



DROWN

in

Me

HUDSON HEARTS BOOK 1

NATALIE CLARKE

Natalie Clarke

Drown In Me

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Contents

Author Note

Prologue

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

30

31

32

33

34

35

36

37

38

39

40

41

42

Epilogue

Author Notes and Acknowledgments

Also by the Author

DROWN

in

Me

Author Note

Drown In Me is a forced marriage, soulmates romance and is book 1 of the Hudson Hearts series. It is recommended that this series be read in order.

It is intended for readers 18+ due to explicit sexual content, sexual assault, terminal illness, references to suicide and themes that some readers may find triggering.

Please excuse some British spellings of certain words, please remember I am a British author writing American characters set in the USA.

Prologue

Past

I'm going to die.

I'm going to die...

Those words play on a relentless loop in my brain as the current threatens to drag me under, it's grip on me is too strong, too potent.

"H... Help!" I gargle as my head dips below the surface, the freezing water rushing into my open mouth and down my throat.

My heart thunders heavily in my chest as adrenaline pumps through my veins, fuelling me to fight for my life. It pounds out a rhythm in my eardrums, like my very own countdown. A race against time before it's too late.

My lungs burns like lava, the need to breathe is overwhelming, and the tiny gulps of air I manage to take in as the water laps at my face aren't enough.

I think back to when I was six. My mom used to take me to weekly swimming lessons. Said it was an essential life skill

you might need to use one day and I remember hating every second.

Why didn't I pay more attention?

Maybe if I had, I wouldn't be in this situation.

My arms flail around me, my hands desperately seeking something, anything, I can use to pull myself out. My fingers feel for the thick sheet of ice that covers the surface of the lake, but everything is so cold, so slippery, I can't get a good grip.

It's cold.

I can't get over how cold it is. It seeps through my skin and deep into my bones to the point where everything is numb, every single muscle in my body is seizing up, my joints slowly locking into place from the freezing water that engulfs me, swallows me up and tries to drag me down.

I'm terrified.

It's the first time I've admitted it, but I'm terrified.

Below me is total darkness, which only makes me kick my legs harder to. The dark has never scared me, but it's the unknown of what lies beneath, the emptiness that chills me to the bone, if the freezing water hasn't done that already.

"Help! S... Somebody p-please!" I yell louder, gripping the ice with stiff, numb fingers, though I can barely feel it.

The muscles in my arms and legs burn, crying out for relief but my brain is telling me to keep going.

Today can't be the day I die.

Not like this.

But who will find me?

It's growing dark and the temperature is dipping further below freezing. No one will be out here.

Realisation dawns on me.

No one will be able to find me.

I'm all alone.

I really *am* going to die.

I reach out again for the edge of the ice, clinging on as tight as I can but I'm not strong enough to pull myself up. My muscles are weak, and all of my strength has disappeared.

I need air.

My lungs scream for air as black dots dance in my vision, my head feeling like it weights about a thousand pounds, the pressure almost too much to bear.

My nails dig into the ice in one last attempt to cling to the little amount of life left in me.

“HELP! H-” My fingers slip and my voice is swallowed up by water, my mouth opening as I accept my fate.

I can feel my body beginning to relax as my eyes drift closed, a wave of peacefulness washing over me.

Is this really what death feels like?

Just as I'm about to allow the torrent of water into my lungs, I'm tugged out of the water, and suddenly I can breathe again.

It comes in large gulps like my body can't get enough as I cough and splutter, gasping for air. It's so rich and thick I can almost taste it on my tongue.

Desperate hands claw at my clothes as I'm pulled from left to right, dragged across a hard, cold surface, my body a dead weight, frozen and unable to move.

We come to a stop and I feel a hand on my chest and something warm covers me.

"Can you hear me?" a voice asks. I think it's a woman, or a girl. It's a soft delicate voice, angelic. It comforts me, wrapping around me like a warm blanket.

I try to speak but it comes out as a gurgle, my throat full of water. I'm rolled onto my side as water spouts from my mouth.

"Help is coming. Just hang in there," the voice continues.

I blink against the harsh light that pokes through the clouds above me. I'm lying on something cold and hard, though my head rests on something warm and soft.

"It's going to be okay, I promise." My eyes flick up to where the voice came from, everything blurry but slowly it all comes into focus.

It's then that I see her.

An angel.

1

Gage

Present

Bullies. Just one of the many things that piss me off.

I fucking *hate* bullies. Always have.

Those cowardly bastards who are too much of a pussy to pick on someone their own size that they go after someone smaller, *weaker*, knowing full well their victims don't stand a chance of fighting back.

I've dealt with my fair share of bullies in my twenty-nine years, whether it be at school when I was younger, forced to defend some scrawny kid who couldn't stand up for himself, or some prick and his goons picking a fight with one man in my nightclub just like a couple of nights ago.

I don't tolerate it, plain and simple and it just so happens I'm both lucky, and wealthy enough that I have the means and the power to stop it.

“You seeing this?” Rafe, my brother asks, staring out of the wall of glass in my office that overlooks the large packed dancefloor below us.

Strobe lights flicker and flash in an array of colours while the speakers pound out a heavy beat, the sound below muffled by the soundproof glass.

My hands curl into fists as they rest on my desk, my teeth gritted, my heart pumping a little faster in my chest.

I lied.

There is one thing I hate above bullies. One thing I will not stand for, especially in the city that’s my home, in my *club*.

Wife beaters. Women abusers.

Only the weakest of men feel the need to prove their toxic masculinity by picking on a woman. They clearly have to compensate for their tiny dicks by swinging their fists.

“I’m seeing it,” I reply, my eyes trained on the CCTV feed on my computer screen of a guy in the corner of the club, pinning a woman in a place he assumed no one will notice.

I’ve been watching them for a while now. They’ve been in the club for about an hour and a half, nothing too out of the ordinary, just a guy on a night out with his girl at one of the hottest nightclubs in Halston. Only the woman’s body language had set alarm bells ringing as soon as they sat down at one of the tables. While the guy is big and brash, tossing back beer after beer, the woman remained quiet, her eyes dancing around the room while her body kept still and

hunched, her arms wrapped around her body as though to protect herself. There's no doubt she's uncomfortable here. *Scared.*

He'd only engaged with the woman a couple of times, too preoccupied with the two other guys that sat with them, only now he has her cornered as she cowers away from him, shrinking back into the wall while he towers over her menacingly.

"How do you wanna play this?" Rafe cracks his knuckles, ready to pound the prick into dust.

I say nothing, watching the couple as she recoils away from him as he continues spewing whatever bullshit falls from his mouth.

I'm not unfamiliar with making enemies, and I've got my fair few, it's unavoidable when you're part of one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in the city, and while I've never shied away from a fight, there's one golden rule I will always stick by; women and children are off limits.

Alec and Theo stand against the left wall of my office, their arms folded, their eyes flicking between me and the scene below. They are two of my most trusted men, loyal to a fault. They've been working as part of my security team here at *De La Rosa* for the better part of a year and I trust them completely.

My eyes return to the computer screen and I watch as the prick strikes the woman across the face with the back of his hand and my jaw tightens. I look over to my men, giving them

a nod and in a second, the two of them disappear out of my office door. They know what needs to be done.

“That fucker is in desperate need of a beating,” Rafe comments, unbuttoning his navy tailored jacket and popping the top two buttons of his shirt.

“All in good time, brother.” I smirk.

Rafe is just a few years younger than me and since my father stepped down from the family business, he’s been my partner in all things, sharing the responsibilities that comes with running a Kingdom such as ours.

I’m not a Mafia boss by any means, although we’ve had a few dealing with the local mob once or twice over the years. My family own most of the properties and businesses here in Halston, and with our family being well respected members of the community, nothing happens without my say so.

A few minutes later, Alec and Theo return, the man shouting and thrashing against their hold as the woman trails behind them meekly, though up close I realise she’s much younger than I first thought.

She can’t be any older than my sister, Sierra who’s just shy of turning twenty-one.

“What the fuck is this bullshit? Get your fucking hands off me, man!” the prick shouts as he’s deposited in to the chair opposite my desk by Alec and Theo. He can’t be much older than me, his dirty blonde hair is cropped short and his bigger build does nothing to intimidate me, it’s more fat than muscle.

He exudes arrogance as he straightens his jacket, tossing a scornful glance at Alec.

Rafe holds out his hand to the girl, a small blonde who stands awkwardly, fiddling with the sleeve of her threadbare sweater. “Come on, babe. You’re safe now.”

After a moment of hesitation, she takes it and allows my brother to lead her to the sofa against the window. She sits down next to him and he throws an arm around her shoulders, whispering something I can’t hear into her ear that makes her smile.

“Do you know who I am?” I ask the man in front of me.

“Should I?” he shoots back.

I lean back in my chair. “Yes, you should. You’re not from around here are you?”

“No, I’m from L-”

“Don’t fucking care,” I say, cutting him off. “Do you know why you were brought here?” He shrugs, his indifference only fuels the anger burning in my veins. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s not polite to hit a lady?”

“Seriously? That’s what this is about? *Fuck.*” He goes to stand up but Alec pushes him back down with a forceful hand.

“I don’t tolerate violence in my club, especially when cunts like you think it’s acceptable to hit a woman.” I glance over to the girl, “Who is this man to you?”

Her eyes drop to her lap, her lips sealed shut.

“She’s my girlfriend, man,” the fucker says.

My eyes burn into his. “I didn’t ask you.”

I look over to the girl again, Rafe whispers something to her that I can’t hear and she shakes her head.

“She’s not his girlfriend, bro,” Rafe tells me.

I catch the girl’s eye. “You’re safe now, from here on out, you’re under the protection of the Hudsons. This man won’t hurt you again.”

“Hudson? As in *Gage* Hudson?” the prick asks as recognition dawns on his face.

“So, you’ve heard of me? How nice,” I say sarcastically. “Now, I’ll ask *again*, who are you and what are you to this girl?”

He remains silent.

I lean forward in my seat. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. It’s your choice. You can either tell me, or I’ll find another way of making you talk.”

Still refusing to speak, he reclines in his chair and stares back at me.

I rise to my feet, rounding my desk to stand in front of him. “I don’t like bullies, much less guys who beat up women.” The back of my hand collides with the fucker’s face. “Doesn’t feel very nice, does it?”

The prick stays quiet. He’s not going to say anything, and I’m not prepared to waste anymore of my evening with him.

“Get this piece of shit out of my sight,” I say, before Theo drags him out of the chair. “Drive him to the city limits and toss him out onto the highway, I don’t really care.”

“Boss.” Theo nods.

I look back at the prick. “I never forget a face, and if I see you in the city again, you’ll regret it.”

The prick continues fighting against Theo as he leads him out of my office, the sounds of his shouts fading into nothing.

“Thank you,” the girl mumbles, giving me a small smile as she peeks up at me through her bangs.

“I meant what I said, you’re under our protection. Rafe, why don’t you give our guest a tour?”

“Sure, come on, doll.” Rafe shoots me a wink as he leads her out of my office while I settle back into my chair behind my desk.

My brother is an insufferable, self-proclaimed ladies man with a revolving door of women coming in and out of his life. It’s been that way since he was sixteen. And although, Rafe and I are similar in some respects, when it comes to women, that’s where the similarities differ.

I’ve never been interested in one-night stands, or casual sex, I indulged in enough of that shit through high-school and college to last me a lifetime, and while it satisfied a need, it was temporary because the second it was over, I was left unfulfilled, wanting something I’m not sure I’ll ever have.

A family. Marriage. Children.

Love.

Growing up, I don't think there were ever two people who loved each other more than my parents. Their marriage spanned over thirty years and not a single spark of their love ever waned or faded. They were in love right up until the moment my mother died in a car accident when I was fourteen years old.

I would watch and admire the way he made her smile, how he kissed her tenderly and told her every day how much he loved her. He worshipped the ground she walked on and without her, he's a shell of the man he once was.

While my brother would call me a pussy, I've always dreamed of having that connection with another person. Having someone to share my life with, have a love I'm willing to die for. Extreme, I know, but that's the only way I can describe it.

And there's only one woman I've ever wanted like that, the only woman I can ever picture when I imagine what my future looks like, but the catch?

She doesn't even know who I am.

I pick up my phone and hit the number I've dialled a thousand times, and it only takes three rings for him to answer.

"Gage?" Derek's gravelly voice rumbles through the phone.

Derek worked for my dad before he worked for me. He's our go-to guy for most things. Intel, surveillance, you name it,

he's our guy. Only for a while now, there's been one job on the top of his priority list.

"Where is she tonight?" I ask.

"Are you at the club?"

"Yeah." Of course, I'm at the club. Where else would I be on a Saturday night?

"Take a look out your window," he tells me.

My brows pinch together, but as directed, I stand from behind my desk and look out over my club, letting my eyes scan across the crowd of dancers that fill the floor when someone catches my eye.

A girl.

The girl.

My heart skips a beat in my chest and I press my palm against the cool glass, clutching my phone tighter in the other.

She's sat at the bar, drink in hand, her long ash brown hair shimmers under the lights as it flows in loose curls down her back. She's deep in conversation with someone I've come to understand is her best friend, Reese, a red-headed spitfire, so I'm told.

"How long has she been here?" I ask Derek.

"She and Miss Reynolds arrived about thirty minutes ago."

"Thanks, Der. Appreciate it. You take the rest of the night off, okay?"

"Are you sure?"

“Go spend it with your family. I’ve got eyes on her.”

“Thanks, Boss. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” I hang up, pocketing my phone, my eyes never straying from her.

Reese leads her out onto the dancefloor by the hand as they weave their way through the crowd before Reese spins her and the two of them laugh. The corners of my mouth curve up as I take in the sight of my girl’s wide smile.

She’s radiant.

Reese is no stranger to the dancefloor, dressed in a tight-fitted dress that barely covers her ass, she dances confidently, putting on a show for the men that surround her. However, my girl is hesitant at first, unsure as to what to do with her hands, clearly not as comfortable on the dancefloor as her friend. Her eyes dance over the people around her as she tries to mimic their movements and slowly, she finds her rhythm.

My dick hardens as I watch her sway her hips to the beat and I have to tug on the collar of my shirt that strangles me as heat prickles at my skin.

Her royal blue dress swishes around her legs as she allows the music to move her, her hands threading through her hair as she sings along to the song pumping through the sound system. She doesn’t dance for attention, putting on a show for the people watching unlike her friend, she dances for herself, enjoying the music, totally oblivious to the people around her.

She’s so beautiful and she doesn’t even realise it.

I wonder what she'd look like dancing just for me. Wearing nothing but black lace and stilettos, her lips stained blood red, her body on display for my eyes only...

I clear my throat, forcing away that train of thought as I focus my attention back on her, but my breath locks up when I notice she's stopped dancing, her head angled up with her eyes trained on mine.

She doesn't look away when our eyes meet like I expect her to, instead her gaze lingers on me, her head tipped to the side in curiosity and my blood heats under her gaze. Even from here I can see the sparkle in her eyes. Jade green, the memory of them as fresh as the first time I saw them.

After a long minute, she turns back to her friend and the connection between us is lost.

Fuck.

I watch her for the rest of the night, unable to focus on any work knowing she's only metres away. My blood simmers and my body hums, as if it can sense her proximity.

I knew this girl had a hold on me, I just never expected it to be so strong. That from just a single look, all of the oxygen was sucked out of my lungs like a vacuum, my forehead beading with sweat.

This is the closest I've been to her in years, only it's not close enough. I ache to touch her, to hold her close. To *kiss* her.

Her and Reese leave just before midnight and I have Theo tail their taxi all the way home to make sure they both arrive safely.

I've kept tabs on her for as long as I can remember, long before I took over the business from my father. I had the means and the loyalty of the people around me to make it happen. It's a cruel, fucked up world we live in with even more fucked up people within it, and the only way I can sleep at night is with the knowledge that she's okay.

That my girl is safe.

Any person who ever tries to hurt her is a dead man walking, breathing on borrowed time, because Della March is mine.

Della

“Is your head pounding out a beat Taylor Hawkins would be proud of like mine is?” my best friend, Reese asks through the phone, her voice thick and weary with sleep, not to mention the chronic hangover she’s sporting.

I woke up to a slur of text messages, all disjointed and broken sentences that made zero sense and a hundred hungover voice notes after she got home telling me how much she loves me. I’m sure she was crying at one point.

I clutch my phone tighter to my ear as I shuffle out of bed. “You forget I didn’t hit the Vodka like you did. Besides, it was our graduation celebration, so what if you got a little wild?”

“I’m never drinking again, I swear to God,” she groans.

“And how many times have I heard *that*?” I laugh, though instantly come to regret it.

Despite not drinking as much as my friend, my head still pounds in my skull. I don’t drink alcohol often and I guess it

must have hit me harder than I expected.

“I forgot to tell you. Remember that guy I was talking to at the bar?”

“Which one? Gonna need you to be a little more specific.”

I can almost see her eyes roll on the other end of the phone. “Ugh! You know the one. Tall, blonde, looks like the love child of Ryan Gosling and Austin Butler?”

“Random, and *no*, but carry on.”

“Well anyway, he called me asking if I wanted to hang out later,” she says.

“What did you say?”

“We both know what guys mean by *‘hang out’*. He wants to fuck, *obviously*.”

“When has that ever stopped you?”

“You’re totally right, I’m *so* going.”

I bark out a laugh. She’s shameless, but that’s why I love her. Reese has been my soul sister since we were little and we’ve been joined at the hip ever since. She’s a 5’6” knockout with copper-red hair and the body of a goddess any girl would be proud of, and *boy*, does she know it.

“We need to find you a man,” she says. “Hey! Maybe my man has a brother.”

“No, Ree,” I sigh.

“Del, you’re twenty-fucking-two years old and the only boyfriend you’ve ever had was Evan *micro-dick* Thompson in

Junior year.”

Ugh. Evan Thompson, my first and only boyfriend. The thought of him makes me shudder. The memory of my first time having to ask whether it was in yet and to have him blindly stabbing at my vagina in the dark with no idea what he was doing doesn't give me much hope when it comes to men. I might as well be a virgin with my inexperience.

“Seriously, babe. You need to get some dick in you before you shrivel up in there and die.”

I choke back a laugh. “That’s a little extreme, Ree.”

“Adelia!” my father shouts from downstairs, his voice thundering through the house and my stomach immediately drops with dread.

I’ve done something wrong, I just know it. For as long as I can remember I’ve tried to please him, and whatever I do never seems to be enough and I always end up disappointing him.

“Ree, I gotta go. My dad’s calling me. Talk later?”

“Love you bitch,” she says.

“Love you more.” I hang up. Tossing my phone onto the bed, I quickly throw on some clothes, a pair of jeans and a sweater before jogging down the stairs.

I find my dad at the bottom of the staircase, tapping impatiently against the mahogany bannister with his fingernails. He’s dressed in his usual suit; plain white shirt,

dark jacket and trousers with a matching tie. His face is stern as I reach the bottom.

“Ah, you’re finally up,” he says disapprovingly, tossing a glance to his watch to emphasise that it’s almost noon. “I hear you and Reese went out last night.”

“Yeah, to celebrate our graduation.”

“To *De La Rosa*.”

My heart thuds. “Were you spying on me?”

“Did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

“Dad, it was a few drinks and dancing. We weren’t even there that long. It was harmless.”

“Gage Hudson is *not* harmless,” he snaps.

The sound of that name has my mouth clamping shut. Rarely is the Hudson name ever spoken in this house and if it is, it’s nothing good.

It’s been made no secret how much my father hates the Hudson family. He’s never gone into detail, but from what I can gather from the pieces of information I’ve managed to patch together in the past, Joseph Hudson stole everything that rightfully belonged to my father and our family. Everything that is theirs should belong to us. Our families’ rivalry has spanned decades, and now Joseph’s eldest son, Gage stands at the helm of their empire. A ruthless man who makes the Devil look a saint, so my dad tells me.

The man who just so happens to own the club I went to last night.

“You will not go back there, Adelia. *Swear* to me.”

“I swear, Dad. I’m sorry, it won’t happen again.”

He gives me a tight-lipped smile. “Good girl.” And with that, he disappears into his office, clicking the door shut behind him, leaving me stood in the hallway staring at the closed door.

A chill sweeps through the house and I shiver, wrapping my arms around myself. Ever since my mom left when I was six, this house has felt too big for just the two of us. It’s more fitted to a family of six than two people, with its five bedrooms, three bathrooms and a dozen different rooms throughout that we never even use.

It doesn’t feel like a home. It never has.

I glance around the bare walls at the lack of both character and colour. There’s no indication that a family lives here at all. No photographs from family vacations, not that we had any. No baby pictures from when I was little, no photos of my parents on their wedding day.

There’s nothing.

It’s empty, and for such a huge house it has a way of making me feel more claustrophobic than if I were locked in a prison cell.

I’ve never felt as though my life is my own. I’ve always had to answer to someone and justify my actions. I thought

that by choosing to go to college I could escape these walls, but I didn't even get that luxury. I commuted back and forth to classes every day, the non-negotiable for my father to allow me to attend at all. Reese decided to commute with me, seeing as we were going to the same college anyway, there was no way she was staying on campus without me.

We graduated a few weeks back and not once have I heard my dad congratulate me. Hell, he didn't even attend my graduation. Not one single person close to me saw me experience one of the happiness and proudest moments of my life.

I head back upstairs and hit the shower, letting the warm water wash away the remnants of my makeup, and as it cascades like a waterfall over me, I allow my mind to wander back to the man I saw watching me from above the dancefloor last night.

I'm not used to male attention, I usually leave that to Reese, because guys seem to gravitate towards her like a magnet, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy that fact he was watching me and not her. How my heart raced and shivers danced across my skin under his intense gaze.

It's a feeling I've never experienced before, but one I want to feel again. If I feel like that from just his eyes on me, I wonder what it would feel like to have him touch me.

What would his lips feel like against mine? What would his hands feel like as they explored my body?

I'm half tempted to keep living in this fantasy I've created in my head, my fingers itching to trail lower to the spot between my legs that throbs with desire.

The fact that it was Gage Hudson's club we went to and that the man was watching from what appeared to be an office, I would bet anything that that man was Gage himself, and the thought makes me shiver.

I shouldn't want him, but I do. What's the harm in creating a little fantasy? It's not like I'm ever going to see him again.

3

Gage

“How’s the girl?” I ask my brother as he taps away on his laptop on the living room couch.

I haven’t seen him since he led her off to give her a tour of the club the other night after we kicked out the abusive asshole she was with. My brother spends a lot of his time at our hotel downtown, especially lately with everything going on here. It gives him his own space, his escape.

“She’s good.”

“Get anything out of her?”

“As a matter of fact, I did.” He closes the lid of the laptop. “Her name’s Maddy, a runaway from San Diego. Says she hitch-hiked her way across the country and came across our guy from the other night. Turns out he’s involved in a human trafficking organisation and she was due to be shipped off to Mexico in two days. No fucking wonder she was so petrified.”

Human trafficking in my club?

What the fuck?

“Is she okay? Did they hurt her?” I ask.

He nods regretfully. “They raped her. Says they filmed it.”

“*Fuck...*”

“She’s got no family, bro, only her piece of shit foster parents who she was running from. She’s only seventeen.”

“Where is she now?”

“At the hotel.”

“Tell her she has a job and a place to stay if she wants it. I’ll have Derek look into the trafficking organisation, that’s not something we want on our fucking doorstep.”

“I know. Oh, Sierra says Dad was asking for you not long ago.”

“Thanks, man.”

I pat my brother on the shoulder as I pass him, heading for my father’s room.

I take a deep breath, pressing my hand flat against the solid wood door before twisting the handle and stepping inside.

I stand at my father’s bedside, looking down over him as he sleeps while my little sister, Sierra lays a damn wash cloth over his forehead. She shoots me a worried look through her teary red-rimmed eyes before returning her attention to our dying father.

I was in the middle of a business meeting this morning when I got a call from her telling me my father had taken a turn for the worst and to come home.

We found out a while back that he had pancreatic cancer, and having found it too late, there's nothing more that can be done for him except make him as comfortable as possible. I scoured every contact I had trying to find the best doctor money could buy in the hope they would tell us some positive news, but even *I* knew I was grasping at straws.

He went through dozens of rounds of chemotherapy, and although we knew it wouldn't cure him, it bought us more time with him. It took a toll on him, though. The pain and the fatigue that came with it wasn't worth delaying the inevitable for, and he soon decided to stop altogether.

"It's been a bad day today," Sierra says, her eyes on our father's face as her chin trembles.

On good days, he's like the man he once was; strong and funny with a sense of humour that could have Bob Hope paling in comparison. I could almost pretend that none of this was happening. But it's days like these when the reality sets back in, that sinking feeling that settles in your gut knowing that time is running out.

The hourglass is beginning to run dry and that one thought guts me. Truth is, I'm not ready to lose him.

"I hate this, Gage." Sierra's shoulders deflate. "I hate seeing him like this."

I take in my father's state. He's lost so much weight these past few weeks his cheeks have hollowed and dark circles surround his sunken eyes.

“Me too.”

“I’m scared.” Sierra’s voice cracks, a cry escaping her lips.

I round the bed, pulling her into my arms where she cries softly against my chest. I smooth a hand over her jet-black hair and press my lips to the top of her head. “Everything’s going to be alright, Si. I promise. Rafe and I, we’ve got you.”

“I don’t want him to go,” she cries, her voice muffled in my shirt, and I make no attempt to reply.

I don’t want him to go either.

She was too young to really remember losing our mom. Only being five or six at the time, her memories are hazy, so in a way she’s experiencing all this for the first time, though Rafe and I remember it vividly.

“Come on, let’s let him sleep. We can check on him later,” I say, guiding her out of the room, but not before she presses a delicate kiss to our dad’s cheek, squeezing his hand gently.

“I’m gonna go for a walk,” she says with a sniff. “I’ll see you later.”

“Sure,” I say, giving her upper arm a gentle squeeze before watching her walk away.

∞∞∞∞

I spend the next hour and a half hauled up in my office, trying to get some work done to pass the time but I can’t concentrate

on anything. All I can think about is my father.

He's still sleeping when I re-enter his room and I lower myself quietly onto the chair beside my father's bed, my hands locked together as I rest my elbows on my knees, staring at my feet.

"Gage."

My head snaps to my father who's eyes are weary as they linger on me. "Dad."

"You look like shit," he grunts, a hint of a smile on his lips.

I choke a laugh. "Ditto."

He struggles into an upright position. "How is Sierra? I think I may have scared her earlier."

"She's scared of what's happening to you."

"You and Rafe, I need you to promise me you'll take care of your sister, as well as yourselves."

"You don't even have to ask. And stop talking like that. You're not dying anytime soon, you hear? I won't let you."

He chuckles, the smile soon fading from his face as his eyes harden. "You know what I'm going to say, Son, but--"

"Dad, don't. Don't say it," I breathe out. I know what's coming. It's a conversation that has started and subsequently ended many times over the past couple of months.

"I have to. You and I both know my days are numbered, and I've made peace with that. But I have to know our family will live on, that everything your mother and I worked for will

continue. And if I can see at least one of my children married before I die, I-

I shoot to my feet. “Who would you have me marry then? Huh? There’s no fairy godmother who will wave her wand and magic me a wife out of thin air.” Who is he trying to kid? How the fuck am I supposed to get married in such a short space of time?

“What about your girl? Della?”

My heart swells at the sound of her name. “The girl who doesn’t know I exist, you mean?”

“And who’s fault is that? You’ve always said you wanted to make her your wife one day, so what is stopping you?”

“You know what.” I don’t have to spell it out.

“That was years ago, Son. You’re both older, and our family is more powerful than ever. Randall March can’t hurt us.”

The sheer mention of her father has my fists clenching. “She doesn’t belong in this world.”

“She’s Randall’s daughter, Son. She’s already in it.”

I shake my head. “You can’t ask this of me.”

“I can, and I am. I want you to experience the love your mother and I felt and I want to see the start of it. I-

I don’t wait for him to finish as I storm out of his room with a slam of the door, ignoring his voice that calls me back. He lets out a low, throaty cough and my stomach clenches as I

grip the wall in the hallway for support. I hate hurting him, but if I'd stayed, I would have said something out of anger that I'd later come to regret.

I storm through the house and into the study that I use as my office for when I'm not in the city and allow my heartbeat to even out.

How can he ask this of me?

Because he's dying and he wants to see me happy. Because even as death approaches, I can't blame him for his selfish request.

Even if I gave in and accepted, how the fuck am I supposed to get Della to marry me in at such short notice.

I could blackmail her? Bribe her? No, I can't do that. That's not who I am.

I check my phone and see I've had two missed calls from Derek and my stomach drops. I hit the call button and he answers after the first ring. "Derek, everything alright?"

"We've got a problem. I'm on my way over to your house now."

"What's going on, Der?"

He sighs on the other end. "I just got word from a source who told me that Randall March is in talks to make a deal with Bryce Tanner."

What the hell is March doing getting into bed with Bryce fucking Tanner?

He's a nasty, vindictive son of a bitch with no morals and no care for anyone other than himself and his hunger for power. I had a run in with him a year or so ago over a project that would have been more trouble than it's worth. Suffice it to say, I put a stop to it before it had even took off and he didn't take it too well.

I like to know everything there is to know about my enemies and my business competition, and Bryce is at the top of my shit list. I've been watching him for some time and found out that he's got his fingers into any business going so long as it provides him with more power. Drugs, guns, money laundering... The list is endless. The man is well known for building his reputation on fear and intimidation and will stop at nothing to get what he wants, but unlike me, Bryce has no boundaries.

The thought that Della's father is in talks with him has my hands twitching and my jaw ticking.

I want him nowhere near my girl.

"What would March want with that bastard?" I ask.

"Seems Bryce has made him an offer."

"For March Enterprises? What would Tanner want with it? It's a sinking ship."

It's no secret that Randall has all but run his company into the ground, what Tanner wants with it, I have no fucking clue.

"It's not just the company Tanner wants," Derek says.

“What are you talking about? March Enterprises is all Randall has to offer...”

Wait...

Realisation of what he means hits me square in the chest and he doesn't have to answer to know what he's implying.

“Della.”

Della

My feet ache as I make my way up the driveway that leads to our house, the gravel crunching under my boots. After a whole day spent shopping with Reese, my muscles are sore and my feet are beginning to blister. A hot bubble bath surrounded by candles and a soothing face mask is calling me.

I stop when I notice an unfamiliar car parked outside. A man stands beside it dressed all in black with his hands clasped in front of him. There's another man stood outside my front door, dressed exactly like the other guy in exactly the same stance. Neither one of them moves a muscle as I climb the steps to the door and head inside.

I drop my bags just inside the doorway and make my way towards my father's office, but as my hand reaches for the handle, I hear a voice I don't recognise.

It's not unusual for my father to hold meetings here in our house, but something in the tone of the voice from the other side of the door makes me stop.

“She’ll never agree to it. I know her,” my father says.

Who is he talking about?

“Quite frankly, you don’t have a choice, and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll take the offer, considering it’s me who holds all the cards. You hold onto the company on your own, it’ll run itself into the ground before the year is out. But if you give me what I want, I will help you build a company bigger than anything those Hudson bastards could ever hope to build. You need me. Might I remind you, you also need me to keep my mouth shut. Once you sign, the contract is binding, she’ll have no choice but marry me.”

What the fuck?

I push open the door to find my father sat at his desk while a blonde man leans over it on the other side. I don’t recognise his face but he looks to be in his early thirties. His tall frame towers over me, even with the few metres that separate us. He’s handsome, but as his eyes travel up and down the length of my body, a cold chill snakes down my spine.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask, turning my attention away from the man as his eyes continue giving me the once over and instead, look to my father.

“What have I told you about eavesdropping, Adelia?”

“Who’s getting married?” I ask.

“We are, love,” the man answers and my eyes shoot to his. His lips curl into a smug grin.

“And who are you?”

“Bryce Tanner, the man who’s going to save your father’s business.” He holds his hand out to me, but I take a step back. I can’t stand the thought of this man touching me, there’s something about him that makes my skin crawl.

“I’m not marrying anyone.”

“I’m afraid it’s not up to you.” Bryce turns to my father, pushing a handful of papers across the desk.

My eyes snap to my father. He swallows hard as a thin sheen of sweat coats his forehead. “You have no right to do this, Dad. It’s my life! I’m not some pawn to be used in a business deal, I’m your daughter.”

“You are *my* daughter and you’ll do as *I* see fit.”

His harsh words hit me like a slap to the face and tears sting the backs of my eyes. “You don’t own me. Mom would never let you do this.”

“Good thing she’s not here then, isn’t it?” he snaps.

Bryce sucks in a sharp breath, wearing a smirk.

“Fuck you. Fuck both of you.” I turn on my heel and march out of my father’s office, slamming the door closed behind me and break into a run to my bedroom.

I collapse onto my bed, pulling my knees up to my chin as I lie on my side in the centre of my mattress.

How could my dad do this to me?

What makes him think he has the right to dictate my life? Decide who I’m married to? I’m twenty-two years old. I’m old

enough to make my own decisions, and one thing I'm absolutely certain of.

I will *never* marry Bryce Tanner.

I jump up from my bed and drag an old backpack out from under my bed. I'm not staying here. I've been waiting for the right time to get out of this house for years, and this is it. This is the opportunity I've been waiting for.

I throw the bag onto my mattress and toss in some clothes, toiletries, a spare pair of shoes and a stack of cash I've had hidden for emergencies such as this.

There's a knock on my bedroom door and I freeze. I zip up my bag and shove it back under my bed just as the handle of my bedroom door turns and Bryce steps into the room.

"Get the fuck out of my room," I tell him, folding my arms across my chest defiantly.

"You know we're going to have to do something with that mouth of yours when we're married. They're not the words of a lady," he says, condescendingly.

"I said, get out!"

He grips the edge of my door and slams it hard enough for the walls to shake and the reverberations to rumble through my body. He stalks forward. "Maybe if I shove you down onto your knees and have you choke on my dick, that'll make you think twice about talking to your fiancé like that."

"It'll be a cold day in hell before I *ever* become your wife."

“As soon as your father signs on that little dotted line, you’re mine.”

“My father doesn’t own me, and neither does anybody else, especially not you.”

“Oh really? We’ll see about that.” He moves faster than I can react as his hand finds my throat, slamming me up against my bedroom wall with enough force to knock the air from my lungs.

A waft of cheap cologne stings my nose and I recoil from it.

“I think it’s only fair since you’re going to be mine that I sample the goods, don’t you? Get a feel for the pussy I’m going to be fucking for years to come.”

“Don’t you dare touch me.” I spit onto his face, the sight of my saliva coating his face has me standing a little taller, but I don’t see his hand coming until the back of it cracks against my cheek. The sting radiates through me, making my eyes water and my ears ring.

“You dirty little cunt.” He tears open my shirt straight down the middle before tugging forcefully at my bra until all of me is on display for him. He grips my breasts and pulls, pinching my nipples hard enough that I yelp in pain.

He spins me around so my chest is flush against the wall, the weight of his body pinning me there with no way of escape. He drags his nose across the side of my face and down to my neck, biting down the soft skin on the spot where my

neck meets my shoulder. I cry out as his teeth sink into my flesh until he draws blood. “I’m going to have so much fun making you bleed.”

“Get your fucking hands off me!” I push back against him as hard as I can, my muscles burning from exertion but he’s too strong.

He reaches for my arms and pulls them around my back so hard I wince. I feel him tie something around my wrists, then he grips the tops of my arms and throws me down onto my bed face down. I land with a bounce and try to squirm away, but he grabs my ankles and drags me back. He tosses me like a rag doll exactly where he wants me and straddles my thighs from behind.

Fear spreads like ice through my veins as the sound of him unbuckling his belt fills the room. The overwhelming urge to cry grips me, but I refuse to show him weakness.

I continue to fight as much as I can with my arms restrained and my body pinned beneath him, I then feel him reach around for the button on my jeans.

“No! Stop. Please!”

I feel his lips at my ear. “Keep begging, sweetness. It makes me hard.” He grinds his rigid erection into my ass and I whimper.

He tugs at my jeans and I scream as loud as I can, my lungs burning and my throat turning scratchy. He reaches for something I can’t see and turns my head, stuffing whatever it

is into my mouth to dampen my screams before tearing my jeans down my legs as well as my underwear.

“Keep your fucking mouth shut, bitch. You’re gonna take my cock like the good little whore you are and you’re not gonna make one sound. Understand?”

His fist wraps around my hair and tugs my head back sharply. “Do. You. Understand?”

I give him a small nod as he shoves my face back into the mattress, his huge hand at the back of my head holding me there as the blunt head of his cock nudges between my legs.

This can't be happening.

He pulls my hips up at an angle, my knees tight together as he spreads me open and surges forward. A scream catches in my throat as he begins to pound into me. I squeeze my eyes shut as tears begin to form in the corners. He’s big, and I’m bone dry and it feels like I’m being split in half from the inside out, torn apart in the worst way imaginable.

Fighting will only worsen the pain and drag this nightmare out even longer, so I stay still and silent as he uses my body and takes what he wants in the hope this will be over soon.

He’s trying to break me. Tear me down and crush any and all resolve I have left, but I won’t let him. He can break my body, but he’ll never break my spirit because I’m strong enough to get through this.

I have to be.

The creak of my bed matches the harsh brutal rhythm of his thrusts, his fingernails biting into the flesh of my hips painfully.

His thrusts begin to quicken, his movements hurried as he nears his climax, the sound of his grunts surrounding me, and just before he reaches his release, he pulls out of me with a groan, coming in thick hot spurts onto my back.

He pants, rubbing his release into my skin. “Would you look at that... I made you bleed after all. *Beautiful.*” He says it as though he’s in awe, the sick gratification of what he just did to me thick in his voice.

A minute later, he releases my bound wrists that are now numb and climbs off me.

I don’t move. I just lie there, listening to him get dressed, too frozen to do anything other than wait until the moment he leaves.

I flinch when I feel his wet lips meet my sore cheek. “You are gonna make such a good little wife, love.” He slaps me roughly on my ass before leaving.

The second the door clicks shut, a cry escapes my throat, my breaths coming fast and jagged.

Gingerly, I move my arms, wincing against the pain in my shoulders from being held in such an unnatural position before I pull out what turns out to be one of my tank tops from my mouth he used to silence me.

I rub my aching jaw and manage to move up into a sitting position. My jeans and panties are bunched around my ankles, my shirt gaping open and my breasts exposed from my torn bra.

I pull off my clothes and leave them a heap on the floor and make my way to the bathroom, the sting between my legs making me whimper as I walk.

Climbing into the shower, I watch the water turn a pale shade of pink as it swirls down the plughole and once I'm satisfied my body is rid of his smell, his cum and my blood, I step out.

There's no avoiding the sight of my reflection in the mirror above the sink and I stifle a sob as I take in my body. Dark purple bruises mar my neck, my arms and my thighs. The bite mark on my shoulder is red and angry, little half-moon dents from his fingernails are embedded into the flesh of my hips. The insides of my thighs are sore from the friction of his skin on mine, though it's nothing in comparison to the pain on the *inside*.

The sounds of his grunts echo in my head and I make it to the toilet just moments before I throw up the entire contents of my stomach, the memory of what he did to me too much to bear.

I can't stay here.

I can't stay here knowing my father is happy for me to be forced into a marriage to that monster. I refuse to be

condemned to a life of fear and abuse at the hands of my husband.

No fucking way am I letting that happen.

Ignoring the blood stain on my bed sheets and the odour of sex that lingers in the air, I pull on a fresh change of clothes and reach for the bag I packed earlier, making sure I have everything I need.

I have no idea where I'm going to go, but anywhere is better than here.

Della

As I descend the stairs, Bryce's voice filters through from my father's office, and that sound alone only spurs me on further.

My heart is pounding against my rib cage as I head for the front door but stop when I see the silhouette of one of the men standing outside through the frosted glass panels.

One of *Bryce's* men.

I tiptoe past my father's office, careful not to make any noise and make my way silently through the house until I reach the back door.

I reach for the handle just as a door clicks open behind me and the voices of Bryce and my father grow louder.

I slip out the back door and out into the cool evening air. It's grown darker outside and a brisk chill sweeps through my clothes, my skin erupting in a billion goose bumps.

There's a path that leads down the side of the house and I take it. I stop once I reach the front, the two men outside still

standing in exactly the same spots as before. There's a row of bushes just ahead of me that line the driveway and just as the front door opens, I duck down and begin to crawl.

"I'll go get her and you can speak to her before you leave," I hear my father say.

My father must disappear back into the house leaving just Bryce and his men.

"How did it go, boss?" one of them asks.

"The little bitch fought hard, I was almost impressed. In a few days she'll be mine and I can fuck the defiance out of her until she can't fight anymore," Bryce boasts as his friends laugh darkly and I whimper.

The ground is hard beneath my hands and knees. My shoulders are sore from earlier but I push through the pain.

"Adelia?" my father shouts from the house and my heart jumps. "Adelia! Where are you?"

"What's going on?" I hear Bryce ask.

"She's gone."

"Adelia!" Bryce's harsh voice splits the air. "I will find you!" His voice sends a shiver through my body.

Shit.

I crawl faster, and something sharp slices the palm of my hand and it takes everything within me not to cry out, but I have to keep moving.

A minute later I reach the end of the driveway, noticing a black SUV parked up on the opposite side of the road, the headlights illuminating everything two hundred feet in front of it, including me, and I break into a run.

I race down the street, sticking close to the shadows of the hedges and the trees that line the street.

I hear the screech of tires behind me and I pump my arms and legs harder, my heartbeat pounding in my ears.

I reach a crossroad as the only car for as far as the eye can see approaches.

“Stop! Please!” I wave my arms as the car grows nearer and thankfully, the driver pulls up to the curb in front of me and rolls down the window.

“Are you okay? Do you need some help?” the man asks. He looks to be in his fifties, thinning greying hair and a short beard.

“Can you give me a ride?”

“Where you heading?”

A pair of headlights in the distance catches my attention as they grow closer.

“Anywhere,” I reply.

“Jump in.”

I round the side of the car and climb into the passenger seat and pull on my seat belt. “Please just drive.”

The man pulls back out onto the road at a steady speed. I know how stupid it is to get into a stranger's car, especially at night, but what other choice did I have?

My chest heaves as I pant for breath, my muscles burning and my heart thumping heavily against my ribs.

“You being chased or something?” the man asks, glancing into his rear-view mirror. I spin in my seat and watch as the car behind us gains on us quickly. The headlights are blinding and it makes it harder to see, but deep in my gut, I know who the car belongs to.

The car swerves and comes up alongside us. I sink down in my seat, using my hair as a curtain to shield my face, but through the gap in my hair I can see one of Bryce's men in the car next to us.

The next thing I know, the car veers into us, hitting us hard on the driver's side and the man beside me pulls the wheel hard to steady us.

“What the fuck? Who are these people?” he shouts as we're hit again, the crumple and screech of metal is almost deafening as I cling onto my seat, my nails biting into the fabric.

We're hit from the side again, only this time, hard enough to drive us off the road. We skid to the curb and collide with a lamp post which spins the car a full one-eighty, both front airbags exploding in our faces until we finally skid to a stop.

I unbuckle my seat belt and pull myself up, a sharp pain shooting up the back of my neck. Smoke billows out from underneath the crumpled hood of the car, the windscreen smashed into a million pieces that are scattered all around us.

“Are you okay?” I ask the man who rubs his neck as blood trickles down his cheek from his brow.

Before he gets the chance to answer me, the passenger door is torn open and I’m dragged out by my hair, the force enough to rip it out from my scalp.

Bryce slams me up against the side of the car, my back hitting the cool metal hard. “You dare try to escape me, you little bitch? You’re mine!” Bryce booms, his hand connecting with the same cheek as earlier, hitting me hard enough to make my head spin.

He shoves me to my knees at his feet as one of his men drags the man who tried to help me from the car, his eyes wide as they force him to his knees in front of me, his eyes wide darting between all of us.

“No! Let him go, he didn’t do anything wrong!” I beg.

“Please, Sir. I-I don’t know what any of this is about but I have a wife, a daughter,” the man pleads.

“This is what happens, Adelia, when you insist on defying me,” Bryce says. “I suggest you learn from it.”

My eyes widen as one of Bryce’s men raises a gun to the man’s temple as he shakes uncontrollably in front of me.

“No!” I shout as a flash of light and a loud bang pierces my ear drums. Something warm and wet hits my face as the man’s body crumples to the ground in front of me and I can’t hold back the scream that rips through my throat.

I stare at his body, still and lifeless as blood and brain matter drips from the gaping hole in the side of his head, his hair matted and soaked in blood.

Trembling, I reach out for the man’s hand, noticing the gold wedding band that wraps around his third finger.

His poor family...

“I’m so sorry,” I cry, my vision blurring with tears.

Bryce brings a cloth up to my face. The chemical smell burns my nose and stings my eyes, and I try my best not to breath it in. “You run from me again and I’ll break every bone in both your fucking legs, you little cunt,” he spits.

I kick my legs and flail my arms, clawing at his hands for release, but my muscles slowly begin to relax, my body gradually losing the strength to fight.

A screech of tires punctures the air and a second later there’s shouting all around me, a jumble of male voices and I’m dumped hard to the ground.

Just before I drift into unconsciousness, I feel a warm hand touch my face as I’m brought into someone’s arms, wrapped up against his strong body as I’m cradled against his chest.

His voice is the last thing I hear before darkness pulls me under.

“I got her,” he says, then lowers his voice to a whisper, his breath at my ear, “I got you, angel.”

6

Della

I wake with a start, my heart thumping erratically in my chest. The room around me is pitch black, save for a soft sliver of light filtering in through the blinds that falls onto the bed. The sheets beneath me are unfamiliar, they're crisp and soft, almost brand new.

Where am I?

My head pounds heavily, the ache spreading all the way down the back of my neck. I roll over onto my side but I wince. Every muscle in my body is tight and stiff, and everything that happened yesterday floods back to me.

Bryce. The marriage. My assault. The crash. The man I watched die in front of my eyes...

A cry lodges in my throat and I gasp as a noise from somewhere deeper in the room grips my attention.

“How are you feeling?” I startle from the sound of the deep male voice that fills the silence.

I scramble up the bed, pulling the sheets up my body that's thankfully still clothed. I search through the darkness and as my eyes adjust, I notice a shadow of someone sitting across from me in a chair.

"Who are you? Do you work for him? Do you work for Bryce Tanner?"

"No, I don't work for Bryce Tanner. I'd gladly die than work for that bastard."

"Then who are you?" I ask again.

There's a flicker of movement, and whoever it is steps into the light, illuminating his face, and recognition flashes in my mind.

"I know you. I saw you at the club. You were watching me."

"And *you* were watching *me*." The corners of his mouth curve up, revealing deep set dimples in his cheeks.

He's dressed in a pair of dark trousers and a white button-up shirt with the top three buttons undone, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

He stands with his hands in his trouser pockets, peering down at me. I can't make much out in the darkness of the room, but I have no doubt he's the most handsome man I've ever seen.

"My name's Gage. Gage Hudson."

My heart stills, all of the things my father has told me about him filling my mind. He's not at all what I expected when I pictured what he might look like, but one thing I've learned the hard way is that looks are usually deceiving.

Trust no one.

"Gage Hudson." His name leaves my lips on a whisper. So it *was* him watching me that night.

"I take it you've heard of me." He sounds almost amused.

"Nothing good."

"I guess I have your father to thank for that, but I promise you, most of it is likely untrue."

"Wait? You're not a blood sucking monster who preys on innocent girls?"

He barks out a laugh. "Not quite. It's four a.m. I'll let you get some more sleep. We'll talk more a little later. I just didn't want you to freak out and wake up in a strange room alone."

"Yeah, because being watched by a stranger while I sleep is *so* much less creepy."

He chuckles. "You've got one hell of a sense of humour, Adelia March. I look forward to exploring more of it." I don't know this man, I don't even know where I am or what I'm doing here but the way he says my name has me feeling things I should *not* be feeling.

"Get some sleep," he continues. "You're safe here."

I watch him leave the room, softly pulling the door closed as his footsteps gradually disappear into nothing.

ooooo

The next thing I know, the morning sunlight streams through the window bathing the room in a soft, yellow glow. I squint against it until my eyes begin to adjust, and it's only now I can properly take in my surroundings.

The bedroom I'm in is huge, almost double the size of my own back home. It's minimal, the only colours in the room a crisp white and cream. I stretch out my sore muscles while admiring the Queen-sized bed I'm lying in. Against the far wall is a solid-wood dressing table with a mirror, and in the corner of the room nearest the window sits a chair, the same chair *he* sat in just a few hours ago while he watched me sleep.

Why am I here?

What does Gage Hudson of all people want with me?

I climb out of bed. I'm wearing a plain t-shirt and a pair of stripey sleep shorts, my own clothes nowhere to be seen.

