinched her lips closed.

I went down to my haunches right in front of her before saying, “From what I’ve been able to find so far, you’ve helped traffic over ninety-seven children in the span of twenty-nine years. You are one of nineteen people I was able to uncover in the Singh Circus organization. If you want this to end with you alive and in prison, talk. If you want this to end with a bullet in your brain in my linen closet after I’ve tortured the information out of you—and I will, I have zero compunction forcing you to talk in whatever manner I need to—then feel free to remain silent.”

“Who are you?” she hissed, losing the shy act.

A shy woman she was not. I knew the kind of evil that lay beneath those eyes that looked so much like Crimson’s it hurt.

“I’m the man who’s going to clean this disgusting filth up, then build an empire on your rotting corpses,” I snarled.

She swallowed hard, her eyes a bit wild.

“I haven’t heard from Stefan in a while. I thought he’d turn up, but he hasn’t. So I wanted to see where he was, get the lay of the land, and make sure that he wasn’t talking when he shouldn’t be,” she said, finally understanding the danger she was in.

“Do you have any other contacts at the circus?” I asked.

The information Keene had looked like he’d ferreted them all out, along with my help, but we couldn’t be positive.

“No,” she said. “That’s why I’m here myself.”

“And what makes you think Stefan talked?” I asked curiously.

“Because he’s forced to check in with me every week, no matter what, or I’m supposed to come looking for him,” she said.

“Why?” I asked. “What does you having that information do? Who do you go to if you can’t get ahold of him?”

“It used to be Ansel,” she said. “Now, we all just keep up to date on each other’s lives. To make sure that one of us isn’t talking when we shouldn’t be.”

“And who is ‘we?’” I pushed.

She closed her mouth.

I slowly pulled a sheet down above her head, then pulled the knife from my pocket and cut a thin, two-inch slice from the length of it.

She watched with worried eyes.

“You’ll share,” I said as I stood up and tied the top of the sheet to the top shelf where I had some anchors built into the studs of the wall to hold the shelves in place.

“I can’t.” She was already shaking her head.

I double looped it from the anchor, then bent down and reached for her hair.

She gasped when I yanked it toward me.

I had the twelve-hundred-thread-count sheet wrapped around her throat, and her off her feet, before she could take a full breath.

Bryson watched on with barely a reaction.

When she was on the tips of her toes, and her eyes were so wide they had to hurt, I said, “Last chance.”

She spewed off a list of names.

I knew them all but one.

I handed Bryson the sheet and texted LaDerrick with that information.

Then I said, “Get her out of here, Bryson. See if she has any more information than what we’ve gathered, then take care of it.”

He knew as well as I did what ‘take care of it’ meant.

Bryson took Idabell out of my apartment kicking and screaming, and I hoped he brought backup like I'd told him to. Even if he didn't, I knew he'd get her there, throwing a fit or not. It didn't matter how much noise she made, I owned the damn building, and there wasn't a single person in this building I didn't vet before letting them in.

The door to my room opened, and I turned slowly to find Crimson standing in the wide-open doorway.

Naked.

"My mom gone?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" she asked. "I mean, that was my mother."

I started loosening my tie, then slowly pulled it free from around my neck.

Her eyes took in every single move I made, and then the slow, methodical walk toward her.

When we were only inches apart, I said, "Osborn, huh?"

She licked her lips nervously before saying, "It was spontaneous."

"Spontaneous," I mused. "You know what else is spontaneous?"

She bit her lip and shook her head.

I closed the distance between us, wrapped my hand around her waist, and then carried her to my bed.

She gasped at the move, and then looked at me with wide eyes as she bounced on my mattress before coming to a stop.

I tossed the tie to the floor, lost my shirt and jacket, and tossed them on the floor, too.

Her eyes kept getting wider and wider. If it wasn't so comical to see, I might've found it sexy as hell to see what I

did to her. Alas, she was just too funny, and I couldn't stop the smirk from crossing my face.

Her cheeks pinked, and she looked away, allowing me the surprise I needed to flip her over onto her belly, hike her hips up, and smack the hell out of her ass.

She shrieked. "What are you doing?"

"What am I doing?" I asked. "How about a spanking for each time you went out of your way to fuck with me?"

She snapped her mouth shut for all of three seconds before saying, "I didn't think it would bother you."

The fucked-up thing was...it didn't.

It didn't bother me one damn bit actually. Which was really fucked up, because I had a lot of secrets that should really stay hidden. If she exposed me, it wouldn't just be me hurt.

Yet, I kept allowing her overreaching to happen.

And I shouldn't.

I really fuckin' shouldn't.

"It doesn't," I snarled. "Which is bad. Do you know what would happen to me if you slipped up?"

She looked at me through wide eyes, her left cheek planted against my mattress, and her shoulders collapsed under her. Her hands were clenched in fists at her side, and she had a fantastic fuckin' handprint in the middle of her left ass cheek.

But it was her hair sprawled all over my pillow that had me forgetting how infuriating she was and thinking that maybe there were other, more pleasurable ways that this could be solved.

I slowly unzipped my slacks, then unbuttoned and pushed them down, giving her plenty of time to take off if that was what she wanted.

But she stayed, not moving a single muscle.

I took advantage of that and wrapped my hand around my cock to guide it to her entrance.

She stilled. "I'm on birth control."

The blurted words had me grinning.

"I know," I said. "I know everything there is to know about you now, darling. I know what your favorite color is. The way you take your tea. You hate black coffee and put so much goddamn creamer and sugar into it that you might as well be drinking diabetes. I know that your last health exam was a few months ago, and I also know that you have an implant, and tried to get your doctor to give you a hysterectomy at nineteen."

She shivered. "Do you know why?"

I smoothed my hand over her ass, right over the place that still likely stung from my earlier machinations.

"Because you can't stand kids." I laughed. "It says so right in the online gift you gave your sister, Simi, when she popped her babies out earlier in the year."

She snickered but stopped when I pushed my cock in to the hilt.

It was incredibly easy only because she was slick, hot, and ready for me.

As if she'd been sitting there, waiting for me to come home and punish her for the way she'd come into my life and hurricaned her way around inside of it.

She hissed in a breath between clenched teeth, and I watched my cock get swallowed up by her juicy pussy.

Tight.

Always so freakin' tight.

And wet.

And hot.

“Ughhh,” I grunted as I pulled out and thrust back inside.
“How can you do this to me?”

She didn’t answer.

I didn’t either, catching her hips and pulling her into me so I could grind into her further.

She mewled, her eyes squeezing shut. “Oh, baby.”

Oh, baby.

Two words. Three syllables.

They were enough to bring me to my goddamn ass as I sat back and pulled her with me.

She came up onto her knees and leaned back against me, the entirety of her weight resting on my thighs.

And together we moved.

We ground into each other. We panted. We sweated. We made a fuckin’ connection.

One that I knew I should shove so far out of my orbit I couldn’t feel it anymore, yet brought in close, protected it, and built every fuckin’ wall around it I could erect.

Because this wasn’t something I’d ever felt.

Not with my ex-wife. Not with any girlfriend. Not with anything in this world but her.

“Jesus Christ,” she breathed. “I’m...”

It obviously didn’t take much for either one of us.

Fuck.

With her teasing me all day, knowing damn well I’d been watching her every move, I’d been ready to take her from the moment I’d first seen her arrive at my place.

And now, with her clenching around me as she came so hard she all but collapsed, I had no choice but to follow right behind.

It was as we were both lying there, panting and spent, her fuckin' hair across my goddamn face, that I said, "I'm on every single human trafficker's hit list."

She stiffened.

"I may not be the one they know is doing it, but I have enough skin in the game that it will one day catch up with me," I said. "If that happens, you'll be directly associated with me."

Meaning, she could be hurt just as much as I could. Or worse.

Which was what sickened me more.

The thought of her being hurt in any way, because of the choices I'd made in my life, was unacceptable.

Just the thought of her leaving me sent shocks of panic through my veins.

I shouldn't be feeling this way.

There was a reason I'd stayed away from any long-term relationships...yet I didn't kick her out of my bed. I hadn't sent her and her mom to a safe house—of which I had seven. I didn't tell her to stop looking into me like I should have. And now, we were too far into this for me to ever let go.

It was a lose-lose situation for her, and she didn't even know it.

"I'm a big girl, Winston," she whispered. "I've played the controlling, not living life game. From now on, my every goal in life is to live it to its fullest. If what you're trying not to say, but are actually getting across, is for me to leave and not look back, that's not going to happen."

My stomach sank.

"I don't want to go."

Well, that was fan-fucking-tastic.

Because I didn't want to let her go.

CHAPTER 16

*Don't be ashamed of who you are. That's your parents' job.
-Crimson to Winston*

CRIMSON

He left the bed in the middle of the night after getting a phone call that woke both of us up, and I wanted to know why.

So, when he closed the door softly behind him, I didn't think.

I just reacted.

One second, I was in bed, naked and depleted where he left me, and the next I was slipping into one of his tailored t-shirts, yanking on a pair of sweatpants that I'd think about being too tight later, and shoving my feet into flip flops before running toward the door.

Luckily, I didn't forget to check the peephole before leaving, because when I got to the door, he was standing on the doorstep with the phone pressed to his ear and a look of murder on his face.

Whatever had taken him from my bed, he hadn't wanted to leave me to handle it.

That made me feel remotely better, but not enough to not follow him.

When he left, taking the elevator, I did the same and took the stairs.

He walked to the street where he'd parked his car right outside the apartment complex, and I ran to the back of the building where I parked mine in the lot after being followed to his place.

I poked my nose out of the driveway and looked left and right, spotting him to my left as I did.

Seconds later I was pulling out of the lot and hanging far enough back that I knew he couldn't see me.

Or shouldn't.

We drove for an hour straight through traffic—bumper to bumper, might I add—and didn't stop for anything until a train caught us up well outside of the Dallas city limits.

I pulled into a Sonic and straight into a stall, wondering how long I would be staying there before the train was finished.

The answer was enough time to order myself a drink and a soft pretzel with cheese.

The drink was okay. But the soft pretzel? That was positively divine.

I wished I had time to order a new one, but just as I licked the last vestiges of salt off my fingers, the arms of the railroad track light went up, and Winston was taking off again.

