

A DARK
HALLOWEEN
ROMANCE
NOVELLA



LAYLA CLAYTON

DIRTY TRICKS

A DARK HALLOWEEN ROMANCE NOVELLA

LAYLA SIMON

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P R E F A C E

Content Notice:

this story contains scenes with sexsomnia, stalking, coercive control, gaslighting, sexual assault (including references to CSA), physical assault, blood play, murder, unorthodox use of a chainsaw, and the occasional severed cock.

PROLOGUE

XANDER

I SWIPE MYSELF THROUGH THE REAR GATE TO KINGSWOOD School using my staff pass, groaning as the movement ignites a sharp ache in my ribcage. Blood makes my mouth taste of meat and metal until I spit it to the side, running my tongue over my teeth to clear away the leftovers.

My fucking stepfather and his fucking temper.

Me and Mum were fine for years, with him held pending trial, then locked away, then under strict release conditions. Even when the courts forgot to inform us of each new development, the grapevine did its job.

And today he did what we always knew he would. He tracked my mother, turned up on her doorstep with shitty petrol station flowers and an insincere grin, and refused to leave, despite her repeated requests.

She called the cops when he barged inside, but they still hadn't attended by the time we fled. I'd fought him into the bathroom, holding the door closed while my mother threw our important belongings into the backseat of the car.

I could have sworn the narrow window was too small for him to climb through, but he managed. Most of the injuries I sustained were inflicted on the short stretch of path from the front door to where Mum had the car waiting next to the kerb, engine running.

A lucky kick to the groin had winded him, bending him double.

That was my last sight of him—hopefully my last sight *ever*—stumbling after us despite the pain. His anger, his sense of entitlement more important than any injury.

A tickle creeps up the back of my throat and won't leave until a cough tears my lungs apart, making my head spin and my knees buckle.

The right side of my chest is tender, my head aches from half a dozen different blows. Split eyebrow, split lip. My nose feels crunchy to the touch and far too malleable.

I spit onto the grass again. This time, it's clear, and my spirits lift a little.

Bones will heal. Pain will recede.

Not like the deep gouges he left on my face five years ago. The ones that sent him to prison.

It took him five seconds to slice the lower half of my face to ribbons. Inflicting deep cuts from my nose to my throat, cuts that healed into puckered scars, twisting across my cheeks, my lips, my chin, making it so a pretty girl would barf if she looked at me. Even I struggle to face myself in a mirror.

He did that, but today he came and knocked on the door like his inadequate prison sentence wiped the slate clean. Like what he'd done didn't have further consequences.

A wave of exhaustion hits, making me stagger. I'd love a large coffee, even a service station one would do, but I gave every cent I had to my mother before leaving her at the pickup point for the shelter.

Now I'm eighteen, they weren't keen on me staying there with her, and I didn't want to do anything to make it harder. I left her on her own and she won't be able to contact me for a fortnight. I'll respect their rules, but my heart aches with how much I miss her already. How scared I am for her.

Far more scared than for myself. I'm in no state for another fight, but Kingswood's security means even my stalker stepfather will be kept safely on the other side of the school gates. I can camp in the equipment shed and no one will ever know.

But before I head there, I need to scrounge some food. Apart from the mouthfuls of blood I've accidentally swallowed, my stomach's been empty all day.

When I reach the ground level grating for the student housing block, I glance around, checking there's no one in

sight, then tie a bandanna over my face. The crawlspace under the building is full of dirt, dust, and debris.

I wriggle like a worm across the grimy floor, using the light of my phone screen to navigate, stopping underneath a manhole cover.

It's a tight squeeze through the gap, then it becomes even more awkward. The room above used to be a storage closet, but they converted it into student quarters shortly after I started working here, still unoccupied, but I'm trapped underneath the bed.

My fingers fumble at the catch of the baseboard along the side, then I slowly roll out, trying not to aggravate my injuries.

Once upright, I take a step... then freeze as light floods the room, blinding me.

A girl stands near the door, blocking my path. Her eyes are wide open, hand still resting on the light switch.

Shit.

I stare at her, barely daring to breathe.

"There's none left in the cupboard," she says in a low voice, a pleasant voice, a desperate-to-please voice. She stares at my collarbone, chewing on her wide bottom lip and hunching her shoulders.

The stance reminds me of my mother, scared of the man she married.

I can't bear this tiny girl—five foot even, maybe five one if she thinks tall thoughts—being afraid of *me*.

"Hey," I say softly, raising my hands in greeting and surrender. I remain exactly where I am, so my six foot three frame doesn't frighten her any further. My eyes dart down from her face for a split second, just long enough to see she's wearing a long t-shirt that ends mid-thigh.

A shirt and nothing underneath. I can see the sculpted curves of her tits underneath the thin off-white fabric. Can see the dark apex at the top of her thighs.

“But they’re out of season,” she continues, tilting her head back, so the light is absorbed into her wide blue eyes, illuminating them into a sunrise.

For a second, I’m confused as hell. Then the blank stare and nonsensical language click.

She’s sleepwalking.

I take a step closer and wave my hands, but she doesn’t see, doesn’t react. Her arms hug her midriff before she retreats into the corner, her right shoulder pressing flat against the door I need to escape.

My jaw tightens with a jolt of recognition.

I saw her earlier today. She stood in the student housing office with an enormous man, an enormously *loud* man, while the poor clerk stationed there tried not to flinch at the foul language that flew from the fat fuck’s mouth.

Her father, I guess. There’d been a tiny grey rabbit of a woman sitting in the front seat of the car outside, features pinched as she stared fixedly ahead, waiting.

A once-pretty woman edging past her use-by date.

Nothing like this strange girl, a hair away from being plain, spared that indignity thanks to the intrigue of her wide-set eyes and obscenely wide mouth.

The wide mouth with the plump upper lip that she now licks, sending a bolt of desire ricocheting through my battered body.

I move closer, calculating I can probably lift her out of the way, no trouble. She can’t weigh more than ninety pounds. Since she didn’t wake when I clambered out from under the bed, there’s a good chance she won’t wake if I move her around the room like a chess piece.

One step forward and she whimpers, then drops to her knees. I move closer, concerned at the collapse, then stop when I’m half a foot away.

Her blank gaze stares through me, then drops level with my crotch. A rush of blood to my cock gives her a standing

ovation, instantly, embarrassingly, hard.

I imagine what someone will think if she wakes and screams for help. They'll arrive on the scene with her on the floor and me standing over her, a throbbing erection inches from her face.

But the thought does nothing to quell the surge of lust. I rub myself to relieve the worst of the discomfort, then jerk my fingers away when she reaches for me, dragging at the elastic gathering of my sweatpants, tugging them down so my rigid prick springs free, slapping against my abdomen.

With her left hand clinging to my waistband, her tiny right hand clamps around the base of my cock, fingertips not even halfway to touching. She pumps gently, then frowns, pulling away to spit in her palm, spreading the saliva over me before she sets to work again.

My balls tighten, my asshole clenches. My head spins with dizziness, overcome by the sensation.

A rush of tingles spreads out from her touch. Nothing at all like when I perform the same activity alone. The hair on my head fizzes, my nipples harden to stone, just the brush against my soft tee enough to make them burn.

I'm a freak. No girl has ever touched me before.

They certainly haven't wrapped their delicate fingers around my *cock*.

My head sags backwards, the vertebrae in my neck turning liquid until my mouth gapes at the ceiling. My lids narrow with pure joy, thanking the universe for this unexpected pleasure arriving out of the blue.

"It won't fit," she murmurs, her voice soft and small and comforting, an aural balm.

My hips jerk towards her, my palm going to the wall beside me for support as I loom above her kneeling form. My head switches direction, lolling forward on my boneless neck until I stare straight down at her. Almost as turned on by the vulnerability of her position as I am by the electrifying caress of skin against skin.

I inhale, breathing in the floral notes of her shampoo, an aroma of roses and feijoas and spring sunshine. My senses twist and turn, jostling for prominence.

Those wide eyes fasten on my chin, and I tuck it under, worried she'll see my scars, though the bandanna is still in place.

With the lubrication, her hand continues to send bolts of pure joy catapulting through my body, making my muscles tense, my hips tipping even farther towards her, making it as easy as possible to keep pumping me.

The touch is intoxicating. It makes my brain buzz with soft energy, a matching hum sounding low in my throat.

I'm an ugly monster, a boy whose scarred face repels every glance. This kind of magic doesn't happen to *me*.

But the thing that shouldn't be happening continues. When I'm already blessed more than I know what to do with, the little angel leans forward, opening that wide mouth to its fullest before her lips close over the head of my needy cock.

"Christ," I groan, moving the hand not supporting me to rest on her head, touching against the softness of her long black hair, guiding her a little, my fingertips spreading wide.

I bite down on the inside of my injured cheek, a warning not to speak again. I don't want to do anything to risk waking this entranced sleeping beauty before she finishes her work and swallows my prize.

Her tongue runs around the head of my cock, gentle and wet and warm, so much better than in my imagination. When she closes over the tip and slides her mouth farther along my shaft, I fight the urge to thrust inside her. My hips tilt but she adjusts to the change in angle, keeping her tongue pressed against my swelling head as she withdraws, slurping a little as she sucks against me, her hand working harder to pump the base while she gulps in air before taking me in her mouth again.

Urgency forms as the long slow suction and the friction of her wet tongue teach me a hundred new favourite-things. My

eyelids flutter as she works me with her hands and her lips, saliva pooling in my mouth.

I'm so new, so green, my orgasm approaches at the speed of light. She shifts position, grabs my arse in both hands and takes me further inside. Takes me all the way into her silky, slippery throat. So deep, I feel the clench of her muscles, the vibration as she gags and swallows.

The sensations are so bright, so welcome, so pleasurable, it quickly becomes too much.

My fingers tighten on her head, holding her in place as my hips disobey my strict instructions. They get caught in a thoughtless haze of pleasure and thrust forward, jamming deeper into her throat while I watch the tears pour down her face.

Our eyes meet. Her pupils focus.

A zap of electricity jolts me, sends my cum surging into her throat, the twitch and pulse of my cock against the seal of her lips adding another layer of exultation to the experience.

For the first time, an orgasm doesn't bring sadness, loneliness, and the dank scent of failure wafting from my drained cock.

It's glorious. Ball clenching, bone shaking, muscle trembling joy.

My hand cups her face, thumb stroking against her soft skin, wanting to pat her and caress her and have her experience all the pleasurable sensations she unleashed in me.

When I break away to hitch up my sweats, tuck myself away, she gets to her feet, head bowed, thumb in her mouth sucking before she jerks it behind her back like she's been scolded for a bad habit.

"Was that good, daddy?"

I freeze solid.

All the muscles in my gut clench tight at the words. The horrible realisation of what's going on inside her head strikes me, short-circuiting my joy as quickly as it had begun.

A painful knot forms in my chest as I reach for her. My hand gently strokes her hair as I struggle with the horror that must be playing out behind those wide, unseeing eyes.

I know what abuse sounds like. I've seen it far too often inside my splintered home.

Now there's nothing else to distract me, I see bruises spotted along her wrists, a large discolouration above her elbow, blemishes marring the smooth skin of her thighs.

Fury boils through my bloodstream.

The enormous fucktard of a man who dropped her off today is abusing this sweet, perfect, obliging girl. There can't be any other explanation.

Anger chokes me. My chest muscles seize, becoming so rigid I have to fight for every breath.

"It was so good," I whisper to her, moving close enough that my broad chest offers shelter. My hand moves lower to cup her cheek, my thumb stroking away the stray hairs clinging to the sticky mess that dribbles from her exquisite mouth.

At the praise, her features stop pinching together. A shiver of relief allows her jaw to stop clenching.

"But I'm not your daddy."

A slight frown creases her brow. Her teeth worry at her bottom lip.

I lean closer to her, so close our lips almost brush before I travel further to rest by her ear. Close enough to whisper, "I'm the man from your dreams, angel, here to keep you safe."

CHAPTER ONE

THREE MONTHS LATER

LEXA

“Don’t you dare,” Vonnie says as I drape my costume over the desk in my dorm room, still in its garment bag. “Get into the bathroom and try it on. What’s the point of having your gorgeous boyfriend buy you a special outfit if you’re not going to rub it in my face?”

“Here you go,” I say, pouncing on her and pushing the bag against her hip. “I’ll rub it all over you.”

She collapses into giggles, trying to fend me off with less and less effect the deeper into hysterics she treads. The girl is so ticklish she tickled *herself* when getting changed into her PE kit this week. A feat that I thought should be submitted to the Guinness record book people for assessment, but which she charmingly declined.

I’m nervous to see what Finn deems an appropriate outfit. I told him I was going as Wednesday Addams, but he immediately interjected to say he’d sort it. Not to worry about a thing.

I hadn’t *been* worried, just excited.

We’ve been going out for just over two months now. Sometimes he doesn’t read me all that well, but it would be churlish to say anything. Better he tries and misses than going out with a boy who never tries to read me at all.

A knock at the door saves me from indulging her desire.

“About time,” Jenna announces, pushing me inside when I open the door and slamming it behind her. She leans against it for a moment, head tilted like she’s listening. “The boys have gone crazy in the common room. They’ve formed into teams and are vying to outperform each other at the party.”

“Outperform how?” Vonnie asks.

“Who cares how? I don’t understand why they turn everything into a sport.” She pushes away from the door and

gives a squeal. “You got your costume? Try it on. Show us how it looks.”

And I’m back in the same position. “I’ll try it when I’m on my own,” I say, expressing my reluctance and seeing it not make a single jot of difference.

While I don’t want to take the costume out in front of them in case it’s embarrassingly raunchy, I can’t work out how to refuse them.

I’ve never been good at denying people what they want. After a few free sessions with a school counsellor—because my dad won’t pay for ‘that self-indulgent rubbish’—she identified I struggle to set boundaries and struggle harder to keep those I manage to set.

The advice on how to rectify those traits would have been more helpful, but she didn’t get to identifying that in the few hours I’d wrangled.

Unlike seemingly every other kid in this school, I don’t have oodles of money at my disposal. Everything has to go through my father first and he’d already told me no.

“What about *your* costumes?” I ask, perching on the edge of the bed and trying not to let my gaze wander back to the garment bag. To keep looking at it will just encourage them to keep pestering me. “What are *you* both wearing?”

“Sexy witch,” Vonnie declares. “With a broomstick to fend off attacking demons.”

“I’m an angel,” Jenna says, tossing her platinum blonde curls from side to side. “What else?”

“Come on.” Vonnie grabs my hand and drags me towards the bathroom while Jenna lunges for the garment bag. “At least unwrap it, even if you don’t want to wear it.”

“Okay.” I hold up my hands in surrender. “I’ll unwrap it, but that’s all. It’s unlucky to be seen in a Halloween outfit before the party.”

Jenna looks vaguely uneasy. “Is that true? It sounds familiar.”

“Because she’s stolen the idea from the bride not being seen before the wedding,” Vonnie says between bouts of laughter. “There’s no way that’s a real thing.”

“Oh,” I say, surprised by the bunny ears that fall out as soon as I undo the zipper. “Apparently someone confused Halloween and Easter.”

“Sounds about right,” Jenna sniggers. “All that testosterone’s got your boy’s head muddled.”

I drag the rest of the costume out, feeling better about the whole thing. “This is actually nice.”

A statement which makes Jenna howl even louder.

“See?” Vonnie says, pushing me towards my bathroom. “Go change in private, then give us a show.”

I slide the door closed, giving in now so I don’t have to fend off the same request for the entire hour left before dinner.

The ears are cute, all fluffy and floppy. They feel like real fur, although I hope they aren’t. There’s a jumper, knitted from wool so soft I rub it against my cheek for a few moments with my eyes closed, enjoying the luxurious touch against my skin.

Angora, it says on the label, and I don’t mind *that* being real. I’ve seen videos online of people combing their pet bunnies for the soft hair that gets spun into yarn. It makes me pleased to think Finn listened and paid attention enough to know I’d like it. Often, it’s like we’re complete opposites, so this surprises *and* delights me as well.

I pull on the top and the white booty shorts made from elastin denim. They have such a tight fit they look sexy. Sexier than I would have picked for myself, but it’s flattering to know Finn enjoys seeing my body.

The last item is the tail. It’s as soft as the jumper, as fluffy as the ears, except for the solid silver cone attached to it. I can’t work out what that part’s meant to be.

My first thought is it’s a tag from the shop. A busy attendant pushed everything into the bag and forgot to swipe it across the magnetic removal tool they have.

But that's not it. It's far too big for starters and the fluffy tail is carefully stitched to close around a bump on the metal. It's part of the design.

I don't understand how to wear it.

With the rest of the costume in place, I preen in front of the mirror. The top is lovely, hugging my curves without being overly clingy. The softness has me on cloud nine and I know it'll keep me warm against the coolness of the coming October night.

There's a vent in the shorts and I understand it's something to do with the tail, but that's as far as I get. When I slide back the bathroom door, the fluffy white bobble is still in my hand.

Vonnie gives a wolf-whistle so enthusiastic my face turns as bright as a berry. "I've got some face paint you can use to draw whiskers on," she says, spiralling her finger as encouragement for me to twirl. "What's up with the tail?"

I hand it across, admitting, "I don't know how it works."

She stares at it in confusion for a second, then her nose wrinkles and she tosses it to Jenna with a laugh. "Is this what I think it is?"

"What do you think it is?" I ask, but my voice is too quiet, and they don't hear.

"Yup," Jenna says, tossing it back. "Did he put lube in the bag?"

Just the word makes me squirm. I think they're teasing, but I'm not sure where the joke lies. "It was just the costume."

Jenna takes pity on my confused state and hands it back. "It's an anal plug," she says, scrunching her face again. "You're meant to shove it up your arse."

Vonnie bursts into shocked giggles and Jenna joins her. I plaster on a smile, but my insides curl into a ball and die.

I don't understand the joke.

I don't understand the costume.

All I want is to go along in the op-shop outfit I found for myself, but Finn will be furious if I do that.

I've been looking forward to the Halloween party for well over a month. My old school never celebrated, and I couldn't wait to have fun dressing up, trying to work out who's dressed as what, having them guess my costume in return.

My throat squeezes closed and the bunch of nerves behind my ear twang as I fight back tears, skin already crawling with the embarrassment of wearing something that doesn't suit me, inside or out.

I know my friends aren't really laughing at me. They're uneasy about the costume, too, and it's spilling out the wrong way.

"You can probably cut the stitches and just sew it onto the shorts," Vonnie says, clocking my expression. "I've got a sewing kit in my room if you need it."

But I can't destroy the costume Finn bought me. He'll be just as upset if I do that as if I don't wear it at all.

"Thanks, but I think I'll just wear it how it is."

"Okay." She gives a quick frown of concern, touching her hand to my wrist.

"What was that noise?" Jenna asks, springing to her feet.

I tilt my head, listening to the soft huffs of air. "This room used to be a storage space." I kick the bare plank along the side of the bed where most everyone else in the school has two large drawers. "There are fans and stuff under the bed and a few other weird things about it."

"Yuck. You must hate it in here. I wear ear plugs to keep out ambient noise as it is."

"I like it." When they turn to me wearing puzzled expressions, I add, "The noises make it cosier. The pipes sound like someone's breathing in tandem with me. It's lovely."

Jenna pulls a face. "Guess I'll take your word for it."

There is more I could tell them, about how sometimes my dreaming mind turns the sounds into a man, a divinely proportioned saviour who peels away from the shadows under the bed as I lie asleep, rising to stand tall as he watches over me. But that sounds crazy, so I keep it to myself.

Mine is half the price of the other boarding rooms as a nod towards the inconvenience. I would gladly put up with ten times worse to have my own space. It's exciting to have friends. To have a boyfriend.

I love not having to live at home, cowering in the shadows. Never inviting anyone over in case it upsets Dad. Not having to listen to the noises coming from his bedroom, shuddering at the thought he might grow sick of his new wife, kick her out, and we'll be back to just the two of us.

My stomach shrivels as I think about what he's subjecting her to, but that's not my business. At least, that's what she hissed at me, openly seething, the only time I asked.

Vonnie clicks her fingers at Jenna. "What's Todd wearing?"

My skin turns cold, and I shiver, cutting my eyes to the floor in case the wrong expression trickles onto my face.

It must work because Jenna gives an elaborate sigh at the thought of her boyfriend. "He's grabbed a box of those old-style horror hockey masks from the roller derby rink. They're *all* wearing them."

"Ugh. Boys don't have any sense of fun."

"The red masks?" I ask, struggling to fit them into the picture. "Finn told me we were going as a matched pair."

"Aren't the team called the roller wolves?" Jenna asks. "Perhaps that's what he meant. He's a predator and you're the prey."

"Oh." I bite into my lower lip, another drop of fun draining from the day. "I guess that fits."

"Yeah, it does." Jenna smiles at Vonnie. "And he can openly swipe at your enemies for a change."

I frown, turning the words over, trying to make them make sense. After a half minute of silence, I shrug, giving up. “What d’you mean?”

Jenna smirks. “Haven’t you noticed bad things seem to happen whenever someone crosses you?”

My expression must tell her I don’t have a clue what she’s talking about because she adds, “Remember the time you complained about Mr Hickory marking you down on an essay because he couldn’t read your, quote, atrocious handwriting, end quote?”

“What about it?”

“The next day he walked into class with his arm in a cast and a twelve-stitch long gash on his head.”

“From a car accident,” I retort, rolling my eyes.

“Where his brake lines were cut,” Vonnie says. “I heard it from Maisie Sargeson. He got it fixed at her dad’s garage and they had to stop work for a half day while the police came in to photograph the evidence.”

I stare at her with a puzzled frown. “A, I don’t know the first thing about cars and B, I’m hardly going to endanger his life over an essay.”

Vonnie continues, “And what about Brad? A day after he tugged your ponytail at assembly, he turned up to class bald except for those red patches on his scalp.”

“A superglue accident.” I shake my head. “He told everyone he was fixing a model plane and it got everywhere.”

“Right.” Now Jenna’s the one rolling her eyes. “And Pete crushed his own foot after kicking open your bag, did he?”

“Amelie came to school with a black eye the day after making fun of how you pull up your socks.”

“Bea had her hand slammed in a car door after pinching the last carrot cake muffin off your plate.”

I stare at the two of them, thinking they’re both insane, except... that is quite a lot of coincidences. A tiny glimmer of

fear lights up the base of my spine, and I joke to get rid of it. “Guess I better not complain about Finn, then.”

The girls look at each other, then burst into laughter.

Jenna clutches my shoulder, gently shaking me. “He’s the one doing it, you dope.”

“Finn?” Now I’m back to where I started because there’s no way in hell my boyfriend would go to those extremes. Not to defend my honour.

“Of course, Finn.” Vonnie’s peals of laughter are so loud, I can’t help but smile, too. “Who else would it be?”

An alarm sounds on her phone and she makes a face. “That’s Mum pulling in the drive. Gotta go.” She bumps me with her elbow. “I’ll steal some lube from her bathroom for you. It’ll help with your tail.”

My smile stops as I nod, having no idea if she’s serious or not. Either way, the idea doesn’t exactly spark joy.

What on earth is Finn thinking? He can’t seriously expect me to wear that in *public*, can he?

“I’ll walk you out,” Jenna says, traipsing after our friend. “See you at dinner, Lexa.”