Who the hell changed me?

The hand I cut yesterday has been cleaned and bandaged, and the bite mark on my shoulder looks to have had the same treatment. My eyes land on the thick bruise that bands around

my neck like a collar. I reach up, tracing the purple mark with my fingers, my thoughts wandering back to what caused it.

“Did he do that to you?” I jump at the sound of the voice, spinning unsteadily on my feet to find Gage standing just inside the door. I didn’t even hear him come in.

“What?”

His eyes are hard as they zero in on my neck, his jaw clenching. “Tanner. Is he the one who gave you those bruises? That bite mark?”

“Yeah,” I mumble.

“Son of a fucking bitch,” he grits out, shutting the door and stepping further into the room. “I brought you some food and something to drink,” he says, placing a plate of sandwiches and a bottle of water down onto the beside table before closing the space between us.

“Where are my clothes?”

“In the washer.”

“Please tell me you didn’t dress me while I was unconscious.”

He chuckles. “No, that was my sister.”

“Okay, good.”

Now that it’s light, I can get a proper look at him. He’s at least 6’2”, and even at my 5’7”, I have to crane my neck up to look at him. His dark hair is longer at the top and cropped shorter along the sides. There’s something about his warm

hazel eyes that I recognise, but I can't place them, almost like I've seen them before somewhere. But how? I'd never even met him up until a few hours ago.

My eyes trail down his body. He's dressed in a dark grey suit, and even beneath his shirt, I know there isn't an inch of fat anywhere on his body, just a wall of sculpted, solid muscle.

"Keep undressing me with your eyes like that, angel. I might just get the wrong idea."

My eyes dart up to his face. "And what idea's that?"

"That you want me."

"Trust me, Stockholm syndrome is *not* my thing."

"Get kidnapped often do you?" he asks.

"Is that what's happening here? Are you admitting to kidnapping me?"

"That's not technically what happened."

"Oh really? So, what would you call being chloroformed and taken to a place I've never been with people I don't know?"

"I wasn't the one who chloroformed you, that was all Tanner. If I hadn't gotten to you when I did, there's no telling what he'd have done with you." He reaches forward, dusting his fingertips over the bruise on my neck, a frown knitting across his brow as his eyes drop to the marks on my arms in the shape of fingerprints.

I can fuck the defiance out of her until she can't fight anymore... Bryce's voice echoes in my mind and a wave of nausea washes over me.

I cross my arms over my chest, pulling away from his touch. "Why am I here, Gage?"

"Because there is no way in hell you will ever marry Bryce *fucking* Tanner."

"How do you know about that?" I ask.

"I have eyes and ears all over this city, it was only a matter of time."

"What is it to you who I marry? You don't even know me."
Why the hell does he care so much?

"I know you a lot better than you think," he replies, his eyes softening, something flashes in them that I can't decipher.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He stuffs his hands in his pockets and sighs heavily. "That's a conversation for another time."

"Right, well as much I hate the idea, the deal between my father and Bryce is pretty much cut and dried so..."

His jaw ticks. "He's not coming within an inch of you, and he'll certainly *never* lay a hand on you again, I promise you that."

"How can you be so sure?"

A moment of silence passes between us, like he's gearing himself up to say something he knows I won't want to hear.

“Because in three days you’ll be married to me instead.”

What?

I blink up at him. Stunned.

I replay his words over in my head to make sure I heard him correctly.

“No. Absolutely not! That is *not* happening!” I shout, skirting around him only to be halted when his hand grips the top of my arm.

He looks down to where we’re connected, loosening his grip slightly so not to hurt me. “Would you rather it be me you’re married to or that bastard, Tanner?”

“And you’re so much better? I’ve heard *all* about you.”

“Oh, yeah? Do enlighten me. I’m all ears.”

“You’re ruthless and selfish. Your whole family fortune is built on lies and theft, taking what isn’t yours and to hell with everyone else.”

A laugh rumbles through his chest. He thinks this is funny? “Is that right? Correct me if I’m wrong but I’m almost certain I heard your daddy’s words in there somewhere. Tell me, do you believe everything Daddy tells you, or are you not allowed to think for yourself?”

The crack of my hand against his cheek takes me as much by surprise as it does him. “Fuck you.”

“You only know what you’re told. Your whole life has been sheltered from the real world, moulded by the people

who surround you. It's easy to listen to the lies you're told if you haven't heard the other side of the story, but a little advice, don't judge what you don't know. It makes you sound naive."

Forcing back the sting of tears in my eyes, I take another swing at his face, only this time, he catches my wrist, squeezing hard, but not hard enough to cut off the circulation.

"That's the last time you do that. I gave you the first one, you won't get another," he warns, loosening his grip. "I don't know what twisted shit your father has spun you about me and my family, but I'm not the monster you think I am. You have my word, you're safe here."

"I don't trust anyone, especially men I don't even know holding me against my will, forcing me to marry them, so forgive me if your word means shit right now."

I learned early on in life that people say one thing and then do the opposite. The only person you can rely on in this life is yourself. So that's what I do. I trust no one, not until they prove to me that they deserve it.

"I'll come back once you've had time to think about it."

"I don't need time to think about it, because the answer will be the same. I am *not* marrying you."

His eyebrows quirk up as if he sees it as a challenge. "We'll see."

Gage

I leave her room, shutting the door behind me with a click and stand staring at the plain white door that separates me from her. “Fuck,” I sigh.

What have I done?

I flick the lock into place, sounding a hundred times louder than it’s supposed to.

There’s a thump from the other side of the door, the handle turning. “What are you doing? Gage, open the door.” She tries the handle again but it does nothing.

Bang!

“Gage, open the fucking door!” she shouts, the fear and anger evident in her voice slicing through my heart.

I rest my head against the solid oak wood and heave a deep sigh. “I’m sorry.”

The sound of her fists pounding against the door follow me all the way down the hallway.

Damien, one of the guys I hired to keep my house secure after a failed break in a few months ago stands at the end of the hall with his hands clasped together in front of him.

“Keep an eye on her, but do not touch her. Anything happens, you call me, understand?”

“Yes, Sir.” He gives me a firm nod and heads towards her room.

I feel like the world’s biggest bastard locking her in her room like a prisoner, but right now with how she’s feeling, she’s a flight risk, a risk I won’t take.

She wouldn’t get very far if she did run, given the electric gates at the front of the house are manned twenty four hours a day and there are almost a hundred security cameras that monitor both inside and outside the house.

I hadn’t planned on stealing her away and keeping her here against her will. If I’m being honest, I hadn’t thought any further than getting her as far from Bryce as I possibly could. Bringing her here was the best idea.

I’d had Derek parked up on the street outside her house, keeping me in the loop. I’d got a call shortly after to say he saw her taking off down the street, followed by a black 4x4 shortly after.

He followed them, and by this time I was already on my way, Rafe and Alec in tow.

Seeing her on her knees on the side of the road last night while that bastard stood over her holding a chloroform-soaked

rag to her face, I fucking lost it.

She felt so good in my arms as I carried her to the car, I wanted to keep her there forever. Having her warm body tucked against mine was the best fucking feeling on earth. To know she was safe and she was finally mine.

As I head for the stairs, my father's bedroom door opens and he steps out, clutching the door frame for support.

"What are you doing out of bed? You should be resting." I take his arm and guide him back into the room.

"I'll rest when I'm dead, and I'm not there yet, so give me a god damn break. I already have your sister mollycoddling me, I don't need it from you too."

I laugh. Even with the weakness in his bones and muscles and the pain that cripples him, he still has his sense of humour.

I sit him down on the bed and take a seat opposite him in the chair. He looks a little better today, he has more colour in his skin and his eyes are brighter.

"So, I hear I'm going to be attending a wedding after all," he says with smug pride.

"You heard?"

"I think the whole fucking house heard." He chuckles.

I rub my forehead. "She's not going to make it easy."

"The good ones never do. You have to work twice as hard to catch them, but they're worth it in the end."

"That how it was with you and Mom?" I ask.

He smiles softly. “Oh, your mother made me work for it alright. That was the fun part. But when I finally got her, there’s no better feeling on this earth.”

He lights up whenever he talks about my mother, that’s why I always make a point to mention her. It makes him happy to talk about her, remembering their love.

“What do I do, Dad?” My question takes him by surprise because I can’t remember the last time I ever asked him for advice. I’ve always known what to do, but right now, I’m at a total loss.

“Don’t give up on her, Son. She’ll come around. Hell, living under Randall March’s roof is bound to fuck anyone up. He’s filled her head chock full of shit about us making him out to be the victim.” He leans forward, resting a hand over mine. “She’s the one, Gage. I feel it. Feel it deep in these old, weak bones... that girl is the one meant only for you.”

“I feel it too, I just wish that she did.”

“It’s not even been a day, give it time.” He pats my hand and rises stiffly to his feet. “Now fuck off, I need to use the bathroom and I’d sooner die than have to rely on someone else to wipe my ass for me, so get gone.”

I bark out a laugh. “Okay, holler if you need anything.”

“I won’t,” he grumbles, which only makes me laugh harder.

I leave my father in peace and head to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee. I could do with something stronger with a

higher alcohol content but it isn't even noon yet.

Rafe is sat at the breakfast bar typing away on his phone. He looks up when I enter.

“Jesus Christ, she do that?” Rafe asks, a smirk touching his lips as he takes in the redness of my cheek.

“Well, I didn't do it to myself,” I reply sarcastically.

“Guessing she didn't take the news of her impending marriage too well.”

“That's putting it mildly, pretty sure she hates me right about now.”

“Can you blame her?” Sierra chimes in as she floats into the room, swiping my freshly made coffee out of my hand and taking a swig. “She just found herself in a strange bed in a strange house with a strange man telling her she's getting married in three days. What did you expect would happen?”

“But I'm not a stranger,” I point out.

“She doesn't know that. Why don't you just tell her the truth?”

“I can't. Not yet.” I'll tell her who I am when the time is right, when I'm ready for her to understand all of this.

I know keeping her in the dark isn't ideal, but right now it's for the best.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I answer it without even looking at the caller ID.

“Where is she, Hudson?” I'd know that voice anywhere.

“Bryce Tanner... Is that you?”

In my periphery, Rafe’s head snaps up at the sound of the name, stopping whatever it is he was doing.

“You know god damn well who it is. Where is she? I know you took her.”

“You’ll have to be a little more specific who we’re talking about here.” Amusement grips me. It’s always been fun to wind this prick up and push his buttons, he just makes it too damn easy.

“Don’t act dumb, it doesn’t suit you. Adelia March. You took what’s mine and I don’t appreciate that very much.”

“Yours? From where I’m sitting she’s very much *mine*, being it’s *my* roof she’s under and *my* bed she’s sleeping in.” That last part’s not strictly true, not my bed specifically, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“Her father’s looking for her, he’s worried sick.”

“You can tell her father she’s safe with me, a lot safer than she’ll ever be with you, that’s for damn sure.”

“You’re gonna regret this, Hudson. You’re gonna wish you’d never been fucking born!”

“Goodbye, Bryce.” I hang up and place my phone back inside my jacket pocket.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Rafe says.

I shrug. “I know, but it was too tempting not to get under his skin. He’s a prick with no backbone, he can’t touch us.”

Rafe chuckles, shaking his head as my phone rings in my pocket again.

It's Damien.

"Boss, we got a problem."

"What the fuck now?" I say on an exhale.

"It's the girl. She's gone fucking ape shit."

"Jesus..." I pull up the security feed for her room on my phone and watch as she kicks against the window several times to no avail.

I can't hear what she's shouting as there's no microphone attached, but by the way she's attempting to destroy the room, it's nothing good. She picks up the heavy chair from the corner of the room and carries it to the window.

"Fuck," I mumble, taking off in a run towards her room, taking the stairs three at a time.

Damien stands aside to allow me past as I flick the lock and burst into the room, just as she lifts the chair above her head. I rush to her, snatching the chair from her grip before she has chance to smash the window and toss it behind me.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"What does it look like? I can't stay here!" She darts past me, heading for the bedroom door but I get a hold on her waist and hoist her back, pulling her into my body. "Let me go!"

"Please, Della. Stop. You're going to hurt yourself."

“I don’t care! I don’t want to be here!” She kicks out her legs, her arms reaching for me, fighting my grip on her.

“Della,” I say firmer, wrapping my arms around hers to keep them still.

“Please,” she cries, her head tipping forward, her body shaking. “*Please...*”

I lower us to the floor, and with her back against my chest, I sit her on my lap, my arms still firmly locked around her. “What were you planning to do, huh? Jump out of the window and run? How would you do that with two shattered legs when you landed? That’s if you survived, of course.”

A cry catches in her throat, the fight that was in her body only moments ago has disappeared, her body relaxing against me. “Alive or dead, my life’s over either way.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the chest. *Would she really rather die than marry me?*

My grip on her loosens. “You must really hate me.”

“I don’t *know* you, I don’t trust you and I hate that you’re making me do this. I... I don’t want to be here, Gage.”

“Believe me, if I could have done things differently, I would have.” *If she only knew...*

“I just want to go home,” she says softly.

I release my hold on her and get back to my feet, leaving her on the floor of her room.

I run a hand over my face. “Do you really? Is going home what you *really* want? Think about it, Della. If I let you go home now, you’ll be married to that bastard within days. And your wedding night? He will take and take and take until there’s nothing left of you. Is that what you want?”

She goes to speak but clamps her mouth shut, swiping away the tears that stream down her cheeks as she averts her gaze.

“I thought not.”

She might not want to admit it, but she knows I’m right. I’m the only thing standing between a comfortable life with me or a life of misery and abuse with *him*.

I drop to a crouch in front of her, reaching out to tip up her chin to look at me. I’m met with puffy, bloodshot eyes, her beautiful jade green irises desperately searching mine. I hate to see her cry, and from this moment on, I vow to never be the cause of her tears again.

“I know my word doesn’t mean much to you right now, but I need you to understand that I would *never* hurt you. *Ever*,” I assure her.

I get to my feet, placing the chair upright and back where it belongs before heading for the door.

“I wouldn’t try any more escape attempts, I can see everything.” I glance up to where the tiny surveillance camera in the top corner of the room. I placed it there while she was

sleeping last night, not because I wanted to, but because it was necessary.

“You’re filming me? What the fuck?” She shoots to her feet in outrage.

“*Not* filming you. I only turn it on when there’s something I need to see, like if you try to hurl the chair at the window again or make a noose using the bed sheets.”

“Hmm, I’ll have to save that idea for later.”

“You fucking try it and see what happens,” I warn.

“You don’t scare me Gage, that would actually imply that you make me feel something.”

“Trust me, fear is not the type of *feeling* I want to give you.” I know she understands what I’m referring to. “In a couple of months you won’t be able to get enough of your new husband, I guarantee it.”

“Not a chance. If you touch me, I’ll kill you.”

“I would love to see you try,” I say with a smirk. I nod towards the tray of food I carried in for her earlier. “You should eat.”

“Not hungry.” She screws her nose up defiantly.

“This would be a lot easier if you’d just work with me and not against me.”

“Never. I’ll fight this if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Gage

“Boss,” Alec greets, stepping into the study which doubles as my office when I’m working from home.

I need to do something productive, checking in on Della every five minutes is slowly going to drive me into madness, which is why I called him over this evening.

I gesture to the chair opposite my desk. “Take a seat.”

“What can I do for you?” He straightens his jacket and drops into the chair.

“I would like you to come to work for me.”

His brows pinch into a frown. “I don’t understand.” *Of course he doesn’t, he already works for you at the club, asshole.*

“I’ve known you a little over a year now, you’re one of my most loyal employees and it’s one of the reasons I trust you as much as I do. I value loyalty highly, and after how you helped me out, I would like you to work at my personal security, a bodyguard of sorts, to keep my family safe. After last night

there's now no doubt a threat to both the girl and to my family, and I don't trust anyone as much as I do you."

He inhales deeply, scrubbing a hand over the stubble that covers his cheeks and jaw. "Wow, I... I don't know what to say, Boss."

"Please, call me Gage," I say. "It would mean relocating. I have a spare room with your name on it, or a guest house adjacent to the house if you would prefer something more private. Please understand that this job could be dangerous, and of course your salary would reflect that. It is completely your choice what you decide and I don't expect an answer right now b-"

He leans forward. "Boss, I- *Gage*," he corrects. "I was in the Marines for many years, so I'm not afraid of a little danger, and I know my way around a gun. Since I left the Forces, I haven't been able to find myself and where I belong, but working for you has been the only stability I've had since I got out."

I think that's the most I've ever heard him speak since I've known him.

"I saw what that Tanner guy did to your girl last night, and quite frankly anyone who hurts a woman doesn't deserve to live. I accept your offer."

"Really?"

He nods. "I'll keep your family safe, Bo- *Gage*."

“I was also considering hiring Theo?” I leave it as a question, hoping for his input.

“I can’t think of anyone more suited for the job.”

“I will speak to him. Thank you.”

We both rise to our feet and make our way to the door.

“If you’re available tomorrow, we could run through everything, and set about getting you moved in? Unless it’s too soon?”

“I travel light and I don’t have much in the way of belongings. Tomorrow is fine,” he replies.

I lead Alec through the house towards the front door just as my sister turns the corner, her forehead slamming straight into Alec’s chest, sending her stumbling back. He grips her elbow to steady her and her eyes lift to his face, her jaw practically hitting the floor.

“Oh, hey.” Sierra’s eyes are wide as she takes in *all* of Alec. It takes her a good few seconds to eye him from top to bottom and back again, and I don’t miss the reddening of her cheeks. “Sorry, I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“No harm done.” His hand still on her arm, and the second he realises, he snatches it back and stuffs his hands into his pockets, giving her a tight-lipped smile.

“Sierra, this is Alec. He’s going to be working as our security here.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widen, a ghost of a smile on her lips.
“*Good.*”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ma’am.”

She sniggers. “Please never call me that again unless you want to give me a complex.”

Alec’s smile deepens. “My apologies.”

A few excruciatingly awkward seconds pass, and I’m forced to clear my throat to cut through the tension that hangs in the air like a bad odour.

Sierra snaps her gaze up to me. “I uh... I should be going. I have... things to do.” Her eyes meet Alec’s again, “It was nice to meet you. Welcome to the madhouse.”

Alec chuckles as Sierra disappears into the kitchen.

I see Alec out of the house and head back upstairs, resisting the urge to go to Della’s room to check on her. Instead, I force myself into my bathroom and hit the shower before retiring to bed.

This is going to be a long night.

∞∞∞∞

I can’t sleep.

No matter how hard I try to drift off, it just isn’t happening, my mind refuses to switch off and my body does not want to relax. I toss and turn, getting more and more

frustrated with every hour I see tick past on the clock beside me.

I sit up against the headboard and reach across the bedside table for my phone, pulling up the feed to her room.

The app on my phone allows me to see into every camera around the house, the only bedroom with a camera inside is the room Della is in.

It's not a way to spy on her and try to catch a glimpse of something I shouldn't, it's purely for her safety.

The camera footage finally loads, and there she is, curled up in the middle of her bed, the sheets around her body a tangled mess.

I don't blame her for how she acted earlier, I'd probably do the same thing if I was in her position, but she needs to understand that she's not in any danger here and whether she likes it or not, it's her best option right now.

I can't protect her if she's anywhere but right here under my roof, and as extreme as it may be, the moment she becomes my wife, she'll be untouchable to anyone but me.

Untouchable to Bryce fucking Tanner and her cunt of a father.

Those bruises on her skin, I feel every one of them, I feel the slap he dealt her against her cheek like it was meant for me. I feel the tightness of his grip, strong enough to leave finger marks all over her arms. And that fucking bite mark? Makes me sick to my stomach.

What the hell is wrong with Randall March if he thinks promising his daughter to the biggest, cruellest bastard I know is acceptable?

Is he insane?

Clearly he doesn't have his daughter's best interests at heart, only his own.

On the screen, she stirs and I zoom in on her closer to find her wide awake, her hands squeezing the pillow underneath her, and my heart clenches in my chest when I notice her body shaking as silent tears wrack through her.

Knowing I'm just a few rooms away from her is eating me alive, but knowing they're tears *I* put there makes me feel ten times worse.

What I wouldn't give to hold her, kiss her, touch her in a way no one else ever has and nobody else ever will.

She has no idea how special she is. How everything I've done has been to ensure her safety, even when she didn't realise it. I've been a part of her life for over a decade, she just didn't know it.

She's always been mine, and I'm going to do everything in my power to show her that I'm hers too.

“Wow, you get *any* sleep last night?” Rafe asks the moment I enter the living room the next morning. He’s sat stretched out on the couch in a pair of sweats and a t-shirt watching some shitty TV show.

“None,” I reply. “Listen, I’ve got a meeting with Terrance Newman at noon, going over the final checks for the casino’s opening. Can you handle it for me?” I ask my brother.

His eyes snap to mine. “You’re not going?”

“I’m needed here, and I trust you.”

We’ve been in the process of creating a casino for nearly a year, it’s been a slow road but it’s finally coming together, what with the grand opening being just over a week away.

“Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t be asking if I wasn’t. You’ve got this.”

He thinks on it for a beat. “Okay, brother. No problem. You focus on taking care of your girl.”

“Always. Thanks, man.”

“Good morning!” Sierra sings, dressed in just a silky robe that ends mid thigh, her hair is sopping wet with fluffy pink slippers on her feet.

“Would you put some clothes on, Si? There are nearly a half a dozen men in this house, not including your two brothers *and* our father.”

She waves me off. “The people in this house have seen me in much less. How many times do I walk through here in a

bikini in summer? Stop being such a sexist pig.”

“She’s got a point,” Rafe comments.

I shoot him a warning look before turning back to Sierra, following her through into the open plan kitchen diner. “I’m just trying to protect you.”

She grabs an apple from the fruit bowl on the kitchen island. “You don’t have to, Gage. I’m a big girl, I can take care of myself.”

Rather than argue, I let her have this one, and I can’t help notice the grin on Viola’s face as she pours a cup of coffee.

Viola has been working for our family since I was a child. She’s what keeps this house running and our sanity intact. She must be in her sixties, her once blonde hair turning white at the roots, though she could easily pass for a woman a fraction of her real age.

She was my mom’s best friend and stayed to take care of us after she died when my father was inconsolable.

“Will you tell this jerk that it’s the twenty-first century and a girl can wear whatever she likes.” Sierra’s eyes fall on Viola.

Viola chuckles. “She has a point there, Gage.”

“Don’t you gang up on me, too,” I groan.

“Thanks, Vi. Us women have gotta stick together.” Sierra winks before taking off towards the door.

“Sierra,” I call after her.

She twirls around. “Yes?”

“Could you do me a favour?”

“Depends on what it is.”

“Could you check on Della? I don’t seem to be getting anywhere and given her escape attempt yesterday, I think I’m the last person she wants to see right now.”

She smiles. “Leave it to me, big bro. All she needs is a little girly down time and some good food and she’ll be fine.”

“Don’t say anything you shouldn’t,” I warn.

“When are you going to learn to trust me, brother? Your lack of faith in me is a little insulting. Don’t worry, I won’t let slip your precious little secret.”

I step closer, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “Thank you.”

She floats down the hallway towards the staircase as I make my way back towards Viola.

“Breakfast, Gage?” she asks.

“No. Thank you. I don’t think I could stomach anything other than some coffee.” I’m not going to lie, I’m fucking starving, but the girl up in the guest bedroom has my stomach in knots. I’m worried whether I’m doing the right thing by keeping her here, worried I’m making her hate me even more than she already does.

She’s safe here, away from Bryce, I remind myself.

Viola slides a cup of coffee across the marble counter top towards me. “She’ll be okay, you know.” she says, as if

sensing where my thoughts lie. “All good things work themselves out in the end.”

“I hope so.” I take the cup of coffee and take a sip, letting the warm liquid slide down my throat. “Thanks for the coffee, Vi.”

I head to my office and take a seat behind my desk and pull out my phone, dialling Derek’s number. There’s something that’s been eating at me and I need answers.

“Gage.”

“Derek. I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

“I need you to look into Bryce Tanner a little deeper. There’s something that just isn’t sitting well with me with him.” *When does it?*

“I’ll take a look and get back to you,” he says. “Want me looking in any particular areas?”

“I want anything and everything. I want as much dirt as I can on that bastard.”

“I’m on it. How’s the girl?”

“Safe, but very stubborn and more scared than she’ll admit.”

“I’m glad you finally have her safe. She’ll come around once she realises she can trust you.”

“I hope so.” I hang up.

I really do hope so.

Della

I feel like shit.

This is the start of my second day here, and it's been too long since I've felt the sunlight on my skin and filled my lungs with some fresh air. I've never been one to hate being indoors, some days I don't even bother to leave my house, but here? I feel trapped, and these four walls seem to be closing in on me with every tedious hour that passes by.

I'm getting claustrophobic. Irritable.

Bored.

How long is he going to keep me locked up here? And once we're married, does he still plan on holding me in here like a prisoner?

Married.

In two days I'll be a married woman. An unhappily married woman at that. God, the thought makes me want to cry because there's nothing I can do to prevent it.

I pull myself out of bed, not caring about the fact I'm still wearing the same clothes as yesterday, not to mention the bird's nest that's taken up residence on my head, my hair a dishevelled, unwashed mess. There's a strange odour that lingers in the room that I'm almost certain is coming from me seeing as how I haven't had a shower since before I got here.

I head into the en-suite bathroom to use the toilet and splash some water onto my face to wake myself up. My eyes are red and puffy. I cried for so long last night that I must have cried myself to sleep at some point early this morning because I can't remember much after that.

My stomach lets out a long, loud growl. The sandwich Gage brought me yesterday afternoon along with pepperoni pizza that creepy bastard, Damien tossed at me last night didn't go very far.

I'm starving.

I move back into the bedroom when I let out a squeal. There's a woman sat on the edge of my bed. She's wearing a tight black dress that ends mid-calf, her dark brown hair hangs in ringlets around her shoulders and her full lips painted a deep shade of red.

"Wow, it really smells like something died in here," she says, scrunching up her face in disgust.

"Who are you?" I force out.

Her hand shoots out towards me. "Sierra, your sister-in-law to-be in..." she thinks for a moment, "two days," she

finishes gleefully with a kind smile. “And you’re Della March.”

“That’s me.” I reach out my hand and shake hers.

She looks me over, her head tilted to the side in curiosity as she gives me the once over.

“I see why my brother is so taken with you. I brought you some breakfast. I don’t know what you like or if you’re vegetarian or vegan or whatever, so I got a little of everything.” She’s not kidding. A tray sits beside her on the bed piled high with food. There’s scrambled eggs, toast and bacon. A bowl filled with a selection of fruit, two glasses of orange juice and some cereal.

“Thank you, and this is all perfect.”

“Great! I’m starving!” She takes a plate of her own and starts piling on the food, and after a moment I do the same, taking a little of everything.

“So, you’re Gage’s sister?” I ask, taking a bite of my toast.

“Gage’s absolutely fabulous, all around awesome younger sister, yes.” She winks. “Between me and my two brothers, I intend on being your favourite Hudson sibling.”

“You have another brother?”

“Yeah, Rafe,” she answers around a mouthful of food. “Gage is the oldest at twenty-nine, Rafe is twenty-six and little old me is almost twenty-one.”

“And Gage... What is he like? Is he... Is he a good man?”
I probe.

Sierra gives me a warm smile. “Besides my dad, Gage is the best man I know, and I’m not just saying it because he’s my brother. He’s strong, he values family and he’s always been there when I needed him. I know all of this must be intimidating but honestly? You could do worse than marry my brother.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Oh really?”

“Yes. He stands up for people when they can’t do it themselves. He’s a natural-born protector, it’s what he does. You’re here because he feels the need to protect you too.”

“But why *me*?”

“That’s something only Gage has the answer to, princess.”

I don’t press further, and we spend the next fifteen minutes chatting while finishing off our food.

I help her clear up, piling everything back onto the tray before she heads for the door. I go to help her but she puts out a hand. “Back away from the door, princess. Can’t have you escaping on me, now. Gage would throw a fit if I lost you.”

“As if I would,” I say, feigning innocence with a hand to my chest, a smile tugging at my mouth.

She opens the door but turns back, resting the tray on her hip. “Little tip. Take a shower, you look and smell like shit.” She gives me a wink and for the first time since I got here, I laugh.

I like her.

“Everything you need should be in the bathroom. You look about my size, I’ll go grab you some clean clothes and leave them on the bed for you.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“You know what? I quite like you, Della. Kinda looking forward to having you as my sister.”

The reminder has my gut clenching but I force a smile. “Is um... Is Gage here? Like, at home?”

“Yeah. You should be honoured, you know. He had Rafe fill in for him on a meeting today so he could be here should you need him. He’s never missed a single business meeting until today.”

“Could you get him for me?” I ask.

“Make yourself look less homeless and I’ll think about it,” she teases with a wink before leaving the room, locking the door behind her.

I take a shower, paying particular attention to my hair, and I can safely say I feel better for it. I could stay in here all day, the warm water covers me like a blanket, washing away all my worries, as cliché as it sounds.

My talk with Sierra has made me feel a little better about this entire fucked up situation, though I’m still not fully convinced.

As promised, once I'm out of the shower, I find a pair of black jeans and a t-shirt Sierra has laid out for me on the bed. Luckily, I packed a spare bra and a couple of pairs of panties in my backpack which sits by the dressing table. Almost forgetting I have a camera trained on me 24/7, I grab my clothes and rush into the bathroom to change.

I run my fingers through my damp hair to even out the knots and take a quick look in the mirror and unlike this morning I'm not met with the reflection of an ogre and more like my old self again.

It's not long after I've finished getting dressed that the lock on the door clicks and Gage steps inside.

My heart jumps in my chest as I catch his reflection in the mirror. Unlike the last few times I've seen him, today he's not in a suit. He's in a pair of plain grey denim jeans and navy Henley. His hair is messy, his cheeks and jaw covered in a five o'clock shadow and his eyes are heavy as if he slept even less than I did.

"Sierra said you'd asked for me." I can hear the hope in his voice as he speaks.

"I can't be in here any longer, Gage," I say.

"I can't let you go ho-"

"No, I mean this room. I'm going stir crazy in here. Is there any way I can go outside? Stretch my legs for a while?"

He runs a hand over his face, thinking on the idea. "Alright, but if you run..."

“Where would I go? I’m sure you have cameras in every corner of this house. Even if I did run, I don’t think I’d get very far.”

He nods slowly. “Okay, come on.”

My heart lightens as I reach for my shoes, slipping on my *Converse* before letting him guide me from the room.

I pass by Damien who’s standing guard outside and shiver, his eyes lingering on me a little too long, but I do my best to ignore it.

Gage’s hand stays pressed to the small of my back as we walk through the house, and it’s a lot bigger than I expected. It’s more like a mansion than a house, the long hallways leading off to a dozen different rooms in every direction.

Sierra stands off to the side when we reach the bottom of the wide staircase and winks, giving me a smile.

A sigh of relief escapes me the second we step outside, the sunlight warming my skin instantly. I take in a lung-full of cool, fresh air, enjoying how good it feels.

For the first time since I got here, I can get a proper look of the house. Mansion was right. The back garden is easily a couple of acres, lined with tall trees and flowers of every variety. Off to the left is a huge built-in swimming pool and hot tub, and to the right, a gravelled pathway that seems to wind its way around the rest of the garden.

“You want to take a walk?” I look up to find Gage peering down at me.

I glance over his shoulder to where Damien stands a few metres away with his arms folded, gazing off somewhere into the distance as though he's bored, but I'm grateful he's at least looking somewhere else other than me.

"You're not going to leave me alone, are you?"

"Not a chance," Gage says with a smile.

I take off walking, winding my way down the path, the gravel crunching underfoot.

"How are your bruises?" Gage asks, falling into step with me, his long strides equalling two of mine.

I trace the bruises on my arms with my fingers that are now beginning to turn yellow around the edges. "Fine. They don't hurt today, just look ugly."

"Nothing about you could ever be ugly."

I toss a glance over to him. "Should've seen me this morning, I looked like I just got spun up and spit out by a tornado."

He chuckles. "I'm sure you were still beautiful."

I stop and turn to him, eyeing him. "Are you trying to butter me up to get me to go along with this whole marriage bullshit?"

"Maybe, but either way it's happening whether I have to carry you down the aisle on my shoulder or not," he replies confidently and without shame.

I stare at him for a moment in total disbelief. *Is he serious?*

I scoff, spinning on my heel and continue walking. “I can’t believe this.”

“What?”

“*This*. Everything. It’s bizarre. In the space of a few days I’ve faced the prospect of marrying two different men that I barely know.”

I can’t even wrap my head around everything that’s happened recently, it’s enough to make a girl go crazy.

“I guess I always figured that when I eventually got married, I’d be marrying someone I love,” I continue. “Someone I was *in love* with. In my head I always imagined the fairy tale.”

“You don’t think it’s the same for me?”

“In what fairy tale does the prince carry the princess kicking and screaming to the altar tossed over his shoulder?”

He frowns, almost as if my words have hurt him. “Is the idea of marrying me really that repulsive?”

“Being *forced* into a marriage I don’t want, *yes*,” I correct. “Why are you pushing this when you know it’s not what I want?”

“Because it’s the best option.”

“For who? I *do not* want this. You keep saying you won’t hurt me and have my best interests at heart, but I don’t see it that way. You say you’re protecting me from Bryce, but why? What am I to you? Our fathers hate each other. Is this just a

way to one-up my dad? To flaunt it in his face that you managed to steal his daughter?”

“It’s not like that,” he says softly.

“Then tell me what it’s like. I’m sure you have a whole herd of beautiful women flocking to become your wife.”

“But it’s not *them* I want.” My heart jumps as his hand reaches up to touch my cheek but I flinch, and his hand freezes millimetres away from my skin before dropping back down to his side.

His face contorts into something that resembles hurt at my rejection.

I didn’t intend to react like that, but after what happened with Bryce, it’s a knee-jerk reaction to recoil from a man’s touch.

“Why me?” I ask.

“That’s a story for a-”

“A story for another time, yeah I got it,” I finish, taking a step back and heaving out a sigh of frustration.

His phone rings in his pocket and he pulls it out to see who’s calling. “*Fuck,*” he breathes out.

“Take it. I’m going to sit out here for a while. I won’t run, I promise.”

“Fine, but Damien stays.”

“Wonderful,” I deadpan, moving to the stone seat that overlooks a large pond, noticing the fish that swim beneath the

surface.

Gage's voice gradually disappears as he heads back for the house and I'm left with Damien, who's eyes are currently burning a hole into the back of my head.

I don't know why he hates me so much, or what I could have possibly done to irritate him in just two days but the look he gives me, the way he glares at me, it makes my skin crawl.

The only other time I've felt like that was when I was with Bryce.

I swivel around on the seat, finding him stood, arms folded behind me, his eyes boring into mine. "What is your problem?"

"My problem is *you*. When I took this job with the Hudsons I didn't sign up to be stuck babysitting you all fucking day," he complains.

"I'm sorry I'm such an inconvenience, but if you remember, I didn't choose to be here. Maybe you should take up your frustration with Gage." I get up and storm off down the path that leads back to the house with Damien hot on my heels.

"You have one hell of an attitude problem, girl," he comments. "Need a good spanking if you ask me."

"Go fuck yourself, Damien," I toss over my shoulder.

"Maybe I will. Maybe I'll think of your dirty little mouth choking around my cock while I do."

I stop dead, remembering Bryce saying those exact words just a couple of days ago. My pulse pounds in my eardrums as my hands begin to shake, plunging me back into the memories of that day I've managed to force down since it happened.

I spin around and walk up to Damien until I'm within an inch of him. "You're disgusting and you will *never* touch me. Asshole."

I turn and carry on walking with him a few metres behind me and it's not until I reach my room and the lock clicks into place that I can finally breathe. To not have his eyes on me is like a weight being lifted from my body. Having that door separating us makes me feel a whole lot safer, and something in the back of my mind is telling me that whether I trust him or not, Gage isn't the one I should be afraid of.

That's reserved for the man on the other side of that door.

Della

I'm stood at the altar, the minister towering above me. His mouth moves but I can't hear a single word of what he's saying. The only sound I hear is the faint chime of wedding bells that ring through my ears.

Everything around me is a brilliant blinding white, the people sat either side of the aisle watching the spectacle are hazy, like I'm looking at them through a thick layer of fog.

I glance down at the white gown that hugs my body, the delicate lace soft under my touch, the sweet scent of the white roses that I'm holding drifts up into my nose.

To my left, Sierra swats away a tear from her cheek, smiling sweetly.

"Are you alright?" the man beside me whispers and I look up to see Gage, his jet black tuxedo a stark contrast to the crisp white all around us.

I nod, forcing a smile and something settles inside me as I take in the man next to me, the way he's looking at me has me feeling things I'm not used to.

Beside him is a man who looks like a younger version of Gage, a man I can only imagine is his brother Rafe.

"I now pronounce you Man and Wife. Mr. Tanner, you may now kiss your bride."

Wait. What?

My eyes flick up to find it's not Gage standing beside me.

It's Bryce.

Gage and his siblings have since disappeared, leaving me standing in the presence of the Devil and the man who flanks him.

Damien.

"You're mine now, love." Bryce's voice makes me shiver. "I told you I'd find you eventually." He reaches up and I recoil away when I see his hands stained in blood.

My blood.

Damien's laugh cuts through the air when he takes in the horror on my face.

Bryce grins. "I'm going to have so much fun making you bleed..."

I jolt awake, my eyes heavy and disoriented. It takes my mind a minute to catch up, taking in my surroundings to ground me

to the here and now.

It was just a dream, I remind myself. It wasn't real. He can't reach me here.

As my eyes begin to adjust to the dark, shapes of furniture coming into focus, they settle on a shadow in the corner of the room.

A man hidden under the cloak of darkness, sat in the chair across from me. I gasp in surprise, my heart lurching in my chest.

Gage.

I should be angry, but I'm not.

I'm not exactly sure what this feeling is inside of me, but all I know is that there's a tiny part of me that enjoys him watching me, and dare I say he makes me feel safe?

What is wrong with me?

"You're starting to make a habit out of watching me sleep, Gage."

"Guess again."

I yelp, my heart jumping into my throat as Damien comes into view, the smirk on his mouth sending chills down my spine and suddenly I'm on high alert.

"What are you doing in here? Get the fuck out!" I scoot up the bed, stumbling out from under the covers and onto the other side. The bed is the only thing separating me from him.

He grins. “There’s that dirty mouth of yours. Like I said before, we gotta do something about that.”

“I’ll scream.” My warning only makes his grin grow wider.

“You can try, but I wouldn’t recommend it.” His eyes drop down to my body and his eyebrows raise in surprise. “Well, what do we have here?”

It’s only then that I realise I’m only in a plain white strappy tank top and a pair of panties. No bra.

I’m on full display.

On instinct, I cross my arms over my body to try to hide it from him but a dark chuckle rumbles up his throat. “Gage was very generous allowing me to spend a little time getting to know you.”

My breath locks in my throat. “W-What?”

Gage knows about this?

“Seems he’s a man who likes to share.”

My heart sinks at his words.

How could Gage do this? All those promises to keep me safe and that no one would touch me were all lies.

There was a moment earlier today when I wanted to believe him, a part of me almost beginning to warm to him. Like he said, by marrying him, I’d be safe out of the clutches of Bryce and my father. It would be the lesser of two evils. The better of two options.

But of course, I was wrong, as with many things lately. Gage is just as bad as all the rest.

Before I have chance to react, Damien lunges for me. He grapples me to the ground, one hand pinning my arms above my head and the other over my mouth, muffling the scream that tears through me.

“I’m going to fuck that dirty mouth until you choke on me, bitch,” he spits, the stench of his rancid breath has me gagging.

Gripping me hard, he drags me to my feet and dumps me on the bed. I squirm and struggle beneath him but the full weight of his body pins me to the mattress.

He brings his mouth level with my ear. “Seems you’ve got a lot of guys going crazy for you, I’d like to see what all the fuss is about.”

He releases my arms and begins groping me, his hands edging closer to my underwear. He forces my legs apart and settles his weight between them. I can feel his dick hardening every time I struggle, like he’s enjoying the fight and it makes me sick.

“Fight me, bitch. It gets me so hard,” he grunts, reaching for the zipper of his pants, groaning as he palms his dick through the fabric, rubbing it against my thigh.

I need help.

I refuse to let this happen again.

I will not let another man abuse me.

I open my mouth as wide as I can and bite down on the calloused flesh of his hand, hard enough that I can taste the metallic tang of blood on my tongue.

I gag as he roars in pain, moving his hand enough for me to scream so loud my throat feels like it's tearing apart and my lungs burn in my chest.

Damien's hand collides with my face, the sting radiating through my cheek. "Shut the fuck up you little bitch!"

I scream again, swinging my hand into his face as hard as I can. I've never punched anyone before and it hurts like a bitch, but all I can think about it getting him off me.

There's a loud crash and Damien turns to look over his shoulder at Gage, who's eyes are wide as they take in the scene in front of him. His eyes dart to me and his nostrils flare.

Why does he look so surprised?

"Get your motherfucking hands off her," Gage seethes. He's dressed only in a pair of black sweatpants, his bare, muscled torso on display.

"Boss, I-" Damien's words die on his lips as he stares at Gage.

What is going on?

Raising the gun in his hand, Gage aims it at Damien's head and flips off the safety.

Damien releases me and scrambles off the bed. I reach for the bed sheets and cover myself as much as I can, bringing my

knees under my chin.

Gage's eyes drop to where Damien's belt is unbuckled, his pants gaping open and his eyes go wide. Damien quickly reaches down to dress himself.

"Are you alright?" My eyes snap to Gage, his soft words a stark contradiction to the anger painted on his face.

"What do you think?" I shoot back.

"What the fuck's going on, brother? What's all the noise?" The man I assume to be Gage's brother, Rafe, comes to a stop beside him, taking in the scene in front of him.

"Damien here thought it was okay to touch what wasn't his."

"Gage," Damien begins, but he doesn't let him finish his sentence. Gage's fist collides with Damien's face before he has the chance to continue and he goes down, clutching his face. I'm almost certain the force of the blow was enough to break his jaw.

"Did he touch you?" Gage asks me, nearing the bed but I shuffle away from him.

"He wouldn't have if it wasn't for you."

His brows pinch. "What are you talking about?"

"You know full well what I'm talking about. He came in here bragging about how you like to share."

"The fuck?" Rafe asks, looking towards his brother.

“Is that what this piece of shit told you?” He shakes his head in disbelief, running his tongue over his bottom lip. “Well, that just isn’t true *is it?*” Gage asks, kicking Damien in the gut, making him groan even louder.

Gage crouches down to where he’s splayed out of the floor, a stream of blood trickling from his mouth and nose. “You sure have some nerve touching her. You’re fucking lucky you didn’t get the chance to go further because you’d be dead already.”

What is going on?

Did he not know what Damien was going to do?

My mind whirls with confusion.

The sound of footsteps echo down the hall and a gasp fills the silence. “Del, you okay? I heard a scream.” Sierra asks, hurrying to where I’m sat. She perches on the edge of the bed, wrapping her robe around her body tighter before placing a hand on my leg.

“Rafe, go get Alec and Theo. We’re gonna need some help taking out the trash,” Gage says to his brother.

“Abso-fucking-lutely.” Rafe disappears down the hall.

“Sierra, take Della to my room please,” Gage asks, before his eyes flick to mine as he reaches out a gentle hand to my arm. “I have a few things to attend to, and then we can talk.” He gives me a reassuring smile before I’m lead out of the room.

Gage

I watch over my shoulder as my sister leads Della down the hallway towards my bedroom, though the knowledge that she's safe does little to dampen the fire already raging through my veins.

I stare down at the piece of shit at my feet, his blood staining my floor, his existence sickening me to the core. The fact he is still breathing is due to him not being able to accomplish what he set out to do tonight. To violate Della.

He touched her.

He touched *my girl*.

Her blood-curdling scream still echoes in my mind and it had me out of bed and taking off in a run, the gun I keep at my bedside every night clutched tightly in my hand.

Della. My only thought in that moment was to get to her.

She looked so tiny compared to Damien, his hulking body towering over her as he pinned her to the bed, laying there

dressed only in a thin tank top and a tiny pair of panties. She might as well have been naked.

The thought of him touching her has me wanting to lodge a bullet right between his eyes.

I saw the realisation of being caught out dawning on his face the second I burst through the door.

He knew.

He knew right then what this betrayal meant for him.

I suppose I should be thankful for small mercies, he could have had his dick hanging out, but that doesn't mean he didn't have the intentions.

"They're on their way," Rafe says, coming to stand beside me.

"Good."

Damien coughs. "Boss, please. I-"

"We both know I'm not your boss, Damien." But I bet I can guess who is.

Half an hour later, we're in the old basement underneath my house. It's dark and eerily quiet, but the perfect location for what I have planned. The walls are so thick the basement is practically soundproof. No one on the outside can hear a damn thing down here.

Alec has Damien secured to the chair in the centre of the basement. His hands tied behind his back and his ankles

strapped to the chair legs as his head hangs off to the side.

He's still unconscious, blood drips from the corner of his mouth, his right eye is almost completely swollen shut and his face is swelling up like a balloon.

"Is your girl alright, Boss?" Theo asks.

"A little shaken but she'll be alright once I've talked to her. The prick has her thinking I allowed him to do this, some shit about me sharing her around."

"And she believes him?"

"Seems she does." It's bad enough that she already hates me, but to have her thinking I could possibly do this to her is like a fucking knife through my heart. I may have done some questionable things in my time, but bringing her or any woman harm is not one of them.

Damien groans, his eyelids fluttering as he begins to stir.

"Welcome back," I say as his eyes land on me, or *eye*, I should say. His good one, that is.

"P-Please," he mumbles, his voice thick and hoarse.

"Only cowards beg, Damien. And only *cowards* force themselves on defenceless women. Why did you assault Della? Who ordered you to attack her?" He says nothing, so I drop to eye level in front of him. "I suggest you speak now before I find another way of *making* you talk," I warn, flashing him the gun still tight in my hand.

"Just kill me, get it over with."

“And skip out on all the fun? I don’t fucking think so,” Rafe says, a smirk curling at his lips, his eyes wide with excitement. “You went after one of our own, that shit doesn’t fly with us.”

“Tell me who gave you the order,” I say, and I’m once again met with silence, and without blinking, I flip the safety and pull back the trigger.

The gunshot rings out and Damien screams as the bullet tears through his knee cap, shattering the bone completely.

“Tell me who gave the order!” I shout. “Or do I have to cripple you entirely?” I tap the tip of my gun onto his other knee, making my threat perfectly clear.

I know how to handle a gun, my dad took me and Rafe shooting on the weekends when we were younger, and though I’ve never shot anyone before, an odd satisfaction falls over me.

“Bryce! Okay? It was fucking Bryce Tanner,” Damien cries.

“Why? Why would you turn your back on me? What was it he offered you? Money?”

“He told me he’d pay me two-hundred grand to rough the bitch up a bit and make it look like you were behind it.”

I knew it. I fucking knew Bryce was behind it, the motherfucker.

“Rough her up? Seems to me you were going to do a lot more than ‘*rough her up*’.”

“So, I wanted to fuck the bitch? The little cunt needed putting in her place, nothing a little cock wouldn’t fi-”

I don’t even realise I’ve pulled the trigger until the shot pierces my eardrums and Damien’s screams fill the space as his other knee is shattered.

The sound of the gunshot ricochets off the walls, slowly dissipating into nothing.

After his screams die down, his body stills as he passes out from the pain.

I turn to Alec and Theo. “Get rid of him, I don’t care how. He wrote his death sentence the second he touched her.”

I spin on my heel and head for the door, making my way back through the house to my room where Della waits with my sister.

Adrenaline pumps through my body, my hands shaky at my sides. I have to take a moment before I go in to compose myself. I press my palm to the wall and take a deep breath to keep a hold on my anger. I don’t want to scare her even more.

I twist the handle and find her sat on my bed with my sister’s arm around her shoulder. One of my sweaters hangs loosely from her body to keep her warm.

Just the sight of her has a wave of calm washing over me, all my anger suddenly fading away.

“Thanks, Si. I got her from here.”

“You gonna be okay?” Sierra asks her, and after a moment, Della gives her a small nod. Si rises from the bed and squeezes my arm as she passes before disappearing out of the room.

“I know what he told you, and none of it is true. I would never allow anyone to touch you and the fact you think I could be capable of that is...” I trail off, scrubbing a hand over my stubbled jaw. “Bryce offered him money to attack you, making you believe it was me who told him to.”

“I know,” she says quietly.

“You know?”

“I know it wasn’t you, I know that now. I saw your face when you rushed into the room, how angry you were. I’m sorry I believed it.”

I move towards her, taking up the space on the bed beside her. “It should be me apologising to you. I failed you. I failed to protect you like I promised I would.”