He drove and drove and drove until I felt like maybe I needed to start looking for some place to stop off for gas.

But eventually he pulled into a driveway.

To a state penitentiary.

Eyes widening, I pulled off to the side of the road and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

I gave up after twenty minutes and called Folsom.

“Hey,” I said when she answered. “Can you hack into a state penitentiary for me?”

There was a long pause before Kobe, Folsom's husband, said, “I'm sure that she can. But maybe you shouldn't bring her into your escapades in the middle of the night.”

I waited.

Eventually he sighed and gave up, putting Folsom on the line.

“I’m jacked into your car’s GPS location. Give me five minutes, and I’ll just shoot it to your car’s system,” she said.

I waited a whole ninety-seven seconds. I counted using the one-one-thousand method.

“What is this?” I asked.

“This is the feed from the main entrance to the rooms where I’m guessing the inmates meet with their visitors. I’m guessing you’re looking for Winston. I haven’t found him...ah ha!” She paused. “There.”

She shot a live video to the screen, and I froze.

Because on that video, even in prisoner orange, was a very gorgeous woman.

As in, drop dead gorgeous.

“That’s his ex-wife,” Folsom said. “I sent you the only article I was able to find, remember?”

I continued to watch the screen. “I guess, maybe, I didn’t understand they still had contact.”

“All logs in and out of the prison that I’ve been able to pull show that he’s only ever been to visit twice. Once after she arrived, and this one,” Folsom said.

I bit my lip.

Then I watched as Winston, leaning back in the chair listening as the woman talked, got more and more upset looking.

Then he roared something in her face, got up so fast that his chair flew back eight feet, and left.

I watched her as he left, and she looked...broken.

Upset beyond belief.

I wished I knew more.

But if Folsom couldn't find it, Winston didn't want it to be found.

I didn't expect him to come right out, but he'd also disappeared from all monitors in the prison, so I'd expected him to pop up sooner rather than later.

But that didn't happen.

For a whole two hours, I waited.

Then the gates started to open, and his car came into view.

I slunk down in my seat, not wanting him to see me.

I stayed down there for what felt like plenty of time for him to drive right on by, but when I finally poked my head up to check, it was to see a very defined bulge behind a perfectly fitting pair of black slacks right outside my window.

"Ruh-roh," I said as he wrenched my door open.

"Hey!" I whined. "Those were supposed to be locked."

They *were* locked. I wasn't dumb. I knew better than to sit here in the dark with my doors unlocked.

"You made my phone your digital key, remember?" he asked.

Oh, yeah. I had.

Last night in between sex number one and sex number two, I'd told him about this really cool feature I had with my car. Then I'd used his phone to set it up since it was closer than mine was across the bedroom.

Only, I'd found out after making his phone the digital key that you could only have one digital key, and to change it, I'd have to call customer service in the morning.

Why had I done that, you ask?

Because it'd seemed like a solid plan at the time.

But that was before he was looking at me with murder in his eyes.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, feigning innocence.

It was a near one hundred percent certainty that he didn’t believe me. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

“There’s a reason I want my privacy,” he said to me, looking...broken.

Well, growled was more like it.

The man had a great growl.

But right then...he looked off.

Like what he was about to say was going to be hard for him to admit to. Or possibly even voice aloud.

Instead of saying what he felt, he grumbled darkly at me. “Move over.”

I scrambled over to the other seat.

“What about your car?” I asked, looking at it as we zoomed past it.

“Fuck the car,” he grumbled.

I didn’t say anything, but I did send a text to Folsom, asking her to contact Winston’s computer guy, to see if they could get out here to pick his car up.

Because the more I stared at him, the more I realized it was good that I’d come. I’d given him a reason to be somewhat distracted, but the further he had to stew, the sicker he looked.

We stayed silent for the hours it took us to get back to his apartment.

I’d just gotten out of the car in his parking garage when he rounded my car, bent down, and all but tossed me over his shoulder.

I squeaked as my belly hit his shoulder blade but didn’t tell him to put me down.

He carried me straight into his bedroom. Then treated me like he hated me.

I. Loved. It.

•••

He was lying there, silent and still, in the aftermath of the most fantastic sex we'd ever had. Which was saying something, because holy wow, did the man give good sex.

“Used to, I wanted to fill a house with children,” I said as I stared at the ceiling above my head, surprised by the words that'd come out of my mouth. “I wanted to wake up and spend my days raising a passel of kids on a farm with ducks, donkeys, and so many chickens I couldn't count them all.”

He took so long to respond I thought he was asleep.

But when I turned over to look at his sleeping face, I saw him glaring hard at the ceiling.

I waited, feeling like maybe he was working through something, and he would speak when he was ready.

It ended up being a solid ten minutes before he did.

When his angry words permeated the calm vibe I had going on, I was utterly shocked.

“I don't want kids.”

I blinked.

But before I could ask why, he answered for me.

“My wife killed our children.”

His wife. Killed. His children.

I was smacked in the face so abruptly with those words that at first, I couldn't comprehend.

I blinked. “I'm...*what?*”

There were no freakin' words. Absolutely none. I couldn't come up with some even if I tried, his words were just that brutal to my soul.

I mean, you'd always heard about this happening.

Postpartum depression was a real thing.

But you never expected it to happen to someone you knew.

Let alone someone you were trying to convince yourself you weren't falling in love with.

“My wife. She killed our children. She's currently serving three and a half years for the murder of our two babies. Twins. They were seventeen months old,” he said carefully.

Detached.

He was so freakin' detached.

And I knew without a doubt that would be all I ever got from him about the matter.

He wouldn't be able to share anymore.

This big, beautiful papa bear was broken, and the one woman in the world he was supposed to trust with them had been the one to break him.

“Three and a half years?” My voice rose an octave with each word. “What kind of fucking sentencing was that?”

He looped his hands behind his head and continued staring at the ceiling.

“The kind where the judge felt like she'd suffered enough,” he scoffed.

I swallowed past a large lump in my throat, unable to form the right words.

“What did she want with you today?” I asked.

He turned his neck once to the left, and once to the right, eliciting a loud pop as he cracked his neck in each direction before answering.

“They had two years' worth of court dates and appeals,” he said. “She spent two years in a psych facility getting better, and then two and a half in the state penitentiary.” He closed his eyes. “That meeting was her telling me that they granted her parole. She'll be out next month.”

Next month.

She'd be out next month after killing her own twins.

That was...unreal.

"I..." I started, but he interrupted me.

"I don't want to talk about it anymore," he said stiffly. "Just know that there's a reason this'll never be anything more than it is."

Never be anything more than it is.

Could I live with that?

"You don't ever want to be with another person ever again?" I asked.

He shook his head.

Was I okay with that? Getting scraps?

No.

But was I able to leave him just because of that?

Also no.

It was a damned if I do, damned if I don't type of situation.

But maybe, if I tried hard enough, he could get past that fear?

I mean, sure, I didn't want kids anymore. But that didn't mean one day I wouldn't change my mind.

I hadn't met Winston before.

Now...who knew what I'd want in a couple of years.

"Being with someone like that makes you vulnerable," he said. "But she broke me. There's not a single piece left of me that wants to feel that way ever again. And the easiest way for that to happen is to never form an attachment that has the potential to hurt me. So yes. I don't want that. I don't want you that way."

I don't want you that way.

I had no clue that something so innocuous could ever hurt that bad.

Yet, he'd accomplished it.

And I had no choice but to live with it.

CHAPTER 17

*I was crazy back then. (Yesterday.)
-Text from Crimson to Simi*

CRIMSON

I flipped through the air, my feet catching the tight rope easily, and reached for the metal hoop that was swinging past my head.

My mind was luckily blanked.

In the two weeks since we'd had that discussion about him wanting nothing to do with me in any permanency, we'd spent very little time together.

At least, I'd tried to, anyway.

Yet, each day, there he was.

I'd gone back to my own apartment that next morning, secure in the knowledge that I needed to have nothing to do with him if I was ever going to get over him.

Because that was what I was going to do.

I was going to live the rest of my days without him. I'd done a lot of the unhappy things in my life, and I deserved better than a man who wasn't willing to take that road with me in the end.

I should've known from the beginning it'd never work out. I mean, the man was a freakin' killer billionaire. If there was anything on this planet that made him out of my league *and* no good for me, that was it.

A: I didn't fit into his world.

B: he was right. He had some scary people in this world that would go out of their way to eliminate him if they could.

It would be best if I did my due diligence and stayed away while I still could.

Yet, each day, it became harder and harder to stay away.

Which was why yesterday, I'd finally broken down and opened my door when he'd knocked.

He'd come in, slammed it closed behind him, and had kissed me breathless.

Then he'd fucked me senseless.

This morning, when I'd woken up alone, I knew rather quickly that allowing him entrance into my life wasn't going to be the correct answer for this.

Going cold turkey, and possibly leaving altogether, might be the better way to go.

Alas, the circus must go on, and we had a soft opening in two and a half weeks.

That was why we were having a practice run with employees' friends and family tonight. Whoever had the time to watch.

Usually, Hades was the tight rope walker, and Zip was her backup. But tonight, it was my show, as well as the acrobatics and contortion I'd be doing in three, two, one...

I bent backward, my head touching the back of my knee.

The crowd gasped, and I felt a burn in my belly as I stretched farther than I had in a while.

I flipped, my head going from the downward position, to upward.

Facing the crowd, I bent double over the ring, my face now nearly pressed to my own ass.

Then the ring was spinning, the people at the top taking advantage as they twisted from where the rope was secured to the rafters.

I didn't usually like spinning, but people thought it was way better than sitting still, so I allowed it to some extent.

But, just as I expected them to stop, they didn't.

They kept spinning and spinning until I had no other choice but to hold my position for much longer than I expected or wanted to.

The crowd cheered, and luckily my brother and Hades finally paid enough attention to what was going on to know that I was about to fall right the fuck off the ring if they didn't stop it.

I heard a loud curse from above me, then the ring slowed its spinning.

I had to stay, holding myself on the rings with my arms straight for much longer than I expected, the ring finally coming to a slow, gentle stop on its own.

But it didn't matter.