Once they leave, I go into the bathroom again, turning from side to side, trying to see myself from every angle. I insert the tail through the vent, resting the metal along my crack, but it’s uncomfortable as hell. I don’t want to imagine how much more discomfort awaits if I use it properly.

After a minute, I undress, staring at my naked body in the mirror. There are bruises on my upper arms. My throat constricts as I stare at them.

I stretch out my fingers to match the purple and brown blotches but can’t get anywhere close. My hands are too tiny.

A shiver hits, and I twist away from the mirror, getting into the shower and turning on the water, letting the cold hit me while I press my palms to the wall, only moving when it warms past body temperature.

The calming drops land against my head, trickling down my face, hiding the hot tears.

CHAPTER TWO

LEXA

AFTER MY SHOWER, I DRESS IN A SHORT PINK DENIM SKIRT that Finn once mentioned he liked and pair it with a bright yellow sweatshirt that makes me smile. Bruises hidden, I can once again look in the mirror, poking my tongue at the reflection before I leave for the cafeteria.

“Cut in,” Finn tells me when I try to join the end of the queue, scanning for Jenna. It feels rude, but he insists, and I don’t want to make him angry. Not when he’s trying to do something nice.

There are four choices for mains, and I stare at the heated bins, enjoying myself as I weigh up the pros and cons of each. I’m happy to allow students to go ahead of me when I’d otherwise hold up the line.

“She’ll have the broccoli and almond salad, no croutons, and the fruit yoghurt for dessert,” Finn says, shooting me a fond expression that verges on exasperation. “You’re so funny the way you can’t make up your mind.” He reaches underneath my hair to squeeze the back of my neck, collaring me, playfully shaking me back and forth.

It’s a loving gesture, even if he grips tightly enough that I hide a wince behind my shaky smile. He’s not being intentionally rough, it’s just he’s strong and misjudges sometimes because I’m small, even for a girl.

“I can make up my mind,” I say, but he doesn’t hear me.

It’s true. I just like running through all the combinations beforehand, thinking of how each one would taste, which of the deliciously different textures I’d enjoy most in my mouth. But I should learn to do it quicker.

At the end of the counter, I reach for a chocolate chip cookie, the crisp cellophane wrapping tied with a pretty jute string.

“You’ve already got one dessert,” Finn says, staring at me until I put it back. “Don’t be greedy.”

My lips press together, the insult cutting, and I bow my head in case he sees my eyes have a shine.

I follow him, but a girl angles in front of me and I jump back to avoid her, crashing into someone close behind me, instead.

Appalled by the hard jolt, I turn to see the boy from the janitorial staff staring at me. When my tray tips, he reaches out to cup my elbow, lightly lifting and supporting it so I don’t lose my dinner to the floor.

“Sorry,” I murmur, my gaze catching on the intense colouring of his hazel eyes. They’re shot through with brilliant gold flecks, like the world’s most expensive snow globe. For a second, I forget where I am, what I’m doing.

They’re beautiful.

I’ve never been close enough to notice before, but my breath stops. They’re the same colour eyes as the man from my dreams.

I get dizzy, inhaling through my nose and catching his scent; a mix of cut grass, machinery grease, and the salty tang of fresh sweat, like someone mowing a lawn right by the ocean.

Intoxicating but not anything like my dream man. The figment of my sleeping imagination smells of blood and testosterone and anger.

Plus, he isn’t real.

“Get your fucking hand off my girl.” Finn shoves the boy’s shoulder, sending him careening into the wall. “You shouldn’t even be in here at mealtimes. We don’t need freaks around when we’re trying to eat.”

Freaks?

The only freakish thing about the boy is those beautiful eyes and that heavenly bone structure. Half his face is covered by a dust mask, but I wish I could pull it down, see if his nose

is as regal as those cheekbones, if his mouth is as lush and inviting as the promise in his gaze.

Part of me wishes he would speak, but I'm equally relieved he doesn't, not giving my boyfriend the chance to take his words the wrong way and escalate into a full-blown fight.

Finn must say something else, something to me, because his hand latches around my upper arm, clamping tight like a vice, and he marches me to his table, populated by a heaving mass of uncouth boys.

I risk one backward glance to see if the boy stares after me, but it's Finn his gaze is fixed upon. A dark, lethal look, zeroed on his bruising grip.

My skin tingles, a thousand nerve-endings firing at once.

He looks ready to murder.

The last thing I want is for my boyfriend to think I'm interested in someone else, so I turn my concentration to my food. Once I've eaten the few tasty slivers of almond that top my least-favourite vegetable, I grimly chew through the rest before sighing at the dessert.

I hate yoghurt. The sour tang never fails to turn my stomach. It tastes like someone left the milk out on the bench to go thick and sour. The pieces of fruit are tart bright counterpoints to the rancid dairy, but even they can't elevate the taste enough to stop me gagging at the third spoonful, pushing aside my plate.

"Not hungry?" Finn asks, frowning at me. "Lucky you didn't take that biscuit after all."

I give him a smile, eyes searching through the crowd of students, picking out Jenna and waving to her, but she's with some other friends and doesn't see.

Her boyfriend does.

Todd stares at me and slowly licks his tongue across his top lip. When he finishes, he pokes it into his cheek until it bulges, thrusting it a few times until my stomach heaves and sweat pops out on my forehead.

“I have to go,” I blurt, no longer caring about Finn’s feelings in my desperate need to get to the bathroom before I hurl.

A second after I fall to my knees, hugging the cold porcelain edges for support, my entire meal comes back up, pattering into the bowl. The taste makes me heave again, mostly liquid this time, then I sit back on my heels, dizzy.

I push the arms of my sweatshirt up, reaching for some toilet tissue, and once again see the fingertip bruises on my arms. The bruises where Finn held me down while Todd fucked my mouth like I was an inanimate sex doll, laughing as I cried.

The tears want to come again but I force them back, biting savage dents in my inner cheek until the urge recedes.

It’s just a stupid misunderstanding, that’s all. I *thought* I’d said no, but I can’t have. Or maybe I did, and they just didn’t hear because I ‘squeak like a goddamn mouse’ as my dad would say.

Finn would never have pressed ahead if I said no; his friend wouldn’t have stuck his grimy dick halfway down my throat if I’d been crying and struggling to get away.

It must have just been something I shouted inside my head, and I can hardly blame them for not hearing *that*.

When my stomach settles, I flush the toilet and swish water from my cupped hand to rinse out my mouth.

They’re no longer in the cafeteria. I check the common room, hoping against hope that Todd will have gone to his room instead, but my luck is terrible today. He sits right next to my boyfriend, eyes crawling over me until I feel dirty enough to fold my arms over my sweatshirt.

“You look tired,” Finn says as I join him, sitting on the arm of his chair. “How about you head to bed and send me something I’ll like?”

I nod. When I try to kiss his cheek, his nose wrinkles and I can’t blame him. My mouth probably reeks.

It's a relief to reach the safety of my bedroom and lock the door. I brush my teeth and pull out my vibrator from under the sink, giving it a careful rinse before stripping naked.

In bed, I position the phone camera to record just like he showed me, and fire up my dual vibrator, starting with the sucky end.

I'm always awkward at the start. Self-conscious even though I have dozens of these in my phone history. The sucker has the motion I prefer, but the moment it works its magic, I switch, knowing Finn prefers me to use the wand.

He told me how much he likes to see it moving in and out when we watched the first video together, me cringing, him critiquing my performance so I could do better next time.

At first, I worried he might show the videos to other people, but he swore he'd never do that. Marty from my economics class once said something that sounded like he *might* have seen one, but when I asked Finn, he laughed and said I'd misunderstood. It was all in my head.

The thought derails me. The buzzing near my clit does nothing.

Then my eyes close and my head fills with the boy from the cafeteria. The one I often catch in my peripheral vision, a reassuring presence even if today was the first time I really saw him. Saw *into* him, almost. The jolt when our eyes locked was that intense.

My imagination fires and I replay the encounter.

The bump as my body backed into his, the steadying brace of his hand. The way he stopped my tray from falling when any other boy in the room would have let it tumble, would stand back and laugh at the mess while I fell to my knees to clear it up, embarrassed.

Those enormous hands. He easily cupped my elbow and half my upper arm in one smooth palm.

I pretend one presses against my lower back as I play with the toy, a thick finger making a swirling motion full of promise. I imagine those gold-flecked eyes trained to my

pussy, watching with rigid intensity as I satisfy myself when what I'm really doing is trying to satisfy him.

Trying to make him come before he beats me with the monster cock that's hardening between his legs.

But I'm nowhere close, not when I purposely twist the vibrator until it stops buzzing against the bit I like, edging myself while my mind purrs with satisfaction at the euphoric discovery of a new daydream. A safe place to play anytime I like.

Safe?

I don't know where that word sprang from, but it fits. An aura surrounds him, suffusing me in its warm glow.

One of his giant hands cups me, his thick finger straining to reach between my legs, sliding along my inner folds before he lifts it to his mouth, sucking down my flavour like it's a tantalising treat.

Except here, my imagination falls apart. He wore a mask and as my internal elves work hard to dig through my memories, to find a matching visage to complete the gorgeous portrait, they come up short.

Who gives a shit?

Not me. He could be a gorilla underneath the face covering, and I'd still find him raw and rugged and beautiful.

A strong, beating-chest gorilla who'll pin me in place until I give him what he needs, what he demands. Until I give him my orgasm and when that doesn't satisfy him—because how could it, such a tiny thing—he will force me into another and another, my legs shaking from exhaustion, my skin numb until I think his delving fingers can't possibly wring one more.

“Give me another, angel,” he growls in a voice with more vibration than the toy between my legs.

A voice I can hear rumbling through my ear canal. Though he's not real, he's not speaking. My imagination is so entranced that I'm lost inside the movie playing out in my

brain, more aroused than I've ever been, on fire in a way I never thought possible.

My dream man inhabits the boy from the cafeteria, turning him into flesh and bone, muscle and gristle, sending blood into the throbbing veiny monster he houses between his legs.

“Give me another or I'll have to take it for myself.”

And I try. I force the wand deeper, thrusting against muscles that are weak from ecstasy, nerves twanging, their clenching too weak to get me where I need to go. Where he demands I be.

“Guess I'll have to work for this one,” he murmurs, tongue licking me from my pussy all the way to my chin, the trail of saliva hot and wet against my skin while the knowledge he can't get enough of me, can't slake his need to taste me, makes my mind cave inwards, readying me for what comes next, what I crave, what I fear.

The toy is tossed aside as he mounts me. My eyes stretch wide, but they're still unable to take in all of him.

He rubs the head of his cock along the length of my pussy, smiling to see how drenched I am, how much I want him, smiling as he rubs himself against the part of me that belongs to him, signature scrawled on the title deed, initials in the check box, signed, sealed, delivered, stored in the file cabinet with all the other important documents, secure enough to withstand the most agile thief.

His forever.

A whimper escapes my throat and I clamp my lips shut because he didn't give me permission, not yet, maybe not ever.

He didn't give me permission and the stern glance works as a reprimand, pinning me frozen against the mattress, shaking as he drags the head of his cock through my folds again, his gaze eating up my eager reaction.

Those golden flecked eyes catch every shake, every tremor, every twitch as my thigh muscles fight to spread wider, stretch past the point of comfort, wanting to give him better access than I've ever granted another, wanting his mark on me,

in me, his thrust inside me a sign of possession as meaningful as a brand seared into my skin.

“You ready for me? Is my trembling angel ready to take her master’s cock?”

And I don’t know what dark part of my brain tapped into this scenario but my libido roars like a fucking lioness, stamping the ground, impatiently waiting for her partner to mount her and rut like the king of the motherfucking savannah.

I imagine his palm pressing against my shoulder, effortlessly pinning me to the bed while his cock teases me, strokes me, makes my pussy salivate until I must be dripping onto the sheets.

Then he rams home, filling me with one thrust, gargantuan pressure, stretching me until my nerves sing, bringing me a bottomless helping of the good pain, the sweetest pain, pinning me with his cock the same way his hand pins my shoulder.

My hand clutches my bare tit, pressing and moulding, pinching at my nipple, revelling in the rough sensation as my mind paints his hands over mine, making everything a thousand times better.

He pushes deep into my body, leaving a gaping imprint that any other man would struggle to fill, pushing into me until my pussy aches at the stretch.

I hear his ragged groans in my ear, the cloth of his bandanna fluttering against my neck, sensing his teeth through the thickness of the fabric as he fastens his mouth onto my shoulder, the pressure increasing, tearing at me as the speed of his stroke increases, plunging into me again and again and again while I forget how to breathe, how to think, how to do anything except be a receptacle for the gift of his massive cock.

The fantasy becomes so real, so all-enveloping that I hear his breathing, the walls of the room echoing as my lungs adjust to his timing, synching effortlessly with his rhythm. My aural channels pulsate with ecstasy, adding to the sensation of

my vaginal walls clinging to the wand. My pussy sucks it in and pushes it out, nearing completion, chasing it, gaining until it's right there, right within my grasp.

And at the last moment, the instant before I come, my foot stretches out to knock the phone over, tumbling it onto its screen, this moment for me and only for me, this perfect rumbling clenching orgasm a solitary endeavour tailored perfectly to my dreams.

The waves claim me, crashing into the shore with the same force the ocean beats boulders into sand, plundering me, hammering me, beating me into submission until my consciousness hangs by a solitary thread, the only thought left guiding me to turn off the machine that my thighs clamp around like a prize they don't want to surrender.

Muscles twitching, head drifting, I lie spent on the bedcovers, my chest sucking in gigantic mouthfuls of air.

Too frantic to bear lying still, I stumble from the bed, legs uncoordinated as they try to remember their purpose aside from clenching around an imaginary arse, begging an imaginary cock to shove deeper.

A few staggering steps get me to the bathroom, where I slide the door closed behind me. Usually, I shy from the mirror, hating to be the centre of attention—even my own—but now I meet the gaze of my reflection. I stare at my heaving chest, at the glisten of sweat across my forehead, my cheeks, my collarbones.

I feel amazing. The shame of self-pleasure is completely absent. All that's left behind is a glow of wellbeing from head to toe.

My head sags as I brace myself on the edge of the sink, panting like I've just run a marathon. My eyes are wild, too much white showing. I'm still more turned-on than I've been in my life before, aching for another release though it's only seconds since I came.

I force myself to stand upright, suppressing a shiver as I send the incomplete video. Then I jump into the shower,

cleaning myself and soaping my toy until it passes the sniff test.

My stomach grumbles, recovered from its earlier spasms. I drink a glass of hot water to curb my appetite, then move into the bedroom, pulling on the long tee I use as a sleep shirt.

When I turn to place my vibrator under the pillow, I see a treat waiting for me.

A cellophane wrapped cookie tied with pretty jute string.

My numb brain doesn't understand how it's there when I didn't hear the door opening, didn't hear a thing.

I pick it up, sniffing, my nostrils filling with the scent of cut grass and engine oil. A cookie manifesting on command the same way my dream man manifested in my bed minutes earlier.

I don't know how it got there.

I don't care.

My shaking fingers tear at the wrapper, biting into the chewy goodness of the biscuit, tasting the lumps of chocolate, the hint of vanilla and cinnamon baked into the treat.

With the buttery concoction filling my belly, I lie in bed, knees curled to my chest as I wait for the warm embrace of sleep. The fan underneath me sucks air in and pushes it out, sounding like a living breathing human being.

My phone buzzes and I check the screen. A heart symbol from Finn. A thank you for the video, despite its cut-short ending.

He can be so sweet sometimes and I love him so much, I really do.

It's just that sometimes, the thing I love most about Finn is that in two months, when he graduates, I'll never have to see him again.

CHAPTER THREE

XANDER

I WAIT FOR ANOTHER TEN MINUTES AFTER I HEAR LEXA FALL asleep, then push aside the baseboard underneath her bed to crawl into the room.

My balls ache, my cock aches, throbbing in time with my heartbeat. I've been hard as a rock since hearing the whir of her vibrator above me. While she showered, I should have crept from her room to make my escape.

Instead, I left the present on her pillow, then resumed my place while I listened to her eat, then fall asleep.

It's risky being in here. The riskiest thing I do at this school, and that's counting the actions I take to ensure her safety.

There's a far cry from tripping a teasing boy so he chips a tooth on the hard concrete—my most recent correction—to being caught in a student's room after hours. Especially without her knowledge.

They wouldn't just drum me out of my job for this infraction. They'd call in the police.

I'd get a record. Worse, I'd never be allowed near her again.

But even knowing this, the ache to see her grows every day, too compelling to ignore. The ache to be seen by her has captured my soul.

I thought anything more was an impossibility, nothing but a daydream. But today...?

Today she *saw* me. She *stared* at me. Our eyes locked together like we were physically joined, and I peeked straight into the heart of her.

I know she saw straight into my heart, too.

Then her arse of a boyfriend blustered and raged, and the moment was over.

I hate Finn. Hate him with a passion. I also know I can't act against him like I can the others. Not without her permission. Not when she *chose* him from the multitude of boys she could have.

Now, when I should catch up on the jobs I skipped to lay under her bed this afternoon, I'm back. Staring at her sleeping form. Wishing I could pry open her head and crawl inside, lie down with her thoughts surrounding me, the epitome of peace.

The long t-shirt she sleeps in is rucked up a little, the sheets twisted between her legs where she tossed and turned before sleep reached out its long arms to claim her.

Her splayed legs expose the tender skin of her inner thigh and despite all my promises, despite knowing how nasty, how disturbing my actions are, I can't resist reaching into my sweats and grabbing hold of my swelling cock, pulling and tugging at myself as I imagine those sweet thighs parting for me.

As my need grows, I spit into my palm, remembering how she did the same on the first night we met, my head dizzy as I think of how her wide mouth closed around me, how she gagged and strained to take me as far inside her as she could, dispensing more pleasure than I've ever known.

And it's not just her body that I hunger for. Or not entirely. I love her expressive features, how sometimes her face pinches closed when she says something, and nobody listens.

I know she thinks it's her, that she's not loud enough or clear enough. Maybe one day, I'll gather the courage to tell her she's not the problem. It's them. Too selfish, too deluded, too caught in their own drama to see or hear anyone different.

Their loss, not her failure.

My grip grows stronger, tugging harder, rougher with each stroke, like I'm punishing as much as pleasuring myself. The loneliness of the solitary act not eased by being in the room with another person but intensified.

I stop caring about the noise I make, part of me hoping she'll wake or at least wake into the sleepwalking self I've

seen a half dozen times since the first night. That she'll notice me the same way she did earlier in the evening. That she'll look at me and lock my image deep inside that gorgeous mind, watching it on the inside of those spectacular eyes.

Load me into the wiring of her brain and make me a part of her forever.

The tugs grow harder, faster, as I get closer. With my eyelids at half-mast, I watch her stir, heels pushing the covers even farther down as she rolls onto her back, arms splayed on either side of her pillow.

I watch the rise of her chest as she inhales another deep, dream-filled breath. Imagine those hands reaching for me, closing around me. Imagine those sweet lips parting, that tongue resting against her teeth as she guides me inside her, sucking and licking and welcoming me deeper while her eyes lock to mine and she sees me, really sees me, and all it takes is one more tug and the head of my cock swells, muscles twitching as my release fires into the cup of my waiting hand.

For a moment, I'm ecstatic. Then dribs and drabs of reality slowly make themselves known.

I'm left with the sheen of sweat on my forehead, my lungs catching as I haul in one deep breath after another. There's the tight pull of muscles on my right cheek, where the nerves are buggered beyond repair, caught in the deep scar tissue that slices across my face, my lips, my chin, one side digging so deep there's a chink missing from my jawbone.

With my clean hand, I swipe my fringe away from my forehead. The other is sticky from my own spunk, the smell driving Lexa's sweetly showered scent from my nostrils.

I need to clean myself in the sink but for the moment, I stay, transfixed by the sight of her.

The rapid flutter of her eyes beneath the lids makes me wonder at the content of her dreams. I hope she isn't trapped in the shadows, her memories clawing at her, even in sleep; not like that first night, where trauma had her walking the room.

I want her to dream something good. Something clean. Something pure and real and calming.

I move, not thinking, just obeying some primal urge. I dab a drop of my release onto her thumb, then stare in wonder as she wriggles her shoulders, turns onto her side again, and sucks it into her mouth. An adults-only pacifier.

The tip of her vibrator pokes from beneath the pillow and I paint it with my cum, dotting it, smearing it, then adding another layer, coating it, basting it; knowing she'll probably rinse it clean before she uses it again, but imagining her pushing the wand deep inside, our fluids mingling, clenching her muscles around it as she orgasms, encouraging my team of swimmers to push towards their goal.

Thoughts of birth control are wiped away by the image of one of them succeeding, of her concave belly growing fat with my baby.

And I jerk my hand away because that's borderline delusional for a girl who's never shown the slightest interest in me. For a girl I've never even had the balls to talk to... at least not while she's awake.

I move into her bathroom, quickly rinsing my hand and drying it clean on her towel, inhaling the scent of her from it before returning it to the rail.

Her breath hitches and I freeze, eyes guilty as I stare at my reflection. Then she sighs, falling deeper into sleep, and I move back into the room, filling my soul with one last languorous look before I slide under her bed, pulling the baseboard back into place before dropping through to the crawlspace beneath.

Someone's going to catch me. Each day I get away with a little more, but I'm well acquainted with how luck works in my family. We get the bad stuff, or we get nothing at all.

But tonight, I make it out with no one seeing. Tonight, I sneak into the shed, pull out the bedding I keep there, and spread it on the concrete floor with no one the wiser.

There's a sheet over the window to hide any glow but I still wait to turn on my phone until I'm snuggled inside my sleeping bag.

The link to the camera feeds takes a while to connect, the pause tightening my gut as I wonder if it's caught my fake credentials. Once it loads, I navigate to the cafeteria cameras, and click to view the half hour when Lexa was in the room.

It starts a few moments before she steps back into me and I watch the footage closely, seeing if it vibes with what I remember.

The stumble, her weight briefly—far too briefly—against my chest. The moment she turns, stares up at me... and stops.

My eyes scan the video, rewinding to replay it, to see the same incident over and over again.

Lexa falls. I catch her.

She looks at me. She *sees* me. She smiles.

For the past few months, I've tailed her as much as I dare, stayed as close to her as I could, but she's never so much as glanced my way. Not while she's awake and her sleepwalking state doesn't count. Whoever she looks at during those dreams isn't me.

In the footage, my hand automatically extends, catching her elbow when the tray tips, palm buzzing from the touch, righting it so she won't lose her meal to the floor, losing myself to her gaze.

A moment that lasts until a palm shoves me back; Finn's angry features thrust an inch from my face.

The footage carries on, not caring that something incredible took place. It shows her walking back to the table, head bowed as it often is, shoulders hunched, hands gripping her tray so tightly I'm surprised the thick plastic doesn't snap.

Lexa takes a seat next to Finn. Her eyes flicker to and away from him as he speaks, making polite listening expressions as she eats her meal.

She forces herself to eat the yoghurt even though she hates it, even though her nose wrinkles every time she passes it on the buffet line, something her oblivious boyfriend could see if he wasn't so self-absorbed.

She takes a spoonful, tries not to wince, and glances across the room to where her friend sits, snagging the attention of Jenna's boyfriend instead.

Something happens. My nerves flare into high alert.

I can't see Todd's face. There are four cameras in the room, but their angles aren't trained for subtlety.