“You couldn’t have known what he would do.”

“That call I got yesterday when we were in the garden, I found out there was a rat among my men, someone who had been turned against me.”

“Damien?”

I nod. “Did he touch you?”

She shakes her head. “He tried, but you got there just in time.”

Thank fuck.

I take her hands in mine, her skin silky soft in mine, but they're ice cold. I half expect her to pull away from my touch, but she lets me hold them, rubbing the back of them with the pad of my thumbs to soothe her. "He won't hurt you again, I swear. No one *ever* will."

Her teary eyes meet mine. "What if they already did?"

Her question catches me off guard. "But I thought you said he d-"

"Before. Before I came here," she says quietly.

"Bryce?" I ask through gritted teeth. She doesn't even have to answer because the flinch at hearing his name tells me everything. "Tell me what he did to you?"

"What *didn't* he do?" she mumbles, dropping her eyes to her lap.

My heart stills. "He *raped* you?"

A tear trickles down her cheek and it's the only answer I need.

"I tried to fight him, I-" Her voice cracks, and with that one sound my heart cracks too.

Jesus Christ...

Bryce fucking raped her.

I rise from the bed, letting my fingers dig through my hair, tugging it hard at the roots until my scalp stings.

My fist sinks into the wall by the door, the pain radiating up my arm in a way that feels good. I don't miss the shriek of

fear that leaves Della as I pull my fist back, pieces of plasterboard falling to the ground at my feet.

“When?” I grit out. “When did he hurt you?”

She sniffs. “The night I ran. The night I found out about the deal between him and my father. He let himself into my room, hit me, threw me on the bed and...” Her eyes are distant as she lets the memories invade her mind.

Of course...

It all makes sense. The bruises, the bite mark on her shoulder, the way she flinched away from my touch yesterday.

It was all because of *him*.

I cross the space and take her face into my hands, forcing her to look into my eyes. “Della, listen to me. He will *never* touch you again, I swear it. Do not let what he did rule your mind, it will only destroy you. Rise above it, you’re strong enough, I know it.”

“I don’t know how,” she cries. “I thought I was doing okay. I managed to block it out but after tonight... It brought it all back up.”

“Don’t let him win. This is what he wants. He wants you to live in fear, but that’s not a life. Not one you deserve, and you deserve the world, Della.”

I swipe away the tears that mar her beautiful face with my thumb as her eyes search mine.

“I promise you that when the time comes, Bryce fucking Tanner will pay for what he’s done to you, I’ll see to it. You never have to be afraid of me or anyone else in this house, you’re safe here, with me.”

Without thinking, I lean forward and press my lips to her forehead, not missing the tiny gasp that escapes her mouth.

She doesn’t trust me, not yet. I just have to find a way to show her that she can rely on me. She doesn’t have to fight on her own, because I’ll be fighting right alongside her.

“Get some sleep, it’s been a long night. You can sleep in here, I’ll take one of the guest rooms. Sleep well, angel.” I hold her head in my hands for a second more before releasing her and shifting off the bed, heading for the door.

Della

I'm getting married tomorrow.

That's the thought that has kept me up for most of the night. No matter how many times I repeat the words in my mind they don't seem to sink in.

So much has happened in recent days that it feels like my life is spiralling out of control and between the wedding and what happened with Damien last night, I think I'd be more concerned if I managed to sleep soundly.

Plus, the sweater wrapped around my body and the satin black sheets I'm lying on smell like *him*. A musky, manly scent that envelopes me, reminding me of my reality, my future.

Every girl has dreamed of their wedding day, their father walking them down the aisle while their friends and family look on. The love of their life waiting at the altar for them, tears in his eyes as he takes in how beautiful she looks.

But that dream won't be my reality, because my father won't be there, there will be none of my friends or family there and the man at the end of the aisle is as far from the love of my life as you could possibly get.

He's so sure that after we're married, I'm going to fall at his feet, but it'll be a cold day in hell before that ever happens.

I'm not blind, he's the most gorgeous man I think I've ever laid eyes on, but the fact of the matter is, I don't want this wedding, this marriage, this *life*.

There's a rustle of movement outside the door and I notice the handle beginning to turn. My heart leaps in my chest and on instinct, I slam my eyes shut, evening out my breathing to appear deep in sleep.

I don't have to open my eyes to know it's Gage. Who else is it going to be? His presence is potent, like he's giving off some sort of energy that ripples through the air and seeps into my bones.

His footsteps are quiet as he moves around the room then disappears into the en-suite bathroom, the shower switching on a few minutes later.

I lie there listening in silence, images of him standing under the hot spray of the shower totally naked on the other side of that door invade my mind. After what happened with Damien last night, thoughts such as those should be far from my mind. But I can't help but picture what his body would look like, droplets of water glistening against his skin, sliding

over his muscles, over his broad chest and his taugth torso, down... down... down...

The sound of the shower clicking off snaps me from my daydream, and when I see the door handle turn a minute later, I shut my eyes, evening out my breathing to slow the racing of my heart.

I hear him moving around the room again, and unable to resist, I crack open an eye to see him with his back to me dressed only in a white towel that hangs low on his hips. With the double doors of his wardrobe wide open, he pulls a crisp white shirt, a dark grey jacket and matching trousers off their hangers.

Just as I thought, his shoulders are wide, the muscles of his biceps flexing with every movement. His upper body tapers down to a narrow waist, disappearing under the towel.

“You don’t have to pretend to be asleep, I know you’re awake,” he says casually, not turning to face me.

Shit.

I contemplate staying quiet and calling his bluff, but in the end, I cave. “How did you know?”

“I can see your reflection in the mirror on the wall.”

“Oh, right.” My cheeks flush hot.

He turns around and I’m met with a wall of toned, hard muscle. Droplets of water trickle into the dips and valleys of his abs and something pulses between my legs.

He smirks when he catches me checking him out and my cheeks flame even more. “How are you this morning?” he asks.

I pull myself up to sit, the sheets still wrapped around my body. “I didn’t sleep much, guess I have a lot on my mind.”

“I didn’t sleep either. Every time I close my eyes I see that bastard touching you and I...” he trails off, taking in a sharp breath to control himself.

“What happened to him? Damien,” I clarify.

“You don’t have to worry about him anymore. He’s gone.”

“Gone as in...”

“Gone,” he confirms, his face void of emotion as he speaks the words. He doesn’t have to elaborate because we both know exactly what he means by ‘gone’.

Damien is dead, and I’m not sure how I feel about that. I should feel glad after what he tried to do. *Relieved*. But I’m not. My heart feels heavy.

Someone died all because of me.

Gage must read the expression on my face because I feel a warm hand cover mine as he takes up a seat on the edge of the bed. “Don’t feel sorry for him. He made his choice and he knew full well the consequences of his betrayal. Trust and loyalty are important to me, and when someone breaks them, there’s no going back.”

“I feel exactly the same way.”

Silence falls between us, but it's broken when Gage starts to speak.

“How would you feel about going shopping today? Get yourself some new clothes, some toiletries and such?”

“With who?”

“Sierra, and a couple of my men to ensure your safety, of course.”

A smile forms on my face before I realise it, the thought of breaking free from the confines of this house, even for a little while is an opportunity I won't pass up. “I'd love that.”

“I don't want you to feel like a prisoner in this house, I'm sorry if that's how you've felt since you got here, I never wanted it to be like that. This is your home now and you can come and go as you wish.”

“Really?”

“Does that make you happy?” I nod and he smiles softly. “I'm glad.”

“I'm going to get dressed, you should too. Sierra's waiting for you downstairs in the kitchen. Viola's cooked breakfast.” His eyes linger on mine for a second longer before he gathers his clothes and walks back into the bathroom.

Just as he begins to closed the door, his towel slips off from around his waist, giving me a perfect view of his sculpted ass and toned thighs and my breath hitches.

Jesus.

My mind wanders to places it shouldn't. Places I try to force back, but the thought of how his body would feel against mine are too strong.

Would his touch be harsh or gentle?

My heart skips a beat in my chest.

Shit. I'm attracted to my fiancé. A man who is forcing me to marry him in a little over twenty-four hours.

What is wrong with me?

I find my way back to my room, and as the door swings open, the crumpled sheets on the bed and the bloodstain still visible on the light coloured laminate flooring are an unpleasant reminder of what happened last night. The force of what could have been slamming me in the gut.

What would have happened if Gage hadn't found me in time? Would Damien have gone through with it?

I shudder, forcing away the thought.

I take a quick shower then find more clothes that Sierra let me borrow, a pair of grey jeans this time and a plain white t-shirt and denim jacket. I throw my damp hair up into a messy bun before leaving the room.

I have no idea where I'm going, this place is like a maze but I try to remember where Gage led me when he took me into the garden the other day. After a minute, I find the stairs and the smell of food guides me into the kitchen.

A woman with white hair stands over the stove with her back to me. Sat at the breakfast bar, Rafe scoops more food onto his already sky-high plate while Sierra scolds him.

“You pig! You’ve already had two plates full, leave some for the rest of us, would you?” Sierra spots me and her eyes light up. “Della! Come sit!” She pats the stool beside her and reaches for an empty plate.

When I slide onto the seat, Sierra pulls me in for a loose hug. “How are you?”

“I’m okay, thanks.” She eyes me for a long moment, searching for any hint of a lie after what happened last night, and once she’s satisfied by my answer, she nods and turns to her plate of food.

“Della, we haven’t officially met,” Gage’s brother begins, “I’m Rafe, the most handsome brother out of the two, *obviously*. It’s a pleasure, finally.” He reaches over to shake my hand. He looks a lot like Gage, though his features are softer and his eyes are a bright blue compared to Gage’s hazel ones. He’s slimmer in build than Gage, his shoulders not as broad. His hair the same rich dark brown but styled a little longer and messier than his brother.

There’s something playful and friendly to his facial expression, it lacks the composure that makes Gage’s thoughts impossible to determine.

The lady with white hair comes to stand beside him. She looks around her early-sixties, her face kind and warm. “I’m

Viola, it's lovely to meet you, dear. It's been a long time coming."

"You all sound like you've been waiting for me to get here for years," I say.

"Maybe we have." Rafe gives me a wink, a split-second before a piece of toast hits him in the face with a slap. I glance to my right where Sierra casts her brother a warning look, giving him a small shake of her head.

"Here!" Sierra deflects, piling my plate with food and sets it down in front of me. "Dig in!"

"Thanks." The food is delicious and I didn't realise how hungry I was until I started eating. "Um, Gage said something about us going shopping today."

"Yes! We've got to get you some new clothes, you're starting to make me jealous, you look *way* better in my clothes than I do."

"Hardly."

"*And*, we've gotta find you a wedding dress. I know the perfect store we can try, their dresses are beautiful. I was thinking something..."

I don't hear the rest of her sentence. The mention of a wedding dress has reality hitting like a sledgehammer into my gut, again. Somehow I can go ages without thinking about the wedding and then when my mind catches up and I remember, my stomach lurches and nausea curdles in my belly.

“Della, are you alright?” Sierra asks, tearing me from my thoughts.

“What? Oh, yeah. Fine. I just... I hadn’t even thought about a dress,” I tell her. “I hadn’t really thought about any of it.”

“What? The dress is the most important thing, how could you forget something as important as that?”

My stool scrapes back across the tiled floor as I rise to my feet, the sound grinding everyone in the room to a halt. “Why is everyone acting like this is normal? I’m literally being forced into a marriage I don’t want. This wasn’t my choice, none of it is. I don’t care about the dress or any of it, so forgive me if I’m not excited by the prospect.” My outburst takes me by as much surprise as it appears to have done the others and I go to leave the kitchen when I find Gage stood in the doorway and I stop.

“Gage,” I breathe out.

“I uh...” He clears his throat, “I have a few things to take care of. I shouldn’t be long, maybe an hour or so. Alec and Theo will accompany you both on your shopping trip.” He closes the distance between us and my breath catches as he peers down at me, brushing a hand over mine. “I hope you find something you like, Della. I’m sorry,” he whispers the last part before turning on his heel and disappearing down the corridor and a second later, the front door slams closed.

He heard every word I said, I’m sure of it.

I shouldn't care. I shouldn't feel guilty for making him feel bad when he's doing all of this against my will.

So why do I care?

Maybe because ever since I got here, he's given me no reason to fear him, he's cared for me and protected me in a way no one ever has before.

I don't know what his reasoning and his motives for marrying me are beyond protecting me from Bryce, but even I have to admit that marrying him is a lot more appealing than marrying Bryce, which is ultimately what would happen if I were to return home.

But the question still remains about the feud between our families and what really happened to make them hate each other.

Who's lying and who's telling the truth?

All my life, the Hudsons have been made out to be the enemy; the liars and thieves that stole what little my father had, but how much of that is really true?

I'm yet to meet his father, but Gage is nothing like the man I was lead to believe him to be, in fact he's the opposite, and dare I say that he seems like a decent guy?

The one thing I do know is that whether I like it or not, I'm going to be his wife, a *Hudson*, in a little more than twenty-four hours.

A man I don't know. But a man I'm sure will protect me from harm.

Della

Sierra and I have spent the past hour and a half spending an obscene amount of money on clothes, underwear, shoes and toiletries. She's dragged me around every single store we come across to the point where my feet are swollen and throbbing, screaming at me to take a break. Sierra assured me that money is no object, but it makes me feel uncomfortable that Gage is paying for all of this. I've never liked accepting money from people, I've always paid my own way and hate relying on charity, but Sierra insisted it was Gage's wish.

Alec and Theo walk conspicuously behind us, dressed head to toe in jet black suits and stand out like sore thumbs. So much so, the odd looks Sierra and I get off other shoppers makes me uneasy. With their guns strapped to their hips, Alec and Theo scour the crowds for any potential danger. It's overkill if you ask me. Sure, the threat of Bryce is still there, but he's not stupid enough to strike somewhere so public. Would he?

Sierra takes my hand and steers me into a bridal store to the left of us, the bell above the door chiming as we enter, the scent of lavender filling the air.

“Welcome,” a beautiful blonde lady beams, making her way towards us. Her smile falters for a split-second as she takes in the two hulking men behind us, but she composes herself quickly. “I’m Dana, how may I assist you today?”

“I’m Sierra and this is Della, my sister-in-law to be,” Sierra introduces with a sense of pride. “She’s getting married tomorrow and is in need of a dress asap.”

Dana nearly chokes. “T-Tomorrow?”

“Yes. Is that a problem? We can always take our business elsewhere...” Sierra challenges, folding her arms over her chest.

“Um... No, absolutely not.” Dana then turns her attention to me. “What type of dress are you looking for?”

“Um... Nothing too fancy. Something like that, I guess,” I say, pointing to the dress that is modelled on one of the mannequins. It’s a floor length white silk dress with a cowl neckline and buttoned detailing down the back.

It’s simple and elegant.

It’s perfect.

“May I try it on?” I ask.

“Of course, let me go and find one in your size,” the lady says before heading into the backroom.

She returns a minute later and leads me into one of the curtained changing rooms. I strip down to my underwear and carefully step into the dress, securing the straps over my shoulders and do up the zip at the back. The fabric is soft against my skin, it's so light I don't even notice I'm wearing anything at all.

I turn to look at my reflection in the tall, narrow mirror and my heart expands.

I look beautiful.

I've never said that about myself, *ever*, but taking in the sight of me in this gorgeous wedding gown, I look *beautiful*.

The dress hugs my body, accentuating the fullness of my chest and the curve of my hips.

I run my hands over the silky fabric, smoothing out the crinkles and let my eyes wander up and down my body.

I can't help wondering what Gage will think of me when he sees me in this dress.

Will *he* think I'm beautiful?

"Well? The suspense is killing me, Della. Show me the damn dress!" Sierra yells from the other side of the curtain.

I tug it back and she gasps, taking it in. A wide smile takes over her face as she claps her hands together excitedly. "Oh my Gosh! It's perfect!"

"Yeah it is," I agree, smoothing my hands down the sides of the dress.

“You look stunning.” Sierra twists her neck to the two men who stand like statues by the windows. “Doesn’t she look incredible?”

Alec and Theo each take a quick look at me and nod stiffly.

“Yes, very... pretty, Miss March,” Alec replies woodenly, his smile only lasting a millisecond before it vanishes.

“Wow, don’t flatter the girl, would you? It’ll go to her head,” she replies sarcastically with a roll of her eyes before turning back to me. “My brother is going to freak when he sees you in this tomorrow.”

“I doubt it.”

“Della, do you really think the only reason he’s marrying you is to protect you from that piece of shit, Bryce Tanner? No.” She steps closer, taking both my hands in hers. “I know the whole situation isn’t ideal, not to mention a little fucked up, but my brother cares about you. He’s crazy about you, and between you and me, I think he’s hoping that in time you’ll find yourself crazy about him.”

ooooo

When we get back to the house, the sound of voices echo down the hall. One is unmistakably Gage’s.

“How dare you barge into my house...” I don’t catch the last part of what he said, but whoever it is he’s talking to, it isn’t a welcome visitor.

“How dare *I*? You steal my daughter away and you...”

“That’s my father,” I say, turning to Sierra, and before I realise, my legs are carrying me towards the voices.

I stop just behind the door that leads into the living room. I don’t even have to enter the room to feel the anger and the tension between Gage and my father that hangs thick in the air.

“I suppose you think it’s perfectly acceptable to promise your daughter to a man like Bryce Tanner. Do you have any idea what that man would do to her?” Gage asks.

“Don’t pretend to care about my daughter and stop playing the hero, Hudson, it doesn’t look good on you. You have no right to do what you’re doing,” my father says.

“You have no idea just how much I care about your daughter, or maybe you do. Maybe that’s why you kept me from her for so long.”

Wait. What?

“You will *never* marry my daughter. Over my dead fucking body.”

“If that’s what it takes,” Gage replies casually. “I *will* be marrying Della. Whether you like it or not, it doesn’t matter much to me. But I will spend the rest of my life protecting her from men like you and Bryce fucking Tanner, even if it kills me.”

“She is *my* daughter. My blood. She does what *I* say.”

“Not anymore,” I say, stepping out from behind the door and they both turn towards me as I enter.

Gage’s face hardens while my father’s lights up in fake delight.

“Adelia, darling. Are you alright?”

“You don’t have to pretend to care, Dad. If you did, you wouldn’t have allowed Bryce anywhere near me.”

“Darling, he’s just a little hot-headed. Once you get to know him, I assure you h-”

“I suppose that’s why he raped me then? In my bedroom that day,” I cut in and my father’s face doesn’t falter even a fraction. “I suppose that’s why he turned one of Gage’s men against him and ordered him to attack me last night. Yeah, that’s real husband material, right there.”

“Adelia, do not defy me. You will come home with me and we can put an end to all of this once and for all.”

My jaw falls open.

Did he even hear what I just said?

Does he even care?

“I’m going with you,” I tell him, moving to stand beside Gage. “I’m staying here, with Gage.”

My father’s nostrils flare, the anger of my defiance written across his face. “You will do no such thing.”

“I’m twenty-two years old, Dad. I can make my own decisions in this world.”

“You heard her, so get the fuck out of my house.” I feel Gage’s hand close around mine and my heart skips a beat.

I have never disobeyed my father, I didn’t dare. I have always been the good girl and done what he said, whether I disagreed with it or not, but going home only to be forced to marry Bryce Tanner? That’s where I draw the line.

Almost as if he senses my unease, I feel Gage’s hand squeeze my own, reminding me that he’s there and a strange sense of power and strength floods me, allowing me to stand a little taller.

“This isn’t over, Hudson. You are not taking yet another thing from me.”

“Keep telling yourself the same lie you’ve been telling for years, Randall. We both know the truth.” The three of us whip around to find an older man entering the space. He’s tall but sickly thin. His cheeks are hollowed, and his eyes surrounded by dark circles.

Is this Gage’s father?

They have the same colour eyes and share the same shaped mouth. I had an idea of what his father would look like, but it’s nothing like this. There’s something about his face that feels vaguely familiar.

Where have I seen him before?

“*Joseph* Hudson... You look like shit.” My father almost sounds amused.

Joseph stands up straight, walking towards us, his movements stiff and calculated as though he were in pain. “I believe my son has asked you to leave. The girl wants to stay here and as she and Gage are to be married tomorrow, this is now her home. I suggest you accept that.”

“Accept it? Not fucking likely. This isn’t over.”

“A pleasure as always, Randall,” Joseph says with a sarcastic edge to his voice and something passes between them before my father turns and storms out of the house.

“Are you alright?” Gage asks me.

“I’m fine.” It’s not totally true, but it’s also not a lie either.

“Dad, you should be resting.”

Joseph shoots his son a warning look. “I’m not dead yet and my legs still work. I can walk just fine in my own god damn house,” he grumbles, making my chuckle. His face softens when his eyes land on me. “It’s nice to officially meet you, Adelia. I’m Joseph, and it’s a pleasure to have you here.”

“Hello. Thank you.” I force a smile as I stare at a man my father has had me believing to be the devil incarnate since I can remember.

“I for one am delighted my son has decided to settle down. You’ll be a welcome addition to the family. Now, I’m off to have a stiff drink of something cold and alcoholic to rid the image of Randall fucking March from my brain.”

“Should you be drinking on your medication?” Gage asks.

“Loosen the leash, Son. One drink isn’t going to kill me. I think I have bigger problems to worry about, don’t you?”

Gage doesn’t argue as Joseph disappears down the hallway, leaving Gage and I alone.

“How was your shopping trip?” he asks.

“Um, it was fine. Sierra forced me into buying anything and everything I looked at and dragged me into the bridal store...”

“Did you find a dress that you liked?”

“I did.”

He smiles softy. “I look forward to seeing you in it.”

Silence settles between us, every second growing more and more uncomfortable.

“What did you mean when you said my dad kept you from me for so long?” My question catches him off guard and he hesitates to answer. “Let me guess, a story for another time?”

A corner of his mouth quirks up into a smile. “Something like that.”

“Why do we have to get married tomorrow? What’s the rush? If you insist on me marrying you, why can’t we just... I don’t know, get to know each other better? I’m not ready for this, Gage. I mean, none of my family will be there, not that I have any, but, not even my best friend will be there.”

“Is that the girl with the red hair I saw you with at the club that night?”

I nod. “Reese.”

Silence falls between us once again, only Gage breaks it a moment later. “My father is dying, Della.”

I don’t know what I was expecting to hear, but it certainly wasn’t that. The look of pain etched onto his face makes my heart ache. “I’m sorry, I had no idea.”

“Pancreatic cancer. It’s terminal. His dying wish is to see me married before he... before it’s too late. We have months, if that.” He closes the space between us, reaching up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear only this time when he reaches out to touch me, I don’t flinch. I let his fingers linger over my skin. “Della, I know you don’t want to marry me, but I don’t think I can let you go, especially knowing that Bryce is still a threat to you. I can’t risk you falling into his hands again.”

“Is that the only reason?”

His eyes soften. “It’s one of them, but no. Not completely.” It’s a loaded answer, I’m not exactly sure what it’s loaded with, but judging by the look in his eye, it’s a whole lot more.

“Is marrying you is the only option, to keep me away from him?”

“By bearing the Hudson name comes protection. The protection of my family and the reputation the name holds. Marrying me means he won’t be able to force you to marry him, and you won’t have to endure a life of fear and abuse.”

“How do I know you don’t have your own ulterior motives for marrying me?”

“I don’t, but I need you to trust my word.”

“I don’t trust anybody,” I reply.

“What will it take for you to trust me?”

“A lot, but you’ll know when it happens.”

The air grows thicker, as silence fills the space.

“I think you know by now that I would never hurt you, and I hope with time I can earn your trust.” He clears his throat, his brows pulling tight. “Which is why, once we’re married, it will be a marriage on paper only. I would never force you into anything physical or sexual, nor expect anything from you that you aren’t willing to give me. The only thing we would share is the Hudson name, if that’s what you want.”

Is he saying what I think he’s saying?

“You’d do that?” I ask.

“If it made you happy, yes.”

“I... I don’t know what to say to that.”

“Don’t say anything. Think about what I’ve said. I have some things to attend to before tomorrow. The ceremony begins at one o’clock at the *Hudson Hotel*. I look forward to seeing you there, Della.”

He leans in and presses his lips to my temple, they’re strong and soft and my skin tingles from the contact. My breath locks up in my throat as his lips brush my skin. His

warm breath fans across my face as he pulls away, peppermint filling my nostrils.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Miss March,” he says, leaving me standing there in the middle of the living room, my heart beating out of my chest and my cheeks ablaze.

This man is making it impossible for me to hate him, begging the question of whether marrying Gage Hudson be so bad after all?

Della

I'm not sure I can go through with this.

My heart is pounding so fast in my chest I'm sure I'm seconds away from having a full-blown heart attack. My hands tremble uncontrollably and I can't seem to stay still. If I'm sitting, I'm fidgeting and if I'm standing, like I am now, I'm pacing the floor back and forth enough to wear a hole in the plush white carpet.

We're in the top floor suite at the *Hudson Hotel* in the centre of Halston. It's huge, the decor a sparkling white and a glimmering rich gold. A bank of floor to ceiling windows to the left look out over the city, towering over the bustling streets below. The wide living area leads off into two separate bedrooms, both with en-suite bathrooms.

Where the hell is Sierra? She only said she'd be a few minutes and that was fifteen minutes ago. For the past hour and a half she's helped me prepare, styling my hair into a half up-do with thick brown curls falling down my back in waves,

all of it held together with a full can of hairspray. She fixed my makeup; nothing too heavy, just a little foundation to even out any blemishes and imperfections, nude eyeshadow and black mascara that makes my green eyes pop, and a pale shade of pink lipstick that complements my complexion perfectly.

Sierra went downstairs to check on everything where the staff are currently making their final preparations for the ceremony but is yet to come back. I'm assured by Sierra that it's a small wedding reserved for close friends and family members, but small could mean twenty people or two hundred, and the not knowing is driving me crazy.

I check the clock on the wall that reads twelve-forty. In a little over half an hour I'll be a married woman, and the reminder has the butterflies already fluttering in my belly turning into a frenzy as my stomach flips and rolls with nerves.

A wave of nausea rises up inside me and I make a quick dash to the bathroom where I dry heave into the toilet. Since I haven't eaten a bite since yesterday afternoon, thankfully nothing comes up save for a water and bile.

I hear the door to the suite open and I sigh.

Finally.

Rising to my feet, I quickly rinse my mouth at the sink before leaving the bathroom. "Sierra, where have you been? I've been going insa-"

My words die on my tongue when I take in the man standing before me. Gage stands in a jet black tuxedo, his pants and jacket tailored to hug his body and the shirt beneath it a crisp white. His outfit completed with a black bowtie under his chin.

His face is freshly shaven, his thick dark hair styled in a way that has my fingers itching to rake through it, and his eyes... the colour of warm honey that have my insides melting.

It would be pretty hard for any girl to resist the sight of this man, and as much as I wish I could ignore this feeling inside my belly, it's telling me I *am* one of those girls.

He's gorgeous.

His eyes lock onto mine, and my cheeks heat under his gaze.

"Isn't it bad luck to see the bride before the wedding?" I ask, crossing my arms over my body self-consciously as I stand there dressed in just a white bathrobe that ends mid-thigh.

The corners of his mouth quirk into a smile. "I've never been great with tradition. Seems I have a knack for doing everything the wrong way around," he says and I can't help but laugh. "I brought something that I thought might make you smile, or rather, *someone* that might help make you enjoy today a little more."

He turns and opens the door, and for a second I'm sure I'm seeing things and it takes me a moment for my mind to catch up.

"Ree?" I ask, my best friend's mouth widening into the biggest smile as she charges at me. She slams into me, the force knocking me back a step or two as I hold her tighter than I ever have before.

"Babe, you're kinda strangling me here," she says and not realising my own strength, I release her.

"Sorry, I just... I can't believe you're here." I pull her in for another hug as emotion overwhelms me and I can't stop the tears that roll down my face.

"Hey! None of that! You'll ruin your makeup!" she scolds, swiping at the tears.

"How are you here?"

"I thought it only fair you have someone represent you in a room full of people you don't know. I knew having Reese here would make you happy," Gage answers for her.

"Listen, we're gonna catch up but I need to pee and get changed. Mister *I have zero patience* over here ushered me out of the house before I had the chance. Be right back!" she hurries into the bathroom and slams the door closed.

I turn to Gage. "Are you trying to have me believe you're actually a decent guy?" I ask with a smirk, crossing my arms over my chest.

One corner of his mouth curves up. “I still haven’t convinced you?”

“Don’t force me to marry you and I might actually go as far to say that I like you,” I joke.

His smile widens and turns playful, and my heart thuds.

God, I love his smile.

“You know I can’t do that.”

I shrug. “It was worth a shot.”

I close the space so there’s only a couple of feet between us. He inhales sharply when I reach up onto my toes and press my lips to his cheek, the soft scent of his sandalwood cologne wrapping around me and intoxicating my senses. I let my lips linger on his skin for a beat before easing back.

“Thank you. You don’t know how much it means to me to have my best friend here today.” My gaze flicks down to his lips for a split-second, imaging how they’d taste on mine if I were to close the tiny gap between us.

In the blink of an eye, his arm snakes around my waist as he hoists me against the wall, his body pressing tight against mine.

A gasp escapes my lips. “What are you doing?” My heart thunders in my chest so fast I’m sure he can feel it.

“I know you don’t want me, but if this is the first and last chance I ever get to hold you, you can be damn sure I’m going

to take it.” He leans forward to rest his forehead against mine, his warm breath wafting over my face.

We stay like that for what feels like forever, his arm around my back and my palms pressed flat on his chest. It feels good to be held by him, and somehow, I don’t want him to let me go.

The energy in the room hums, like it’s charged with some sort of electricity as we stand there, gazing into each others eyes.

“Della,” he breathes out, his voice so quiet it’s barely audible and before I know it, I’m reaching up, my lips brushing his so gently I wonder if he can even feel it.

My body ignites and my lips tingle, wanting more, but before I get the chance, a door swings open and we break apart.

Sierra bursts into the room and when her gaze lands on Gage, her eyes go wide. “Gage! You should not be in here! Get out!” She grabs his arm and drags him towards the door. “Come on, you can get your fill of your wife tonight but for now, you need to go!”

The mention of our wedding night has my stomach churning. Shit, I’d forgotten that part.

How could I forget such an important part?

Gage’s eyes connect with mine just as Sierra slams the door in his face before turning to me. “And you, get that dress on before I put it on you myself.” She takes the dress still

concealed in it's zip-up dust cover and thrusts it towards me. "Wait. Have you been crying? Your eyes are red and your mascara has ran. Ugh! Another thing I need to fix."

Reese returns from the bathroom wearing a dark green dress that hangs mid-calf. It's modest for her, seeing as every dress I've ever seen her in barely covers her ass and has her boobs on full display. It has lace detailed with a deep but unrevealing neckline. Her hair falls in loose waves and red lipstick covers her mouth.

"Sierra, this is my best friend, Reese. Ree, this is Gage's sister," I introduce.

"It's really nice to meet you. Now, do you wanna help me get her into this dress without messing up her hair or her face?"

"Absolutely!"

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"You look stunning, babe," Ree says, smoothing out any remaining wrinkles from my dress. "When the hell did you decide to get married and why was I the last to know?"

"I only found out myself three days ago," I reply. "It's a very long and very complicated story."

"I don't know the ins and out what's really happening here between the two of you, but even I can see he's infatuated with

you.” She pulls me in for a hug. “Sierra and I are going to head in. Good luck!” She blows me a kiss as her and Sierra disappear through the door that leads to the function room, the sound of soft music and idle chatter have my heart racing.

Everyone is in there waiting for me on the other side of that door, including Gage.

I can’t believe I almost kissed him.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I shouldn’t want him.

I glance to the large fire door that presumably leads onto the street or a side alley next to the building. A few feet and I’d be free.

“I wouldn’t,” a voice warns behind me, finding Gage’s father limping towards me. “You wouldn’t get very far before he found you. Or worse, Bryce finds you first.”

Deep down I know he’s right. If I ran there’s no guarantee I’d be free, and the thought of coming face to face with Bryce again fills me with terror.

“Shouldn’t you already be in there with everyone else?” I ask.

“Can’t have my future daughter-in-law walk down the aisle all alone can I?”

“Are you sure you’re alright to walk?”

He shoots me a sideways glance. “I already have my son up my ass about what I can and can’t do. Please don’t be like

him.”

I chuckle. “Okay.”

“I know we don’t know each other too well, but I can’t imagine a better wife for my son, and I’m so glad I’m alive to see it. You’re good for each other, I can feel it. I see myself and Gage’s mother in the two of you. She was the light of my life, just as you will be to him.” He smiles fondly as he speaks about her.

“Is your wife not here anymore?”

“Yes.” He takes my hand and places it over his heart, “she’s always with me, in *here*. And in here,” he presses his finger into his temple.

My heart warms. “You’ll have to tell me about her sometime.”

He nods slowly. Clearing his throat before looping his arm through mine. “Are you ready?”

“No,” I reply honestly. I don’t think I’ll ever be ready for this.

“Perfect.” Joseph nods to the two men who stand guard at the entrance to the function room and they pull the double doors open in sync.

Violins play a slow, hauntingly beautiful rendition of *Always On My Mind* by Elvis Presley as Joseph leads me through on shaky legs. My hand tightens around his arm to stop it from trembling and my heart pounds so hard I can feel it everywhere.

The room is decorated in pure white and sage green. My favourite colour.

How did he know?

As we reach the end of the aisle, I glance up to find Gage stood at the other end, his hands clasped in front of him as his eyes land on me. His mouth parts as he takes in the sight of me, his eyes trailing over me from head to toe.

The way he's looking at me has my stomach fluttering and my heart skipping a beat. With this feeling inside me, I could almost convince myself that I want this, that I want him.

I shouldn't, but I can't deny that there's a tiny part of me deep down that does.

We start forward, our steps syncing to the song, my eyes darting around the room. Either side of the aisle are roughly two dozen people and only one I recognise, Viola. I see Sierra and Reese sat on the front row, their beaming smiles easing some of my nerves. I glance across to Rafe who stands beside his brother, squeezing his shoulder and whispering something into his ear that makes Gage smile, but not once does his gaze waver from me.

When we reach the end of the aisle, Joseph releases his hold on me and finds his seat as Gage reaches for my hand, his touch sending tingles through my body.

"You look beautiful, angel," Gage says softly, squeezing my hand.

"Thanks," I manage through a shaky voice.

We both turn to the front of the room where the Officiant stands before us.

“Welcome everyone, please be seated,” he begins.

The guests return to their seats and the sound of the violin slowly quietens to a hush.

“We are all gathered here today to witness the marriage between these two people. If anyone has any objections as to why they should not be married, please say so now.”

Gage inhales deeply, and I have the sudden urge to yes. This could all be over if I speak up now. So, why can't I make myself say the words? They're right there on the tip of my tongue, so why can't I say them?

I glance up at Gage who's watching my face closely, like he can almost see the war that's going on inside my brain and it's not until I give him a small smile that he's set at ease, blowing out the breath he's been holding in.

“Wonderful. So lets begin.”

I take long, slow breaths to steady my racing heart and as if sensing my nerves, I feel Gage's thumb run across the back of my hands, and with that small gesture, my heart begins to steady.

“Do you, Gage Joseph Hudson take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to love her, comfort her, honour and protect her through sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, to have and to hold, from this day forward, as long as you both shall live?”

Gage's eyes hold mine. "I do."

The Officiant turns to me. "And do you, Adelia Rose March take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, to love him, comfort him, honour and protect him through sickness and in health, in sorrow and joy, to have and to hold, from this day forward, as long as you both shall live?"

I stare down at our joined hands, how mine fit so perfectly in both of his, how his touch doesn't fill me with dread and fear, but care and security.

Can I see myself loving Gage one day?

I look up into his eyes, the fear in them at my hesitancy to say the words.

"I do." The words fall from so easily from my lips that I don't even realise I've said them, and before I know it, I'm sliding his gold wedding band onto his finger and he's sliding a ring onto mine.

"I now pronounce you Man and Wife. Mr. Hudson, you may now kiss your bride."

The memory of my dream a few nights ago fills my mind as a panic sets in, but my pulse evens out when my eyes flick up to meet Gage's.

It's okay, I tell myself.

He tucks a piece of hair behind my ear and cups my cheek in his hand as he leans down. I suck in a breath just as he seals his lips over mine.

It's slow and gentle, like he's testing the waters to see if this is okay, not wanting to take things too far. When I don't pull away, he deepens the kiss, and I feel it in his touch the moment I kiss him back. His hand tightens on my face as his free hand comes to rest on my hip.

My hand reaches up to cup the back of his neck while the other grips the lapel of his jacket, holding him closer.

The tip of his tongue glides along the seam of my lips and I open, allowing him inside. His tongue tangles with mine and I fall deeper into the kiss, the room around us fading away and suddenly it's just him and me in this moment, drowning in each other's kiss.

I don't want this feeling to end.

Gage tears his lips off mine, panting for breath, but not before stealing one more kiss from my lips as his hazel eyes hold mine.

A roar of applause erupts in the room, making me jump as the violins start up again.

Gage lifts my hands to his mouth and presses a kiss to them both.

"Today is the first day of the rest of our lives together, angel, and I promise I won't give you reason to regret it."

Gage

I now pronounce you Man and Wife. Mr. Hudson, you may now kiss your bride...

I keep playing the words over and over in my head but no matter how many times I do, I can't get them to sink in.

My wife...

I've dreamed of this day for years and now it's finally here. *She's* finally here.

And she's finally mine.

"Congratulations, brother!" Rafe pulls me into a hug, clapping me on the back.

"Thanks, man."

He pulls back and turns to Della. "Welcome to the family, Della. Maybe now my brother will stop moping around like a lovesick puppy."

A hint of a smile crosses her face as she glances down to the floor, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth and I track

the movement. I can still taste her on my tongue, still feel the softness of her lips as they glided against mine. I'd only intended it to be a quick chaste kiss, assuming she wouldn't it to be anything more in front of two dozen people she's never met, but when I felt her kiss me back, I couldn't bring myself to stop.

She felt too good.

I know I promised I wouldn't touch her until she expressly asks for it, but after that kiss, keeping my promise is going to prove harder than I ever imagined.

"Come on, angel." I place a hand on her back and guide her down the aisle while some of the guests congratulate us as we pass by, followed closely by the wedding party.

As the double doors glide open, we're met by a ruckus, the sound of shouting echoing through the lobby.

My eyes shoot over to where two of the security guards of the hotel are blocking a man who's attempts to get by are relentless.

"Hudson!" I know that voice and beside me, Della tenses. He manages to barge his way through them and heads towards us, my guys hot on his heels.

How the fuck did Bryce manage to get into my hotel?

Alec and Theo flank us while I reach down and close my hand around Della's possessively.

"Come to congratulate me on my wedding day, Tanner? How nice of you."

“You fucking married her? The bitch is mine!” he seethes.

Anger floods through me. “Della was never yours and you know it, and if you call her by anything other than her name again, I’ll rip your fucking tongue out.”

“I *always* get what I want, Hudson, no matter what.”

“Even if it means they’re not willing? Seems to be a speciality of yours, doesn’t it?”

He knows exactly what I’m referring to and his eyes dart towards Della who’s taken a small step closer towards me, a move that has me standing taller.

He smirks. “That what you told him sweetheart? Come on, admit it. You loved every fucking second of it.”

I don’t even blink before I’m on him, his jacket tight in my fist as I throw him against the nearest wall. “It’s sad, really. That you felt the need to force yourself on a woman in order to get laid. Can you not find anyone willing, Bryce?”

His eyes flare in both anger and what looks to be desire, like the memory of what he put her through arouses him, and I’ve never wanted to kill anyone more than I do right now. “Of course, but I like girls who have a little more fight in them.”

I smash my fist into his face, his head cracking against the wall behind him and he grunts in pain.

“Get the fuck out of my hotel, Tanner. I’d like to enjoy the rest of my wedding day with *my* wife. Now, if you’ll excuse us.”

I take Della's hand in mine and tug her towards the exit.

"You might have her now, Hudson!" he calls after me.
"But I wouldn't count on keeping her."

I ignore him as we reach the exit followed by the guests that I had forgotten were even there.

I'm seething. How fucking dare he barge into my hotel and try to ruin today?

The second we step outside, Della rips her hand from mine and quickens her pace, heading towards the car that waits on the curb for us. I can tell by the stiffness in her body and her wide, determined strides that she's upset, which is why I don't try to chase her down.

I watch as she gathers the skirts of her dress and climbs into the back of the blacked out sedan.

I feel a hand land on my shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Congratulations, Gage. She makes a beautiful bride," Derek says, giving me a smile.

"Thanks." I smile back. "Tell me you have some news, Der."

"Still digging. Don't worry, I'll have something for you soon."

"Alright. I'll see you back at the house," I reply, a little disappointed there's no dirt yet.

When I reach the car, I slide into the seat beside Della where she stares blankly out of the car window, her chin

resting on her hand as the driver pulls away.

“Are you alright?”

A single tear trickles down her cheek. “No.”

“I’m sorry about Tanner. If I thought for one second he’d be there, I-”

“You know there was a moment earlier today,” she begins, her eyes still fixed out of the window as she speaks, “a part of me that wanted this. I think a part of me even started to trust you.” She swipes away the tear and turns to face me. “But what just happened in there with Bryce... *That* is the reason I don’t trust people. I trusted you with the knowledge of what he did to me. I told it to you in confidence when really, I had no reason to. And now every single person in there heard what he did to me. And now when they look at me, that’s all they’re going to see. They’re going to see some poor girl who was taken advantage of, too weak to fight back. I don’t want their pitiful looks but that’s all I’m going to get. So, thank you for that.”

“And what? Did you think I’d just stand by and let him spout all that shit about you? You’re my wife, and I won’t stand for anyone speaking about you that way.”

“I don’t need you to protect me. I can stand up for myself.”

“Yeah, that’s worked well so far.” The words are out before I can stop them and the regret settles in my stomach immediately.

“Fuck you, Gage,” she spits. “Fuck you...” her voice breaks as she turns her gaze back out the window as another tear slides down her face, followed by another, and another.

Shit.

“Please don’t cry, angel.” I reach over to catch her tears but she swats my hand away. “I’m sorry, Della. Truly.”

After a long stretch of silence between us and as the tears continue to roll down her face, she speaks. “When we get back to the house, I want to be left alone.”

“We still have to reception to attend.”

She glares at me. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“Wonderful,” she deadpans with a shake of her head.

My stomach twists. “Just a few more hours and it’ll be over, I promise.”

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When we get back to the house, some of the guests are already there to greet us. As we step out of the car, I hold out my hand out for Della, to which she is reluctant to take, but eventually does, and for most of the afternoon, she remains stiff at my side. I do my best to make her more comfortable but all of the progress I thought we were making these past couple of days has been wiped out after today.

And she's right. There was a time and place for what transpired between Bryce and I today, and in front of all of our wedding guests, was not that time. I just need to figure out a way I can make it up to her.

As we're congratulated on our marriage, Della does her best to force a smile, but there's a sadness in her eyes that I want desperately to take away.

The only time I think I see her genuinely smile is when I find her across the room talking to her friend, Reese. I knew bringing her friend to the wedding would make her happier about today, seeing a familiar face to calm her nerves and reservations.

An old business partner and friend of my dad is taking at me but I can't recall a word he's saying because my focus is transfixed on my wife.

Fuck, I could get used to saying that.

She's sat in the corner with Reese, her head thrown back in laughter and through all the voices and music that fills the room, I swear I can hear her laugh as clear as day.

It's a beautiful sound that I want to hear more of.

As if feeling my eyes on her, her gaze finds mine. The smile fades from her mouth when she finds me watching her and after a moment she tears her eyes from mine and returns her attention back to her friend.

"Trouble in paradise already, brother?" Sierra asks, following my gaze. "It's only been what...? Three hours?"

“Sierra, please. Not now.”

“Leave it to me, I’ve got a plan.” A cunning smile crosses her lips before she floats away, stopping in the centre of the room and clinking her champagne glass. The music quiets and silence falls over the room. “On behalf of my family, I would just like to take a moment to congratulate my brother, Gage and his beautiful new wife, Della on their marriage.” Sierra glances to me and winks as the room erupts in applause.

My gaze cuts to Della who’s eyes are filled with apprehension.

“I think it’s time the happy couple have their first dance,” Sierra continues. “So come on you two, don’t keep us all waiting.”

Della is hesitant as she rises from the chair, crossing the room towards me. I meet her in the middle and place a hand at the small of her back, leaning down to whisper in her ear, “I got you.”

Our guests create a large circle around us as *At Last* by Etta James begins to play. I close my hand around Della’s as her other comes to rest over my heart.

It thumps beneath her hand as I peer down at her. She’s looking anywhere to avoid meeting my eye.

“I never wanted to hurt you, Della. Nothing like that will happen again, I promise. I will be a good husband to you.”

“Until you get bored of me.”

“Never. That will never happen, Della. I’ve been waiting for this day for what seems like forever and now that it’s here, I can scarcely believe it.”

She leans her head back to look up at me. “Why me? Up until a few days ago I was nothing to you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, angel. You’re everything.”

Her eyes hold mine and she soon relaxes against my body as we sway to the song. My hand tightens around her body, inching her closer to me as we continue to move in sync. A waft of her perfume drifts into my nose and before I realise I’m doing it, I press my lips to her forehead, lingering there and she doesn’t pull away.

The song comes to an end too quickly and before I can stop her, she disappears.

A few hours later, my house begins to empty, and after seeing off all but one of our guests, I return to find my wife clinging to her best friend as the two embrace in a tight hug.

After they break apart, Reese turns to me. “Thank you for allowing me to be here, Mr. Hudson.”

“Please, call me Gage. You’re welcome here any time, and should you need anything at all, come to me or my brother, Rafe.”

“Okay.” She smiles.

Theo is stood against the wall to my left. “Can you make sure Miss Reynolds gets home safely?”

“Of course.”

Reese pulls Della in for one final hug. “Love ya, babe. Take care, you hear me?”

Della nods, her chin trembling as Theo leads Reese out of the room.

“I’ve had Viola set up your things in the guest room opposite mine. I figured you wouldn’t want to stay in your old one after what happened.”

“I’m not staying with you?” She sounds surprised, *relieved*.

“I figured you wouldn’t want that either,” I tell her. As much as I would love to share my bed with her, I know it’s not what she wants. “Come on, I’ll show you to your room.”

She trails behind me as we make our way upstairs, and much like her old room, it’s roughly the same size and carries a similar colour scheme and layout.

“Is there a camera in here too?” she asks, taking in the room.

“No. But there are cameras all over the house to which I have access to at all times. For safety purposes, of course.”

“Of course.” She rolls her eyes. Her gaze lands on the bed where a small box lies on top. “What’s this?”

“It’s a cell phone. It seems in the altercation between you and Bryce that night when I found you, it was beyond repair. I had someone save the data from it and transfer it to a new one for you.”

“You trust me with a cell?”

“Is there a reason why I shouldn’t?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“Then of course I trust you,” I say. “I’ll leave you alone now. I’m sorry today has been a disappointment for you. Goodnight, Della.”

I turn for the door before her voice halts me. “Could you do me a favour before you go?”

I swing around. “Anything.”

“Can you help unzip my dress? I can’t quite reach it.” She seems almost embarrassed to ask.

I smile, closing the space between us. “Turn around.”

She spins so that her back is facing me and I reach for the zip. As the thin fabric of her dress falls open, I can’t resist letting my fingers graze against the smooth, creamy skin of her back. I feel her shiver against my touch as the zip comes to a stop at the base of her spine.

She doesn’t move a muscle, as if she’s waiting to see what I do next. I lean down to press my lips to the spot between her shoulder blades and I hear her suck in a breath.

I want her.

I want this woman so fucking bad. My fingers ache to touch her, my tongue watering to taste her and my cock throbs painfully to feel her body beneath mine, craving the sounds she'd make as I took her to oblivion and back.

But I won't, not until she wants me to.

"Goodnight, angel." I let my hands graze up her bare arms and squeeze comfortingly before retreating from the room.

I cross the hallway and enter my bedroom.

The image of her on the other side of that door, naked underneath her wedding dress has my cock hard as stone in my pants and within seconds I'm standing under a stream of freezing cold water from my shower, willing my dick to die down but the need for release is too strong.

I reach down to stroke my shaft with long, slow movements, living out the fantasy of what our wedding night *should* have looked like.

I strip her out of that dress and lay her on the bed still wearing her stocking, heels and garter belt where I spend hours teasing her with my tongue until she's begging for me to let her come. Then, and only then do I slide my cock inside her. She's so warm and tight and I lose myself in her body, eating up the sound of her moans that are like music to my ears.

My hand works my length harder as I imagine the sound of her release, how she would scream my name in pleasure as her

body shakes beneath me, and before I know it, my climax is upon me.