I'd already lost any and all desire to be on the ring anymore.

Sadly, I couldn't just get down seeing as I was fifty feet in the freakin' air.

It took me some time to sit up and get my mind on track again.

Luckily, they pulled me right up into the rafters, Keene's strong arms doing the pulling.

When I finally came back online, I heard Hades arguing with someone, letting them know that they were no longer welcome at the circus and to meet with security—her man—before departure.

Keene wrapped his arm around my waist and hauled me onto the scaffolding above the circus, and I couldn't stop myself from leaning into his arms.

"You okay?" he asked.

I couldn't nod.

I could only sit there and wait for the room to stop spinning.

Keene let me lean, talking to me softly as I came back to myself.

My heart was utterly pounding in my chest, and it wasn't until long minutes later that I heard him talking about Winston.

"...sitting in the crowd, staring up here like he's about to lose his shit," Keene said. "Something you'd like to share about you and Osborn?"

I blinked.

Was there?

No.

"There's nothing between us," I said. "He's just invested now that you brought him in."

He snorted, obviously not believing my words any more than I did.

"That's why he is still looking, I'm sure," he drawled.

I didn't bother to look.

To look was to admit that I wanted him to be looking, and that was a dangerous situation to be in.

"What happened?" I asked to change the subject.

Keene grumbled something under his breath.

"One of the assembly crew was up here, and the one who was supposed to be up here doing the assisting for this act had to 'use the shitter' according to Jessup Smith. Jessup took over and lied to us about him knowing how to do this. Even though he was told to stop multiple times by Hades and never listened. Hades called for me, and it took me this long to get up here. I'm sorry," he apologized.

Jessup Smith.

A holdout from the old crew, pissy because his job was getting phased out.

“He’s mad because he’s being let go after next month,” I said. “I had a talk with him this morning about it, and he wasn’t happy.”

Keene sighed. “That doesn’t excuse the fact that he didn’t listen and could’ve fuckin’ killed you. I talked to the others about a safety net, and we’ve come to the conclusion that this whole danger we put ourselves into on a weekly basis isn’t something that’s necessary any longer.”

“You mean, you talked to Coffey and Slone who had problems with Tony and Simi going up into the air without some sort of safety net to keep them from falling and getting permanently harmed.”

“Yes,” he answered, sounding amused. “You don’t agree?”

“I’ve agreed that the old ways are done,” I pointed out. “Multiple times.”

He squeezed my shoulder. “Agreed.”

I blew out a breath, and finally pulled myself away from him. “I think I’ll live.”

He squeezed my shoulder, then pulled me up into his arms.

He hugged me tight for a long time before saying, “Did you invite Mr. Glare?”

Mr. Glare.

What a great name for him.

“No,” I said. “Maybe he’s coming to admire his handiwork.”

In the two weeks since I’d been avoiding him, he and Keene had cleaned house.

There wasn’t a single person left who had in any way, shape, or form been a part of the criminal acts of my father’s dynasty.

Now, only fresh, new, very upstanding people remained.

“Doubtful,” he said. “He could’ve done that earlier when I paid him.”

“You paid him?” I asked in surprise.

“He didn’t want me to,” he said. “But I donated a large portion of the proceeds over some royalties we’d gotten last year. He can use it to fund his other business since he helped us so much.”

“Hmm,” I mused.

It was funny, but I felt like I was paying him for killing my mom.

Did that make me a contract killer?

Not that I had full confirmation that he’d killed my mom, of course.

But I suspected.

Again, I should probably be more upset, but I couldn’t be. Not when she’d been complicit in the harming of children.

I would never be okay with that, and I wouldn’t live with her actions on my conscience.

“Can you get down?” he asked.

I didn’t answer, instead showing him that I could as I climbed down the ladder that would lead to backstage.

Hades was waiting for me when I got to the bottom.

I’d barely taken two steps off the ladder when she launched herself at me. “Holy fuck, I thought you were going to fall!”

I squeezed her back, still unused to this sister she now was for us. For so long, Hades had been so withdrawn from us. Always fighting, fighting, fighting some invisible force that only she could see. Sure, there’d been good times. But not like there were now.

But then we’d learned why she’d been so...broken. And I couldn’t say that I blamed her for how she chose to handle that

trauma.

But this affectionate, kind, caring person was someone I loved.

Sure, I loved the crotchety, always in a perpetual bad mood, angry one.

I now loved this side of her, too.

It was fun to see and experience.

Especially when her man walked up and glared at me. “You okay?”

I nodded at Hannibal.

“I took care of the fucker,” he said.

My brows rose. “How?”

“I told him he could see himself out the door or I’d make sure he couldn’t walk out of here,” he answered.

Snickering, I patted him on the shoulder, then walked to the plastic bench that was right off the stage center.

“That was fan-fuckin-tastic,” Simi said, a baby strapped to her chest. “We’re supposed to trust these people with our lives, dammit! This is why I want safety nets!”

I giggled. “Keene already said they’re coming. I imagine they’ll be here before our first show, now.”

Simi glared at me. Then broke out into a relieved laugh.

“You’re sure you’re okay?”

I nodded at her.

“Good,” she said as she turned around. “Come eat. Coffey is here tonight cooking for the show.”

When we’d moved to Dallas and our permanent location, Coffey’s job as the camp chef had sort of become obsolete. But that didn’t stop him for long.

Between our choosing to make the circus a permanent place, and us landing in Dallas, he’d already started working

on a food truck that he planned on parking outside of the circus. Though, he did make sure to make it possible for all kinds of other food trucks to be available, too.

I stayed where I was, still a bit shaky on my legs.

“I’m here!” Val said as she hurried into the room in scrubs and a white coat.

I grinned. “You look so cute, Val.”

Val rolled her eyes as she ripped off the coat and threw it to the side.

Band-Aids, syringes filled with saline she called flushes, and IV paraphernalia spilled out onto the floor.

She ripped the robes that she used to read peoples’ palms from the clothing stand and threw it over her shoulder. Then she took off at a run toward her booth.

A booth that was subsequently close to the food truck area where she’d get lots of visitors intent on hanging around waiting for food, with no other choice but to stare at her and think about getting their palms read.

“You okay?”

I looked over at Tony’s man, Slone, who had shown up out of nowhere.

“Yes,” I answered. “Even though my head’s still spinning, and I feel like I’m low key about to puke everywhere, and the thought of going anywhere near food trucks right now, smelling a smorgasbord of all kinds of different foods, makes me want to run the other way.”

Slone grinned. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, that last little trick was rather impressive, even if what you did do wasn’t intentional. I got a video of it to show Briley.”

Briley, his daughter, who hadn’t been able to come due to a robotics competition with her new school.

“Send it to me. I might look at it tomorrow when I forget how bad it felt,” I offered.

He caught my shoulder with his and pulled me into his body.

I leaned into him and walked with him outside where the rest of our family was already huddled in front of Coffey's trailer.

"Coffey's Crater" was his and Simi's brainchild and was doing really well. Out of all the food trucks in the food truck park, his was by far the most popular.

And right now, the thought of going over there and being friendly with family and friends was the very last thing I wanted to do.

Honestly, I wanted to be snuggled up in strong, muscular arms that belonged to a man who had a perpetual bad attitude while doing so.

Instantly deflated, I pulled out of Slone's arms and headed in the direction of Val's 'tent.'

In actuality, it was a covered awning area that was right off the seating area for the food trucks. It was the most visible spot in the area, and you had to pay twenty dollars for five minutes with 'Madam Valhalla.'

I walked over and stared as she talked to some young kid that had to be all of sixteen.

His face was bright red, and he was staring at Val like she hung the moon.

This far away where all the people were supposed to stand, you couldn't hear what was being said—by design, might I add—but I could tell she was giving her same ol' spiel. That, and I could see the light of her phone underneath the table where she was working with Folsom.

Turning away from the likely illegal activity—but if you didn't admit it was illegal it wasn't immoral—I walked a bit away from the food trucks and toward a less busy part of the food truck park.

I was three steps into the shadows when I felt strong arms come around my waist and pull me farther into the darkness.

This time, I was scared.

Because though I was used to being pulled into the darkness by a strong man who I couldn't get enough of, these weren't any strong arms that I knew.

I'd just gotten jerked around and shoved up against the red and white tent that covered the concrete building when a hand covered my mouth so hard my head dug into the wall.

"Listen, lady," the growled words of a man pissed beyond belief. "I can't afford to lose this fuckin' job! You need to let me keep it. If I don't, I die."

If I don't, I die.

He moved his hand so I could speak, but I was already denying his request, confident in the security of the area.

Only, I was a little too overconfident.

Because the man who was now holding me against the building had also helped install the security. And the equipment, and he also knew how to avoid it.

"I didn't fire you!" I cried out.

"That security fuck escorted me off the property." He snarled directly in my face. "That equals firing in my brain."

I felt my throat start to burn from here he was holding my shirt so tight at my neck that it was pushing into my esophagus.

"I'm the one in charge of hiring and firing," I tried. "If I don't want you gone, you won't be gone."

He looked skeptical, but at least he let up his pressure at my throat.

My freakin' uniform was fantastic—God rest Stefan's awful soul—and held strong despite the way he was holding

me up with it. But that also meant it was being used like a vice around my throat, despite the loosened pressure.

I was also starting to panic, because like the dumbass I was, I'd wandered off into the shadows and nobody had known where I went.

How stupid could I be?

I mean, we'd literally just fired a disgruntled employee.

Think!

Inwardly berating myself for my stupidity, I hadn't quite been paying attention to what the man in front of me was saying—God, I couldn't even remember his freakin' name!—until he tightened his hold on my outfit again.

My breath choked inside my throat as the harsh seam pressed against tender places.

“You're not listening to me, are you?” he snapped in my face.

Jessup.

Jessup Smith.

“I don't know why you are hurting me,” I said. “I never fired you. And no, I'm not quite listening to you because you're choking off my air supply by fisting my leotard in that way, and it's hurting and my throat is burning, and I'm having trouble thinking.”

He threw me away from him so hard my head bounced off the concrete wall at my back.

I fell to the ground, shocked at the force in which he'd done it.

So easily, too.

God, it was scary to think how much stronger men were than women.