He must mouth something, make a gesture. It frustrates me I can't pinpoint it, especially when she flees from the cafeteria seconds later. I search through the feeds, picking her up as she sprints along the hall to the girls' bathroom, a hand clapped over her mouth.

My stomach draws tight, tiny pinpricks of fury tingling across my shoulder blades.

I rewind, play out the scene again. Rewind. Again.

Each time, I miss the cause for the dramatic reaction.

My stomach muscles clench and I rub a hand across my abdomen.

I'm sickened that something happened, something *right under my nose*, and I can't see a fucking thing. I can't work out if Todd's teasing or telling her important information. If he's making a face or issuing a threat.

If I should kill him or thank him.

If it were clear, I could act, the same way I always act against those who upset Lexa. After a month spent punishing the tiniest infraction, the student body seemed to get the message. Maybe not consciously, but even before Finn tucked her under his wing, they were keeping their distance, showing her due respect.

They gave her the space to blossom like I knew she would, handing her the confidence to make friends.

Much as I'd love Finn to stick his head in a woodchipper, I'm trying hard to respect her choices. I don't want to undercut her confidence the way I saw him do tonight, but now I'm struggling to remember why I drew that line.

It should benefit her to have someone bigger and stronger as her companion. Another protector, but this one a man fit to be seen by her side.

That's what I tell myself.

What I've *been* telling myself.

Now I'm sick to think that by letting her have her choice, I might be enabling her abuse, and what does that make me?

I'm holding myself so tightly that when my phone rings in my hands, I jump and give a cry, almost dropping it.

The call's from my mother. I tug off my mask, so my words won't be muffled. "Hey, what's up?"

She gives a nervous giggle, something she always does on the phone no matter who she's talking to or what the call is about. "I found a new flat for a hundred less a week. We'll be out in New Brighton."

"Sounds great."

Another laugh. "Hold off on the praise until you see the place, but yeah. I've got a good feeling about this one."

As Mum launches into a detailed description of every feature, I close my eyes, relaxing. In the two months since she left the women's shelter, she's struggled to find a new rental that matches her reduced income.

Unable to risk a return to her old workplace, she downgraded from a supervisor at a large department store to a checkout operator at a busy supermarket. She comes home run ragged after every shift, but at least she's not looking over her shoulder all the time. The protective order the police issued might sound fancy, but it'll do nothing to stop my stepfather if he tracks her again.

I turn my entire salary over to her and scrounge whatever food and equipment I can from the school, but with rental

prices still soaring, it's been difficult to find a place within our means.

"Will you be okay with the commute?" she asks once her enthusiastic summary comes to a halt.

"It'll be fine," I assure her, not knowing if it's true. "If I need to, I'll continue stopping here for a few nights each week. Keep me out of your hair."

During her four-week stay in the shelter, I got used to camping at the school. Much as my invisibility can be aggravating day-to-day, it comes with advantages.

I can grab food from the cafeteria each day and sleep in the outdoor equipment shed each night, showering in the gym bathrooms. The janitorial staff role gives me access to most of the school and no one on the faculty has ever caught me.

Some of those nights were spent asleep under Lexa's bed, protecting her from unknown evils.

When my mother asks me where I go, I'm truthful, to a point. I know she appreciates having time alone while she heals from the latest trauma doled out by my stepfather.

While I have no intention of leaving her defenceless by moving out entirely, I appreciate the space, too.

"Do you want to get takeaways tomorrow, to celebrate?"

I wriggle my shoulders clear of the sleeping bag, staring at the workbench. One of the red hockey masks perches there, stolen from the cardboard box in the common room while the three students in there stared blindly past me.

From the conversation in Lexa's room this afternoon, I know Finn will wear one to the Halloween party tomorrow evening.

He's slim and far prettier than any boy needs to be. I'm broader but we're the same height, we have the same hair colour. If I wear something loose-fitting, use a modulator to disguise my voice, nobody will know a different boy hides under the disguise.

“How about Sunday, instead?” I suggest. “There’s a Halloween party tomorrow.”

“You’re going to a party?”

Mum’s voice instantly brightens. It’s been a long time since she mentioned anything, but I know she worries about me not making friends. Not having a life besides home and my job.

She worries, and she blames herself for my disfigurement. Even though I wasn’t exactly drowning in offers of friendship before the scars.

“Maybe,” I hedge, then as thoughts of Lexa spill into my mind, I add, “There’s a girl I like.”

“Xander!” I can practically hear her salivating for information. “What’s she like? Are you going to the party together? What’s her name?”

“My battery’s about to die,” I tell her, desperate to abort the conversation I started. “Better go.”

“Promise you’ll tell me all about her on Sunday.”

“Sure.”

I hang up the call, leaning over to plug my phone into the wall charger before settling onto my back, hands behind my head.

There’s no way I’ll be able to pull off the ruse for long, maybe not at all, but I don’t mind flirting with the idea, letting my imagination run wild, visualising a party with the girl of my dreams on my arm.

Who cares if she’s there because she thinks I’m someone else?

She thought I was someone else the first night we met, and the memory of that occasion is my fondest treasure. Tomorrow could add another gemstone to the collection, maybe one that shines even brighter than the first.

CHAPTER FOUR

LEXA

THE LUBE IS GREASIER THAN I'M USED TO, AND THICKER. When I smear it across the metal surface, it adheres in gummy streaks. Just the sight of it turns my stomach.

I lay the anal plug on the bathroom vanity and wash my hands, not able to rid them of the slippery sensation until I dry myself on the hand towel.

“Pick it up,” I whisper when my hands don't want to obey my commands. “Five seconds and it'll be done.”

But I don't listen to myself more than anyone else does. I stare at the item, watching it grow larger by the second.

The ring of my phone is a welcome distraction. Until I lift the device and see my dad's picture on the caller display.

An icy chill wriggles along my spine.

“Daddy? Is everything okay?”

“You're coming home,” he says in a rough whine that means he's upset and is looking for someone to take the brute punch of his emotions. “Pack everything and be waiting at the gate by midday, tomorrow.”

My teeth nearly bite through my bottom lip as I process his request. “But the school year doesn't end till mid-December.”

“You can attend your old school. It costs me a bloody arm and a leg to keep you in that place.”

The place he insisted I attend when I was perfectly happy going to the local high school. Now I've gone through the upheaval of a change, and the strangeness of making new friends, of getting my first ever boyfriend? *Now*, he wants me to leave.

“What about—”

“I've made my decision, Alexandra. Be ready.”

The call cuts off and I feel emotions bubbling. I can't go back home. I can't go back to everything that means.

My hands shake as I pick up the lubed plug, tears threatening even though I've already applied my makeup so if I cry now, everyone will know. I stare at my image, freezing at the subservient little mouse I see there. Thinking of what my father has in store for me the moment I get home. Guessing his new wife made her escape and left me holding the bag.

A large crack appears across my reflection, jagged from corner to corner. My hand is empty and the anal plug spins across the bathroom counter, lodging in the corner where it joins the wall.

I threw it, I must have thrown it, but that doesn't seem like me. Not something daddy's favourite girl would do.

For the months I've been at Kingswood, I've put the thought of home far from my mind, locking it in an underground pit. But now, it's loose again.

Loose and screaming in my head.

I tear off the bunny costume with shaking hands, gasping in shallow breaths as I toss aside the beautifully soft angora jumper. The jumper which is just a trick to make me accept the rest of the outfit, and the outfit is nothing more than a vehicle for my degradation.

This is my first Halloween party. With my father's voice still rumbling in my ears, it'll also be my last.

I'm not going to attend wearing a costume I didn't pick for myself. If this is my last night of freedom, the least I owe myself is to dress how I want.

My heart thumps, too fast, too strong, as I slip into the black blazer, the blue and black kilt I bought months ago, quickly braiding my dark hair into two long plaits. My light makeup gets rubbed away and I go to town with the mascara and eyeliner, turning my blue eyes navy as I surround them with darkness.

Much better.

In the corridor, I duck my head as I pass the other students, only brightening when I reach the common room and see Jenna and Vonnie waiting.

“You look fantastic,” I say, tapping the wide brim of Vonnie’s witch hat and admiring the far less sturdy halo topping Jenna’s costume from afar.

“No bunny?” Jenna asks. “How did you talk Finn around to that?”

I shrug, trying not to let the words penetrate my bubble of happiness. “This suits me better,” is all I say before launching into enthusiastic applause as another student walks in, dressed as a crime-fighting bat.

Soon the buses pull up outside, ready to drive the twenty minutes to the old Christchurch showgrounds. We assemble near them, presenting our tickets to get on board.

Half the students opt for their own transport, so it’s no trouble for our trio to sit together. We get the one-minute warning at the same time I receive a text from Finn.

“I’ll be along later. Have fun.”

My eyes widen. It’s the least Finn-sounding text he’s ever sent me. A bloom of hope settles in my chest. Perhaps I’ve been misreading his signals. Tonight, could truly be fun.

“Looks like Todd’s catching a ride with Marty later,” Jenna says, getting her own text. “Can’t say I mind making it a girls’ night.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Vonnie sneaks a hip flask from a hidden pocket in her outfit and takes a swig before pressing it into my hands.

I don’t usually drink, and my stomach’s been tender all day, worrying about the costume Finn bought me, so I haven’t eaten. It’ll go straight to my head.

With a grin that feels completely out of character, I take two pulls at the flask before passing it along to Jenna. The vodka burns a line down the back of my throat that turns to a warm buzz.

“This is going to be the best night ever,” I declare, stomping my heavy black boots for emphasis. “I’m gonna take pictures until I run out of memory.”

“I heard they’ve got themed displays this year,” Jenna says, passing the flask back to Vonnie, who tucks it away for later. “We should look around while everyone else makes a beeline for the DJ and bar. Claim a spot where we can have our own private party.”

“Sounds great.” And it does. My excitement is building again, clambering past the knockbacks and returning even more amped for the night. “I’m glad I didn’t wear heels because I’m going to dance until I drop.”

Jenna makes a scoffing sound. “Good luck dragging Finn onto the dance floor.”

“If he can’t be bothered to turn up on time, then he doesn’t get to veto my plans,” I declare.

The vodka works in my bloodstream, mixing with the heavy dose of freedom from knowing my new life ends tomorrow.

I feel reckless.

I feel wild.

“And I don’t need a partner to dance with. Unless one of you lovely ladies wants to volunteer.”

“Me,” Vonnie says, raising her broom and cackling. “We can sweep the competition away.”

The joke doesn’t warrant my gusts of laughter but neither seems to mind as I collapse into giggles.

My euphoria grows as the bus turns into the grounds, and we walk into the decorated event hall. There are numerous spaces for people to carve off the main crowd and hold a private party. We follow Jenna’s advice and look through each display on offer while the rest of the partygoers gather in the centre of the marquee, a massive, echoey space that reminds me of an airport hangar but apparently is an indoor arena for the horsey crowd.

“I want to go back to the pumpkin carving one,” I say once we finish the tour. “Those bright colours make me feel so happy.”

“Are you sure it’s not the large knives that attract you?” Vonnie flashes a wicked grin. “But I prefer the stables.”

“No, thanks,” Jenna declares. “I’m allergic to hay bales and I can hardly play an angel if my face is covered in hives.”

“Which one did you like, then?”

“The serial killer display.” Her eyebrows waggle suggestively. “I’ve always wanted to try a machete massacre.” She mimes at being a psycho killer, slashing the air.

“You’re more likely to be a victim,” Vonnie says.

Jenna tosses her head at the information. “That’s even better. These heels are such murder to wear, I could use a lie down.”

The frown she sends towards her gorgeous shoes makes me laugh and feel grateful I’m in my flat boots. “Well, that’s still two options. Want to play rock, paper, scissors for the honour of picking?” I wriggle my shoulders with joy. “I’m feeling lucky tonight.”

“So am I,” Jenna says, holding out her fist.

Vonnie squeals with laughter and I wonder how much vodka was diverted before ever reaching the inside of her flask. “From his reputation, I’m guessing when you’re with Todd, you get lucky every night.” She waggles her eyebrows. “Or three times a night.”

“Shut up.” Jenna aims a light swat at her friend. “In case the costume didn’t clue you in, I’m an angel. I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

At the mention of Todd, I force a smile into place but my shoulders hunch, the muscles uncomfortably tight. The others don’t notice as I hold out my fist, bumping it against Jenna’s. “Best of three?”

It only takes two. My rock loses, then my paper.

“Murder chamber, here we come,” Jenna says, showing off her dance moves despite the supposed pain in her feet.

We’re close to the room, just passing by a victim with a gigantic axe buried in her head, when strong arms latch around my waist, lifting and spinning me in a circle. My friends continue onwards, not realising I’ve been snatched.

“Where do you think you’re going?” a voice modulator rumbles in my ear. I shake him off and turn, disconcerted at how easily it disguises Finn’s voice, the same way the red mask disguises his face.

I can’t even see his eyes, the holes set at such an angle, there’s nothing but shadows with an occasional flash of movement.

A thrill of fear shivers across my midriff.

He could be *anybody*.

But I know it’s him. I can tell by the white shirt that carries his family crest embroidered on the breast pocket. It strains a little at the seams as his muscles bulge larger than usual, but that’s probably due to swinging my entire weight around.

“You want a drink?” He jerks his head towards the bar while I stare in shock. Previous attempts to grab a drink in Finn’s presence have led to lectures on being one of ‘those girls,’ whatever in 1950s hell he means by that.

When I don’t answer quick enough, his arm curls around my waist again, drawing me close against his side as he heads for the bar, regardless.

There’s a long list of specialty cocktails alongside the normal wine and beer. I stand, reading through the descriptions, feeling the pressure to pick until all the words blur in front of my eyes.

“The *Bloody Murder* sounds good,” he says, arm still looped around my waist. “Although so does the *Soulless Iced Tea*. Which ones do you like the look of?”

I stare at him in surprise, then turn back to the list with a tingle of delight. “The *Unlucky Thirtini* and the *Black Magic*

Margaritas.”

“Hm.” He pulls me in front of him, linking his arms around my midriff though Finn doesn’t usually like to touch me much in public. When he does, it’s more likely to be grabbing my upper arm than wrapping himself around me.

I wonder if he got into the cocktails before leaving. Perhaps that’s why he missed the bus.

“How about taking one of each?”

My eyes open wide in amazement. “Yes, please,” I blurt before the offer gets snatched away. I tense for a moment, wondering if this is the prelude to a cruel jibe. My head replays the word ‘greedy’ from his criticism yesterday, making my collarbones feel hollow.

But he orders the four cocktails with no further comments, asking for two straws and handing one to me the moment they’re passed across. The glasses are so wide, brims alternately crusted with salt and ice, that I don’t think he’ll be able to handle all of them, but his long, thick fingers easily lift the stems.

“Lead the way.”

I head towards the torture room but can’t get close enough to see Jenna or Vonnie through the crush. Not even the tip of Vonnie’s hat, and since there’s no way we’re getting in there, I angle towards the pumpkin carving room instead.

The lower popularity means we easily get a table. I put a hand on the barstool to scramble onto it, but Finn intervenes. “Need a hand?” and when I nod, he easily lifts me into place.

He’s never been this tactile before. Sometimes I think he hates touching me with anything but his dick, so it’s a welcome change.

For a brief second, I think someone else is wearing his outfit, then I shake my head. Finn doesn’t appreciate anyone touching his stuff. There’s no way he’d lend out a shirt.

But there’s an appeal to the fleeting thought. Of course, it’s my boyfriend behind the frightening mask, but for the

moment, I let my mind wander. What if it weren't? What if the man from my dreams had drifted across the thin veil between imagination and reality, his soul taking over the body for just one night?

Then I snort. More likely the sips of vodka from earlier are already making their consumption known.

If anything, the veil's between the living and the dead, not the imaginary and the real, and it's not even true Halloween—that's mid-week.

As he drags his stool next to mine, slinging an arm around my shoulder to stabilise me on the tall chair, making it easy to sample each different drink, I don't care what prompted the change.

It's my last night of freedom before the cage of my family home clangs shut around me. With Finn acting nice, it's doubly important to document the moment.

I grab my phone out and take a picture, smiling with joy at the result, leaning my head against his broad chest as he swaps out the riff on a Bloody Mary for the next drink.

Hopefully, he's still in this good mood when I gather the courage to tell him I'm leaving tomorrow.

If I tell him.

With so few hours left, I push the troubling thoughts aside and concentrate on my next sip.

CHAPTER FIVE

XANDER

“IT MUST BE MARTY,” LEXA DECLARES, HAVING HUMMED AND hawed over the occupant of the red devil costume. “Nobody else’s eyebrows are that bushy.”

“Isn’t that him?” I say, pointing to the boy who has a hockey mask matching mine pushed high on his head while he chugs a beer, slopping it over the rim as he loses his footing.

“Damn.” She taps a finger against her plump lips, then clicks her fingers. “Tomas, then.”

“Third times the charm.” Not that I know any more than she does. I barely recognise the names she’s tossing about.

“And what do I win for guessing correctly?”

“The satisfaction of being right.”

She pouts for a second. “Not a kiss?”

I press my mask against the side of her face, and she rolls her eyes. “Yeah. That was totally enjoyable. Nice tongue action.”

My arms slot around her waist, hugging her so close she’s barely seated on the stool any longer. “You’ll have to do a lot better at this game to win tongue.”

Lexa squeals with enjoyment, wriggling against me until I’m dizzy. The overload of cocktails is helping but I’m amazed how easy it is to be with her. There have been a few quizzical glances, but she hasn’t questioned my identity out loud, and the longer my ruse lasts, the more I relax.

I never imagined my spur-of-the-moment plan would work out this well. My memory banks are crammed to bursting, trying to immortalise every second.

She drains the last of a blue drink, slamming it onto the tabletop. “Another mocktail please, sir.”

The real drinks were watered down—someone in the school hierarchy apparently remembers being a teenager—but

Lexa's tiny enough they still had an effect. From our second round, I've been fetching her the non-alcoholic versions, and she's having just as much fun.

"Which one is next on the list?"

"A *Frankenstini*."

An apple martini. Or just apple juice with foam and crushed ice for the innocent version.

"Two coming up."

When I jump down from my stool, Lexa does the same. "And where exactly do you think you're going?"

"To the little girls' room." She bats her eyes. "And I'm gonna see if I can spot Jenna and Vonnie. They must think I abandoned them."

"Just blame me." I lift her over my shoulder while she giggles, traipsing through the crowd to deposit her at the entrance to the bathrooms. "Say a sexy stranger kidnapped you and refused to let you go until you tried all the mixes on the menu."

She plants her hands on her hips. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you're trying to get me drunk."

"On apple juice."

"Where else does cider come from?"

The answer cracks me up and she patiently waits until I laugh myself out. I'm in such a state of euphoria that my laughter comes far too easily. "That's like comparing vodka to fries."

I wait until she's disappeared inside the room, then hustle to the bartender and order the next round. When I get back to our table, two other students have claimed our chairs, but a well-timed growl has them deciding another room might be less bother.

This time, I turn my stool upside down on hers for better protection, then make my way back to the corridor to collect her.

“My own personal chariot,” she says, linking her arms around my neck and leaning into me as I scoop her into my arms.

The soft breaths against my neck are heavenly. Another memory gets crammed into the vault. I never want this night to end.

“Oh, no,” she murmurs as we arrive back in the pumpkin carving room to find the table occupied and the drinks gone, my simple trick nullified. “We’ll have to dance the night away instead.”

The activity has never appealed to me before but suddenly, I can’t imagine anything more satisfying than spinning around to music with this lovely lady in my arms. “Lead the way.”

Lexa takes a step back and squints at me. “Who are you and what have you done with my boyfriend?”

Knocked him out with chloroform and left him slumped in his bathroom is the actual answer, but honesty is well overrated.

“It’s your night. Whatever you want to do, we’re doing.”

I’m probably pushing my luck. Her suspicion ebbs and flows and with each un-Finn-like characteristic, she’ll doubt me more until the game comes to a grinding halt.

But there won’t be another opportunity like this one. Better I do everything I can to make the night special, store up memories to treasure, than erase the joy by pretending to be a godawful douchebag only interested in himself.

“Fair warning,” I add. “It’s been a while so you might have a crap dance partner leading you around the floor. Get set for some top level embarrassment.”

“Pfft.” She wrinkles her nose as she scoffs. “It’s not *Strictly*. No one’s judging.”

I glance around, seeing scores of teens doing exactly that in a hundred different ways, but I shrug. What do I care if she doesn’t mind? It’ll be Finn’s problem at school on Monday, not mine. “Okay, then.”

“Inside or out?”

I don't understand what she means until we reach the dance floor and I see it continues through concertinaed doors into a flat hard-packed clay circle outside.

“Definitely out.” I take a firm grip on her hand, scared to lose her. I use my shoulders to clear a wide path, snapping, “Watch it,” when a boy gets too close.

Then we're outside. I can breathe easier free of the crowd and the stifling air.

“You're not too cold?” I check as she shivers but Lexa shoots another satisfied grin my way.

“You'll have to keep me warm.”

I wrap her in my arms, regretting how the mask stops me from resting my head against hers.

The song isn't meant to be a slow one, but we make it work, swaying to every third or fourth beat. Our bodies move in time, finding a rhythm together, pressed against each other until we're one.

Her hand is against my back, the touch light but it pulls tighter when I spin her, so I do it again. The other is against my chest, our heights so disparate, she can't comfortably stretch to rest it on my shoulder. Our thighs brush as we dip and sway, my hands against her lower back, offering her support if she needs it.

A bump swells in my throat, making my eyes water. My chest constricts until it feels like I'm about to implode.

This is perfection. This is more than I ever dreamed.

An alternate life spins out in my head. One where my stepdad is a father figure rather than a controlling nightmare. One where my face isn't sliced and diced into disfigurement, where my brain propels me into better grades in school rather than hacking into the school databases for information.

In that world, I'd be her equal. I could fulfil my role of protector from beside her rather than from underneath her bed.

We could sit in the classroom, passing notes to each other. I could escort her from one lesson to another, then scramble to make it to my own class on time.

The worst problem would be conquering my nerves for long enough to ask her on a date.

Which she might still refuse, even in this candy coated version of the real world. A smile crosses my lips again.

My left hand nestles into the small of her back, knees bending so the full strain of our height difference doesn't fall solely on her shoulders. My right hand cups her cheek, thumb stroking along her jawline while my chest clutches with the strength of emotion.

I want to take her to the movies, out to dinner. I want to fall in love slowly, telling each other stories from our childhoods, finding similarities, laughing at our differences.

You can listen to her stories of being raped by her dad while you tell the anecdote of being knifed by your stepfather.

A match made in hell rather than heaven, but it might still work if I ever gave it a chance.

Until you show her your real face and she runs screaming.

I tire of burrowing into my head and turn my attention back to how her small frame connects with mine. Once she finds out the truth, she'll never let me near her again. So, if this is my one chance then, at the very least, I want to kiss her.

On our next twirl past the DJ, I see a side door open. Two dishevelled and starry-eyed partygoers tumble out, adjusting their costumes. A closet? A door through to a secret staff room?

When the musical beat lets me, I spin Lexa closer to the opening, until there's a transition from one song to another, and I'm near enough to try the door handle. Unlocked.

I put my finger to my mask—shh—and whisk her inside, locking the door behind us before I use my phone light to see where we are.

“You’ve hauled me into a cleaning closet?” she says, her voice adrift on barely contained laughter. “I demand to know your intentions at once.”