I groan as I come in thick hot spurts into my hand, her sweet moans filling my mind as I shudder and jerk from the aftershocks of my release.

Fuck, I haven't come that hard in forever.

I haven't had sex with a woman in years. I've never wanted to because no one holds my interest, no one does it for me.

No one except for *her*.

It all comes back to her.

Della

The kitchen is empty when I come down the next morning, all except for Viola who's cooking what smells like bacon and eggs on the stove.

She twists around when she hears me enter and a wide welcoming smile lights up her face. "Good morning, dear. How are you?"

I slide onto a stool at the breakfast bar and sigh. "I'm alright, still trying to process that this is my life now."

This is *my* kitchen in *my* house, though I still feel out of place, an outsider not totally at ease in my surroundings. So much has happened in such a short space of time that it's hard to believe any of it is real.

"You'll soon adjust, I'm sure of it," she says, bringing the sizzling pan over to me and placing two rashers on the plate in front of me, then adds two eggs and some toast. "It's been a lot to take in since you arrived here, but I assure you, given your situation, you're in the best place."

“Doesn’t feel like it,” I say, taking a sip of coffee that scolds my tongue.

She rounds the counter and takes a seat beside me. “I’ve known Gage since he was a little boy, back when his eyes didn’t even meet the top of this counter. He was the sweetest kid you ever saw, and I had the pleasure of watching him grow into the fine man he is today, and aside from my dear late husband, Jeff, Gage is one of the best men I know.” She places her hand on top of mine. “It might not feel like it now, but there’s something between the two of you, I saw it yesterday in the way you kissed one another. Sometimes love can be instant, taking hold of you as quick as a flash of lightning, but with others it takes time.”

“I don’t know if we’ll ever get to that,” I say.

“It’s already happening, sweetie, and you know it. You just need to decide whether you open your heart to it. Listen, I’m always here if you ever want to talk, just think about what I said.” She pats my hand and sets about cooking some more bacon.

A short while later once I’ve finished my breakfast, Viola’s still cooking and I’m still the only person who seems to be awake in the entire house.

Viola turns and places a jug of orange juice on the counter in front of me and her eyes lift to something over my shoulder. “Good morning, Gage. Breakfast?”

I stiffen, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up as I sense his eyes on me the second he enters the kitchen.

“Sure, thanks.” He takes a seat on the stool to my right and my heart quickens. “Good morning, Della.”

“Morning,” I reply, glancing his way, forcing a smile. He’s wearing a black button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up and light grey trousers, his hair slicked back like it was yesterday.

His hand brushes mine as I reach for the pot of coffee and his touch leaves a trail of fire on my skin, just like it did last night as his fingers traced my spine while he unzipped my dress.

The memory of him so close, his soft warm lips meeting the base of my neck has a dull ache building between my legs, the same ache I was forced to quell under the cover of darkness in my bedroom last night.

I only hope what he said was true about there being no camera in there, because if there had been, he would have seen it all, leaving nothing to the imagination. Though there’s a tiny part of me that pictured him across the hall, watching me on his phone as I touched and teased myself. My wedding dress laying discarded on the floor as I lay naked with my hands between my legs imagining his hands on my body, his mouth kissing parts of me nobody else ever has in a way that had me biting into my pillow to stop from screaming his name out loud.

I’m ashamed of the way I feel. It eats at my insides when I think about what I did last night because I shouldn’t be thinking of him like that, I should hate him.

I want to.

But the truth of it is, I'm attracted to him in a way I never have been with another man and I don't know how to turn it off.

"Did you sleep well?" he asks and for a second I wonder whether he knows what I did after he left my room, but I'm just being paranoid.

"Good. You?"

"Very well, though it would have been a lot nicer sleeping beside my wife."

My heart thrums in my chest.

What the hell do I say to that?

My cheeks are on fire as I glance up to see Viola wearing a smirk as she places the dishes into the dishwasher and not knowing what to reply, I remain quiet.

After a while, Gage and I fall into an awkward silence that hangs thick in the air.

"If you'll excuse me, I'm going to go for a walk." I slide off my stool and hurry out of the room.

I step out into the morning sunshine, the sunlight warming my skin as I wander through the two acres of luscious green grass and the beautiful vibrant flowers that smell divine. It's not that I don't want to be around Gage, I just don't know how I'm supposed to act or what he expects of me now we're married. We've never really discussed what happens from here on out.

I'm way out of my depth and I have no idea what I'm doing.

I stroll out to the very end of the yard where it is almost completely concealed from the rest of the garden. In the corner there's a raised flowerbed where lilies of almost every colour flourish, the area immaculate with not a single weed in sight.

I crouch down to dust my fingers over the soft petals, breathing in their sweet floral scent.

"Those were her favourite." I let out a yelp as I spin around to find Joseph sat on a bench behind me. I didn't even notice he was there, nor that there was a bench there in the first place. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

I place a hand to my chest to steady my rapid heartbeat. "It's okay. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

He smiles. "Not at all, I enjoy the company."

I move over to the bench and take a seat beside him. "How long have you been out here?"

"A couple of hours. I like it out here in the early morning. Whenever I feel up to it, I come here and watch the sunrise. I feel closer to her."

"Your wife?"

He nods. "Evelyn... She always loved gardening, had a knack for it, so I built that flowerbed for her so she could grow her lilies there. Whenever I sit here and look at them they remind me of her, how she'd spend hours out here with this contented smile on her face, then she'd look up at me and her

smile would widen. Best damn feeling in this world.” He stares off into the distance, remembering a time gone by.

“The way you talk about her... You really loved her didn’t you?”

“Never loved anyone or anything more. She was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. The purest soul of anyone I’d ever met. You remind me a little of her, you know.”

The truth of his words seep into my heart and a longing washes over me, a longing to have someone talk about me that way one day.

Is this man really the monster my dad would have me believe? A monster who talks so lovingly about his late wife?

“What happened between you and my father? Why does he hate you so much?” A part of me doesn’t want to know, but after spending all of my life believing my father’s words about the Hudsons, nothing of what he said seems true now that I’m here as a part of their family.

“Your father was in love with Evelyn.”

“What?” My eyes widen. I did not expect *that*.

“We were friends back then, Randall and I. Young and on the cusp of financial success. Both venturing into our own businesses. He saw her first, and they dated for a short while. It was rocky between them from the start and when things were bad, she confided in me. We got close, and the more time we spent together, I knew it in my heart she was the girl for me. I told her how I felt and she told me she felt the same. She

didn't cheat on your father, she wasn't the type of woman to do something like that and as soon as she plucked up the courage, she left him. He didn't take it well, mind you."

"Oh my God."

"He wasn't just mad that she chose me over him. Her father was wealthy and he had his eye on her father's fortune from the beginning."

"So, my father thinks you stole her and her family's money from him? That's what this whole bullshit feud has been about?"

"He's always been jealous of our family's success, always wanted what we have built and tried his best to sabotage it, though he's never succeeded," he says. "Adelia, I'm not telling you this to poison you against your father, I'm sure he's managed to do that all by himself, and God knows *I* haven't been a saint. When you're in the line of business we're in, it hardens you into someone you don't even recognise at times. I suppose at my age and growing closer to death, it makes you take stock of your life, I just thought you deserved the truth for once in yours. And really? What would a dying man like me benefit from telling you yet more lies?"

"Are you scared?" I ask. It's a loaded question but what I'm implying is clear as day.

He ponders for a moment before a soft smile crosses his lips and his eyes find mine. "No, because I know I'll get to be with her again."

I can't hold back the tears. They flow so freely that I don't even realise I'm crying until the tears drip from my chin.

"I'm sorry, Adelia. I didn't mean to upset you." He touches my hand comfortingly.

"It's okay." I sniff. "It's just... it's not everyday you hear about a love as strong as the one you and your wife shared. It's beautiful."

"I hope you're able to find a love just like it with my son one day," he says with a smile.

"I don't know about that..."

"I do." He pats the back of my hand, and without another word, he rises from the bench and begins a slow, leisurely stroll back through the garden.

Della

“Is everything alright?” Gage’s voice startles me when I re-enter the kitchen, catching a stray tear and swiping it away from my cheek. He’s stood by the sink below the window that looks out over the entire garden.

My eyes meet his to find a frown knitted across his brow and I force a smile. “Hmm? Yeah, fine.”

Gage doesn’t seem convinced by my answer “Have you been crying? Did my father say something to upset you?” He must have been watching us talking through the window.

“No, nothing like that. He was actually telling me about your mother.”

His face softens. “Oh.”

I slide onto one of the stools at the breakfast bar. “She sounds amazing.”

“She was...” He trails off, swallowing thickly.

“I didn’t want to ask your dad, but... What happened to her?”

“It was a car accident,” he begins, walking towards me to lean on the other side of the counter. “I was just a kid when she died. There was a fault with the car and... she didn’t make it. But the kicker? She was never supposed to be driving that night. It was my dad’s car.”

“Oh God, Gage... I’m sorry.” Without realising, I’m reaching out, placing my hand on his forearm. Tingles spread through me from where I’m touching him and his eyes fall on my hand, then up to my eyes.

“That was hers, you know. That ring.” He touches the ring that’s wrapped around my finger, a delicate gold ring with a leaf detailing, the dainty stems intertwine all the way around, while tiny diamonds are encrusted on each individual leaf.

“Gage, no. I can’t accept this. I don’t deserve it.” I go to remove it from my finger but his hands cover mine, stopping me.

“I want you to have it, so does my father and so would my mother. That’s where I disappeared to that day when you and Si went shopping. I had it stored in a safe deposit box downtown, it’s been in there for years. I’ve been waiting for a reason to take it out. It’s the only thing I have of hers.” He runs his thumb over the diamonds that sparkles under the light.

“I don’t have anything left of my mom. I used to, but not anymore. I don’t remember her well, but my memories come

to me in tiny pieces that gradually build up a picture in my head.”

“What happened to her?” he asks.

“She left me. One day she was there and the next... she was gone. All of her things were gone too. My father told me she was having an affair and left us for the other man, but I never believed it. She loved me, she wouldn’t just leave.”

After she left, my father would always talk about my mom like she was a piece of shit under his shoe, but that was only if she ever came up in conversation at all, which was rare. If I ever asked about her or mentioned her, he’d shut me down and tell me she was gone and to forget she ever existed.

As if I could ever do that.

She was my mom, the one person I loved most in the world and despite everything my father told me about her, deep down I know she’d never leave me.

She loved me. I’m sure of it.

“I had this necklace, a silver heart-shaped locket, it belonged to my grandma, and before she died, she passed it down to my mom,” I say, picturing it so clearly in my mind.

She had a photo of us put into the locket. A picture of her holding me in the hospital when I was a baby, and on the other side, a photo of one of the few family vacations we had. A photo of her and me building sand castles on a beach in Mexico.

“She gave it to me when I was five and made me promise to never take it off. I never did. Then one day... I lost it.” My chin trembles as I force back the tears. “That was all I had left of her.”

That necklace was invaluable, and the day I lost it changed everything for me, for a number of reasons. I searched and searched for it, but never found a trace of it.

My heart clenches at the thought that I’ll never see it again. I don’t have any photos of my mom, my dad made sure to erase her from our lives so that it *was* as if she never existed.

Every year that passes, her face fades a little more from my memory, and I’m terrified of the day when I can’t picture her at all.

“Gage, I really can’t accept this ring. It’s all you have of your mother, it’s important to you.”

“As are you.”

My heart jumps. “Gage, I really can’t. I’m not worthy of it. I mean... This ring symbolises all of the things a marriage should mean and our marriage is *not* what you’d call conventional and I... I don’t know how to be a good wife to you. There will be things you’ll want, things I can’t give you right now, and might never be ready to,” I ramble.

He squeezes my hands tighter. “Della, believe it or not, this marriage means something to me. I know you and I are far from conventional, but I meant every single word of the vows

I said to you. And as for what you can give me, the fact that you're my wife is enough."

"How though? You're a man and I'm sure you have... *needs*. I guess what I'm saying is that, I wouldn't blame you if you found someone else to... to *satisfy* them..."

He shakes his head. "I don't want anyone else. I wish things could have happened differently between us, but the truth is, the only woman I want in my bed is the one who wears my mother's ring and bears my last name. You're my wife. *You*, Della. I will remain faithful to you, and if you ever decide you want to be *more*, I'll be here, waiting."

His words have a rush of emotion crashing through me and it takes all of my strength to keep from crying again.

This man seems almost too good to be true. He's seriously saying he won't sleep with anyone other than me, and even if that never happens, he'll be faithful to our marriage. And for some reason I believe him.

There is a war raging inside of me. The part that has always refused to trust and allow people in is slowly but surely breaking down, because with every second I grow more attracted to my new husband, and the idea of being his wife isn't so terrifying anymore.

Gage

I'm sat at the desk in my office at my new casino set to open next week. It's my brother and I's first business venture together and I couldn't be more excited. It's slowly taking shape and I can't wait to see it when it's finished.

I'm steadily working my way through a ton of paperwork and invoices on my desk when there's a soft knock at the door before Maddy, the hitch-hiker we saved from being trafficked walks in carrying a drink in her hand.

I gave her a job here, working at the front desk or behind the bar, wherever she's needed. She seems to have fitted in and adjusted well.

She sets the drink down in front of me.

"Thanks, Maddy." I smile.

"No problem. Congratulations by the way, on your marriage. She's a lucky woman."

"I think *I'm* the lucky one," I reply. How could I not be? My dream of making Della my wife had finally come true.

Now comes the task of making her fall in love with me.

I watch Maddy saunter away, a little unsteady on her feet in her five inch heels which I'm sure she's not accustomed to wearing. Just as she's about to close the door behind her, she pokes her head around. "Mr. Hudson. Derek Hayward is here."

"Send him in."

Derek strides through the door, walking with purpose until he's standing on the other side of my desk.

"What have you got for me?" I ask.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a USB stick and hands it to me. "I did some pretty deep digging, exhausted all my contacts to get this information."

I plug the hard drive into my computer and hundreds of video and picture files fill my screen.

"Bryce is into some pretty dark shit," Derek begins, rounding the desk to stand behind me. He clicks onto one of the photos and the image of a man pops up. "A few weeks ago, one of his guys was seen with a young woman named Bethany Wilson from Manhattan. She was reported missing a week and a half ago by her parents. I ran a face recognition check on the dark web and she turned up here," he clicks on a video link where a young girl with bleach-blonde hair lies completely naked on a dirty mattress while four guys surround her.

She cries hysterically, her whole body visibly trembling as they begin to abuse her body which is already covered in bruises, bite marks and a number of different burns.

One man takes a knife and cuts a trail down the inside of her left thigh all the way from the apex to her knee, leaving a trail of blood that beads from the wound. She screams, the sound of her pain slices right through me as I watch another man situating himself to kneel above her head. He shoves his dick into her mouth roughly, the sounds of her screams turning into strained coughs as she chokes from the rough intrusion.

Two other men stand above the girl, stroking themselves while watching the scene play out in front of them, groaning from the arousal her cries of pain is giving them.

I pause the video, her screams still echoing in my mind. “Torture porn? What the *fuck*?”

I swallow hard, forcing back the urge to vomit that crawls up my throat.

“Seems she was trafficked, and she’s not the only one. There’s been a string of girls being reported missing across the country, all around the same age or younger disappearing without a trace. Most of them turn up in videos like this, the youngest being only fourteen.”

Jesus Christ.

“You think these guys have anything to do with Maddy?”

“I’d put money on it.”

What would he have done to Della had he managed to get a hold of her? Was the whole marriage bullshit just a charade for something bigger? A lie told to her father to get him to hand her over?

My fists clench at the thought. The image of Della lying on that dirty mattress enduring the terror and pain that this girl did has me seething.

“Each one of these videos shows a different girl. I don’t know what happens to them after they’ve served their purpose, but my guess is, it doesn’t end well for them.”

I press the intercom on the phone. “Maddy, can I borrow you for a sec?”

“Sure, on my way.”

A few minutes later, she enters my office. I usher her around the desk and leave my seat so she can sit down.

“Now, what I’m about to show you might be uncomfortable, but we have to know whether you recognise any of these men, okay?”

Her eyes are wide with fear but gives me a small nod. I pull up screen-grabs of a few of the men involved. Her body is rigid as she scans each photo, shaking her head as I move onto the next.

“Wait! Go back, please.”

I bring up the previous photo and Maddy leans forward. “Him. I recognise him. He was one of the men who... who... did those things to me.”

“Did they ever hurt you? Like cut you or burn you?”

She stills. “Yes.”

“Fuck...” I breathe out. “Fuck!” I bring my fist down hard onto my desk and Maddy jumps, a squeal catching in her throat. “Is there anything we can do to stop it?” I ask Derek. “There has to be a way to remove the videos from wherever they were uploaded or shut this whole fucked-up operation down, Derek.”

“I’ll look into shutting the websites down, it might not be easy, but I’ll try. As for the operation itself, it goes beyond Bryce and a few guys. It’s wide-spread. A multi-million dollar operation with players in high places all over the world, most of them probably untouchable, people you wouldn’t suspect. We’ve barely scratched the surface.”

“There has to be a way...” How the fuck can I sit back and allow all of these girls to suffer? Some might simply turn a blind eye and convince themselves it’s not their problem. But I can’t do that.

I just feel so useless.

“How the fuck could Randall hand over his daughter to a monster like that? Does he know?” *Does he know he promised his daughter to a predator?*

“I don’t know. I’m guessing not considering it seems Bryce is blackmailing him.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

“March is struggling financially, my guess is Bryce caught wind of it and made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.”

“There’s got to be more to it. I know Randall’s a bastard, but handing over his daughter so easily? We’re missing something, I’m sure of it.”

“I’ll keep looking. Have a nice afternoon, Gage.”

“You too, Der.” I watch him leave before turning to Maddy, “You’re excused too, Maddy. Thanks for your help.”

“No problem. But, Mr. Hudson? Be careful. Those men... They’re more powerful than you think. They can make someone disappears without leaving a trace. They snatched me off the street so fast, it only took seconds.”

“Thank you, Maddy.”

Once I’m alone, I turn back to the paperwork littering my desk, but I can’t seem to focus on anything. The USB stick sitting beside me is like an undetonated bomb waiting to go off. Knowing what is on there is making me sick to my stomach and all I want to do is wipe it completely so none of that vile footage sees the light of day again, but right now, it’s all I’ve got against Bryce and his sick business. It’s bad enough these bastards are targeting innocent women, but teenagers? Children? How low can someone sink? How many of these men are walking around in plain sight?

Too fucking many.

They need to be stopped. But how?

One thing I do know, is that I can’t afford for Della to find out about this. It would crush her to know that her father

promised her to a man like that, whether he knew what Bryce was into or not.

I won't tell her, at least not yet, not until I know more. For now, I'll keep this buried to protect her.

Always to protect her.

∞∞∞∞

The house is quiet when I get home.

“Della?” I call out, to be met with no answer.

I hear a faint sound of music filtering in from the backyard, and dropping my things down onto the floor and tugging off my jacket, I head outside to find Della in the swimming pool wearing nothing but a blue bikini. She floats on the surface of the water that shimmers under the blinding sun, her hair fanned out around her head like a halo. Her eyes are closed as she hums to the song playing from the speakers of her phone and I can't help but smile as I watch her.

Christ, she's so beautiful.

We've been married a little under a week and this pull I feel towards her has only grown stronger with every passing day.

“You coming in?” I hadn't even noticed that she was now standing in the water that laps just below her collarbone, gazing up at me.

“I don’t go in.”

She frowns. “Why not?”

“I uh... I can’t swim,” I admit, rubbing the back of my neck.

“Seriously?”

“Deadly.” *If she only knew how deadly.*

“It’s not even deep and you’re practically a giant, it would be *impossible* for you to drown. Come on, it feels amazing.”

I have to admit I’m tempted. Being so close to my wife wearing nothing but a sexy little bikini that has my cock hard as a rod in what just happens to be my favourite colour is enough to have me diving off the pool edge fully clothed.

The last thing I expected was to have her invite me to join her. Since our wedding day, I’ve tried to keep a healthier work/life balance than what I’m used to. I’ve always drowned myself in work to keep the empty hole inside me that has always been reserved for Della out of my mind. Forcing myself to forget that besides my family, the one thing I really wanted was out of reach.

But now that I have her, there’s no reason to be at work for so long. Now, I have a reason to come home, something to look forward to at the end of a long, tiresome day.

I look down to where Della waits in the pool, her head tipped to the side while I stand at the edge as dread coils in my gut.

Don't be a pussy.

Her face lights up when I tug off my jacket, followed by my shirt and tie, tossing them onto the lounge beside me. I see her breath catch in her throat when I reach for the buckle of my belt and shove down my trousers, kicking them off along with my shoes until I'm down to my boxers.

My skin tingles as her gaze glides over my body slowly, her lips parting as she drinks me in.

Her eyes dart up to mine, realising I've caught her checking me out, not for the first time, and I can't stop the chuckle that bubbles up from my chest. "You don't have to be embarrassed by checking me out. I'm your husband. Anytime you wanna get a load of this," I motion down to my body, "all you gotta do is ask, angel. I'm all yours."

I lower myself down to sit on the pool edge, my lower legs submerged in the cool water. My knees are just a foot away from where Della stands, her head level with my crotch and my cock twitches with the thought of having her mouth on me.

I slide into the water which only comes up to my chest, keeping a healthy distance between us.

"See, it's not so bad," she says. "Is this the first time you've been in here?"

"Yeah."

"That's just not right. It's criminal. If I had a house with a pool in the back yard, you'd have to drag me out of it."

"You do now," I remind her, and she smiles.

We begin moving around each other in a slow circle, the water lapping softly up against us.

“So what made you hate the water?” she asks.

“What makes you think that?”

“I don’t know. Usually when someone says they can’t swim, it means they’re afraid of it.”

“It’s not that I’m afraid of the water per se, it’s more the fear of drowning than anything. There’s nothing worse.”

“Sounds like you’re talking from experience.”

“Something like that,” I reply.

She watches me for a moment, searching my eyes with a look on her face I can’t distinguish and for a moment, I think I’ve blown it.

Said too much.

“I guess it’s kind of like heights. I’m not a lover of them, but the thought of falling terrifies me,” she says.

“I didn’t know you were afraid of falling.”

“Isn’t everybody? I mean, who in their right minds would enjoy falling unless you were severely unhinged?”

“Sometimes falling is the best part,” I say, not bothering to hide my double meaning, after all, I should know.

A shy smile touches her lips, but is gone in an instant.

“I’m surprised you invited me to join you, I’d have thought you would want to avoid me.”

She shrugs. “I figured we’re married now so I may as well make an effort to get along.”

“That the only reason?” I press.

I take a step closer and she takes one back so she’s crowded up against the side of the pool with just inches separating us.

“What other reason would there be?” she asks, inhaling deeply, chewing on her lip.

My cock twitches, wanting to take her lip between my teeth, feel her mouth on mine, wrapped around my length.

“To get a load of me in my underwear, of course.” I reach up, swiping a piece of hair that sticks to her face. “I’ve seen you checking me out, wife, how your eyes trail over every inch of me.” Her eyes flit from my face, down and back up again as a blush stains her cheeks. “Don’t be embarrassed to want what’s yours. All you have to do is say the words and I *can* be.” My cock throbs, praying to god she gives in and allows me to take her right here. It’s not what I’d envisioned for our first time, but I don’t think I could make it to my room of I tried.

Her eyes linger on mine before she clears her throat, “I’m getting a little cold, I’m gonna head inside.”

She doesn’t wait for me to reply, because she scoots around me and she’s out of the pool faster than I can blink and gone a second later, leaving me standing in the pool by myself with a raging hard-on that tents my boxers.

“What the fuck are you doing in *there*?” Rafe asks as he appears at the back door.

Fuck, this is all I need.

“Della asked me to join her for a swim,” I reply, wading my way through the water and lifting myself out.

His eyes catch my tenting underwear and he howls in laughter, his head thrown back. “She’s got your balls in a vice grip so fucking tight, bro! For fourteen years, a fucking siren couldn’t serenade you under her spell and lure you into the water, and Della’s managed to do it in a week.”

I snatch up my discarded clothes and head towards him. “I’d do anything for her, you of all people should know that.”

His smug grin softens into a genuine smile. “Yeah, man. I know. Don’t fucking understand it myself, but I know. It’s always been her. I’m happy for you, Gage. *Really*.”

“She’s great isn’t she?”

“Yeah, bro. She’s fantastic.”

I head inside and make my way to my room, stopping outside Della’s room to hear the shower running in her ensuite.

Rafe’s right. Della *does* have me in a vice grip, but not just around my balls... Around my *heart*.

She’s *my* siren, and she could lure me just about anywhere and I’d follow.

Gage

“Is Della almost ready?” I ask my sister as she descends the stairs in a sequined gold dress that sparkles under the lights.

My brother stands to my left, adjusting the sleeves of his suit jacket while Alec and Theo stand off to my right.

“Beauty takes time. Believe me she looks incredible, you’ll see,” Sierra says excitedly.

It’s the grand opening of the casino tonight and our first public appearance as husband and wife. At first she was opposed to the idea of accompanying me, but at the prospect of being able to leave the house for the first time in over a week, she came around to the idea.

I didn’t intend to lock her up here, I want her to be free to come and go as she pleases, but right now, with Bryce and her father still a threat to her, I can’t afford for anything to happen to her, and staying here is the safest option. Tonight is an exception, she’ll be by my side at all times and I won’t let anything happen to her.

At the sound of footsteps at the top of the stairs, I glance up and my breath catches in my throat.

Della's dressed in a form-fitting black V-neck evening gown with a long slit running up the side from the floor to the middle of her thigh. It hugs her perfectly, highlighting every sweep and curve of her body. She's wearing her hair in a high ponytail, brown curls falling down her back as small strands frame either side of her gorgeous face. Her makeup is minimal, all except for the deep red colour staining her plump lips that has blood shooting straight to my cock. She takes each step with care, holding up the skirt of her dress so as not to trip.

She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

When she reaches the bottom of the stairs, she steps towards me, and noticing my eyes raking over her, her cheeks turn a deep shade of pink as her gaze slips to the floor.

"You are stunning," I tell her and her eyes flick back up to mine, a small smile touching her lips.

"No plus one tonight, Si?" I ask.

She hesitates a moment before answering. "Um, no. I asked but... he bailed."

Something seems to be bothering her, and I'm about to ask when Alec clears his throat.

"Theo and I will ready the cars, Gage," Alec announces, and with a nod of my head, my men disappear out the front door.

“And you?” I ask my brother.

“I don’t date, bro, but I’m sure I’ll be leaving with a girl or two when tonight is through,” he replies smugly.

I roll my eyes. “Come on, let’s get this show on the road.” I place my hand at Della’s back and guide her through the front door before helping her into the back of one of the cars, while my brother and sister head for the other.

We’ve fallen into somewhat of a routine of sorts. Although we still sleep separately, we share meal times together and talk, and I might go as far to say she’s beginning to trust me. I enjoy our conversations and I thought I knew everything there was to know about her, but I’ve come to find out that I don’t. I’ve learned that she enjoys reading trashy romance novels and watching even cheesier romantic comedies. Her comfort foods are grilled cheese sandwiches and fried chicken. She loves animals and has given to charities and sponsored endangered species for years.

I’ve found that it’s these little things, these tiny snippets of her life that I enjoy learning about the most. The things that make her tick and make her smile.

Things that have me falling in love with her even more than I already have.

When we arrive at the casino, the night is already in full swing. The entire ground floor is flooded with people, the music playing through the speaker drowned out by the sound of voices and laughter. Groups of people circle each games table that are placed strategically around the room.

“What do you think?” I ask Della who’s eyes drift around the room. It’s decorated in black and gold, it has a sultry atmosphere, it’s classy and sophisticated, just like our clientele.

“It’s incredible. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

I take my time introducing everyone to Della and despite her initial reservations about coming here tonight, she surprises me by engaging in conversations with the people I introduce her to, seeming genuinely interested in what they have to say. It’s easy to see how she charms everyone. Every man is sucked in by her beauty, wanting what they can’t have and I secure my arm around her waist tighter. The possessiveness within me rising to the surface.

I like it.

I love being the envy of every man here, it’s a feeling I’ve never experienced before, but one I could quickly get used to.

An hour later, I’m standing on the platform against the far wall, my siblings to my left and my wife close to my right.

“Thank you all for coming tonight on the grand opening of the Hudson Casino. This project has been a long time coming for my brother, Rafe and I, and we are so glad to be able to

share it with you all. My father sends his apologies for not attending tonight, but he wishes you all have a wonderful time. Tonight though, is not just a celebration of the casino, it is also a celebration of my recent marriage.” I feel Della stiffen at my side. “For those of you who haven’t had the pleasure, I would like to introduce you all to my beautiful wife, Adelia. I’m a lucky man to have such an incredible woman at my side, and I’ll be forever grateful to have the opportunity to share my life with her. So please, if you will. I would like to propose a toast to Adelia.” I raise my champagne glass into the air.

“To Adelia!” The room cheers, and I straighten my shoulders in pride, tugging her closer and pressing a kiss to the spot just below her ear, feeling her shiver against me.

I lower my voice to a whisper only she can hear. “To my beautiful wife.”



Later on in the evening, I spot Della chatting to my brother and sister by the bar, and I can’t help but gush at how easily she fits into my family, my world. Without realising it, my feet are on the move, gravitating towards her.

I slip my arm around her waist. “Having a good time?”

Her eyes find mine as a small smile touches her lips. “Yes, I am.”

“I’m glad, and I meant what I said earlier at the house. You’re stunning.”

She blushes, but as she tries to hide her face from me I take her chin in my fingers and bring her eyes up to mine.

“You don’t see it, do you? How every man in here wishes it was them with his arm around you instead of me. How every married man’s attention falls on you instead of his wife, and how *she* wishes she could look even a fraction of how gorgeous you are. You’re the most beautiful woman in this room, there’s no doubt about that.”

Her eyes turn teary as they peer up into mine. My eyes flit down to her lips as she tugs it between her teeth, and I don’t miss how her eyes flick down to mine either.

I want to kiss her. So fucking bad. And I think she wants to kiss me too.

I lean in, my lips grazing hers ever so slightly at the exact moment my phone buzzes in my pocket.

“Fuck,” I mumble, dropping my hand from her face and digging into my pocket for my phone to find Zeke, one of my security guys back at the house calling me.

“Zeke. Everything alright?” I ask.

“Boss, you need to get to the ER. It’s your father.”

My stomach bottoms out at the mention of my dad. “What the fuck happened? Is he okay?”

Three pairs of eyes all snap in my direction.

“Think he’s had a stroke, Gage,” Zeke says and I reach out for Della’s hand to ground me as my knees threaten to buckle.

“We’re on our way.” I pocket my phone and swallow thickly, trying to process what I’ve just been told.

“What’s going on, bro? Rafe asks.

“Is it dad?” Sierra grips onto our brother as his arm goes around her.

I go to speak but I can’t seem to get the words out, the image of my dad lying lifeless in a hospital bed is the only thing I can think about.

Is this it?

Is this how it ends?

“Gage?” Della’s voice seems to snap me from my daze. I meet her eyes as they search mine, her brow furrowed.

“He’s had a stroke,” I manage to force out.

Si gasps, her hand covering her mouth to hold back a sob as Rafe’s arm tightening around her.

“We need to go. *Now*. I’ll tell Terrance we’re leaving, he’ll take it from here.” I signal over to Alec and Theo and within seconds, they’re stood in front of me. “Get my family back to the cars. I’ll meet you there. We’re going to the hospital.”

“Everything alright?” Alec asks.

“It’s my father,” I say before turning to Della and place a kiss to her cheek. “I’ll meet you at the car. Go.”

While my family is lead out of the casino, I go in search of Terrance, the casino's manager, and once I've told him what's going on, I head for the underground parking lot.

I slide in beside my wife and before I can even close the door, we're tearing out of the lot and onto the road.

My heart hammers in my chest as my mind races.

Della's hand finds mine. "It's going to be alright, Gage. He's going to be okay." She forces a smile, though I didn't miss the tremor in her voice.

"I hope so, angel. I really hope so..."

Gage

My knee bounces restlessly as we sit in the waiting room of the hospital. Della sits beside me, doing her best to comfort a hysterical Sierra who hasn't stopped crying since we left the casino. Rafe paces back and forth in front of us with his arms crossed over his chest, his eyes distant as though he's deep in thought.

Alec and Theo, joined by Zeke stand against the wall opposite us, their eyes scanning the hospital ward, though I don't miss how Alec's eyes keep falling on my sister, his jaw clenching as he takes in her state.

He catches me watching him and in a flash, he averts his eyes, clearing his throat. It's not the first time I've noticed him looking at her in a way one of my employees should *not* look at my sister, and on any other day, I'd take him aside and confront him, but it's not my priority right now.

All I can think about is my dad.

Was it a bad stroke? Will he recover? Will he have permanent brain damage?

The questions that swirl around my head are driving me insane but I don't know how to switch them off.

We've been sat here for almost two hours and not one doctor or nurse has been by to give us an update on his condition.

My stomach in knots and I keep imagining the worst. I know I shouldn't, but it's how I prepare myself for bad situations. At least that way, when the worst happens, I'm somewhat ready for it rather than having it happen out of the blue.

"Are you the Hudson family?" a tall man dressed in a long white coat asks and as if on cue, each of us stands.

"H-He's our dad. Is he okay?" Sierra sniffs.

"My name is Doctor Page, I will be overseeing Mr. Hudson while he's here. It seems your father has suffered what's called an ischemic stroke. It's a blood clot that has prevented oxygen and blood from reaching his brain. We have managed to clear the blood clot and so far your father is in a stable but critical condition which is why we have him sedated in intensive care. We'll be monitoring him over the next forty-eight hours and while we won't know the full extent of the damage until he wakes up, I'm confident that he will recover," he explains.

"What caused it?" Rafe asks.

“It could have been a number of different reasons, the most plausible cause in his case being his pancreatic cancer which has drastically increased his risk of suffering a stroke. It’s not uncommon given his condition.”

Sierra sobs, her hands covering her face as Della pulls her into her arms, running her hands up her arm comfortingly.

“Can we see him?” I ask.

“You may see him, though please remember he is heavily sedated and will likely be for many more hours. I’ll take you to him, if you’ll follow me?”

The doctor leads us down to a room at the end of the corridor where my father lies in the bed in the centre of the room hooked up to a number of machines.

I know it’s my father lying there, it looks like him, and yet somehow, it doesn’t. It looks nothing like the man I’ve know my whole life. The man I looked up to and idolised. He looks so weak, so fragile. So unlike my father.

If it wasn’t for the constant *beep beep beep* of his heart monitor, I’d have thought him dead already.

“What happens when he wakes up? What can be done for him?” Della asks.

“With regards to the stroke, as I said, we’ll know more once he regains consciousness. We can establish the extent of any possible brain damage and aid him in his recovery. As for the cancer, there’s really nothing w-”

“There’s got to be something!” I shout, cutting him off mid-sentence as anger and panic flood my veins. “*Anything!* Y-You’re a fucking doctor, you should-”

I feel Della’s hand close on my forearm. “Gage, they’re doing everything they can for him. Trust them, they know what they’re doing.” Her voice is like a wave of calm washing through me.

I look back up to Doctor Page. “I’m sorry,” I mutter before taking one more look at my father and storming out of the room, the doors crashing against the wall as I blaze through like a tornado.

I return to the waiting room which thankfully, is empty and rake my hands through my hair hard enough to pull it straight out of the root, but I don’t feel the pain.

I can’t take this.

For once in my life I have no idea what I’m supposed to do. It’s out of my control and I hate that there’s nothing I can do. I hate that I can’t do anything to stop the disease that’s ravaging my father’s body, slowly sucking the life from him. I hate that I wasn’t there tonight to help him, instead I was celebrating the opening of a casino that means shit to me right now.

I should have been there.

I should have been there for him when he needed me.

But the thing I hate most of all is the fear I feel inside. The fear of when the day comes my father takes his last breath, I

won't be ready. No matter how much I try to prepare myself for what is to come, I won't be ready.

“Hey.” Della's soft voice snaps me from my thoughts. She hovers awkwardly in front of me, shifting from one foot to the other, her arms hugging her body.

“Hi.”

“I came to check on you.”

“Sorry about that in there, I just...” I sigh deeply. “I just don't know what to do.”

“You're not supposed to do anything, that's what the doctors are for.”

I back up against the wall and scrub a hand over my face. “You know, there's only ever been a handful of times I've not been in control of a situation, times when I've never felt so helpless and vulnerable. And now... My father is dying, my wife doesn't want to be my wife, *understandably*. My sister is a mess and I... I don't know how to regain control. I've been trying to prepare myself for my father's death, ready myself for what happens when it comes, but the truth is, I'm not. I never will be. All of it falls to me. Keeping the business running and keeping my family together... I'm terrified I'm going to fuck it up.”

“You're not going to fuck it up. You're stronger than you think, Gage. We can't control everything in our lives, sometimes we have to allow things to be out of our hands, and it doesn't make us weak. Not everything has to fall on you.

You have Rafe and Sierra who love you, they're here to support you. As am I."

My eyes find hers, my chest lightening with hope. "Really?"

She nods.

Before I can register I'm moving, I cross the space between us and lift her. My arms go around her waist as I hold her to me, her feet hovering a few inches off the ground. On instinct, her arms band around my neck and I bury my face in the crook of hers, breathing in the sweet smell of her skin and the floral scent of her hair.

"I need you, angel. I fucking need you," I whisper against her neck, dusting my lips across her skin enough to make her shiver.

"I'm right here," she soothes, her fingers sweeping into my hair.

I'm not sure how long we stand there, it could be minutes or hours or days but it wouldn't be long enough. She feels so good in my arms, like she's meant to be there.

She was always going to be a part of my life, I've known that fact for years, but I underestimated just how much I need her, and right now, I need her more than ever.

Reluctantly, I pull back, releasing her from my hold. I place her back on the ground, then push her hair from her face, letting my fingers drift across her cheek and I'm almost certain she leans into my touch.

I take a quick glance down to her lips, the need to kiss her is overwhelming.

“Della...” I breathe out, slowly leaning in, my eyes never leaving hers as I watch for any sign I should not be doing this.

She doesn't pull away, so I lean in further. Her lips part as she sucks in a breath, waiting for the moment our lips will touch. My eyes drift closed and just as I feel my lips brush against hers, the doors to our right burst open and we break apart, the moment ripped away from us.

I turn to glare at Alec. “What is it?”

“Gage, Sier- I mean, *Miss Hudson* is becoming increasingly distressed. Forgive me if I'm speaking out of turn, but I feel we should get her home.”

“Yes, I guess you're right. There's nothing we can do here, anyhow. I just...”

“They'll call if there's any news,” Della reassures me. She must sense my reluctance to leave my father here.

“Alec, please get my sister to the car, we won't be far behind.”

“Boss.” With a nod, Alec turns and heads back through the doors.

“Is there something going on between Alec and my sister?” I ask.

“I don't know, but I think he cares about her,” Della says. “I think it's sweet.”

“I think if he carries on, he’s gonna lose his dick if goes anywhere near her.”

“Gage,” Della warns. “She’s safe with him, you know that.”

Deep down I know she’s right, I just don’t like having things hidden from me, especially if it concerns me or the people I love.

I reach down and take Della’s hand. “Come on, lets go home.”

Della

It's been four days since Joseph was taken into hospital and has since then, he's woken up and is talking again. According to Sierra, who's barely left his bedside, he sleeps most of the day and is groggy and disoriented when he wakes up. He's complained of numbness in his left leg and toes and his words come a little slower and more slurred than they had before, but thankfully, there doesn't seem to be any signs of permanent paralysis. The doctors are still keeping his condition closely monitored over the next couple of weeks which is how long they are expected to keep him there.

As well as Sierra, Rafe has been almost completely absent, save for coming home to change clothes only to be back out the door within minutes. As for Gage, he has spent most of his days drowning himself in work to keep busy. He switches from barricading himself in the study here at the house, or using the hotel, the casino or the club as a distraction.

I, however, am done with spending hour after hour bored out of my mind with nothing to do. It doesn't feel right to visit Joseph by myself, given I've only been a part of the family for less than two weeks. Which is why I managed to slip out of the house and borrow one of the dozen cars parked in the garage to meet up with Reese.

I haven't seen her in person since the wedding and I miss her. I park up outside the restaurant not far from her house on the outskirts of the city and head inside. She's sat at a table against the far wall and her face lights up when she spots me.

"Hey, babe!" She shoots up from her chair and embraces me in a tight hug. "I'm surprised you made it out without your husband attached or a bodyguard hot on your heels," she says, returning to her seat as I slide in opposite.

"He doesn't know," I admit.

"What?"

"Since his dad had the stroke, I've barely seen him, or any of them for that matter. They probably won't even notice I'm gone."

"So, how's married life treating you anyway?" she asks, calling over the waitress. "I'll have a porn star martini and my friend here will have a strawberry daiquiri, please."

The waitress leaves and I turn to Reese. "I can't drink, I'm driving!"

"One drink with food is not going to kill you. Relax, babe. Would I ever steer you wrong?"

“Uh, yes.”

She raises an eyebrow and cocks her head. “You didn’t answer my question,” she says, deflecting.

“There’s nothing much to tell. Gage and I are on better terms now, I guess.”

“Are you fucking him yet?”

My jaw drops open. “What? No! I am *not*.”

“Why the hell not? He’s ridiculously hot, he’s rich, he clearly wants you and not to mention he’s your *freaking husband!*” she argues, counting each point on a different finger. “I’d be all over him like a rash if it were me.”

“Because... I...” I can’t even answer her because I don’t have a good reason. It’s not that I don’t want to, God knows I do. Those moments we shared in the pool the other week, the casino and at the hospital proves that whatever is happening between us is real.

I want to kiss him. I want to feel his hands on my body and his lips against mine just like our wedding day because I’d never felt anything like it in my life.

So, why not?

“See! You can’t even think of a reason. You’re going to have to do the deed eventually or he’ll start looking for it somewhere else,” she points out, just as the waitress returns with our drinks.

I shake my head. “No, he wouldn’t do that.”

“Oh, really?”

I take a sip of my cocktail. “He said he wouldn’t. He told me that I’m the only one he wants and that our vows meant something to him, so when I’m ready to take the next step, he’ll be waiting.”

Her eyes bug-out, her jaw all but hitting the table. “Jesus, he’s sure got one raging hard-on for you, babe. So just do both of you the favour and ride his god damn dick before it falls off. What’s stopping you? You have a man who refuses to sleep with anyone else other than his wife. If that’s not a declaration of love, I don’t know what is.”

“No, that’s not... We’re not...”

“Soon, though. I guarantee it.” She grins smugly and takes another sip of her drink, humming along to the song playing on the sound system.

Her phone buzzes beside her and she glances down, smiling at whatever text message just came through.

“A new boyfriend?” I ask.

Her eyes meet mine and shrugs. “Just some guy I’m talking to.”

“The same guy from *De La Rosa*?”

“Pfft, no! Been there, done that and got the t-shirt. Turns out he’s got a pretty face, hot body, *tiny* micro-dick!” She illustrates the size with her thumb and forefinger. “Anyway, this new guy is kinda sweet.”

“Vague much.”

“I don’t wanna jinx it.”

I don’t press her on the subject, and instead we order food and catch up while we eat and it’s nice to actually do something remotely normal for a change. It almost feels like old times.

The waitress comes over once we’ve eaten to clear our plates away, and I’m just about to speak when Reese’s eyes lock onto something over my shoulder. “Um, Del... Gage is here.”

“What?” I spin around to find Gage at the bar, speaking to one of the bartenders before scanning the restaurant, and his eyes soon zero in on me.

He starts forward and judging by the expression on his face and his strong, purposed strides, he’s not happy and my heart thumps.

“Gage! Couldn’t do without her, huh?” Reese asks in an attempt to cut the icy atmosphere that has settled over us since he got to the table.

He forces a laugh. “Apparently not. I apologise, Reese, but I’m here to take Della home. We have a few matters to discuss.”

“Oh, um. Sure, I guess. I’ve gotta get going anyway, Del. Text me later, okay?” She slides out of her seat, finishing off the last bit of her drink.

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you too, babe.” She blows me a kiss before she leaves.

“Alec will follow us, I’m driving you home myself.” Gage pulls out his wallet and tosses a handful of bills onto the table and steps aside to let me out of my chair.

I already know what I have coming without him even having to speak as we make our way to the car, and as soon as the driver’s door slams and he starts the engine, my stomach sinks.

The drive back to the house is a silent one, the tension in the car so thick you could slice through it with a blunt butter knife, and it’s not until we’re in the house that he decides to speak.

“Do you know why I came to get you?” he asks when we reach the living room, stripping off his jacket and tossing it over the back of one of the chairs.

“Because you’re a raging control freak?” I shoot back, my arms folding across my chest.

“No, because for the past hour I’ve had my guys scouring the fucking streets looking for you! When I got home from work and found you’d gone, I didn’t know what to think. I tried calling you a thousand times and you never answered.”

“I left my phone here by mistake, I only realised after I’d left.”

“Which is another thing, you can’t just leave whenever you fucking feel like it. Do you know how much danger you

put yourself in by going out without protection?”

“Well, I’m fine, aren’t I? Nothing happened.”

“But it *could* have. I have enemies, Della. Bryce to name just one. He could have ploughed you off the road again and taken you from me. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what he’d have done to you had he found you.”

“So what? I’m to stay locked up in this house for the rest of my life? I’m going insane, Gage. I just wanted a few hours of normalcy, is that so wrong?”

He sighs, rubbing his forehead. “Of course not. But you can’t just leave like that, especially without telling me where you are or who you’re with.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Am I to run my itinerary past you before I make any decisions for myself now? Hell, why don’t you just time my bathroom breaks too?”

“Stop being so dramatic, Della. Like it or not, I am your husband, and you will damn well listen to me. When you leave the house, if you’re not with me, you take a bodyguard with you, it’s that simple.”

“Newsflash, I’m a grown woman and perfectly capable of protecting myself.”

“Because it’s worked out so well for you in the past,” he replies sarcastically. “Why can you not just obey me?”

“*Obey you?*” I scoff, blinking up at him. *Did I hear that right?* “How fucking dare you! You know, you almost had me fooled. I thought we were making progress, you and me, that

we were finally getting somewhere. For a moment I thought that being married to you wasn't so bad after all, but you've just proved to me that you're just the same as all the rest. You may be my husband but I will not *obey* you like some fucking dog. Stay the hell away from me, Gage. I hate you." I turn and dart to my room, slamming the door closed and collapsing onto my bed, letting my tears fall free.

How dare he?

How dare he try to control me?

I have spent my entire life answering to my father, having to justify my actions and tell him where I am, who I'm with and what I'm doing, and now I'm expected to do the same with my husband?

Absolutely not.

I roll over onto my side, facing away from the door with my arm clutching my stomach as a cry wracks through my body.

After my conversation with Ree earlier, it made me see how stupid I'd been, rejecting the man I'm married to who has proclaimed and promised so much for no other reason than that I'm his wife. The promise to protect and remain faithful to our marriage despite how it came about.

But now? I have no idea what to think or how to feel.

I won't admit it to him, but I know he's right. I shouldn't have just left without telling anyone where I was going. I shouldn't have left on my own, it was reckless, but he had no

right speaking to me the way he did, pulling rank and treating me like a child.

I'm his wife, surely I deserve a little respect?

I must fall asleep because the next thing I know, I'm woken by the sound of a gentle knock on my door.

"Della?" Gage's voice drifts through the door that separates us and my heart squeezes.

He knocks again, only to be met with more silence, and after a moment, he must give up because I hear movement on the other side, and the second I hear his bedroom door click shut, the tears begin to flow again.

I swore I'd never give another man the power to hurt me. But these tears that are falling? These tears are for a man who has the power to both own and break my heart in equal measure, a man I was beginning to trust, a man I'm at risk of falling in love with.

Della

The next day it takes everything within me to head downstairs. I know facing Gage is inevitable and avoiding him is impossible considering we share the same house and sleep in rooms only three metres apart. But after yesterday, I hope to God he's gone into work early.

When I enter the kitchen my heart sinks when I spot Gage standing beside Rafe, craning his neck over his brother's shoulder as Rafe taps away on his laptop.

He straightens up when he sees me, a trace of remorse crossing his face as a deep line settles between his brows in a frown, like seeing me is painful somehow.

Gage gives me a small but hopeful smile. "Good morning."

"Hi," I reply, my voice void of any emotion as I avert my eyes and continue forward, pulling myself up onto one of the stools at the breakfast bar.

“Breakfast, sweetie?” Viola asks with a beaming smile.

“Um, just coffee this morning, I’m not very hungry. Thank you.”