My brain was throbbing when I finally forced myself to look up at him.

“I can fix this tomorrow,” I said. “Everyone is high on adrenaline tonight. In the morning, you can come into my office, and we can talk about everything. You can tell me who this guy is who’s willing to hurt you if you don’t have this job, and I’ll make sure that everyone knows you weren’t fired.”

God, did that sound as lame to him as it did to me?

“Tonight,” he said. “I have a meeting with him. He’s going to ask questions.”

I felt my stomach lurch.

I wasn’t sure if the nausea was from my head trauma or the way he was pacing in front of me like a caged animal.

Whatever the reason, I didn’t think this was going to turn out well for me.

CHAPTER 18

*It is what it is, and it is not great.
-Text from Crimson to Val*

WINSTON

I stood in the shadows of the parking lot and waited for Jareth to show.

He'd called during dinner time, which was enough to have me freezing in my tracks as I'd been about to climb in my car and leave.

His urgency and the way he told me to meet him here had me freezing as my insides turned to ash.

Just the thought of her being in the middle of something was enough to put my entire system into overdrive.

I might've been avoiding the utter hell out of her, and I might've been denying myself what I really wanted, but that didn't mean I didn't still care for her.

A lot.

That was why my fuckin' chest felt like it'd had a small Mazda sitting on it for the last two weeks since she'd left my bed for good.

Other than that one slip up a few nights ago...

A car pulled into the lot, and Jareth came to a stop beside me, not bothering to park his car well.

Which told me what I needed to know.

What I was about to hear wasn't good.

Not good at all.

"What is it?" I asked the moment he stepped out, not bothering to shut his door or turn his car off.

“LaDerrick has been trying to get a hold of you for the last few hours,” he looked at the building. “I got through to you now, but I was already headed here.”

“What is it?” I barked, unable to stop the fear from leeching into my voice.

He looked sickened as he said, “The mom had another name to cough up today.”

The mom.

Another complication.

Despite her being a sick piece of shit—not quite participating in the trafficking, but definitely allowing it to happen around her while also being a perfect alibi for anytime Ansel Singh needed it—she was still the mother of the woman I refused to love.

Killing her was a mark against my moral code that I hadn’t been able to get over since I’d taken her to her semi-permanent home.

“Who?” I asked.

“Old guy named Dario Espada. LaDerrick looked into him, and he has a spookily, squeaky clean past that doesn’t add up. Millions that aren’t accounted for, money that comes in and doesn’t go out, but he suspiciously doesn’t have anymore. And a lot of friends in a lot of high places.” He looked grossed out.

“This Dario guy,” I said. “Does he have any connections to this circus aside from Idabell?”

He nodded once. “An old crew hand named Jessup...”

I was already moving, cursing the entire way.

Jessup Smith.

A man who had literally just been fired for what he’d done to my Sunny.

Sunny.

A name I'd called her in the heat of the moment two nights ago, but was so right for her I hadn't stopped using it in my head since.

"Come with me," I called out over my shoulder.

Jareth fell into step beside me as we jogged back into the circus, through the throng of people who were now making their way to the parking lot.

We skipped the security checkpoint, hopping over the metal blockade that was meant to keep people from doing what I'd just done.

When I got into the main area of the tent, I headed toward where I could hear people talking.

Tonight, the only ones eating were supposedly family.

That was why, as I rounded the corner, I started calling out for Keene the moment I'd reached the food truck area.

"Keene!" I called out.

Where was he...*there!*

He looked up from a plate of nachos he'd been eating, a frown on his face, and said, "Yeah?"

"That man you let go," I said. "Did you make sure he left the property?"

"I did," Hannibal called out, looking alert and ready.

Keene, now nacho free, started walking toward me. "What is it?"

I looked around but didn't spot her.

"We got a name from Idabell today," I said as I continued to scan the faces, only to not find her. "Dario Espada. Jessup Smith, the one that you escorted out, answers to him."

A scream.

A short, sharp, quickly cut off sound that had us all turning in the direction it'd just come from.

Shadows.

I was moving toward the shadows of the tent as soon as the sound had escaped.

I found her there, the only thing illuminating the area a small security light that looked like it'd been turned toward the building instead of facing out, with a man pointing a gun at her head.

She was slowly straightening to her full height, and she was staring at the man with the gun like he had just ruined her world.

And maybe he had.

“Sir,” I said as I stared at the gun, my heart in my throat, and the thought of ‘please not her’ in my head. “Please put the gun down. Nobody has to get hurt here.”

The man looked at me like I was stupid.

Maybe I was for thinking he'd follow an order. But I didn't know what else to do.

He was pointing a gun at her, for Christ's sake. I only took lives, I didn't try to prevent them from leaving Earth.

This was all new for me. And the panic I was feeling at the thought of her getting hurt in any way was a stifling, almost debilitating sensation inside me that was making it extremely hard to think logically.

“You can go fuck yourself,” he said. “I'm busy.”

“Sir,” I said again, aware that more and more people were joining us in the shadows.

That's when I nearly lost it.

Crimson, who was now fully on her feet and holding the back of her head like she'd hit it, turned only her eyes to me.

And the fear that I saw in them. The confidence that she knew I'd save her. It was nothing less than horrifying.

She trusted me so much that she knew I'd keep her safe.

“Listen,” I tried again. “We can work this out any other way than this. If you want to hurt someone, we’ll happily allow that to happen. Just not to her. I’m here. I had a hand in getting you taken out of the complex.”

Never would it be acceptable for her to hurt.

He turned and stared at me with vacant eyes.

“You?” he asked. “I didn’t even see you.”

I watched out of the corner of my eye as Crimson tried to move toward the male, intent on surprising him while his attention was elsewhere, but I saw what she didn’t.

The man knew she was about to move because he was watching her out of the corner of his eye like I was watching her.

Just as I said, “Sunny, don’t!” he lifted the gun and aimed it directly at her face.

“No!” I bellowed, trying to move toward him. But it was useless. I was too far away, and there was no way I was stopping a bullet. I wasn’t that fast.

He shot her.

Before I could so much as react, he’d shot her.

She fell into the tent pole in slow motion, and I watched helplessly as the tent collapsed above the two of them.

The big, metal beam fell and collapsed on top of her, way too much steel to ever fall on top of a person and them not sustain any injuries from it.

I moved, almost on autopilot, and started to pull back the red and white tent material, trying to unearth the woman who had stolen my heart without me even realizing it.

All her annoyingly persistent texts and unauthorized visits had paid off.

I was hers.

And Jessup Smith had shot her.

The fabric kept falling, the other tent poles no match for the thousands of pounds of fabric it'd been holding up.

In a matter of seconds, the entire tent area that had been covering the food trucks and the side of the building was down.

On top of the woman who was bleeding from a gunshot wound.

Nobody struggled underneath it, either, giving me a very nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Hands were there helping me, but it felt like the more we moved, the more it continued to shift and fall.

Finally I uncovered a booted foot, but it didn't belong to the woman I'd been searching for.

"Shit!" I cried out in frustration.

Before I could push that body aside, though, a hand lifted and shot blindly at me.

He'd hit his target.

Me.

A bullet ripped into my shoulder. Another to my lower leg. And one more to the right thigh.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

A sickening thud followed the last shot, but my brain was confused and shocked.

"Got him," I heard someone say.

And, almost as if I could only focus on one thing at a time now, I moved six inches over and started to move more fabric.

I found her at the bottom, eyes open and fearful, as she stared at me with a look of utter horror in her eyes.

She had a heavy metal beam across her hips, and her neck was bleeding profusely.

Was that where he'd shot her?

I reached out and placed my hand against her neck, causing her to whimper.

“You’ll be okay.”

Looking at her, watching the amount of blood pumping out of the side of her neck and knowing there was nothing that could be done for a neck wound like that without medical intervention, I knew this was it.

The seconds would count.

I pulled out my phone and made a call.

“Mackenzie.”

CHAPTER 19

Gaslighting is not real. You're just crazy.
-Winston to Crimson

WINSTON

“Keep her talking,” someone urged. “And if not talking, at least keep her awake.”

I didn't know who said that.

All I did know was that I had just enough energy to hang up the phone as I'd made a call to a friend who happened to own a fleet of helicopters, I had enough energy to tell her anything and everything she wanted to know to keep her awake and responsive.

“Tell me about your babies,” she rasped. “I want to know them before I go.”

Know them before I go.

My heart literally broke in my chest.

“You would've loved them,” I croaked. “They were the sweetest babies in the world. They were so good. I know that they say twins are a handful, but my two? They were like a breath of fresh air in the shittiest smelling world you could ever imagine.”

She hummed. “Were they beautiful?”

“So, so beautiful,” I agreed. “They had all this blond hair, and the bluest eyes ever.”

“Blue like yours?” she asked, her fingers coming up to weakly curl around my wrist. The one that was at her throat, that I could feel blood squirting out between my fingers with each pulse of her heart.

“Blue like mine,” I confirmed. “They looked nothing like my ex-wife.”

“Good,” she rasped. “Good.”

“The night I brought them home from the hospital?” I said. “I looked at them and knew that they were going to be my reason for living. They’d be the sun and the moon, the wind and the rain. They’d be what kept me whole.”

“Tell me,” she said quietly.

Too quietly.

I’d share my personal nightmare with her all day, every day, for the rest of my life if it kept her here on this earth with me.

The beautifully vibrant woman looked like she was on death’s door, and I wasn’t doing well with that.

I hadn’t realized the depth of my feelings for her until I’d seen the gun aimed in her direction.

Heard that shot sound.

“Are you listening, Sunny?”

Sunny pressed a kiss to the wrist of the hand that was holding pressure on her neck wound.

She was listening.

“Listen, because I want you to know,” I ordered. “If anyone gets to know the hell I’ve been through, it’s the woman who pulled me out of it.”

• • •

7 years ago

I couldn’t quite explain what it was that I loved about coming home so much.

Maybe it was the way the twins ran at me with excitement in their eyes.

Maybe it was the way my wife met me at the door.

Maybe it was the way that I parked my car and could sometimes see them all in the living room dancing to a song I couldn't hear but knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was "Great Balls of Fire" by Jerry Lee Lewis. God, the kids loved listening to that song on repeat.