Instead of answering, I shove my phone in my pocket, blinking in the darkness, waiting for the hovering lights in my retinas to fade.

When they do, I reach out for Lexa, pulling her close against me. My body trembles as I lift my mask away, placing it on a narrow bench beside the entrance. I shiver as I sense her head tilt back.

I’m desperate to kiss her, except she’ll feel the scars on my lips.

She’ll know I’m a fake.

Instead, I kiss her neck, pulling down her collar to reveal a patch of bare skin, fixing my mouth to her, my tongue licking across the surface, tasting her unique blend. I spin her to face away from me, slowly peeling away her blazer. I fold it neatly, placing it on the bench before I reach around to unbutton her blouse, easing the fabric from her shoulders.

Her palms brace against a cabinet as I kiss my way along her spine, letting my tongue explore the bumps and dips, rubbing my evening stubble between her shoulder blades, exulting each time I coax forth a gasp, a moan.

Once her blouse is folded on top of her blazer, I draw her back against me with my right arm, my left stroking along her shoulder, down past her elbow, entwining our fingers while I move a step farther into the closet, navigating by touch.

I bend her forward, placing her palm flat on the bench next to her clothes. I remove my arm from around her waist, caressing the curves of her body. Her skin heats beneath my touch. Her nipples harden, noticeable even through the thickness of her bra.

A tremble of anticipation makes my legs quiver as I bend over her, running my tongue from the waistband of her kilt up to the nape of her neck, unable to resist pressing my hardening cock against her plump arse, my mind whiting out with pure

ecstasy for long seconds, floating into a parallel universe where anything is possible. Even the events I couldn't dare to dream.

Her hand reaches behind her, clutching around my thigh, drawing me closer and the touch is so bitter-sweet that tears come to my eyes.

I chose my disguise, staged this dirty trick to fool her, so why does it cut my heart that she believes I'm Finn, when it's what I wanted?

I capture her hand, pressing it flat next to its matching partner.

"Keep them there until I tell you otherwise," I murmur, forgetting my voice changer is still inside the mask, biting my lips to keep them closed as I wait for her to notice, wait for her to say something.

But she doesn't.

Perhaps because my voice is so husky with arousal that I barely recognise it myself.

It's a sensual feast as I run my hands over her bare torso, carefully undoing the clasp of her bra, excited by her groan as I reach around, cupping her tits inside my hands. The weight of them turns on something deep, something primal in my brain. More than just the increasing frisson of sexual excitement. A possessive kick that keeps building.

I can't give her up after this. She's mine. We were meant to be together.

Regret tugs again at my chest. I want to spill my secrets, expose my identity, hoping against hope she'll still want me after the reveal.

But instead of confessing, my fingers find the hem of her skirt, sliding it upwards, high on the whimpers as I blindly explore each newly exposed inch of skin. They slide into her lacy underwear, my thumbs rubbing over the smooth curves of her surprisingly plump arse.

Then I tug down the delicate fabric, all the way along her thighs, kneeling as I ease them to her calves, leaning forward to kiss the tender skin on the back of her knees, wishing I could see every inch of her while also relishing the dark.

When her underwear pools around her ankles, I help her lift each leg, getting them free of her boots, adding them to the pile of her removed clothing.

I kiss all the way back up her legs, letting my moans of pleasure evaporate against the tender flesh on the inside of her thighs, then her pussy, my thumbs spreading her apart while my tongue licks with slow strokes, chest muscles burning as I try to contain the emotion swelling within me, tasting the soft centre of her as her thighs shiver and her hips tilt, opening her further to me.

“You like that, angel?” I ask, forgoing my ban on speaking in my eagerness to seek her feedback, needing to know that I’m not forcing an unwanted gift on her, even as her body flashes signals of appreciation. “If you want me to go faster or slower or deeper or wider, you tell me, okay?”

A gasp escapes her throat, then she hums as I tease around her entrance with the pad of my finger, slowly, slowly easing it inside, her cunt slippery with welcome.

“Use your words, otherwise, I’ll have to decide for you. Or is that what you want? You just want me to give you what I think you need?”

She slaps her palms against the bench, the wordless sounds spurring me onwards. I curl the tip of my finger, working on instinct, guided by her whimpers, the ripples as her muscles clench, by the myriad small indicators signalling her enjoyment. My finger drags against her inner walls, creating friction, especially when I follow her encouragement and increase the angle, increase the pressure, listening to her breathing as it picks up speed.

My erection throbs between my legs, hating the constraint of my jeans, chafing against the dry fabric when all it wants is to seek somewhere wet as its home.

I get to my feet to adjust myself and then I can't stop there, not when she's spread in front of me, waiting. Not when my loss of vision means my other senses take the foreground and my ears are full of her moans and gasps, the slide of fabric against skin, the small tremors that spread out, echoing across the shelving.

My ears fill with those tiny cries, and my hands tingle from touching her, my tongue buzzes, buds dancing from her taste.

I roughly open my jeans, pulling myself free before I take hold of her hips.

“Stop.”

My head buzzes with an overload of desire. I struggle to push it back, gripping her extra hard for a split second before I wrestle my hands away, retreating a step, panting with need.

Electric tingles bounce across my forearms, an aftereffect of my skin caressing hers.

“You don't want me to touch you?” I gasp, having to force myself back another step, move away from the temptation. The steady thump in my head takes on a new form, each beat whispering, *found out. You've been found out.*

I hear her turn, step nearer, fingertips bumping into me from the darkness.

“Your voice,” she whispers, and a light frost covers my skin. “I recognise your voice.”

I sidestep, getting closer to the door, ready to bolt if this conversation goes the wrong way. My body temperature continues to plummet, shivering to get back to stasis.

Her hands find me again, moving across my chest, across the sensitivity of my nipples, curving around the side of my neck while I wait for my world to implode, for my daydream to end.

A thumb strokes along the ridge of my jaw, then across my lips, then both hands cup my face, and she must be standing on tiptoes to reach me, her breath caressing my throat.

And because it's her, I tilt my head forward, giving in to her silent beseechment. I bend my knees to make it easier for her fingertips to roam my face, for her to pull together my image in her mind's eye.

“How did you do it?”

My throat is glue and chalk and sawdust. Even once I clear it, I have to strain to get the words out. “Do what?”

And her breath teases my ear, blowing against the soft hairs near my cheek. “How did you get out of my dreams?”

CHAPTER SIX

LEXA

THE MAN IS COMPLETELY STILL UNDER MY WANDERING HANDS. I can only get the vaguest shape in my head, even with the eager exploration of my fingers.

“I’m not...”

My cheeks heat in the dark room and I back up a step, embarrassed, feeling foolish. What on earth am I talking about? This boy, this man must think I’m stark raving mad.

Then I reach for his hand, take it in mine. It’s miles away from the smooth pampered palm of Finn’s hand. Hands that have never performed a hard day’s manual labour.

This skin is rough, hard callouses along his fingers, spread in bands across his palm. So large that when he returns my grip, it’s like my hand is swallowed whole, spreading a delicious heat.

Not Finn. No more than it was Finn letting me take all the cocktails instead of picking one without caring if it was a flavour I’d like.

Not Finn who happily let me gossip and make guesses about everyone’s costume, joining in on the fun, adding little pops of humour to the conversation until I convulsed with laughter.

Not Finn who swung me around the dance floor, not caring if his moves were rusty or awkward, just losing himself in the beat of the music and the touch of his body against mine.

Part of me regrets speaking.

I could have braced myself on the wooden bench, let his exploration set me on fire with every touch. I can already feel how his consideration would extend to my body. There’d be no pressure to hurry and arrive at the destination—I can’t imagine him leaving me behind.

But I have to know. This ghost of a man has haunted my dreams since my first night at Kingswood. He’s the reason I’m

always happy to go to bed early, why I can't wait to fall asleep.

I open my mouth to apologise, to say I don't know what I was thinking. But instead, what comes out is one of the first things my sleeping buddy ever said to me. "I'm the man from your dreams, angel, here to keep you safe."

He shivers, his arms going around me, holding me close. When I bury my nose in his chest, the skin is raised in bumps, a patchwork of goosebumps.

"What's happening?" I ask, content but confused. The rich scent of his body fills my world, and my mind finds another label for this deceitful stranger. The boy from the cafeteria.

"How do you remember that?" he whispers. "You were sound asleep."

A name pops out of the ether; from a school assembly where the head droned on forever, introducing the auxiliary staff in an avalanche of job titles and faux applause.

"Xander?"

His arms cling tighter to me, a gasp catching in his throat. "You know my name?"

For the first time, I recognise he's more fearful than I am. I don't want this lovely man to go away, to distort back into Finn, a change that would instantly destroy my evening.

And as much as I'm scared to lose him, this boy trembles at being exposed. He shivers at me knowing his identity.

I *mean* something to him. He's treating me like I'm *important*. Even before I tell him how much he means to me.

The realisation fills me with joy.

"Can I see you? Without the mask?"

But that request has him pulling away, scared at more than his identity being exposed. I think I know the reason. When my fingers explored him, they felt the twisted knots of deep scars.

And instead of his face, he offers me an apology. “I’m sorry I tricked you.”

His voice is so nice, so different without the modulator distorting it. My hands pull him closer again, moving across his face, his chest, caressing the muscled solidity of his arms. “Can I kiss you?”

He crouches a little for me, not forcing me to stand on my tiptoes, neck craning back. And when my fingers find his mouth, trace out the shape of his pouty lips, he lifts me to his height, *easily* lifts me, like I weigh nothing at all.

My legs wrap around his waist, my ankles hooking together so even if his strong arms falter, I’ll stay securely in place.

Then I bend my head forward, pressing my lips against his. A tender touch, softer than the angora jumper tossed aside in my room. Soft enough that my hands cradle his skull, holding him steady so I can press my lips harder against his, so I can explore them, sucking the plumpness into my mouth, tasting the faint metallic tang of his skin.

He lets me explore him, lets me lick and nibble and plunder his mouth, increasing the pressure at my whim, the sensation intensified by the dark cocooning us, trapping us in a space where touch is king, hearing the queen by his side.

My hands splay across his chest, fumbling with his buttons, eager to stroke the taut muscles hidden underneath, to cup those broad shoulders and luxuriate in the silkiness of skin against skin.

When I have the first three undone, I’m too impatient to wait. I fasten my lips to his collarbone, sucking along the ridge there, my tongue licking and tasting him, lapping at the saltiness of his skin, inhaling his unique musk—a mix of grass, earth, grease, oil, and the scent of hard manual labour.

A scent that makes my eyelids flutter in rapture.

His hands spread across my back, easily holding me, supporting me. Then one moves, cupping my side, the thumb

stroking farther inward, caressing the curve of my breast, the nipple peaking with excitement at the touch.

A moan escapes my throat, a signal of encouragement that he takes and runs with, hand moulding my tits, holding them, squeezing them, moving from one to the other while my mouth continues to explore his, my kiss ravenous like I've not eaten for days. My teeth nip at his bottom lip, making it swell, making it better, especially when he follows my lead, giving back to me whatever I gift to him. Learning what I like and adjusting on the fly, so I have more of it.

Then his mouth moves, finds the shell of my ear, overloading me with a heavy breath that vibrates through my aural canal like the world's best and most specific sex toy. The words that follow cause just as much excitement. "I want to taste you. Can I taste you?"

And I nod, I whisper yes, desire twisting me into knots as he places me atop the bench again, briefly cupping my cheek before he drops to his knees.

A shiver hits behind my ribcage, pulling on a cord of desire, making a connection from my lips, my thundering heart, my tender stomach, to the needy flesh pulsing between my legs.

His large hands grip my thighs, thick fingers curling over the tops, the rough pads a delicious sensation against the tender flesh.

I jump as I feel Xander's tongue, on edge in a hundred different ways. The long strokes along the inside of my lips, teasing at my clit, are something I've never had before.

It's amazing. I close my eyes so nothing he's doing gets past me. All my nerves jump and flutter with delight until I can't help but release a soft moan.

The moment I do, his head lifts and I whimper.

"Am I doing it wrong?"

"No one's ever done this for me before." I wriggle my toes and give a soft laugh. "But I don't think so. The only note I have is more. Give me more."

His smile is wide and weird and wicked. “More coming right up for the lady.”

Oh, but I’ve never felt less like a lady. As his tongue drags through my folds, drawing forth a bundle of responses I didn’t know my body could produce, I’m the farthest thing possible from a lady.

A tramp, perhaps? That sounds more like it. As the full length of his middle finger slides inside me, the tip curling in a come-on gesture as he slowly drags it back out, tramp seems perfect.

Everything seems perfect.

My hips rock, my fingers tangling in his hair. I try to be gentle, but the overload of sensations clouds my head, my judgement, until I’m rougher than I mean to be. Until I tug and twist and have to force myself to let go.

“Don’t stop,” Xander says, coming up for air, his nose dragging back and forth over the tender flesh of my inner thigh, the tease somehow stimulating my clit even more than when his tongue flicks over it. “Pull my hair as much as you like. Drag me wherever you need me to go.”

And the place I drag him is straight to my greedy mouth, splaying my legs to bring him closer, opening myself to him, devouring his attention in return, close to sobbing with joy.

“Are you sure you’re not a dream?” I pinch his forearm. “Because you seem far too good to be true.”

His lips press against the shell of my ear, his heavy breaths driving me wild. “Only for you. For anyone else, I’m a nightmare.”

And that’s even better. My lover and my protector. I know without him having to say that he’s the one who’s looked out for me since I turned up here. He stopped the teasing before it could grow into bullying. He made sure I had a safe space within Kingswood’s walls.

“I want your cock inside me,” I moan, my lips seeking his again, unable to get enough of him, desperate to have more, to have as much as he’s willing to share.

I sense his hesitation and think I know the reason. He's less experienced than me.

"Is it your first time?"

He nods, his voice cracking as he whispers, "Yes."

"Can I guide you?"

And relief ripples through him like a waterfall, easing the tension from his muscles. His whispered, "Yes," gives me permission to reach for the button of his jeans, for me to insert my hand inside, fingers of one hand curling around him while the other impatiently pulls down his zipper, tugs down his briefs, setting him free.

Even with both hands, there's more of him than I know what to do with. He clutches the edge of the bench either side of me, arms shaking.

"Let me know if I'm doing something you don't like," I whisper, determined to be worthy of the gift he's placing into my hands.

He gives a throaty chuckle, edged with tears, his breath heating the side of my neck. "I like that. I like your fingers wrapped around me."

And I pump him a little, loving the way the satin skin moves under my palms, forming as careful a picture of his manhood in my head as I did with his face.

I bum walk right to the edge, spreading my legs wide, enjoying the vulnerability of the sensation, a vessel waiting to be filled.

My fingers reach farther around, gently rolling his balls, one at a time, while a low whine escapes from his throat, like an inflatable leaking air.

"Are you ready?"

He lifts his right hand to cradle my head, positioning us cheek to cheek. "Yes."

I line up the head of his cock with my entrance, rubbing the tip up and down my slippery folds, more than ready for

him.

Then I tilt my hips, drawing him forward, closing my eyes in ecstasy as I guide him slowly into me, filling me to the brim, my cunt eagerly stretching around his girth, my hand cupping his arse, guiding him forward when his hesitation would have him hold back, and I don't want him holding back a single thing.

“You feel so good,” I whisper, not even a hint of a lie in there, no flattery, just the unvarnished truth. My hips rock against him, not bothering to wait for a conscious instruction. My muscles clench and release him, already close to the edge.

He's frozen in place, the tiny rotation of my hips the only movement. “I'm scared I'll hurt you.”

“You won't hurt me, but even if you did, I'll tell you. It's not something you have to guess, okay?” My lips seek his out, adding to the pulse of the monster parked between my legs. “But right now, you feel wonderful. Move how you want, discover what you like.”

My body floods with joy as I hand control back to Xander, excited to find out what he does with it. Anticipation zaps through my veins.

CHAPTER SEVEN

XANDER

AT FIRST, I'M SCARED TO MOVE. THE SENSATION OF MY COCK nestled inside her body is so incredible, so overwhelming, I don't want to make a single change.

But Lexa encourages me, and I desperately want to please her, to show my complete trust. I withdraw a little, caught between a whimper at the loss and a groan at the increased sensitivity as my wet cock meets the air again, feeling different, feeling changed.

Then I plunge myself back inside her, the noise of her moan echoing along my nerves, setting them on fire.

The second time I do it is even better than the first, the anticipation adding another level to my enjoyment, lathering on another layer of desire.

I didn't know how the walls of her cunt would drag against me, making every millimetre of my sensitive flesh flicker with joy. I didn't know how her eagerness to have me back inside her would act like an amplifier, dialling up the sensations until they're shouting with joy. How when I thrust forward, she'd pulse around me, encouraging me without words, letting me know the pleasure is shared.

My speed increases, Lexa tilting her torso forward so my chest claps against hers, the soft press of her breasts sending me halfway to delirium.

Her fingers twist in my hair, pulling at the roots, and I clamp my mouth over hers, letting loose a cry that's swallowed into her throat.

"Is that okay?" she whispers, and I nod, then groan in agreement.

"S'better than okay," I manage, a tremor running through my voice in time with my thrust. "You feel incredible." My right hand finds her tits, rolling my palm across them, pinching at the nipples until she yelps. "Sorry."

A heel lightly kicks against my backside, teasing out a surprised laugh.

“If I wanted you to stop,” she grumbles, “I’d ask you. Now, do it again.”

I comply, tensing as I pinch over the hard bud, this time concentrating enough to feel the way her muscles ripple against my cock as I she gives a cry again; pleasure mixed in with the pain.

My mouth fastens over the injured nipple, tongue stroking it, lapping like a kitten as I take away the sting. The awkward bend of my neck as I strain to reach it allows me to slow my pace, to widen the experience at the same time I deepen it.

When I lift my head, her fingers explore my face, slipping inside my mouth where I suckle them, giving a playful bite, judging how hard she can take it from her whimper. Then she steals my hand, her open mouth against my palm, licking and sucking, wet and warm with her tongue surprisingly rough. “Fuck, I want to eat you up,” she says with a moan before she bites into the curve of my neck, sending a spark of pure electricity zapping down to lodge deep in my balls.

The catch of unbridled lust in her husky voice sends another wave of arousal cascading through my body.

With one arm, I support her, keeping her body where I need it, changing angles at her encouragement. My opposite hand braces against the bench, our joint rhythm becoming so frantic I expect the walls to shake, the floor to split apart with a jagged rent, accompanied by an earthquake sized rumble.

“I love the taste of you,” Lexa murmurs, licking along the underside of my chin, an unexpected erogenous zone. Then she nuzzles against my ear, her panting breaths filling my world. Her whisper is barely audible, “I’m close.”

Knowledge that catapults me forward in my own journey, until I strain to hold back, to make sure I don’t cheat her. Don’t take my pleasures at the cost of hers.

But as much as I want to hold back, to make the experience last forever, the urgency is already building to a

crescendo. Even when I hold still, my cock pulses, jumping in time with her clenching muscles, hauling me closer and closer to the edge.

“Are you...?”

A series of short, fluttering convulsions takes hold of her before I can complete the question. “I’m coming,” she whispers as her shudders pick up strength. Her soft cry bounces across my ear drum while her rippling muscles tease my cock, playing with it, the sensation so good it wipes out all thoughts of what I was trying to say.

My stroke increases, finding a rhythm, experiencing a buildup of pure joy as my mouth seeks hers, as my lips crush against her mouth.

I devour everything she gives me while my hips pump, thrusting my cock deep into her until my balls tighten, my arm clamps around her like a vice, my release shoots high into her waiting body.

A roar tears loose from my chest as I thrust again, for one final time, then scoop her arse into my hands, not wanting to soften, to shrivel, to slip out of her. Wanting to stay hard forever, buried deep inside her warm wet home.

I laugh but could just as easily sob. There are too many emotions, I can’t process them. I clutch her like a drowning man would cling to a life preserver.

“That was...” I begin and can’t finish, the sounds turning into nonsense in my throat, being swallowed before I gasp in another breath of air.

Her hands bunch in my shirt, dragging me to her mouth for another soul-baring kiss.

“I didn’t...” my voice chokes to a halt again, but this time I forcibly swallow and keep going. “I didn’t use protection.”

The soft laugh puffs across my cheek, instantly contagious. “I know,” she whispers like she’s telling a secret. “I’m the one who put you inside me.”

And the words hit my funny bone, convulsing me double with laughter. The joy finding a comfortable resting place there, tossed on the waves of mirth.

Lexa laughs with me, then we both stop, falling silent as someone tries the handle to the room, bangs their frustrated palm on the door, then walks away, cursing.

“I think that’s our signal to leave,” she whispers, and I wish we didn’t have to. I wish we could stay here, safe in the dark, our bodies entwining, our arms wrapped around each other.

But I obediently straighten, buttoning, tucking, stretching, adjusting my clothes until they feel like they’re back in order. Helping Lexa to find her underwear, her blouse and blazer.

“Can I turn on my phone light?” she asks and for a minute I can’t work out why she’d seek my permission.

Then I understand.

She’s asking if I’m okay for her to see my face.

I want to reach for the mask, to get under cover, not throw down a bet when I might lose everything.

Instead, I say, “Okay.”

The beam is directed at the wall, not at our faces, but we both still wince as the harsh white light fills the room. Lexa quickly adjusts the buttons on her blouse, finding the right holes and pulling on her blazer.

My stomach jostles with nerves as I stand back, the red mask and voice changer held loosely in my hands.

I bare my face to her curious eyes, and it’s like I’m baring my soul.

I want to beg her to be gentle, but I don’t need to. She stands, still pulling her kilt into place as her eyes flick over my body, my ruined features.

Then she steps forward, her hands cupping my face between them, eyes still devouring the scarred wreckage of my face.

“You’re so beautiful,” she whispers, and I must have misheard because that’s pure insanity. Nobody visits an art gallery to stare at the cracks in the paint. Nobody stares at my slashed mouth and chin and thinks I look good.

Except her eyes *are* staring at me, feasting on my appearance like they’ve hungered to see the gaping white stretches of my jagged scars.

They devour me while her fingers trace the outline of my fat lips and my cheekbones, touching gently to my cheeks, skirting my wide nostrils to land on the twisting lines that cut through my flesh in three long wounds, which didn’t heal the way the first surgeon assured me it would. An infection damaging his careful stitches until not even his skill could hide the laddering and puckering, the bumps and lumps of scar tissue and hard gristle.

My chest loosens as her exploration continues. I inhale and I can breathe for the first time since the wounds were inflicted. Like her acceptance is the air I’ve been desperate to draw into my lungs.

“You’re my beautiful badarse,” she whispers, then giggles but not in a mean way. In a delighted way, like she found a new special treat.

Her thumb traces one of my twisted lines, brushing against my lower lip until I suck it inside my mouth, stroking the rough pad of her thumb with my tongue, tasting the salt of her skin and the harsher salt from our earlier cocktails. Tasting, too, the sweetness underneath, drawing her farther and farther into my mouth, sucking her like she’s my pacifier against a cruel world, finally releasing her with a pop and bestowing a hungry kiss in the centre of her palm.

I’m about to reach for the doorhandle, get us back to the real world, when my phone rings. Three buzzes and it stops. A second later, it rings again.

No.

Fuck no. Not now. Not when my life is so perfect.