I keep my eyes down, acutely aware of Gage’s eyes on me, his gaze heating my skin. I’m still mad at him for everything he said, but I’m also too stubborn to admit I was wrong and he was right.

“We should probably get going, Gage,” Rafe says, closing the lid of his laptop and sliding off his stool.

“I’ll be out to the car in a minute,” Gage tells him and after a moment, Rafe leaves the kitchen.

Gage takes a step closer to me, running his hand along the smooth cool marble counter top. “I’m going to be gone for most of the day. Will you be alright on your own?”

“Well, I’ve managed by myself this far, I’m sure another day won’t kill me,” I say sarcastically, finally meeting his eye and I can tell by his face he wants to say more, but ultimately decides against it.

“I’ll see you later, and I’d like it very much if we could talk when I get back. Just the two of us.”

I shrug. “Sure.”

“Goodbye, Della,” he says before retreating from the kitchen and I breathe a sigh of relief the second he’s out of sight.

“Whatever that man has done, you can bet your behind he wants to make it right,” Viola comments.

“I know. I’m making him work for it.” I smile.

“That’s the only way to do it, honey.” She laughs. “Listen, I’m visiting my son in an hour or so, he’s in town for a few days and I’m so excited to spend some time with him. Will you be alright by yourself?”

“Sure. I’m sure I’ll find something to do around here. You go have fun. When was the last time you saw your son?”

“About two years. Since then, I’ve got myself a new grandbaby that I’ve never met. Gosh, I’m so looking forward to holding him,” she tells me, and I smile, seeing the warmth in her eyes as she talks about her family.

“You go get yourself ready, I’ll clear up,” I offer.

“Oh, no. That’s not necessary.”

“Viola, go. I’ve got this,” I insist and after a moment, she relents. She pulls me in for a hug, pressing a kiss to my temple, just like my mom used to when I was little and I blink back the tears that threaten to spill over.

“You go have fun with your family,” I tell her before she leaves the kitchen.

Once I’ve loaded the dishwasher and tidied the kitchen, Sierra floats into the kitchen.

“Morning,” I say.

“Good morning. I’m heading to the hospital for a while. I should be back in a few hours.”

My heart sinks but I plaster on a smile. “Tell your father I’m thinking of him, won’t you?”

“Of course. See you later.” I hear the front door slam closed a minute later and once again, I’m all alone.

∞∞∞∞

I’m sat in the study, reading one of the many hundreds of books in their library when my phone buzzes beside me. I glance down to find Gage’s name lit up on the screen and I sink further into the chair.

I contemplate not answering, but ultimately decide against it.

“Della, where are you?” he asks.

“Exactly where you left me this morning. Haven’t moved a single muscle,” I reply, sarcasm thick in my tone.

“*Where* are you?” he repeats firmer, his voice laced with what sounds almost like panic, and my heart begins to thump.

“I’m in the study reading, why?”

“I got a motion detection alert just now from the front of the house. A black SUV just pulled up and four guys I don’t recognise just got out.”

I slam my book closed. “Who is it? Bryce?”

“I’m not sure, but whoever it is waited for us to leave. Is Sierra with you? Viola?”

“Sierra’s at the hospital and Viola’s out with her family. It’s just me and however many guards are here.”

Bang! Bang!

I jump, pressing my hand against my mouth to stifle a scream. “Gage, there’s gunshots.” My eyes sting with tears, my voice coming out like a squeak as my throat closes up.

What the hell is happening?

My mind whirls.

There’s another gunshot from somewhere in the house.

“Del, I can see you on the CCTV.” I look up, searching for a camera and soon land on it, fixed into the corner above the door. “I want you to go over to the desk. In the top draw you’ll find a gun. Go!”

I rush over to the desk and drop to my knees, tearing open the draw. I rifle through stacks of paper and sure enough, a gun lies at the bottom. I pick it up. It’s cold and heavy in my hand. “Gage, I-I’ve never shot a gun before.”

“It’s easy. Just flip off the safety, aim and fire. Now, scoot under the desk and stay hidden.”

I start to crawl, the carpet rough on my knees as I hide myself under the desk, pulling my knees up under my chin and making myself as small as possible.

“How many are there?”

“Just three, one is already dead.”

Shit.

Three strong men against just me. The odds are slim but I only have one choice.

Fight until I can't fight any more.

“Gage, I'm s-scared,” I say, unable to hide the tremble in my voice.

“I know, angel. But you're strong, stronger than you think. We're on our way back now but we're about fifteen minutes out. Just hang tight, baby. I'm coming for you.” I cling to his words like a lifeline.

He's coming for me.

“Fuck, they're coming down the hall towards you. Stay absolutely silent, okay?”

My pulse spikes as I hear the sound of footsteps down the hallway, growing louder the closer they get.

I quickly put the phone in my back pocket and grip the gun tighter in my hand, clicking off the safety and moving my index finger over the trigger, ready to use it if the time comes.

I pray that it doesn't.

The door opens and I hold my breath. Through the rushing of blood in my eardrums, I can hear them moving around the room. Any second they're going to figure out where I am and drag me out of here, and I'm terrified I'm not going to be able to fight the both of them.

“Where the fuck is this bitch?” one guy asks, his gruff voice sending tremors of fear through my body.

“Fuck knows, but if Tanner thinks we’re gonna bring her in without having a little fun with her, he’s got another thing coming. You’ve seen her picture, imagine what her cunt feels like wrapped around your dick,” the other says, his crude words making me nauseous.

A series of shots ring out from upstairs and my throat tightens even more, making it hard to breathe as I try my best not to make a sound.

“Go check it out,” the one with the deeper voice says, “I’ll follow in a minute.”

I hear the other one leave the room while one pair of footsteps grow closer and a soft silhouette of the man standing at the desk falls on the wall, his feet just a few inches away from where I’m hiding on the other side.

Every sound is heightened as my heart pounds frantically, each of my senses working on overdrive. I can hear him breathing and I do my best to silence mine, worried that he can hear me breathing too.

My hand shakes as my finger tightens on the trigger as I will him to walk away.

He hovers over the desk for a moment before backing off and just like his friend, he too leaves the room.

I blow out a breath, letting my head fall back against the wood behind me.

Bang!

The sound makes me jump, it sounded like it was just outside the door.

I squeeze my eyes shut. *When is this nightmare going to end?*

Everything falls silent.

No gunshots. No shouting. No footsteps.

I stay under the desk for what feels like hours just listening for any sign of movement or sign that the men who have raided our house are gone.

But there's nothing.

I crawl out from under the desk, the gun tight in my hand as I peek over the top of the desk, scanning the room.

It's empty.

I get to my feet and tiptoe across the room towards the door, looking through the crack out into the hallway.

There's a body on the floor, the body of a man I recognise as one of Gage's men. Kaleb, I think his name was, a pool of blood like a halo around his head. I want to go to him, but chances are he's already dead.

I have to get out of the house. *Now.*

I don't think there's ever going to be a right time, so now is a good a time as any.

I open the door a fraction and slip through the gap, but I only make it a couple of steps down the hallway when a man

emerges from the room off to the left and I freeze.

Shit.

His dark eyes flare and his mouth widens in a grin as he looks me over, a look as though he just won the jackpot on the lottery. His stare turns darker, reminding me of how a predator looks at it's prey before it goes in for a kill.

Determined.

Dangerous.

Deadly.

He glances down at the gun in my hand and chuckles. "Little girls shouldn't play with toys they can't handle."

He advances on me quickly and without even thinking, I raise the gun and fire. The recoil ricochets up my arm as the bullet sails past him and lodges itself in the wall.

I spin on my heel and take off back towards the study, but I'm not fast enough as the sound of his boots eat up the ground behind me.

An arm circles my waist and hauls me back before tossing me to the floor. I go down hard on my ass and before I can raise my gun again, it is kicked out of my hand, landing with a loud clatter on the floor.

He looms over me, his knees bracketing my hips as his hands go around my throat. "Bryce has so many plans for you. You're gonna be the whore of every man willing to pay, you jumped up little cunt."

I try pulling at his wrists to loosen his grip around my neck, but he's too strong.

I struggle beneath him and drive my knee up hard between his legs, and the second his grip on my neck loosens, I smash my elbow up into his nose as hard as I can.

His hands fall away from my neck as he howls, his nose pouring with blood.

I roll over onto my front and scramble to get to my feet. My eyes fall on Kaleb's body, noticing the glint of a knife blade poking out from under him, but before I can reach for it, a hand wraps around my ankle, dragging me back.

"You little bitch!" I'm turned over onto my back with him towering above me just as his fist slams into my face, the pain unlike anything I've ever felt. It's like my skull is splitting in half.

I kick out with my free leg and clock my attacker in the face, sending him tumbling backwards as I go for the knife. I manage to grip it, my hand wrapping tight around the handle.

I hear movement above me, and just as the man comes down onto me, I drive the knife up, the long silver blade sinking into the side of his neck up to the hilt.

His eyes bulge, his hands reaching for his throat, grappling for the knife still lodged deep in his neck and pulls. The knife lands on the floor as blood spurts in all directions, including me.

I shuffle along the floor until my back hits the wall, drawing up my knees as my body trembles uncontrollably.

I'm transfixed, the horror playing out before me is unbearable to watch, but I can't tear my eyes away.

He coughs and splutters as his knees give way, and he lands with a thump. His blood soaks through his clothes and drips onto the floor as I watch the life drain from his body.

Within minutes, he crashes onto his back, his legs bent uncomfortably underneath him as the convulsions that wrack through him slowly come to a stop.

He's dead.

I scream, the sound piercing the air as the reality of all that has just happened hits me full force. I scream until the breath in my lungs dries up and my voice turns hoarse.

I killed someone.

I did it.

He's dead because of me.

My mind races a mile a minute, I don't know what to think or how to feel. I'm just... Numb.

My ears begin to ring, my vision going hazy around the edges as my head grows heavy.

I can just about make out the sound of a voice calling my name.

“Mrs. Hudson?” it calls. “Mrs. Hudson! *Adelia!*”

Theo hurries over to me, taking in the dead body of their fallen colleague to my right and the man I just killed still bleeding out two metres away from me.

He reaches for me but I recoil from his touch, hugging my legs tighter to my body as my head tips forward to rest on my knees.

All of the adrenaline that was coursing through me only minutes ago has faded and an overwhelming sense of fatigue has taken over my mind and body.

I'm tired. I just want to go to sleep.

Gage

“Della!” I shout, my voice echoing through the house as I run towards the study. Rafe and Alec are two steps behind me.

I rush through the living room and turn the corner to find my wife huddled against the wall in the hallway leading to the study. She’s curled into a ball with her knees drawn up under her chin as her body shakes.

Two bodies surround her, one of my guys, Kaleb Edwards lies with a bullet through his forehead, his eyes wide and lifeless. The other is her attacker, the man who dared touch my wife. I’d have given him a slow painful death if he wasn’t dead already. There’s a wide gash in the side of his neck, a large dark pool of blood on the floor beneath his body.

Theo stands against the opposite wall. “She won’t answer me, Boss. If I go anywhere near her, she screams.”

“I’ve got her. Alec, can you take care of all this?” I ask, motioning to the bodies.

“Sure, Boss.”

“There’s two more of Bryce’s bastards upstairs, one in one of the bedrooms and one in the hallway. There’s also one in the kitchen,” Theo says.

Bryce. So he *was* behind this.

“Can you give Alec a hand? I need to take care of my wife.” I turn my attention to her, taking slow steps towards her so as not to spook her. “Della?” I keep my voice low and soft as I crouch down in front of her.

Her hands, face and clothes are crusted with blood, and a thin sheen of sweat beads on her forehead while a deep purple bruise swells on her cheek.

Her eyes are fixed on the floor. I follow her gaze to where the knife she used lies discarded, covered in blood.

I block her view, reaching out my hand to touch hers that are ice cold. “Della, baby. You’re safe now. I’m here. I’m not going to let anyone hurt you,” I reassure her. I expect her to recoil from my touch, but she lets me hold her hand.

“I killed him. I-I killed him...” she mumbles over and over, her body still shivering.

She’s in shock.

“Della, baby. Can I lift you?” After a moment she gives me a small nod. “Okay, put your arms around my neck.”

She slowly lifts her arms up and I manage to manoeuvre her into my arms, one arm supporting her back and the other under her knees.

I cradle her to my body as she rests her head against my chest and make my way up to my bedroom. We pass by the attacker in the hallway, praying the other one isn't lying dead in my room.

Thankfully, my room remains untouched and I head straight into the en-suite bathroom. I set Della down on her feet, holding onto her and turn on the faucet in the shower.

"I need undress you, okay? You're covered in blood." Without looking at me she nods, giving me the green light in allowing me to peel off her jeans and her blood-soaked sweater, leaving her in just her underwear.

I guide her into the shower, and immediately, she drops to sit as she was before, with her knees tucked under her chin as the warm water cascades over her. It's almost as if she feels safer that way.

Kicking off my shoes, and shedding my jacket, I step under the steady stream of water with her, grabbing a bottle of body wash and some shampoo before sliding down the tiled wall to sit on the shower floor with her.

She rests her head on my shoulder as we watch the water turn a pale shade of pink as it washes away the blood from her body.

I squirt some body wash onto the palm of my hand and begin washing her body, and once I'm satisfied she's clean, I turn my attention to her hair, washing out the blood that's dried there.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t there,” I say, smoothing my hand over her hair.

“Not your f-fault.”

“Yes it is. I underestimated the lengths Bryce would go to and I didn’t have you protected nearly enough as I should.”

“It doesn’t matter now. It’s done.” Her voice is emotionless and empty as she stares into nothing, her mind clearly elsewhere.

My mind wanders back to sitting anxiously in the back of my car, my heartbeat rapid in my chest as I watched the events unfold on my phone screen. Watching those bastards just inches from my wife, wondering if they were going to find her and what they’d do if they did, knowing full well I was helpless to stop it.

“Come on, let’s get dried off.” I pull her to her feet and wrap her up in a towel. I sit her down on the edge of the bathtub as I gently dry her body before drying myself off.

I head into my bedroom and pull out a sweater and sweatpants for her to change into and let her get dressed in private while I change into something dry.

I help her into bed and pull the covers over her body. “Do you want something to eat or something to drink?”

“Not hungry. Thanks,” she mumbles, snuggling into the pillow.

“Okay. Get some sleep. You’re safe now.” Without thinking, I lean down and press my lips to her forehead, letting

my lips linger over her skin gently.

I begin to pull away but her hand slips into mine, her skin soft and delicate. “Don’t go,” she says quietly. “Stay with me?”

My heart explodes in my chest at hearing her words.

Without needing to be asked twice, I round the side of the bed and climb in beside her, and once I’m settled, she shuffles across, seeking the heat of my body and the safety of my arms.

I hold her to me as her cheek rests against my chest, directly over my heart that thumps wildly beneath her.

Her warmth wraps around me like a blanket, soaking through my skin. She falls asleep quickly and I lie there for what seems like hours, just holding her, enjoying the feeling of her body tucked up against mine, savouring it in case it’s the last time I ever will.

○○○○○

Some time later, I untangle myself from her carefully so as not to wake her, repositioning the covers over her body, letting my fingers dance across her cheek before leaving the bedroom.

I find Alec in the living room talking to Theo. They both turn when I enter.

“Boss, we’ve disposed of the bodies of the intruders. As for Kaleb, we’ve wrapped him and laid him in the basement

for now,” Theo says.

“Fuck...” I rub my forehead. “It shouldn’t have come to this.”

“Gage, we knew what we signed up for when we took this job,” Alec says.

“Not this. You didn’t sign up to be put in the middle of a war.” I didn’t hire my guys to fight my battles for me and put their lives at risk. The last thing I want is to lose any more.

“Been there, done that already, man. You forget I was a Marine. This job, your family matter to me and I can’t speak for anyone else, but I will die protecting you and your family if necessary.”

“Me too, Boss,” Theo agrees.

“I can’t ask that of either of you.”

Alec places a hand on my shoulder. “You don’t have to.”

“How the fuck did they manage to get in?”

“The gates weren’t breached and there’s no sign of forced entry,” Theo starts. “Ryan and Zeke were manning the gates. We found Zeke conscious but bleeding and Ryan is currently missing. Conveniently, the CCTV footage for the front gates was turned off so we didn’t manage to get anything from it. The only thing I can think of is that Bryce’s guys were let in.”

“You think Ryan was in on it?”

He nods. “Zeke said he’d been acting strange all day, jumpy and on edge. He said the van showed up at the gates

and Zeke was hit over the head from behind.”

“Jesus...” Two of my guys turned by Bryce in just over two weeks. Is there anybody I can trust?

“Is Mrs. Hudson alright?” Alec asks.

I nod. “She’s shook up, but she’s sleeping.”

“You’ve got yourself one hell of a fighter there.”

“She shouldn’t have been forced into a position where she had to fight in the first place. I promised to protect her and I failed, *again*.” First with Damien, and now this.

“Don’t beat yourself up, Gage. Go and be with your wife. We’ve got everything handled here.”

I’m just about to turn around when Sierra bursts into the room.

“What the hell is going on? I’ve got like a million missed calls and texts. What’s happened?” Her eyes dart between the three of us.

“Alec, will you fill her in? I need to get back to my wife.”

“Yes, Boss.”

Della

I wake up groggily, my eyelids hanging low and my head thumping out a heavy beat. The side of my face throbs and it takes a minute for everything that has happened to come flooding back, and when it does, it crashes into me like a tsunami.

I fly out of bed and run to the bathroom, making it to the toilet in time to bring up bile and nothing else since I haven't eaten all day.

My stomach growls, but the thought of food makes me want to heave. The image of that knife sinking into that man's skin turns my stomach upside down and I gag again.

I wait for the wave of nausea to pass, sticking close to the toilet bowl as a precaution when I hear the bedroom door open.

"Della?" Gage calls, stepping into the bathroom a second later. His brow furrows with worry when he takes in the sight

of me before him, practically hugging the toilet. “Are you alright?”

I shake my head. “I killed someone. I...”

“If you hadn’t, he’d have done far worse to you.” I know he’s right, but it doesn’t make knowing the fact that I took somebody’s life any easier.

“I keep seeing it. The knife going in... the blood...” I trail off as the images fill my mind again. “I can...” I swallow hard, “I can still feel it going into his neck, how easy it was.”
As easy as slicing warm butter.

I look down at my hands and suddenly, they’re covered in blood, in *his* blood. A scream rips through me, a torrent of panic slamming into me and I wipe my hands frantically on my clothes to get it off, but no matter how much I try, it doesn’t budge. The blood is a permanent stain on my skin, a reminder of what I did.

“Della. Della!” Gage’s hands cover mine as he drops to his knees in front of me.

“Blood. So much blood...” I try to pull my hands from his but he grips me tighter.

“Angel.” I look up at him, his face just inches from mine. “It’s all in your head, baby. None of it is real. Look.” He holds up my hands in front of me and just like he said, my hands are clean.

Bloodstain free.

“Your hands are clean, angel.” Gage brings my hands to his lips where he dots kisses over my knuckles and around to each of my palms.

A sob lodges itself in my throat and my forehead tips forward to rest on his shoulder. He takes my hands and places them around his neck before lifting me effortlessly, carrying me back into the bedroom.

He sits me down on the bed and hands me a glass of water. I sip it slowly, scared that if I drink too quickly, I’ll vomit it back up.

“You’ll never have to do anything like that again, Della,” he says, tucking my hair behind my ears, my skin tingling beneath his touch.

“I’m a murderer.”

“No, no you’re not.”

“Yes, I am,” I argue. “Shoving that knife into his neck wasn’t even the worst part of it. The worst part? I *wanted* him to die. I’m glad he’s dead and I’m glad I killed him. It makes me feel better knowing that he’s gone.” My voice cracks, the realisation of what I just admitted to has my stomach clenching. “I’m a horrible person.”

Gage takes my face in his hands and turns me to look at him as he kneels at my feet in front of me. “You are not a horrible person, do you hear me? You did what you did to survive and I don’t think anyone could blame you for being happy he’s dead. I know I am, but you are not a bad person.

You're a better person than me, and what I saw today, how strong and how brave you were... I couldn't be prouder of you."

Proud?

My eyes lift to meet his. "You are?"

He nods. "I was so scared that I wouldn't get to you in time and you'd be left defenceless. But you were right yesterday, you *can* take care of yourself. You don't need me to protect you." He swallows hard, like the thought of not being needed by me pains him.

"I'm sorry for leaving the house without telling you. It was reckless, and I get it now."

He shakes his head. "No. I should never have spoken to you how I did. I know I hurt you and I regret it deeply. The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you. You're my wife, Della, and I know it's going to take some time to figure this marriage out, but I want you to be happy here with me."

I look deep into his warm hazel eyes, my insides melting at the way he's looking at me and I see only sincerity in his gaze.

Am I happy here with him?

Could I learn to love him?

Yes, I think I could.

Because the way he's looking at me right now has warmth spreading through my heart and has my belly doing flips.

I was wrong, and so was he.

I *do* need him.

My eyes dart down to his lips, and without warning, I lean forward and press my mouth to his.

I've taken him by surprise, because he doesn't react for what feels like minutes. I begin to pull away, worried I've done the wrong thing, but then his brain finally kicks in and he kisses me back. His hand closes on the back of my neck, his lips strong but soft as he moves to control the kiss.

His tongue traces the seam of my lips, seeking entry into my mouth, and the moment my lips part, his tongue sweeps inside to meet mine. They tangle together, tasting, exploring as my hands dive into his hair.

I pull him to me until I'm flat on my back on the bed with him hovering above me, his hips wedged between my spread thighs.

My hands drift over the hard muscles of his body, memorising every curve and dip as his mouth glides over mine with expert ease, and just like our first kiss on our wedding day, I lose myself in his lips, in his touch.

He moans against my mouth and the sound makes the spot between my legs pulse with need. I can feel myself growing wetter with every glide of his tongue against mine.

I want more.

I want my husband.

I *need* him.

“*Gage*,” I pant, reaching for the waistband of his trousers, but he stops me.

“Not tonight, angel,” he mumbles against my lips.

My stomach sinks. “Don’t you want me?”

“I want nothing more, but tonight is only about you, angel, if that’s what you want.” His eyes search mine, waiting for the green light.

I nod.

He reaches for the hem of my sweater and lifts it, exposing my breasts to the cool air in the room I shiver, his eyes dancing over my naked skin and my nipples pebble under his heated gaze. His hands cup them, squeezing and teasing them before he dips down and closes his lips around my left nipple, taking it into his mouth.

I arch my back as he nips and sucks, the feeling of his mouth on my body unlike anything I’ve felt before. He soon turns his attention to the other and does the same until I’m squirming beneath him, a strangled moan escaping my throat.

“*Gage*, please,” I moan.

He pulls back to look into my eyes, running his hands up and down my thighs. “I want to taste you, is that alright?”

The ache between my legs grows, the steady throb getting stronger and stronger, and I want nothing more than his mouth on me. “Yes.”

“Has anybody done this to you before?”

I shake my head.

“Good,” he replies with a hint of a smirk as he tugs at the string keeping his sweatpants secured at my waist. He then hooks his fingers into the waistband and pulls, peeling them down my legs along with my underwear before tossing them somewhere behind him.

He sits back on his heels on the floor at my feet, his eyes taking in my body, naked and on full display for him. He drinks in the sight of me, his heated gaze trailing from my head to my feet and back up to rest between my legs.

My cheeks are ablaze under his intense stare.

He reaches for my thighs and pulls them wider apart. He kisses a trail from my ankles up to the insides of my thighs, alternating between my left and my right before sinking his head between them, swiping his tongue from my entrance all the way up to my clit.

I gasp at the unfamiliar feeling. His tongue tasting the most intimate parts of me feels so foreign, but so good. He uses his fingers to spread me open, rubbing my clit with the pad of his finger before replacing it with his mouth, sucking on the swollen bundle of nerves that has me screaming.

He sinks a finger inside me, searching for that spot that will send me over the edge and begins pumping while his tongue continues its beautiful assault on my clit.

I cry out, my hands finding his hair for something to grip onto as my feet come to rest on his shoulders. Every single

nerve ending buzzes as sparks of pleasure engulf me, spreading out to every part of my body.

His arms band around my thighs, holding them open while he feasts on my pussy like he can't get enough.

“Gage, please don't stop,” I beg as I feel the familiar tingle at the base of my spine, the warmth pooling low in my belly as my orgasm begins to build.

“So fucking good,” he moans, the vibrations of his raspy voice reverberating through me as he dives back in, fucking me with his tongue and I don't think I've ever experienced so much pleasure in my life.

Pleasure not given by someone else, that's for sure.

“Play with your nipples, angel. Touch yourself.”

I look down my body to find his eyes on mine as I reach up, untangling my fingers from his hair to touch myself. I dust my fingers over my hardened nipples and I gasp, a bolt of pleasure zipping through my body.

Gage continues his assault with his tongue, his eyes fixed onto me as I pluck my nipples, circling them with my fingers and I can feel my orgasm building even quicker now.

“Gage, I'm...” I reach for him with one hand, tugging at his hair while I continue to play with my breasts with the other.

It only takes another minute until I'm screaming out his name as an orgasm wracks through me, bucking my hips off the bed as fireworks dance behind my eyes.

My thighs grip his head like a vice as my muscles locking up. Wave after wave of pleasure crashes through me, and Gage doesn't let up until he's coaxed every last ounce of my release from me. I'm fisting his hair so tight, I'm surprised I haven't ripped it out of the root completely, but he doesn't seem to mind.

My head drops back against the mattress, staring up at the ceiling as my vision begins to clear, my chest heaving.

I have never come so hard in my life.

Gage settles himself between my legs, the fabric of his trousers the only thing separating me from the solid erection rubbing against me. He hovers above me, his thick dark hair wild and messy from my hands, his lips glistening with my release.

"I wanna hear you come for me like that every day for the rest of my life, angel." He dips down and captures my lips. He groans against my mouth as he shares the taste of my release on his lips with mine.

It's so erotic, and I love it.

"Tell me you feel this. Tell me you can feel this thing between us," he says, pulling back to look into my eyes.

"I feel it," I admit. *God*, do I feel it. It grows stronger with every passing day and I don't think I could stop it, even if I wanted to.

A hint of a smile touches his lips when he hears my answer. "We can take this as fast or slow as you want, but

from here on out, you sleep in this room, in this bed. With *me.*”

The thought of sleeping beside him every night, with him just inches between us thrills me, butterflies fluttering in the pit of my belly.

“Okay,” I agree.

Would I stop feeling this way if I could? Would I go back to my old life having never met him?

No.

Because the reality of it is, as much as I hated the idea of this marriage, I’m slowly but surely falling in love with my husband.

Della

The atmosphere between Gage and I has shifted somewhat the next morning. It's calmer, and more relaxed. Strangely, even after everything that happened yesterday, I've never slept so well. Maybe it was from the mental and physical exhaustion of it all. Maybe it was the fact that the mattress beneath me felt as though I was floating on clouds. Or maybe it was because I was lying beside my *husband*, his body only inches away from me, his arm draped over my body protectively.

Husband...

I don't think I'll ever get used to saying it. At first, the word terrified me, carrying with it so many connotations and expectations as to what it meant. Though now, it comforts me, something I never thought I'd feel.

We head down for breakfast with Gage's arm secured at my waist as we enter the kitchen.

"Oh my gosh! Della, are you alright? I heard about what happened. I can't believe it." She pulls me in for a hug,

wrapping her arms tightly around my neck.

“I’m fine, just glad it’s over.” It’s not a total lie. I *am* okay, physically. *Mentally*, I can still see the look in the man’s eyes as I drove the blade into his neck. His cold black eyes haunt me every time I close my own, but I do my best to fight back the memory.

“Does it hurt?” Sierra motions to the bruise on my cheek.

“Not as much as it did.” The swelling has gone down since yesterday, but the area is still tender, the edges of the bruise turning yellow while a deep purple circle has formed under my eye.

Viola steps forward from around the kitchen island wearing a tight-lipped smile, guilt written across her features. “I should never have left you yesterday.”

I reach out for her hand. “I’m glad you did. There was no telling what would’ve happened had you stayed. I couldn’t think of you getting hurt,” I say and her smile widens. “And later, I wanna hear all about your day yesterday with your family.”

“Okay.”

“So, what’s this then, huh? You two finally a thing now or are just gonna keep ignoring the sexual tension between you?” Rafe asks with a grin and a mouth full of food.

“Fuck off,” Gage deadpans, but I can only chuckle.

“Just a question, bro. I mean, I kind of already have the answer given the decibels of screaming coming from your

room last night. You got a good pair of lungs on you, Del.”

My cheeks flush red hot, though I can't help but laugh as Gage goes for him. Rafe swipes his plate from the counter and jumps from the stool, running down the hallway, the sound of his laughter echoing through the house.

“My brother is so immature,” Gage grumbles with a roll of his eyes as he returns to my side.

“I like him.”

“He's asking for a broken nose,” Gage says loudly enough for Rafe to hear as he returns to the kitchen, still wheezing from laughter.

“He's only teasing,” I laugh, placing my hand on his chest as I crane my neck to look up at him. “So... I was thinking, if you wanted, I could maybe move my things into your room later?”

His brows raise as he brings his hand to my waist. “You mean *our* room.”

“Yes. *Our* room.”

I know it's all moving a little fast, but I've never felt so content as I did last night, sleeping beside him. So *safe*.

The smile he gives me is wide. “I'd love nothing more. Rafe and I have some business to take care of. I'll only be a couple of hours. I can give you a hand when I'm done.”

“Okay.” I smile.

He leans down and captures my lips, stealing my breath away as his fingers tangle in my hair.

I'm acutely aware that we're in full view of his siblings and Viola, but I don't care. I fall into the kiss, his woodsy, masculine scent enveloping me, making me heady.

He pulls away, letting his forehead rest against mine. "I won't be long."

"Okay."

He steals one more kiss before disappearing out of the kitchen with his brother leaving me standing there with two sets of eyes on me.

"It's about time," Sierra comments with a smirk.

"What did I tell you, sweetheart? It was just a matter of time," Viola says, giving me a wink.

∞∞∞∞

I'm in the middle of gathering my things from my room when there's a knock on the door. I turn to find Gage leaning against the door frame. "Need a hand?"

"Depends on what you plan to do with it?" I ask playfully, a smirk working its way into the corners of my mouth.

What the hell just came out of my mouth? *Was that flirting?*

Who am I?

He chuckles, stepping further into the room. He reaches for my waist and pulls me into him, pressing a kiss to my lips. “Oh, I can think of a few things, but I meant with your belongings.”

“Yes, please. Could you grab the things hanging in the wardrobe? I’ll take these.” I lift a pile of clothes that lie folded on the bed.

“Of course. Make yourself some room in the dresser drawers.”

“Okay.” I carry the pile across the hall, dropping them onto the edge of the bed to free up my hands.

I pull open the top draw of the dresser, which holds a few of Gage’s t-shirts and sweaters. I shuffle them to the left to make more room when my eyes catch on a small black velvet box at the bottom of the drawer.

A part of me thinks I should leave it alone. It’s obviously there for a reason and with it being at the bottom, Gage clearly didn’t want anyone to find it, but as always, my curiosity gets the better of me and I take it out, flipping open the lid.

My heart stops, thudding to a complete halt in my chest and I have to blink a few times to make sure I’m not hallucinating.

My necklace.

My mother’s locket, the same one I lost when I was eight years old. I take it from the box and open the locket and sure enough, mine and my mom’s faces smile back at me.

I'm seeing things, surely. My mind playing tricks on me. After the trauma of yesterday, it wouldn't be unheard of.

Why does Gage have it?

How did he get it?

Gage appears at the door carrying an armful of clothes still on the hangers. "How many clothes did you and my sister buy. I-" His eyes drop to the necklace that dangles from my fingers and the colour drains from his face as he inhales a deep breath.

"Where did you get this?" I ask.

He hesitates a moment, and I can see the cogs turning in his mind, trying to come up with an answer, and judging by the look on his face, he didn't want me to find it like this, if at all.

"I found it," is all he says, dropping the armful of clothes onto the chair in the corner.

"Found it where? I told you about how important it was to me... how heartbroken I was when I lost it. Did you have it then?"

"Yes."

His short, clipped answers are only stoking the angry fire that burns in my veins.

"Where did you get it?" I demand.

"I didn't want you to find out like this, Della." His eyes meet the floor and his shoulders deflate as he perches on the edge of the bed.

“Find out what?”

“I was going to tell you, but I was waiting for the right time,” he begins, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees. He swallows hard before he starts to speak. “When I was fifteen years old, I almost drowned. Rushton Lake had frozen over and for some reason, I was out on the ice. It cracked and I fell through. I thought I was going to die. But then an angel saved me. *You* saved me, Della.”

I blink at him, my mouth opening to say something, but the words don't come.

No. There's no way.

I steady myself against the dresser, my legs threatening to buckle underneath me.

For the first time in fourteen years, I allow the memories of that day to resurface, memories I've forced down into the deepest darkest part of my brain. It was easier that way.

Gage was the boy I pulled out of the water?

How is this possible?

I can still feel the biting chill in the breeze that prickled like a thousand tiny needles on my skin. I can remember the ache in my burning muscles as I tugged a boy almost twice my size and almost double my age out of the freezing water. Only for him to die anyway, or so I was led to believe by my father.

Lies.

“It was you...?” I breathe out, my vision blurring from fresh tears that well in my eyes. “I... I thought you were dead.”

He frowns. “What?”

“I asked my dad about you, I needed to know if you were okay and he told me... he told me you didn’t make it, that you died that night in the hospital.”

“Son of a bitch,” he snaps under his breath, his jaw clenching.

“I cried for three days. I felt so guilty for not being able to save you. Why would my dad lie to me?”

He fists his hands. “To keep us apart. A few days after, I went back to the lake and found your necklace. I wanted to return it to you. I even came to your house but your father was there. He never even gave me the chance to hand it over before he told me to stay away from you. So I kept it. If I was never going to see you again, at least I had something of you with me.”

Oh my god.

“You wanted to know, why you. Why I wanted you. This is the reason.” He rises to his feet, closing the gap until there’s only a metre separating us. He reaches up and dusts his hand over my cheek, swiping away the tear that I didn’t realise had fallen. “That day, when you pulled me out and waited with me until help arrived, I remember so vividly the colour of your eyes. I dreamed about them. From that day on, I vowed that

one day, when we were older, I would make you my wife. That I would spend the rest of my life protecting the brave, beautiful girl who risked her own life to save mine.”

He takes the necklace from my hand and reaches up, securing the clasp around the back of my neck.

“I can’t believe it’s really you,” I say, reaching up to touch the locket fondly.

“I’ve loved you for fourteen years, Adelia Rose, and I never imagined I could fall in love with anyone as hard as I have for you.” His words steal the breath from my lungs, emotion choking me up so much I can’t even speak.

He loves me.

My heart races, expanding in my chest as he stares down at me. I’m almost certain I can see his warm caramel-coloured eyes glistening with tears as well.

“I’ve fallen for you, too,” I admit and he sucks in a breath, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“You don’t know how long I’ve waited to hear you say that.” He cups my cheek and smashes his mouth to mine, his tongue wasting no time in tangling with mine.

His hands sweep into my hair, angling my head back to give him better access as he kisses his way along my jaw and down to my neck.

I let out a sigh as he sucks on the sensitive skin just below my ear before returning to my mouth. The kiss soon turns

desperate, *bruising*, our hands roaming over each other like we can't get enough.

He backs me against the door, slamming it shut before reaching around me to flick the lock in place, then takes my wrists in one of his hands and raises it over my head, pinning them against the wall.

“What are you doing?” I ask as he moves in, his nose brushing mine.

“I'm going to kiss you, and tease you until you're begging for me. Then I'm going to carry you to bed, where I intend to spend the rest of the evening making love to my wife.”

Gage

I cuff her wrists in my hands, pinning them to the wall as I devour the sensitive skin of her neck, kissing a trail upwards towards her ear where I take her earlobe in between my teeth and tug it gently, making her moan. The sound alone is enough to make my cock twitch.

I take my free hand and reach down under the hem of her dress, slowly dragging my fingers along her thighs until they reach the thin cotton of her underwear. I let my fingers dust over her through the fabric and begin rubbing slow, drawn out circles over her clit. A gasp escapes her lips and whether she means to or not, she widens her feet, and I press against her clit harder with the pad of my thumb.

I watch as her bottom lip catches between her teeth, her eyes drifting closed as I dip my finger under the waistband of her panties, feeling a soft tuft of hair as I slide my fingers through her folds that grow wetter by the second.

I watch her eyes flare with desire as I slowly sink a finger inside her while continuing to tease that swollen bundle of

nerves I know will tip her over the edge.

The thought of hearing her come again, as beautiful and as sweet as last night, has me adding another finger, pumping faster, as desperate for her release as she is.

“Gage, please... I want to touch you,” she whimpers, and as much as I like having her at my mercy, I want her to touch me too. I want to feel her hands on my body, the warmth of her touch to sink deep into my bones and never let go.

The second I release her hands, her lips crash to mine, her tongue gliding along mine while her fingers dive into my hair.

God, she tastes like heaven. I don't think I'll ever get enough.

Seeing the look on her face earlier, her necklace dangling from her fingers, my heart sank. I thought for sure, I'd lost her for good. I saw the pain and the betrayal in her eyes. She trusted me with the truth and I betrayed that by keeping who I really am from her. It was never an option to keep it from her forever, but I'd planned on coming clean when the time was right.

But now, I'm in no doubt about how she feels, as she claws at my hair, tugging on it firmly, kissing me with such earnest it's as if she'll die if she stops.

I know it's the same for me, because her kiss is oxygen, and without *her*, I cease to exist.

It only takes a few more pumps of my fingers into her warm, tight channel for her to explode. My mouth muffles her

cries as her orgasm takes hold of her body as she rides it out on my fingers.

Once the last of her release ripples through her, I reach for the hem of her dress and peel it off her body, tossing it onto the floor, leaving her in just her bra and panties as I dip down to kiss her lips.

I shove my jacket off, throwing it behind me before I begin working my way down her body, kissing every inch of her exposed skin down to her thighs. My hands wrap around the back of her legs as I brush my lips over the thin cotton of her panties. I can smell her arousal, feel the heat and her wetness seeping through the fabric as I lick a line over her pussy.

I kiss my way back up her body, taking her nipples into my mouth one by one over the black lace of her bra, teasing and tugging them gently between my teeth until she's trembling in my hands.

My mouth waters to taste her, explore her body more, but I don't think my cock can take much more. I need inside of my wife.

I bend to lift her, guiding her legs around my waist as I walk towards the bed. I sit on the edge, pulling Della onto my lap so she's straddling me. She grinds down on me and I groan, the warmth of her pussy seeping through the thin fabric of her panties into my trousers. My cock aches to be set free, a steady throb that grows with even the slightest of her movements above me.

She reaches for the buttons on my shirt and tears at them frantically before moving down to my pants.

She unbuckles my belt, pops the button and pulls down the zipper before reaching inside. Her hand wraps around my cock and begins to stroke and I suck in a breath. It's been years since a hand that didn't belong to me was wrapped around my dick and it feels fucking fantastic.

I can tell by the tremors in her breath and the shake of her hand that she's nervous, and although her inexperience doesn't surprise me, she has no reason to be nervous of doing something wrong.

Because she never could.

She guides her hand along my shaft and I allow my head to tip up to the ceiling, my eyes drifting closed as my cock pulses in her hand, so painfully hard it's almost too much to bear.

I feel her lips on my neck, her tongue licking up my throat and something snaps inside me. I grip her thighs and rolls us until I'm settled between her legs.

"What do you want, angel?" I ask, staring down into those beautiful jade green eyes I've been dreaming about for fourteen years, so full of desire and excitement.

She goes to speak, but quickly closes her mouth, her cheeks turning an even darker shade of pink.

"I need you to tell me what you want, baby. After everything you've been through, I don't want to push you into anything you're not ready for." The thought of Tanner's hands

on her has red hot rage flooding my veins and the need to erase his touch from her body consumes me.

She takes her bottom lip between her teeth and smiles self-consciously. “I want you to fuck me.”

Her words have my cock leaking. There’s nothing on this earth that turns me on more than a woman who knows what she wants, and for that woman to be my wife? I don’t think it ever gets any better than that.

“What else?” I press. I need to hear more of her words.

“I want you to make me come. I want you to touch me like no one else has. I want you to love me...”

I smile. “I already love you, angel. Let me show you.” I take her lips with mine, licking into her mouth as I reach around to unhook her bra, peeling it down her arms before taking her tits into my hands. They fill my hands perfectly, her nipples rosy pink and as hard as diamonds.

“Gage, I need you,” she whimpers beneath me, fumbling for my pants and I help her tug them down my legs. My cock springs free as I kick off my pants then hook my fingers into her panties and slide them off.

“Are you on birth control?” I ask and she nods. A part of me is happy, and there’s a tiny part of me that wishes she wasn’t, the thought of getting her pregnant excites me, but there’s plenty of time for that. “I’m clean. I haven’t had sex in years.”

“Really?”

I nod. “There’s only one woman I’ve ever wanted, and I’m looking right at her. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted, Della. Only you.”

Her eyes glaze over with tears as I dip down to kiss her, reaching between us and taking my cock in my hand, guiding the tip through her folds before sinking deep inside of her in one, driving in to the hilt.

She cries out, her hands wrapping around my biceps, clinging to me as I pull out, only to thrust back inside over and over, sending us both into a tailspin of pleasure as we lose ourselves in each other’s bodies.

I’d often wondered what it would feel like to make love to her, I’d pictured it so many times, lived it in my mind, but nothing could ever come close to the real thing. She feels incredible.

Her legs fall open wider as her head tips back against the mattress, her mouth parted on a moan, a sound that has me thrusting harder, hitting that spot inside her that I know will make her explode.

Her tits bounce with every sharp snap of my hips, her walls clench around my dick and a groan rumbles up my throat as my release grows closer.

I take her hands and pin them either side of her head, locking our fingers together as I move inside her, my thrusts hard and deep.

Sweat beads on my forehead as I try to delay my climax until she's ready to come too, but when I feel her pussy tighten around me again, I know she's close.

“Come with me, angel. I wanna feel you come all over my cock,” I pant.

I keep up my rhythm, and it's not long before a scream catches in her throat, my name ringing out all around me as she reaches her climax. I follow closely behind her, coming inside her so hard black spots dance in my vision as I collapse on top of her.

She clings to me as the last of her orgasm ripples through her, my movement stilling inside her.

We stay locked together, our bodies spent and sticky as we regain our breath. I roll onto my side and bring her head against my shoulder.

“Can I tell you a secret?” she asks.

“Of course.”

“On our wedding night, after you helped me out of my dress, I... I touched myself.”

That mental image has me hard again in a minute. “What were you thinking about?”

“You,” she admits. “Doing what we just did.”

“Do you want to know something?”

“Mm-hm.”

“I touched myself that night too. I imagined myself peeling that beautiful wedding dress off your body and worshipping every inch of you until the sun came up.”

She turns over onto her stomach, her fingers dusting over my bare chest as she looks up at me. “I wanted that too. I knew it then at the ceremony that I had feelings for you, I just chose to force them down because acting on them would mean I was accepting this marriage.”

“And now?”

“Now... I can't imagine my life any other way. Finding out the truth of who you are has only made me want this more.”

I take her chin in my fingers and lift her face to mine, sealing my lips over hers.

“Why now? Why did you wait so long to come for me?” she asks.

“I was waiting for the right time, I guess. Trying to figure out the best way to get close to you. But when I found out Bryce's plan to marry you, I couldn't allow it. I never really thought it through, but all I knew is that you would never belong to him.”

“I'm glad you did, you saved me. Being married to him would have been a death sentence for me.”

“You once said that about marrying *me*,” I remind her.

“That was then. You've given me life, Gage. I want to live, and experience everything the world has to offer. I want to

experience it all with you.”

An idea pops into my head. “Why don’t we go away? Just the two of us for a few days? We never did go a honeymoon.”

Excitement flares in her eyes. “Really?”

“Really,” I confirm. I brush her hair from her face.

“I’d like that.” She smiles.

Della

Past

I'm empty.

I feel nothing.

There's a hole inside me. It's wide and dark, like the old wishing well at the bottom of our garden that goes down and down and down into nothing. It makes me sad. It's like a huge black hole sucking everything inside, just like I learned in my science class.

I'm often told I daydream too much, I'm in my own little world, they say. There, but not *all* there, like my mind is somewhere else.

For a long time I haven't felt like myself, not since she disappeared, left without a single trace as if she never existed.

My mom.

The most important person in the world, the most amazing mom a little girl could wish for upped and left without saying goodbye. That's what dad says, anyway, but I don't believe him. She wouldn't just leave me, not my mommy.

I reach up to where my necklace hangs on a thin silver chain around my throat. The necklace my mom gave to me. It's shaped like a heart, and on the inside, it has photos of me and my mom when I was little.

It's all I have left of her.

I fiddle with the locket in my fingers, the silver metal cold under my touch.

"Adelia, are you even listening to me?" my dad asks, dropping his fork with a clatter against his plate, making me jump.

My head snaps up to where he's sitting on the opposite end of the dining table. "Huh?"

He narrows his eyes, his jaw ticking in annoyance. "Don't 'huh', me. I asked you a question, but you clearly weren't listening, as usual."

"Sorry, Daddy," I mumble, dropping my eyes to the plate of food in front of me that I've hardly touched.

"I'll ask you again, what is going on with you? I had yet another call from the school regarding your short attention span in class."

I say nothing and continue to pick at my food.

“Is this about your mother? Again? Because if it is, I’ve had just about enough of it. You can’t carry on like this.”

“I can’t. It’s been two years, Daddy, and you never talk about her.”

“Because she left us. Now forget about her.” He rubs his forehead like he’s tired. Or *bored*.

Something squeezes tight in my stomach. How can he expect me to forget my mom?

“But I miss her,” I say quietly, trying so hard not to cry.

“Do you think she misses you? *Us*? She’s gone, Adelia. Gone!”

“I don’t believe you!” I rocket out of my chair and rush out of the room, pulling on my boots, my hat and my coat that hang by the front door.

My dad calls my name but I’m out of the front door before he can reach me, the thick layer of snow crunching under my feet as I run.

I run and run and run until my legs burn and my lungs ache.

I come to a stop beside a wide lake, a place my mom used to bring me to when I was little.

Rushton Lake.

It’s so beautiful in the summer, the water sparkling in the sunlight, the bright greens of the trees and the rainbows of

flowers that surround the water. Now, the trees are bare, the flowers dead and the lake completely frozen over.

I wonder if my dad is out looking for me. Driving through the streets to find me.

I don't want him to.

I've never shouted back to my dad, I've never been brave enough and I can only imagine the trouble I'll be in when I get home for talking back.

What if I never go home? What if I stay here forever?

That could be fun.

I shiver from the cold as I make my way through the trees, the sharp branches cutting into my hand. I slide down one of the tree trunks and start to build a snowman, rolling the snow in my hands, the freezing cold stinging my skin.

Shoot. I forgot my gloves.

I'm in the middle of shaping my snowman's body when I hear a loud crack that splits the air, followed by a splash. Someone shouts and I get back to my feet, searching through the trees to find out what it was.

I see someone struggling in the water, a few metres away from the edge. It's a boy. He shouts for help, gargling water as his arms wave and flail in the air.

"Help!" he cries.

I have to help him.

I move closer to the edge of the water and step out onto the ice. It creaks under my feet but I take each step carefully. The boy continues shouting as I get nearer but then his head disappears under the water.

I finally get to him, I drop to my knees and reach for him. I try to grip his hand but he is moving too much, so instead, I grab his jacket and tug as hard as I can.

He's so heavy.

The boy stops moving. He stops shouting and his body goes limp.

Am I too late?

I keep pulling but I can't get a good grip, the ice underneath me is slippery. I look around for something to hold onto and I find a thick branch sticking out of the frozen surface.

There was a storm a few weeks ago and a tree must have fallen down. I'm just able to reach it with my legs, stretching flat onto my belly, hooking my leg around the branch and pulling with all my strength to get the boy out.

It works.

I reel him in, sliding his body across the ice as he coughs and splutters until we reach the edge where I sit down, bringing his head onto my lap.

I brush the hair from his face as his whole body shivers and jerks.

He's alive. *Thank God.*

I tug off my coat and lay it across him to try to keep him warm. "Can you hear me?" I ask.

He opens his mouth to speak but it just comes out as a gurgle, so I roll him onto his side as a trickle of water spurts from his mouth.

"Help is coming. Just hang in there," I tell him before shouting as loud as I can for help, praying someone hears me soon.

I smile down at him and reach for his hand, squeezing it in mine though I can barely feel it. Everywhere is numb. I'm not even sure he can feel me holding his hand, but it makes me feel good to know that I am.

His eyes find mine, they're warm, golden, sorta like the colour of honey, or the syrup I have on top of my pancakes for breakfast.