Ever since I'd watched Top Gun with them, they'd been obsessed with two things. Planes and that song.

I got out of the car and hurried up to the house, my eyes on the gutters that looked like they needed to be cleaned out.

That was why I didn't first notice the quiet as I walked inside. I was thinking about all the things that I needed to get done around the house.

Helping make a company great made life hard sometimes. There were things that fell to the wayside in order to make it more doable.

Sometimes the house and taking care of it was my very last priority.

"Babe," I called out when I finally realized that the house was too quiet. "Babe?"

"In here."

That sounded...wrong.

She was normally bubbly and excited, but lately things had been a bit strained.

Her sister, Madison, had gone missing not too long ago. At first, they'd thought that she was just a sixteen-year-old runaway. But then my computer guy had done some digging at my request, and we'd found her on a website of all places. A website that catered to disgusting, vile men who wanted specific types of kids.

She'd been missing for ten days when we finally found her, in a brothel in the middle of Moscow.

She'd been broken.

And since then, Carissa had hurt for her sister.

Ready for anything at that point as I came around the corner to our bedroom, I was surprised to find my wife sitting on the bed, cross-legged, staring at the door as if she'd been waiting for me to come home.

"What's going on?" I asked, my gaze going to the bathroom beyond.

There was water on the floor.

"I'm...well..." She looked hurt. "Why don't you ask how I'm doing anymore?"

I thought about my answer, knowing my wife was a soft-hearted woman who needed care right now and not the blunt, honest truth, and said, "Well, I kind of know how you're doing, baby. You're sad for your sister."

She looked down at her hands.

"I can't do it."

I moved closer, now seeing clothes on the floor in the bathroom.

Firstly, the water on the floor was quite the surprise. My wife kept an insanely tidy home, even with two toddlers running around.

Secondly, the clothes were even more of a surprise. She hated when clothes were left on the ground and wasn't shy about telling anyone about her distaste for the act.

My gaze went back to my wife. "Can't do what?"

"I can't keep them in a world this vile," she said, her eyes far away and oddly empty.

"Where are Joe and Judd?" I asked again, my heart pounding. "Are they with your parents?"

She didn't answer, only stared at me with an unblinking expression on her face.

*A sick sort of dread started to fill my belly at her words.
“What?”*

*I again looked toward the bathroom, the chaos of just what
I could see from the door concerning.*

“They won’t ever hurt again.”

*From the beginning, my wife had issues with postpartum
depression. Though she was all happy and excited to be a mom
on the outside, she struggled a lot after the birth. And though
I’d done a lot of the child raising in the last eighteen months, I
knew she’d turned the corner.*

At least, I’d thought she had.

*“Where are Joe and Judd?” I asked then, my heart
pounding. “Are they with your parents?”*

*She smiled serenely, as if she no longer had a care in the
world.*

*I moved woodenly into the bathroom, a sick sort of knowing
entering my veins as I made my way into the large room.*

The first thing I saw were the footed pajamas.

There were owls printed on them. Red and white ones.

*Just like the one on the branch across my collar bone,
sitting right next to the green and red one that matched the
other set of pajamas.*

I’m not sure why I’d done the owl.

*Maybe it was the way Judd had loved the pajamas so much
I’d had to find a pair in every size.*

*Maybe it was the way Joe pronounced ‘owl’ in the cutest
little baby voice. More of an ah sound than an ow.*

*Whatever it was, I knew that the boys loved those pajamas.
And I’d washed them last night and left them out on the bed
for them to wear again tonight.*

I did just about everything I could to help Carissa out.

So for them to be on the floor...

The water had soaked them.

They were on the ground soaked through.

“It was harder to do than I thought...” Carissa said quietly.

“Harder to...” I trailed off when I saw the two bodies floating in the bathtub.

Both of them were face down.

And so blue.

I didn't think.

Before I could tell myself to move, I found myself diving headfirst into the bath to pull them up out of the water.

And I'd never, ever forget the way both of their bodies flopped around like dead weight.

Not something they even did in complete sleep mode.

“I can't raise them in a world that has this kind of rot in it,” she breathed. “So I forced them to move on from this world. Where they would no longer suffer.”

• • •

“Keep talking,” Jareth said, his eyes filled with a knowing that I knew I wasn't able to accept yet. “The longer she stays awake and aware, the better.”

She couldn't turn her head with the way I was applying pressure. I moved so that I was lying down beside her. I had the palm of my hand resting against the other side of her face, and she attempted to lean forward so that she could be close without being too close.

I was lying in a puddle of her blood.

“Tell me the rest, and I'll decide,” she whispered.

I made a sound in the back of my throat. One that sounded like a wounded bear that wasn't doing too well.

Fuck.

I heard crying.

I wasn't sure who.

I didn't care.

Anyone could hear my life story and I'd be okay with it, as long as it kept those beautiful gray eyes looking in my direction.

Gray eyes that were filling with tears.

“What else do you want to know?” I asked. “Do you want to know that I promised myself I'd never love someone like that again? What about how I made it my life's mission to rid this place of every single sick pedophilic fuck this world has to offer after my wife decided our children would be better off being dead than living in a world that allowed that to happen? Or, how about how I fell in love with a girl who ate my favorite macaroni, and let me know without saying a word that she was here to stay, whether I liked it or not?”

“Someone's coming.”

That's when I heard the blades of a helicopter slicing through the air.

It landed close, but I didn't notice, or care, as I talked to the woman lying on the ground bleeding beside me.

“I want to get married,” I said quietly.

A tear spilled over.

“I want you to live with me. Go through all my things. Steal my clothes. Reorganize my bathroom...” I trailed off when someone said, “Get out of the way.”

I was forcibly moved, and then I watched in sick horror as the metal beam that'd stayed across her hips was lifted off by six men.

Six men that I couldn't place.

Not with my vision getting blurry.

“We're out of here,” someone said.

Then they were lifting her on a yellow backboard and practically running to the waiting helicopter that I could still hear running somewhere beyond where we were.

“Boss,” Jareth said quietly. “You need to be looked at, too.”

I knew I did.

I’d taken a gunshot wound to the shoulder, the right thigh, and the back of my left calf.

I forced myself to get up, shaking off Jareth’s attempt to help, and stared at the ground for long seconds.

There was so much blood.

Even for two people, it was too much.

Death was in the air, and I swallowed hard.

“Holy fuck,” I heard someone say.

I looked to the door to find Price Crow, the owner of my cleaning company, staring at the mess. “Everyone okay?”

What he meant was ‘everyone who needs to be okay.’

“No,” I rasped. “No.”

“Boss,” Jareth said again. “You need to go.”

I knew I needed to go.

I just couldn’t make myself move.

“What’s the ETA on the Life Flight?” I asked.

“Mackenzie really came through,” Jareth said. “He got the bird here in less than four minutes. The closest trauma center is a seven-mile flight away as the crow flies. The flight crew estimated that she’d be there in less than three minutes. In the trauma room in seven. Ambulance is here, though. Let’s get you to it.”

I nodded once.

Then I collapsed.

CHAPTER 20

On the inside, I'm hootin'. On the outside, I'm hollerin'.
-Text from Crimson to Winston

CRIMSON

“News of this is going to hit the media any second,” I heard someone snarl. “Keene, you and Hannibal need to go right now and find this Dario Espada. Contain him until we can ask questions, but make sure he doesn’t bolt. Which he is going to do.”

Dario Espada.

Who was that?

It was the last thought I had before I passed out.

• • •

“Sunny.”

Sunny. Stay with me, Sunny.

The second time he’d called me that, I was bleeding out on the ground and he was bent over holding my neck with his monstrously big hand.

My sisters had been screaming around me, shrieking that Jessup—sweet but quiet Jessup—had just shot their sister. The tent had fallen over after my body had been forcibly slammed into the main pillar in the middle holding it aloft, and the first thing I’d seen when that fabric was ripped off of me was Winston’s terrified face.

He looked horrified.

And I’d heard him say ‘Sunny’ over and over again.

In between the most horrible life recap I’d ever heard.

“Sunny.”

I blinked open one bleary eye and stared at the ceiling.

“Sunny.”

Then I saw Jareth there, staring at me, looking haggard.

“Hey,” I croaked.

Why was he here?

“I’m here because boss wanted me to check on you,” he explained. “Your family is out in the waiting area getting updated by the doc. But I came here because I wanted to see your eyes open. He needs to know that you’re alive before he decides to follow where he thinks you might be.”

I swallowed hard. “Is he okay?”

Why would he be following me anywhere?

“He was shot three times,” he said. “One was a flesh wound. That was the shot he took to the calf. The right thigh was a bit worse, but still something that should heal in about six weeks. It’s his shoulder that’s gonna take the most time to heal. At least three months is the suggestion the doc’s giving his parents. But the bullet nicked an artery, and they’re taking him in for surgery shortly to repair it.”

Shot three times. Artery, nicked artery. Taking him for surgery.

My brain wasn’t functioning enough to say what I really wanted him to know.

But a few words did make their way through my clouded brain.

“Tell him he’ll die over my dead body.”

Little did I know that we’d both be experiencing a few near-death experiences over the next hour.

And we’d wind up in side by side OR rooms as we did.

Stay with me, Sunshine. Don’t let go.

I’d never let go. Not willingly, anyway.

• • •

“...find him,” someone growled.

Who was him again?

“Good. Put him at the safe house with her mother,” I heard someone continue with their apparent phone conversation. “I’ll ask questions once I’m sure she’s out of the woods.”

She being in the woods was probably me.

Why was I in the woods?

“...going into surgery now. They expect it to take a while. Her hip bone is shattered. So is her femur,” a male continued. “She has a lot of issues regulating her blood pressure now, too. They’re worried she’ll crash once the surgery starts.”

That was a bummer.

• • •

Beep. Beep. Beep.

“We’re losing her!” someone yelled.

I didn’t know that voice.

What I did know was that my head felt like it was floating, and there was a really bright light in front of me that was so warm that I wanted to curl up into it and stay there forever.

I was at peace.

I smiled with my eyes closed, and the sun warming my skin.

“Hello.”

I looked over at the two bright blue-eyed boys. Like a pool. Gosh, they were blue.