But when I pull my phone out, I see the truth on the caller display. “I’m so sorry. I have to take this,” I mutter, lifting it to my ear, already knowing what I’m going to hear. “Mum?”

“Xander,” she whispers, then shrieks at a loud boom, like a heavy boot crashing into a door. “He’s here. I can’t—”

Her voice cuts off. I hear a faint stomp of feet, then the horror-movie sound of the wardrobe door slowly rolling back.

“I’m coming,” I say, trying not to shout, trying not to give away her location if there’s even the slightest chance she’s still hidden.

That my evil fuck of a stepfather doesn’t know exactly where she is.

Lexa collects her phone, opening the door, reacting to the panic in my voice. “Can I help?”

“I need to get home. My stepfather is—” But I break off.

She’s already taken my subterfuge and my scarring in stride. To reveal the evil underbelly of our family is one step too far.

“Will you be safe here?” I ask, scanning her face for a sign before she can say a word.

I can’t take her with me. Not when I’m driving to the loose cannon that is my stepfather.

“Don’t worry,” she reassures me, squeezing my arm and turning towards the nearest side exit, letting me know it’s okay to leave her, to go.

And I cup the back of her head, pulling her towards me for one last kiss. One final touch of joy from the night that’s been a thousand times better than I could have hoped.

A shard of pure hatred zaps through me, directed at my stepfather. A hatred worse than any I’ve felt for him before.

If he’s wrecked this, I’ll kill him.

But Lexa doesn’t look like I’ve wrecked anything. The only emotion on her face is concern.

“Go,” she says, shooing me ahead of her. “Get home. Don’t worry about me.”

“I’ll call you when I can,” I say, accepting the phone she offers me while striding towards the side door, slipping outside. I grab her number before handing it back. “Find your friends. Stay with them.”

She nods, gesturing for me to go, and I break into a run, sprinting for my vehicle. Right at the last moment I turn, needing one more sight of her to take into the dangers of the night. As I stare at her, at her kind eyes, her smiling face, feeling the depths of our connection, I’m hit with a sense of doom.

A strong note of foreboding that can only be tied to my mother’s panicked phone call because there’s nothing here, nothing at this school sanctioned party, that could hurt Lexa.

I wave, ignoring the fear that claws at my brain.

I wave and force myself to turn away from her, to leave.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LEXA

EMOTIONS WAR INSIDE ME AS I WALK THROUGH THE JOSTLING crowd. Happiness that I made a deep connection with Xander. Fear for tomorrow, for what returning to my father's house might hold in store for me.

Concern that Xander doesn't know what he's getting into. That as quickly as he appeared in my life, he'll leave.

A shiver tries to take hold, then I feel his phantom arms around me and hug myself, trapping the sensation while I push my way through the revellers to land next to Vonnie. Her large witch's hat is easy to spot even in the crowded party.

"There you are," she exclaims, looking merrier than I've ever seen her.

Her nose is bright red while her eye makeup is in streaks across her face, black swatches that state categorically she's having an awesome time. "Now where's Jenna got to? I swear, it's impossible to keep track of both of you."

"Look for the halo." I snag an empty chair and clamber aboard, scanning the crowds for her distinctive white hair. "Over by the door," I say, clapping and waving; not that she sees me from this distance.

There's some kind of altercation going on near her, the bouncer shoving someone away from the entrance.

"Come on." I grab Vonnie's arm and drag her in the right direction, grateful when she takes over and leads since her six-inch height advantage works far better to part the crowds.

"Angel," Vonnie croons the moment we're within hearing distance. "You're my sweet angel."

I know she's trying to recreate a song but between the aggregate noise of the venue and her pitchiness, have no idea which one. Still, the effort has me in hysterics. The residual joy from my encounter with Xander turning into a generalised glee.

“There you are,” Jenna declares, grabbing my arm and tugging me until I’m right in front of the doorman. “Now tell this guy that your boyfriend is allowed inside.”

I stare at the masked figure lurking behind the bouncer. For a split second I think it’s Xander, already finished with his mission.

Then my eyes pick out his slimmer build. Note the impatient tilt of his head.

Ice runs through my veins. “Finn?”

“Where the hell have you been?” he demands. Then, in a whining tone, “You should have checked in my room when I didn’t make the bus.”

“You sent a text,” I say, but he shakes his head, not listening.

“I passed out for no reason. I could have *died*.” He lifts the mask, face twisted in disgust. “I spent an hour at the clinic waiting for the all-clear while my so-called girlfriend was here, partying.”

I clutch at my necklace, hand curled loosely into a fist, head bowing.

“Wait,” Finn says, taking a closer look at me. “What the fuck are you wearing? Where’s the bunny costume?”

“Take it away from the door,” the bouncer interjects, hustling us to the side so a couple of flying pigs can flash their student IDs, oinking their way inside the marquee. “And no entrance without your card. Those are the rules.”

“Then bend the fucking rules,” Finn explodes, shoving a wad of cash at the man. “Here. Take that as your identification.”

But the man ignores him.

“Can you go back to the school and get your card?” I glance around the parking lot, wondering how he got here since I can’t see his car. “It’ll only take half an hour.”

“It’s not there. Someone stole it.” He puts his hands on his hips, glaring around him with an increasingly heated glare. “This fucking party sucks, anyway. Wanna try a real party?”

Apart from me, Vonnie, and Jenna, there’s also a small crowd of his usual mates nearby, all wearing the same red masks. All identical.

One of them will be Todd.

I don’t want to go anywhere with him or my boyfriend.

My *ex*-boyfriend. Which he will be as soon as I find the guts to tell him.

The brief thought flashes that this isn’t my problem. I can head back inside the party, find a seat somewhere, and wait for Xander to finish his urgent business.

By the time he gets back, the party will be winding down. We might have the dance floor to ourselves. We could sway and dip and spin around in each other’s arms, not caring what anybody else thinks.

But Finn grabs my arm like he senses I’m plotting an escape. He drags me farther into the parking lot, the others trailing us, giving a yelp of pleasure when he sees a bus unattended.

“Get on board,” he says, giving me a smack on my rear. “I know a far better party than this suck-arse affair.”

Todd pushes his mask off his face, the reveal adding another layer of dread as he finger-combs his sandy hair back from his forehead. “Why didn’t you say earlier? This whole thing is lame.”

“I’m staying,” I say, backing towards the marquee entrance, the bouncer not paying the slightest attention to me, still glaring at Finn for whatever insults came his way before I joined them.

I skirt around the others, trying to work out a plan but Jenna takes my right hand, dragging me closer and Vonnie pushes me from behind, excited by the prospect of breaking the rules.

“You don’t have the keys to the bus,” I whisper, not wanting to defy Finn openly.

He taps the side of his nose. “Yeah, I do. There’s nothing that happens in this place that gets past me.”

My body freezes, interpreting every word as a threat.

Does he mean he knows what just happened between me and Xander?

Worse. Did he engineer the scenario? Is this entire dream night going to turn out to be a dirty trick? Has he somehow worked out I’ve been cheating on him in my dreams and is now set to take his revenge?

Tonight wasn’t in your dreams. You’ve still got the imprint of Xander’s cock between your legs.

And his cum.

My face flushes crimson with guilt.

Finn walks closer, his back to the others. “Want to see the part of my costume that took the longest to source?” he asks, his voice carefully pitched so it won’t carry.

I shake my head, but he isn’t really asking. He’s never really asking.

He opens his jacket and pulls a pistol from the inside pocket. My mouth goes dry.

It doesn’t feel like show and tell.

It feels like a threat.

I swallow sawdust in a throat made from sandpaper. Given the malevolent glint in Finn’s eyes, even without the weapon he’ll happily drag me on board, kicking and screaming, if I resist.

My head slumps in surrender as I fall into step behind my jostling friends and mount the bus steps. We spread across the front seats while more people spill through the door. Most of the boys wear the red masks. Our trio are the only girls.

“Everybody set?” Finn calls out to a responding roar. He turns and winks at Todd who’s in the seat behind Jenna. Then he winks at me.

I press a hand to my stomach and manufacture a smile. Whatever he has planned, it’ll soon be over.

It’s just a party. Hardly a reason for a panic attack.

Finn presses a combination into a keypad attached to the dashboard and the engine rumbles into life.

The journey takes us into the hills, winding up the steep bends of the narrow road. Everyone else is in a jovial mood, some boys calling out a rugby team chant, others trying to top each other with ribald jokes; cheering and laughing, shouting out the punchlines.

I keep a smile in place, nodding or shaking my head when Jenna or Vonnie addresses me, otherwise staring out the window, melding into the shadows as I usually do.

The contrast of their excitement just serves to intensify my dread. My only relief is that with Finn driving, I don’t have to bear the weight of his gaze.

The bus is an ill-fitting shape for the steep and narrow street, especially on the corners. I close my eyes and think thin thoughts as it travels higher until we finally turn onto a large flat parking lot already crowded with vehicles.

“Everybody dismount,” Finn cries as the vehicle shudders to a halt. “The passcode for the door is six-six-six, sixty-nine.”

An obligatory snort comes from the teenage boys.

I drop a pin for Xander then join the queue. I count fourteen people plus me as we enter the new venue.

It’s an old sanitorium of some kind and I keep my arms close by my side, not wanting to catch any old-fashioned diseases that might leak from the porous walls.

Inside, there’s a far spookier atmosphere than the bright lights and fun decorations of the party we just left. Cobwebs stretch from wall to wall, appearing so real I stick close behind Finn, letting him break the clingy strands apart.

There's a large lobby with candles dripping molten wax until they're twice as fat and half as tall. The flickering light makes shadows dance along the old concrete walls. Dark patches show where moisture has stealthily invaded over the years, letting mould spread its dank fingers from the cracks like monstrous wallpaper.

"This is so cool," Vonnie squeals in my ear, literally jumping with excitement. A bat flies across our path, the string guiding it only obvious after we've shrieked.

Once we mount the circular staircase to the mezzanine, we find other partygoers. The costumes here are far darker, far sexier than our school dance. As a man with a ball gag in his mouth and a satisfied expression in his eyes walks past, drawn by a long leash, I admit that Finn's bunny costume would have fit right in here. Arse plug and all.

"Through here," he tells me, gripping my wrist so I can't misunderstand.

He leads me along a passageway, ducking into a door at the end, the only marking on its khaki painted metal a pentagram that looks like it's drawn in blood.

"Wait," I call out, turning to see a crush of red masks and neither of my friends. "Where's Jenna and Vonnie?"

"At the bar," Todd's voice says from behind the mask nearest me. "They'll bring their drinks through here when they're ready." He raises his mask, wiping sweat from his brow. "I gave them the directions."

The words should be reassuring but instead they drip another layer of fear along my tingling spine. His eyes are flat and cold. As I stare at him, they seem scarcely human.

"It's set up for selfies," Finn says, swerving me away from Todd to tuck me under his arm. "We can all get some great shots and make the rest of the school look like amateurs."

As we move farther inside, I steal frightened glances around the decorations, unease increasing at every snatched image.

Along the walls are chains, manacles, some with skeletons dangling from their rusted iron bracelets. A large shadow moves across the corner of the room, something far bigger than a bat being drawn on a string.

In the centre are stocks, the old wooden boards sitting open, ready to entrap its next victim. Beside it is the matching pillory, the neck and wrist holes gaping like open mouths.

Each direction brings a worse surprise. None of the items look like playthings, staged to cause a fright. A rack in the corner looks like its gasping for its next victim, like having tasted the glory of a live body being twisted into disfigurement at least once, it's ready for more.

I instinctively cling closer to Finn, shoulders shaking when that shadow moves again, snuffling sounds filling the room as our echoing footsteps cease.

“Fuck me,” Todd says in strangled admiration. “This is some next level Halloween shit.”

“Ooh. Look at the doggy,” a hockey-masked boy behind me says, moving over to pat the head of the creature skulking in the shadows. “Why would someone leave this little cutey here? Who’s a good boy?”

The dark furred hell hound steps into the light as the boys coax it into play. It stands two feet high at the shoulder, dark hair gleaming with the good health of a careful owner.

Okay, it’s not a hell hound at all. With its large paws and eagerness, I doubt the dog is long out of puppyhood.

Finn jerks his head at Todd, and he moves, snapping his fingers in front of the animal and shooing it from the room.

I wish I could follow it to safety or that Finn could be that easily dissuaded from his plans. Instead, he grips my wrist tighter, then pulls me hard back against him, both of us facing forward, his arm clamped so tightly across my shoulders, I can barely move.

“Who’s up for a photo?” he asks with forced jollity. Then, when a volunteer steps forward, he gives a menacing chuckle. “Into the stocks!”

My stiffness slowly eases as the boy gets into position, the large wooden beam trapping his legs while some of his friends pick up foam fruits and vegetables, pelting him with the soft replicas while others take photos, and he tries to bat the projectiles away.

“You want to try?” Finn asks in a voice meant just for me to hear.

There’s a softness to his tone and his arm is no longer a metal band over my chest, becoming warm and pliable. He’s teasing but in a nice way, not the sharp manner he sometimes has.

I want to encourage the change in behaviour by joining in, but I’m scared. My instincts are screaming.

It’s silly. We’re at a party. Everyone’s having fun. My friends are downstairs getting drinks and will join us at any moment.

There’s nothing to be frightened of, except for the decorations, which were built that way on purpose.

But experience twists his sweet words into arsenic laced candy, a treat with deadly repercussions. My friends are in the building, but I don’t have an ally in this room. Just two boys who’ve hurt me before, one of them armed.

“Maybe later,” I whisper back, the breath in my lungs disappearing as I wait to see how the refusal lands. Then I have a moment of inspiration and turn to tease him. “What about you? I wouldn’t mind a few shots of you in manacles, you naughty boy.”

The change in him is immediate. Any remaining menace evaporates in an instant and he laughs, really laughs, not the hideous chuckle he makes when something hits him the wrong way.

“You fancy yourself as a torturer, do you?”

“I don’t need to torture you,” I respond, falling into the game with relief. “Unless you’re determined not to give up your secrets.”

His arm loosens and I slip from his hold, bouncing over to where a large leather whip is curled atop an aluminium bench, the sink old and chalky where limescale coats the surface. I give it a test snap, the leather thong longer than I first thought, bouncing on my toes in delight as it cracks the air.

“Wow. Guess the dungeon’s got a sexy new mistress in charge,” he teases, light on his feet as he crosses to the wall, staying out of the reach of my new favourite weapon.

Finn inserts his hands into the metal rings, gripping hold of the chains above because they’re too loose to contain him. He shakes them, the metal rings clanking against each other like harbingers of doom.

“Confess,” I shout, my voice louder than I meant it to be. When I snap the whip, a couple of boys move away, laughing uneasily.

It feels like power, and I love it.

The whip cracks again, my eye carefully measuring the distance, so it doesn’t accidentally hurt someone. A laugh bubbles from my chest, the sound a joyful counterpart to the absolute gloom of the room.

“Hey, pretty lady,” Todd says, grabbing it from my hand while others raise their voices in protest. “I think you’d better be careful playing with these things. They’re not toys.”

My skin crawls at his unwelcome touch, then a soft foam tomato hits against the side of his head, lessening my revulsion, twisting it into mirth. His illusion of control shatters. I can’t hold back a giggle but cover my mouth with both hands, my shoulders shaking.

“Get the pictures,” Finn orders me and I’m happy to oblige, taking half a dozen burst shots with my phone.

“Not with *your* camera,” he scolds, smirking as I draw near and put my hand into his jeans pocket to pull his phone out. “While you’re there...”

“Nope.” I say firmly, walking back a metre to get some shots with his device, taking them from a couple different directions while he mugs, poking his tongue out, rolling his

eyes back until they only show whites, shaking his head until his hair sticks out in all directions.

I forgot how much fun he could be when he wants to. It's been so long since he wanted to be this way at all.

There's a twinge of guilt that I cheated on him, but it's barely there, gone the instant I try to examine it. We're over at midday tomorrow either way, and I no longer believe Finn cares for me. Not in that way. Not as a boyfriend should care for his girlfriend.

A fact I've spent too much time and energy avoiding, even when he invited his friend to share against my explicit wishes.

He mugs for the camera, pulling ten different faces in as many seconds, making me laugh and struggle to capture each one before he moves to the next. There's a small ache of sadness that this wasn't a larger part of his personality.

But it's past time to call this thing.

"I need to break up with you," I whisper, well below an audible level, the words a test run just to see how they feel in my mouth. "We're not a good fit."

When a shiver runs through me, I look upward, seeing Todd's eagle eyes fixed to my lips. I see him flick a glance at Finn whose smile is still in place but now with a hard edge. He slides his wrists free of the manacles and I have the horrible sense he heard. Somehow, he heard.

But then he laughs as another boy tries out the pillory, his neck almost too large for the carved hole, his wrists caught as the board comes down to kiss against its neighbour, trapping him in between.

"Ahh," he faux screams, wriggling his hands and shaking his head. "Let me out. I'll be good if you just let me out."

"Heads up, Nate," a boy yells and the one in the pillory glances over just in time to get a foam tomato smack in his face.

"Oh," he yelps in surprise. "Don't throw them that hard."

“You should be grateful we’re throwing the foam ones,” his friend counters. “You think I didn’t see you making a move on Valerie after I specifically called dibs?”

Another foam fruit hits him, bouncing harmlessly away while the restrained boy collapses in hysterical laughter, struggling to raise the beam, then dancing out of reach. “She’s going out with Morgan, you dick. Dibs hardly count.”

He bats the next foam vegetable away, then runs to gather up those already thrown, pelting them back at his friend until both their aim is ruined with laughter.

“Get in there, Todd,” Finn says, jerking his head at the contraption. “Pretend you’re a thief. It shouldn’t be too much of a stretch.”

There’s something tangled in his words but I’m just glad to move past my earlier awkwardness. Of course, he didn’t hear me. Finn doesn’t hear me even when I shout in his face.

I try to find my earlier smile, recreating it with none of the joy, the warmth. When Todd waggles his hands and head in the pillory, I join in with throwing a few of the foam toys, my aim atrocious and my propulsion so weak they wouldn’t hurt even if they hit the target.

Finn stands back, shaking his head, cracking jokes, taking pictures. There’s no longer any sign he overheard my whispered words.

A boy nearby climbs the dangling chains until he reaches the ledge of a high window. He balances on the edge, walking the two metre wide ridge before scampering down the dangling skeleton on the other side, earning himself a forearm and hand for the trouble; a new weapon he immediately turns on Todd’s arse.

The half-moon creeps across the window, illuminating the room past the candles and glowsticks mounted around the walls. It raises my spirits as I stare at it, then jump when Finn grabs me around the waist and spins me in a circle. “Your turn.”

“Oh, I don’t—”

He drags me over to the restraints, levering up the beam to release Todd, cackling when he nearly trips over the foam toys scattered around. “You’ve been convicted of lewd acts,” he says, then chortles like a maniac. “Into the stocks.”

I rest my neck and wrists on the carved base beam, smiling nervously as he lowers the top down, trapping me there. When I try to pull my hands out, they don’t budge, even though I’m far tinier than the occupants so far. My head can’t move either, the top beam hitting against a knobby bit of my spine.

“Doesn’t she look good?” Finn asks Todd who comes over to stand beside his friend, putting an arm around his shoulders while they purse their lips and stare at me. “What’d you reckon, fellas?”

He throws the question out to the group and the other lads stop experimenting with the devices on offer, gathering in a semi-circle while my temples pinch with unease.

I try to lift the top beam with my neck, but it’s stuck fast. When I swivel my head to the side, I see why. Unlike when the other students tried it, a bronze band has been slid into place, holding the two boards together.

Panic grips me, squeezing all the air from my lungs, making my eyes bulge and my pulse race with adrenaline.

“Aren’t you taking a picture?” I ask, trying for normality. Still trying to convince myself this is a photo opportunity. Not an elaborate trap.

Then Finn squats in front of me, eyes level as he cups my cheek, running his thumb along the rise of my cheekbone. “You want to break up with me?”

Every bit of me freezes. I can’t function. Can’t breathe. Can’t talk. Can’t blink.

“Guess she’s a single lady again,” he calls to the room, and the gathered boys greet it with jocularly while dark spots dance in my vision and my ears buzz with static. “Anyone have ideas of what to do with her?”

“I know a way she can get you over your breakup,” Todd says with a laugh, reaching for his zipper and undoing it, the

metal teeth unlocking as his erect cock strains for release. “You want to take turns or is it all hands on deck?”

“No,” I say, the word barely forming between my stiff vocal cords and my lack of air. “No.”

And Finn pretends not to hear me like he always does, except for the whisper on the one occasion I didn’t want him to listen.

And that twists the knife. Brings my fury bubbling to the surface.

“No!” I scream, then scream again, and again, until I run out of breath, then again as soon as I can. As soon as I gulp sufficient air into my lungs.

“Let me out of these fucking things,” I shout when my shrieked repetition fails. My wrists tug until they wear red bracelets of chafed skin, my skull protesting as it whacks against the unrelenting solidity of my wooden restraints. “Let me go.”

Finn moves away from me and there’s a tiny bud of hope, but he’s just fetching a stepping stool, positioning it in front of me. Once he climbs on that, his crotch will be at my head height.

And not one boy in the room moves to help me. Not one moves to leave. My screams don’t puncture their conscience.

It’s like I don’t exist as a person at all.

“Since you’re no longer my girlfriend, you can be part of the entertainment,” Finn says, eyes narrowing, not a jot of empathy in their dark depths.

He turns to his friend, passing over a key as he nods at the exit. “Bolt the door.”

CHAPTER NINE

XANDER

MY PULSE RACES AS I SLAM THE BOOT CLOSED, RUNNING around the vehicle for the driver's seat, desperate to get going, to get rid of the evidence, to get back to my girl. I wipe blood from my eyes, the cut on my forehead immediately providing a new stream into my vision.

This time, my stepfather wasn't fucking around. Tonight, he came with a knife.

I'd arrived home to find it held against my mother's throat, the short window of time she'd bought to phone me by barricading herself in the wardrobe, long gone. My stomach had curled, the edges charred by my burning rage.

There are long white spots in my memory, interspersed with freeze frame images of him coming for me, slicing my scalp when I ducked my head to stop him stabbing out my eyes. The knife moves from his hand to mine in one still frame; buried in his chest the next. Me twisting the blade to do more damage.

In the final one, his lifeless eyes stare blankly at the ceiling.

Time jumpstarted back to its usual sequence as I pulled the vehicle close to the front door, as my mother and I hauled the body into the boot.

She's just left, fleeing to establish an alibi far from here. There's no need to run to the safety of a shelter. Not any longer.

I open the garage and stare at the assortment of tools and machinery left there by the landlord. We have strict instructions not to use this part of the property, but I guess my days of rule-following are behind me. I walk along the benches, hefting a hammer, a manual saw, a large chisel, imagining the damage each of them would cause.

Then I see the grand prize. A chainsaw sits on the lower bench, plugged into a charging station. As I pick it up, I smile to see the hundred percent mark on the battery gauge.

I grab a hammer just in case I need to ensure the fuckwit's dead before I carve him into pieces. Once stored in the backseat of my stepfather's car, I pass around the rear of the vehicle, his keys already safely in my pocket.

A text comes through to my phone. My mother.

"I'm in Amberly. I'll grab a cheap room at the pub for the night."

Despite the horrific events of the past half hour, I smile at her message. When I told her to get in the car and go, she didn't hesitate. All going well, I can join her there tomorrow while the police are none the wiser.