I keep shouting out for help and only a minute goes by before a lady and her dog come to a stop just above us.

"Are you alright?" she shouts down.

"He needs an ambulance. He fell into the water. He's freezing."

"Okay, hold on, sweetheart." She pulls out her phone and dials, speaking so fast I don't catch a word she says.

A few minutes later, the sound of sirens fill the air and I look back at the boy lying across my lap, his eyes still fixed on

mine. "It's going to be okay, I promise."

ooooo

I'm sat on a chair in the hospital waiting room, swinging my legs back and forth, blowing on my stone cold fingers when a man steps into my view. He looks old like my dad, but he's thinner with more hair.

"Are you the brave girl who pulled my son out from the lake?" he asks.

I nod. "I'm Della March."

He smiles. "It's lovely to meet you, Della. I'm Joseph, and I want to thank you for saving my boy."

The double doors of the waiting area burst open and my dad steps through. His face grows angrier as he looks at the man. "What are you doing here?"

"Giving my thanks to your daughter." The man looks down at me and winks.

He seems a nice man.

Why can't he be my daddy instead?

"Adelia, you wait here," he tells me before he and the man leave the room.

Their voices get quieter and I push the door open an inch and peek around the corner to see them talking. My dad points at the man's face, stepping closer to him.

It's like they're arguing.

Why is my dad angry with that man? What did he do wrong?

When I see my dad storming in my direction, I race back to the chair like I hadn't moved a muscle.

The door swings open and my dad seems angrier than I've ever seen him. "What happened?"

"There was a boy. He fell into the lake. I saved him."

He blows out a breath. "You could have been killed. Why would you do something so stupid? Risk your life for a stranger?"

Why is he shouting at me? I did a good thing by saving that boy, didn't I?

"I couldn't leave him to drown, Daddy. He was so scared."

"The man, did he say anything to you?"

I shake my head. "He just said thank you for helping his son."

He nods slowly, but still doesn't seem very happy. "Come on, let's go home."

"The boy. Is he alright? Can I see him?" I ask as I follow him out of the waiting area.

"No."

"But, why not? Daddy, I want to see him, make sure he's okay. Wh-"

He stops, spinning around to look down at me. “Because he’s dead, Adelia,” my dad snaps in a hushed voice. “He’s gone, you were too late. Now come with me and let it go.” He takes my hand and jerks me forward roughly and I whimper.

I look back over my shoulder to find the man watching us down the corridor, his eyes sad as we turn the corner and disappear out of sight.

I cry silently all the way home, streams of tears wetting my cheeks and blurring my vision.

The boy... He didn’t make it.

I keep picturing his face in my mind. I thought for sure he’d be okay. But I didn’t get to him in time.

It’s all my fault.

He’s dead because of *me*.

I bite down on my lip to hold the sound of my cries in, reaching up for my necklace as I always do when I’m sad, but it’s not there.

I search around the backseat for it, checking my coat pockets, but it’s nowhere to be found. Panic rises up inside of me.

No...

No. I can’t have lost it.

Not today.

I think about telling my dad to go back to the hospital.
Maybe I left it there?

But would he care?

He's managed to erase almost every trace of my mom from
our lives, he'd probably be happy it's gone.

My last connection to her is broken.

I blink away my tears and rest my head on the window,
looking up to the sky.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, hoping that if the boy made it to
heaven, that he can hear me, that he knows I did everything I
could to save him.

I'm so so sorry.

Gage

“After everything we did last night and here you are trying your best to hide your body from me,” I chuckle, watching how Della attempts to slip out of bed and back into her clothes without exposing an inch of skin and enjoying it a little too much.

Her eyes flick over her shoulder, a deep pink blush creeping up to her cheeks.

I made good on my promise to make love to her all night. I kissed every inch of her smooth, creamy skin, touched parts of her that had never been touched before and had her moaning enough for her voice to ring through my head for hours.

I lost myself in her body, and she in mine, and yet now with her cheeks tinged in pink, her self-consciousness astounds me.

Does she not realise how beautiful she is?

“Come here.” I crook my finger at her.

A shy smile plays on her lips as she shuffles closer, clutching the dress to her chest.

“Lose the dress, angel. I want to see you.”

After a minute, the dress falls away, leaving her naked as she crawls back onto the bed, and my eyes rake over her from head to toe, my heart skipping a beat.

The rock hard length of my morning wood I woke up with tents the sheets that cover me, and somehow it's grown harder the second I laid eyes on my wife. Her hair is a dishevelled mess of rich brown curls and her lips still pink and swollen from last night.

She climbs over me and I open my arms to welcome her in, but she takes me by surprise when she moves to straddle me, lowering herself down over my dick and I glide in with ease.

“Fuck, angel.” My head tips back against the pillow as she begins to ride me, her beautiful full tits bouncing every time she lifts up and drops back down onto me.

This new-found confidence that didn't exist minutes ago has me climbing closer and closer to my release. There's nothing sexier than a woman who isn't afraid to take what she wants.

Della's fingers glide up her body, stopping to play with her tits, making her gasp. Her eyes never leave mine as I watch her touch herself and it's the hottest thing I've ever seen.

My hands find her hips, and I use the leverage to meet every one of her movements, thrusting up into her until I'm balls-deep in her pussy that is warm and wet around my cock.

She cries out as she circles her hips, grinding down onto me, seeking the friction she needs to come.

"That's my girl. Ride my cock." I reach down to play with her clit, pinching the swollen bud as she moves faster above me, chasing her release.

"Gage..." she pants, her back arching as her pussy clenches around me. She's close, and the second she tips over that ledge, I'm there to catch her as her orgasm sets off my own.

I come with a deep groan as I fill her up, my fingers digging into the flesh at her hips, every muscle in my body locking up as my orgasm wracks through me.

She shivers and spasms above me as she rides out the rest of her release, her movements above me slowing to a stop. She goes to climb off me but I clamp her back down.

I shift to sit up and take her face in my hands. "I'm a goner for you, angel."

"I think I was a goner for you the moment I met you," she admits.

I smirk. "Oh yeah? Is that because of my, what do they call it? My *'big dick energy'*?"

She barks out a laugh, slamming her hand over her mouth as she struggles to contain it, and I can't help but join her. The

sound of her laughter is something I crave to hear for the rest of my life.

Her lips twist as she sobers. “So, I wanted to ask you something.”

“And you riding my dick like it’s a sport is your way of softening the blow, right?” I take a deep breath as I wait for her to continue.

“I was thinking about getting a job,” she says, chewing on her bottom lip. I open my mouth to protest but she silences me with a finger to my lips. “I can’t be that wife that sits at home all day, twiddling my thumbs waiting for my husband to come home.”

“Baby, you don’t have to work, I’ll take care of you. You won’t want for anything.”

“But I *want* a job. I need to do something worthwhile with my time, something productive to stop me from going insane.”

I mull the thought over for a beat. “What is it you had in mind?”

Her face lights up with hope that I’m not shooting her down in flames. She shrugs. “I’m not really sure.”

“I could find you a job at the casino, or the hotel? You could be my personal secretary to cater to my every need,” I tease, brushing my lips over hers.

“Oh yeah, Gage Hudson’s wife working at her husband’s company. There’s no telling what she had to do to get *that* job.”

“You’d be by my side because you are a bright, intelligent woman with more smarts in your little finger than some of my employees put together. Fuck what people think.”

She rolls her eyes and I give her a sharp smack on her ass that makes her yelp.

“I’m serious, Gage.”

“And so am I. You studied business at college, right?”

Her eyebrows lift. “How do you know that?”

I give her a wink. “I know quite a bit,” I reply. In fact, I know quite a lot about her that she doesn’t realise. “Anyway, *Hudson Enterprises* is a family business, always has been. Sierra has no interest in it, so that leaves Rafe and I. Join us. Work alongside me and my brother, learn about the business.”

I’m surprised I never thought about it myself. It means I get to spend more time with her and teach her all there is to know about the company. I can have her close, keep her protected, knowing she’s not too far away while she gets to keep busy and stay occupied. It works well for the both of us.

“Really?” she asks.

I nod. “Rafe and I will teach you everything you need to know, and if there’s a particular area that interest you...”

I can see her mind working, and it doesn’t take her long to come to a decision. “I accept, Boss.”

“Yeah?”

She nods with a smile, holding out her hand and I take it.

“Now, with you being my wife and all, I’m not entirely sure how to go about putting you on the payroll. Will you take daily pussy-eating and a dozen orgasms as payment for your work?” I try to keep a straight face, but it cracks when she shoves me in the chest playfully, laughing as I roll us over so she’s lying on her back, my dick still buried inside her as I hover above her.

“You’re a bad man, Mr. Hudson.”

I press a kiss to the tip of her nose. “No, just a man who’s got it bad for his wife.”

Do I ever...

∞∞∞∞

“Someone’s in a good mood this morning,” Rafe comments with a smirk as I stroll into his office at the casino.

“Am I?”

“Yep, that stupid, loved-up smile on your face gave it away.”

Shit, am I smiling? I clock my reflection on the reflective surface on his drinks cabinet to my left.

Well, damn... So I am. The smile stretches from ear to ear like the cat who got the cream. I guess in a way I did.

“The powers of pussy, bro... Every man’s downfall. From here on out, you are officially pussy-whipped.”

“Oh yeah? So why haven’t you made an honest woman out of somebody yet?” I ask, dropping into the chair opposite his desk. Knowing how much my brother loves women, the fact he refuses to settle down amazes me.

He screws up his face. “Why tie yourself down with one when you can have them all?”

“You’re a sick man, Rafe,” I say with a shake of my head, and he howls in laughter. “When you find the love of a good woman, you’ll see.”

“Yeah fucking right,” he says with an eye roll. He clears his throat, “Listen, have you uh... visited Dad in hospital lately?”

His question catches me off guard and a sudden sinking feeling grips me, my stomach bottoming out. “No, I haven’t,” I reply, swallowing hard.

“Sierra called me earlier, said she’d been to see him. She says he’s always asking after you, wondering why you won’t visit.”

Guilt slams into me, gutting me from the inside out.

It’s not that I don’t want to see him, because I do. My father has always been one of the most important people in my life, and for so long I thought myself unafraid of anything. But facing the prospect of my father dying, the stroke bringing the inevitable one step closer, I’m terrified.

I’m terrified of losing him and I don’t know what else to do than to bury my head in the sand and pretend it’s not

happening. Avoid it and look the other way, because if I don't think about it, it can't be true, right?

Wrong.

It's happening. I know it is. I just can't face seeing my father lying in a hospital bed, hooked up to all those machines like the last time I saw him, weak and frail, so unlike the man I've grown up idolising.

"Have you been to see him?" I throw the question back at him.

He nods. "The other day."

"How is he?"

He runs a hand over his face. "I'm gonna be honest, man, he's not the same. He's in pain, though as always he uses humour to cover it up. Fuck, Gage, I... I'm scared."

Scared? Never has my little brother ever offered up a glimpse of what he's feeling, he's always covered it so well, I guess he's like our dad in that way.

How could I have been so selfish? I'd been so up in my head about the whole situation, I didn't stop to consider how my siblings were dealing with it. I've buried my head in the sand to protect myself when my brother and my sister need me.

I get up and round the desk, placing a hand on his shoulder, giving it a comforting squeeze. "I'm scared too, brother."

“You have to go and see him, bro. He needs you.”

“I will, I promise.”

Della

“So, down to the right is Rafe’s office and the one opposite is Gage’s,” the girl, Maddy informs me. She’s been giving me the grand tour of the casino while the guys are in a meeting.

Despite the boss being my husband, nerves coil in my belly. It’s my first day on the job and with any new job, it’s intimidating. There’s a lot to learn, especially with how fast it all happened.

“I also wanted to congratulate you on your marriage, you’re a lucky woman.” Her smile is genuine.

“Thank you,” I reply. “How did you come to work here? You seem quite young.” She can’t be any older than me. She’s a few inches shorter, even in her five-inch heels.

“I’m seventeen. A month or so ago I became involved with some bad people and Gage and Rafe helped me out. I was homeless and had nothing to my name and they gave me a job, a place to stay. I owe them everything.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re okay now.” I smile.

“Thanks. Okay, so now we’ve done the tour, the real work begins. I’ve been off for the past two days and since then I have a ton of admin to do. Want to help? Might be done sooner with the two of us.”

“Lead the way.”

∞∞∞∞

After two and a half hours of filing invoices and stock taking, my neck aches and my eyes are sore.

“Maddy, can you send in my wife please,” Gage instructs through the intercom.

She sends me a smirk. “Have fun.”

I make my way to his office and knock on the door before poking my head in. I find him at his drinks cabinet pouring what appears to be a large Scotch, downing it in one before pouring himself another.

“Hi,” I say, widening the door and slipping into the room.

He sinks down into his leather chair and smiles. “How’s your first day going?”

I shrug. “Hmm... So-so.” I motion with my hands. “You see, my boss has been working me *really* hard. I’ve heard on the grapevine that he’s kind of a dick.”

He smirks. “That so?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Come here.” He pats his lap, and I make my way towards him, swaying my hips seductively just to tease him.

When I reach him he pulls me down onto his lap, my back against his chest. He tilts my head to the side and presses his mouth to mine. I lean back against him, my tongue lashing against his as I circle my hips, grinding my ass onto his cock that I can feel hardening in his pants beneath me.

“Don’t start something you can’t finish, angel,” he warns against my lips.

“Who says I don’t intend to?” I reach between us and squeeze his cock in my hand.

He lets out a deep groan that rumbles through his chest. “Seems I’ve turned you into a monster, Mrs. Hudson.”

“Seems you have.” My eyes find his over my shoulder and I smile coyly.

“Bend over the desk and put your hands behind your back, baby.”

A gasp catches in my throat and my pussy clenches, warmth settling low in my belly. I shift off his lap and bend over the cool mahogany of his desk, placing my hands behind my back as instructed. In this position, my ass is directly in front of his face.

Over my shoulder, I see him tug off his tie then uses it to bind my wrists, locking them together before lifting the hem of my dress.

I put the sexiest pair of underwear I owned on this morning, just in case a moment like this arose.

“*Fuck, angel...* You planned this didn’t you? Did you wear these with the intention of seducing me?”

I giggle. “Maybe.”

“Naughty girl.” He leans in, pressing a kiss to my temple before spreading my ass cheeks and plunging his tongue inside my pussy.

I cry out, already so wet for him as he eats me out like I’m his last meal. He licks and sucks, his tongue relentless as it spears in and out of me. He reaches around to play with my clit, rubbing circles over the tight bundle of nerves, driving me into a frenzy.

“Gage,” I moan, my legs struggling to keep from trembling.

“You want more?”

I tug at the binding of my wrists. “Yes, please.”

I hear the distinct sound of a belt being undone, the sound of a zipper cutting through the air and a second later, I feel the blunt head of his cock teasing my pussy, the tip only dipping inside an inch. “This is gonna be hard, angel. Think you can take me?”

I nod. “Mm-hm.”

He kicks my feet apart and settles himself behind me, guiding his cock into my warm channel.

A scream catches in my throat as he wraps a handful of hair tight in his fist as he begins a hard, steady rhythm, pulling out and driving back inside me with long, drawn out thrusts.

The sounds of our bodies slapping together fills the room, and the sound of his grunts has my pussy clenching around his hard length.

I struggle against the bindings at my wrists, but I can't deny how turned on I am as my husband takes total control of my pleasure, owning my body and using it to take what he wants, but with the knowledge that I'm safe with him.

Pulling out of me, he unties my hands and flips me over onto my back, guiding my legs around his waist. He leans over, claiming my mouth while he drives back inside, rutting into me so hard the desk jerks across the floor with a loud screech.

"You're taking me so well, angel," he praises, his lips grazing my ear.

My pussy clenches, squeezing him like a vice. I love his dirty words, they have my core clenching and ready to come in a heartbeat.

"You were made for me, Della."

My hands claw at his back while his hips thrust faster, bringing us both closer to our release. "Gage... I'm so close..."

"Come for me, baby. Now," he whispers into my ear.

My legs tighten around him and I scream as my orgasm takes hold of me.

“That’s my girl, come for me,” he coaxes, drawing out my orgasm that has me shuddering as it wracks through me.

He follows me over, his hot release spilling inside me as a deep groan rumbles up his throat. I cling to him, my chest heaving as his thrusts begin to slow, wringing out the last tremors of our orgasms.

He pulls out of me and fastens his pants back up before taking a handful of tissues from his desk and begins cleaning me up.

I sit up, smoothing my dress back into place.

“Satisfied now, angel?” he asks with a smirk.

“Hmm.” I shrug before breaking into a laugh.

He steps between my legs and takes my mouth with his. “All I want to do is drag you home and have my way with you.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“What? The dozen orgasms I’ve given you these past few nights weren’t enough?”

I take the tie that lies on the desk next to me and drape it around his neck, tugging him closer. “Seems this monster can’t get enough of her husband.”

“What did I tell you, huh? That you wouldn’t be able to get enough of me.” He grins.

I shove him gently in the chest. “You don’t have to be so smug about it.”

“Maybe I am a little smug, but more than anything, I’m happy. Happy that after so long waiting for you, I finally get to share my life with you.”

I smile, leaning forward to press a kiss to his lips. “Me too.”

He takes my hands in his. “Can I ask a favour?”

“Of course.”

He rubs the back of his neck. “I uh... I was thinking of going to see my dad.”

“Really?” As far as I know, he hasn’t made a move to see his dad until now, and despite him loving his dad dearly, the only reason I can come up with as to why he hasn’t visited sooner is because he’s scared of losing him.

He’s already been through the loss of his mother and now he faces losing his dad too.

“I want you to come with me. I’m not sure I can face it alone.”

I press my palm against his cheek and he leans into my touch. “You don’t even have to ask, Gage. I’ll be there.”

Della

That weird sickly, chemical smell hits me the second we step inside the hospital, everywhere I look, a harsh white blinds my eyes. I know visiting hospitals aren't meant to be a pleasant experience, but that sudden sinking feeling, the sense of foreboding never fails to surprise me. It curdles in my belly, making me nauseous.

Gage is stiff at my side, my hand clasped tight in one of his as we make our way to Joseph's room.

Gage is trying his hardest to pretend that everything is fine, but I know he's anything but. The days with his dad are numbered, and I know it weighs heavily on him.

We reach his father's room and stop just outside the door when a young female nurse makes her way towards us.

"Can I help you?" she asks.

"We're here to see Joseph Hudson, he's my husband's father," I reply.

“Oh, how wonderful. Gage, is it? My name’s Lacey, I’m your father’s nurse, he talks about you quite often.”

Gage stiffens beside me. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s doing well, his recovery is making wonderful progress and I think it’s thanks to his high spirits. He’s a real comedian that one. I will warn you though, the stroke he suffered has took a toll on his speech, so be patient with him.”

“Can we see him?” I ask.

“Of course. I was just coming by to check on him actually. You’re welcome to follow in behind me.” She smiles.

I glance over to Gage, but seeing how he makes no move to follow her, I turn back to Lacey. “We’ll be through in a sec, thanks.”

“Alright,” she says, pushing open the door and disappearing inside the room.

“Are you okay?” I ask Gage.

“What if he’s...” He sighs. “What if the stroke has *changed* him?” His eyes find mine and I’m met with the same vulnerability that I saw the night his dad was admitted. The first night all I wanted to do was hold him.

I reach up to take his face in my hands. “Then we’ll deal with it, whatever happens he’s still your dad and *whatever* happens, I’m right here with you,” I reassure him. “The main thing to focus on is that he’s here, and he’s alive, that’s all that matters, right?”

He leans down, resting his forehead against mine. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

“I’ve been told once or twice.”

His lips curve into a smile as he presses a delicate kiss to my mouth, squeezing my hand in his, and with a deep breath, he twists the handle and we step inside.

Joseph sits propped up in his bed with the covers draped over his waist while a low, hoarse cough tears through his throat. It’s rough and guttural and by the look on his face, it’s painful too. Lacey stands at his bedside, rubbing circles over his back soothingly, sitting him forward on the bed.

His cough eases somewhat and his eyes are bright when he sees us enter, and despite his battle to make his muscles work, he gives us a crooked smile.

“Well, aren’t you both... a s-sight for s-sore eyes.”

His posture is slumped, as though his spine can no longer hold him perfectly upright and there’s a slight sag on the left of his face.

“Hi, Dad.” Gage’s smile is stiff as he stops at the bottom of the bed, his eyes never staying on his dad for too long like he can’t bear to see him this way.

“I’ll leave you all to it. Press your button if you need anything at all, okay?” Lacey smiles kindly at Joseph before she leaves the room.

“How are you, Joseph?” I ask, dropping down into the chair at his bedside and cover his hand with mine.

“Still alive and... k-kicking, s-weetheart. It’d take m-more than some... silly s-stroke to knock me down.” Although there’s a slur to some of his words, Joseph pays it no attention, his voice light and hopeful. I can almost see his mind working, but there’s a short circuit in his brain that causes him to stumble over some of his words.

“I see you still have your sense of humour,” I say.

“A-Always. But words seem to c-come to me slower these days... which isn’t s-s-so great for my... comedic t-timing.” He sighs deeply, as though it takes twice as much effort just to speak since his stroke, and though it may frustrate him, as I’m sure it would anyone, he doesn’t let it show.

I laugh, glancing over my shoulder to Gage who wears the ghost of a smile of his own. Even Gage can’t deny that despite the stroke and the cancer that rages through his body, Joseph takes what is happening to him in his stride and doesn’t let it faze him.

“So... h-how’s married life t-treating you... S-Son?”

A soft smile touches Gage’s mouth as his eyes find mine, and coming to stand behind my chair, his hands reach out of my shoulders, squeezing lovingly.

“Good. Really good,” he replies, dropping a kiss to the top of my head. I can hear the pride in Gage’s voice as he speaks and it makes my heart jump. “She knows everything, Dad.”

Joseph’s face brightens. “I-I-I’m... real happy for you... both.” He turns to me, “Are you... happy?”

I reach back and place my hand on top of one of Gage's, threading my fingers through his. "I'm really happy, and you were right that day you walked me down the aisle, we are good for each other."

Joseph smiles at that, giving me a soft nod of approval, squeezing my hand that is still resting on top of his.

"Have they said anything about your recovery?" Gage asks.

"The doctor s-seems... hopeful. Says I c-could be home in a w-week. My balance is not what it w-w-was, though."

"And the cancer?" Gage presses.

Joseph's eyes drop to the bed. "The c-cancer's spread, S-Son... to my liver and also to m-my... lungs. I'm not going to... sugar-coat it, G-Gage but..." Joseph's eyes are sorrowful when they meet his Son's, "It's happening f-faster now."

It takes Gage a long minute to react as he stands there in silence. I twist around to find that his face has fallen, his eyes vacant of anything as he tries to process what Joseph has said.

"I h-haven't told your... sister about it s-spreading. I... I'd like it if y-you didn't either."

"She has a right to know, Dad. Does Rafe know?"

Joseph shakes his head.

Gage clears his throat. "Excuse me."

Without another word, he disappears out of the room, ignoring both me and his father calling his name.

I turn back to Joseph. “I’m sorry. I think he’s struggling to come to terms with everything. He hasn’t left it this long to visit you because he didn’t want to, he’s just... terrified of losing you and he doesn’t know how to deal with it.”

“It was the s-same when his... mother died. He b-became angry, acting out. The f-f-fear made him... a-angry.”

“I’m gonna go find him, I won’t be long.” I give Joseph a tight-lipped smile before leaving the room.

I don’t have to look far before I spot Gage, leaning back against the wall outside his father’s room with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans and his head bent down to the ground.

“Hey.” I keep my tone light as I come to a stop in front of him.

“How does he expect me to keep this from them? I can’t...” He scratches his forehead, and doesn’t meet my eye. “I’m sorry I left, I just...”

He doesn’t have to finish his sentence because I know exactly what he’s trying to say.

“We knew this was coming.”

“I guess I’d got it into my head that there’d be more time. He looks so weak, Del, so fragile and I... I can’t bring myself to even look at him, what selfish bastard does that make me?” Guilt etches itself onto his face.

“It makes you human. I’m not going to lie, things are probably gonna get harder now, and your dad won’t ever be

the same, but he's still your dad and the time he has left... we have to make it the best we can for him."

"I know. I just don't know if I can handle all this, it's too much. What with Dad, us, the company and fucking Bryce... I feel like I'm drowning and I can't make it back up to the surface."

"None of this is supposed to be easy and I know it's hard, but your dad needs you, Gage. I know you feel like you have this responsibility to take care of everything and everyone and keep things running, but you don't. You don't have to shoulder all of this by yourself. You have Rafe, and Sierra, and you have *me*." I step closer, gliding my hands up his chest feeling the solid muscle beneath his shirt, while his hands come to rest on my waist. "If you're gonna drown, drown in me."

He leans forward and takes my mouth, our surroundings fading away into nothing as I lose myself in his kiss. He backs me against the wall, deepening the kiss as his tongue sweeps into my mouth.

After a minute, I pull away. "When things have calmed down around here, and we have your dad back home and settled, you're gonna take me on that honeymoon you promised, wherever it may be and we're going to spend some time away from all of this. Just you and me."

His smile widens. "Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere, as long as it's with you."

Della

With our fingers locked together, Gage's thumb rubs gentle circles over the back of my hand as we sit side by side in the back of the SUV. He's staring off out of the window with a contented look on his face, while I'm sat all but jumping out of my seat, my foot tapping impatiently.

"About ten minutes until we reach the airport, Boss," Alec announces, glancing over his shoulder briefly before turning his attention back to the road.

"When are you going to tell me where we're going?" I ask my husband.

A few days ago, Gage announced he was taking me on our belated honeymoon, and since then, he's refused to tell me where we're going and the suspense is killing me. All he's told me, is that it's somewhere hot and to pack bikinis that are easy to tear me out of, which is exactly what I did with Reese and Sierra on our shopping trip yesterday.

I'm almost certain Gage is loving seeing me slowly lose my mind. My relentless pestering only amuses him which only irritates me more. I've never been great with surprises.

Gage meets my eye and smirks. "You'll see."

Alec is accompanying us on our trip while Theo and the others to remain at the house and take care of things back home.

Joseph was discharged from hospital five days ago under the care of a full-time nurse, one of the conditions of his release that he wasn't best pleased about. We've also arranged for a physiotherapist to visit him three times a week to build his strength back up.

Despite the medication they've prescribed him and the fact there's little he can do for himself without help, his spirits remain high and his humour still on point.

He's also been approached by the palliative care unit as they try to ready him for what will ultimately be the end, and while Joseph is relatively relaxed by the whole thing, his children are anything but. They are each struggling in their own way, though some hide it better than the others.

I feel a twinge of guilt to be going away only days after Joseph came home from hospital, but he insisted we go and not to worry about him.

"Tell me where we're going."

"Nope."

"Please?"

“No.”

“Are you sure there isn’t a way I could maybe... *persuade* you into telling me?” My hand reaches across his lap and brushes over the outline of his cock.

He groans. “You can try your best to persuade me, but there’s no guarantee it’s going to work.”

I sit back, crossing my arms over my chest and pout dramatically, which only makes him laugh.

“The surprise will be worth it, I promise.”

Once we arrive at the airport, Alec follows closely behind us, helping us with our bags as we head towards the check-in desk where I find we’re travelling first class, something that I’ve never done before.

Once the assistant has checked our passports, and taken care of our luggage, she hands Gage our boarding passes. “Your flight leaves in a little under an hour and a half, you’re headed for gate number thirty-eight. Enjoy your trip.”

We spend the next hour or so browsing through duty-free and getting a bite to eat before making our way to the correct departure gate where we’re guided by another assistant to the first-class lounge.

“Enjoy your trip to Antigua, Mr. and Mrs. Hudson,” she says with a smile.

My eyes snap up to Gage. “We’re going to the Caribbean?”

He beams. “Happy?”

“I’m so happy!” I throw my arms around him and kiss him in the middle of the airport, not caring who’s watching as his arms band around me, lifting me a inch or two off the ground.

Once my feet are firmly back on the floor, Gage presses one more delicate kiss to my lips. “These next few days, I want to make them count. I’ve waited too damn long to have you, angel. Now that I’ve got you, I’m never letting go.”



It’s the middle of the afternoon when we arrive in Antigua, and after a four hour flight and the wall of humidity that hit me the second I was off the plane, I am in desperate need of a shower. A sheen of sweat clings to my skin and my hair is slowly but surely sticking to my scalp.

It’s a short drive from the airport to where we’re staying, a huge, picturesque villa overlooking the crystal blue ocean. Alec has his own apartment a stone’s throw away from us, Gage wanted him close, but not so close our privacy was compromised. Having him just a phone call away helps to settle the sense of foreboding that has burrowed itself inside me, that feeling that despite it being unlikely that Bryce would come after us here, things with him are far from over.

I follow Gage into the master bedroom where a huge four-poster bed stands in the middle. Opposite, is a wide sliding

glass door that leads out onto the balcony that overlooks the ocean. He drops our bags down at the foot of the bed as I pull open the sliding door where a cool breeze and the smell of the ocean drifts through, ruffling my hair.

“Look at that view!” I exclaim, taking in the mountains on the horizon, how the sun shimmers like tiny diamonds on the surface of the sea. “I can’t wait to go to the beach.”

“And we will,” Gage says, sidling in behind me, his hands sliding over my hips and around to my belly. “But first,” his lips graze my ear as his fingers slip under the waistband of my denim shorts, “I want to fuck my wife in every room in this place.”

I spin around to face him, struggling to hide my grin. “Do you promise?”

“Swear on my life.” He crosses his finger over his heart. “By tonight, there’s not going to be a square inch of your body that hasn’t been touched or kissed, and not a flat surface in this villa I haven’t fucked you on.”

I suck in a breath, his words sending liquid heat down between my legs. My cheeks burn. “That sounds... incredible, but I need a shower first, I feel gross.”

“We’ll start there then.” He pulls me in, his hands tight at my waist as he leans down, placing his lips over mine. “Now, get that beautiful ass in that bathroom, Wife. I want you naked by the time I come in after you.”

“Yes, Husband,” I reply with a smirk, watching his eyes flare in want and need.

Knowing his eyes are still on me, I kick off my shoes and unfasten my shorts leaving them a pile on the floor as I make my way to the bathroom. Tugging my shirt over my head, I toss that onto the ground too, creating a trail of discarded clothes leading to the bathroom door. I then hook my fingers into my panties and shimmy them down my legs, a smirk touching my lips as I feel the heat of his gaze on my naked skin. Once they’re off, I then unhook my bra, leaving it hanging from the door handle as I disappear inside the bathroom.

It’s not long before Gage is on me, his hands roaming over my body from behind as his lips attack my neck, and I can’t help but melt into his touch.

I spin around in his arms and begin tearing at his clothes, desperate to rid them from his body while his mouth finds mine. His tongue darts between my lips to tangle with mine as I walk him backwards towards the counter.

I wrestle off his belt, pushing his pants down his legs as I guide them to the ground so that I’m on my knees in front of him.

“Della,” he says in a warning tone, fire dancing in his eyes as he stares down at me where I kneel at his feet.

His cock is hard beneath his underwear and my mouth waters. I tug off his boxers, his cock springing free as I free them from his legs so that he’s as naked as I am. I allow my

eyes to trail over him, and from this low angle, he's like a God from Greek mythology, all sharp, defined lines carved like stone.

My eyes land on his hard length that is almost level with my face and I swallow hard. I've never done this before, and with the little sexual experience I had before I met Gage, what if I disappoint him or do it wrong?

"You don't have to do this, angel," he says, reaching down to touch my face delicately, as though sensing my hesitancy.

"You've tasted me plenty of times, I'd say it's my turn, wouldn't you?" I don't wait for him to respond and instead, I wrap my palm around the base of his shaft and seal my lips around the head.

My heart pounds in my chest, my limbs shaking with nerves but I do my best to force them down as I glide my lips back and forth over his cock, using the flat of my tongue to lick the underside of his shaft that has him shivering from my touch.

"Fuck, Del..." he moans above me and I smile around his cock, my pussy throbbing with the thought of bringing him pleasure.

One hand fists my hair while the other grips the edge of the counter. His hand at the back of my head, guides me over his cock, not hard enough to hurt me, but enough to show me how he likes it. I hollow my cheeks and suck harder, making him hiss, so I take him as deep as I can take him, the tip hitting my throat and I fight like hell against the urge to gag.

“Finger yourself, baby. Ride your fingers just like you’ll be riding me later.”

My pussy clenches as I reach between my legs, slipping two fingers inside to find myself dripping with need. I rise and fall on my thighs, lifting myself up and dropping back down, fucking myself on my fingers while I continue to suck my husband’s cock.

I lift my eyes to find him watching me with rapt attention, his eyes wide, his lips parted on a pant as he watches me get myself off while getting *him* off.

Gage’s breathing becomes jagged and uneven as he nears his climax. “Jesus Christ, Del.”

I move my head faster, swirling my tongue around the head and he groans.

“I’m going to come, Della. Come with me, baby, make yourself come. Keep fucking those fingers, angel.”

His dirty words of encouragement are enough to send me over the edge, my body locking up as pleasure spreads through me, my thighs shaking as my orgasm floods every part of me.

I moan around his cock as I keep sucking, feeling him thicken inside my mouth, and it’s only a few seconds later that my release triggers his. A low groan rumbles through him as his climax takes hold, warm jets of salty liquid hits the back of my throat that I swallow down.

His eyes close and his face tips up towards the ceiling, his hands tighten around my hair as his orgasm wracks through

him. His stomach muscles ripple as I continue sucking, making sure I take every last drop he has to give me.

As he starts to come down from his high, he uses his grip on my hair to pull me to my feet where his lips attack mine, not caring about tasting himself on my lips.

“You’re driving me insane, angel,” he moans, his lips brushing over mine. “I will never get enough of this. Of *us*.”

“Neither will I. You’re what I want, Gage, more than anything.”

“You don’t know how happy it makes me to hear you say that,” he says with a smile. “Now, I’m sorry to say I’m going to ruin this incredibly romantic moment with you, because the things I want to do to you...” he trails off, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Show me.”

He bends to lift me, my legs wrapping around his waist instinctively as he walks me towards the shower. “With pleasure.”

Gage

“I’m surprised I’m getting a phone call from you between all that honeymoon bliss and your radio silence these past couple of days,” Sierra says on the other end of the phone as I close the bedroom door quietly, hoping not to disturb Della who’s still sleeping.

“I already told you, the power was out, only got fixed this morning.”

We found out not long after we arrived that the Caribbean had suffered a hurricane that had swept through just days before we got here, leaving a large proportion of it without power. Luckily, Antigua and a couple other islands were largely unaffected, save for the cell signal being down up until this morning.

“I’m just calling to check in. Are you all okay?” I ask.

“I’m fine, Rafe is never here, probably dick deep in pussy or at some bar as per usual.”

Rafe has always kept his cards close to his chest, he's never been one to open up about anything which makes it extremely difficult to figure out if he's alright.

“And Dad?”

“He's okay. He seems better now he's home but...”

“But what?”

There's a pause. “What if the stroke has... brought everything forward? What if he doesn't have as much time left as we thought?” I don't miss the tremor in her voice as she speaks and a pang of guilt shoots through me. After my dad swore me to secrecy, it's been eating at me ever since. I can't look my brother or sister in the eye without it crippling me, but who am I to go against his wishes?

He's chosen not to tell them, because he doesn't want them to worry even more, but I can't help thinking they should know the truth.

I have a sudden urge to tell her, and I'm just about to open my mouth when I think better of it. “It's just a set back, Si. Dad's not going anywhere, not yet.”

“But what about that cough? It sounds like he's about to hack up a lung. It's awful. Do you think he caught something in hospital, like a bug?”

I rub my forehead. “I don't know, Si. Please don't worry yourself, okay?”

She sighs. “Yeah, okay. Well, I've gotta go, I'm meeting Reece for lunch.”

“Since when did you two become bff’s?”

“Since *you* whisked our girl away on a last minute honeymoon, otherwise she’d be here. Tell your wife I said hi, and that I miss her, would you?”

“Will do. Take Theo with you, after what happened with Della, I’m not taking any chances.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I can almost picture the eye roll as she speaks.

“Si, I’m serious.”

“Yeah, I got that. Love you, Brother.”

“Love you, too.”

After she hangs up the phone, I dial Rafe’s number, but I’m not surprised when it sends me straight to voicemail.

I shove my phone into the pocket of my jeans and head back into the bedroom where I find Della up and out of bed, digging through the draw in search of clothes.

My eyes trail a path over her body as she faces away from me. Wearing only a tiny pair of panties, the golden morning sun hits her smooth creamy skin, making her glow.

For the past two days we’ve barely left this room, we’ve been like a pair of horny teenagers who just discovered the joys of sex. We can barely keep our hands off each other, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. The sheets are a crumpled pile in the middle of the mattress and the room reeks of sex, but I don’t give a fuck. This is the first time I’ve had my wife to

myself since we got married and you can be damn sure I'm going to make the most of it.

I've only ever done drugs a few times in my life, something I'm not particularly proud of but what kid who went to college never smoked a little pot or did a line of coke at a frat party? I never did drugs enough to get addicted, just enough to get the occasional high, so I have nothing to compare this to, but this feeling I have with Della, that's what I imagine addiction feels like. This burning need for her that cripples me, rocks me to my core, the craving that is only satisfied when I get my fix of her. I could get high from her moans of pleasure alone, the look of ecstasy on her face as her orgasms take a hold, she's so fucking beautiful, it's almost painful.

I live and breathe her and *only* her.

My cock stiffens and I watch as Della shimmies out of her underwear, leaving her totally naked before changing into a sunflower yellow strappy bikini that is tied into knots at each of her hips. She then ties the straps of her bikini top around her neck and around her back.

She must catch me watching out of the corner of her eye because she glances over her shoulder and smirks. "How long have you been stood there?"

"Long enough."

Her eyes glance down to my growing cock that strains against my jeans. "Apparently so."

I move forward and I'm on her in seconds, devouring her lips with mine as my fingers tease the knots at her hips. "I want to rip off this bikini with my teeth, angel. You're really testing my restraint here."

The little tease giggles. "Later. You promised we'd go to the beach this morning and I'm holding you to that. He..." she points down to my cock, "he can wait."

"Yes, dear," I mock, which only makes her laugh harder as she slaps my chest playfully. I love it. I love this new-found back and forth banter between us. I take her chin between my fingers, tipping her face up to look at me. "I love it when you laugh."

"I love it when you *make* me laugh," she replies, rising up onto her toes to peck a kiss to my lips. "Come on, let's go to the beach!" She takes my hand and leads me out of the villa.

In truth, she never has to lead me anywhere. I'd follow her to the burning fires in Hell if that's where she was heading.

I'd follow her no matter what.

○○○○○

I recline back into the sun lounger on the golden sandy beach our villa looks out over. I'm dressed in a loose pair of shorts, my dark *Ray Bans* shielding my eyes from the blinding sun as I watch Della wade through the shimmering ocean, that little

yellow bikini that leaves nothing to the imagination becoming a temptation almost too much to bear.

Alec sits on the lounge to the right of me, his eyes scanning the beach and the surrounding areas for any sign of a threat, not that Bryce would be stupid enough to try anything in public, let alone hop on a plane and follow us all the way out here.

“Earth to Gage Hudson,” my attention is snapped up to my wife who stands above me, “where did you go just then?”

I shake my head, sitting up straight. “Nowhere. Come here.” I reach for her, pulling her wet body down onto mine, my lips seeking hers in an instant.

She settles herself between my legs, her hair dripping droplets of water onto my chest as she presses against me, her back to my front.

My fingers draw lazy circles over her stomach. “What were you doing at the lake that day? I never thought to ask before.”

It has never occurred to ask why she was there in the first place, why she decided to head down to a frozen lake at the exact moment I almost drowned.

She cranes her neck to meet my eye. “I was playing in the snow. The lake was special to me and my mom and I felt closer to her there. That day... my dad had been grilling me about something and I ran away. I considered living there forever, building a hut in the woods so that I didn’t have to go

home again, figured I could take better care of myself out there on my own. I was building a snowman when I heard you, splashing and shouting for help.”

The memory of the ice cold water seeping into my skin and deep into my bones sends shivers through my body.

“I was so scared, Gage.”

I nod slowly, knowing exactly how she felt. “I thought for sure I was going to die that day, I had nightmares about it for months, my dad even suggested counselling.”

“I spent every day since thinking you were dead, the guilt of not being able to save you eating away at me day after day. How could my dad lie about something like that?” I was eight years old for crying out loud.

“He wanted my family as far from yours as possible. You saving me that day meant that we were indebted to you. Your father didn’t want that hanging over his head, so he told us to stay away and forget the whole thing, pretend it never happened.”

Her body stiffens. “He had no right to lie to me.”

“There was no way on this earth he’d ever keep me from you. You and I... we were inevitable.”

“I think I was always meant to find you.”

“You want to know something? I think so, too.”

She leans up, brushing her lips over mine just as a warm breeze sends a plume of sand over us both.

“Oh, my. I’m awfully sorry!” the lady on the sun lounge next to ours exclaims, folding up her beach towel she had just shaken to loosen the sand.

“Don’t worry about it. No harm done,” I say, giving her a reassuring smile.

She can’t be any older than fifty or so, her brown hair turning a silvery shade of grey, soft wrinkles cover her face as she smiles, the lines a painting of a life well lived.

“You two make a beautiful couple. Are you married?” she asks, and I can’t help notice her accent. She’s British. She gasps sharply, “Just ignore me, I shouldn’t be prying.”

“We’re actually on our honeymoon,” Della replies, sitting up and extending out her hand. “I’m Della and this is my husband, Gage.”

My heart leaps at her calling me her *husband*. I love it.

The lady takes Della’s hand before shaking mine. “That’s wonderful! I’m Annette. Congratulations on your marriage. May it be a long union full of love and laughter.”

“I’m sure it will be,” I say.

“Are you here on vacation?” Della asks her.

“Yes. I recently lost my husband of twenty-eight years and I needed a break.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you, Della. Me and my husband actually came here on our honeymoon so this place is very close to my

heart.” Annette takes a second to compose herself, steadying the tremble in her chin. “Well, I’ll leave you both to it. I hope you enjoy the rest of your holiday. Oh! I mean *vacation*, as you call it,” she says with a laugh.

“Thank you, and to you,” Della says as Annette packs away her things and walks away.

“I couldn’t imagine losing you, Gage.” Della’s eyes are full of tears. One escapes, sliding down her cheek and I reach out to swipe it away.

“We have our whole lives ahead of us, so don’t give it second thought, angel. I’m not going anywhere and neither are you. I can’t wait to experience this life with you, to build a family with you.”

“We haven’t talked about that.” She inhales sharply, like the idea of children terrify her.

“Do you want kids?” I ask.

“I... I hadn’t really thought about it. I never used to think so but now, with you...” Her eyes lift to mine. “Yes, I want children someday, I want to give you a baby and experience being a parent, just not yet. I mean, if it happens by accident in the near future, I guess we’ll deal with it, but I am *nowhere* near ready for that yet.”

“I can’t lie, the thought of your belly round and full with my child makes me hard as a fucking rock,” I admit.

“Is that your way of telling me a little breeding kink turns you on?”

“Only since I married you.” I lean in to whisper in her ear, “I can’t wait to fuck a baby into you, Mrs. Hudson.”

“Oh my God!” She shrieks, making me laugh. She turns her face away to hide the blush that creeps up into her cheeks, but I turn her back to face me.

“Admit it, you love it really,” I tease, and she laughs. “Seriously though, the thought of you as the mother of my children makes me so fucking happy, and so excited to start our family.”

She slips her hand into mine and squeezes. “You’ll make a great father someday.”

I’ve always wanted to be a dad, and here with Della, that dream is one step closer to becoming true.

I capture her mouth with mine. “Yes, someday.”

Della

We're leaving tomorrow.

It's hard to believe our trip to Antigua is almost over.

Yesterday, Gage hired a guy to take us snorkelling where we swam with the turtles. It took me a while to convince Gage to join me considering his aversion to water, but once he was in the water and found there was no way he could drown, he soon got the hang of it, and with my hand in his, I had one of the best moments of my life. One I got to share with my husband.

I shift in my seat where I sit on the balcony attached to our bedroom and wince. Every muscle in my legs and back ache. We were up and out at the crack of dawn this morning and spent hours hiking in the mountains, stopping momentarily to take in the breathtaking view below us.

I look out over the ocean, watching as the sun begins to set on the horizon, the sky turning a beautiful shade of orange.

I let my hand drift over my belly, imagining it round and swollen with my baby, and an ache unlike anything I've ever felt forms in my chest.

After our conversation at the beach the other day, the more I'm warming to the idea of having children. I hadn't ruled it out completely, I'd just never allowed myself to go there, after all I'm only twenty-two, I have plenty of time for that. But meeting Gage has made me want to have a baby, maybe even sooner than I'd originally thought. I want to share that experience with him and grow our family.

My phone pings, Reese's name lighting up my screen.

Reese: So excited to see you when you get back! How is Antigua you lucky bitch? Xx

Me: I can't wait to see you too! It's beautiful here, I kinda don't want to leave. *sad emoji*

Her reply comes back a second later.

Reese: Do not say shit like that to me. You are coming home, period! Don't make me come out there and drag you back here.

Me: I have a feeling you would too.

***Reese: Damn right. I love you too much to lose you, girl.
Xx***

Me: I love you too much to leave you. Xxx

"Fuck!" Gage exclaims in the other room, the sharpness of his voice making me jump.

I pocket my phone and go in search of Gage.

He paces the room back and forth while speaking on his phone. “Another? Fuck... He’s not just picking random girls off the street anymore, he’s hand picking ones he knows he can get the highest price for...”

What?

Who is he talking about?

“We need to find a way to stop him, Der,” Gage continues. There’s a pause on this end as he listens to whatever Derek is saying. “Della? Yeah, she’s fine. We’re heading back tomorrow so we can discuss this further then.” Gage spots me out of the corner of his eye lurking by the door. “Der, I have to go. I’ll see you in a couple of days.” He hangs up, pocketing his phone and forcing a smile.

“What was all that about?” I ask.

He hesitates a moment before speaking, something I’ve never seen him do before. “Oh, nothing. It’s just Derek, filling me in on business.”

“That’s not the sort of business I’ve ever heard you talk about.” I give him the opportunity to tell me the truth but he remains silent, making no move to speak. “Gage, please don’t lie to me. I know what I heard, and that was not business.”

“Della, this doesn’t concern you, okay?”

“Picking girls he can sell for the highest price?” I paraphrase. “Who? Bryce?”

His face falters. “Della-”

“I’m not a fool, Gage. Whatever is going on, I have a right to know, because that guy that attacked me back at the house? He said something similar to me. He said that Bryce has plans for me. He said that I’m gonna be the whore of every man willing to pay. What was he talking about? I know you know, so just tell me the truth. What is going on?”

Gage’s shoulders deflate. “I didn’t tell you, because I thought keeping you in the dark was for the best.”

“Keep me in the dark about what?” I press.

He scrubs a hand over his face before taking a seat on the sofa, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “I found out not so long ago that Bryce is involved in a sex trafficking ring. Kidnapping girls, selling them for sex or selling them into the porn industry, torture porn, to be specific.”

I slap a hand over my mouth to stifle the cry that lodges itself in my throat.

What the fuck?

“Derek obtained footage of girls, some as young as fourteen in a number of videos where they’re tortured, gang raped, burned and beaten to within an inch of their lives.”

My knees buckle and I collapse into the chair opposite Gage, his words swimming around my mind as I try to make sense of them.

Trafficking... Kidnap... Rape...

I feel sick.

My stomach coils but I manage to keep back the wave of nausea that sweeps over me.

“How many girls?” I ask, my voice thick.

“I don’t know. A lot, I expect. The girl that I hired a while back, Maddy... She was there the night you and Reese came to my club. The guy she was with was quite rough with her and we intervened. Turns out she was being trafficked. We managed to get her out.”

“Oh my God.” My voice cracks as my vision blurs with tears. “Was Bryce behind that?”

“We think so. He seems like an important player in the whole operation, at least on this side of the US. Derek’s been watching him for a while now, and now we know how he got rich so quickly. He’s into some pretty dark shit.”

“And me? What was Bryce going to do with me?” Was the whole marriage to Bryce just a front?

“I think the marriage part was real. For some reason, Bryce wanted a hold over you and Randall, and we think your father was being blackmailed into allowing Bryce to marry you. We don’t know why he sought marriage specifically, maybe for an inheritance or something, but I expect that somewhere along the line, Bryce would have... *shared* you.”

The insinuation is loud and clear and the thought makes me shiver. “Do you think my dad knew what he was into?”

My dad was being blackmailed? Over what? Was he so caught up in Bryce's web that he'd do anything to get himself out, including allowing me to be trafficked?