So. Blue.

“Hi,” one said while the other just smiled.

Twins.

They were...

Something niggled at me, and I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"How old are y'all?" I asked curiously.

Why did I ask that?

"Eight, almost nine," the one who hadn't spoken earlier said. "Do you know who we are?"

Did I?

"No," I answered honestly. "Should I?"

The one on the right smiled, and it was the smirk that sent a shock of awareness through me.

I knew that smile.

I knew those eyes.

I knew that hair, too.

Only, on the person that I knew it from, I'd only seen that hair in photographs online.

"You're his babies, aren't you?" I asked softly.

They both beamed.

God. My heart.

My stupid freakin' heart.

Then there was only one standing there.

"Where'd he go?" I asked, looking around to see if I could spot him.

I didn't.

What I did see was that we were in this really bright place. It didn't have walls, and we weren't outside, but everything was just so freakin' bright. It'd be a miracle if I could see anything beyond that kind of light.

"Judd went to keep Daddy here with you," Joe answered.

"Joe," I said, smiling. "You're beautiful."

Joe smiled.

“Where is ‘here’?” I asked.

He shrugged. “In between. You’re not there, but you’re not *home*, either.”

That made a whole lot of sense.

“Do you want to leave?”

“Never.” I smiled. “Though this place is very peaceful.”

I looked around. I could live my life here and never feel like I was missing a thing.

It was...peaceful. I’d never felt such peace before. It was so soothing and I knew that I’d never get tired of the contentment that filled me.

“You’re back.” He smiled then.

I frowned.

Then I was staring at a bright ass light that definitely wasn’t nearly as peaceful as the other place had been.

There was screaming. My chest hurt.

And distantly, I could hear even more yelling that definitely didn’t originate from the room I was in.

“She’s back,” a female voice said. “We need to get her sedated again.

“Yes, please,” I croaked.

•••

WINSTON

So warm.

I’d never felt so contentedly warm before.

I opened my eyes and smiled.

Because this place.

This feeling.

It was something I had never felt before.

Like a perfect rightness was filling me so full it was almost overflowing.

“Daddy.”

I blinked as a blond-haired, blue-eyed little boy stared at me with familiar eyes.

My heart instantly leapt.

“Judd,” I breathed.

I didn’t know how I knew it was Judd, just that some innate rightness told me it was.

My baby smiled. “Daddy.”

Something in my chest, something that’d been broken from the moment I’d gotten home and hadn’t felt them in my arms ever again, healed.

“Can I get a hug?” I croaked.

I’d dreamed of this.

I’d read plenty of books when my children were younger, and a lot of them always said ‘one day you’ll pick them up and not realize it’s the last time you’ll ever do that.’

They had no clue how right they’d be.

But at least most of those who said that had their children to still hug when the feeling of missing them got to be too much.

I hadn’t even had that.

Then that tiny body was in my arms, and those tiny little hands were wrapping around my shoulders, just like I’d always dreamed I’d have again one day.

“Where’s Joe?” I groaned, holding him way too tight.

More tiny arms circled my neck.

“You have to go back, Daddy,” the boy at my back said.

Something inside of me rebelled at that.

I couldn't leave them. Not when I just go them back. Not again.

"No," I denied, my heart weeping at the thought of never having them to hold again.

God, I'd prayed and prayed for this day. For the time when I'd be reunited with them. And now they were telling me I had to go back?

"You have to," Judd said from in front of me. "She'll be all alone."

"She?" I asked, my brain not quite working right, otherwise I would've never forgotten *her*.

"Sunny," Joe said. "She needs you. She won't be able to function without you now."

That was...horrifying. The thought of leaving her behind was just as abhorrent as leaving my children. But when you had kids, you made this commitment that superseded anything else in the world. Even the love of your life.

"She has a family," I said, feeling sick for even thinking about her when this was all I'd ever hoped for. "Y'all will be left alone if I leave, too. And I made a promise to y'all first."

Joe giggled. It was music to my ears. A sound that I'd begged for many a night in the past seven years.

"We're okay," Joe said as Judd confirmed with a head nod against my own. "We want you to go. Time doesn't pass the same as it does with you. You're the one who has to live with the heartache. We only have to pass the day, and you'll be back."

If that wasn't a kick to the heart.

"But..."

But before I was ready, I was being forcibly yanked away from them.

The scream of anguish that left my lips once they were out of my arms was enough to follow me right back into the real world.

That perfect contentedness was gone, and I was being thrown back into my body like a sack of potatoes spilling all over the ground.

I woke with my heart hurting, and the knowledge that I'd left something very, very important behind.

CHAPTER 21

*Shutting the fuck up is gluten free. Add that to your diet.
-Text from Crimson to Winston*

WINSTON

Stomach aching something fierce—either because of all the antibiotics in my system or the fact that I was standing on two legs that had just been shot—I stared at the doctor as he recited every single thing that was wrong with my Sunny.

“A shattered left hip. She’ll need to be immobilized for a solid eight weeks. Which coincides with her shattered left femur,” the doctor said. “She’s got some bruising around her torso where her ribs were cracked—none of them are broken, though. And her neck wound from the gunshot graze will be the fastest of it all to heal. As long as she doesn’t strenuously activate any of those muscles for about three weeks, that’ll heal perfectly.”

I felt like I’d just gotten the same damn lecture from my own surgeon a couple of hours ago when they’d released me from the hospital—against hospital advice, might I add.

I wasn’t going far, though. I just wanted to go up to the ICU where my girl was staying, but they wouldn’t allow me to. So there I was, ten hours out of emergency surgery, checking out of the hospital against medical advice, and now listening to another surgeon tell me all of what was wrong with my ‘wife.’

The name change worked really well, though. I was able to fib and tell them I was the husband, and as we spoke, LaDerrick was hacking into the county courthouse to make sure that the family didn’t kick me out like they’d tried to do twice now.

Sure, they were only doing it because they wanted to spend time with their sister, and she was only able to have one visitor at a time if I was in here, but that didn’t matter to me.

I was here to stay until she woke. Then, when I was sure she was safe, I'd go back home and shower off the last three days of my life.

Only then...

"Her hip," I said as Keene looked down at his hands beside me. "Is that going to be back to normal?"

"It was a very clean break, and although it's somewhat unfortunate seeing as all the healing and immobilization that's required to heal this type of break, she should make a full recovery with absolutely zero issues," he answered.

He. Felix.

"Dr. Kent," a nurse said from the door. "You're needed..."

"You can wait outside until I'm done with this patient and her family," Dr. Kent reprimanded the woman.

I looked at her nametag.

T. Wilkes.

Making a mental note to have LaDerrick do some digging, and possibly letting the hospital know about her unprofessional behavior, I dismissed her.

"What about her?" Nurse Tammy asked sulkily. "Isn't she supposed to be working?"

I looked at where her finger was directed and saw it was focused on Val.

Then I narrowed my eyes, squared my shoulders, and said, "Get the fuck out of here!"

The nurse jumped.

Val looked like she was about to cry.

And Felix looked annoyed.

Sensing she wasn't needed or wanted in the least, she left with a huff.

“I want her nowhere near my wife,” I snarled. “If she gets near her, I’m going to fuckin’ revolt.”

Felix nodded once, looking contrite. “I’ll have a word with her.”

He fuckin’ better.

“Feel free to fire her if you want,” Keene muttered, looking at Val. “I’ve yet to find her attitude anything but atrocious.”

Felix’s left eye twitched. “Noted.”

“Is there anything else?” Simi asked as she clung to Coffey.

We were standing in the hallway at the end, right outside of Sunny’s room. The hallway was partially blocked off by another set of doors, and it was obvious this was a containment room of some kind that they’d turned into a special room just for Crimson.

But that was what money bought you.

Privacy.

What it also bought you was fuckin’ headaches.

Like the paparazzi that had camped out for two reasons right outside the goddamn hospital doors.

One, because they’d known that I was involved in some sort of ‘attack’ at the circus. And two, because my ex-wife had gotten out of the pen, and was now trying to check in on me every two hours.

Luckily, my parents had kept her away.

Unluckily, my parents hadn’t stayed away.

They wanted to know anything and everything there was to know about the woman who’s side I hadn’t left.

They also had food sent up here, and brought themselves, every single day since the event had taken place.

Speaking of parents, my mom poked her head through the closed doors at the end of the short hallway.

Upon seeing me, she walked right up to me and poked me in the good shoulder. “You’re supposed to be in a hospital bed, Mister!”

I sighed. “That hospital bed wouldn’t allow me to be where I’m at right now.”

Val snickered.

Dr. Felix Kent looked at her in a way that I recognized.

Zip said something to Tony, Hades, Keene, and Simi that had them all snickering.

My mom wrapped her arm around my waist and said, “Is she going to be okay?”

“That’s what I was just relaying,” Dr. Kent said as he looked at me, then my mom. “We expect Crimson to make a full recovery.” He paused. “It’s just going to take quite a bit of time.”

•••

It took her a week to wake up.

Part of that week she’d been sedated.

The other part she’d been stubborn and hadn’t wanted to wake up.

In the end, it’d been in the middle of one of my more forceful talks when she’d finally popped open her eyes and said, “Do you ever shut up?”

Grinning, I said, “I’m not sure I know what that means.”

“And I thought I was bad.” She rolled her eyes. “All you do. Yap, yap, yap. A person can’t get any sleep around here.”

I felt tears well up in the back of my throat. “That’s why I’m here. To annoy you like you annoy me.”

She sighed, then turned her head with a small wince.

It was enough to have my heartrate jacking up into the ‘probably should get that checked out’ zone.

“You love me, huh?”

I swallowed hard.

“For some reason,” I teased.

She reached out her hand, and I took it.

I’d only let it go to stand up and lean over her bed.

Now, I caught it back up in mine, feeling like a piece of my soul had settled back in place, and said, “Sleep, baby. I’ll be here when you wake.”

She grinned. “I know you will.”

• • •

3 days later

The next time she woke, was when we were all in her room, and we were discussing Jessup Smith and Dario Espada.

“Hey,” she whispered.

I whipped my head around and stared at her, my heart full once again to see those beautiful eyes on me. “You’re awake.”