If everything goes according to plan, I'll have a special girl on my arm when I do.

There's a pin from Lexa and I click into it, frowning when I see the location high above the city, then smiling.

The road she's on goes higher, joining with the main routes along the hilltop range. There are a million spots up there where I could dispose of my stepfather's body. Every couple of years, someone goes missing and even with dedicated searchers, it can be months before they're found. *If* they're found.

No one's going to find this repugnant excuse for a human being. Nobody cares enough for my stepfather to mount a search.

Two birds with one stone. The evening is lining up again, taking me back to the perfection with which it started. Now I'm thinking of her, I can't wait to get back to Lexa's side, to cuddle her into my embrace.

The journey doesn't take more than twenty minutes, but it seems longer. Every time I stop at a set of lights, I scan the occupants of the surrounding vehicles, wondering if they notice anything strange, wondering if they can sense the corpse hidden in the boot.

At one point, a police car speeds across the intersection in front of me and my mind blanks in panic. It's going the wrong way, oblivious to my presence, but it still sends a nasty jolt to my system.

A few hours and I'll be free and clear of him. I'll check in on Lexa, then take care of business. My mind calms, thinking of coming back to her later, the job done.

There might be questions to answer somewhere down the track, but there are people who can help me with that if need be. A criminal element was in touch a while back, asking questions, feeling me out for a role.

I didn't lean into their overtures so they went away, but I know if I needed to, I could reach out and rekindle their interest. They're not the kind of gang that ever goes away, even if the head of the snake occasionally changes.

But that's a thought for the future. I snap back to the present, eyes on the road in front of me as I curve up the side of the hill. There's a half-empty carpark waiting right where Lexa dropped her pin.

Once through the entrance, I take a moment to adjust to the décor, admiring the labour that must have gone into the extensive decorations, smiling until I glance down at my shirt, streaked with blood.

My red mask is gone. Lost god-knows-where in the tangled events of the evening.

But I decide it doesn't matter. If there was ever a night for bloodstains to go unnoticed, it's this one.

I take a staircase to the upper level, then scan the room, searching in vain for any sign of Lexa's dark braids. Her friends are over by the bar, one looking green and the other struggling to keep her upright.

No sign of my girl. I turn to the right and walk along a corridor, head attuned for any sound that whispers of her presence.

Around the corner, a dog stands outside the door at the end of the hallway, ears raised on alert. It doesn't appear vicious,

but I still keep my distance until the last moment. When I twist the doorhandle, it won't budge. Locked from the inside.

I press my ear against the door, the metal cool to the touch, old paint—probably lead based—flaking away in long strips at the edges, bubbling in the middle.

There's no reason to think she's in there but my soul screams that it's true.

I yank at the handle again, kicking at the base when it doesn't give. I can't pick locks and have no clue where a spare set of keys would hide out, providing there is one.

The dog nudges the back of my knees with its head, then skitters away when I try to give him a pat, slinking along the corridor and out of sight.

I move back to the bar area, scanning the crowds for someone who looks like they might be in charge, someone with authority, someone who could give me a key to the locked door.

As I pass through more and more rooms, finding nothing but revellers, I try to reassure myself that there might be nothing behind the metal door. It could be marked with a pentagram for fun; perhaps a room where the property owner stored their valued items.

But the logic behind the attempt falters the longer I go without finding Lexa anywhere else. We connected. I felt it to my very soul, and I saw the same reflected in her eyes. She wouldn't have gone somewhere with Finn after that, played along at still being his girlfriend.

And my worry increases. I know from my mum's history, the most dangerous time for a woman in a bad relationship is when she tries to leave.

You don't know that it's bad.

Except I do and there's no one more to blame than myself. My mind fills with the recording from the cafeteria. One glance from Todd and her body radiated tension, vibrating with distress until she bolted from the room.

The images fill me with panic. Something is *wrong*. This is my *job*, far more than the work I'm paid to do. I swore to keep her safe.

"Excuse me?" I snag a nearby man in his thirties, thinking that's as good a place to start as any. "Are you the owner?"

He jerks away. "Fuck off."

My aggression levels climb in tandem with my anxiety. It takes far more self-control than it should not to punch him. But I move onto another likely target, this time clutching their upper arm so they can't leave as easily. "Do you know the owner?" When the stranger stares blankly at me, I add, "There's someone in danger. I need to get into a locked room."

They shake their head. "I'm just here with my mates. Buggered if I know who's running it."

And when I turn to ask another partygoer, he calls over to a friend. "Hey, Derek. Who's throwing this party?"

The query echoes around the room but returns to me with no one the wiser.

"Sorry," the guy says, shrugging before he makes a beeline to the bar.

Downstairs, I try the doors on the ground floor, hoping to find an office, a reception area, something of use. All I find is an unattended cloakroom where a few partygoers have trusted their jackets to luck.

Nothing else. Nothing helpful.

I move outside, picking up speed, jogging back to the car. There's a spare tyre and changing kit in the boot but I doubt it's worth the trouble of moving the body to get it out.

The hammer. I fetch it from the back seat and heft it in my hand. Great for threatening someone or slamming it into a rando's head, less likely to get me through a locked door. I toss it back and slam the door, staring around the grounds before I turn back to the building.

With each second, my pulse increases. Adrenaline pumps through my system, needing an outlet, begging for someone to

fight. My eyes feel too large, bugging from my head as I scan the outside of the building, trying to match it to the internal map.

There's a window, halfway up the side. My spatial awareness insists it must lead into the locked room.

I run over, staring at it from below. At three metres above the ground, there's no way I can climb the smooth wall to reach it. Even if I could, the narrow ledge looks perilous. I could easily make a misstep and plunge straight to the ground.

You don't even know she's in there. Don't do something foolish. Your mother's counting on you.

But my mother's free from imminent danger. Until I know Lexa is as well, she takes priority.

I should never have left her.

What was I thinking?

I run around the perimeter, staring upwards, trying to create a plan with a brain stuck in a hamster wheel—running at the speed of light and getting nowhere.

I need a ladder.

There isn't one here.

It's not something I can MacGyver together from the contents of my car.

Inside. I should go inside and start asking again. This time ask if anyone's seen her. She might have gone home. She might be waiting safely in her bed.

The dull beat of doom pounding inside my head doesn't think that's likely.

The roof. I see a trellis leading to the roof. From there, it's a metre and a half drop to the ledge.

Along with my stepfather and the chainsaw, I bundled a tarpaulin and a length of rope into the car.

I run, not allowing time to second guess myself. With a quick glance that no one's nearby, I open the boot, pawing past

the dead weight of the body and grabbing what I need. After a second's hesitation, I sling the chainsaw over my back, tightening the harness strap to keep it steady.

Over my other shoulder, I toss the rope and run back to the trellis, grabbing at the decaying wood and sending up a prayer.

CHAPTER TEN

LEXA

MY HEAD BLANKS WITH PANIC, DISTRESS CHOKING ME. I BARE my teeth at Finn, but it just makes his grin wider. The few others I can see are glued to him, watching his every move, waiting for direction. Someone behind me gives a mocking snort. Another clangs the chains dangling from the walls.

He stands back, making sure I'm watching as he pats the bulge from his jacket pocket. His voice rises and falls in a sing-song manner that sets my teeth on edge. "Once we've all had a turn or two with you, how about I leave you here with the gun? By that stage you'll be better off with a bullet in your head."

The taunt sends a river of panic twisting and turning through me. It's exhausting, rampaging through my body, setting every cell of me to high alert when there's not a damn thing I can do to help myself.

Tears roll down my cheeks, an impulsive attempt to gain sympathy, which backfires. "Oh, are you upset, dear?" Finn says, mocking me. "Should we go back to the bar area and fetch a couple of your friends?"

The threat makes my insides curl. I wonder if I hadn't turned up at Kingswood when I did if it would be Jenna trapped inside this contraption instead of me.

Except she's too smart for that. Far smarter than you.

His snort of laughter is echoed amongst his friends. If they are friends. More like hangers-on who enjoy riding coattails, too stupid to think of their own pleasures so they indulge in the ones Finn provides.

I flinch and give a squeal as someone touches my leg. Rather than dissuading the roaming fingers, the hand moves higher, sliding between my thighs as the fabric of my skirt drags against my legs.

“Let me go,” I beg, my voice hitching as sobs catch me off guard, tears still pouring forth though they’ve already proved their uselessness. “Please, Finn. I won’t tell anybody.”

“I don’t care if you tell anyone or not.” He crouches in front of me again, staring into my eyes, catching a falling tear with his thumb.

His eyes are dead. Soulless. He doesn’t have empathy any more than he has a conscience.

The only person who matters in Finn’s world is Finn.

I close my eyes, then open them, scanning the edges of my peripheral vision, hoping to see someone I can appeal to. Someone with a better nature who might break the spell of his command for long enough to get me the fuck out of this situation.

All I see are mindless followers, looking to him for hints of how he wants them to behave, then dancing to his tune like loyal monkeys.

Worse, at the very edge of my vision I see Todd, standing with his cock still sticking through his open zipper, stroking it as he watches me. Jerking himself off to my helplessness. My inability to resist.

“Does your girlfriend know where you are?” I call to him, hoping to shame him, to bring him out of whatever spell Finn has him under.

But Todd laughs, shaking his head. “Jenna doesn’t mind me sleeping around. She’d rather I stuck it in some whore than bother her three times a day.”

My throat clutches, nausea churning in my gut. I still haven’t eaten unless the fruit in the cocktails I drank earlier counts. No lining in my stomach and I’m not an experienced drinker.

I close my throat, screwing my eyes shut as I fight to keep everything down where it should be. If I throw up now, it’ll enrage Finn and he’s already deranged, another screw loose will just add impetus to the ways he already intends to hurt me.

“Don’t cry, sweetheart. I’ve got exactly what you need, right here.”

I open my eyes to see Finn’s erect cock right in front of my face. Somebody laughs, a harsh sound with no humour. Images of my father flicker through my mind, a slideshow of horror that I try to force back into its hiding place, but it won’t go. Not now I’m a captive audience. Not when the horror all around me is something he’d probably enjoy.

My lips part, perhaps to utter another platitude, a useless plea for lenience, but what they get is the head of his cock thrusting against them, trying to gain entry, and I whip it to the side, as far as the wooden cradle will let me.

“Are you trying to play hard to get?” Finn asks in a happy voice. “Gotta say, I don’t think that’s going to work out for you.”

I feel hands on my rear again, my skirt lifted to expose the cheeks of my arse, the fancy lace knickers designed more for access than protection.

They offer even less as a finger hooks them to the side, exposing me.

“Your girl’s wet already,” a voice says, oozing with pleasure. It runs from baritone through to soprano and back again, breaking like he’s far too young to have any business here.

There’s a tug at the elastic and soon they’re down at my ankles, giving me a graphic example of the difference between my flimsy underwear and full exposure.

I panic. My mind whites out a little as I pull and tug, whipping my head back and forth until I feel it thump against the wood, my wrists burning where I strain against the enclosure, my desperation no match for its solidity.

“Now, now. You’ll only end up hurting yourself,” Finn croons. “And where’s the fun in that when we’re all ready and willing to hurt you instead? You don’t need to lift a finger.”

He traps my head flat against the board, my neck screeching in protest, the muscles in my shoulder making a

loud pop that makes my nausea surge again, the pain overwhelming.

When I come back to myself, I'm pleading and babbling, snot running from my nose, eyes streaming with tears. A hand caresses my arse, another loosens my blazer, my black blazer that matched so perfectly to the costume in my head I couldn't believe my luck at finding it; especially in an op-shop with a price tag I could actually afford.

But soon it's twisted up around my shoulders. Treated carelessly, like I hadn't stared at it with adoring eyes for a full month before tonight, imagining how it would look paired with my braids and my kilt, thinking how to do the makeup that's now streaming down my face.

And I'm no longer scared. Fury like I've never felt before boils and bubbles through my veins, a flood of effervescent rage so different to my normal temperament it's like seeing the face of God.

"You fucking creep," I shout at Finn, aborting my pleas in a flow of pure outrage. "You wouldn't know how to satisfy a woman so you're full of threats and coercion and stupid, stupid lies that everyone sees through, you pathetic little man. No wonder you had to bring your friend on board. You probably need Todd to hold your hand, to reassure you how goddamned wonderful you are, so you don't break down and scuttle away like the limp-dicked loser you are."

And for a second, limp-dicked is the apt description. His excitement dissipates at the speed of sound; at the speed of my voice hitting his ears, telling everyone in the room exactly what I think of him.

Telling the truth for the first time in forever.

"And Jenna won't put out for Todd because she's secretly shagging half the rugby team. Except it's not a secret at all; anyone can drop by their changing rooms at the end of a match and hear her scream in ecstasy. It might just take you a time or two to recognise the sound because I'll bet money, she's never screamed like that with you."

Finn punches me, my jaw defenceless against the blow, blood and pain flooding into my mouth, whiting out my vision, cotton wool damming up my ear until I can't hear a thing on my right-hand side.

I let my mouth sag open, a line of blood and drool dripping from it in a stream, slowing to individual drops while the pain bites deeper, the numbness coming far too late to spare me from the blow.

“Sure,” I mumble, wincing at the pain but needing to speak more. “Punch the girl who can't hit you back. That'll show all your friends how manly you are.”

Finn's hand moves and I flinch, a whole body reaction that makes every existing injury sing its painful song at full volume.

I spit out the last of my current mouthful of blood when nothing happens. There's nothing I can do about the swelling closing my eye or the cramp that twists a nasty blade deep into the muscle where my neck and shoulder connect.

“Is this how your dad knocked up your mother?” I ask Finn, deciding an aggressive push forward is the only chance of relief. “Did he strap her the stocks and rape her because he couldn't get his dick hard any other way?”

A new palm strokes my arse, sliding between my legs, digging into me, the intrusion painful. I feel it withdraw and then a sucking sound, like the boy's licking his fingers, relishing the taste.

And his laughter afterwards gives me his identity.

“Do you like that, Todd? Do you like the sloppy seconds after an actual man fucks me? Lap up his spunk like a good boy. Bet your daddy's favourite at home.”

This time the punch hits directly on my eye socket. I hear a crack a second before the pain of the injury lands, sending a bolt of pure agony sizzling along every nerve in my face. The swelling flesh and bruised skin nothing compared to the sharp splintering of bone.

A howl wrenches from me; not something I can control. Pain and adrenaline fight for control of my nervous system, chemical warriors battling for the prize belt.

“About time you shut her up, isn’t it?” Todd says, embarrassment and anger pulsing in the low tones of his voice. “We’re here to fuck, not to listen to her foul mouth.”

Finn grabs my face, reigniting every nerve ending, my jaw so painful that when he squeezes it, my mouth automatically opens.

Too late, I understand the dangers of that position. Too late as he shoves his cock into my mouth, not even trying to be gentle, so rough it’s like his own anger has dampened his senses so he’s no longer aware of pain.

The head of his cock bounces off my molars, sliding into the gag zone.

“Open wider,” he says, the words straining to escape through his gritted teeth. “Open your fucking mouth or I’ll punch you again.”

And I try. The impetus to obey so deeply ingrained that my jaw strains against the swollen flesh, dragging at the inflamed tendons, the imprint of my younger self trapped in a state of constant terror, desperate to please.

He shoves forward, no longer gagging but choking, the swelling of my nose enough to smother me.

There’s nothing in my head but survival instincts, clashing with each other, defaulting to the baseline as they scramble for a plan.

A slap on my arse sends a new worry spiralling into the morass of stewed emotions. Todd wipes some of my wetness around my hole, forcing his finger inside.

Not that. My wrists burn and ache as I tug them again, fighting a losing battle.

Finn withdraws long enough for me to gulp a breath. My eyes dart from side to side, seeking a path of escape, but all I

see is boys standing, watching, voyeurs to the play unwinding in front of them, front row seats to a porno show.

One boy strokes his cock, unbuttoning his fly to grab it in his fist.

Horror floods me.

They're not watching a show.

They're waiting their turn.

My eyes dart upwards, catching the window from their periphery, seeing something that could be a shadow, could be a figment of my imagination, could be a dream.

A highlight roll of my evening with Xander plays out, showcasing everything I've ever wanted in a partner. His attentive eyes, the beautiful twists of his scars. The tenderness of his touch, akin to worship.

A boy who only wants to protect me, to please me.

I want that.

I *deserve* that.

Those wishes and dreams spur me on, compel me to fight for myself, to use any weapon I can to return to his side, to find my way back to the perfect night we were making with each other.

The anger rebounds, burning away everything else until I'm left with perfect clarity.

I can't free my head. I can't free my hands.

But I have legs.

I clamp my mouth shut and kick behind me, barely connecting but having a rush of savage pleasure at Todd's yelp. I try again, aiming at a different spot and getting him harder, feeling the crunch of his kneecap under my heavy boot.

The shadow snags my focus again. I hear a boy call out, "What's that?"

A thump sounds above me as Finn nudges at my lips, slaps my face, then pulls the pistol from his jacket pocket.

A boy yelps with surprise, stepping back from my line of sight as Finn lays the barrel along my cheek, the metal grotesquely warm from nestling against his body. “You open your fucking mouth, or I’ll shoot you and we can take turns fucking your corpse.”

Fear loosens my jaw and his cock surges into my mouth again. Behind me, Todd places his hands on my hips, holding me steady as he nudges at my arse.

There’s so much pain and fear and anger my body shuts off, going numb. And I wonder why I’m trying to save my life when there’s nothing here for me. I wanted a night out to carry me into the darkness ahead and instead I’m being tortured.

Well, fuck that and fuck Finn.

I snap my teeth together, my incisors chomping through skin and flesh and tissue. My molars take their grip and refuse to relinquish it as blows rain against my head. A high whine fills the world.

The sweetest sound I’ve ever heard.

A man screaming because of what *I’ve* done to *him*.

He staggers, then his feet slide from the stool, his body crashing to the floor, his penis tearing off in my mouth.

A gunshot rings out and I tense, expecting to feel the pain or stop feeling anything at all.

But another boy screams. To my ringing ears, it sounds like Todd. When he falls silent, others take over, an exhilarating chorus. I hear his body thump to the ground.

Granted a reprieve, I chew, my molars mincing Finn’s dismembered dick, ensuring he can’t just go to the hospital and reattach it.

My stomach rebels and I spit it out before it can choke me, coughing and spluttering, his blood and my blood dripping from my sagging mouth.

A window smashes above me, glittering shards of glass tinkling to the floor as a figure jumps from the ledge, an electric chainsaw roaring to life in his hands.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

XANDER

I LAND HARD, LURCHING FORWARD TWO STEPS BEFORE I FIND my balance, sweeping the thrumming blade of the chainsaw ahead as a boy runs towards me.

My smile is wide and vicious as I step forward, enjoying how his savage grin falls away, how he abruptly reverses direction, scrambling for the door. For a second, I worry he'll escape, then he plants his foot against the wall and tugs, the endeavour fruitless.

The door is locked.

We're all trapped in here together.

I laugh, the sound bouncing off the stone walls.

A foot away from me, Todd lies slumped on the floor. A river of blood stains his chest. I think he's dead then his eyelids flutter.

I lower the blade of the chainsaw, cutting straight down the middle of his head.

The machine whines as the teeth catch on the hard bone of his skull. Flecks of blood and brain matter spray across my lower legs.

When its motion stutters, I put my foot on Todd's shoulder and tug, my smile broadening as it comes free and more splatter flies in the air.

Fucker touched my girl when she didn't want him. I step on each arm slicing through his wrists, the vibrations shaking through me as the whirring chain cuts through joints and tendons and bone. The blood sprays and the chunks of flesh fly, the scent of a fresh kill thick in the air.

I cut off his hands because that's a fitting punishment for a thief. A boy who stole touches from a girl who didn't want him.

And when I'm done, enraged that it was so easy, brought so little satisfaction, I shove the nose of the saw in his mouth, tearing through his lips, loosening teeth. Shoving it deep into his throat until the blood would choke him, the metal chain would choke him if he still drew breath.

Around me, red-masked boys scream, running in circles, piling up behind the locked door.

In my derangement, I could go after every one of them, teach them all a proper lesson.

Instead, I stride to the pillory and unhook the bronze fastener. The chainsaw falls silent, and I swing it onto my back, raising the beam and pulling Lexa into my arms.

Her face is swollen. Blood streams from her mouth

Guilt swamps me. I should have taken her with me, kept her under my protection even if it seemed a far more dangerous option at the time.

As my eyes investigate each wound, I feel her pain a hundred times over, my empathy slammed to maximum volume. Too much to bear. Only her responding touch as she hugs me back offers me a path to redemption.

Beyond her, Finn lies on the floor. His fly is open, arterial blood pulsing from the stump of his severed penis.

Pride swells in me that even when caught in this trap, my girl gave as good as she got. Defending herself before I could raise a hand to protect her. I would take the chainsaw to him, but vengeance belongs to Lexa. She's the one entitled to decide his fate.

I cup her face between my hands, careful not to exert any pressure, wary of her beaten and battered flesh.

"You came back for me," she whispers, those wide-set eyes glistening with joy and relief.

"Of course, I came back." I rest my forehead against hers and close my eyes. All my attention focuses on her. "You're my girl. I'm so sorry I left you alone, I—"

I shake my head as the words buffer. All my apologies. Regrets.

Anger surges, directed at my stepfather. The selfish arse whose actions tore me away from Lexa.

The selfish arse now in the boot of my car.

“Where are you hurt?”

She shakes her head, hands linking behind my neck, causing a new surge of emotion to warm my chest. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll heal.”

A shoulder slams into me, the tackle making me stagger. Lexa draws her leg back and kicks the attacking boy in the groin, doubling him over.

I laugh in appreciation, then press the button for the chainsaw to fire into life. I turn, facing the bulk of the imprisoned teenagers.

They’re all wearing the red masks. The same one I wore tonight.

A sickening thought occurs, that Finn planned this. He hand-picked his tribe. If there’d been anything left of Lexa tomorrow, no doubt they would band together, spouting alibis until each one of them was in the clear.

The fury is huge but taking out my anger on these miscreants isn’t the prize.

The love of my sweet lady is the only reward I want to claim tonight.

“You want to kill all of them?”

Lexa laughs, the sound merry and joyous. A perfect counterpoint to their screams and wails. She claps her hand and another of the boys rushes me, stopping a few inches short of the churning blade, face twisted with frustration.

I lunge, making the boy shriek, making him scamper back in retreat. His cheeks colour as the crotch of his pants turns dark. Shaking at the encounter, he retreats further. His grand gesture over before it began. Hands raised in surrender.

They can't be armed, or they would have come for me. A smile lights my face, my twisted wreckage of a face.

"Maybe they just need a fright," Lexa suggests with her kind heart leading the way. "To make them think twice before they scare another girl. You." She points her finger at a quivering mass of useless testosterone. "Come over here. Put your hand on the beam."

The boy drags his feet, and she lunges forward, teeth bared, making him jump. When he still doesn't hurry, her eyes scour the floor, hands plucking Finn's gun from the mess and aiming it at her target.

"You can get your arse over here or you can get shot."

He walks over, face miserable with fear. "Put your hand on the pillory," she says, then shakes her hand. "No. Not your whole hand. Choose a finger."

I flash her a wicked grin as the boy stares in horror, complying only when she jerks the barrel to hurry him along. He lays his pinkie on the beam, and it barely takes a touch with the chainsaw to send it spinning to the floor.