"I honestly don't know, angel," Gage replies.

Those poor girls. They must be terrified. And children? Anger boils up inside me. How sick can people be to get off on abusing children?

My head is spinning, a million questions circle my mind, but one question stands out above all the others. I find Gage's eyes. "Why would you keep this from me?"

He bows his head, sighing deeply. "I thought I was protecting you."

"By lying to me. Gage, I'm your wife, surely that counts for something."

"Of course it does, you know how much you mean to me."

"Those girls? That could have been me. I could have been one of them and you didn't think I had a right to know what Bryce was up to?"

I rise to my feet, as does Gage, starting towards me.

"Del-" Gage reaches for me but I shrug out of his grip.

"Don't. I can't deal with this right now. I'm going for a walk to think. *Alone.*"

His jaw clenches. "Only if Alec accompanies you."

"Fine," I force out, slipping on my shoes before leaving the room.

I hear Gage's voice talking to Alec on the phone, instructing him to follow me and not let me out of his sight.

I slam the door as I descent the steps before joining the sidewalk. The sun burns hot on my skin, the soft breeze fanning my hair.

There's a sound of heavy footsteps, and I catch sight of Alec over my shoulder as he falls into step a couple of metres behind me.

I glance back at the villa where I notice the distinct outline of Gage's body standing at the window, watching me.

I turn away and keep on walking.

Gage

The front door finally opens an agonising three hours after my wife slammed it shut. I sigh in relief after going out of my mind the second she walked out of here, roaming through unfamiliar streets as it turned dark. I knew she was safe, what with Alec hot on her heels, but no matter where she is when she's not by my side, I'm a wreck.

She steps into the living room, toeing off her shoes and without a single word, collapses onto the sofa opposite me. She stares down at her feet with an unreadable expression, and even in the silence, I can feel the anguish radiating off of her in waves.

“Della?” I say quietly, taking slow steps towards her before kneeling at her feet, taking her hands in mine. I'm thankful when she doesn't pull away from my touch. “Are you alright?”

She gives me a barely-there nod.

I place my lips against the backs of her hands. “I know you’re angry with me for not telling you the truth and I’m sorry. I didn’t tell you because it wouldn’t have changed anything, and I didn’t want to upset you unnecessarily. Please talk to me, angel.”

After a long moment, her eyes lift to mine. “I just needed to think, to make sense of it all. I am angry with you, but I get it. I get why you kept it from me. You were trying to save me from feeling like this.” She chews on the inside of her lip. “I can’t stop thinking about it. About Bryce and what he’s doing. Those girls...” her voice cracks, and I pull her into me, wrapping her up in my arms so fucking tight.

“I’m so fucking sorry, angel. It makes me sick to my stomach and I want to rip Tanner’s god damn head off, but as selfish and as bad as it sounds, I’m glad it’s not you.”

“It could’ve been. That’s what scares me the most.”

“I know. We’ll get him, baby, even if I have to kill him myself, his day will come, I swear.”

“Can you stop him? Save those girls? Surely there’s organisations like the FBI or something that deal with this sort of thing?” she asks.

“I have to be honest, baby, I’m out of my depth here. I’m no gangster or mob boss, I don’t know the ins and outs of all this, but yes, there are people we can talk to. Derek’s told me he is working closely with an old contact of Alec’s back from his Army days who now works for the FBI. They’re looking into it. Please don’t let this eat away at you, angel. Worrying

about it won't do them *or* you any good." I press my lips to her temple and her body relaxes into mine, her arms locking around my back, her warmth seeping through my clothes and into my skin.

"I wish we could stay here forever, just the two of us," she says.

"That would be nice, wouldn't it? I could have you all to myself for the rest of eternity."

Her lips find my neck, kissing up the side of my throat and I tip my head back to give her better access. Her fingers thread through the thick locks of hair as her lips glide along the line of my jaw, nipping at my chin gently with her teeth.

Her lips finally find my mouth, and wasting no time, her tongue dips between my lips to tangle with mine. I cup the back of her head, holding her to me as the kiss deepens.

Fuck, she tastes so good.

"I need you," she whispers against my mouth.

"I'm all yours, angel. Do with me what you will."

She pulls back to look into my eyes. "Really?"

"Yes. This is the last night of our honeymoon before we go home, let's make it count, shall we?"

"Take me to the bedroom," she commands.

I smirk. "I thought you'd never ask."

We touch down back in the US the next afternoon, welcomed by a thick layer of dark clouds and a heavy downpour of rain, a stark contrast of wall to wall sunshine we had for the better part of a week.

Theo is waiting for us in the arrivals lounge, ready to help carry our luggage to the car.

“Boss,” he greets with a nod, before turning to Della, “Mrs. Hudson.”

“Hey, Theo,” she replies with a smile.

“You go on ahead, angel. I won’t be a minute,” I say, pressing a quick kiss to her forehead before she hurries to catch up to Alec. I turn to Theo who walks beside me. “What’s been happening?”

“We found Ryan.”

I stop dead, my fists clenching at my sides. Ever since the incident at the house, I’ve had my guys scouring the entire city and the surrounding areas for any sign of him. He betrayed my trust and put my family in danger by helping Bryce access the house. I want him gone.

“Where is he?” I ask.

“Dead. Derek got us an address and Zeke and I went over there two days ago, found him on the floor surrounded by pills and booze. Seems he overdosed. We searched through his phone and found a video sent anonymously to him the day

before we found him, a video of his girlfriend being raped and tortured before being strangled to death.”

“Jesus Christ...”

“My guess is, Bryce used his girlfriend to get Ryan to do what he wanted then killed her regardless. He obviously couldn’t deal with what happened so he...”

“Killed himself,” I finish.

Theo nods regretfully.

Somehow all of my anger and hatred towards Ryan fades away and a deep sadness falls over me.

And understanding of why he did what he did.

It wasn’t as selfish as taking Bryce up on an offer for money like Damien. No, Ryan was trying to save the woman he loved.

By taking his girlfriend, Bryce had Ryan exactly where he wanted him, knowing full-well he didn’t have a choice. Bryce took advantage of a man’s weakness and used it for his own gain, and just like the sly bastard he is, and even after Ryan did what he was told to do, Bryce killed her anyway.

Why didn’t he come to me and tell me what was going on? I could have done something to help him.

I can’t blame Ryan for doing what he did, and as much as I detest betrayal, if it was Della and I found myself in a similar position to him, I’d do the exact same thing.

Della

Gage has already left for work by the time I wake up the next morning from a restless sleep. No matter how much I tried to quieten my mind, sleep just refused to come to me because I need answers.

Ever since I found out the truth about Bryce and his fucked up operation, more and more questions have been surfacing, but the one I want answering the most, is if my dad had any part of it.

Does he know about Bryce and what he's doing? And if so, how could he knowingly hand me over to a man like that so easily?

There's a part of me that would rather not know, and the thought that my father was both a knowing and willing participant in this kills me, and my stomach twists at the prospect. Whatever the answers are, I need them, which is why I need to talk to my dad. I know Gage would kill me if he ever

found out where I was going, but what he doesn't know won't hurt him, right?

Once I'm dressed, I head downstairs, swiping a set of car keys from the safe and making my way through the hallway. I reach the door that leads to the garage, just as Theo appears around the corner.

"Mrs. Hudson? Where are you going?" he asks, his brows furrowed as he awaits my response.

I force my most convincing smile. "Oh, I'm just going for a drive, it's getting a little stuffy in here."

He gives me a look that tells me he sees right through my lie. "Then I'll come with you."

"That's really not necessary," I insist.

"Ma'am, I'm under orders not allow you out of the house without a bodyguard for your safety. Where you go, I follow."

Shit.

"I don't need a babysitter, Theo."

"Not saying you do, but Gage would have my balls if anything happened to you on my watch, and I'd like to have kids someday."

Deep down, I know I'm losing this battle. I contemplate making a run for it, but my guess is, he'd catch me before I even make it five feet. "Fine. But if you must know, I'm going to see my dad."

"Is that a good idea?"

“No, but I need answers, and he’s the only one who has them. Shall we?” I turn the door handle and head inside, bypassing a line of different sized vehicles, all shiny and new and worth more money than sense until I reach the storm grey *Audi* tucked away at the back of the garage.

Reluctantly, after a minor disagreement over who drives, Theo resigns to ride shotgun with me taking the wheel.

It doesn’t take long before we pull up to my childhood home, a place I once considered my safe space, only now, as I stare up at the building, I’m plagued with the memories of events that transpired here the last time I set foot in it.

I suddenly feel unsettled here, like I don’t belong, like I’m an outsider, and I hate it. My stomach sinks with the thought of seeing my dad again after the last time.

His car is parked out front, so I know he’s home.

“I still don’t like this, Mrs. Hudson,” Theo says, pulling the handgun from the holster strapped to his side, checking that the clip is full before placing it back under his jacket.

“Neither do I, but I have to do this.” I switch off the engine and step out of the car, making my way up the steps to the front door.

I ring the doorbell that echoes through the house, it doesn’t feel right just walking straight in. The door swings open and I’m met with my dad. He does a double take, not quite believing that I’m standing on his front doorstep.

“Adelia?” My dad’s face lights up in surprise. “Darling, what are you doing here?”

“It’s not a social visit, and before you ask, yes, I’m still a Hudson, and no, I have no plans to change that, so don’t get too excited.”

“Please, come in.” He steps aside to allow Theo and I through before leading me into the living room.

I turn to Theo. “Will you wait outside for me? I’ll call for you if I need you.”

His jaw clenches, his eyes flicking briefly to my father, not liking the fact I’ll be out of his sight, but after a moment, he nods. “I’ll be right outside the door.” Theo makes it known he’s carrying as he flashes my father the gun concealed under his jacket before exiting the room.

Once we’re alone, my father pours himself a drink from the cabinet underneath the window, offering one to me, but I decline. He takes a seat, taking a sip of his drink. “You’re looking well, Adelia. Seems marriage has worked wonders for you.” I almost take the compliment, but I can hear the condescending undertones in his voice as clear as day.

I fold my arms across my chest, raising my chin. “Gage is good to me. He makes me happy.”

My dad scoffs, shaking his head. “Does your husband know you’re here?”

“No, and I’m not here to talk about my husband. I’m here for the truth.”

He frowns. “The truth?”

“I want you to answer me honestly, and if you ever loved me at all, you’ll give me the truth. You owe me that.” He says nothing as he waits for me to continue. My heart hammers in my chest as I open my mouth to speak. “When you agreed to hand me over in marriage to Bryce, did you know that he’s one of the key members of a sex trafficking ring here in the US?”

My father’s face falters slightly, his eyes widening, but he remains silent. He downs the entire contents of his glass and stands up. “That’s ridiculous,” he dismisses.

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s nonsense. Where did you hear such a thing?” He pours himself another drink.

“It’s *not* nonsense. Gage has contacts,” I say and he scoffs again at the mention of Gage. “He thinks that after Bryce had his fill of me he would have sold me to the highest bidder. Why he suggested marriage, I have no idea. But deep down you know there’s truth to it. You must have known what kind of man he was. So, I’ll ask again, did you know?”

He seems offended that I’d even suggest it. “You’re my daughter, Adelia. Do you really think I would wish such a thing like that for you?” He sighs deeply, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Believe it or not, Addy, I love you, and I’d never wish to see you hurt.”

Addy.

A rock the size of a boulder lodges itself in my throat at that name, a nickname I haven't heard him call me since I was a little girl, back before my mom left.

Back when we were happy.

“I've always done what I thought was best to keep you safe, to *protect* you. And no, I had no idea what Bryce was involved in, and I'm sorry he was ever a part of our lives. I didn't think things would escalate as they have.”

I stare into my father's eyes, and it would be so easy to believe him, to take what he's saying at face value, but there's more to this than he's letting on, I can feel it in my gut.

“Why did you agree to hand me over to him in the first place? Why was I involved in the business deal between you?” I ask.

His jaw tightens. “It was one of the conditions Bryce set out. It was non-negotiable.”

“But why?”

“Adelia,” he warns, releasing an irritated sigh. “Just leave it.”

“No, I won't. Why did he want me so badly? Why were you so willing to give me to him? There has to be a reason.” Something that Gage said pops into my mind. “Was Bryce blackmailing you? Did he know something he could use against you?”

Something passes across my father's face as he chooses not to speak, telling me I'm on the right track.

“I’m right aren’t I?” As I push harder for an answer, I can see my dad growing more and more agitated and at some point, he’s going to snap. “What did he have on you? What could be so bad you were willing to hand me over to a complete stranger for a business deal?”

“Adelia! Enough!” my dad booms, and I jump. He rises to his feet, his deep, gruff voice bouncing off the walls.

A second later, Theo bursts into the room, his gun tight in his hand. “Mrs. Hudson, is everything alright?”

“Everything’s fine, Theo. Thank you.” I give him a reassuring smile and after a moment, he retreats back from the room.

“Tell me what he has on you, Dad,” I say, my voice softer this time and at my words, his face crumples.

His crashes back down on the chair, avoiding direct eye contact as he fidgets with his hands. “I can’t.”

“Why? Whatever it is, it can’t be that bad. Maybe I can help?”

He shakes his head. “You’ll hate me.”

“Dad, you’re scaring me.” My heart is in my throat as I stare down at him, his leg bouncing restlessly while he chews on his lower lip.

“Your mother didn’t abandon you.”

“What? Where did she go?” I ask.

What the hell is he talking about? Of course she abandoned me, I got home one day to find her gone, and all of her belongings along with her. It was like she'd been erased.

Wait...

My dad's eyes finally lift to meet mine, and he doesn't have to speak another word as he watches everything slip into place in my mind. How I'd never fully believed she'd leave me. How there wasn't a single trace of her left, not one shoe or piece of jewellery left behind. Not one single thing. How so easily my dad dismissed any mention of her.

"Where is she, Dad?" I ask, trying my best to keep my voice steady as tears sting the backs of my eyes, but the solemn look on his face has me fearing the worst.

"I'm sorry, Addy," he mumbles.

"Where *is* she?"

"She's dead." The words fall so easily from his mouth that it takes me a minute to work out of he actually said them.

She's dead?

I stare wide-eyed at him, too stunned to speak as I try to make sense of what he just told me but the words swim around my head so quickly they almost make me dizzy.

She's dead.

She's dead.

"No. N-No... I don't believe you. W-What are you even talking about, I-?"

“She was trying to leave. She was going to take you away from me. I caught her carrying bags through the house, she thought I wasn’t home. I... I was never going to just let her leave with you...”

My blood runs cold in my veins, chilling me to the bone.

“Oh my God.” My legs buckle beneath me and I crash down onto the leather couch behind me, clinging to the edge as realisation sinks in.

“How could you?” A sob catches in my throat as white-hot tears well in my eyes.

“We were fighting and she fell down the stairs. She broke her neck. It was an acc-”

“*An accident?* Do you really expect me to believe that? It’s a little convenient she fell, don’t you think?” I rise from my seat and head for the door.

“I’m not sorry,” he says behind me, making me stop. “You wanted the truth, well this is it. I did what I had to do to protect my daughter, and letting that bitch leave with you was never an option. I’m sorry I’ve hurt you but I’m glad she’s dead. Our marriage was doomed from the start and she hated me towards the end, and I her. She knew my heart lay with someone else, always did.”

“Evelyn,” I say, turning on my heel. Gage’s mother. “You were in love with Evelyn.”

He swallows hard at the mention of her name. “Always was. When I found out she died I-” He shakes his head,

running a hand over his mouth, his grief of her death still cutting deep. “She was never supposed to be driving that night, Adelia, not in *his* car.”

She was never supposed to be driving... Gage’s voice rings through my mind. It was Joseph’s car Evelyn was driving that night.

How does my dad know who’s car it was?

No...

“No,” my voice cracks. “Dad, please tell me you didn’t. Tell me you didn’t kill Evelyn too.”

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles and my heart lurches in my chest.

“Oh my God!” I clutch my stomach, nausea curdling in my belly as my other hand comes up to cover my mouth as a sob rips free.

This can’t be happening.

It can’t be.

This is all just a bad dream. I pinch the skin of my arm between my fingernails and the sting radiates through me.

This isn’t a dream. This is *very* real.

Did he sabotage Joseph’s car? Did he pay someone to do it for him? Why?

I don’t even want to know the details, I can’t stomach them right now. It makes no difference either way, Evelyn is dead and it’s all my father’s fault.

My legs wobble beneath me, but I manage to grab a hold of a table to my left to steady myself from collapsing completely.

“Why Joseph? Jesus, did you think that by getting rid of him and mom that you and Evelyn would live happily ever after together? She loved Joseph, *not* you. This torch you’ve been carrying for her has turned you into someone I don’t even recognise anymore.”

I have to get out of here, I can’t be in this house any longer, not with him. Despite the size of the room, the walls are closing in and I’m struggling to catch my breath. It’s suffocating.

I turn back towards the door, forcing my feet to take one step after the other when a hand on my arm tugs me back. “You can’t tell anyone, Adelia.” My dad’s voice is hard as his eyes bore into mine.

“Why? Are you going to kill me too?”

My dad’s face falters. “Please, Addy.”

“Don’t call me that,” I spit. “You’ve lied to me for years, Dad. Everything you ever did or told me was to cover up your secret. You say you did it to protect me, that it was for the best. The best for *who*? Truth is you did it to protect yourself. Stay the hell away from me, *Randall*.”

He flinches at my use of his name. “I can’t lose you too, Adelia. Please.” His grip on my arm loosens a fraction and I wrench myself from his grasp.

“You already did.” I head for the door, ignoring him calling my name as I walk away on shaky legs.

Once I’m outside the room, I lean back against the door, fighting the urge to slip to the ground, hug my knees to my chest and weep.

“Mrs. Hudson?” Theo frowns as he takes in the sight of me.

My shoulders sag and I dig through my pocket for the car keys, handing them to him. “Please take me home, Theo.”

Della

My head throbs as I lie wide awake in bed, the steady *thump thump thump* of my heartbeat pounding in my eardrums like a marching band while the pillow beneath my head lies soaked with my tears.

The second Theo pulled the car into the garage earlier, I was up and out before we'd even come to a stop. I needed to be alone with my thoughts, to wrap my head around everything I've learned today.

It doesn't feel real.

Did that conversation between me and my dad actually happen?

I've played it over and over in my head, so much so it began to get as irritating as listening to a broken record. It was bad enough to learn that my father killed my mom, but Gage's mother too?

It's all too much.

It feels like my whole world has been torn apart, everything I once believed lies in ruins and I don't know what I'm supposed to do now.

I've never properly grieved her. When she left, as I believed she had back then, I was always holding onto the hope that she'd come back for me one day. But as the days, months and years passed, it was slowly becoming apparent that that would never happen, and I had accepted it. I figured that wherever she was, she was happier there than she would have ever been in our house. Happier away from my dad, and away from me, though I never fully believed the latter.

But now, after fourteen years, I can grieve. I finally have the closure surrounding her disappearance, only I feel like I've lost her all over again.

I fiddle with my mom's locket that hangs around my neck, flicking open the clasp, the hinge letting out a tiny squeak, before snapping it shut, only to flick it open again, then close it over and over. The sound and the repetition of it soothes me somehow.

I'm startled from my thoughts when the sound of Gage's voice travels down the hall and my stomach lurches.

Shit. What the hell am I supposed to say to him?

Do I tell him?

No. No, I can't do that. It will crush him, and the way I'm feeling right now, I don't want him feeling like this as well.

But how do I look him on the eye and pretend everything is fine? How do I keep the knowledge that my dad killed his mother a secret from him?

I suck in a breath when I hear the bedroom door open behind me.

“Della? Are you awake?” he whispers, and I can see his reflection in the mirror as he tugs off his jacket, tossing it over the chair before loosening his tie from around his neck.

“Yeah,” I mumble.

“Angel, are you alright?” He rounds the side of the bed and drops to a crouch, his hand coming to stroke my cheek, swiping at the tears that are slowly drying on my skin. “What’s wrong?” he asks, his eyes searching mine as his brows crease into a frown.

I sniff, lifting myself up far enough to wrap my arm around his neck. His arms go around my back and I cling to him, burying my face into his shirt as a sob catches in my throat.

“Baby, tell me what’s wrong,” he presses, stroking my hair from my face as I pull back. “Does this have anything to do with going to see Randall today?”

I tense, pulling back. “How long did it take for Theo to rat me out?”

“About two minutes after I stepped through the door.” A smile ghosts over his lips, but disappears quickly. “Why would you go there?”

“Because I needed answers. I needed to know if he knew who Bryce really was when he agreed to that deal.”

“And?”

“He didn’t know, at least I don’t think he did, but you were right, Bryce *was* blackmailing him.”

His eyebrows raise. “Are you serious? What did he say?”

“He um... He...” I can’t say it. I go to speak but my throat closes up like someone is squeezing it tight. “He... killed my mom, Gage,” my voice cracks, fresh tears spilling over. Saying the words out loud makes it all that much more real.

Gage stares blankly at me, like he doesn’t quite understand what I just said. He opens his mouth to speak, but shuts it again, speechless.

“She was trying to leave him,” I continue, with a sniff. “She was going to take me with her and he found out. There was some sort of a fight as she was trying to go and she fell down the stairs. He... killed her. He says it was an accident but...”

“Fuck, angel,” he breathes out, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I don’t know what to say.”

“They were constantly fighting when I was younger, and he was always so awful to her, shouting, belittling her at any opportunity, it was a miracle she stayed with him so long. I think a part of him resented her, resented the fact she wasn’t Evelyn.”

My gut twists at the mention of his mom's name but I force down the feeling.

He can't know.

“Now I think on it, it all makes sense. Why all of her belongings vanished so fast, why he was so quick to shut down any talk of her and how quickly his mood changed whenever I brought her up. He lied to me for years. I hate him, Gage. I hate him.”

Gage pulls me into his arms. “I'm so sorry, angel.” He presses a kiss to the top of my head as his hand rubs slow circles on my back.

I hate lying to him, and the guilt is already eating away at me by keeping him in the dark about what really happened to his mother. He deserves to know, but with the life slowly draining from his father, I can't break his heart even more.

I know I'm being hypocritical by keeping it from him after being so angry at him for not telling me the truth about Bryce, but this is ten times worse.

I *will* tell him when the time is right, but that time is not now.

“I always knew she wouldn't abandon me, I *knew* it.”

“She loved you, and I don't think she'd have ever left you if she had the choice, anyone who would doesn't deserve to breathe. Any person would be lucky to have you in their life, which makes me an even luckier one to call you my wife.” He pecks a kiss to my lips as he lays us down in the mattress with

my body still wrapped up in his arms as he lets me cry it all out, all the while rubbing a hand up and down my forearm comfortingly.

“I didn’t think I could hate your father more than I already did, I guess I was wrong,” he says against my hair.

If only you knew the half of it...

“I can’t stand him. He told me he didn’t regret it, that he was glad she was gone. What kind of father says something like that?”

“A shit one. A man who doesn’t deserve to have children. You and your mom deserved so much better than him.”

I roll my body on top of his, straddling his hips while his hands come to rest in my thighs. “Make me feel better?”

I need a distraction, an outlet. I need to forget everything that has happened today and feel something other than the pain and heartbreak my father has caused me.

“Are you sure that’s what you need?” he asks, his eyes searching my face.

I nod. “I need you.”

With those three words, he leans up and kisses me deeply with such earnest it’s as if he’ll never kiss me again. I drown in his touch as he explores every part of me, I lose myself in his kiss as his tongue tangles with mine, and in this moment I realise I can’t imagine my life without Gage in it, I can’t imagine myself any place other than right here and now, in the safety and security of my husband’s embrace.

A man who has only ever showed me love.

A man who would go to the ends of the earth for me.

A man that I've grown to love.

He's woven himself within me, consumed every single one of my senses and managed to steal my heart and called it his own.

But you know what? I wouldn't have it any other way.

Gage

“You’re looking v-very dapper, Son. S...special occasion?” my dad asks.

“I’m taking my wife out on a date,” I announce, adjusting my cufflinks. It occurred to me a couple of days ago that I’d never taken her out on a proper date and I want to rectify that.

“How w-wonderful!” His smile is a little lopsided, but he doesn’t dwell on it. “I’m so happy the t-two of you are... getting along.”

“So am I. She’s everything I could ever wish for.” *And more.*

She’s the love of my life and I don’t know what I’d do if I ever lost her. I’d tear down the fucking world until she was back in my arms.

“How are you doing, Dad?” I ask, noticing him wincing in pain every now and then.

“I’m still here. For how l...long is an-nother story.”

From what Sierra and my father's nurse tells me, he's doing well, and he's making progress and despite his reluctance at having a full-time nurse, he's slowly warming to having her around.

He's still not able to walk unaided, and with his health declining, I don't think he ever will. Time is not in his favour.

Time.

Something we're running out of.

He sleeps a lot these days, only waking for a couple of hours at a time and to eat, when he wants to, that is. He's slowly losing his appetite and since he came home, he's lost a significant amount of weight. His face is thinner, the skin around his face and neck loose and greying. His hair is thinning and he seems exhausted most of the time.

"Don't you think it's time to tell Rafe and Si the truth?"

He shakes his head violently, his face hardening. "No. I d...don't want them to k-know."

"Dad, the longer they go on living in the dark, they're..." I pinch the bridge of my nose, "they're losing precious time with you. I hate to be blunt but how would they feel if you died tomorrow and they missed the chance to make the most of the time they have left with you?"

He reaches over to me, searching for my hand. I near the bed and perch on the edge as his hand finds mine. "Promise me, G-Gage. Promise me you won't t-tell them."

I stare into his eyes as they plead with me, *beg* me, and no matter how much it kills me to keep the truth from my siblings, who am I to betray my father as he lies on what could quite possibly become his deathbed?

Against my better judgement, I relent. “Alright. I promise.”

“T-Thank you, Son.” He pats the back of my hand. “Now, go... be with your wife. Have a lovely evening.”

“I will. Good night, Dad,” I say before exiting the room.

I walk into the bedroom to find Della bent over, her beautiful ass high in the air wearing the skimpiest pair of panties I think I’ve ever seen, the thin black lace a stark contrast against her creamy skin. She twists when she hears me enter and smiles.

Shit, she’s braless, her perfect tits just begging to be licked and sucked. My mouth waters at the thought and I stalk towards her.

My hands find her waist as I pull her against me, grinding my growing erection into her ass while my hands come up to palm her tits. “Fuck, I’m thinking about forgetting dinner and skipping straight to dessert.”

Della giggles. “You promised me dinner and I’m holding you to it. I’m hungry.”

“Mmm... so am I.” I spin her around in my arms and devour her lips, licking into her mouth as I bend to lift her and toss her onto the bed.

“Gage! You’re ruining my hair!” she squeals.

“I don’t fucking care, I just want you.” I take her mouth again roughly as my hands roam her body, her skin smooth under my touch.

“Gage!” she protests with a laugh, and with a sigh, I release her, tugging her back up from the bed before smoothing out her hair.

“I’m looking forward to showing you off on our date. I’ll be the envy of every man in the restaurant.” I plant a long, deep kiss to her mouth. “I’ll be downstairs. You look beautiful, by the way.”

“I’m not even dressed yet,” she points out.

“You always look beautiful, angel.” I steal one more kiss before leaving the room, allowing her to finish getting ready.

“Hot date with the wife?” Rafe asks with a smirk when I enter the living room, eyeing up my dark grey suit as I pull on my jacket before adjusting my sleeves.

I chuckle. “Something like that. What are you up to tonight?”

He shrugs. “Probably hit a bar, pick up a girl, the usual.”

I laugh with a roll of my eyes. My brother never changes. He’ll soon realise that taking a different girl to bed every night soon gets boring, I just pray he’ll find a girl to fall in love with so he understands what it’s like to feel the love of a woman.

The click of heels on the wood floor ring through the house as Della sweeps into the room in a floor-length black dress that falls in waves around her legs. The deep-cut neckline gives me a beautiful glimpse of her full breasts.

Her dark chestnut brown hair cascades around her shoulders in thick curls that bounce with every move.

She's absolutely beautiful.

Her makeup is minimal, though her lips are stained in red, a sight that has my balls tightening with the image of that red mouth wrapped around me.

Maybe tonight...

"I don't even know what to say, angel," I say, my eyes raking over her body from head to toe, how the dress clings to her every curve.

A blush creeps up into her cheeks.

"Looking good, Della," my brother admires with a smile and a wink in her direction. "Well, I'm outta here, you both have a good night," Rafe says before disappearing from the room.

Once he's safely out of earshot, I turn to Della, who's busying herself by straightening my tie. "My dad's still adamant he doesn't want them to know the truth. How long is he going to carry this on for?"

"I know it's hard, but he's doing what he thinks is best to protect his children," she says.

“By letting them think he’s going to be around longer than he is? It’s not fair to them to keep them in the dark. The stroke was the beginning of the end, and he’s living on borrowed ti-” Movement catches my eye over Della’s shoulder and I look up to find Rafe hovering in the doorway and the words die on my tongue.

He steps fully into the room, his eyes hard as they bore into mine. “Oh please, brother, do carry on. I’m all ears.”

Della whirls around, her face paling.

“Rafe-” I start.

“No!” He cuts me off. “No more lies or fucking excuses, Gage. Tell me the truth.”

“Dad never wanted you to find out like this.”

“Find out what?”

I guess there’s no point hiding it now. “When he was in the hospital, they ran some tests and found the cancer’s spread to his liver and lungs. The time we thought we had left with him is now significantly shorter,” I explain regretfully.

Rafe’s eyes widen as anger reddens his face. “Why the fuck would you keep that from me? Does Sierra know?” I shake my head. “Jesus Christ. You had no right to keep this from us.”

“He made me promise not to say anything, Rafe. I wanted you both to know, I begged him to tell you.”

“Save it,” he spits. “You,” he points a finger at me, “you keep out of my way, and you,” he points to Della, “I thought you were my friend, remind me to never trust a pretty face again.”

“Leave Della out of this!” I shout.

“Fuck you, Gage!” Rafe tosses over his shoulder as he storms out of the room, the front door slamming shut a second later.

“Fuck,” I groan.

“He’ll come around. Once he’s calmed down and had time for it all to sink in, he’ll see why you kept it a secret.”

“I don’t know, angel. He’s already struggling and I just made everything ten times worse. Rafe is one stubborn bastard.”

“I guess it runs in the family,” she quips.

I smile, taking her face in my hands and dusting my lips over hers.

“Do you still feel like going out? We can stay here if you’d rather?” she asks.

“No, no... I promised my wife dinner, and I intend to keep it, as long as you provide dessert.” I quirk an eyebrow.

She giggles. “You’re so bad!”

I chuckle. “Come on, let’s go to dinner.”

“This restaurant is beautiful,” Della comments, her eyes scanning the room, taking in the low mood lighting and the slow sensual music that filters through the space.

“Only the best for my wife.”

We’re sat in a quiet booth along the back wall, with Theo and Alec on a table just across from us, keeping a watchful eye over the area.

We chat before and during our meal about anything and nothing, and I think the only time I take my eyes off of Della is to look down at my food. I don’t know how it can be that I fall for her more with every day that passes.

“There’s something I never got around to asking you before,” she begins, resting her elbows on the table. “How did you know so much about me. I think you know more about me than I do about myself.”

“I’ve watched you from afar for most of your life,” I confess.

“You know, in the wrong context, that could sound kind of creepy.”

I laugh. “Maybe, but I thought that if I couldn’t get close to you, I had to be close enough that I knew you were safe. I knew from that day you saved me, you’d be my wife one day, but until then, I’d settle for finding out everything I could about you.” Some could call it an obsession, keeping tabs and watching someone unsuspecting, I called it love. She saved my

life and I owed her everything because of it, the least I could do was ensure she was safe and happy.

“I was watching from across the street at your junior prom, you looked so beautiful in that silver dress you wore.” Her eyes widen. “I was there at your high school graduation, stood at the back of the hall clapping when you received your diploma.”

“Oh my God,” she breathes out.

I had anticipated her to be a little uncomfortable to learn I’ve been watching her for over a decade, but the look on her face tells me the opposite.

“I was there when you graduated college, you don’t know how proud I was of you that day.” From across the table, I can see her eyes glistening with tears so I reach my hand across the table and take hers in mine. “You’ve been half my life, and I plan to spend the rest of it with you.”

She shuffles around to my side of the booth, her thigh brushing mine and she turns to me. “I’d like that.”

“Did you ever wonder why I called the club *De La Rosa*?” I begin. “I would’ve thought it was obvious, but maybe it’s obvious only to me. It’s a Spanish surname that translates as ‘*of the rose*’, nothing too special, but to me it was a way to have the love of my life’s name written in huge neon lettering without anyone suspecting a thing.”

I see her thinking it over in her mind, and watch the realisation dawn on her face. “*De La Rosa... Della Rose.*”

I smile. “You have no idea how important you are to me, Adelia Rose Hudson.”

She squeezes my hand tighter. “I think maybe I do.”

“I’ve also been wondering whether you would wanted us to renew our wedding vows? Get married properly this time?” I offer. I don’t want her looking back on our wedding and regretting it, hating the fact that she was forced to be there.

“No. No do-overs. If truth be told, that day... I wasn’t there because you were forcing me to, I was there because deep down I wanted to be, I just never admitted it to myself back then. Just like I’ve never told you that I love you until now, but I do. I love you so much, Gage, that the thought of living without you is too much to bear.”

My breath catches in my throat the second those words fall from her lips, words I’ve waited for what seems like an eternity to hear. “You love me, angel?”

She nods, a tear escaping. “I love you.”

I crush my lips to hers, pouring every ounce of love I feel for this woman into it, not caring about who is watching.

I signal for a waitress to credit the bill to my account before taking my wife’s hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

I lead her to the elevator that takes us to the underground parking lot. I push her back gently against the wall as I take her mouth with mine, her arms winding around my neck. “Say it again,” I whisper against her lips before diving back in for another searing kiss.

“I love you,” she pants, her tongue lashing against mine.

I’m so lost in the kiss that I don’t hear the ding of the elevator, and it takes a not-so-subtle cough from Alec that I finally come up for air.

Della giggles, covering her face with her clutch in embarrassment before I take her hand as we head for the car.

The parking lot is fairly well-lit, a dozen or so cars fill up the spaces, but no other people besides the four of us.

“Say it just one more time,” I say, spinning her, my hands at her waist as I walk her backwards.

“I. Love. You,” she repeats slowly, dragging out each word.

“I love you too, baby.” I go in for a kiss but I’m interrupted.

“Gage, we’ve got a problem,” Alec says, nodding to the cars.

I look down to see all four tyres on both my car and the car Theo and Alec followed us in have been slashed, long deep gashes stretching the entire diameter of the rubber.

“Fuck,” I mumble, my hand gripping Della’s tighter as I pull her closer.

Alarm bells blare in my ears as I search the lot. No other cars have been touched and there’s not another person in sight.

“Gage? What’s going on?” Della asks.

“I’m taking Della back into the restaurant, you two hang back here and check it out,” I say to Alec and Theo, who’s hands are already wrapped around their guns.

“Yes, Boss,” they both reply in unison as I begin to steer Della back towards the restaurant.

“Gage, what’s happening?” Della presses as we cross the parking lot, heading back the way we came, her heels clicking along the floor as she tries to keep up with my pace.

“Something doesn’t feel right,” I reply, just as the sound of screeching tyres pierce the air, echoing through the lot.

Everything happens so fast and yet in slow motion all at the same time as a dark grey van speeds around the corner and steams straight towards us.

Alec and Theo are already running, their guns raised towards the van as they shoot, the bullets spraying in every direction. It’s an all-out gun fight and my wife is in the middle of it.

“Della, go!” I shout, pushing her towards the elevator doors which is still a fair distance away, and I watch her run towards the elevator, away from the chaos that surrounds us.

I look over my shoulder and see Alec crouching behind a car to reload just as Theo steps out, getting a couple of shots in only for a bullet to hit him dead centre in his forehead, his body dropping like a dead weight to the ground.

The van ploughs towards me, and as I attempt to step out of its path, it swerves, clipping me as it screamed to a stop.

The force of it knocks me off my feet and my head bounces off the concrete hard.

White noise pierces my ears and my vision tunnels as a sharp pain shoots through my skull. No matter how hard I try to get up, to go to find my wife, every limb and every muscle feel like they each weigh a hundred pounds.

I'm weak.

A dark shadow looms over me. "I'd love nothing more than to kill you right now, but I'd rather you suffer." I know that voice. I'm sure of it. Is that Bryce? It sounds like I'm hearing it through a thick pane of glass, it's muffled and distorted. "Sleep tight, Hudson. She's mine now, just like I said she'd be."

Bryce.

Something hard collides with the side of my head. Black dots spot my vision and I'm dragged into unconsciousness as the sound of my wife's screams ring in my ears.

Gage

Beep... Beep... Beep.

I'm woken by an irritatingly monotonous beep, a sound that shouldn't seem that loud, but its tone pierces through my eardrums, splitting my head in two.

I open my eyes and instantly regret it, the bright white lights in the room blind me, stinging my retinas and I reach up to shield my eyes.

"Fuck," I groan, shifting my position, ignoring how my aching bones and muscles fight back.

Where the hell am I?

A door opens and I hear someone release a deep breath. "Thank fuck. Gage, can you hear me?"

I crack open an eye to see Alec standing over me at the side of the bed I'm lying in. I take a quick glance around me, noting the tiny television in the top corner of the room tuned into an old black and white western playing on screen. The large heavy door at the bottom of the bed clicks loudly when it

shuts, and the heart monitor to the side of me is where that incessant beeping noise is coming from.

Why the fuck am I in a hospital?

“Alec? Why am I here? What happened?” I ask.

Jesus, he looks how I feel. His dirty blonde hair that is usually slicked back neatly is now an unkempt mess at the top of his head, spitting in all directions. His eyes are heavy, as dark grey shadows hanging under them like he hasn't slept in a week and his clothes are crumpled, his white shirt stained in both dirt and most worryingly, blood.

“You don't remember? Last night, in the parking lot?”

I search back through my memory to the last thing I remember, and it hurts my brain to even try.

I remember the restaurant and my date with Della. She looked so beautiful. The words *'I love you, Gage,'* ring in my ears, feeling that same warmth I felt deep inside yesterday when she said them for the first time.

Flashes of images pass behind my eyes.

The van... The chaos... Theo getting shot... Getting hit by the car... Della...

Fuck!

I jerk upright on to bed and pain slices through my head but I do my best to ignore it as I swing my legs out of bed. I rip off the clip attached to my finger, and the sound of the monitor it's connected to blares beside me.

I go to stand up but I sway from left to right on unstable legs as the world around me tilts. A wave of nausea passes through me, that sickly feeling crawling up my throat as bile fills my mouth.

I feel sick.

“Gage! Take it easy,” Alec says, supporting my weight as he sits me back on the bed. It’s then that I notice the scratchy grey and white hospital gown I’m wearing that barely covers my ass cheeks.

“Della. Where... Where is she?” I ask, taking deep gulps of breath, the dizziness and nausea slowly passing over.

Alec’s expression turns gray and my stomach sinks, fearing the worst. “Bryce has her. We’ve been searching all nig-”

The door bursts open. “Mr. Hudson!” the petite blonde nurse screeches. “What are you doing out of bed?”

“Discharging myself,” I say, rising from the bed, steadier this time as I reach for my clothes piled up on the chair.

“Sir, you can’t do that, you’ve suffered a concussion and a nasty hit to your head,” she protests.

“I thank you for your concern, but I’ll be fine.”

“But yo-”

“Look,” I say, cutting her off. “My wife is missing and the longer I spend in here, the higher the chance I might never see her again, so I am leaving here whether I’m permitted to or

not.” I wince from the throbbing in my head, the volume of my voice only making the pain worse.

“I’ve got him from here. We’ll sign any paperwork we have to, but we’re leaving now,” Alec says, and after a moment, the nurse relents.

“Alright, but please take it easy, and if the pain gets worse or you experience any more nausea or dizziness, please come back.”

“I’ll see to it he does, thank you.”

After the nurse leaves, Alec allows me to get changed, returning a few minutes later with a bag of painkillers and discharge papers, and once they’re signed, I dose myself up on pills and the two of us leave.

“Talk to me, what’s been going on while I’ve been asleep?” I ask as we blast through the exit, heading through the parking lot.

I can’t believe I’ve been unconscious in a hospital bed all fucking night while my girl is out there with that bastard.

I’ve wasted so many hours, anything could have happened to her since last night. She could be anywhere.

You can reach the other side of the world in the time I’ve been sleeping.

“Theo’s gone,” he says regretfully. “It was instant, and we got his body out of there. They took Della, bundled her into the van and high-tailed it away before I could get to her. I found you on the floor unconscious and brought you here. I

went back to the restaurant and met Derek there, he pulled the CCTV footage to the parking garage, hoping to catch the registration plate and track it through the city. It's a false plate so we can't trace it to anyone. Derek is still searching for her, he said he'd call if he had any leads."

"You got my phone?" I ask, just as we reach the car.

"Yeah, why?" He pulls it out of his jacket pocket and hands it to me before sliding in behind the wheel.

I climb into the passenger seat. "Because I know how to find her."

"What. How?"

I open up the tracking app on my phone, praying that I see a blinking red light that signals Della's location. "A while back I put a tracker in her mother's necklace."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Alec asks.

"Because I never thought I'd have to use it." I didn't like going behind her back, but I always worried that something like this might happen, especially with Bryce still a constant threat to her safety.

"So, where is she?"

I pinpoint her location and our distance as the app maps out the fastest route to her. "She's out of town, about ten miles east, just past Ashgrove. If we hurry we can be there in less than half an hour. Have you tried calling Rafe?"

"Several times. He won't answer."

I run a hand through my hair. “Jesus Christ,” I mumble, reeling off directions to Alec as he pulls out of the lot while I dial Rafe’s number.

I go straight to voicemail so I dial again and again until he answers. “What the fuck? Can’t you take the hint that I don’t wanna talk to you? I mean what do you exp-”

“Rafe, shut the fuck up for one minute and listen. Bryce has Della, Alec and I are headed there now.”

“Fuck, are you serious?”

“I know you hate me right now, Rafe, but I need you by my side. I need my brother. *Please.*”

There’s a long pause and for a second I think he’s hung up on me. “Alright, send me the location and I’ll meet you there.”

“Thank you, brother. Truly.”

“Yeah, whatever.” He hangs up and I drop him a pin to where Della is, or should I say, where her necklace is?

While the little red light flashes on my screen showing that the tracker is active, there’s no telling whether Della is even still alive.

Is she even still wearing it? What if it has been ripped from her neck and dumped in the middle of nowhere?

No.

I force it away. I can’t entertain these thoughts going around in my head, I can’t think the worst. I have to remain

optimistic and hopeful that my wife is just minutes away, that I'll see her again because right now, hope is all I've got.

Della

I've been staring at the same bare wall since they dumped me in this room last night. I'm in an abandoned warehouse god knows where or how far I am from home, trapped in a tiny closet that smells of old chemicals and something that is long since dead. Probably a rat or two.

I shiver at the thought.

It's freezing cold in here and my ass is going numb from the rock hard cement floor I'm sitting on, clutching my knees to my chest while rocking back and forth for something to do. My beautiful black dress is torn and stained in dirt, and my purse and phone are long gone.

I'm stuck here, wherever here is with no way out or no way for anyone to find me.

A tiny strip of light shines in from the gap around the locked door that allows me to see a little of what's in here with me. The closet is only a few metres wide and large industrial shelving stretch to the ceiling line the walls. I'm not sure what

this warehouse used to be used for, but it's what it is used for now that worries me more.

Why did Bryce and his men bring me here?

Is this the place he uses to stage his... "movies"? A place where no one would be any the wiser about what is going on here?

My stomach bottoms out

Oh God. Is that why I'm here?

My mind wanders to Gage. The last I remember is watching Theo's body fall to the ground, a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead and Gage unconscious on the floor just metres away from me.

I did what he said to do, I ran. I just wasn't fast enough, and when I saw him get struck by the van, there was no way in hell I could leave him like that. Before I had the chance to go to him, I was ripped away by one of Bryce's men and bundled into the van, but not before I saw Bryce kick Gage in the side of his head while he lay defenceless on the ground, a blow that knocked him out cold.

God, I hope he's alright.

The door clicks and swings open with a creak, the bright light stinging my eyes and I have to squint. A dark outline of a tall, beefy man standing in the doorway.

"I have to use the bathroom," I say, my voice coming out hoarse, and my throat scratchy and dry.

The guy's face remains nonchalant as he steps further into the small space, towering over me. He glances to an old metal bucket in the corner of the closet and kicks it towards me with a loud clatter.

“Here you go.” He smirks, enjoying the horrified expression I'm no doubt wearing.

“No fucking way.”

“Then I guess you'll have to piss your little panties won't you, little girl?”

“Fuck you,” I spit.

“Oh, I'd love nothing more, *bitch*, but unfortunately for me, you belong to Bryce.”

“I belong to no one, especially not *him*.”

He chuckles darkly. “You have no idea. Bryce brought you these,” he tosses a bottle of water and half a loaf of bread at me. “He'll come get you shortly. *Ta-ta*.” He waves mockingly before pulling the door shut again.

Once I hear the lock clicking into place, I toss the piece of bread that's no doubt stale or riddled with mould somewhere on the floor. Besides, I don't think I could handle food right now, regardless of how loudly my stomach argues otherwise. Instead, I gulp down the entire bottle of water like I'm stranded in the sahara, suddenly realising it could be my last for a while.

It's not long before my bladder screams at me to empty it, the pain slicing through my lower abdomen and no amount of

crossing my legs is going to cut it. Forcing back the humiliation that has me wanting to cry, I pull up the long skirt of my dress and crouch over the bucket. Shame grips me, but I figure the mortification I feel at having to be forced to do this in private is better than peeing myself in full view of the men on the other side of that door.

My eyes grow heavy and tired as my head falls onto my knees, and as I'm about to drift off to sleep, the lock clangs and the door opens.

I don't even have to look up to know who it is. I can feel his eyes crawling over my body and it's enough to make me nauseous.

"Hello there, love," Bryce greets, condescension laced in his voice.

"Has it really been necessary to keep me in here all night?" I ask him, glaring up to meet Bryce's eye.

"I felt it add a little anticipation to the whole thing, don't you? It really built up our reunion."

"Go to hell, Bryce. Why am I even here?"

"Because I want you to be. Come," he extends his hand to help me up, but I ignore it and rise to my feet by myself. I don't want any part of him touching me. Not again.

I follow him out into a large area, a factory workshop. The walls, floor and ceiling completely white, and empty boxes, toppled tables and chairs scatter the space. This place couldn't

have been touched for years. Many of the windows have been boarded up, while others remain smashed, a brisk breeze sweeping through, chilling my skin.

“What is this place?” I ask.

“Do you like it? Back in the fifties it was used as a factory to build cars. It produced thousands of vehicles every year, but it went out of business in the seventies when overseas imports were cheaper than making them here in the States.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Are you going somewhere with this?”

“Are you not enjoying my history lesson?”

“Not if it doesn’t have a point.” I figure showing defiance and strength may work in my favour, seeing as our first encounter made it seem like he feeds off of weakness.

“My grandfather worked in this factory, poured his blood, sweat and tears into it. It was his life, and when he died, he passed everything he had onto me since my dead-beat of a father was out of the picture.”

What does all this have to do with me? Is this really all he kidnapped me for?

He turns to face me. “I’m not a bad guy, Adelia, or I never used to be, at least. But you see a year or so ago, I bought this factory using the same money my grandfather left to me. I was going to start a project that would make me one of the most powerful men in this fucking city, richer than your husband even. I had plans, dreams...” His jaw tightens and his nostrils

flare as he turns to me, “Right up until your *fucking* husband ripped them all to shreds!” he booms, making me jump.

“I poured every dime I had into this place and I never got a single cent of it back. I lost everything because of Gage *fucking* Hudson, *everything!* I’ve never been one to let shit go, so, I started watching him, learning everything there was to know about him, and imagine my surprise when I came across you? His infatuation with you gave me a way in, a way to get under his skin. He took everything from me, so what better way to get to him than to take the one thing that mattered the most to him? *You.*”

My heart thuds. “Is that why you made a deal with my father?”

“I wanted a part of his company, but what I really wanted was you. It was too damn easy to blackmail your cunt of a father. All a guy’s gotta do is do a little digging and what d’ya know, the man’s got a couple skeletons in his closet.” He must notice the look on my face because he smirks. “So, you *do* know... Does Gage know his beloved wife’s dad killed his mommy?” He grins smugly, enjoying the fact he has the upper hand.

“Tell me, Bryce,” I begin in an attempt to change the subject, “what kind of man becomes involved with a trafficking organisation that sells women and children for sex, and tortures them in front of a camera for money?”