“You’re here.”

I winked. “I said I would be.”

She smiled, then turned her head to look at the rest of the room. “All of you? Weirdos.”

Keene snorted. “We’re weirdos because we love you and want to make sure you’re okay after witnessing a shit show like that?”

“Whatever,” Crimson grumbled. “Who has my food? I’m starving.”

It was only after she’d settled back with some broth that she circled her hands in the air and said, “You may continue to talk about Dario.”

I didn't bother to call her on her eavesdropping.

Instead, I went back to talking. "Jareth and a few of my guys interrogated Dario and have linked him to several child abductions throughout the years. He used to be a sound guy with y'all. Any of y'all remember him?"

I passed around a photo that Jareth had given me earlier.

"Actually, yes," Val said. "He was creepy. I remember because he kept trying to get me to go out with him, only he wasn't allowed to go unless he went with his mother."

"Gross," Simi said. "No, I don't recognize him. But I tended to stay away from the weirdos."

There were snorts that followed that statement, then Crimson saying, "Yet you found the biggest one of them all and married him. Oh, and had kids with him."

Speaking of kids.

They were lying in the middle of Crimson's bed, and she was staring at the babies with longing.

My heart hitched at the sight.

"What?" I asked.

She frowned. "I want to hold them."

I looked to Coffey, who nodded once.

Picking the one up closest to me—the first child in my arms since my own had been there—I moved the baby so that he was in the curve of Sunny's arms. Helping hold him there, I stayed that way while the discussion flowed around me.

"What is the plan for him?" Slone asked. "Is he going to go to jail?"

It was Hannibal who said, "He's not going to get to go to jail."

Nobody said a word to that.

But he was right.

Dario would never find his way to jail.

Jessup, who'd succumbed to his injuries—taking a metal beam to the face would do that to you, even if it was wielded by an enraged brother who was pissed off that you'd hurt his sister—had been blamed for the occurrence at the circus.

There'd been plenty of witnesses who'd corroborated the story.

As far as the police were concerned, Dario was never a player in the game.

But that was okay.

I'd make sure I fixed that problem as soon as we were sure we'd gotten everything out of him that was possible.

“Oh, he's so cute.” Crimson sighed. “You have to take him now. Put him back where he was. I need to go to sleep. I keep dreaming about the sweetest little twin boys ever, and it's a great dream.”

Before I'd had the baby in my arms, she was nodding off again.

And my heart was pounding in my throat.

Was it possible that she was dreaming about my boys?

I couldn't wait to ask her.

CHAPTER 22

*I look better bent over.
-T-shirt*

CRIMSON

Bleep. Bleep. Bleep.

I blinked owlishly at the door, surprised to see the brilliantly flashing light there.

“What the hell is that?” I asked.

No one answered me.

Why?

Because I’d finally convinced Winston to go to work today.

We’d been holed up in this apartment, both of us healing, for going on eight weeks now.

It was time to get back to life.

Or, at least, it was time for him to get back to his.

There would be no working for me for a while.

At least another six weeks, according to my orthopedist.

And now the goddamn fire alarms were going off.

Oh, and now that we’d moved into our new place, we were now on the thirty-seventh floor of a very secure, nobody is ever going to get into this building who Winston doesn’t want in here, high-rise.

Every single person in this building—including my family—was now very much vetted.

It was a strict, you have to know somebody to live here, kind of place. You also had to pass a few very strict tests that were required to be able to move in.

And here I was, in an almost full body cast, staring at the door in horror.

Because how in the ever-loving hell was I going to get down there?

My phone rang, and I answered it woodenly, knowing without a doubt that Winston was about to be very calm, and very icy toward me.

“Hello?”

There was a very long pregnant pause and then, “The fire alarm is going off.”

Oh, yeah. He was pissed.

The door banged loudly, and I winced.

“Who is it?” I asked carefully.

“Zip,” he answered, still just as icy. “She’s staring in horror at the elevator that is now shut down because you’re not allowed to operate an elevator in a high-rise during a fire.”

“Is it an actual fire?” I asked carefully.

“There’s a fire on the fourth floor,” he answered. “Laundry room. The entire thing is fully engulfed. They’re working on putting it out, but there’s a very high possibility that it’ll spread to the floors below and above it.”

Oh, boy.

I pressed the button on my watch—another concession that I’d made in order to get Winston out of the house this morning—and the door unlocked.

Zip ran inside, her eyes wild. “There’s a fire!”

I nodded.

“They turned off the elevator!” she cried out, just as horrified as I was.

“I know,” I said carefully.

She raised her hands and sifted them through her hair.

Her very short, very cute hair that was shaved on the sides and a cute little do on top.

It was so totally Zip.

“I’m going to go find someone. A firefighter.” She widened her eyes. “Oh! My new neighbor!”

Her new neighbor was actually still quite new to us. I knew Winston knew who he was, but no matter how much we asked, Winston wouldn’t give us any more information on him.

From what Folsom—who Winston had called and told not to give us anything—had given us before she’d been ordered not to, we knew that he was a man. He was tall. He was famous. And that was it.

We’d seen him exactly two times.

Once when he was moving in and both Zip and I were in her apartment, and the second time as he disappeared into the parking garage like he was freakin’ Batman.

“He’s probably…” she left before I could say ‘gone.’

Like any other smart person in the world.

Shit.

“You there?” I asked.

“I’m sending firefighters up right now,” he said stiffly. I could also hear him moving in the background, as if he was running.

Shit.

“Don’t come back,” I pleaded. “This is a big day for you.”

A big, big day.

“I’m already gone,” he said.

I closed my eyes with a groan.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

“You have the center opening today,” I said.

Or whined, more like it.

“Fuck the center.”

I gritted my teeth and chose not to argue.

How could I argue? I’d do the same if the situations were reversed.

“Damn,” he said.

I was about to ask what that was supposed to mean when there was a man pushing through our door.

My mouth fell open and I was fairly sure my jaw hit the floor.

Because none other than NASCAR’s Golden Boy himself walked into my apartment looking like a dream.

“Holy shit, your Nash Christopherson!” I cried out.

My gaze didn’t leave Nash, but I knew Zip was freaking out right now.

This explained why Winston didn’t tell us who was living by Zip.

Last month when we’d watched the NASCAR race, Zip and I had gone on and on and on about how hot Nash was, and here he was in the flesh. Winston was just trying to protect Nash.

The poor guy.

“You need a lift?” he asked.

I bit my lip for a few long seconds before saying, “You’d have to carry me down eight thousand flights of stairs.”

“It’s only fifty, and I climb stairs all the damn time,” he said as he walked to me.

Then he stared as he tried to decide the best way to get me up and then carry me.

“I think over the shoulder might be the best,” I admitted. “I bend at the waist.”

Kind of.

Actually, I more stuck out fully straight, like planking. But otherwise, he’d have to carry me like a goddamn board, and who the hell wanted to do that down that many flights of stairs?

He hauled me up, then we were descending the stairs, fast, but not so fast that I was jarred in an uncomfortable way. More of a ‘this is going to suck’ kind of way.

It was on flight twenty-two that I finally worked up the courage to talk to the man carrying me.

“You okay?” I asked casually.

I wasn’t okay. And if I wasn’t okay, he was damn sure not doing okay.

But when he answered, he didn’t sound the least bit winded.

“Fine,” he said through a grimace. “Your cast is digging into my shoulder blade, though.”

I didn’t move, just in case it might hurt him more.

I did, however, pray that the next twenty-five flights of stairs came a lot easier.

“This is absolutely ridiculous,” Zip panted from about two rows up. “What the fuck kind of system is this? People who are paralyzed or handicapped in some way should never have to worry about this.”

I agreed.

Until I was hurt, I’d never considered the logistics of anything for handicapped individuals. I’d just blissfully lived my life in absolute ignorance.

Then I’d been shot, shattered my femur and hip bone, and had to wear a cast for the rest of the year.

That, unfortunately, meant I'd learned rather quickly that despite the leaps and bounds we'd made in this world since it'd been civilized, there were still a lot of areas we could improve upon.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Zip said. Then there was a hard clang-clang as what I assumed was my wheelchair making its way down a flight of stairs. "Hopefully that didn't break anything."

Oh, boy.

"Your sister is a nut," Nash said.

"My sister is a nut," I confirmed.

"I can hear you!" she cried out from how many ever floors above us. "Just because I'm seven fucking flights of stairs above you, doesn't mean that sound doesn't carry! I can hear that he's not even panting, too. Douche."

I hid the laugh that almost slipped out, and instead said, "I love you, Zipporah."

"What kind of name is that?" Nash asked.

Zip growled. "The kind given to me by a pedophilic father who thought it would be great to give us exotic names in case he decided he didn't want to use us in his goddamn circus anymore."

Shit.

Nash didn't say anything to that, and I was glad.

Zip, as well as all of us really, had a lot of hostility toward my father after learning the depth of his depravity.

To be completely honest, every last one of my family had changed their last names. All the single ones decided to drop the last name entirely and just have a first and middle name. So now Keene was Keene Day, and Zip was Zip Nancy. Val was now known as Valhalla Drew.

Tony, Simi, and Hades had taken their husbands' names.

Honestly, it was good to have forgotten that part of my life. Even better, it was nice that we no longer had the stigma of that name hanging over the circus, either.

Because let's be honest, after everything had gone down with my deceased father and the rest of the circus workers who thought they'd never be caught after hurting and targeting children, the media had a hay day. They threw the Singh name into the mud and trampled on it.

As it should be, of course.

It'd also put a sort of hiatus on our circus opening as well.

We wanted to give the world time to realize who we were now, and that meant we let everything play out in the court where it came to my mother and the other ex-employees of Singh Circus.

It also helped that we'd been the ones to turn those workers in. To bring light to what had happened, and not just go sweeping it under the rug like it hadn't happened.

"Fuckin' fuck," Zip said as she paused. "How badly do you think you might need this wheelchair?"

"Um," I hesitated. "It's kind of hard to find one that allows you to lie completely flat."

In fact, it'd taken well over a week to get the one I had, and that had been with Winston pulling every favor he could to make it happen.

Who knew they were so freakin' rare?