He spins in the opposite direction, whimpering. Face drained of colour. His injured hand clasped to his chest.

Lexa shoves him farther back, giving a come-on gesture to the next boy. "Your turn."

Each boy reluctantly steps forward, whole bodies trembling, their shrieks drowned out by the roar of the chainsaw. As each falls away, clutching their wounded hands to their chest, their features twist with pain and shock.

"We're going to let you go," she calls out when the last one is done. "And if any of you even think of saying a word about what happened here, your DNA is going to turn up places you wish it hadn't."

Their blank expressions tell me the message hasn't landed, so I rev the chainsaw. "Say anything and I'll come back and finish the job."

Lexa crouches next to Finn, taking the door key from his pocket. She advances on the group, and they give her space, none of them showing any signs of attack.

When she unlocks the door and throws it open, they shuffle past. Each bowed head whispers a thank you as they pass, followed by footsteps running along the hall.

Alone except for the bodies, I switch the chainsaw to my back and walk over, taking her into my arms and pressing her back against the door to close it. “You’re okay?”

She nods, tugging at my shirt until I lower my head.

Our lips touch and a bolt of pleasure shoots from head to toe. I cup her head so she doesn’t bump it, trying to be gentle with her split lip, her battered face. But need overrides my impulse control and Lexa gives back as good as she gets, fingers curling in my hair, dragging me closer when I try to back away.

“I want you,” she gasps when I come up for breath. Her hand cups my jeans, rubbing me through the thick fabric. “Trap me again. I want to be helpless while you take whatever you need from me.”

But I can’t put her back where those boys put her. I twist her to face the door, my breath hot in her ear as I tug up her kilt, sliding my hand between her legs as her hand reaches behind her to pull my head down to her shoulder.

She tugs me down to bite into the curve of her neck, hearing the sob of release as she bumps her arse back against me, a warning to hurry, her spare hand bracing her against the metal door.

I free myself from my jeans, guiding the head of my cock to where she’s wide and wet and waiting for me. When I sink into her, she moans, turning her head so her cheek rests flat against the cracked and peeling paint. “So good, Xander. You feel so good.”

And my hand goes around her throat, easing her into place so I can suck her earlobe into my mouth, lick from the ball of

her shoulder all the way along to her neck, fastening there, grazing my teeth against her tender flesh.

The clenching of her walls around my cock is ecstasy. I'm high off the scent of blood in my nostrils and the heat of her warm cunt and the slippery sounds as I thrust into her, flesh clapping together as I lift her skirt out of the way, one hand delving past the door to cup her pussy, splitting her wide with my fingers until I can arch along her folds, circle her throbbing clit.

She pushes back against me, urging me deeper, so deep I feel lost inside her, drowning in her warm ocean.

Her hand leaves my head, instead taking the hand clenched around her throat and pulling it down to her breasts, encouraging me to squeeze them, caress them, nipples pebbling against my palm, her back arching as I pinch at them, teasing them with my fingertips.

The rush of killing, of cutting, of maiming elevates the thrill that grips me as I plunge in and out of her, our bodies joining in ecstasy, the breath stolen from my lungs as my muscles tense and release with each thrust.

I grab her thigh, lifting it higher, spreading her wider, catapulting forward at her resulting moan, her friction driving me insane, whitening out every thought until all that's left are the frantic moves of an animal, desperately joyful, full of craving, full of need, even my breath ceasing in the chaotic tumble towards my release.

"Are you ready?" I ask, my fingers finding their own answer as I circle and stroke her clit, draw my finger along her slippery creases, going farther to rub the flesh where my cock pounds into her, increasing the sensation as her muscles clench and hold, squeezing so tight it blinds me.

A gasp catches in my throat, pulse thumping in my ears, all the sounds and sights and senses focused on our connection as her cunt flutters with her imminent orgasm and my last thrust catapults me past the edge, weightless for a split second before I go plummeting to earth, feeling the thrill, the exhilaration as

my cock twitches and my cum shoots inside her, the only place it ever wants to call home.

For long moments there's nothing in the world except Lexa, her spent body sagging, caught between me and the door, my arms stretching around her, holding her safe as my cock slips from her body and I pull her skirt down, modesty exerting its call far too late.

She giggles, palms flat against the door as she tries to find her footing. When she turns, the widest smile lights her bruised face. Her head sags back on her neck like the vertebrae have forgotten how to fit together, eyes staring into mine.

"That was..." and she dissolves into laughter, lifting her arms above her head, then hooking them over my neck, bending me down to kiss her even though the contact makes her wince.

"I love you," I say and it's far too early, far too much, but it's been there since the first moment I laid eyes on her. Not in the room but in the lobby, watching her wait placidly behind the monster who fathered her. My eyes drawn to her. Even then, the brightest spot in any room.

And I don't need anything back from her, not more than what she's already given me, which is a thousand times, a million times more than anything I could deserve.

So I spiral into overwhelm when her hand raises to trace the line of my jaw, her eyes lock to mine, and she whispers, "I love you, too," and I can see in her eyes, she means it.

Every cell in my body dances with the news, my soul lifting until my body barely weighs a thing.

She stands on her tiptoes to kiss me again, this time a feather light touch like being stroked by angel wings. I grasp her hand, clutching it close to my chest, close to my heart, feeling my world flesh out until it's complete.

Then Finn comes to, screaming.

CHAPTER TWELVE

LEXA

THE PIERCING CRY MAKES ME JERK, BUMPING MY HEAD against the door. A rush of pure hatred floods my body. How dare that worthless piece of human wreckage interrupt our heartfelt moment?

I pull the gun from my blazer pocket.

This is the last time Finn gets to influence what I do.

Xander takes my arm, pulling me back, and I turn to him, disappointment flooding my mouth at the thought he's controlling me, just like all the others. But when he raises the chainsaw, unhooking the strap, I relax.

He's offering me a better option. He's falling in with my plans, following where I lead, and the trust in his eyes is all I ever hoped for.

"Thank you," I murmur, swapping weapons, surprised by the lightness of the machine.

My eyes scan the housing, reading the labels for the controls, running my fingers over them while Finn wails louder. Even though his cries should be music to my ears, I still find them grating.

Everything about him rubs me the wrong way.

Xander steps back, not interfering, not wrenching the chainsaw away to mansplain the instructions, giving me the time and space to figure it out on my own. Once I understand the layout, I move over to Finn, staring into his face, his pretty, pretty face that hides such an ugly soul underneath. A mask as disguising as anything he could have worn tonight.

"No," he calls out, raising his hands. "Please help me, Lexa. I promise if you take me to hospital, I won't say a thing."

I frown at him, not considering his offer but thinking through other scenarios.

Ten minutes ago, I willingly risked my life rather than let this boy treat me how he's always felt entitled to treat me.

I'm still standing. I'm still alive. With the renewed surge of hope that Xander gives me, my brain thinks in terms of the future. Of what might happen next and where my choices could lead.

"Get to your feet, then," I order him. "If you want to go to hospital, you'll need to walk. I'm not lifting you down all those stairs."

"I can," he blurts, trying and instantly curling into a ball, cradling his savaged genitals and sobbing.

"Doesn't look like you can." I glance at Xander who returns my gaze calmly. He doesn't know where I'm going with this but he's happy to wait until I reach the destination.

Joy fills me to overflowing until happy tears leak down my face.

"Just... I can... just give me—"

"We're not giving you anything," I snap. "Get to your feet now. I'm done playing. Even if I don't chop your head off, you've got a torn artery. It's small so it might take a while, but you'll eventually bleed to death."

"Oh, we should get that on video," Xander says with a laugh, pulling out his phone. "I've never seen a eunuch bleed out before."

His casual tone makes me smile.

"I'm trying!" Finn says, getting to all fours, panting heavily at the effort. "I can do it," he proclaims again while I roll my eyes.

When I move behind the pillory, his eyes beseech me to help but I just give an amused snort, and gather all the pinkie fingers, tucking them into my kilt pocket.

"There's a bin over here if you want to throw them away," Xander offers but I shake my head.

“I’m gonna burn the flesh off then make a necklace to remember the worthless appendages they used to be attached to.”

He laughs in appreciation, nodding his head and moving to stand over Todd’s sprawled body, nudging it with his toe. “Why did you shoot him?”

For a second, I think he’s asking me, but his gaze falls on Finn. “Wasn’t he meant to be your friend?”

“Sorry if my aim wasn’t perfect,” he retorts. “You try getting your dick bitten off and see what your aim’s like, you fucking freak.”

“Watch your mouth.” I stand back, tilting my head as I stare down at him. “You’re not doing too well on the standing up front.”

He gives a strangled cry and launches himself upright, arms held out for balance. The colour drains from his face and he staggers sideways, catching himself on the pillory beam, then pushing away from it with a shriek when he realises he’s got his hand on the blood from his fellow sickos.

“Better,” I say, lifting the chainsaw to rest on my shoulder. “But it’s a long way downstairs. I think it’s probably easier if we just chop you into pieces here.”

“No. I’m doing it,” he shouts, taking a step towards the door. “See?”

“Cool.” I glance over to Xander. “Do you think you could drag Todd all the way outside?”

He nods and I move to stand beside him. It doesn’t matter to me that Finn’s mobile. It’s not like he poses a threat. “I could probably take his head to make him lighter.”

“Oh, yeah?” He shrugs. “You know we’ll be seen. There’s no way to clear all the people from the stairwell.”

“I don’t care about hiding,” I say, then start the chainsaw, cutting through the bone and gristle of Todd’s neck, having to roll him over midway when the blades would otherwise spark against the concrete floor.

Once the head's separated, I bury the blade inside the cut Xander previously made, lodging it deep.

“We’re just going to walk out there, covered in blood, dragging a headless corpse?”

“And we’ll probably win first prize if there’s a costume contest.”

He slips his hand around me waist, hugging me closer. “What happens if Finn gets too mouthy?” he asks in a voice designed to carry. “You want me to shoot him?”

“Sounds like a good plan to me.”

I tilt my face up to his, then lose myself in his kiss, tingles spreading across my body like sparks of electricity.

It’s only time worming its way into my consciousness that draws me back to our task and I reluctantly pull away, hefting the chainsaw and head onto my shoulder, tucking Todd’s severed hands into my pockets. “You ready?”

“I’m ready.”

“You’re walking ahead of us,” I tell Finn. “If there’s a peep out of you at the wrong time, you’re getting kicked downstairs or you’re getting shot.”

He nods, face so drawn he’s aged twenty years.

It seems impossible that we can just walk out of the house, but the only remarks as we trek through the premises are the occasional wolf whistles of appreciation at the level of detail in our costumes. When one masked stranger lurches drunkenly close, I shake the head at them until they stagger away, laughing.

The chainsaw and head are heavy enough to make the trek tiring. It must be a hundred times worse for Xander dragging the full weight of a corpse behind him, but he doesn’t breathe a word of complaint.

A complete contrast to Finn who, even without speaking, makes enough whimpers, groans, and snorts, I’m kept up to date with his pain levels.

But we reach the entrance and from there it's only metres to Xander's car.

"The boot's already full," he says as he clicks the fob to unlock the doors. "Chuck everything in the back seat."

The Finn component of 'everything' mutters dark curses and gives one loud shriek as he bends himself into the seat. Large drops of sweat bead his forehead but he manages a smile as I chuck the head into his footwell, keeping the chainsaw, and taking the gun when Xander passes it to me.

He starts the car and heads along the driveway, pausing at the end. "Where to?"

"Hospital," Finn groans with a tone suggesting Xander's an idiot.

Rude.

"Is this your car?"

Xander's mouth twists into a scowl. "No, it belongs to my stepfather." His eyes meet mine as he adds, "He's in the boot."

There's a hesitant twist to his lips, which relaxes as I say, "Guess he deserved it."

"Guess he did."

I point upwards, not needing another commentary from our only living passenger. Xander nods and makes the turn, taking up farther into the hills.

"You're going the wrong way, dipshit."

I had been going to wait until we found a suitable resting place for the bodies, but Finn's voice is like fingernails on a blackboard. I aim the gun, warning Xander, "This might be loud."

The gunshot to Finn's head is indeed loud. It's also immensely satisfying.

A career trajectory briefly dances through my head. Assassin for hire. I could be the next *Villanelle*.

But the mess and the stench of the gun and the glut of blood and Finn's bowels releasing in his death throes, sway me in the opposite direction.

"We can probably stop anywhere along here," I say when we're high above the city, winding away from the bright lights to the shadowy side of the Port Hills.

Xander pulls to the side of the road, barely more than gravel on clay at this point. "Are you sure you don't want to make one more stop before we get started?"

I stare into the eyes of the boy I love and see his kindness, his thoughtfulness in this gesture the same as I do in every other action he takes.

When I don't answer, when I can't get my mouth to answer, he gently suggests, "Your daddy?"

The old shame surges out of nowhere. My equilibrium destroyed. And I could ask him a hundred questions but the one I settle for is, "How did you know?"

His hands fall to the base of the steering wheel as his kind eyes search my face, testing to see how much truth I can handle.

And he must decide I can handle all of it. That any truth he delivers is better than the truth I had to live.

"On your first night at school, I was in your bedroom. I needed to get into the school after hours and there's a manhole from the crawlspace, right under your bed."

His face gently flushes, showing there might still be some secrets he's keeping to himself. I think of all the nights I've lain awake, listening to the fans, thinking how they sound like someone breathing.

A strange calm falls over me. A sense of peace that those nights I might have been listening to Xander instead.

"Was I in the bathroom?"

He shifts in his seat, eyes briefly breaking from mine. Colour gives him a flush of good health as he forces his gaze back level. "You were sleepwalking."

I open my mouth to say that I haven't done that for years, then close it again because obviously I have. I wrinkle my nose. "Was I babbling?"

"You don't babble." He sounds so offended, I smile. "I needed to leave, and you were in front of the door. I was going to lift you out of the way, then..." He trails off and spends a few seconds making swallowing look like the hardest thing in the world. "You gave me a blowjob."

A snort of laughter bursts from me and I hug myself in surprise. "Sure. A likely story."

"You did!"

I roll my eyes, believing him even as I find the entire story unbelievable.

"When you finished, you said—"

"Wait." I hold up my hand, struggling to hold back laughter. "When I *finished*? Are you saying you came in my mouth on our first acquaintance?"

His expression tells me he'd rather be in a million different conversations than this one. "Sorry."

"Your apology is accepted," I joke, then frown at his continuing discomfort. "There's probably a compliment in there, somewhere."

"Yeah," he says softly. "You deserve all the compliments."

His hand reaches for me, and I take it, cuddling it against my cheek, kissing his knuckles where the skin is crisscrossed with old scars.

My blood runs cold when he whispers, "You thought I was your father."

Tears threaten and I suck them back because I've cried enough tears to last me a lifetime. Alone in my bed, locked in a bathroom stall at school, or huddled in my wardrobe, hoping tonight he won't come home. Or if he does, he'll have picked up some woman at a bar he can loudly fuck in his bedroom instead of coming into mine.

Shame fills me but when I look at Xander again, he shows the same emotion. “I’m sorry. I promised I would protect you and left you to deal with the worst person alone.”

My hand clutches his twice as hard until I can feel his bones grinding against each other. “I’m not alone.”

He nods, misery still suffusing his face.

“I’m not alone,” I repeat. “And neither are you.”

This time when he nods, it’s firmer, more like a promise than a concession.

And I gladly throw the last of my fears away as I answer his earlier question. “Let’s go see my daddy.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LEXA

MY BODY TREMBLES AS WE WALK UP THE SIDE PATH TO THE front door. The suburb is old money. Well-established trees line the wide streets, large houses set far back from the road, with long, winding driveways.

It's strange to be back here. The months away have diminished it, turned it back to normal size instead of it looming above me.

Or perhaps that's the company by my side. All the way here, Xander steered with one hand, the other holding onto mine, giving me reassuring squeezes whenever I grew tense.

Now his arm is loose around my waist, resting on my hip. Blood is smeared everywhere. Xander might as well still be wearing the mask, his face is that crimson.

When I politely knock like I'm entering a stranger's dwelling, my expectations mount a fight with reality. I'm determined, but that mightn't stick long enough for me to do what I have to do. This man isn't just a monster like Finn. He's my father. My flesh and blood.

The footfalls inside turn my stomach into a tight fist, the pain worse than the throbbing from my pummelled head.

My dad throws the door open, stares at me, then stares again, his face undergoing a thousand different expressive changes. Then it settles into its usual rage. "Get inside," he thunders, grabbing my upper arm. "You can't have the neighbours see you like this."

I jerk away but can't loosen his grip. The old inertia grabs me. The seductive call to just give in, to do what he wants so he'll finish quicker, and I can go back to living inside my head.

Then Xander reaches across to clutch my father's forearm. The tendons on his wrist show in stark relief as he tightens his grip, tightens, tightens, then my father lets go of me and

Xander releases him. Dad shifts his stance, rubbing his wrist. “Who the fuck are you?”

I pull out the gun, pointing it at him. My hands want to shake but I force them to hold steady.

I’ve already been through so much tonight, I don’t want to let myself down now.

“Get into the garage,” I tell him, jerking the barrel towards the internal door. “Don’t make a sound.”

Not that it would matter out here. These enormous houses and their old sections are set so spaciouly it’s akin to soundproofing.

I know because of how many times my screams went unanswered.

“What are you doing, sweetie?”

The endearment makes my stomach acid bubble. What should be a soft word is baked hard by the pain he inflicted over long years.

Xander bristles at my distress. “She’s telling you to move. I suggest you obey her.”

My father’s lip curls. “And then what? You’re going to rob me? You think you’re some kind of modern day Bonnie and Clyde?”

“How about I tell you what’ll happen if you don’t follow my instructions?” I shift the grip of the gun between my palms, taking a firmer hold where they’re sweating. “I’ll start a countdown and when I get to one, I’ll shoot.”

He smirks, and the expression fills me with cold rage. Rage and regret that I let him get away with things for so long. I tried once, confessing to a private tutor, but it didn’t get me anywhere. Not when they were on dad’s payroll and happy for a raise to keep their mouth shut.

Now I’m filled with sorrow that I never tried again. That I didn’t understand there were other types of people in the world. People who couldn’t be bought. People like Xander.

People who would believe me and help me, even if they were hard to find.

“Three.”

Fuck starting at ten. I want to move things along.

“Two.”

We stare at each other, his lips thinning where he presses them hard together. Perhaps to stop saying something he'll regret.

It looks like it pains him to rein himself in and I take my first small sip of delight.

The moment my lips part to say, ‘One,’ he retreats a step, then another, finally turning his back on me to walk to the connecting door, stepping into the chilling confines of the garage, the breezeblock walls and concrete floor retaining the cold like it's their sole purpose.

“Now what?” He's immediately belligerent, jerking his chin at me.

He stands on the fancy rug my mother bought way back when I was six or seven. Before she died and things got really bad.

The fancy rug he delighted in laying in the garage so it would be ruined with oil and grease and tyre treads, the hateful, hateful man.

There's no remorse on his face. No sign of concession. “Let me guess. You're going to whine about—”

I shoot him in the abdomen, my gaze fixed to his, absorbing the moment the shot hits, his eyes widening in surprise a second before the pupils contract with the pain.

The puncture wound gapes for a second, a neat hole, then releases blood and stomach acid and shit from his pierced bowels in a wet spurt.

The noise of his screams annoys me far more than the crack of the gun firing. He falls to his knees, and I walk a step closer, this time shooting him in the throat.

His eyes are wide above the glut of blood leaking from his new wound. His mouth opens and closes, no sound emerging, his vocal cords trapped in the carnage.

“What was that, Daddy? I didn’t hear you.”

I get closer to him, close enough to touch as his hand holds his throat, fingers straining to stop his lifeblood dripping free.

“Are you asking me to stop?” I tilt my head to the side, staring at him like he’s a museum exhibit. “Are you trying to say no?”

His eyes are shiny bright, then his eyelids flutter, settling closed as his arm drops loosely to his side a second before he collapses forward, his face making a dull thunk when it hits against the solid floor.

And I’m aggravated that was it, that was all it took after so long spent in misery.

I shoot him again and again until the gun runs out of bullets, then I turn it, smashing it onto his skull, rolling his lifeless body over until I can crunch it into his face, mashing his lips against his teeth, crushing his nose until the cartilage makes the same snap crackle and pop as my favourite breakfast cereal.

When the gun isn’t enough, I lunge for a hammer, hung from its special place on the wall, the outline clearly showing its domain.

I grab it and hit him until my arm grows tired, until I’m breathing in the spatters of blood.

And Xander doesn’t pull me away. He doesn’t tell me to be silent. He rubs his hand on my back to remind me he’s near but lets me scream and crash the heavy tool into my father’s increasingly unrecognisable body.

My twisted emotions shatter into tiny pieces at the same time. Not erasing them but making them smaller, manageable.

Making it so I can breathe.

Finally, I stand, sobbing with exhaustion and overwhelm. I let Xander pull me into his arms, let him hold me steady.

“Is there anything more you want to do?”

I nod against his chest, palms splayed across the warmth of his muscles. I can't believe I mistook him for Finn, not for a single second, not when my ex was the laziest boy alive, and this body shows the effort of years of manual labour.

“One more thing,” I say, drawing back from him and turning again to the wall of tools. This time, I take down the large secateurs used for trimming the smaller branches off trees.

I kneel in front of my father, unzipping him and dragging out his cock.

It's so tiny, I laugh, unable to comprehend how he turned it into another weapon to hurt me with.

It's so tiny, the large gardening tool is overkill, but it does the job.

One snip and his penis tumbles onto the rug, seeming to grow smaller with every passing second.

I have my fingers as trophies. I have no need for another.

With relish, I smash the tiny organ to a pulp with the hammer, giggling and laying my head against Xanders chest, letting him scoop me into his arms when I grow tired.

We stay there, resting, letting the warmth of our bodies feed into each other until we're both ready to move again.

As I pull away, I plant a kiss on the side of his cheek, then my mouth seeks his fat lips, licking them in a tease, entwining my fingers in his hair as he responds in kind.

“Do you want to bring the car closer?” Xander asks when the kiss ends, dangling the keys for me to grab. “I'll get him ready to drag into the seat.”

And we stand, my arms refusing to let go of him though my head tells me I should, that each second we linger is another second where we might be caught.

But he doesn't hurry me along. His hand gently cradles my head, letting me dictate the pace. And the moment I'm ready, I

pull away, clearing my throat. “I’ll toot the horn when I’m close. The door release is the button under the light switch.”

My mind is too light as we load my father’s corpse into the car boot. I stretch my arms over my head, trying to relax the stiff muscles. “I’m going to feel that tomorrow.”

“Good,” Xander says, hauling me to his side. “And I hope every time you have a muscle twinge, you re-experience all the joy of tonight.”

And there is so much joy. I never want the night to end.

We drive into the hills again, finding the same spot as before and adding the new body to our existing tally.

Xander stamps on the dry soil. With Christchurch’s average rainfall half that of the other main cities, the clay is always rock hard. “A grave will take a long time to dig. Maybe six or seven hours and that’s with it being shallow.”

“How much longer will the chainsaw last?”

He checks the battery gauge. “It’s sitting just under sixty percent.”

“Then I’ll strip their clothes off and you start cutting. We can leave chunks of them out for the animals to pick over or toss them into the harbour and let the fish have at it.”