His eyebrows lift in surprise and his mouth widens into a grin. “Somebody’s been doing their research, I’m impressed.

When you've hit rock bottom, there's not much lower you can sink."

My face scrunches in disgust. "You make me sick."

"Don't judge me until you've been in a similar situation. You'd do the same."

"I'm pretty sure I wouldn't. Some of us have a conscience, something you seem to lack," I reply, turning my back and taking a few steps away, putting some distance between us. "Is that what you had planned for me? Why even go to the trouble of proposing marriage?"

"Marrying you was purely for my pleasure. I wanted to see the look on Gage's face when I married the woman he loves, the satisfaction of him knowing it was my dick you were riding and not his." His words make me nauseous.

"And after that? What would have happened after you'd had your fill of me?"

"Sold you to the man who paid the highest price for your body." He speaks so casually, so unaffected by his words. "You're forgetting I've already sampled the goods, I know how much money you could make me, still *can*." There's a glint in his eyes that I don't like the look of. "Of course, you're not much use to *me* now that you're already married, but married or not..." his eyes rake over me from head to toe, "you're young, *pretty*... that tight little cunt of yours can make me *a lot* of money."

My heart thuds to a halt. "What are you talking about?"

He takes a step towards me as I take one back. “You’ve generated a lot of interest among my contacts. And…” he glances down to his phone, smiling at something he’s seen, “your chariot awaits, sweetheart.”

I take another step back. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Oh, sweetheart, that’s where you’re wrong. Bringing you here, it was somewhere I could keep you hidden until your transport arrived. Next stop, Mexico.”

My heart pounds in my chest, the sound of my pulse thundering in my ears.

Oh my god.

My eyes dart around, looking for an escape, but judging by the view out of the window, we’re on the first floor of the warehouse at least, and the only door to this level is behind Bryce.

“You can go to hell if you think I’ll allow you to do this.”

He laughs. “*Allow* you? What makes you think you hold any power here. You’re mine and you do as *I* say.”

“Fuck you!” I shout, and before I see him coming, he grabs me, his hands locking tightly around the tops of arms, his fingers digging into my skin painfully.

I kick and scream until both my throat and my muscles burn. If he thinks I’m going to make this easy, he has another thing coming.

I manage to catch his crotch with my knee and use his loosened grip to make my escape. I run as fast as the four inch heels I'm wearing will allow.

The heel on my left snags the thin material of my dress, making me stumble, but I manage to remain upright.

I reach the door and fumble for the handle, but just as it turns, a strong arm locks around my waist and I'm hauled backwards.

I struggle against his hold as he tosses me to the ground, positioning himself above me, his knees either side of my legs pinning me in place.

The back of his hand connects with my cheek, the sting radiating through my skin. "You little cunt. Enjoy your defiance while it lasts, you'll learn soon enough to obey."

Bang!

A gunshot cracks through the air and Bryce freezes above me. A second later, there's shouting, followed by two more shots that sound like they're getting closer.

One of Bryce's men, the one from earlier blasts through the door, totally unfazed to find his boss on top of me. "It's Hudson and his brother with one of their guys."

Gage is here?

Bryce curses under his breath and stands up, tugging me back onto my feet with his hand curled around my arm tightly. "How the fuck did he find us?"

“I don’t know, Boss. Maybe he tracked her here?”

“He couldn’t have tracked her phone, I smashed it last night.” Bryce spins me around to face him, looking me over from top to bottom, his eyes landing on my necklace. He reaches for it, twizzling the locket between his fingers. “This is new.”

He eyes me dubiously, flicking between my eyes and my necklace, and before I can do anything, the chain is ripped from my neck, and he tosses my necklace away like it means nothing. It clinks to the ground, scattering across the floor and falls somewhere I can’t see, and my heart splinters.

My necklace...

Tears well in my eyes, but sadness is quickly replaced by a sudden surge of pure rage.

“You bastard!” I bring my free hand up and slam it into his face as hard as I can, my fist connecting with his nose. The force of the punch ricochets up my arm and I cry out, stumbling backwards.

Bryce clutches his nose that is now pouring with blood, but his eyes are harder now, more determined as he goes for me, eating up the space between us, but before he can reach me, there’s another gunshot, closer this time.

Bryce grips my arm as he turns to his guy. “Move out, we’re leaving.”

Gage

Where the fuck is she?

Rafe, Alec and I have scoured the ground floor of this rat-infested, mould-ridden warehouse, and the only sign of life were the two guys we just killed, presumably two of Tanner's guys.

When did my life become a real-life action movie? I'm a businessman, not some sort of vigilante or a mob boss. When did kidnapping, violence and bloodshed become the centre of my existence? When did I turn into a killer?

Since I married the love of my life, that's when. Since I vowed to protect her no matter what.

I will always choose her, do anything to protect her regardless of the consequences.

That is what love has turned me into.

A sound of some sort of a scuffle on the floor above us catches our attention and I start towards the stairs to my right.

“You guys take the stairwell straight ahead, I’ll take this one and close them off.”

I take the stairs two at a time and come out onto the first floor, making my way across an open space, a brisk wind whipping through the broken windows. There’s a door on the opposite side and I move towards it when something lying in the corner of my eye catches my attention, sparkling in the light.

Della’s necklace.

I reach down to pick it up. The clasp on the chain is broken, it must have been torn from her neck. I place it carefully into my pocket before continuing towards the door.

A gunshot rings out and I grip the gun tighter in my hand, my heartbeat thumping in my eardrums.

I turn the corner to find Bryce in the middle of the narrow corridor. In front of him is my wife, a gun pressed against her hip. A metre or so away is a man’s body, a patch of blood pooling beneath him as he lays lifeless on the floor.

At the end of the corridor stands Alec and my brother, their guns trained on Bryce.

I move in behind him silently, my gun aimed at his head.

“You want to kill me? You’re gonna have to shoot her too, man,” Bryce says.

“I don’t think so,” Rafe replies coolly, his mouth curling into a smirk.

The tip of my gun meets his skull and his body stiffens as I flick off the safety.

“Get your fucking hands off my wife, Tanner,” I order.

Della’s eyes find me over her shoulder and a small smile touches her mouth. “Gage...”

Della manages to slip from Bryce’s reluctant grasp and rushes to Alec and Rafe, who pulls her behind him protectively.

“You made a big mistake by taking her.” My eyes never waver as my hand tightens around the gun.

He spins so the tip of my gun is now resting against his forehead, his eyes boring into mine. “I guess we both have habits of stealing what isn’t ours.”

I know exactly what he’s referring to. It hadn’t occurred to me until we arrived here why this location was significant. He’s referring to his project proposal for the site we’re standing in. It just so happened I had a similar project in the works beforehand, and a few favours to call in which got the project shut down, eliminating the competition.

“Business is business. It wasn’t personal, Tanner, but you taking my wife? You crossed a line.”

“Nice touch putting a tracker in her necklace. It was smart.”

“It was necessary. I knew after that stunt you pulled at my house it wouldn’t be long before you tried something else.”

He grins. “I guess I underestimated your wife. She’s stronger than I gave her credit for. Didn’t think she had that kind of fight in her to take on one of my best guys, she sure didn’t have fight like that when I *fucked* her.”

“You piece of shit!” The butt of my gun hits the side of Bryce’s head and he goes down with a grunt, his knees smashing onto the hard concrete floor. I kick the gun from his hand and it scrapes across the ground.

I move towards Della who rushes into my arms and as soon as our bodies collide, relief flood me and her warmth seeps into my skin.

“Are you alright?” I ask, pressing my lips against her forehead, smoothing her dishevelled hair from her face.

“I am now,” she replies, tucking herself against my body like she can’t get close enough. Her once beautiful dress is now torn and stained in dirt exposing more of her thighs and her midriff.

“Get rid of him,” I tell Alec as I steer Della away.

“Hey, Gage,” Bryce calls, grunting as he staggers to his feet. A trail of blood trickles from the cut to his head and down the side of his face. He laughs. “Don’t they say that marriages with secrets are doomed to fail? You might wanna ask your little wife who really killed your mother.”

I stiffen at the mention of my mom, and I don’t miss how Della sucks in a sharp breath beside me.

“What?” Rafe’s voice cuts through the air.

“What are you talking about?” I ask with an eye roll, figuring it’s just another stunt to piss me off.

“Randall didn’t just kill *her* mom.” Bryce wears a smug grin. “Looks like your wife isn’t as innocent as she looks. Marriage not all it’s cracked up to be, huh, Hudson?”

“Shut the fuck up,” I spit.

I have no idea what is happening right now.

What is he talking about?

Surely he’s got it wrong.

My eyes flick down to Della, searching for any sign that this is real.

“Seems killing one woman wasn’t enough to get Randall off so he went after dear, *sweet* Evelyn too,” Bryce adds.

I point the gun at his head, my hand shaking as my finger tightens on the trigger. “I said shut up!”

“I’m only trying t-” He’s cut off when Rafe swings for him, his fist colliding with Bryce’s face, sending him stumbling back. He collapses onto his knees, clutching his face.

The bastard laugh.

He’s enjoying this. The glint in his eye is telling me he is loving every fucking minute and it is taking every ounce of restraint not to lodge a bullet between his eyes.

Della’s hand comes to rest against my chest. “Gage...”

“Is it true, about our mother?” I ask, and her lips pull tight and her gaze drops to the floor, which is an answer in itself. I tip up her chin, forcing her eyes to meet mine. “Look me in the eye.”

Her eyes well with tears. “I was going to tell you. I-I just didn’t know how...”

I shove her hands off me, her touch burns my skin and her face crumples from my rejection. “How could you?”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing.

Randall killed my mother? And my wife knew and decided to hide the truth from me.

Why?

My head spins. I don’t even recognise the woman standing in front of me. The woman I would never have expected to keep such a thing from me.

The woman I *trusted*.

“Your fucking dad killed our mom?” Rafe’s eyes are wide, his voice laced with hurt as he waits for her to speak, and after a moment, she nods. “I can’t fucking believe this!” Rafe shouts, tugging at his hair as he kicks the wall in anger. “*Fuck!*” He roars.

A tear escapes down her cheek. “He told me the same day I found out he had my mom killed. I was trying to wait for the right time to tell you, I-”

“Gage!” Alec shouts, drawing his gun.

Bryce must have seen an opportunity when we were all distracted because in a split-second, he's scrambling to reach his gun off the floor.

I grip Della's waist and tug her behind me, putting myself between her and the gun as he raises it in the air towards us.

A shot rings out, hitting him square in the chest and Bryce's lifeless body slumps to the ground. Only the shot didn't come from Alec like I thought.

It came from Rafe.

"Oh my God," Della gasps, averting her gaze from where Bryce's body lies on the ground in front of us.

Rafe puts away his gun and straightens his jacket, totally unaffected by the man he's just killed.

Satisfaction swells in my chest as I stare down at his body. Blood pools on the floor beneath him, his dead eyes wide and his leg contorted at an odd angle.

He's gone. He can't hurt my family anymore.

Family.

My stomach sinks like a lead weight when I remember my mother.

"Gage?" My wife's voice is quiet.

Reluctantly, I turn, forcing my eyes to look at her. Tears stain her cheeks, her mascara running down her face as her chin trembles.

“Please let me explain,” she continues and my hands ball at my sides. “I’m begging you, please. I wa-”

“Alec,” I say, cutting her off. “Take her home. Rafe and I are going to pay a little visit to Randall March.”

“Of course,” Alec replies with a nod.

“No! Gage, please don’t,” Della begs, her hands wrapped around my arms but I shrug off her grip. “Gage, please!”

Rafe steps over Tanner’s body and the two of us make our way down the corridor with one destination in mind, ignoring my wife as she calls my name.

ooooo

The tyres of the car screech beneath us as we pull up in front of Della’s childhood home. The last time I was here was fourteen years ago when I tried to bring her necklace back, only to have Randall fucking March slam the door in my face and tell me to stay out of her life.

I guess now I know why.

Not only did he want me as far from his daughter as possible, but by pushing me away, it made it harder for his secret to be uncovered.

My heart races as we ascend the steps, and hammer on the front door and it only takes a minute for Randall to answer it.

His face falls when he sees us, but he doesn't seem surprised. "I'd wondered when you would come," he says, widening the door to let us through.

Not one of us speaks as Randall leads us into the living room, where he heads straight for the bar, pouring a large glass of Bourbon.

"She told you then?" He takes a long swig of his drink.

"What made you do it? What the fuck did my mother ever do to you?" I ask.

"Would you believe me if I told you it was an accident?"

"An accident," Rafe scoffs, shaking his head. "An accident is spilling milk on the kitchen floor or breaking a glass not having an innocent woman killed!"

I take a step closer. "I don't believe a word you say, March. I wouldn't believe you if you told me the fucking grass is green and the sky is blue."

"Do you think I'm proud of what I did? I loved your mother more than I've ever loved anyone. I would never have gone through with any of it had I known she was driving that night."

"And that's somehow supposed to make it alright?" Something clicks in my mind and suddenly it all makes sense. "You were trying to kill my father, weren't you?"

My mom was driving my father's car that night. With both Della's mom and my father out of the picture, there would be

nothing in the way to stop Randall from reconnecting with my mom.

Was he really that deluded?

He doesn't answer, but I know it to be true. My mom was stolen from me and my siblings over some petty revenge about something that happened between Randall and my dad decades ago. Whether he intended it or not, she's dead because of him.

I don't even want to know how he did it, whether he hired someone to do it for him or if he was man enough to carry it out himself, probably the former, I just can't bring myself to ask the question.

I pull out my gun and flip off the safety, aiming it at the spot directly between his eyes.

He doesn't seem fazed in the slightest by staring down the barrel of my gun.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you right now."

"Me." I turn on my heel to find my wife standing just inside the door.

I'm not sure how long she's been standing there, but I assume she's heard enough. Her eyes are red-rimmed as they dart between each of us.

She starts forward, stopping only inches away from me. "Gage, please. Don't do this."

“He killed both of our mothers. Why are you protecting him?”

“Killing him won’t solve anything and it won’t make you feel any better. He killed the woman he loved by mistake, a mistake he pays for every single day. That’s punishment enough.” She lays a soft delicate hand on my arm. “As your wife, the woman who loves you, I’m asking you, *begging* you not to do this. Regardless of what he’s done, he’s still my father.”

Her usual bright jade eyes have dimmed as she stares into mine, all the sparkle has gone as she pleads with me to spare him, and as much as I would love to see Randall March dead, I am nothing like him. Despite the hate that burns in my veins, I would never take him away from her like he stole away her mother.

It would hurt her far worse than it would ever hurt him.

I lower my gun and Della’s body relaxes beside me.

“Thank you,” Randall says and my jaw clenches.

“I didn’t do it for you, March. I did it because death is too good a way out for you. You deserve to live with the pain you’ve caused not only to yourself but to your daughter as well.”

He turns his attention to Della, reaching out a hesitant hand. “Adelia...”

“Don’t think this changes things between us. You may be my father, but I want nothing more to do with you.” Without

another word or backward glance at her father, she retreats from the room, the door clicking shut behind her, and a part of me is proud of her for standing up to him.

Randall clears his throat. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. Just promise me one thing, that you will take care of my daughter.”

I almost laugh. He’s got a lot of nerve to ask anything after what he’s done to my family, but what gives him the impression I would ever hurt my wife?

I don’t entertain him with an answer, and instead I leave the house with my brother at my side.

Alec is waiting by the car when we step outside, the brisk breeze cooling my heated skin.

“Alec, take Rafe and Della home. I’ll make my own way back.” Alec nods in response and rounds the car to the driver’s side.

“Gage...” Della begins, taking a step towards me.

“Go *home*, Della.” She flinches at my sharp tone, her shoulders deflating as she turns reluctantly towards the SUV and climbs into the back seat.

Alec starts up the car and I watch it peel away. My eyes meet Della’s through the window, and pain stabs me in the heart when I notice she’s crying. They’re tears *I* put there and I hate myself for it. I went back on my vow to never be the cause of her tears.

I need answers only she has, but I can't deal with them right now. My head is still spinning from everything that has happened today, and I need a time-out to process everything, a little calm to quieten my mind.

I just need space.

Della

I pace our bedroom back and forth, burning a hole in the plush grey carpet beneath my feet.

I haven't even bothered to change out of my ruined dress, or clean off the dirt and grime that clings to my body, I'm too anxious.

Rafe refuses to talk to me, the whole way home he stared out of the car window as if I weren't even there. Not that I blame him after what he learned today.

And despite my best efforts, and no matter how many times I call Gage's number, it goes unanswered and I'm sent straight to his voicemail. At even the slightest sound outside, I'm peering out of the bedroom window to see if it's Gage pulling up to the house, only to be met with disappointment when I see the driveway empty.

He's been gone for hours.

Where is he?

What if he never left my father's house and decided to kill him after all?

No. He wouldn't do that.

Would he?

I hear movement outside the door and I rush to open it, finding Rafe walking down the hallway. Like me, he hasn't changed out of his clothes. His face drops when he sees me, and without saying a word he averts his eyes and carries on down the hall.

"Are you going to ignore me forever?" I ask.

He stops walking, not bothering to face me directly, just leaves me staring at his back. "Are there any more secrets you're hiding?"

"No," I reply quietly.

After a moment, he turns to me. "I get why you and my brother decided to keep me in the dark about my dad. He swore you both to secrecy to protect Si and I. But my *mom*? How could you keep that a secret?"

"I never meant to lie to either of you. I only found out myself a few days ago and I was going to tell Gage, I just didn't know how to. I kept it to myself because I knew learning the truth would kill you both."

He folds his arms. "Or to protect your father."

"He killed my mom too, Rafe. I hate him as much as you, if not more. He lied to me about my mom for sixteen years.

Please believe I had good intentions, if nothing else. Just... please don't hate me."

He must see something in my expression because his pointed, accusing stare disappears, his eyes softening.

"Come here." He stretches out his arms, inviting me in and I rush into his arms. "You know I love you, Del. I'd do anything for you, you're practically my sister. I just need time to..."

"I understand. I'm just glad you don't hate me."

"Never," he says and relief floods me. "Sierra can't find out about any of this. It would destroy her."

I pull back to look up at him. "Are more secrets the way to go, after everything?"

"She was very young when our mom died. She struggled back then and bringing all that up again is the last thing I want to do unless it's absolutely necessary."

I nod slowly. "I won't say anything, I'll leave it for you and Gage to decide."

"Thank you."

He releases me and gives me a small smile. "I'm gonna grab a shower before heading out, I need a girl and a lot of alcohol to wash this whole shitty day away."

"Don't go getting a poor girl pregnant," I joke.

He looks horrified. "Wouldn't dream of it."

With a wink, he turns and disappears down the hallway.

The weight around my shoulders is significantly lighter, but it's still there because at some point Gage is going to return home, and which way it will go is anyone's guess.

I messed up by not telling him the truth when I should have. I wanted to spare him pain, but I ended up hurting him more by lying to him, and if I could go back and change things I would.

I return to the bedroom and collapse onto the bed. After not having slept in well over twenty-four hours, I'm exhausted. As soon as my head hits the pillow my eyes flutter closed, and I'm powerless to stop the force that drags me into unconsciousness.

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I'm woken by the sound of movement around me. I can't have been asleep that long because I wake up groggily and my eyes refuse to open. It's not until the bed dips beside me that I peel my heavy eyes open.

Gage is sat on the edge of the bed, peering down at me with heavy, bloodshot eyes. His jacket is long gone, the once crisp white shirt he's wearing is marred with dirt.

I pull myself up, my heart hammering in my chest. "Hi," I breathe out.

"Hi." His voice is clipped and hard, his face void of any emotion.

“Are you okay?” It’s a stupid question after today, but it’s all I’ve got.

“Unsurprisingly, no.” He shifts off the bed, dragging a hand over his face. He looks drained.

“Gage, that day... when I found out what my dad did, I was so close to telling you the truth a-”

“And yet you chose not to,” he interjects. “You *lied* to me, Della.”

“I know, and I’m sorry, I regret not telling you but I was waiting for the right time.”

“Was there ever going to be a *right time* to tell me your father had my mother killed? How the fuck do you think it felt to hear something like that come from Bryce fucking Tanner instead of my own wife? He enjoyed every single second of it.”

“Well he’s dead now, so it doesn’t make much of a difference, does it? Besides, I’m not the only one who’s had secrets to hide,” I point out.

He scoffs. “So *that’s* what this is about? You wanted to pay me back for not telling you about Bryce? Jesus *Christ!*”

I jump to my feet. “Of course it’s not! It wasn’t some petty revenge to get back at you, Gage. I just wanted to spare you the pain that *I* was feeling. Do you have any idea how it feels to know my dad is a murderer? That he was the reason we were robbed of our mothers as children?”

A sob catches in my throat as a rush of emotion consumes me. I slide down the wall until I reach the floor, drawing my knees under my chin.

“The way you looked at me today... like you didn’t recognise me... like you couldn’t bear to look at me... it broke my heart, Gage.” A tear slips down my face as I speak. “If you think after everything we’ve been through, and everything that’s happened to us, that I would do anything if I thought for a second it would hurt you, then you don’t know me at all.”

His brows pinch as he sinks into the chair, leaning forward on his elbows.

“Don’t you see that this is what Bryce wanted when he told you? He wanted it to drive a wedge between us, are you really going to let him win, even in death?”

He says nothing.

“When you look at me, do you see *me*, or do you see what my dad did?”

He keeps his gaze fixed to the floor. “I don’t know...”

My throat locks up. “Do you not want me anymore?”

He doesn’t answer, and my heart squeezes tight in my chest, a cry escaping me before I can stop it.

Where does that leave us? Is this it?

I rise to my feet on shaky legs, clutching the wall for support as tears blur my vision. “I’m gonna give you some space.”

He doesn't move a single muscle, still refusing to meet my eye.

I head for the door, but I stop, my hand hovering over the handle. I glance over my shoulder, my heart jumping when I meet his eyes for the first time since he got home. His eyelids are heavy, and even through the darkened room, I don't miss the stray tear that trickles down my husband's face, though he makes no move to swipe it away.

"Remember I love you," is all I say before disappearing from the room.

Leaving behind a note on the kitchen counter, I swipe a set of car keys and head out into the garage. I don't care that I look like I've been to hell and back, though I guess I have in some ways. I don't care that my dress is a tattered mess and I smell like a walking garbage bag.

I just don't care.

I start the car and peel out of the garage, using the remote control inside to open the gates.

Guilt eats at my insides, curdling in my stomach like a disease. My own husband can't bear to look at me, and I'm not sure exactly where that leaves us.

I had to witness yet more death today, the images playing on a reel inside my head over and over, driving me to insanity.

I'm not quite sure how I manage to make it to Reese's apartment without getting myself into a car accident, because

for the whole journey, I couldn't hold back the tears.

Reese opens the door, her eyes widening when she takes in the sight of me, and without a second's hesitation, she pulls me into her arms. The moment her arms go around me, my knees give way and it takes all her strength to hold me up long enough to guide me inside.

She holds me, letting me cry so hard my tears soak through her shirt, and once they've dried, I tell her everything, and she listens.

Dredging it all up makes the past couple of months sound crazy. It hasn't been that long since that night Gage found me and yet it feels like I've been a part of his family for years.

I must talk for an hour straight, recounting everything that has happened, the good *and* the bad, not missing out one single tiny detail.

It's not long before my eyes grow heavy and the pull of sleep calls to me.

I welcome it.

I just want this day to be over.

Della

“I’m back!” Ree calls with a slam of the front door, her keys clinking as they land on the table.

I run my fingers through my damp hair and change into some of Reese’s clothes she let me borrow after my shower, a shower I spent *way* too much time in.

The torn dress has been tossed in the trash, and the dirt, blood and stench that clung to my skin has been washed away, and for the first time in almost forty-eight hours, I feel refreshed.

However, the heaviness that tugs at my heart whenever I think about Gage has me wanting to break down in tears all over again.

I miss him, and I hate how things ended last night, but I’m glad I came here, giving Gage the space he needed to come to terms with everything and figure out where we go from here.

I half expected Gage to barge through the door at the crack of dawn when he found my note and realised I wasn't home, but he hasn't, and there's a part of me that's a little disappointed.

I refuse to believe this is the end for us, after all that we've been through, I refuse to believe we're over.

Maybe I'm just been dramatic. Couples fight all the time, right? But this isn't just any argument, it's a betrayal of trust, and a relationship without trust isn't a relationship at all.

Shaking the thought away, I leave the bathroom and join Ree in the kitchen. She smiles when she sees me. "I brought your favourite."

Despite not wanting to eat, my stomach lets out a loud growl as the smell of waffles, pancakes, eggs and bacon waft into my nose.

"Oh my god," I moan, taking a bite into a pancake draped in syrup. "This is so good."

"Right? Sam added a few extras in the bag for me on the sly, I think he's secretly in love with me." She wiggles her eyebrows.

"You think everyone is in love with you."

"And why wouldn't they be? I'm amazing."

I laugh, reaching my hand across and place it on hers. "Thanks again for letting me stay here."

“You can stay as long as you need, babe.” She squeezes my hand, shovelling a pancake into her mouth with the other.

The thing is, I don’t want to stay here much longer, not because I don’t want to spend time with my best friend, but because I want to be with my husband in *our* home.

I play with my wedding ring, twisting it around my finger. It’s strange how quickly I’ve grown attached to the narrow band of metal around my finger, but the longer I fiddle with it, the more I dislike the feeling of it out of place.

“He’ll come, you know,” Ree says as if sensing what I’m feeling. “Gage can barely go five minutes without you. He’ll come.”

“But what if we can’t get past this?” The thought terrifies me, a thought I’m trying my hardest not to entertain, but it’s difficult.

“He loves you, and you him. You two are so desperately in love it makes me nauseous. Deep down he knows you did it with good intentions, he’s just too stubborn and angry to admit it right now.”

I hope she’s right, because I can’t lose him.

After we’ve finished eating, I help clean up the kitchen, tidying away the leftovers and tossing the excessive amount of packaging away. I lift the lid of the trash and stop when I find a series of letters inside, all torn up but not enough that I can’t make out the words RENT OVERDUE written in thick black font. I reach in for them.

“What’s all this?” I ask, holding up the letters and Reese’s face pales, though she fixes it quickly.

“It’s no big deal, babe.” She shrugs it off.

“Ree, are you late on your rent? You realise they can evict you for that, right?”

She snorts a laugh. “Babe, they’re not going to kick me out. Stop being so dramatic.”

“Ree, this is serious.”

“So what if I’ve been a little late on a few payments, it’s no big deal.”

“If it’s money you need, I can help you,” I press.

“No.” She shakes her head, ripping the letters out of my hand and shoving them back into the trash. “You know how I feel about charity.”

“It’s not charity. I’m your best friend, I want to help.”

“I said *no*, Della!” she snaps before letting out a frustrated sigh, “I’m sorry. Look, I’ll figure something out. I’ll ask my boss for extra shifts or something. Just drop it. *Please.*”

I want to protest, but Reese is one of the most stubborn people I know, and arguing won’t get me very far with her, especially when she’s set her mind on something.

But what am I supposed to do? Let her struggle and let her lose her home?

“Okay, but just know I’m here if you need me.”

She nods stiffly, her arms folded across her chest, so I let the subject drop, knowing she's not going to budge.

There's a knock at the front door, and my heart leaps in my chest. Without even having to open it, I already know who it is.

Reese heads for the door.

"It's Gage," I say, halting her. "I'll get it."

"I'll give you two some space. Holler if you need me." She disappears into her bedroom.

I grip the door handle, my heart hammering as I pull it open.

Gage's eyes lift to mine and he gives me a tight-lipped smile. "Hi."

"Hey."

"Can I come in?"

I widen the door and he steps through. He's changed clothes since yesterday, dressed now in a grey t-shirt and jeans, a black jacket hanging off his shoulders. His five o'clock shadow covers his jaw and chin, and it somehow makes him look even sexier than when he's clean-shaven.

I close the door behind him and stand there awkwardly, unsure as to what to do, and not knowing where exactly to put my hands, I fold my arms across my chest.

He clears his throat. "How are you?"

“Aside from wondering if my husband still wants me, not great.”

He flinches, a deep frown etching itself onto his brow. He steps forward, brushing his hand over mine before cupping my face in his hand, his gentle touch alone settles some of the unease inside me. “I’ve always wanted you, angel. I’ll *always* want you, don’t ever think anything otherwise.”

“But yesterday... you couldn’t even look at me.”

He pulls me into him, and I never realised how much I needed his touch than right now. His arms are tight around my back and all I can do is melt into him, his body warm and solid against mine. “I was angry and hurt and I took it all out on you. I’m so sorry, angel.”

“You had every right to be angry, I don’t blame you.”

“It’s no excuse.”

“I’ve missed you,” I say, my voice muffled by his shirt.

“I missed you too, so fucking much.” His lips meet my forehead. “Can I take you home, and we can talk?”

I ease back. “Are you ready to talk? I don’t want it to turn out anything like last night. I can’t do that again.”

“It won’t, I promise you.”

I chew on my lip that’s already raw and dry from a night of picking at the skin there. “Okay, take me home.”

The drive back from Reese's apartment is one of silence, an unusually awkward silence that hangs between us and has my palms sweating and my foot tapping on the floor.

I don't take much notice of our surroundings, except for the fact we're driving away from home rather than towards it given Gage just missed the turning.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"You'll see," he replies, not taking his eyes off the road, and for some reason a flutter of nerves flip in my belly.

About five minutes later we pull up in a lay-by at the side of a long stretch of road I don't recognise.

Gage switches off the engine and climbs out, rounding the car before opening my door.

He takes my hand and leads me into a dense wooded area thick with luscious green trees that rustle in the breeze.

There's a narrow pathway that winds through the trees, it's a steep decline as the ground beneath us dips, so I walk ahead, Gage a step behind me.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask, a second before I trip on a fallen log, stumbling forward.

Gage's arms reach for me, wrapping around my middle, halting my fall as I'm pulled back against his solid chest. "You okay?" His warm breath tickles the shell of my ear.

"Yeah, fine."

After a long minute, he releases me and we continue down the path. Soon we reach a clearing where the trees become fewer and thinner and the sound of water lapping catches my attention.

I glance back up at Gage who wears a ghost of a smile. “Keep going.”

I carry on past the final row of trees, ducking under a low-lying branch as I step out at the edge of a wide lake that glistens in the sun.

Rushton Lake.

I can't believe I didn't realise sooner. It's been so long since I've been here that I didn't recognise it. The last time I stepped foot here, the earth was covered in a thick layer of snow and ice, the trees tipped in a crisp white. Some of those trees have since been cut down.

Despite its differences, it's still as beautiful and tranquil as ever.

“Walk with me?” Gage holds out his hand and I take it, as we begin a slow stroll around the perimeter of the lake. “Della, I want to apologise to you. Yesterday... I was so caught up in all the shit with Bryce and your dad that I never even stopped to make sure you were okay. He fucking kidnapped you for crying out loud and I didn't even think to check on you.”

He swallows hard, guilt etched into his face as his brows pull together.

I squeeze his hand. “It's okay, I get it.”

He stops and turns to me. “It’s not okay, Della. I swore to myself I would always put you first, but I allowed my hate and anger to get the better of me.” He sighs deeply, dropping his eyes to the floor.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth about my dad, I just didn’t know where to begin. I knew that whatever I decided to do it would ultimately hurt you, so I chose to delay it as long as I could.”

“I guess either way, finding out something like that is... It’s ripped open those old wounds and it’s like I’m living through losing her all over again.”

I can see the torment in his eyes, the fear and confusion of a fourteen year-old boy staring back at me, losing his mom for a second time.

“I’m sorry that you had to find out from Bryce. I guess that was his parting gift, his last chance to twist the knife.” I should have seen it coming, having information like that was like dynamite for a guy like Bryce. How could he *not* use it?

“Did Bryce... Did he touch you?” He forces out the last part, like he can’t stand to even entertain the thought.

“No,” I reply, noticing how his shoulders relax. “I was locked in a closet for most of it. He had some guys coming to collect me, they were going to take me to Mexico where apparently a buyer was waiting for me.” If Gage, Alec and Rafe had turned up five minutes later, they would have been too late. I shiver from the thought.

“*Fuck...*” he sighs with a shake of his head.

“I saw you get hit by the van in the parking lot, then Bryce kicked you and I... I thought I lost you.” My chin quivers as my eyes glaze over with tears.

He tips my chin up to look at him. “It’d take a lot more to get rid of me, angel. I sure as fuck wasn’t going anywhere until I knew you were safe.”

“Theo’s dead isn’t he?” I ask, and Gage nods solemnly. Despite already knowing the answer, my heart still clenches at the thought that he’s not here anymore. I can’t believe he’s gone.

I pull away from Gage. “I can’t deal with this. I can’t handle all this death and the fact that every single person has died because of me.”

From the guy who gave me a ride when I ran from home to Theo and even the guy that I killed, *I’m* the reason they’re all dead and I can’t help but feel responsible for that.

Gage takes hold of both my arms, forcing me to face him. “No. Don’t you dare blame yourself for any of this. That’s a burden even the strongest person couldn’t shoulder. None of this is your fault. Each one of them made their own choices to do what they did, not you.”

“But-”

My protest is eaten up when his mouth lands on mine briefly. “No buts. *None* of it is your fault. None.”

Rather than argue a case I'm no doubt going to lose, I give in.

"I almost forgot, I have something for you." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out something silver that sparkles in the sunlight and holds it up to me.

My necklace.

He must see the elation on my face because a smile breaks out across his. "I found it in the warehouse when I came looking for you. The chain was broken so I had it replaced this morning."

"I thought it was gone."

He moves to stand behind me, bringing the chain around the front before securing the clasp at the back of my neck.

I touch the heart-shaped pendant, fondly. "Didn't fancy waiting another fourteen years to give it back to me?" I tease, tossing a glance over my shoulder.

"Not particularly." A smile crosses his lips as he reels me in, spinning me to face him as his hands come to rest on my hips and my arms instinctively go around his neck. "I've wasted too many years without you already, and I want to start living my life with you." He presses a delicate kiss to my lips. "I also removed the tracker from it. It was wrong of me have it put in there without you knowing."

"I'm glad you did, it could have been a totally different story otherwise."

"All of that, it's in the past now."

“And us?” I ask with an apprehensive bite of my lower lip.
“Are we... okay?”

His eyes soften as he cups my face in both his hands.
“Adelia Rose Hudson, you’re in my blood, under my skin. You consume me. I’ve been drowning in you for so long, it doesn’t feel like drowning anymore. You breathe life into my lungs, angel. You’re the reason my heart continues to beat. I have loved you for what feels like forever, but forever is what we have together, as long as you’re by my side, as my wife.”

My hands close around his wrists as I reach up onto my toes and press my lips to his. “I can’t think of anything I want more.”

“Do you wanna know something crazy?” he asks, banding his arms around my back, holding me close and I crane my neck up to look at him. “Right here, in this exact spot is where I met my wife for the first time.”

I scan my surroundings and realise he’s right. This is the place I dragged him to after I pulled him from the freezing water and held him until help arrived.

“I’m glad I ran away from home that day.” Otherwise we might never have met.

“And for whatever dumb reason I was out on that ice, I’m glad I was.”

It’s funny how things come full circle. After everything we’ve been through and everything that has happened up until this point, we’ve ended up right back to where it all began.

I give him a teary-smile. “I love you, Husband.”

“Angel, I love you too.”

Epilogue

Gage

Two Months Later

“Fuuuck, I could get used to this...” I draw out, my lips grazing the shell of my wife’s ear as I pin her to the desk, her back pressed up against my front.

She’s wearing a figure-hugging burgundy dress that ends just above her knees with a dipped neckline. I knew when we left the house this morning she’d be a distraction, and *fuck* is she distracting me.

I can’t keep my hands off her. She strutted through my office door like she owned the place, and I suppose in a way she does, but I know for a fact one thing she does own...

Me.

She owns all of me. My mind, body and soul belongs to her and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

I take her earlobe between my teeth and tug gently, making her giggle while my hands roam over her body, my cock growing hard against her ass.

My hands travel downwards to grip the hem of her dress and slowly peel it up.

“Gage, stop!” she says with a laugh.

“Do you *really* want me to stop?” I already know what her answer is, she can never say no because she loves it really.

She presses her ass back against my crotch and I groan, bringing my lips to her neck where I plant wet, open-mouthed kisses to her delicate skin, the scent of her sweet, floral perfume wafting into my nose.

My cell vibrates on the desk in front of us and Della reaches for it.

“Let it ring,” I say, spinning her around, gripping her chin between my fingers and taking her mouth with mine.

My cell stops vibrating, but a second later the shrill noise of my office phone cuts through the air, and I’m half tempted to unplug the fucking thing from the wall, but something compels me to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Gage, you need to come home,” my sister says on the other end, and just those few words make me grip the phone tighter.

My stomach sinks. “What is it? Is Dad okay?”

“Just get Rafe and come home.” She hangs up and my heart thumps.

“What’s going on?” Della asks, her eyes searching mine.

I take her hand in mine. “We’re leaving.”

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“Sierra?” I call the second we step through the door, and when I receive no answer, panic begins to set in.

What the hell has happened?

Is my dad alright?

“Sierra!” I call again, my voice echoing through the kitchen.

“We’re out here!” Her voice travels in from the garden, and as the three of us step out onto the decking, we stop.

At the far end of the garden, my dad is on his knees, tending to my mother’s raised flower bed while my sister kneels beside him.

“What the hell is he doing?” Rafe asks, coming to stand beside me.

“I have no idea.” I take Della’s hand in mine and we start towards them.

Sierra turns when she sees us approach, rising to her feet. “I came up to his room to bring him something to eat and he

wasn't in bed. I searched everywhere and found him out here. I can't believe it. It's like he's better."

"He's not *better*, Sierra, he's fucking dying," Rafe snaps and I shoot him a warning look.

"But look at him, he's back to his old self. It's a miracle." There's a flicker of hope in her smile, but it falters slightly, as if she knows the truth deep down but is trying her best to convince herself otherwise.

"Sierra," Della begins, reaching out to my sister, "when someone is nearing the end of their life, they um... they sometimes have this like... burst of energy, like they're clinging onto life just a little longer. One last high before..."

Sierra's chin wobbles, her eyes turning glassy with tears and Della pulls her into a hug.

My dad's condition has taken a sharp nosedive of late, and though he has recovered well from the stroke he suffered, the cancer continues eating away at his body.

He rarely leaves his bed, the last time he did, he lost his footing and fell. That was when I knew things were moving a lot faster than we expected, and instead of my dad's pride getting in the way, and insisting he was fine like he once would, he let us help him. I guess it was then that *he* realised it was moving faster too.

Once my sister has calmed down, we make our way over to my dad, who's currently digging out the weeds that stick up out of the soil surrounding the flowers.

“Dad? Are you alright?” I ask.

His smile is wide when he looks up at me, his eyes wider and brighter than I’ve seen for months. “Can’t remember that last time I f-felt this good!”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“I’m not dead yet, Son. If I want to weed my garden, I’m going to fucking weed my garden.”

Della chuckles beside me and even I have to force back the urge to smile.

He grips his walking stick and shifts to stand, but his knee must give way beneath him because he falters, going down hard onto his knee with a rough grunt.

Rafe and I rush towards him, each taking an arm and helping him to stand before guiding him over onto the bench behind us, and he takes a moment to catch his breath.

Sierra and Della take a seat either side of him and a contented silence settles over all of us as we stare out over the blossoming array of colours of my mother’s beloved flower bed.

This was her sanctuary, and I have a feeling it’s my dad’s too.

“I remember you, you know,” Della begins, inclining her head towards my dad. “That day in the hospital after I pulled Gage out of the water. You came to see me.”

He smiles. “I had to thank the girl who saved my son’s life.”

“I remember wondering why my dad was so angry with you, I guess now I understand. I also remember wishing that... that you were my dad instead.”

He rests a hand over hers. “Della, since Gage brought you here, regardless of the c-circumstances, you’ve been like a daughter to me, and I love you like you *were* my own.”

Della leans in, wrapping her arms around his neck. She whispers something into his ear that I can’t make out, but whatever it is has a smile stretching across his face.

He pats her arm. “Thank you, Della. Truly,” he mutters under his breath, holding her gaze for a moment longer as a tear forms in his eye.

I wonder what she said to him.

“Evelyn and I,” my dad begins. “When we married, the most important thing for us wasn’t the business, or the money... It was to build a family,” my dad continues, wrapping an arm around Sierra as she lays her head on his shoulder. “A family full of love, and if she were still here, she would be so proud of all of you, including you, Della.”

“I can’t do this,” Rafe mutters beside me, running his hands through his hair and tugging. His eyes are heavy and red-rimmed.

He never cries.

He never even cried when our mom died. Not because he didn't want to, but because he doesn't know how to let it out.

"I can't..." He goes to back away but I reach for him, pulling him close. My brother has never been one for affection, which is why him allowing me to wrap an arm around him surprises me.

My father coughs, thumping his chest with his fist. "I want our family to thrive long after I'm gone, just like these flowers. Sierra, Della... Promise me you'll take care of them. They must never die. There needs to be something of Evelyn and I once... once I leave you."

"Daddy." Sierra clings to our father tighter as she sobs against his chest.

He presses a kiss to her forehead. "Promise me."

"I promise," Della says.

Sierra chokes back a cry, swiping her tears away. "I... I promise."

"I think it's time to go back inside now, I've grown very tired all of a sudden."

Della reaches for his walking stick and passes it to him before her and my sister help him to stand. As we enter the house, they both go ahead and lead him upstairs.

"I'm going out," Rafe announces.

My eyes shoot to him. "What? We need you here."

"I'm sorry, I just can't do this."

Before he can turn away, I grip his arm and spin him to face me. “*You* can’t do this? Are you really that selfish? Sierra needs you, *I* need you. Hell, *Dad* fucking needs you. You’re not the only one who’s struggling here, Rafe. I get this is hard, okay? It’s hard on all of us but we’re a family and we need to stick together.”

“I’m sorry. I just can’t.” And with that, he strides away before I can protest, the front door closing behind him a minute later.

I guess I can’t blame him for leaving. None of this was meant to be easy, but how can he be so selfish at a time like this when our dad needs us the most?

Della descends the stairs. “He’s going to sleep a while, Sierra’s going to stay with him.”

I nod, pulling my wife closer when she reaches me, wrapping my arms around her, holding her tighter than I think I ever have before. Her touch settles some of the unease inside me.

She clings to me. “He’s not going to be here much longer is he?”

I swallow thickly. “No, angel. I don’t think he is.”

It's grown dark outside as night draws in and Rafe is still not back. He's been gone for hours.

Where the hell is he?

I try calling him for the twelfth time and as always I get send straight to his voicemail. "Rafe, get your fucking ass back home, now. It's time." I swallow hard at that last part before stuffing my phone back into my pocket, breathing a sigh as I enter my father's room.

Rafe needs to be here.

Now.

We're running out of time.

My dad is lying on his back in bed, his eyes half open as he wheezes, his breaths coming slow and shallow.

Sierra is sat to the left side of his bed, my dad's hand wrapped around her own. Della takes up the other seat on the opposite side with me stood behind, my hands gripping the back of the chair so hard I'm sure the wood will split any second.

"Dad?" His eyes drift to mine at the sound of my voice.

He smiles, but it soon fades as his eyes scan the room. "R-Rafe?"

I shake my head and his gaze dips. "Take c-care of him for me? And Sierra." He reaches out a hand and I move to take it, dropping to my knees beside his bed, clutching his hand tight in both of mine.

His touch is ice cold, his hand feeling as small as a child's in my own. So tiny and fragile.

"I will, you know I will. *Always.*" I fight against the tears that bite at the backs of my eyes.

Sierra whimpers across from me and my dad reaches for her hand too. She brings it up to her face, leaning into his touch as tears cascade down her cheeks. "I love you, Daddy. I love you so much."

"I..." My throat locks up. "I love you too, Dad. I'm sorry I never said it as much as I should have, but please know that I love you."

I can't remember the last time I said that to him. Maybe it was one Christmas when I was little after he bought me the best bicycle a kid could have. Or maybe it was when I won my first football game in high school and he came to cheer me on. He told me he was so proud of me that day.

God, why didn't I say it more often?

My words surprise him because a single tear trickles from the corner of one of his eyes.

"I love you all t-too," he says, his voice barely a whisper. "So... So proud of all of y-you..."

My hand squeezes his tighter when I watch his face soften, his eyes focusing on something only he can see that stands above him. A smile lifts the corners of his mouth.

"Evelyn..." he whispers on an exhale, and with his chest rising one final time, his body grows still and he slowly slips

away.

∞∞∞∞

I'm not sure how long I sit on the edge of our bed, staring at a family photo from when I was eleven years old. It was Rafe's ninth birthday party. I've got my little brother in a headlock, Sierra bounces happily on my mom's lap as my dad presses a kiss to my mom's cheek.

We were so happy. It was the last photo taken of us all together before my mom died. And now there are only the three of us left.

My vision blurs as a tear splashes onto the photo. I thought this time would be easier. My mom's death was sudden and came as a shock to all of us, but with my dad, I've known this day was coming for a long time, and I thought I'd be prepared for when it finally happened, that it would be easier somehow, but it's not.

If anything, it feels ten times harder.

Agony slashes at my insides like someone is pulling every internal organ from my body starting with my heart.

There is a soft knock on the door before Della steps in. She looks exhausted.

"How's Si?" I ask.

"She cried herself to sleep."

“And Rafe?”

She shakes her head. “He’s still not answering his phone.”

Della climbs onto the bed, wrapping herself around my from behind, her cheek pressed between my shoulder blades. “Your dad wouldn’t want you wallowing in here by yourself. I know how hard this is, but he’s with your mom now, take comfort in that.”

“I know.” That thought alone has me at ease. He’s not in pain anymore and he’s been reunited with the love of his life.

I reach around for her hand, bringing it up to cup my cheek while planting a kiss to her wrist. I lean into the softness of her touch. “Thank you for being here today, I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t.”

“I wouldn’t have been anywhere else. I loved him too, you know.” She kisses my palm.

“What did you say to him, out in the garden? You whispered something into his ear.”

She hesitates. “I um... I wanted him to know something, something he could hold onto. Something that I knew would make him happy.” She bites her bottom lip as she shifts to sit next to me. “I wanted to wait for a better time to tell you but... We’re having a baby, Gage.”

My eyes snap to hers. “You’re pregnant?”

She nods, her beautiful green eyes glazing over with tears. “It’s early days, but the tests never lie.”

I reach for her, pulling her into my lap. My arms go around her as I take her mouth with mine, pouring everything I have into the kiss.

I'm going to be a dad... I let that thought sink in as my mouth glides over my wife's.

I didn't think I could possibly love this woman any more than I already do, but learning she's carrying my child... I'm at a loss for words.

"Are you happy?" she asks against my lips.

I brush her hair behind her ear, taking her face in my hands. "In spite of everything today, this news... it's the best news I could wish for. It's wonderful."

"I can't wait to build a family with you, Mr. Hudson." She gives me a teary smile.

"You've made me the luckiest guy on the planet to be the father of our baby." I just wish my dad were alive to meet them.

"Do you want a boy or a girl?" she asks.

"I don't care. It doesn't matter because boy or girl, they'll be a part of you."

She presses her lips to mine before shifting off my lap. "I'm gonna try calling Rafe again. You'll come down soon, yeah?"

"I'll be down soon, I promise."

"I love you."

My hand brushes over her belly and I can't help but imagine what it'll look like in a few months. "I love you too, angel. So fucking much."

Once she's gone, I take the photograph and place it back on the dresser where I found it, positioning it in a way that wherever I stand in the room, my family's faces smile back at me.

I still can't believe my dad's gone. It's so surreal that just a few hours ago I was talking to him. He was happy. He was gardening for crying out loud. How is he not here?

He should be *here*.

He should have gotten the chance to meet his grandchild, and they *him*. I want to give my child everything I'm able to and not have them miss out on a single thing. So, I'll tell them stories of their grandfather and all of the things he taught us, but most importantly, how much he would have loved them had he been alive long enough to meet them.

A day won't go by that my dad isn't remembered.

A tear escapes and I swipe it away with my sleeve just as my phone vibrates in my pocket with an incoming text. Thinking it's Rafe, I dig into my pocket and reach for it, only the number on the screen isn't one I recognise, and the message attached to it has my heart stopping.

Unknown number: I know what you did to Bryce. You and your family will pay for what you've done.

The story will continue in Rafe's book, Lost In You.

Did you enjoy Gage and Della's story?

If you could spare a few minutes, I would be forever grateful if you could drop me a review, even if it's only a few words, your feedback is invaluable to little indie authors like me.

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Author Notes and Acknowledgments

Well, that is book 8 complete! The idea for Drown In Me came to me quite quickly and the characters just wouldn't leave me alone until I told their story. I really hope you enjoyed reading it.

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Thank you all so much.

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