"Fuck," Zip said as she continued climbing down the stairs. "I'm not working out for a week after this."

Doubtful.

Out of us all, Zip was the most consistent one.

She couldn't make it two days in a row without feeling bad.

Another fall out from our father telling us we were worthless if we didn't fit his standards.

“Fireman, anyone here?”

Zip called out from above us, then said, “Thank fuckin’ God. I feel like my arms are about to fall off.”

“At least you could carry it part of the way!” I called out.

“Fuckin’ awesome,” Zip grumbled.

“Hello,” a man in full bunker gear said. “Need assistance?”

“I got this,” Nash mumbled. “But we have a woman a few floors up carrying the wheelchair that’s required. She needs help.”

The man split off from us and I heard Zip exclaim in excitement.

Nash kept descending the stairs.

It was on level eleven that my hunk of burning love made his appearance.

He came up the stairs like an avenging angel.

The moment he saw me, he reached for me.

“But your leg!” I cried out.

“The leg is fuckin’ fine,” he grumbled as he carried me bridal style. “Thanks, Nash.”

“Welcome,” Nash said as he all but disappeared down the stairs.

“Did you make a deal with him that he wasn’t allowed to leave us behind or something until you got here?” I asked.

“Nash is a professional martial artist who can protect y’all.” He shrugged. “I trusted you with him.”

I hooked my arms around Win’s shoulders and said, “My hero.”

He winked at me. Then kept carrying me right out of the building and to the other side of the street where the ten residents of this building waited.

All of them friends and family.

Though, Nash was nowhere to be seen.

“So what the hell happened?” Zip asked no one in particular.

It was Keene who answered with, “The maid left an iron on that short circuited. It caught fire in the wall. Fire’s out, but there was a lot of smoke damage.”

“Bummer,” I said. “The poor building owner is going to freak.”

The man holding me up snorted. “I’m not going to freak.”

“You better not fire her.” I poked him in the chest. “Why are you so sweaty?”

The firefighter finally showed up with my chair, and my angry hero put me down in it before saying, “I came from the safe house.”

The safe house that was still housing my mother and Dario.

“Oh, yeah?” I asked.

“I didn’t do anything to your mother,” he said.

But he had done something to Dario.

“Why not?” I asked.

I had no love lost for my mother.

She got what she deserved.

“Because, despite your anger at her, she’s still your mother,” he said. “I turned her over to a buddy who works for the FBI. She’ll be facing a court of law here after a while.”

I sighed. “Inconvenient.”

He tapped my nose. “Inconvenient, but effective. She won’t have it easy. Women prisoners take it no less hard than men prisoners when presented as beings who think nothing of harming children.”

“Yo, bro,” Katrin, who also lived in our building, said. “This is gonna sound stupid and all, but can I borrow twenty

dollars? There's a hot dog vendor over there, and I'm starving."

"Oh!" I cried out, waving my hand. "Bring me one, too!"

"Convenient that you left your purse," Winston drawled as he pulled out a hundred. "Bring us all one."

She came back with fifteen hot dogs.

I was rather impressed with how she'd balanced them all.

So that was what we were doing when the paparazzi took a photo of all of us, in the aftermath of a fire in our building. Downing hot dogs.

Awesome.

CHAPTER 23

Surviving purely out of spite.
-T-shirt

CRIMSON

I had two things I needed to do today.

One, I needed to pack for our trip to Disney and the marathon that was in three days.

Two, I needed to run a small errand.

The small errand would take me less than ten minutes to drive to, seeing as Winston's ex-wife had moved in less than a block away from where we now lived.

That was the reason for the errand.

She needed to go.

I was now cast free, and it still felt extremely weird to not be so constricted.

The man who was now my bodyguard until I died, Rufus, looked on as I slipped my feet into shoes.

"I'm not sure Mr. Osborn would like this," he said.

I shrugged. I didn't give a fuck.

"Mr. Osborn will have to just suck it," I said as I pulled open the door and left.

He followed me, of course.

He also drove me.

When we arrived at the studio apartment just a short eight minutes from our place, I got angry all over again.

Getting out of the car, I headed for the door and rang the buzzer.

The woman who opened the door was even prettier than I expected.

And me being me, I was dressed in black leggings, a black oversized t-shirt that was Winston's, and my Chucks.

I hadn't washed my hair in three days, and there was mascara bagged underneath my eyes because it was so goddamn hot, and I'd done nothing but lay in a body cast for the last three months.

I took one look at the woman and felt my stomach tighten.

It didn't stop the words from leaving my throat, though.

"I want you to move out of the city, and never come back."

Winston's ex-wife blinked.

"What?" she asked, dumfounded.

"I want you to leave, and never come back," I said. "We're leaving for Florida in a day. When we come back, I want no trace of you left behind."

Carissa narrowed her eyes. "I'll do no such thing."

I tilted my head, then crossed my arms over my chest. "You will. Or I'll make you."

"I'd like to see you try," she snarled.

I smiled then. "I won't have to try at all."

Two days later, I got word that Carissa had violated her parole, even though it'd been LaDerrick and Folsom who'd done the violating.

Good. Riddance.

"I can't believe you're smiling right now," Winston panted.

When I couldn't race, I'd been able to transfer my race tickets to Winston, who'd done the Dopey Challenge for me.

A 5K on Thursday at three o'clock in the morning. A 10K on Friday at three am. A half marathon on Saturday at three am. Then the final race would be tomorrow at the same time.

“Almost done,” I smiled as I pressed my lips to his.

His eyelid twitched. “I don’t think I’ll make it.”

I poked him in the hard belly as I said, “Of course you will.”

And he did.

The next morning, four hours on the dot from when he started, he picked me up at the finish line and spun me around.

Then, when he celebrated his finish, he took the four medals from around his neck and put them on mine. “Will you officially marry me, Crimson Osborn?”

I beamed at him. “I thought you’d never ask.”

That was the photo that was published in every major gossip magazine and on every social media platform.

Me up in the air. Winston holding me there.

And the medals he’d gotten just for me dangling in the air between us.

I framed it and hung it up in our front entranceway. That way I could see it every day for the rest of my life.

EPILOGUE

*Your email did not find me well.
-Email exchanged between Winston and Crimson*

WINSTON

Like the first time I watched her, this time she was just as hesitant to be in the spotlight as she had been when she was young.

But this time, it was with a huge smile on her face and a lovely blush gracing the tops of her cheeks.

“We’re here tonight not only to finally celebrate the grand opening of Circus House, but also to introduce to you the charity that Circus House will be sponsoring each time we hold a show,” Crimson said softly.

Our daughter, nestled in her belly, a bare five weeks along, was unnoticeable to all but one.

Me.

I noticed the swell of her breasts—barely bigger.

The way she protectively splayed one hand over her abdomen.

She looked radiant.

And she was about to perform her contortion act, and I was supposed to be okay with it.

But the good thing was for today’s event she was only five feet off the ground, and there was a pad below in case she needed to come down.

Six months to the day that they’d had the friends and family soft opener, we now had the official first opening day.

“I know a lot of you already know of this charity, since my husband was the one to create it, but I wanted to play you a

little clip my sister, Hades, made.”

And together, we watched the day my sons were born. We watched the clip of them walking for the first time. The first smile. The first birthday cake smash. The first time I held them. The first time they called me ‘dada.’

All their firsts.

Including the day that I put them in their final resting spot.

“As you can see, this charity is near and dear to my husband,” Sunny said as she smiled softly down at me. “And together, we will make sure that no other child will ever have to suffer, even if it takes us the rest of our lives.”

She went on to tell them everything about the charity. What it did—helped kids who needed mental help, whether it be because they were trafficked, hurt by a parent, bullied at school—and why we did it. She also included a little success story. Our latest young girl who graduated with honors from a local high school.

A girl who was found in the pits of hell in Honduras, who had been kidnapped from her family while on vacation. They’d found her, but she’d been unwell. She suffered greatly with her mental health after that, but she wasn’t left behind. She was given every available opportunity, and included in that was an all-expenses paid trip to Dallas where she could get the help she needed, and her parents could have the peace of mind knowing that she was taken care of by the best.

Crimson—my Sunny—weaved one hell of a tale, and by the end, there wasn’t a single dry eye in the house. Including my own.

The circus continued after that.

All the sisters did their routines, even Hades.

And finally, at the end of the show when they all took their bows, I breathed a sigh of relief.

She was back.

She was healthy.
She was mine.
They were mine.
Her family.
Our future child.
They were all mine.
Every last, broken one of them.

• • •

Eight months later

They say you never forget the day your child is born.
And I'd found that to be true.
I'd experienced it twice in my life.
And now, I was experiencing the third.
My wife was pushing out our baby girl.
And she was absolutely murdering me with her words.
"One and done, motherfucker!" Sunny screamed.
I bit my lip to keep from smiling.
Her sisters didn't bother to hide their laughs.
Not a single one of them.
"Oh, boy," Val whispered. "He'll never hear the end of this."
"Shut up, Val!" Sunny snarled. "And get me my goddamn medication!"
"I already told you it's too late," Val said.
She was working a shift on the maternity floor, which just so happened to allow her to be there when her little sister had her baby.

“Come on, Dad,” Val said when she gestured for me to come down to the end of the bed. “Come witness your baby girl come into this world.”

The woman who was looking on at her side, the actual doctor who’d agreed to stand back and let Val work, smiled.

“After you, Dad.”

Heart in my throat, I went between my glaring wife’s legs, and helped deliver my baby.

She screamed just like her mother.

Just the way I liked it.

“Oh, thank God!” Crimson collapsed onto her back as I stared at the miracle in my hands. “I should’ve held strong to that never having kids thing.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “I know, I know. I love the hell out of her. But God, it hurt!”

I moved until the baby was safely on Crimson’s chest.

Crimson started crying. “I’ll never, ever let anything bad happen to you, baby.”

I squeezed Crimson’s leg.

She sniffled, then looked up at me. “I promise you. I’ll always protect her with my life.”

I smoothed her hair back and said, “I trust you.”

And I did.

She’d never let anything happen to her. No matter what.

“What did you name her, Mom?” Val asked.

Sunny looked away from my eyes to my daughter’s and said, “Josephina Judith, after her brothers.”