He shrugs and I’m grateful the moon is high overhead as he gives me a deliciously shy smile. “I vote for the fish. They deserve a treat. Birds get all the roadkill so it’s only fair to let them have something.”

Sunrise is teasing the horizon before we finish, the last thing tossed from the cliffs being the heads. All except one. Xander insists on keeping hold of my dad, the cracked and beaten remnants easily manipulated into a reusable shopping bag.

Even though we need to go, even though we should clean ourselves up and get our alibis straight on the off-chance—the faint, faint, faint off-chance—that we won’t be arrested and thrown in jail, we linger, standing arm and arm, looking out to sea.

Finally, when the sun's making the world a brighter place,
I sigh, and we turn back to the bloodstained vehicle, ready to
drive back into the real world.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

XANDER

THE ALARM WAKES ME BRIGHT AND EARLY ON MONDAY morning. I grab a coffee and drink it over the sink in my mother's flat, chugging it back with no regard for taste.

Yesterday is a blur of anxiety and fulfilment. The wonderment of being able to touch Lexa, of feeling the return of my love, fills me to the brim.

I couldn't bring myself to worry as we snuck into her room at Kingswood using the crawlspace, not wanting to have the card reader record her arrival. Or while we stood in the shower, indulging our dirty thoughts while we washed each other clean.

When I drove the car out to an old farm where an estate tussle has kept the land barren for years, only the lawyers winning, I'd felt the heat of the law breathing down my neck. At any moment, I expected a hand to clamp onto my shoulder. For a voice to say, "Well, well, well. What do we have here, then?"

But no touch came.

The car is now a burned-out husk, even the plumes of black smoke not drawing anyone's attention. When it was done, I called my mother to let her know she was safe to return to her flat.

I rode my pushbike back to town, mixing in with a crowd of other cyclists out for their Sunday morning ride, then peeling away to make my way home.

Home to where my mother waited, her expression cautious, like she couldn't quite believe she'd been set free.

"I'll take the blame," she repeated ad nauseum, trembling with the excess of emotion. "If anyone tries to take you away..."

"You didn't do anything," I point out, each repetition dulling the impact.

I haven't told her about the other bodies we got rid of. She deserves to live a life free of worry, not have me drag her into fresh concerns when she's so recently free of the old.

At school, I let myself into the lobby and pick up the list of tasks that automatically get logged against my name. All morning long, I glance over my shoulder. Half the time thinking it'll be the police staring, the other half hoping it'll be Lexa.

But it's always someone else.

At midday, my boss shares his thermos of coffee with me, though decaf would probably be better for my nerves.

I'm draining my cup when I see her.

She's at a bench, eating a sausage roll from the tuck shop, a kiwifruit sitting next to it for dessert. When she glances over, our eyes lock, then I force mine away.

We can't afford to attract attention. I can't afford to be caught staring.

The closeness eats at me in a way it never has before.

By stealing glances from my peripheral vision, I see her leave an empty food wrapper on the table, though she takes the fruit skin to the rubbish to throw it into the green container. With goosebumps spreading along my forearms, I walk over, as casual as I can make it. My hand snatches up the greasy paper bag, smiling at the love heart she's drawn in the corner, at the triple X underneath.

For the afternoon, I'm impatient, waiting for the day to end, for the students to tire of socialising and go to bed. I wait until I can creep into the crawlspace, lift a manhole cover, and accept an invitation to sneak into my favourite schoolgirl's bed.

And as I skulk around the corridors, I hear rumours of a private party, a sanatorium owned by some rich guy in the hills. A rager that grew so out of control some drunk boys formed a cult, cutting off their pinkie fingers as they swore loyalty in some bullshit oath.

I hear the rumours and smile, my anxiety unwinding a little, letting me relax though it's far too early to let my guard down, storing up the titbits so I can share them later with the girl I love.

LEXA

Guilt swamps me when I see Finn's parents in the head's office while I'm heading to the common room. I've been a bundle of nerves all day long, scared at any moment that the long finger of accusation is going to point straight at me.

But nobody in my classes seems bothered that two students are missing. When Todd's parents stride into the lobby an hour later, I find out why.

"They've run away together," Allen, a quiet boy from my physics class, says.

"Who?"

His eyes widen when he turns to see who asked, clearly nervous. "Ah, I didn't see you there."

No kidding. And when his face blanches further, I turn to see Jenna coming up behind me. Her smile's a little strained around the edges but nothing more.

"Have you heard?" she asks, bumping her elbow against mine in a friendly gesture.

"Heard what?"

"Finn and Todd are missing," she says in a whisper loud enough for the room to hear. "The rumour is that they've gone overseas because his dad wouldn't approve."

I feel like I've slipped into the twilight zone. "Wouldn't approve?"

She rolls her eyes. "You know."

"They're gay," Allen says with barely concealed delight. "And Todd's dad's such a dinosaur, it was leave the country or wind up buried beneath one of his vineyards."

It's like they're both pranking me but the longer I stare at them, the more sincere they look.

"But he's dating you," I finally blurt.

“Yeah, but we never slept together,” she says. “I thought it was because I told him I wanted to go slow, but apparently,” she trails off into a shrug, her face alight with the thrill of gossip rather than showing any sign of upset at being dumped.

Then she puts a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. “Surely Finn showed some signs.”

All eyes in the common room suddenly turn to me and who am I to let the truth impede a juicy rumour?

“I’m not meant to tell...” I say, drawing even more attention, mildly enjoying the sensation, being the dispenser of gossip.

“Go on.” Jenna tosses her head and waves Vonnie over when she spies her near the entrance. “Nothing you say will go beyond these walls.”

The walls which currently have half a dozen students doing a bad job at pretending not to eavesdrop.

“Well...” I drop my voice as low as it can go. “Finn was using me as a beard, but I never guessed he was interested in Todd. He never said a thing.” I pout a little. “He should’ve at least told me they were heading away together.”

“I knew it,” Allen crows, rubbing his neck, smiling with satisfaction as he stares at the two sets of parents leaving the school, looking concerned rather than fearful.

“They probably couldn’t risk it,” Jenna says, to convince herself as much as me. “His family has so much money, they were probably scared any hint of their plans would send guards his way, ready to drag him back home.”

“Bet they don’t even report them missing,” Vonnie says. “His dad thinks it’s the nineteen hundreds rather than the twenty-twenties. If the two of them weren’t such gigantic dicks, I’d feel sorry for them.”

The talk moves on while I sit, incredulous.

They can’t really believe this, can they? Even if they do, surely their parents won’t just let it go.

And two days later, I think the game is up. My name is read over the intercom, summoning me to the head's office. I walk through the corridors, scanning for any sign of Xander even though we're both being careful. Neither wanting to drag the other into anything if trouble is coming our way.

Inside the office, I take a seat, hating the transparent walls that turn what should be a private space into a fishbowl.

A man stands beside her desk dressed in a suit, his expression grave, and I know instantly he's police.

"This is Detective Sergeant Wilcomb," the head introduces him. "I'm afraid to say, we've received some distressing news about your father."

I tug my hair over my face, hiding the bruises from Saturday night because my makeup skills aren't quite up to task. Telling my classmates that I slipped and fell when I got drunk has gone unchallenged, but I doubt a detective would let me away with the lie so easily.

But the detective is more focused on the news he's imparting to me than my appearance. He clears his throat before saying, "There's no easy way to say this. We believe your father has been the target of a gangland hit. We've discovered his... body. He's dead."

"Dead?" I grip the armrest of the chair. Xander told me he left the gruesome find in a rubbish bin in the central city, near the bus exchange. A place where discovery was certain. "Are you sure it's him? He should be at home with his new wife."

I wince a little at chucking her into the deep end, but they probably already know of her existence. They're probably tracking her down to impart the same news as we speak.

But the detective shifts from foot to foot, looking even more uneasy.

"We believe your stepmother, Traci Montgomery, is also deceased."

My mouth drops open, face draining of blood. My ears ring until I shake my head to clear them.

This time, my surprise is genuine.

“I thought...”

His keen eyes suddenly focus in on me, and I gulp, finding it hard to swallow.

“He phoned me on Saturday,” I tell him since he’ll be able to find out easily enough. “He said I had to be ready to be picked up from school on Sunday, but he never came. I thought she’d left him.”

“Well, thank goodness he didn’t make the appointment. I think you’ve had a lucky escape.” His hand briefly rests on my shoulder, giving me a reassuring squeeze. “I’m happy to tell you what I can, though we’re holding back several details while we continue the investigation.”

I nod, face blank as he takes me through his limited knowledge.

“Where will I go?” I ask the head once he’s left the office, his card gripped tightly in my hand. “Did Dad cancel my enrolment?”

“You’re paid through to the end of the year,” she assures me. “We’ll protect you from any adverse publicity as best we can.”

Over the next few weeks, the detective grows less optimistic about solving the crime and the rumours about Todd and Finn escaping overseas, hand in hand, harden into fact.

One boy said he’d overheard them in Finn’s bedroom a few days before the Halloween party, going at it. I remember some of his shared details from when they hurt me together, but I prefer the event reimagined into part of their ‘love story.’ I don’t begrudge the fictional Finn and Todd their happy ending.

It’s impossible to know for sure what happened at the party house. Why the police never found the crime scene, why, after the last guests had departed for the evening, no one had reported the blood spatters left from our joint carnage.

When I close my eyes, sometimes I'll play out the scenario I like best.

The one where a cleaner opens the door and sighs at the mess. She mops the floors with bleach, calls a glass repairer to fix the window. She wipes down the chains and the manacles and the pillory blocks, scrubbing away every trace of DNA until even if the police were tipped off and came calling, there'd be nothing to find.

I think of her, standing back with her hands on her hips, smiling at the thoroughness of her work. Smiling at how clean the concrete floor appears now the bloodstains have gone.

Tired but satisfied by a hard day's labour.

At some point, school will finish. I'll have to decide where I want to live; in my childhood house of horrors or in a new property I could buy with the proceeds.

But for the rest of the school year, I'll stay at Kingswood.

And at night, when I go to my room, I let my arm dangle over the side, free of the covers, waiting until a hand grabs hold from the darkness and I haul a dream man into my bed.

EPILOGUE

FIVE YEARS LATER

LEXA

The cracked bark of the tree digs between my shoulder blades as I press against it, my chest heaving, lungs crying out for air. My eyes bulge in the darkness, blood pressure soaring, barely able to hear above the thump of my heartbeat in my ears.

A sliver of moonlight pierces through the trees above me. I blink, scanning the forests ahead for signs of life. The sharp crack of a twig draws my attention, the shuffle of branches as something large moves through them.

Something large like a man.

And I'm running again, my lungs burning, thigh muscles twitching in protest as I force my stride longer, desperate to move faster. I stumble, flying forward, arms lifting to protect my head, body curling as I hit the ground, tumbling onto my side.

I lie there, panting, my body slowly reporting every new ache and pain. I check my belt but the knife's still in its scabbard. With a groan, I roll onto my hands and knees, gradually rising to my feet.

A cry sounds in the darkness and I'm off and running again, chasing, pursuing the target as he stumbles through the undergrowth, as blind in the dark night as I am but twice as confused, twice as panicked.

After all, he's the one running for his life.

I gain on him, even as the branches tear at my hair, rip at my clothing. Even as I misjudge a gap and wind myself on a tree.

Finally, I get a visual. He's hurt, bent in two as he stumbles and staggers, making more noise as his speed drops, our prey running himself to the point of exhaustion.

Then I have to stop, hands braced on my thighs as I regain my breath, giving myself a wry smile. Guess he's running us

both to exhaustion. Luckily, I know Xander always has my back.

As if thinking of him conjures his presence, I catch sight of his glow in the dark tattoo, the UV reactive ink faint but visible, a perfect match to mine.

After playing these games for a while, we've learned new ways to keep ourselves safe, to make ourselves identifiable to each other while we run through the pitch black forest. The forest perched above the harbour, near to where we cut apart our first kills; its watery expanse waiting to accept whatever gifts we throw its way.

Our prey stumbles, falling to one knee and taking an age to regain his footing. My hand reaches out for him, brushing against the back of his collar. Enough for him to yelp, flail behind him to knock me away, stumbling forward again, breaking into his last shambolic bid for freedom.

And I slow. Deliberately letting him gain some ground, Xander in perfect alignment with my thoughts as he always is, his pace measured to mine.

We move wider apart, then angle together as the trees become sparser, as we near a large clearing.

From here, it's just a hop, skip, and a jump to the road.

If our prey makes it there, he'll have a chance at escape.

But the man stumbles again, falling, his head making such a loud thump as it cracks against a fallen tree trunk I wince in sympathy, but that's the only sympathy our victim will get from me tonight.

I reach for his collar, lifting him, dragging him onto his knees while he cries and babbles in the darkness, blood pouring down his head from his latest injury, begging and pleading and crying.

All of it mildly amusing from our side of the game.

"I can get you money," he tries as a final ploy. "So much money. Hundreds of thousands, millions even. Just please"—he joins his hands together in prayer—"please let me go."

“Isaac Frederick Hallman.” Xanders voice booms like a loudspeaker in the still night. “You have one chance to confess.”

“I’ll confess,” he shrieks, not bothering to wait for the rules. A man so used to getting exactly what he wants from life he doesn’t understand patience.

Or the word no.

“She said she was nineteen,” he says, words tumbling over each other in his hurry to spill his guts, to defend his indefensible side. “I didn’t know. She was begging for it, believe me. I wouldn’t have—”

“Begging to be hit?”

I clamp my lips shut a moment too late but sometimes my incredulity overwhelms me. Even after my long acquaintance with self-deluded arseholes, their utter lack of remorse, accountability, or contrition still takes me by surprise.

It’s like there’s one group of people who try to follow the rules, even when it’s hard, and another group who doesn’t realise there are rules at all. Or, if they do, they think breaking them is a game, a privileged honour. That they’re somehow cleverer for doing all the things society dictates they shouldn’t.

Tonight, we get to teach yet another one that he’s not smarter than the folks who toe the line... he’s an idiot.

An idiot who needs to be purged.

“She likes it rough. That’s what she said.” The whites of his eyes gleam in the darkness, trying to catch my gaze like anything I see in them could drag out my empathy.

But I save empathy for my fellow humans. Not pieces of garbage like him.

“We’ve heard your confession and we sentence you...” I glance over to Xander, who shrugs, passing the honour of the declaration back to me. “To death.”

“No. But—”

Too late, the stupid shit realises we're not in the business of leniency. He tries to get to his feet again but a quick slice through both his Achilles tendons puts paid to that, leaving his shrieking in pain, trying to grab at his wounded ankles, then turning, his fingertips digging into the grass, scrabbling at the hardened dirt as he attempts to crawl away.

A few stamps on his fingers with the steel heels of my boots have him whimpering over a new injury. He's barely coherent, the pain overwhelming him like it's his first time in physical distress.

Maybe it is.

Maybe his daddy's millions meant he grew up in a thick coat of cotton wool.

Any pity for his harsh awakening is overrun with impatience. I grab him by the throat, slippery with the spit and slobber and tears and snot that have run down his chin.

I pull my knife from my belt, stare at Xander, then give a nod. He thrusts a knife deep into the man's crotch while I hold him as steady as I can, making sure he has time to feel it, the utter indignity of being injured when no one around you cares. Then I stab my blade into the side of his throat.

A twist as I pull it out keeps the carotid artery from snapping shut. A geyser of blood spurts into the air, a heavy rain that smells like vengeance.

As it sprays again, I release my hold and step back, letting him fall to the ground. He writhes for a second, the last of his consciousness wasted in agony, then he's gone, body still living but brain disconnecting, seeking the warm comfort of the never-ending dark.

My hands grab for Xander, pulling him close, hands sliding on his skin, slippery with blood. I smear it wider, losing the last white patches of his skin to the deep crimson delight.

The smell is intoxicating. A stench of death and desire that combines into one.

As Xander tears at my clothing and I tear at his, we drop to the ground, me pinning his shoulders to the earth as I straddle him, letting him work out what needs to be removed to leave us bare for each other, feeling his fingers press inside me, checking I'm ready—always the gentleman—before he nudges the head of his cock inside me and I slide my body over him, eyes rolling back in my head at how glorious it feels, sliding down, down, down until he's buried all the way inside me, muscles clenching around him to keep him in place.

Discovering yet again that death is a great aphrodisiac and murder multiplies that by ten.

I stab my blade into the ground above his head, grabbing hold of his shirt in my bunched fist and dragging him upright to take my kiss. One hand supports my lower back, then drops to caress my arse. With the other, he lays his thumb along my jaw, his fingers closing around my throat, not yet pulling tight.

After this long together, we know each other's bodies intimately. We each know what the other enjoys, know what moves surprise and delight.

As I rock back and forth on his hard cock, his hand grabs harder and harder on my arse, then he flips me, slamming me onto the hard ground, still buried inside me.

“Do you want me to make you feel good?”

“Mm-hm.”

His mouth finds the hollow of my neck, licking and sucking before his teeth bite into the tender flesh, deep enough for me to wear his mark for days. In return, I reach under his shirt, scoring my nails across the width of his back, digging into his skin hard enough that when I stroke him, soothing the same spot I've treated so roughly, I feel the raised lines that mark my path.

Then we're twisting and turning, rolling across the ground, his snarl in my ear earning him my first orgasm, my muscles convulsing around his cock while he slows, to let me wring every drop of pleasure, then speeds again, seeking his own.

We pin each other in turn, tussling, wrestling. Alternating between me riding to victory, then being crushed beneath his weight.

Teeth tear at my earlobe, tongue licking the blood from my chest, suck at my nipple, grazing it with his stubble until I shriek in pleasure.

He withdraws from me long enough to turn me over, face down on the ground while he lifts my hips up, pausing for a second for my nod before he slams into my ready and waiting body, burying himself so deeply he might never find his way free again.

And when he finds his rhythm, his giant hands burrow between my legs, forcing me harder against him, pushing me into another orgasm while my mouth sags open, waiting until I recover to tease, "Is that the best you can do?"

He growls, dragging my torso upright, an arm pinned across my midriff as he thrusts into me so forcefully that I would bounce if not for the restraint. My hands grab over my shoulders, clutching his head, digging my fingers into his hair and tugging at it, the vibrations from his groan spreading across my shoulders, finding new erogenous zones to light on fire before he runs out of breath.

His fingers find my mouth, probing, pushing while I suck them clean of our kill, lights dancing in my eyes when I take too long between breaths.

"You have one more ready for me?" he whispers in my ear. "Or do I have to force it out of you?"

I gulp in air, hiccupping out a groan as he finds an angle inside me that curls my toes, makes the hairs on my neck stand on end.

"You want one more, you work for it," I say, the words staccato. "Or do I have to do everything around here?"

For a second, he splutters with laughter, his stroke off rhythm as his chest vibrates against my back, the warmest, sexiest sensation in the universe. And as it always is, his joy is

contagious, making me giggle and snort as erotic tingles spread across my body.

My fingers search for his hands, drawing his arms across my stomach as the sharpest part of his chin finds a resting place in the curve of my neck. When he thrusts again, it's slow, lazy, a Sunday morning pace completely unfitting for our bodies, drenched in blood, filled with adrenaline from the chase, but somehow perfect.

And another orgasm canters onto the horizon, readying itself for delivery, making me clench and flutter and moan. This time, he rides there with me, heads side by side as we stare at the lifeless body of an obscene man.

WE DRIVE BACK to town afterwards, listening to the radio news. I stiffen as the broadcaster gives a teaser for the next article: heads washing ashore in Diamond Harbour.

A headline that hits far too close to home.

Xander and I exchange a tense glance as I turn up the volume, waiting for the full report.

And we laugh as it talks of doll heads bobbing close to the ferry landing. Apparently because of a jettisoned container, the remains of which have now been hauled from the seabed, but not before its plastic inhabitants went wandering.

I sink back into my seat, Xander driving, the tarpaulin on the seat catching any drops from tonight's kill. Each year we're more prepared. Every year we worry it might be the last time, but the last time for this would be good, it would be a dream.

The last time would mean there's no one on our radar hurting people.

As it often does on Halloween, my thoughts return to the night when Xander and I first connected and the chaotic year that followed. After months of using their private investigators

and getting nowhere, Finn's parents finally reported him missing to the police.

They called me into a station, asking questions but not seeming to mind when I pointed out my memory was hazy, that the death of my father had overshadowed everything else. The little I said just reinforced the same story we'd gossiped into existence in the student common room.

By that time, I'd left school. My dad's estate hit a few road bumps before it came fully into my possession, but the banks were happy to extend credit to tide me over, their eyes trained on the grand prize.

Xander stayed on at Kingswood for a year or so after, supporting his mother into yet another new rental, one we bought the instant the estate money came through.

He had some lingering entanglements to sort out at the school; contacts he'd made with figures on the wrong side of the law. His exit required gentle handling, but he got out and stayed out.

There's just one lingering strand left between them; a line back in case anyone ever notices his stepfather's missing. A concern that luckily hasn't arisen at all in the past five years.

The car tyres crunch on gravel when we turn off the main road into our driveway. Once we're through the tall gates, I breathe a sigh of relief. No matter how much fun we have in the great outdoors, it's always a pleasure to return to the controlled safety of home.

After we've showered, after making love with slow tenderness while we examine the bruises and scrapes from the night's adventures, I sit at the table, pulling the accounts folder close while my eyes scan the figures.

"Never a night off," Xander murmurs but there's no reproach in the words.

Since my dad's inheritance came through, we've run a refuge, one that operates by word-of-mouth referrals. We care for those who trust us enough to find their way to our door, but we go one better when we need to.

A large chunk of our expenditure is dedicated to surveillance equipment, to investigators, to running down clues and gathering evidence; the goal for it to be presentable in court.

For those assailants who can't be prosecuted, we make sure our suspicions are verified, that punishment is warranted, and then we serve the appropriate sentence outside of the law.

Tonight, once I finish reconciling the statements that need attention, I settle on the sofa with Xander's arms wrapped around me. The forefinger I took from our latest target sits in the garage, its flesh dissolving away until, in a few days' time, I'll be left with nothing but bone.

Another addition to my necklace. A prized possession that almost never sees the light of day, but when it makes an appearance, the effort is worth it.

“Do you want to watch a movie or go to bed?”

I turn, letting my fingers wander along Xander's chin, tracing his scars. “Bed. I'm too exhausted to keep my eyes open.”

“Lucky me,” he murmurs while my eyes narrow.

“And what exactly does that mean?”

He gifts me with a breathtaking smile. “It means when you're really tired, you're more likely to sleepwalk. And when you're sleepwalking, it's always a fantastic time.”

His honesty cracks me up and I succumb to a bout of giggles, turning within the circle of his arms so we're facing each other.

“Guess I should give my subconscious a round of applause.”

Xander arches an eyebrow. “And why's that?”

“It's far better at picking boyfriends than my conscious mind ever was.”

“Yeah, it is.”

He kisses me and somewhere in there, I discover I'm not nearly as tired as I thought.

Thanks for reading!!!

If you enjoyed Lexa and Xander's story and would like to stay up-to-date with my next new release, please join my newsletter at: subscribepage.io/LaylaSimon

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Layla Simon is a fictional entity writing dark romance stories because she keeps running out of books to read.

(and please don't tell her TBR I said that)

She enjoys writing about large dangerous men and tiny feisty woman, possibly because she is neither of those things.

You can check out her available and upcoming titles on my website: <https://laylasimon.com>

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